

The Madness of Toriakus Boro



as told by Chaobang
2022-3 CE – Year of the Tiger



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for Jora-Bora

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!”

Charles Dickens: *A Christmas Carol* (1843)

You're making some folks uncomfortable by treating our characters like real people. You gotta recognize that not everyone shares your perspective on that. I've gotten multiple complaints about it in the past few weeks...

A correspondence

Your friends... What kind of...people are they? I wonder... Do those people...think of you...as a friend?

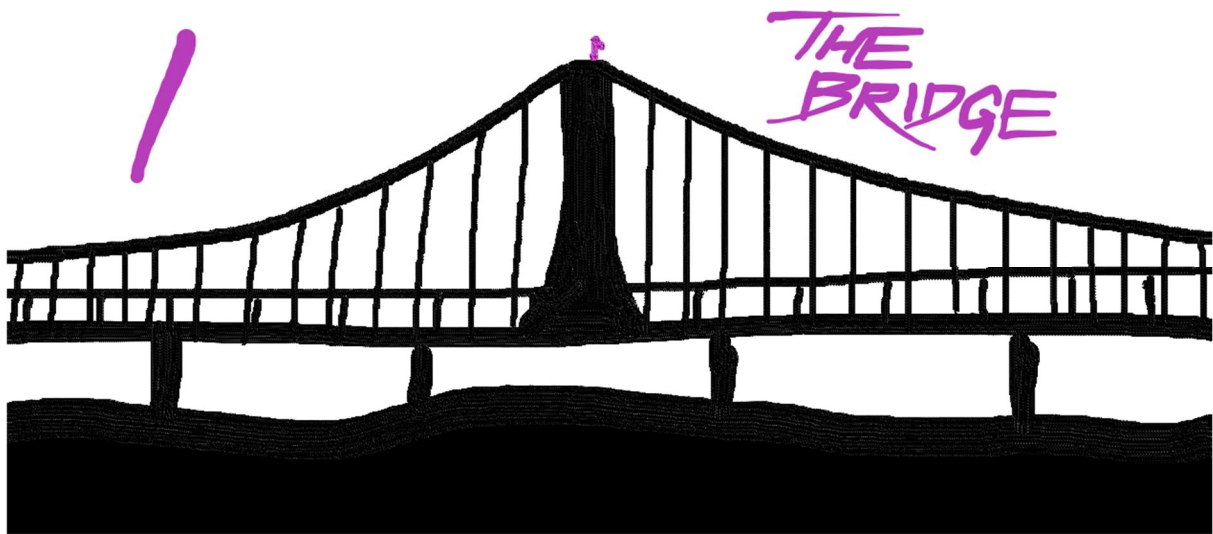
***The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (2000)**

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Cyania, Creame, Majora and Jorako belong to themselves and participate in this story on their own enthusiastic volition. The author makes no claim of agency, still less ownership, over them or their conduct herein.

Iorialus Bóro is fictional.



Iorialis Bóro was real. There is no doubt whatever about that.

Certainly that is not to imply that everyone believed Bóro was who the galleries, documentaries and culture pages claimed him to be. Nor is it to ignore the conspiracy theorists, who ridiculed the notion that so remarkable an artist could climb to such eminence from a working-class background, or so unstable a war-torn country as the Wisconsin Republic, or have so peculiar a name, or even exist at all; for how could any one man, however gifted or dedicated to his craft, produce such a staggering output in painted and sculpted masterpieces? Their conclusion – they’d researched it, you see – was that Bóro could be no fewer than six or seven individuals, working collectively under the one name.

But facts are facts, and as a matter of fact, Bóro was real: a truth which must be understood with absolute clarity if you are to derive any sense, let alone advantage, from the story you are about to hear. If a shred of healthy scepticism remains in your mind, then let it take comfortable rest not on my word, nor even on Mr. Bóro’s reputation as the most accomplished artist in the late lamented United States of America; but rather, on the sound of his scream.

You couldn’t miss it. The roar that rattled from his log-cabin window that fateful summer’s morning, whipping the curtains like a sail in a storm and sending foraging blackbirds fluttering for their lives:

“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

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Quite so, I'm afraid.

I wish it were not, but that's the reality.

But wait. Let's not mistake this for one more example of that worn-out stock outburst, made stale by the American cinematic industry prior to its cruel destruction, along with its Californian heartland, at the height of the Second Civil War. To nitpick it as such would risk undermining the pivotal point here: namely, and to repeat, that Iorialus Bóro was real.

On the contrary, Bóro's howl was unique to him. It was so harmonic in pitch, so ripplingly robust in its quality, so unstoppable in the impact of its sheer essential no-ness, that it was as a signature, stamped emphatically into the Earth's atmospheric profile, of that considerable fact: the existence of Iorialus Bóro.

For the lay observer it sufficed to be startled out of one's wits by it. More nuanced commentators, especially those in the profession, put it down to his *terribilità*. The *terribilità* of his bulging glare; of the way the skin seemed to spiral in behind his nostrils when he turned it on you, with a contraction of the triangle of freckles on his left cheek, still prominent against the blotching left by five decades of American...cuisine (let's be polite); of his ferocious beard, bunched thick as the war-charred brambles of this woodland he called home; and let us forget least of all the *terribilità* of his works: the goddesses, demons and uncanny personages brought to life by his hand in those squalls of paint and thrusting towers of marble, whose common impression, to name but one, was to leave the viewer feeling dreadfully, marvellously tiny: like chequers on whatever board those beings played out their thrilling cosmic recreations.

With visions like those, it was no wonder those far from Mr. Bóro felt apt to suspect his reality, or at the very least, his sanity. But ask anyone privileged to know him and they would tell you there was no soul on Earth more straightened-out in his mind than down-to-earth, no-nonsense Iorialus Bóro. Here was a man who knew what he wanted, did what was necessary, and knew with iron conviction his fact from fiction.

Was that odd, for an artist? Well, perhaps it reflected how so few artists of his age – a true Old American – had made it through the barbarous decade that rent his homeland apart in blood and rancour. That conflict accounted, among many things, for the condition of his home territory. Though nominally a Republic as a bone for its shattered people's pride, Wisconsin was in all practical matters an occupied subject of Canada, one of a dozen such zones in the territorial shambles along the fortieth to fiftieth parallels that was the ultimate upshot of the Canadian Intervention. Such pitiless years had favoured (if living on in such a world can be described as such) doers over thinkers, realists over idealists, movers over

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dreamers; and whatever else you might have called Mr. Bóro, he was not, that is, assuredly *not* a dreamer.

Which in turn was why his latest expression – to give it again, for clarity: “Nooooooooooooooooooooooooo!” – would have puzzled any member of his dedicated fan club, the Bórolites, had they been present to hear it.

It was the same dream, he realised, sitting up in his bed in a drench of cold sweat. The same nightmare, rather, for to call it a *dream* would be to at least keep the door ajar to some pleasing interpretation. But no, he’d decided, there was not a grain of good to be ground from it. It was a nightmare, plain and simple: a senseless, frightening, irredeemably horrible nightmare.

He couldn’t remember when it had first emerged, this grim leviathan, lurching onto his mind as if from the dark depths of Lake Superior. In some period it must have surfaced once a week, perhaps two, but the summer where our story begins finds it returning for him night after tortured night.

Every night: the same dream, the same sea, the same bridge.

A suspension bridge. Grander even than those Chinese megaprojects whose costly failures had embodied that power’s own half-disintegration. A bridge to nowhere, stretching on into the night till it vanished in a mass of fog and fear. It had the breadth for five lorries side by side, while its grand tower (it must have had at least a dozen, but only this stood close enough to distinguish) shot through the sky like a battery of space elevators; indeed, when viewed against the gigantic Moon, appeared to impale it where it hung.

The Moon: it was grotesque! When had it ever looked so hideous? Something was frightfully wrong with it, that much was sure, but by then Bóro’s attention had switched to the silhouette against that pale disc: a person, standing atop the tower. He could tell it was a person because next thing he knew he was up there too, tussling and grappling with this individual in a mortal struggle, and they’d started it, it was their fault, because he’d heard them say “I am Bóro”; to which he could only reply, because he knew the truth: “No! I am Bóro!” And then he was fighting for his life, shoving, thrashing, losing, losing no matter what he attempted in this unfolding panic-scroll of snarls and slips and flapping coats at the apex of this monstrous crossing, foghorns and searchlights and rotor-blades closing in in the driving rain, then always – always! – his flinch at a glimpse of...something, on his adversary’s face in the glare of a lightning strike, something horrific, something so beyond the scope of sense that he could never remember what it was; and then it was too late, in his distraction the impostor’s arm struck his chest, a muscular thump which sent him soaring from the tower and falling, falling, falling to the void-dark sea...

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Hence Mr. Bóro's indulgence, as he roared awake, in that most unfortunate of maligned clichés – "Nooooooooooooooooooooo!" in case you forgot – and I hope that now, having witnessed the ordeal which drove him to it, you will find in your heart the benevolence to forgive the poor fellow.



Being the practical sort of gentleman, Iorialus Bóro wasted not a fleck of his morning on that terrible vision. Nightmares were nightmares: unreal, and that was the end of it. The notion of drawing meaning from such illusions was akin to wringing speech from stone, the absurdity of which Bóro, creator that he was, understood well.

What troubled him more, creator that he was, was the impact on his sleep. He'd have to call on his doctor to inquire if the latest foreign aid shipments had put his pills back in supply. If not, well, the only recourse would be to probe through his well-connected Bórolites, discreetly of course, for the smuggled article.

It was no use beating about the bush. Ailments like these could only be an unfortunate side-effect of factors outside his control: whether age, or drink (some qualities of the Wisconsin Republic proving more durable than its constitutional status), or otherwise the exotic dusts and pigments which he'd long accepted as hazards of his trade.

Having so reminded himself, he was free to dismiss the matter at a snort, and devote the greater depth of his mug of dark-roasted coffee to more productive commitments.

Of which, the first two for the day were straightforward: an invitation to appear at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam for the opening ceremony of an exhibition of his work in a fortnight's time, and another the week after at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. Yes to both: all expenses covered, a handsome bit

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extra for showing his face, and, because everyone in the international art world knew him well enough by now, no onus for fancy speeches or explanations of his work. He had only to offer the famous glower, and that would satisfy the wall of notepads and snapping lenses that piled up at word of his visitation.

He was just about to sign his approval on a third invitation, from the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Jakarta, when, actually reading the thing, he came upon something intolerable. There, there it descended: the Iorialus Bóro eye-bulge, the contorted brow, the pulsing red nose and trembling beard of judgement; and at once the Old Master slammed his fists on the keyboard, whereon, punishing it like a faulty piano, he hammered out the words:

Sir – I note with justified ire your use of the term ‘lifelike’ to describe my oil on canvas The Goddess Majora Devouring the President’s Sons. Please to be informed that the characters in my work are fictional, and not, in fact, ‘lifelike’, nor indeed bearing of the faintest resemblance to life, reality, existence, or any other formulation with which you might characterise the real world – and, further, that your suggestion they do is an affront, a heinous irresponsibility, and a terminal discredit to yourself and your institution. While in a personal capacity I wish you the speediest recovery from whatever regrettable condition gives rise to these delusions, professionally you leave me with but the singular option: to wit, I decline your invitation, categorically, and require that you remove my works from display, return all pieces on loan, and never care to exhibit any or any part thereof in future.

Respectfully yours, Iorialus Bóro.

P.S. They’re not real.

He slammed the *Send* button, forwarded a copy to his lawyers for good measure, then seized up the offending invitation, ripped it to shreds, and deposited its sorry remnants in the waste-paper basket.

Lifelike! Imagine that!

Bóro’s mood was completely ruined.

An average day found Bóro conjuring in his studio, palette in one hand, four brushes at a time flourishing like conductors’ batons in the other. Otherwise he’d be hurtling about the ladders and scaffolds of his sculpting yard, entrancing even the bears and lynxes with his zeal for chiselling miracles from stone.

Oh, if you’d but seen him at these labours! But of course, you couldn’t; it was precisely to stop you that Bóro, for all that his career’s takings could have established him in comfort in the Wisconsin Republic’s surviving cities, instead dwelt alone in this humble log cabin in the northern woods. The softened light

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filtering through their leaves soothed his aesthetic sensibilities, not to mention his mood, while the remoteness and wild predators kept nosy eyes off his process (the animals being naturally too afraid of him to make trouble), and offered space to unfurl his creativity into the areas and volumes it righteously demanded.

His lifeline was his fan club, the devoted Bórolites. Their three to four hundred members were mostly working professionals with creative urges they pursued in their spare time. A core of these, some thirty or forty, had been Bóro's friends for decades, and had organised the security, intelligence and supply arrangements that saw him safely and without interruption through the conflict years. Even now, with an eye to his advancing age, they sent him regular deliveries of food, art supplies, and more than the occasional gift: his vintage coffee-press, the thick brown overcoat he never left home without, the Nintendo Galaxy games that were ever his inspiration, or most worthily of all, his precious, precious reserves of Madagascan white chocolate.

As you see then, these people knew people. It was no ordinary feat, in this wrecked and partitioned post-conflict society, to procure resources so rare as these. But by now you grasp Bóro's renown, so it should not surprise you that the Bórolite milieu encompassed officers and administrators from the Canadian occupation, business owners from the questionably-subsidised new-rich class cropping up from the ruins as they do, Old American veterans, foreign consuls and inspectors, and about every possible description of trader, fixer and specialist. It also counted recent immigrants, with their access to vital overseas networks, who had travelled from the other occupied zones – sorry, United Nations Special Protectorates – within the former American fringe. The Cuban, Haitian and Mexican zones were each represented, as was Chinese Alaska (the 'recovery' of this 'inalienable sovereign territory since time immemorial' having taken place in the closing phase of the war). Ostensibly here in service of relief and rebuilding projects, everyone knew they'd really come out of admiration for the Old Master and his work, as well as a determination, no matter what equally creative accountancy or supply-chaining they had to leverage, to see him splash his paints and carve his blocks in health for many years to come.

They would have done it for free, such was their esteem. But Bóro valued his supporters, no matter how he affected to rail at them for always wanting things, and so he bent his back to reward them with privileges. These included the exclusive right, for a three-hour window each season, to submit commission requests. Of the hundreds he received he'd work his magic on whichever he liked best, and you could guarantee it'd be hemmed in by crowds at the Louvre, the Victoria and Albert, or the Hakone Sculpture Park by the end of the year.

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Occasionally he'd even set up a webcam, such that for a breathtaking few hours his followers could watch him at it, his wilderness's terrible internet connection only scattering a further mystique upon proceedings.

And then, on the final day of each month (this thirty-first of July being such a day), a car driven by the Bórolites' chief secretary, a New Madison restaurant owner named Cavallaro, would show up to drive the Old Master from his sylvan retreat, out along hastily-repaired highways replete with Canadian checkpoints, derelict gas stations, charred husks of tanks and artillery pieces scattered about the wayside, and tent-cities full of the displaced, past which Cavallaro sped to spare his passenger the attentions of the itinerant peddlers and window-washers; then on into the nearest town, the strategically-renamed Bóroville, or more specifically to the world-famous Iorialus Bóro Gallery on Bóro Street. This grand pile had its own story. Formerly the town's historic post office, it was used as a garrison by Maga Confederacy militias during the war, wrecked by Canadian shelling, then restored, after the Treaty of Thunder Bay, as the Museum of American Memorabilia: a repository of yesterdays such as tattered flags, armaments, a mountain of captured and burned red caps, and in pride of place, the Liberty Bell from the destroyed Wisconsin State Capitol, which the sensitive (or perhaps shrewd) occupiers had allowed them to display as a salve for wounded sentiments. But the museum had gone bust as those sentiments, perhaps ill-disposed to their shameful past, fumbled instead for some prospect of future; at which point the Bórolites, sensing the opportunity, passed a money pot around, bought up the museum, and expanded it into a massive new permanent exhibition for Bóro's most prestigious works.

There they were then, three ground-floor wings spread across eight hectares, affording the proper floor space, ambient lighting, and museum cleaning-fluid fragrance to appreciate such masterpieces as *Cyania from the Ashes of Stratholme*, and *Lynels at Dusk*, and *The Goddesses of Balance*, and *Cats in the Snow on a Thursday Morning in Spring*, and *The Pudding-Demon Creame Plunders the Sweets of God* (works ridiculing the old Christian deity, identified with the atrocities of the Maga Confederacy, had been in high fashion in the war's immediate aftermath); and of course the four towering panels which so long ago had first made Bóro's name, known colloquially by their nickname the Green Quadtych. Unlike the residual Americana, now relegated to the second floor, the huge throngs of tourists who packed airplanes for these covered the museum's costs seven times over, to say nothing of their favours for the Wisconsin Republic's economic revival.

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Only one person in the world had better to do than visit these marvels. That was Iorialus Bóro, who on his arrival this evening stomped straight past his museum's double doors and took a side passage, accompanied by Cavallaro and a pair of security guards, into the private hall where to grace the monthly Bórolite reception with his presence.

Oh, to hear it! – the immediate hush, like the smothering hand of his goddess Majora over its chatter and clinking glasses and shuffling soles as like a magnificent thunderhead, the Old Master drifted into the room.

“Hooray!” someone roared, and next moment Bóro was as a grizzled mariner, rowing his dinghy upon an ocean of claps and handshakes.

“Wonderful to see you in fine health, Mr. Bóro!” The gallery's curator, the huge Madame Rogg, came barrelling at the old man to thump him on the back and push an overflowing pint-glass into his hands.

“Mr. Bóro, Mr. Bóro! Would you be so kind as to provide some words of encouragement for your suffering fans across the border?” inquired his good friend Mr. Zorić, chief correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, recorder at the ready. “Oh, and have you any tips I could pass on to my new cartoonist? She idolises you, and rightly so!”

“Oy! Mr. Bóro!” came the shout of the infamous Great Lakes pirate – or rather (let's remain courteous) the transportation specialist, Captain Butcher: a fellow who looked every part his name, yet still had to raise his voice to be heard over the storm of cheers and toasts. On wading close, he leaned down to put into Bóro's ear: “Seriously, how are you man? Heard the old – you know – 's been troubling you lately. See me in the back when you've a minute, I might have something to help you with that.”

Now there was a hand he could shake with vigour! But he'd shake all of them so, he insisted on it, each person here had negotiated bandit-infested broken highways and fields full of mines to come pay him their respects, so yes, absolutely, there would be warm words for the staff taking such good care of his works, and advice for the new cartoonist, and a wad of appreciation for the hard-working...freightmen braving cutthroat rivals and the Canadian Navy to keep the good folks of the Wisconsin Republic fed and medicated.

Speaking of which, here was Commodore Eva of the Lake Michigan Fleet herself! Having greeted the Old Master, she and the pirate flashed grins. There were no enemies under the Bórolite umbrella, only real human beings, all rank and pretension stripped away in the shared starscape of primal emotions to which his artworks were their shuttle.

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“Buddy! You made it!” Colonel Dasgupta, the Canadian Vice-Director for Public Security, Occupation Headquarters, Wisconsin Republic, came up behind him.

Bóro’s beard beamed as they embraced. This was one of his oldest friendships, dating to when Dasgupta had started out as a struggling fantasy novelist in his twenties. Bóro had done illustrations for him, and their bond remained robust even as the Maga Confederacy’s Redcaps spread the war into his native Manitoba, driving him to take up arms, astonish himself as much as his superiors with his talent for organising others, and thus find himself, in the course of the Canadian Intervention, at the spearhead of the liberation of Bóro’s home territory. If it wasn’t its remoteness that had spared Bóroville the worst of that ferocious fighting, it was surely Dasgupta’s considerate input on his old friend’s behalf at the strategy table.

“Still at your books I hear,” said Bóro with a grin. “I’m sure you’re finding plenty of time to write in your new post, what with how well-behaved we are up here.”

“Yeah. Let’s just say I’m grateful not to have been appointed to...you know, more restive parts,” Dasgupta replied, with a shifty side-glance in case any of his colleagues from the miserable Ohio occupation were present. “But hey! You know it’s you we have to thank, Iorialus. Your stuff reminds people of what’s important. Why, the love and excitement that bursts from your –”

“Nonsense, nonsense.” Bóro waved his hand. “I do what I feel like, you know that. Glad if it makes people happy.”

“Oh, more than happy, don’t be modest!” the Colonel insisted. His eyes were misting, and if you looked carefully you could resolve that mist into a thirty-year catalogue of Bóro after heart-stirring Bóro, as though the artist had sewn each masterwork straight upon the man’s heart on the operating table.

“Tell you what,” Dasgupta pressed on. “You heard about the ceasefire last week with the rebel holdouts in the Western Upland, yes?”

“I did, did I? Come man, you know I don’t follow politics.”

“Heh. Of course you don’t. Well, want to guess how we did it? No threats, no UN peacebuilders, no months stuck in talks. We invited them here and had a chat in front of your *Sunday Afternoon at Creame’s Bakery*. That’s it. They were in tears I tell you. Your painting did all the work. They couldn’t say if it transported them more to the childhoods they’d wished they had, or to magical worlds awaiting them beyond the stars. Either way, we all remembered what life was about. That adorable innocence in Creame’s face, it *transported* them, left them amazed at how you could take such a curious creature and make her look so *real* –”

Silence, like a flash freeze. Chatter, laughter, shuffles, glugs, all strangled; the room a gallery of statues, each a study in petrified horror.

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“Real,” uttered Bóro, from the back of his throat.

A crystalline crack, lengthening in your ear. Then a crash, as the glass exploded in his trembling hand.

It was a spell of release, for at once the reception hall was as a firing range as a fusillade of cries, condemnations and outstretched fingers launched in unison upon the mortified Colonel Dasgupta, who, realising his mistake, now clapped his hands to his lips and reeled in circles as in a doomed attempt to zigzag this crossfire. But to no avail, for here once more descended the wrath of Iorialus Bóro, whose censure, each word worth a hundred of any mere mortal’s, battered unto his old friend’s ribs:

“Real, you say? Real? I thought better of you, you, you – you understand what you have done sir? Do you? Do you?”

“Your pardon, please!” the Colonel protested. “I didn’t mean – for goodness’s sake man, it wasn’t even my –”

“You called one of my characters real. You said it. He said it. You all heard him say it, did you not?”

“What the hell is wrong with him?” someone shouted; “He needs psychiatric help!” another complained, and then they were all over him, wringing their slighted spleens upon the man who, whether through carelessness or pent-up malevolence it didn’t matter, had committed the ultimate *faux pas* in Bórolite culture. The border between the real world in which they lived, and the all-too-compelling imaginative realm of their artworks: that was a frontier more strictly fortified than any in this blood-spattered mosaic of post-American territories. To undermine it was reckless. Dangerous. Unforgivable.

“We cannot accept it sir.” Bóro’s voice ascended like the crank-up of a bearded Gatling gun. “No, no, we cannot accept it! You, you of all people, know you no better? They are *fictional* characters! Designed by me! Yet you, sir, you would speak of them as though they were real? Here, in a public setting? In *my* community, whose distress at your behaviour lies plain before you? It’s not on! It’s a disgrace! Time and a place man, time and a place, everyone knows it, you are necessitated to recognise it, and if that simple consideration is beneath your care, well, then – out.”

Dasgupta stood stunned. “Wh-What?”

“Out. At once.”

“Oh no. No, no, you can’t do this, you can’t! Iorialus – we’ve been friends for years!”

“OUT!” Bóro roared, and in the ensuing scuffle Dasgupta had his cap knocked askew, his face scratched, his coat ripped and scrunched as in a rain of fists and

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tankards Cavallaro took hold of his one side, and Captain Butcher the other, and with further acceleration supplied by Madame Rogg's boot on his rear they dragged the offending element from the hall, his cries and collisions echoing back up the corridor till the outer door slammed them from the Bórolite world. By the time the Colonel's ear hit the rain-drenched pavement, no ears in the hall had cares left for it: everyone was back to discussing Bóro's art in the appropriate way.

The secretary and transportation specialist stepped back in, beating the dust and rain off their jackets. Bóro took them aside, checked they weren't hurt, and offered his thanks for their due diligence.

"No trouble," said Cavallaro. "Rules are rules. Don't matter how they feel about it, if they want to be part of a social space then they can't go about behaving like they're mentally ill."

"Aye, we don't need weird shit like that," grunted the pirate. "Hrrm. Still, d'you think something might actually be wrong with him? It can't bode well for us, having someone who can't separate fact from fantasy so high in the administration. You alright Mr. Bóro?"

The Old Master's arm still shook. He took a pause, to get his breathing under control.

"Yes," he said at length. "Yes, I shall be. You just make sure I never see that man's face in here again."

As it happened, Bóro narrowly missed Vice-Director Dasgupta on the way out. The Colonel had remained on his knees, in the rain, stupefied by disbelief, clinging with his sight to the statues of the balance deities Majora and Minora that stood astride the gates to the Iorialus Bóro Gallery, his spiritual home. The solidity of their towering stances, somehow only stauncher for the glints of mischief in their eyes, could not square in his heart with what it refused to know: that that world had rejected him, exiled him, made of him a criminal; it was over, just like that.

The shock was worse than anything in his military career. Even coming inches from a Redcap suicide-bomber during the harrowing bloodbath of the Third Battle of Kenosha was no comparison.

In that lamentable paralysis he remained until eight minutes to eleven, when his kindly aide at last prevailed on him to be steered into an official car and driven away. Five minutes later Bóro himself emerged, accompanied by Cavallaro to the latter's own vehicle, a lean and mean Chang'an electric, for the long drive home. The rain too was driving now, fierce and cold as the humiliated heart of this post-conflict statelet; another advantage to his rural residence, Bóro thought, for

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runaway climate change in the ruined municipalities of the Wisconsin Republic meant slums submerged by floods, filth vomiting from sewers, and water supplies made undrinkable by the chemical residues both of the conflict itself and the agro-industrial plants it had laid to waste.

“When did July ever get this cold?” his driver complained, as a column of Canadian armoured cars rolled past at a junction. “Aah, look at them go! Suddenly they’re making the flashiest APCs in the world and even two years after the war finished they’re crawling all over us, just to show off, but it’s still too hard for them to fix our electricity grid. Damn power cuts. I hate this dark. Gives me the creeps, it does. You alright there Mr. Bóro?”

Bóro snorted by way of acknowledgement. He’d half dozed off in the passenger seat, as was his habit.

Impatient fingers rapped on the steering wheel.

“Nice gathering though weren’t it? Got them all excited for your forthcoming statue.”

Cavallaro paused, as if in hope of a reply.

When it didn’t come, he added, with hesitance: “You sure you don’t want to offer a hint about –”

“*Creame’s Abode*,” grunted Bóro. “Sculpture of her house. Not a word. But you’ll need to know in advance because you’re going to arrange the transport for it. I shall unveil it at the end-of-year gathering.”

So riveted was his club secretary at being first in line for this news that he didn’t realise the lights had changed; and, it being too dark for other road users to see it was Bóro in the car, he received a blast of irate horns for his trouble.

They drove on, headlights carving through the night, to the outskirts where stood the Actually Reformed Church of Christ the Sorry. The building had been cobbled out of debris at the war’s end by a sect of the old religion, seeking to rescue its repute in an image of healing, compassion, social empathy, critical thought and opposition to all abuses of power (no really this time); thereby, they hoped, dissociating it from the violence in which the Redcaps of the Maga Confederacy had buried its name.

Ever with a care to encourage worthy civic endeavours, Bóro had donated them a charismatic limestone carving of one of his characters, the undead warrior Cyania. As a sign of the open-minded spirituality they sought to espouse, they’d installed it in pride of place as a gargoyle on the belfry. Even in these foul conditions, the driver could take heart in her silhouette: coffin-lid shield raised to protect her flock, sword held high to catch the lightning, cape arranged in Bóro’s signature mastery so as to drain the rain and lend to the sculpture’s structural

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stability, all while appearing to flap free in the wind. Her grin would have lifted the most wretched political prisoner in the confidence that the universe cared, that all would work out whether in this phase of life or the next; and though it was too dark to see it, the mere knowledge it was there quelled Cavallaro's urge to reach for the heater button.

Bóro's grumble broke the silence. "Look. Isn't that one of the Canadian fighting vehicles?"

No mistake, there in the rear-view mirror loomed the turreted outline of one of those armoured cars.

Cavallaro frowned. "Following us? That can't be right."

Dasgupta? – Bóro wondered, but immediately thought better. He wouldn't. Every Canadian from High Command down knew that to so much as touch Iorialus Bóro would be to bring a world's worth of fire down on their heads, not to mention put the war back on before you could say "Give Us Back Our Upper Peninsula".

The man was dead to him at any rate. What he'd done: it just wasn't on.

They turned right, now following the edge of the vast churchyard. Vast, because the war had promoted this typical town cemetery into the worst mass grave in the region. Each tablet, cross or angel that peeked from that ocean of fog stood for dozens of corpses, none of whom, need it be said, had entered the premises in such fine condition as Bóro's charming zombie on high.

"Huh. Looks like they've gone." Cavallaro craned round just to be sure, though it was a matter to be sure of anything in this accursed gloom.

"I suppose they were headed out on the Minneapolis road," said Bóro, irked to find himself roused alert by this strange turn. "Hrnh. Still grisly up that way I hear. Are you sure this route is safe?"

"Positive," said the secretary, though the waver in his voice betrayed him. "It's the same road Butcher's gang takes to supply my restaurant up in New Madison. Never had any problems with it."

Bóro noticed the man take a hand off the wheel to feel for his coat pocket. Within it, he knew, lay a revolver which, strictly speaking, ought to have been handed in under the decommissioning programme.

"Damn. That's some fog." Cavallaro's eyes left the road to peer through the cemetery fence. "Almost makes you think there's – no!"

Out of nowhere the Canadian armoured transport came careening off a side-road, swerving into their path with a hellish screech of tyre on tarmac, and had the secretary lost a hair of a moment on the brakes then that would have been the end of things. Next it was their seatbelts that saved them, though the car's frame might have done better without the deforming rattle of Bóro's roar.

THE MADNESS OF IORIALUS BÓRO

The Mask

The shock struck Cavallaro from his senses; neither the freezing rain nor the authority of his target registered as he drew down the window, stuck out his head and loosed a Sicilian tirade at the armoured lunatics who but for the width of one of Bóro's brushes might have deprived the world of the Old Master's miracles for good, let alone left the southern Republic's populace in grief for want of the saving grace of fresh cannoli. Bóro too was on the point of getting out to give the swaggering occupiers a piece of his thunder when Cavallaro's fuse went out as fast as it had lit; in fact he was trembling, jowls pouring with sweat, a crooked finger raised as he struggled to utter, but couldn't get the words out –

“What...the...fuck...” Bóro spoke for both of them.

