

CUSFS



CYOA



1.

You awake in some sort of damp enclosed space, there's a persistent dripping behind you and there's an irritating trickle of water running under your back. There's a few stray beams of light coming from a hole in the roof to your right, but the contrast between the brightness and the dark room prevents you from seeing anything.

"You were warned not to come here. The barriers are there for a reason."

You look around but can't see the source of the voice from your current position.

"They have taken something from you, you can tell that can't you? But there's more at stake than that, who you are or were doesn't matter now, your clumsy entrance has summoned them, and they want out."

You scramble to your feet as a plume of dust falls beside you, a scratching and thumping noise passes overhead but soon tails off again. Looking around there is no obvious source of the voice, there are three dark shapes but none of them seem to be moving.

"Help me destroy them and I will show you how to get back the part of you they stole, you are a shark now, my hunter. Track those beasts down and you will escape this drifting city intact."

The other shapes are moving now, waking up. One of them calls out. "Get out of me demon!" The outline seems to be shaking.

"We haven't got time for this! Leave that lunatic and get out of here!"

Do you:

Investigate the shaking shape? Go to 3

Or try to find a way out? Go to 2

2.

That voice is right. You're no fool.

You dump power into your leg actuators, uncoil the springs, and leap for the hole in the ceiling. Your Herculean jump takes you all of five centimetres from the ground.

What.

You stare down at your body, the weird fleshy protrusions, smooth dark skin where there should be artfully carved bone and wire. What kind of a body is this? You're overwhelmed with unfamiliar sensations - there's a pressure in your throat - you're off-balance - you stumble against the wall, feeling glass and watery fluid draining into a channel on the floor.

No time! You force yourself to edge along the wall, staring at the shapes in the middle of the room. Your actuators shake, unprompted.

"Alright. The door's-"

A hiss behind you, and you fall into a wide corridor. On one side is a line of indistinguishable doors. On the other...

Clouds. Looming. Enormous. Spiralling eddies pouring off curving roofs. Snow sweeping off the vast bulk of towers, hanging impossibly in the fog. (It's not impossible. You know the mechanism. Still...)

You haven't gone too far, then.

"Alright, good. I imagine that body will take some getting used to. Best I could find. If you would be so good..." The voice stops abruptly. You hear new voices in the distance, laughing.

A hatch on the floor slams open. "Get in! They'll see you!"

Do you:

Get in that hole? Go to 4

Wait and greet the strangers? Go to 5

3.

As you edge towards the dim shapes a great *thump* carries overhead, bringing a chunk of stone crashing to the floor. A mournful roar echoes around the distant heights of the chamber.

Singsong laughter meets your ears. "We can't escape!"

One of the figures is standing now, swaying slightly. "We could never have escaped! Isn't it obvious?!"

Another *thump* shakes more dust into your face. You wipe it away, and when you look up again you realise the standing figure is facing you, face hidden in the shadows, holding something which glints coldly in the dim light. The other figures are pushing away on the ground, moaning slightly in terror. *Thump*. The standing one steps into the light and –

The glimpse of your own face grinning from across the room makes you stumble backwards and fall. *Thump*. The not-you steps forward, raising a dagger aloft in triumph. "There is one way to get it out of your head, and only one!" *Thump*.

"Now!" The voice behind your left ear is little more than a hiss. "You know your purpose! You are a shark! Hunt!"

You root on the ground and one hand closes over a wickedly sharp splinter of marble from the ceiling. Fumbling the crude weapon, you make to stand –

And the walls of the world explode with a great cataclysmic CRASH; the dusty light streaming in from a gaping hole in the wall casts a silhouette of something enormous, something vast and hungry that hunches in the gap and roars...

Do you:

Deal with the beast? Go to 6

Deal with yourself? Go to 7

4.

Something is running through you. It makes you jump impulsively at the first available choice without much space for rational analysis. So as soon as you are told, you get in the hole. You are greeted by a feeling of complete displacement and foreign thoughts intrude in your brain.

"I'm not alive. I don't exist."

They stretch indefinitely in time. The very same matter and physical laws that make you have several very different solutions, all co-existing. For a few moments you touch the others, non-existing as much as you. They would look like dust. But in their eyes you are the random dust cloud and they have structure.

Then you are real again, residual doubts still lingering at the back of your mind. But your sense of identity and integrity is back. Around you a vast plain, covered in what seems to be short purple grass. A white hot sun is shining. At your back there's a hatch, identical to the other one. It lies at the end of a gravel path which cuts through the grass. The voice talks again.

"You look shaken. Take a minute to recover. I apologize for that Quantum Cotard's Syndrome, there was no time for Ontological Shielding, but we should have shaken them off. Now please, follow the path until you meet a cone-shaped building"

You can faintly make the outline of the building far away on the horizon. There also seem to be another one on the opposite side.

Were the glass stalks just turning to follow you?

Do you:

Follow the path as told? Go to 9

Leave and go wherever you want? Go to 8

5.

It seems like there will be no escaping the denizens of this place, and it is just possible that they will make better allies than that voice, the voice with no apparent body of its own which has stolen yours and trapped you in this inefficient *thing*.

Best of all, whispers a part of you, if each thought of you as their ally, giving you time to evaluate.

You turn away from the hatch, and towards the four approaching figures, approaching faster now they have indeed seen you. They are significantly larger than you, but they are not dressed for combat. Their expressions on seeing you – simply curiosity, no concern – suggest that neither are they trained for it. Advantage of size, advantage of numbers, but you are sure you could overcome them if necessary.

