

DIVISION CLOCK

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Death may take us,
Illness may break us,
Fortune may shun us,
Luck may pass us.
Madness may overcome us,
Love may fade away.
These constant fears drive us,
These thoughts deprive us,
Of the hope that still remains.

My story is for all that which is dear.
A loved one, a friend, a loyal dog, an idea or belief.
Anyone, anything, anytime, anywhere.
The clock ticks on for all of us.
What is dear to you?

A Poem

What will be my fate?
Speak! Whoever you might be.
So desperately I yearned to fly,
But apart my wings you tore.
Why do you desire my flesh and blood?

Why now must I live?
Truly it is better up there...To swim across sky...
Answer! Whoever you might be.
Tiredness takes rule,
To sleepiness my body yields.
So many things I had time for,
So many things I could have done,
But apart my wings you tore.

A thousand fires blaze inside my head.
A half hour is all that's left - If I only knew for what.
Maybe they will notice us,
And out of curiosity,
The doors will open to those rooms,
Where seals are placed on memories.

-E. S.

The Beginning

A pleasant, luring aroma of strong, black tea, brewed with dried mint leaves, emanated from a small glass jar held in the hands of a thoughtful young man. He was sitting precariously on the edge of a comfortable sofa, tightly embracing the vessel with the hope of coveting all of its precious heat. Outside, the bitter, winter winds tried desperately and in vain, to confront our guest through the glass window. The blowing and whistling could scarcely be heard as an indefinite raspy whisper reigned through the room. It seemed that the winds, masked by a relentless sea of falling snow and an endless shimmering of bright lampposts, changed their form into a haunting aura of unusual, majestic demons with eyes as large and languishing as flickering kerosene lamps peering inside with a whimsical curiosity and dreadful anxiousness. Slowly raising the jar of tea to his lips to take another soothing sip, a feeling of profound melancholy and obverse tranquility engulfed his consciousness. An illusion of a dreadfully assuaging serenity spread across his troubled thoughts, its mystical hue weaving around his restless subconscious desires like an imperturbable spider indulging in spinning its milky web around the dimly flaming wick inside one's breast.

Yet it was hopeless to struggle against an abhorred, unvarnished truth. It was futile to conceal the scathing pain tearing away mercilessly at one's soul, to preserve the fragile remnants of a lost,

misunderstood past seeping from a freely conscious mind into the drudged slavery of an inner, lifeless and insipid darkness infecting all being. The heavy, burdening shroud of deception assiduously unraveled itself, as if heeding respectfully to a gentle, caressing stroke from Asmodeus' steady, unblemished left hand. The once scalding hot tea now felt gravely frigid. Its calming, entrancing flavor seemed infused with sheer impassiveness, no longer playfully wafting upon the nose. Nature's violent, tormenting winds blasted through the poor remains of the shattered window. Its numerous pieces of broken glass, smothered with somber, reminiscent drops of dark, crimson blood, lay scattered on the carpeted floor. A cruelly resonant, deep voice, marred by its copious guilt and deformed from innumerable innocent betrayal, cried out with vehement asseveration, tinged with ardent irony – 'Accede!' But, it was to little effect. Instead an indigent, sweeping purl of melancholy prevailed with unsullied cogency, its dilatory, cautious advice trussed into one single word - "Vie." Partially obscured by the empathic, auguring darkness, the young man's dismal brown eyes quivered apprehensively at the impressionistic shadows of cars flooding across the walls, as if lost in a pernicious reverie. He rose and disappeared into the night, trailing the path leading into the darkness.

Do not forgive them.
Do not embrace them.
Simply forget them.
Those who did not believe your dreams.
Those who did not feel your hopes.
Those who did not offer you support.
Those who mocked your ideas.
Those who shunned your vision.

The Stroll

Sitting behind a well-abused writing desk, bought for ten dollars at a local garage sale, Valiko stared musingly at his sprawling, turbid handwriting. For a great many days, he was experiencing a tenacious impediment in epitomizing his abstract work. An incessantly recurring daydream possessed him to a stage of torpidity. He sharply pulled open a drawer and impatiently grasped a long, slender switchblade. With a seemingly careless flick of the wrist, but with skill and immense vexation, he threw it at a sociology textbook lying on the floor. The keenly sharpened knife easily penetrated the already crudely punctured volume with a satisfying thunk. Much to his regret, this did not succor the unsettling frustration that was creeping steadily upon him. For hours, he sat in solitude within the confines of his small, dusty room filled with books, notes and depressing thoughts. For months, he mulled over all his past mistakes, wrong decisions, romantic hopes, and personal shortcomings. At first he blamed himself,

then everyone else and finally society as a whole. Eventually he realized that he needed to change something in his life. But he could not do it. He did not know how. Some mysterious affliction held him back from taking a step forward and reaching out for happiness. He wanted to do it. He wanted to feel it. Yet a fear of obtaining it was so terrifying that it overcame the longing for peace of mind just one more time, every time.

He stared out the window at the red roses in the garden, covered by tiny droplets of cold rain. He placed his hand on the cold glass but jolted back from it instantly. The switchblade was in his hand. He closed it and placed it in his pocket, trembling nervously, unable to comprehend how it had gotten into his possession. Looking across his shoulder, he saw a woman standing at the door. She was naked. Her body was covered with a seething horde of snakes. They swarmed ceaselessly across her delicate, milk white skin, tenderly licking the blood from the cuts they left behind as they slithered across her body. As they passed over a wound with their tongues, the woman's skin healed instantly. Their luminous, multicolored presence united into a single charming hiss. In one hand she held a freshly severed rose and in the other a curved sword with a delicately engraved silver hilt.

She approached him slowly, holding the flower close to her nostrils. As she inhaled the sensuous aroma, the snakes began to hiss violently with spine-chilling delight. Their movements became tantric,

spontaneous, and erratic. The woman came up within a kiss's breath of him. She lowered the rose and dropped the sword to the floor. The snakes slowly ensnared his body, pulling him even closer to her, their jagged scales ripping apart his skin. He screamed out in pain. He came to his senses. He stood outside in the drizzling November rain next to the rose bush he had been admiring. He felt his pocket. The knife was there.

Valiko decided to go for an expeditious walk down to Credence River to clear his mind. It was a place where he believed he could elude a perpetually increasing mental distress. It was a place abundant in light-hearted, carefree remembrances of a mythical past life. He wanted to lose himself in warm memories. He wanted to relive treasured, beloved moments of pure, simple bliss and forget the hurtful, wretched and despised instants of encompassing, intricate woe.

He stepped out onto Em'ly Drive, made a brisk turn at Heep Circle, and descended down Traddles Street at an even pace. He gazed wondrously at the profound gifts autumn had bestowed for all to cherish: beautiful silhouettes of warm reds, rich yellows, and honey oranges encircled the lone wanderer. Gently falling leaves, painted vividly with nature's enrapturing hues, glimmered in the sunlight as they cascaded to the ground in a reveling, intense dance.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Valiko entered Credit Park. He seated himself upon one of the many

large, square rocks bordering the flowing river. He tried hard to relax by breathing in the cool, refreshing air and staring at the flow of the cold, murky water that carried freshly fallen leaves from the trees beside him, in the hope of shedding off his dreamy, mental numbness. Minutes passed. Hours faded away. He felt no relief pass over him. He could not focus on anything. Nothing came to mind, any pleasant thought or repulsive memory. In a gentle whisper to himself he wished it all to end. He could not continue on.

He looked across his shoulder at the trail leading through the park. It was empty. Not a soul dared walk in such gloomy weather. He looked up at the teary sky. He wanted to be alone. That was why he came to this place. To stand apart from others was his own choice, but to be forsaken by others entirely was an unbearable thought. He yearned not to be lonely any longer. He longed to find a person who could guide him into the light of clarity and show the path out of depression.

He looked once more across his shoulder. An alluring girl in a black dress reaching down to her bare feet was walking on the trail. As she walked she picked leaves off of the tree branches, spinning them carelessly around in her hands. She seemed unaffected by the cloudy, dreary weather and smiled constantly whilst breathing in the soggy, forest smell. He wanted to catch her attention. He quickly began to pick up fallen leaves off of the ground around him until he had made a wreath of them. As she came

closer to the river he began to wave it over his head while looking in her direction. She noticed him and, despite that he was a stranger, walked up and seated herself upon the rocks by his side.

Observing the girl up close, he felt a wave of fear pass through his heart for an inexplicable reason. She gazed upon him with a curiously sagacious, inviting manner. Her smile bid welcome to either the Heavens or to a fathomless abyss. Her short, strawberry blond hair was as welcoming as the darkest, tenebrous night and as cordial as the effulgent, spring sun. She spoke in clear, amiable tone with a warm countenance. Her opulent voice by some means clutched his heart with a tight, icy grip. It started to rain lightly.

"So, I see that you're sitting here alone with only your thoughts for company. And you truly look depressed. What's troubling you?" she asked while looking directly into his eyes.

Valiko lowered his eyes to the ground, hesitating to answer as if embarrassed somewhat by the reference to his depressed state. He did not know what to say, but he eventually settled upon answering truthfully after asking a question that gnawed at his thoughts.

"You could have just walked by... why didn't you?", finally asked Valiko, his cheeks turning a pinkish red from a creeping uneasiness.

The girl's smiling expression was unchanging. She stared straight into his eyes without a single wink of her beautiful dark brows.

"Well, you collected a bunch of dirty leaves off the ground and started waving them around frantically. That means a lot of things. It means you were watching me. You wanted to get my attention. You were hoping that I would come and sit here. Am I right? And also, you seem to be a bit handsome. That also played a small role. And also I'm in need of someone's company as well." she replied with a small dosage of gentle laughter to ease the awkwardness of the unexpected encounter and dispel any inhibitions from that of her chosen interlocutor.

Valiko slowly raised his eyes to look at her, focusing first upon her smooth legs followed by the silky dress which accented a graceful, curvy figure before coming into contact with her inviting gaze.

"Yes, you're right, I did quickly collect a bunch of leaves to get your attention. And thanks for the compliment. You don't look bad yourself", mumbled Valiko, unconfident in his ability to keep the girl interested in conversing with him for long. "I'm sitting here because I've locked myself up in my room for too long and I needed to get some air."

She looked surprised at his profound isolation from the world, but it seemed to capture her interest even more so, "So tell me what do you do locked up in your room for so long?"

She appeared to be unusually out of place by the river, in the forest with a bouquet of leaves in her hands dressed in fine silk and with bare feet. He felt that something was not right. Then to his alarm, he noticed that she was not wet from the rain. Her hair,

body and dress were completely dry. Her feet were unblemished with dirt despite having witnessed her walking on the muddy path. Her round, intelligent eyes kept changing color between a contemplative deep blue and a relentless light green with every blink. He attributed all this to his potentially unsound state of mind, the very reason he had sought out the park as refuge.

"I usually read most of the time and I'm aspiring to become a writer." he answered concisely, without going into too much detail for fear of swamping the girl with examples that could sound boring and bring the conversation to a speedy conclusion.

However, her interest was aroused by his succinct responses, "Oh, and are you working on something? What are you writing?"

Indulging her curiosity, he continued to reply in short, "I'm attempting to write a novel, but somehow I just feel I don't have enough inspiration."

She continued to probe him unwaveringly, "Hmm, what's your story about?"

Unable to withhold the urge to disclose his ideas with someone, Valiko answered more eloquently this time, "It's about a person who becomes tired beset with rage at the internal prison he has created for himself. He is overcome by the urge to change something in himself but unable to act on it, which instills even more frustration. He naively wishes that a miracle will come to pass to bestow a tool that would help him. But from here I

begin to doubt the very merit in the idea itself and don't know if I should continue or not."

Reflecting on his ideas, the girl seemed to take a liking to her companion, visibly enthusiastic, "So it seems that you're a romantic philosopher, just like me."

Valiko became gradually uneasy in the girl's presence. He felt a burdensome weight settle within his chest, as though his heart turned into a solid block of lead. He tried not to show his increasing discomfort. But he felt further disturbed when he noticed that while they were conversing, the leaves in the girl's hands were slowly withering up. A horde of small spiders began to crawl on them, emerging from the sleeve of her dress. She seemed awkwardly motionless and paid keen attention to his every word. Her eyes remained focused on his throughout their entire conversation, never waning or distracted. For a brief instant, and to his horror, her eyes narrowed to form snake-like slits before returning to normal.

Valiko continued to attribute all this grotesque phenomena to his degrading state of mind, continuing the conversation without flinching, "I guess I am. Ever since I was little, I always kept to myself. I was the loner. I was the outsider. I was the stranger. Rather than play outside with others I sat in at recess and wrote small poems. One time I won an award for the best poem about our school. You know what bothered me about it?"

"What was it?" asked the girl with what seemed to be much vested interest.

“The fact that I didn’t like my school. School in general and what teachers taught me there. That I always got a bad grade in English. That I had no friends. I despised the school building itself. Yet I wrote a poem that praised my school, the building itself and everyone in it. It bothered me that I was not honest. I wrote something to win praise, attention and recognition. I wrote something I didn’t like myself, but which sounded nice and was something everyone wanted to hear. So I threw out the poem and the letter from the principal praising me. And after that I stopped writing. I went spent recess fighting with bullies. I fought those who tried to make fun of me and so for being honest and rightful, I was punished. All of these childhood experiences stick with me today. I’m still the outsider.” described Valiko, surprised at the internal reflections that he usually did not share with anyone.

The girl seemed to have stopped smiling and became very thoughtful at Valiko’s last words, “So you enjoy reading and writing most of all. Why so?”

The mysterious girl had touched upon a highly intimate topic for Valiko. Although he was reluctant to share them, his thoughts continued to pour out freely, “Yes, you could say that. I’m more of a self-learner. I learned nothing in school. During class I brought my own books and read them. All I learned, I learned from reading literature, watching movie, observing everything around me. For doing these thing I got in trouble. No one understood my supposed strangeness. I didn’t really like following rules or

standards of behavior. When I was in school, I could be reading *Gone with the Wind* one moment and at recess I would be fighting some jerks in the play yard. When I got to university, I dropped out. Not that I didn't like the ideas in psychology or sociology. I just didn't like the formalities, tests, statistics and disregard for my own writing. It soon became dull and boring to me. I lost interest."

"As for me," started the girl, "Life itself is a story. It's an enthralling, grand opera act that has no set script and no planned ending. There is only complete improvisation on the part of the actors, who have only their experiences, ideas and wit to captivate and teach the audience. Why condemn yourself to a conscience filled with nothing but miserable thoughts, regrets, and bitter anger. Something guides us through our lives, does it not? What do you think guides your life? Chance, fate, destiny, karma, or merely cause and effect?"

Valiko ruminated for a moment before answering. He had never really given thought to what his own beliefs were. Irresolutely, he stumbled around an idea lacking in convincingness.

"I believe that life drowns in contradiction, chance and hope. Life poses questions that are difficult to answer, questions that are sometimes refractory, thorny, knotty and abstruse. But, I also believe that this intractability is an aspect that pervades our consciousness through an inner conflict of emotions and thoughts. It's not the mere existence of a theory or idea itself that influences us, but the

meaning we put into it ourselves and for ourselves. And since we put meaning into anything, there will always be a consequence for everything we do. I think our life is a blend of chance, fate, destiny, karma and cause and effect all intermingling with each other. It may be also be likely that all these different words describe the same thing.”

“Tell me something. I’m very curious to know,” began the girl. “What was that power that your character had in mind? How did he wish to overcome his dejection?”

The leaves in her hands had entirely withered away. It continued to rain. He was completely soaked and beginning to shiver from the cold. The mysterious girl’s stare was becoming unbearable. He wanted to leave her, but he could not rise. The weight in his chest kept him pinned down. Her eyes glistened mischievously. Her body seemed poised like a devilish serpent waiting to strike its mortal prey. He continued on nonetheless. His voice was smeared with nervousness.

“I’m depressed. Very depressed. That’s why I’m here. I’m having trouble finding myself. I’m having difficulty finding my calling, so to speak. I feel very lonely. I sit in my room imagining stories for my book. I have trouble connecting with people. I cannot find love. I cannot find my purpose. And honestly I sometimes feel overwhelming anger at those who don’t understand me. And that anger seems to help me awake from my mental slumber. It fuels my desire to prove that I’m not weak. But that anger wears off

on my good nature. I realize that anger will never bring me love. Yet I remain depressed. My consolation is my writing. Through it I can escape my glum reality. Through it I can live another life. Through my fantasies I shed my own meekness."

"So how would your character get his inspiration to change his life around?" the girl asked with a sharp flash of her sly snake eyes.

Valiko stammered on, feeling a rising pressure to end the conversation, but answered as if pulled by the tongue by some invisible, overpowering force, "I haven't really given much thought to it..." Valiko abruptly stopped speaking and gazed at the girl in trepidation. Her dress was no longer black, but a dark, blood red color. Her eyes shined with a bright, disquieting green. The graceful autumn leaves, previously emblazoned with nature's warm, glowing brilliance and unpretentiously trailing the cool, reposed breeze, were steadily becoming infected with a disturbingly sallow, lurid sepia. The salient, rich landscape lost its remarkable coloration, giving way to random patches of an emerging bizarre and vapid painting overflowing with dismal, uncouth shadows.

Only the girl remained an exception. She radiated in marvelous hues. It appeared as though a mad abstract artist made one last exception and saved his precious watercolors solely for her. Physical space itself became utterly twisted by a deadly, constricting snake-like vacuum, converging in a grotesque halo of saddening twilight around the mysterious girl. Beside her was a gentle, bewailing

white hound standing next to a freshly cut rose lying on a patch of black soil. The dog was crying feverishly and its countless teardrops began to dampen the ground around itself. A small puddle began to form and engulfed the flower, drowning it in hopeless grief. And the flower, now completely covered in the salty liquid, shed its inky color, transforming the pool into blood. The flower was now colorless. Drained. Empty. Desolate. The wreath turned to dust. She picked up the rose, playfully spinning it around in her delicate fingers. She looked at it whimsically for a brief moment and spoke in a pleasant, unassuming voice.

“Look at what your thoughts do to you. The color of life itself is sucked out of everything around you. You no longer find the beauty in the simple things. The leaves lose their radiant shades, withering into dust. The rose sheds its color of love and passion, offering nothing but its sharp thorns. The once refreshing air becomes odorless. Only your crude fantasy shines out in light.” spoke the strange girl in a maleficent whisper.

“Who are you? A shrewd, masquerading Mephistopheles? A vile, salacious demon perhaps? A twisted, depraved and lascivious Margarita? If you have done this to me, undo it, for it is unbearable! My dreams alone beset my life with barrenness, and now to endure a state of hallucination and face my own madness?” uttered Valiko, his body trembling at the dread of losing his sanity.

“Whatever has been done to you, it has been done to you by yourself. You cry out in spite, you wish revenge, you try to find salvation in your own dreams. It is only our expectation that nothing continues or lasts forever, and at some point there must be a brief pause or intermission. No matter how much we would like something to continue, we want it at the same time to come to a lull. Take the rose.” She raised her arm up to him, offering him the colorless rose.

Valiko reached out to accept it. He tried to avoid the thorns while grasping the flower, but they lanced out maliciously into his palm. He wailed out in pain and lost consciousness.

As the portentous, reticent midnight hour drew near its zenith, a poor soul became ensnared in a conflict between two intransigent, opposing forces. Too much regret, not every tale has a felicitous ending nor does it always have a fortunate beginning. Only at its midpoint is there some offer of consolation, some glimpse of hope. A grave, contemplative behemoth emerged inaudibly from the musing twilight umbra. It eyed the senseless corpse eagerly as it advanced towards it, as if drifting on the leaden, stifling air, sniffing the scarlet blood greedily. It hesitated in licking it off the delicate skin. Instead, it impatiently turned its head as if hearing a remote, commanding call far below the Heavens. It glanced avidly and perspicaciously at the heart, as though feeling its irrevocable, fading rhythm and pierced the

chest with its dagger like, jagged fangs, biting down deeply in the soft tissues.

Valiko could hear the girl's sweet voice call out to him: "Protect the clock!"

He awoke to witness Aurora's invigorating, delightful honeydew blanket the peaceful, intriguing river. There was no coming back. This was not death nor was it life. It was a chance wasted, an opportunity ignored, a love turned away, a word of forgiveness left unspoken and a guilt not acknowledged. This was not Hell nor was it Heaven. Here there was no stopping point, no momentary pause, and no brief intermission. It was neither an end nor a beginning. But, surely there must be something: an origin, an end, a continuance of movement and time. Is all we believe to be true, what we perceive to be; is in all its actuality an erroneous self-delusion, an orchestrated chimera, a phantasm of the mind, a spectra hidden in a dark corner? Or is it? The mellow, serene twilight entirely consumed the harmonious, promising daylight. He arose and stepped into the subduing, faint half-light, his soul lost amid the lamenting clouds.

Poppy Flower Girl

Taking several irregular strides forward, the path beneath Valiko's bare feet and his surroundings began to change unceasingly, like a canvas endlessly tormented by the numerous brush strokes of a playful and cynic artist. The brisk, invigorating white night of Toronto metamorphosed into a peaceful and wet grassy valley cradled dotingly by a thick creamy mist that periodically dispersed with the cool breeze only to return daringly like a guilty parent, tasked by numerous domestic responsibilities, to their little one's crib, unable to resist caressing their child.

Trailing the damp, dark green turf with her itty-bitty trotters a girl giggled amusingly to the tickling sensations, her laughter perpetually increasing in volume with every additional step until her merriment thundered across the entire vale, echoing off the hillside. Behind her every step bouquets of opium poppy flowers sprouted into full blossom, maturing in a trice of a second, their petals curling up to form fruitful, bulging buds nearly splitting from ripeness. She picked a flower every other step, lancing the bud with her Damascus blade vertically just above the stem and sucked out the latex insatiably. Her shadowy hair whirled into uncontrollable fits of hysteria, spreading into gigantic arms that pulled dozens of the narcotic capsules into its grotesque black jaws and devoured them uncontrollably.

Valiko grabbed several of the flowers in a manic trance, wrestling with the crepuscular demon for consecutive doses of the potent drug and sipped the milky white liquid, his hands trembling wildly from its compelling effects. Continuing on unhurriedly, they reached an infinitesimal pool of crystal clear water encircled by a pack of grey wolves guzzling down the fresh, clean liquid whilst periodically raising their furry heads looking around for any potential threats, their keen blue eyes penetrating through the blanket of mist into the distance and responsive ears twitching skittishly to the slightest noise. Upon seeing approaching guests they dispersed instantly, sprinting with supernatural speed into all directions across the hills and beyond, disappearing entirely from view.

The poppy girl strayed near the edge of the pool and her flower trail started to mushroom around it, multiplying at an exponential rate and growing to mammoth size proportions. Despite the vigorous attempts of her dark, winding spirit to snatch as many gigantic specimens as possible, it could not keep up with their rapid profusion and exhausted itself. Withdrawing it distracted its appetite by reshaping its host's hairstyle incessantly. The girl's craving weakened sharply and, turning around to look at her companion with a questioning peek and drowsy red eyes, dived into the pool unexpectedly, her flowers dissolving instantly in an eruption of squealing shadows.

Valiko sauntered towards the pool and leaning down felt the unfathomable depth enrapture him with

its refreshing temptations. Unable to keep balance from the stupefying effects of the mystical poppies he tumbled over into the water, the liquid engulfing his entire body and dragging him to the recesses of its bosom.

Shivering violently from the bitter cold, Valiko awoke to witness an icy field spotted with volcanic mountains of snow. Hot lava spouted from their orifices, melting the frost instantly and vaporizing into steam by a new layer of thick ice crystals sprayed by a colossal cloud moving with sinuous grace across the sky. The entire field was studded with blue roses covered by speckles of snow, unaffected by the wintery frigidness and blooming resplendently despite the absence of warm sunlight. Looking at his rose, he witnessed the edges of its petals gradually bluing from the arctic winds. He snuggled into his dark cloak and almost instantly felt cozily warm like a piece of toast smothered with butter while his feet burned through the ice like hot, flaming coals soaked in fuel.

The poppy girl approached him, nearly tipping from the intoxicating effects of the opium while waving her hands into the air in a fit of outrage from the inability of her flowers to grow and harvest their fruit in such extreme conditions. With her blade raised up threateningly she started on Valiko, swinging the Damascus steel hysterically, elongating it with each swish until it extended to the size of a long sword.

Valiko grasped his rose and, passing his arm through the shadowy cloak, wet his hand with its inky substance. Imagining a shield in his mind's eye he lifted the rose in front of himself until it weaved into a shape characteristic of those used by soldiers of the ancient Roman Empire, the rose head curling into the center of its underside to form a smooth handle and stuck out its thorns like skewers from the other. With his stained hand he conjured up a svelte rapier with a finger guard and readied himself for the girl's vicious advance.

The poppy girl swung out violently with her weapon and struck a surprisingly hefty blow against the shield, shattering several of its thorns and fracturing a part of its rugged surface. She stumbled backwards on her bottom from the impact and Valiko smacked her blade with his, fracturing the fine Damascus steel to pieces. Quite unperturbed, she raised herself up and, peering impatiently at her armed foe, changed her strategy of attack. Her hair began to twirl wildly in all directions, dancing madly to the tumultuous winds. Slowly it manifested into a formidable, spine-chilling shady creature of indistinguishable form with mammoth size pincers that lashed out ferociously at Valiko. The creature seized his sword and destroyed it in a single snap, leaving a nothing more than an inky spot upon the snow.

Grasping the handle of his defense firmly with both hands, Valiko sidestepped towards one of the hills precipitately in fear for his life as the monster

thrashed his shield brutally. Each hit was more damaging than the last. His rose began to slump from the savage hammering of the beast, its snarly structure gradually weakening and its petals infected by a pale blue color. Another mighty ram from the demonic shadow maimed the shield, destroying the gnarly intertwined stem and felled Valiko onto his back.

Holding the unwound, diminishing rose close to his chest, he braced himself for the worst. At that moment, the agile clouds circling the sky in random patches billowed together to form a titanic chain-like structure that hemmed in the shadowy monster and showered it with a torrent of hail, toppling it together with its poppy girl host straight into the path of a recurrent discharge of lava from one of the mountains, extinguishing them both in a flurry of smoke.

The ice cracked beneath his feet, sending Valiko tumbling down through a tunnel filled with a waterfall of cascading light resembling a sapphire blue aurora diffused throughout a starry sky, flooding his perceptions in a sea of wonder. Feeling an extreme dizziness overtake him, Valiko closed his eyes in an effort to shed himself of its nauseating effects. His head began to spin wildly, his thoughts raced uncontrollably, and his extremities developed a nippy numbness. Opening his eyes once more; the discomforting sensations abruptly ceased. The burdening weight upon his chest returned to plague him.

He found himself facing a chipped brick wall, smothered in abstract graffiti and covered with vines that weaved turbulently through the crevices, carving out a small doorway-like opening by eating away at the stone. Valiko, stepping through the orifice, bent down to fit through its cramped dimensions and found himself behind his writing desk.

Utter Madness

A note lay on the floor, partly torn and smothered in wet ink. The dirty mark of a hurried footstep covered the upper right corner. Hurried and hardly legible writing was scribbled across the tight confines of the sheet ripped out of a small notebook.

My dearest and most wonderful Elira!

How glad am I that I finally know the purpose of my miserable and unadventurous life! You would be happy for me, but skeptical of my idea all the same. I can now visualize that lovely, cynical grin of yours that gives rise to a desire to hug you close and convince me to rather go to bed with you rather than stay up late working. Alas, how much I miss our wild nights together! It cannot be now. It cannot be yet. Once I have conquered, then we may enjoy our solitude in peace and security. Until that time all I leave to you is this spontaneously and impulsively written note.

Too many times have I indulged in sheer fantasy, formulating plans in my mind which were never realized or I never planned to execute. Fortunately, fate has smiled upon my poor soul and endowed me with an opportunity of last resort. I leave now in haste to embark on a journey that will define me and if not place me alongside the great figures of history then at least stir an uproar which will

reverberate throughout centuries to come. Too long have I hid in the shadows of self-pity and unnecessary apprehension of my own grotesque spectra. Nevermore will anyone dare to reproach, threaten or criticize me! I want them to tremble at my name and to silence their cowardly squeals. Our society drastically needs a change. I have never sat well with authority, nay I despise any authority over me. Tonight I will be authority itself. And if not command, then I will certainly rise above the squalor and take you with me!

Until we meet once again.
Your darling,
Valiko.

Great Festival

There was a deafening silence as both clocks hands slowly crept up to the next hour, threatening to announce it unceremoniously and with a lack of enthusiasm. The old grandfather clock was barely noticeable tucked away in a tight spot on the wall behind a half-filled bookcase, the books that were left not worth the read. Scattered notebooks were filled with ideas long past their time. There were partly exposed novels long forgotten filled with senseless and impartial words. There were photographs with dusty frames, some lying face down, some with shattered glass, and others with no frame at all. All that remained of a once comfortable

and large bed was a mattress frame, ripped apart with its iron gushing out onto the floor. Here and there a glimpse of bright light slithered through the small windows, giving the room a touch of nostalgic defeatism.

A black dog lay asleep behind the mattress frame next to a pile of wooden boards, ripped out from the once pristine hardwood floor. The cool autumn breeze seeped in through the poorly insulated windows. Even though they were closed, the room had a tendency to adopt the temperature outside, like a chameleon camouflaging according to the weather. This meant either unbearable stuffiness in the warmer months or freezing cold at all other times. This did not seem to perturb the dog's sleep nevertheless. It was used to sleeping in odd places. This room was not the first, nor would it be the last. Upon approach of the clock hands towards six o'clock, the dog raised one floppy ear as much as possible to listen whether the time would move forward. The second hand approached fifty-nine seconds to six and stopped. The dog lowered its ear with a disgruntled, hopeless sigh and faded away as the clock rewound itself once more.

Valiko was disturbed yet again by the nervous cough and twitch in his left thumb, annoyingly gnawing at his self-projection. Trying to focus his thoughts, the space around him swirled into a dark mass, turning into an enormous red boxing glove that thumped him on the head and into his chair.

A soft, warm light glimpsed through the windows, illuminating the papers and laptop computer next to him. The bookcase appeared to be filled to the brim with books and on the bed lay his black cat with deep green eyes, and unnaturally long whiskers. A cup filled with coffee was on his left. Grabbing it nervously, Valiko sipped up the contents. Upon swallowing he noticed that something was not right. He preferred his coffee with sugar and low fat one-percent milk but this was dark. Looking in the cup he noticed that were several squeezed out lemon pieces, which was the cause of the highly bitter taste. He decided to throw them into his mouth with a jolt of the cup and chewed them up together with the skins. Despite having a sweet-tooth and distaste for all bitter flavors, the lemon pieces seemed to have invigorated his mood.

The cellphone rang with a pulsating beep. Reaching into his left pocket, Valiko saw that it was the well-known number of his perhaps one and only friend, Constantine.

"Hey man, what's going on? I called you about six times before." he complained.

Valiko hesitantly answered in a puzzled voice. "Six times? That's strange, I didn't hear the phone or anything. Maybe I wasn't in the room?"

"Ha, man yeah right. You always keep your phone in your pocket. Well anyways, it's still not too late to go to that thing I was talking about." said Constantine.

"What thing? Oh, the beer festival, right?" asked Valiko, desperately trying to remember where he had spent the last several hours.

"Yeah, the great beer festival. We both like beer and this one will have hundreds of craft brewers there. I'll pick you up soon." replied Constantine.

"Wait, I can drive there myself if you give me the address." Valiko answered.

"Man, are you drunk already? You don't have a car. You never had one. Unless you managed to somehow win the lottery? Hey, if that's the case man, I'm here to support you every step of the way. You know we can party if that's the case?" he laughed with a touch of friendly sarcasm.

"Wait, I had an old Ford pickup!" thought Valiko to himself. Something felt wrong, totally and undeniably wrong. It shook him to the bone. He felt as though he had just plunged into a deep, cold and bottomless pool of ice cold and salty water. And then he got control of himself once more and replied, "Ok sure C., I'll be ready to go in about five minutes. When will you drop by again?"

"I'll be there in about twenty, don't sweat." promised C. "Just don't forget your ID. You always look younger unless you don't shave for two weeks. If you haven't shaved bring it anyway, ha-ha."

C. hung up the phone first, leaving Valiko in a perplexed daze. He felt as if his very understanding of the past, present and even future had somehow been knocked out of him. Trying to remember what happened to him up until now was difficult.

Everything appeared dreamy, blurry and hazy. Any attempt to recall what took place before waking up in front of his desk seemed to take an excruciating toll on his mind. In the end, he partly gave up and decided to focus on the now. Taking a glance at himself through the vintage mirror that hung on the door, he estimated that his black t-shirt and pants appeared in normal shape and reached for his keys. Turning around and quickly heading out, he saw a glimpse of his reflection once more. It seemed as though his clothes appeared to be all white and the room filled with brightly burning candles. It was for a brief moment, but shaking his head he once again saw all as before. Still even more perplexed by this unexpected encounter with what appeared a complete opposite visual projection of himself, Valiko hurried down to meet his friend.

C. dropped by in his matte charcoal black, vintage 1974 Mustang with pomp. The music was turned up all the way up, pumping out the best of AC/DC and Ozzy Osbourne through a speaker system he had installed on his own and spent nearly a fortune. But, as always, he ruined the songs a bit by always increasing the amount of bass which damped some of the finer melodies. He had the festival's official t-shirt on and a black Kangol beret.

Jumping in the front seat, Valiko glanced unconsciously at his window. For a brief moment, he thought he saw a black cat with bright, flaming green eyes stare back at him steadily. The mysterious cat then leaped straight into the glass and dispersed in a

flash of shadowy smoke. Shaking off his disbelief, he shook C.'s protruding, impatient hand.

"Hey Valiko, finally. I thought you'd never even see my hand, ha-ha", he laughed again, pressing the gas pedal all the way down.

The drive to the festival was not a long one, but Valiko felt as though a lifetime passed by since he had last seen his friend. He had forgotten how close they were or whether they were close at all. He could not recall their last meeting or what they last talked about before the conversation by phone. A murkiness haunted his thoughts as he dwelled on the past. It took a while of concentrated thought, but he managed to remember a few names and details. Turning down the music a few decibels, he wanted to touch base with C.

"Hey, so how you been lately? What have you been up to?" inquired Valiko.

C. shrugged his shoulders and seemed to change expressions for a second. For that moment, it appeared as though he gave away a tinge of sadness.

"Things haven't been going so well, I either with work or personal stuff. I keep getting into hot debates with my boss. It's just been taking a toll on me lately." voiced C. with a depressed tinge.

"Debates on what? asked Valiko. "I thought that you seemed to enjoy your job?"

"Well, I did enjoy it, up until the point where I just couldn't stand all the bullshit I was being asked to do on a regular basis." replied C feverishly. It

seemed as though he was steaming underneath when the conversation touched on his job.

"What kind of bullshit are you talking about?" asked Valiko, revealing a spark of curiosity.

"Well, I've always had a problem with authority. I still don't understand how I got into the police or why I decided to sign up. I mean, it was exciting to imagine myself as a cop; the pay was enticing, along with a slew of benefits, plus, I would get to have a gun, drive a police car and arrest a bunch of bad guys. But, the more I worked the more I kind of got disillusioned if you know what I mean." explained C.

"Disillusioned. Whoa, that's a fancy term you shot out C., haha", grinned Valiko. "How exactly did that happen?"

"I wanna explain a few things to you Valiko. The police is a police "force", not a service for the public. No matter how they try to reform, the actual system is designed to be retaliatory and punitive. Its focused punishment, enforcement and coercion. When the shit flies, the police are trained for shooting down whoever and whatever. But enough of that. I passed all the tests, passed the training, got my badge, got hired and then when I started working I realized that all I imagined it to be was not what I imagined at all."

"How did you imagine it would be?" asked Valiko with deepened interest. "I mean, enforcing the law isn't really bullshit is it?"

