

Siege Therapy
By Steve Thorn

Jake had spent enough time in the small village for its peculiar smells to become familiar. He became aware of the acerbic smell of green wood burning seconds before the alarm was raised.

“We are under attack.” The Herald had seemingly materialized next to him just as the klaxon sounded.

Jake acknowledged the Herald with a nod. “What are we facing?”

“The north wall is under attack by a small force of eight men. They began with flaming arrows and now they are hacking at it with hand axes.”

The walls had been constructed from saplings bound together. The young wood would smoke more than burn so the attackers had opted to punch a hole through the rawhide bindings.

“That’s all?” Jake shrugged. “Send out the Red force, they need more experience. Give them blood.”

“Very good, sir.” The Herald departed to distribute his master’s orders.

Jake returned to the armor he had been inspecting previous to the attack. The armor was pretty archaic, using badly tanned leather to hold badly formed plates of steel together. There were many dangerous and noticeable gaps that were obvious once the armor was donned. The helmets were made of tough hide held into a crude shape by metal bands.

Jake tittered over the weaknesses of the newly created armor. At least it would be more protective than the hard leather armor his infantry currently wore. He reached over and picked up a shield. The shields were more reliable to protect his troops than the armor. They were constructed

of layers of small wooden blocks and each layer of blocks was disjointed from its former, adding an unprecedented strength to them.

He was hefting the shield around to feel its weight when the Herald reappeared.

“The attackers have been destroyed. Red force was unscathed.”

“Good. Send out a couple scouts to see what route they traveled. Send a few serfs to fix what they can of the wall.”

The Herald noticed the shield. “Are you content with the new armor?”

Jake set down the shield and picked up the sparse leggings without answering. The Herald took the silence as a command to assign the scouts and left.

Jake threw the leggings down in disgust and looked at the nervous blacksmith. “Very well,” he sighed. “Distribute them to the troops. Make sure everyone capable of using a shield is assigned one.”

Jake deeply inhaled the metallic tang of steel beaten into submission and stepped out into the gloom. It was mid-morning but the valley in which his little village resided was sodden with low laying fog. There were never sunny days in this area, a continual mist seemed to permeate the area leaving the world in an abysmal half-light that muted colors and dulled the senses.

He headed over towards the newly built stables. Not long ago, some serfs looking for a new quarry from which to mine rock had come across a herd of wild horses that lived in the steppe where the northern valley began. They had come back with news of their find and Jake had doubled their numbers so that half could round up the horses and the others could continue the search for a new quarry. The horses were good news but he still needed rock to fortify his village.

As he walked through the viscous mud of the village he could look north and see the smoldering section of wall being repaired as two peasants were busy adding new lashings to the saplings. South of him was the Town Hall where most of his command decisions were made and the more mundane tasks of his role were performed. Behind him to the east, past the blacksmith's work shop, were the large fields of farmland tended to by his veteran farmers and beyond that a deep forest that was slowly being thinned by his lumber efforts.

As he approached the freshly built paddock and stables he could see the trainer had one of the horses out, walking it through exercises. Jake came up quietly, leaning on the fence, watching the training in progress.

The horses had been broken by the trainer weeks ago and now they were going through a more thoughtful and less savage training. He had a leader rope attached to the horse's bit and was walking it around in a large figure-eight.

The trainer saw Jake and gave him a nod of acknowledgement. He looped the rope around his hands taking in the slack, bringing the horse in closer to him. He winked at Jake and gave a low whistle. A few children came running out of the stables and into the paddock grass, spreading out and leaping up onto the fence in various positions.

The children started whooping and hollering and the horse started to protest to the noise by attempting to rear up. The trainer pulled on the rope, keeping the horse's head down and once again proceeded to lead him back into the figure-eight motions. The children kept up their clamor as the horse's flanks twitched with anticipation and yet it still held to its course.

From behind Jake, the Herald spoke. "He is wise in his training."

Jake turned to the Herald but he pointed forward drawing Jake's eyes back to the horse.

“Those figure-eights are important. Once the horse is used to the pattern of left and right, it can be taught to gallop like that. For it to do this successfully in battle, it needs to learn how to break its natural stride.”

Jake nodded but wasn't sure if he truly understood what it all meant.

The Herald continued. “A horse's power is thrust diagonally. To lead with the right leg, it is the back left leg that gives it propulsion. If the trainer can make it change its propulsion in mid-stride then the change of direction is smoother and faster for the rider. That alone is a matter of life and death to the cavalry if they are to be successful in battle.”

“The noisy children are pretty obvious,” Jake butted in. “Getting the horse used to the chaos of war.”

“Yes,” The Herald agreed. “It will get much worse as the training progresses. By then there will also be a rider and the horse will learn more subtle cues to shift from left to right. For a properly trained horse, the bit and spur are not the way to direct them during battle. The rider will merely change direction with his hands and legs.”

Satisfied with the training, Jake backed off from the fence and motioned for the Herald to follow as he headed north. He could hear the children taunting the horse as they left and thought of how it would still be a couple seasons before the horses were ready for battle, but at least by then maybe they would have some colts added to the population.

Jake stopped for a moment to bask in pride at his latest accomplishment for the lowly village. Before him sprawled a mud hill. It was wide and its attendants filthy. The peasants working upon the slippery knoll were completely covered in the mud and fought to bring up various pieces of cut wood.

