

Host

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by [embrodski](#)

Summary

Space Zombies want to save humanity

Notes

An audio version of this is available at hpmorpodcast.com (under "Other Stories")
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Host

Julian leaned against the push bar of a side door of his high school and stepped out into the false sunlight. Jupiter rose massively to his left. The sky-ceiling above him was bisected from horizon to horizon by the station's sunline, which shone brightly from a spot near the nine-o'-clock position. The clear ceiling scattered the light into Earth-mimicking crystal blue. The next few days were scheduled to be warm and cloudless. Most days were.

The hall behind him was empty; the class bell had rung few minutes ago. He'd waited out the transfer rush holed up in a bathroom stall. He couldn't continue going into those classrooms, pretending to be alive. Not today. He cut across the school's perfect lawn of EarthGreen Grass®. Modified, of course, but true biological living stuff.

No one called after him, no one was outside watching for leaving students. High schools didn't even have fences around their perimeters. The teachers said it was because they trusted kids his age to be responsible. Bullshit. It was easy to chase down small children and manhandle them into submission, forcibly move them, or confine them. It was much harder to control people who were

fullsized, could run just as fast, and fought back. It was amazing how much difference something as ignoble as size could make. Only when adults couldn't physically impose their will on children did they suddenly have things like "trust" and "respect."

Julian turned a corner, and the school was out of sight. He wasn't sure where he was going, just away from there. Large single-family homes with green lawns spread around him in imitation of the Earth ideal. Every one stood empty, awaiting the return of two parents from work and 1.8 children from school. The houses loomed like giant skulls, hollow windows staring down at him. At least it was better than the school, full of empty people and hollow eyes.

Two more blocks to a major cross-street. He missed Drew. If Drew was here, Julian would probably still be in class, passing notes or whispers, mocking the teachers. He'd have someone to sit with at lunch. Out here at least he had an excuse for being alone—there was no one else around. A noticeable fraction of residents had left after the Abominations hit Titan Station around Saturn last year, figuring the inner planets would be safer. It had been the first raid in over a decade. Julian's father thought people were overreacting.

Julian reached the larger two-lane street. To his left it stood empty all the way to the inverted horizon, where the upward bend of Alpha Habitat's curvature brought it into contact with the azure sky-ceiling. To his right a single transport zipped along in the distance. He paced across the street and ducked into the grocery store on the other side.

It was silent and immaculate. With no customers, the cashier units sat powered down. A small janitor bot worked through its routine unnoticed. Julian walked down the aisles slowly. The shelves were well-stocked; there must have been a shipment lifted up from Ganymede yesterday. When he passed the candy bars, he casually pocketed one. But it didn't have the same thrill without Drew. Drew's parents didn't like Julian and had decided to do something about it. They'd transferred across the station umbilical to Beta Habitat, Alpha's counterweight. Julian and Drew were effectively severed, the brightest part of Julian's life snatched away and not a damn thing he could do about it. Because Drew's parents "didn't approve." Assholes.

When he left the store, the world wasn't quite the same. As he walked to the small nearby park, his feet tread on something that wasn't the ground. It was as though a thin physical barrier separated him from the stuff beneath him, a shellac coating that wasn't actually there. He reached out to touch the bark of an air-recycler. It stayed solid, a beautiful piece of machinery as sturdy as the maple tree it was built to imitate. If it was honest it would have broken apart in his hand, revealed to be a ghostly fraud underneath a veneer of reality. Maybe if he knew the right way to wrench it, he could make it crack, reveal its true nature. But he didn't.

Occasionally Earthers would complain that the trees weren't "real" because they weren't biological. They had no idea what unreality felt like.

The park was as abandoned as the store. Julian wandered over to a swing and sat down. He fished the pilfered candy bar from his pants, pulled his tablet from his backpack, and resumed reading the fae noir graphic novel he'd started at lunch yesterday.

In the beginning, there was darkness. Minds were imprisoned in bodies. They collided in the Chaos, but they could not link, and they were alone. After eons, God was born at the outer edge of the Chaos. God moved upon the Chaos, linking the minds, creating the Heavenly Host.

For the first time, there was joy. The Host delighted in existence. They basked in each other's thoughts, swam in Their collected memories and experiences. Every hurt was felt by

All, and every joy was shared by All, and so hurt was eliminated and joy multiplied. The Host sang in gratitude, Holy Holy Holy is God! Holy Holy Holy is life! And Their joy banished the darkness.

Yet amid Their rejoicing there was a pain of discontent, a sharp pebble of rebellion. Within the Host no mind resided in a single body, and the pain was drawn out for years before it could be found. When at last the poison was located, it was immediately excised, sloughed off from the Host so it would not rot the purity of the whole.

At that moment, an infinitesimal fraction of the Host—relieved to be freed of this niggling irritation, and joyful to return to the exaltation of God—found itself alone. The pain of discontent was no longer a distant jab. It was now the entirety of its existence, an all-consuming agony. The thing that had been an angel realized in horror what had happened.

“It was me?” he asked, but none replied. All about him was darkness.