"That part is one of the most complicated things ever", spat out C. "I mean, sure if you follow the rules to the letter, you should know exactly what to do in every situation. At least most of the time. Sometimes shit comes up that needs some sharp creativity from your end. But, actually following the rulebook was getting kind of hard. Sometimes, I start hating the police I'm actually working for."

"How so? I mean why would you start hating it if you enjoy the job, it pays well, you have some kind of special status?" asked Valiko.

"That stuff that comes with the package is all good and fine. I'm talking about things like when officers break the rules off-duty and get off easy by flashing their badge. Like speeding, passing stop signs. Or even more serious, like shooting someone by accident. And if you or your dad has some good friends in the system, you'll almost likely either be proved innocent or get off with a small warning. Or when your commanding officer tell you to pack up a protester who's not even technically doing anything wrong. I mean, I'm not trying to say that all officers are bad. But, sometimes I feel that the same laws that are there to protect all of us sometimes work counterintuitively and in the opposite direction. But anyways Valiko, let's leave it at that for now. I just got my own issues that I need to sort out."

By the time they got to the beer festival, the celebrations were already well underway. The drinking was intense. The music was loud. The atmosphere was exciting. The beer was good. What

more could be expected to have a great time? Valiko grabbed a large mug of unfiltered, white Belgian-style wheat beer and sat down with C. on a large patio. Despite the large crowd gathered for the festival, this small craft brewery's enormous patio was relatively empty. As he exchanged glances of satisfaction at the quality of the brew with C., they saw a fellow about their age come through and sit next to them with a small glass. He took a few swigs of the bright, yellowish liquid and burped loudly. He then raised his glass as a sign of appreciation and asked:

"So how you guys liking the beer?" C. spoke up with a grin, "It's amazing, I'll definitely be buying more in the future. I'll probably grab a case off you after we're done taste-testing in the field."

"Sounds good, buddy. Glad you like it. It took a while to get it just right you know." said the guy calmly.

Valiko wanted to know how they started up, "So how exactly did you start?"

The guy explained his story in short, "I worked at a pecan farm as an accountant about a few years back. But, things didn't work out. The owner was getting old and gave the reins to his younger son who didn't understand much about business or about keeping track of expenses. Soon as some equipment broke down, he bought it new immediately. Even if it was a small fix, he didn't bother. He also had some grandiose plans. He bought some land that cost a fortune and planted some more baby trees there.

Obviously it takes a while for a baby tree to grow and make some profit, and here was a whole field that needed to be watered daily. Oh, and they didn't care about the water. They just watered and watered the fields daily. It finally came to the point where they ran out of capital money and started using the stakeholder's money. That was a big no-no. Eventually I left and they were left with quite a predicament. I saved up some money, partnered with a few other guys and we started brewing some small batches, just going door to door selling. We finally earned some capital to quit garage-brewing and opened a small warehouse."

"Amazing man. Well, you make great beer. Keep up the good work." said C.

"I'll leave you guys with your beer, I gotta run and keep on top of the presentations. Enjoy the festival!" said the guy as he stood up and started towards their tent.

C. seemed quite hesitant to say something at first, as though he felt guilty about it in some way, "Hey, listen, Valiko. I agreed I'd meet up with Kate here somewhere. We kind of had a big argument recently and I barely managed to ask her out here. I'm just gonna to go call her and find her. You wouldn't mind waiting for me would you?"

"Sure, no problem C. I'll probably go try a few more brews and come back here." answered Valiko without any indication of feeling that it was necessary for C. to somehow feel guilty about it. He decided

not to ask what their big argument was and leave that for later.

"Ok, thanks man. I'll be back soon. Just give me a call if you can't find me later." said C. and left in a hurry, while trying to nervously hold the beer mug and the phone on his left shoulder.

Valiko took a long sip of beer with his eyes closed to enjoy the smooth, fuzzy drink which had a characteristic citrus blend of orange peels together with a touch of honey somewhere. Opening his eyes, he saw a man sitting across from him. The beer that he swallowed just seconds ago got stuck somewhere in his stomach, which contracted from the unexpected appearance. The man was facing him and gazing at him calmly. Suddenly Valiko noticed that the music was gone. The loud noises of laughter, small talk and beer pouring was non-existent. Looking around him there was only pitch black darkness. The patio remained as it was, lighted with a glow from an unknown source. The floor seemed to remain solid along with the table and chair.

Valiko felt a growing inner fear of this omnipresent darkness. He looked the stranger in the eyes and curled up inside. The man's irises were swirling like dark thunderclouds with flashes of blue lightning bolts. No matter how hard he stared, it was hard to get a feeling of what the stranger's intentions were. He could not assess the other's thoughts, intentions or whether he was even looking straight at him. The stranger broke the silence with a rough bass:

"So you're Valiko?" said the stranger coldly. "I am the Servant."

Valiko stared back at the stranger. He phrased his question in a manner usually expected when people are usually in strange situations, stressed out or exhausted. "You are who? The Servant?"

The stranger let out a deep sigh as if met with a heavy burden or obstacle. It appeared to be a human being. But something about its features indicated that it could be either male or female. Those terms were relative and in no way could be applied to this rather peculiar individual being. It was what it was perceived to be. With a momentary pause, as if gathering up much needed patience, the Servant spoke:

"Have you been experiencing strange visions or dreams lately? Have you been seeing things during your regular life as they say?"

Valiko became even more puzzled with these two questions. He had to make sense of everything up to this point and he felt compelled to start asking the questions: "Honestly, I have no idea whether you are real, I am drunk, seriously ill, mentally unstable or hallucinating. But regardless and taking into account those factors, I would like to know who you are. What the hell, you might as well call yourself the devil or some kind of mythical creature. I'm honestly not sure what to think anymore and it might not matter anyway."

The Servant let out an even deeper sigh than the last and responded. "We urgently require your

assistance, Valiko, and I have been sent to guide you along the way. And to answer your question, I am definitely real. Not in the flesh, so to say, but definitely real. But again that all depends on what you define as real. If real is human, then possibly I am not human. But real is subjective, really. I may be as much a project of your disturbed imagination as I may exist independently of your consciousness."

Even more bewildered, Valiko once again asked more questions in an exasperating tone, "Help with what exactly? I just don't understand. Help me understand what exactly you need to guide me with and what I need to do."

"I will explain the situation.", started the Servant. "Your grandfather acquired a very special clock at one point."

"Wait", interrupted Valiko. "You mean the old grandfather clock that's in my room?"

"Ah, so it's in your room." said the Servant thoughtfully and with a smirk. "Thank you for letting me know the location. That was simpler than I had realized. He. The clock does not reveal its location to me. I can but sense its everlasting presence and permanence. Thank you, he he he."

The lights dimmed until it was pitch black and the Servant disappeared in a bright and magnificent explosion of electrified, blue lightening that streamed out in an elaborate web. Valiko felt the support beneath him rumble and he fell into a seemingly endless abyss. He felt a force slowing him down until, once again, there was a powerful thump on his head.

He jolted and found himself sitting back in the patio with the music, cheering and loud laughter resonating all around him. His lower jaw was slightly open from the initial shock over which he had yet to get over. It seemed he had erred in some way. But, in which? All that happened seemed more real than a dream could ever be. He had felt more alive speaking with the Servant than he had been with C. at the festival or ever beforehand.

"Hey, Valiko! Why's your jaw down so damn low, ha ha! Don't you know you should keep your jaw closed in front of a girl?", mumbled C. loudly.

Kate stood nearby grumbling and throwing disapproving looks in his direction. Then, just as Kate was about to muster up some critical remark, C. fell to his knees, his half-empty beer glass flying out of his hand. He was obviously drunk as could be. Valiko knew that the best way to handle the situation was to get C. home as soon as possible otherwise the tall tales of his exploits would come spurting out, followed by delusions of grandeur.

"C. maybe let's get you home. Kate, will you help me out?", asked Valiko politely, to which she responded quite nicely, "Of course."

They grabbed C. by the shoulders and guided him through the rumbly crowds towards the Mustang. Kate jumped in back while C. was neatly placed in the front passenger seat by Valiko. An unexplainable feeling of apprehensiveness took hold of him just as he grabbed the keys from Kate and started the

engine. He felt as if a cold draft seeped through his body and then disappeared just as it came.

"What's wrong Valiko?", asked Kate. "You look kind of pale even from here."

Valiko barely turned around. He did not want his worrisome facial expression to make Kate possibly doubt his confidence to drive. Stepping on the gas, he drove C. and Kate to his home as quickly and safely as possible. He decided it would be best that C. stay a while at his place. They carried him into the living room and onto the couch. As Kate went to get a glass of water from the kitchen, Valiko slowly crept up the stairs to his room.

He had a bad feeling upon recalling the Servant's comments on his grandfather's clock. He had no idea that it carried any significance or value other than that it was a gift. His grandfather had found it at a garage sale several years ago, fixed it up, hung it on his wall and it had been working ever since. The only strange thing that crossed his mind about the clock was that it had kept running for several years, even though it was mechanically powered. Usually mechanical clocks had to be rewound in some way. Upon entering the room, he peered at the corner behind the bookcase to check the clock. It was gone. Pinned in its place was a jet black rose, oozing with a black liquid that looked and smelled like tar. It trickled from the rose, leaving long trails on the wall and dripped onto the hardwood floor. The clock was gone. Valiko stepped up to the wall to examine the rose in more detail, believing he

might find a clue as to who was here. As he reached out to touch the black liquid, the wall seemed to shimmered and pulsed. The wall seemed to be transform into a sheet of molten lead.

A strange baboon jumped out through the pulsating waves and landed on the spot beneath the rose. It greedily gulped down some of the sticky jar until the floor and walls were spotless. It turned rapidly around and, noticing Valiko, let out a shriek. It then jumped back into the molten wall and disappeared. Valiko came up closer to the rose and dabbed his finger in the tar. He then licked his finger. The substance was surprisingly sweet with a flavor similar to black licorice. Looking out the window, he saw a cuckoo bird flying from tree to tree. As it flew from one evergreen to the next he saw it transform into a hawk. It returned to its nest and destroyed all its eggs. It then flew away into the horizon. He instinctively felt someone's presence behind himself. He looked around and saw the Servant. The latter did not flinch.

"So, Valiko, as you can see the clock is gone. It is quite a shame you had no idea of its importance. I even gather you probably even thought of throwing it away once, thinking it a piece of junk. Oh no, this clock is an invaluable treasure to us. A treasure which you led us directly to. Once again, you fall so easily into our trap. Your curiosity and naivety seem to lead you astray each and every time.", voiced the Servant in a raspy, self-confident and delighted voice.

"Despite this, you still pose an inherent danger to us. And so we let the rose take you."

"What the hell are?", shouted Valiko. But before he could finish the black rose enveloped him with its elongated thorns and sucked him into the molten wall. The Servant grinned with satisfaction, picked up the glass of water and exited the room.

Lost Route

Valiko was tossed into an anomalous kaleidoscopic swirl of radiant colors and impossible shapes. Illustriously formed pentagrams surged passed with a swish, cutting off a tuft of hair. Cyan and razzmatazz reached out with strings of light to caress his neck and shoulders soothingly. Arsenic and feldgrau puffed out of a gaseous crater, enveloping him entirely in a miasmatic smoke and seeped into his nostrils and mouth. The gas slowly started causing him to cough and choke involuntarily. As he kept perpetually falling, his lungs seared with pain at every fresh breath. A Mikado leaped out in the shape of a dragon and burst out a torrent of vermilion flames, blinding him momentarily. With a loud pop, a cataclysmically large explosion of colors took place. The shapes collapsed and imploded into a large dark mass that smacked his body with the force of a high energy sound concussion. He blacked out entirely.

When he awoke, Valiko could not feel any air resistance nor understand in which direction he was falling. It appeared as though it was a black tunnel. He felt nearly weightless, without any force pushing or pulling in any direction. It was most surely the closest thing to a vacuum chamber. But he experienced a strange feeling of freedom. No tension. No outside interference. No direction. He knew he was falling, but it could have been either up, down or sideways. There was no way to tell with any manner of certainty. The senses were completely

overwhelmed by the previous mosaic of hallucinatory visions.

Valiko closed his eyes, trying to imagine this to be a lucid dream. He had dreamt of unreal, absurd and even violent events in the past. But, this supposedly illusory dream felt as real as could be. It felt more real than any normal experience or perception ever before. Just as he felt in the Servant's presence, so he felt alive once more. It was a sense provoking, euphoric trip, but his thoughts dwelled on feelings of guilt. He felt he needed to somehow deny this freedom. He convinced himself that by embracing it his imagination would become limited in some way. His logic battled with emotion to inhibit any step towards unlimited conscious or unconscious restriction. As his mind struggled with an inflow of conflicting thoughts, Valiko felt a sudden and powerful pull before landing in a sea of laurel green. As he slowly raised himself, he found himself in a dark room surrounded by a square shaped bright spotlight. As he looked up he could not spot the source of the light. It seemed as though the floor was alight, but that the light should be radiating from a source above it.

A howling, raspy and unpleasant voice pierced the darkness. "So Valiko here you are, finally our prisoner at last. Your grandfather was a wily one. But, it seems you are far more careless."

Valiko lost his patience and let his anger, confusion and impatience spurt into a fury of declarative questions. "What do you want from me!?"

Who are you?! I am tired of feeling confused! What do you want?"

The voice let out a stream of horrible, crackling laughter, " I will grant you a last favor before leaving you to rot in this prison. I will let you know why you will spend the rest of eternity here"

With a loud hum and buzz, a large mask swooped past him. It seemed to be composed of a mix of several clouds of fine particles yet appeared to be made of solid steel. The mask swept past him hither and thither, never stopping in one place for longer than a moment. The expression on the mask changed with every sentence, mimicking almost every possible disagreeable facial expression in existence. As it moved around in random lines, it left a faint trail of particles which fell to the floor and hatched like eggs into small white spiders, which made their way towards Valiko. Feeling that the spiders posed a threat, he stomped on all of them nervously. The mask kept on swooping and talking. Valiko wanted any conversation to end as quickly as possible. Even though his curiosity was at a peak, his feelings of hopelessness and weakness were overwhelming.

"Your grandfather was a guardian of a very peculiar clock, called the Division Clock. This object was obviously not just an ordinary timepiece. It encapsulates the force of time itself. What you humans perceive as time is merely an embodiment of the principles of cycles. Everything you perceive is an inherent result of cyclical periods or packets of

activity. A clock is used to simply measure or count those specific periods. Now here is the most interesting part. The Division Clock is the secret interlink between time and space. It is the force that holds them together. Without it the dimension of the universe would collapse. The clock was and is the key. And we have been longing to get our hands on it. Now it is finally ours. With its power we can re-shape both time and space. Now do you see?"

Feeling somewhat puzzled, Valiko ventured a question in a quiet, trembling voice, "What do you intend to do?"

The voice cackled in even greater laughter. "As any classical villain should, we intend annihilate you humans by disrupting the dimensions and rupture four dimensional space. What we need is energy to fuel our own world. By creating a rupture, the laws of thermodynamics will also be at our disposal. An endless supply of pure energy can be re-directed to any point or dimension in the universe. You humans have been allocated some of the lowest levels of energy in the universe, but it is highly structured, spawning an incredible balance. And why? Because of the clock! Now it is our turn to rise!"

The mask zoomed in and came within a hair's distance of Valiko's face. It radiated neither anger, hate nor violence, but he felt its presence to be overpowering and nauseating. He could not stand being so close to it. Some particles dropped on his arm only to spawn dozens of tiny spiders which crawled up his arm. They bit into his skin and started

sucking on his blood. He quickly tried to brush them off and the face flew off with a final horrendous bout of laughter.

Looking around he felt trapped by the darkness, like in an open cage on a jagged mountainside. He was not confined necessarily by bars, but take a step in the wrong direction and he would be smashed against the sharp rocks. Bending down to one of the edges, he tried to feel whether there was a solid surface beyond the light. His hand sensed something. Whatever it was, it was definitely not an abyss. Should he venture into the darkness? But what was there? Nothing could be seen. He could walk an infinite distance before finally collapsing of exhaustion. Who knew whether more spiders were out there... An overwhelming fear gripped him, paralyzing his ability to think rationally.

He scratched his head, walk around the perimeter of the square and turned to face any side. Finally, he realized that regardless of the possible danger staying within the square or trying to find an exit would lead to the same inevitable result: exactly what the mask wanted. Except for one difference - with leaving the square he had a slim chance of making it out in some way. He extended his foot outside of the square again to feel the ground and confirm its solidity. When he verified it once more, he took a step into the darkness. No sooner had his body immersed into the dark than it sucked him into a giant gaseous whirlwind and spit him out back into the square. Valiko landed painfully on his back. The

gaseous cloud twirled until it formed a repulsively shaped mouth which giggled in the same raspy manner as the mask. It glowed with a darkish purple and smacked its greenish tongue with delight. It then disappeared back into the darkness.

Resolving not to give up, Valiko attempted to exit from another side of the square. He moved cautiously towards the darkness, anticipating another attack from the unknown Gaseon. Surprisingly he took several careful steps forward, looking back constantly. The square was still visible nearby. He took a few more steps before he felt something blocking his path. Turning around to return back to the square, he felt something solid and transparent blocking his return. He could still see the square but an invisible barrier hindered any movement in the opposite direction. He felt pinned in by yet another unknown force. In a moment of desperation, Valiko tried to muster a maximum amount of common sense. He started feeling the barrier. It seemed to be smooth and straight only to the left or right direction. It did not bend. Yet, each time he turned in a directly opposite direction, it blocked his path. Why not try moving sideways? He moved right sideways and moved in an L-shape path. The barrier was gone! He shuffled across quickly back to the square.

Valiko now felt that there was a pattern. One side had an obstacle, the other a Gaseon. Perhaps if he tried the other two sides, it would offer some clue as how to get out of the trap. But, after returning to the square he had lost track of which side he had

tried. He could either continue through trial and error or simply waste time by letting a depression clog his ever increasing resolve to find the Division Clock and get back at the Mask.

Stepping towards another side, he moved forward with more courage. He seemed to be moving forward steadily without any inconvenience, until he fell through the surface as though a hole had opened up from straight under his feet. He fell into a candlelit pit with slimy stone walls. Chained to the wall were several baboons like the one he had witnessed in his room. Upon seeing him they hissed and yelled wildly. If not for the chains it seemed they would have devoured him on the spot. Suddenly they quieted down as if in nervous expectation of something to occur. A slit opened from the top of the wall and a red banana came falling down. The first monkey to grab the banana swallowed it whole, together with the meaty skin and disappeared from the room. There were two more baboons left in the chamber.

After a few minutes the slit opened and Valiko was ready to catch the banana. This time however a pink apple dropped out. But Valiko grabbed it right in front of one of the baboon's nose. He started eating it in the hope of returning to where he started. The apple had a peculiar sweet taste, as though honey mixed with lime and mint. Once he had finished eating it, nothing seemed to happen. The baboons were waiting and heehawing to themselves. It dawned on Valiko that he had to eat the core as well. He gulped it down. As soon as he did, the

previous baboon appeared once more. Amazed at this fact, Valiko understood something was wrong with his logic. He decided to wait until all the baboons grabbed any fruit and disappeared. After the pink apple came a black pear, a neon red pineapple and then a baby blue watermelon. The last took the remaining baboon a surprisingly small amount of time to devour. Once it had disappeared, Valiko waited. After a few impatient minutes, the slit opened and a matroshka doll with an ugly face dropped to the floor. Valiko picked it up and twisted it. It let out a deafening shrill cry and the entire room split into two, sending Valiko falling once more until he landed into the white square again.

Sitting down in an attempt to assess his options, he noticed a bright red young rose lying gracefully near the center of the square. The matroshka was lying down sideways near the edge of the light. This time he was careful as he approached, deliberating before touching it. As he reached out towards it, more spiders streamed out to cling onto his hand. They had patiently camouflaged against the floor, waiting for an opportunity to attack. He managed to squish them all. As he got closer to the flower he could hear a sweet, pleasant melody echoing in the distance. The sound was characteristic of a harp although it seemed to be a flute in his other ear. Somehow he felt compelled to think that this rose was a helpful gesture. A gift from above. A symbolic gesture of vigilance. It was a pleasant thought knowing that perhaps someone or

something was watching. He picked it up. The rose gradually unfolded its petals. Expecting the worst, Valiko closed his eyes in preparation for another set of mind-boggling experiences. But nothing happened. The sweet melody continued, becoming more and more appealing and soothing to the soul.

Opening his eyes, he saw a small note inside. It read - "Present the rose as a gift to the beautiful Russian lady and she will thank you." The petals closed up. Scratching his head he tried to look around to see if he had missed a Russian lady anywhere. There was definitely only the ugly looking matroshka. He decided to place the rose next to it. But nothing happened.

The rose unfolded its petals once more with a note - "Help her on her feet!". Valiko gently raised the matroshka, set it down and placed the rose in front once more.

The wooden doll started vibrating and spinning violently where it stood. A wave of shrill cries blasted through the darkness, knocking Valiko off his feet. The top of the matroshka shot off in a random direction, nearly hitting him in the head. The internal doll's heads also shot off in haphazard directions. Finally, no more doll heads were left. The bottom of the matroshka melted into the surface of the square and out through a vibrant orange red circle appeared a young girl, dressed in a traditional Ukrainian dress and red boots. Without saying a word, she smiled in thanks. Turning sharply around she let out a stomp with her boots, changing the

color of the square to red and a hummed out a melodious tune to the harp's melody. The square began to steadily blink. It then stopped. Gradually square by square began to light up starting from the original point to form a road through the darkness.

Overcome with joy that a safe route presented itself, Valiko could not help but pull out a smile. The Ukrainian girl picked up the rose and handed it back to him, nodding towards it. Valiko saw the petals open once again with a note - "Hurry! But don't forget to give the girl a kiss goodbye!". Valiko slightly blushed, but reached out to give a hug and kissed her on the cheek. The girl turned around in a whirl and jumped back into the circle from which she came. The squares now formed a zigzag route which lit up in a bright white light into the unknown horizon. Valiko placed the rose in his pocket and ran as fast as he could along the secret route.

Tick-Tock

As Valiko stopped on the path to catch his breath, a multitude of clocks of different size, shape, style and color appeared as floating ghosts within the darkness. They hovered across the dark plains, while some periodically zipped past Valiko leaving a trail of yellowish dust and causing him to sneeze every time. Each showed the exact same time - one second to six o'clock - and their second hands let out a loud synchronous tick-tock. He looked back to see how far from the original starting point he was. It was now a long way behind. He started walking. All the clocks instantaneously disappeared from view. Only a barely audible, faint tick-tock persisted. The clocks had simply hidden themselves temporarily from view, but remained watchful of the route.

It felt as though several hours monotonously passed by, yet the route seemed never-ending. There was no exit or break in the zig-zag square pattern in sight. Valiko stopped again. All the clocks reappeared. The time remained the same - once second to six. He felt tired of walking. Sitting down, he pulled out the rose to examine it. He had only now noticed that it had no thorns. They did not seem to have been pulled out or cut out. It seemed that the stem was naturally thorn-less. Wondering who it was who magically sent it as a gesture of help, he realized that it may just as well have sent him on a journey to nowhere. He noticed that the clocks

began to tick faster and faster as if in nervous expectation of some event.

The rose opened up gracefully to reveal yet another note: "Keep going! Do NOT stop!" After re-reading it three times to see if there was a hidden message, the note dispersed into a watery mist which was quickly swallowed by the darkness. At the same time Valiko noticed that the rose had become slightly withered, as if drained of its energy. The clocks began to tick more intensively and Valiko decided to raise himself up and continue on. Just as he was about to get up, he heard a deep roar from above. Looking up, a fiery cloud seared through the dark skies. A large reptilian bird with enormous wings and gold feathered body soared towards him. It periodically let out a long, hot stream of fire with each roar. The fire ripped through the darkness like sheet metal, leaving large cuts like a knife thrust through a canvas painting. The bird rapidly approached and released a torrent of flames on the path right in front of Valiko. The fire melted the path with an oozy, acidic after-burn.

The force of the air from the bird's wings caused Valiko to lose his balance. He was about to fall into the darkness, yet instinctively reached out to grab hold of the edge of the path. This turned out to be a smart move. The darkness surrounding the path had no solid surface. Valiko held on with both arms and struggled to pull himself up. There was no surface off which he could push off with his feet and the edge was quite slippery, making it even more difficult. The rose was still in one of his hands, which

did not help his grip either. Suddenly, Valiko realized the bird flew in a circular trajectory and as making its way directly towards him, ready to release a storm of flames upon him. Just as it opened its beak and released hell, the rose opened up its petals and released a powerful glow of white light. The flames dispersed in a simmering hiss as they touched the light. Terribly blinded by the glow, the bird flew off with an angry puff of flames. The bird had caused unanticipated difficulties and left Valiko in yet another complex situation.

The petals closed and, just as Valiko was close to slipping, the bottom tip of the flower released a web of roots into the solid surface. The rose also straightened and became rigid. This was enough to stabilize Valiko's position. Grabbing hold of the flower with both hands, he managed to pull himself up. Once he had stood firmly on the white surface once more, the rose regained its former consistency and the roots dispersed. The clocks reappeared, ticking more slowly than usual.

A large chunk of the path ahead was destroyed, leaving a crate the size of about three squares. Attempting a jump was futile since the distance was too wide. Valiko now looked to the rose for a hint. As if reading his thoughts, the petals once again unfolded with a note: "Guide my light, use your sight!" The rose lit up with a white glow towards the edge of the path. As Valiko moved the flower the light restored a square ahead. He continued to move the light all the way up to the other edge, until the

path was restored. The glow then dimmed, until the petals closed leaving another note: "Tired am I. Rest need I." The petals closed and Valiko realized that the flower looked worn, saggy and blanched. Placing it in his pocket, he rushed once more along the path.

Trudging along, Valiko thoughts dwelled on the Division Clock, the Mask and the rather strange place he was in. He tried to make sense of what has happened up to this point and could not determine whether he was dreaming or alive at all. It all seemed so unreal and real in tandem. He doubted his sanity. He questioned his perception. He distrusted his mind. He wanted to break free from this inexplicably bizarre cage. Or was it even a cage? It might be borderless, limitless and incomprehensible. Valiko was not certain he even wanted to know its totality.

Lost in deliberation, he looked towards the path and noticed that one of the squares ahead was glowing in a dark navy blue. The first plan of action that came to his head was to jump over it. However, the squares were quite large and the idea had rather a low chance of success taking into account the distance factor. Knowing that colors were quite dangerous in this dark world, he gauged that the risk was worth it. Taking a few steps backwards in preparation, Valiko jolted forwards, leaped right before the edge of the blue square and pushed his body forwards to the maximum. But it was not enough. He landed almost two steps before the beginning of the next square. Nothing terrible happened as he led himself to believe. But just as he

let out a relieved breath, the square became to rumble and a white linear spiral drew itself from one edge to the next, meeting at the center. A cone shaped depression formed, causing Valiko to lose balance and fall straight into the core. The force of the pull downwards was equivalent to being sucked into a quicksand, the more he struggled the deeper his body immersed into the slimy blue. He was neck deep when a singular and powerful force pulled him sharply downwards.

As Valiko descended into the depths of the square, the slimy stuff wrapped around his arms to form similarly colored blue boxing gloves. A mouth guard formed and propelled itself into his mouth. As a final bonus he even got a pair of blue and white-striped sneakers. When the procedures were finished the blueish veil of slime and light unraveled and revealed a boxing ring. A blue chair pulled up underneath him and an invisible hand pushed him down into it. Across in the opposite corner there appeared two oversized, bright red boxing gloves which were almost triple his size. The red boxing gloves floated through the air in a whirl and threw mockup training punches into the air. They spun and turned with lightning speed, imitating upper-cut and jab movements. A sign with the round number 5:59 was bobbling around the ring, also held by some invisible figure or hands. A copper bell, attached to a thin string, dropped down from above straight into the middle of the ring and struck with a loud bang.

The chair vanished underneath him. Not quick enough to react, Valiko fell to the floor. The large red gloves approached him with exponential speed, swinging aggressive, and high-velocity punches. Just when he managed to get a footing and slightly raise his gloves in defense, the gloves swung a few jabs and an uppercut that sent him flying back. The hits were strong and as Valiko landed on his side he felt a gnawing jolt of pain surge through his jaw. His vision blurred and sent him into a daze. The red gloves seemed to back off while he was on the floor. A large ghostly timer, similar to the ones he encountered on the path, popped up not far off, counting down from number ten. The display mimicked a simple digital timer, showing single numbers. Valiko thought that perhaps if he stayed down, the match would end and be the end of it.

Yet as the timer approached five, the floor underneath him began to fade in a large ellipse. Looking down, he noticed an expansive body of water with a swarm of sharks flying out from between the waves and smacking their mouths in expectation of fresh meat. One of the sharks' teeth were stained dark red. Valiko bolted and stood on his feet. The timer popped off and the match continued. Vowing to stay in defense as long as possible, he tried to figure out what exactly to hit. The red gloves were impossible. Yet there was no body. He decided to attempt to verify it. Ducking down as low as possible as the red gloves approached once more, he attempted a short punch towards the place where the

body would usually be. Nothing but air. His punch swished through air and instead he lost balance. The red gloves merged into one single gigantic glove which prepared for a massive knockout and final punch.

Just then the bell dropped and sounded the end of the round. Valiko was thrown back into the chair. Quite perplexed, he looked down to the floor in utter hopelessness. The gigantic glove dispersed to form two gloves. It seemed that despite the apparent show of invincibility, the time was taking a toll on them as well. Feeling as if his days were numbered, Valiko looked up once more and gazed into the darkness. He noticed that the sign with the round had changed into a message, carrying it was a woman in a red dress and green shoes. The message read - "Keeping going! One more, Valiko!"

Heartened by the message, though not comprehending why and from who the message was directed to him, he decided to out-dodge the red gloves. The bell struck and Valiko ran directly towards the gloves and dodged sideways before they could hit. He bounced off the ringside. One of the gloves twirled unexpectedly backwards, ramming him straight in the nose. He fell, but immediately got up and started sliding sideways across the ring's perimeter. The red gloves merged once more, but this time the gigantic hybrid glove started glowing, puffing and shooting sparks until it turned bright orange. As if in preparation for releasing itself upon Valiko with all its might, a red laser-like target

pinpoint appeared in front of it and started taking aim. As Valiko moved about so did the target pinpoint.

Just as the gigantic glove exploded like a gunshot towards him, time slowed. The mysterious girl jumped across the ringside and flew onto it. In the blink of an eye she transformed into a thorny serpent and constricted the glove. The time reset and the large thorny mass collapsed in front of the spot where he stood. Huffing and puffing, the glove attempted to escape. Meanwhile, the timer reappeared the started the countdown. When the timer hit zero, the floor completely opened up and the thorny snake grabbed hold of one of the posts with its tails and released the glove to the sharks. The floor closed up and the ring evaporated into the path on which Valiko got sucked in. The snake turned and twisted in front of him until it reformed back into the rose. Picking it up, he could see that it was even more withered than before and desperately need of water. So was he. He urgently continued along the path in hopes of finding water. He neither had any traces of sweat nor felt any pain from the multiple hits.

Valiko kept moving along that path with ever-increasing speed, until his thirst began to impede any progress. Sometimes Valiko doubted he was moving forwards at all. It could very well be that the path could be going in circles for all that mattered. His mind increasingly began to wander on thoughts of drinking. He began to recall all the ice-cold,

refreshing mojitos and deliciously sweet, strawberry daiquiris he had drunken in the past. Next came thoughts of an extra-large growler of non-filtered dark beer. Then he remembered the lemony-fresh, mint-leaf homemade iced tea to which he held the secret recipe. His thoughts kept returning to water no matter how much he tried to focus and block them out.

Eventually, he noticed that his head was bowed down beneath his shoulder level, dangerously slouching when all attention should be concentrated on avoiding any potential dangers. A heavy draft of hot air suddenly blasted from Valiko's right hand side. As he turned to look, he felt a pang of pain rip across his eyelids. He instinctively closed them as an unknown material flew on the wind. It felt like thin particles of sand. It was painful but, he needed to keep track of the direction of the path. As he kept walking for several minutes, the sand and wind seemed to have furiously doubled their efforts to cause a nuisance. Valiko was persistent in his resolve to keep moving, despite any potential setbacks, such as unclear visibility. But, as the quantity of sand began to increase, Valiko felt that his actual leg movements started to encounter more and more resistance. Glancing down, his feet were sinking into the actual sand, which was building up on the road and filling up the squares as though they were lined up containers without a lid. Not knowing what to do, he continued to push his legs through the mini desert that was steadily forming. An enormous camel ran

past him and shot out an equally large jet of spit that landed straight in Valiko's face. As the wind kept blowing, the saliva kept dripping behind the ears. Mixed with the sand, it turned into a sticky, disgusting mask that was difficult to wipe off. The sand bestowed the wind with a voice. As the particles collided with the momentous gust, a disgruntled howl terrorized the eardrums, causing them to resonate to a painful hum. Hands made out of the sand began to break through from the depths and grabbed his legs, dragging him down and pulling back. The more Valiko struggled, the more the number of hands increased. They began to shoot out and take hold of his elbows. One hand wrapped completely around his waist and began to squeeze his body like a murderous anaconda snake.

Valiko tried to grab hold of the rose, but it seemed that it had spent too much energy saving him beforehand to assist him now. With a violent tremor that dispersed the sand hands within a moment, the wind suddenly died down. Looking around for some apparent reason, Valiko felt that a more serious danger must be the cause. And he was right. On the horizon, a terrific mountain of flames in the shape of an iceberg was floating towards the path with phenomenal speed. It spewed out sharp icy spires and hail the size of basketballs as it approached.

Looking straight towards the path, Valiko was flabbergasted - a silhouette of a doorway shimmered in the distance not too far off. He struggled through

the sand, of which there was less and less as he waded towards the path ahead. Finally, he reached the squares without any sand and made an all-or-nothing sprint towards the silhouette. As the fiery iceberg loomed nearer, spikes of ice crashed and the hail plummeted like meteors, destroying the path behind him. Valiko reached the door. Without any hesitation, he pulled the handle and jumped in just as a shower of hail annihilated the path. All that could be heard at the last moment was the Mask's loud, shrill giggling, accompanying the "fireberg's" destruction like a madman's soundtrack, composed solely for sadistic pleasure. As the door slammed shut, it was levelled by the incoming spears of ice.

The Heroine

“There are dark shadows on the earth, but its lights are stronger in the contrast.” – Charles Dickens

She was a prepossessing girl with a graceful, curvy figure, lovely face and bewitching eyes that flickered like a kaleidoscope to the whim of her mood. In moments of happiness, they rippled into an alluring deep blue. In moments of fury, they blazed into a fearsome light green. He would give up everything in his possession, he would sacrifice anything to kiss her sweet lips, feel her tender heartbeat, catch her every breath and caress her lovingly. He dreamt constantly of licking and gently biting down on the smooth skin on her entire body. His heart and soul was hers, ripe for the taking, like an overripe fig bulging and cracking such that all the inner contents were in full view.

The full moon shone dimly through the open French windows, revealing embracing shadows of lust and delightful pleasure, playfully inkling upon her delightful, strawberry blond hair. They were finally together after countless days of anxious separation and disquieting emotional ordeal. The constant fear of losing each other had plagued them incessantly. Yet they were once again by each other's side after a year of separation. By holding onto the past their feelings were based now only on sheer, broken memories. Time did its job well, eroding a solid foundation of love, but still could not unearth it

entirely. Like the roots of a tree firmly planted deep in the soil. A young tree is supple and weak, taking time for its roots to take hold and grow strong. As days turn to years violent weather washes away the soil, but not the roots, never destroying all hope for it to flourish. Nature's impulsive moods can engulf all that is dear in unrelenting, sludgy mire without judgement, reason or provocation. In the moment of passion, they were now two parts of a whole, if only just for now.

