

Reddened skies hail forth; the clouds have all been blown away. In exodus, they have all taken their forms and left their barren homelands. Light, unlimited, they were inflated folk; they lived as projections rather than material. They have gone and left nothing in their place, a voiding cardinal canvas encompassing all. Figuring themselves to be worthless, to have, in their perversion, been deemed without value, they migrated away from the heavens. Such was the weight of the crimes that man had committed; he, in his transgressions, was left without a sky to conquer.

Few roamed the desolate lands; in the flames that had wrought the end of time, few had survived. But, akin to the roach, man lived on. Even in his segmented and rotting limbs, he retained animation. Small colonies, scattered across the marred globe, dared to rise above the rubble. Primitive tribes, they were forbidden the wings that their predecessors had ripped from the angels, and in such, were mortal and quick to perish. Folly, in the sense of miserable continuance, was their purpose, dwindling and continuing until the maimed land had been rendered entirely infertile. A few thousand years further, they might continue on, toiling about, watching themselves, already a shell of what had been, decompose. Man, an animal, a roach, would not meet his end until all resources had been exhausted. Like a block of ants in a river, they continued onward on the corpses of their soaked brothers, passing the time until they reached the peak of the forthcoming waterfall.

It was, upon this mass of ants, that Lepro lived. He, born after the great descent, had only ever known the skeletal remains of man, spending his life wandering around the execrable and rotting flesh of the commonwealth. Wrapped in musky fabric, worn from cruel sand-filled winds, he walked nimbly under the shadows of ruined skyscrapers. Two hours remained until the next storm would hit, so said his colony's wetterfrosch. A youth, he had little purpose to his life; beyond the immediate needs of destitution, such as scavenging and meager organic harvesting, he had little obligation. Life held only struggle, and in such, time could be wasted as he willed it. Necessity, once a false projection of an era filled with removed concerns, had taken its leave. Men, women, himself, all could perish with ease; food was sparse, water rare. These concerns, immediate and fundamental, found their ways into the breast of some, they who, despite the great and immediate fate that awaited them, wished to live. His colony's Kaiser was one of those individuals, and under his orders, Lepro was sent out to scavenge daily. Lepro belonged to they who gave life little significance; even in the very task he had been given, designed to further the hell bound species, he lost years of his life. The sun which he bore upon his body, guarded against or not, was harsh. Exposure to it had killed his mother and father, who had trekked out to where he now lived, victims of a violent revolt in a neighboring colony. Cancerous growths, gifts given to those who dared show themselves to the angered and vindictive flower residing in the crimson solarium, was a boon Lepro had begun to know well.

Lining his arms, where the cloth was thinnest, were small lumps. In good time they would kill him, he estimated within three or four years, and that was that. Still, or perhaps because of them, he traveled the lands, searching for anything of use. Holding his arms out, balancing upon a steel beam, Lepro continued onward with a self-humored swagger; he found good pleasure in the outward escape. Back home, in the colony, he felt sickly. The dampness of

the burrowed land, the grey cement walls of the bunker- all assaulted his senses, turning his head around. Worse of all was the smell and sounds, the scent of decomposing flesh, wrought from those, who like himself, had experienced the solar gaze for too long.

Two factions, separated by unconscious choice, made up the populace. One, who the Kaiser had labeled the kaninchen, was composed of those who had lived their entire lives underground, who were free from the stench of decay. These folks, in their knowledge and ancestral preservation, tended to the gardens, drawing water from the earth, and lived, by the standard of the dying world, well. The other faction was composed of the kojote, the fleeing immigrants, the first and damned generation of their newfound colony, those who had already been condemned to an early death. Kojotes could further be categorized, composed of two different peoples; those who wished to bear no children and live out the rest of their life without planting seeds and those who looked for their offspring to become kaninchen. Both, with the exception of pregnant women, for the sun killed the fetus, were assigned to scavenge the lands, and when the time came, to go and perish in the sand. Lepro was of the first, but by choice, a rare distinction. He knew the way of agriculture and water retention, for his parents had, upon a posthumous desire, wished him to be of the kaninchen. When he came of age and knew all there was to know, he surprised his peers in his choice to go out into hell. For this, he was well known and celebrated, manufactured to be a figure of higher responsibility and martyrdom. Unknown to most, what Lepro had found by accident, the population was beginning to grow too great for their land and resources, and in such, unless there was to be a cleanse of the scarcely needed kojote, there would need to be more men like himself. So, he was well received and given priority rations, and when he left in the daylight hours, he was given great cheer.