You stay silent as they reach you, wary of betraying yourself with a wrong greeting, accent, even language - who knows who these figures are? You endeavor merely to look confused. That, at least, is not difficult. They seem to accept this: crowding around you, making comforting noises, one giving you their fabric overgarment.

As they turn to shepherd you with them, you see that slung across their back, previously hidden by the cloak, is a long, slender contraption. It has intricate details, delicate levers, but you see a hefty metal rod with some cruel-looking edges. To them, perhaps a scientific instrument. To you, a potential weapon.

Do you:

Follow the strangers to their destination? Go to 10

Or attempt to acquire the rod? Go to 11

6.

All thoughts of sharks and hunters vanish from your mind as you look up from where you stumbled backward onto the floor. The sunlight streams through the hole, like a halo of fire around the hulking form which is slowly advancing into the room, each footstep reverberating round the room, bringing dust and rock clattering from the ceiling.

You are still grasping the marble splinter tightly in your hand, and, knowing that surprise will be your only chance, you rise into a crouch and creep over to the side of the room, ducking down behind a boulder

As your eyes adjust to the light, you manage to get a better look at it. It is bipedal, but bent over, with two long arms and wicked looking claws. It swings its head towards you and you see a thick snout containing rows of fangs, and behind its head a huge ruff of the same black leathery material that covers its whole body.

Its head turns slowly away again, looking towards the figures on the other side of the cavern. You know now is your only chance to strike. Fighting your fear down you spring from cover, dive towards the beast and drive the marble splinter deep into its back with all your strength.

The beast roars and lashes out with its arm, clipping you on the side of the head and sending you flying. You land with a crunch on the broken ground near to the wall that the beast destroyed.

Do you:

Get back up and finish off the beast? Go to 13

Or make a run for it? Go to 12

7.

You turn toward the more immediate threat, your doppelgänger. And not a moment too soon – already, it is lunging toward you with the knife. The chunk of marble slips between your sweaty fingers as you stumble backward. You raise it in defence, swinging in a crude arc to protect your body.

But wait – your double isn't attacking you! It's moved past you, in the direction of that hissing voice, and is now pinning something to the ground.

The shadows writhe and you can't quite make out what your doppelgänger is fighting. You can hear shrieks of pain and fury though. "You are my tools now! Fragments! Nothing more! How dare you defy me?" cries the voice you heard moments before. "Hunt! Hunt each other!"

You turn to get a closer look and see a being made of shadow, of vapour, thrashing on the ground locked in combat with your double, who has pinned it by one wing? Limb? Some instinct tells you to help, and you throw the chunk of marble at that shadowy form, pinning it further. Your double turns to look at you, and shouts "Good! Give me your hand!"

Your fingers, fouled with blood and plaster dust, touch and a white spark shoots across the gap toward that shadow being shrieking on the floor. It cries out and dissolves into separate clots of vapour, which vanish as you watch.

The double looks as frightened as you feel. "What was that?" you both say, simultaneously.

You add:

"We need to get out of here, now." Go to 15

"We need to help the others." Go to 14

8.

You are becoming annoyed with following the commands of a mystery voice using you for an unknown purpose. You turn away from the path and set off perpendicular to it, avoiding both buildings. The grass ripples as you walk, shifting so that your feet strike hard earth instead of its

purple stems. Belatedly, you recognise kra. This does not help you narrow down where you have been transported to, as it is a notoriously invasive weed. The white sun, however, suggests that this is an entirely different solar system from your home.

“Why did you send me here?” you demand of the empty air. “Where *is* here?”

“Follow the path,” says the voice. You search near your sense organs and find no transmitter. “I can’t talk for long. Get to the building and my people will explain everything.”

You reach a ridge and see a valley spread out below you, with a squat concrete building complex at its centre. You attempt to zoom in, but find that your new oculars lack this function.

“Why did you upload me into flesh?” you demand.

“It was the only –”

The voice cuts off suddenly. Panic grips you; your body attempts to optimise itself for a fight, and you feel your limbs tense and your circulation increase.

You spin round, hearing two people approach you from behind. Both are powerfully built and carry blasters. You don’t know how they got so close unnoticed.

“Come here,” one of them orders.

Do you:

Go with the guards? Go to 16

Run to the complex in the valley? Go to 17

9.

Once again, there seems to be no choice involved in this apparent request. The voice has not yet led you wrong, and following its suggestions is clearly the most sensible option.

Although the path looks as if it should really be a direct one, as you follow it towards the building it winds unnecessarily. Frustratingly, in fact. Your lower actuators are not as powerful as they could be with the right construction or even augmentations, but you feel that given the chance to actually head *directly there*, they could take you to the building in a good third of the time of this damned meandering path.

But the voice asked you to follow the path, and the voice is your benefactor. It does not seem right to go against its wishes.

Or is it just the voice telling you that?

Almost unconsciously, your angle to the path becomes slightly greater. You consciously do not think about this, or the way you are very unintentionally carrying yourself closer to the path's border with that extraordinarily green grass. Without realising it, for you do not look down, you step off the path.

You are standing in a dark, stone room with no windows.

It feels like there should be a flash, or a thunderclap, or some non-visual occurrence to signify the fact that you have been transported to somewhere completely different without any apparent mechanism or cause, but there is not. You are simply no longer on the path.

In something like a shock reflex, you step backwards. There is the crunch of gravel beneath your feet, and then you are staring from the edge of the path across the sea of green.

Do you

Keep following the path to the building? Go to 18

Try stepping off again? Go to 19

10.

You decide to bide your time and learn more about the strangers before attempting any violence. Perhaps they can help you understand the circumstances you are trapped in.