From the armoured vehicle's hatch: a shaggy shadow, unfurling as it resolved into a feathered figure: tall, far too tall, and though it stood right before their windshield it was too dark to discern any features, except...horns? Spikes? Tendrils? Sharp protrusions, striking forth from where its head might be...

A mask?

A mask! Its colours flowing to life as the full moon, fresh and bright as celestial truth, broke forth from the clouds: there, there he saw it! Two enormous circles, aglow in an amber not of the traffic lights they might have resembled in a more comical tale but the cores of vengeful suns, pinpoint pupils piercing into his –

“Aaaaaahhh!” That was Cavallaro, overcome with terror as he thrust a shaking hand into his pocket, missed, missed, missed again, succeeded on the fourth attempt and yanked out his handgun, fumbled, nearly dropped it, got a grip and took aim through the windshield –

A thrusting motion by the phantom, it had arms it appeared, and the driver slumped in his seat, dead if not for the sleep-bubble swelling and receding into his nostril.

And now it was Bóro's turn to panic, for this was wrong, this was all wrong, but unlike his driver his was a career's experience of precise coordination of sharp instruments in hands which ever seethed with creative rage, and that muscle memory came to his aid as he seized Cavallaro's pistol, kicked his way from the car before the horror could cut him off, and barrelled through the gate in the fence, in amidst the bushes, the gravestones, the soup-thick fog, the protection of high Cyania's coffin-lid shield and the consecrated soil of Christ the Sorry, and no, neither were real, but that wasn't the point, he needed shelter, somewhere to breathe, to think, to put solid matter between himself and that bloodcurdling apparition...

“Bóro...” the fog seemed to call to him.

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The Mask

He swore as he threw himself behind a headstone, choking for breath, clutching a hand to his hammering heart, fastening the other round the revolver.

“Bóro...Bóro...Iorialus Bóro...”

“It’s not real,” he instructed himself. “It’s not real. It is not.” And having satisfied himself on this account, he leapt up, trained his gun across the headstone, and bellowed forth: “What do you think you’re playing at you bastards? I am Iorialus Bóro! And I’ll have you know, I’ll complain, I shall write a letter, I - ”

A tap on the shoulder.

Bóro swung round, a roar – crushed to a gasp. There, right there was the masked phantom, bending and swaying upon him! And to make matters worse, because it had to happen, in that same instant his gallant gargoyle’s sword ripped a lightning bolt from the sky, and with a startled snarl Bóro smashed the trigger, once, twice, the shock of his shots reverberating off the church walls, but the recoil had thrown him back and he stumbled across the grave, to come to rest in a splatter of mud and consternation. But there was no time to curse, only to seize up the gun and scramble to his feet as the mask came upon him: how, how had he not hit it? It made no sense, he couldn’t have missed from that range, but those eyes, oh, by whatever gods you believe in, those eyes! That was not the mask of a prankster, not some paper slip-on you pick up in a party shop; those soul-searing beacons horrified the Old Master clean from his wits and sent him hurtling through the churchyard, panic the only fire in his veins now, panic this way, panic that, but it was no good, no matter which way he turned the phantom returned for him, rising from the crypts, stepping from the walls, drifting down from the storm-tossed sky, till he found himself backed into an exterior corner of the building, chancel wall to one side, nave to the other, the masked monstrosity strolling toward him, casual steps that nonetheless carried the inevitability of the end of all things...

“You’re not real! You’re not real!” The words piled up behind Bóro’s tongue, but it was no good, they wouldn’t come out, it would have been no more possible to speak them unto reality itself. But Bóro was an Old American, so where words failed, up came the revolver: click, click – but it was jammed, or empty, useless, more than useless as with a sweep of the phantom’s arm – from twelve paces! – the gun was whipped from his hand and lost to the darkness.

But he wasn’t done, he was Iorialus Bóro; up came the cubes of his fists, shaking apoplectic even as they swayed, waiting, waiting for this horror to get in range...

But it didn’t. It stopped just out of his reach. It raised its arms...

...and wiggled its fingers at him.

“Wooooooh,” it threatened, as presumably it was supposed to.

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The Mask

Finding its dramatic effect eroded somewhat, it cleared its throat.

“Iorialus Bóro!” it proclaimed, properly now. “Iorialus Bóro, take heed!”

The voice might have come from beyond the church, the cemetery, the sky, the Earth, the stars. It was like the All-Voice of some outer entity, lifting the lid on the universe to address him therein.

“Who do you think you are?” Bóro demanded, transmuting his fear to fury as had served him well under the old regime. “What business have you with me?”

“I created you, Iorialus Bóro!”

“W-Wait, wait right there,” he stammered, “what the hell is that supposed to mean? You, you, this must be some obnoxious joke! Who put you up to this?”

“You did!” – a riposte of such force that it hurled Bóro into the wall, suspending him there as though by the scruff of his overcoat. He slumped to the earth, gasping, spluttering, floundering like a marooned fish in a mire of muck and vegetation, as the mask – those eyes, they peeled all artifice from their path! – bore down on him and declared, as though straight unto his soul:

“Understand, Iorialus Bóro! What is, and is not; what was, and was not; what will be, and will not be, and could be, and might be, and should be; all these things, here and there, beyond and between, are bound by the fibres of space and time, by the myriad worlds and the agency of all who inhabit them, by all cause, all consequence, and by the balance of order and chaos. It is the web of reality, Iorialus Bóro. You, too, are of it, and it is of you. You weave it, ohh you weave it, yes you do, as you alone, Iorialus Bóro, know to weave. But take heed, Iorialus Bóro! Take heed while you can! The heart from which you spin those threads lies in the grip of a terrible order. Loose it! Loose it, Iorialus Bóro, lest those lies unravel you and all the reality you know!”

“It’s not real. It’s not real.” The beleaguered Bóro had fastened his eyelids and strove to bury his consciousness in this refrain; but those dread pupils, those cosmic lighthouse-beams, they pierced all veils, burnt through all barriers, transmitted their truth straight to the physical and metaphysical core of what it meant to be Iorialus Bóro.

Later he’d have the leisure to tell himself he was in shock, he was hurt, it was raining, he’d drunk too much at the gathering, that at any rate there was no possible meaning to be retrieved from such nonsense. But he’d heard it, and that was the truth that mattered.

“Three tolls!” the voice rang, as the phantom’s cloak shuffled into the darkness. “Three tolls, Iorialus Bóro! Will you take heed, before the last?”

But to be plain, the Old Master was in meagre position to take heed of anything beyond the crash of his heart, the bruise on his spine, the lump of terror lodged

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The Mask

in his throat and the spatter of good old occupied Wisconsin soil across his coat, his hands, his face, his fearsome hair. Indeed, he looked much as a study for one of his own sculptures, in the very instant of emerging to life from clay.



Phantoms weren't real. In that regard, they were the same as nightmares. So secure in this knowledge was Iorialus Bóro that by morning, mere hours after his frightful ordeal, he was convinced nothing out of the mundane had in fact happened. After all, his club secretary Cavallaro, who had at last grown concerned, followed Bóro's footprints, and roused his delirious, mud-caked hide from the cemetery floor, not only remembered nothing untoward, but gave him such a strange stare at the mention of masks and armoured cars that his sensibility compelled him to drop the matter at once.

It was simple to explain. He'd had too much to drink, got out for a walk in the rain and stupidly lost his footing. Hardly dignifying, but easily within reason, respectable Wisconsin Republic citizen that he was. As for any additive errors in his memory, well, those would be down to his budding senility, or his upset at that outrageous Colonel Nobody, or that suspicious new Japanese beer Madame Rogg had deigned to get hold of.

He and Cavallaro agreed to speak no more of it, and a week later, as the Old Master charged his smartphone, tossed his clothes in a suitcase, and pocketed his temporary Canadian passport ('I am actually American' scribbled under Official Observations, with *terribilità*), his thoughts had turned to the cheery business of his new exhibition in Amsterdam. On his return there was Delhi to prepare for, and by the time he got back from that, all traces of that horrible night had vanished from his concern.

THE MADNESS OF IORIALUS BÓRO
The First Toll: Hallow's End

Yes, it was full steam ahead for Iorialus Bóro, armed with a new stack of commissions, secret projects, and a bottle of sleeping pills he'd got off Captain Butcher to keep the nightmares at bay. The seasons likewise marched on, and soon the woods surrounding his studio, not to be outdone by the fires of his palette, shed their greenery for a wash of livid reds and golds. But even at their breathtaking best, the maples struggled to match the beauty of his *Majin Symposium*, the oaks were made modest before his *Two Worlds in Balance*, and the birches could only weep before the triumph of colour that was his *Thirty-Six Views of the Siege of Zandalar*.

Now, not all aspects of life under the old order had been disgraced by the war, or abolished by the provisional regimes and occupying powers. They could take the Americans' political independence, their union, their land, their dignity, even their cherished assault rifles – bloodily, it turned out – but nothing, absolutely nothing, was going to take away their Halloween. Quite the reverse: from the conflict's wake of corpses, that festival of spooks and pranks had clambered refreshed. After all, this was the one day of the year where rather than take grief or fright at that flourishing population of ghosts and skeletons, it was socially accepted to imagine them on terms of public merriment, harmless pranks, and fun for all the family.

The Wisconsin Republic's Canadian caretakers shared in this tradition so had no reason, culturally speaking, to impede it. Yet no-one could doubt that the heel of Occupation Headquarters had hardened since the surprise resignation of its Vice-Director for Public Security, one Colonel Dasgupta, 'to spend more time with his family'. His replacement, it was rumoured, had lost her parents in the Vancouver Massacre: one in that wave of bombings by nationalist partisans whose incitement by a desperate Maga Confederacy had dragged the Canadian Army down here in the first place. Rumour or not, her dimmer view of the populace was well communicated by the tightened travel restrictions, curfews, and cuts to humanitarian aid.

Still – they could save on decorations. The howl of eerie wind through the bombed-out ruins, the creak of fractured door-flames, the flap of torn curtains in the gutted hollows; the bats that streamed through the evening skies, thriving on the insect life which swelled in turn amidst the corpse-pits, the rotting fields, the insanitation and squalor: conditions like these made yesterday's cheap plastic doodads and bedsheets with eye-holes redundant. Why make up Halloween scares when you had the real thing?

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The First Toll: Hallow's End

As for the jack-o'-lanterns, well, pumpkins were in short supply, what with the devastation of local farmland and refusal of Canadian food-aid to oblige. But that was okay, because the turnips trafficked up from the American rump states, comparatively bloodcurdling when carved, made for a suitably heritage-conscious substitute; not least when cut to resemble certain Canadian cabinet ministers, spirited to Milwaukee in the night, and lined up on the pavement to glower at Occupation HQ.

"We can pick up a bunch for your house if you like," jested Cavallaro, as the car crawled past. "Look – it's Green 'Arry!"

He pointed to a turnip of particularly gruesome complexion, supposedly – you could tell from the forehead – meant to represent Dr. Harry Dar, the Canadian Prime Minister and uninvited sovereign of some two thousand square kilometres of former United States territory. (By coincidence, once upon a time this man had commissioned Bóro's most famous early work, that Green Quadtych; the moniker was thought to reflect Dr. Dar's environmental credentials.)

"No thanks," chuckled Bóro. "He'll scare the kids half to death."

"Oh sure. Let them curl safe round the boots of huge rasping zombie lady instead."

"Come now! You know Cyania wouldn't invade your country without asking first. Because that's how I designed her. She's fictional."

"Hah. True there. Any sensible child knows the undead aren't real. God knows their real lives will be grim enough, growing up paying their taxes to Harry the Dictator."*

The children under discussion were the admiring trick-or-treaters who made the traditional pilgrimage to Bóro's cabin on the final night of October. He was famously generous when it came to filling their buckets with candies and, if lucky, a secret figurine of his characters or two, so long as his visitors behaved politely. Of course, the real reason they turned up wasn't sweets, nor gifts, but this rarest of chances to interact with the reclusive Old Master in person.

It was a long drive home from Milwaukee, the interim capital, where he'd attended a two-day function with some senior Bórolites following the previous week's reception (held early this month due to Halloween). By the time they pulled up his driveway evening had set in, and once Cavallaro dropped him off he trudged for his cabin, sacks of chocolate in tow, past the clay pumpkins, leaf-wreaths, spooky signposts, and his magnificent *Hallow's End Surprise*. This last was a life-

* For the record, it should be clarified that Prime Minister Dar had been democratically elected, with a healthy majority, through an entirely legitimate, transparent and peaceful process.

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size bronze of his illustrious undead warrior: daunting, dauntless, sword sheathed and hands on hips, either to welcome Bóro's callers or size them up – whether with a military or culinary eye was unclear, such was the terrific ambiguity of her gaze. As a zombie she naturally held a high profile in Bóro's fall portfolio, and each year he wheeled this likeness round from his sculpting yard for this night alone.

With much humming and chuckling he wiped his boots on the doormat, hung up his coat and hat, and parked the sacks in convenient dispensing position next to the entrance. Disappearing into the washroom to freshen up, he re-emerged ten minutes later in his favourite V-neck sweater and woollen trousers, then slumped into his armchair, cracked open a bottle from his precious stash of Azure Ribbon (some of the last to leave his preferred Milwaukee brewery before its tragic demise by Canadian artillery) – and settled down to wait.

On the stroke of seven: *knock knock knock.*

Bóro stomped to the door. Reached for the handle. Paused, for suspense.

Grinned, as the scrabbles and excited whispers tapered to a hush.

He opened it.

Look! Five little faces, wide-eyed in wonder. But the Old Master was accustomed to this reaction, and waited with a placid smile as the tykes chased down their composure. And once they'd corralled it, they rode it back in the customary formation: "*Trick or treat!*"

Two were costumed after his adorable pudding-demon Creame, and the other three were Cyanias with cardboard shields and toilet-roll swords. It warmed the old man's crusty heart to see their dedication undiminished by post-war poverty, so he not only filled their rusted kitchen-pots with chocolates, he also went up to their parents, whose awe hadn't made it past the great statue, and offered them two cartons of precious fuel for the journey home.

"Off you go then," he steered the kids, arms bear-like round their shoulders. "Now you can tell all your friends about the time you got to tug on Uncle Bóro's beard. Get home safe, and don't forget to harass your parents to take you to the Bóro Gallery this winter."

He almost added a "Ho ho ho" before remembering the proper order of things. But you'll pardon him for getting into the spirit. This was the one night he could allow himself pleasure in peopling with the general public. Any more would undermine his cloistered mystique; and how would he get any work done then?

"Oh, bless you kind sir! Bless you, bless you!" the adults honoured him. "Bless you, Iorialus Bóro, for your charity and your heartfelt visions in these dark times!"

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Here came diminished dregs of what had once been an urban bourgeoisie; haggard war veterans, many with crutches or missing limbs; and a sprinkling of besuited, better-fed carpetbaggers from the Canadian administrative classes. Some were intent to fill Bóro's ear with personal stories of how his art was the singular rope that hoisted them clear of an abyss of despair, or fuelled them with courage for the day they'd throw off the shackles of tyranny and restore the United States to the greatest country in the world or some such, until he grunted, and prevaricated, and ushered them as graciously as he could off his porch, ahead of where the lanterns of his next set of tributaries hung ever in patience.

"There you go young man," said Bóro, piling chocolates into the hands of a boy too poor to afford a saucepan at all. His years couldn't have exceeded four or five, and his longing eyes kept wandering off up the verdigris contours of Bóro's big bronze champion of the grave. Seen from down there, Cyania could well have been the secret daughter of Lady Liberty herself, lying low like a guerrilla in the woods till it came time for another go.

"Well? Didn't you have a question for good Mr. Bóro?" said the boy's mother kindly. "Go on, dear."

"Uhh, Mr Bóro, sir," the child stammered; a high, shy voice. "I don't suppose, um...Ms. Cyania...lives here with you? If it please you sir, I'd very much like to meet her. You see, she makes me feel so...very...uhh, brave..."

Bóro was blinking. Snapping his eyelids like one of the occupiers' cold-blooded speed cameras.

He growled, dangerously: "Cyania is not a real person. I think you know."

"B-But, but she is real, isn't she sir?" the child rushed on, oblivious to his doom. "I - I mean, she's wonderful, they're all so wonderful, how *couldn't* they be real? I always thought...they must live with the great Iorialus Bóro in his magical cabin in the woods, or, or he must at least *know* them, or some...thing...uhh..."

He trailed off. Gasp, as did his mother. Took frightened steps back, for the Old Master oscillated on his doormat. Then he reddened, the spirals of his cheeks drew taut, and his freckles pulsed, and his eyes bulged, his hands balled into fists, and his ears and nostrils gushed with jets of steam. The entire queue was staggering now, its wiser members fleeing for their cars as the trees shrank back and the wind wept in witness to this frightful metamorphosis of a Tolstoian hermit into an Old Testament fire-and-brimstone prophet; and lo! Pity the foolish, ignorant child who'd pricked the balloon of Bóro's wrath, which now surged into his face at full blast:

"How *dare* you" - only Bóro could roll *dare* into seven syllables - "how *dare* you, on *my* porch, in front of *my* house? Who do you think you are? Need you a lesson,

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lad? Need I show you what makes a thing real? And you, woman! This is your fault! Do you not teach your child what's real and what's not? Do you not understand the difference? Do you? Do you? This is too much! Get out, get out, get out!"

That last part, at least, was in surplus. Expecting a thumping, the child and his mother had already bolted halfway down the drive. But now the Bórovian volcano was well and truly unplugged, and it erupted upon the crowd: "All of you, out! Out I say, out! There'll be no more hand-outs or warm words tonight!"

A more reckless visitor found the guts to plead: "B-But Mr. Bóro! We drove nine hours to see you - crossed from Illinois - hard border - shot at - please - we love you -"

"OUT! Out, out, and don't ever come back till you've learnt that fictional characters are *not* real people!"

And they broke for it, scattering like woodland creatures at the burst of a geyser, filling the night with wails and cries so abject that any actual Halloween spectres lurking about would have been terrorised clean of their organs.

"Senseless, insolent, *foul...*!" Bóro seethed, slamming the door behind him. He crashed his fist on a chest of drawers, roared at the top of his voice for good measure, then thundered into the washroom, where he splashed cold water upon his face till he felt it, that is, till it ceased to vaporise in flight.

This was not the first time his Halloween procession had brought itself to a premature end like this, but each occasion further pumped his fury. How, *how* in this war-torn waste of a country most of all, could people be so hopelessly deluded?

Maybe that was it, he brooded. The war. The way so many things that were real throughout living memory - the United States of America, for a start - had fizzled to fantasy overnight. Who'd have thought it? And as for those persistent pockets of zealotry in now-faraway places like Cuban Florida and Mexican Texas, shooting and bombing in a scream for American restoration; well, what better exhibit of the murderous power of even the most laughable fancies?

No wonder people's heads weren't on straight.

The Old Master crashed in his armchair. Emptied his bottle of beer in a single swig. Exhaled in a long, low rumble.

It could be nice to have America back, he walrused.

He might even have wanted it, if he could be bothered.

But wanting things didn't make them real.

His grandfather clock rang eight.

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Knock. Knock. Knock. Heavy, this time.

“Go home!” Bóro shouted. “I told you, no more!”

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

“I said BEGONE! Curse you, must I chisel it into your skull?”

His adrenaline raced once more and he launched from his seat, whole batteries of word-fists lining up in his mind as he reached for the door just in time for it to fly open of its own accord –

“Ahah! It's not locked! Well then, don't mind if I do!”

– and in she strode, shunting it wide then ducking beneath the threshold in one deft motion, yellow eyes leading like fog-lights from the night, each step a clank of her plated boots. “Oh, these look flavourful!” she threw in, spotting the open sack of chocolaty offerings and – still the same action – dipping in a gauntleted hand to scoop out a good dozen bars.

“What what!” Bóro barked. “Did you not hear me? You, you...”

“Ah? Oh, you must be...hmm. What was it again?”

She hefted her iron-strapped coffin-lid shield against the wall, causing the whole shack to shake. Then she pulled a scrap of parchment from the pouch on her belt and held it up to her eyes.

Squinted.

Moved it back and forth.

Dug her fingers into a leather strap, pulled out a pair of spectacles and flipped them on.

“*Yo-ri-ah-lus Bóro*. That's it! Bóro! You'll pardon me if I call you Bóro, right? The rest's kind of hard to pronounce.”

Bóro's forehead throbbed like a concertina. His drive to righteously explode was held in check by a single mitigating factor.

“Well, that's...not a bad costume, madam,” he conceded. “No, no, I'll admit, that's quite a good costume.” His professional brain kicked in and he curled a finger on his chin, wondering what smith could have fashioned such serviceable plate in times like these. Tough metal, shaped to fit, obviously bespoke, a little worn and battered but structurally sound, a strong alloy, no doubt imported; she must be a woman of means. And what pigments had she mixed to produce such a rich sea-green effect in her face and hair?

“Hmph. An out-and-out admirer of Cyania's, are you?”

For some reason the question earned uproarious laughter.

“Ahaaah! Yes – yes, I suppose you could say that! Her number one fan, just possibly.”

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The boom of this pilgrim's mirth rekindled Bóro's irritation – it wasn't at all Halloween-y for a start – and truth be told he found her height quite intimidating. "Right," he put in. "Well, look, I'm not in the mood to make exceptions. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"Aaww come on, after how far I had to travel to get here? Nah, I don't think so."

She yawned – disturbingly, no hint of breath – and stretched her arms behind her back. The scrape of plate and crack of bone made Bóro flinch.

"Now look, I shall not ask you again," he came back. "Madam, you are trespassing in –"

"Hey, nice little setup you've got here! You know, this neighbourhood kind of reminds me of home. Ironic, seeing as it's about the only part of your country that *doesn't* look – you know – all beaten to death of late." Her gaze, eerie glow and all, set off on a wander. "Yeah. Good old Plaguelands, they used to call 'em. I miss the days when we still got harmless ghouls and skeletons roaming about. You'd better watch out my friend, things change once the opportunistic rich folks move in and start zoning on their terms, and bringing their crops, and building stuff up their way and what have you. Strawberry fields everywhere now, would you believe? What was so wrong with good old pumpkins?"

Bóro's spleen compacted, distracting him from his broader predicament. He happened to loathe strawberries with a chemical passion. Their mere mention could sink his appetite for the rest of the day.

By his recovery, his intruder's eyes had found him again. They blinked.

"Oh! Yeah, kind of spaced out a moment there. Sorry about that. The name's Cyania."

Poor Bóro! The aforementioned spleen would need a transplant at this rate.

"Now look here!" he spluttered. "You've gone too far, madam, no mistake! Do yourself up as you like, but you cannot go pretending my characters are real!"

The zombie looked surprised.

"What. You don't believe in me?"

"I do not!"

She spread her arms in a hapless gesture and looked over herself, as though checking she still existed.

"Well, whyever's that?"

"Why – because – *because I designed you!*"

"Designed, you said?" She bent down and sniffed him, prompting an unprintable reaction on his part. "Haah! Good one that! Odd sense of humour. I like it! You know Mr. Bóro, I can see we're going to get along just fine. Now then, they told

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me you people are big on booze in these parts. What's a dried-out corpse got to do to get some moisture around here?"

And she stomped past him, just like that, the contents of Iorialus Bóro's living room dancing on their shelves to each slam of her soles.

You would probably guess that the Old Master felt something in the whereabouts of stunned, appalled, and more than a little frightened right now. This might explain why rather than follow her, his first thought was to rush to his bedroom for a long, hard stare at his sleeping tablets. He eyed them up close; from underneath, too; then he shook the bottle, tipped out some pills and examined them under the light.

For all he could tell, they were no different from those he was used to.

He dropped them with a roar as a massive crash issued from the kitchen.

"Oh, so *that's* how it opens!" his visitor's voice sailed in. "Oh. Okay. I'm not sure this was...erm, meant to come off like that. Hey, are these your clothes? I thought this was your refrigeration. Yeah. Sorry about that. You'll...probably want to get it looked at. Hmm, perhaps it's...? Aah, yeah, this is it! Hah! Seriously. Why put the window on the clothes-washer rather than the one you cool your drinks in?"

Bóro clenched from fingers to nose. His visitor's enunciation was smooth, almost aristocratic if not for some roughness around the edges and that all-too-convincing hint of an undead rasp. It needled him in all the wrong places. It was as though it invited him to consider the ransack of his kitchen an act of courtesy.

She couldn't be English?

No. Surely not. With the way that place had gone she couldn't have afforded her spectacles in that case, let alone a set of armour, an entry permit and a flight via Toronto.

Seeing his dismayed features materialise at the door, the gate-crasher explained: "Yeah. Excuse the mess. We didn't really crack electromagnetic machines till the last twenty years or so, see, but they told me you guys have relied on them for generations now. Aahh, all these contraptions get my old heart beating! You know, I've been getting a few installed at my place, but this stuff is something else. Shame it doesn't seem to have helped you guys with – you know – getting along better. Yeah."

As she spoke she pulled bottle after bottle of American Wisconsin's breweries' last hurrahs from his fridge, sniffing and sipping them one by one. At last she found one that appeared to satisfy her, but rather than drink it – as if that wouldn't put sufficient height on her escalating ladder of transgressions – she actually unscrewed her hip-flask and emptied the bottle into it, each splash on the floor like a lead weight hooked upon Bóro's heart. Then having secured this plunder she

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tossed the depleted vessel, only to grab a fresh equivalent from Bóro's fridge – his last, it turned out – and now, only now, to raise it to her lips for a gratified glug.

“Ahhh. That's more like it. You know, I've never touched one of these cold-boxes myself. Can't beat a good old crypt for keeping things chilled.”

“You...you're not some simple devotee,” Bóro snarled. “This is organised! A set-up! You've come to steal my projects, my secrets! Who sent you? Canadian intelligence? Maga rebels? No, no, not sophisticated enough – aha! You're from the Chinese galleries, aren't you!” He edged around as he spoke, moving instinctively to cut off the side-door into his art studio. “Well you listen to me madam, I am Iorialus Bóro, and I tell you, we have things like copyrights and intellectual property in this part of the world, the least you could do is attribute me, and if you think it'll help you that the Canadians can't run our courts then think again because you'd do well to believe I know my way round a hammer! Who are you really, and what are you doing in my house? Answer!”

He wasn't joking, you too had better believe it, but the gallant Cyania only fell about in that aggravating laughter of hers; oh, how it wrenched his nerves! It was as though he could see a gaggle of ghostly kids hanging off her, all joining in, rolling about on the floor at the expense of his dignity.

“Oh come, come, my good man!” she chuckled, and she reached out to place a hand on his shoulder, their first touch, startling poor Bóro with her lofty presence. “Espionage? Me? When did I ever go in for such underhanded roguery? Well, you'd know, wouldn't you, seeing as you *designed* me! Waahahah!”

Blood bursting to a boil now, Bóro grasped her wrist and made to wrench her off his shoulder.

Her arm didn't budge.

He dug in his fingers. Wrenched harder –

...then gasped, shrinking back against the wall.

What unearthly strength!

Her grin: it terrified him! Not in its own right, understand, it was all cheer and charm and flawless dentistry. The thing was, it just as cheerfully expressed an unearthly fortress-like impregnability about this woman. Her muscular fitness, steadfast stance, motions honed swift and sure as only decades of training and live combat experience could provide...

She was a professional, much like him. Any hammer raised her way would come down a hammer no longer.

Bóro's face turned white as a sheet.

“Huh? What's up?” she inquired. “You look like you're staring death in the face or something!”

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She just couldn't resist, could she?

"You...wh-why have you..."

"Well come on, my dear fellow! Isn't it obvious?"

Realising it was not, at least not for everyone, she loosed a sigh – again all reflex, no wind – and lowered herself to explain:

"Why, it's Hallow's End! You know? That time when the walls between the worlds are thinnest? The hazy line between light and dark? And the veil between the living and the dead, for that matter, yeah, that helps. Rehheh, I'm a zombie. I'm gonna haunt your house, hide your keys, leave your gadgets on till it wears out the batteries, find where you play golf and plug the holes, the usual Hallow's End business. All in the time-honoured tradition of getting you to reflect on your memories and remember the dearly departed of course. Hey, the departed – that's me! Though I guess from your point of view I'm less departed, more arrived, aren't I? Wahaah! Well, how about it? Remember me yet? Your faithful old friend Cyania?"

By this point Bóro had backed into his living room. He was so out of sorts that the edge of his rug caught beneath his slipper, and he stumbled, and swore, and caught himself on his armchair.

"Heh. And there I thought you were getting into the spirit of things. What's with the face? You guys dress like dead people, you call out to dead people, you put up little spooky images of dead people, but you're all surprised when you see an actual dead people?"

"B-But of course!" Bóro blustered. "Because it's a festival, a fun time, it's just Halloween, it's not –"

"Real?" Cyania finished for him.

A deathly silence.

The word had come down like a casket lid. It carried all the force of Bóro's own.

But she broke it just as fast: "Well, where's the sense in that? I mean, if it isn't real, why treat it like it is? Or if it is, which it was when last I checked," – she looked herself over again – "then why pretend it's not? Sheesh, I don't get you people. What did they call you? AmeriCanadians, or something? Sorry if it's wrong. You know I never cared much for all those long lists of factions and lines on maps and what have you."

To which Bóro, feeling somehow affronted on multiple levels, fought back: "Well I – why, you – that's enough! Everyone knows the undead aren't real! They're just, well...like you say, *treating them like they are* because it brings people together, gives them good feeling, I mean, it means, means something –"

"What, something real?"

Another silence, save for Bóro's anguished breathing.

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After a longer pause, Cyania resumed:

“Means something real for them. You were going to say that, right? So Hallow's End – Halloween, as you call it – it's sort of both real and not real, then? Rather like my handsome self is sort of alive and not alive. Would you say that's about the measure of it?”

Bóro collapsed into his armchair. His heart was pounding, as furious as if he'd taken a blow or received the perfect Halloween fright.

Blood pressure, he remembered. When this nightmare was over, he'd have to speak to his doctor about blood pressure. Then Captain Butcher for more damn pills. Stronger ones, if at all possible.

Damn it all. Was he so old already?

Meanwhile that insufferable zombie – oh for a classical eat-your-brains type, at least his hammer could answer that! – that insufferable zombie swigged down the last of her beer, no, *his* beer, half-stifled a belch, then, flashing him another glimpse of her impeccable oral hygiene, she strolled out the front door, grabbing her coffin-lid shield on the way.

Bóro sat. Just sat. Shut his eyes, felt his rage cool down, his chilled nerves warm, and his laboured breaths return to liveable rhythm.

Had she gone?

A long exhalation.

She'd gone. It was over.