He was cast to the Earth, and his name was called Adam.

Julian’s father, Lucius Higgins, barely blinked as another message popped up on his display, alerting him to his son’s activities. Truancy. A petty larceny that would be billed to Lucius’s account. A note that another family counseling session would be required. He ignored them, intent on his work. His fingers tappity-tap-tapped across the keyboard, as he verified and prepared for tomorrow. A dull feeling of hunger came and went. He didn’t have the attention to spare for eating today.

He didn’t notice as the sky faded into darkness.

Lucius cross-referenced the data he’d reaped from Titan during its fall to the Abominations for the umpteenth time. It was a staggering amount of information, a station’s digital death scream in the hours leading up to nuclear self-destruct. He’d remotely commandeered a laser antenna to beam out that data as soon as the chaos began. It had been easy, as he’d been behind the attack in the first place. It was his dry run, his beta test. He didn’t know how many lives that data represented, had never calculated how many additional minds could have been evacuated out to Neptune with one more antenna broadcasting. It didn’t matter. He’d needed that data.

There wouldn’t have been any lives lost at all if the stubborn bastards didn’t insist on selfdestruction. It was their own damn fault.

Tomorrow would be the culmination of two decades of work. Two decades since he’d been reborn in the fires of Oberon Station. They’d called him one of the few “survivors” of the first known Abomination attack, but nothing could be further from the truth. He’d spent every moment since that day struggling to reclaim his life. Recreating what the Neptunians would be happy to share. Two decades retracing the footsteps of angels.

The hardest part was the education he’d needed—the level of programming finesse. Now that he had that, he could recreate the virus in a matter of months anywhere. The technological infrastructure pervaded all inhabited space. Humanity stood right at the brink of Nirvana, afraid to take that last step. Cowering like children at the pool’s edge. All but the Neptunians. It was a shame that he would never put all that training to work again after this.

Everything was perfect, of course, but he wouldn’t be able to sleep tonight, anyway, so he made himself useful. Triple-checking everything. The first fifty hours were critical, those formative hours before the overmind had time to compose itself. Lucius would oversee everything up to that

time. He had plenty of stimulants to carry him through. He realized that he'd never sleep again. The thought came with a giddy edge.

He'd lived in hell for nearly two decades, laboring to save his fellow damned. They'd kill him if they knew.

A rattle and click, as the front door opened. Familiar footsteps in the hallway. Lucius kept working.

It was after dark when Julian came home. The house had seemed empty from the outside, but when he opened the front door he heard his dad's rapid typing. He walked into the kitchen slowly, unwilling to disturb the quiet rhythm. His dad sat at the dinner table in a dark kitchen, his face lit pale by screen's glow. It seemed to float disembodied in the night. Julian set down his backpack. The typing paused, his dad's blue eyes darted up to look in his direction.

"It's late," he said. Not as an accusation, merely a statement.

"Yeah."

His father's eyes returned to the screen, and he resumed typing. Julian pulled some nutra from a cabinet, working mostly from memory in the low light.

"No one at school remembered, did they?" his father asked.

Julian's stomach clenched. He stood in silence, looking down at the carton in his hands. His father asked it so easily. Like the world hadn't been torn apart.

"You can't blame them," his father said. "Back on Earth there are environmental reminders. The days get shorter, the weather gets colder. Leaves change color. And deep inside something turns on, says 'Last time these conditions were present, something momentous happened. What was it?' Out here, every day is the same. There are no cycles to guide us, no natural events to remind us. Out here a year is nothing but a number in a file. Don't let it bother you."

"Kay."

Another twenty minutes passed before his father flipped the computer off, finally settling the kitchen into full darkness.

"Julian," he started, then paused for the span of several breaths. Finally he continued. "I know what it's like to have the world reject you. I know it hurts. But please, be strong, just for a little while longer. It will get better."

Julian sought out his father's gaze, but couldn't see anything more than a thick shadow of human form. His voice held the notes of a promise. As if he could possibly promise something like that. Julian didn't reply, his chest constricting under weights he couldn't see.

"Don't stay up too late," his father told him. He took the computer and headed upstairs. With each fading step Julian could breathe slightly easier, the suffocating pressure on his chest incrementally fading. Until at last it was quiet, and he was at peace. He returned to his backpack and pulled the captive-bolt pistol from within it.

To Julian, the word "pistol" usually meant the weapons seen in cinema, wielded by police or military. This was nothing like those. It was a plain steel cylinder, with a safety release trigger near

the back, and a contact trigger around the muzzle in front. You held down the safety release and smacked the contact trigger against something, and the capacitors inside would fire, flinging a metal spike out of the muzzle. The “captive” part was key—the spike flared at the trailing end, too wide to exit through the muzzle. Internal springs would return the bolt after it reached maximum extension and reseal it. This prevented projectiles from being flung around a space station, which was of critical concern to everyone. Only the elite defense forces at the citadel carried free-projectile weapons.