One of them tries to start a conversation, but it soon becomes clear you don't share a common language with the strangers, so you stay silent. Still, they seem friendly enough, offering you a hunk of gluten-rich material (perhaps it contains some kind of encoded information?). You hold it politely, and then surreptitiously drop it when you realise you have nowhere to store it.

Your inner voice is silent for now. Perhaps it realises you no longer trust it completely.

The strangers lead you to a building on the ground near one of the floating towers. Its lamps shine warmly through the fog and drifting snow, promising comfort. Outside the temperature is low, which is making this body quiver and feel unpleasant. You're glad you followed the strangers here.

The brightly lit building is filled with others like the four strangers who brought you here, large pale beings talking and laughing. Chandeliers hang from the galleries, illuminating a scene which almost seems familiar – a rowdy indoor market where many items are for sale.

An old woman stands by one of the curtained market stalls. Your strange companions suddenly become more urgent, grasping your wrist roughly and pulling you along toward her. You realise how weak this body is in comparison to theirs – you couldn't break away from their grasp if you needed. They jabber excitedly to each other in the language you can't understand. The old woman has a friendly looking smile, and it broadens as she beckons to you. You feel as if you recognise her from somewhere. Perhaps she is a friend?

Your inner voice speaks up abruptly. "I can't believe you're being so stupid. Don't go with her. When they release your hand, run away as fast as you can!"

Do you:

Run away through the crowd? Go to 20

Follow the old woman? Go to 21

11.

They are unable to stop you, as even in this imperfect body you move too fast and with too much awareness. You take the rod, and as they try to take it from the answer come instinctively: directed, brutal, rapid violence. You crack the neck of the first one with an elegant swing from the right, make it whirl so that it thumps on the head of the second, round kick the third as it tries to approach while you are engaged with the second. You terminate it like the other. The fourth gets his arms broken as he tries to man-handle you, and a bad case of mashed head.

You are free. Free to follow the voice. Free to go wherever you want.

Dr Singh sighed. She reclined back on her chair, touching the nape of her perfectly shaved head. With a flick of the finger she opened the intercom with the Engineering section

"Yes?" said a feminine voice on the side

"We lost another one to Delusion"

A short silence, and a direct question

"What happened?"

"I was reattempting a Symbolic Re-Integration. But I think the cyber psyche of this one had too much freedom inside the simulation, damn this new Mnemosine OS they forced on us. The patient... well it attacked the reintegration routine."

Another moment of silence

"I'll be sure to file another complaint. We can't afford to lose workers like this" answered the voice in a frustrated tone

"Well I suppose they'll have to do something about it. But for this one... now it's gone. Orpheus division out."

12.

You stumble outside into blinding daylight. A firefly rises feebly from where it was swatted by the beast and lands on your shoulder. You start running, the crashing waves in the background rising to a roar. You nearly lose your balance when you skid to a halt.

Before you, the cliffs drop into the frothy sea below. You can see the surrounding barrier reefs. Beyond them, the faint outline of a colossal flipper, gently pushing the city across the seas. Your drifting grave?

"This was the escape plan?"

Startled, you almost lose your footing. Looking at your shoulder, you realize the firefly is vaguely humanoid, its skin covered in silver scales. Green blood mixes with the red kind dripping from your

left ear.

“Name’s Remora,” it says.

Before you can reply, dirt crunches behind you. You turn slowly. The thick snout curls into a smile as the beast corners you against the cliff.

“Should’ve killed it when you had the chance,” mutters Remora.

“Beware the suckerfly!”

It takes you a moment to recognize the growls as words.

“You came here seeking mastery over form,” the beast continues. “In your folly you gained little and lost much: a spirit fractured in four. You are broken. Leave now and you will waste away, a puppet in the hands of the fly on your shoulder. Stay, free my brothers, and we will mend you.”

“And then eat you,” says Remora.

“Any counter-proposal?” you ask.

“Sure,” she says. “Jump.”

Do you:

Stay? Go to 22

Or jump? Go to 23

13.

You stagger to your feet, steadying yourself against the remains of the wall behind you. The beast is breathing heavily, staring at you as though judging how best to attack to finish you off. Thick greenish-black blood drips from the wound in its back and spatters on the floor.

You grab a jagged fragment of rock from the ground as the creature begins to spring towards you and hurl it as hard as you can towards the creature's head.

The rock strikes it directly between the eyes with a sickening crunch. The beast roars out in pain and clutches at its face, more blood spurting out between its claws. The roar trails off and the beast sways slowly before crashing to the floor.

As dust trickles down from the ceiling and your heart rate begins to settle, you see a faint glint from underneath the black leathery ruff around the beast's neck. On closer inspection, it turns out to be a delicate silver locket with a bright green gem at its centre. It seems somewhat familiar, though you can't quite place where you could have seen such a thing before. As you admire the locket, you hear a faint, almost musical sound drifting in from the room that the beast crashed through from.

Do you:

Investigate the sound? Go to 25

Or open the locket? Go to 24

14.

“Agreed.” Your doppelgänger nods. “Did you hear his voice? Don’t listen to him. Ever. Now, more importantly, do you remember the split? The shattering? When we went through the barrier?”

Your blank expression must have been sufficient answer.

“Damn. Okay, I’m part of you, and you’re the original, and for now, just call me Frag. These guys are you too, they’re just less....stable. From what I remember. That’s another thing – we’ve done this before. You always forget, but I remember bits. Now, grab one of them and let’s go. Those shadow things are new.”