Jake walked off to the right, bringing the portcullis into view around the edge of the hill. He admired the genius simplicity of the peasants' handiwork. As they had started building the portcullis out of rough timber

and hemp rope, other workers had gone out and started to bring in dirt in vast amounts. In order to safely work the heights at the top of the portcullis they had built a mound of tightly packed earth so the builders were still working on ground level, so to speak.

The finishing touches of running the tough, braided hemp through the inner mechanics of the gate were underway as he approached. For the most part, the village was now a fenced community, protected by cut green saplings and reinforced by larger stocks of lumber. With the finishing touches of having a working gate, an entrance that could be guarded, the village could easily grow in population.

The peasants finished fishing the rope through the cutaways in the lumber and whooped in delight. The Herald glided in silently next to Jake. "They wish to show you their handiwork, my lord."

The work they had done was not bad for a first effort. The portcullis was a twelve foot tall and eighteen foot wide gate of fist-thick logs. There were gaps between the logs so that archers could shoot through it to keep attackers at bay. There were also small balconies atop each side of the gate that could hold lookouts or archers if needed.

The fence that surrounded the rest of village was only eight foot tall so the portcullis was an intimidating barrier. The ropes that would raise the gate were thick, hairy tentacles that drooped out of the dark cuts atop each side of the portcullis. Twelve peasants, six to each side, began pulling taut the ropes. They creaked in protest, but slowly the heavy gate began to ascend. A crowd had gathered with the raising of the gate and they all applauded loudly as the gate reached its apex and the lookouts above locked the gate open with heavy drop-bars that snapped into notches cut into the lumber.

Through the applause Jake could hear shouting. The Herald came in close to his ear, pointing towards the watchtowers atop the portcullis. "They say a rider approaches."

A rider, Jake thought. There had never been a visitor to the village on horseback before, friend or foe.

The small clan around the gate scattered at the sound of the approaching horse. Jake could see the outline of the rider; it looked like a rag doll riding atop a horse, bobbing and swaying with the animal's canter. It approached at full speed.

As the horse cleared the gate the crowd and Jake inhaled in awe. The rider was a corpse tied to the horse's rudimentary saddle. The dead man's hands were tied behind him and the rope ran up his back to loop around his neck, forcing the corpse to sit upright. The rope could not hide the fact that the man's throat had been savagely cut open from ear to ear. Dried blood had stained the front of his loose fitting tunic.

Jake stared at the dead man's face as the horse settled down and stopped, nickering at the crowd slowly enveloping it. The man's face looked very familiar. Jake took in the whole picture and jumped when he finally saw the paper pinned to corpse's chest. Written boldly in blood were the words: Help Me!

Everything around Jake froze. All sounds stopped. The village, the horse, the dead man and his note all faded into blackness.

Slowly a pinging noise echoed inside his head, building in volume and frequency. Soft light filtered into his vision as the goggles were removed by a technician in a drab gray uniform. The technician nodded at Jake and reached up to both sides of his head. As the earplugs were removed there was a final loud ping of the acoustic sensor and it went silent. Jake moved his jaw, trying to pop his ear drums that had built up pressure from the

acoustic radar that had been tracking his head movements while in the game.

As was routine, Jake could only sit patiently while the technician removed all the apparatus from his useless body that allowed him full immersion into the virtual world of Hallowed Kingdoms.

“What happened in there? Why did I get dropped out?”

The technician looked at Jake closely, checking the dilation reflexes of his pupils with a penlight. “What do you mean? Your allotted three hours were up. You didn’t notice your ten minute warning?” The technician asked him in a tone that said he had known many kids to ignore the warning bells because they were either too wrapped up in the game or weren’t ready to quit playing.

“No, something happened. Someone rode into the village. Some dead guy.”

The technician only nodded and turned Jake around in his wheelchair, guiding him towards the baffled door. Jake loved the interior of the game room. The walls were covered with dark foam cones of various sizes. It was like a cave of soft stalactites that muted all sound, enabling the acoustic sensors to track with extreme accuracy.

In Jake’s case, the acoustics weren’t as important, he knew, because only his head and face could move. The rest of his body movements were translated through the wire-skin mesh he wore over his bald scalp like a yarmulke while playing the game. The game techs had explained to him that the mesh was sensitive to actual firings of electricity in his brain and converted that into his wishes within the virtual world.

Jake was rolled out of the room and into a normal hospital-type hallway, bustling with nurses and doctors and voices requesting attention through a public announcement system. He was always slow to compose himself back to the noises of the hospital after being submerged into the

game for so long. It was a bright and invasive place that contrasted greatly with the quiet sounds of vast outdoor spaces and crude, violent warfare.

In the game he could walk, he had power. Back out in the real world he was useless. He was pushed around in a wheelchair because he couldn't help himself. Nothing worked. He could feel nothing below the waist and the pain above could be excruciating. It was time for another treatment.

The orderlies were friendly enough, always chatting him up when they pushed him around to his next series of appointments, but he tended to spend more time with the doctors than anything else. He remained silent as he was pushed over to the Oncology Wing, his mind still running in silent chaos over the way he had abruptly been pulled from the game.