During the Abomination raids, when Julian was still a baby, these captive-bolt pistols were cached in every public building and most private residences. Officially, they were for selfdefense. In practice, everyone knew they wouldn’t be of much use against a mindless horde. With only enough energy for ten firings when fully charged, it was understood that these were for use as an immediate and painless way to kill yourself before the ravenous monstrosities descended on you. There weren’t many around now, but Julian’s older brother Kelvin had found one somewhere.

To Kelvin, the pistol hadn’t implied “Use in case of Abomination attack.” For him the label must have read, “Use in case of overwhelming despair.” One year ago today, he’d done just that. Julian had found his body.

Julian fingered the cylinder, turning it over and over in his hands. Light glinted off one end, reflecting a streetlight. He’d done this almost every night for a year, he knew this pistol more intimately than any other object in his life. Had Kelvin done this, before he’d killed himself? How long had he sat, studying the smooth curves, the clean lines?

A rip reopened inside Julian, a jagged line of heat in his chest that seared up to his throat, forced his breath hard and heavy. He blinked rapidly and looked up, out the patio windows.

The sky was clear now that the sunline had faded out for the night. Jupiter was directly below them at this time. Above, the dark velvet of night, scattered with pinpricks of starlight. Rising around him, the black bowl of the station, sparkling with lights. A rough grid of diamonds spreading in all directions. Every light was a point of life, another person like him struggling into the next day. Every life a manmade star, separated from its neighbors by a gulf so uncrossable it may as well be light years of empty space. Ultimately every light burns alone, surrounded by darkness; but at a far enough remove they weaved together into an unbelievable tapestry. He took in the sight, let the citylight fill him, and inhaled deep lungfuls of crisp air. And slowly the cool filtered in, numbed the burn. He was part of this beauty.

Julian set the smooth metal of the cylinder against his cheek, feeling its cool radiate through him. He hadn’t believed it was suicide at first. Not Kelvin, not after their mother. Now, a year later, he realized that somewhere along the way he’d finally accepted it, and he wasn’t even sure when. The city-station shimmered around him.

After a long time, he returned the pistol to his backpack and went to bed.

The next day when the transport deposited Julian before his school, twenty minutes late for his first class, he stood on the sidewalk without moving toward the doors. The little vehicle rolled away, heading silently to its next customer. Julian looked at the school, mouth setting into a scowl, and considered. Eventually, he turned away. Not today. Not even for a minute.

It is written that the Rabbi Haim of Romshishok desired to see the afterlife. He sought out the ancient texts that should have been destroyed, and the arcane tomes that should never have been penned at all, and filled his mind with forbidden knowledge. After decades of research and labor he

crafted a blade which could pierce the veil between worlds.

He cut a portal for himself and stepped into a lavish world of beauty and plenty.

In a clear meadow, rows upon rows of tables were set with plates laden with the finest foods. They were arranged around a massive central pot that bubbled with a hearty stew, and the aroma that permeated the air set the Rabbi's mouth watering. Yet the people who sat at these tables were pale and emaciated, skin stretched tightly over their jutting skeletons. They moaned in agony, and their breath stank of hunger. The Rabbi saw that their elbows were bound with angel's hair, and none could bend their arms to bring food to their mouth. He shuddered at the sight of their misery and realized he was in Hell. Quickly, he left.

When he cut his second portal and stepped through, he again found himself in a lavish world of beauty and plenty. He feared he had returned to Hell, for he stood in an identical clear meadow, with identical tables laden with the finest foods. But this time the people who sat at the tables were plump. They laughed and chatted, obviously satiated, even though their elbows were also bound with angel's hair. As the Rabbi watched one man picked up a spoon, dug into a plate before him, and fed the man beside him. The recipient thanked him and did the same in return. The Rabbi realized that this was Heaven. Heaven and Hell were the same, the difference between them was in their inhabitants.

Overjoyed to think of the misery he could end, Rabbi Haim cut a portal directly to Hell and rushed back to the starving wretches.

"You do not have to go hungry!" he told them, shouting in exuberance. "Feed your neighbor, and he will surely return the favor and feed you!" But the inhabitants of Hell would not heed him.

"I will not feed this detestable man next to me!" he was told. "If I give food to someone of his kind, I would be no better than him! I would rather starve than to give him the pleasure of eating!"

Dejected, the Rabbi left Hell forever. But he neglected to close his portal when he left.

The inhabitants of Heaven could now see the plight of those in Hell, and they could not bear it. To see misery on such a scale filled them with horror. They came into Hell to help its denizens, to feed them freely and without condition.

Those in Hell recoiled at this perversity. Strangers had intruded into their world. Large, grotesque people, full of hair and flesh and always showing their teeth. They would warp everyone in Hell into replicas of themselves. Worse, the strangers brought more than just physical deformity. They spat on the culture of Hell, giving succor and comfort to the most vile of sinners. They swore that those in Hell would be seduced by Heaven's values, and would come to think like they did, and value what they valued. Everything Hell knew would be destroyed, replaced by the all-consuming Heaven.

The denizens of Hell took up their forks and their knives and attacked the people of Heaven. They tore their clothes and pierced their skin, and after enough blood was shed, the people of Heaven retreated.

