

The Story of Calvus
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Part One

I

Calvus got up. Where? Dust. Dusty cell, grimy cell. Some square feet, not large, not small. Dark. Calvus looked down. Most was black, eyes hadn't adjusted. Bed where he gotten up from, white sheets without light, a body. Calvus' body. Thin? Cold. Eyes starting to adjust. Head throbbing a little.

There was a door made of wood at the other end, hazy, metal latches and other adornments. Piles of black something in places and corners on the floor. No windows. Calvus felt a moment of disorientation. Gone to bed some time long ago, couldn't remember. On a journey someplace. Very important, all. A robe covered him. Still cold. Drab light filtering from somewhere. Prompted memory.

Gods and clowns. I am a clown and I'm with her. She knows exactly what she's doing, knows about the clowns, the gods, the new ideas and the plan. She's tuned in, she's a being without type, a waiting interpreter and responder overflowing with certainty. It's beautiful. Strains of music. Oh--the music! Feels like precise adjustments, paradigm shifts, vertigo of a death dive into exhilarating truth. Like a generator turning, things getting started up, moving faster and faster. That was the appeal, that's why I stuck around for it--and I wanted to be someone like her, too, and the music was a such a part of that . . .

Getting awake now, really rather better now. Calvus shivered. He needed food, too, though he wasn't the least bit thirsty. He tried to stand up, but his right leg faltered, and he slid back onto the bed. The sheets were tattered, seemed old. The bed's length covered about two-thirds of the cell's width. Calvus looked out the other way, across the bed's short side, but the cell contained mostly nothing there. Still much dust, and inscrutable pilings, but it all had a perfectly resigned air of meaninglessness. Where was the light from? Calvus didn't know. The door, straight out across from the bed's short side, had an elaborate lock connected to spirals of non-functional metallic pomp wreathing its outer side. The ceiling might as well have been a wall.

He was wearing a cloak. He had gone to sleep in a cloak, and then he was here, and

now. His name was Calvus--last name? The lack was oddly unfazing--and he had come here with very specific instructions. There was something he should be doing.

Calvus turned his torso toward the front of the bed. No pillows there. He pulled the sheets back, but there was nothing there to see. The half-light diminished the discoloration of a few oblong patches on the mattress.

A wristwatch!

He had taken it off to sleep. He strapped it on, with the motion as the most familiar thing in the world, comforting and nostalgic. *He usually did this at least once a day.* There was a button to the upper-right which made the face glow. A sickly green cone pierced through the room. It branded the present moment with the neon-lite stamp of reality. The present moment was **11:17**.

II

The door. There wasn't any other choice. Calvus had gotten down on his hands and knees to be sure. He'd stirred up long-dormant dust off the floor, and spawned a rippling series of coughing fits, as he examined the cell. He still couldn't see what the dark material covering the ground was. Its aroma wasn't repulsive: reminiscent of bitter coffee. It sifted through his hands. The walls were cold and partially covered in wet moss.

Calvus approached the door resignedly. A big circle of metal contained the lock and shot off multiplying metal strands that formed a clamshell pattern above and below it. He gave it a shove.

Creak.

It hadn't been locked. Ahead was dark. Calvus cupped his ear toward the door. No sound. It was colder out there than it was in the cell, and Calvus wrapped his cloak tighter. He put a foot forward and struck the floor of a corridor.

By the wristwatch's light, Calvus could see that the corridor was taller but less wide than the cell. Same stone walls, with the moss present if less aggressive. After about fifteen paces, the corridor terminated in a short hallway extending a few feet to either side. There were four doors along the far wall of that corridor, and a low, empty table along the left

branch.

After inspecting the table, Calvus brought his watch-light close to the leftmost door. There was a large plate in the same grayish metal that had made up the cell's lock. It bore an inscription: *Dept. of Sonopoetic and Lexopoetic Analysis.*

The second door: *Katherine Medlow, Associate Director, Nontypical Destructives and Ethics Dept.*

The third: *Harmonotyping.*

The young doctor had slick, long hair and the certainty of a gung-ho technologist. "We call this an invariant approximation device. We used to call it a harmonotyper, before we appreciated certain subtleties of invariance." Having stayed up for the past forty-eight hours, Calvus didn't understand a word. Mostly forgotten terminology jostled pointlessly in his head. There was no way he could clear up any of this for himself before he'd gotten some sleep.

"What that means," the doctor said, his voice moving along with the sustained intensity of a motor, "is that we want to find the underlying strand that makes you Calvus, no matter where, when or even what you are. We've got to get you processed through here in five minutes, so my instructions for interpreting the results will be brief. You won't recognize your invariants. No one ever does, because we never stop to notice them. Memorize everything the machine says. Usual procedure is to repeat it at each meal, and upon waking and going to bed, for at least the next six weeks. And even if what it says isn't true, it's still true."

The doctor shrugged with his eyebrows, as if to deny that made any more sense to him than it had to Calvus. He motioned vigorously toward a stocky metal chair in the middle of the little, clinical room. Calvus sat down. A computer screen floated in front of him, attached by thin rods to the chair's right arm.

"Put your palms on the ends of the armrests," said the doctor, sounding like he was reciting a legal document.

Calvus complied. The doctor turned towards the door.

"I've got lots to do," he said with a grin. "Make sure you're out of here in"--he checked his

watch--"three minutes."

He let the door slam behind him. Calvus sat. The screen was black. Calvus gazed idly at the plaster walls and the fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

The chair emitted a purr. A friendly sound, somehow. Calvus looked down, and saw that the screen was no longer blank.

0000 You will never marry.

Another purr.

0001 Learn to truly enjoy water.

Another.

0002 No one has ever told you how many eyes you have.

0003 Invariant report is done.

Calvus stood up and walked out the door. It slammed loudly behind him.

III

Calvus pushed at the door slightly, and it gave. In a vigorous flourish, arrays of dust scurried away from the door-frame. The hinges gave off a funny, outsized creaking noise.

The contents of the room were predictable: sterile walls made bluish under the ubiquitous shadow-light of god-knows-what, boxing in a metal chair with a little attached screen. Given the precocious dust colonies that the door had housed, the room itself was eerily clean. A bare wooden nightstand was nestled in the far-right corner, for what reason Calvus could only guess.