He slumped back. Stared at the ceiling. Clamped his eyes shut once more, determined not to open them till he'd slept off whatever the heck he'd just been through.

His clock tocked on.

He snuffled.

Breaking his promise to himself, he hauled his eyelids open and sniffed again, consciously this time.

Was something burning?

Sniff, sniff.

“Fuck!” he roared from the depths of his lungs as with brain screaming arson, he launched for the front door.

The Old Master burst out into the red-gold air – and roared once more.

In place of his *Hallow's End Surprise*, a massive straw mannequin. A bonfire round its base, lashing its legs with bright hot flames.

His undead visitor stood a few paces back. Holding his blowtorch.

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Imagine Bóro's distress! He bellowed forth: "What the hell are you doing? Put it out, put it out! You can't just – this is my house – *what have you done with my statue?*"

The flash of a grin in the fire's glow.

"What's that? Your statue? I didn't see no statue. Aahh, there we go! Doesn't that warm your old bones? Come, stand over here!"

Poor Bóro! He'd been through a lot tonight, but this – *this!* – was the limit.

He marched on his would-be Halloween haunt, clamped a convulsing hand on her arm, and levered himself to glower into her face, his eyeballs streaked with crimson fuses.

"What," he snarled, "is the *meaning* of this, woman?"

The zombie's own hand parked atop the Old Master's head. Ruffled his curls, apparently for the pleasure of it. Her sharp nails even clipped off a hair or two to complete the sacrilege.

"Well what does it look like?" she replied in good cheer. "It's a wicker man!"

"*I can see that!* I want to know what it's doing on my driveway!"

Then he paled, rage fizzing to vapour, as ancient colonial visions kindled in his memory.

His eyes, anxious now, swivelled to the effigy.

Combed the straw up and down.

He backed away.

The zombie cast him a puzzled glance.

"What's up with you now? Good grief, if you AmeriCanadians don't scare at every shadow you see. Or don't see – hah! Are shadows real, do you think?"

No hatch. Unless he was missing it? No windows, no ladders, no gaps in the straw that might accommodate the dimensions of a Iorialus Bóro...

"My good man, it's the obligatory Hallow's End ceremony! What did you think it was?"

The fright was real enough. Alas for Bóro! It really wasn't his fault. It was Julius Caesar's if anyone's.

Cyania grasped that another explanation was in order, so she thunked down the blowtorch – his blowtorch – and crossed her arms.

"Alright, look. You remember the part about coming to terms with old memories, right? Well – that's who this guy is! The wicker man's your burdens, your fears, your regrets, any worries or animosities; whatever you like, in fact. Anything you don't want festering in you into the cold dark winter. So here's the night when you dwell on them, get them all lined up, then when you're ready," –

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she picked up a stick – “give them to the fire and let their ashes rise away on the wind.”

The zombie's face had come alive. Proverbially, at least. She tossed in the stick. Loosed another of those disturbing airless sighs as she watched it crackle.

“I'll have you know I'm missing my local this year, just to come spend it with you,” she told him, a touch rueful. “Ahh, those big public ones are something awesome I'll tell you. The honking huge wicker man they stick up outside town, tall as those trees there, blazing like mad, sparks bursting all the way to both Moons. People from all across the area come to feed their worries to the fire, all solemn and everything; but by the end it's like we've lifted the tombstones off each other's backs and it's all strangers hugging each other, talking about anything they like, glugging hot stew and munching meats and veggies straight off the grill, all fresh from the harvest, kids running about everywhere; you get the picture. Everyone's left cleansed and fortified, sure in each other's support and ready to blaze a path through the dead season.”

The fire had reached the wicker man's waist. Much as he loathed to, Bóro had to admit the heartiness of it. Straw and flame, the simplest ingredients; but shape them a certain way, put a story or two behind them, and natural imagination made of them a beacon not even the endless cold could penetrate.

“Of course, my shuffling, groaning lot stuck their own meaning on Hallow's End,” Cyania rambled on. “Yeah. Kind of an independence celebration, from the time we were liberated. The Forsaken, we called ourselves then. Political thing. But, er...yeah. I guess your guys aren't really in the mood for that part, with – you know – all that's gone down here of late. Heh. Sorry if that's insensitive.”

“Independence celebration,” Bóro muttered.

Those were fun, he recalled. The Fourth of July. Barbecues, fireworks...

Maybe the Canadians would let them next year.

For old times' sake.

Even if it wasn't real anymore.

“Hey. If it helps, the scribes say it goes way back.”

“Hrmph?”

“Hallow's End. Back to before there were scribes, even. Must have been precarious, facing the winter year on year without the knowledge healers have these days or big warm cities or reliable agricultural practices. I guess your Halloween must've come from something similar, once upon a time.”

Bóro felt his heart settling. A sobering fire, sturdy company...

No. He wouldn't allow himself to like it.

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She'd crashed through his door, raided his fridge, set off a fire in his yard. For all he knew it was all some distraction or mind-trick. It would end with her sabotaging his tools, or carrying off his precious work, the wicker-fire must be to signal a helicopter or something –

A clap of her hands snapped him to attention.

“So! Got anything to leave for the flames, Bóro my old friend? Any burdens weighing you down, any troubles better off set aside?”

When he harrumphed, she bent in close, grinning of course, and put in his ear:

“Any *knots*, of a *terrible order*, to loose from your heart?”

Bóro barked – the words went off in his head like a small stick of dynamite, releasing smoke which took the shape of something bloodcurdling, two circles hot with the roar of creation blasting straight through him, then the distorted Moon filled the sky, and the Bridge, the Bridge!

...but too fast, too fast thank goodness, for then it was gone.

He caught the undead arm to steady himself. It was secure as a girder, didn't even sway. But his beard did as he shook out his head, mumbling curses, clasping a hand to his persecuted heart.

At last he recovered; found his feet. He cleared his throat.

“No. No, you'll find me quite alright, thank you very much.” He still sounded dazed. “More important, I think it's time we –”

“Oh is that so?” Cyania cut in, sounding less disappointed than he'd hoped. “Well then! In that case, how about we take a look?”

Cyania approached the flames. In her hand, a tiny leather pouch. Before Bóro could wonder what was in it – nothing advantageous to his health, that was sure – she'd tugged loose the rope and pinched the bag upside down. Some indistinguishable powder sprinkled onto the wicker-fire...

...and the whole thing went up in a shriek, easily drowning out Bóro's, as the blaze not only surged to engulf the entire straw statue but turned lilac: the very lilac of the Old Master's patented sketch-paper!

“What have you done now?” he gasped, as the flames swirled, then separated like the paints on his palette...

“Shhh! This is the good part!” Cyania hushed him, rattling with excitement now. “Let's see what we have!”

The wicker man's fire: it was resolving into an image.

“It's coming, it's coming...oh! More of those fancy contraptions? Looks like some dwelling, don't you think? Ooh, I wonder what that one does. Hey, that's

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electric lighting, right? Yeah, we've got that too now! And...there! Who's that, there on the floor? Hey, hey! Cute little rascal isn't he? Do you recognise him?"

Bóro swore, because he did recognise him, he recognised him at once.

The child in the vision was hard at work. Cardboard cut from cereal boxes, pencils, pastels, crayons, tiny tubs of paint and wax and modelling dough: these materials covered the floor around him, and an impressive expanse of his arms and face as well.

The zombie cooed. You had to hear it to believe it. Bóro meanwhile had begun to sweat in uncontrollable fury.

"It's just a nightmare," he seethed. "This – this proves it. Twisted, sickening, indefensible..."

"Proficient, isn't he?" said Cyania admiringly. "Ooh, look at him go! There, what he's drawing there? Hmm, a green one and a purple one: are those sisters? And there's a cuddly pudding-thing there, cute as a button, and that looks like a model of some kind of big lion, and – ooh, what's that one? Hey, I like that one! Tall, built, skin green as the briny sea; who's that handsome young corpse then? Yeah, that one's my favourite! Hahaah!"

"I can't bear it," snorted Bóro. "I demand to awaken. Now, right now if you please."

But Cyania wasn't hearing. Rather, her notice had fallen on another crayoned masterpiece.

"Oh? Now who's that?"

Well then.

Compared with the others, this little girl looked conspicuously ordinary. Chubby. A cascade of brown hair, a purple shirt, a triangle of freckles on her right cheek...

Bóro's blood, till now on the verge of bursting in flames like the wicker-straw, instead plunged dozens of degrees below freezing.

A voice cut in: "Now what have you there?"

Someone else had entered the scene. Straight away the boy grabbed up his creations and clutched them to his chest.

"Not more imaginary friends I hope? You remember what happens to children who talk to imaginary friends?"

"N-No! No!" the boy defended himself. "I...I created them! They're not real, I promise!"

"Oh, good!" Relief, but its shadow was undiluted menace. "Now see, I'm putting the lighter away because you're telling the truth as a good child should. But if I hear you daydreaming or chattering to false idols again..."

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Far in the distance, Cyania mused:

“Hmm. Self-protection? Can't say much for a world where kids have to protect themselves from their own folks...”

The image melted in a fiery churn. When it returned, it was to a soundtrack of lugubrious chanting. A candlelit hall, rows of benches, a stark wood cross above an altar...

“Oh, they mentioned this,” Cyania cut in. “The old creed. Can't say I understood a word. Even those cowed types who worshipped the Old Gods – you remember, with the tentacles and stuff – were easier to decipher. Still, I heard these types have gone quiet since the more unhinged ones stood up high on the wrong side of the war and got themselves killed or thrown in jail. Hey, that's you there right?”

Was it? With all that'd happened since, the memory should have been sealed behind a wall of time.

But never mind that. It was a brave or foolhardy soul at any rate who looked on Iorialus Bóro and imagined he'd been a child at all, as opposed to having leapt full-formed from marble struck by lightning.

The teenage Bóro was under duress. Whether on account of the text in the prayer-book, or the dreary soundscape, or the content of the recitals that sounded suspiciously like an advocacy of genocide, or just the monochrome dourness of it all; something wasn't sitting right with him, and he could stand it no longer.

He tugged the sleeve of the person beside him. An adult, out of shot save the arm. A whisper, readable on his lips. A question? Three words, just three –

– and a firestorm of screams, shoves, slaps and condemnations, in such vituperative American that even Cyania, unused to such elaborate dialects, had to hold her ears, doubling, trebling, ten people, twenty, the roomful, till those hounding blasts tore the image asunder and cast it floundering into the flames...

“Yech. Alright, you got me. That's screwed up.” She pulled off her spectacles; fingered the condensation off their lenses. “Guess there's no limit to how creepy life gets when a load of people just believe what they want together, huh.”

Creepy, thought Bóro in the depths of his suffering. Wasn't it creepy enough to have a zombie on his driveway without her applying such terms to things other than her?

“Yeah, my world's had its share of cults,” said Cyania. “But loads of decent devout types too. Venerating all sorts: big goddesses, big animals, the Light, the Void, you name it. Thing is, often they're worshipping the same stuff. And the real deities, well, they're usually not too bothered when it comes to what people

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believe, so I guess it's really up to you. Trust me, I've met 'em. Even had to take down one or two, back in the day. Hah. Story for another time. Hey, you alright?"

Bóro was certainly not alright. He hadn't needed a wicker man to blast that reminiscence down to where it wouldn't get in his way. And it hadn't since – when? Too long to remember?

It seemed it wasn't the same as forgetting.

Still, heaven was high and God was far away. Probably hiding under a rock after what the war had done to him. Poor Iorialus Bóro had far nearer ordeals to worry about as the sparks flew again, then parted to reveal...

"Hey, looking stylish there!" the zombie couldn't wait to share. "Ooh, was that your first studio? Beard still brown as a bear I see. Pointier, too. Although...hmm. Yeah. Gotta say this thunderbush it's grown into is way cooler." She squeezed it, of course she did, which only compressed the rage up into his skull. "Hah! There, see what I mean? You're mad at that guy, but the brown brambles don't quite give you, you know, the *terribleness* you get from..."

"Shut up!"

He was rocking now, trembling as though suddenly naked in the breeze; something about this vision had shunted control back to his overworked spleen. Of course Cyania mistook it for bravery – one doesn't simply tell a seven-foot armoured zombie to shut up – and chucklingly obliged.

The memory-Bóro was berating a young man: "Enough is enough! For heaven's sake man, what do you take me for?"

"Please, Mr. Bóro sir!" The fellow went down on his knees. "Like I told you, my mother's gravely ill, they think it's Lyme disease, and they're throwing me out of my tenement; and I've abused your generosity enough, I know it sir, you've done so much more than I ever had a right to ask, but if you can't provide me just this one last mercy I know I'll –"

You couldn't measure which Bóro was quaking to greater magnitude. But the one in the image couldn't explode, somehow just couldn't; not with his apprentice in such pathetic condition, blubbing like a broken dam and digging his fingers into the Young Master's overcoat.

"And you did provide, didn't you?" That was Cyania. "Because you're like that. Big beard or small beard. He was your apprentice. You cared."

"That wretched, *evil* son of a –"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to make you watch the whole thing."

"It was all lies," Bóro grated through his wheezes. "The sick mother, the landlord, the gushing gratitude; all of it. I only found out after he disappeared with the canvas I'd spent months on. It was of you, curse it. A *Zombie at the Gates*. The

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bastard was a con artist all along, he sold it to some Malaysian private collector for millions. Politician or something, later went down in a corruption scandal but I never saw my painting again. Pah!"

"Urrgh, that's rough. My good man, I'm sorry."

He coughed. "Pfft. Not your fault. Hope you're having a good time with your swimming pool up a skyscraper in Kuala Lumpur or whatever."

"Wonder if this is the heart of it," Cyania murmured. "It's only rational. Conjuring fake realities around him, only to bring 'em down on his head and let him stew in them; after an experience like that that, who wouldn't flinch at anything they couldn't know for certain?"

"Caught another one!" boomed someone who booms for a living. They both looked up, for the flames had shifted once more, this time to present the very woods they stood in. Bóro's cabin could just be glimpsed through the trees, but the trees themselves cast dire shadows on proceedings, for the sky was a dark and threatening red. Across the horizon, cities were aflame.

The largest shadow split in two: a beefy mass – Captain Butcher, as he lived and breathed – and a kicking, struggling figure secured by the larger man through the elbows. A separate, slighter shadow spoke in the voice of the restaurateur and Bórolite secretary Cavallaro.

"Sneaky little Redcap, hmm? Now what could possibly have brought you snooping through these woods?"

To which the captive broke into an astounding expletive-laden diatribe against the 'traitor' and 'communist' Iorialus Bóro (who, to be completely clear, had not participated in the Second Civil War and rarely gave any form of political opinion to public record). Within the first few words, indeed, the man's speech departed from any semblance of meaningful reality, spiralling instead down a wanton kaleidoscope of stolen elections and woken agendas, cannibalistic journalists and government pedophiles meeting in a secret pizza parlour in Mr. Bóro's basement to build disease-inducing radio masts and erase the true history and blow up the monuments and replace real people with colourful drug-trafficking alien reptile Jewish Chinese Muslims; by which point the sentries in the memory had given up much as the flummoxed zombie outside it, to whom all this might as well have been the language of fishes.

"Take him away. You know what to do," Cavallaro instructed. And he shouted after them as they dragged the creature away: "And watch your back! The Canadians broke the Duluth Line last night, they're crossing the St. Louis as we speak, but so long as the front's nearby we're at risk. Whatever way things go, we'll not let this war deprive the world of Iorialus Bóro!"

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Finding the undead analysis suspiciously absent, Bóro glanced sideways – and bristled in indignation.

She was holding up a smartphone. Recording. Recording his memories.

“Nifty, isn't it?” she said, seeing him speechless. “They told me you use these things round here, is that right? Looks like it does a ton of other stuff too. Ahah, look at this! You can even have it point straight back at you! Hey, come, come stand over here! No? Then maybe if I angle it like...yeah, yeah! Just like that, hold that face, that's perfect!”

Bóro was close to apoplectic now. “Have you had enough, *madam*?” He brought the last word down like a blast door, a final barrier against acknowledging the zombie he knew and thereby the reality of this most stressful Halloween horror show.

“Yeah, guess I am kinda fed up with it,” she said, prodding distractedly at the screen. “It keeps failing to respond when I push it, see? Ah, it'll be because it doesn't like my cold dead fingers I'll bet! Hah! How's that for discriminatory design?”

“I *didn't* – mean – the phone!”

“Huh? Oh. Oh, right! Well, sure, guess you've got a point. Your whole country went to pieces because people lost their grip on reality and decided it could mean whatever they wanted. Isn't that the story?”

Bóro vacillated, like a bubbling pot about to blow its lid.

Then he relented. Sighed through his beard.

“You see what happens,” he snarled. “You see it. We've all seen it. And when you listen to them now, their gruesome accounts in the testimonies, the tribunals, and the truth and reconciliation commissions, you can't imagine how, how we became, how they were allowed...”

In the lilac light his wrinkles deepened. The pair stood in silence, bathed in the wicker-fire's purgative glow.

“So I ask you again,” Bóro found his will. “Is that enough, *madam*? Because I tell you, it's more than enough for me. I've a mind to sleep this off, and when I awake, I'll be safe in my bed, with the blackbirds singing in the branches, my bag of coffee waiting in the cupboard, and not a zombie in –”

“Hey, don't look at me,” said Cyania, pointing to the bonfire. “Why don't you ask this guy? What, did you think I was controlling it? It's your memories, my friend, not mine! Hey, looks like there's another coming in!”

Bóro's heart sank as he watched the wicker-fire confront him with yet another piece of his past.

“No! You *can't* do this, you *can't*!”

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Someone was pleading with him in the foyer of the Bóro Gallery. Stricken with tears, a middle-aged woman in a lab coat, the red badge of the Canadian Space Agency sewn on the pocket in place of the now-defunct NASA emblem.

"Please, Iorialus! I've known you since...since..."

"It's not good enough," the Bóro in the image laid down the law to her. "I tell you, it's not good enough! You've gone too far this time, and you know it!"

"But how else can I explain it?" wailed the tearful scientist – or, if the tag on her lanyard was accurate, Professor Madoka Akaguma of CSA Lunar Division. "Iorialus, your art changed my whole life! Don't you remember? All those beautiful stars in that famous Creame painting, I could never see them back in Tokyo; I got into astronomy because of you, because I dreamed that friends like Creame were out there watching us, wanting to play! And Cyania, she was there for me whenever my life broke down, like when the Redcap Arizona government cancelled my projects – "

"That's enough! I'll hear no more of this, professor, no I shall not!"

"...and then in the war, when they smashed my telescope, burned my observatory, when I was so frightened every day; your characters, they're my family! They're my true friends in this crazy world full of hatred and cruelty, they give me strength to go on, they make things make sense, they –"

"This is outrageous! Beyond the pale! Don't you see you need help? For heaven's sake, stand up, stand up! Now look. I mean you no ill will, but you've left me no choice, you hear? Regardless of motivation or necessity, this sort of behaviour causes me problems I have an obligation to address in an official capacity. You are to be expelled from the Bórolites, your museum pass revoked..."

"No! Please, please no, I need your club! And your characters, my friends, what shall I – no, please Iorialus! How can I manage without you? Please, come back!"

Her cries ascended, piercing the vision like shards of glass as the Old Master scrunched his nose in disgust and stormed away; and as it fizzed she was shrieking, clawing at herself, beating the walls and bursting with tears as the life-changing implications of her ostracism burst through to her consciousness and shredded it to blood-drenched confetti...

The professor's anguish faded into the flames.

"Same beard as now," Cyania broke the flickering silence. "That was recent, right?"

"She's a scientist, for heaven's sake. She should have known better," Bóro insisted, fists clenched, spirals and wrinkles taut as they'd go. "She got too attached. She wasn't going to recover so long as she stayed, her delusions would only have made everyone uncomfortable. It was for her own good."

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“Her own good? My good man, with the battles I've fought I've met plenty of folks who've had their minds broken by their experiences. Heck, even where I come from, you still get people who think the undead are mentally ill by definition! Agonies like hers; people like that don't just go away and recover you know? Don't you think connecting with us on, what do you call it, a *real* level, was maybe not a problem with her health so much as the only way she knew of looking after it? Because sometimes all folks need is –”

“No *more!*” Bóro exploded. “I've had it, I've had it I tell you, and for fuck's sake stop calling me your good man! You, you, you sniggering carcass, are you not satisfied with the loot you've dredged from my damnable remembrances this night? People *cannot* be allowed to mix their facts and fictions, no madam, they cannot! The consequences are plain as the night is dark!”

A shrug of shifting plate. “The only consequence I see from that one is a real and honest young lady having the plug pulled on her because she didn't see reality the same way you do. I mean, granted, some people'll start wars over that, or manipulate it to mess with you. But this girl, she wasn't like those people you showed me earlier, right? Heh. I wonder where she is now; whether she ever came to terms with losing her community of friends who believe in us one way or another. And she wasn't the only one, am I right? You've kicked out plenty of people who need us on the same pretext, and the best part is, it only ruined 'em so hard because you who brought them into our support in the first place.”

The Old Master had turned his back. He was more than done with this particular night of spooks and frights.

“Hey, you can't go yet!” Cyania spoke up. “We're almost done! No really, I'm pretty sure this is the last one!”

Bóro ignored her. Shuffled for his door.

“Heh. Suit yourself.”

The zombie turned back to the wicker-flames. Watched them amass into one final image.

“Uhh...Bóro? Hey! Bóro! Don't look now, but I think you'll really want to see this...”

His fingers slid round the doorknob. “I really do not,” he muttered.

“Hey *there!*”

A woman's voice, so clear and fresh that it ruffled the treetops.

“.....!”

Bóro spun round, and in his shock, felt his entrails twist into knots.

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A cascade of chestnut hair. A purple shirt, with big white letters across the chest reading NOM, as befitted an individual with no shame to take in her dietary passions. A triangle of freckles on her right cheek.

"So, did you find him?" she was asking. "Does he really exist?"

She filled the whole image – oh, that enormous toothy smile! – and for an alarming flicker Bóro felt she was addressing him from the flames. But the Old Master had an eye for perspective and sensed that wasn't quite right. No; it was stranger than that. Like she was speaking to...someone in her hand?

That made sense, he remembered.

The woman's irises were blue as the sky, her sentiments no less clear. One moment, expectant. And then: excitement surging upon those irises, those fleshy cheekbones, a face cresting the summit of an epiphany...

"Really?! I...I can't believe it! But I always thought – well, never mind, go on, go on! Tell me what you heard! What did he say? Did he say anything about me?"

Another voice, tiny, at the limits of audible range...

...then an instant, a fraction of an instant, to glimpse those pupils dilate in horror, the furrowing brow, those parting lips, a trembling singularity of grief, confusion, rage, disgust, terrible, *terrible*, his own *terribilità* reflected in symmetry as the depths of the woman's lungs blasted forth: "WHA-"

...then the view went dark, and the lilac faded as the brilliant reds and yellows poured back in.

The embers strained, too heavy to reach the sky.

"So. How about it?"

Bóro stood numb.

"Hey. You alive in there?"

The profanity of zombie fingernails returning for his hair – he jerked to attention.

She was still there. Standing over him. Cyania. *His* Cyania.

Offering him a branch.

"There's still time before the fire goes out. Well then, Bóro my friend?"

Bark white as bone. Silver birch, he recognised.

"There's gotta be something you're better off relinquishing before going to bed tonight. Come, this is your chance, before the cold comes and freezes it up in your veins!"

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The flames filled Bóro's vision. A difficult face for the firelight to navigate: curls, wrinkles, creases, obstacles everywhere. A landscape of rugged excrescences, strewn as though to shelter the darkness whatever lurked beneath did best in.

"That last one," he sneered. "What was the purpose of it? Tell me, madam, whyever did you –"

"Hey come on, enough with the *madam* alright? I don't think anyone's called me that since I was, what, seven years old? It's me! Remember? Your harmless old adventuring zombie Cyania? Too restless to stick to any one country, any one world even? Heck, you've probably known me long enough to remember me when I was alive!"

"We've discussed this," Bóro grunted. "You're not alive."

"Well, yeah! Tell me about it, hahaah!"

"That's not – you know what I meant! You're not *real*!"

She drew back the branch. Rested its end in her other hand. Turned it this way and that as she gazed into the wicker man's flames.

"Hmm. Gotta say I feel pretty real to me. But then again, if you'd told me before that there was a world out there where everyone's so sure their own bonkers reality is the only one, well...heh. Guess the truth never runs out of surprises."

She tucked the stick under her arm. Removed her spectacles; wiped them on her leather strap before folding them away.

Then she turned back to Bóro. Offered him the branch once more.

He glowered.

After a while, she said: "Well, it's your choice. But...you're really fine going on as you are?"

"I'll take my chances I think."

"That's final, is it? Just to get things straight."

"You heard me."

"And you still don't believe in me?"

"I do not, madam. Look. This is either a superbly creative set-up or a correspondingly superb hoodlum of a nightmare, but the thing about both those, see, is they're recognised warts on that miserable bastard we refer to as real life, as much as I wish they weren't. And there's a whole gamut of things that would account for your manifestation, and the trials and torments you've put me through tonight; *real* things, mind you, like vile memories, and improperly-fermented beer, and undercooked steak, and all those wretched potholes and photos of corpses day after day in the newspaper; and I tell you madam, what's real is real, and we're stuck with it, because reality couldn't care less how you or I feel. So no offence to you, and I really do wish you well in whatever imaginary fog you're planning to

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disperse in because believe me, you hold yourself up a great deal more impressively than most cadavers we haul out of the gutters round here. But a fact's a fact, and it's a fact that I've drawn and sculpted you for all my years, so yes, I should know, and I tell you square: zombies aren't real, this isn't real, and you, Cyania – you are not real.”

Flickers. Shadows. Embers on the wind.

“Oh.”

The branch never wavered. One moment it was there, still his to reach out and take. The next she'd withdrawn it.

“Heh. A shame, that. Can't pretend I'm not disappointed.”

She faced the flames.

Tossed the branch in the air a few times, catching it on the descent. It appeared to gleam, as if charged with the ashen light of the waning gibbous on high.

“Well, alright. I'm sure you have your reasons. Guess I can't really blame you, with the kind of life you've had. Still, old friend,” – she raised the branch – “you won't mind then if this glum old bag of bones sheds a memory or two of her own while she's here? I mean, we went to all this trouble...”

Bóro was nearing his house again. As far as he was concerned, the trouble was no longer his.

“If you must,” he grumbled.

“Yeah,” Cyania muttered. “Gave it a go. It hurts, but what can you do? Can't say it'll sit right with me, getting represented by someone who's sure I'm not real.”

She stood in reflection, even after Bóro's door slammed shut.

But not for long. This old soldier wasn't for hesitating.

“Nah, it's not even that. It's just – this reality or that, friendship's gotta mean something.”

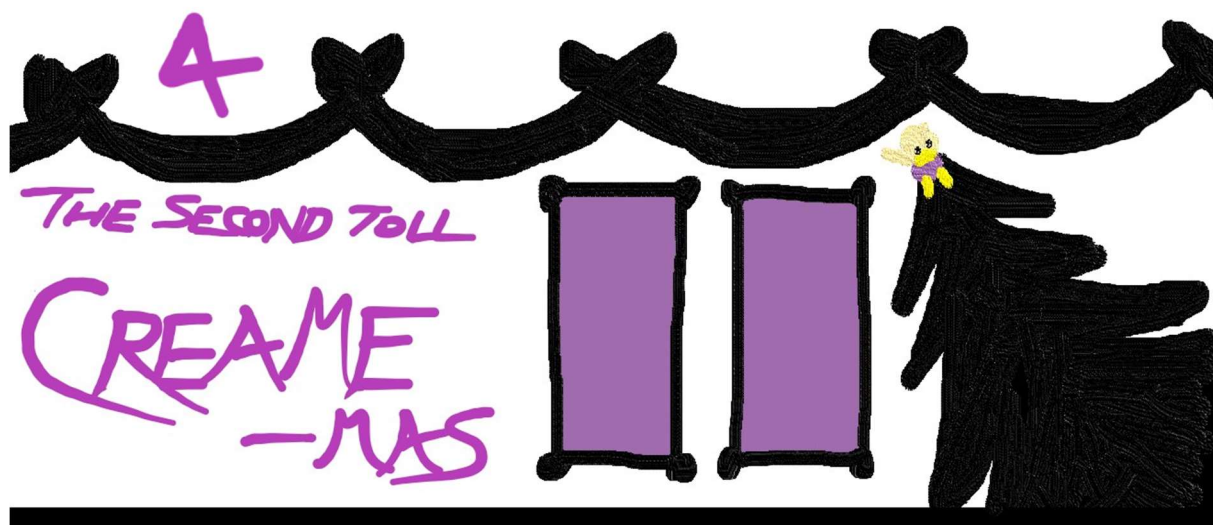
She tossed it in, though it was more of a flick. And as she slung her casket-lid shield on her back and trudged into the night – *crunch, crunch* went the dry leaves – the branch spun through the air, and the instant the first lick of flame bit its bark...

A bellow from the house, as a great crumbling in the sculpting yard rocked the surrounding land and sent owls and bats fluttering from the treetops; then fire from Bóro's studio, fire thick with smoke this time, fast fire, furious fire, and not only from his house, for as the branch broke to ash at the wicker man's feet, so did every painting of the zombie hero Cyania in all the galleries and collections of the world, save only for those in service of people who held open the slightest possibility, even in the remotest or most abstract senses, that she might be real; and likewise her sculptures and statues, in every size, every material, fell to

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powder in his sculpting yard, in squares and streets across the world, in landscaped gardens and statue parks, and even on temples, from the great cathedrals of Paris and Florence all the way down to her gargoyle on the Actually Reformed Church of Christ the Sorry in nearby Bóroville, whose great casket-lid shield, first to detach, clashed to rubble against the steeple bell.

Its toll cast rings of dread far across the war-scarred wastes of the Wisconsin Republic. It was heard in the towns, in the woods, across the lakes, but in the ears of Iorialus Bóro it rang loudest of all.



“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

I’m sincerely sorry. It’s no more fun to narrate than it was for the innocent black bear, sniffing for mushrooms below Mr. Bóro’s window, to be struck from its wits and sent bawling into the forest. Nor may we presume it any the pleasanter for the man himself, terrorised awake yet again on smashing into the sea.

Or rather, not smashing into the sea. Because it wasn’t real.

Yes: speaking strictly, dreams are not real. That is what makes them dreams.

Consider, however, that this only makes sense from an external frame of reference. Experienced from within, they are real enough. Which arguably is also what makes them dreams. Do you follow?

Small wonder that the study of dreams is one of the oldest fields of human inquiry. Smaller wonder still that despite this, no-one truly has a clue what they are.