It meant little to him, for Lepro been rendered by his station to a stoic and quiet existence, but for it, he had the strength to endeavor as he wished in his outdoor travels. Under the intense weight of the sun, he scrambled about without direct intention. He had been tasked to find plastic waste, intended to be recycled and reused for many usages. Shrubbery, the thin dune grass that sprouted in the shadows cast by the dilapidated cityscape, was also valuable, serving as fertilizer for their gardens. In his head, at some subconscious level, he began to hum as he moved about, stopping every few minutes to shove some waste into his pack. He was about two miles out from his colony's shelter, nearing the edge of their territory. In the last two years, another group had moved into the east side of the city's corpse, creating a few disputes. Lepro, conversing with the Kaiser, had recommended a war with them, relieving them of their overpopulation issues, but he had been quickly shut down. Their people, those who would dare to go out, even in the evening, were not suited for warfare. Food was sparse enough, and it was impossible to tell the other group's technological powers; all that was known was that they carried weapons, for a few of the kojote had been found with deep gashes along their border. Through this manner of corpse diplomacy, they had distinguished their territories, never wishing to meet each other. The Kaiser, an idealist, did not seek revenge for the loss of lives; they were only kojotes but instead began to have notices posted around the spots they had found the bodies.

There was never any response, but never again, by the digression of the traveling kojotes or a sense of agreement, had another scavenger been found killed, nor had previously marked

resources within their proposed territory been violated. Territorial resources, such as the grass patch Lepro was currently tending to, remained untouched. Without ever meeting each other, the two colonies, both unknowing of each other's size or state, found peace. The Kaiser had called it a sense of goodwill, Lepro had named it the overarching nihilism of the land, but so life continued onwards, down the dried-out river.

A beam shifted under Lepro's foot, sending him tumbling down onto the floor below. With a sickening thud, he hit the ground. Feeling his foot give way to his weight, he let out a yelp of shock. A nauseating feeling spread from his stomach outward, bile gathering in the back of his throat. Despite all his body's attempts to have him wretch, he retained his liquid, knowing that failure to do so would ensure his death. If that which had happened did not already. His vision under siege by a light film of static, his fall keeping him reeling, he thought of his potential return and what the Kaiser would say. He would, doubtlessly, should Lepro somehow return, make an example of him. Cripples, even as it was often hard to distinguish between the average survivor and one, were not tolerated. Burdens had already been imposed by the heavens above; there was no reason to shoulder more. This was a reality known by all inhabitants of the land, belonging to the savages of the east and his very own colony. Your position, in being crippled and rendered without use, was the very same as anyone else, regardless of one's situation.

Prodding his lower foot, unwilling to look at it yet, the wave of resulting pain was so great that it nearly knocked him unconscious. Closing his eyes, Lepro let out a long sigh, feeling the little sand left spill through the hourglass. The pain was cruel, but his new station, he assured himself, was not. It was knowing, and knowledge, he projected, was without an adjective, without a descriptor. He was left with only a handful of choices now, laying there in the dust. If he were to wait, and in the off chance be found by one his own, by one of the kojotes, he would be brought back, and his flesh would be recycled, turned to soil for their garden. Such a fate was not unpleasant; it would give his life decent purpose. Since he, having been subjected to the sun for too long, could not conceive a child, that was the only way in which he might find continuance. The thought was rather unpleasant, he found, for he had no obligation to the colony. Growing up there had not been his choice; their dogma, their desire to continue, it was not his own. He could equally spill his own blood; he carried with him a carved blade composed of trash he had scavenged. Suicide, death by his own choice in a world pitting the external against man, would be poetic, in a sense. But, as he knew, he was not a poetic man, and in such, this solution, in its intended meaning, held little value for him. In a final exertion of energy, perhaps once night had fallen, he could make his way to the border and be killed by another man. Maybe he would find comradery with them, and they might set his foot and let him recover. He could tell them everything he knew, and with their combined knowledge, conquer and pillage his home. Or, they could kill him and use his flesh, just as his own people would upon his recovery. It was all rather pointless, but at the same time, amusing.

It began with simple solutions to his predicament, basic burial preparations, but it quickly devolved into madness; as he sat upon his proposed deathbed, Lepro established all sorts of fantasies. He had never been much of a dreamer, his mind had always retained a thoughtful

blankness, but now he seemed content to experience a lifetime's worth of delusion. In and out came imagery, disrupted only by the slight creeping throb of his foot, of his limited youth. A childish and naïve lover's embrace, a fatherly figure's recycling and burial, his time in the damp gardening chambers as a child, all passed quickly through his mind. Fantasy and escape, he cherished these as they were presented to him, but after a few hours, when the sun began to fall, he was forced to decide what he wished to do with himself.