"Hello, Jake." Nurse Janet greeted him. He only nodded in reply. He hated the cancer treatments. He hated the machines they used and the medicine they pumped into his veins that were cold and thick and made him shake for hours afterward. Janet shooed away the orderly and rolled Jake over to the formidable looking machine that would read his brain.

It was a menacing tube of metal, painted a friendly white as though it were an innocent enough piece of machinery. Jake knew all too well about the hour he would be inside it, under its scrutiny, and the evening of crushing headaches that would follow because of it.

"Let's get you ready for Mr. Brainscan" said Janet. She easily lifted Jake from his chair and placed him on the reflective tray that would feed him to the machine. He weighed next to nothing, and many of the attendants found it easier to just pick him up and place him where needed. She pulled over the IV unit that dangled from the ceiling and jacked it into Jake's permanent shunt on his left arm.

"You know the routine, buddy boy. Don't roll your head around while we read all the squishy stuff in your head."

Jake grunted. He knew the procedure well enough, and plus, they had a V-shaped block of foam that held his head in place and he couldn't easily turn it even if he wanted to. As for the rest of his body, well, that wasn't much of an issue either.

Nurse Janet walked over and placed a warm hand on his forehead. "We'll get you better, sweetie." And she left. Jake could only stare at the vague glow of hidden fluorescent lights that made the ceiling appear as its own light source. The room dimmed. The machine clattered and whirred as it awoke. Feeding time.

In the Control Room, doctors Haven, Planck and DaVerre watched the three-dimensional reading of Jake's brain in progress.

"So, what are we looking for?" asked Planck.

Haven stepped back from the large virtual monitor and moused in a few commands that made the monitor split in two. "We are looking for any differences in the pathways of Jake's thinking." Haven tried to control the impatience in his voice. Planck was a superior in ranking but a dolt all the same. Planck had been sent down from the higher echelons of Modern Medicine to study the groundbreaking work that he and DaVerre had established.

The second screen brought up a different view of the data being acquired. It was an ocean of information literally displayed as an ocean with its tides and swells. It was a chaotic view yet hypnotizing to watch.

"We can view his waves of thought, patterns of thought. The ways his thoughts travel and how they react to one another."

DaVerre stepped over beside Haven and pointed to the readings that were displaying live data. "These are his thought patterns as they happen." DaVerre picked up a palm-sized chrome sphere and slowly turned it in his hand, manipulating the displayed data with it. "We can skim past the surface tension of his thoughts." The view dived into the depths of Jake's

oceanic thoughts. “And now, we can follow the undercurrents, so to speak, of his psyche.”

Planck interrupted. “Are you saying that you can read a person’s mind with this?”

Haven sighed loudly as though he had been tasked to teach algebra to a three year old child. “It’s not as mundane as that. It’s not like we can say that right now he’s thinking of pink teddy bears. We study patterns of thought, we force patterns of thought and read them, categorize them. If we record his thoughts while showing him a picture of a horse, we don’t have a recording saying now he’s thinking of horses, because what his mind is actually doing is following a pattern that might bring up his memories reminiscent to him of horses.”

Planck nodded as though he understood but Haven could see plainly see his confusion.

“This is not a mind reading machine, Doctor Planck. This machine gives us the data we need to extrapolate how his mind works. We have spent weeks reading his patterns while controlling his stimuli. We show him a dog and record the pattern. We show him fire and record the pattern. After all of these baseline recordings are gathered we can see patterns to his, well, patterns.”

“And so,” Planck drawled out. “How will this help with his cancer?”

Daverre dropped the sphere-mouse. Haven was stunned, but not for long. “Cancer? Planck, cancer? You haven’t even read our damn reports have you? That boy doesn’t have cancer!”

Planck shrugged his shoulders which made Haven fume even more.

“My God! Do you even *know* what we are trying to do down here?”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Haven, but I don’t fully understand what you are attempting to do down here and why the Board has given so many funds to your project.”

Daverre reached out and put a calming hand on Haven's shoulder. "Let us show you something," said Daverre. He picked up the sphere and started manipulating the information on the monitors. "Do you see this?"

The monitors both showed a view back on top of the ocean of thought data where rhythmic patterns created a calm buoyant surface. The image then traveled across the surface, speeding over small wakes. "These little white-top breakers are usually designated as agitated thoughts and actions. Now, let me steer us over to a different direction."

The view changed dramatically. The surface began to break violently against itself. It was as though the volume of information had become deeper and darker shadows lay beneath the surface. Abruptly the view stopped as the entire surface had become a churning mess of spray and static that could not be completely represented in their model. In the heart of the chaotic tumble of information was a huge black orb, thought patterns were bashed against it and sent spraying back as a mist. The roiling was never-ending yet the orb remained unfazed.

"What is that?" Planck had stood up in anxiety at seeing the chaotic storm before him.

Daverre manipulated the sphere in his hand once again, bringing up a different shot of the black orb in the other monitor so that both versions were showing side by side. The image he had just brought up was clearly a larger dimension than the live display in the other. Daverre looked over at Haven and started to say something.

Haven interrupted with a clearing of his throat. "That would be a void within the boy's memory."

Planck looked over at him expectantly. Haven glanced over at Daverre then across the room to the glass window that showed them Jake.