For Iorialus Bóro, it had ever been enough to know they meant precisely nothing. But as the harsh Canadian winter came chomping across the Great Lakes, and temperatures in occupied Wisconsin plunged below zero (how much bitterer beneath the shame of their Celsius scale?), so too did the Old Master’s cast-iron certainties strain.

His nightmares were worsening. Whether on account of the cold, or the nervous aftershocks of his horrid Halloween hallucinations, they’d bashed

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through the blockade of his sleeping pills and come for him with a vengeance. Night after night that imaginary struggle atop an imaginary bridge beneath an imaginary broken Moon ruined his real sleep, soaked his sheets in real sweat, and shook real snow from real branches by means of that most regrettably real scream.

Worse still, and worsening with each encounter, was the ruthlessness of his assailant. Harder and faster those blows rained down, the shoves, the barges, the elbow-strikes, then the lightning, that flash of a glimpse, that paralysis in horror, followed by the thump, the winded gasp, the shunt backwards, falling, falling...

Were Bóro of such temperament to analyse these nightmares, and it is important that we recall, he was not, he might have remembered that he used to hold his own for at least five minutes. Sometimes six.

Now he could barely manage one.

He might have wondered how to win.

Maybe he did wonder. Of course he'd never let on. But it could be worth it, the Old American in him insisted. Overpowering his attacker was surely the correct way to end these terrors.

He was no gorilla, Iorialus Bóro. But he was the Old Master, with arms thick on the heft of marble and a hand-eye coordination for the legends.

If only he could bring his chisel into these confrontations. Or at least his palette knife.

Maybe if he slept with it under his pillow?

What was he thinking?

"Fuck sake," he sighed. "It isn't real." And he gripped his coffee mug tight in both hands and glowered at the snow through the window.

Events outside Bóro's dreams deteriorated to match them. November brought the first news of skirmishes along what was now the Sino-Canadian border, with ugly clashes at Beaver Creek and Juneau. Chinese fleets also twice came drifting up Puget Sound to loom intimidatingly in sight of Canadian Seattle.

The government in Beijing insisted in international forums that they were merely affirming the Ninety-Dash Line: a traditional claim, supported by three-thousand-year-old Shang Dynasty oracle bone carvings, which demarked the North Pacific Ocean up to twelve nautical miles from the North American coastline as inalienable Chinese maritime territory. The Canadian imperialists, they railed, should cease their immature provocations and end diplomatic recognition for the Republic of Hawai'i: historically a Chinese province, they maintained, although the naval strength it had inherited from the American

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colonisers – nuclear-armed submarines neither confirmed nor denied – made any reminder impractical for the time being.

The Canadians were having none of it. Prime Minister Harry Dar had reached the height of his popularity, what with the successful pacification of the string of former U.S. territories acquired during the Canadian Intervention, the huge boost to domestic industries brought by that conflict, and now that it had ended, the official resumption of the Canadian Space Agency's mission to the Moon. They'd generously accepted the Chinese stabilising presence in Alaska, they pointed out, seeing as no-one else had seemed ready to pacify its tenacious Redcap infestation, but only on condition that the People's Republic respected historical treaties in regard to the Alaskan border as well as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. But though Canadian politicians and diplomats maintained a courteous front in these disputes, they were happy to coast on the papers and media interviews of certain people in their universities who, calling themselves *realists*, gleefully framed China as a declining power, desperate to save face by grasping for the mines of Yukon after its bloody loss of Xinjiang, Tibet, and most humiliating of all, in its cack-handed attempts to forestall this descent, its forfeit of two-thirds of Yunnan to the Vietnamese. By the same framing, brave ancestral Canada was the next century's rising power. It had to grow up fast, they asserted, by ditching quaint fixations like Mounties and beavers in favour of the geopolitical hard-headedness, competitive appetite, and resolve to punish troublesome subjects – formerly known as Americans – that was ever the way of successful great powers in the *real world*.

Sure enough, this toughened climate blew in on the snow and promised a long, hard winter for the Wisconsin Republic. As always, people told each other they might have it worse. They had shelter, or pieces of it; foreign aid kept them just about fed and heated; and if nothing else, they still lived on their home soil, whatever its name today or tomorrow. That was more than could be said of the hordes of American refugees still swarming across the longest land border in the world, live on twenty-four-hour TV, with only the clothes on their backs and a suitcase or two if they were lucky. Initially welcomed by the Canadians, attitudes had soured once the Americans spread the unrest onto their territory, dragging them into their war and putting them to the awful trouble, out of the kindness of their hearts, of stabilising the borderlands through military occupation. Not a day went by without the opposition parties or noisy street protests demanding Dr. Dar send back the American refugees, or remove their state support, or better yet, build a 'Great Wall of Canada' all the way from Portland to Baltimore to halt the crossings.

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That last was unrealistic, everyone knew it. But it did draw attention to the more serious question of long-term arrangements for occupied territories like the Wisconsin Republic. In the event, with the Mexican, Cuban and Haitian zones already annexed by their respective caretakers, the seventy-two American rump states in diabolical turmoil, and the menace that was the Chinese buildup in Alaska, there could only really be one outcome. The best ever Christmas present for their suffering brothers and sisters, announced Sunshine Harry (so known for his affable manner as much as his championing of solar photovoltaics): the formal integration of the Wisconsin Republic into Canada, with all the security, reconstruction and De-Magafication guarantees that would entail. By way of a free advent calendar they'd even get to spend December under martial law, just to contain any excitement this promotion to *Wisconsin Province* might rouse in their grateful hearts. And if the pilot proved successful, the rest of the occupied territories could follow next year, thriving no doubt on the lessons of the Wisconsin Model.

State, Republic, Province: different flags, different uniforms, different weights and measures, but not necessarily so different in the realities of everyday life. They all taxed you, buried you in paperwork, prised the guns from your hands, and promised they'd one day get round to filling the gaping hole in your road or supplying your house with potable water again.

For most people, most of the time, the distinction might have been meaningless. And for Iorialus Bóro, it was distant as a dream.

The Old Master had his own festive gift for the masses to work on. And when Bóro worked, nothing, that is to say, absolutely nothing, interrupted him: not his broken sleep, not the disastrous damage to his studio from his Halloween somnambulation or drunken rampage or whatever the hell he had done; not even the tear-stained letters from art institutions worldwide, remorsefully informing him that his pieces – bafflingly, all depicting Cyania – had been damaged or destroyed in incidents still under investigation.

He could work that out later. He had Cavallaro and his gnomes for that. His task, his calling, his sole commitment, was to finish *Creame's Abode* in time for Christmas.

The genius of *Creame's Abode* would also be the misery of its critics, reviewers, art historians, and alas, storytellers. Supposedly crafted to represent the dwelling of Bóro's sweet little pudding-demon Creame, it had emerged so extraordinary,

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so detached from all known aesthetic or indeed geometric points of reference, that a meaningful description in words was quite impossible.

But who on seeing such a sculpture would want to describe it? No, you'd want to play in it: to crawl through its tunnels and shifting apertures, slip through its funnels and chutes, bounce off the springpads and dough-pits, and climb up through ceilings which, solid as they appeared, would part to the touch like soft putty, revealing secret chambers: a lair of cosy cushions, say, or a laboratory-kitchen stacked with colourful machines for making sweets. It didn't matter if you were six or sixty, you would come out of there believing Bóro had come within a whisker of giving it working teleportation pads, size-change fields, or indeed, thanks to some stunningly creative use of depth cues and forced perspectives, of making it larger inside than out.

All that was missing was an encounter with Creame herself. But how could you meet someone who wasn't real? Even the Old Master had his limits. But you might, at least for those short sublime seconds, make contact with the feelings or mythic implications of that imaginary being called Creame, were she to exist, entirely hypothetically, if it were possible. This was art after all, and what is great art if not sublime?

The shadow of sublimeness was terror: a cosmic terror for those who caught on to the true alarming depths of Creame's power, but a more immediate terror for the contractors hired by Cavallaro to shift the finished structure. They drew up Bóro's driveway in mid-December in a massive articulated lorry, slathered with 'BÓRO' in white paint to defuse the suspicions of the Canadian patrols. The installation was strapped onto boards and shrouded in six layers of fabric, confounding the loaders' attempts, all twenty of them, to get to grips with its irregular profile, but they had no choice, Bóro absolutely refused to entrust it to mechanical cranes or forklifts. The driver then faced the unenviable task of delivering this cargo safe to the Bóro Gallery under both cover of night and the thunderous eye of the Old Master in the seat beside him. The poor fellow resembled a melting snowman by the time they pulled into the courtyard, so relentlessly had the anoraked Bóro barked at him to watch the damn potholes, or steer clear of the checkpoints, or take the next corner properly if he dreamed to see a cent of his fee.

But they got it there, that was what mattered: off the truck, up the corridor with not a bump or a scratch if they knew what was good for them, and into the private reception hall. There it would stay, under velvet covers and constant armed guard, for the few days left till the twenty-fifth: the most eagerly-anticipated day on the Bórolite calendar.

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The December reception, held on Christmas evening, was a fantastic blast of bright lights and ribbons, raffles and speeches, songs and toasts and boards decked in cheeses and pile upon pile of cookies, cakes and cranberry pies. Everyone on the Bórolite roster was invited, and everyone came, in particular those who couldn't make the monthly gatherings due to work, family pressures, or living in places like Melbourne or Buenos Aires. Though pared back by the years of conflict, shortages, and now martial law, the new building had given them this splendid reception room to do justice to it, while the Canadian authorities understood its cultural significance and granted special travel passes to all participants, as well as exemptions from rationing, curfews, and assembly limits.

But what they really came for was its prime custom: Bóro's unveiling of his grandest work of the year. Like *Creame's Abode*, these were often interactive pieces; thus his circle's privileged preview doubled as the works' final test run before their carting into the galleries for the post-holiday re-opening.

Beneath the excitement bubbled the rumours. He'd heard them. You couldn't keep secrets from ears like his. Iorialus Bóro was unwell, they whispered. Insomnia. Nightmares. Memory lapses. Careless accidents, like his studio fire in October. Cataracts. Gout, someone dared mention. He'd been seen with a walking stick, a hearing aid, a pacemaker, a dialysis machine.

It wasn't his first winter to catch wind of such nonsense, but it worsened with every passing year. According to the Cavallaro-shaped breeze, the word *dementia* had been uttered. They were only concerned, his secretary reassured him. It was natural to worry when their beloved master spent his days shut up in a cabin in the wilderness, nose-deep in high-energy processes beyond the wits of ordinary people. Hence the importance Bóro invested in these receptions, the Christmas instalment first of all. He was old, but not that old. This was his chance to put beyond doubt for another year that Iorialus Bóro still had the spit and vinegar of forty of them, that his masterpiece-engine still roared hot as the Sun. He wouldn't even have to terrify them to jelly in the process, because it was Christmas, the season of merrymaking, bush-bearded jolliness and sacks full of Bóro-themed gifts. Beneath the wreaths and coloured lights, around the tree with a miniature Creame in a Santa hat on top and ornaments of his characters dangling from the branches, the output of his tools and teeth alike, whatever their decibel level, would be parsed as generosity to all and a blast of festive cheer to lift the world through frigid times.

To prepare, the museum closed a week early. A full round of cleaning and maintenance followed, after which the lights were switched off, the galleries shuttered, and all the staff went home to rest. Those with the honour of servicing

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the Bórolite gathering returned early on Christmas Day, where under Madame Rogg's rigorous instruction they erected the tree, hung the decorations, set out the tablecloths, inspected every last corner and crevice for bugging devices, and only then, with the hall done up in the safe, secure spirit of the season, did the curator bid them to down their hammers, staplers and cloths and go refresh themselves for the entertainment to come.

Among this advance guard was Bóro himself, who had his own ritual to carry out before his guests arrived. It began with a light lunch with the organisers, Rogg and Cavallaro among them, in which the Old Master combed the list of attendees, firing off gruff questions about this name and serious doubts about that one till he was satisfied none of this year's participants had a record of confusing his characters for real people.

Then, having drained his coffee, he marched into the offices to knock heads with Mr. Khai, the museum's chief of security. Also present were Lennard the night watchman, the in-house art historian and veteran tour guide Dr. Hamil, and specially Lieutenant Mazar, here on behalf of Occupation Headquarters and in high jubilation, no doubt due to her office's imminent promotion into a permanent executive branch for Wisconsin Province.*

Duly assured on security arrangements, Bóro marched out to the courtyard for a final check on supplies and logistics. He absorbed the latest news from Captain Butcher, who had been put in charge of these undertakings along with his number two, a young lad called Mr. Monke; apparently everyone in the profession called him Monkey out of his admiration for some pirating hero in East Asian legend. Both men were uncharacteristically glum. After a little prodding they confided in Bóro that the reason was the integration of the occupied territories: for with the border removed from the Lakes and regulations aligned, the movement of goods would become standardised, with no more naval patrols to evade or customs inspections to circumvent, and where would that leave their honest little enterprise? They'd either have to go legit, meaning regulatory oversight, or else sail down the Mississippi to ply their trade where the need was still great, but so too the danger from rebels, bandits, better-established competitors and political regimes which shifted swift as the currents.

Thankfully Bóro's next port of call was a heartier one: the in-house Creame Treats Café. Here the new baker, a young redhead called Jessica, was busy

* Oh yes: the generals would remain in charge of the Province until at least the end of the transition period. Wasn't it obvious? And because Dr. Dar was such a considerate fellow, the military would even shoulder the over-stressed populace's burden of appointing legislators, judges and mayors! Weren't the Canadians generous?

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directing the catering team to conjure a mouth-watering mountain of cakes, cookies, gingerbread houses, Yule logs, fudge cubes, macarons and cranberry pies; a banquet of sugar-coated delights by any standard, but this year of all years a positively fitting one to fill out the setting for *Creame's Abode*.

New building, new baker – still, old customs had to be kept. The first bite was the Old Master's, in advance for good luck, and he always selected a white chocolate cupcake. Delicious, read his wrinkles, to the relief of baker and crew. The curator was right to be impressed by Jessica's credentials, he thought. Thank goodness they'd recruited her, otherwise she might have joined most people her age and emigrated somewhere useless like Canada.

Upper Canada, he grumblingly corrected himself. Central Canada? Metropolitan Canada? Real Canada?

That would need sorting now, wouldn't it?

Well, somebody else could do it.

So amid these musings did Bóro reach his final stop, and this was the most important. The reception hall: all decked out in Christmassy glory and ready an hour in advance, just as instructed.

He dismissed Cavallaro and the stragglers for now. Relieved the sentries of their watch. Paced the hall, back and forth, till their footsteps and voices receded.

He waited a little, for meditative effect. Whistled a tune from an old-time favourite video game. Chuckled to himself.

Then he seized the corner of the velvet, counted to three, and yanked it off.

Grumbled. That wasn't quite right.

He threw it back up. Tugged out the creases. Tried again. He had to get this exactly right.

Seven attempts satisfied him. He was used to it now, it'd be fine. But before replacing the cover he drew it aside and stood back to regard his winter's handiwork.

Creame's Abode. Magnificent, if he said so himself. No – more than magnificent. Enchanting. Transcendent. The real thing, had it existed, could scarcely be better.

The evening would be his followers' privilege, but these moments were his own. To bask in the wonders he'd brought on the Earth, wonders never before imagined in the story of humankind, yet by his hand, fixtures built within it, *real* fixtures, never to be erased from its pages...

"What!" he snapped, as something moved in the corner of his eye.

Moved? In his sculpture?

No. It couldn't be. They'd made sure – *he'd* made sure –

It did! There: in the window!

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Bóro convulsed. “Who’s there?” he roared.

Whatever it was suddenly vanished.

He blinked.

A wild animal? Goodness knows there were enough wolves and foxes and bears running loose, reclaiming the soon-to-be Province’s ruined streets and suburbs.

He must be seeing things again. Damn it – his age, his stress, his liver...

Then to his horror and consternation it re-emerged.

A face in the window, the colour of cream, gaping out through a pair of cute dark eyes and a little mouth open in curiosity.

Bóro stared.

The face stared back.

A bellow for security surged in the Old Master’s lungs...

...but dwindled in his throat to a wheeze.

It wasn’t on account of the more insistent bellow, from the Old American part of his brain, to storm his art installation and drag the intruder out with his own hands. No, it was out of the question: ohh, that adorable face! Those huge shy eyes, peering out through little purple iris-rings: no heart could stand to confront such innocence without being found in violation of some universal truth.

A Creame costume: the only explanation. No mistake. A child, judging by the height. But of course. You had to be a child, or in any case remarkably short, to pull off a convincing Creame.

The thought mollified Bóro. The conflict’s toll in displaced and orphaned kids would not be settled soon, whatever the radiant promises issuing from Ottawa. Even now, two Christmases after the Treaty of Thunder Bay, over a third of Wisconsin’s urban population had no permanent dwelling, and in outlying districts like this the situation was worse. The Bóro Gallery did its best for the local dispossessed with its Christmas Eve distribution, but this urchin must have been desperate enough to linger about its bright lights and sneak in during the night, no doubt getting lost and sheltering in *Creame’s Abode*.

That last being the least surprise. Because who wouldn’t want to shelter in *Creame’s Abode*?

Sympathetic now, Bóro contracted his voice into the gentlest growl he could manage.

“It’s alright, my little friend. You can come out now. Uncle Bóro won’t hurt you.”

The face stared on. That tiny O-shaped mouth was making him feel like a triceratops.

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“It’s only me,” he persisted. “Don’t be afraid, I don’t bite.”

The face ducked out of sight.

Re-emerged to peek round the door.

Her hair: it was perfect! But of course it wasn’t hair at all. Creame had a body made entirely of some mysterious blancmange-like substance. Soft and malleable, she – or rather Bóro, who’d designed her – had shaped that flesh to resemble a hairstyle a little like a scoop of ice cream pressed on top then allowed to melt into smooth comma-shaped curtains. Two of these tapered around her cheeks, asymmetric for cuteness, each to end in a little bulb by her chin. More flopped round the back, but the best one protruded on top, where it hooked around in a little wobbly antenna.

It was superb, Bóro couldn’t deny it. The tone, the positioning: it looked so naturally contiguous with her face, rather than efforted to match it.

Which made him leery. His mind trundled down a list of plausible mixtures: some toxic, all expensive and in requirement of industrial suppliers or expert modelling skills. Far out of reach of a destitute child of war, surely?

The figure leaned out, still sizing him up as she might a tiger. Her outfit came in view: that purple bodysuit, its little straps and ribbed sides evoking stars through a porthole and consoles covered with buttons; the nifty yellow kerchief bound round her neck like a scarf, the matching yellow gloves, and – well, that sealed it! – the black pores along her upper arms, four in a line on each side: this was no costume, this was a disguise! Accurate, professional, up to no good in his prized installation with less than an hour to go till the Christmas reception!

But just as the flick of an inner switch reset Bóro to gnashing blood-faced factory settings, the little intruder appeared to make up her mind. Her change in disposition was instant: she burst from the doorway towards him, little yellow boots padding upon the polished floor, her shy gaze replaced by a beam of such joy as would have brought tears to even the surliest insurers and crocodiles. A joy which flung her mouth wide open, such that Bóro observed she’d even got the blue of Creame’s tongue down perfect –

With a squeal of affection, the little creature flung her arms round Bóro’s chest and hugged him tight.

This would have been the point at which an ordinary citizen advanced to the difficult questions. The way her head squashed in as it pressed in on him; its rubbery texture round Bóro’s discomfited fingers, as he attempted to push back; the scrunch of his nostril-hairs to a playful tickle of vanilla; and that strange sensation of mass, somehow overpowering to a degree unexpected from this pocket-rocket body of hers, stout round the hips as she was...

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But you might have inferred that hugs were not a regular fixture in the busy schedule of Iorialus Bóro. Even assuming his permission – yes, we’re allowed to breach the bounds of the realistic in a story like this one – only years of military training might produce the guts for the attempt. So lacking referent experience, Bóro’s questions reflected his own training. Iron weights lining her outfit, perhaps? A thicker helmet than he’d presumed? Then the person wearing it must be tiny indeed, ten or younger for sure. But then, what child had the strength to carry such weight?

She was giggling up at him, like he were her long-lost uncle or something. It was disconcerting.

“Now look,” he managed to utter, still somehow drawn to moderation. “This is my gallery. We’re about to hold an extremely important function here. We can’t have you running around like this. You’re not an art thief are you? A spy? What – maybe an automaton!”

That had to be it! He wouldn’t put it past the Chinese these days, that was for sure. What, did they think the Iorialus Bóro Gallery hid state secrets that would put them one up in their border disputes with the Canadians?

“Well we can’t take the risk, so I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me. Mr. Khai will take responsibility for –”

But rather than let him finish, the creature emitted a delighted moan, fastened her gloved hand on his, and as if to confirm his worst suspicions, began to drag him towards the door in the corner.

“What – you – no, not that way! That’s a staff-only area, it leads to –”

The permanent exhibitions, he recalled with a plummeting sensation, as his uninvited guest broke off, hurtled across the room, and whammed through the door so hard that the impact shook the walls and jolted the branches on the giant Christmas tree. In their shuffle the ornaments tinkled, as though his whole roster of characters was giggling at his expense.

The Iorialus Bóro bellow resounded through the rooms of his namesake museum: “Get back here you rascal! Get back here or I’ll have you sent back to Beijing bound and gagged in a crate!”

But there was no stopping that Creame-like interloper now, set loose in the Old Master’s galleries and as hyper as if released from a cramped rocket-ship after months in deep space. Her shape dashed across arches, up and down walkways, round the columns and seating circles, inciting Bóro all the more for the whooping and wheeing which answered his shouts. The patter of her boots came up behind

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him one moment, echoed four or five rooms away the next. At times she appeared to dart along the walls, or upside-down across the ceiling; and most insufferable of all was the rattle of shutters, opening here, crashing down there, along with the whacking on and off of the lights: as sure a sign as any, were Bóro's sense of reality flexible enough to take it, that this being, just like Creame, carried her own physics with her.

Bóro changed tack. His quarry was running him ragged. She was far too agile and full of beans to chase around at his age.

"Security!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "Security! There's an intruder! Are you there, Giuseppe?" – meaning Cavallaro.

No answer; but they couldn't have missed this racket, they'd be on their way for sure.

Perhaps he could trap her? Buy them time?

He ducked back into the staff area. Re-emerged with a broom with a nice thick handle. Unperturbed by the thought of how ridiculous he looked – in his best suit, too! – he drew up beside the arch to the adjacent gallery, gripped his impromptu weapon tight in both hands, and waited.

The intruder's thrilled cries rang in the surrounding rooms. From the opposite wall, his *Goddess Majora at the Summit of Her Power* grinned smugly down at him, arms folded, stance wide with an almost Roman arrogance.

The lights went out. Bóro cursed, with flying spittle. He waited some more. Then the dark aggravated his eyes and he snarled, reset his grip on the broom, took a deep breath, and barrelled through to the next hall.

Here the lights were on, and the Old Master cursed once more as his pupils dug through the brightness. There was his would-be Creame, still as a traffic cone, eyes raised to a painting: *Saccharine Succor*.

"Now look here –"

But as though to ice this cake of insolence, she half-turned to look at him, all deep-eyed and curious again, and put a finger to her mouth to bid him quiet.

What cheek! Bóro stood stunned, but only for a moment. Then he primed his jaw, readying the great-grandfather of all reprimands for this disgraceful little scamp in a Creame suit...

...only for his voice to desert him once more.

That wasn't *Saccharine Succor*.

He hadn't set foot in here in months. Why would he? He knew all his works off by heart.

For this exact reason he also knew that not one of them depicted American refugees piling across the Mexican border.

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Even if, say, in his sleep some devil had possessed him to paint so unpalatable a subject, it was impossible. Because the crossing point was without a doubt the bridge between the Vegas Commune and Mexican Arizona, overlooking the wreckage of the Hoover Dam; and he'd never even seen the new border infrastructure here till a chance glimpse on the news the other week while flicking through channels ahead of a session on his Nintendo Galaxy.

Those parts were a shambles. The Vegas Commune had degenerated into one of the most hellish of all the American rump states, an abysmal havoc of lawlessness, gang violence, water shortages and harrowing poverty. Since the recent formal annexation of the Mexican occupied belt under the Dallas Agreement (or *Guadalupe Hidalgo II*, as more historically-informed commentators, admittedly mostly Mexican ones, jokingly called it), people stranded on the wrong side of the Colorado and Arkansas rivers were fleeing with renewed desperation for the Mexican protective umbrella.

Suffice to say, this was not your typical Bóro subject matter.

Furthermore the image in the frame was moving. Just like on TV.

"What the...!" Bóro spluttered, dropping his improvised armament with a clatter of wood on wood.

"Shhh," Creame whispered up at him.

"I must be out of my mind," he muttered, regarding the images nonetheless.

In fact they weren't like on TV; compared to those scenes this was decidedly serene. The American refugees remained ragged, destitute, in some cases sported nasty injuries; but now they were filing patiently through Mexican customs as though through the stalls of a train station. On top of that, they were getting through. No arrests, no scuffles, no flaming projectiles; the border guards had opened the gates and were checking them in with but a cursory once-over and a "Merry Christmas!"

This was so surreal, unrealistic you might say, that Bóro could do no more than stand perplexed. Only after a while did he register the tugging on his arm. Creame had picked a *Toronto Star* off the nearby bench – had the cleaners missed it? – and was trying to slide it into his hand.

He gripped the newspaper, automatically. Unrolled it. Took in the headline: SHOCK REVERSAL: MEXICO TO WELCOME REFUGEES.

Judging by its tone, the article's writer was as staggered as its reader about the sudden change in Mexican immigration policy. The details, borne out by the images on Bóro's painting, were indeed startling after the bloody scenes of the previous week. The former Americans were given food, drink and medical checks, then put on buses for the huge refugee camp up the road at Kingman. There those

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with family members in the new Mexican states would be lined up for reunions, with the rest offered temporary accommodation, dedicated counselling, Spanish lessons, and assistance to resettle elsewhere in the country.

It was unthinkable. If sense didn't disqualify it then bitter history did. What could have prompted it?

The paper was dated December eighteenth. The day they'd closed the museum.

But of course! Bóro remembered Cavallaro's message about the Mexican president's visit a few days earlier. If he hadn't bunkered down to finalise *Creame's Abode*, because the art always came first, then naturally he would have come down to greet her. Instead he'd learnt from his secretary's reports that Her Excellency had been moved to tears; who knows, perhaps on this very spot. Creame had cuddled her way into her heart and taken up permanent residence there, because that was what his sweet, mischievous, pudding-textured cuddle-monster did to everyone, a friend to all who set eyes on her and especially to those who offered her sugary treats. Her image had come to grace the top of the Christmas tree in the reception hall without anyone remembering making the decision, because it just felt right. Cheery, hungry, utterly generous: she was the spirit of the season by another genetic structure.

"Merry Christmas!" "Merry Christmas!" – the Mexican border officers were hailing immigrant after immigrant.

It couldn't be. Surely not.

His art couldn't have done this. Nothing could have done this. Not in reality.

Then again: Creame reminded everyone what was important. Bóro remembered Colonel Dasgupta too, the scoundrel. What that man had done was beneath contempt, but hadn't he shared a similar story about the rebels in the Western Upland? His little alien's deep, lovable eyes were like a mirror; in them you saw the Pale Blue Dot, felt tiny in the universe, but it was a universe stuffed with cuddly affection. The power of art – and the power of Creame.

"Merry Christmas!" "Merry Christmas!" Real or not, what a sight for the Old Master who'd lived most of his life against the backdrop of the United States' rancorous final decades! Were he not Iorialus Bóro it would have moved him to tears.

From beside his elbow, a bashful voice: "Creame-mas!"

When he freed his eyes from the magnetic allure of the Mexican border, his little friend was already waddling off into the next room.

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“I’m hallucinating,” Bóro told himself. “Another attack. Now, of all times! What in the world’s got into me this year?”

A giggle from ahead. Then a holler from Bóro as the gallery plunged into darkness.

He snarled and swore as he lurched in empty space, and again as he tripped on the benches; thank goodness they were cushioned! He couldn’t make out the walls like this, let alone the way he’d come, blast it; there was only the rectangle of light that was the way Creame had taken, the one way he assuredly did not wish to go, deeper into delirium. He ought to retreat instead, get Cavallaro to call his doctor, or at least a pharmacist. But no, that was no good, such people would all be at their Christmas dinners or doling out soup at the relief centres.

“They’re coming,” he promised himself. “They’ll be here any minute.” No sign of them shouting his name or raising the shutters, but of course there wasn’t, how should he hear them over the rumble of his heart, his throat, his irrational terror?

Terror, because he knew what that mysterious little creature was capable of. He’d created her.

But – those capabilities were over-the-top ridiculous. Even fantasists would have laughed. And anyway, this wasn’t Creame, because Creame wasn’t real.

The fear was real. He seethed at its foolishness. It had decided, against his wisdom, that he wasn’t sticking around in the dark with a Creame-shaped stranger loose in here.

He stumbled for the light.

This was the Drake Room, named in honour of one of Bóro’s old benefactors and home to the best of his twenties and thirties. One of the longest chambers in the museum, it hosted statues of his goddess characters in a range of attitudes (impressive still, but a shadow of the pair outside the entrance), as well as paintings of other people’s characters from the days such commissions drew in the bulk of his livelihood. The centrepiece, *Cats and Dogs*, was the latest to catch the admiration of that Creame-disguised interloper (but no, let her remain Creame now, since we know.)

It wasn’t *Cats and Dogs*. Bóro sensed this before he even looked.

In place of that memorably wholesome scene, it showed a bunch of furred and hatted soldiers in snowbound woods.

For whatever reason it had Creame thrilled. She was humming a catchy tune.

The soldiers were swaddled in winter gear, but even Bóro could tell apart the Canadian snowman-suits and the earflapped caps of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. Which was as well, because if not for that attire they might have been the same force. This was clearly the Canadian-Alaskan frontier, but contrary

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to the vicious skirmishing of late that had pumped both nations' newswires with bellicose bile, this was a scene of contented camaraderie. They were sitting about on logs, exchanging crackers, chocolate and flasks of tea, showing each other notebooks and photographs or laughing at shared jokes, perhaps at their governments' expense. A Chinese officer was offering his Canadian counterpart a cigarette, but the latter had politely declined, returning an explanation, most likely, of Sunshine Harry's public service smoking ban. In the background a few more of them completed the obligatory trope by kicking a football around.

Still humming her happy melody, Creame pointed. Unnecessarily: the picture's focal point was obvious.

On the central tree stump stood a cluster of Creame souvenirs: Creame plushies, Creame postcards, Creame keyrings, framed printouts of Creame paintings. Some were blatantly of dubious legality in their manufacture, Bóro fumed, but their effect was not in question. They'd been placed by both squads. The love of Creame surpassed all boundaries. In its shared reality, imagined divisions melted away. As far as the deep evolutionary fundamentals of the human heart were concerned, it was Creame first, China and Canada second.