Weighing his options, finding his usual resolute sense of calm once more, Lepro decided. Pulling from his pack some plastic, he began to wind it tightly around his fingers, twisting it into a type of rope. Locating some scrap, a few smaller beams of contorted metal, in the distance, he began scooting his way over, careful not to bump his wounded leg. Having arrived at his destination, he got to work binding it to his leg. It was poorly done, but it provided a somewhat reliable splint, and with a great deal of effort and pain, he was able to stand. Pausing, leaning against the building's concrete wall, he listened for the sound of the wind. It was slight but definitive, not strong enough to stop him, but certainly strong enough to hinder his progress. If he was knocked down and fell upon one of the dunes, he would likely find himself unable to move and then boil under the sun the next day. Such a death was not agreeable, and in such, Lepro wrapped his knife around his forearm, ensuring he would not lose it even if he were to fall and stumble down one of the dunes. Rending himself calm, succeeding to partially slow the amplified heart rate he felt so intensely through his shattered ankle, he limped out of the building, back into the deserted world.

Immediately, he was hit by the wind. His body, over the years, had grown used to its kiss, but it was like normalizing a slap to the face. Where he might not feel the sharp pain any longer, it still awoke him, setting his limbs aflame. This, he thought as he felt the light particles of airborne sand collide with his body, was where meaning was retained. It was through the abrasion of man, each particle that slammed against him took a bit of his self away alongside it, proving its divinity in its subtraction from his essence. Man had, propelled forward by an obdurate economic drive of a stagnant era, brought forth supreme worship of his own ego; in this manner, each state, each mind, looked only to enlarge its grasp, to further find dominion over the nature which had borne it. So far did the ego, the inflated and falsified soul of man, expand that when it inevitably popped, the order of the natural world, desperately bound to the whims of the ascending men, followed suit. But now, facing a void of a world, a corpse of what had once been an expression of a worship of that what was natural and immediate, he felt peace. No drive, no ego, pushed him forward into the dark depths of hell. It was his own will, propelled forward by the ecstasy he achieved through being worn, like rock, by the earth's winds.

Riding the natural high of his interpersonal findings, brought forth in full strength by his brush with death, he flung himself to the east. The wind, in its gritty gusts, pushed him forward, emboldening his limping gait. Over the amounting dunes, small waves of foot-deep sand, moving about mystically, he slowly traversed, his mask clinging tightly to his face. Moisture, drawn from his perspiring brow, precious essence let loose from his tightened bleached skin, had no right leaving him then. Subconsciously, he had learned to live as a lizard might, every droplet was retained, he had begun to fashion his clothing, upon nothing but instinct, in a manner that

allowed for the best body temperature regulation. This jolting and unforeseeable conclusion, the time bomb that had been strapped to his shattered foot, it disrupted his manners, even changing his psychophysical state. It felt pleasant to have his bodily free from regulation, the deep and resounding drumming of his heart brought forth a euphoric feeling. To waste when all was precious, to drain oneself of their lifeblood, it was all a fantastical affront to the hellscape he traversed through.

One mile, that was how far he needed to travel. Three times, he fell, and twice he was able to bring himself back up. On the third fall, his last collapse, he was silent. Previously, on a small dune but a few hundred yards, he had screamed and sworn as he had misplaced his weight, tumbling to the bottom. But, as he fell for the third time, he uttered no noise. It was, in a sense, the resolution of a doomed deer, snagged by some predator; it spends his last few minutes with blank eyes, awaiting what is to come with an impossibly stoic manner. Learned helplessness, where a dog will, even when all it takes is a single step forward, lay down and receive the unseen channel's electrical shock. Lepro landed somewhere in between these two psychological factors. A sigh, almost of relief, escaped his lungs once his nerves had been eased. After spending so much time in a world dictated by the sun and its child, the sand which it had braved from the raped soul in the great exodus, he thought to find more comfort in the finality of its embrace. Instead, all he saw was the static stagnation of a weary body, half-paralyzed, half resigned. He could not sleep, for his mind was kept aflame with the excitement of its demise, accompanied by the cringing pain of his misplaced leg, but neither could he retain conscious thought. Instead, he lay there without entirely existing, waiting for the sun to slowly smother him, resenting the moon. The lunar body, hidden by the haze of a light sandstorm, took her time in her descent, taunted him.

"Child. Why do you rest here? Have you lost your mind?"