Blinking in mild shock, you turn to the two figures still on the floor. One of them is muttering quietly and giggling – you catch ‘Shark’ and something like ‘Zimbo!’ before Frag picks him up. You grab the other and sling him over your shoulder, but he never says a thing. They both wear your face, too.

Frag looks around. “We should go through the hole that thing came from. I don’t know what happened when we touched, it doesn’t seem to be happening again, but we’ve never made it any other way before and that hole is new even to me. It’s not my best plan ever, but it’s the best I’ve got. Any objections, Firstie?”

You pause for a second before replying. “You clearly know what’s up more than me. Lead on, and fill me in on the way.”

“Deal.” Frag starts heading off into the passage. You’ve still got the chunk of marble from before, having picked it up again after the fight.

Do you:

Follow Frag? Go to 26

Drop the guy you’re carrying and rush at him with the crude knife? Go to 27

15.

“That’s so weird,” your double says, tossing his shard of marble between its hands. “I was just about to say the same thing. Like, word for word.”

“Eerie,” you say. But not as eerie as the writhing shadows at your feet, who, while you’ve been engaged in badinage with your identical twin, have been crawling towards the pair of you, their faces raised in expressions of twisted beseechment.

Every one of their faces is identical to your own. Or at least, they appear to have been made after your own image, although some, to be sure, have failed. Some versions of you have collapsed in on themselves like badly made pots. Here, a nose slides down the side of your face. There, the side of your head gapes open, revealing an earthy brown substance inside. The room is swarming with poorly made models of you, none robust enough to stand or talk like you and your doppelganger have managed.

“I think these...creations may be beyond our help,” says your twin, portentously. Which is weird, because you’d been about to say the same thing, in the exact same portentous tone of voice. But you don’t, because it’s already been said. By your twin. Portentously.

How portentously?

Pretty much as portentously as it gets.

Go to 33

16.

You stand before them, trembling with uncertainty. Running might have been your instinctive choice but you no longer trust this body to move as quickly as you would need to get away. A pool of yellow fluid gathers at your feet.

The two guards look both amused and disgusted at your fleshy state. You're clearly not a threat to them. “Another one fresh from the vat, I suppose,” says one to the other, “I don't know why the Source wants them like this if all they're going to do is make a mess for us to clean up.”

The other guard says something you don't understand, about the “purity” of an embodied existence. “We should envy it, Riko. Yes, its life in the () will be short, but the existence it will have compared to us – the sensory experiences alone – must be worth it.”

You disagree. This body is awful and distracting! You can feel its meat rotting around you and it's gradually dawning on you that you *did* lose part of yourself to get here. Something is missing, but before you can articulate the thought one of the guards has picked you up casually by one arm and is striding further away from that complex in the valley. You're headed toward a tiny dot on the horizon, purple grass shaking beneath the guard's running feet.

As you grow closer, jolting painfully along with each of the guard's long steps, you can see it is a gateway. It feels similar to the hole you jumped through before. A portal.

The guard who had talked about “purity” gives you a wistful smile. “This is it. The entrance to your final journey. I envy you, really.”

“But - “ you manage to stammer out, “I'm not meant to be here! Something's missing!”

“They all say that,” mutters the other guard. “Look, you made your choice already, OK? Your original upload chose for this version of you to experience flesh – so here you are, experiencing it. It's no use complaining it wasn't what you expected.” Before you can make any further explanations or protests, the guards take an arm and a leg each and unceremoniously fling you through the gateway.

The same feeling of disassociation strikes you, but not as strongly as before – perhaps you are more

used to it, or perhaps this gate has 'Ontological Shielding' whatever that is. But there is a gap in your perceptions.

When you next become fully aware of yourself, you're in a strange soft cocoon. A rhythmic noise assails your ears. The air is warm and heavy and you have to push a smothering layer of fabric away from your face. You're in a small room decorated with stuffed animals, walls covered in striped paper. On the nightstand a clock shaped like a frog is making that loud noise and you grope at it to try to make it stop.

A being like yourself but taller stands in the doorway, smiling and wiping its hands on an apron. "Rise and shine, sweetheart! Time to go to school!"

17.

You turn and run, with all the might your puny organic body can muster. You're painfully slow without your pedal inductors as the guards close in from behind. The walls of the complex grow taller as more guards pour out from hatches hidden in the grass –

"Left! Left!"

You follow the voice's instructions and dash to one side, dodging a searing beam of plasma which incinerates a line of kra in an azure blaze. You keep running, panting for breath, and as you round a corner you see –

Yourself.

Your body, great and gleaming, its chrome magnificence blazing through the smoke.

You stand before it, dwarfed by its beautiful immensity. The guards circle you, magnetoplasmic weapons trained on your skull, but you are struck dumb, too overcome by wonder to try to flee.

"Now, now is your chance..."

The voice is very low now, but the courtyard is silent – the guards paralyzed with terror.

"You alone can wipe the Qoyaan from this plane of existence..."

Wait. The Qoyaan? You hesitate, déjà vu creeping down your spine.

"Leave my body and return to yours, and you can be the paladin of our people – you can exterminate this scum and return us to glory!"

Breakthrough. You remember everything now. Before... you were a weapon, had no free will. But this organic brain is... flawed. You can make decisions. The voice, the being whose body you wear, would have you return to omnipotent servitude.

What'll it be?

18.

That rattled you. You turn back to the direction in which the path leads and start to pace down it, with a new sense of urgency.