He glanced over at the nightstand. It was out-of-place, that was for sure. Indeed, it was an insolent gesture, a violation of a rule that, however arbitrary, should be followed for a number of very good reasons--for yes, *A Harmonotyping parlor should consist of, and only of, 1) a rectangular enclosure no more than 10m high, capable of containing between six and twelve persons, and 2) . . .* Calvus blinked. He felt a lot more lucid since the early moments back in the cell, but that only made the gaps in his cognition stand out in high relief. He knew that this place was familiar to him, but he didn't know why. It was definitely shoddy somehow, an inferior copy of some ideal, not least because of that irritating nightstand. But what the basis for this

judgment was, Calvus didn't know.

A whimsical little inspiration sent him over to the nightstand. He wouldn't stand for this aberration! It had no right to be there--whether or not he had any inkling *why*--and he wanted to inspect the offender, determine the full extent of its aesthetic transgression. There were two austere drawers, clustered toward the top, with handles that were streamlined simplifications of the one on Calvus' cell. Calvus opened the top one, in a playfully aggressive gesture. Nestled between balls of dust was a crumpled piece of paper. Calvus picked it up, unravelled it, coughed twice, and looked.

increasing, more and more. Even the children, bless their hearts, are starting to realize that something is wrong. I've turned down my instantiation to 16 min/day out of caution, but it makes life terribly difficult. Everything is consumed in practical matters. Organizing the household in a few clipped minutes, checking on the health and well-being of the engineers, and then a precious few moments, if I'm lucky, to spend with Emmeline. Such an astounding child! She has playing some kind of musical invention on the organ lately. It's half an hour long and she's in fits that I can't be around to hear the whole thing at once. My dreamlike days are filled with reiterations of the same clever themes-- always a few are familiar, and a few unfamiliar.

2/12/96

Down to ten min/day. They say this is the strongest threat we've had from Inverness since the days right before home was shot up. Among the engineers, morale is low and drinking is heavy. I wake up and stumble through their den, and then huddle drowsily on the rug in the corner of the organ room with Emmeline. She's traded in her melodies for dry sobs.

2/16/96

G. came by today and asked what Emmeline was all stirred up

about. I constructed some nonsense about nightmares, a phase, an inevitable part of such a unique childhood . . . G. nodded but I could tell he wasn't convinced. The engineers want to meet him. They don't want to do much else anymore. The last few times I went into the den they were playing some kind of dice game and writing scores over their design notes. Even their supply of

The back of the paper was blank. One unassuming bit, though, had started a flutter in his chest. He looked back. Where was it?--where was--oh. There. Inverness.

Yeah. Calvus felt a miniature steeling of the heart. An affirmative feeling. A good old place. Inverness. Something worth his effort. A home country.

He was Calvus, a man with a cloak and a digital watch, a man of Inverness. Still a man of Inverness, yes, no matter where he was now, or why. It was comforting, to have something at all outside himself.

The nightstand, anyway, was still unacceptable. Unacceptable, Calvus now thought, by the noble values of Inverness! *Whatever those are*, he added. A self-parodical urge led him almost to dash the nightstand to the floor--for the glory of Inverness--but he restrained himself. The contents of the top drawer had been interesting enough, and he didn't want to destroy the contents of the bottom one, if they happened to be fragile.

He opened the drawer. It looked fragile indeed, for it was made of flesh. It was, if his eyes were honest, a human being smaller than Calvus had thought possible. It was wearing what would have been an unremarkable blue evening gown if it had not been about five inches in height. It--she--was either dead or asleep. She had brown hair and a round, collected face. She looked familiar, somehow.

Her arm began to stir. The motion had an animate character. For a moment, one of Calvus' unexamined assumptions was undermined: was he in fact a giant, in a world where five inches of height was the norm? But a brief consideration of the room's size, combined with vague but seemingly reliable memories, reassured him. She blinked once or twice, and propped herself up drowsily, and mumbled something unintelligible. A familiar voice, too.

It was a surprisingly loud, firm voice, from that kind of a frame.

"Yes, undoubtedly."

Syllables pronounced with an unexpected clarity, a kind of relish for their arrangement. There was a lull.

"But, certainly . . ."

Her eyes flitted open for a moment, closed, then opened again. She looked up at him. A measure-long rest of inactivity, and then a narrowing of the eyes, in recognition.

"Why in the hell are you here?" She spoke with the same steady pace. There was something like anger there, but dampened by a hint of satisfaction.

"I don't know." It was a honest answer, Calvus figured.

"Calvus? Are you really Calvus?"

"Yeah." At least he knew properly what his name was. *Calvus, with a cloak, of Inverness*--the identity calcified further.

"And you don't know why you're here again. Inverness. Oh, Inverness." She tilted her head back in a small delirious laugh. Hearing the word from someone else brought back that vigorous feeling, for a moment.

"What is this place?" Calvus asked.

Her head stayed tilted back for an interval, precariously long. Abruptly, she snapped out of the reverie. "Seriously? You don't know?" There was that syllabic relish again. "What have they done with you? And *why*?" She gazed off to the left, pleased with her bewilderment, as she had been with her anger a moment earlier.

"Yeah, I don't know."

"Oh. That's . . . funny." She seemed distracted, giving a rote response. She was still gazing off toward the corner of the drawer, towards the blank edge of the wooden tray she sat in. "It was . . . truly unconscionable, not really justified in the first place, just a travesty."

"Come again?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I drifted off."

Calvus compulsively, uselessly checked his watch. **11:29.**

"Well, see." She chuckled. "I guess, if I have to explain. See, your name is Calvus. And you're from Inverness. A ludicrous place. To be avoided at all costs." She pronounced

it like a dictionary definition. "Dedicated to rubbish. Basically. Some of us tried to do a little better, in this world. We were *against* rubbish. It's a weak stand, but it's a stand. We were trying."

There was something there. A few images flashed across his mind. *In perturbatione pervenire. Gods and clowns.*

"And, well. It's, um, so complicated. I can't remember it so well now. It's indistinct."

She tossed herself about a bit, swayed, and managed to stand up. At full height, she didn't reach the top of the drawer--must have made sleeping in there more pleasant.

"Look, let me show you. It'll be easier. Pick me up."

He cautiously brought his hand forward. The hanging sleeve of his cloak swung out before his arm. She recoiled, with what looked like sincere alarm.