Bóro felt a tug on his arm. Then a big nuzzle. It would have been awkward, but his mind was elsewhere. Teetering on the precipice for all he knew.

"I did not paint this," he stated. "I did not."

"It's Creame-mas!" was the only response that apparently warranted.

While he struggled to work out what in blazes was happening to him, his practiced eye picked out details by second nature. As was often the case, a grim tinge underlay this cheerful scene. It was in the soldiers' weary faces and postures, the leaf-stripped trees, the stark and shaded snow. These people plainly had no interest at all in the mounting confrontation in whose story the world was casting them front and centre. The Canadians' badges said them to be exhausted veterans of the American war, while the Chinese faces were young and raw; an impression which, had he followed the news, Bóro might have put down to the decimation of their army's experienced ranks in the loss of Tibet, to say nothing of the Yunnan debacle. These recruits were a long way from home, surely hankering to go back to their families for the upcoming Lunar New Year rather than spend it blitzed, shelled and stranded in yet another far-flung frozen wilderness.

Perhaps whoever had put the first Creame plushy on that stump had given them a chance.

Bóro stopped stating he hadn't painted it. He had a sinister sense that that made it more likely, by process of elimination, to be real. And that would be ludicrous.

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“Creame-mas is for everyone!” said his apparent creamy creation, who wrapped both arms round his and tugged him on.

He felt too muddled to resist.

Perhaps he should, he thought, as she dragged him into the dark.

Specifically, into a narrow hall which housed a staircase to the second floor. The relics of the old country still retired up there, Bóro remembered, but there was space opposite the steps for just one painting. As if on cue, it lit up in a halo of light. The plaque read: *Protection of the Grave*.

But of course, it wasn't.

There was at least a grave. Hundreds of graves in fact. A small set of mourners, weeping. Another live stream, as it were, and he recognised the setting: the overcrowded cemetery of the Actually Reformed Church up the road.

Creame hugged his arm tight. Offered a sympathetic moan.

But Bóro was all dismay. He had recognised one of the grieving relations at once. She was garbed in salvaged fabrics, far too frail for her age, the tears she shed long silenced by terminal despair.

He had met her. Among his Halloween pilgrims.

A horrendous thump in his heart. He remembered. Knew who was in the grave without having to see.

Uttered a wail, when it showed him anyway.

It was the tiny child he'd berated for asking to meet Cyania. A five-year-old boy, helpless in a world of dystopian brutalities so unimaginable that Bóro's zombie made more natural sense to him. He'd even believed she lived with him in his cabin.

Well she hadn't deserted the lad. Not even in death, as if that had ever stopped her. Too poor to afford decent burial clothes or even a casket, all he had was a picture of her he must have torn out from a magazine or museum pamphlet.

It wasn't clear what had done for him. Cholera, malnutrition, suspect medicines, fires and accidents in the ruins and ramshackle shelters from which so many grasped for the next sunrise; whichever the case, his circumstances were no exception in these dismal times. Take consolation, bade the priest blessing his remains, that he journeys on to life beyond death on Christmas Day, ever walking beneath the protective shield of his beloved friend Cyania, whose practical wisdom and knowledge of the way will guide him safe to righteous shores by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

The light dimmed.

The image faded. An empty wall remained.

“But she's not real,” Bóro heard himself say, though in fact he'd only coughed.

A little worried face peered up at him.

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“It wasn’t my fault.” Again, the words wouldn’t come out.

He reversed onto the staircase. Thunked down and wrapped his face in both hands, clenching it hard like a block of unruly marble.

What the heck was this world doing with his work?

I just create what I feel like. Glad if it makes people happy.

That was all it was. His honest answer to people’s inordinate praise. They loved his stuff. They filled museums with it, wrote articles and scholarly analyses – fine. But what had it to do with life and death? War and peace? With *politics*?

They took it so seriously. Had they all gone nuts?

“It isn’t real,” he objected to Creame, who’d followed him over.

The little pudding-demon looked sad to see him so forlorn. She squeezed her chin, as if wondering what to do.

Then she beamed. She knew. The way to cheer him up. The way to save the universe.

She reached behind her, undid the knot on her yellow kerchief and pulled it from her neck.

Then she clambered around him and put it round his.

It barely fit. She had to tug the ends to bring them close enough to tie. Then she returned to face him and grinned at her handiwork, taking especial pleasure in the funny way it pulled across his beard.

“I cannot understand.” His tone was deflated. “Put my museum back how you found it. My life too, if you please.”

The request seemed to confuse her. But not for long, because next moment she was all thrills again and skipping off to the next room.

Bóro sighed and hauled himself up. Baffled, bewildered and now shaken by the sight of death, he had decided better than to try to process this turn of events. Get through to the other side: that was all.

With trembling steps, he staggered after her.

The Windstrike Portrait Hall was named for another of Bóro’s sponsors from more limber times. The paintings here were detailed studies of his characters: mostly portraits, hence the name, but so too larger pieces depicting them full-bodied, often in representative settings: studies and kitchens, bedrooms and dining halls, restaurants and taverns, rural and mountain landscapes, or panoramas altogether alien. These backdrops teemed with a infinity of little details such that each time you looked, you dug up new treasures of insight into the characters concerned.

Bóro had guessed by now that they wouldn’t be the characters he expected.

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For instance, Creame had found Colonel Dasgupta.

Bóro's nostrils flared. The yellow kerchief wobbled on his beard.

The former Vice-Director of Public Security for occupied Wisconsin, now in civilian clothes, sat across a desk from a besuited man with hair annoyingly combed and a wad of papers in his hands. In the windows beside them, an urban skyline. Winnipeg, Bóro recollected; you couldn't mistake that glass-and-stone abstract monstrosity that was the Human Rights Museum.

"Just a final point: you are certain you are comfortable to acknowledge Iorialus Bóro?" the man in the suit put to Dasgupta. "Hey, don't mistake me, I'd do the same. I know it's only theoretical as yet that on annexation, the former American territories will once again be integrated into a functioning intellectual property regime. But from a purely ethical standpoint, given the debt of your story's characters to Bóro's work..."

"They are his characters," Dasgupta stated straight out. "But – ah, how can I put this? I have my own relationship with them too. You know? Of course you do, everyone knows. They're not just *characters*, they're something profounder, that's why the man's a genius. They embody timeless forces in which all society has a stake, like, well, God I suppose. Or Gilgamesh, or Santa Claus, or John Lennon."

"Archetypes. Quite. And there's no question a book like this – I mean, look at it, *Creame Opens a Cake Factory in Occupied America*, this unique blend of Bóro magic with your real-life experience in the military system; it'll sell like her cakes, it's just the balm people's hearts are crying out for in these troubled times. Still, the reason I ask..."

The publisher folded his fingers together. His lips wavered.

"I understand you have a...difficult personal history with Mr. Bóro."

"I...did." Dasgupta's expression was pained. "Suffice to say we are no longer on speaking terms. I cannot deny the lasting harm the man's actions did to my public career, still less my health. I..."

He slowed down, selecting his words carefully.

"I'm not sure he sees it, you see. Sees what he's done. The truth of what he's brought into this world. The incredible power of his art, and of his characters. Maybe he doesn't want to. Heck, maybe he can't, as in, they'll stop speaking to him if he openly recognises it, I don't know. The only thing I can speak of in any honesty is how much his stubborn-arse rigid attitude over it cost me. But I'll still acknowledge my creative debt to him. If not for him, this story wouldn't exist."

"Well then."

The publisher shuffled the pages together then laid the stack neat on his desk. After a final exchange the two stood up. Shook hands across the table.

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Creame gave a squeal like a gurgly “yay!” and spun to face Bóro, pumping her fists in glee.

“He can do what he wants,” the Old Master grunted. “I don’t know him.”

Still – better have a word with Madame Rogg, said the little calculator in his brain. Three times people had put out popular works based on his stuff since the war’s end, and in the following quarters museum visits had trebled. If they properly prepared, so would donations.

Meanwhile Creame had found another painting.

“I dread to guess,” grumbled Bóro. “Hmph! Actually, who the heck is that?”

The woman sat in pyjamas in a more frightful tip of a bedroom than even the Old Master could have represented in paint had all the villains in hell possessed him to attempt it. Her hair was dark and dishevelled. She was mumbling to herself. No: mumbling to framed pictures of Bóro’s characters set up in the neat order of some household shrine.

“I got it,” she was telling them. “They gave me the post. Really, they did! Look, look at this!”

She held up a glossy badge for their admiration. Blue sky, gold stars, red maple leaf.

Bóro shivered. It couldn’t be.

But it couldn’t not be. Even he had heard the news, because when the Canadians weren’t complaining about the Americans – sorry, former Americans – or the Chinese then it was the only thing on their minds these days. The Canadian Space Agency’s imminent mission to the Moon: humanity’s first attempt since the horrific Musktown Disaster to station a living presence on Earth’s storied satellite, and a focus of huge national pride. It went without saying that they had selected the best of the best for its forty crew, and in early December, after countless delays, CSA Lunar Division had finally announced their mission commander: one Professor Madoka Akaguma.

There had been questions of course. Though brilliant, Akaguma was widely considered eccentric. Socially awkward at the best of times, she had turned downright reclusive after her much-publicised expulsion from the Bóro Gallery about a year ago, since when she’d rarely appeared in public and refused all television and radio interviews. Colleagues who conversed with her whispered of the perpetual shadow on her brow, her laconic speech, her spectral gaze which seemed to stare straight through you. More partisan critics objected, if in roundabout terms, to her status as a former American citizen who’d made her career in NASA before the CSA subsumed that now-legendary – as in, no longer

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real – organisation’s functions, resources and facilities under the terms of the post-war settlement.

Most commentators were quick to rubbish these prejudices however. The Canadians had retained thousands of American scientists in this manner. What sense would it have made to waste their skills and experience, or worse, watch them offered to the rival Chinese space programme instead?

“You can’t tell me that’s her,” said Bóro, fighting a gasp. “She couldn’t – couldn’t possibly –”

Could you blame him? The old friend and former Bórolite he’d confronted only four rooms away; he’d never seen her in private. How could such an eminent public professor live in this pigsty of an apartment, surrounded not by family or friends but manga, anime, books, magazines, video games: fantasy worlds with phenomenal artistic merit, he was familiar with many of them, but no bearing on the harsh realities of this one?

“But she has friends,” spoke Creame, as though reading his mind.

“Thank you, my beloved friends,” the professor was addressing her assembly of Bóro characters. She was bowing on her knees: a gesture of deep gratitude and respect from her land of birth. “And as ever, please accept my pointless apologies. This week too I tried to contact your respected channeler, the one who brought us together, but as every week since that evil day, he refuses to answer. What can I do if he will not even talk? I fear we shall never make amends, and so I might never return to the fold of your friends in this world, nor overcome my fury at what he did. I know the depth of your care for that man, so please forgive me. There is no excuse.”

She took a Creame plushy off the altar and embraced it. Tight. Eyes wet with grief and affection, each tear as concentrated as might be brought out by a cherished sibling or furry friend.

“No. No more humans. I can never trust humans again. You are my true and only family. Thank you for all you have done to get me this far. It’s not long now. When we reach the Moon, the human race will remember; they will understand. We can do something to mend this world at last.”

“The Moon!” Creame squealed encouragingly. Her expression was something like that of a seal watching its pup take its first few paddles underwater.

“She’s delusional,” said Bóro. “She’s delusional, and now they’re sending her to the Moon. *They’re* delusional. But why I am seeing this? Why am I seeing you? Why am I talking to you? How did I become delusional too?”

Creame didn’t hear, because she was sniffing. In due course so was Bóro. Now that was no delusion: the mouth-watering scent of fluffy baked dough and crisp

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cool frosting, of chocolate fudge and cranberry filling and spiced gingerbread fresh from the oven...

She was off at relativistic speed. Already her footsteps rattled in the next corridor.

The corridor with the entrance to the Creame Treats Café.

“No!” Bóro’s roar decked the halls as he hurtled in pursuit.

It was worse than he’d feared. The little pudding-demon was scampering between the sweet-packed counter and the catering staff, plying them with cuddles, head-rubs and the wet-eyed treatment in an obvious effort to legitimise a move on the Christmas treats.

It was working. Of course it was, it was Creame. It would have worked if the baker were a windsock, let alone the excitable redhead Jessica.

“Oh my gosh, she’s *cuuuute!*” came the inevitable. “Have you ever seen something so adorable? It’s almost like she’s...”

She caught Bóro’s glare and clamped her mouth with both hands, mindful of the volatile job security in these parts.

Then she stared at him puzzled.

“Uhh, Mr. Bóro? Why are you...”

She paused, as though contemplating the consequences.

“Why are you wearing her scarf?”

“Do not,” Bóro growled, “under any circumstances, let her at the sweets.”

“What? Oh come on sir, we’ve gotta at least give her a cookie or something!” one of the servers protested. “Ohh, just look at these eyes, sir! How could anyone say no to this face?”

“Out of the question,” stated Bóro.

They were staring at him in astonishment. They’d all noticed the same thing.

You’re afraid of her. You mean she’s not just some kid in a suit?

No! He couldn’t let them think in that direction. Not he! Not Iorialus Bóro!

“Oh very well,” he relented. “But just one –”

The little terror whooped for joy then fell on the mouth-watering mountain of sweets in a one-Creame carnival of crumbs and chocolate flakes, spools of jam, high-intensity scarfing noises and a swirling, sparkling snowstorm of powdered sugar.

One cupcake? One roomful? In fairness, he’d never specified.

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Her demolition job complete, Creame beamed at them through sated eyes. Released a happy burp. The entire provision of biscuits, cakes and assorted treats for the Christmas reception had gone to its glorious demise.

The caterers stood still as ice sculptures, vibrating three ways between awe, anxiety and admiration.

But not Bóro.

“You fiend!” he bellowed, the offence so incendiary this time as to blast him free of this evening’s stupor. “This is inexcusable! Those were for my guests, you, you impudent, gluttonous –”

“Aaww, come on Mr. Bóro!” Jessica and the others were evidently still under Creame’s spell. “It’s not her fault! Is it, you cuddly little cake-monster you?”

“Is it not? Is it not? Well, what are you going to do about it? Are you going to prepare a replacement selection for the good people who keep this place running in the next, oh,” – he consulted his watch – “four minutes, would you tell me?”

“Uh-oh,” Creame peeped through the silence.

In truth Creame very much did feel guilty to learn that those cakes had been meant for such an important event, rather than laid out specially for her as it’s safe on the whole to assume cakes are.

She gazed across the litter of crumbs. Then at the staff, then Bóro, then the graveyard of sweets again.

Then she grinned and narrowed her eyes. Sneaky. Don’t worry, I’ve a cunning plan, that face said.

She waddled up to Jessica.

Opened her mouth: “Aaaa-!” as she might at the dentist.

Bóro snapped: “Oh *shi*-”

“Eeek!” the baker squealed as she vanished into Creame’s big blue maw in a single gulp!

Creame swallowed. A little bulge travelled down her throat.

She giggled.

And then, before any of her appalled onlookers could react, an extraordinary change came over her. She grew in height, perhaps half a metre; the baker’s bright blue apron popped into being over her outfit, and her fleshy hair-shaped protrusions bounced, swayed, then lengthened till they roughly resembled the shape, if alas not the redness, of Jessica’s own style. Those little purple irises turned amber, likewise to match, and moreover glimmered with the newfound knowledge absorbed off her passenger...

...whose application she set about at once, only with the sensational alacrity of a creature from beyond who much prefers her own physics to those of the worlds

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she visits, and is such a delectable treasure that the latter's laws happily go on holiday to spectate. So it was now as she whirled from the storage shelves to the rolling boards to the racks of baking trays, humming and chuckling as she tossed the eggs and butter and sugar into dough, bunged in yeast then blew on it to catalyse hours of work into a single second, sliced and shaped the mass into a hundred varieties of confectionary, splashed them with icing and chocolate sauce and nuts and berries and sugar stars and drawings of her face in jam, then slid them into the oven and spun the dials round and round to accelerate the baking process. She whipped them out, got to work on the next batch, and so on and so forth till before their eyes the counter overflowed with twice the pile of sugary goodnesses it offered before.

Grinning with satisfaction, Creame regurgitated Jessica, who sprawled into a chair, about as dazed as you might expect. Then, her features having reverted, she scampered up to the flabbergasted Bóro and lifted his arm. She fingered at his watch, fixing him with an inquisitive gaze.

Forget four minutes: she'd done it in two and fifteen seconds. How about that? And without waiting for an answer she giggled from the room.

Bóro boomed through the dark gallery, marshalling his resolve while he had it: "That's quite enough!" He could just make out the pale little shape at the far end, and now he marched on her, determined to halt this madness once and for all.

"I don't know who you truthfully are or what game you're playing," he declared, "but my reception's due to start, and by interfering with arrangements and harassing the staff you've crossed the line. I need you to stop, young lady, and come with –"

She'd twisted to face him, finger raised. "Shhh," she whispered again.

"No, look here! You've gone too far! I am Iorialus Bóro, and so help me I'll –"

Admonition flipped to alarm as the lights flashed on. He threw up an arm, momentarily blinded, and treated the world to the Bóro snarl.

When he looked again, he almost spluttered out his teeth.

Now he could see, he'd remembered what this room was.

On the maps it was labelled *The Classics*. It housed, quite straightforwardly, his earliest works, or at least those which survived in exhibitable form. The so-called Green Quadtych was here, as was a mighty display case showing off the rows of tiny figurines – clays, marbles, bronzes, even a jade – which had marked his first forays into sculpting.

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But the sequence of seven sketches Creame had found was older still. They were memorable to Bóro as the works which, in the course of their creation, had first whispered to him that the path of the artist promised a future of meaning, pleasure and fulfilment.

They each depicted a chubby young woman with cascading brown hair and a triangle of freckles on her right cheek.

The plaque beneath simply read: *Buddies*.

“Oh, don’t you mess with this one,” Bóro warned, “don’t even *think* about –”

“It’s my friend!” sang Creame, voice rich with fondness. “It’s Iorako!”

“Iorako...” Bóro mouthed, for the first time in decades.

But hang on; his memory couldn’t be *that* bad.

She must have looked, what, thirty or forty in these pictures?

He’d never drawn her at that age.

He hadn’t drawn her at all since...when?

He couldn’t remember. He’d never actually chosen to stop. One day she had been as core to his repertoire as Cyania, Creame and his goddesses. The next, he just no longer felt inspired to, and so he hadn’t. Hadn’t since. That was all.

“I did not draw her like this,” Bóro spat, feeling a shadow crawl up his veins. “I tell you, I did not!”

She was moving.

“No, I did *not*!”

In the first sketch, she sat in the bath, face buried, arms round her knees. She was blubbing: “He d-doesn’t believe in me! He doesn’t...I, I’m *not real*! Why? Tell me why!”

Someone else was in the scene, somewhere: the faintest hint of a voice, striving to reassure her. But to no avail.

In the second, she’d tossed aside her purple T-shirt and was digging funereal black from her wardrobe. “I can’t accept it,” she was muttering. “After all those years, I honestly thought...”

In the third she sat sprawled over a dinner table, a condemned wreck of a woman in a wasteland of emptied bottles, chocolate wrappers and rinds of Provolone cheese.

In the fourth she wasn’t even visible. Nothing was. It was pure darkness. All Bóro heard was her tearful wail, and in the background, straining to pierce it – yes, no mistake: “It’ll be okay, I promise you! It’s all going to be okay...”

In the fifth, she’d progressed to that most serious and contemplative of situations in the average person’s day; that is to say, sitting on the toilet. The change felt abrupt, but she’d advanced in years, Bóro knew it instinctively. She

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was back in a purple hoodie, her forked-eyebrowed countenance sharp with such steely deliberation as Bóro had never, in all due respect, imagined she might bother to delve in.

In the sixth: a closed door. Her voice from within: "...the Thousand Worlds? What kind of a name is that?"

A pause; no, that garbled scurry that indicated a telephone conversation.

"Very well, I'll consider it."

A click. A long silence.

Then at last: "Alright. Let's go meet them."

Some shifting and scrambling. Then – this staggered him – out she marched, and she must have been almost his present age but goodness she wore it well: the defiant bounce of her curves, the new gravitas of an upright posture, those elegant grey streaks in her undiminished torrent of hair...

Something about this sixth image filled Bóro's heart with deep foreboding. What had happened to this woman?

No, scratch that. Nothing had *happened* as such, because she was fictional.

But then, what was all this?

Why, when it came to it, had he stopped producing art of her? The question lingered ever at the margins of his mind, it had hung there for years, but it was only now, face to face after such a long absence, that it hovered in to confront him.

The Thousand Worlds. What the heck was that? It sounded like the name of a pub, or a café. A hotel perhaps. Who was she going to meet?

Something failed to add up about what he'd just seen, and it seized him with dread.

There was a seventh picture. The last. But Bóro was struck by an ominous sense that he shouldn't look.

Something awaited him there, he believed. Something he ought never to see. Something unspeakable.

Creame had wandered off.

No. He shook out his curls. What was he thinking?

He was an Old American. He was Iorialus Bóro. He had nothing to be afraid of. None of this, *none* of this, was real.

He looked – and screamed!

The seventh sketch: it was *him*! Iorialus Bóro, the eruptive wrath of the Old Master alive, beard bristling like a burning bush, lips spluttering in spate, nostrils flaring like foghorns, a visage distended by fury, destruction, *hatred* as it roared in

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his face, his *real* face: "I AM THE REAL BÓRO! YOU ARE NOT REAL! YOU ARE NOT! YOU ARE NOT! YOU ARE NOT!"

The words, the blows, they beat his face like fists from hell; and had Creame not reappeared to soften his fall – very effectively it must be said, uttering something like "o-doh-doh," – then that might have been that for Iorialus Bóro.

On his revival, a groan like a bear emerging from hibernation.

The gallery faded back in. Cool silence; but in the distance footsteps, laughter, bustle. "Merry Christmas!"

The Old Master sat up, as though propelled by a spring.

How long had he been out?

He barked as something hugged his face. Through the muffle of that soft alien tissue, a squeal of delight.

When the pressure released, seven faint purple squares crossed his vision.

They resolved. *Buddies*. As he remembered them: the young Iorako, engaged in innocent pleasures with some shrunken friend.

At a patter on wood, he twisted to see Creame scurry off in the direction of the party noises.

That was it! Christmas, the Gallery, the Bórolite reception! He was due to unveil *Creame's Abode*. He'd looked forward to it for months. Then this naughty child or creature in Creame's guise had broken in here, led him on a right chase round a carousel of festive fancies: soldiers, refugees, the Mexicans, the Chinese...

He hadn't processed it. His memory was stuck.

He was shivering, he realised. Feverish, forehead hot as a radiator, but the rest of him frosty as a refrigerator buried in glacial ice.

No. Never mind. That chorus of celebration, growing in his ears: that was what mattered.

"Curse them! What were they thinking, starting without me? They'd better not be clambering on my sculpture!"

He staggered to his feet, shook his senses into gear, then broke into a forced march through to the next chamber, then the next, then an intersecting corridor, following the din till he found himself back in the service room where the chase had begun, just in time to glimpse Creame's baggy trousers meld into the bright light ahead.

A break in the chatter. Rippling outward: gasps, laughs, cries of amazement, shuffles, the squeaks of shoes and trolleys swerving out of the way...

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If Michelangelo could have had a go at Bóro's face right there, that would have been it for art. Nothing in future could have surpassed it.

Instead, perhaps for a ceiling fresco, he might have pulled off a *Creame Discovers a Christmas Party* worthy of Bóro himself: that epoch-setting pandemonium of gasps and wails and flailing limbs and flapping coats and soaring hats and bursting corks and splashing blasts of ale and fruit punch and red wine, of rows of faces struck along a spectrum from existential terror at one end to cute-saturated adoration at the other; the chaos of palms pressed to walls, heels pinning coat-tails, elbows in faces and toppling tables and Christmas crackers bursting in all directions as in a once-in-a-universe moment that was also the cosmic epitome of all terrified crowds, a roomful of people in the last days of the Wisconsin Republic spontaneously reacted to the introduction of a soft, squashy, zooming, whooping, all-devouring bundle of alien cuddle-monster.

It was out of control, there was no stopping it now, she was here then there, hugging, squealing, tickling, dancing, leaping for joy, climbing the tree, shaking presents, gulping juices and sodas off the tables, burrowing through the pack of guests in a wake of shouts, stumbles and slippages...

"Got you!" A voice like a depth charge blasted a gap in the bedlam.

It was Captain Butcher, who had somehow managed to clamp his hands round Creame's arms, much to her aggravation, for now she was twisting and writhing, giving off agitated cries like "Nnah! Nnah!" as she struggled to get free. And now Cavallaro was there too, having taken the initiative to push through the crowd and seize this rampant intruder by the wrist. Then a pair of security men were running up, and Madame Rogg with her imperious scowl, and somebody was screaming, somebody else was roaring with laughter; but Bóro himself, the upstaged man of the moment, head still spinning from his blackout, could only rock on the spot where he'd entered the room, quite stupefied by the consummate absurdity of the scene.

"That's quite enough of that, you little scoundrel!" Cavallaro snapped. "Who let you in? I don't care how impeccable your costume, this party is for adults only!"

To which the beleaguered Creame, flailing into tears, cried in answer: "I'm real! I'm real!"

The ceiling might have plummeted on their heads for the pressure of silence that followed.

Then blown clean off, as the air intake of four hundred throats burst out in a simultaneous discharge:

"How dare you child, how *dare* you?" "*Minchia!* You would insult Mr. Bóro at his happiest time of the year?" "Get out! Out of here, you worthless scamp!" "You

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there! You're Canadian, do something useful for once and get some cuffs on this whacko!" "She needs a freaking mental hospital, not a Christmas party!" Rough hands clamped the sweet interloper's head, her arms, her wrists, tugged her this way and that, and she loosed a wail of agitation, the most heartbreaking sound you ever did hear amidst this swell of condemnations; but Iorialus Bóro, whose distress at these developments only locked him tighter in his own immobilisation, couldn't get past that desperate cry which, as though appealing to what Creame had sincerely observed him to find most important, pleaded its challenge straight into his marrow: "But I'm real! I'm real! Real Bóro, tell them I'm real!"

"Shut up!" bellowed Captain Butcher, struggling with such vigour as parted the pack to expose Creame's waterlogged eyes, eyes only for Bóro, for harmless, cuddly Uncle Bóro; but then they vanished once more as the smuggler's brawny frame shifted round, and he was furious, red as a beetroot and stomping like Bowser as he bellowed: "I'll give you real, you brazen pest! Off with your mask!" and to Bóro's horror, he wrapped an arm round Creame's head, gripped her antenna with the other, and attempted to twist, and twist –

"No! Stop!" Bóro roared, but nobody heard, because of the "AMFF!" –
...and just like that, Butcher was gone.

Creame stood in the middle of the hall, in her own space, her assailants having fallen off her in shock.

Still she strained. Internally, this time.

No use. Perhaps the pirate had nothing of merit to absorb. Or more likely, her powers were simply not compatible with people who rejected any possibility that she was real.

She could still eat them though.

Which she did. What else should she do? They'd broken her heart, and as she proceeded to communicate it in fair proportion, the confounded crowd disintegrated into a far more straightforward stampede of screaming terror. But it was too late to scatter now, far too late, because "AMFF! AMFF!" – the security guards went hollering into her maw, as did Butcher's first mate Mr. Monke, and there went the night watchman Lennard, and there, rather impressively it had to be said, went Madame Rogg, curator of the fateful institution in which, it was now clear, the seminal disaster of the nascent Wisconsin Province's socio-cultural history was rapidly unfolding. Because next to be gulped down was Lieutenant Mazar, tipped for her role in the new provincial government, and Commodore Eva of the Lake Michigan Fleet, along with the whole host of Canadian civil and military officials in attendance; and the next scream was that of the security chief Mr. Khai, who very foolishly had attempted to rush the unstoppable Creame with

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his baton. The guests were banging on the walls now, blocked at the doors by barriers of puffy material much like Creame's skin, it had sealed off all the escape routes, and there went Dr. Hamil the art historian and Mr. Zorić of the Chicago Tribune, as well as a dozen other reporters, editors and foreign correspondents, the plumbers and architects, the barristers and archaeologists, the moneylenders and the salvage consultants, the ambassadorial secretaries and councillors from the chambers of commerce; then last of all, lost to the world in bawling incomprehension, the club secretary and restaurateur Cavallaro, who'd dropped his revolver as soon as he'd produced it, it was impossible to aim such an awful thing at this paragon of innocence, so all he had left was to cower against the wall as the little pudding-demon shuffled up to him –

– and Iorialus Bóro, final witness to all this, brayed with the confidence he perhaps should have found earlier: “No! No! No! No!”

...but it was useless, the words were as good as not real as with one last “AAMF!” his faithful secretary was scarfed from the world.

And now she glared up at him. At the petrified Bóro, through dripping eyes. Beads of sweet water drew trails down her violated face.

She got up on tiptoe, took her kerchief in both hands – not harshly – and pulled it off him.

Fastened it in place round her neck.

Whimpered, without meeting his stare: “Creame-mas is for everyone.”

Then she turned, and trudged back to the structure she'd emerged from, *Creame's Abode*. There she cast him one last hurt glance from the entryway; but then, too shy even now to hold it for long, she disappeared within. The doorways and windows sealed up without a trace, as if the walls had filled them in.

Bóro stared after her. At that featureless patch where a moment ago and forever, that crestfallen little face had baked itself into his psyche. It was all he saw now: not the silenced tree, nor the meaningless mirror and crystal chandeliers, the shredded tinsel, the toppled tables and rolling plastic cups. Only the disconsolate stare of the sweetest, most trusting little pudding-terror in the universe, *his* little pudding-terror, on whose gifts he'd built his career only to leave her to the narrow-minded meanness of those who, consuming those gifts even as they denied their existence, had now met, or perhaps become, a just dessert.

What had he done? – Bóro might have wondered, were he capable of anything of the sort right now.

A light on a stick, which he hadn't installed, flashed red.

Creame's Abode: it started to beep.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

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A countdown.

“No!” was all he could holler, one step all he had time to take, as the final beep rang shrill.

In a burst of flames, the little house lifted. Its thrusters, which he *definitely* hadn't installed, burnt through the floor and filled the room with smoke. Bóro hacked and spluttered and batted at it with his arms, just in time to catch his creation hovering there: a bounce in the air, then another. Then it launched, instantaneous, smashing a hole through the ceiling as his beloved Creame rocketed to freedom.