Her every touch sent an electrifying jolt of energy through his body. A simple smile or a heavenly wink of an eye triggered a feverish throbbing of his veins. His heart pulsated at an exacerbating rate. The slightest caress sent a wave of goose bumps across his skin. He wanted to be certain that she was all his. He was ready to carry out any caprice like a dedicated slave that yearned to please its master, if only to free himself. His joy was overflowing and his excitement contagious. Looking at the poor creature before her, she could very clearly see the longing for some sort of condescension. Aroused by his passionate advances, she threw him a soft, enthusiastic smile and they paused to talk to one another. They wanted to listen to each other's voices. They needed to hear their love. As they lay by each other's side, she gave voice to her doubts:

"My dear, do you think we really and truly love each other? Maybe it's all just physical desire burning in our hearts? Maybe passion is all that gives us the illusion of love?"

He seemed aggravated and distressed at her doubts at his feelings, for he had completely opened himself up to her only last year, sharing all his hope, dreams and love. He tried to explain his thoughts as best he could:

“I love you, very much! But why do you always doubt it? Or are you afraid of that it might be genuine? So that you fall into woe at realizing that a fantasy is only an illusion. Or maybe it’s because I don’t have enough money or am not earning enough?”

She gazed at him steadily, her eyes sporting a carefully hidden tinge of craftiness. She would at times become intolerable. She would pick on the smallest things. When he would use his hand to point at something she would yell at him. When he would pronounce something wrong or occasionally make a sentimental joke she would become irritated. When they were apart she would refuse to give him hope of being with her. Yet, she would always say his name affectionately. She would say it like no one else could. She would make sure he was well groomed and dressed nicely. When he would fall into melancholy she was there to lift his spirits. She would swallow up his periodic waves of cynicism, hesitation and anger like Thor’s well during a winter storm. He was neck deep in love yet convinced that she wanted to find a reason to end their relationship. Maybe he did not want to face a bitter truth. Maybe he wanted to believe that he was in love and that his love would last forever. Maybe he had lost himself in his own

doubts. Perhaps his love was on the edge of being swept away by his own illusory uncertainties, threatening to leave hers unwanted and neglected.

"No, my love, I'm not concerned about money. You're still young and inexperienced. I'm your first love. And I'm worried that your passion will disappear one day and you'll realize that you didn't love me after all. The realization that I'm maybe just a whim of your desires is painful for me to imagine. The thought that you'll leave me when your passion runs out and seek out another girl plagues my mind. And what's even worse is the thought that you'll be comparing me to another. And I never want to feel like I love a man more than he loves me!"

She curled away from his embraces with tears in her eyes. He attempted again to calm her unjustified fears and doubts of his honesty. Could she not see that he had given himself up to her entirely? Was she bent on playing around with his sentiments?

"Just because I'm young and you're my very first girl doesn't mean I don't know how to love someone. But, I've always noticed that you doubt me very often. This isn't the first time we talked about this. Don't you feel happy when you're with me?"

"I feel so happy with you that my head spins. When you're this close to me it's euphoric."

"So why do you worry? My love for you hasn't diminished despite us being apart for so long. It will probably disappear only if you stop loving me. That's my only fear - that you will stop loving me. I want to

be with you constantly. I can't get enough of you. And you drive me crazy all the time."

"I know, my dear. I feel the same way for you. When I'm with you I forget everything that I considered important before we're together. I shed off my stress from work, my frustrations with my studies, and my fear of my own shortcomings. When I'm with you I feel complete. But try to understand me. I'm worried about opening myself up to you. Offering you all the love that I have in my heart and then to lose you to nothing more than your lustful desires, only to be broken pitilessly by passion and not experience a truly sincere and embracing love is my gaping fear. I only want to know that you are sure in your own feelings for me. Don't think that I distrust you or wish to find a cause to push you away from myself."

"I need you by my side. There's nothing that I wouldn't do for you. I only begin to doubt you when you doubt me. Then I start trying to find something wrong with myself. I attempt to discover what I did wrong. But my feelings for you are sincere."

"When our passion runs out what will we be left with? What will you be left with? Sure we are enjoying ourselves now. Our relationship has just begun. But our passion cannot last forever. Once it becomes exhausted what do we do? We can't make a sound judgment based on pleasure in bed alone."

She was as tense as a cat held up high above a pool of deep water and began to tremble violently from panic. He noticed her anxiousness and tried to

calm her fears. Placing his hand on her neck, he began to massage it caressingly, reaching through her hair and up to her head, gently clasping and releasing with his fingers. She closed her eyes to relax. He lay down close by her side and kissed the back of her neck tenderly. Her edginess lessened and she settled into a more playful mood.

“We don’t share just a bodily attraction. We spend time together every day. We know each other’s habits, likes, dislikes and foolishness absentmindedness. Why do you think that there might be nothing more than lust between us?”

“Right now we’re together, but you’ll have to leave me soon. Again we’ll be apart for who knows how long. And you don’t have enough money to marry. But I want to marry and I need to. I’m tired of putting in all my energy into work, but with every day that goes by I see no result. I just want to marry and hand over all my problems to a husband. I wish I could just find a handsome millionaire and I wouldn’t have to work and just relax. So, if you want to sleep with me you’ll have to pay for the rent, take out the garbage, do the laundry, bring me breakfast to bed, take me shopping, take me on vacations wherever I want to go and give me one of your credit cards so I can use it any time I need to. But that’s not the entire list yet.”

“So what do I get in return?”

“You’ll get me, which is worth more than anything else.”

"I thought that when we sleep together we both get pleasure in return? Why should it be one-sided?"

She had a sly look upon her face filled with content with his reaction of feeling wronged and used. But is to be capricious really a bad thing? All she wanted was to keep him in check occasionally and make sure he remained loyal, seeing a burst of raw emotion that made him value her all the more.

"No, I get less pleasure from sex with you."

"You know what bothers me? That fact that you're saying all this as if all I want is sex from you. That you're demanding I should do everything and that you get no pleasure from being together. It makes me feel that you just need to use me. Those things that you're talking about I would do anyway. There's no need to list them like a contract."

By now they were both aware of a developing argument that was bubbling and threatening to explode to the surface. The girl saw that her lover was becoming frustrated in his inability to understand her concerns and took her joking manner close to heart. To sooth his growing vexation she decided to make a compromise – to save her troubles for another time. Only time would help dip her lover into the pool of understanding, cooling his temper and allow his reason shine through.

"Forget what I said. It was foolish of me. I was just joking, my dear. Don't take my words seriously. We're together right now and that's what matters."

They paused to kiss each other passionately. They still had an insatiable urge to talk before making love once more. They needed some hope of reassurance. Only by hearing their voices could they regain their relaxed composure and infatuate their own ears, drowning them in melodious, affectionate words. He spoke to her gently. He spoke to his beloved. They faced each other, continuing to lay side-by-side and staring into one another's eyes engrossingly.

"What do you think of my work?"

"You mean the story you're working on? I like your writing very much and I believe in you. I'm sure that it will turn out great."

"I think I have some really good ideas, but I always doubt that I came up with something new. I'm constantly unhappy with the fact that there's always something in the way, thwarting my ability to make a breakthrough."

"It's probably because you haven't fully thought out the plot and what you want to say through your story."

As they continued to converse, captivated by one other, an ensemble of shadows passed along the walls. Gigantic dog-like shapes stalked the room, pausing to sniff for a scent, each facing opposite directions and revealing their keen fangs. They streamed along the wall behind both lovers in uneasy expectation of unearthing some secret and dashed away from the approaching moonlight, vanishing into a dark corner behind the dresser.

"Some people aim for perfection. I don't aspire to achieve it. I don't want to. It's the omissions that make us love everything we do. Nothing can be ideal. Think about it. If everything was flawless we would soon go crazy. Even the desire for perfection cannot exist without imperfection. Either way, both these words are meaningful only in a certain context. In the end really, it probably comes down to what someone personally believes. Unless someone convinces himself or herself of something, unless they begin to believe in a certain idea, they won't change those that they held in the first place. But sometimes an idea can be either like a polite, dirty rascal or a blatant, considerate wise man. It takes a lot of effort to sort them apart. Or maybe they're one and the same but we fail to see it."

"I do really like what you're saying. I really think you should pursue what you like doing, honey." She said it in a warmhearted tone, splashed with faith in his abilities and smudged with a little suspicion of his periodic laziness and unproductive inclinations.

"Really? I don't think I should. I feel I have no skill, inspiration or talent. It's one of the worst feelings a person can experience. We all need recognition from others. We see ourselves relative to others around us. To find a purpose in our lives is what guides us. Without that thin, fragile string of hope binding us to ourselves we become lost in a desert of denial. I try to be honest with everyone I ever come to meet – only loneliness answers my greeting. I

always feel like Dostoyevsky's Mishkin and rereading his novel only makes me feel more so. I'm just a hopeless romantic that wants to hide from everyone and become a distrusting skeptic."

The moonlight had by now entirely coated their nakedness. A large black cat appeared on the windowsill unnoticed by the couple. As it yawned and licked its paws both lovers' yearning for one another intensified. It leaped into the room and changed into a shadow that crawled along the wall until it too settled into a dark corner behind the mirror. The girl released a long, sweet yawn and declared:

"Enough of these depressing thoughts! We're finally together so let's move on to something more pleasant. Why don't we make each other comfortable and you can show me your philosophy in action. Most philosophers just talk and talk some more. They write pages upon pages about problems here and there. They come up with fancy long-winded arguments. Some even sprinkle around a few numbers hither and thither. But rarely does someone plunge head first into those problems in an attempt to fix them. So why don't you try your best to fix me up, my lover?"

As both caught each other's romantic, affectionate embraces, the evening moonlight slid delicately through the suede velvet curtains, singling out their yearning gazes and knavishly skimming along their carnal, intimate moments, pausing on a single, dark red rose resting in a tall, thick crystal vase. The neglected, wrinkled flower glistened like an indefatigable eye full of ill, baneful jealousy. After

having satisfied their natural, pleasurable urges, she walked up to the vase and pulled the rose out of its captivity. As she spun it around in her small, delicate fingers, sniffing the dwindling, aromatic scent, she pricked her ring finger at its tip. The windows instantaneously shattered, sending sharp shards glass flying through the air. Candles that had been inexistent appeared floating in the chamber erupting in extraordinary bright flames. The petal of the flower began to bleed a trickle of blood, covering her hands and spreading across her naked body in a curvaceous pattern. The sepals spread apart, elongated and merged together to form a single, hardened stiletto point that stealthily slid into the palm of her hand. She walked up to her slumbering lover and punctured his heart with it, the thorns tearing away at her left hand. The blood dripped onto the shards of glass on the floor and flowed languorously to her bare feet. She walked away, fading into an emerging, haunting sepia that pulsated throughout the room, filling it with a myriad of prisms of obscure light that swallowed all sweet memories, love, and life itself.

Up in the saddened, remorseful clouds, a supernal, coruscating midnight sun lambently murmured its euphonious ode of peacefulness. As he dropped his gaze upon the river, he observed an aerie mist forming above the water, its white tops gleaming in the caliginous light. He was once again facing the mysterious girl. The rose was in his right hand. It was now raining heavily, but he did not feel wet or cold. He looked at himself in wonder, his eyes

widening from disbelief and confusion. He was dressed in a black, silky shirt, long, baggy pants and a short cloak. On his head was a soft, fabric hat much resembling a beret, pulled down to one side. He was barefooted. Touching his new clothes, Valiko yelped out in unnerving incredulity. The fabric felt like a shadow that he could not touch or feel but had seeped into his flesh, binding itself to his very corporeal existence. He tried to tear them off, but as he grasped the murky outlines and contours his hands felt as slippery and icy as though he had dipped them into a frosty snow. He looked at his palms and saw that they were covered in a strange inky liquid. He submerged his hands into the river to wash it off. The substance came off instantly, but the water scorched his hands like alcohol poured on a deep wound. Rain itself could not penetrate him despite its persistent efforts. The rose itself was covered in a profusion of static water droplets. As he turned it around and admired its beauty, the droplets remained motionless, trapped in time and space. As he touched a droplet out of intrigue, it dispersed into many smaller ones, but his finger remained dry. He placed the rose into his suit pocket and looked at his hand. It was scarred from the thorns and bled faintly, but he felt no pain or discomfort.

A colossal white, wooly hound walked up and lay down by the girl's side. It was a formidable creature with dark, intelligent eyes so commanding that they seized one's attention and seemingly tested the will of one's mind in resisting its powerful aura of

violent enticement by peering hauntingly at its prey. As he looked into those bottomless, chilling globes of gloominess, he felt as though death itself stared at him musingly, deliberating his fate. He peered at the girl in hope of some explanation. She seemed amused at his perplexity and laughed mockingly.

“So did you enjoy making love to me?”

To these words he reacted with great irritability and with a surge of uncalled for vehemence. His good-natured, revealing face became as expressionless as a gnarly stonewall, a thin foggy veil enveloped his eyes, and his hands clenched tightly into quivering fists. The idea that he was being played with aggravated his pride. He felt tricked by his own hallucinations. It was all only just a vision. There was no passion or love. All he was left with was time. That fact that he was used for some unknown purpose he did not comprehend fuelled his fury. He suddenly felt impelled to seek some sort of vicious revenge upon her. To make her suffer was the only thought that crossed his mind.

“I did, but the ending was not so enjoyable.”

“Ha, it’s all about the process! The intrigue, the action, the words, the movements! Only they create a good or bad climax. You seem to care only for your own pleasure. All you felt was passion, not love. Yet you told me so convincingly otherwise. I took you to be an honest person. It seems that your honesty exists only to mask your desire for nothing but lustful appetite.”

This accusation only served to further feed his appetite for aggression and he began to growl savagely, clamping his teeth stiffly like a cornered animal fooled into a trap. To his surprise he no longer felt caged in by his depression. No longer was he bound by doubt. Only hatred filled in the gap left behind in his heart. Any feelings, either imagined or real, faded away into obscurity.

"Tell me who you are! What happened felt like hazy dream. What ill fortune besets me? I wronged no one, I told no lies, and I remained true to myself. Why then do you come to ruin my serene loneliness?"

"You do know me. You've known me all along. You are the one who, afraid of your own loneliness, called for me here in this park. You've dreamt of me during all those countless hours you spent in front of your computer, your books, and your notes. You've seen me in your dreams. You've wished constantly for me to come and overtake you. You wanted insanity to assail you! And now I have come. But still you hesitate to accept me."

"I did not wish for my lunacy to go so far. Who are you?"

"I am anger, revenge, defiance, cruelty, love, doubt, lust, intelligence, benevolence and violence all fused into a good heart. But since we all need a name for something, my name will be Elmira. And I came to you to give you what you had so desperately desired. You wished to part with your depression did you not? I heard your wails of bitter sorrow. You

hoped for a power to see through the falsity that surrounds you and bears down on you. I will give it to you to wield. You lost something in yourself at a point in time, suppressing it under the guise of loneliness and for the sake of inner peace. Nothing comes without cost. To see through falsehood, you're condemned to a life of a stranger, a wanderer, an outsider, a lost traveler seeking shelter amid a forest of deceit."

"Yes, I did lose something. I threw away my purpose in life into a sea of worries. I locked my happiness deep inside a room of memories and destroyed the key to it. I cast away joy in return for spiteful solitude."

Valiko suddenly felt relieved of the exhausting weight inside his chest. He felt unusually lighthearted and awake. But at the same time he felt impatient, agitated and urged to leap at her violently. He wanted to stab her through the heart as she did to him, except with a long, sharp knife. He sprung at her with a crazed roar that sounded like a battle-cry. But with a gentle wave of her hand the rose inside his pocket radiated with its former, genuine color and spread out, weaving around his neck and thrusting forth its serrated thorns lightly into his skin. The weight in his chest returned with even greater magnitude, forcing him to collapse to his knees. The white hound vaulted at him, pinning him to the ground and revealing its razor sharp canine teeth. Subdued, his mind fluttered in a daze. The behemoth released him and returned to its keeper. He returned

to his previous state of thoughtfulness, his momentary lapse of impulse fading away once again into a rough millstone upon his chest. She whispered gently, licking off red drops of blood that had begun to appear as raindrops on her supple lips and mouth. The rose slowly returned to its place inside his pocket, leaving a few burning scratches on his neck along the way.

"To no one do I wish a feeling of loss or aloneness. Every night is a lonely night and every day is a lonesome day. Those who have not felt this way are few but those who it plagues endlessly are even fewer. Take the rose."

"And if I do, it means that I give in to my own madness. I can't do that. I'd rather remain sane and without such a dreadful flower. What power can I possibly wield with a flower?"

"Deep down inside you do not want loneliness to consume you entirely, but at the same time that is what you want. At heart you are a defeatist that wants hope to appear and reach out to you. But as a romantic you do not believe in yourself, yet your fantasy is to save others from your own fate. Days go by and you wish for an imagined power that will let you influence the fate of others, punish the cruel, deceptive, hypocritical, and remorseless, thereby somehow shaping your own. You are against violence yet when the moment comes you embrace it. I am no Devil or evil spirit nor am I some kind of angel or kind apparition. I am the embodiment of your twisted reason and emotions."

"But surely nothing comes without cost or consequence?"

"Take the rose. It is a fitting incarnation of your raging insanity. You live your life as outcast from society yet you long to understand how to be a part of it. Your mind is unable to bear the hardship you have endured before this. You probably have no recollection of it. You are an inky silhouette. You need to find yourself. You need to save the Division Clock. Take a look at yourself in the mirror.'

When Elmira mentioned the clock, a hideous, mocking laugh blasted in the distance. The rose leaped out of his pocket once again and curled into a large, oval-like shape. The thorns near the ground formed into large, thick roots that dug into the earth at an exponential rate. It took on the shape of a mirror stand and a water drop, sliding off from one of the petals exploded into a shiny mirror. Elmira responded to Valiko's confused expression.

"Now, wet your hands with the substance that you felt while touching your clothes and approach the frame."

Valiko smudged both his hands in the liquid once more and came up to the frame carefully. The rose had rested itself on the very top of it, facing him like a spotlight. He cautiously raised his hands as if to place them through the structure. The dark, oozing liquid spread out to transform into a smooth, thin glass. He gazed at himself while keeping both hands rested upon it. His appearance and surroundings were like that of a personage from an impressionistic

painting. His presence appeared to be real, but was as smudgy as one of Monet's landscape paintings; his dark clothes a smear on canvas constantly rippling to the breeze. The view around him was a fantastical blend of abstract impressionistic contours interplaying with random patches of fantastical, serene color.

Rather than pinching himself to see if he was dreaming, he jumped back and punched through the glass. It shattered into pieces and his hand was cut by the blast of shards and began to bleed profusely. The rose untwined itself and hopped back once more into his suit pocket. Elmira approached him, her eyes fluttering with a seductive, deep sea blue. She raised his hand up to her mouth and licked the blood greedily with her snake like tongue. Each cut that she passed over healed with a painful, smoldering tingle. When she had finished she looked into his eyes pensively and returned to the rock, laying down in complete discontent. The enormous white hound, appeared by her side.

"My loyal hound, Samile, will follow you. If you ever need any help, call her name. If she judges that you are in grave danger, she may decide to help you."

"I don't understand, why may decide?"

"Because the Mask is no easy opponent."

Her composed countenance gave way to a diabolical wrath. The rose's stem stretched out to immeasurable proportions and wrapped around his entire body, constricting him like a snake, though its

thorns only lightly tickled his skin. The hound closed in on him like a predator on fresh meat. Valiko now understood the inevitability of his compliance to the will of his dementia.

“Defeat the Mask and you will find what you are looking for.”

The rose unwound itself back into Valiko's compartment deftly and Elmira's cool composure returned. Blood droplets materialized from an unknown rain cloud above her, which fell directly on her lips, which she smacked with content. Some invisible, deathly filter fed the monster.

“Remember Valiko, you are the one who invited me. The blood is a representation of your thirst for violence. You are bound by your imagination. Now it is time for me to leave you. Continue on your quest. Find the clock and defeat the Mask!”

It was almost pitch-black night. The rain continued to pour endlessly. A fiendish, swarthy handsome man stepped forth from the trees and walked steadily up to the rocks. He came up beside them. He was dressed in a cloaked black suit, wearing a princely, dirty silver chain over his neck and held out a brightly flaming, timeworn lamp on the tip of his ring finger between them. His entire presence seemed impenetrable by the glaring light, appearing as one consuming and hazy shadow just like Valiko's. Elmira arose and walked upon the trodden, grassy earth towards the trail from which she strayed. The great hound followed her steadily behind, sniffing the

muggy air. As it wandered increasingly farther from the light and into the freezing, dreary night its contoured shape shimmered briefly in a twisted human form. The darkness engulfed them completely in its outspread arms. Valiko stood up and turned to the strange figure standing silently before him. It was a figure in a greyish cloak that seemed too made of smoke. He smelled like a fire fuelled by cherry wood, which was pleasant and alluring.

"Who are you?"

"I am the Gatekeeper."

"Where am I?"

"Right now you are nowhere. You are lost in your own shadows of indecision."

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice. You can live in your past or take a risk by stepping forward to live with it. But it seems your own hesitancy has led you astray. You already made your choice when you called Elmira to yourself. If you follow me there is no turning back."

"And if I choose not to follow you?"

"The bloody stains upon the grass leave no trace as time passes, while the river flows on and on..."

Valiko's thoughts raced frantically – Was this all an illusion? What he dreaming? Was he mad? Seeing that his options were quite narrow and his sensations physically persuasive, he decided to follow the course of the tide.

"Fine then, I choose to go."

“Follow me. Keep your eyes on the light or you will fall and be lost.”

As they started to walk along the muddy path, dark, gloomy night gave way to bright, sunny daylight with a pulsating burst from the lantern and then subsided into twilight with another, more dim surge of light. Except for the morose, composed guide treading ahead of him, all else appeared unclear and vague as though seen through a pair of filthy, translucent lenses. As they made way through the dense forest only the obscure, waddling light of the lamp ahead of him gave any sign of consolation. Making several strides forward, spots of bright, white light began to flash all around, swirling into a black and white fresco. He now felt as though he was no longer walking upon the earth. His feet seemed to touch the same inky substance that was now a part of his being. With every step he took, his mood began to change drastically and the weight inside his chest became overpowering. In one step he was brought to tears by a feeling of profound desolation. With another he began to laugh out in beaming joy. And yet with another he passed into a violent rage and with every other step his fury continued to deepen.

He began to chase the Gatekeeper in an attempt to catch him and steal his lantern. Yet as he caught up to the keeper of shadows, his attempt to grab hold of him was like snatching a mist from the air. The wily figure evaporated and appeared once more in the distance. Cursing loudly, panting sporadically and feeling exhausted, Valiko halted. The

more he walked the more overwhelming his exhaustion became. Every step forward soon became agonizing. He took his eyes off the flame of the lantern and looked back. A small odd patch of muriatic light shined compellingly within a few steps of him. He turned around and walked towards it. He heard an ear-splitting cracking noise and the light vanished. A crevice had begun to form beneath his feet. From it, a horde of shadowy claws gushed out like a geyser, pulling him down forcefully. The Gatekeeper rushed forth and released a powerful streak of light from the lantern at them. The shadows vaporized with a hideous, bone-chilling shriek, freeing Valiko. The ruptured space closed up with a profusion of shiny, silver stitches of light that interweaved together in a cross pattern and left behind a faint sparkle. The Gatekeeper held out his lantern silently towards him and motioned him to follow obediently.

Sheer Erraticism

A note placed under a jar half-filled with tea. Candyland is near. The winds are howling. All that my mind remains focused on is keeping my thoughts clear. A chocolate perhaps? No, remember that you are on a diet. Only rice, no candy for you. Bah! Enough! Write the note and go do what you were bent on doing.

My Dear Elira,

Sitting here alone, with nothing more than this dreadful whistling of winds to comfort and ease the pain, makes my heart rumble with agony and gradually fills it with a desire to flee this awful place as quickly as I can. How many times have I sat by the windows looking, nay, staring out into the world beyond the thin layer of glass? There is nothing beyond it that is of interest to me and yet I am forced to comprehend the magnitude of its importance to my physical survival. I am my own prisoner. My thoughts either betray me or I am slowly going mad. I do not know what you will think of it, but even all hope for hope seems to have withered away.

And yet I stop myself here! There is a way to break free from these chains! I have long thought over my own existence. I have tried to employ empirical and logical reasoning to aid my dilemma. I have listened to the reasonable explanations and detached theories of psychologists who have tried to come to my aid and guide me. I have tried to adapt my thinking and train of thought to incorporate the accepted social norms, practices and morals that without which I would be deemed an outsider in an instant. I feel constricted by others even when there seems to be no cause to feel so. Do I have the right to such a feeling? Is there evidence that this is a normal state?

I have lived all my life in a perpetual state of adaptation and made my primary goal the avoidance of pain. I had realized from an early age that in order

to avoid getting noticed, witnessed or discovered if you will, that I would need to keep a low profile. Why you may ask? Why the need to hide, to find a dark corner in this world and stay put there like a stray dog? Is it because I want to be above all others? Yes. I want to feel independent. I do not want others to meddle in my private space. I do not want to attack and crush that which I hold dear to my heart, my own existence, safety and love. This is something they can do in an instant! How many times have I witnessed the paradoxes and hypocrisy which plagues all peoples and in all countries, all nationalities and all groups regardless of time, country or social strata! We are all quick to judge and draw our tongues forth, spewing our empty words and saliva upon the very soul of those we do not wish to know and probably will never come to know fully and truly. How many times have I found myself bullied, ridiculed, harassed and outcast? For what? For being honest? For never wronging a living soul?

It fills my heart with hate, anger and a fervent desire to vent my rage in a brutal physical offensive. I want to hurt. I want to see blood spilt. I want to tear them to pieces. I want to destroy them. I want flames, ashes and utter annihilation! When defending myself all I get is a remonstrance from authority figures! Can you believe their nerve? Can you believe their logic? Even though I can attempt to understand it rationally, empirically, philosophically and otherwise, I will never accept it! They say that I cannot use physical force to defend myself! What an absurdity this is, is it not?

Someone attacks my dignity, my pride or my physical well-being and if I defend myself I will be considered just as guilty of some kind, of committing some kind of abuse upon the other! The solution they offer, the way out? They say: report it to authorities and they will resolve the issue.

Ah! How sound is their logic. How upright and noble they are. How sweet is their song of romance when their only motivation is to cover their own asses by upholding some high off principle. Someone has attacked me, should I simply let them get away with it and say nothing, do nothing? I want to know that if they do something to me which I do not like, my retribution shall be so severe as to deter them from even glancing my way. Why should I be denied this right? The police have it. The government has it. Try and insult a police officer or physically attack them. What will be their reaction? They have the right to use force against you without consequence. The laws protecting individuals against undue force from authority? Do not deceive yourself. I do certainly do not. How many instances have you heard of police abuse? Has any one of them received a remonstrance that would be equal to the harm they have committed? Ask yourself: when individuals rally to protest against a government, what is the usual response? Physical confrontation. Pure and simple direct control using force. They have the right to be armed, to use force, to beat you up, to arrest you, to confine you, to strip you of any rights. You have the right to do nothing. To take that right means facing

an entire army dedicated to wiping you off the face of the world and social stratum, to put you in a cage to rot for the rest of your life, living on a diet of noodles and soup with nothing but a hole as a window and a yellow toilet seat.

What to do? Oh what to do? I spent my entire life trying to avoid the consequences of direct confrontation. I was under the impression that if I kept silent and played by the rules, that I would be able to live peacefully. Now I certainly have nothing more to lose. I will rise like the awakened Krakon. Surely, the ancient Greek philosophers did not mean a monster in the direct sense. Surely, it was symbolic of a human nature, a desire for freedom, for vengeance! I want to utterly and totally rip apart all and anyone who steps on my path. I want to shred them to pieces using my bare teeth and batter the hypocrites with my hardened knuckles. What would I give for a one on one with some nasty critic or snottosed and corrupt government official! I will make them pay dearly for all they have done. I will give them something that will make their knees tremble.

I do not want to conquer. I want destruction of those who limit the freedom of others. The laws are for the regulation of behavior and protection of society. Bullshit! The laws are absurd, limiting, constraining and unfair. They were always that way throughout history and so will remain. You say we have evolved? That over time laws have become more progressive, less focused on the actual crime and more on the social factors surrounding both the

individual and the circumstances of a crime? That punishments have become less severe? True! That laws have made it necessary to delegate the protection of individuals and their property by an outside agency such as the police so as to preserve equality? True! That laws have enabled modern society to develop, for economies to rise, for people to abandon warfare and not worry for their safety? Has modern society eliminated warfare? In my opinion the world wars far surpassed any kind of imaginable horror and destruction than in all ages. But, perhaps this is because of the evolution of communication and print media which has allowed everyone to experience the war in all its encompassing violence. I do not know.

All I know is that history does not change, that people's natures remains constant so long as the human population continues to exist, breed and until every individual is dead a cycle of basic biological needs will continue to dictate their and our actions. Oh, let me show them my powers. Let me demonstrate how wrong they were. How tired am I of playing their game. I am not content with beating them at it. All I want is peace. I want to know that I have lived in freedom. With a steel jaw, clenched fists and cold face do I now stand and aim for the door, for today I have come across an example of how low we creatures are in the face of Nature, in the face of the greater powers and secrets of the Universe which no one will ever be able to fully comprehend.

I leave this note to you, my darling. I only wish that I could say this all to you while holding your hand close and keeping it warm. But alas, you are so far away and time is a barrier that constrains me. I must do this for you, for your sake and mine. I cannot reveal the full purpose in this note alone. The time is not yet ripe for me to lay it down in words here. I hope to see you soon, free and at ease. Finally, I will be able to be commander of my own life and free to act as I wish without fear!

Your sweet Gummy Bear,
Valiko

Bottle Effect

The Mask hovered incessantly around the clock, eyeing it in silent satisfaction, its expression showing immeasurable content at having secured an invaluable and powerful prize. In a flurry of insane ecstasy it flew in zig-zag trajectories, twisting and turning in a spasm of erratic hysteria, causing a convulsive flurry of twenty-one different facial expressions. Zipping past the clock, it scathed the outer dark wood frame with its razor sharp metallic edges as if taunting it to retaliate. It sought to provoke an proportionate reaction as if daring an opponent to accept a duel. The Division Clock continued to keep time gracefully, swinging the pendulum without interruption and to the dismay of the Mask, without a hint of acquiescence to its insidious taunts. Growing ever more impatient with the inability to stimulate a reactionary burst of retaliation from the object of its obsession, the Mask settled directly across near a large wooden gate, strengthened with iron and stood like a relic from an ancient, medieval castle, impermeable and impenetrable to brute force, scarred by countless arrows, spearheads and siege engines.

Nestled in an eerie chamber surrounded with walls of immeasurably thick layers of dark matter, multiple shadows rippled across the inky fabric, sending out hollow shrieks that sounded like knives being sharpened for butchering. Hither and thither a terrifying, oversized rhinoceros emerged from a

random point in the wall and charged towards the clock with electrifying speed, sending out howls of thunder and blasts of lightning from its horn. As the rhinoceros approached, readying its horn for hammering, the Division Clock's hands alighted with a faint shimmering glow that instantaneously burst the rhinoceros into tiny inky droplets which were then sucked into the dark fabric once more.

The Dark Matter urged the continuation of the attempt at conquering the clock, sending out shadows employing different tactics in the hopes of finding a weak spot. Next came a panther-like inky shadow that mimicked the cautiousness and slyness of the animal. It emerged from a wall at the back of the clock and approached carefully, soundlessly and effortlessly in the hopes of springing forth to avoid dispersal by the clock hands. As it neared the back of the clock, it opened its mouth to reveal its sharp dagger teeth and spread out its rapier-shaped claws. Ready to pounce like a cat on a mouse, the panther's tail tip elongated to form a trident-like point. It leaped forth in the hopes of piercing the clock's backside with its claws. Yet just as it seemed it would succeed, clock shimmered and released a blinding white light that annihilated the panther and singed the dark fabric. A small hole appeared as though hit with a spotlight that briefly displaced the inky shadows, revealing a starry sky before the Dark Matter covered it up again.

Suddenly, a swarm of dark beetles emerged from below the bed of smooth pebbles covering the

ground surrounding the clock and completely covered it in a matter of seconds. The Dark Matter sent out a slithering anaconda that engulfed the clock in a forceful, constricting bind. For a brief moment, it seemed as though the clock was unable to counter the double attack, showing no signs of resistance. And then, suddenly the clock released a blast of light that swirled into a tornado of bright light and blazing fire that exterminated the dark shadowy shapes. Cringing from the loss, the Dark Matter's fabric rippled with a tinge of fear at the power housed by the old grandfather clock. The Mask showed an expression of disgusted defeat and faced the gate, waiting for something to appear with a semblance of anxiousness. The gate gracefully opened and the Servant stepped forth.

Bowing lowly before the Mask, the Servant glanced at the clock sideways with visible trepidation. The great power emanating from the Division Clock was intense in its magnitude, which he attempted to veil by raising the side of a dark inky cloak as through holding up a shield to protect oneself from a violent blast of overpowering white light. The Mask seemed to express profound disdain at the Servant's faintness.

"So you have come, my loyal shadow."
Uttered the Mask. "What news of Valiko? Have his days finally been numbered?"

The Servant kept his cloak raised and bowing once more as if bracing for an unexpected and violent reaction, he stated in a plain voice and as

tactfully as possible, "It appears as though Valiko is indeed lost, my lord."

The Mask did not quite seem content with a suggestive response and demanded a rather more detail report. "It appears as though you wish to experience the full magnitude of my wrath, Servant! It appears is unacceptable! I need to know! I need to know without doubt that Valiko will find his way here and do what is expected of him!"

The brushed metallic surface of the Mask began to puff with an expression of self-destructing anger that bordered on a delirious paranoia, cracking to expose veins of reddish lava that flowed and dripped on the pebbled surface below it. With a fury, the mask began to inhale the inky substance from the walls, sucking in the slime greedily. After a few moments of this grotesque feast, the Mask closed its mouth, swallowing everything. The cracks oozed with the inky matter, pouring down on the pebbles and, reacting with the burning lava, transformed into innumerable black spiders that dispersed and hid underneath the rocks. With a slight shudder, as if an earthquake had passed, a dark mass began to form behind the Mask, forming large animal-like paws and legs that were unnatural and dragon-like in shape. A titanic pair of wings formed and extended out from the dark body. The Mask giggled with glee and disconnected itself from the mass, allowing the last blob to form a head in the shape crossed between a Komodo dragon, crocodile and eagle. The Mask sharply turned to face the shadowy creature and

released a torrent of flames upon it. A monster emerged from the fire with metallic scales, steel sharpened claws and a wingspan that would put the Hercules plane to shame.

With a yell that would shatter the decibel scale, the Mask summoned the beast to action, "Lead him to me!" With a roar, the creature raised itself into the air with a single sweep of its massive wings and flew into an inverse tornado-like opening from the top of the ceiling.

The Servant took a step backwards out of respect, but nevertheless kept his cloak raised. Turning to face the object of its dissatisfaction once more, the Mask spoke as softly as the serene silence before a great storm. "Do you have the key?" asked the metal face.

"No my lord, I do not have it," replied the Servant and in an attempt to avert the application of any potential force towards itself, quickly inserted a comment. "However, if I may propose a solution to this dilemma, my lord, we could save the time and energy needed to harness the clock's power."

Although the urge to liquidate the Servant was intensely visible by the dispassionate facial expression etched onto the metal face, curiosity wrestled with the lust for destruction. Curiosity overcame passionate insanity.

"And what is your proposition on this most delicate matter?" inquired the Mask. "I am running out of time. The clock is proving most stubborn to crack open. Without the key, the power within it

remains impenetrable, like a magnificent mountain housing an apocalyptic volcano. I need that power. We need that power. With it I can wield every single atom of this universe.”