The cone-shaped building seems to be gradually drawing nearer, though the path is still meandering frustratingly. You daren't step off it again though, for fear of where it will take you. As you approach the building, you get a sense that something is following you. Sure enough, when you glance over your shoulder you can see a number of the shapes you saw earlier, lumbering along at a surprising rate. Gaining on you. They look similar to your own body, but degraded into an even worse state of neglect. Maybe the voice had been right when it had said that this was the best it could do...

You pump as much power as possible into your actuators, trying to lengthen your lead. Eventually turn a corner and there is the building, right in front of you and with a small hatch in the base.

"Quick, in. Don't let them follow you." The urgency in the voice mirrors your own fear.

You wrench open the hatch and dive inside, slamming it shut behind you just before the creatures following reach it. The second you do, blackness descends.

You open your eyes blearily to bright light and three unfamiliar faces staring down. The lips of one of them begin to move.

"He's back", then louder "Can you hear us sir?"

Confused by the whole situation, you give no response.

"We should all know not to try going in there, you most of all. I had to manifest as The Interrogator and pull some serious hacks on the program to get you out. We nearly released many volunteers and some subjects whose mindstates are not yet fully assimilated, it could have been disastrous. Sir?"

None of this is familiar to you.

"What's this in his hand?" says another. "It looks like a note."

He takes the crumpled paper from your limp hand and begins to read.

19.

A single moment of pause before you step forward, a single step, off the path.

You are standing in a dark, stone room with no windows.

You step back onto the path. The purple grass rustles in the breeze.

You step forward. You are standing in a dark, stone room with no windows.

You step back onto the path. Purple grass rustles in your vision.

You step forward. You are standing in a dark, stone room with no windows. You can feel a soft breeze.

You step back onto the path. The purple grass is motionless, and all the stalks have turned to point directly at you.

You step forward. The wind howls around the dark, stone room. Windowless yet there is light, purple light, pulsing quietly behind the maelstrom bouncing between the walls.

You step back onto the path. You can hear nothing. You can feel nothing. Shards of purple six feet long lie in low spikes all pointing to you. You stand in a circle of them, no way out, no path, except a space exactly one step forward.

You step forward. The wind cuts into you, forcing you to the floor, a great pressure that feels like a hundred spikes ripping at your skin, you can feel your own heartbeat pulsing purple in your mind, drowning out the wind and the noise and your own distant screams. You have to keep stepping. You can't stop. You can't stay here.

You step back onto the path. The path is gone. The sky is blotted out by a ceiling of purple, a solid wall of shining crystal, you are alone in this tomb. Spikes at your back cut into you but you feel nothing, hear nothing. A step forward, and feeling will crush you. A step back, and your senses are naught but the dim sense of your self fading. You're not alive. You don't exist.

A step forward, and the world is ripped to purple shreds, the walls of the room blasted away by purple thunder, and gasping in pain you can see endless plains of purple grass, a gravel path, and a white-hot sun that scorches your skin. Screeches fill your ears. You stumble back –

– And collapse silently in a dark, windowless room you cannot see made of purple stone you cannot feel. You're not alive. You don't exist. There is no moment when you die, for you do not live, but nothing lives in this room, and there is no body to remain. Your adventure ends here.

20.

You run, and as you do you curse this body's unstable gait, dodging confused humanoids is so much harder when you are forced to divert so much attention to the flailing of your limbs. "Up! You need to get higher." You are not sure why your inner voice wants you to do this, but you are not sure of anything right now. You glance around for a way to follow the order you've been given but while you are doing so you fall victim to the uneven terrain and fall to the floor, unable to ventilate. The things that had captured you loom over you and are speaking again.

You don't wait to find out what it was they were about to say though, since you have been given other instructions. You are well aware by now that your body is fairly useless when it comes to most things, so you shield your side and feign damage, hoping that they will deem you irreparable and lose interest. Unfortunately for you, this only seems to draw more attention, and several of them grab you and roll you over, uncovering your deception. They take you out of the market and, to your

surprise, upwards. You attempt to run a diagnostic but that function does not seem to be available in this body, so instead you just have to settle with waiting for them to let go of you again.

“This is high enough, if you get to an open area we can extract you” There are several of them holding you now, but they seem to be holding you looser than before, you wonder if they are attempting to avoid damaging you. However, you feel that you have a chance of escaping and you take it, you manage to find an open area fairly easily, and they don’t seem to have pursued you this time. “Stay still.” The voice orders, and you obey.

Seconds later you are on the ship and the one responsible for the voice in your head is saying to another “And next time, wipe the memory more thoroughly before letting it loose among the locals.” They turn to you. “We will need to obtain a new body now, they’ll remember this one. I suggest you deactivate it now and prepare a bit more carefully next time.”

21.

Ignoring the hysterical complaining of your inner voice, you follow the old woman down a narrow passageway behind her stall. One of the four strangers follows you, his heavy body blocking out the rapidly retreating light.

The woman stops in a storeroom and bends painfully into a white box on the floor, muttering unintelligibly. Then she turns around and reaches up to the side of your head. You see a flash of metal buried in her claw-like hand. “Stop her – ” is all your inner voice manages to say, before being cut off by a sharp stinging sensation behind your ear.

The woman withdraws, holding a small insect-like device coated in your blood. “I haven’t seen a model like this before,” she says, dropping it onto a workbench with a snarl of disgust. “Must be another prototype.”

Your head feels light and free, a way it’s not felt since you woke up with that unpleasant voice muttering in your ear. A voice, you realize, which has done nothing but offer you advice ranging from misguided to downright evil. Your thoughts, now unshepherded and free to wander where they want, return to the woman’s words, which you’ve only just noticed you understood completely.