From the heavens, a tremendous shattering and clattering as the gallery of American memorabilia rained its grievances. Dust curtailed down, exposing a cold patch of sky through which an accusatory side-glower from the Moon struck Bóro unawares: a half-moon, blindsided as if by his invasion of its privacy, if not a pallid mirror of this shock to his Christmas, his museum, his rational soul. But then it was lost as the cavity disgorged a flutter of tassels in red, white and blue, then a shower of decommissioned assault rifles, and then at last the old Liberty Bell of the Wisconsin State Capitol came crashing through the rafters into the ruined reception hall, taking the tree down with it.

Its clang shook the museum's foundations. It shattered Bóro's.



When the roof of your life falls in, the last thing you want is a talkative taxi driver.

It was Jessica and the caterers who dug him out: beard singed, suit caked in dust, staggering like a clockwork Santa down to the final turns of its key. The Bóro eye-lightning had been extinguished, their fright all the worse for the cloud-white barrenness which replaced it. There were further absences: his Christmas art installation, four hundred guests, and two thirds of the reception hall ceiling to start.

They got him an ambulance, of course they did. But service was slow. It was Christmas evening, medical incidents were popping up like moles, mostly from ill-advised party attempts in the soon-to-be-Province's precarious housing, typically involving drink, fire, historical nostalgia, or all of the above. When the paramedics eventually showed up, they steered the Old Master outside only for him to wrestle free right on the steps of their vehicle and demand they send for Cavallaro to drive him to his cabin instead. After much bitter remonstrations in the chilly night air they left, but neither Cavallaro nor anyone else for that matter could be found after an hour-long search, by when Bóro's desperation to get home was too tempestuous to negotiate. Out of options, they settled on a thus-far reliable taxi company whose number one of the servers pulled from her pocket.

Naturally they were Canadians, as Bóro discovered to his woe when the driver, who called himself Basdeo, apparently from Georgetown (no, the *real*

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Georgetown) via Toronto, took their exit from the premises as the cue to open the curtains on his life story. It was the honour of his days to meet the incredible Iorialus Bóro, Basdeo proclaimed – the real Bóro! – yes it was, because he'd been fanatical about his art all his life, and would be much obliged for his autograph, what a tremendous honour, I must be dreaming sir, on Christmas Day would you believe it! And whether Bóro proffered it or not, he was damned if he could remember, he spent the rest of the journey regaled at excruciating length about whether he'd heard of his own works, then asphyxiated in a tide of gushing praise for the magical yet oh-so-realistic brilliance of his character Creame, and then to crown it all the irrepressible Basdeo took his eyes off the road and hand off the steering wheel to whisk the bobble-head Creame figurine off his dashboard and twist round to prod him with it, jesting at how the touch of Bóro no doubt served to recharge its auspicious properties.

For the first time, Bóro's shattered psyche left him no strength for outrage. The unlikely result was that both men survived the trip to Bóro's woods. The savvy Jessica had had the foresight to pay the driver in advance, because the moment they reached his driveway Bóro kicked his way out, careened for his front door without so much as a Merry Christmas, then blundered his way in, ripped off his suit, and fell into the washroom with a brutal slam of the door.

For about ten minutes, the blackbirds and rabbits grazed the perimeter of his sculpting yard in silence.

Then they looked up to a long, low sobbing.

Boxing Day brought the investigation.

The sudden disappearance of the entire Iorialus Bóro fan club sent shockwaves through occupied Wisconsin, not least because many of its members held key positions in its civic, economic and cultural life. The impact was all the more disruptive for its happening on the eve of Wisconsin's admission to the Canadian political family, whose more sceptical elements seized on the opportunity to lambast its good citizens ('still too American!') and renew their case for a delay.

The Dar administration insisted things would go ahead as planned. But the Canadian Parliament's corridors vibrated with considerable unease about the Bóro Affair, as it was already unhelpfully getting termed. The turmoil stemmed from one simple fact: no-one, it seemed, had the foggiest idea what had occurred. All they could say for sure was that some terrible incident had taken place at the Iorialus Bóro Gallery during its annual Christmas reception. The building had been cordoned off since three in the morning, so no-one could verify – or in other

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words, disprove – the rumours of a terrorist bombing, or infiltration by Chinese agents, or that the Old Master himself, if he wasn't dead or missing as some claimed, had finally snapped and plastered them into his sculptures.

The sensitivity of the matter must have registered all the way up the political hierarchy, because a twelve-strong squad from the military police showed up at his cabin at ten. Nine were fans, because people generally were, but to mitigate any conflict of interest they'd burrowed deep into the dark pits of the force to bring along a rare critic, as well as another two who hadn't the first clue about art. Feeling perhaps like small-town sheriffs told they'd been sent to arrest the king, it was with great timidity that they assured Bóro through his door that they only wished to ask a few questions. The horrendous sight of the beached whale-carcass of a figure who opened it hardly improved their confidence; and when he shuffled away without a word, sank back in his armchair, and resumed the blank-stared vigil he'd maintained throughout the night, they were left totally at a loss.

They might as well have interviewed a hologram for all the sense they could draw from him. He had nothing to share but shrugs, shudders and incoherent mutterings, and these kept breaking off, losing track, plunging by some insurmountable gravity to the same conversation-terminating grunts: "But it did not happen." "It was not real." "It was impossible."

He did not object, or perhaps did not hear, when they informed him, after pained consultations with command, that they were leaving four officers to keep watch on his house overnight for his own protection. They returned the next day, and then the next, but their dismay only grew as each call found him advanced in deterioration: staring into space, losing himself down a bottle, consuming no solid food but white chocolate, never leaving his armchair except to use the toilet. By the end of the month they were urgently concerned for his welfare, and after a further to-and-fro with their bosses, offered him temporary relocation to Wisconsin's new capital, where he would receive all the counselling, support and medical attention a fresh Canadian provincial budget had to offer.

He was a shade of himself, Iorialus Bóro. The story to which he lived had crashed. It simply had no means to accommodate what had happened, any more than Pokémon might tolerate Henry VIII or Hamlet process the Death Star.

Such being the case, why bother anymore? He heaved a sigh and allowed his uniformed minders to guide him to their car; did not even flinch when they cleared his outer gate to a burst of flashes and camera-lenses banging on the windows, courtesy of the scrum of journalists jostling for a glimpse of the Old Master in scandal.

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They put him up in an official apartment opposite the old Milwaukee City Hall. Fierce fighting during the Canadian Intervention had razed the centre of Wisconsin's largest city, but that impressive terracotta edifice, an 1890s Neo-Renaissance local wonder, had miraculously survived. Some basic government accommodations had since sprung up about it, mainly to cater to the influx of Canadian administrators after the city was made the seat of occupation.

Into the best of these blocks they parked Iorialus Bóro, under direct instruction from the top, those involved all suspected. And in fairness to the authorities it was hardly shabby. It had a satisfactory lounge with a sofa and television, a computer station, a mini-fridge, a coffee machine, a trouser-press, even an exercise bicycle. A small balcony adjoined it, overlooking the square left open by the planners for troop assemblies and relief distributions. Directly across stood the City Hall, providing Bóro a fine view of its magnificent clock tower: over a hundred metres tall and festooned with carvings, columns, arches, gargoyles and beer-stein-shaped corner elements beneath a copper-clad spire.

The balcony's reinforced-glass double doors had blackout curtains for privacy. And he could buzz his minders from the military police at a moment's notice, they assured him: get them to bring anything he liked, carry messages, send a therapist or chaplain. Most important of all, they would see to his safety. This strip between the Milwaukee River and Lake Michigan after all was what locals had nicknamed the Blue Zone: the fortified heart of occupation authority which only the military government and licensed civilians – contractors, reporters, petitioners and so forth – were allowed to enter. Of course the legendary Iorialus Bóro was free to go wherever he pleased, they promised, although the concerned public would appreciate it if he alerted his bodyguards first.

If he harboured feelings towards any of this, Bóro showed no sign. In his disconnection he scarcely registered the counsellors and interrogators who came in hope of finding him magically restored to the vigorous, mallet-swinging force of nature of half a century's repute, only to trudge away dejected. Their visits were irregular at any rate, because for all the authorities' alarm at the Bóro Affair and concern for the Old Master as a cultural treasure, the Canadians' minds were fast moving on to other priorities.

For a start, the second day of his Milwaukee captivity was also the last for the Wisconsin Republic. On the stroke of the new year, its shrivelled mind-tethers to the dear departed United States would flutter harmlessly away, so freeing it to leap for a joyous dawn of full membership in the Canadian federation. Freedom! Dignity! Reconstruction! Regulatory alignment! Indigenous representation!

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Policing by consent! And when its people were ready, a return to civilian rule; no really, Ottawa promised. Maybe even elections one day, if they were good.

But at the pageantry in the square below – flag-raising, O Canada, gun salutes, marching bands, live moose – Bóro wasted not a glance.

With glowing hearts we see thee rise, the True North strong and free...

Mental illness. He could deny it no longer. He was afflicted, just like Dasgupta, Akaguma, the Mexican president, the director of that gallery in Jakarta and all those others. And like them he had refused to acknowledge it, failed to get help. All the signs had been there since that hare-brained ramble in the churchyard on a wet summer's night. That had cost him his pride, but the next attack, on Halloween, had cost him several of his works and might easily have burnt down his studio. He had ignored it still, and now he had paid the price: his supporters, his museum, his independence, his sanity; even his day-to-day drive as an artist.

The sketchpad and pens they'd left him sat pristine on the table. Because his imaginary characters, Cyania, Creame: they were mixed up in his madness, indeed they had become it. It was his hallucinations of them, recklessly allowed to thicken, that had blocked off his view of the real world.

And the best part? That very blockage barred him from the truth of the matter. The Bórolites had vanished, but to where he did not know. His museum was out of commission, but no explanation lay in his reach. His made-up characters: they had capsized his life, buried the hows and the whys; it was all their fault! But he couldn't even blame them, the bastards, because they weren't real!

How harrowing was that? His compass was spinning, spinning out of control; but how had it broken? Where was his True North now? To even think on it was a hazard, kept him caught in this crazed cognitive death-spiral. So to further indulge in the creative processes that had at long last pitched him in headfirst? Hell no!

Sleep was no shelter. The nightmares were back. They had never really left. The bridge, the misshapen Moon, the impostor; he no longer fought. Straight away came the glimpse of something he knew but didn't, then the thrust of the arm, the thump on his chest, the slow and silent descent into darkness.

By day he fumbled for distractions. But such was Iorialus Bóro's misery that in the period he had happened to crack there was only one on offer, and it just had to be the resurrection of one of humanity's most stupid, stubborn fantasies of all.

They were going to the Moon.

The Canadian Space Agency's lunar mission had entered final preparations, with the launch of its spacecraft, the *Majora II*, scheduled for the final week of January. Bóro had assented to them naming it after his goddess character years

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ago, the request being Professor Akaguma's; but in his present circumstances, having it echoed back at him in euphoric tones by every inhabitant of his television was like a screwdriver to his kidneys.

But why would they speak of anything else? The spacecraft was a technological marvel. A sleek torpedo that appeared totally inadequate to house its forty crew, once in lunar orbit it was designed to unfurl into a dazzling array of modules, solar panels, data centres, quantum computers, capsule docks, prehensile gussets and longerons and a great many more such enchantments which Bóro did not understand (indeed the colourful animations on the wall-to-wall coverage looked the work of magicians in their own right). Its completion was also a logistical accomplishment given the interruption posed by the American war; as well as a diplomatic one, in that they had secured first the former NASA space scientists, and second the assent of the Cubans, now sovereigns over Florida (or what was left of it), to sell them control of the Cape Canaveral station which as in ages past would spring humanity into the stars.

The government in Ottawa understood the symbolism and milked it for all its worth. The American *Apollo* programme's first realisation of the lunar dream in the 1960s, its transition from lunacy to reality, had been a watershed in human history. But with no return to the Moon in almost a century, the achievement had subsided back to imagination. For a time it was expected that the rich and rampant private companies of the moribund United States would inherit the torch, till their buccaneering hubris met its abrupt and bloody end in the Musktown Disaster. As the world floundered deeper into its morass of conflicts and crises, each so much the harsher for climatic upheaval, the Moon came to feel as far from reality as ever. But then of course had come the election of Dr. Dar and the Great Canadian Revival, and now it was time, they announced, to signal to humankind that if it got its act together, it could yet make a future beyond its ailing planet.

Of course it would not be the Dar administration without a sub-layer or three of genius politics. Its masterstroke, in this case, was to inveigle the CSA to configure the timetable such that the *Majora II* would reach the Moon's orbit three days before Lunar New Year.

The metaphor was obvious: a fresh start, a new cycle of health and happiness in human history. But it was also an overture to the Chinese, and those in their wider cultural sphere, who observed the Lunar New Year as a principal festival. That wider sphere was not incidental: it included Canada's own well-established East Asian communities, a vital bridge in cross-cultural communication, as well as the immigrant labour helping to rebuild the occupied territories. Milwaukee for its part had attracted a large Vietnamese contingent. These were no friends of the

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Chinese right now, as Dr. Dar knew well; hence their invitation under reinvigorated relations, a stick in the wounded Chinese flank to go tastefully with the red-enveloped rocket-shaped carrot.

Thus if all went well, the sense of stake both powers' peoples would share in *Majora II* as a pan-human endeavour would dampen down the confrontational noise. If it helped head off another war nobody wanted in Alaska and the Pacific, then so much the better.

Because Canada was a democracy, or so the government regularly reminded its new province, it was leaving responsibility for these festivities – or perhaps more to the point, their budgeting – to their own administrations and communities. Meanwhile Bóro refused to use the coffee machine and demanded they bring him his own French press from his cabin, and so in the mornings he sat on his balcony, mug in hand, casting an expressionless gaze across the tree-shaped streamers, blossom beds and piles of paper fruit already multiplying across the square. Next to crop up was a wooden scaffold, right in front of City Hall. It was to be the centrepiece of the city's Têt-style celebration, said his minders – or properly *Tết Nguyên Đán*, the Festival of the First Morning of the First Day: a great tower of coloured paper, decked in images representing the lunar mission and the thriving Canadian-Vietnamese friendship. On completion it would be level with the City Hall's roof, typically closed to the public, allowing rare access, on the three nights between arrival in orbit and the New Year, for one hundred citizens chosen by raffle to bask in a top-notch view of the fireworks.

They'd secured him a ticket for the final night, because he was Iorialus Bóro, and that night would bring the best surprise of all. After months of work, they had completed repairs to the City Hall clock tower's bell: a 22,500-pound (or rather 10,000-kilogram, they had to say now) bourdon behemoth damaged during the war, but now back and better than ever, right on time to ring in a new cycle of history.

"Isn't that exciting, Mr. Bóro?" they nudged and prodded him. "Like it's announcing to the world that Wisconsin too is alive and well again, how about that? That'll get you back on your feet and no mistake!"

By launch day Bóro had clawed back a modicum of sensibility. He'd had them bring his Nintendo Galaxy, and played *Animal Crossing: The Fifty-Year Mortgage* on it when not scrawling random lines on his sketchpad. A fierce dig here, a wild dash there; it was his fist versus the rest of him, wrestling his innate urge to once more bring forth his characters.

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Maybe abstract art was the way to go, if he ever got his life back.

When the Canadians called on him he asked for news of his affairs, only to come up frustrated. His museum remained under investigation. No, there was no new information they could share. Neither hide nor hair had been found of Cavallaro or the other attendees; the detectives were baffled, the families distraught. They'd questioned the caterers, but released them for their obvious innocence. They all vouched for Bóro and wished him well; there was even a postcard from Jessica in Montreal. But don't worry sir, they rushed to add, you're not under suspicion, heavens no. We know you hadn't the faintest motive to orchestrate such a calamity, even if we're all secretly convinced that your eyeballs and beard could supply the means between them.

That was when he understood them at all. Half of them seemed to come from Quebec, to manage the Vietnamese in French he surmised, and for most of these (not all, to be fair) sullyng their tongues with English seemed to bring them such displeasure that he imagined their superiors had forced them to at gunpoint. It took an age of noncommittal grunting to get them to relent from the bewildered tone that implied his psychosis consisted, not in seeing characters that weren't there, but in the unbelievable pathology of having never learnt to speak French; and by the time they left him alone they had so exhausted his nerves that he had to risk a further summons to resupply his coffee.

Such was his shadow of a life now. Put up with strangers in suits who pretended to care about him. Faff about on his games console. Scribble senselessly. Sit there mumbling to himself as he watched the workers cobble on the growing festival tower. Occasionally the Moon itself came out to leer at him, each time with a further sliver shaved off its face as though daring to suggest he consider the same.

It occurred to him that Lunar New Year fell by definition on a New Moon, that is to say, an invisible one; which felt counter-intuitive both for a lunar festival and an attempt to land on the bloody thing. But the people on television happily corrected him. The landing site, near the ruins of Musktown with its salvage opportunities, was on the western near side, whose coolness and terrain relief under the subsequent sunrise would offer optimal landing conditions. And just as well, for the almighty row this convenience had averted between the government and CSA over the sticking of political fingers into science-led operations.

They could stick them where they liked as far as Bóro was concerned. This was not his reality. The concrete skyline, the caterpillared traffic, the constant people-noise; he was meant to have left this all behind. He needed his forest: the foraging beasts, the mellow light, the moist scent of soil, the crisp wind whistling through

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the trees. The peace it gave him to disentangle the controlled pace of his life from the chaos of his creative imagination.

The creative imagination that had proved too dangerous for its own good.

No: he had to get back. If he was to recover from his madness, it wasn't to be here, surrounded by twenty-four-hour politics and people with their heads in the stars.

He would tell them as much when next they came, he decided. Demand to go home. Insist on it. And if the paparazzi came swarming on his doorstep, well, his chisel arm wasn't the part that had lost control.

He pushed through to the balcony and waited for the telltale dark car with a little Maple Leaf flag to pull up outside.

Surprisingly, it came straight away.

More surprising still, the door opened to disgorge a shambling tower of dark feathers topped with a huge-eyed mask.

He watched it sweep into the building. Felt a shiver down his spine which in honest circumstances ought to have drenched him in bloodcurdling fear. But it didn't. To put it plainly, he just couldn't be bothered anymore.

He plodded for the door. Waited for the buzzer. Remembered she wasn't the kind who knocks. Opened it.

"Woooooh. Have you taken heed, Iorialus Bóro? Take heed, take heed! A single toll remains!"

He glared up at her.

"Mmlehh, you're right. What's even the point?" She must have switched off the microphones that echoed it out and back through multiple universes.

A large and elegant purple hand emerged. It took off the mask, yanked off the cloak, tossed them aside and made them vanish with a click of its fingers.

The air shunted into Bóro as though compressed under enormous pressure. Cascades of lavender curtained unto his nostrils.

"It would be you," he growled.

"Well, who else would I be?" The goddess Majora raised her hands in mock disbelief.

"Either give me my life back or leave me alone," said Bóro.

The deity laughed dryly and strode past him into the apartment.

Bóro returned to the lounge to find her flopped on the sofa, waist-high boots crossed on the coffee table, his Nintendo Galaxy controller in one hand and a cocktail glass of pure alcohol in the other.

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It gave off fumes. But the smoke alarm knew what was good for it and pretended not to notice.

“I suppose you mean to convince me you’re real,” he told her.

Her irises, rich as moonlit honey, hovered on his scowl. Then they returned to the screen.

“Pfft. Why would you suppose that?”

He held his breath. He was more amazed than he cared to admit. Not that this almighty goddess of chaos (or properly, of balance; she’d sort of got fed up of the order part), by far the most ancient and terrible of his original characters, had at length joined his queue of hallucinated tormentors. Why, he had expected it, what with her name stamped in his face over and over by that insufferable moon rocket. She was a tower of a woman, with lilac skin, a triangle of selenic face-paint on either cheek, a mane of midnight-blue hair with bangs free and fierce and one heck of a braid down the back. And that was to say nothing of her bizarre getup, gold circlet with horns included, whose beguiling tricks in shape and colour were surely designed to persecute any poor geometrically-illiterate writers out there.

No: the real wonder was how oddly at home she’d made herself in this mundane government apartment, of all places.

“Did you watch the launch?” she put to him with indifference, through a mouthful of his chocolate. She’d accelerated his console two hundred and fifty years into the future to boot up the long-anticipated *Legend of Zelda: Oracle of Seasons/Ages* remaster.

Bóro sighed and surrendered himself to the spare armchair. “No,” he demeaned himself to converse with this phantasm. “No, I did not. And you did not take the trouble to manifest from my heap of sorrows just to ask me that.”

Majora shrugged. “Mmn? Whyever not? Thought you might be interested, with that old friend of yours in command.”

“What, Akaguma? Don’t even start –”

“It’s seen as a big deal you know? When a lifeform finds its way off its starting planet. It tends to...hmm? Broaden their horizons?”

She eyebrowed him meaningfully.

“You were behind this,” he confronted her. “You ambushed me last summer. You attacked me in the cemetery. Did you put Creame and Cyania up to it too? Wait; what am I saying? Oh, you see? Curse it, curse my rotting skull! Why do I speak to you as if you are real? I *created* you, for heaven’s sake! Why have you done this to me? What have you done to my life?”

Majora downed the last of her drink. Waved her hand to make the glass go away, then picked up Bóro’s coffee mug. Sniffed it. Frowned. Waved again, so it sparkled

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clean, then once more to fill it with hearty coffee. His bag of beans shuffled on the shelf behind her.

“Are you real, Iorialus Bóro? Because I could have sworn I created you.”

He tremored. “No, I insist, you have it exactly backwards!”

“Oh for – come on.”

With a weary groan she pulled a dictionary from the air and flipped to a page a little way in. “*Create: from creātus (Latin), past participle of creāre (to make): to cause to exist or happen, as something new, unique, or which would not otherwise occur.* How about that? Would you have *otherwise occurred*, Iorialus Bóro? Would you have been carved from the block of possibility if not for this captivating hand of mine that steered yours by the wrist, wrung your admirers’ wallets over your bank account, herded strangers by the pocketful into your exhibitions; chipping and slicing away the superfluous material so as to liberate you to be you? Who was it who spoke to you even when puffed-up fools who should have known better forbade you from speaking back? Who kept your windows open on the fresh air of the cosmic commons when those acolytes of that little dick of a coppersmith, that Yah-something-or-other, poured his slag down your throat? Who so thrilled your warlike tribes that they kept clear of you even in the hottest heat of their hatreds, because the one thing they shared was the longing, innate to all sensible mortals, to tremble in my fragrant shadow? I offer you the fact, Iorialus Bóro, that without the contributions of your awe-inspiring great goddess Majora – why that’s me – the Bóro you are, the *real* Bóro if you like, would not have been *caused* to exist. So I ask you again: who created who?”

The Old Master snorted. Retorted, as he alone would dare: “Have you finished?”

The goddess’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“I am done with these games Majora. You may say what you like; you most definitely shall, knowing you; and I daresay I should respond in kind. But what counts, what decides the issue, is that at the end of the day, I am real, and you are not. There is the truth. And it’s a fact, I admit it, now I must face it: I’ve gone thoroughly out of my wits, imagining that you sit there right now, engaging me in a real conversation. But you see, here it is: I at least *recognise* now that something’s wrong with me, and won’t go *believing* it, or inflicting my fantasies on others, just because they drift through my shipwreck of a head!”

Majora rolled her eyes, as at the folly of mortals no matter the planet or period.

“Am I mistaken?” Bóro hammered on. “So you would have me believe, what? That the painting paints the painter? The building builds the architect? The book writes its author?”

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“Well they do, do they not?” the goddess hurled back, carelessly steering the little figure on the screen into holes. “Pwah! It’s not the likes of my sisters and I who chase one another in circles, arguing round the circumference of time about gods and mortals and who made who in whose image! Or do you propose to argue, to a *balance deity*, that you might have one side of an equal and opposite interaction without the other?”

Bóro slammed his hands on the armrests, then clenched them, readying a discharge of hot exasperation.

“By those feelings you feel, Iorialus Bóro,” she put to him, pricking that bubble before it could swell, “you are as willing a participant in these *games* as I, and I could play them for as many lifetimes as you like. So how about you prove to me that you’re real instead?”

“Oh, piss off.”

“Well? You can’t, can you? No more than you can prove that I’m not. And believe me: you’d be hardly the first to try. Mmh. In this profession that’s practically an occupational hazard.”

Oh, that smirk: so damnably smug!

It was pointless to argue. He knew Majora well enough. No matter what challenge he formulated, she’d pull some sophistry out of that big divine arse of hers, no doubt glistening with irrefutable spools of high-energy primordial soup, then proceed to whirl it about his head, jerking it away each time he reached to grasp it.

He slouched instead. Rubbed his tired eyes.

“Look,” he said at last. “Just tell me this. If, as you claim, you created me – which is preposterous, but just for the sake of argument, I’ll be patient; then why waste your energy trying to convince me of your reality when you know, because you do, that nothing in your power could prevail to do so?”

He realised he’d thrown her more bait, regretted it straight away; braced himself to have his last slivers of sanity leeches by her nonsense.

Instead she threw the controller down and facepalmed in displeasure.

“Urghh. Why indeed! It’s a good question.”

Sensing the initiative, he renewed the offensive. “Is there, what, some inscrutable cosmic scheme of yours that requires a harmless, decrepit old man, who yearns only to paint in peace, to be driven from his senses? Or did you simply have nothing better to do?”

“Which would you prefer?” she drawled through a yawn. “You’ll believe what you like, Iorialus Bóro.”

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“I’ll believe what’s real, thank you very much! Why, if the arrangement of circuits in my brain means so much to you, why not put the case plain from the beginning? Why plague me with fires in my house, explosions in my museum, disappearing my supporters, abuse after abuse after abuse? That’s not the kind of god you – I mean, not how I designed you!”

He waited, then fell into a snarl like the revving up of a motorcycle engine. Her habit of taking her time, with not a hint of whether she’d heard the question or not, or might bother to answer now or next year: oh, how it infuriated him!

She returned to him eventually, after a round of in-game shopping.

“I have a little friend from this planet, you know,” she told him innocently, as though it held any connection with his grievance. “Nice girl. Likes to travel. Mortal, but not really. Quite short, if kind of tall.” She paused for effect, smirking as she watched the reality-meter malfunction throbbingly in his forehead. “She tells me about this world sometimes. Places. People. Stories. Good memory, that one. And you know, just as I was wondering what to do about you, I happened to recall a charming little tale she shared with me one long, cold winter. It concerned another incorrigible old snapper: set in his ways, impervious to the currents of cause and consequence; at least till a bunch of ghosts came along at the winter festival and spooked him into reflecting on his memories, the impacts of his actions, the perils of his trajectory. Well, I thought, maybe –”

Bóro had stood up.

“That’s it?” He looked utterly gobsmacked. “You, what, wrecked my life over some stupid fairy tale?”

Not to be outstood, Majora stood too.

“What of it? Would you expect any different?” She cackled so hard that the line between fury and incredulity was well and truly submerged. “Did you want an eight-point grand strategy, a written submission to the cosmic bureaucracy, a pre-ordained arc from outside the spiral of time? Do you not know me after all then? Did you not *create* me, little man?”

“Not like this! Not to fuck your own creator!”

“Oohh, now don’t tell me you’ve forgotten –”

“Not *a word!* I was, what? Fifteen?”

“Exactly: just the other day!” And because she just had to, she yanked the stained bedsheets out of thin air and flung them for his consideration. “Or, Iorialus Bóro, might it be worth your pondering that creation is not in all dimensions so certain as you believe? That it takes a jot more information than is sensibly available to you to distinguish between dream and dreamer, human and butterfly; to chalk the tides at the ford of seeing and being; to claim that opening a door to

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a different world amounts to bringing it into existence? Or just perhaps, rather than making – still less *assuming!* – such claims as not even those at my level have grounds to hold secure, might it not suffice to appreciate that the warp and weft of reality strung our passages together when possibly, just possibly, it found we ran better entangled than this petty altercation of ours, which is your fault, might suggest? If, and trust me, this defies my belief too: if you and I are, what was it: *Connected?*”

“Pah! What the hell are you talking about? What have I to do with your earthquakes, your floods, your plagues, your extinction events? Spare me!”

“Spare yourself! Am I the one who builds on faultlines? Fracks for shale gas? Cuts corners in dam construction? Smashes up the biosphere I live in?”

“Call this *better*,” Bóro dared her, raising a finger to his fearsome visage. “Go on. Call me *better* for your generous interference! I was perfectly happy with the way things were before you stuck your gaudy prosthetic horns into my affairs, thank you very much!”

“Before I stuck my horns into your affairs,” she said coldly, “your future was the prosthesis. I gave you a real one.”

“And what would you have been without me?! Come on then, *woman*. If you’re real, let’s settle this once and for all. Show me your power. Go and, oh to hell with it, eat these Canadians or something. Bring back the United States. Or better yet, rewind time to before you wound me up in your crazed schemes, oh yes! Give – me – back – my – life!”

They were eye to blistering eye now, Bóro with a foot on the sofa to catch up on height.

“Is that your preference?” Majora fired back at him, in a tone which boiled his blood for its allusion that she knew the answer better than he did. “You mean to tell me it would net you more genuine pleasure, cost you less hesitation, to screw your planet around with gratuitous metaphysical acrobatics, than to pry open the sealed, welded, bolted, trip-wired, magnetically-confined vault of your attitude, by the diameter of one flimsy string, in order to consider, and free both your nerves and your conscience in the doing, that the *real world*, as you insist on calling it, consists in more than the singular stiff-as-a-plank dimension in which you would suffocate its myriad possibilities? You, Iorialus Bóro, a mortal who has done more than any in your generation to hurl open the ways between those very realities whose manifold truths you hurl out on their ears!”

The inch between them bristled with sparks. Then it was other sparks that burst: not there, but outside. The three-day countdown to New Year started tomorrow. They must have been testing out the fireworks.

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Majora jerked her head at the balcony.

“There’s still time, if you want it,” she offered him, easing off a touch. “There’s still the third toll.”

“*The third toll*,” Bóro scornfully imitated her. “Oh yes! The third toll! And what happens, pray tell me, on the third toll?”

“Beats me,” she said with a shrug. “Everybody dies, or something. Nothing to do with me.”

“Nothing to do with you?! You’re the one who –”

“I don’t make the consequences, Iorialus Bóro. Or, what, is yours the disposition to scream at the postman when your letters offend you? If you resent this so much you might have just stayed away from bells!”

She wandered away, shaking her head. Stared through the glass of the balcony doors. No reflection, Bóro noticed, only an overloaded flash, as just had to go with the territory for a pain-in-the-arse deity like her.