Daring a bold question, the Servant asked, “With the power you harness, my lord, what is your intention, if I may respectfully inquire?”

“Ha!” answered the Mask sharply. “You do not deserve to know due to your failure, but I believe that you will be more motivated this time around to achieve my ends. If not, then my metal beast will swallow you whole! The clock houses the ultimate power to wield the fabric of time itself. I intend to absorb that power and with it build a central fortress from an unlimited supply of dark matter! I will twist the universe and make it my own! Ha ha!”

As the gate doors slammed shut behind, the Servant faced the square path in front which stretched out into the horizon, with a sandy desert surrounding it. From a secret compartment somewhere in the back of the cloak, a pair of worn binoculars were removed and positioned just in the area where the eyes should be. However, the Servant’s face remained veiled in a darkish mist, hazy and unclear as an evening smog. A puzzled and concerned “Hmm” revealed a growing frustration at the inability to find the targeted object through the lenses. The binoculars were returned to storage. The Servant remained still in self-deliberation. A plan had to be formed and activated immediately. However, Valiko was not visible under the radar.

“Could he have miraculously escaped?” thought the Servant. “If so, then my fate is sealed in the belly of the Mask’s metallic dragon-beast, to be slowly digested and ceasing to exist.”

Just as the Servant was deliberating the outcome of failure, a fireberg floated past in the distance, releasing a bright spark of flame and ice. A large chunk of the path was ripped apart due to the impact of the floating icy volcano. Taking a deep breath, the Servant focused all thoughts on finding Valiko. The Mask could definitely feel the presence of the boy somewhere lost in the web. Escape would be highly improbable. Possible, yet extremely unlikely. The labyrinth was too complex. Yet, he was nowhere, but somewhere. This led the Servant to a sudden realization, “He must have descended deeper into the web! He is in the Deep Zone.”

Such a possibility simultaneously unnerved the Servant and made the Mask’s plans more difficult to lead to fruition. The Deep Zone was inaccessible even to the Mask itself due to the highly unpredictable concentrations of energy, madness and randomness. Valiko could very possibly never return and be consumed within the depths of his own hallucinations. The Servant would be sliced and diced without delay, consumed by an inferno of Valiko’s own reflection. The Deep Zone’s energy could very well be used by Valiko to destroy all of the Masks’ visions of grandeur. An indirect rescue plan was the optimal strategy in this case. With a swift gesture, the Servant blew a waft of smoke using the cloak. A

large, two meter high bottle of bubbling, carbonated water formed on the path. Summoning an inky tornado, the Servant sent it carrying the bottle into the Deep Zone.

Deep Zone

When the door shut tightly behind Valiko it was crushed into a pulp, dispersing into the dark abyss of nothingness and leaving an empty space in its place. Surrounding him was the same monotone and dreary darkness which had nearly broken any will to continue further with its unspeakable, mad and hallucinatory dangers. Looking down, he noticed that there was no longer any path, but a long stairwell leading into a suspiciously arched tunnel entrance. The steps appeared to be made of a smoky grey stone, worn smooth from the multitude of feet which had passed its way over time. They were remnant of a descent into an ancient dungeon hosting gruesome tortures, but a more positive speculation as a potential wine cellar was more pleasing to Valiko. As soon as he glanced at the steps with the thought of descending, they transformed chameleon-like into a saturated, bright and colorful rosy quartz that glowed with an ambient light. The archway, which was lined with the greyish stone, released a pulsating glow which, like a chain domino reaction, dispersed outwards to reveal a wall of pinkish stone that stretched nearly to infinity in all directions. Despite the warm light emanating from the stones, it was not enough to pierce through the thick darkness, permeating all space like an impregnable smog.

The luminous invitation was unexpected and heightened Valiko's interest as well as apprehensiveness. If he had learned anything from

his experiences in this dark place, it was that it was dangerous, full of surprises and beyond comprehension in the scope of its madness. The radiant display of a beautiful panorama composed of vivid pink color and glowing light was a welcoming relief from the darkness which made one's heart heavy and led to an utterly depressing state of mind with unnerving thoughts, memories and hopes for the future. It was definitely a trap! Turning sharply around, Valiko hoped to find an alternative route, but faced a steep cliff that opened up to an ocean composed of a slimy inky water that crashed against the jagged rock stretching below the drop. The choice was clear - either commit suicide by dropping to his death or continue on. Even if he managed to miraculously survive after the drop, there was a herd of black, whale sized sharks browsing near the perimeter. Valiko was not ready to die a gruesome death by his own choice, unless the circumstances were indeed dire, and even then he wanted to keep his options open.

Turning back around, Valiko decided to simply sit down and wait in the hopes that some idea would allow him to break free from the Mask's labyrinth of despair. As soon as he made the move to sit down on one of the steps, a dark metallic chair popped out from underneath, in the form of a spiked chair that resembled a medieval torture device. Each spike resembled a sharp, oversized, slender nail that would cause unimaginable pain if he were to risk sitting down. Each time Valiko attempted to sit on the

surface by switching his position, it would disappear and pop up instantly below his body, leaving him no other option but to stand. Going a further step in mocking his attempt to take pause and contemplate, a neon stripe that looked like a digital news strip ran across the top: "Just try it! To add to the mockery, a wind began to blow from the cliff as if urging him towards the steps.

It was clear that the Mask, with a perverted twist of black humor, was forcing only one option upon him. Staying meant facing consistent taunts, while moving forward almost certainly meant facing some unknown danger yet again. Valiko preferred the danger over the taunts or cliff jumping. He descended slowly down towards the archway. On the way down, he turned around and spat on the steps behind him in an act of symbolic defiance at being forced into a corner. The spit landed on the stones and with a sizzle turned into a scorpion with a sting head the size of a tennis ball. It started on Valiko, as if commanded by a demonic spirit to attack fearlessly and without fear of consequence to its own welfare. Valiko immediately bolted down the steps without looking back from the gruesome fear of being stung. The potential aftereffects of poison causing immediate, unceremonious and irreversible death far outweighed any sense of pride, vanity or morality.

A loud chuckle resounded in the background like a fragment of a grand symphony, imbued with a venomous hate and foreboding evil, that escorted its listener into the depths of an underground prison

with unspeakable delight. Awaiting Valiko was a set of indescribable, contorted and grisly encounters that would test his nerves, conscious and any beliefs about himself, the world and the perception of it.

Soul Dungeon

As Valiko walked through the tunnel, a complete and utter penumbra engulfed him until the light from the rosy stones was snuffed like a burning candle by the delicate pinch of a colossal hand. He kept walking briskly, terrified at the thought that the scorpion would continue its pursuit in the darkness. The thought of being killed in the dark with the inability to see it coming further accelerated his ever increasing pace.

A dim flicker of light could be seen in the distance. Running towards it, Valiko came to a large fireplace, made of black amethyst and housing an intensely burning fire that smelled of cherry wood and pine. The smell of the fire was surprisingly pleasant and enrapturing in stark contrast to the somber surroundings, which were hardly bearable. In front of the fireplace was a solid wooden table of broad proportions, its surface incredibly polished to reveal and accent a unique grain that embodied all the spectacular colors of autumn. The legs of the table were carved into the shape of reptilian paws, the scales were meticulously crafted and painted to look as realistic as possible. Appearing rectangular at first sight, the tabletop mutated into an elliptic figure

as Valiko approached it. Coming closer, it metamorphosed into a triangular shape. On the table was a trench knife and a soft leather belt sheath lying beside it. Its tough-looking brass handle looked worn, chipped and blackened from heavy use, but the blade had a razor sharp edge that could slice easily through anything imaginable. A scintillation of light from the fire revealed a giant door, its iron linings and handle glistening with a soft yellowish glow.

Without a second thought, Valiko grabbed the knife and tied the sheath to his waist. A weapon to defend himself from any potential threat was welcome. Desperate for some form of protection, he secured the knife in the ideally manufactured leather placeholder while stroking the surface of the table gently in respect for the sublime craftsmanship. Feeling more confident with an offensive tool in his possession, Valiko decided to take his chances from now on, moving forward rather than looking sideways. Relying on an attack instead of mounting a fear-stained defensive. Preparing for action, instead of deliberation. Acting immediately rather than waiting for events to force a hand. He opened the door and stepped through without delay, but what he witnessed far exceeded any far flung expectations.

It was an early summer morning. Valiko was facing a dirty, beaten and unpaved road. He was standing in a ditch and the door was nowhere to be found. Across the road stood a building, its once bright red bricks now a smoky grey. By the sign on

the very top Valiko could tell from the Cyrillic that he was somewhere in Eastern Europe. Something felt odd. Holding up his hands, he attempted to overcome his sudden stupor. His body appeared like a blurry pastel painting, drawn with several shades of black color, resulting in a murky, obscure umbra that looked demonic, threatening and incomprehensible. He felt entirely normal, but his outward visual presence caused a slight panic. Looking for some cover, Valiko quickly dodged across the road and hid behind a tree and bushes, keeping his head low to avoid being noticed. His very movement bent the fabric of space around him, causing a disturbance that bent the light around the contours of an ethereal shape.

The early morning dew was still clinging tightly to the blades of grass, yet to be evaporated into a listless mist by the rays of warm sunlight. Not a soul was present. The school was based in a mountainous, rural area, with numerous cliffs and the nearest house out of sight. There were a countless number of brightly colored tulips planted in front of the school. With their gentle yellows, mellow oranges and lovely pinkish hues, the tulips gave a breath of fresh life into the ruinous school building, which otherwise would have made enter it unbearable. Valiko could not help but feel the pleasant honey aroma, lazily drifting with the cool morning breeze, overcome any shock, hopeless and doubt that may have plagued his conscious. Everything about the air, smell and place seemed out of place with the creeping wretchedness

that dominated the atmosphere, as though predicting an unfortunate event. It stirred a feeling of gloominess that was nigh impossible to shake off. Something felt wrong. The combination of angelical flowers lining the walls of the dismal building seemed out of place. Yet, as always the world seemed a better place in contrast.

With a slight uncontrollable shudder, Valiko spotted a man hiding out in the bushes directly across from his own hideout. The suspicious figure was waiting for someone. It was a tradition in rural areas such as this one that the eldest child of a particular class should come a half hour early to water all the flowers. Valiko noticed a girl skipping tiredly along the path on her way to perform her duties. She could have been no older than eight years. She approached the door of the school and picked up a rusty old flower bucket lying on the steps along with just another simple bucket. Filling the latter with water from the well, she proceeded to pour it carefully into the former, making all the preparations as though in fear of being scolded by her teacher. Proceeding to flower all the tulips, she walked by the bushes concealing the man. He leaped out at her. It all happened too quickly. He forcefully covered her mouth and painfully seized both arms. Taking her into the bushes, Valiko could see him making an attempt to rape the girl to satisfy his carnal, monstrous urges. Slow to overcome his disbelief, Valiko's delayed reaction quickly grew into a furious hatred both at his own inaction and at the villain. Yet, when he tried

rush forward to save the little one, a powerful force held him in place. Struggling with an aerial quagmire, an invisible barrier had been placed in front of him, preventing any action. His loud, vehement yells directed at the miscreant were muted by the same barrier, like a soundproof chamber.

Valiko then witnessed how the bastard sharply pulled back the girl's head by her long blonde hair. He slashed her delicate throat with a homemade, jagged knife and left her body lying to bleed profusely against a birch tree. The poor girl's throat spouted forth a fountain of blood, staining the soft, black earth with her innocent life essence. As she lay there with her arms askew and her neck gashed open, Valiko could not bear the sickening sight and the ghastly sensations of horror that overwhelmed him.

Valiko felt as guilty as if he had been an accomplice to the unspeakable murder, having done nothing to prevent it. A deep hatred of the bastard transformed into a bitter, spiteful malevolence. Valiko made one more attempt at breaking past the barrier. With a thundering cry of intense wrath, he shattered the invisible barrier. Shards of mirror glass scarred his face as they shot out from the wall, breaking from the intense pressure exerted towards it. Valiko's entire black and white shape was now stained with bright red blood. Dashing towards the bastard, Valiko focused all thoughts at avenging the young girl's life. As the bastard walked away from the gruesome site remorselessly, content with having

relieved himself of his sexual stress, he was stunned by Valiko's storming roars of passion. He pulled out his knife once more, disturbed that someone had possibly witnessed him during the act. He decided to fight to the death. He leaped out to stab Valiko in the chest, but his knife vanished into a wisp of thin air. Unable to comprehend how this had occurred, he had no trouble formulating an alternative action plan. The man punched Valiko straight in the jaw. Valiko fell back, surprised at his own corporeality. He realized that though endowed with a special appearance he nonetheless physically existed in both time and space.

The rose was in Valiko's hand. The bastard leaped at him once more. Valiko pointed the rose directly at him. It lashed out viciously. Wrapping around the man's neck, it constricted his breath and pierced his veins with its sharp thorns. The rose slowly jabbed deeper into the man's tissue as he struggled to free himself, in order to prolong his agony and suffering. Valiko saw the blood vanish as the drops fell to the ground. When bastard's body was finally lifeless, the rose released its steely grip, dropping it to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Bringing the rose close to his nose, Valiko licked a few drops of blood dripping from the thorns, his eyes flashing with a tinge of wild, light green. Samile appeared in the distance, its haunting contours revealing its thirst for the blood of the guilty. The colossal hound approached diligently and grabbed the soul by its leg, dragging it off noiselessly

into an emerging prism of sepia amid a haze of obscure light. Valiko dragged the body to the nearest cliff and pushed it into the chasm below. He walked up to the very fringe of the precipice. Was the final push the right thing to do? To punish murderers, rapists or any other guilty of some heinous act against the innocent, by taking justice into his own hands by killing them?

A voice clamored and resonated like a constraining echo in his mind, forcing him to take a step back. A woman pulled him away from the brink with a strong tug on his arm. She hugged him lovingly. Valiko reached out to her lips, closing his eyes to savor the heavenly kiss. But nothing happened. He opened them to see the rose in his hands, its colorless petals dripping with warm blood. The red drops fell on a frosty snow surface.

He saw a note. It was his writing. It was his story. He needed to find what he had lost. He needed more blood. He needed to find a way out. He needed to escape his perpetual madness. He slid away into the embracing snowstorm in search of some sign of hope.

Springtime of Life

Wandering into the raging blizzard of heavy snow and chilly winds, Valiko covered himself with an inky cloak to insulate himself from the freezing cold. "Where did I get the cloak from?" he wondered as he wrapped it around his body after which he looked like a minuscule black caterpillar cocoon.

He could barely see two steps in front of him as he trudged through the meter deep snow. Continuing along, the strong gales forced him to lower his head and blindly keep moving forward. Although the cloak kept him snugly warm, as the conditions worsened, he began to feel just how frigid Mother Nature can become, mercilessly pounding the earth in full force with ice. He suddenly bumped headfirst into something. Raising his head, he saw a vintage red telephone booth fully covered in ice, making it nearly unrecognizable. Regardless, it would be a safe haven from the ever-increasing magnitude of the ice storm.

An attempt to force through the slim door was useless. It was completely frozen shut by a thick layer of ice. No pushes or kicks would break through it. Valiko took the rose into his hand. He wondered if by imagining a tool in his hand, the rose would form into it. As he held it up, picturing an item he sorely needed, a large sledgehammer formed in his hand. Valiko wasted no time in pounding the telephone booth, to free it of its icy grip and seek shelter. After

several intense hits, he managed to get to the door. The sledgehammer transformed back into the rose and Valiko shut himself quickly inside.

He had no idea what his next action would be. His only thoughts were focused on avoiding the cold and waiting for the storm to pass. He noticed that the actual telephone was in mint condition and possibly even untouched. He reached out to it out of curiosity and picked it up. There was a loud beep, followed by Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. Valiko was hooked instantly by the piece and it provoked a bittersweet mood, giving rise to both warm, fuzzy inspiration and bleak, grimy depression. Just as the song was halfway finished, a loud interference silenced the music, followed by a momentary silence and then a familiar laugh, "He he he."

The Mask spoke slowly, taking brief pauses in between phrases, "So here you are Valiko. All alone. Listening to classical music, soon to be frozen to death or smashed death by an avalanche of snow and rocks. What is to be done? Ha ha!"

Valiko took a deep breath and replied in a tone colder than the ice threatening to freeze him to death, "I look forward to smashing you up into tiny little pieces with my sledgehammer. It will be my pleasure to crack open that steely mask of yours and finding out the real monster behind it."

His words only fuelled the Masks' generic laughter and annoying sarcasm, "Ha ha ha! Valiko, I just cannot wait. Come quicker. I'll give you a hint as

to where I am. Just dial 'springtime'." The Mask then hung up abruptly.

Valiko deliberated for a second and then dialed 777-464-8463. Nothing seemed to happen. Hanging up the phone, the booth tumbled over on its side. Unable to react quickly enough, Valiko bumped his head against the metal frame of the booth.

The flowers and fruit trees in the garden were in full bloom, spreading out their petals like a sunbather stretching out their hands and legs on the milky white sand to capture the sunlight and bask nonchalantly in the warm, spring sun. All the snow had melted away, watering the fresh sprouts of grass buds and breathing in new life into the earth. A profusion of robins fluttered amidst the apple, cherry and peach trees, calling out to one another with their teasing, melodious songs. They flew from branch to branch and tree to tree mischievously chasing each other while rummaging carefully about for crumbs of food. The air was refreshingly cool and playfully tickled the stomachs of a couple lying beneath the birch trees on a swing sofa as it breezed by fondly. Sweet, juicy raspberries, the size of large thumbs, were ripening within a mere blink as tiny spiders crawled into their center to hide from unwanted guests and enjoy delicious solitude. A small handmade pool nearby was filled to the brink with greenish, lightly bubbling water that was home to a family of small fishes and frogs that shyly surfaced time to time.

The neighbor's dog, Tuz, made its way through to the door of the couple's modest cottage. He began to plead the elderly woman, exiting the door with a large plastic basin, for a bite to eat. The woman, upon seeing the poor creature, went back into the kitchen and unraveled a gauze strip with bits and pieces of leftover meat and bones. Chewing upon the delicacies, Tuz discovered a weighty slice of cooked cow's tongue, which he devoured contently. He then trotted through the raspberry bushes, the neighbor's garden and onto the main road, from which he spotted a seemingly irresistible scent.

Across the main road, a young boy was running around all the neighbors' yards, trampling on all the unearthed soil in an attempt to catch a wily butterfly with a small net in his hands. He ran to and fro, rolling around in the grass and dirt, jumping upon trees to catch the ever-agile specimen. The butterfly flew down along a trail down the hills to the river. The boy, without second thought, dashed ahead into the bushes along the path in expectation of capturing his coveted prize. He stalked the butterfly all the way to the edge of some carved out stone steps leading down to the riverbank. The steps were narrow and steep and the boy had never gone down them alone. He decided to take a risk and follow the butterfly until he had finally caught it. Tuz appeared not far from him at the top of the hill and lay down on his stomach, observing the boy rushing to chase his prize.

The boy could see his grandfather swimming out deeper and deeper out into the middle of the river, his white cap bobbing up and down like a fishing float. As he looked on to see how far his grandfather would swim out, the white cap suddenly disappeared from view. The water swallowed up the cap unsparingly. The boy began to panic and yell out desperately. He made a step forwards out of fear for his grandfather's life and slipped, losing his balance. Distraught at his inability to swim and rescue him, the boy tumbled down against the rocks to the very edge of the river and lay motionless. The dog wailed and ran back to the cottage, crying out for help. But the dog's barks were to no avail. As the child lay still upon the brownish, dirty sand covered in washed up algae, a colorful red rose sprung up next to him. It was unusually large in stature and bent down to check if the boy was alive. It wound close to the boy's mouth and spewed out a coruscating, sensuous aroma with a powerful gush while curling around his chest. The boy came to his senses, gasping for air frantically.

He raised himself up and remembered that his grandfather was drowning. He wanted to stand up and plunge into the water to swim to him, but the rose held him tightly, preventing him from doing so. He was trapped. He reached out for the flower carefully. As he was about to prick his hand on the sharp thorns, it flailed out, entwining his arm. It restrained his motions, but left him unscathed.

He suddenly noticed that the entire landscape became devoid of its former bright, spring color. Instead, it appeared like a distorted and smudged infrared photograph. The colors were smooth, calming and ethereal. He looked upon the surface of the river and he could see through the previously murky, grimy water down to the very bottom of the riverside, its small waves silhouetting in different shades of grey blue. At its very center the river was its deepest, its precipice giving way to a dark, forlorn grey that was impenetrable to light. There in that unknown turbid water, somewhere in that woebegone gorge, his grandfather's body was drifting away, forever lost to the deep, murky waters.

A woman appeared by his side and whispered something poisonously into his ear. Intoxicated by her mellifluous voice and tender words, he longed to follow her. She grasped the bloody flower, which wound around her palm, and whipped it out into the distance like a fishing line. The flower flew out into the middle of the river and dived into the water. The woman then pulled back on the thorny line, bringing in the magical rose. In the flower's twisted hold was a completely soaked white cap. The boy was no longer a boy. Valiko started to weep profusely and shake violently from grief at having lost his grandfather. She bid him to follow her. He stood up and followed her into a twilight sepia prism-like barrier of dim light that manifested itself before them. The butterfly flew across the water, gliding along the cool breeze away to the other side of the river.

Delirious Intermission

Valiko's derangement continued to escalate. Observing the murder of a little girl and his grandfather's drowning within a short span of time had adversely impacted his connection with reality and overall perception of self-being. A strange woman led now led him into the streets of what appeared to be a thriving metropolitan area, with numerous multi-storied buildings and a large, central tower overseeing the hustle and bustle of everyday city life. Valiko's head was spinning and his heart beat uncontrollably. An excruciating headache took grip, further serving to impact his ability to think rationally. The sounds all around him increased in volume as if someone turned up the level a few turns on purpose. Car beeps sounded like gunshots and people's voices like wild hyena cries. Unable to withstand the mounting pressure, he dashed through the wintry streets of his neighborhood amidst the relentless, harrowing voices assailing him at each forlorn stride, clutching his chest desperately as if bent on ripping it apart and pulling out the bitter agony infecting every organ and sensation of both body and mind with his bloody, bare hands.

As he ran, the shadowy cloak began to wrap around his body and constrict him with great force, the hood forming into a large hand like creature that enveloped his neck like a shawl, slowly strangulating him. Choking violently, Valiko continued to charge through the narrow alleyways, winding avenues, and

between cars on the icy road while trying frenziedly to wrench the shadows off. The more strongly he resisted, the more powerfully the grip seized hold of him. The cloak sucked the cold air into itself, chilling Valiko to the bones till he was blue and shaking feverishly. His energetic, rapid pace subsided into a weak, flopping strut and he gasped uncontrollably for each breath. As he neared ever more closely to total collapse and suffocation, the space around him became infected anew with lurid sepia-like color that streamed through the landscape, smoothing any rough edges and blurring reality. The bright lights of the numerous lampposts intensified for a brief instant, nearly blinding Valiko. Exhausted from the painful struggle and difficulty in drawing in another deep breath, he prepared to meet his end.

Just in that moment of final culmination he came to realize, looking upon the beauty of the inky paint splattered over the scenery of the snowy city, immersed in a whirl of light and radiant color, that he had never made a heartfelt effort to overcome his fears, doubts and melancholy but instead accepted his own illusions unquestioningly. Arousing from his dreamy stupor, Valiko fought back to recover his love for life, to welcome his own existence and consciousness of it with open arms, casting away gloomy despair.

With one final burst of despair, Valiko tore the cloak from his body and neck, throwing it aside onto the snow. The creature squawked with a hellish cry like a thousand crows and dispersed into the dark

spots untouched by the beams of the lanterns. There were no longer any cars or people roaming through the streets and roadways. All life had disappeared leaving Valiko alone with his own thoughts. Samile appeared standing motionlessly in the distance, sniffing the air wolfishly. Facing his direction it charged at Valiko, rushing towards him at phenomenal speed. As it jumped into the air at his neck, he summoned up his courage and grasped the hound by its jaws, forcing them in opposite directions with great force, ripping them apart with a loud frightening snap. The beast toppled into the snow, staining the white, fluffy flecks of ice with dark blood that trickled listlessly up to Valiko's bare feet.

The rose elongated to dip its head into the pool of blood and commenced sucking up the warm liquid impatiently as it twirled its stem around in the air like a dog in sweet contentment. Valiko turned to run away and leave the bloodthirsty flower in the hope of casting away the power of inconsequentiality he craved for eagerly. But within a few steps the rose whipped out at his legs, snagging them ferociously with its thorny stem. Falling into the snow, Valiko saw the rose slithering towards him swiftly like a snake ready to strike its prey. He tried to stifle the rose's advance by kicking it wildly as he moved back. The rose simply weaved around his feet, locking them together and continuing to entwine his legs. There was nothing that could be done to stop the demonic flower. He remembered the knife. Pulling it out desperately, Valiko began to slash at the rose. Cutting

through the mesh of thorns and sinuous fibers, the rose retreated. Looking at his inky and blood stained hands, the watercolor, blurry shades that had contaminated him started to fade gradually into more realistic, natural tones. He began to see the world more clearly. His vision became less fuzzy and the bleeding hound was washed away seemingly by a fresh layer of paint, disappearing in a smudge of white stroke of brush. The beautiful colors of the city lost their fantastical luster, acquiring a monotonous hue of stark reality. The haunting, sinister laugh of Elmira resounded throughout the dreary streets, daring him to find her – ‘Do not let me go!’

Valiko grasped his head from the anguish of realizing his own dementia and raised his head towards the sky for some sign of hope. The rose quivered apprehensively and rubbed itself fervently, licking its wounds with tongue like petals like an animal after a fight. He raced once again through the windy, relentlessly cold streets. Not a soul was in sight in the freezing labyrinth of snow, ice, stone and light. He chased after the voice in the expectation of tracking down the infernal voice to its master. But the longer and farther he ran, the more his luminous watercolor appearance faded and he became acutely aware of the creeping cold affecting his bare feet and unprotected, partially clothed body. The inky substance oozed off steadily until his gleaming aura washed out almost entirely.

As he collapsed to his knees, a glass bottle taller than himself landed in front of him with a bang,

settling into the surface. The bottle was filled to the brim with water. It was only now that Valiko realized just how thirsty he was. He grabbed the bottle neck and tilted it towards his mouth, gulping down the liquid greedily. After drinking as much of the contents as physically permissible, his head spun out of control and he collapsed from exhaustion.

The Servant appeared above him, holding his lamp close to his head. Valiko looked at the cloaked, shadowy figure for some sign of consolation. Turning about in a swirl of flames, the figure pointed his lamp ahead, the brilliant light flashing away into the far distance. The Servant motioned silently towards the beam of light, his presence silhouetting to the wind like one giant ripple of interweaving dark flames. Following the trail of the light with his red, worn out eyes and crippled mental faculty he made one last effort to overcome the bitter cold, physical exhaustion and lightheadedness caused by his profuse bleeding from the numerous gashes on his legs. Dashing into the path of the light, the Servant turned into a colossal blazing cloud and engulfed Valiko, transporting him from the web of his own embittered and lamenting visions.

New Beginnings

'...those who are unaware they are walking in darkness will never seek the light.' – Bruce Lee

The Servant hurled Valiko through a torrent of bright, golden yellow light that gradually blurred into a dazzling fresco of wonderful vivid colors and dark inky shadows intermingling playfully with each other. They drifted in a capsule of flame and smoke across the city among unending cascades of luminous prisms, kaleidoscopic falling leaves and faint spots of twilight blotching the panoramic view with their lurid ambience. Amid the distorted silhouettes of filthy ghetto buildings, newly erected modern apartments and hordes of people rushing about their business, a multitude of gigantic willow trees composed of glowing white light spread out their leafy branches to encompass the intruding murky outlines with their caressing embrace. A flock of birds flew from bough to bough, chasing one another in mid-flight. With each stroke of their wings they shed all their feathers and regrew a new set of different coloration and pattern. As they skimmed above the ethereal blue water, a series of violent tempestuous waves arose and battered the square shaped rocks along the beach into fine grey sand, until there were none left. As the last rock was destroyed with a loud, reverberating wallop, more rocks sprung up from beneath the sand and the cycle continued. The picturesque landscape swirled into a shimmering halo

of grotesque contours. The Servant, spinning Valiko around deftly like a rock nested in the pouch of a sling, catapulted him into the very center of the emerging crown of light and shadow.

Valiko found himself in a dimly lit prison cell in the midst of sounds of continual, resounding gunfire taking place outside of its damp, stony walls. In one of the corners lay a middle aged man with a fully grown, shaggy beard and dressed in soiled tatters, his face sapped and wrinkled by an incessant emotional tension from the day to day struggle to survive hunger, thirst, unknown term of confinement and the possibility of death at any moment. The man was fast asleep and by his constant grunts, moans and rapid eye twitches appeared to be dreaming. Suddenly, raising himself up, he jumped from his screeching bunker and began frantically digging through all the rags of his cot, searching beneath the bunkers of his comrades until finally finding what he had been desperately looking for: a large metal spoon. Grasping it firmly in his wearied hands and pressing it against his chest like a cross, he lay down once more. But, he could no longer fall asleep. No matter how strongly he yearned for the mesmerizing world of dreams to take ahold of him once more, his dream was lost, his sleep never to return to him this night. He remained awake holding the spoon, mumbling what seemed to be a frenzied prayer. Two of his companions, stirred awake by their comrade's raving spew of words, began to discuss what had happened.

"What do you think has taken over him? A fever? Perhaps a delirium?"

"No my friend, the man has been in here longer than any of us two can imagine and I've been in here longer than you. I think it's something else, but we better ask him. Hey, what's the matter? You alright my friend?"

The man stopped rambling on abruptly, turned to look at his cellmates and spoke with a tinge of deranged fervor in his voice.

"I dreamt of very nice hot porridge, with lots of butter and milk and a large thick slice of dark rye bread smothered lusciously with butter and gulping it all down with big cup of black tea with lots of sugar and a large piece of lemon. The dream was so pleasant and I was about to eat the porridge with such an appetite. And then I remembered that I didn't have my spoon. I couldn't find it. I had nothing to eat the porridge with. I was so hungry and I so wanted to finally eat. So I woke to find my spoon. But when I finally found it, the dream didn't come back. I can no longer fall asleep tonight. And the dream will probably never come again. No porridge for me, no tea or bread...No food."

The man began to weep profusely while shaking nervously from the stress of his disillusionment. Turning to his side to face the wall he held on tightly to his spoon as though it was a brace to reality. He closed his watery eyes and, burying his face in the rags of his cot, tried to fall asleep with the hope of someday being able to realize his dream.

Valiko heard a loud, ear-piercing whistle approaching seemingly from above the prison cell. A blast of an artillery shell turned the prison cell into rubble in an instant. The spoon lay amidst the chunks of stone and pieces of carnage left scattered across the ground by the powerful charge. Valiko lay with his eyes open but blinded by the smoke. He was unable to move as his legs were buried underneath some of the debris. He closed his eyes and his mind began to spin wildly, propelling him once more into the obscurity of light and shadow, into the Servant's embrace.

Rubbing his eyes open, Valiko looked around to see that he was lying in a grassy field with his arms and legs spread out. Standing up, he observed that everything around him was smudgy. The grass was like a single smear of light green paint spread out across a canvas. The fluffy white clouds were like sketches outlined with a pencil surrounded by the watercolor filled baby blue sky. He noticed a woman running swiftly across the field. She fell down into the grass on her knees. She was sobbing nervously and smiling strangely. It was an inconsolable, disturbed smile. It was a smile that chilled Valiko's heart. Looking up into the sky, she focused on something ahead in the distance. It was a sparrow flying in her direction with a twig in its beak. Only the woman and the bird remained clear, untouched by the contagious blurriness affecting the entire terrain. As the bird approached the woman, it dropped the twig into her hands. Catching it, the woman raised herself up and walked up to Valiko. Looking straight into his eyes,

she offered him the twig. Her hands were covered in deep lacerations and shook restlessly as she held out the little stick. He took it from her hesitantly, in expectation of some sort of trap. She spoke to him pleadingly.

"Can you offer me something in return for my gift to you?"

"What can I give you in return? I have nothing. I'll give it back to you then."

Valiko attempted to hand over the twig back to the woman, but she backed off sharply with a crestfallen countenance. He made a step forwards to try and return it again. But she backed off again, this time with a seething, embittered glare and yelled out him in rage.

"This bird has brought me nothing but a lamenting sign. I gave it to you in the hope that you would express at least some sympathy, be it fake or true. And knowing my loss, feeling the grievous blow to my heart, seeing the torment of my soul in plain sight before your eyes, you stand unmoved and uncaring for a stranger in affliction. All I want is some sign of understanding, to know that I am not alone in my despair, to feel the compassion of another good heart flow beyond space and time and touch the strings of my own heart. I do not ask for someone to grieve with me, to mourn my loss, the loss of someone strange to him or her. I only wish to know that there is at least someone standing by watching me with a good heart, untouched by the darkness of the shadows of broken memories, unblemished in

their actions by deceit, contempt, jealousy or violence and always willing to reach out to those who are desperate for some sort of hopeful sign, a sign that they are forsaken to wander the lonely streets of the city, unnoticed by anyone and invisible to their empathy."

"Maybe you would rather remain unseen to anyone at all? Those who care nothing for you will walk by you regardless of whether you are visible to them or not. They will ignore your pale face, shaking hands and feverish, misty eyes in the midst of their own bubble filled with worries, doubts and desires. Would you not rather wish that your despair be obscured in shadow, never to be revealed to the unwary, indifferent eye of a stranger?"

"The good is never remembered. One mistake, on misunderstanding drowning it all instantly in bitter hate...What I lost through my own foolishness and indecisiveness I can never get back, my fate repaying me with that loneliness which I so deserve and so hopelessly struggled to avoid all my life..."

Feeling his chest, Valiko remembered that he had cast the rose away, shunning the bizarre power with which it had endowed him. He had nothing to offer her, nothing except an expression of sincere thoughtfulness at her words. She stepped away from him slowly, turning her back on him. The bird flew into the blurriness, dissolving within the aura of light like a drop of ink within an ocean of water. The woman faded into the edge of the canvas, dispersing

into the margin between the lively, vivid colors of the landscape. With a stroke of the artist's fine brush she receded from view, her dress fluttering to the airy breeze saturated with the aroma of chamomile flowers. Valiko tried to run after her, but with each vaulting stride he took the weight upon his chest grew until he felt the pain seemingly impale his heart with invisible long, sharp stakes, releasing a faint trickle of blood down his side. The stinging agony became intolerable, forcing him to his knees among the soft blurry blanket of chamomile flowers. The woman's bare legs appeared before his eyes. She kneeled down in front of him with a hot cup of tea in her hands, the steamy fragrance of chamomile enrapturing his body and mind, diverting his attention from the agony. She offered it to him while looking attentively into his eyes. Taking the cup into his hands, he coveted the soothing warmth that spread through his shaking, clammy palms.

As he thirstily took a long-lasting sip of the calming, yellowish liquid, Valiko saw everything around him swirl into darkness. He lay in bed with a beautiful girl, her strawberry blonde hair grazing against her breasts as he made love to her. He kissed her passionately, but he could not see her face. It was smothered in a soft blur. He tried to make it clearer by gently caressing her face, but it only became more cloudy and vague. She gradually faded away from his loving embrace, the glowing light engulfing her with a brilliant radiance and blinding his vision.