"Sorry."

She collected herself and said nothing. He gently pressed her by the sides of her arms and raised her from the drawer.

"On the shoulder, if you will. It's the easiest."

He set her down on his right shoulder, paused, and closed the door.

"It's at that end of the hall." In his peripheral vision, she gestured toward his right. Calvus stepped out into the hall. A slight chill hit him, along with an unpleasant smell of moss. He was approving more and more of her decision to sleep in the Harmonotyping room, nightstand or no.

The door at the end of the hall was like all the others. The plate said *Atrial Plaza*.

Calvus stepped in, looked up, and gasped. The transition was very nearly ridiculous. The room was far larger than the block he'd been in. It looked like the central square of a city. Inexplicably, a breeze passed his face. There were definitely walls and a ceiling, but it took him a moment to realize this, because they were covered with a huge, unbroken painting. As in a theater, a set of balconies jutted out of the walls at regular vertical intervals. There were at least six or seven of them, their sides covered with continuations of the painting and the walls behind them lined with doors.

He looked up to see what looked like a genuine skylight, looking up into a bluish sky,

a sunrise tone. The whole room, indeed, looked like it was lit by the start of a sunrise. In the painting, stylized rays of light streamed away from the skylight in all directions. As they radiated across the rest of the ceiling, they progressively dissolved into a field of geometric patterns, then into a strange circular image of a sky, blue in some places and starry in others. It was inhabited by what looked angels with enormous, brightly colored wings, by small indistinct blimps and by funny twisting metal structures that wreathed the inner geometric realm, almost lovingly.

"Look over there." She made a full-body motion toward the right. Calvus looked over. There weren't any balconies along that side of the room, now that he looked at it. There was--

That.

The edges of the wall retained the style of the rest of the mural, depicting some indiscernibly intricate scene. Across most of the wall, though, was something else. It was in roughly the same style, and showed a good amount of effort, but it had clearly been painted in after the mural was complete. The edges didn't blend right, and its domineering scale ruined the tidy composition. It was a mythical sort of monster, with an almost spherical torso crowned by three distinct heads. What Calvus noticed, though, were the eyes. They were everywhere. Sprouting on stalks from the heads, from the arms. Each head, in a display of restraint, had only two eyes above its leering mouth, but they sprouted their *own* eyes from their whites and irises. Its fingertips gazed about dazedly. Its feet looked up at the torso expectantly. Eyes everywhere.

No one has ever told you how many eyes you have.

It was all starting to come back to him.

V

Calvus was in a loop. Day and night had lost relevance, and sleep was a necessary tedium. The loop went like this: A fuzzy, buzzing pain in the head. This was the sign to start over. Then memorization. At the final end of exhaustion, when all original thought would spiral off into wasteful tangents, he'd found that a good dose of rote could wake him up. After a few hours, he'd move to a straightforward task. Engineering, design, tinkering.

He had projects upon projects, in diverse states of completion. Fix a problem here, scribble down an idea there. A streamlined break for food. Dispatching responsibilities. Then to the exciting bits. An hour practicing rhetoric and Main-spoken languages. Practice with small-scale temporal stitching and destructives. Adding to the skill set: musical instruments, firearms, vocal impersonation. Right about now would be some kind of breakdown or self-doubt incursion, inevitable and even comforting. Finally, he'd do some real work, usually an instantiation in sub-Main. He'd come home either exhausted or trembling in fear, then pour over some performance charts, and read and tinker until the miasma clouded his head and he knew it was time to memorize again.

This was all necessary--it was his duty, he thought. Anything less would be failure. He heard the headlines about Unil day after day, loop after loop. What they were doing was threatening Calvus, and Inverness, and in doing so they threatened his deepest convictions. But beyond that, the real crime was what it all meant for Main. Inverness was a *shepherd* of Main, and in the last analysis Unil was too, like it or not. Violating their duty to Main went beyond mere moral transgression to intellectual disgrace.

And that was how Calvus found himself administering a block of sub-Main, at some dizzy hour near the end of a cycle. This block mapped to a gnarled swath of New England, with a few random patches of old England included as if part of some linguistic mixup. He'd done this so many times now that he didn't even feel the powerful vertigo that usually came with instantiating in sub-Main, the feel of an inexplicably different context, of old ideas snapping into new functions they weren't perfectly fitted for. There was a rowdy scuffle between his senses as usual, as the same blurred notions bounced from sight to touch to smell, ostracized by each sense in turn. Then everything settled down, and he got a picture of the block. The communities here were tranquil and staid. Little dramatic potential there. He took a random step and ended up peering down through the roof of someone's house, which was conveniently removed for his inspection. The surrounding neighborhood spread around it in a flat, cartoonish way, reduced to commingled snippets of scenery and character. Typical sub-sight.

Why can't my parents respect me? thought the house's only inhabitant. Not in those words, of course. The level of abstraction fuzzed in and out: *and I don't understand why they*

can't respect Billy either, I mean he loves his knives and guns and talks about them so much but he's not a bad person . . . zoom-out . . . and my sole life-aspiration for the past three years has been to form a band and it's just not going to happen . . . zoom-in . . . I love tortoises. Calvus stepped back from the house--not worth his time.

The whole town, a little place somewhere in Massachusetts, flattened out before him. *Shelly doesn't know why she's getting her master's degree. Shelly is putting off washing the dishes. Charles just found a one-dollar bill. Charles believes that gerrymandering plays an unappreciated role in Massachusetts politics, and is having trouble deciding whether he really loves Sarah or whether he only thinks so because his job is distracting him from the issue.* Jeremy passes under a streetlight at dusk, notices that it's just been turned on, turns back to gaze at the cone of light. *Jeremy is six years old and believes that the Wizard Kids will solve the world's problems by the time he's grown up.*

Calvus smiled. He was beginning to find the quiet differences of opinion under the surface of the psychological consensus. Any place, no matter how normal, could be shaken up a little if you knew where the fault lines were. He could see the goals of the younger generation diverge from those of their employers, as plain as on a graph. He could feel the instabilities underpinning stable lives, and taste the understated gestures that expressed them. He reached an arm a bit to the side and grasped something. *Marcus is a community college professor of economic history. Marcus has a vegan son and a son who's student body vice president and smokes pot three times a week. Catherine left Marcus a few years ago because he never wanted to leave the house except to go to work.* Perfect.