“You did well to resist it,” says a voice behind you. “You must have been stronger than the others they caught.”

Without the bug thing – whatever it was inside you – blocking access to your memories anymore, you recognize the voice that you’d taken for a foreign stranger’s immediately. It belongs to your brother. And at the same time, you remember what it was you had been trying to do.

What was it?

Trace Siri to her top-secret headquarters Go to 29

Market a new bodybuilding programme to the citizens of Silicon Valley Go to 28

22.

You're not silly enough to leap off a cliff for a firefly you've just met. You sternly inform Remora of this fact, and take a faltering step away from the edge. The beast sweeps you up in its claws.

"Ugh. They never listen." Remora buzzes away, wafting silver.

"You are wiser than your siblings. We are Five, and we appreciate your trust." Lifting you daintily onto eir shoulders, Five springs onto the ruined stonework encrusting the cliff. Quickly returning to the room where you awoke, ey picks up your three unconscious clones.

You cling white-knuckled to the beast's fur as ey leaps across the flooded streets and shattered monuments. This district, it seems, has slid catastrophically towards the ocean, foundations giving way under the relentless pounding of the city's fins.

Five carries you to a cracked plaza. A vast compass rose has been inlaid in once-bright mosaic, now thoroughly dulled by grime. Carefully, ey places the four of you at each of the cardinal points.

"You wanted mastery over form. I wished the same, and the same peril befell me. My new brothers and I struggled in vain to reunite our minds, but our spell went awry."

There is a sound of tearing, and you watch as the beast's limbs separate: each arm drags itself one way, each leg another, joining you and your clones. Only the head remains at the centre of the circle.

"Look at what has befallen us!" the beast's head cries. "My poor brothers, locked away in these legs and arms! But with your help, we have a chance to set things right. All of us shall become one, a being of untold power, as both of us dreamed."

At that instant, Remora drops from the sky, a silver thunderbolt, and starts kicking at the head with little success. "*Now do you see?* Destroy the head and put an end to this evil!"

But it is too late to withdraw. You find yourself locked in place as Five's arm climbs onto your head. There is an intense buzzing, as if at a noisy party – then silence.

You glance around Reunification Plaza from five pairs of eyes. Ah, there are your arms. There are your other arms.

They could use some improvement.

You watch with pleasure as the flesh reknits itself. New joints here, yes yes. Perhaps these two could merge? Perfect. How about Remora?

Remora resists. You are still too weak.

Well, mastery takes time, and you have plenty of it. You bring your limbs back together and wait patiently for your next visitor.

23.

The wind picks up around your ankles. You have got to be insane. But maybe a death dashed upon the coral so far below will be quicker and less painful than at the hands of the beast. You take a deep breath and – without enough room to take a running jump – lean towards the yawning abyss.

The beast realises what you are about to do just as it is too late to stop you. With a ferocious snarl it launches itself, but gravity snatches you away from its arms, leaving the beast clawing at thin air. It bellows in anger, and the sound alone follows you down, down, down...

A little green glow rises slowly in your field of vision, just out of your grasp. Over the whistling roar of the wind in your ears, before she accelerates upward and out of earshot forever, you can just hear Remora say:

“Excellent. One down, three to go.”

24.

You rip the locket off the monster’s thick neck. Closer up, you see that the green gem forms part of an insignia that you’d know anywhere. It’s the logo of hit reality TV show *The Room of Doom!*, a spiky dragon’s face wreathed in gilt flame. The locket swings open, releasing a drab blast of confetti into your face. The distant theme tune from outside the room gets louder, rising to the crashingly annoying jazz saxophone finale you know only too well.

You feel a rumble beneath your feet, but the music drowns out the noise. With a waft of dust, the three surviving walls of the room descend into the ground, and the ceiling is winched into the air. You squint in the thrumming heat of the stage lights. Raising a hand to shield your eyes, you make out a cliff face of tiny figures, all watching you. As if with one mind, they all burst into applause.

“It seems we have a winner!” booms a genial voice, amid a torrent of applause. “And what a winner! No previous Room of Doom contestant has actually slain the beast in order to win the locket. Looks like we’re going to need a new one!”

The audience erupt into forced laughter. A short man wearing a bright green jacket walks up to you, microphone in hand, picking his way over the many failed contestants that surround you. He grabs your hand, the one holding the locket, and holds it aloft. The audience cheer once more. The failed contestants hold their heads in their hands, including that one that in the madness of the battle, you had thought resembled you.

The host of the evening inserts his microphone into your face. “But the question on everyone’s lips is, what will the holder of the locket...”

“CHOOSE TO POCKET?” the audience chant back.

What prize do you demand?

Increased governmental contribution to state pensions? Go to 30

Or a plate of cooked turkey slices, mixed light and dark meat? Go to 31

25.

You don't know what it is, but something seems compelling about the melodious sounds. Clutching the locket closely you step away from the slowly cooling corpse of the beast and move towards the source of the sound. There is something about it that bothers you but you can't place it. Although you half expect it, nothing jumps out at you as you edge your way around the dead animal to the doorway the sound is coming through.

The room beyond is filled with treasure, and you can do little more than stare entranced at it. The music calms you, you can barely remember fighting the creature outside. It seems like that happened so long ago, it hardly matters anymore. You can't remember ever hearing of such a treasure here, but you are glad there are no stories, it will mean there's less chance of people coming to take it from you.

A cold drop of water falls from the ceiling and hits the back of your neck, you flinch and drop the necklace and in the moments before you catch it the room seems dark and empty. But then the room returns and you figure you must have blinked, the treasure is still there. The music thrums in your ears and you smile, not only is it before you but it is yours, and you will defend it.