A foot prodded his back, in turn leading to his leg pressing up against the dune, shifting its weight slightly. He responded, more to the shocking stimuli than the stranger in the dark, with a yelp. Still residing within the motionless pool of indifference, of recession, he failed to recognize the stranger's words for a human and quickly returned to his vegetative state.

"You are still young. But you dawn a traveler's clothes. As close to death as I. We are then the same age. Let me respect your age, fellow traveler. Do you wish to live? If so, I will take you. I know much about the land. But little about people. Will you teach me? If you decide to live. You need not choose now. But you must soon. Or you will perish. Under the sun, you do not have long. Maybe one day," the voice said.

When Lepro didn't respond, his body still unable to entertain her suggestion, the voice coughed two times and then was silent. He was left alone on the dunes once again. Above, in the heavens, the tainted maroon moon grinned maliciously, awaiting its spouse's arrival. There was no external threat; outside of time itself, the land was devoid of all life. There were no coyotes or scorpions; the sun boiled even the most resolute creatures. Cockroaches, that which had been previously proclaimed the king of perseverance, were cooked alive by the UV rays of the malignant sun; they too, like their long-removed cousins, lived in the damp crevices of dormant

sanctuaries, waiting for the concrete overhead to someday collapse. When the sun was to roast him, would he too curl up, his legs crumpled and bound to his chest? He was, in a great many manners, like an insect. It would be suitable to die like one, he thought. Dismissing the stranger for a hallucination, brought forth by the qualms of his passing sanity, he did his best to cling tightly to his flesh. The sand had, until then, held onto the sun's heat, storing away its cumulative reception deep into the sands. Now, hours after the sun had departed, the cold had overtaken the resident heat. When the angels had fallen from the sky in the great exodus of life, there was a balance in the atmosphere fashioned from the new climate's extremity. At day, one would find hell, at night, realistic heaven; the flesh could freeze over. Lepro wished it were so; his clothing, designed for both travel by daylight and moonlight, protected him from the worst of the element's touch. Slowly, of course, it would seep through his textile protections, but he would not die. Lose a few toes, possibly, but that mattered little in the present. The moon could maim, but the murder was the sun, and it would do its course in the morning. He would remove his wrapping then and perish. He had not the will to slit his own wrists, not now, for the cold drained him of all energy.

The morning came, and the sun rose; his foot had gone completely numb. Sometime in the depths of the cold darkness, the cold had grown too prevalent, for it soaked into him through the exposed skin of his shattered ankle, and he had passed out, entering a hyperthermic trance. As the sun bore down upon him, it thawed his mind but not his foot. All the pain was gone, but the skin felt rigid and rubber-like. Lepro considered this a blessing, for it allowed him to move with a numbed grace. Positioning himself upward, the back of his neck pressed against the warming sand, he grimaced. The sun, dulled by his mask, had returned in full force, and its heat had drained him. Two more days, that was what he reckoned he had. If his leg retained its obtund state, he might even be able to summit the dune and continue his pursuit of the other colony. If he couldn't summit the dune, he would end his life, for he had not much longer until the sun drew from him all his strength.

Beginning his ascent, a pathetic pursuit of a slight incline piled upon the foundations of a toppled company building, he pushed himself forward. His left leg, which had born the fall's weight, couldn't hold his weight, which rendered him unable to stand. Like a toddler, he pushed his body up the dune, foot by foot. It was exhausting work, that which he could have crossed in mere minutes now seemed to take hours. But, in accordance to the same insensibility that had pushed him forth the day prior, that which had come from the assurance of death and the promise of finality, he advanced. Gripping the loose sands, forcing the intangible and collective particles of the despoiled soil into a solid step for his ascent, Lepro made his way up.

Under the sun, which had, in the time passed, found its place in the middle of the sky, he reached the top of the dune, but twenty meters from where he had awoken. There, at the top, was a hunched body. It dawned no protection from the sand; the abrasive wind freely embraced their nude form. A man of healthy prospects, his figure rounded and muscled, stood at the top of the dune but a few feet away from Lepro. His body was pale, the color of slightly aged paper, and he was smiling as the wind abused him. Lepro, thinking his mind lost, faster than he had expected, stopped and looked upon the angel who had descended to return his soul. A pragmatic man

rendered religious by the heat of the forbearing sun, Lepro, unsure of his own existence, sought to kiss the creature's feet. Subservience, without accordance with his will, overpowered him. The very existence of the beautiful entity, composed of pure and unbothered essence, demanded it. Coming closer to its feet, the creature turned its head to him.