"Read our report and come to the VR Lab tomorrow morning."

The swooshing and whirring noises of the machine began to slow down, allowing Jake to breathe a little easier knowing that the scan was nearly over. Silence finally engulfed him and the tray he was laying upon hitched then slid his body outside of the steel throat. The tray clanked to a stop and Jake saw Dr. Haven and Dr. Daverre standing on each side of him looking down, tight smiles on their faces.

“Hello, Jake” said Haven. Daverre merely nodded at Jake.

“Hello,” whispered Jake. He found he could postpone the headaches a little while if he kept himself quiet and calm after the scans. Haven reached down and gently lifted Jake, turned slowly and set him down in his wheelchair.

“Anything good in tonight’s scan?” asked Jake as Dr. Haven placed his limbs in all the correct supports and rested his neck back into the cuff that would hold his head up.

Daverre finally spoke. “Actually, yes. It would appear that your medicine has begun to shrink the tumor.”

“That’s good news, right?”

Haven stepped behind Jake and began pushing his chair, heading them out of the lab and down the hall. Jake could hear DaVerre’s footsteps following behind them. “Of course it is. It’s extremely good news.”

They made it to Jake’s room without further discussion. Jake had been lost in quiet thoughts, keeping the pain at bay. Dr. Haven rolled Jake up to his bed and Dr. Daverre came around to lift him out of the chair and into his bed.

“Does my mom know? Does she know about the tumor shrinking?” Daverre stepped back and looked at Haven.

Haven answered. “No, she doesn’t know yet.”

“Is she around? I haven’t seen her or dad today.”

Dr. Haven laid his hand on Jake's. "Son, you saw them both this morning."

"No I didn't. I went straight from breakfast to chemo, they gave me a couple tubes for lunch since I couldn't hold any food down, and then I went into Hallowed Kingdom and then, well, I just got scanned." Jake stopped himself; he could feel his brain starting to swell with a migraine. "They haven't been by," he whispered.

"Jake," Dr. Haven said quietly. "You saw them this morning. Your memory is still a little flaky, son."

"Do you mean from the tumor or from my accident?"

Dr. Haven shrugged. "Could be both. We'll see."

Jake dreamt of Hallowed Kingdom. It was different than when he normally played, in this version he was a cruel dictator with a thirst for blood and torture. He ruled with a magical gauntlet that gave him terrible strength and he used its power indiscriminately.

He forced his peasants to follow him. Through his brutal rule his technologies were forced into higher levels but left his village vulnerable to disease and famine. He didn't care because his most ruthless warriors would go out and gather more peasants to work the fields and cut the wood. He had found a tribe of ogres that could reach straight into the fire to work steel. His black heart reached out and brought back evil creatures that lived in shadow to join his side of the war.

What war? – A small voice inside his head asked.

But the Herald, dressed in black silk with steel spikes driven through leather straps reminded him that the war they were fighting was for total dominance. It was a battle to rule *everything*.

Dr. Planck was waiting in the dark room that was designated as the VR Lab. He sat at the end of a long table in the middle of the room, under the small glow of a Halogen desk lamp while all of the overhead fluorescents quietly slept.

Haven and DaVerre came in with steaming cups of coffee in their hands. They were surprised to see Planck waiting for them. Haven closed the door behind them and looked down at his cup. "Sorry we didn't bring you any, we didn't think you would be here yet."

"I don't touch it."

"Are you a tea man?" asked Daverre, attempting to keep the mood light.

Planck ignored him and slid a manila folder across the table. "What have you done to this child?"

Neither men answered him as they each grabbed a metal stool from a workbench and dragged them over to the table.

Haven sat down heavily with the weight of having to once again explain his techniques to someone ignorant of what they were trying to accomplish.

"Where do we start, Planck? We could start with what this child has done."

Planck would hear none of it. "You have tricked this boy. You faked his accident and you faked his cancer. Come on, man. A hit and run that he doesn't remember and then you tell him he has a tumor while being treated for his paralysis. What the hell are you doing?"

Dr. Haven silently counted to ten as he sipped his coffee. He set the cup down and moved his hands to his lap, purposefully avoiding his inclination to throw the hot liquid into Planck's face. "Dr. Planck, can we now assume that you have read our report?" he said calmly, and then added "Thoroughly?"

“Yes,” Planck sighed.

Haven sat forward, still not trusting his hands to broach the table top. “So you know what he’s done?”

“Yes, Haven. I read his records. I read your report. I saw your analyses and hypotheses. And still I’m asking, why are doing all this to that poor child?”

“Because he’s special,” DaVerre piped in. DaVerre had no problems speaking while armed with his coffee cup. It hovered around his lips as he spoke. He would sip between sentences and inhale the steam as though it were a calming incense. “Jake was a good boy, a good son. He held adequate to good grades through school, he played some sports and never got into any trouble other than the occasional detention, and those would be from joking in class. He was a happy, exuberant, normal kid.”

So then,” asked Planck, “what happened?”

“We don’t know. In a small matter of days he turned into the little monster you read about.”

“That’s not entirely accurate,” interrupted Haven. “Something was happening in the background. Something was festering within Jake and started coming out in subtle ways.”