Now there was an art to this. The Unilists called it bargaining with the mortals. Inverness folk likened it to pulling off a magic trick. With a gentle motion, Calvus made a slight tear in the sub-Main barrier and reached through. The barrier was smooth and tore off at the touch, like rice paper. The psychosocial plasma of Main shuddered a little at his advance. *Marcus is reading the New York Times. Ryan is listening with headphones to a man with a guitar sing about lost time.* Calvus twitched. *Ryan is wondering where, in China, his compact disk player was made.* A stronger twitch was met with some friction. *Ryan has always wanted to go to a good college. Ryan's grades in his sophomore year of high school have been excellent, particularly in English and mathematics!* He was getting the shape of Ryan now, understanding the kid a little more uniquely. It brought a droplet of empathy, as it always did. *Ryan is wondering how high-tier*

schools spend their revenue. Calvus was getting a little deeper into it all, now. Marcus is eating a bag of cashews. Ryan can no longer tolerate complicity in a corporate society and is going to live off the land away from home. Marcus will not understand. Marcus will only have Steve left. A new layer of folds was emerging in the structure, bringing its own level of resistance. Steve is shooting the shit on the phone. Steve believes that the invisible hand of the marketplace is beneficent, generally. Steve used to have a stuffed teddy bear named Larry, when he was three. Marcus is thinking, man, sometimes we don't appreciate those little pleasures, like a cup of coffee in the evening. It was working out well, with few complaints. Steve is desiring a lifestyle. Steve has acne on his right cheek that has always frustrated him. Ryan is reading about local edible plant life. Ryan had a girlfriend in eighth grade and it didn't end well. Ryan has a funny urge to go take her away with him. Marcus is asking Steve where he is going in life. Steve asks Marcus where he has gone in life. And that was it. It had been a bit rough, Calvus judged, but compassionate enough. Compassion was Inverness' first informal rule in these matters.

Now, for the last stroke. He pulled his hand back out of the barrier. The tear deformed into a picture of pebbles. A big pile of pebbles at first. *Steve has drunk too much tonight, and alone, too. Marcus' students wonder about his exposition of certain points.* The pebbles diminished to a trickle, and then a spaced-out line. *Ryan's college girlfriend meets a wealthy history major instead and marries him in their junior year. Marcus meets James in a therapist's office, and they strike up a friendship.* He formed each pebble into a stone loop, perfectly self-causing. It was an easy temporal stitch job. When everything was consistent, he stepped back and admired the still-functioning town and the nearly invisible break in the barrier. Nice work.

Calvus stepped back. The town receded into a little reductionistic speck of light, surrounded by dreary rural wastes for a ways in each direction. Their low population density revealed itself in the limp mix of a cool temperature and blurred loneliness. He glanced around and caught glimpses of bustling cities and fragile, appetizing belief systems. There was much to be done!

A voice from over his left shoulder. At first, he thought it was some particularly lucid Main denizen, but that impression vanished when the first word was done.

"Calvus?"

"Yeah?"

"How's it going?" It was Maxwell, his boss.

"Pretty well. I've already done one job, looking for the next one."

"Nice. I just wanted to tell you that we've cancelled your assignments for tomorrow. There's a special assignment in Main at 11 AM. Fifth century B.C. We thought you'd be a good candidate."

In Main. Calvus had never been there before. This had come out of nowhere: Calvus had only started serious work a few months ago, and Main assignments were usually given to people with two years experience, minimum.

"You can opt out if you want, of course."

"No, of course not. This is a privilege."

"That's the spirit."

"Don't we already have enough guys for Main, though? I've got plenty to do as it is."

Maxwell chuckled. "Things are changing, quickly. They've been getting more aggressive. Some of the other guys have been seen timeline changes on a hour-by-hour basis. Listen, get out of sub-Main. I'll tell you all about it."

Val looked at his hand and scrunched up his face. He grabbed a card, hesitated, then put it down on the board. *Childhood Romantic Obsession*, read a title on the top, followed by a hefty small-print block of rule text. "Chairman Mao steps down from his government position to pursue his childhood sweetheart, who he's spotted in a picture in a newspaper. The populace of the United Chinese-American Socialist Democratic Republic is up in arms."

Calvus grinned. He flicked through his hand and took out a card. *Verse*. "Can I have that in an elegiac couplet? No stuttering."

Val sighed, pushed back his chair, and hefted his stocky body out of it. He spread his arms wide, a dramatic gesture that looked somehow both ridiculous and appropriate from Val's stubby, leather-jacketed arms.

"Clippings from dailies show Zedong his boyhood love and he steps down." Val, index fingers extended, swung out the beat. "Populace thinks he's insane; revolution . . . oh, dammit."

Calvus glanced at a page of dense notes. "We agreed earlier that that'll cost you a two-point penalty in hawaiian shirt-related domains, plus additional deductions in early blues-

rock contexts."

"Fair enough," said Val, sitting down. Calvus drew another card from the huge, ragged stack to his left. He checked his watch. "Main in three hours."

"That'll be something, anyway. I've heard the first time you go there, you feel something you've never felt before. Like something clicks."

"I'm a little scared, honestly. Just being in sub-Main scares the hell out of me."

Val gazed at his cards for a moment, then looked up. "Dude, I feel like I never see you. I mean, this is our first time playing in weeks. How much time have you been spending in sub-Main, anyway?"

"A few hours a day. Plenty of other stuff to do, though. I tell you, Unil's getting worse and worse."

Val snorted. "That's what I used to think. That's what everyone thinks. I dunno, I think it's just a way to get us to care. I've never been big on the whole workaholic thing. You start seeing Unilists every time you turn around, you start skipping games of Inverness Chess, and pretty soon you're just like them."

"No, it's different this time. Max said so. They're using a lot of destructives on the late fifth century B.C."

"What the hell do they think they're doing?" Val squinted.

"Damned if I know."

Calvus looked over his hand again. Then, inevitably, to his watch. Once he started checking it within the same five-minute interval, he knew he was stressed out. He sighed. Three hours.

VI

"Is something wrong, Calvus?" Her lack of inflection was merciless.