"You will come then? Good."

And in his words, his tone, previously distorted by the sands, pure and distinct, the angel, peeled back the hellscape, picking up his corpse. Against the angel's soft skin, untorn and smooth, Lepro's limp hand rubbed, the foreign stimulus sending a slight tremor through his body. Reclined back, his body took upon the position of a martyr, his head slack, bent over the crook of the angel's forearm, matched the descending slant of his right leg, the splinted one jutted out at an unnatural angle. Carrying on without evidence of effort, the angel danced over the dune that was to serve as Lepro's fatal antechamber, malingered with a surreal sense of balance between the sharpened edges of the mercurial slate. To the east, now pressing against the winds current, to went, and within half an hour, it had arrived at its destination. At the base of one of the many derelict monoliths, it escaped the sun's watching eye, making its way into the skeletal remains of the high-rise.

In the back of the building, tucked away, was a marble staircase. From its depths was a slight upward draft, pushing out any of the polluting slate that had coated the remains of the building's foundations. It was here that the angel laid down Lepro, stripping off his crude brace. Moving upward, the seraph gently lifted off his face coverings, revealing his cracked skin. There was no hair underneath; he had, upon volition, shaved it all off, finding it intrusive when wrapping himself for his expeditions. Afterward, he found, none of it had grown back. Experiencing alopecia without the treatment of the cancerous tumors slowly growing all throughout his body, he had found it humorous at the time. It was like this, exposed to the elements, unprotected by devices he had come to worship; the mask, years before, the brace, the day prior, that the angel left him. Descending down the marble stairs, it held Lepro's dull knife in its right hand, the blade pointing towards the ground.

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Awaking at the top of the marble staircase, Lepro was slow to regain his senses. Sand and dirt, pushed back from the building's basement, had filled his nose, caking his eyes. He dedicated his rising perception; before he could tend to his environment, he first needed to account for his own health. His leg was still numb, entirely without sensation. Neither his feet nor toes responded to attempts at movement; it was as if they were not his own. His bag, which he carried a small canister of water, was missing, presumably lost in his tumble. Leaving him without a mask or any materials in a building he could not remember entering, facing a mysterious stage. Pushing himself against the wall, feeling the clinging grit rub off on his hands, Lepro attempted to lift himself up. On his third attempt, he succeeded, trying his numbed leg. He still had complete control of his lower hip, but everything below his kneecap was inaccessible. As such, he was able to take a few wobbling steps to the side, wanting to be free of the strange

gust coming from the basement, and consider his options. A few moments later, he accepted his situation, noting that there was only one natural choice. Life had brought him here; in the strange collision of seemingly disjointed events, he had been rendered in the presented position. There was no real reason to deny what he found himself poised in front of; his mind was far too fatigued to give any more reason to what he faced. Looking about at the banal conclusion of his subverted fate, Lepro began his descent down.

So deep was the flight of stairs that he could not make out the bottom, instead of focusing on keeping his unbalanced continence from falling down. One step at a time, he descended, quick to note the low ceiling height. Entering the realm between the unforeseen destination and the typical scenery of the above world brought forth a sense of static emptiness; purgatorial sensations clung to his aged skin. His nose kept looking for the familiar stench of humans, of the sickly and the diseased, the very scents he had learned to associate with the cool, damp world of sheltered existence but found none. Nothing was apparent here in-between worlds, just himself, and even that felt lacking and intangible.

At the base of the stairs was a trough of water, a glowing lantern placed above it. Immediately, without thought or restraint, Lepro flung his body towards it, lapping up its contents. The water was cool, matching the damp temperance of the air about him. Lepro's shadow was cast on the wall behind him, his body bent over like some starving beasts dining upon its prey. When his thirst was sated and his skin was moistened, Lepro rose, trembling with the pleasure of his findings. Still, even after his gluttonous outburst, the trough was half full. It was more water than he had seen in weeks and the most he had even been blessed to be in the company of. His back straightened; he had grown used to his limb's predicament. He gave the trough one last longing look before looking in front of him, down the tunnel.

As if it were a mine shaft, it was composed of compact dirt, held up by a skeleton of wooden posts and supports. It was dark, unlit other than the lantern above the trough; Lepro could make out nothing beyond his immediate sight. Letting himself lean against the wall, he continued forward, allowing the packed dirt walls to guide him. Ten steps ahead almost entirely emerged in darkness; another lantern ignited. This time it was to his left, casting a dim light over another trough. In this one, however, there was a thick red liquid. Moving over to look into its basin, Lepro stuck his finger in, testing its composition. In it, as met by his movements, were a great deal of small chunks of a foreign substance.