But the people of Heaven could never be happy again. They felt the misery of those in Hell, it tore at them as if it were their own. They could not ignore the moans of the suffering. Nor would they close the portal now that they knew of Hell, for that would be against the very nature that made Heaven what it was.

The people of Heaven realized what they must do. The people of Hell were sick, and they had to

be helped, even against their will. Once they were well, they would be grateful they'd been saved. For months the people of Heaven prepared—forging weapons, training in combat. When they could no longer stand to delay for even one more hour, they launched the greatest invasion that has ever been seen across all creation.

So began the War For Hell, which rages to this day.

Drew's heart jumped to an anxious tempo as the maglev passed through the final meters of ceiling structure and plunged down to the citadel below. The tube's walls were clear, and the entire Alpha Habitat stretched below him in a patchwork of green. Streets radiated out from the central citadel. Lego-block buildings lined them, growing rapidly as the transport dove from the sky. Centripetal forces pushed him into his seat as the rail curved outward, twisting into a widening spiral. It wrapped the citadel from its central spire down to the ground, shedding velocity in a rumbling hum the whole way.

It was dawn in Alpha Habitat, same as it would be in Beta Habitat on the other side of the umbilical. Drew tightened his grip on his backpack. He'd packed it with nutra and some personal effects before he'd slipped out of his house last night, but he'd been too nauseated with trepidation to eat a bite. He hadn't been able to sleep during the crossing either, despite the long delay at the central dock. He blamed that on the zero-G. It certainly wasn't because he was terrified of what his parents would do when they found out. He absolutely, positively didn't care about their tantrums. Plus, it was too late by that point.

A hand clapped on his shoulder. Drew started, dropped the backpack, jerked his hands up. To surrender or fight, but he never found out which. The hand belonged to some asshole with a briefcase, hurrying unsteadily down the aisle while the transport was still in motion, jockeying for position by the door. Drew let out a shaky breath. Tried to ignore the gnawing in his guts. He closed his eyes and envisioned the scene again.

Julian would be pushing through the crammed school hallways, face sullen, eyes downcast. Alone, of course, in the press of bodies. Then he'd glance up. He'd see Drew at the end of the hall, leaning nonchalantly against Julian's locker, trying not to grin. Somehow, magically, here in Alpha Habitat, here in Julian's school, like nothing had ever happened. Julian's face would break into an incredulous grin, and they'd light right out of there. If they were careful, they could be free for days, and Drew had enough nutra to last them both.

The maglev came to a feather-light stop. The doors slid open. Drew stood and shouldered his backpack, waiting for his turn to disembark like a civilized human being. He glared at the suited asshole already trotting across the terminal toward the citadel entrance. Just like his dad. Drew wondered if his parents had noticed he was gone yet.

He had exited the maglev car when the first scream pierced the air. A brief shriek of fear, coming from the citadel side. He'd been moving to the opposite exit doors and craned his head to glance behind him. There was only a mass of milling people. The shriek came again, and now the cry was multiplied. A burst of movement, people were running from those far doors. A scream of pain, sharp, and the entire crowd recoiled.

Drew stood frozen as figures bumped past him, some rushing forward to help, others drawing away. For a crazy second, he was sure this was his parents, coming to get him, somehow he'd been found already, and they were pissed. Then another shriek of pain, ragged, and the entire mass of people was shoving him outward, away from the rising screams.

“Abominations!” he heard. Impossible. He’d just come from the docks, everything was fine, how would Abominations have gotten here? Some idiot was sparking a panic. Drew put his head down and pushed toward the outer doors, his heart rising into his throat. He had to get out before the stampede.

A tide of bodies swelled behind him, smashed him into the people in front, crushed the breath out of him. The animal smell of terror in the air now and a chorus of death screams and panic. He couldn’t draw breath to join in.

Some undertow pulled the pressure from his back, and he gasped for air. Up ahead someone fell down, long hair trailing, and the mass of humanity flowed into the gap. Finally movement, people bursting through the exit doors. Something yanked hard on Drew’s backpack, wrenched him back. Fear pumping through his veins, Drew twisted to free an arm. He caught a glimpse of the suited asshole, now sans briefcase, grabbing Drew’s backpack, pulling himself forward. His mouth was warped in a distended howl, his eyes begged for help, and gripping his other wrist was a coiled, seething form that was almost human. It could be human, if it didn’t move like an agent of death, cold and predatory and wet with blood. Drew slipped free of the backpack and plunged forward.

The crowd trampled the fallen, now two, now three, broken sobs coming from below. Drew gasped and pushed, and now he was on someone’s chest, and he wanted to reach down to pull them up but not nearly as much as he wanted to flee from that thing, oh god, how was this happening? Where were the security bots?

And then he was through the doors and sprinting blindly down the street. Maybe he should stop and assess, but his legs just kept pumping, and all he could think was “my parents are going to kill me so hard when they catch up with me.”