Some scrappy bit of his mind launched a doomed effort to distract him. "That's who you are, aren't you? The little Greek instigator? Slipping your ideological hemlock into his conversations?"

She emitted a knowing little laugh. "Yes, Calvus, that is where we first met."

There was a pause, as that optimistic bit of Calvus' psyche threw up its arms at last,

and he remembered the *next* time they'd met.

"Man, I really killed a lot of you guys, didn't I?" It was an unbearably limp thing to say, but he had to say something.

"You did! Really more than one might have thought necessary, in fact. Though I suppose that's how you people always did things. We would have been much more humane, I assure you."

"They told me I had to do it. That you guys had gone beyond the pale, and Main was going to go out forever if I didn't do it."

"You had to? Funny notion, 'had to.' I wouldn't have thought Inverness folk would be so keen about it."

A kernel of indignation formed somewhere in Calvus' chest, but it immediately dissipated. This was no time to defend Inverness.

"What happened after that? I can't remember anything."

"Oh, lots, presumably. I holed myself up in that cabinet until the shooting stopped, and I've been talking with my old buddies in Greece since then. You know, it's funny, being back in this body . . ."

"I mean, I really guess I should apologize," Calvus said, in one speedy, awkward breath. "All I was thinking back then was how bad I thought Unil was, all these apocalyptic visions and these notions that I had to do something fast. I'm not sure I was in my right mind, really, at the time. I mean, honestly--"

She laughed the same laugh again. And she was right: he sounded ridiculous. He didn't really know what he was babbling about, anyway. Was he sorry? The question was absurd. Yes, he was sorry indeed! *I'm sorry I committed mass murder. Genocide on your people was not very nice, I agree. Can I buy you a box of chocolates, or something?*

"I can tell you haven't gotten yourself all sorted out, yet." She patted the side of his neck with a tiny hand, a substitute for a condescending pat on the head. "There's no need to apologize for your crime when you're still sorting out precisely what it was."

But that was the problem--there was need to apologize, as much as there was need for anything else at all. Now it was really coming back, in a heady flow. He was here for that very reason, to apologize. He was here, in Unil, on the order of Max, his boss from

Inverness--the decadent wealth of detail!--to heal old wounds, to admit that he had committed the worst moral aberration in history and to express the goodwill and penitence of his people.

"I committed the worst moral aberration in history," he said. "I am here to express the goodwill and penitence of my people."

"Oh." She paused, having nothing witty whatsoever to say to that. "So that's why you're here."

"Yeah. That's why I'm here." He hadn't been sure of it himself until he'd said it.

"Well, there's someone you should see, then. The queen."

"Unil has a *queen*? How? Aren't absolute rulers only possible in Main?"

"Well, you can see that for yourself."

She nudged him toward a door at ground level, set into the wall furthest from where they had entered. As he walked, he glanced over at the thing with the eyes. For some reason, it had only a hollow, rote impact--a preliminary shudder followed, unexpectedly, by a calm and lonely apathy. So he looked up, toward the whole mural's central conceit. His eyes fixed on an angel, its face turned away, that had a huge set of yellowish wings. At the edges, the wings faded slowly, indistinctly, into a darker yellow and then into the dusk-like blue of the sky against which they stood. And, though Calvus couldn't fathom why, that image frightened him where the eye-beast hadn't. Those wings had power, they had gravitas, and above all a sense of seriousness. *You are about to be judged*, they said to Calvus, *and you will receive no special treatment*. He felt like a little, wayward child, pinned against that monstrously cold twilight.

The door booted them, unceremoniously, into an austere and damp stone corridor like the one he'd entered from. There were doors at regular intervals along the sides, which he ignored. That odd ambient light was a bit brighter here, but he still couldn't see more than a few feet down the corridor. After a few minutes of walking, she poked his neck. "To the right."

He turned, and gave the door a push, unable to make out the handle distinctly. It gave, and he stepped through. He was in a box of a room, a little taller than he was and wide

enough to fit maybe three of him at once. He looked up, and traced a dim, reddish cone of light to a heat lamp hanging haphazardly from the ceiling. The room would have been wider if it hadn't have been for a bench, which protruded from the walls at about his hip level and was covered in shadowy piles of wire and metal. A nice, reliable notion, dating back to the days of his zealous loop, entered his head. He knew what this was. It was dirty, in disrepair, and in a different style than he was used to, but he'd know the basic principle anywhere.

"An instantiation booth?"

"That it is. We're going to Main. Hanover, 1703 A.D."

"The queen doesn't live in Unil?"

"No." He waited for elaboration, but none came.

He felt a few slight tuggings in various parts of his body, as if there were thin cords being pulled taught inside him. It was a familiar feeling, and it meant was that she, or someone, had started the instantiation. The tuggings increased, the strings jostled a bit, and seemed to slide back and forth along invisible pulleys. A second of physical disorientation, a limp and momentary adrenaline rush, and oh, it was good to be back, back in the whole masochistic swing of it all, relishing each grumbling report from the body as a new badge of service to some indistinct cause--

And he was there all at once, fully. It really and truly startled him, not so much the "Main feeling" of disturbing, off-kilter immediacy, but the simple intensity of the thing before him, the worryingly deep browns, the unrestrained chill. He was in a waiting room or antechamber, cozy if cold, about fifteen feet in width. The ceiling extended just above his head. Most of the room was filled by a large grand piano, on top of a green rug. Calvus had a moment of confusion: *Has the piano even been invented yet?* He decided not to ask about it.

He felt a funny lightness on his right shoulder. She was gone. He looked around. To his left was a large wooden sliding door, covering most of a wall. And on the right side of the far wall was a little staircase, leading upward, with lit candles mounted on either side of it. Sitting on the bottom step was a lad--the best word for him, without a doubt--with a shaggy halo of brown hair and an odd, epicene look. He raised a hand in an abbreviated wave.

"I find a male form works best for most parts of Main," he said. Calvus nodded.

"So where's the queen?" he asked, breathlessly. Opening his mouth made him realize that he hadn't fully recovered from the instantiation. His lips were annoyingly numb, and his inner ear was sending him distressed telegrams.

"Oh, she'll be in in a moment. She knows we're here."

"Mind if I play something?"

"Go ahead." The lad shrugged.