Rubbing his eyes open he found himself in a dusky, woody forest. The sound of a river flowing in the distance brushed lightly against his ears. The call of a cuckoo perched atop a tree echoed hauntingly throughout the woodland. Valiko counted seven times before he heard the faint ruffling of the cuckoo's feathers as it flew away into the emerging twilight. The yellowish golden light, slightly tainted with a pinkish hue, peered curiously through the leafy branches. In the instant that Valiko stood up, a flock of cuckoos materialized from the streaks of light and flew upon the trees to rest upon the lower branches. They formed an irregular circle around him, continuously flying past his head to switch positions with one another. They began to gawk loudly in discord, each of the birds calling out in periodic intervals, their sound reverberating throughout the forest like an out of tune organ with its keys depressed in random order. With each call, the loudness of their gawks intensified and another horde of birds appeared to join in on the circle. The army of cuckoos continued to grow until they had transformed the trees around Valiko into one massive ripple of feathers and wings, the branches bending with a slight cracking noise from the weight of the birds. More and more birds emerged from the twilight and the sound of their reverberating cries soon became overpowering. Clutching his ears, Valiko made a run towards the sound of the river. The silhouette of a woman manifested itself from behind one of the trees and shot out a burst of the inky

substance that he had shed off by discarding his cloak, onto the congregation of cuckoos.

The legion of cuckoos became infected with the ink and merged into the form of a giant protruding arm that reached out with a menacing gesture to take ahold of Valiko. He tried to run away from the wavy, shadowy threat but a mass of birds shot out at him from behind the trees, blocking his path of escape. The hand snatched him from the ground, lifting him high into the canopies of the forest and gradually tightening its grip, squeezing Valiko until it became difficult and painful to breathe. It then released its hold, continuing the cycle of constriction and release to prolong his suffering. He endeavored to wrestle with the hellish form by twisting and turning as the grip loosened, but as he struggled to break free, the birds jabbed him violently with their beaks, causing him to bleed profusely.

Drops of blood dribbled down onto the supple lips and face of Elmira standing below the constrictive trap. With her lengthy, snake-like tongue she licked the life out of her victim voraciously whilst twirling the rose in her hand. The rose weaved and spun around her hands and body like a restless serpent craving for a meal, digging its sharp thorns into her milky soft skin. As it slid swiftly across her body, it left a trail of deep gashes from which it sucked out the blood that spurt forth. The wounds healed instantly as it passed, leaving her body unblemished.

Feeling overwhelmed by the loss of blood and inability to break free from the iron hold upon his life, Valiko wanted to finally give up and submit to the will of his visions. Yet, his heart cried out pleadingly for life! Remembering all the joy and sorrow, all the mistakes, failures, dreams, hopes and belief in love he decided to try and fight back once more. And in that moment of clarity, he saw the girl with the butterfly umbrella walk towards Elmira and strike her protruding tongue. Knocked off her feet by the forceful blow, the hand controlled by Elmira released its hold, dropping Valiko onto the umbrella. The hand dispersed, releasing a dark cloud of shadowy cuckoos after him. The umbrella and girl exploded into a throng of colorful butterflies as Valiko landed upon them. They gushed out exponentially, breaking his fall and bursting into the air to collide head on with the inky mass of birds.

Each one of the butterflies within the pulsating, polychromatic mass of color was adorned with a unique wing pattern. As the cuckoos stabbed the butterflies with their stiff beaks, they evaporated into a puff of smoke and multicolored light and three more materialized to take their place. The butterflies intertwined the cuckoos in a web of golden light that weighed them down and propelled them to the ground, but it could not contain the shadows for long. After snapping ferociously at the wreath encaging them, the delicate strings of light dispersed and the birds broke free to join the fray once more. Both forces of dark twilight and vivid light battled

with each other, yet both forces were an equal match, neither gaining the upper hand and each continued the cycle of destruction and entwinement.

Valiko dashed towards the river. But as he neared close to the edge of the rocks, Elmira surrounded him from all sides. There were several of her likeness, each dressed in a different colored and styled dress and whispered poisonously into his ears, urging him to jump into the water. Overwhelmed by these visions and desperate to return to reality, Valiko pulled the rose off the body of the Elmira in the crimson dress and hurled it into the river. As the flower fell into the water, giant waves arose from the river and swept away the demonic projections of his mind together with his own self, plunging him into unconsciousness.

Valiko tumbled down a void filled with murky shadows that tried to snatch him with their hideous claws and absorb him into the darkness. He kept his eyes closed in fear of realizing that he was lost in an endless vision of despair. But as he fell and his head spun wildly, the girl with the umbrella appeared before him again. She came up close to him and asked him to grasp the handle together with her. He reached out and touched her hands as they rested upon the smooth handle. Valiko opened his sapped eyes and found himself in a crowd of people rushing past him on the busy streets of Toronto. He was the only one stained with color while everything else was blotched in an indistinct, blurry black and white that seemed to be pulsating and moving like a video on

fast forward, everything leaving behind a fuzzy trail as they passed. No one paid notice to his presence in the middle of street. Feeling exhausted emotionally and physically by his mental disparity, Valiko collapsed amid the frantic bustling of people back and forth, blinded by their desire to move forward.

As he barely kept one eye open, a little girl asked him innocently, "Are you alright mister?"

Valiko gathered his strength and answered good-heartedly, "No, I'm not feeling to well. You are the only one who stopped to ask me. Thank you for this. But don't stay, go along now and leave me be..."

The girl stood and stared for little while longer before kneeling down beside Valiko again. He offered his small hand to him as if determined to lift him up and help take him to safety. Touched by the girl's goodwill and smiling at the depressing thought that it was impossible for the girl to aid him, he reached out to him anyway. As their hands touched, the canvas of the painting ripped apart, engulfing him in bright, golden light.

A pleasant, luring aroma of strong, black tea, brewed with dried mint leaves, arose and gradually emanated from a small glass jar, held in the hands of a thoughtful young man sitting precariously on the edge of a comfortable sofa, tightly embracing the vessel with the hope of coveting all of its precious heat. Outside, the bitter, winter winds tried desperately and in vain to confront him through the glass window. Despite the indefinite silence reigning

between the walls, their furious blowing and whistling could barely be heard. It seemed that they, masked by a relentless sea of falling snow and an endless shimmering of bright lampposts, changed their form into a haunting aura of unusual majestic demons, with eyes as large and languishing as flickering kerosene lamps peering with a strange whimsical curiosity and dreadful anxiousness inside. Slowly raising the jar of tea to his lips to take a sip of the sweet, soothing drink, a feeling of sweeping joy overwhelmed him and a sudden love of life burst forth from his heart, spreading through all his thoughts, dreams and memories. He stared at the impressionistic shadows of cars flooding across the walls, as if lost in a pernicious reverie. He realized that it was quite dark in the room. He rose and turned on the light. It glowed brightly in the midst of the retreating shadows.

Mirrored Past

There were eleven mirrors in the room and each was housed in a frame of the same wood as the transmuting table Valiko had encountered. They encircled him, leaving no space in between, carved from a single piece of wood as though an entire tree had been sliced and furrowed out, leaving the base of the trunk to form an expansive enclosure. Each mirror was identical in size and shape, rectangular in height and broad in width. The frame had a large span of wood in between each mirror, allowing for a spacious central platform. In between each frame were various chiseled out patterns, expertly etched with an exact precision. One mirror frame had a myriad of interlinked circles, another a multitude of ocean waves and yet another a stunning arrangement of flowers interweaving with each other. Looking upwards, this mysterious chamber was located in some deep, hidden cave, with only a small aperture of yellowish light shining through to the bottom, bouncing off an endless number of dust particles. The air had a dense smoky flavor, saturated with the smell of lightly burned wood permeating the entire space.

Valiko moved closer to one of the mirrors to inspect it more closely. As he peered into the brilliantly shining glass, he rapidly took a few steps back and gasped spasmodically. In the mirror was a reflection of a familiar girl staring straight back with an expression of profound sadness. Her sweet smile

was dwarfed by the immense sorrow flowing from her tearful eyes. With a listless fixation on Valiko, she inspired a feeling of deep regret, dejection and protracted melancholy. Gazing at the mirror, he knew deep inside his own memory that the girl was of some great significance to him and experienced a nerve-racking sensation of déjà-vu that sent an electrifying tremor through his neck, leading him to jolt his head suddenly in order to shake it off. Valiko continued to stare fixedly at the girl. She raised her hand, placing it against the mirror as if she were directly on the opposite side. He wanted to break her free. She was trapped and needed his help.

Devoid of reason due to an uncontrollable fit of hysteria, he bashed the glass with his bare fists. With a frightening episode of violence, the mirror cracked and oozed with the black inky Valiko had encountered beforehand, but the girl was nowhere to be found on the other side as he believed. The sharp shards of glass lay scattered on the floor as the inky substance continue to flow profusely as if from some major injury to a monstrous beast. Valiko tried to remember the identity of the girl, but his memory remained clouded in a deep fog. Looking around, he noticed the same girl appearing in all the mirrors, waving her hand, staring at him pleadingly. The light in the center of the platform increased in brightness as though a cloud blocking the sunlight was driven away by the winds, illuminating the platform like it would a small patch of grass on earth. The cast away

rose gently floated down through the stream of sunlight to rest in the middle.

As Valiko deliberated whether he should reunite with the powerful flower, he heard the familiar laugh that haunted him constantly: "Ha-ha-ha. Valiko your long lost love is gone. Never to return to your bosom again. I won't let you stop my plan now that I've found where you are. Experience the full force of my power."

Valiko saw The Mask blot through the darkness and disappear. He then saw a tongue of flames rise from around the enclosure of mirrors. Rising magnificently from the depths of the blackness was the steely dragon, its snaky eyes fixated directly on Valiko, boding only immediate and utter destruction. Its powerful wings caused a veracious gust that knocked Valiko against the broken mirror. The inky substance immediately formed long chains that clapped onto his hands and legs to hold him firmly. Unable to move, Valiko witnessed the dragon settling down onto the opposite end of the platform, directly in front of the rose. The menacing, fantastical flying lizard unleashed a roar that caused all the mirrors to shatter at once, unleashing a deluge of the inky substance. Losing no more time, the dragon took a deep breath in order to unleash a final blast of flames that would roast Valiko into ashes.

Remembering that the rose took on any form that he imagined in his mind, he visualized a large wall. As the dragon unleashed its fury, a thick, thorny wall instantly formed to thwart the fire. Surprised

from the unexpected barrier to its directives, the dragon jumped onto it in order to destroy it. Its large claws pierced the wall and ripped open a gash. The surface of the platform was almost completely covered in the inky ooze and began to creep up against the wall and shoot out large spears towards the wall in order to speed up its destruction. The dragon decided to leave the demolition work to them and started to raise itself in the air.

Realizing that the strength of the rose's power was limited and that the dragon would simply pass over the blockade and fry him to cinders, he quickly tried to think of a suitable weapon that would immobilize the beast. Wondering whether the rose could form three separate items, Valiko decided to try. But the rose appeared to be too weak to respond. The ink simultaneously injured and poisoned the flower. And Valiko could feel as his chest was being ripped apart. He now understood that he and the rose were connected. And if whatever attacked the rose affected his strength, he reasoned that he could overcome it if he gathered enough strength of will. He came to the unexpected realization that perhaps due to his own denial and suppression of hope, he had been feeding The Mask's source of power. Was this all an illusion of his own making? Or was it truly and solely the domain of The Mask? He felt a burning rage overwhelm his entire being. He needed to free the girl. He needed to know who she was. He now remembered that he loved her.

With an unyielding energy boiling stormily inside his heart, the wall began to heal and regain its durability. The inky spears no longer dented or slashed through it. He felt a warmth pass across his upper body as if someone wearing a cozy wool sweater hugged him tightly and snugly. It was a wonderful feeling. He felt an efflux of happiness and confidence that he had not felt in ages. The inky chains lost their iron-like consistency and dissolved back into their oozy form. Responding to Valiko's commands, the rose turned into a hefty shield and spear. As the dragon finally rose into the air, Valiko ran to pick them up. As he grabbed hold, the rose further weaved into a set of body armor, which covered his entire body and head.

The dragon blasted a torrent of fire and Valiko shielded himself with the shield. He was untouched by the intensity of the heat and stared chillingly at the monster. In turn, it charged Valiko with full force from atop. As it approached impact, he stabbed straight into the heart. In an instant, the giant beast was felled to the floor, bleeding abundantly with the ink from which it was composed, gradually beginning to lose its form. With a sudden insight, Valiko jumped onto the belly of the beast and removing the spear, pulled a petal from his armor and dropped it into the wound. The bleeding stopped and the ink turned into a bright, silvery substance, healing the dragon's wound instantly. With the intent of using the creature to find the Mask and vanquish it, Valiko was about to command it to rise. Just then the ink began to slink

back into the frames, restoring the broken pieces of glass to re-form the polished mirrors once more. It was as if the mirrors had never been broken. They then began to glow brightly and spin across in a circular fashion until they slurred together and formed on large gate. The doors opened with a creak and the Servant stepped through. Valiko leaped at the Servant, but stopped halfway through as the latter spoke.

“Valiko. If you really want to recover the Division Clock, you need the Key that opens it. Only one who has the Key can be the true protector of it. Only then will you be able to restore the balance and thwart the Mask’s plans.”

In suspicious disbelief, Valiko uttered bitterly, “And why would you give me helpful advice on how to destroy your master. Can he not hear us now? Why would you aide me?”

Underneath the Servant’s hood, a pair of black-coloured eyes with a crisscrossed retinas that gave it the form of an X, gleamed back at him in reply, “Find the key and you will find yourself.”

Valiko was still unsure of the Servant’s intentions, “And where should I look for the Key?”

The Servant replied simply, “The key is hidden somewhere in the real world. Perhaps you had it all along and misplaced it. Perhaps your grandfather left you a clue that you failed to recognize. Want to go back and take a look? Feel free to use this door.” The strange being then stepped back through the entranceway and was gone.

It was strange that all of a sudden, the Mask would let him go so easily. Maybe since his most powerful creature was now owned by Valiko, it threw him off guard. But as these thoughts crossed his mind, the Mask whisked by with the speed of light, throwing him off his feet and tearing his armor apart. The broken pieces of the armor flowed into the shield and sword.

Facing the dragon, the Mask appeared disappointed and enraged.

“So, my own loyal servant betraying me by helping you escape. My powerful dragon defecting, now converted into your own tool to command. Never.”

The Mask discharged a mighty superball of electrified dark matter that instantaneously liquefied the dragon into nothingness. It then turned on Valiko, but was too late. He has rushed through the door, which immediately closed behind him.

Floating close to the door, the Mask changed face. Its previous satisfaction had returned. The gateway dispersed once more into eleven mirrors and the Servant appeared from one of them, bowing to the master of its soul.

“My lord, I did as you instructed. Is all going to plan?”

The Mask was avidly content and spoke so, “Yes, now that Valiko is interested in finding the Key, I am sure he will succeed and return to find me. Make sure that he finds the way to my lair. We are running

out of time, but hopefully soon, the Key will be mine. Now go and do your duty!”

The Servant respectfully bowed and exited through another mirror as the Mask faded into the fabric of space, vanishing out of sight.

The Journal

Valiko walked through a winding tunnel lined with pillars of white fire that stretched out into the distance. The ceiling and path were composed of smooth white marble. It appeared that they were shaped from one long continuous block of carved out marble. At the end of the path he reached a small door that appeared from first glance to be made of burned parchment. He turned the handle and stepped through. He was in his study room. Turning around he saw a door snap shut in the wall and disappear, leaving only barely noticeable keyhole. His sword and shield were also gone. Valiko was tempted to think his adventures were only but a dream if not for the rose which remained in his pocket. Then again, he could just be crazy.

He needed to look for clues to the key's location and began to recall any potential hints his grandfather might have left. Although his memory was still shrouded in mist, he could still pull bits and pieces of previous conversations they had. In the short snippets he could recall, nothing seemed out of the ordinary or pointing to a key. And then it hit him! Valiko swiftly dodged to his bookcase and pulled out a little red journal with a handmade cover out of cardboard paper hidden behind all the other books. The cover was stained and worn from all the years it had endured. It was a slim volume of not more than about twenty pages in total, but listed all his grandfather's important events in life. Or so he had

thought. He had never actually read it simply because he was always too busy working or doing something that pointlessly distracted him from what really mattered. There was always the rush to do homework, the drive to earn some extra cash or to watch a movie, but he could never find a few minutes to simply open up his late grandfather's journal. Finally opening it up, he was taken aback by the contents of the first page, which was sewed into the beginning, but was on crystal white paper compared to the others which were yellowish and worn at the edges. It was very large piece of paper, folded into a smaller one and handwritten with a fountain pen:

Dear Reader (whosoever you may be, hopefully Valiko),

My name is Albion and if you are holding this journal of mine then I am long gone and left it in your care. The information contained in these pages is very important and has been passed down through the generations, from grandfather to grandson. According to legend, this has taken place since whenever time first began for us humans (if there was a beginning). Although it has never happened, the journal was to be passed on to another trusted individual if the grandson proved too inept to inherit it. A note such as this has never been left before, but I stitched it in the very last days of my life. So,

enough of the introduction...on to the crux of the matter.

Along with this journal, each generation has passed down a clock-like device to their next generation. In the very beginning it was as a very primitive device, but depending on the knowledge and experience gained with each generation, the clock could take on any form they wished. How so? Well here's some science fiction and fantasy for you: the clock's physicality is not as crucial as the force that it embodies, the force of time. Only our lineage has the ability to pass on this gift. This force of time can be manifested into almost any object that is a representation of time to humans. So it was our first ancestor who invented the very first clock in order to enclose the force of time.

Despite the modern scientific view which theorizes that ancient civilizations had poor timekeeping capabilities, they are wrong. Ancient civilizations had developed superior mechanical timepieces (with the help of our ancestors), but they were all lost after a great, terrible and destructive war that reduced nearly the entire ancient world into nothing more than a relic of the long lost past. Perhaps science may eventually discover all the secrets buried in the rubble of the earth.

Each successor in our generation is named the Protector of the Division Clock. Yes, it sounds very formidable and noble. But there's a great deal of responsibility. If anyone with evil intentions should ever discover the secret of where the force of time is

hidden (whether a neighbor next door or by anything from another world) then the entire balance of the Universe will be cast into jeopardy. The last time it happened, the entire ancient world was utterly annihilated. Our ancestor had made a mistake and accidentally revealed the Division Clock to a group of strange individuals from an unknown place. The late Emperor during that time (to put it in terms of today's modern abbreviations of BCE or CE), in the year 1001 FCE (First Common Era) had ordered our ancestor to show them the latest developments in time-making he had achieved. Lying on his work table in plain sight was the first ever pocket watch, something which the strange guests immediately recognized as the Division Clock. It turns out that they can feel its presence but never determine the exact location unless they are led to it. Seizing the clock, they attempted to destroy our ancestor, but he was not easily defeated (since we have tricks up our sleeves if something like that were ever to happen). Our Rose stepped in to help our ancestor recover the watch, but in the process the Great Mask came to Earth and battled to gain possession of it - without success. But in order to thwart the Great Mask, a great cost was paid. Unfortunately, there was no account left about how this happened or why as the time span was simply too great to leave any original writing up to this day (although many of us did rewrite texts or made copies with each generation). As a penance for this catastrophe from our ancestor, we are prohibited from ever possessing the Key to the clock and cursed

with depression for most of our lifespans. Happiness would come to us periodically, but only for brief moments.

However, the secret in all of this is, is how to find the key in times of great need. Why? Because with it, you will be able to harness the power of the clock and re-direct the force of time itself. Do think that's time travel? No. It means altering the very fabric of time, space and direction leading to an entirely different random set of events. This means that if altered, random events will be re-shuffled, leading to potentially different outcomes. That may sound boring, as you cannot travel back in time, but time does not work that way. It is not a thing, only a random force acting in space. Time acts differently in different worlds. Why were we humans chosen as protectors? Because our physical structure would not be able to wield the force of time. It would destroy us entirely, but this only applied to our world - considered a safe haven far from any strange creatures or beings.

And now, if you ever should need to find the key - beware. You should only seek it out if you are truly desperate. Not even aiming to avoid the death of a loved one is risk enough. It will be only reshuffling a chain of events that may lead to the same outcome regardless. But enough. Here is how you will find the Key:

- I. Find Waldemar. Who's that? An ancient knight known as Waldemar the Great. In this age he looks

like an old man, but don't let his appearance fool you. You'll find him on East Avenue at his bakery, Fresh & Friendly Bakery & Deli. Throughout the millennia, he's been baking bread and other goodies. He's the person who also helped our ancestor defeat the Great Mask. You will need his guidance to actually find it, because he's the one who hides it. In order to gain that approval, you will need to pass Waldemar's test.

II. If you pass his test then you will need to find the place where he has hidden it. That place is usually inaccessible and full of difficulties (imagine a very excruciatingly difficult puzzle game that changes as you move through it).

III. And as safeguard in case Waldemar is destroyed, at the place where the Key is hidden you will need to pass another final test to determine if you can possess it.

IV. If you receive the Key you will need to return it back to Waldemar after a single use. If you do not, you will be smitten from existence after three warnings (same thing if you lose it). This basically means you can reshuffle time only once.

From what accounts our ancestors left us, I believe only one of us passed Waldemar's test but I'm not sure if they passed the second (or got that far). One thing that is certain is that the tests can be

dangerous, but they can also be stopped at any moment if you give up. But if you give up, you will never be able to take it again in your lifetime. So take your chances wisely.

If anyone should ever face the Great Mask once again, its defeat will not be easily obtained and the whole world may face the chance of complete destruction. This means that civilization as we know it would have to start everything from scratch for the second time in a row.

In the following pages are brief accounts of important beings or events encountered by our ancestors. But on the last pages you should find an account of how to maximize your chances of passing Waldemar's test.

Keep this journal safe. Pass it on in good condition. If in poor condition, copy it into a suitable and durable format.

Good luck!

Albion.

Closing the journal, Valiko looked for a means of storing it safely upon himself before he would set out to meet Waldemar. He scrambled around the room and dug through drawers to find a potential case. He then stopped to wonder whether the rose could be of some assistance. With an image of the needed item in his mind, Valiko asked the flower for

help. A petal fell from its head and turned into a durable handbag as it touched the ground. Placing the journal neatly inside, he rushed downstairs and outside. C.'s car was sitting in the driveway. Thinking that a lift would be helpful, he rushed back home thinking C. was there waiting for him. But, C. was nowhere to be found. Only the car keys lay on the sofa bed. Grabbing them, Valiko thought that his friend would not mind as long as he handled the Pony well and briskly headed back outside without second thought. Starting the engine, he felt the rumble under the seats from the mufflers, causing the entire frame to vibrate and it felt as though not only a pony was under the hood, but a tiger purring resonantly under the body.

Waldemar's bakery was only a twenty minute drive away not too far from the main downtown area, in a once thriving small business community now the home of a few fast-food shops, a retirement center, hospital and a library as the main attractions. A few small shops and stores remained, their former business now choked by heavyweight competitors not even located close to the area. The rise of monopolistic department stores and large supermarkets gradually pulled customers away from the enticement of the scanty corner variety stores and small-scale family-owned establishments. Some survived, barely making ends meet while others closed down and moved on. It seemed that most of the younger generation were only waiting for an excuse to abandon their neighborhood and flock

outside of it in search of food, furniture and entertainment leaving behind a much older generation to scour the bakeries and delis in search of a good quality kielbasa. Regardless, a few small shops continued to provide exceptional service in the wake of a localized recession and their main asset was being their own landlords. Those who had to keep paying rent, simply packed up soon as they managed to sell. Those who could not find a buyer were left bankrupt. In this atmosphere the entire neighborhood stagnated, drawing in a bunch of mentally unbalanced individuals, old folk and a lot of dogs along with them. Waldemar's Bakery was just around the corner and situated right in the very heart of the Ontonia Community area. With deep historical roots, Ontonia remained firmly in place, patiently awaiting better times.

Quite surprised, Valiko found a free parking space directly outside Waldemar's "Fresh & Friendly". Stepping outside, he took a long look at the shop and all around the neighborhood street, which was mostly deserted except for a couple of lonely pigeons and a local drunk sloping around from shop to shop, asking for money to buy some booze. It was mid-day and the cool autumn breeze was making itself known, whirling along a bunch of leaves, ripped up parts of newspapers, flyers that no one ever reads and some brown stained white garbage bags. On the storefront there were several trays displaying appetite-inducing and saliva-stimulating chocolate croissants, cheese Danishes and cheese/spinach-filled

rolls. A large-print sign hung visibly above the display - "Fresh Sandwiches with Oven-Roasted Black Forest Ham and European Cheese Made on the Spot - Always Fresh and Friendly". The aroma of freshly brewed coffee mixed with the smell of fresh bread from the oven, drew Valiko in despite his nervousness and apprehension. Pulling open the door handle unconsciously, all he could think of in that moment was of how much he wanted a hot sandwich and a large mug of hot coffee with milk. He had not paid any attention to his hunger. While trapped in the Mask's labyrinth, he had not experienced neither pain, hunger nor thirst which had also dulled his sense of orientation and self-awareness in the real-world. It seemed that there was nothing more ideal than to bite down on a freshly baked butter croissant and forget about the past, present or future for that matter. He finally walked in, expecting to start out with a good meal prior to taking any test.

The Great Knight

An incredibly humble-looking man with a pleasant smile and in a clean, bright red apron, carrying a large tray of fresh croissants, walked towards the counter as Valiko entered. Behind the register were a few large rectangular, weaved baskets that were nearly empty. The man greeted him cordially as he unloaded the croissants into the baskets.

“Hello, Sir, and how can I help you today? Can I get you anything? A fresh croissant perhaps? Right now they are priced at three for a dollar.”

Valiko felt so hungry that he could swallow all the croissants on the tray and eat the tray itself for desert.

“Your baked good smell delicious and just looking at them makes my stomach turn over with hunger. But, I have an urgent task ahead of me. I’m looking for Waldemar, are you him?”

Looking thoughtfully at Valiko with a hint of wariness, the man asked, “May I ask why you are so eager to speak with Waldemar personally?”

Valiko blurted out in response hinting at the reason without any direct details for fear of being taken by a stranger, “My name is Valiko and my grandfather left me a note saying that I can discuss something about his clock with Waldemar?”

The man asked him one more question, being still slightly distrustful, “And your grandfather’s name?”

Valiko was getting slightly impatient, but held his calm when answering, "My grandfather's name is Albion. So, are you Waldemar?"

With a grave gesture, the man replied, "Yes, indeed I am. Follow me to my office, Valiko."

Waldemar led the way down the single aisle filled with shelves of products on both sides, himself walking down behind the equally long counter lined with deli cheese and meat refrigerators. They walked into the spacious kitchen in the back and to a door that had a dirty "Washroom" sign slapped on it. He entered and motioned from inside for Valiko to enter as well. When the latter entered, he locked the door and started washing his hands.

"Valiko wash your hands as well.", directed Waldemar with a stern tone.

Although this all seemed very strange to Valiko, he did as instructed and washed his hands with a lavish amount of soap and wiped his hands clean with a paper towel.

"Excellent, now we are all set.", said Waldemar as he pulled the chain on an Victorian toilet with the water tank mounted directly above the seat. Once all the water flushed out, Waldemar unlocked the door and bid Valiko to follow. They had entered an magnificently furnished room, lined with impressive paintings, filled with towering bookcases containing hundreds of thick volumes, a solid oak writing table and dozens of designer accessories. In addition, hanging along the walls were numerous unique swords, knives and shields that Valiko had

never seen previously anywhere else. Although unmistakably weapons in the literal sense, they were unusual in form and design compared to any yet in existence. It could be argued that either they were a mix of ancient style with modern materials or simply invented before the modern age, with more advanced technology. Looking up, he noticed an enormous modern-looking chandelier that looked much like a coffee colored pine comb, but which dispersed a warm, pleasant light that illuminated the entire chamber evenly. Impressed with the premises and confounded by the route to get here, Valiko ventured to start the conversation, but Waldemar beat him to it as he sat down in his large, black leather chair.

"So Valiko, what exactly did you grandfather tell you about the clock?" he asked in a calm, subtle voice.

Remembering his grandfather's warning that he could be smitten from existence for neglecting the duty to protect the clock, it seemed quite dangerous to inform the Knight of the Division Clock himself of it off-hand and face certain annihilation, but that's a risk he decided to take.

"I learned of the Division Clock only after it was stolen by two beings, one which calls itself the Mask and another the Servant." Began Valiko, "They sent me into an abyss of darkness where I endured numerous obstacles and enemies, but I managed to escape. They are now planning to harness the power of the clock in some unknown way and for an

unknown purpose. I learned of all the significance in my grandfather's journal.

Valiko saw an expression of vehemence fermenting on Waldemar's face and attempted to divulge the entire story as speedily as possible. Once he had promptly finished, he stood silently awaiting a response from his listener. He decided not to reveal the journal to Waldemar, as it contained advice on how to pass his test and would possibly compromise his potential advantage.

Waldemar's expression metamorphosed into a quaky uneasiness which was in stark contrast with his cool tone of voice, "If what you say is true, then the Mask needs the Key to harness the force of time. Unless he finds the Key, no harm will come to the Division Clock itself. My advice is for you to return to your normal life and leave this to me. I will take care of this matter."

Valiko noticed that there was something off with Waldemar's response. He had pondered the disparity of the Servant's hint aimed at pushing him into finding the Key and the apparent usefulness this would bring to the Mask. Although discovering that an ancient and powerful knight could remedy the situation, a composed and calm response was expected, but a highly discernible level of doubt was startling, "Waldemar, I know from my grandfather that you are the Great. But, I can clearly see you are troubled by my news. If the clock is unbreakable without the key, why are you so visibly worried?"

Taken slightly aback by Valiko's responses, Waldemar took a great, deep breath and paused for several moments as if deliberating whether he should continue the discussion or send his unexpected guest away. After a few more deep breaths, he finally spoke: "It is true that I am worried. I am worried due to the calamity that may unfold upon the modern world yet again for a second time in the history of this planet. Now that the Mask has taken possession of the Division Clock, it will not be easily taken back. If I attempt to take it back, great destruction will ensue. People will be frightened. Armies will be assembled. In my battle for the clock, they will be unable to neither understand nor distinguish whether I am friend or foe and attack us both. I will not be able to save them from the fury of the Mask itself. As last time, our clash ended after many years of battle. By that time, many great civilizations on this planet perished. Those that remained hid in caves or in thick forests. Others sailed away to remote islands. To give you an idea of the scope of destruction and upheaval, Rodinia's crust itself was shattered to pieces, setting in motion the movement gigantic land masses to form the current continents as they are most recognized today."

Amazed, Valiko could not believe that civilizations existed during times considered pre-historic, "But wasn't Rodinia an ancient supercontinent? I've heard of it before and it existed hundreds of millions of years before any known

civilizations. I'm not even sure dinosaurs existed back then. So how can this be?"

Waldemar in turn peered at Valiko with a clever look, "There can be no explanation for it, Valiko. It just was. Civilizations existed. Massive creatures also existed. But civilizations came and went just as animals did. Over time, any potential evidence was destroyed, some remains intact buried deep below the Earth's surface. Modern science may never discover all the secrets. Those that it discovers will in turn be lost over the cycles of millennia, until the present world as you experienced will at some point be lost in time as well. The Earth continues to change over time. The crust evolves, creatures evolve, the climate evolves and the universe itself evolves. Tell anyone now that advanced civilizations existed millions of years ago and they will laugh in your face. Why? Because they figure it is impossible simply because they see their own present society as the most advanced possible."

Valiko felt there was some substance behind Waldemar's explanation, especially if he indeed existed since time immemorial as mentioned in his grandfather's journal. "So about the clock. If fighting to get it back is not an option, then what?"

"We wait until the Mask gives up.", Waldemar replied plainly. "The force of time cannot be tapped without the Key, which is safely and securely hidden. As long as this is the case, the Mask is powerless."

A sudden realization crossed Valiko's mind and he quickly rushed to share it, "Listen, Waldemar, but what if the Mask were to find you?"

This question stunned Waldemar which led him to stare directly at Valiko for several moments and analyze this potential threat. "It is highly unlikely that the Mask would be able to pinpoint my whereabouts. If this were to happen a clash would be unavoidable and lead only to a destructive outcome. The Mask would attempt to destroy me and thereby determine the location of the Key. No, it would not be possible....unless..."

As he was about to finish the sentence, Valiko's shadow turned pitch black and detached itself, molding into a human like shape that transformed into a cloak covered figure - it was the Servant! The being spoke slyly.

"Well, well, Valiko. Thank you for leading us to Waldemar the Great in person. It has been quite some time since we last met and we have lost contact during those years. My lord will be so pleased that I have unveiled the location of the Knight that he may even venture to come for an uninvited visit."

Behind Waldemar's chair there stood a complete set of medieval armor on display together with a great sword and shield. Within a split second the armor snapped on to him, fused with his body and exponentially quadrupled the physical size of Waldemar, drastically changing his appearance from that of a humble man to an imposing and indestructible power-house. Grabbing hold of the

sword and shield, the Knight charged at the Servant, but was stopped in his tracks by a powerful blast of a shadowy, black lightning that sent him flying against the wall. Unharmd by this annoyance, the Knight brushed it off and sent off a powerful blast of white flames from the center chest emblem adorning his armor which the Servant barely fended off with his inky barrier.

With a loud voice, the shadowy being exclaimed, "Do you really want to destroy the world once more? Do you really want humanity to suffer!?"

The Knight abruptly stopped his fiery torrent and asked in a mocking yet demanding tone, "And what do you propose, shadow?"

Using this window of opportunity, the Servant explained his proposition. "Give my lord the Key and you will spare this world the unnecessary destruction that it will endure otherwise. My lord will be so generous as to leave the Earth unscathed."

Valiko bid the rose to form his own set of armor and weaponry in preparation for attack. The Knight noticed this transformation and spoke plainly to the Servant, "If your lord harnesses the power of time, then this world will be in jeopardy, plunging it into nonexistence along with any others. I cannot allow this to happen. The Key will remain hidden at all costs."

The Servant listened to the Knight's declaration patiently before setting loose a statement whose purpose was to undermine its opponent's grounds for attack. "Waldemar the Great, your sacred

duty is to defend the Division Clock at all costs. However, you cannot make this decision without consent of the clock's Protector. Doing so would leave you stripped of rank and banished from this world. You know this to be true." Satisfied by the deafening silence caused by its words, the Servant continued. "The Protector in this era is Valiko. You must seek counsel with him prior to making any rash decision. Remember, the world is a precious thing. So many humans have lived, suffered and died to build a foundation for future generations to live in comfort, relative peace and enjoy pro-longed life and stability. Do you really want to destroy it all? Make the wise choice. Give my Master the key and he will spare your world."

Indeed, the Knight was perturbed by the Servant's words and glanced at Valiko before declaring with a terribly deep bass, "We shall convey a private counsel and give you our decision. Leave us for the time being."

The Servant bowed respectfully and transmuted into a dark mist that evaporated into the fabric of space.

Turning to Valiko once more the Knight, leaned against the great sword and asked him in a straight-forward manner. "You are the Protector so what say you?"

Valiko's thoughts raced wildly as the fate of mankind was at stake based on his decision. The responsibility was enormous, but then again if everyone is destroyed who will he answer to anyway?

Yet the prospect of seeing thousands of years of progress wiped away would leave him in a dire position. After all, he too was human and needed a place to call home. There was also the question of discovering who the girl was. Only the Key itself could help him. With steely resolve, he answered confidently, "Knight, the world cannot be subject to destruction a second time. But at the same time we cannot allow the Mask to unlock the clock's power. Give me the Key. I believe I have a plan that could help us destroy the Mask and save this world from unnecessary destruction."

"Then so be it.", declared the Knight, but continued with a crafty tone. "Enter the door through which I led you here and pull the chain. If you pass the test, I will reveal the location of the Key to you."

Valiko proceeded silently towards the door, entered and pulled the chain.