“Subtle?” Planck reached across the table and grabbed the dossier he had earlier relinquished and flipped it open, tabbing through a few pages before stopping and pointing at an item. “It says he killed the family cat.”

“And we don’t know why,” said DaVerre.

“Okay, I understand you want to know why,” said Planck. “But this is more than just killing the family pet. He put the dead animal in the water softener. It had to have been in there for weeks with the whole family bathing and drinking that water while it rotted away.”

“Actually,” said DaVerre with a smirk, “it didn’t really rot sitting in that tub of salt water.”

Planck was not in the mood for dark humor. “DaVerre! They were drinking and showering in putrid water. The cat was dead and its fluids were leaking out into the water. Now, cut the shit!”

Haven was impressed with the outburst and retrieved his cooling coffee. “You are correct, Planck. Even Jake was bathing in the water, drinking it up, brushing his teeth. This is, he had no memory of killing the cat. He still has no memory of it.”

“Yes, your report says he has no memory of any of the violence he enacted.”

“Correct,” said Haven and DaVerre in unison.

“Have you checked for dementia?”

“No history of sickness that would bring on dementia,” answered Dr. Haven. “The boy definitely has a psychosis. We have batted around all sorts of ideas and the strongest still is that he is a split-personality.”

“And for this you cripple him and make him think he is dying?”

“Not necessarily, Planck. He is a good kid at heart. He has no memory of the evil he has done to his family, we genuinely believe that. We also believe that we can help him.”

DaVerre leaned forward to join in. “Jake is completely oblivious to what has happened to his family. He has no clue. When he was arrested, the police told us it was a cruel, evil child full of hate that they arrested. During his psych-eval the psychiatrist said she was speaking to another child. A boy lost, with no memory of what had happened.”

DaVerre began to take a drink and noticed his cup was empty. He sat it down but when he continued talking his fingers kept reaching out as though searching for a full cup somewhere out of reach. “The psychiatrist had read about our work here at the clinic with virtual therapy and gave us a ring. We’ve had him ever since. We doped him up enough to kill his short term memories of the police station and the travel here.” DaVerre’s

restless hands closed into a steeple under his chin. "All of his other memories are locked away."

Planck filled in the gaps. "So, he woke up and you told him that he had been in a horrible accident. He had been struck by a hit and run driver, paralyzed, and miracle of miracles, while treating his injuries you had come across a tumor within his brain and could treat that also. You were able to disable his body and run experiments on his brain without him thinking anything out of the ordinary. Well, at least out of the ordinary realm of being paralyzed and having brain cancer."

"Pretty much," said DaVerre.

"Jesus Christ!" Planck slammed his hand down flat on the table. "You have broken numerous laws, completely *fucked* his civil liberties, and who knows how many levels below malpractice you guys have stooped!"

"We want to save him," said Haven. His simple answer stopped Planck from any retort. Planck looked from Haven and DaVerre in silence. He took a deep breath and sat up straight.

"The only alternative we have now is to save him, gentlemen," said Planck.

"We?" said Haven.

"Alternative?" said DaVerre.

"Yes. The only way we can save the clinic, this lab and The Foundation from being shutdown if this ever hits the news is to save him. And I am going to help."

The pinging sounds faded away into silence. Jake was floating above the land of Hallowed Kingdoms. The world below was a mass of black with a central clearing below him with various tunnels spiraling out from the middle. Trees and land showed within the cleared sections and the rest of

the world was hidden away in a fog of war, keeping him ignorant of his surroundings that had not yet been explored.

He settled down softly within his main office in the Town Hall, gliding through the ceiling as though it were made of shadow. The Herald was there awaiting his next commands. "Good day to you, my lord." He bowed deeply to Jake.

During his descent into the world, Jake had checked how his village had fared after he had left. Even if the technicians didn't believe him, Jake knew that he had been pulled from the game without it being paused. It had continued on without his instruction, without his rule.

It appeared as though the village had continued to grow in his absence. His village was ready for an upgrade to be initiated. The villagers had continued to gather wood and harvest crops, creating a large amount of stock that would be spent in upgrades. The horses were still in training and showed one more in his inventory. The one that had brought the corpse to his gates.

"Herald, initiate an upgrade. We are going to become a city."

The Herald bowed again at Jake and shimmered away to carry out his orders. Jake sat heavily in his small wooden throne and called up his village stats. Three transparent windows appeared in the air before him and thickened in opacity as information began filling the screens.

At the bottom of the first window a progression bar showed the time it would take for his upgrade to finalize. He could not perform certain operations while in upgrade mode, so he took the time to view his inventory. The villagers had finished their work on the city wall and it now surrounded the village proper except for the open forest where the woodcutters kept a heavy population around the small sawmill. There were quite a few cases of villagers getting sick. There were always a couple that were getting sick and dying off but this many was a little alarming to Jake.

Half of the villagers had died from the affliction of whatever disease was attacking them and the others had fully recovered.

If he didn't find the source of the disease before the upgrade was complete then he would either have a larger population, so larger numbers of sick and dying, or his upgrade would be for nothing as he wouldn't be able to gather new villagers because of the sickness in the city.

"Herald," Jake called. The Herald appeared before him and gave a small flourish of his hand and cape. "Yes, my lord?"