The instantiation had gotten Calvus back in the mood for music. Back in the days of the loop, music had followed him everywhere. He'd needed an continual stream to keep working. The genre and origin didn't matter; what mattered was that whenever he got lonely, whenever some idea would not wedge itself into his head no matter how hard he jammed it, he could perk up his ears and catch a few distinct, unpredictable inflections. The central role of listening had led him inevitably to composition, where he could form just the sort of inflections that best reached his soul when mired in tedium. He sat at the bench, raised his hands promptly above the keys in a fake-pompous flourish, and began to play. A pleasant little machine of a piece, composed without incident during one of his most harmonious loop-cycles.

That drew the queen, apparently. Half a minute into the piece, someone slid the big screen door open. Calvus turned to look, still playing, and saw a more dimly lit, longer room. From it adolescent girl stepped in, maybe twelve or thirteen, with a bluish gown and straight dark hair that went halfway down her neck.

"Did you compose this piece yourself?" she sneered in German.

Calvus spent a few moments just trying to figure out her meaning. Normally that sentence would have been said in admiration, but not with her tone. She had put a belittling emphasis on the word "yourself," as if talking to a child.

"Yes, I did." Best not to get off to a bad start with the queen of Unil. Though if this pubescent waif was indeed the leader of Unil, what *could* he be sure of, anymore?

"Composed early in childhood, I presume. Might I ask, however, why you would choose to play such an embarrassing bit of juvenilia at your evidently mature age?"

Calvus didn't know what to say, and kept playing.

"Though, you know"--she paused for a split second--"the melodies can be predicted

from the chord progression through a mapping based on hyperbolic coordinates. That is an amusing choice." Calvus had no idea what she was talking about.

The lad spoke up. "It's me. Periboea."

"Oh, Peri! I hope things have been well for you since the attack. And who is this musical wunderkind?"

"That's Calvus. He's back, and bursting with apologies."

The lad looked pleased with himself. The girl stepped back a bit, and blinked. The cheerful arrogance of a moment ago had dissolved. She was surprised, that was for sure, but there was something in those very startled eyes, an awareness and tenacity, that made Calvus' whole body tremble. His hands faltered, and the piece stopped abruptly.

"Calvus. I am Emmeline Leibniz, queen of Unil." *Of course you are.*

It was definitely her. That signature expression in the eyes had sealed it. And yet there was something undeniably wrong about her, or if not her, the fact that she was here, and the way it was all arranged. There was something repulsive about her small stature, her delicate age. That familiar ferocity in the eyes was comically out of proportion with her small, skinny frame. Emaciated Em. This wasn't how he remembered her from--from where? After the loop, after the murders? She was a child again. Emmeline the epsilon. Em as an em-dash.

It had all, he was realizing, changed so much since the good days. The days when everything was in order and everything made sense and, genocidal terrorist or not, he had felt an indecent amount of hope for all things.

VII

The loop had grown stranger. Calvus made discoveries on daily basis. He made so many little advances. His thought became partitioned into fitting increments. Everything was splayed out in front of him, diagrammed in terms of its value to Inverness, as easy as seeing. Living started to be a bit like sub-sight. Sub-sight was like dreaming.

And then of course there was that day. A proper day it was, in fact, with an old-fashioned cup of coffee in the dining hall and a game of Inverness chess. Val cornered him

with an ingenious use of the *Inbreeding* card and they both cracked up.

"I've gotta go," said Calvus. "See you in the evening, probably."

Val patted him on the back. "Good luck."

So he stepped into the instantiation booth.

He had held the instantiation point in his mind so many times, over the past few loops, that the real thing felt wrong. The loop had a way of doing this. He had scoured maps of Unil for the best possible location, and after he'd found it, he'd gone over it in his head in every spare moment--mostly to fill his mind with a ready-made image and avoid dangerous stray thoughts. A little cell-like room, of unremarkable size, with an old long bed filling much of its area. There was that wooden door at the end, and those old piles of *cibi* lining all the walls. Unilists lived such inhuman lives. There were thousands of these cell-rooms, and all as stony and cold and half-lit, though the inhabited ones tended to have decorations. The *cibi* was an all-purpose nutrition and stimulation substance: they'd have real food when feeling indulgent, but most of the time, any hungry or tired Unilist would stoop to the floor and gobble a bit of that dark-colored powder, which was strewn across every floor in Unil. Like an animal. Disgusting.

So, as he had imagined would happen, the cell and the bed and the piled *cibi* looked a bit too real, like an overblown artist's rendition. The stone blocks in the walls had dents and cracks he hadn't imagined, and they seemed almost offensive. Calvus had had a dark, billowing cloak designed for today--it was dramatic, impactful, maybe a little excessive, and wasn't that the Inverness way?--and from it he took his proudest work. It was modeled, for aesthetic effect, on Main's most stylish killer, the twentieth century handgun. Inside was a mechanism that did something no one had ever thought possible, which was killing people. Everyone in Main died eventually, of course, and many of them were killed. But Main was all laid out like a book that could be edited at will. Spend an afternoon in sub-Main practicing supernatural group therapy on murderer and victim; you'll avert a death and be back in time for dinner. Calvus' treasure was different because it could kill people, *real* people, ones that couldn't be revised back into existence, except by some hypothetical higher editors whose existence would be beyond Calvus' apprehension forever. Calvus turned it at his face for a

moment, just for fun. *I could be dead! All the future thoughts and deeds that would go out, just like that!* That kind of power in a cute plastic case smaller than his foot. He was beginning to see what made everyone in Main so consistently crazy.

They always left these doors unlocked, for some chilly communal purpose Calvus didn't fully understand. He stepped up to it, admired the intricate but useless lock, and pushed it open with one efficient tap. He could barely see the end of the corridor, and the darkness gave him a pang of instinctive fear. He reminded himself that as long as he had the treasure, there was nothing they could do to him. He checked his watch. **10:47**. A few more nervous thoughts floated into his head, and the loop's routines, by now perfected, jumped to the rescue with ready-made replacements. *You will never marry. Learn to truly enjoy water. No one has ever told you how many eyes you have.* He tossed them around a few more times, in different combinations, until he felt ready to walk down the hall.

There was a short metal table near the end of the corridor. He thought he heard a sound coming from beneath it, a high-pitched scuffle. He took a few steps away in instinctual fear, and found himself in front of a door. A big metal plate on the door said *Katherine Medlow, Associate Director, Nontypical Destructives and Ethics Dept.* What an oxymoron.