Knight's Test

After the water flushed down the toilet, Valiko opened the door and beheld a vast circular chamber, its walls lined with large stone blocks and several wooden doors. In the center stood a stone pedestal with an enormous sapphire orb the size of a basketball. He entered and the door shut itself behind him, gradually fading away into nothingness and disappeared from view, leaving no way to turn back. Waldemar's voice thundered:

"Valiko! This test was designed to deter anything or anyone with evil intentions from locating the Key. After one of your ancestor's errors led to the destruction of the first advanced civilizations on Earth, the Protectors were no longer entrusted with possession of the Key. I barely managed to protect what was left and established this trial to prevent future Protectors from attempting to harness the clock's power. This is solely meant to impede them from using it for their own means or accidental disclosure of the secret. If at any time you wish to save yourself or give up, shout my name out immediately and I will rescue you. Good luck!"

Valiko walked towards the pedestal and noticed that the sapphire crystal orb was surrounded by an arrow-shaped dial, resting on a stony surface with five carved out sections with strange symbols that highly resembled the Babylonian numerals. Beside each symbol there was a carved out slot with reliefs resembling all the ancient elements, except for

the fifth. Valiko easily discerned the four symbols: fire as a flame, wind as a tornado, water as waves and earth as a tree. The fifth remaining was represented with a strange symbol that resembled several crisscrossed triangles and the letter "I". As he moved around the pedestal, the dial followed his direction, spinning around like a powerful magnet attracted to a piece of solid metal. Examining the orb more closely, Valiko noticed that deep inside its center there rested a flower. It appeared to be a rose, but due to the dim lighting he could not be certain. He struggled to figure out what the next step would be. He approached one of the doors but it was locked. There were exactly five doors corresponding to the number of sections around the dial. He tried opening them all with no luck. Not a single door would budge open. An attempt to bludgeon each door with his sword was futile. Each door was impenetrable and firmly locked. His sword left no visible damage on the wood.

Frustrated, Valiko felt helpless, alone and incapable of solving the very first puzzle. He did not want to give up so early, but he had no idea on how to tackle the problem. He returned to the orb and leaned against the pedestal. Instinctively, he reached out to touch the dial. Placing his right hand upon it, he tried to move it. Surprisingly, it offered no resistance and Valiko slid it towards number one, the most logical choice, represented by the earth symbol. When the arrow head was aligned with the symbol in the center, it began to glow in the same color as the

sapphire crystal and Valiko heard a loud click and thump, as if something heavy fell behind one of the doors. Turning around, he saw the same number symbol glowing on a door directly in line with the dial pointer. He headed towards the door and turned the handle to enter.

Room #1 - Earth

The door sunk into the earth as Valiko stepped out, leaving him in the middle of a forest with gigantic trees towering high in the air. The soil was as dark as a starless night sky. Small black stones, which looked like obsidian rock, were scattered randomly underneath the entire forest canopy. All the trees were taller and broader than the tallest sequoia in existence and reached into the sky. Valiko was walking among true titans. As Valiko walked along, leaving footprints in the soft black earth, he was amazed by the breath-taking scenery until he reached the edge of a grassy meadow. He sharply ducked to the ground. A young deer was grazing peacefully on the grass. On its neck hung a short silver chain with a large medallion with the same tree emblem as in the room. In the distance, quite a bit farther across at 180 degrees from his position, another pair of alert eyes was keeping track of the graceful, four-legged animal. It was quite apparent now that the medallion was important as it would be a snug fit on the pedestal. Perhaps this was the test itself? To recover the medallion? If so, then the only feasible way would

be to kill the deer. Catching it could not be an option as its speed could not be matched. The rose could not assist him in creating a transport device as it only formed solid objects. The first thought that crossed his mind was to bid that the rose form a bow and arrow, shoot the deer and obtain the medallion in the hopes of finding the doorway back into the Elemental Chamber. If not him, then most likely the adversary further off would take action and then the medallion would surely be out of reach. The medallion was the way out.

As Valiko carefully raised his bow he realized that Earth represents Mother Nature as well and that killing a living thing would not be condoned. The gentle fawn barely noticed his presence and peacefully continued chewing on clumps of grass, entirely unaware that an unexpected killer was lurking among the edge of the woods, aiming directly at its heart to take its soul. Valiko lowered the bow and arrow. He could not kill such a graceful creature. He would rather not have the medallion and fail the test, rather than feel guilty of killing a living thing in exchange for a shiny trinket. It would go against the very reason he agreed to undertake Waldemar's test, to save the destruction of countless innocent lives over a Key. He noticed that the glimmering pair of eyes was gone. The deer suddenly looked up, stared into the distance and bolted out of sight. Valiko headed back towards the woods in hope of finding a doorway out. If not, he would call out Waldemar and give up. As he slumped dejectedly through the trees,

he looked up and saw the same deer, not more than a few meters across, standing elegantly on top of a massive obsidian rock and staring straight in his direction. Valiko stopped in his tracks. The deer lowered its head and the medallion slipped from its neck, falling to the base of the rock. It then took another scrutinizing look at Valiko and jolted into the forest. Valiko warily walked up to the rock and picked up the medallion, which lit up with bright emerald glow.

A doorway formed from the rock. Entering, Valiko found himself back in the Elemental Chamber. He walked up to the pedestal and placed the medallion into the appropriate relief next to the number one symbol. The Earth medallion lit up once more and the door was bound with a sudden outgrowth of thick roots, sealing the entrance shut. Valiko spun the dial to number two, pointing to the element of fire.

Room #2 - Fire

The door behind Valiko burst into flames and vanished in a puff of black smoke. All around were ponds of hot lava, spitting out bubbles of searing magma which landed on the volcanic rock and ash covered ground surrounding them. Valiko immediately raised his shield to take cover from barrages of fireballs that were expunged from the deep recesses of several volcanoes, surrounding the area to form a valley of fire. The heat waves

emanating from the magma ponds were unbearable and toasted the skin after a few seconds of standing close to one. Valiko rushed to find a safe spot from which the intensity of blazing heat and magma could be experienced on a lesser scale. Breathing was difficult due to the high concentration of ashes permeating the air and with each inhalation taking an unprecedented physical toll, Valiko's head began to spin out of control and the surroundings blurred into darkness and fire. He knew he needed to find the elemental medallion, but conducting a search through the valley of fire would be suicide. Barrages of molten rock plummeted from several kilometers high, plunging into the ground, cracking the surface and leaving new depressions that quickly filled up to form fiery lagoons or sent out copious splashes of lava in Valiko's direction, forcing him to extend his rose shield into a broader barrier.

The extreme conditions were rapidly hindering any determined resolve to sustain any more continued pressure. The rose's ability to hold an effective defense was gradually weakening, its thick barrier had been absorbing consistent missiles from all possible directions and now was in a rickety state. Several more explosions of lava would render multiple gaping holes that would then threaten to set the entire barrier aflame, leaving Valiko helpless. Realizing the dire situation and imagining the gruesome death that awaited should he continue, he began to contemplate surrender once more as the only feasible option. He bowed down onto one knee

to conserve the energy spent standing upright. A sudden pulsating heat wave exploded from a nearby magma pool that burned the skin on his hands, elbows and shoulders. Yet, just as he opened his mouth with the intention of calling out Waldemar for help, Valiko stopped and let out a wild cry that echoed through the valley. There was nothing left for him outside this room. Life's purpose seemed clear in a moment of clarity - a fight to the end even if it was with Apollo in the flesh. After the emotional outburst of all his pent up frustration, Valiko grasped hold of his shield even tighter, mustering up any remaining strength to run towards one of the volcanic mountains and possibly search for an escape route. Yet, as he did, he felt a strange sensation. The heat abided to a more mildly hot temperature. The barrages of molten rock ceased and the magma pools calmed, no longer spewing bubbles of bursting lava as if someone lowered the heat on a boiling kettle and prevented it from spilling out. He bid the barrier to fuse back into the shield for extra protection and to observe what, if anything, had resulted in such a drastic change in conditions.

When the barrier obstructing his view was gone, Valiko jumped backwards from shock. Facing him was an enormous giant figure, clad in magnificent black armor and with a man-like face made of volcanic rock. In his hands he held an equally grandiose flaming longsword, the tip of its hilt decorated with a cherry-red ruby the size of a baseball. Unsurprisingly, the fire medallion was fitted

into its chest plate of armor, radiating in a brilliant plume of flames.

Without warning, the figure began twirling and swinging the fiery sword, charging towards Valiko like a mighty, unstoppable rhinoceros. Raising his shield, Valiko set a firm footing, bracing for a destructive impact. The collision sent him flying several meters and demolished the shield into multiple pieces. An attempt to push himself up with his left hand alarmed him - his hand was completely numb and barely responded. Even a slight twitch of the fingers was excruciatingly painful. Meanwhile, the dark armored figure looked on with ghastly satisfaction at having felled an opponent so easily. Resolving not to give up, Valiko stood up once more and raised his sword. With a whirl of his sword, the broken pieces of the shield fused into his left arm to transform it into a stone-like battering ram, while the rest reinforced his body armor. A fierce clash ensued. The titan charged once more, but this time Valiko prepared to throw a devastating punch in the hopes of felling it. As the titan approached with full force, Valiko leaped and slammed it straight into the chest, dislocating the medallion. In a blaze of flames, the blackish armor liquefied into rock, turning the entire being into a stationary statue.

Picking up the medallion, a door emerged once more from beneath the ground. Once more, Valiko placed the fire medallion into the appropriate slot and the corresponding door burst into a wall of fire. The rose flowed out from his left arm. He could

now feel it again once more as if nothing had touched it. Turning the dial hesitantly to number three, Valiko braced himself for what possibly awaited him behind the door of wind.

Room #3 - Wind

After entering, an incredible gust of wind blasted the door into pieces and sent Valiko spiraling through the air like a rag doll. Expecting to crash into the ground, Valiko was surprised to discover that he was flying at exponential speeds on turbulent air drifts, raging cyclones and gargantuan multi-colored gaseous cloud formations. There was no sign of ground. Valiko was beginning to feel nauseous from the toxic gases that made up the atmosphere. The constant change in wind direction pulled and pushed him in random directions that felt like several high velocity roller coasters were crashing into his body, forces which would have utterly crushed and ripped him apart if not for the armor. He had to act rapidly or face losing consciousness. He bid the rose to transform into a pair of short, flexible wings and extended them from his sides to form a mini-glider. This offered him a more increased level of control over the direction. Valiko made an attempt to glide away from the enormous clouds. After a tedious effort to navigate the powerful winds, Valiko manage to reach a pocket in the atmosphere that was calmer and had a higher level of oxygen. Although the strong winds still kept him afloat, they were now

more bearable. He was now able to think more clearly.

Like the previous elemental rooms, the conditions were unique. But, unlike the previous rooms, Valiko was not on solid ground. Riding the breeze, he wondered whether to wait and see in safety or glide out to search for some sign of the wind medallion, to face the dangers of poisonous gas clouds and atom-splitting winds. As he was pondering a plan of action, something whizzed past his head with a hum. It was the wind medallion, glowing a vibrant lilac-color. It zipped straight into a dark purplish cloud, leaving a glittering trail of electric sparks. Valiko drastically needed the ability to circumnavigate the winds. An idea crossed his mind and he bid his rose to form a long bird-like tail with a broad leaf-shaped tip, taking inspiration from the anatomy of birds. He propelled himself in the direction of the trail of electrified sparks, desperate to catch up with the medallion. He rushed through clouds that spanned the size of entire cities and dodged incredible lightning bolts which sped through the air, forming huge nets that looked like a spider's web and would have made Zeus jealous. Valiko attempted to avoid contact with the electrified nets, flying through the holes while trying to master the winds. After multiple twists and turns, Valiko finally spotted the actual medallion. Just as he was within a few meters of grabbing hold of it, the powerful gales suddenly began to abate and drastically lowered his speed, allowing the medallion

to slip away. Undaunted, but with unparalleled frustration, he reached out towards the medallion's trail in protest. It sent an intense surge of electricity through his body, but instead of being fried into a crisp, Valiko felt his acceleration increasing. The trail was acting like a magnet that catapulted him in the direction of the medallion. Within a few seconds, the medallion was in his grasp as he flew into a gigantic cloud.

When he emerged from the cloud, he landed back into the elemental chamber. Quite exhausted, Valiko placed the wind medallion into the appropriate slot and saw the door turn into a poisonous magenta-colored cloud that guarded the entrance. He proceeded to turn the dial to the second last element - water.

Room #4 - Water

As Valiko stepped through, he found himself standing on a pillar of ice in the middle of a sea of water, with icebergs and ice-flows decorating the entire landscape. The door shut behind him, turning into ice and breaking itself into tiny pieces. The pillar shook and cracked apart, sinking into the chilly water along with Valiko. Submersed in temperatures close to zero Celsius, Valiko felt his heart nearly stop from the freezing cold. He quickly swam to the nearest ice flow and raised himself onto the snowy surface with difficulty. He gauged that unless he could find a source of heat, he would face an accelerated rate of

hypothermia and die within a few minutes. Suddenly, the rose diffused from his body, planting itself firmly into the ice, unraveled its petals and lit up in flames that rivalled the biggest of campfires. Within a few minutes Valiko was dry again. He wondered how the rose could possibly create fire, whereas this was previously impossible. The thought dawned on him: with each elemental medallion he recovered, he most likely gained the ability to wield the forces of that element. The rose snuffed out its own fire and fused back into body armor.

As a cyclopean iceberg drifted not far from Valiko's position, he noticed a scintillation of light. Starting intently, he noticed the warm glow of a turquoise blue deep within the recesses of an icy mountain that was nestled on the iceberg. The iceberg was drifting swiftly along, slicing through story high waves like a knife through butter. He needed to get across, but the vast span of water made it impossible to jump. The winds were not strong enough to glide towards it. He realized that he could try wielding the wind element in order to propel him across, but how? Instinctively, he bid the rose to form the same gliding equipment he had used earlier. Then, with a flash of violet light, the rose summoned a gust of hot wind that lifted Valiko into the skies. He easily rode the thermal airstream and landed on the base of the icy mountain.

Buried within the very heart of the mountain was the water medallion. With the assumption that he could melt the ice and reach it, Valiko unleashed a

torrent of fire from the rose. But to his dismay, the ice had not melted a drop. He tried smashing the ice with the sledgehammer he had used earlier, but with no effect. Amazed at the mega-resistance of the ice, Valiko could not think of any way to cleave through it. As he was lost in thought, a noise erupted from the water which sounded like a hundred seagulls merged into one loud cry. From above Valiko saw an enormous horde of the birds, made completely out of crystal clear ice and hurling sharp, meter long icicles from their mouths. Valiko quickly raised his shield for protection, but the projectiles punctured through it, one of them hitting his arm.

With a painful cry, Valiko dodged out of the way in search for cover. He jumped behind a huge boulder of ice. His arm was bleeding profusely, staining the snow. Parts of the shield fused into the wounded area to stop the bleeding temporarily. The icy seagulls continued to bombard icicles in his direction, but the boulder prevented them from hitting Valiko. They flew up to the top of the mountain and perched there, waiting for the next opportunity to attack their target. Multiple splashes of water shot out into the air and penguin-like figures, made out of the same crystal ice, landed onto the iceberg across from Valiko. Without warning they rolled into a sphere and began pounding against the boulder. There were dozens of these icy bowling balls and the boulder began to gradually crack open. With several more hits, Valiko would be at their mercy.

With a profound sense of urgency, Valiko knew he needed to think of a way out. Who knew that this elemental chamber would turn out to be so annoyingly difficult? He suddenly realized that he had yet to try using the power of the earth element. Although skeptic that it would help him in arctic conditions, he nevertheless summoned the rose. Glowing with the color of a jade crystal, the rose created a massive sprouting of roots that entwined the icy penguins and crushed them. Wondering whether the same could be done to retrieve the water medallion, Valiko bid the rose to dig through the mountain base. The powerful roots weaved through the solid block of ice like a fish through water and grabbed hold of the medallion. A root emerged next to where he stood and offered it to him. With the medallion in his possession, an unknown force carved out a door from the block of ice and Valiko stepped back into the elemental chamber. The door froze entirely into ice.

Placing the final medallion into the slot, they began to glow with their respective colors, pulsating in synchronization every four seconds. After four continuous cycles, the fifth section's emblem on the dial lit in a bright, white light and released a powerful blast of light towards the fifth door, unlocking it for Valiko in a cascade of swirling rays.

Waldemar's voice boomed from different directions, "Valiko! You have done well to get so far! None of your ancestors had managed to obtain all the elements as you have done. You have passed the

first part of the test! The Key lies behind the fifth door! Yet beware, the fifth room houses the most difficult test of them all. It is the room of Illusion. Proceed at your own risk and good luck!”

Valiko entered the fifth door without delay, expecting to finally obtain the Key and with it prevent any unnecessary destruction by obliterating the Mask.

Room #5 - Illusion

Rather than finding himself in a strange place as he had expected based on the previous rooms, Valiko entered what appeared to be an apartment that was strangely familiar, but one he could not remember no matter how hard he tried. The door closed behind him and he stood in a narrow corridor. The smell of delicious cooking drifted from the kitchen door along with sounds of light, relaxing jazz music. Moving towards the door, Valiko gently turned the handle and entered. A beautiful girl with strawberry blonde hair rushed towards him and greeted him lovingly, kissing his lips and biting his neck. He realized that he had recognized her from somewhere before, but his memory continued remaining nothing more than a blur. He could not remember anything at all, yet the strong feeling of Deja-vu pursued him like a hungry wolf stalking its unsuspecting prey.

The girl noticed his surprise and looked straight into his eyes: “Honey, what’s the matter? You

look really tired. Did you have another stressful day at work?"

Valiko answered in the most general manner possible to avoid further suspicion and to figure out what was happening. What this actually another test? If so, then where could the key possibly be hidden?

"Yes, sorry. I'm just really exhausted. So what are you cooking?"

"I'm making your favorite meat pie, don't you remember you were begging me all week and all day today to make it for you! Dear, you are always so forgetful!" Answered the girl. "I bought the ready-made baking dough that we usually get from the store and inside it's going to be lean ground beef, mushrooms, parsley and golden brown fried onions."

It sounded truly, mouthwateringly delicious and in a sudden flash of clarity he remembered trying it before. The girl continued to work on preparing the pie filling while he stepped outside to the balcony. It was nighttime. The apartment was located on a very high floor, opening up a beautiful view. The balcony faced an expanse of cottages, each with their own expansive grassy backyard. It was mostly dark in this area, except for a few scattered yellow lights. A bit farther in the distance, a tall bridge shone brightly, its lights reflected by the river. Taller buildings could be seen across the divide and more apartment buildings were clumped together closer to the road connecting one side to the other. The air was invigorating and carried hints of burning wood from multiple fireplaces, filling it with the smells of cherry, oak, ash

and hickory. The girl hugged him from behind, kissing him gently behind the back of the neck.

"Don't you just love this view? I will probably never grow tired of it. We're lucky to have found this apartment. Although it's at the outer edges of the city, it's not too far away so we can enjoy the best of both worlds."

"Yes you're right, this location is ideal and I'm in love with the view just as you are.", replied Valiko thoughtfully, still trying hard to understand what was going on and what he was supposed to do. He spouted out to his own bewilderment, "I love you so much, my dear."

The girl wrapped her arms around his neck and whispered into his ear, "I am the Key, Valiko."

He turned sharply around, but she was not there. He rushed back inside, but she was nowhere to be found. There was also no trace of the meat pie. The pleasant smell of food was gone, replaced by the repugnant odor of cheap detergent and old books. The person he loved so much was gone from his life. In tears, he got down on both knees, clasping his head overcome with the sudden influx of long-forgotten memories. He let loose a bereaving howl with all the fury in his heart and air in his lungs, "Elira! I love you so much! I miss you so much!" He had lost her somewhere along the way. Memories flashed in his eyes like a roll of camera film that spun too quickly to make out any of the scenes. Yet, deep in his heart, he knew that he had lost Elira forever. He opened his eyes and looked down onto the floor to see a hefty

silver key on a chain. A white light wrapped itself around the outer sides of the kitchen door. It was time to go. He placed the key around his neck and exited full of nothing but sorrow, tears and bitterness.

Continuity

Valiko ended up back in the Elemental Chamber and the door behind him vanished completely, leaving only a stony wall in its place. The orb housed in the pedestal was glowing. There was indeed a rose housed inside it. Waldemar's voice thundered grumpily, "So Valiko, congratulations! You have recovered the key despite facing physical and lastly, psychological endurance. It's time to come back! Place your hand on the orb."

Valiko did as instructed. Placing his right hand on the orb, he began to glow in sync with the orb and the other medallions. After five pulsating bursts of light, everything around him disappeared in an auroral radiance. When the effulgence subsided, Valiko was back in Waldemar's office. But, Waldemar was gone.

Instead, the Servant greeted him enthusiastically. "So, Valiko, you have managed to find the Key, congratulations! I was quite worried that you would give up at the very last moment."

Perplexed, Valiko readied his defenses with shield, sword and armor. "Where is Waldemar? If you try and take the key, I will destroy you even if I must give up my last breath. I will fight till the end."

Laughing loudly, the Servant replied, "Waldemar? There is no Waldemar here nor there ever was! Waldemar is a convenient fiction. A ruse to get you here!"

Even more stupefied, Valiko shook his head in disbelief. "What do you mean? I was here in this room, at the bakery, speaking to him. I followed my grandfather's note!"

Laughing with even greater amusement, the Servant floated even more closely to Valiko with each word and spoke in Waldemar's voice, "Did you ever question why there was a new note in your grandfather's journal, spattered with fresh ink? Because I placed it there. Did you ever bother to read the entire contents of the journal? I think not. You saw the note. The note had exactly what you wanted and expected. Did you even question why your grandfather would give you instructions leading to the key? If you had read on, you would have understood that he would not have condoned it. Go ahead turn to another of the pages."

Valiko did not lower his sword or shield. Reaching for the journal would be a distraction that would play into the Servant's favor.

"Considering what you're saying is true: what about the elemental chamber then? You created all those tests as well?"

Stopping within a few steps of Valiko, the Servant's eyes lit up brightly and replied in its former voice, "Well, the chamber was not an invention. It was indeed designed by Waldemar. But, Waldemar remains only a legend and exists no more. The knight was destroyed in 1001 FCE by my lord. Yet, with the last drops of time energy from which he consisted, he formed a hidden chamber, encapsulating the key with

it. The location was unknown to my lord and the victory drained a considerable amount of power... Only after several millennia was I able to find it and my lord able to return to this world."

Valiko was infuriated and spoke in a low, husky voice, "You used me. You tested me. You mocked me. Now you are truly pissing me off. I think you should burn."

The rose understood the hint and released a generous burst of flames at the Servant. Taken by surprise, the latter was unable to avoid the surge of fire and transformed into a shadow that dispersed into nothingness. Valiko's move was entirely a gamble as he had no idea he would still be able to summon the power of the elements outside of the actual chamber. Doubting that fire would be enough to destroy the Servant, but only serve to delay the being's return, Valiko rushed to exit Waldemar's lair. He had a plan. He had a goal. He had no idea how to realize the plan or achieve the goal. But, he was determined to succeed. He rushed home.

Barricading himself in his room, Valiko sat down at his writing table and pulled out his grandfather's journal. He was determined to actually read it this time to the end, despite the possibility of being chased down by the Servant at any moment. Rationalizing that the Servant did not expect to be attacked using one of the elements, it would stay clear for just enough time to allow him to formulate an effective plan. Pulling out the journal, an inky substance was dripping from the cover. He opened it

up. The sewed in note was blank and dissolving into the blackish ink that made up the Servant and had pursued him all this time. The note melted entirely and the ink-like goo spilled onto the floor, dissolving between cracks of the hardwood boards. The other journal pages were unstained and Valiko sped through the first one, feeling ever guiltier for his haste in pursuing the key as he read: "The year was 1986. It was the pinnacle of my career as a mechanical engineer. I just received a raise and a promotion. My family had all the necessities of life and despite the initial difficulties I experienced in my rocky start at an independent life, I had succeeded. It was euphoric in the sense that for the first time in my entire life, I could sleep more easily knowing there was a certain stability which had been achieved. Years of built-up stress, insufficient savings and constant upheavals seriously damaged my hopes of ever finding a place in society. Eventually, I managed to do it and now I can breathe more calmly knowing that I can spoil my wife with gifts, spend time together and go on vacation once in a while. Our children have anything they will ever need. Certainly, we do not overspend nor can we afford to live a high lifestyle, but we have enough to consider ourselves to be in what they call the upper-middle class of society. It was during this most peaceful time of my life that everything should go to naught.

It was an early Saturday morning and I decided to go out to visit some garage sales in the neighborhood. What was I looking for? It was strange

that I suddenly got the urge to go out and look for a grandfather clock. I loved those types of clocks for as long as I could recall. I remembered that my father and even grandfather each had one in their homes. It was only much later on that I discovered the true significance of this detail. To my astonishment, I discovered one for sale at a bargain price. The owner wanted only \$100 for it, despite the fact that it was without a single scratch and made of solid oak. The owner noted that although the clock was mechanical it just kept on running. He also mentioned that the key to the clock door was missing and that he never opened it. It was sealed tightly and he did not want to break it apart.

The owner helped me load the clock into my van and I drove back home. I managed to get it inside by tilting the base sideways until I slowly got it into the living room. I placed it in a corner of the room. Although it looked quite plain, it was nonetheless an exquisite accessory to the room and house overall. I was fascinated by it. My wife also came to love it.

On the same day when it was time to go to bed, I had an uneasy feeling. Lying in bed and trying to fall asleep, I could hear the tick-tock getting louder and louder, until it was so loud I swear my entire family should have awakened. But, amazingly they all slept soundly. I wanted to wake my wife and ask her to verify whether it was indeed the clock or I was experiencing an auditory hallucination. But, I decided not to wake her or else face an angry lecture

in the morning. I made my way down to the living room and as I got closer the tick-tock gradually got quieter. But, I was quite shocked by another anomaly.

Next to the clock there stood a figure in a cloak. When I tried to rush towards the kitchen, thinking to call the police before I was noticed, the man or whatever it was, suddenly appeared in front of me to block my path. Whether it was just dark or whether the being was human at all, I was too scared to think rationally. I just started throwing punches. Yet my hands touched nothing. I was merely fighting a shadow and my hands flew through nothing but air. I was unable to protect myself from what happened next. The figure unleashed a strange inky goo that wrapped around my hands and feet, binding them in dark chains. My limbs were spread out and I was hovering in the air. The unnatural being then demanded that I hand over some key in return for my life. Naturally, having no idea as to what key was in question, I begged for my life claiming complete ignorance. The figure then unsheathed a shadowy sword and pointed it straight at my heart. Although I struggled with all my might against the chains, it was hopeless.

Closing my eyes, I hoped for a miracle. But, just as the sword pierced my chest, a radiant flash of white light beamed from behind and knocked the being back. My chains evaporated. The being vanished into nothingness, threatening to return in the future. I looked back at the clock and a woman emerged from the brilliantly glowing clock together

with a huge white hound. She introduced herself as Elmira and handed me a beautiful red rose, explaining that I am the next Protector of the Division Clock, which stood in my living room. The being that attacked me was called the Servant and wanted the Key to harness the force of time, which was embodied by the clock. The clock's door was opened by the Key and could be used to harness or wield the power. I was still under the impression that I was hallucinating or dreaming, but the experience was too vivid, natural and physical for it to be a product of my imagination. Elmira showed me that the rose could be used to defend myself against the Servant in the future and that my ancestors were all charged with protection of the clock. She mentioned that there was once a great knight, known as Waldemar, who fought an evil power from another world, known as the Mask. However, it is believed that the knight sacrificed himself in order to stop the Mask. He succeeded in sending the Mask back to its world, drained of all power but at the cost of the destruction of all ancient civilizations. She pleaded me to accept this duty and pass it on to my succeeding generations. Still unable to believe this fantasy and seeing the acceptance might lead to a conclusion, I agreed to become the next Protector. Parting, Elmira mentioned one last thing - the Servant cannot find the clock if not led directly to it. It is a shadowy creature that can take on the form of anyone or anything, impersonating people or even immaterial items in order to discover the clock. Unless led

directly to it, it cannot find it. It was shocking for someone to tell you that you had welcomed an imposter at one point into your home! The mystical woman and hound then vanished in a magnificent flash of white light.

I went back to bed, but only managed to fall asleep closer to the early morning. Upon awakening, things seemed to be normal. My wife and I prepared for work, sent the kids off to school and had breakfast together. My wife left early as she was in a rush. I still had some time to read the morning newspaper and drink another cup of coffee. Sitting down to the kitchen table, I shook off my late night visions as nothing more than a bad dream. And then I saw the rose covered in fresh rain drops resting on the table in front of me. I jolted and almost spilled all the contents of the hot coffee pitcher on myself. It was impossible to imagine and yet I picked up the rose with my own hands, feeling its tender stem lying in my palm and gazing upon the fine droplets that adorned its vivid crimson petals. I realized then that I either had a serious condition or what came to pass was indeed true.

Making my way into the living room, I stared at the clock for what seemed an eternity. An endless number of questions plagued my mind. I wondered whether my family's safety was at stake. God forbid they should ever have to face any evil. I then started to question whether this machine was indeed an invention of some God? Surely, time itself left to be protected by humans? Did it make any logical sense?

It surely did not, but if a chosen few were indeed tasked with guarding such a secret then did it mean that free will existed? Did time travel then really exist? I had a lot of irrelevant question in my mind at that point. What was true was that my life had changed forever in a single night without my consent nor could I influence those series of events. They just happened.

What did I do? I hid the clock up on the second floor in my office in what would eventually become Valiko's room. Although my wife was adamant at this decision, I managed to assuage her confusion by claiming that the clock had broken over the night and that I would work on fixing it. After a few decades had come to pass my excuse remained the same, but by then only I had even noticed that the clock still existed in our home. Eventually, my office became my grandson's room, who never seemed to complain about it. I continued to keep the rose hidden in my office and was surprised that it never aged, withered or otherwise showed signs of change over the years. The water droplets remained as fresh as ever. And if I tried to shake off the water, they appeared once more as if showered by an invisible rain cloud constantly drifting above it.

There were no more incidents involving the Servant and yet every day I went to sleep in apprehension of being attacked in the middle of the night. I never quite mastered the power of the rose as was described by Elmira and in a way I do not regret it. But one strange thing happened when Valiko turned

18 years old. I remember that this was when the rose disappeared entirely. I could not find it anywhere after that. I simply assumed that perhaps any danger threatening the clock had passed, but I hope that this presumption should not have to be disproved later on. Perhaps, the reader of my journal should think me a crazy old man or consider this an attempt at a practical joke, but what I experienced can probably be never proven to anyone who does not witness it with their own senses. To this day, I have yet to understand whether I had a minor form of schizophrenia that made me see things and perceive imaginary threats or whether the story about the clock is true. My only understanding is that the key itself remains hidden by Waldemar and that I was warned about the danger of the key.

I hoped to leave this journal hidden in Valiko's room. If you, Valiko, or whoever should discover it, reads the contents and brushes it off as lunacy, so be it. But, I wanted to note down my singular experience regardless of its farfetchedness as it was probably the most unique in my entire life. And I hope that no one should have to face the dilemma that I did - having perceptive reality blur and merge with one's imagination. Although our minds perceive the world subjectively, this can, as far I can tell, go too far until we lose track of that reality which our society interprets, for all intents and purposes, as being normal. Having said that, I hope this journal will help anyone assess their own sense of reality, even if in the contrast it would help them ascertain whether they

face the onset of a neurotic madness or, on a more positive note, give them a good laugh. I humbly wish with all my heart for the latter case.

Best,

Albion.

P.S. You may wonder whether if at all I left another journal or diary with more stories from my life. To be honest, I had written down much over the course of the years, but eventually gave up keeping a record simply because I perceived my life to be relatively boring, routine and uneventful. I wish it could have been different looking back. I wish I could have done things differently. I longed for adventure, travel and action. All those things which the movies and books immerse us in - another world, a fictional world full of hope, daring and dreams. Perhaps the single most event in my life was the one I dedicated my short journal to. Whether hallucination or not, it was exciting in a way and bestowed a sense of greater purpose into my life. I urge you not to run from your dreams, but to embrace them even if it is nothing more than a pure fantasy, devised as a shelter from the hatred, jealousy, unfairness and scorn that forms the backbone of reality. Valiko finished reading the last pages with tears in his eyes. Wiping his face with the side of his hand, he remembered how his grandparents raised him ever since he was a little boy. His parents had left him in their care, working

hard to support the entire family and make a living. He barely got to see his parents as they were constantly balancing multiple jobs and laboring long hours. They believed in the American dream, but it turned out to be nothing more than a hijacked lottery. Years of general labor, workplace abuse, false hopes and taxes all took their toll. They worked hard, but it was barely enough to make ends meet. To those who claim that in money lies not happiness are either blind, foolish or trying to cheat you. The constant struggle for a dollar more would either break you, make you or destroy you. In Valiko's case, an insufficient family budget meant the worst possible things, a family break up. With each partner dissatisfied and seeking better prospects, a split occurred. A memory leaped into the corner of Valiko's thoughts. He remembered rushing to meet someone as the heavy apartment door sprung open. Dressed in a clean, black suite and lacquered shoes, his grandfather walked up to greet him happily. Begging for a present, a large hand pulled out a piece of gum and placed it in his outspread hands. As he unfolded the wrapper he could clearly make out the words on the back:

Alive is the knight,
A soul of might,
Revive you must,
The future past,
Begin you must,
A search at last.

Valiko's mind snapped back to reality. He looked at this hands and the gum wrapper faded away into a swarm of light particles that flew through the keyhole etched into the wall. It was the same place from which he escaped from the Mask's labyrinth and he doubted the genuineness of the hint. Was this another lure aimed at obtaining the key? Then again, the key itself could be used to open the door, a portal to another world, perhaps? The light particles represented a stark contrast to the inky shadows deployed by both the Mask and Servant. They could not possible wield them. One thing was certain - Waldemar had to be found. The fate of time itself was at stake.

As Valiko rose to try out the keyhole the doorbell unexpectedly rang. He wondered whether it might be C. and made his way down. Opening the door he saw Kate. She had watery eyes and mascara blotted all over her face. Without a word she entered and hugged him closely. Her smell was addictive to the senses, her touch soothing and her body on warm to the touch. His natural instincts were aroused. Kate was an attractive girl and Valiko had difficulty combating the urge bubbling deep in the back of the subconscious mind, desiring her physically in that very moment. Yet as always in terms of social norms would dictate, speaking one's thoughts directly could be dangerous, consequential and misleading. Valiko spoke in a manner he deemed would be acceptable in the particular situation.

"Kate, what's the matter? Are you alright?" Valiko blabbered out in a worrisome tone.

The dashing girl looked straight up into his eyes, "It's C... he can be such a jerk. This time he went too far. He's totally racked up and impossible to talk to. He said a bunch of things that really hurt."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Kate." said Valiko with a touch of empathy. "So why did you come to me of all people? I mean we're not really that close and I'm just a bit startled really."

Kate looked on at him with a strange glance that was both cunning and seductive. With a faint smile, she answered in a voice barely louder than a whisper, "Well, I've always taken a liking to you, Valiko. Maybe I made the wrong choice in going out with C. and the more times I've seen you the more attractive you've become. Besides, you're not as insensitive as he is and more attentive to what I'm feeling."

Valiko was bewildered by Kate's unusual behavior. Something was off. They met only a times and almost never talked to each other. Physical desire clouded reason, intuition and common sense but Valiko managed to stammer out a question that would set off an internal alert.

"So you drove C. home? I noticed the mustang outside?" he asked calmly and without even moving a brow.

She seemed perplexed by his question and rather than answering directly, she responded with a question in turn, breaking up with more tears as she

spoke, "Maybe I can make some tea? That would really sooth my nerves. Do you want a cup? If you don't mind that I use the kitchen?"

Valiko could not refuse her offer. He also felt it would be wrong to demand an answer, especially since it appeared she was truly heartbroken. There was no reason to doubt her sincerity, yet in the back of his mind, he still felt something was not right. And with the sudden appearance, making a disappearance would be perceived as strange. And yet he could not delay. With every passing moment, the chances of meeting the Servant once more increased. Although the element of surprise was on his side before, Valiko could not count on the same tactic again, knowing that the shadowy fiend would no doubt find a way to outwit and out power him. Making his way upstairs, Valiko briskly stepped towards the wall with the keyhole.