Glancing back at him was a mirror image of himself, only played to the tune of a red herring taking flight. His face was there but distorted; the swirling of the gestating tannins broke the retention of his form. A nose sliding downward, a face painted a crude shade of maroon, his eyes slipping from their sockets, flowing, flowing downward. They held some depth, some mention of meaning, his eyes, but it, as a whole, illuded him. A smile, caused by ripple or divination, he knew not which he might put forth as the truth, formed on his reflection. The liquid rose, his projected brow emerged from the pool, pulling alongside it an emergent bust of his head. Captivated by surreal conjuring beyond his immediate perception and far outside of his own subverted banal assumptions, he mimicked his nereid's movements, drawing himself closer to the trough. Triumph, pure unabridged victory, impossible retention of the ecstasy of both

mountains summited and lovers dominated; in his consumption of the nymphonic entity, he found all this and more. Exaltation consumed him, and he continued to drain the trough, finding an exacting sense of perfection within his every sense. Knowing only the desert, being born into a world of perilous declarations, one, in the great shadow of a fallen dogma, that failed to amount to any pursuit of life or truth, this release he found in the second through was untold of. Knowing only the dryness of need, a virgin body dropped into a pool of euphoria; he was to drown and find great pleasure in it.

“Here, you may die if you wish it. Your flesh is needed, not your mind. Cleanse it here, find within your wanting state wanton gluttony, and equalize the plague that has been set upon your body. Find here your need, and then sate it. Sate it, again and again, never cease, for eternity you may know this pleasure, so you shall never need to seek it again. You are to be our savior, the last man. As such, you must taste power and know its feeling. Drinking that which was necessary, you need none of this toxic brewery, but here you are, drinking with greater ferocity than you had under the weight of death’s shawl. Purge and purge, again and again, let your lungs fill with the taste of power, of succession. Think yourself worthy and deserving of this great fallacious feast. You cannot help it, for you are a man. We worried you might not be, and in such, watched carefully. Close, you came to removing yourself from the qualms of that dying race that is man, almost, in your ultimate death, emerging as the proprietor of the first generation of true man, of the...”

Flung backward, Lepro began to vomit profusely. His whole body was rejecting his stuporous spree of consumption; that which had been soaked deep into his veins was now being shoved out, spewing out of his nose and mouth. Accompanying the liquidized maroon excrement, acting as a vassal for it to be shipped out upon, was the water he had first drank at the entrance; the two were heterogeneous, in their shared space, they separated to the highest degree possible. Wrenching terribly, Lepro collapsed and was still for a while, his body and mind disgorging the parasitic replica from his revolting pneuma. At the base of the second angel, he deprecated his soul; his illegitimate and suppressed mortal desires brought forth in an amassed and unviewed spectacle. Taking on a similar illuminative form as the first, that which had stopped Lepro’s ascension, the second angel, stood tall above his collapsed body. Taking the form of a mother, it grabbed him from behind, lifting his body up by the armpits. In this awkward position, executed with precise and cursive manner, she laid him against the wall, facing the emptied trough. Brought forth by her motions, impressed upon his chest by her pressing hand, he coughed twice more, freeing his lungs from the last of the liquids. When he was able to open his eyes, the motherly angel was gone, leaving him alone. His clothes were thick with mud, a product of the liquid vices conglomerating with the resident sand; when he was able to rise from his kneeling position, he felt burdened by its weight.

What pushed him forward now was a sense of necessity; his collapsed lungs and frozen leg were but further driving forces. Left behind by the motherly seraph was a foreign scent, presenting a guide rail for Lepro to cling to. Wobbling forward, his head turned down, engrossed in the aroma, he continued down the dark tunnel. Within this damp void, he traveled for a while, emerged in complete darkness. He was only guided by the rough rocky walls and the angel’s

remains. As a child, before he had faced the sun's efforts, he had enjoyed playing in the colony's tunnels, rushing about with the other children in old ventilative shafts. It was a great game to them; the excitement of being in another world within the confines of their prison was overpowering. Squeaking with joy, one of the more adventurous children might slip through an opening, falling with a thud onto the ground of some long since abandoned office. It was all connected, the colony's system of underground havens; they had taken sanctuary in the underground network of the city's western commerce center. Sealing off all but one of the entrances, building the gardening beds, the procurement and establishment of their facility had been a massive undertaking. Such was the tale told to Lepro and the other children when they were found in compliance with their guardian's will, reminding them firmly that they were blessed to reside in such a safe world and that disrespecting it would bring no good.