"Do you know what is killing my people?"

"It is disease, my lord. Even through quarantine I have not been able to stop its growth. Something is making them sick."

Those last words ran through Jake's mind. They echoed and whispered, reverberating through hollow parts within his memory. *Something is making them sick.* His stomach lurched making him sit up straighter. Making them sick. Making them... Jake stood up despite his disapproving stomach. "I think I know what it is."

The Herald watched Jake carefully. "And what would that be, my lord?"

"Come with me." Jake said nothing else as he left the Town Hall and proceeded to the center of the village. There was a bubble of electric blue glow covering the whole village, reminding Jake that he was in mid-upgrade.

Jake approached the well which fed the whole village. "Herald, I need three villagers." From three different areas of the village Jake could hear 'Aye!' in chorus. One villager approached from the north, a bow resting on his shoulder, an endless quiver of arrows strapped over the other. Another villager came from the east, the rake in his hand dissolving away as he approached his lord. The third villager came from the northeast at a trot, his leather armor creaking.

All three came up to Jake and bowed down on one knee. Jake immediately began giving orders. "Herald, I need a torch. You," he pointed at the villager in leather armor. "You will go down in the well and see what the water looks like. You other two will lower him down."

The villagers arose as one. The Herald handed the lit torch to the villager that would be lowered into the well. It burned with a thick smoke. The other two villagers had rope magically appear in their hands. One moved over and tied it around the armor-clad villager's waist while the other uncoiled the rope and threw it over the well arm for added support.

Jake was full of anxiety from an unknown source as the villager was lowered into the dark well. Plumes of smoke wafted from the hole as he descended out of sight. After a moment The Herald spoke. "He says there is nothing but water."

Jake put his hand out to speak and noticed how badly he was shaking. He trapped both hands under his armpits and yelled at The Herald. "Send him into the water!"

Jake became slightly dizzy when The Herald reported to him that the villager had found something under the water's surface. Cats, he heard, as the world began to slowly revolve around him. Dozens of rotting cats were floating in the village's water source. Jake lost consciousness.

"Amazing." Dr. Planck had been repeating that word ever since pulling off his sensor wires and leaving the game.

DaVerre grinned. "Yes, it is."

There was a different room for observing the game in action and for injecting players into the scenario as needed. The main virtual lab was equipped to let two others, usually doctors, be planted into the game to watch events unfold, or contribute to the therapy. Dr. Planck had chosen

to be The Herald so as to view Jake's reactions as the cats were discovered.

Haven had been monitoring the game from his specialized control chair. It contained all the controls that Haven needed for viewing and controlling the game. He had designed and built it with a little help from DaVerre.

Haven stood up and the ambient lighting within the room brightened enough to see their surroundings under a soft glow. No bright lights were allowed in the lab. There were side effects to being immersed in the virtual world they had created. After leaving the game, intense migraines could grip the user and hold on for hours. Haven and DaVerre had tried many different methods at controlling how the mind was affected by the sensors and virtual inputs but they still could not bypass the residual headaches.

Planck finally shook himself of the astonishment from actually being in the game. "The cats shook him badly. How did it look on the topo-maps?"

"It stirred up quite a current."

"And?" asked Planck expectantly.

"You might have done something, doctor. There was a hairline crack that appeared on his memory void, as though parts want to break through. But, as you saw, he went unconscious before anything could escape."

"It's his sanity's self-defense mechanism. Shutting him down before his innocent side can remember anything."

DaVerre agreed from across the room. He spoke loudly without any consideration for their sensitive minds; he had not been plugged into the system. "Yeah, he did the same thing when we sent his father's corpse into the village."

Planck had tired of exploding at the two whenever they divulged in some other piece of information that they had seemingly forgotten to

mention previously. "He has done this before?" he asked with a sigh. He perked back up. "You sent his father's corpse into the village?"

"Well, yeah," said DaVerre.

Haven cleared his throat. "We had begun the same shock therapy just yesterday that you're employing today." Haven let slip a rare grin. "So, I guess, maybe we do think alike."

Planck tapped his finger on his chin. "And what happened when he blacked out?"

"We pulled him out of the game."

Now it was Planck's turn to grin at Haven. "But your reports show that when he is sleeping he has the same sort of patterns as though he is playing the game, correct?"

Yes, but..."

Planck cut Haven off. "Make sure the technicians leave him alone. Plug me back in as The Herald. Can you give this boy control of his surroundings? Like admin rights to the game?"

"Sure" said Haven, sitting back down into his control chair. "But he could wreck the system. Hell, he could do anything in there."

"Exactly," said Planck as he moved back to his chair, handing DaVerre the sensor devices he needed to reconnect.

Jake woke up in his throne. His right hand felt weighted down and he raised it to see he wore a heavy glove of black steel, a combination of plating and chain mesh that made his hand appear two sizes larger than normal. He made a fist of the glove and green steam escaped from it. As he squeezed his fist harder, a furious whistle of the green steam blew out and a black liquid started dripping off the glove, sizzling when it hit the marble floor. Acid.

He stood up and looked around the room. This was no longer his Town Hall. This had become a Keep. Walls of cool stone surrounded the large main room, smooth marble covered the floor. His throne, he noticed, was made of gold and platinum and encrusted with jewels. This couldn't be his normal upgrade, he thought.