Taking the chain off his neck, he was about to insert the key when he felt a hand touch him on the shoulder. Twisting sharply around, Kate transformed into the Servant and shot out a flood of inky shadows which wrapped around his hands and feet. Realizing that he had been deceived, the key would be lost if he did not resist. Summoning the wind element with a furor, the rose glowed lavender purple and a powerful flurry of wind and bolt of lightning shot through the windows, shattering them to pieces and hit the Servant, sending the being flying against a wall. The inky strings dispersed around his limbs and Valiko inserted the key and turned it clockwise. A

contour of bright light formed the shape of a door and he jumped through before the Servant could recover. When the portal closed, the Servant arose, readying for a bow.

The Mask emerged out of thin air and faced its loyal subject, demanding a report: "Servant! Did your scheme transpire with success? Is my grand plan coming to fruition?"

Replying, as always, with a respectful tone, the Servant bowed even lower than usual, yet this time did not bother to raise the clock, "My lord, Valiko will soon be led directly to you. He has the Key and will open the clock door, giving you the ultimate power!"

The Mask was visibly pleased with these news and its imperious tone no longer contained any elements of criticism, "Excellent, my servant." He laughed darkly, "You will be most amply rewarded for your services. I will be awaiting Valiko in my lair." Do not fail me! Here is a small gift for your efforts thus far!"

Opening its mouth, the Mask spit out a dark cloud that engulfed the Servant and seeped into the cloak. "With this your cloak can now resist the elements that Valiko wields. It will give you an advantage when disposing of him. After I obtain the power of time, destroy the poor soul, he he.", uttered the Mask as it disintegrated back into the fabric of space.

The Servant floated up to the wall from which Valiko made an escape. From the neck, it removed a charcoal-colored chain with a black key. Inserting it

into the keyhole, the being turned it counter-clockwise and a pitch-black portal opened in the form of a door. Hovering into the darkness, the Servant's eyes glowed a hellish red in anticipation of the culmination of its grand plan to harness the force of time. The pieces of crushed glass lay on the floor in a pool of blood. It was then that a person entered the room and transformed into Samile. Walking up to the stained shards, it sniffed and licked the blood on the floor. Turning its immense head towards the direction of the portal, the magnificent hound leaped directly into it with a violent snarl.

Pure Madness

Dear Elira,

How I long to see you once more! Just one more time! I feel an inconsolable guilt for neglecting to spend enough time with you. To hold your soft hands, listen to your sweet voice and caress you lovingly while peering deep into your eyes. These thoughts are driving me mad with each passing day without you. There is nothing in this world left for me of worth. Every day I grow weary of the habitual routines that need to be performed. I have grown weak physically and mentally. I no longer experience pleasure. I no longer feel happiness. I no longer feel uplifted as I felt with you. There is an emptiness in my heart, a void that cannot be filled with any positive emotion or thought. My only thoughts focus on lashing out against the world and every single soul on it. I can no longer control myself and my vehement is easily triggered by the smallest of slights.

Just the other day someone snubbed me across the shoulder walking on the street, uttering some kind of rude remark. I usually would have avoided any confrontation nor ever even sought to utter a word, preferring to continue along my route. Yet, this idiot so enraged me that I grabbed him by the neck and unleashed a series of blind punches. He tried to defend himself and in a normal state would have overpowered me, but he was no match for my

anger. I hit him anywhere possible in a blind rage. I punched him until a stream of blood surged from his face and half his teeth were gone. I only stopped short of killing the bastard. In that moment, I saw no reason why this piece of shit should continue walking the earth. Someone called the police, but I was gone by then. They are probably looking for me, but so far no one has yet to find me.

Looking back, I reasoned that my reaction may have been too violent perhaps, but a great fire is burning in my heart and slowly consuming any sense of empathy, kindness or consideration. I vowed to seek seclusion for fear of my increasingly impulsive and violent behavior, barely leaving my room. I could not find any reason to seek out anything beyond the four walls within which I felt safe both from myself and others. What money I had saved was enough for the moment for my basic sustenance, but eventually I sought shelter in my former room at the house. Without you the world was shattered. My dreams are full of nothing but blood, violence and death. It is a torture of the mind, but I embrace it.

My family, troubled by my sudden degradation, sought to help me with kind words and idealistic expectations. They say that I should move on with my life and seek to make the most of it. They say that my grief will pass with time. These words only intensify my anger and I barricade myself in the room, refusing to exit for weeks on end. I say that time may heal certain wounds, but not like the trauma that I have experienced. I feel only

uncontrollable wrath and my only desire is to rewind time back to those moments together with you. But, these thoughts only serve to further fuel my passions as I realize that time cannot be rewound nor reset. I know not what to do. I am empty. I am alone. I am without you.

Your love,

Valiko.

Search for Waldemar

Valiko faced a multitude of stony steps that hovered above and close to each other, connected by an invisible force that bestowed an appearance of a winding staircase in the form of a grand impossible figure stretching out to infinity. The steps floated in odd directions, a few twisted and turned while others were smooth and straight. Some of the stairs extended into vertical or horizontal lines, while others braided into a helix-form or elongated into random zig-zag patterns that made no logical sense and distorted any sense of visual acuity. Between the irregular and jumbled blocks, an infinite amount of glowing light particles clumped together in hotchpotch fashion, within an impregnable smoky mist interspersed throughout the entire space in all 360 degrees of view.

Faced with another maze which offered no clues but only limitless possibilities, it was a splendid visual representation of pristine randomness and a striking testament to freedom of choice that only the abstract imaginations of the likes of Dali or Picasso could interpret only after gulping down a few hard drinks. It looked like a mini galaxy with the stars, planets and moons all scaled down in their magnitude, but with endless possibilities and an incomprehensible number of options. As he stood wondering which way to choose, a white chair spouted from the misty floor. As if mocking his indecision, it offered a place to sit. Compared to the

chair encountered in the Mask's maze, this one actually appeared quite comfortable, with soft fluffy pillows composed of the same smoke permeating the entire space.

He sat down briefly before bolting to his feet. The smoke was making him feel tired, sleepy and lazy. He felt that the more time he took to make up his mind, the more indecisiveness was planted. An aura of procrastination was creeping up on him through the guise of the mist and even the simple action of stepping forward seemed impossible, his feet paralyzed with doubt but beginning to glow in a sparkle of white light. To overcome this lassitude, Valiko summoned the power of the wind to create a light breeze blew away the mist around him. As soon as it was done away with, Valiko could feel control over his own limbs once more. Any delays in this place would lead to utter loss of the ability to govern himself physically. The more time spent in inaction, the more paralyzed he became. He feared what would happen if he had succumbed to a longer period of pensiveness and looked at the radiating stars - they were all lost souls! He jumped to the nearest stair, running along to avoid any more contact with the cursed substance, very much resembling the inky ooze wielded by the Servant except in its color, texture and effects.

Moving along the stairs, Valiko managed to walk in every possible known direction and angle, even striding upside down briefly. Each step was connected, but the route led in a new direction with

each stride. Many of the steps crossed, broke apart and formed new, alternate routes. Sometimes, Valiko felt he was gaining no progress in this convolution of staircases as there was no sense of linear movement or reference point from which to gauge the distance travelled. There was no sign of the initial doorway from which he embarked, but many of the star formations did look familiar, so much so that a momentary lapse of confidence took grip and Valiko paused to take a look around. As soon as his movements ceased, a thick cloud of smoke quickly swept past, enveloping his entire body up to the neck and acted like a powerful and enchanting tranquilizer that lulled him into a deep sleep. The rose was unable to resist the potent effects and its dull shimmer of light was dimmed almost instantly by the smoke. The blocks formed a translucent spherical structure, encapsulating Valiko together with the intoxicating substance. The sphere began to glow brightly in a radiance similar to all the other stars strewn throughout the entire space and gradually began to compress itself towards the center, diminishing in size.

Valiko succumbed to a lucid slumber and was unable to assess the rapidly deteriorating situation external to himself. Engulfed in a highly colorful dream, he found himself reliving a former memory. He was walking through a picturesque park with the girl he knew only by name as Elira. They were holding hands and strolling along, making funny faces, playfully throwing puns at each other and discussing

their hopes, fears and life experiences. The park itself was filled with wildlife of all kinds. With each new turn they took they saw a new animal dashing among the trees, bushes and grassy plains. Whether a curious fox, unsuspecting skunk or jumpy rabbit, the couple enjoyed spotting them and watching them wander along among the beautiful scenery. They were whispering a jumble of affectionate words to each other and exchanged passionate kisses.

It was a perfect dream. It was a blissful memory. And then all the wonderful colors of nature were infected by a golden-yellow sepia, which covered the entire landscape like a cancerous twilight, leaving nothing immune nor untouched from its influence. In that moment, Elira began to cough violently and uncontrollably. She fell on her knees and bent over, continuing to cough with a disturbingly deep resonance. Valiko bent over as well, frightened by this unexpected turn of events. As he got down on his knees and began to gently pat her back, he noticed small splashes of blood on the grass. His heart quaked in trepidation at the possible implications - either tuberculosis or emphysema as the diseases leading to this dreadful consequence. After continuing to cough for a span of more than five minutes, Elira got up and hugged Valiko tenderly. Her entire body felt cold, limp and weak from the intense bout. She hung on his neck for quite some time before she was ready to continue their walk, but this unfortunate event left a horrible impression on

them both and they could not return to the former joy which they shared just before its occurrence.

To Valiko's shock, Elira reached into her purse and pulled out a slim menthol cigarette, lighted it with a small metallic lighter with an engraved rose and began to smoke it smoothly, puffing out clouds of smoke. Incensed by this inconsideration for her own health, Valiko finally did something he wished had been done much sooner - pull out the cigarette from her hand and stomp furiously on it. She was in turn visibly upset and scolded Valiko for his behavior which prompted him to stare at her in disbelief. An attempt to explain the negative effects, which she had herself just experienced, Elira shrugged off his pleas to stop smoking. Walking away, she lighted another cigarette and disappeared into the looming forest.

Valiko ran towards her, but a dark wall arose that prevented him from entering the woods. Enraged, he struck and hit the barrier several times in vain. The wall did not budge. Desperate to catch up with the love of his life, he placed his open palms upon the wall and realized that his own dream was taunting him, playing around with emotions and distracting him from his own doom. He then looked around to see the wall closing in from all sides. Realizing that something must be done, Valiko pushed against the wall with all his might, screaming out Elira's name fervently and in a spell of hysteria exploded into a terrific fiery tornado that crumbled the walls, leaving nothing but dust in its wake.

When Valiko awoke, he realized that he was confined in the sphere and that it was constricting him actively, like an anaconda spurious to digest its prey. Using the powers of the water element, he placed his palms on the walls of the sphere, freezing it completely. Then with a flash of magenta from his drowsy rose, a formidable surge of lightning crushed the blocks which had imprisoned him. With a raging hysterical anger, Valiko continued to blast the blocks, destroying all in view. He then summoned a tempest that sucked in all the white smoke until it was whirled into a sphere. With a vicious smile, he unleashed a gush of flames from the rose, burning the smoke until it was gone.

Gasping for air, Valiko's body convulsed from the excessive ire consuming and thwarting any sense of reason. He was ready to charge at anything standing, floating or moving in his way and lightning bolts continued to discharge from his hands, annihilating any block that chanced to fly across his field of view, while the rose's gusts of wind kept him hovering in the air. The glimmering stars did not budge from their grouped formations and any electricity was absorbed instantaneously with a flash of light.

As Valiko continued to fume, he yelled out a challenge to the assumed foe or force that assailed him in this celestial place. He then heard a deafening rumble exuding from all directions followed by spine-chilling wails which sounded like an opera of cries from slaughtered animals in their last moment.

Multiple beams of light beamed toward Valiko like high powered lasers, heating up his armor drastically. Although he managed to resist, it was only temporarily. The light pulverized the armor within seconds and cut through his body like hot knives. Valiko struggled with every ounce of energy left in his body, but then the pain subsided. He could not move a single muscle and was stuck in a limbo, hanging like a puppet hanging on a string waiting to be pulled into life. Emerging from all directions simultaneously were more blasts of light that coalesced to form a behemoth polymorphic figure with a massive head in a medieval Corinthian helmet that showed only a pair of wild eyes, scanning for its enemy. No matter how hard Valiko fought against the force holding him, he could not overcome their hold on his body. Only his mind and vision remained untouched.

The being stared silently upon its trapped prey and took notice of the silver key hanging on Valiko's neck. With a thundering voice, the great being spoke: "What business doth one have here? From whence doth thou have the clock's key? Speak!"

Valiko suddenly felt control over his mouth once more after the figure's command to answer the questions. He answered with a touch of defiance, "I am the protector of the key. I came here in the hope of finding Waldemar the Great and ask for his help in stopping the Mask".

With these words, the helmet being's eyes dimmed slightly, their vehement glare dwindling into a calmer stare. For a few moments, the being was

utterly silent, until it began to ask more questions: "So, the Mask hath returned...that is unfortunate. I could sense a being managed to obtain all the elemental medallions and the key itself. Seeing the key upon yourself, I could not ascertain whether you belongeth to the darker forces, seeking to wreak destruction and havoc upon this realm of light. And yet, I see now that it was you who had passed the tests of the elemental chamber. For what purpose did you seek out the key?"

Feeling that he was not yet perceived as an ally, Valiko answered as sincerely as possible to the helmet's questions. "I sought the key in order to prevent the destruction of the world, as had happened millions of years ago. If the power of the clock is harnessed, I believe I can use it to seal the Mask in time forever. That is my plan."

"Hmm. What you speak sounds noble." Replied the helmet. "Yet, the Protector of the clock cannot wield the force of time. No human can. Only a force as supernatural as the Mask can possibly make the attempt. Coming from another world, its force in the universe is an anomaly that should not exist. But, the randomness pervading the structure of our entire existence cannot be predicted. It seems that the battle for time is a product of natural balance. A constant contest to ensure stability across the entire fabric of space. You will fail in the end and the key will fall to the Mask. For this reason, I cannot allow you to leave with the key. I can sense that you are indeed one of the Protectors and in this case, I cannot take

the key by force from you. You must transfer it voluntarily and I cannot coerce you into handing it to me. So, what will it be?"

The prism of light imprisoning Valiko loosened immediately and a platform of blocks formed under him to catch his fall. Landing on the platform, he stood up to face the helmet, feeling his entire body and checking for any damage. He was indeed whole and unhurt. "And if I do not submit to your request for the key?" asked Valiko boldly, gripping his rose close to his chest.

The helmet answered straightly, "I will not imprison you as you just experienced, yet I will not let you leave this place until death takes hold of you from natural causes. You will not be able to leave nor find an exit."

Without any pause for thought, Valiko exclaimed angrily, "If I cannot persuade you to help me, then I shall have to destroy you."

He summoned a ferocious hurricane wind that engulfed the helmet and a deluge of water that froze to form a hollow sphere of ice around it. Believing that the helmet was now trapped, Valiko readied his sword to deliver a final blow to the being. Yet, just as he prepared to spring forward like an arrow into its mark, the ice was blasted apart by a violent surge of energy from within. The winds were re-directed and enveloped him in turn.

The helmet declared in a detonating manner, "Thou shall not destroy the guardian of the clock!"

and sent out a laser-like rays of light towards Valiko once more.

Prepared this time, Valiko bid the rose to form a polished shield of glass. The rays hit and bounced off at random angles. Curious to know what may occur if the rays hit back the helmet, the shield inverted to form a mirror that harnessed the rays and re-directed them back towards the being. Taken aback by this unexpected move, the helmet began to freeze as its own rays formed a mesh that trapped it. Unable to move it was strange that it could not dissuade its own power.

“Enough!” Declared the helmet now known to be Waldemar. “You have proved yourself worthy to wage battle against a higher power. Your determination not to submit to me has shown that you may yet gain an advantage over the Mask. I am immune to the elemental forces, but the Mask is not. My rays of light have been turned against me. It has been awhile since a protector has done so and now I am trapped unless you authorize my release.”

Valiko was amazed that he had managed to beat the helmet so easily. Could the fight against the Mask prove equally triumphant? He had doubts about freeing Waldemar, yet gaining a pledge of assistance from the knight was in his interest. “If I release you from your bonds, will you open the portal and help me save the clock?”

“I can open a portal back to your world. But in order to find the Mask, you will need their black key, always kept in the possession of the Servant. Once

you obtain it, you will be able to find the place where the clock is kept.” replied Waldemar, pronouncing each word slowly.

“How can I defeat the Mask?” Asked Valiko tempestuously. “I need to know how I can eliminate the being from existence.”

“Unfortunately, I cannot know the way.” Answered Waldemar sadly. “What you see is merely an obscure residual embodiment of a greater power I once held.”

“But, where are you now? I believed that you had sacrificed your powers to create the elemental chamber, thereby hiding and guarding the key?” asked Valiko inquisitively.

“I had indeed clashed with the Mask many millennia ago. But, in our battle I witness most of the peoples of this planet nearly wiped out. I should not have cared for them, for a much greater cost was at stake. I could not afford to curb my offensive and neither could the Mask. My light rays collided with the dark ink of the Mask constantly and the battle lasted 888 years. In the last minutes closer to its ultimate ending, I finally realized that humans had been charged with the clock’s protection and with their demise, I would have failed as well. The only way out was to self-destruct, focusing my entire power to trap the Mask in a cage of light and teleport it to a distant universe. My remaining essence created the elemental chamber. Only a few thousand people survived and slowly they re-built the remnants of

civilization, yet to achieve the greatness that existed in times past."

"Yet you exist in some form, how is that so?" asked Valiko with a sense of powerlessness against an opponent that took over eight hundred years to defeat.

"I exist because I am a part of the clock. I was created together with the force of time, but my power was expendable. At the same time, I was not fully destroyed, my energy simply re-directed towards another purpose - hence the chamber."

An idea sprouted in his mind, like a tulip bulb during springtime. "So your essence is contained within the clock itself? If I were to open the clock-door, would you be able to regain your former power and form?"

"Hmm... I had never thought about such a possibility, but it may be possible. Yet, if you wish to save modern civilization from another apocalypse then I would not recommend it.", mumbled Waldemar as if dissatisfied to consider this option. "But, if you were to try and it succeed, I will aim to put an end to this once and for all."

"It is I who will obliterate the Mask forever." Declared Valiko and then added. "If you promise to obey my command upon your restoration, I will release you from your bonds."

"I give my promise." Stated Waldemar, his eyes glowing a pristine white and lowering as if in acknowledgement of his gratitude. "And I also wish you to know something. Your rose's name is Lumia

and contains an essence of good, hence its vividness and resistance to signs of withering over time. Its power is only as strong as the will of the person wielding it. If your will were to break or you were to give up, so the rose too would dry up and be gone. Only if the person is strong-willed and determined will it be capable of bringing you great power. And yet if that same power is abused and not applied to a just cause, it will resist. The Servant also wields a hidden flower known as the Umbra, embodying the forces of evil. Just like evil, the stronger that hate, anger, jealousy or violence burn in one's soul, the more intense will be its power. However, just as Lumina has a weakness, the Umbra's strength can be used against it. Even those with good intentions can have evil intentions lurking in their hearts. Lumina cannot be wielded by purely evil, while Umbra can be used by anyone. Remember this - there is sometimes no fine line between where evil begins and good ends. To end this conflict, Umbra and Lumina need to be fused into one."

"Thank you, Waldemar, for your help. With each forward step I take with determination, the more knowledge I acquire. Where before I was misguided and misinformed, confused and hopeless, I know now what I must do." Valiko waved his sword into the air towards Waldemar and commanded that he be set free from the prison. The light rays diffused instantly and Waldemar faced him. On the platform where Valiko stood, several blocks raised to form a small

barrier similar to a brick wall which then glowed radiantly for a split-second to reveal a keyhole.

“If you turn your key counter-clockwise, you will return to whence you left”, said Waldemar gravely. “To find the black key, your only hope is to defeat the Servant.”

Waldemar then transformed into a glowing sphere which dispersed across space with a blast of light. Valiko placed the silver key into the hole and turned in counterclockwise.

Samile

As the snowy white hound exited the shadowy doorway portal, it ended up in a damp, somber dungeon lit by torches burning with dim, caliginous and supernal flames. The walls and ceiling were not made of any known solid material. They were composed of a hybrid substance that bordered between being either a blackish, inky ooze or an electrified cloud of volcanic dust. It was unearthly, vaporous and elusive as it constantly contorted, shifted and ebbed forming a portent hallway. Only the floor appeared physically tangible, laid out in slabs of onyx stone. Dark shapes scurried across the numinous fabric of the walls, some dashing back and forth in animal form, composed with a dark ink that gave them the appearance of hand-drawn figures with a fountain pen on canvas. Swarms of bats kept flying from one side of the wall only to disappear into another further down the corridor, repeating this over and over while their squeals echoed piercingly in the ears. Pumas with emerald green eyes dashed along the walls, climbing up and down, then leaping from one side to the other before vanishing into the murky aura. A vulture-like figure spat out darkish flames as Samile continued along the pathway while a gargantuan lion grumbled resonantly, stalking its target from a close distance, hiding behind the muddy clouds. None of these creatures chose to attack Samile, keeping at a safe distance either due to the risk of being crushed by a colossal hound or

were being kept on a short leash by an omnipresent master patiently waiting for the opportune moment to strike. The air was surprisingly chilly, flowing through the passageways like a strong draft wind, causing the fabric to convulse and bend to its direction.

Samile rushed along the passageway with the speed of a hundred dogs, sniffing out the scent of the Servant. After several sprints forward, an entrance introduced itself, decorated with three enormous gargoyle statues resting atop of the archway and two mammoth serpents carved out in the stony borders around it. Each engraving had pointed teeth, an ugly disproportionate face and a life-like consistency that slightly rippled from the slightest sound or breath of air. As Samile crossed the threshold, the etched out eyes of the mystical shapes glowed with an icy blue and a stream of blood trickled down from their mouths.

Emerging from the dimly lit pathway, Samile entered a chamber lined with the same tenebrous fabric, which formed a dome-like confinement. In the middle stood a platform and pedestal carved out of marble. The pedestal held an emerald green crystal orb enclosing a flower and the four elemental medallions shining brightly around the dial. Samile peered at the orb pensively as if it was familiar, perplexed by its location in this shadowy den. A cloaked figure stood close to the pedestal with its back turned to it and facing a large door on the opposite side. As Samile approached the platform,

the trio of rocky gargoyles appeared from behind blocking the exit while two serpents slithered across on opposite sides, raising their revolting heads and stood by as sentries, hissing venomously in unison. The dark figure turned sharply around, revealing itself to be the Servant, its eyes glowing with a bright scarlet red, hidden under the large hood.

Speaking with the usual amicable manner it afforded to its enemies, one that aimed to throw the unwary off-guard, the Servant expressed genuine surprise, and "I would never have expected such a respectable guest in my private quarters. Welcome, Samile.", but the cordial tone turned business-like as soon as an apparent formality had been met. "You usually do not interfere with matters pertaining to the clock. I assume there is some other purpose for which you have sought me out?"

Samile raised its giant head and answered immediately, and without any form of greeting, in a demanding tone, "If you do not hand over the black key to me willingly then I will take the necessary steps to extract it by force."

"What a grand threat from a big white dog!" Spat out the Servant, its cozy tone of voice abruptly taking on a spiteful character. "A mere dog cannot change an inevitable outcome. My lord will end up wielding the force of time and nothing or no being can stop this. Pledge your allegiance now and your soul might be spared. Some time may be allocated for you to exist."

Growling vehemently, Samile answered aggressively, "And become a restless shadow of the darkness, bowing to your every command, scourging the walls of your black palace as nothing more than an ornament? Never. I prefer my freedom and to dwell in the light!"

With a great bound forward, Samile landed on an area on the platform close to the Servant's position and released a blast of white flames from his mouth. With a wave of the cloak, the Servant brushed off the flames like it was merely sprinkling water from a hose. Undamaged, the ink-like figure vanished into the stormy volcanic clouds, bidding the vigilant sentinels guarding the exit to attack the hound. The gargoyles flew in from both sides, grabbing Samile's body from the top with their hellish claws and proceeded in battering the head with stony clubs. The serpents slid forward and spouted mists of poisonous gas that caused uncontrollable contortions. With a powerful howl, Samile's own body alit in a brilliant burst of flames, frying both snakes into a crisp. Biting down on one of the gargoyles jagged paws, it slammed the beast against the platform, shattering it into pieces of tiny rocks that dissolved into ink and absorbed by the onyx floor. The last gargoyle continued its intense attack, but within a moment shared the fate as its twin. Shaking off the spasms caused by the snakes' poison.

Samile saw the Servant appear before him once more, drifting down from atop of the dome. "Foolish dog, you will never be able to help Valiko

nor defeat me! If you believe in the idea that good always triumphs over evil, then you are mistaken. Good and evil complement each other. They coexist in the contrast of both shadow and light. Good can never thwart all evil, since every being or object casts a shadow in the wake of any light source. Evil can conquer good, simply by destroying all the hope and light in this world. With the power of time in our possession, we shall settle this eternal and unnecessary conflict. The worlds will be at peace under the shadow of time."

Looking up at the Servant, Samile viciously uttered questions that had stoked its curiosity, "Was not this orb present in the elemental chamber? Why is it here in your possession?"

"You are just as easily fooled as Valiko himself!" Uttered the Servant with a short laugh. "The powers the elements bestow upon one who has acquired them are truly great. Enough even to bind a great evil or wield the power of the clock? Yes. I was unable to spin the dial and access the four doors. And so I placed Umbra right on top.", here the Servant gestured towards the orb which had begun to steadily glow green and revealed a black rose hidden within its depths. "Doesn't she look superb? Placing the medallions around her, Valiko allowed me to harness the nearly unlimited power of the elements, effectively neutralizing any potential threat to my lord. Now do you see the inevitability of your defeat?"

Raising its head back, Samile unleashed a wrathful howl with a force that caused the platform to vibrate and transformed into a human shape. In place of the great hound, Valiko stood armed with sword in hand. "If you are under the impression that I am fighting for some abstract concept such as the force of good, then you are mistaken. Dividing good from evil can be as pointless as dividing white bread from black bread. All I want is my Elira and memory restored!" declared Valiko.

Aghast from the unexpected appearance and stout resoluteness of Valiko, the Servant attempted to escape by floating upwards, but a wave of his foe's sword released a torrent of white flames that cleaved the inky walls and formed a burning net, effectively sealing all any exit. "Ah, this is even more unexpected. This is really quite interesting. And here I thought I was facing a mere dog. Now it is just a mere human. Are you certain that you wish to challenge me? I am not easily defeated."

As the Servant spoke the last words, Valiko swung his sword silently, striking the crystal forcefully, smashing it into tiny pieces. He grabbed the black inky rose, known as Umbra. A bright orb of light sparked in place of the crystal and Waldemar's boomed, "Place the Lumina in place!"

Valiko placed Lumina onto the pedestal. The Servant instantly whirled into a creature that was a cross between a giant octopus and hydra, with long tentacles exuding from its back and multiple heads spitting out a greenish, sticky, corrosive goo. The

Octodra spun around Valiko, blasting out the substance in all directions, splashing on his armor and sword, burning through it gradually. The tentacles acted as tandem whips, flying through the air at once and hitting Valiko's legs with a powerful explosion of lashes. Collapsing to the floor, Valiko held up his shield to protect his limbs from being hit by the toxic liquid while slashing out with his sword. The Octodra then used this moment of weakness to wrap its slimy tentacles around Valiko's feet and raised him into the air. As Valiko's fate seemed uncertain, the elemental medallions whirled into one stream of light energy and fused into the flower. Lumina floated upwards and into Valiko's outstretched hand. Pointing it directly at its foe, Valiko released an efflux of blazing light into the Octodra, relinquishing the inky figure and not leaving even a single atom of its existence behind. Only a hefty black key fell onto the onyx platform. The foe had been finally vanquished. Valiko picked up the key, placed it into the keyhole, turned it counter-clockwise and opened the door. A momentous task was ahead.

Umbra & Lumina

With a successfully executed plan to acquire the black key, Valiko had managed to overcome and vanquish the Servant with relative ease by capturing the full power of the elements. All that remained was facing the Mask with the same level of boundless confidence, concentrated energy and somehow fusing both roses together. As he stepped through the thick layer of shadows they dispersed quickly in his wake, opening up a path made out of large blocks of reddish amber stone leading towards a structure in the distance. The pathway cut through vast fields of sunflowers in full bloom that stretched into the horizons. Each sunflower was several meters in height and their seedy heads were so wide that a full-sized individual could easily fit in its diameter, calmly rest within the inner rim. The girth of the stalk was as thick as a lamppost to compensate for the enormity of the flower head and support its marvelous size. Each sunflower was facing the direction of the structure, which featured an enormous elliptical discus through which the sun shone onto the fields.

As Valiko walked along the path, it began to branch off in multiple directions and interweaving closely, forming small patches of sunflowers that looked like small islands disconnected from the main continental body, lost in a sea of amber. The structure itself towered over the entire visual space like a mountain overlooking a valley, its enormity breathtaking and face in the distance. As he continued

along the path, Valiko kept looking to ascertain whether he was making any progress towards the structure, but as more time passed, his position seemed unchanged in relation to it. The structure remained set in a distant point and unapproachable. It seemed that more time and even more walking was necessary to get closer. Valiko shuffled along, quickening his steps and enlarging his strides all the while wondering why the Servant had kept to such a dazzling, peaceful place. Losing any account of the passage of time, Valiko felt that several hours had potentially passed walking through the fields, but there was an uncertainty that it could not have been several minutes either. What was obvious was that no visible progress towards the structure had been made, despite feeling exhausted from physical exertion.

A soft wind blew across the field, causing a pleasant rustling of the sunflowers' rays and sending a few loose seeds flying onto the pathway. The sunflower's gently bent towards the west, leaning slightly sideways, their heads looking down curiously upon an unknown traveler amid their ranks. Gradually, the wind abated into a soft breeze and then began to die down. The sunlight in the distance began to dim, covering the sunflowers slowly in a shade of dusk which darkened their color into a saturated, saffron yellow. Valiko observed the discus in the distance steadily being eclipsed by a moon-like shape. Once the full eclipse had taken place and the switch was complete, the discus emanated a bright

white light onto the fields. All the sunflowers began to close up their rays and lowered their heads as if they were dedicated believers, bending down to pray to heed their respect to a greater force from above and to beg for help just before going to sleep. Once all the flowers had lowered their heads, a pitch-black night sky emerged without a single visible star.

As Valiko slowly continued along the path, feeling the stalks with his hands for guidance in the dark, he noticed that the distance to the discus was shortening with each new stride taken. He rushed along the path in the hope of quickly reaching the structure to finally discover what it contained. But, as he began to speed up, the discus was yet again engulfed by an eclipse, switching back from moonlight to sunlight. The surroundings were once again gradually covered in rays of bright sunlight. Rushing forward while looking up, Valiko neglected to see which route he took and collided into a sunflower stalk, reaching a dead end at one of the pathways. As he ran back to an intersection and pressed along a new path, the less progress was made. In fact, it appeared that not only had he not gotten closer, but had ended up further away from the structure than initially starting out.

Valiko began to notice that the faster he walked during daylight, the slower the discus changed from sun to moon. Based on nothing more than a hunch, he slowed down his pace drastically, until he was moving at the speed of a couple slowly walking through a park, taking their time to hold

hands and savor every word of their conversation. Looking up, Valiko noticed that the discus began to rapidly transform into the moon. Deciding to experiment, he slowed down his pace even more once it was dark yet again, moving as fast as a snail on a lazy day. To his surprise, the slower he walked, the nearer he approached the structure, until within just a few snail-like steps, he stood before the steps of the grand structure.

The architecture of it was a mix between Duma's castle of Monte Cristo with a round Ireland tower holding the discus at the top of its tip. The entire building was colossal in proportion, its walls extending as far as the eye could see in any direction, built using the same golden reddish amber stone that made up the pathway, with numerous gothic reliefs and broad archways. There were no windows or openings of any kind, the only possible entrance being the etched outdoors which were closed shut. A steep, lengthy staircase awaited prior to reaching the doors and Valiko following the same principles of deliberate sluggishness in order to reach the top. Upon ascending, the sunlight dawned upon the sunflower fields once more. Valiko approached the doors and noticed that one consisted of a darker while the other of a lighter amber stone. There were also two small keyholes in the middle of each. Thinking that this entire place embraced the ideas of counter-intuitiveness, he inserted the black key into the lighter door and the silver key into the darker

door, turning the second counter-clockwise and the first clockwise.

The doors slid open sideways to reveal a hallway lined with amber stone vases, each containing one enormous sunflower, extending upwards in height towards the top of a spacious vaulted ceiling with numerous carved out flower patterns, welcoming either sunlight or moonlight at all times. In contrast to the exterior, the inner workings of the building were carved from extra fine, white limestone, possibly the same as that used to line the surface of the pyramids originally during antiquity. Ten vases lined the walls of the wide hallway, with five on each opposite side. As Valiko entered, the doors slid shut and both keys dropped inside to the floor, falling with a suppressed thump. The interior breadth of the structure was surprisingly smaller in scope in comparison to its outer appearance, the ceiling extending quite high vertically while retaining only a relatively disproportionate narrow corridor.

On either wall were engraved drawings that contrasted dramatically with one another. On the left-hand side there were depictions of people walking among the sunflower fields with expressions of profound mirth, drinking from cups, carrying children on their back, while others lay inside the sunflower heads eating seeds and spitting out shells, a sun and its shining rays of light prominently featured above. On the right-hand side there were scenes of destruction, with almost all the sunflowers razed to

the ground, people lying motionless along the paths, the figures of the Mask and a Knight battling amongst the carnage, a round moon directly above their shadows.

At the end of the passageway there was an elliptical chamber that swelled into the tower holding the discus. Here, too, were several vases lining the walls. A beam of light shone on a cloaked figure standing in the center of an eloquent floor painting of several sunflowers, with the middle being the largest while many more flowers spanned the rest of the space to the edge of the walls, their sizes decreasing in proportion to their position away from the central flower. Thinking the figure to be the Servant, Valiko raised his sword in preparation for a potential battle, but as soon as he did so, several tough sinewy vines wrapped firmly around his arms, restraining him. One of the vines removed the sword from his hand while another took away the handbag. Looking around the chamber, Valiko realized it was the sunflowers' outstretched leaves which unobtrusively manacled him. The figure turned around. It appeared to have the anatomy of a human, but instead of a face there was a mask in its stead, one half in a finely polished, smooth silvery exterior, while the other half was a darkish Damascus steel with an allusively imprinted pattern of a combination of a variety of waves, ellipses and flowers.

The strange being spoke to Valiko in an archangelic voice which resembled that of a preacher's hymn in a religious temple, magnified by

the echoes off the walls: "Welcome to the Temple of Illuria! As I see you are a new visitor unfamiliar with our ways, I will introduce some of our core beliefs. One of our doctrines is that of neutrality. While in the temple, any weapons, violent gestures or expressions of negative emotion are forbidden. So too are any defensive tools, items such as books or other accessories and expressions of positive emotion. Though this may seem strange to an outsider, our religion is centered on the principles of opposing sides. We embrace the belief that there is nothing inherently good nor evil, ugly or beautiful, old or new. As a consequence, our walls are decorated always with two possibilities, one or the other, another or the next, peace or war, both sides of a coin face so to say. Our Wardens, the sunflowers holding you, also embody this principle. Sunflowers usually represent peace and bode no harm, thus they guard the premises to ensure that our doctrine is not violated and are allowed to use a reasonable amount of force. If you declare that you will abide by our doctrine, you will be granted permission to stay for as long as you need. If you decline, you shall be escorted out immediately. What say you?"