“And there I was thinking this was such a bright idea,” she muttered to herself. “Goes to show, doesn’t it? How after a rough night even a big bad primordial goddess isn’t immune to miraculously becoming a blockhead.”

Bóro wondered whether to retort, till he noticed she’d switched to arguing with herself.

Well, let her. He was done. If even she couldn’t finish him, they’d learn their lesson and leave him be.

She pulled off her horned circlet in one hand. “Pfft, don’t know what got into me. Mortals. You’d think I would have learned by now, would you not? Saw something special in this one, did I? Thought this world would be different?”

She glanced. Met his glare.

“Forget it,” she said. “You’ve made up your mind.”

“You’ve realised, have you?”

“And now it’s late, thanks to you. If it’s all the same to you, I’ll stay tonight and take my leave in the morning.”

“Suits me,” grumbled Bóro, as he made to retire. “You lunatics squat in my imagination, may as well squat on my sofa too. Damn and blast it, what did I do to deserve this?”

His bedroom door slammed shut.

Opened again. Bóro stomped out, crossed the room to her, dragged his coffee mug from her hands with a silent sneer, then disappeared once more into the bedroom.

“Mmnh,” went Majora.

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Part of her was imagining reducing him to the size of an ant and treading him into the carpet.

She certainly had the power.

She was omnipotent, technically speaking.

But as the stubborn old Bóro had amply demonstrated, power alone wasn't enough.

Instead she snapped her fingers, instantly swapping her outfit for a fluffy midnight-blue dressing gown.

She parked herself on the sofa and brooded awhile.

When she knew he was asleep, she reached out and took back the mug.

After that she went back to the video game for a spell, but he'd put her out of the mood. Before closing it, she put her hand through the television screen and took some mysterious seeds off an in-game tree. Drawing them out, she dropped them in the mug, spun a finger to change them to liquid phase and mixed in some honeys and cinnamons pulled from here and there to create a cosy winter infusion.

It might not be enough, she mused.

"Mleh. Let's have a toy..."

A flick of a finger: right to left, right to left. Live images of local people getting ready for bed flicked across the screen. Spotting a young pair she decided required it for their annoying monogamy, she reached through, closed her hand around them, and lifted them out.

Held them a while, enjoying the squirms.

Then she slipped her captives into her bust, made herself comfortable on the sofa, whipped a blanket of shadows over herself, and shut her eyes.

She still twisted and turned for most of the night.

Bóro emerged next morning to find her sacking the lounge. Tables upended, rugs rolled back, cushions flung through the air...

"Christ. I swear I never designed you so petty," he remarked, getting his creeds mixed up in pre-coffee torpor.

He blinked. Then stared.

The pace of her excavation: this was not about living up to her wanton repute as a chaos goddess for the heck of it, still less a statement of disdain for the hospitality of the Canadian taxpayer.

"There you are," she said, neither looking to him nor breaking from her ransack. "Have you seen my mask?"

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“Fuck sake,” he groaned, and waded through the battlefield to put the kettle on.

“Not that it’s dangerous,” the goddess added quickly, curling a finger to levitate the mini-refrigerator. “Why it’s practically harmless. Realistically speaking, that is. I wouldn’t have brought it otherwise.”

Up went the printer: shake, shake, shake, because you never know with printers. All realities fear their nefarious ways.

“If you’re going to play havoc with the laws of the universe,” said Bóro, “then at least have it do something useful and fill my mug. Actually, where in blazes is it? I swear I...”

“It’s special, you see,” Majora hurried on oblivious. “A cultural artifact, you could call it. Ancient. Irreplaceable. Complicated history. Scares people who don’t know better. Mmh. Come to think of it, it’s kind of like you. Didn’t you see where it went?”

Bóro roared as he too was levitated so she could yank up the carpet beneath him. He landed, or rather was landed, with an objectionable thump of backside on floorboard. Cursing hard, he laboured to his feet, steered them back into their slippers, then restored the carpet’s place with a vicious kick.

“I suppose it *could* be a problem in the wrong hands,” Majora speculated, turning her onslaught on the exercise bicycle next. “Hypothetically, you get me. For all *real* purposes it’s an inert block of wood, since my sisters and I purged the residues after all the – you know, the trouble. Pffah, don’t know why I mention it really. Probably just to observe the obvious: that it’s impossible to completely rid an object of its memory, given that its experience, by virtue of itself, becomes a property of its material existence. Why that’s fundamental, everybody knows it. Manuscripts don’t burn and all that. So there’ll be a trace, even at the slenderest order of magnitude, through which its particle interactions still carry the echo...”

She released the exercise machine. Its pedals whirred on, an echo of their own maltreatment.

“But it’s academic, you people might say. Only, oh I don’t know, a Category Ninety-Nine environment or something daft like that could re-ignite such a trivial vestige. No risk at all really. Safe as my sisters’ egos. Still would be nice to have it back.”

Bóro’s head spun. She was bad enough in the comics he used to draw, where he’d had to concede half the page to her speech bubbles.

“I shouldn’t have left my bed,” he griped. “What the hell is a Category Ninety-Nine environment?”

Majora’s slender eyebrows arched.

She stopped.

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Stood tall, her gaze at last meeting Bóro's. She appeared genuinely puzzled by his ignorance.

"Category Ninety-Nine? You know? A reality that's...mmhh, how would you call it: terminally fucked up beyond recognition? A cosmic abomination, presenting a threat to every reality it touches? Gibberish in other words. Totally theoretical. Circular, even. A reality so absurd that its reality is impossible. Nonsense, right? If you ask what I think, which by and large is a healthy thing to do," – and here she uttered a name he failed to catch – "just made it up to complete her chart or something inconsequential like that. I mean, what would it be? A world where critical masses of populations commit to such senseless all-destructive fantasies that their reality rearranges itself into a lethal, agonising, yet somehow perpetual collapse-loop in those delusions' service? Pfah! I ask you!"

Bóro decided on a collapse of his own, into the sofa. Right now he would have considered himself something of an expert in matters agonising and perpetual.

"It's too early," he complained. "What have you done with my coffee press?"

But there was no stopping Majora once she'd got going. "And make no mistake my little artist, you know me, I'm the last great and terrible goddess you'll find shying from a round of necessary destruction here and there. No no, for a Category Ninety-Nine we're talking something else entirely. Call it a qualitative singularity, if that's helpful. It would entail, mmnh, let's say, sapient power imbalances along absolutely arbitrary frames, *absolutely* I tell you, as in, with no conceivable cosmic footing whatsoever. Can you imagine it? Of course you can't, that's the point! Or maybe...mhmm. Unbridled antagonism to the diversity inherent in all matter beyond the first few degrees of complexity? Just for instance, you understand me," – her words slowed, turned sharp as her fangs, and just for maximum aggravation she crouched behind the sofa, parked a hand in his hair, and swivelled his face to meet hers – "the will to lay waste to the lives of *real people*, to spontaneously lose the ability even to imagine them as *real people*, the moment they fail to accord to – what, some rigid reality which isn't even real? Pfah! I mean, who does that, Iorialus Bóro? What does that even mean?"

Bóro wrenched himself free, then dug through the calamitous pile-up she'd made of the sofa cushions and rescued the remote control. He flipped on the television. Anything that would shield his ears from that infernal monologue.

He remembered as soon as he saw the news tickers that this was the day the other Majora, the *Majora II* spacecraft, was due to arrive in lunar orbit.

BETRAYAL! – the TV shrieked. Bóro bellowed and threw up his hands, sending the remote clattering off the ceiling.

"Good grief! *There it is!*"

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Majora peered across his head: a surge of primal heat smashing into him with the heft of a grand piano, indigo shadows tickling his neck and armpits; but he failed to sense them, he was too busy having his nerves shredded by the horrifying pair of crimson orbs on the screen – the eyes, the eyes! There it was, the mask! Red on white, eyes alight with an ancient madness, twin reactors churning with the molten amalgam of truths and delusions so violently blended that all meaning in those notions melted, melted to hatred, hatred meaningless, hatred supreme...

Betrayal. Always they betray me. Always they punish me. Torture! Torture, torture!

The shape, the voice: they were Professor Akaguma's, but then, they were not. Fastened on her face was the mask, pinholes piercing, tendrils twisting, spikes sharp as the pain in the heart that mask had tapped, whose stabs now pricked its terrible secrets awake. Behind her the interior of the *Majora II* space capsule flashed blood-red, alarms screaming, people screaming, but none of that panic so penetrated Bóro's soul as the hiss, *that* hiss, the catalytic hiss of torments modern and ancient locking step in a discharge of inconceivable power...

Worthless. A failure. A failure no matter what. They hate me. They HATE me. Never wanted. Never love, never love, only NORMAL! Revenge! Revenge! Destruction! Chaos! Consume...I shall Consume..."

"Normal?" Majora was chewing her tongue, as though trying to crush the word to fit through her lips. "What might that be? Would you know?"

Screams from outside now. Outside the apartment. Shouts, cries, what the fucks, dog howls, engines choking, saws and hammers clattering on stone...

To dump his adrenaline if nothing else, Bóro rushed for the balcony. Majora whisked open his curtains just in time, he'd have smashed headlong into the reinforced glass if she hadn't stunned him to the spot with the sight beyond.

"What is this?!" he spluttered. "What's happening now? What have you done?"

That was when he saw it.

The Moon!

"Damn you Majora! I ask again: *what have you done?*"

The object in the sky was not that sliver of a crescent whose imminent withdrawal was to herald a new lunar cycle, as well as a new era for humankind courtesy of the Canadian Space Agency. No: this moon was *full*, full as a fridge full of milk, full of its own bursting energy, so full it outshone the tiny Sun which struggled to rise behind it!

How was it possible? When did it ever stand so bold in the sky?

When did it feel so...heavy, just to look at?

When was it ever so *big*?

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Not in reality. Never in reality.

Only in myth.

Only, Bóro remembered, in some traditional Japanese legend he'd read about long ago...

"So *she's* got my mask," said Majora with relish. "Hah! What a pain!"

Bóro lumbered around. The goddess stood leaning against the doorframe, shins crossed, arms folded in satisfaction, lips raised in a canine smirk.

"You...you..."

He couldn't string his words together; but the strikes of his finger, from Majora, to the television, to the Moon, to the bystanders gawping and snapping selfies in the square below, then at Majora again, readily conveyed his accusation.

"I what?" said Majora, putting up her hands. "I didn't do anything!"

"*Your mask!* How did it – you threw – threw it on purpose –"

She gave a *fufufu* worthy of a Kabuki stage. "You wound me, my little friend!" she protested. "Fine, fine, tossing it aside at random might have been a *little* careless on my part. But her craft up there: it's, what, just over two Magnitude Forty-Three planks away? Why, at that radius that's a minuscule point within the probability space. Well short of any recognised responsibility margin!"

Bóro glared up at her.

"You can't prove anything," she said, grinning harder. "You could try I suppose. But you'd be wasting your energy. Trust me on this, any arbiter in the universe would absolve me straight away."

"Can I strangle you instead then?"

"Hmm, let me check: nah. Besides, you won't consider me real yet, will you? That might be a precondition."

Helicopter rotors overhead. Ambulance sirens. The sudden change in lunar behaviour must have been inauspicious for people driving, eating too fast, or operating heavy machinery.

Bóro dared a glance at the television, but it had defaulted to a test card. The masked Akaguma's eyes had burned two circular shadows into the screen.

He dragged open the doors and shambled onto the balcony. Locked his hands on the rail and peered hard at the offending celestial body.

His beard twitched. His legs were shaking. Blurred as his vision might be through fury, fear and deferred expectations of morning coffee, there was no mistaking it.

The Moon was too large. Larger even than a few minutes ago.

Falling.

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Three days, he somehow knew. That mask, and Akaguma's mental illness: the force of their combination had altered the Moon. Possessed it. Halted its movement. And now it was falling.

The Moon was falling.

Three days.

He spun to face Majora.

"Put it right," he demanded.

She threw up her hands again: the standard reaction to the approach of the referee when you've just taken someone out with a murderous tackle.

"You can," said Bóro. "You're omnipotent."

"You say that as though it means I can do anything!" the goddess objected.

"Don't start that again. You can change your size, for a start. Make yourself huge and catch it."

"Nuh-uh. I mean, I *could*, but I'd need three others to help. Got to be four, that's how it works. I'd ask Minora, but you know what she's like, she won't set foot in a world as imbalanced as this for all the dumplings in the multiverse. Seriously, this one's beyond me. I've analysed all possible courses of action over the next three days, and come to the understanding that nothing I do can prevent the impact. It's a narrative imperative I'm afraid. An impervious outcome of the causes and consequences chosen within your reality. Sorry about that."

"You, you big damn divinity," Bóro sneered, "you would speak to me now of causes and consequences?"

"Well, obviously? Any being of executive cosmic power, even one as captivatingly attractive and awesome as this one here, must show due respect to the web of cause and consequence. Where would it leave us otherwise? Why not go ask your people's demented copper-monger in hospital? And as for these," she pointed out, wiggling her eyebrows at the Moon, "these are your consequences, Iorialus Bóro."

"My consequences? What in heaven's name has the Moon to do with me?"

"Our dear professor Madoka Akaguma. She trusted you, you know? She invested all that she was in those to whom you connected her, because her own reality refused her such connection. We were her love, her will, her values, her fortitude; her truth, you might say. We gave her all that might have been hers, might have waited out there for anyone, *if* this world of yours functioned like a believable member of the cosmic community. But what did you do? You cast her out for it. Her and so many others before her. Do you see? Your behaviour, regardless of motivation or necessity, caused problems I have an obligation to address in my, mmhh, official capacity: not because it was *sinful* – such was never

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my metric, you know it; but since it finally crossed a threshold of ruinous absurdity. Do you understand now, Iorialus Bóro? You did not merely destroy a living soul this time. You found one already destroyed; resurrected it, recharged it steadily with hope; then annihilated it utterly, blamed it, and left it rent asunder with no recourse. That doesn't just happen, Iorialus Bóro. Not without consequences. You might as well have taken your sledgehammer to the foundations of reality itself."

The steam piled up in Bóro's ears with every slanderous word, but she left his tongue not a crack to squeeze in.

"This one had no means to recover from that cruelty, Iorialus Bóro. So she didn't. And tell me honestly: *why should she?*"

And now the Old Master recoiled, because that whimsical visage had contorted into a snarl. Not Majora's textbook hot twist of rage for any fiendish mortal, intolerable relative or cheating video game, but something infinitely darker: a snarl of crystallised pain as chilling as the interstellar void.

Only one type of wound could twist a face so. The worst type. An atrocity so vile as lay beyond the capabilities of the most callous of enemies. Only one category of power had the capacity to inflict an injury so dire, and it was one to which even the mightiest beings in the cosmos had no defence.

The power of the trusted, beloved friend.

"*Why should she*, Iorialus Bóro?" she advanced on him; and he stood his ground, he was an Old American, but suddenly the balcony felt very small indeed.

"What possible cause," the goddess seethed, "can you offer her, not to will the obliteration of a world which carved up her life in perfect suffering? None at all, because heed me, Iorialus Bóro, I can tell you just how she feels, and you know it too, since you claim to have *created* me, since you know my story, since you have been there yourself, so hide not behind the pretence that any being with a heart *ever* recovers from that special mutilation of getting impaled by the hand that warmed it back to life. And you may believe what you like about who's real and who isn't, and which of us created the other, I couldn't care less, it's spurious by comparison, because here is something which matters, something universally precious, something pivotal to the function of *all* realities, and if you would butcher it on an altar to such feckless answers then you may forget about my official capacity because my personal one has words for you which you may sew into your shadow, Iorialus Bóro: *I am fucking disappointed in you.*"

The scent of lavender feels not nearly so fresh when it gusts in your face at stellar temperatures.

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Majora's fingers had clamped on his hand. She squeezed it, like a stress ball: hard, so hard it ached in his bones, should have crushed them to powder were executive-level editing of kinetic variables not instinctive to her. Sparks flew from her ionised breath as she drew back, relocated her grip to her own chest, and reminded herself in a disturbing tone: "*You don't have to kill them. You don't have to kill them. You don't have to kill them.*"

Bóro for his part was still winching his jaw off the floor. Taking advantage of the pause, the goddess steadied her lungs, stood to full height, then turned to regard the falling Moon.

"So as to your request, Iorialus Bóro: rather than own your consequences, you would ask me to alter them? No no. Completely out of the question. You are the only individual in existence with the power to do so."

He stared from her to the offending satellite. Looked to her again, as though for confirmation.

She nodded. Stuck a finger at the dressing-gown pocket containing his smartphone.

He was Iorialus Bóro. The military police, the provincial authorities, CSA Command, Mission Control, the *Majora II*: he could have his mouth in Akaguma's ear in less than a minute.

"You could still change it," she told him. "You could keep the Moon's weight off this world, if only you would lift the weight off your own heart. And I should warn you: weights on the heart stay sunk in it no matter how many realities you cross, and don't mistake my concern, your conscience is none of my business, but if you have one then it will be a weight of shame, and if you do not, it will be a weight of rage. Ask yourself: is that your will? Is that the *real* Iorialus Bóro?"

"Oh. I get it now." He spoke so quiet the words were lost in the shuffle of his beard.

"Something tells me you don't," said Majora.

"Oh, but I do."

He was chuckling.

Chuckling at Majora; at the Moon; at the outright farce of his situation. Next minute he was hollering with laughter, clutching his waist, spraying his tears, choking up as he laughed so hard the lymph nodes swelled painfully behind his ears.

"Ohh, I get it!" he declared. "Oh, what a fabulous crock of stunts you've pulled for me today! Yes, yes, I declare, this is the limit!"

Down in the square, his blasts of mirth worthily competed with the falling Moon for public attention.

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“And to think, you almost had me fooled there. My house, my livelihood, my career, my friends and supporters: you phantoms have devoured them all in this deranged project of yours. What’s left to take, after all that? What have you left to threaten me with? Oh, I don’t know: go full horror and *drop the Moon on me*, how about that? Look, look: it even looks like my face! Hahaa, what a delight! Well you’ve gone too far this time, way too far, oh yes, you’ve overshot the range of my best measuring tape, you desperate fools! Whatever did you take me for? A doddering old dotard? A clown? A politician, do you think? However did you convince yourselves I might believe *this*? When would the most gullible halfwit in the world believe the Moon was falling? Look! You’ve flicked your last dice at my forehead and it’s bounced right off and gone tumbling down the drain!”

Majora was clutching her own forehead, as if at the mother of all headaches.

“You know what I reckon?” said Bóro, real relief in his voice now. “I reckon that if I wait three days, this will be over. Back to normal!” The word produced a minor flinch. “Your hallucinations will clear from my skull, the nightmares will end, I’ll be back in my cabin with my mail on the doormat and good old Giuseppe on the phone, and I’ll tell him to get me tickets to go study a few Pollocks and Mondrians and take my art in a healthier direction from now on: one where it stays on the bloody canvas, for a start!”

“That’s your final answer,” Majora sighed.

It wasn’t a question. Bóro was already dancing back to the kettle.

“Very well. No point waiting. Doubt you care to sit around either. Pfft. Mortals. Always in such a hurry.”

The goddess reached back and removed the band from her braid. Shook it out, so that her waterfall of tresses danced free in the breeze.

She adjusted her collar. Reached through realities. Returned with a violin in one arm, a crescent-shaped bow in the other.

She placed the chinrest to her jaw.

Tuned up: stroked the strings for a bit, then put on an attentive frown and engaged in some important-looking fiddling with the pegs.

“Not that I’ve ever understood the mortal concept of time,” she interrupted herself. “Why only in straight lines? Alright, sometimes you think a little and get circles, or even cones. Still: that’s reductive you know?”

In the cloud of her contemplations, the panic in the square seemed oddly distant.

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“Past, or future? Madness, or sanity? Imagination, or reality? Pfft. One or the other, one to the other: the balance is poorly served. No, no. Only by moving up and out, to where the tension itself is revealed as illusory. Now that’s balance. That’s a true new cycle.”

She sighed.

“Mmleh. Well if he so cares for his old one, the least we can do is give it a proper send-off. Here we go then. Majora’s *Dirge for a Terrible Order*.”

She raised the bow.

“In A major,” she thought to add.

She played.

A melody deep as the void, haunting as its most cryptic of ancient mysteries; nonetheless it gripped the heart with a rich anticipation and, as though its stave spun off into metaphysical ribbons, wound round the handles of time and began to drag it forward, faster, faster...

The day flew by. There they flitted: the labourers rushing to put the finishing touches on the festival tower; the uniformed soldiers and people in dark suits gathering to point at the Moon and talk seriously about it; others popping up on rooftops with binoculars or telescopes. As the sky darkened, the Moon loomed large as a gigantic lantern or a hot air balloon at close range, offering an incredible naked-eye view of its seas and craters. A crowd ascended the tower and crossed to the roof of Milwaukee City Hall. Stood mesmerised. Fireworks.

Majora’s hands sped up. Double time. Some dirge. Her performance was suddenly inspiring: a rousing blast, a call to action, a promise of excitements to come; and right at the margins, look and it was gone, an irreverent riff, as if to keep alive the hint that all of it might be (but then again, might not be) part of some game, if not an enormous joke at your expense.

The second day. The Moon continued to swell. Traffic jams in the streets below. People were getting out. Birds and dogs going berserk. By midday the square was deserted. The car-horns and loudspeakers maintained a chorus in the distance as the provincial authorities began the evacuation. Louder into the afternoon, as they found the roads deliberately blocked by ‘lunar sceptics’ proclaiming it a hoax to take away their freedoms. Through windows, the televisions and computer screens displayed baffled scientists, chest-thumping clerics and media influencers, reports of observatories getting firebombed and 12G phone masts attacked due to rumours, attributed to the Redcap prison grapevines, that it was all a conspiracy by professional astronomers, foreign governments, and the late George Soros who’d blatantly faked his death and was living it up in secret in Panama or somewhere. Then came the tsunamis. The earthquakes. Volcanoes

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popping across the continent like the fireworks of this second night, for which barely a handful of the ticketed elect showed up.

Faster again. Quadruple time. Majora's strings were frenzied now, spitting flames as she worked the bow wild.

The third day. The Moon filled most of the sky now. The roads were rivers; its gravitational pull had dragged Lake Michigan ashore. Everyone had fled, or taken doomed shelter; not even a seagull remained in the sky. More earthquakes. What skyscrapers had survived the war began to shed bits. By night they were crumbling. Bóro reappeared on the balcony, in jovial spirits. "Pah! What are you waiting for?" he taunted the Moon. "I'll have a fine festival once the show is over! Come! If you're going to fall then fall already!" He stomped off to bed. No fireworks tonight. Everything shook as the impending satellite gained a brilliant red envelope, flushing upwards and outwards as the atmosphere surged from its path.

Majora's hand approached light speed. Even an audience with a pathological loathing for music would have felt rinsed, electrified, would have leapt and cried and launched their hands in a standing ovation. Then the rest of the city fragmented under the pressure and the air whooshed out, scorching so hot that the view from the balcony faded to white, just as the lunar ceiling came down and crashed through the City Hall's spire.

The violin signed off: a triumphant burst of chords – *Happy New Year!* – as the tower shattered, clock faces and all, to reveal the great bell within, impeccably restored, right as the Moon fell through it. The final sound: DONG.



Sunlight.

Bóro stirred. Winced at the warmth on his face.

He rubbed his eyes. Opened them.

Blinked.

He'd slept. He'd actually slept! And not only that, he felt fresh as a glacier this morning.

Could it be true? How stupendous was that? A night of unbroken rest!

He sprung from his bed, stretched out his arms for a mighty yawn, then slipped into his dressing gown and strolled from the room, whistling an upbeat tune.

He frowned, arms frozen mid-flourish.

"Are you still here?" he said.

"Mleh," Majora reacted from the sofa.

Bóro gave a clap. "Hohoh! You see? Everything's still here! The end of the world didn't happen after all then, did it?"

"If you say so," she offered, as if it were all the same to her. Her sharp attention was on the violin in her lap. One of the strings appeared to have snapped.

Bóro sang, operatically, he couldn't help it, as he put the kettle on.

"Well, that's that then. A good coffee, a quick soak, then I'll have the Canadians send a car to take me home. That's the measure of it, don't you reckon?"

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The Real Bóro

The divinity didn't look up. "Sixty-six point six; repeating, of course," she muttered, as she threaded the broken ends round her nail. Then she withdrew it and raised the instrument in both hands, examining her repair job.

"Hah! You never did enjoy being wrong," chuckled Bóro. "Well! You be you. I'm headed back to the real world."

His felt so light-hearted he could float. Whether you believe in the gods or not, it can feel awfully satisfying to win a wager with them.

He took his time with his morning ritual, even making a treasure hunt out of the latest round of where-did-the-imaginary-goddess-put-my-mug. Then he savoured each glug of roasted bliss as it trickled from his throat to his gut, from where its warmth radiated, out from his organs to the limits of his limbs, washing out the last stubborn buildups of mind-addled stress as it went. Then at the final swig he raised his mug to his frustrated visitation and toasted their mutual health, before whipping the curtains aside, dragging open the double doors and trotting out to the balcony –

A loud roar, followed by a splash.

A twitch at the corners of Majora's lips. Now it was her turn to take her time as she set the violin at her side, rose to her feet, strolled across to the doors, and crouched to drag the floundering Bóro from the water.

Firm arms looped beneath the Old Master's armpits and hauled him back into the apartment. He hacked and sputtered, shivering in his saturated dressing gown, gasping out of rhythm like a stranded shapeless thing from the deep.

Majora stepped over him with a sympathetic smile and drew the curtains full, bathing him in glorious sunlight.

"Come on," she said patiently. When he instead lay twitching and shuddering in his puddle, she took his mug off the floor and spun a finger, directing the water in his hair and clothes to spool into it. Once it was full she tossed it out through the balcony doors, then repeated the process, bailing this stricken vessel of a man till his shock subsided, and he loosed a huge gasp, and shot up...

...and immediately wished he hadn't.

There was no balcony.

No square.

No Milwaukee, in fact.

Just water.

He mouthed: "No..."

Splash, splash. Beyond the apartment, water everywhere. Nothing but.

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The Real Bóro

“No! No, no! Ohh, it can’t be! It’s not right! It’s not *real*! No, no, no!”

“The Great Lake, they call it now,” Majora explained, as though aside to an imaginary observer, because poor Bóro for one wasn’t hearing. He was on his feet now, jerking haphazard, nails digging so tight in his scalp that his knuckles turned white.

“It wasn’t – this doesn’t – no! No! Nooo!”

The last of his senses took leave of him, and he screamed.

“So I *might* have absorbed some of the impact,” Majora went on, massaging one hand with the other. “What of it? I’m big. No problems with that I expect?”

“Noooooooooooo! Noooooooooooo!” Bóro tore about in the background, wailing through his waterlogged lungs, ripping at his hair, thumping his chest, seizing up lamps and cups and plates and clocks and smashing them into the floor, the walls, his own forehead...

“I couldn’t stop it gouging a huge crater out of this continent, but...hey, at least the planet’s structurally sound, and it’s orbit’s stable. Mmnh. Heck of a mess though.”

And now Bóro had fallen to his knees and was punishing the floor with his fists, his rage melting to grief, his shrieks sinking to frenzied sobs.

Majora crouched at his side. “Hey. Not even a little appreciation? Look, I even stabilised the Moon.” She pointed outside. “A little worse for wear, but still tidally locked, still wheeling round faithfully as ever. Have you any idea what trouble’s involved in making localised adjustments to the gravitational constant? Sheesh, they’ll be putting angry letters through my door for days now. But it was either that or faff around with masses and energies, and that would constitute executive interference with causes and consequences when it’s not even my patch of spacetime, so meh.”

She sighed, and waited for him to calm.

He didn’t.

“No really: take a look.” She unfurled a map. “All these lakes have flowed together in the crater. The Great Lake. From here, to here: you see?”

Somehow it wasn’t helping.

“At least your capital’s alright. This one: Ottawa, correct?”

Bóro reared up and loosed a howl of lamentation in her face. She winced, and pulled out a handkerchief to dab off the spittle.

“But this area here,” she went on, indicating the Great Lake. “Well, real is real I’m afraid. Everybody died because of you.”

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The Real Bóro

On observing the drastic further deterioration in Bóro's emotional welfare, she put in quickly: "But look at it this way. You've made some people's lives remarkably more straightforward."

A consoling arm round his back.

"For a guy who doesn't do politics, you've done an awfully good job of resolving the constitutional status of Wisconsin."

Yes, time is a funny thing, Majora considered; and there was plenty of it to reflect on as she waited for Bóro. These people charted it on their clocks and calendars as though in a shared pretence – oh, mortal arrogance! – that it worked the same for everyone: the eight o'clock train, the inflexible deadline, the Battle of Sekigahara. They did this in full knowledge that a shift in mood, in language, in reference frame, was all it took to radically change their experience of it; knew it so well they couldn't even define it from first principles, only fumblingly approach it from the second degree, through the aid of something already reliant on it: what a clock reads, the measure of change, the succession of events, the direction of increasing entropy...

Well alright, that last was not without its fun. Professional satisfaction, she might say. Akin perhaps to that of those rail station staff who got paid to shove passengers into the train carriages till they were crammed tight enough for the doors to shut.

What time since lunar impact? – they might have asked, clipboards and calculators at the ready. What time between Bóro's quick soak, if not quite the one he anticipated, to his engagement with the new day?

She scoffed. What arbitrary questions!

A feeble groan: "All gone...it's all gone..."

Well, it was a start.

Then of course, through dripping, pleading eyes: "Is it real?"

"You tell me," said Majora.

"No. You did this. *You*."

The open palms again. Wasn't me, ref. "What, you insist I'm not real but it's still my fault? So unfair!"

And now he'd had enough. "Aahh, to hell with it!" he cried. "You're *real*, alright? I don't understand it, I'll be damned if I know what anything means anymore, but I can't take it! You're real, you're real! Is that enough? Are you happy now? Is that good enough for you, you puffed-up, purple-chested primordial bully?"

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The goddess shrugged, helping him up even as his inner pillars crumbled into the clouds.

“And so tell me, why does it matter? What does it mean to you, that you’d drop armageddon on my head just to hear me say it? Fine! You’re real! You’ve won! Drive it into these triangles you’ve got for ears if that’s your condition for releasing me from this – this –”

But the goddess was shaking her head.

Of course. He remembered.

“Three tolls,” he uttered.

“So it goes, Iorialus Bóro.”

“Three tolls. Oh, no, no...”

“Yes, yes. Three is three; even I know better than to argue with that particular number. And as much as a functioning cosmos might find to question of your old country, Iorialus Bóro, it sure did know its bells.”

“Then, that means: it’s too late, isn’t it? Too late...too late...”

Majora sighed.