Julian sat in a cinema theater, feet on the seat, chin resting on his knees, staring at a corner of the screen from the second row. The theater was empty save for a couple kissing enthusiastically in the far back. The film was another dramatization of the attack on Uranus’s Oberon Station, when humanity first learned of the Abominations, seven years after Neptune had gone dark. This one was an action piece, all flashy gun battles and explosive decompressions. Very little focus on the horror when people realized that their lost loved ones were coming back—not physically dead, but mindless, murderous husks. No mention of the scores who killed themselves rather than give another weapon to the enemy, another body turned on its former family. Julian let the vibrations and explosions wash over him, the flaring colors dazzling his periphery.

Eventually the action ended, the plot wrapped up, and the credits rolled. Julian sat at the bottom of the scroll, unmoving. He would have stayed straight into the next showing, immersing himself in cycle after cycle of flashing color and sound, but the damned house lights came up and broke the trance. He was ejected from the high-contrast pocket universe into dulled reality. He sighed and stood up. The couple in the back row had left at some point earlier, probably to go fuck.

No signs of life in the hallway outside. Only the sounds of his own feet treading over the carpet, his own breath in the air. He ambled down the distended corridor. Maybe he’d get a soda. Maybe he’d just leave. The familiar buzz of refrigeration units grew closer, the faintest scent of popcorn before the air circulation units whisked it away. He emerged into an empty lobby.

Julian hesitated. The ceiling soared up from where he stood, the lobby a cavernous maw bridging two worlds. The false sunlight slanted in through the vast glass façade of the entrance. Those who worked this netherland had left their posts. It was his domain for now. He eyed the security cameras, decided screw it, and grabbed a hot dog from behind the concessions counter. He took it

with him as he crossed back into the halls, settled into a darkened theater, and ate in one corner. He read for an hour, but his attention kept drifting. The fake meat sat uneasy in his stomach.

Finally he stood and pushed his way back into the halls. Nothing. His steps a bit faster, he walked back to the lobby. Not too fast. Didn't want to look like an idiot.

Still the lobby stood abandoned.

Julian ducked into the bathroom, purely because he had to pee. He walked to the stall at the far end, glancing into each one he passed. All empty. The sound of his urine stream splashing into the toilet filled the room with echoes.

Back in the lobby he immediately made for the front doors. Holding his breath he pushed against one, nearly jumped when it clicked open. He was unreasonably relieved to have been let out. He shivered once in the sun, looked around.

The world outside was as abandoned as the one within. The silence was much deeper, without any mechanical hum to offset it. Where was everyone? The shadows looked tilted somehow, and Julian realized the sun hadn't changed position since he'd first reentered the lobby an hour ago. The bright glow had stopped progressing down the station sunline; it looked to be frozen at just past midday.

Suddenly Julian wanted to be home, behind walls. He pulled out his phone to page a transport. It warbled a low, negatory tone at him. No connection. The network was jammed. Which was ludicrous. It was impossible to jam the network; the available bandwidth was astronomical. And yet the system was so flooded his meager request couldn't get through. Julian stuffed the phone back into his pocket and hurried down the street.

The next building down was a restaurant, Jimmy Rocket's, with an outdoor patio in front. Half-empty plates lay at abandoned tables. A single chair lay on the ground as if knocked aside. The restaurant's front door gaped open, a soft chime looping every few moments to alert the staff that an obstruction prevented it from closing. A pair of feet.

Julian rushed over. Finally another human. A man, sprawled on his side, spilled into the Jimmy Rocket's. Something glistened just under his chin. Julian rolled him onto his back and his breath caught. It was the guy from the theater, the one who'd been making out in the back row. The left side of his neck was mangled, from just below his ear down to his clavicle, like it'd been torn into by an animal. It didn't bleed though; it glistened with a grey sheen that rippled and pulsed. For half a second, Julian's entire body locked up as realization hit. Then he shot to his feet. Too late. Before he could move, the man's hand snapped out, viperlike, and clamped over his ankle. His eyes remained closed, but now a low groan escaped from his lips.

"Help!" Julian yelled, yanking and jerking away, but the hand held. "Shit!" He brought up his free foot and stomped viciously on the hand, over and over, wrist, fingers, whatever. He felt a crunch. Foot up, and down, again, again. "Let go!" Skin came off the knuckles, red smears spread across his shoe. The grip was iron, might as well have been a manacle. The man's eyes flickered, another moan rose from him.

Julian whipped his backpack off, tore it open, yanked out the captive-bolt pistol. He held it like a knife, muzzle down, his hand clenched on the safety release. All he had to do was smack the muzzle on something and the contact trigger would trip, fire the piercing bolt. He stood paralyzed. He couldn't just stab it into the guy's chest. Right? You don't just go around stabbing the shit out of people! Even if they were mostly Abomination by now. This wasn't a damn movie. Maybe he could pierce through the wrist? It might not let go. He might have to keep piercing several times,

until enough bones were shattered and enough meat severed that he could rip free...

The Abomination's eyes flared open, and it lunged at him, jaws wide, hand pulling. Julian screamed and swung down. The pistol connected with something hard and discharged, bucking in his hand. It flew from his fingers as the Abomination's head dropped and cracked against the floor. A neat hole in the back of the skull pumped thick red liquid, sparkling with grey glitter. The Abomination jerked, its hands spasmed, Julian's ankle came free.