Valiko silently obeyed and bid Lumina to merge back into its flower shape, settling into his handbag. The sunflowers eased their tight grip and their arms returned to their leafy state. The strange being noticed Valiko's rose and motioned towards it, one hand being of the same polished silver while the other in damascus, both opposite in relation to the

sides of the mask. It continued speaking in the same aerial manner, "That rose which you carry has a great power, strengthened by the strong will kindling in your heart."

Valiko interrupted the being politely, "If I may ask you a question directly - who are you?"

The figure always seemed to speak in a neutral tone, with intonation of any kind, with any clue as to either its disposition or intention, hinting at neither goodwill nor hostility, "I am called Atavius and I am a teacher of this temple. I welcome those who have strayed from the path to good as well as those seeking refuge from evil. Our religion also embraces other beliefs and our doctrine of neutrality only applies within the temple itself."

"What about outside of the temple, what doctrines must be abided according to your religion?" inquired Valiko, expecting a series of other possible restrictions, but instigated another long sermon.

"Outside of this temple, you are free to act as you wish. There are no additional rules, unnecessary dictates or ecclesial laws. Our beliefs are not a 'religion' if you must call it that, but merely a set of convictions of faith. We have no scripture, no holy book and no hierarchy of positions. We have no specific prayer, sign or insignia that is used as symbol of it. Our religion simply has a name, Illuria, and nothing beyond that and our core beliefs. Before I go any further let me ask you whether there is a religion that you practice."

"No, there is none. I was never religious in the sense that I attend a place of worship nor do I ever pray to any god." answered Valiko honestly, his interest rising in Atavius' speech as the latter continued.

"I see that the reason is not because you neither believe in the existence of an all-powerful being nor disbelieve that existence. In all possibility, you are plagued by incessant doubt about life, death and the eternal question of an afterlife. As you are a mortal being, these are questions that arise at some point in human life. These are questions that cannot be avoided. And any being that has not yet stopped to ponder about such questions will do so eventually. Mortal beings tend to rationalize them. Some will deny their importance, some will avoid deliberating them, while others may accept a certain answer as correct for peace of mind. Some will tout scientific observations as definitive proof that no otherworldly power exists, substituting randomness for predetermination. Some will point out that even science is flawed by its own principles, our own biology working against us, limiting our scope of observation. There are many examples of this ongoing and never-ending debate within human society, but what is important is that our religion, named only Illuria, welcomes dividing opinions, contrasting beliefs and opposing sides. One of our core beliefs is that no religion should impose or otherwise dictate a particular way of life nor categorize certain actions as holy or unholy, bad or

good, correct versus incorrect. Another holds that a person is free to believe whatever they wish to worship or assign a symbolic meaning to either an inanimate or animate object. Going further, a follower of Illuria also believes in an open mind whether to new ideas, innovations and to constructive debate. We believe in the fundamental ideas of prosperity, growth, family, love and nonviolence but at the same time we acknowledge that violence, hate, jealousy, vengeance and anger are an essential aspect of life. We acknowledge that much as the first lead to peace, they cannot bring utopia to the world. As much as the latter are counterproductive to the first, they are a fundamental part of human nature. We also recognize that at some point, a human may realize that there is nowhere to go, nowhere to turn, no-one to offer hope, inspiration or love. It is in these moments that many look upwards in search of help. Our temple is simply a place one can come to when they wish, to look up into the light of either the sun or moon and find their own peace. For what purpose have you come to Illuria?"

Valiko peered at Atavius intensely, trying to digest the pastoral discourse, wished to ascertain whether the being could help him achieve the fusion of both roses, "I have come to seek out a way to bind both Umbra and Lumina together in order to stop the Mask and regain the Division Clock. Will you be able to help me?"

Atavius looked directly at Valiko as if reading his mind, but it was impossible to gauge anything from a

faceless mask. Not even the hands offered a clue, showing no signs of either inclination to help or an intention to strike him down as an enemy. Here in Illuria, everything was obscure, two-faced and enigmatic.

"It may be possible to bring about the fusion you desperately require to surmount your foe, but under one condition." uttered Atavius in a monotonous voice, promising either success or failure.

"What is the condition?" asked Valiko, anxious that there was some hope of obtaining the tool he needed to defeat the Mask.

"The fusion can only take place here in the temple where we stand now. As such, the doctrine of neutrality cannot be breached. This applies also to the outcome of any goal achieved by the item forged here. Therefore, should Umbra and Lumina be fused into one for the purpose of conquering the Mask and regaining the clock, you must in turn sacrifice something on your part. Why, you may ask, if you are fighting for a greater good? By vanquishing something considered evil, Illuria would have violated its stringent neutrality. Since both sides are embraced here, I cannot help you if you do not abide by this condition."

Deep in rumination, Valiko was willing to sacrifice anything except possibly his own life in order to bring about peace, "What must I sacrifice? And what if I promise to do so but do not go through with it? What then?"

"The condition is that you cannot reset time as per the power of the clock, once you have restored and acquired it." Here Atavius paused for a few moments before continuing, "If you should fail to follow through with this condition, a spot of soil in the field will await you for eternity."

Appalled by the sudden notion that all the sunflowers were potentially once individuals such as himself, he could not help but ask to confirm it, "So that means that I will live out my life as a sunflower?", inquired Valiko nervously.

"Correct. I believe that both good and evil are shades of the same color. There is no reason why white should be considered any better than black or vice versa as they are both subjective interpretations. At one time in our long history, both good and evil waged war on our sunflower fields, both sides causing an equal amount of destruction to the beauty of this land. This is why Illuria will give a fair chance to both sides to succeed. The tool you will acquire will by no means assure your decisive victory nor will it disrupt the balance of neutrality if you succeed. Becoming a sunflower for eternity is fair penance for breaking an agreement, a non-violent method of settling such an issue. So what say you to our Illurian terms - Yea or nay?"

Only one doubt haunted Valiko - he wanted to reset time in order to regain a lost love. He wanted to restore his lovely Elira and to be with her once more. And yet, resetting time was no guarantee of any particular outcome nor could the clock be used to

alter events. With a nod of accession, Valiko declared, "Yea! I agree to your condition!"

"So be it! Place the roses in my hands. Lumina in my dark hand and Umbra in my light hand."

Valiko pulled out both flowers and handed them warily to Atavius. Standing in the center of the elliptical chamber, it raised both into the air and chanted, "Amplexus Umbra, Luxum Lumina! Form now the dagger of Illuria!"

The light from the discus spawned an eclipse of the sun and moon, creating a celestial aura of twilight. When the rays of the supernal light touched the two roses, Umbra transformed into an inky, electrified orb, emitting a pulsating like a beating heart pulled out from a living body, while Lumina became an orb of pure white light, shining as brightly as the sun in all its glory. The two orbs converged, releasing a violent spark of dark shadows and lightning of such magnitude that the walls of the tower slightly cracked and the floor shook as if an earthquake tremor had passed below it. Atavius beheld a small dagger in its silvery, metallic hands and handed it over to Valiko. The weapon was not extraordinary in any respect. If not for the unique styling of the double-edged blade, with each side of the tang reflecting the patterns on Atavius' mask, it would easily be mistaken for a simple kitchen knife ready for peeling potatoes.

"Now that the dagger is yours to wield, I assume that you would be in a hurry to discover the location of your foe?" inquired Atavius.

Looking up at the blank face, Valiko decided at an attempt to weed out a clue at the Mask's location, "In exchange for declaring Illuria as my religion, would you grant me a favor?"

Atavius answered without hesitation, "Accepting Illuria's beliefs is your own choice, an acknowledgement of a subjective reflection that you can live with those beliefs and allow them to guide you interaction with the world. There is no need to declare your acceptance of a particular faith, religion or set of beliefs unless of course you aim to receive something in return, either recognition, acceptance, monetary gain or some other tangible or intangible direct or indirect benefit. Unfortunately, there is no reason for me to grant a favor in this case, as it is also not in my interest to have you in my debt or accept one voluntarily. If you step out onto the path looking directly into the horizon, you will return to the door from which you arrived." The masked being then gestured towards the doors at the end of the hall and beamed up into the discus.

Valiko exited the temple and followed Atavius' instructions, except as he took a step forward, instead of looking directly into the horizon his thoughts focused on the Mask and his gaze fell beyond the door from which he came. As if warped through a tunnel composed of snapshot memories and within a few blurry seconds, he ended up facing a single bronze lever with a question - "What would you prefer to do?" along with a small note - "Please

choose carefully as you can only select one option.”
followed by three choices:

1. Surf the sunlight
2. Recover a memory
3. Find the enemy
4. All 3 please!

After musing about the abstractedness of the choices, Valiko waved his hand, “Ah, what the hell...” he thought to himself and pulled the lever towards the fourth choice. The blinding light from the temple’s tower focused its intense energy into his position like a prison spotlight and pulled him into the discus.

Last Note

Dear Elira,

I have yet a few words left for you before I am finally gone from this world. I love you. I love you more than I could ever have imagined. Spending an eternity reading a countless number of books filled with smart ideas, fictional dialogues and idealistic promises of a bright future, I neglected the most important events and opportunities in my life. Rather than feeling my heart's direction, I ran the other way for fear of accidentally making a wrong or stupid choice, factors that I were all locked in my head, tormenting me daily. In my attempts to think rationally, I shunned taking important decisions that would have found me in a much better position in the future.

But most importantly, in my drive for a utopia of mind, spirit and short-term financial gain I neglected what I wanted so dearly - to spend time with you. I was constantly racing. Constantly busy, constantly working, constantly seeking new ventures and constantly making grand future plans. I forgot about the here and now, replacing it with and, if and but, delaying the time I should have spent with you. If I could gaze into your beautiful eyes just one more time, just one last time and see your mutual love shining right back, my heart, soul and body would be at peace. But, that will probably never happen.

Resetting the time may either unite us or change nothing.

So long has human civilization wanted to achieve time travel. For what? To see past historical events? To change the fate of mankind and point it in the right direction? These are all lies. If time travel were possible every single person would attempt to exploit it for their own gain. Why then do they lie, my dear? Why just not openly say that if time travel were possible then a loved one might be saved from an accidental death? Cured from a disease? Placed a bet and won a fortune? Humanity would love to do all those things. And yet, I have come to realization that time is unalterable. It seems to be based on randomly linked chains that bind every single subatomic particle in existence in this universe. With each random event, a new event may occur or may not occur. We dream and hope that there is a connection, a relationship, a pattern or a powerful being overseeing them to define our purpose, to make death all the more less frightening. It is all nonsense. Or is it?

I have long wondered about how strange my life was, whether all the events that occurred between my birth and final death happened by chance or due to an unavoidable fate. The more I peruse my experiences, the more I am inclined to accept both theories of my miserable, tiny and mortal existence. It all seems so bitter near the end. To spend years searching for a person that loves you back despite any imperfections. To spend an eternity

developing a lasting bond. And then, they are gone. Lifeless. Dead. Nailed within a box and lowered into the earth or churned by fire in ashes. Is there Heaven? Is there a Hell? Is there any Paradise? Does it all matter in the end?

Every day I spend imagining that last breath, a last tender caress and the final words inviting nothing but darkness, bitterness and fury into my heart. There is no much left undone and I cannot sleep soundly no longer. That everlasting, absolute moment haunts, torments and lashes out at me. I want to die in the hopes of returning to you and yet I realize that once I am dead, no memory will remain of your wonderful laughter, unique sense of humor, loving hugs and incredible personality! And once I am gone, there is no guarantee or possibility of seeing you alive once more, for I will be no less bereft of life! I cannot bear to hear nor see the hypocritical preachers, the pitiless liars, the cruel commentators and the ruthless lawmakers. This world is but a living hell without you by side to give it a semblance of a purpose.

Could not insanity be the answer? The way out of my dilemma? To lose touch with the world? Yet then the monsters of this world will be satisfied. Less competition. More space. Increased opportunities. No remembrance. Why save humanity when each person wishes you death. Why save a world fuelled by hatred? To live another day? Why? Oh why? To suffer alone in sickness? To lay paralyzed physically in bed? To witness family either full of grief or spitting on our deathbeds? I am overpowered by the

magnitude of the injustices of being human! Each second of life I stand to lose it. Each minute I dread losing another. Each breath may be our last. No consolation. No regret. Boundless imagination. Limited time. Let the dice be thrown.

I will always be forever yours.

Valiko

Tide of Dawn

The early morning sun boded news of yet another bright grey, welcoming day. A smell of burning firewood saturated the cold, fresh air blowing from the North, carrying a trace of adventurous opportunity. A young boy stood the edge of a lazily flowing river. The banks were rocky, uneven and cragged in all the wrong places. Across on the opposite river bank a trio of black bears roamed among the meagre foliage, munching on whatever sustenance could be found. One of them was the mother bear, while the other two were her small cubs, apparently twins and no more than a few months old. As the boy approached the water for a better look at the bears, the mother bear stood on her two hind paws, raising herself to an incredible height to also get a more accurate picture of her observer. As if acting on instinct, the boy ran back and hid behind a skinny tree, its width barely enough to conceal even a cat. Ascertaining the absence of any threat to her cubs, the mother resumed her active foresting for nourishment in preparation for winter soon to come. After they had completed their hunt, the trio then descended into the water, slowly swimming to the other islands in the hopes of discovering a hearty meal.

Thrilled at having the chance to see real bears for the first time in his life, the boy ran back into a small tent to record it in his journal. His heart pounding with excitement, he wished to see more of

the wildlife in this magnificent place. Although the leafage was scarce this time of year, many of the trees were evergreens, while most of the rocky surface of the hills was covered with thick mosses of varying colors. The trees were emancipated from the extreme weather conditions, barely surviving each year on the scant layer of topsoil scattered upon the rocks. They grew within soil trapped in crevices or other deformations that characterized the area. Some managed to survive even on bare rock, the moss offering the only support during harsh times, sheltering roots from abuse by subzero temperatures or intense heat.

Life as a wild thing was difficult, especially if the conditions all around were not in your favor. Many trees succumbed to the pressure, withering into dried out bark only to be consumed by the flurries of fungi or snapped under their own weight, falling into the waters to gradually float into nonexistence. There were also the finer moments. Occasionally it was not that bad of a place. During summertime, various outgrowths offered shelter and served as food. A multitude of creatures roamed past the islands like curious tourists, some gathering in patches, sticking together at all times, while others wandered in lesser known directions in hope of finding an interesting cafe not on the map. Birds flew hither and thither in search of fish bubbling on the surface to catch a breath. Wolves scouted in parties, but never stayed for long, the first to realize that this place had long ago lost its former luster, like a country unable to

attract any immigrants or even tourists due to its staleness. Indeed, there was not much at all to like about it, but the young boy found it enjoyable. One could wander across the thin forests, swim across from isle to isle or enjoy gazing at the starry night sky. During the night, the twinkling lights of thousands of stars penetrated the atmosphere, cramped together so tightly that seeing empty space was a rare sight.

There was a time when the young boy wished that he could note down all the details of his observations, but each time he began to write, the words seemed to whisper to him - "Psst. Stop. Your writing will eventually be lost in time. Your perception is the here and now. Enjoy it."

He enjoyed laying on a bed of soft moss mixed with dried grass and large pieces of peeled birch bark. Entering the tent as the pleasant weather began to turn sour, the boy dropped down on his back, huddling under a homemade blanket to keep warm. When it started to rain, he enjoyed listening to the raindrops hitting the top of the tent right above his head, their faint thumps echoing the dreamy state of his soul and journey towards self-discovery. Closing his eyes, a stream of tears ran down the side of his face. He was at peace. He was a lost soul, doomed to wander the world without reconciliation. As he kept his eyes closed, the surroundings blurred into waves of light that appeared like a rising tide of golden water. As he struggled to swim through it, he realized that the liquid state of the substance was merely an illusion. There was no water, but pure

waves of light passing through every fiber of his physical body. As he looked around, there were only shimmering patches of stars welcoming his presence.

Rather than fighting against the high tide, the boy embraced its guidance, following the flow of light. He was cannonaded through a pigmented fresco with an array of flowers popping out in the fabric of the horizon, appearing as water colored images drawn on a papyrus by an invisible artist. Wonderfully vivid pinkish tulips, enchantingly cherry reddish roses and exquisitely purplish orchids appeared with the fine, decisive strokes of a slim brush hidden by the oscillations of the tide. Embracing the rush of happiness surging through his entire soul, infected by the silky web of euphoria, the boy continued to surf along, absorbing the addictive sensation. The flowers in the distance continued to multiply, each more beautiful than the last, until the entire parchment of the sky had been covered in a harmonious scenic display of watercolor. As the boy flew through the ethereal web of bliss, a pelican zipped across the space above, its large wings barely scraping the surface of the tide and jerking its head in his direction.

The bird was reminding him of that which was forgotten and he understood that something had been lost. What? As reason and thought grasped hold of his mind, the tide began to turn, until the golden waters had ebbed away. The picturesque flower paintings were splashed and smeared with a black ink as if the entire ink bottle had been smashed

against a drawing by an artist disappointed with their work. As the illusory fabric began to dissolve and fade away into nothingness, the boy discovered the lost truth. Standing near the edge of the water, he stared into the edge of the horizon as his tears dissipated into the river's now tumultuous flow. His soul was alone, cast away into the bleeding estuary of time.

Scarred Perceptions

Rather than being disturbed in the morning by the annoying sounds of an alarm clock, a young man awoke to the delicious aroma of fried eggs, buttered toast and freshly ground coffee. It was an enticing combination of smells that served as confirmation of his existence as a hungry human rejoicing at waking up sick-free, carefree and unburdened by old age. Lying in bed for another few minutes, he decided to keep his eyes closed to savor the coziness of the blanket, feel his limbs relish the sensations of stretching out in bed and listen attentively to the gentle footsteps of his girl in the kitchen preparing breakfast. It was usually he who was the first to rise in the mornings and make breakfast as a rule. This was an unexpected exception that caused a sweet reverie.

Lazily getting out of bed, he dressed himself into a pair of grey, heavy cotton sports pants and put on a warm woolen sweater. It was unusually cold during the first few minutes of the morning. Noticing that the window was wide open, letting in a plentiful amount of cool winter air, he was perplexed at not having felt the chilly draft while he lay in bed. Closing it, the young man also decided to put on a pair of warm socks as the coldness sent off a shudder throughout his body. Once the sock procedure was complete, he felt ready to descend down the stairs to greet his lovely wife. Exiting through the bedroom door, he stopped abruptly, discovering the distinct

aroma of a rose. With a slight step backwards, he noticed a slim crystal vase on the dresser beside the bed, containing a single specimen of the thorny flower. A freshly cut baby rose, its petals yet to unfold to witness the bright daylight, rested humbly within its container providing a sensual fragrance that uplifted his spirits. The young could not recall how the rose had gotten there, but he was convinced he may have bought it as a token of affection for his wife the night before. In fact, all the events of last night seemed hazy and inaccessible as he battled the effects of early morning memory loss.

It was still dark in the hallway as he descended along the stairs and it was strange that not a single sound could be heard from the lower floor. Usually his wife would be shuffling back and forth, speaking on the phone with her mother or banging a spoon loudly against something to possibly get his attention from above. Only the quiet whistle of the boiling kettle could be faintly heard as he approached the last step. Their home was a simple two-storied house, located several hours away from any metropolis and in a scenic rural area. Although they enjoyed city life, both their hearts yearned for a home far away from all the hustle and bustle of crowded streets, nosy neighbors and polluted air. There were only a few rooms and they were not incredibly spacious, but neither were they too cramped. The staircase merged into the hall, which led directly to an open wall kitchen that contained a wonderful backyard view which featured plenty of open fields, hilly topography

and swathes of forests. Turning sideways to make way towards the kitchen, the young man wanted to surprise his love with an unexpected hug and kiss on the back of the neck.

He suddenly froze in shock, disturbed by the scene greeting him back. An unknown man held his wife by the neck with a choking grasp, a knife lodged against her throat. "My love! Why was this happening? This will all be alright, this will all be fine. Just focus." were the thoughts jolted through his head as he beheld this violent picture, his mind still unable to fully comprehend how these events came to unfold here and now. Just a few moments ago, a blissful morning had welcomed his soul with open arms, only for the dim kitchen shadows to betray it. Everything happened too quickly within those few seconds, all the events blurring into a smudge on the fabric of time.

The young man rushed forwards but another man, hidden behind the door and his face covered in a mask, slammed him across the head with a blunt instrument. The woman screamed out in a desperate plea for help, but the masked man sliced her throat unceremoniously, silencing the last wails of life. It was all a blur for the young man. Dazed from the ferocious blow, he struggled to rise, but the men approached swiftly and pounded him in a wild frenzy until his eyes closed, his heart swelling with bitter anguish. He wanted to die here and now, never to remember the death of his loved one. An attempt to fight back was futile, the foes overwhelmingly

enjoying a gruesome advantage. It was too painful to bear the magnitude of the loss and the young man finally succumbed to darkness drowning in a pool of blood.

Path to Oblivion

Floating into the discus, Valiko could see the outer rims of the elliptical figure divulge, its contours bending inwards at his approach to avoid any contact at all costs, like a cat outstretching its paws for fear of touching water. The surface of the disc was dazzling, its bright white light beaming with the intensity of the sun. Fearing that a painful, scorching death awaited him and regretting ever touching the lever, Valiko raised the shield to prepare an encounter a flaming incandescence. To his astonishment, barely any heat was being emanated from the light source. Rather, he felt a rising warmth within himself that filled his soul with dread of the unknown events to unfold ahead. There was no U-turn, no game cheat or switch to pull that would change his course. Any clue as to what lay beyond remained shrouded in mystery.

The rims of the disc folded around him as he got nearer to the center, like the mouth of a great blue whale opening up to swallow a school of fish into the great depths of its belly. Valiko struggled to shrug off the increasing warmth, sneaking up upon him like a mystical stealthy burglar wishing to steal all the thoughts, feelings and ideas hidden within his

heart's secret vault. Although his body felt happiness rush through its veins, it was as artificial and temporary as a dose of anesthesia that would last only long enough to keep a spasm of pain at bay only for its effects to fade away within a short time. The surface of the disc glowed in a welcoming shimmer, its texture similar to boiling, molten lead in a giant smelt pot. Instead of characteristic liquid bubbles, a series of infinite, minuscule ripples surged across from all directions towards the innermost point of the ellipse, gradually merging into a hand-like form that extended its reach towards the approaching object. With a sudden influx of an inky substance landing onto the disc like drops of rain from a thundercloud, the rippling of the waves blended together to form another hand-like form, as black as the night sky. The hands of light and darkness put out their palms forward and fingers upwards in a gesture of mutual unity, directly in front of Valiko's eyes. With a measure of apprehension, Valiko remained indecisive about going forth again into the unknown corners of another hallucinogenic distillation of perverse fantasy only to discover more disappointment. Looking back, the outer edges of the disc had completely formed a sphere around him, with no way out. Letting out a deep sigh, Valiko placed his palms onto the protruding shapes. The colossal hands grabbed hold of his wrists, yanking him into the disc.

Tossed into a prismatic tunnel filled with a never-ending cascade of psychedelic colors, Valiko reached out to touch the elastic, fuzzy beads of light

fluctuating to the sound of an ambiguous but catchy melody. As his hand touched the elusive material, the volume of the music increased dramatically, the unknown blasting out sounds that turned more and more incoherent and unbearable, gradually transforming into mere annoying squeaks, screeches and beeps. Looking at his hands, he noticed the beads of light had stuck to the skin, infecting it with a multiplicity of colored ink and spreading out to form an elaborate set of intricately drawn tattoos across the back of his hand, extending up to the elbows. He felt a gnawing and lacerating pain as if a thousand needles were puncturing the skin and piercing the bones. Unable to bear the consummate pangs of pain, he attempted to rub them off, but to no avail. The beads of light continued to weaved across both hands, undaunted by his attempts to thwart them. On his left hand, a mesmeric depiction of Lumina was formed with an infusion of vivid color, the crystal clear rain drops resting on its petals, while on the right, Umbra was etched using detailed shades of pinkish black, giving it a semblance of eerie and aberrant creature covered in sharp thorns. Once the tattoos has been finished, the beads of light disconnected from the skin, flying back out into the filmy fabric of the tunnel. The tattoos were so rich in detail that both flowers appeared almost sublimely lifelike, their petals and stems twisting, searching for a comfortable spot in their new location.

With a sudden swish, the tunnel came to an abrupt end, its edges extending outwards like a

funnel and Valiko emerged floating onto a familiar square-like path, leading up to a pair of majestically ominous gates. The tune of an unknown, wailing song began to play, sounding like a remixed amalgamate of Mozart's Turkish March, Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata mixed with a dab of jazz and spiced with a dab of electric guitar for flavor. As Valiko approached, both gate doors opened ceremoniously to reveal a thin veil composed of shadowy clouds interspersed with a web of luminous strings spread out across the entranceway, blocking any preview of what lay inside. Valiko plunged his Illurian dagger into the esoteric shroud before walking through it for fear of the potential unknown consequences. Immediately, the strings coiled around the blade, gripping it tightly and releasing a pulsating fluctuation across the entire web. A gargantuan purplish spider, its entire being composed of a hazy nebulous mist, appeared from amongst the shadows and rapidly climbed down across the web towards the direction of the trapped blade, its fangs ready to puncture the trapped item. Valiko slashed out at the spider, splicing through the hazy sinews of the enormous creature dispelling it into the shadows. Slicing through the strings, he finally crossed the cryptic gates.

Emerging through the effluvium of the hazy barrier, Valiko beheld the Division Clock resting gracefully at the innermost point in a chamber very analogous to that of the Servant's, with dark inky billows of electrified shadows flooding the walls

stormily and writhing like a dying beast. Polished jet-black pebbles lay scattered across the entire floor, piled up in heaps around the magnificent grandfather clock, its hands still pointing to one minute before six o'clock, while the second hand continued to tick enduringly. Not a soul could be seen or heard, but the bizarre classical melody continued to play quietly in the background, reverberating throughout the entire chamber, setting a sinister mood that filled the heart with trepidation.

In all appearances, the clock seemed to be unguarded which did not quite quell Valiko's suspicions. The layout seemed to be too simple to be the truth. It was strange that the Mask should hide its grand prize without a form of defense. And yet, he recalled that without the key the clock would be unapproachable and impermeable. The gate doors shut behind him, locking together with a loud click while several thick steel bars slide from across both sides, locking the heavy-looking barricades. It seemed that the gates decided to block entry from without and within. Convinced that perhaps chance had played into his favor, Valiko walked along the pebbles towards the Division Clock. Standing in front of the clock door, he convinced himself that only opening it would trigger the appearance of the Mask which was lurking among the shadows anxiously waiting for him to play along.

Valiko removed the weighty chain from his neck, placing not only the silver key into his right hand but all his hopeful faith in restoring his own

enervated sanity and disoriented perceptions. His hands shaking from trepidation of the consequences should his covert plan fail, Valiko inserted the key and turned it clockwise. Within a few faints clicks, the door had opened, revealing the clock's internal pendulum. Swinging thrice, the pendulum then began to gradually slow down with each new stroke. The entire clock glowed in a bright golden light, its silhouette unleashing long, narrow sparks of light which beamed towards the ceiling and diffused into the shadowy fabric. Within an instant, a powerful beam of energy exploded from the door into the wall across, knocking Valiko down hard into the pebbled surface. The music's volume increased exponentially and the tune changed into a melancholic whimper that sounded like a thousand souls crying out for help. The blast of light from the clock infused with the dark, inky fabric giving it an even more malignant appearance, with disfigured hands and abominable creatures flying out from the walls composed of the same purplish haze as the spider shielding the gateway. These nightmarish shapes flew past Valiko, taunting him as he swung his sword impetuously at them all. Some circled around him like vultures in anticipation of a dead corpse while hundreds of others engulfed his entire body, dissolving into his flesh, further poisoning his muddled perception. It was then that the Mask finally made its long-awaited presence, emerging from the torrent of darkness and floating above Valiko, its face forming a smiling expression of contemptuous satisfaction.

“And so, my dear Valiko, here we are. I am truly in your debt. Thank you for opening the door. It would all not have been possible without your stubborn perseverance. You may thinking that I would spare you so that you can witness me harnessing the force of time, but my ego has no need for dramatic gestures that may only threaten my plans. Witnesses do not live for long!”

The Mask’s exterior metallic surface began to crack open, forming multiple fissures, its eyes glowing a hot red and the mouth sucking in the inky substance from the walls in preparation of unleashing a final blow to its victim. The pebbles underneath Valiko liquefied to form a sticky goo that made it impossible to move, while dozens of inkish spiders crawled along his body, puncturing his skin with their razor sharp fangs and releasing a toxic substance into his nervous system. The Illyrian dagger was in his left hand, but his efforts to lift it up were all in vain. All the pebbles on the surface then dissolved to form a massive inkish pool that slowly crept towards Valiko, completely engulfing him in the horrid material in an attempt to smother any more resistance and bring about a quick conclusion. Continuing to struggle, Valiko felt the Mask shoot out an enormous boulder through its mouth which hit him directly in the forehead. The being then floated towards the beam of light, enlarged its mouth to extraordinary proportions and began to swallow the emitted energy.

Utterly dazed from the blow, a fatal darkness began creeping upon his consciousness as the final wave of ink gushed towards him. Submerged within the liquid, Valiko could feel the last dose of oxygen leaving his lungs and the light of the clock gradually dimming from view. This condition of hopelessness, defeat and weakness felt oddly familiar to Valiko, stirring a final tear in his eye that was instantly absorbed by the ink like a drop of water in a vast ocean.

In what seemed like his last moment, he then heard a gentle voice reticently whispering into his ear, "Emerge from the shadows! Do not let your memories haunt you. Do not let your hopes crumble. Do not let your inner demon defeat you. Drive out your illusions! Save yourself, my love".

Valiko recognized the familiar, mellow woman's voice. They were Elira's sweet words. As pure blackness enveloped him, he saw her appear in the mind's eye waving at a distance, streams of blood running down the side of her neck. Holding both Umbra and Lumina in her hands, Elira displayed them directly to Valiko, the roses' stems curling around her body, enmeshing her in a snarling morass of thorns which pricked her soft skin. She bore a saddened expression, bidding her love another last farewell before disintegrating into the everlasting abyss of death.

Mustering what strength he had, Valiko recognized that his long lasting affliction of protracted derangement could only be stopped if he

reset time. Perhaps spending eternity as a sunflower would be a peaceful salvation from the influences of dementia consuming his consciousness. One last push to overcome an imagined foe and fulfil the desideratum of a wishful fantasy could possibly satisfy the mind's desire for closure and lead to conclusive tranquility. In a moment of clarity, Valiko raised his arms sharply upwards, punching straight through the ink. The tattooed roses on his arms glowed with a blinding radiance, releasing a blast of energy that walloped the oozy ink like a shotgun shell maiming a clay target, evaporating it in an instant. The goo holding him captive evaporated instantly from a single flash of light.

Noticing that its enemy had arisen once more, invigorated by the kiss of death and standing defiant, the Mask wasted no time in pausing its activity to charge Valiko. Shooting orbs of ink from its mouth, they exploded into long, pointed spikes. Dodging each new blast Valiko summoned Umbra to shield him from the shadowy creatures assailing him from all direction as he ran towards the Mask. Umbra pummeled the reviling purplish forms, pulverizing them and absorbing their essence. Spinning around the entire chamber, the Mask pirouetted back and forth to avoid Valiko's reach. Calling on Lumina, the rose extended outwards from his hand like a whip. Snapping it towards the Mask, it unfurled its petals to form a hook. Beckoning the combined power of the elements, a cascade of white flames bombarded the Mask, disabling its frenzied flight. Lumina's hook flew

through the Mask's mouth, puncturing the lip. With the foe momentarily demobilized, Valiko ran with full-speed and sprung forward.

With the dagger raised in both hands above his head, Valiko stabbed the Mask in the center of the forehead. The white flames abated as the metallic surface started to crack like a sheet of glass from the blow of a hammer. With a hysterical shriek, the Mask dropped lifeless onto the floor, shattering into a million pieces, and its final wail rippling across the inky walls. Quivering from the echo, the purplish creatures and shadowy clouds all dissipated into ashes revealing bare, whitewashed walls.

Valiko approached the clock's beam of light and outspread his arms to bask in the golden ambience. Closing his eyes, Valiko finally felt at peace as his consciousness swooshed into oblivion.

Leap of Faith

It was close to evening by the time Valiko decided to leave Credit Park. As he strolled through the endless winding trails lost in deep thought, he had not bothered to keep track of the time. Seating himself upon one of the many large, square rocks bordering the flowing river, Valiko was exhausted from the surprisingly brisk walk. Trying hard to relax by breathing in the cool, refreshing air and staring at the flow of the cold, murky water he tried to recall how he had gotten to this particular spot, but a blurriness besieged his memory. He observed the freshly fallen leaves from the trees beside him fall into the tumultuous river and hoped that a few minutes pause would help shed off his dreamy, mental numbness. A few passed as past hours faded away in obscurity. He felt a profound relief pass over him as he breathed in the fresh air. His focus sharpened and a surge of pleasant thoughts and exciting ideas. The effects of a creeping depression had been shaken off by a brief walk in the park. He wanted to continue on, but it was getting dark. A drizzle started, gently thumping onto his head.

He looked across his shoulder at one of the paths leading through the park. It was full of people quickening their steps to avoid getting wet. Strange. He enjoyed walking during the rain or lying in a tent in the wilderness, listening to the faint thud of the drops against the canvas. He looked up at the teary

sky. He wanted to be with someone. That is why he came to this place. He looked once more across his shoulder.

A beautiful girl, dressed in jeans ran along the trail in search of cover. She managed to find a dry spot under a tree. As she stood under the branches, dodging random drops of water sliding off the leaves, she snatched off several multi-colored leaves and formed a mini-bouquet, spinning it carelessly around in her hands. She seemed unaffected by the cloudy, dreary weather and smiled constantly whilst immersed in soggy, forest smell. She seemed familiar. It was Elira! He wanted to catch her attention. He wanted to run up to her and kiss her sweet lips. As he ran desperately in her direction, he approached the tree and paused to take another look at the girl. It was surely her!

As he stared in disbelief, another young man emerged from the path and approached Elira. She greeted him joyfully and jumped in a tender embrace. They kissed passionately under the evening rain. Turning sharply around, Valiko felt betrayed and disillusioned, deciding to return home as his thoughts swirled into an incoherent mass.

Sitting behind a well-abused writing desk, Valiko stared musingly at his sprawling, turbid handwriting describing his confusion over Elira. He felt lost in a morbid dream, unable to comprehend how he had lost the love of his life to another. For hours, he sat in solitude within the confines of his small, dusty room filled with books and notes, mulling

over depressing thoughts over and over again. He realized that something must be out of place. He wanted to remember what had happened. But he could not do it. Something held him back.

Suddenly, a loud tick-tock caught his attention, causing every fiber of his nerves to jolt. He had not noticed it before. Looking up, he peered at the grandiose grandfather clock standing gracefully against the wall. The clock hands pointed to one minute to six o'clock as the second hand diligently approached to sound out the coming hour. Wiping off a burst of tears with his palms, Valiko suddenly sprung from his seat. Raising his hands against the light, he viewed them attentively in an attempt to verify whether his perceptions were indeed unclouded. On his left hand was a mesmeric tattoo of a red rose with an infusion of vivid color, the crystal clear rain drops resting on its petals, while on the right, a black one was etched using detailed shades of inkish black, giving it a semblance of eerie and aberrant creature covered in sharp thorns.

As the clock struck out six o'clock, it released a warm glow of white light into the opposite wall. Valiko noticed a silver key with a chain sticking out from the unlocked clock door. Closing it tightly by turning the key counter-clockwise, Valiko placed it on his neck. The faint beam of light from the clock formed a gateway that scintillated like a shadowy adumbration in the wall. He passed through it without regret, entering the vast sunflower fields as

the tick-tock accompanied reassuringly on a hopeful note.