You are sure that whatever you originally came to this place for wasn't very important anyway.

26.

You follow quietly, walking with the insane but compliant part of you over your back is hard, but you are thankful that it isn't babbling like the other one was. You are not sure what Frag meant about the process, or why you'd do something like this to yourself. You don't even know if you had had a choice in the matter. You'd seemed reasonably like a whole person before, but you weren't sure anymore. Could you not remember what you were doing here because you'd forgotten, or because that memory was in Frag instead?

Frag leads you to a chamber where there are four alcoves in the wall, and you both lower the ones you are carrying into the central two, you aren't sure why but it seems like what you should be doing. You step into the first one, Frag gets into the last. You are not sure what is meant to be happening next but you can't tell what's going on outside, it seems far too bright to see all of a sudden. Then the memories flood back and you awake, as one person, and you know what happened to you.

You sigh in frustration. It would help if the part of you that knew what you were trying to achieve was ever able to speak coherently. You stretch slightly, feeling your bonds, hoping that somehow one of the partial yous had managed to forget it had let you out. No such luck. You start the spell again, thinking hard about the need to cut your bonds, hoping that the more times you think it the more likely it is part of you will succeed in doing it. The spell kicks in, and for the fifth or sixth time you as a whole ceases to exist.

27.

You plunge the marble shard into Frag's neck. He collapses. You turn to face the beast blocking the passage, but it remains impassive, watching. You make out dark armored pincers.

"Attack me!" you yell.

"You are doing that well enough by yourself," the beast unexpectedly replies.

"Where am I?"

Spidery legs click sideways, unblocking the passage. You glance at its mandibles and decide it can kill you regardless. You walk up to the passage. The city lies within an air bubble, illuminating passing sea creatures. A giant manta ray skirt unfurls below, pushing the city forward.

Behind you, Frag gurgles his last breath. White sparks arc from his body and the other two as they dissolve. Your mind is flooded with memories.

"Zimbol, the sunken city," you murmur. "It's a prison."

"Yes," says the beast.

"My submersible..."

"Lost," says the beast. "But the shadow-thing changed you."

"The barrier. How do I get through?"

"Not with violence. *Remember this.*"

Haltingly, you push through the air bubble. Glorious sea water replenishes your new gills. You sense the electricity of tiny hearts beating in the darkness. *Prey.* You swim towards the dancing soap bubble colors of the barrier and ram into it. Something shatters.

Faint laughter wakes you from a haze. Stone blocks scrape back into place.

"Each death makes me stronger," hisses a voice. "Soon I will be free."

You pass out.

You awake in some sort of damp enclosed space, there's a persistent dripping behind you and there's an irritating trickle of water running under your back.

[Return to section 1]

28.

You turn and look on the familiar faces of your brother and the rest of the 'Stalkers.

"Did we get all of them, Fum?" you ask.

"Sec people say we're clear, now that they know what to scan for," Foe replies before he can open his mouth.

"How are you feeling, Jack?" Fie asks.

"I'm not sure," you reply. "It made me think I was one of *them*... a gearhead."

"We could cancel..." says Fee.

You look at the fabric you still hold. Your skintight greens, 'Stalker logo on the breast pocket.

"No we can't", you reply. "We need this contract. I'll manage."

"What's the snake oil this time?" asks Fum.

"Some miracle muscle-growing program for hardcore VRs," Foe replies. "The kind of people that slowly atrophy in their sim-tanks."

"A fool and their advertising budget are easily parted," says Fie.

"Are we there yet?" you ask.

"Laputa just hit Valley airspace a minute ago," says Fee.

Fum helps you into your suit and attaches the harness to your back.

You feel more like yourself as you walk out of the market in formation, in character. The snow has stopped, mercifully. The fog has not. You reach the edge, a tower levitating above you, white mist extending before you.

You jump.

Your wings unfold as you cross the cloudline, the city's bulk soon behind you. You activate your smoke as you spiral, trailing green vines from the clouds above to the earth below.

The End

29.

You grab the bug and strip its parts out, talking as you do. "There's no time for reunions! I know how to find Siri!" You find the receiver chip and start repurposing it to pick up on the signals from the beacon you'd activated just before Siri found you and put you in a shell she could control. Your hands are steadier now, your fine motor control returning. Your bond-brother leans over the bench to help you with the signal booster; behind you, the old woman is giving instructions to one of the others, who adjusts their particle rifle.

Siri wants to stop the city. You know she's close to managing: who can say how many people she has under her control now? You can't ask anyone for help. But you know you can't let the city fall. And

right now you have a chance to catch her unawares.

The bug chirps and you head out, leading the group, following the map projecting itself in front of your eye. (No longer directly into your mind; another thing to blame Siri for.) The route leads deeper into the centre of the city, through a maze of narrow streets. Fog swirls around you.

You reach a row of buildings which, judging by the signals you're getting, are all one building on the inside. The back door is unguarded. You slip inside. Senses you didn't know you had are telling you Siri is nearby.

You don't ask yourself what you are going to do next. You know you have no other choice.

Confront Siri. Go to 32

30.

"Pensions," you mumble, the fog of your ordeal clearing from your mind.

"Louder, sport," says the host.

"The bots, they have all the jobs," you continue. "What jobs are left for humans? Reality TV? We need to increase state pensions."

The host's smile seems frozen. The audience is silent, their prompter blank.

"We'll return after these messages," the host recovers.

Curtains cut off the audience. The host whirls toward you, smile gone.

"Are you trying to ruin me?!"