Lepro felt no childish joy in his exploration of this facility, however. When he arrived at the end, announced only to him by the absence of the tunnel's accompanying walls, his heart was seized by a sense of apprehension rather than explorative desire. He had arrived at the end, blind and unable to move with proficiency; he was completely at the will of whatever might await him. This was a familiar sensation, and it brought a sort of cruel assurance to him.

"You have been cleaned, yes? You have washed yourself of your attachments, yes? Do you, in your sterile status, wish to see what you have been summoned to do?"

The voice, disembodied, did not wait for a response. At once, the room was illuminated, all darkness was cast aside, the walls became enflamed with the light of a thousand light bulbs awakening. Overhead, a row of spotlights turned on, pointed deliberately at Lepro. His shadow held a stronger sense of assertion than he. A few feet in front of him was another staircase leading down into a massive pit. It sprawled out hundreds of feet in both directions, an enormous crater underneath the steel foundations. An inverse of a Mayan pyramid, the lowest layer, half the length and width of the area encompassed atop the first step, was emerged in the same red liquid Lepro had drunk in the tunnel. Blocked from his vision, Lepro felt himself move towards the edge of the pit, his mind drawn to what it could not quite make out. Now on the edge of the first step downward, he looked down once more, finding nothing more. He, by the implied notion, recognized what he must do to sate the thirst that had begun to arise upon the moment of the liquid's perception. Waiting for him at the bottom of the manufactured cenote was his answer, his solution. There, hidden under the thick liquid, was what he had found wanting as he bored the sun's rays, waiting for his death. It was there, he was sure, that he would know what was propelling him forward. Only through the means of endeavoring to follow the absurd could he capture its meaning; this much was simple and certain.

"Descend then. Meet us in the depths."

Lepro complied.

Moving with a certain fluidity, ignoring his maimed physical body, he arrived at the edge of the pool. Looking into it once more, he found a simple reflection of his body and was considerably disgusted. Filthy and unkempt, composed of scrap and garbage, his clothing was quickly discarded; the room was warm enough to discredit their need. In their removal, he so was

appalled that he had been able to don them that he turned to ascend the stairs once more, depositing them somewhere far from his sight. Despite this internal desire, he found he could not take so much as a step away from the great basin. It seemed to cling to his body, refuting any attempt of severance, no matter how small. A quick wave of discomfort and fear rolled over his body, but it was dispelled alongside the filthy clothes, cast backward upon the stairwell. Now, unburdened, he stood awaiting the heavenly calling.

On each of his sides, an angel appeared to his right, a male, to his left, a female. Both were nude, as he was. Unlike him, they were beautiful creatures, their flesh holding weight, proposing a history of health and purposeful attention. Observing them with a heavy eye, for their excellence had already begun to exhaust Lepro's conscious, he noted their age; both could have been his parents. In their exposed chests, he found a reflection of what his parents could have been, what they might have been if not for the sins of their deceased forefathers. Recoiling, Lepro looked closer at each of them, squinting his eyes, for their holy forms brought strain to his vision. They were a perfect form of his parents, he had failed to recognize them, for he had never paid much importance to their passing, and their skin was so unlike the wrinkled and cracked lesion-ridden flesh he had witness years prior. Beyond the difference in their physical apparition, there remained another distinct difference. His parents had reeked of man; their filth and decrepit health were noticeable far before their bodies were present. These creatures, however, produced an intoxicating aroma, a perfume of cleanliness and fitness.

"Emerge yourself," both demanded, their tones absolute.

Lepro's body took a step forward.

Lining the edges of the pool, a thousand phantoms arose. Each was an epitome of good health; their stomachs protruded beyond their ribs, their faces were full. All, however, were without motion, without any semblance of life. They presented themselves as the apex of mountains of suffering, a perfect form, but they all lacked something integral. As if in response to Lepro's subconscious critique, they began to move, shifting their weight between their feet. Each muscle, from his father and mother's forms beside him, and in the distance, from all the others, twinged as it should have, each pocket of flesh moved in accordance to its anatomy. Yet still, they lacked something, an element that was insurmountably small but indistinguishably important. Searching for this, Lepro found none had shadows, for light shone through each of the angels; being entities of light, they bent it about them, reflecting not their body upon the ground but the environment they were composed of. Immediately, thousands of shadows were formed, all cast away from the liquid below; according to this inherent rule, the room's very lighting changed, angling outward to produce the already present shadows. More and more, from the face to the foot, Lepro named issue upon issue with the angel's present. In an internal and unseen resistance to their orders, the very last push from the man who had been left upon the dunes, Lepro refused to acknowledge their assertion upon the realm he had lived and would soon die in.