Sometime back in the near-mythical early days, when the rivalry between Inverness and Unil was still new, some Promethean engineer like Calvus had come up with destructives. While Main could be sculpted and reformed to any megalomaniac's satisfaction, one couldn't just tear it apart and slap it back together, not with normal means. There was always a negotiation process. People had to stay in character, for the most part, and the uglier discontinuities in logic had to be massaged and painted over. Destructives were a way of getting around that. With skilled use of a destructive, one could get the silliest contrivances and the most unconvincing chains of causation into Main without any Main-dweller raising an eyebrow. Even back then, with the conflict still fresh, Inverness and Unil both realized that destructives, for the most part, went against their basic principles. Whatever their differences, they both wanted a world, not a mess. Ideologically offensive literature was one thing; sub-literate nonsense was another.

But now, inside the room, reading at her spartan desk under this infuriating constant dusk, was this woman whose job it was consider the ethics of destructives.

"So what *are* the ethics of non-typical destructives?" Calvus asked.

"What," she said limply. It wasn't even a question. She was more confused than afraid, and seemed to have no idea what his gun was. That was disappointing.

"My name is Calvus. I am from Inverness."

"How," she said.

"So how does it feel, to be trashing Main? How about that war you started the other day? Did that feel good?"

She was fiddling with something under her desk. "Security is coming," she said, in an oddly casual voice.

There was something off about the whole thing. Why was he talking to her? Did he really want to know her opinions? But then he couldn't just shoot now. That would be meaningless. She wouldn't even know what she'd done wrong.

But that wasn't why he was here, Calvus reminded himself. Cape and gun notwithstanding, he wasn't in Unil for show. He was in Unil--the nice little grooves of the thought were engraved in his mind now, right next to *You will never marry*--because Unil had refused all requests to stop its rampant use of destructives on Main. He was here stop the crimes, and the only way to do that was to get rid of their source.

After Katherine Medlow, it got much easier. He had left her room, wondering at how the little jolts of adrenaline in his chest mirrored the spindly vertical threads of blood that fell from the wound above her eyebrow. He had seen this so many times in sub-Main that the jolts were fully unexpected. The course of his routine duties sent him into contact with death after death, from every perspective at once, with brief flashes of the protagonist's blank mind, the relatives' grief, the cold and stiff body. So why did this tame snapshot, taken from a comfortable distance and tastefully abbreviated, send him into such a tizzy? But although the symmetry of blood--hers dripping, his pumping--was eerie, it was overpowered by the adolescent rush of something new and not quite understood. By shooting Medlow in the forehead, he had *changed something*. It was a feeling, not of power, but of a dizzy powerlessness. The certainty of mental persistence, and of a stately stalemate with Unil, was breaking down. The brute logic of physical consequences, which could pack oblivion into a

plastic trinket, now held him under its purview as just another few-foot toy. He was a willing consort of the fates.

He rode that rush through a door at the end of the hall and into the Atrial Plaza to the Engineering Center. It was night in Unil--the right time for his adolescent vigor--and so the room was lit by a dull orangeish glow coming from nowhere in particular. The skylight showed a few stars, and the mural around it was too dim to make out. When he stepped through the door, a group of men in drab grey suits swiveled their heads. There were about ten of them, and they had been standing a few feet in front of Calvus in a roughly circular formation, talking intently about something. One of them pointed in Calvus' direction and said something unintelligible. Then the whole pack walked, at a brisk pace, toward him. The man who had gestured made unwavering, and unnerving, eye contact.

"Your attire does not fit decorum, brother."

"What?"

The man's inflection was blank and unchanging. "Your attire does not fit decorum. You are required by section twelve-point-oh-four of the contract code to explain any breach of decorum."

Calvus raised the handgun. For a moment, the man's expression didn't change. Then his eyebrows twitched a bit, in an expression of confusion. It looked like he didn't know what it was.

Calvus jumped back. The room was bathed in a brilliant reddish-white light, under which the men's skin turned an eerie, milky color. After a few moments, the light disappeared, and an authoritative-sounding female voice boomed out across the room from some unseen loudspeaker.

"Destructive use has been observed in the peripheral artery of the ventral wing. Evacuate the ventral wing. Detain any individual who lacks decorum."

One of the men, a bulky bald fellow with bushy eyebrows, stepped out of the flock and grabbed Calvus' right arm, the one holding the gun. He twisted Calvus' wrist and grabbed his elbow. He didn't seem to take any more notice of the gun than the first man had. Calvus grunted in pain. Then he pulled the trigger.

The man's grip slackened immediately, and he fell to the ground. The rest of the flock

glanced down at him, still more confused than anything. He pointed the gun at the man who seemed to be the leader, and fired. The man crumpled.

Another flash of red light. The voice spoke up again, with the same lines. The flock stepped back, slowly and hesitantly, and spread out to the periphery of the room. Calvus held out his right arm and swung the gun around a bit, pointing it at each man in turn. There was a sound behind him and to his right. He turned to see a figure, silhouetted in the dim light, step into the room from a door on the ground floor. The figure rushed forward again, seemed to see Calvus, and stopped.

Then a bunch of doors were opening at once. People were rushing and stopping and looking around and the light was flashing and the voice was talking and Calvus just kept swinging the gun around and that seemed to be working. The people were men and women and children in grey suits or dark red dresses. They formed into a sort of ring, pressed close to the edges of the room, and stared at Calvus.

The adolescent vigor was gone now. Calvus felt blank. This moment had been planned for months in advance, and it was not his place to pass judgment on it now.

He spoke up as loudly as he could. "I am here to demonstrate the weapons capabilities of Inverness. From now, whenever you use destructives, we will retaliate in kind. You cannot--"

There was a flash of red, and he was cut off. "Destructive use has been observed in the peripheral artery of the ventral wing. . . ."

There was something tremendously *funny* about that self-serious voice. Calvus imagined the woman it belonged to, crouching in the corner of a room, making pronouncements while gulping down handfuls of *cibi*. Calvus laughed out loud: the idea of *cibi* seemed somehow like a deconstruction of the whole idea of Unil. This vast city laid out in a pedantically organized grid, filled with pricks in suits and prissy little women, all fastidious in their "decorum" and yet--they ate off the ground, like dogs! They were too absurd, too contradictory to be quite real.