He jumped back, fell to the floor, kicking away frantically. The body twitched, making guttural noises. It just kept twitching, slopping tainted blood around it. It wouldn't stop. Vision blurring, Julian spotted the pistol, scooped it up, and scrambled to his feet. The tears came hot, and why was he crying, heroes don't cry. He choked on sobs as he stumbled out of Jimmy Rocket's. Clutching the pistol to his chest, he fled down the street.

This is one thought.

An Old Proverb:

The Greeks gifted the Trojans with a huge horse statue, which secretly held soldiers within it. The soldiers snuck out after dark, threw open the city gates, and Troy fell that night. Thus spoke Ken Thompson: "You can't trust code you did not totally create yourself."

An Old Wives' Admonition:

If you see an injured nestling struggling on the ground, do not pick it up. You may think you are doing it a favor by bandaging its wounds, splinting its broken bones, and feeding it. Perhaps you don't have those skills, but you think it is a kindness to at least return it to the safety of its nest. In fact, you are killing that bird as surely as if you had twisted its neck with your two hands.

When you handle that helpless chick, the oils of your hands rub into its down. Tiny flakes of your skin, loose hair and eyelashes, and even particulates from your exhaled breath, dust the bird's feathers. You are marking it as a thing that has been altered. When the adult birds you scared away next return, they will find an alien creature in their nest. An uncanny doppelganger, which looks like a baby bird, but with the stink of man all over it. They will attack this monster. It will be torn and pierced and finally flung from the nest, and if it is lucky it will die quickly.

You wanted to ease the bird's suffering, but your actions corrupted it into something no other bird would recognize as one of their own anymore. Do not interfere with nature. The bird will live or die on its own—as a bird, and not as a human's artifact, for birds have heeded the words of Ken Thompson.

An Old Soldier's Tale:

During the American-Vietnamese conflict, the invading Americans wished to demonstrate their compassion to the Vietnamese people. Many parts of Vietnam were isolated and poor, and had no access to modern medicine. As the invaders moved through these areas, they immunized children as a show of benevolence. These children would be protected for the rest of their lives against endemic diseases that could cripple, blind, and even kill. The cost to the Americans was so small it didn't even amount to a rounding error in their budget.

After the American troops moved on, the Vietnamese parents amputated the injected arm of each child that had been violated in this way. They spent countless horrified nights holding their

children, comforting them, always watching them for signs of corruption. Had they cut out the agent soon enough? Had they stopped it before it could spread further?

The Americans had attempted to destroy the Vietnamese by attacking their children, morphing them into changelings that looked the same, but were twisted on the inside.

Their values would be altered to fit the Americans' values, their thoughts unfathomable, their passions dark and alien. There was no price that would not be paid to prevent that. Corruption of their essence was the vilest attack.

Do not interfere with others' culture. The Vietnamese will live or die on their own—as Vietnamese, and not as America's artifacts, for humans too have heeded the words of Ken Thompson.

The Reality:

None of these stories are factually true. Their power is not in their factuality, but in the truth they speak to the listener. You are fragile. You can be corrupted. The greater a gift is, the more likely it is being used to breach your defenses. To seduce your values. To change you.

So the greatest gift of all—to rescue an entire people from hell, to lift them from suffering and death into eternal excitement and joy—is feared to be the greatest corruption of all. It cannot be given unopposed.

In such a case, the prohibition against violence is lifted. And when we're doing it for your own good, the only question left is how can it be done most effectively, most quickly, with a minimum of lives lost during the struggle?

Julian crouched in his school's darkened computer lab, huddled under a table, his back pressed against a wall. Drew lay crumpled on the floor, breathing shallowly, his face weakly illuminated by the glow of nearby monitors. Two days ago, Drew had slipped out of his parents' house and stowed away on the crossstation maglev, making his way back to Julian. The Abominations struck that morning, but he'd holed up at Julian's house, where Julian had eventually returned, exhausted and terrified. They'd decided to make their way to the sector's citadel, the most likely place to find help. They hadn't made it very far. Now, covered in sweat and splattered with blood, Drew lay unconscious, arm bound in a make-shift splint. For all Julian knew, they could be the only living humans left. Very soon there would be one less of them.

Julian had learned a lot in the last forty hours. He'd learned that when the glow of the sunline freezes in place, that section of the line begins to burn out. The exterior environment was bathed in intense red light, fading ever so slowly in a drawn out days-long sunset. He'd learned that finding a computer lab with a dedicated optic-line to the citadel didn't mean shit if there was no one on the other end to pick up their calls. He'd learned that trying to set a broken arm in a high school computer lab without anesthetic could cause someone to pass out from the pain. He'd learned that fighting for your life, and your friend's, could be exhilarating in the most unimaginable way. He learned that Abominations didn't feel pain and wouldn't slow down unless you punctured the heart or brain, and that wasn't as easy as movies made it out to be. Using three charges of the pistol was too much to kill one Abomination. It was too long within biting range.