"What more do you need before you commit to the inevitable?"

Lepro looked up from his trance, his attention divided by the amassed creatures beside him. In his irregular ordinations, he had forced them to take upon ungodly shapes, perverting their once pure simplicity. His false mother lacked limbs; her stomach had reverted, her face half decomposed. Composed similarly, his father's teeth spiraled within his maw, showing off a circular pattern of teeth when he smiled, displaying a false emotion Lepro's resistance had demanded. All around, they took the forms of monsters; the angels had been twisted to an almost unrecognizable state. Lepro, unsure of his very self, feeling a great surge of fear and subservience crashing against an equal swell of confidence and dissonance, looked away from the ranks of the angel's, glancing down at the liquid under him. No reflection looked back at him; he was alone in that final moment.

"Drink from the water here, and once every creature here as had their fill, I'll follow."

At once, without question, for every demand was met with absolute compliance, each of the deformed angels fell to their knees and began lapping up the crimson liquid. Receiving each drop with a gluttonous need, their bodies began to twist about, their limbs fluctuated in size and form. The false mother beside him sprouted four new arms alongside its torso, one of which almost struck Lepro. To his right, the spurious father began to meltdown to nothing, his features waxen and smooth, his limbs fell to the floor, sliding off their respective locations with a sickening laxness. All about, in complete silence, the angels brought up the liquid, their forms taking on terrible aspects of devilry, Lepro's command proving to be of a terrible and demeritorious purpose. Minutes passed, horrible, long, visceral, minutes, in which every second Lepro's conscious was assaulted by the deformities presented until all the liquid had been drained. Unable to look down at what had been hidden by the red pool, entirely transfixed by the terrible forms of the deformed angels, Lepro received not a demand but an utterance of a word, one beyond his diction or comprehension. Feeling this word, employing its consideration as a shield against the background of corporal depravity, Lepro shook his head. His hands running alongside his bare arms, feeling the tumorous growths and the absolute lack of follicles, he paused. Then, he spoke it aloud, ridding himself of the biblical pronouncement, and every angel fell to the ground, deflating. Water drained from their malformed and misplaced orifices, in its departure taking away bit by bit of their contorted bodies. In a slow progression, the angels were evaporated, transformed, and the pool was once again filled, only this time with water.

From wine to water, from divinity to abased secularity, Lepro had wrought about a grave transformation, all under the qualms of replication of his very essence, left behind in the world of sand above. He had, in the desert, failed to ascend. Here, in the safety of plethora and plentiful reserves, of goodness and companionship, debased and meaningless as they might have been, he had failed to descend. Now, left alone, feeling the passing of his own mortal flesh, transformed not by the conversion of the wine but by the assault of the sun and the land he had been cruelly left, he looked upon what might have been his.

At the bottom of the pool was a geometric entity. Long strands, composed of a ruthlessly and unforgivingly clean metal, belonging not to his forefathers nor his era, formed ladder like constructions between larger still pillars. Beneath the clear water, some sort of passed god lied, only its bones, pure and free from calcification, remained. Composed entirely of sharp edges, of

definite and planned creation, it was nearly a perfect structure. Only one abrasion of the material stood present, upon the greatest beam, that which the winding helixes of steel-like substance established as a base, there was an unnatural and imperfect hole. As if someone had shot at it with a great cannon, the projectile tearing through its platted scaffolding, it remained shattered and imperfect. A great sense of despair amounted within his breast, looking at the perversion of this perfect creature, and in such, seeing that the sensation was a preservation of the perished angel's wills and not his own expression, Lepro retired to the stairway, sitting on the bottom step.

Like this, he bade his time. He had failed, ultimately, in accomplishing anything. On land, in the realm of the present reality, where he had slain his own internal dragon, questioning the notions presented by the gushing sand, presented as the beast's lifeblood, he had failed. Now, here, under the wanting eyes of a community of reception and pleasant fulfillment, he too had failed to accept what was beautiful and immediate. He had questioned and demanded, stirring the liquid he had ruined the perfect absorption of a pretty reflection. In this failure, he found himself not saddened or resentful. Just, as he remarked, leaning his head back against an upper stair, calm. His body would not last much longer; his spirit had been rejected, his will found wanting. Born into the ranks of the kaninchen, seeking the promise of the kojote, he too had failed in living as either. Without rank, without ascension, without acceptance; he was, in all senses, an *anderermensch*.