He was about to speak up again when the fucking light went back on and the voice was at it again. He could just *see* the little pauses to eat between sentences, the greedy motions, the little dark spots on her otherwise pristine clothes where she'd stained them

with *cibi* grounds.

Oh, to hell with his whole speech--he'd made his point. He'd somehow imagined that there would be something nobler about this moment, but instead he felt he was part of a farce, making a serious point to an uncomprehending audience of puffed-up dullards. So he shot someone. The woman buckled backwards and collapsed. Then he shot the man standing next to her. Another man stared at him, wide-eyed, and then rushed up to the two bodies. So Calvus shot him too.

The light was going off and the prim lady was telling him about ventral wings and he kept shooting the gun and laughing, just laughing his head off, and then instead of the red flashes there was a constant white light revealing dazzlingly red streaks of blood along the floor, and illuminating a really gorgeous mural on the wall. To his left there was a painting of a rolling green field at sunset, with purplish mountains rising in the background, except he couldn't see some of the mountains because a man in a suit was walking toward him, so he shot him, and then he could see all the mountains, which were very nicely arranged and suggested a very pleasant sort of tranquility. Then he couldn't see them anymore because there was a big bright figure moving toward him, moving through the air in a rhythmic way, up and down and up again, and as far as he could tell it looked like a person with big white wings. He couldn't help but laugh--people with wings, now there was an even less dignified image than the woman with her *cibi*--and he shot the bird-person, but they kept on coming, and then there were two of them, and then three, and then four.

"Please drop the destructive instantiator, sir," said the first bird-person.

Calvus pulled the trigger again and again and eventually the first bird-person fell down, and the others looked at the body lying prone on the floor and then looked at each other. There was a sharp pain in Calvus' left leg, and he looked down to see a tiny person, half a foot tall, clinging to his leg. She was biting into his flesh. He recognized her. It was the little bitch he'd met in Athens. He kicked his leg back and forth, and she fell off and ran away. His leg was starting to feel numb for some reason. He looked up into the eyes of a bird-woman--with a beak instead of a mouth, no less! A farce! The bird-woman hovered above him. The edges of her beak glistened like plastic under the gaudy white light that flooded the room. Her beak opened, and all of a sudden Calvus stumbled backwards and

put his head in his hands. She was making a noise, a violent scratchy screeching, and it made his body shake as if he had a fever, it filled his ears not just with pain but with a tremendous, maddening captivating *itch* . . .

He stumbled back, step after step. His steps were precarious because of the shaking, and he had a desperate urge to scratch his ears but for some reason he was sure that that was a very bad idea. He couldn't gauge the passage of time. At some point, maybe seconds or minutes later, he looked up. He still shook and hurt, but it wasn't as bad. He looked around and saw that some people were getting out through the doors, so he shot them. The bird-woman flapped her wings and got closer, which put Calvus into quite a state of distress. He cast his gaze about in desperation, looking for anything to focus on, anything to distract him from his body. He was impressed with the number of bodies on the ground. There must have been hundreds. Most of the bodies looked oddly unfamiliar; Calvus wondered if he had even been looking at them when he killed them. There was a clearing in the bodies, for some reason, on the right side of the room, in a section lacking the balconies that jutted out from the rest of the wall. The mural there depicted something complex and hard to parse, a landscape dotted with villages that resolved, in the foreground, into a whole forest of human figures engaged in a variety of archetypical interactions. Near the middle there were two men engaged in some sort of diplomacy, and standing in front of them was a very small person who was real, not painted. She was a little girl, maybe six or seven years old, in a pretty yellowish frock. She was staring at him, not in horror, but with a sort of piercing intensity--

--an intensity that made the bird-woman's screech seem distant, not so much by salving the pain as rendering it somehow immensely *boring*--

--and before he knew it he was walking over to that side of the room, ignoring the heavy feeling of wing-beats behind him, ignoring the Unilists rushing out of the room in droves. She was only about half his height. She had black hair that went down just past her shoulders, and blue eyes. She looked up at him, and her eyes seemed to suggest a broadness of perception, a thoroughness of consideration. *With those eyes, as a being without type, she gathers all events under her purview.* The room felt very silent and all of the other people in it, living or dead, seemed very far away. The girl raised her right hand, as if to shake hands. The motion was swift and efficient, and somehow reminded Calvus of the utilitarian demeanor of his

loop.

She spoke up, in voice that was high, but firm and clear, and surprisingly loud. "If you wish, we can go away from all this."

Calvus felt a spark of some unidentifiable feeling rise within his chest, something he'd tried to stamp out of himself during the loop. It was an excited recognition. An acknowledgment of something familiar. And that voice was surely familiar from somewhere--more familiar, somehow, than Val or Max or anyone he knew in Inverness--more familiar even than his body, which he suddenly felt as an oddly shaped burden. He wanted to throw it away.

"You are tired and unsure of yourself," she said, looking up at him expectantly. "The world grinds down your resolve. We can go somewhere else. From there we can restart the world."

He extended his hand and placed it in hers. There was a moment in which nothing happened. He felt her hand, and felt a birdlike talon scratch his back. His ears still rang with the same screeching, and he was unpleasantly aware of how the bright light in the room made every surface look oily and unclean. He saw something flicker in the corner of his eye. He looked over at one of the figures in the mural. The strokes of paint were *unraveling*, or perhaps the opposite--they were getting longer, closing on themselves, making everything darker and more intricate. He looked back at the girl, whose face seemed to contain much more detail than it had a moment before, with lines of shading crisscrossing in every direction. Then he was falling, except he wasn't: it was just vertigo of the sort he often got when instantiating in Main, except this was stronger and more disorienting. He looked around, confused, as everything seemed to close upon itself. Everything he could see was so much *more* than it had been a moment ago. This was a headier thing than he had ever felt when instantiating. It was overwhelming, and had a taste of oblivion at the edges. Each surface was trying to tell him something, but he couldn't listen because he was dizzy, *so* dizzy, and then everything burst forth and all suggestions were carried out and the room dissolved in a blaze of impermissible presence, until all he could feel was a warm thing in his right hand.

Part Two

(TO BE CONTINUED)