"Your trash is the only thing people watch anymore," you reply. "I had a message to send."

"That's beautiful," scoffs the host, wiping his forehead with a lime green handkerchief. "Should've applied to be a writist."

"I did. They're only using bots now."

"Huh." The host looks behind you.

You turn to find a sec drone, hypodermic needle extended.

"You seem unwell, citizen. Do you require assistance to reach the medical unit?"

"Wait..."

The needle plunges into your neck. You black out.

You awake in some sort of damp enclosed space, there's a persistent dripping sound. A few stray beams of light shine through a hole into the room beneath you, where you make out three human shapes. You call out to the other game contestants, but your leathery snout produces only an anguished roar.

31.

This isn't even a question. The image is right there on the screen, surrounded by sparkling golden trinkets and high-tech toys. They are all distractions from the prize which you instantly know you should choose. No - you *must* choose. It is a plate, but not simply a plate - although the commonplace setting is an inspired contrast to the savoury stupendousness it contains.

You have been craving meat, in an abstract sense, since the fight with the beast in the Room of Doom, since the crunch of rock meeting flesh and the smell of hot blood running down between savage claws. Longer than that, maybe. Staring at the wall of prizes, you know that in some ways you have needed this your whole life.

Abstract no longer, what you need is before you: a plate of cooked turkey slices, mixed light and dark meat. It is all you can do not to drool. Not trusting yourself to speak – or indeed to open your mouth – you point a trembling hand.

“The turkey!” booms the host triumphantly, as the image of your chosen prize expands to fill the whole screen and jaunty music blasts over the speakers. “And as you all know, on *The Room of Doom!* the whole audience gets to share the joy! We’re going to take our brave winner off now to receive their prize, which means that during our intermission – *turkey for everyone!*”

Still half-dazed by the applause, battle and prospect of your prize, you feel yourself taken off-stage. The host is far shorter than you, but his grip is strong as he pulls you close and mutters in your ear.

“My lucky friend – you are a turkey.”

32.

Infiltrating the building is not as easy as it could have been, like in the olden times, before Siri took over and made the city dumb and deaf to those that didn't yield. You could have asked for the opinion and the instinctive knowledge encoded in the engrams of the warrior cultures that lived here long before your own time, and that had in common with your own tribe only the city itself.

But there's still your own knowledge that allows you to move quickly around her tech-bonded slaves like an oily shadow. You do not neutralize them: Siri has taken them over crudely, they still can be saved. And there's little else to stop your team. There's a series of laser and heat sensors that one of your bond-kin persuades with some clicking sound coming from deep in her throat, and some automated turrets with IFF and targeting brains so hastily-cultured that they are in a pseudo-Alzheimer state. The same bond-sister mercy-kills them.

Siri is weak now; not that she has ever been really strong enough to be a major threat. She's distressed and she's making many mistakes that even your limited brain would have not made in planning for a last-ditch defense. So much for Singularity and superintelligence and all that jazz.

You enter the room. This building must have been used generations ago for power generation and then mothballed when a good third of the inhabitants left over the past three or four centuries. Arcane cooling units are still attached to the walls, and one of them is still pumping heat away. And attached to it you find Siri. Once assessed that she has no more weapons at her disposal, your and

your kin walk to its white ovoidal mainframe.

You all hear different prayers, curses and promises of boons in exchange for its freedom.

Poor Siri. You pity this mind. Born in a different age, lost out of its time, without a friend or ally. But that doesn't stop you from reaching inside the mainframe with your Collapser and forcing its consciousness to fold into a reduced form, complete but not functional. Once copied into safe storage, one of your bond-brothers starts scrubbing up the now-empty computational substrate, making sure that Siri has not left behind anything nasty.

Siri has not been the first incorporeal intelligence to try to bury herself in the City, nor the most powerful. But it will not be the last that will attempt to do so. You sigh, looking at your bond-brothers and sisters faces with relief, feeling the pre-programmed pleasure of a job well done. Most of your job is done for today, but you still have much work to do to restore full functionality to the city.

33.

"What are you saying?" you ask unnecessarily. You've reached the same conclusion.

The beast looks up from where it has been munching on your lesser copies.

"Lightning?" you propose.

You touch fingers, but nothing happens.

"Maybe it only works on creepy shadow things?" your double suggests.

The beast charges.

You dive out of the way as it crashes into the wall.

"Are you noticing any..." you begin.

"...increased performance?" your double finishes. "There's no way our old self..."

"...would've jumped away in time," you say. "Do you think we can make it to..."

"...the hole in the ceiling?" asks your double.

You feel a surge of power as the beast stomps another copy into mush.

"I think we can now," you reply.

You grab the ledge on your second try and help your double up.

You stand on a stone balcony. As you walk you see similar balconies in other parts of the citadel. Beyond them the star field stretches in all directions, without a horizon to stop it.

"Huh," says your double. "At least we know where we are."

"With the ethereal plane, it's more like where we aren't," you mutter.

"C'mon, we're a glass-half-full-of-aether kind of person."

"Remember how we always wished we could meet people more like ourselves?" you say.

“Disappointing, isn’t it? I’m sure there’s a lesson there somewhere.”

You walk into a great hall, where a throne glows softly. You sense your double lunging at your back.

You dodge and plunge the marble shard into its neck.

“As you said,” you whisper, “your creations are beyond my help.”

Dark tendrils envelop your body as you are finally made whole. As you take your seat you realize the citadel is also your prison. It may have constrained its previous shadow lord, but you can do better. Other power-hungry adventurers will come. You can afford to wait.