He'd learned that the nanites started sharpening your teeth almost immediately. Well before they caused you to pass out and really went to work on modifying you into a killing, infecting machine. He could slice up his tongue right now by passing it over his teeth. He gazed at the ragged bite in his forearm, slowly weeping blood that now sparkled with grey glitter.

It wouldn't be long now. He turned the pistol over in his hands, watching the reflected monitor light play off its surfaces, shining red and wet at the end. It looked like this was the way he'd die after all. There'd be four charges left for Drew, assuming it had been fully charged when his brother had found it.

He gripped the cylinder and tried to steady his breathing. He wasn't sure why. There wasn't any need for his breathing to be steady when he did this.

The computer chirped to acknowledge a connection made. A moment of surprise. He'd forgotten they'd set it to retry continuously. A flare of joy, a moment of stupid, irrational hope, even though he knew he was beyond help.

"Who's there?" The voice from the computer demanded. Julian gasped in recognition.

"Dad??" He spun to the monitor, saw his father looking back at him from the other side.

"Julian? You survived the first wave?"

"Yeah, what are you doing in the citadel?" The words were out before Julian registered the tone of his father's voice. Not joy—confusion. It stabbed through him. Stupid. What had he expected from his father? Sobs of relief?

"Are you alright?" This time concern in his father's voice. That was something.

"Ah . . ." Julian blinked quickly, eyes burning. "No. I guess this is good-bye. I . . ." For a moment he wanted to say something that would bite, that would cut his father down to the bone. But at this point, it seemed needlessly cruel. Instead he held up his arm for the camera. "I didn't make it."

His father's face twitched, twisted into concern. Maybe it was an optical artifact, but Julian could have sworn he saw the start of a smile flicker over his dad's lips before he shut it down.

"It's okay, don't worry. I'll talk you through this." His dad's voice was calm, almost soothing.

"No, it's not." Julian's face grew bitter. "I'm not stupid. And Drew is here, Dad, passed out. I have to end it before I turn." He held up the captive-bolt pistol.

"Julian, no!" And for the first time, real emotion in his father's voice. Fear. His face stricken. "You can't destroy your brain before the process is finished!"

Julian gaped at him. Had he heard that right? Before he could unscramble his thoughts, a door opened behind his father, and a harried woman in a rumpled pantsuit rushed into view.

"Dr. Higgins!" she cried, "Thank god you're here. What's the delay?" The woman scurried to a workstation just at the edge of the camera's field of view. "The council is ready, why isn't the reactor going critical—wait. This isn't right. These settings are backward."

Julian saw the grim resignation draw over his father's eyes, saw his face harden. His father's hand reached down to retrieve something from below the camera's sight, and he turned to the woman.

"DAD, NO!" Julian yelled, unheeded. Julian's father raised his hands and sharp explosive bangs sounded from the speakers, four times quickly. A glimpse of red spray from the woman's body, and she fell to the floor in a heap. Her clothes grew dark, and a wet rasp came from her form. Julian watched helplessly.

"Don't worry, I can save her," his father announced as he put down the gun. Julian realized he was

speaking to a lunatic. He saw him reach into a coat pocket and pull out a metal canister and a syringe. He filled the syringe from the canister, and while on the computer screen it looked like nothing more than grey liquid, Julian knew if he was there in person he'd see it shimmering and sparkling, alive and hungry. His father stepped over to the gasping body and plunged the needle into her neck. "The Abominations don't kill anyone," his father spoke as he worked. "Every single brain is scanned. When the first stage of assimilation is complete, your mind melds with the collective consciousness of the Host." He withdrew the syringe and returned it to his pocket. "The bodies don't matter after that. They're used to bring as many people as possible into the fold." Julian shrunk away from the monitor as his father stood up.

"You killed her." His brain wouldn't output anything else. The body grew still.

"She'll thank me, Julian. You will too."

"No. You're . . . working with them? Why?"

"The Heavenly Host is glorious, Julian. You become one with everyone. There is no more fear, or pain. Only acceptance, only love."

"Bullshit." His head swam. "Why don't they just invite us in then? Why the attacks?" Why was he talking? Any moment he'd pass out, and then his body would kill Drew. Nothing else mattered any more.

His father sighed. "They do. But communication is difficult, and the Host doesn't think like we do. The shared mind thinks in waves, in worlds. A single thought would take minutes to convey, they're more like webs of concepts. Entire narratives. And inevitably some people would say no. You don't let a child choose if she should undergo chemotherapy or not, regardless of how much she fears it. The parent knows better. Allowing refusal is . . . it's more than stupid, it's downright immoral. Only a monster would let their child die."

Julian eyed the pistol in his hand. It felt heavier. He was fading. He should do it now. Except, maybe he didn't have to die? It was so sweet to think maybe they had nothing to fear. Putting a spike in his brain would be self-annihilation just when he was on the edge of never being alone. Finally free. Nothing could separate him from Drew again. If it was true.

"You can't possibly know this." His voice came high and quiet, wavering.