No. It wasn't. He remembered now. He remembered the Other Jake.

Jake looked down at his gloved hand once again. He looked back around the room and noticed a sniveling creature of shadow and flesh cowering in a corner. He held up the glove and pointed his fist at the creature. The green steam turned into a gelatinous flame that shot out and stuck to the creature, growing and climbing all over its body, burning long after the body was ash and its screams had faded away.

Jake laughed. His laugh was not his laugh. It was the Other Jake's laugh. Who was who? Why did he feel so good, so excited, at the power he could feel in the glove. The power wasn't just in his glove, it pulsed throughout his body. He was strong! He was a Conqueror!

"How may I help you, my lord?"

Jake spun around when he heard The Herald's voice, his gloved fist held before him. The Herald didn't look right. He looked too wholesome to be in the Keep. His clothes were too bright and his face too noble. Jake opened his fist, lowered his arm, and felt the power within not totally leaving but resting, awaiting his next call for it. When Jake looked back up, The Herald was better. He was a mix of black, cruel leather, and cool, sharp spikes.

"I didn't summon you, Herald."

"Of course you did, my lord. How else would I be here?"

Jake was shocked. The Herald had never spoken back before or appeared without being summoned. "I said I did not summon you, Herald."

The Herald took a step towards him. "Of course you did, my lord. At least one of you did."

"One of us?"

"It must have been the Good Jake that summoned me. As you saw, I looked quite different when I first appeared."

Jake backed up until he was against his throne and fell back into it. "Good Jake?"

"Why, of course." The Herald held out his arms and motioned at his surroundings. "Good Jake would never be in a place like this."

"Shut up." Jake pulled his legs up from the marble floor and folded them neatly underneath him.

"Good Jake would never do things like that," continued The Herald as he pointed off to the left of Jake.

Jake turned to see his parents. They were both gagged and tied to chairs against the wall. "I didn't do that!"

"Yes, you did," answered The Herald quietly. "But you did worse than that, didn't you Jake?"

"Shut up!" Jake put his hands over his ears, burying his head beneath the massive glove.

"There's only Jake," explained The Herald. "No Good Jake, no Bad Jake. Only one."

"Shut up shut up shut up shut up!"

In a commanding voice that echoed through the walls, The Herald yelled. "Show me what you did, Jake! Show me what you did!"

The Herald ran up to Jake and pulled his hands away from his head. The Herald's hand smoked where he touched the glove but he did not let go. "Show me, Jake. Show me how you killed your cat and threw it in the water softener. Show me how you killed your parents, Jake!" The Herald

then looked up at the ceiling. "Don't you pull me out of here!" he shouted to the heavens.

Jake looked up to the ceiling where The Herald was yelling then looked back at him. He shoved The Herald away and stood up quickly. Jake's eyes began to smoke and his glove began to glow a sickening green.

"You want to see what I did, Herald?" As he shouted the Keep changed around them. The lighting became brighter and walls formed about them. Jake had lost the glove and was now wearing his normal street clothes, the hospital gown gone. They were back at Jake's house.

He ran up the stairs and Planck followed. Jake ran down the hallway and into a back room that Planck knew was Jake's bedroom.

They were in his room and the alarm was going off. It said 6:30 a.m. and was beeping, beeping horrendously loud. Jake ran around the room, he was now shirtless and kicking around the floor picking up shirts and discarding them as he looked for a particular one. He finally found the one he was looking for and began to put it on. He stopped and held it out in front of him. There was cat puke staining the front of it. A large yellow stain that had dried already but still held small chunks within it.

He threw down the shirt in a rage and went running downstairs. Planck was in the living room watching Jake chase the cat that was running for its life. Jake chased it into the kitchen and cornered it there. Planck watched Jake grab the cat by the loose skin on its back and yank it up into both hands. It fought him as he finally found the right grip and violently twisted its head, snapping its neck. The cat wasn't yet dead but it had lost all of its abilities except to cry quietly as it passed away.

Planck and Jake in the basement. Jake pries the lid off the tub for pouring salt into the water softener. He throws the cat in the briny water and pushes it under with a broomstick, stirring up salt pellets that land on

the feline's corpse and hold it still as he stirs more salt on top of it. Jake laughs and chills roll up Planck's spine.

Planck is swept up in to the living room. Some time has passed, as Jake's hair is longer and he is wearing different clothes. In fact, he is wearing the shirt the cat had thrown up on, so his mother must have been able to remove the stain.

Jake's mother is sick. Planck can tell by looking at her pale face and the way she leans forward on the couch as Jake is yelling at both her and his father.

"Why can't I go? That's just stupid!" Jake sprays spittle as he yells at them.

Jake's mother puts her head in her hands as Jake's father speaks up. "We've told you why. We told you this last week when you brought home your report card. Two F's, Jake? You aren't going anywhere."

"This sucks!" yells Jake as he runs upstairs.

It is dark and Planck is standing in the parent's bedroom. It is late. Jake comes into the room. Planck can see his wild, red-rimmed eyes. He probably hasn't slept for days, planning out what he was going to do, playing it over and over in his mind.

