The Uncertainty Principle
by seekingferret

Summary

Only the tough will claw their way to the afterlife: the Ouroboros Society motto.

Since 1945, scientists and historians have debated the uncertain case of Werner Heisenberg and the German Uranium Club. In the 1930s, American and German physicists were collaborating to reveal the secrets of the atom. Then their nations became enemies and over the course of a short period of time, the scientists cut off contact with each other. It was as if a group of students had been studying together for a test, sharing tips, sharing answers, sharing complaints about their overbearing teacher, and then it was time for the test. Their teacher eyed them warily to make sure that none of them passed any notes or whispered any answers to each other. The students were on their own, for the duration of the test. At last, the teacher said the magic words: Pencils down. Which students had succeeded and which had failed?

When the Allies declared pencils down on Dr. Heisenberg, they were shocked to discover he had nothing to show for it. No bomb, no nuclear reactor, no substantial uranium enrichment equipment, no conceptual breakthroughs. It was a great mystery. Had scientific progress simply left him behind, or had he deliberately sabotaged the Uranium Club to prevent the Nazis from gaining access to the bomb?

Most of the historians Marie had read thought it was probably a little bit of both. In the absence of the collaborative spirit of the pre-war era, in the wake of the brain drain caused by the Nazi decrees against German-Jewish physicists, the German research program had fallen short, but perhaps the priorities of the program hadn't been as razor-focused on the engineering problems of building a bomb as the American program. Before the Spartan Wars, Marie had liked that answer, because it was so ambiguous it let her believe whatever she wanted about Werner Heisenberg. But down in the bunker, she knew that one way or the other, the real Heisenberg had had to make a choice.
She didn't think Adam understood that. He bore the stresses of the bunker with a doubt she found reassuring. She had no room for it. She had no margin for error, either. The stakes of the game were way too high for indecision or uncertainty.

She remembered the closest she'd come to screwing up with an agony she could almost taste. The day before the First Days, she'd had a twenty four hour pass. She returned to the bunker with a packet of five crossword puzzle books, picked up from the grocery store on post. It wasn't too out of the ordinary for her, but Adam had teased her in his usual way about her anticipating a particularly long shift this time. She'd made the mistake of reacting, snapping at him in her anxiety to deny his teasing in a way that did catch him off guard. She'd passed it off as a menstrual problem, and she thought he'd believed her. Probably.

When the United States had set up its nuclear missile arsenals during the Cold War, they'd established a protocol for the operators stuck in the silos, charged with remaining vigilant and prepared to deploy the bombs. Two people were required to activate the missile. Two passcodes, never to be shared, two redundant guidance paths entered into the system, two keys to be turned with the left hand and two to be turned with the right hand. Never mind that a sufficiently determined tinkerer could circumvent these security measures in their sleep. The rule of two was never actually about security. It was about building community. You had to trust the person who was sharing the burden of nuclear apocalypse with you. Otherwise you'd go insane.

The first time she'd made love to Adam, he'd noticed the tattoo wrapped completely around her upper arm, just a few inches below her shoulder. "It's ouroboros," she'd explained. "The worldsnake. World without end. Amen." He'd looked puzzled, so she'd told him that she'd gotten the same tattoo with six friends the summer she turned twenty, after her sophomore year of college. It was a way to declare their unity in the face of the world. Nothing would ever tear them apart. It was all true, except she'd never gone to college. And the world had an end.

Did she love him? She spent a lot of time thinking about that, since she had a lot of time. It didn't really matter, since she could tell he was growing tempted. Soon she'd be out of time to ponder the uncertainty. But she'd always tried to hold herself to the Delphic maxim, "know thyself," as a matter of mental discipline. Only the tough will claw their way to the afterlife: the Ouroboros Society motto.

She loved his hard, coiled arms and his soft, gentle fingers. She loved his impish enthusiasm, his unfettered romanticism. She loved that he could be cheerful without being an optimist. She loved that he could keep a conversation going even when she was too petered out to contribute, when all she wanted to do was listen to the sound of his voice.

But she also loved that he had never asked her how she'd ended up serving in this bunker, and surely that couldn't be the basis for real love? There had to be some other word for it, some other way to describe the man who made your heart skip a beat as you seduced him closer and closer to the big red button, and the keys and the passcodes and the guidance paths that went along with it. There weren't an awful lot of dictionaries in the bunker.

But perhaps it was true that a part of her wanted him to resist, wanted him to be that hero of epic lore. Odysseus resisting the Sirens. Aeneas resisting Dido. Was it just selfishness, some unpurified part of her mind that didn't feel comfortable playing Delilah? Or was it deeper than that? Was there a part of her that wanted him to reject her advances because it would mean that he cared enough about her to save the world?

But most likely, the answer didn't matter. When the time came, Adam and Marie would stand side by side, turn their keys, and press that big red button. The Ouroboros Society would triumph and perhaps some time in the future, historians would debate whether Marie had been a willing
participant in the temptation of Adam. And for all their debates, they would have to settle for uncertainty.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!