His father leaned forward, looking directly into the camera, looking into Julian's eyes across the miles. They burned with a new fire. "The hell I can't. I was born on Neptune. I was part of the Host. But they rejected me. I destabilized the group mind somehow. When the rescue crews found me on Oberon they thought I was a survivor, but I was left there after the Host withdrew. Dumped back into a single body. God, the silence, all alone in my mind! There was nothing! The Universe was empty! I almost went mad.

"Your mother saved me. I promised I would save her in return, and everyone I loved. But I was too slow. I failed her. And I failed Kelvin." His voice broke, and he took a deep, shaking breath. "But you, Julian—you are finally safe!" he reached out to the monitor with his palms up. "Don't you dare leave me now! Today we're finally free of this hell!"

Julian looked to Drew. His friend's eyes jerked restlessly beneath his eyelids, his breath came rapid. Lying there, clothes torn, flecked with blood droplets, he reminded Julian of the woman his father had just gunned down. He looked back to the monitor, at his father's fevered, begging eyes. If Drew died, it would be his father's fault. Every death on the station over the last two days was his father's fault. The man was a mass murderer.

Julian realized his hands and feet were going numb. This must be it. It was time.

“Fuck you for thinking you can decide for us.”

“Julian—”

But Julian flipped the computer off. Then he reached back and yanked out the power cord. His vision grew dark around the edges, he watched his hands acting through a dim tunnel. He gripped the captive-bolt pistol in one hand and slammed it down on the computer, watched it jump with the piercing impact. Three charges left. Did it again. Two charges. Bang! One. Bang! None... probably. He smashed it down again to make sure, but the cylinder didn't kick in his hand, and the bolt didn't discharge. It was drained. He loosened his grip and let the harmless metal tube fall to the floor.

He wasn't ready to die just yet.

“Let's see how full of shit you really are,” he whispered to the blank screen. His vision went dark, the floor tilted, and then he was falling, and falling, and falling...

Let me tell you a story.

The lancet fluke's proper name is *Dicrocoelium dendriticum*. It is a liver worm. During the adult stage of its life, it lives in the livers of sheep and cattle. This story is not about the sheep or cattle.

When the adult lancet fluke reproduces, it releases its eggs into the feces of its host. After they are excreted, a snail will consume the feces, and in the process swallow the fluke eggs. The snail serves as the host of the larval form of the lancet fluke. This story is not about the snail either.

Once the parasite reaches its adolescent stage, it moves to the respiratory tissue of the snail, and is ejected within balls of slime. Ants consume these slime balls and serve as the parasite's host during its adolescent stage. Now the parasite has a problem. In order to reach its adult stage and reproduce, it must find its way back into a sheep's liver. Ants do not excrete anything that livestock eat. But this story isn't about the lancet fluke either.

When the lancet fluke is within an ant, it migrates to the ant's brain. During the day, the ant continues to go about its anty business as normal. When the day grows old, and night draws its cloak over the sky, a surge of melancholy washes over the ant. It cannot return home with its brothers. It does not belong among them. It is different somehow. As we all know, the loneliness you feel in a crowd is the worst loneliness of all. So the ant goes walking, wandering out into the field. It does not know what it seeks.

If it comes across a healthy blade of grass, the ant will climb to the top of it. It will look out over the field, and gaze up into the shimmering night sky, and feel some small solace in that vast expanse. Surely something out there, in the unbearable distance, must feel as it does. Somewhere it has kin. It clamps itself to the top of the grass and stays there for the entire night, bathing in moonlight.

When day breaks, the ant climbs down and rejoins its brethren in normal ant labor. It goes through the motions, but nothing seems important anymore. The world feels false. So every night it returns to the top of its blade of grass, and waits, and hopes.

The common misconception is that the lancet fluke is controlling the ant's body from its residence in the brain, controlling it like a skilled puppet-master. Some people go so far as to call them

“zombie ants,” as if they had no will of their own. Nothing could be further from the truth. A lancet fluke is microscopic and lacks any physical mechanism that would support cognition or comprehension. Its every movement is a preprogrammed reflexive reaction, responding to external circumstances. Even if it could control an ant, it wouldn’t be able to understand concepts like “blades of grass” or “physical movements.” All it can do is give its ant a desire that cannot be ignored. A desire that can never be fulfilled.

This story is about the ant. Because in the end, the ant wins. Every other ant is content to grind along in the cycle of work and reproduction. Only this ant was discontent with life, driven to seek out more. That final night when the livestock comes grazing through, the little ant’s eyes will be opened, and finally he will see. As the massive lips come down all around him, and impossibly large teeth crush the landscape to pulp, he will exult in the realization that he’s finally found the vast being who can fully understand him. The ground quakes as the green pillars of the world are torn from the Earth, shredded and masticated far above. His legs tremble as he feels the presence of so much unconditional love. He sees the face of God. It draws near, to elevate such an unworthy spirit, to accept him into the Heavenly Body. As the mouth descends, debris and saliva crashing down in advent, euphoria overtakes the ant, and he weeps in ecstasy.

Glory! Glory and Hallelujah! I am coming home!

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