Jake has an aluminum baseball bat in his right hand and a roll of duct tape in the other. He approaches his father's side of the bed. As he beats the man in the head and on the shoulders his mother sits up to scream but she has sat up too fast and retches all over the bedspread.

The basement again. The doors to the house are all locked. The phone has not been answered. For days now Jake has tortured his parents. They are tied up and gagged with the tape. Blood at times loosens the bonds but when his parents fall unconscious, Jake binds them with more layers of the tape.

He taunts them, jabs at them. He has not fed them, but with sickening glee he feeds them ladles full of the water from the water softener tank. They gag but swallow, the salt in the water, the cat in the water, makes them sicker and weakens them. Jake does not lessen his tormenting. He has not slept in days, he cannot sleep. His determination to make them suffer is stronger than his physical needs. He soils himself while torturing them. He does not eat, does not drink, and yet, he does not weaken.

Planck does not recognize the child before him and Jake does not see him. He is too wrapped up in reliving the events. Too hungry to relive the torment he gave, the excitement of having such power over them. Planck is feeling his own weariness. He doesn't know how long in game-time they have actually been but it feels like days.

"Planck. Planck, can you hear me?" Haven's voice echoed within Planck's mind. They had not tried to contact him since they had threatened to expel him from the virtual world earlier and he had yelled at them not to pull him out. He had been so close to Jake breaking through that he hadn't wanted to jeopardize the unrolling of the events.

In his mind Planck answered, "Yes, I can hear you."

"Planck, you guys have been in there for twenty-six hours. We have to get you both out of there."

Planck looked at his surroundings for a moment. "From his reports, when do the police show up?"

"Well, you guys are running in some weird accelerated time that Jake has fashioned in his mind, but after the parents die, the police should show up within the day."

Planck watched Jake as he paced the basement floor. He would take a belligerent swipe at one of the two each time he passed them. "I have an idea," Planck thought to Haven.

Planck went upstairs, through the kitchen and opened the door that led to the garage. Inside he emptied a large cardboard box that had stored some Christmas ornaments and ripped one of the large flaps off of it. He found a can of spray paint on a shelf above the workbench. He began spraying letters onto the cardboard.

“Planck, don’t do that,” Haven sounded like he was either pissed off or very worried.

Planck ignored him and ran back down to the basement. Jake didn’t even acknowledge his return.

“Planck. Don’t do this. You will remind him he is in virtual space. Let him relive this and then let’s get him out.”

Planck walked over to Jake’s father and placed the cardboard sign on his lap. Jake noticed it immediately. The bleeding paint spelled out Help Me.

Jake took a step back and read the sign repeatedly, laughing a little more with each iteration. He started to bellow with laughter and finally looked over at Planck. Jake laughed even harder as he pointed at Planck with the black steel glove upon his hand.

The basement disappeared. Stone walls came into view. Planck could feel the chill of the stone seep into his bones. They were back at the Keep. Jake’s parents were no longer bound to their chairs with tape. They were now shackled to the wall with thick chains that cut through their skin. They had been restored to health. Jake howled as he stalked towards his parents, the glove glowing forge red before him.

“Planck!” Haven ripped off the sensors stuck to Planck’s body. “Planck!”

Planck’s head was pounding. Haven’s shouts were bringing tears to his eyes. He held his hands up as if to ward Haven from assaulting him.

“Jesus Christ, man! What have you done?” Haven had no pity for the man’s migraine.

“I did the only thing I could do to treat this child.”

“Treat him?” yelled Haven. “How the hell is that treating him?”

Planck stood up with weak legs and started trying to stomp life back into them. “Now we can treat him.”

Haven stepped back. “How? You’ve destroyed part of him. Look at these readouts on DaVerre’s screens. There is no more black memory void. It shattered. There’s nothing left.”

“Well, of course there is,” said Planck in a placating tone that caused Haven to stop himself from striking the man.

“The decent part of Jake is gone. It was all destroyed when the dam burst open and you set that evil little bastard free.” Haven took a breath. “You killed Jake.”

“Oh yes, you do have that part right, Doctor Haven. The evil is free. What we call evil is unbound in that child that is hooked up in the other room.”

“And you are proud of that?” DaVerre finally spoke.

Planck let out a small chuckle. “We have the fly in amber, you might say.”

Haven caught on quicker than DaVerre and the thought sickened him. “You want him to keep going don’t you?”

“Think of it,” said Planck. “We have a mind that is completely broken, violent and evil. We can now let it act out its madness. Never before has there been this opportunity, gentlemen.”

DaVerre started to pray quietly from his chair.

Haven slowly paced the dim room. “And how exactly will you treat him?” Haven finally asked.

“That will be for others to decide. Our first action items should be that he remains permanently within the virtual space you have created. This way he can act out his urges and we can study them. Remember, we still do not know what brought him over the edge, what broke his mind.”

Haven looked over at DaVerre. “We didn’t create the monster, we became the monster.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Haven,” Planck said. “In time, maybe we can find a way to fit those peaceful patterns you recorded on top of the patterns that now rule Jake. Until then, well, we have a whole new universe to study.”

“We’ll be ruined,” groaned DaVerre.

“Nonsense,” said Planck. “We’ll use the quaint little phrase you had in your report. What was it? Oh yes. *We manipulated his reality and augmented his virtual reality.*”

The End