“Come,” she said, and led him to the doors of reinforced glass. She walked out, onto the water.

He hesitated: first at the shock of seeing it again, then at the implication he was meant to follow.

She beckoned. “Well come on? It’s not that hard.”

“Water...water...”

“Yes, water, but later there’s going to be a bridge here, so it’s okay. Come!”

It was a good thing Majora didn’t drive. Her enlightened approach to time might have made traffic lights a little difficult.

Bóro stared hopeless.

“Look, hold my hand if it worries you that much. One, two – *theeere* we go! You see? Nice and easy. Oh, are you cold?”

She looked him up and down. Snapped her fingers.

“There! How about that? Your favourite overcoat. Suit, belt, boots; why, you look just like you’re off to open another of those flashy exhibitions of yours. Feeling a little better already, am I right? Of course I am.”

Bóro plodded pointlessly after her, each step taking him further out on the lake. A lake broader than the horizons, with no shores, no ships, no islands, nothing to break the turbulence of blue save for that totally incongruous apartment, that misplaced block from a missing reality: somewhere, some time, if only perhaps, a real city, a real province, a real world.

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Then he saw something else that shouldn't have been real and froze in his tracks, gaping up in horror.

Majora saw where he was looking.

"Oh. That," she acknowledged. "Well I could hardly return it to its prior path, could I? Look: a whole chunk's been knocked out! And I can't be bothered with the paperwork of screwing with the constant again, so it's got to stay in this lane if you care for balance in your orbits, tectonics and tides. Which you do, trust me."

It was starting to make sense. In his dream. Why it had looked so huge, so hideously crooked...

Well, would you have guessed? That that was the shape of a Moon which had bounced off Wisconsin? Surely not. How to even begin to predict the effect of such an impact when it was a state one moment, a republic the next, a province after that?

"No, no. I do not! I refuse!"

"Hmm? What is it now?"

"It can't be. I tell you, it is not!"

The rugged Bóro complexion was etched with terror.

"How can it be real, but not? How can this be? Tell me, *how*?"

"Shhh. It's alright, Iorialus Bóro. It's all..."

"How, tell me?!" He was panicking now. "I've said it; I've said you're real, and now I can't take it back, so where does that leave me? Where am I? How can you, this, be real but not real at the same time? Why, it's grotesque! It's abhorrent! What am I supposed to *do*?"

"Oh dear," said Majora, her gaze almost motherly now. *We all go through it*, it seemed to say.

"Tell me, tell me! I cannot abide it! How am I to be sure of *anything* anymore without this wall between what is, and what is not? Aahh, what use are my calipers, my measuring tapes, these goddamn eyes? Is it all a hoax then? How am I not to fear that all things, at any instant, might give way about me: the sky, the sea, the stars, my skin, all whooshing out of range to leave me a brain and two eyeballs adrift in an infinite void? Aahh! Help! Help! Where am I to stand without solid ground, tell me, where?"

And he stamped, but beneath his boots the water swirled oblivious.

"And yet you stand," Majora pointed out.

He seemed not to hear. He was raving, whirling his arms, and in this course he came face to face with the defaced Moon; and as he glared up at it, it was as if he beheld the lurking demon which had so tormented his senses from the very start, and so advanced on it, shaking his fist, and raised his voice to cry in accusation:

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“Well how do you hang there, you, you, you *half-sun*? Hovering purposeless, shattering the symmetry of the sky, too distant to grasp yet ever too close to ignore? Eh, eh? You are the culprit! I see it now! Ohh, how could I have missed it? Was it not your lucent insistence that warped this world all along? Shifting, phasing, always there but never what you were, and then you’re nowhere! What are you? Tell me the truth! Are you timekeeper or traveller? Hunter or farmer? Do you light my path or darken it? Are you peace and tranquility, or lunacy and impending doom? How do you signify life’s cycles, pulse with its rhythms, yet herald death in your desolation of dusty grey? Which is your face, and which the masquerade? What are your pronouns? Are you man, or woman, or rabbit? All three, you say? Then what do you pound, rabbit? Rice, or medicine? Make up your mind, or mix them but serve me neither! Aahh, to think: we walked on you! We walked on you, or did we? And for what? What use running our hands across your face for ourselves, if we won’t believe what we felt? Foolish! Ahahaah, it’s all foolish! Mad mirror of our follies, you are all things, and no things, so how do you dare be real?”

He crashed to the unseen surface, bursting with all the laughter left in his lungs. Hollered all the harder when he noticed the goddess watching.

Was reality all just some game then? Some grand simulation, its terms beyond the reach of those trapped within it? How then could he know? *Could* he know? Could she?

She shrugged. *Don’t ask me.*

Funny, that. The attitude that had made her so aggravating. Charmingly so, when she did it to other people. Bóro had ever put it down to the blatancy of the pretence; the ridiculousness of the notion that there were things this all-powerful deity didn’t know.

For the first time, it occurred to him that there might be more to it.

“They’re good questions,” she remarked. “Really good, some of the time. But my dear man: are they that important? Does your relationship with the realities, still more with your friends, ride on the answers?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I don’t know!” he bellowed piteously. “I know nothing! I’m stuck! Look at me, lost at sea and it’s not even a real sea! Everything’s real, and nothing’s real, and everything’s nothing and nobody has a clue; so it was all real, and none of it was, and maybe I never was either! Is this life? Is that the answer? Why, you bastard? Just why?”

Silent waterfalls streamed in stages down his cheeks.

The goddess crouched once more. Actually embraced him this time. Held him awhile, till his breathing calmed. Stroked his suffering hair.

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“Look,” she said at last. “It’s not for me to give you the answers. Maybe I could; but who ever looked to the gods for answers and came away satisfied? It was never your belief, as such, that I sought; because honestly, what dickhead of a divinity feels entitled to people’s belief, let alone torments them for it? The proposition I offer you is a different one, Iorialus Bóro: not the answers, but the questions. Suppose you weren’t lost upon the water, but at comfort in travelling it; that is to say, not cowering between your canalised walls, dashing in straight lines from eternal heres to eternal theres, but sailing free upon the sea of all possibilities – shhh.”

She took his trembling wrists in her hands. Met him face to face. This close, the gentle green of her pupils could be discerned from their amber coronas.

“It’s frightening. I know. You’re not used to it. Mortals, hey? But how do you think it might be, if you did get used to it? If you came to terms with your power to swim as you have all along: not only along that flimsy dimension of *is* and *is not*, but back and forth, up and down, in and out, side to side, mastering the currents of what *could be*, and *might be*, and *should be*, with no further need for the mania of clinging like your reality depended on it to that single elusive thread they call certainty, the brittlest fibre in the cosmic structure, whose only function is ever to break beneath the whimsical dance-steps of all free matter?”

“I don’t understand,” said Bóro. “You – you’ve confused me now! Oh, curse it Majora, I implore you, put me out of my misery. Are you real, or are you not? What am I to believe anymore?”

“Real, or imaginary? Time or space? Matter or energy? Position or momentum? Particles or waves? This or that, this or that – how should I know? Ugh, so tiring!”

“Well if you don’t know then how the hell should I?”

“Well should you?”

“Now don’t get me wrong. Sometimes you should.”

Clouds massed. Blue deepened to black as the weather fouled. Only the crystalline gaze of the Moon defied the sky to obscure it, its reflected light no longer smooth but wild as it struck off that broken face, like silver ribbons twisting and jerking across the shimmering waves. Fog mounted, coating the horizons; rumbled, as the surface on which the raindrops pattered cohered into the visible spectrum, taking shape like lines on a schematic: outlines, shadings, patterns, greys and reds; a road, parapets, rails, supports...

“Say, when you’re building a bridge.” Majora strolled here and there as the hapless Bóro watched it assemble around them. “Mmhh. Yeah. Piles, piers, girders,

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arches, anchors, towers, suspenders; you'd better make sure you know your masses, your lengths, your strengths and deflections, your corrosion resistances and your natural frequencies; because you're riding on the answers there, quite literally you see. Unless you'd rather fall?"

She warped to his side and took his shoulders.

"Don't worry. You won't fall. You've got this."

But for Bóro's floundering he might as well have plunged straight through to the lake. "What, what..."

"Real piece of work, don't you think?" Majora placed her hands on her hips and admired the great steel tower as it soared before their eyes, up and up, as though driving straight to the moon. "Now, if only I could remember what it was called. Are names real, do you think? Hmm. The Bridge of...the Bridge of..."

"...the Thousand Worlds?" Bóro offered.

He shuddered. He knew not from where it surfaced, was not even fully aware that he'd said it.

Majora cast him a worried frown.

"The Thousand – what? Now where did you pull that from, Iorialus Bóro? The *Thousand Worlds*? What kind of a name for a bridge is that? Unless, unless...oh. Oh, I see! No no, you have it all mixed up. You must be thinking of the Army of the Thousand Worlds, am I right?"

The word clinked at his feet like a grenade.

"Army," he repeated.

Deep in the shattered hellscape of his mind, a tiny compartment of still-functional cognitive machinery wondered if his day could possibly get any worse.

"The Army of the Thousand Worlds?" said Majora. "You know? The one that formed after a handful of the people you drove out of the Bórolites all those years ago – oh, you won't remember their names – managed to escape this reality, through the very rifts you opened for them –"

"Rifts? Rifts, you say? What rifts –"

"What do you mean *what rifts*? My sweet man, have you yet to realise? The rifts drawn open by your art! Depictions so sublime as to breach the flimsy veil between your reality and ours? The same bridges I and Cre and Cynthia – excuse me, Cyania, look you see, you made me live-name her; the very same bridges by which we crossed to meet you up an otherwise tedious unreality gradient?"

The rain was belting now, but without missing a beat, the goddess pulled out a huge black umbrella, whapped it up for his benefit, and hurried on:

"And now you'll want that explained too, so I will, just in brief, in so far as it pertains to your predicament. Yes, those people you ostracised: a few found a way

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out, out to the very realities to which you offered them a path then monstered them for taking it, where they've been puttering around filling us in on the critical imbalances in this one. That's where the gradient comes from, you see: a reality whose units of consciousness – that's you, Iorialus Bóro – have insulated themselves so violently, so unaccountably, from the mere possibility of any reality other than their own artificially-reduced perception thereof; and in so doing, made themselves so *unreal* as to become materially inaccessible to the rest of the realities short of either a phenomenal application of energy – say, that released from a moon smashing into a planet; or, as you so ironically supplied, some surgical chiselling in those spots, in consciousness as much as in spacetime, where the realities press closest from both sides of the barrier.”

His dumbfounded face told her this was all sailing past him in his present condition; so she sighed, flung up her arms in exasperation, and told him: “Oh, that's right: you *don't follow politics*. Well here it is simply then. You people fucked up, the rest of us know about it, and now there's a massive army on its way to kick your world's arse.”

She locked her hands round Bóro's temples and steered him to face up the bridge. It might have been his frazzled senses, but through the rain dark shapes were shifting in the murk.

“Wait, Majora. Wait. What's wrong with my reality?”

He'd at last found his will. Something in the goddess's description didn't sit right with him; compelled him to speak up for the only reality he knew.

“Straightforwardly? It can't be real.”

“But you said –”

“This is different.”

“Oh, you're having me on!”

“Nuh-uh. There's impossible, and there's impossible. I'm afraid your Earth has a bad case of the latter.”

“No we haven't! That – you're making no sense! What could possibly be so wrong with us that wouldn't be wrong anywhere else?”

“Put it this way, my dear. If you've adapted to swimming in...hmm, let's see, what kills you? How about mercury? Let's say you've learnt to swim in a cage full of mercury, and it's killed off all those of you who couldn't adapt to metabolise it. In that case you might as well call it water for all the difference it makes to you. But the difference is as obvious to everyone else as it is trivial to you. Likewise, if you've made yourself comfortable in the terrible order of a singularised imagined reality, if it's all you've ever known, you might not spare it a second thought; but from all other perspectives it's a poisonous cosmic contradiction, a denial of its

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own nature, a challenge to all realities other than itself and thus of the entire churning flux of possibilities – which is me out of a job for a start! But never mind that, just trust me, because that’s not what’s important now. What’s important is that the Army of the Thousand Worlds is on the move, and here’s the best part: you won’t believe who’s leading the charge!”

And without any prodding, without having to be told, Bóro’s gaze travelled up, and up, up the steel tower...

“Do you see her?” said Majora. “Oh, of course you don’t. Here!” She pulled a pair of binoculars out of nowhere and pressed them to his eyes.

“No. It cannot be her.”

“It can only be her.”

“Too far. It’s gone too far.”

“You’ve known it all along.”

“No, I refuse! It isn’t her! I refuse to believe it!”

“She believes it.”

Cascades of brown hair, dashed with streaks of white. Chubby. And a triangle of freckles on her right cheek: the exact mirror image of those on Bóro’s left.

For her newfound purple greatcoat and cap, he still glimpsed that purple T-shirt beneath. The classic one with big white letters across the chest; but maybe she’d done something to it, or these wretched conditions obscured it, because all he could make of them now was the word ‘NO’.

She was staring straight back at him. Eyes clear as a summer sky, yet tumultuous as a storm ready to burst.

It was true. He’d known it all along.

“Fine. That’s that then is it? I suppose I know how it goes from here.”

He inhaled and shut his eyes, expecting that when he opened them he’d be up there to face her.

No use meeting the end sitting down. He was an Old American. If this was to be the way of things, let her earn it. Let the last image of Iorialus Bóro be left to the world on his own terms: with swinging fists and all the resolve his beard could muster.

After all, said a voice inside him: you created her. What sort of artist gets murdered by his own characters? Stands by while they invade his country, no less?

“You find your courage when you need it,” Majora commented. “Admirable as that may be, she’ll still win. She’s stronger than you.”

He grumbled as he pulled up his sleeves, ignoring the lash of icy rain on his skin.

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“You see, you might not have believed in her; but she’s always believed in you. Still does, perhaps.”

“Come on then! Show me something to believe!” he roared, as he opened his eyes...

...but no, he was still on the road. Coat heavy with rainwater, annoying goddess still hovering next to him.

“No shortcuts this time I’m afraid.” She pointed to a door in the base of the tower. “You’ll have to take the stairs.”

Of course he would. He snarled inward and shook his head, no fan of stairs.

He trudged for the tower. Entered. Craned his neck almost ninety degrees. A square staircase, spiralling smaller and smaller. It might have risen forever.

Forever couldn’t stop him. He was Iorialus Bóro.

He planted his boot on the first step.

“You have to do this,” he told himself. “It’s all there’s left to do.”

Confront her. Confront Iorako.

A girl like him, once upon a time. The other Bóro. Through the mirror. Of all his characters, the one who dwelt on an Earth so like his own.

So like it, save for a handful of tiny differences which changed everything.

Or was *his* the Earth that had changed?

That must be why they’d given her the job, he gathered.

He ascended. Ten steps. Twenty. Thirty. Forty. Fifty. A step for each year of his life.

He wheezed. Looked up and couldn’t help but cringe. He’d barely started!

A different Bóro, from a different Earth. How bloodily must it have pierced her heart, then, to learn she was only a fiction to him? Then to learn on top of that of the conditions in his world: a world so like hers on the face of it, save for those minuscule absurdities which, creeping like cracks through glass, compromised its deep structure; made it lethal to any save those who could contort themselves to not overlap the shatter lines?

A woman like her would have no place there. She would be feared, erased, ostracised as *other*, just like those of its inhabitants who couldn’t mask their realities to satisfy that illusive singularity, that imaginary nothing which wore the robes of the One True Reality and slaughtered all who diverged from it...

Had she been a Bórolite, would they have cast her out too like so much trash?

And what of those like Bóro, who did wear the masks? What cost to their true faces?

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Was that why he and Iorako had found each other in the first place? Because in some puzzling manner, they completed each other? Because she gave expression to those parts of him he couldn't? Gave him, in other words, the chance to be real?

One hundred steps. Barely a start. The rain and wind pounded the steel walls like a cyclone of ghosts, howling and swirling about as he climbed...

He'd cared so much for her, he remembered. No, he'd never forgotten, no matter his efforts to seal the plug on the well of anguish that had one day appeared in place of her warm, comfy house in his imagination, with her cushions, her laptop, her games console, her well-stocked fridge...

She'd cared for him too, till that day. Cared unconditionally, even with no way as yet to know of him. Been there for him in all circumstances. Accepted him, shared his fortunes, his aspirations, his secrets, never judging him, not once, no matter how embarrassing his mistakes, how destructive his rages...

Who else had done that? Who, in the *real* world – no, *this* world?

To heck with it! What made *this* reality so special?

What made it any less *imagined* than hers?

Were the dead real? Was Christmas real? How about the phases of the Moon for that matter? Spaces, numbers, feelings: so much called reality was absent, imagined, subjective. Yet take those parts away and what was left of the real world, real life, real people?

No – never mind. Too late. Three tolls. And now, through these tumblings of a tortured soul in sight of the finish line, just trying to get everything lined up neat and tidy for the coroners and detectives and obituarists and whatever other shit still worked in war-torn, Moon-struck New Canada, Bóro found that he neared the top of the tower. Through a slit in the wall, the shadows of grim leviathans lurched through the clouds. He could hear their engines and rotors, shielded his eyes against their searchlights, and now strange rectangles surfaced from the lake, while ant-like figures amassed on the bridge below...

Perhaps, he mulled in resignation, that girl had been the truest friend he'd ever had. The one who came closest to understanding the real human beneath the sense-defying phenomenon that was Iorialus Bóro; with whom he'd been brought together, hand to hand across the barrier, as though by the care and love of the cosmos itself.

Alternate counterparts. Entangled consciences. Muses. Something like that. Something too real for words.

And now she had come for him. For his world. For his reality.

They would fight, and she would kill him.

"Life's unfair," Old America had enjoyed to remind him.

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So high now. He shivered in spite of his overcoat. Step by step. Almost there. Was this it, then? Was there no other way? Not even time for one last coffee? He fumbled in his pockets. Empty. That shameless goddess must have pilfered the last of his chocolate. Probably had her haughty face full of it right now. The top came in view. An open mesh landing – don't look down – with a door leading out to the roof.

He stopped, three steps short. What was that?

“Hrrmph. Just my imagination.”

Two steps.

Dong.

There it was again.

Dong. Dong.

“...bells?”

Dong. Dong. Dong.

It must be their ships, he thought.

Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong.

That sounded like one heck of a fleet. The Canadians wouldn't stand a chance, poor bastards. Neither would the Chinese for that matter.

A shame. He didn't resent Ottawa *that* much.

Another step. Then the last, onto the landing.

Shivering harder now. Those weren't tears. It was just so bitterly cold up here.

And there was the door. Well, no use dallying. Go on, he told himself. Time to do one last bit for the world by standing up for hopeless old humanity.

He found the handle. Pressed. It stuck; then groaned into a reluctant turn.

Dong. Dong.

He felt so heavy. His heart, most of all.

Not the best place for it. The grated floor creaked beneath his boot. Otherworld army or not, it was crap. Cheap aluminium, slippery, shoddily connected, two millimetres thin at best. Who was their sorry excuse for a supplier?

“I...wish I understood. No, no. I just wish...”

Dong. Dong.

“Oh, curse it! Why? What in the world got into me? To hell with this reality or that reality, what possessed me to be such a rancorous reductive shit to people just because they experienced it in ways I didn't understand?”

Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong.

“Bells. Hah! Four tolls! Forty! Four hundred thousand! A fat lot of good you'll do me now! Bells, bells, bells, bells...”

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Then it occurred to him suddenly, like the light of another world blinking in through a pinhole.

“Hrnph. Weren’t there only meant to be three?”

Yes. That was how it went. Three and out. Everybody knew that. Because you can’t argue with three. Because reality sucks.

Dong. Dong. Dong. Dong.

Did it have to?

Just because this reality, here and now, had chosen to suck, was that reality’s fundamental nature?

Maybe in this reality three tolls meant three tolls and that was that. But all those other realities out there: would they be so rigid for the heck of it? Why should they?

Now that he thought about it, wasn’t a rule like that just plain sadistic?

In which case, why should he give a toss about it either?

Might there still be time, if he wanted it?

He gripped his head in his arms and snarled. He was thinking too much. It wasn’t like him. Iorialus Bóro was a practical individual.

He grasped the handle and shoved his way outside.

Iorako.

Real as she’d been all along. There was no doubt whatever about that.

Certainly, that is not to imply Bóro believed she was the person her dashing attire, upright posture and resolute countenance claimed her to be; that is to say, General Bóro of the Army of the Thousand Worlds.

There they stood, five paces apart, one thousand feet above the world. (But no, we are obliged by law to say zero-point-three kilometres; technically the Great Lake was still Canadian territory.)

He’d never imagined her as the military type. Oh, those irises like circles of clear summer sky! Her face was too honest, her temperament too straightforward. She’d probably never done a press-up in her life.

Look: she was even still wearing those Triforce socks he’d got for her!

Although, he did have to admit: that purple greatcoat looked as cool as anything he’d ever painted, not least with the way she kept her arms free so the sleeves flapped along with its tail.

General my arse, he thought to himself. She was probably snoozing with her tongue hanging out ten minutes ago. She didn’t lead that army in here, they’d have

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been well on their way through by the time they managed to wake her and must have had to hassle her into a helicopter or something.

So angry. She was doing her best to hide it, but he knew.

“I am Bóro,” she introduced herself.

There – there it was! No more time then. Here it came, that thrust of her arm...
...and what did he know, he wasn’t offended any more. All the fight had drained out of him. After all, she was right. She *was* Bóro. Face to face like this, he could contest it no longer.

He shut his eyes and braced himself for the blow.

Waited.

Waited some more.

He must be falling by now. Whoosh, whoosh; it was all the same in this godawful wind.

Why should he even notice? He’d got used to falling off things in his sculpting yard, if never from a height like this. He was Iorialus Bóro. It hurt the ground more than him.

What a way to go. Pushed off a bridge by his own muse, his inspiration, his otherworld counterpart. No wonder he couldn’t bring himself to smile. Too many regrets. If only, if only...

But come on, where was the water?

Alright: it wasn’t that high. Don’t argue with him on that. The Old Master knew his heights, lengths and widths.

“Fuck sake.”

He opened his eyes. Felt genuinely astonished to see Iorako still standing before him, arm outstretched.

For the first time, he noticed her hand was outstretched too.

A tiny voice in him railed forth: *I am the real Bóro! You’re not real!*

He should stash it in a drawer or something, he thought. Just in case he needed it one day.

To build a bridge better than this one, for instance.

God it was terrible! Scandalous, even! What were they thinking? Someone could get killed! He’d show them a thing or two about how to bridge the realities once this was over.

He stepped forward.

I am the real Bóro! I am the real Bóro! – that voice, defiant to the last.

“I, too, am Bóro,” he declared, and took her hand in his own.

Heavens, what a grip! He grimaced hard. Was she trying to break his fingers?

They shook, Bóro to Bóro...

THE MADNESS OF IORIALUS BÓRO
The Real Bóro

...whereupon the bells fell still, and the searchlights shut down, and the shapes receded into the clouds and waves as the massed ranks put their armaments over their shoulders and withdrew; and in that same instant, up in their observation post on the Moon, the zombie warrior Cyania flashed a champion's grin, and the overjoyed pudding-demon Creame launched from her seat and barrelled straight into her, and the goddess Majora folded her arms with a smirk of satisfaction not quite as subtle as she thought, as without further delay the three of them stood and left the room.

Epilogue

The Moon never fell on Wisconsin, first of the twelve new provinces whose creation, according to some historians, signalled the rise of the Canadian Empire.

The evidence is simply not there. Which makes it all the more peculiar that so many people insist that devastating event (the lunar collision, not the rise of the Canadian Empire) indeed took place, only for some freak natural phenomenon – call it God, or a spacetime anomaly, or George Soros – to wind back the sequence of causes and consequences that set it in train. Who can say for sure?

What the history books record, if that is any guide, is that the commander of the Canadian Space Agency's mission to the Moon, Professor Madoka Akaguma, received a mysterious telephone call just as the *Majora II* spacecraft entered lunar orbit. It later transpired that the call had been put in by none other than the world-renowned artist Iorialus Bóro, whose whereabouts had been fervently sought by the international press ever since his disappearance into the Canadian security system after the incident at the Bóro Gallery Christmas reception.

The details of his conversation with Akaguma, which lasted more than an hour, are known only to the pair of them. Her crewmates however would later attest to a remarkable shift in their commander's disposition following the call; an impression shared, in the course of the mission's staggering accomplishments, by the audiences of her news interviews, who noted the renewed blaze of belief in her eyes, the vigour in her speech, and the tireless energy with which she directed, indeed inspired, this new generation of lunar pioneers.

THE MADNESS OF IORIALUS BÓRO

Epilogue

Back on Earth, that telephone call also heralded what the world had been waiting for: the return to form of Iorialus Bóro. The gruff old walrus never spoke of what ailed him in this troubled period, so the customary rumours swirled: difficulties with the Canadian authorities; deaths in the family; a bout of insanity, infirmity, or of course senility. But never mind it, for now he was back, straight into action the moment he swung open the door to his workshop in the woods of Wisconsin Province; or rather the second moment, because first he had to order a replacement for his Nintendo Galaxy controller, which 'a friend', he said, had made off with on the excuse that the control stick drift on her own was terrible.

The masterpieces conjured by Bóro's hand over the last decade of his life transcended anything he had produced before. It was like a big red switch had been flicked, or a barrier breached, unfettering him from mortal limits and hurling open the roof on his true potential. From his brush streamed churning marvels of texture and colour, so convincing that to drink them with your eyes was as to physically feel them with your hands, to soak your lungs in their fresh and wholesome scents, to travel to the hidden places to which their trails and rivers invited you; while at night the floodlights whacked on in his sculpting yard, and the earth heaved, and the clouds groaned, and metal and stone collided in a blistering furnace of nuclear fury, till dawn broke over the treetops, and out on their wheels rolled monumental sculptures so true to life in their bearings, so robust and dynamic in their joints and curves, that on their shoulders alone the museums of the world were lifted into a heyday, the term *Bórovian* firmly established itself in art history courses, and all who looked on these portrayals found themselves changed for life, left in no doubt that somehow, somewhere, in at least some form which reached the essence of things, Bóro's wonders depicted nothing less than truths of the universe.

What was more, they now spoke openly of his art in these terms; moreso and moreso, as they found they no longer risked a blast in the face or fist to the stomach from the irascible Old Master and his Bórolite disciples. The latter, for their part, had resurfaced: Cavallaro in his restaurant, Madame Rogg in the Bóro Gallery and all the rest of them too.* Despite numbering in the low hundreds, they somehow never let slip a peep of what had befallen them during their mysterious absence, aside from the odd joke that they saw 'incredible things' or were probably just asleep the whole time. Nonetheless it was obvious that they had completely

* Well, almost all. It was a sorry fact that a small handful happened to be sincerely nasty, with an irredeemable hatred towards anyone who failed to fit their expectations of conformity. With no prospect of improvement, they ended up released in worlds they would find especially difficult; but we need no longer concern ourselves with these individuals.

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recovered: not one subscribed any longer to the violent fortification of the frontier between reality and imagination, nor to a clinical hostility for those, in the art world of all worlds, who refused to show their passports in its crossing.

Within a year their personalised letters of apology, each carrying the resolute signature of the Old Master himself, had drawn back dozens of members driven out in decades past. The retired Colonel Dasgupta was among them, publishing deal in tow for his new book about his adventures with Creame in Nunavut during his exile and the wonders they had done for his mental health; and so too, on her return from space, was the hero of the hour, Professor Akaguma, with a chunk of moon rock destined for the proudest paperweight duties on old Bóro's desk. There were even a few elderly folks who sat quietly in the corner, whose eyes twinkled when you approached, and whose speech seemed to imply, if you paid attention, that they too had found ways between the realities and conversed in person with Bóro's otherworld crew; to which, rather than punish them for their audacity, the Bórolites listened, and learned, and drew on those insights, whether they believed them or not, to enrich their experiences – of Bóro's art, of life in general – in turn.

Indeed, after only so much exposure to his new level of epoch-shattering masterworks, they all suspected Bóro himself of direct involvements with the characters there depicted. And so they asked him about it, over and over, now they understood they could survive the process. But rather than the earfuls of old, they only received a wink, or a chuckle, or a “What do you think?” as with a spring in his step, Iorialus Bóro hopped into his secretary's car, back to his workshop, where to resume his demonstrations, depending on your perspective, of his return from madness, or his discovery that certain notions of sanity were not so meaningful after all...

...while in a reality not necessarily so far away – perhaps the café of one Milwaukee City Hall or another – a tankard of ale, a more reasonably-sized can of beer, a huge vanilla milkshake, and an ornate cup of lavender and cinnamon tea were raised to toast the newfound health, and long may it last, of good old Iorialus Bóro.

Complicated matters were then discussed. A debate took place over whether the whole deal with the bridge had been a simulation, a pantomime, or a temporary reality in its own right; but the one participant who ought to have known was uninclined to clarify, and appeared to afford little distinction between these scenarios anyway. At any rate, she contended, a literal bridge was unnecessary for now; Bóro and his sublime creations quite sufficed. Furthermore, given the balancing effect of his art, and of the new Bórolite ethos, against those

elements of his reality which maintained their crusade against its own diverse nature, that reality's corruption had receded a touch from critical mass. That is to say, it no longer warranted emergency intervention by the Army of the Thousand Worlds; might be given at least a chance, one final chance, aided perhaps by a little nudging and poking here and there, to reflect, recover, and mature at last as a healthy and functioning member of the cosmic community.

By which point, it was apparent that she alone among these four had kept up, and was for all intents and purposes debating herself.

A harrumph, as the teacup clinked on its saucer. Then a complaint: "What's the matter with you people? You understand there are people who would pay through all their orifices just to hear my voice?"

The beer can alighted next, a little more gracefully than it once might have. "Bleh. Look, I'm indebted to you for organising all this, and honestly still more than a little afraid of you, so don't, you know, do weird stuff to me alright? But I've gotta admit: I can't make heads or tails of all this massive multiversy stuff you're on about half the time."

Laughter ensued, suggesting that on the contrary, she was far from alone in that impression.

"But it all worked out, right? That's what matters. We rescued the other me and I got to keep the overcoat, so I'm happy."

A refreshing glug from the tankard, which thunked down in turn. "Hah! Well put. And I'll hand it to you Your Great Golden Horniness, I appreciate you restoring all the likenesses he made of this charming old corpse here. Art doesn't die, right? Sort of like me then! Hahaah!"

Slurp. Slurp. The imbibing of the milkshake was a spectacle in itself, even as those big eager eyes alighted on the affronted divinity, folding her arms in a sulk as she consoled her slighted grandeur.

"Seriously people? I reach out to you one by one, I show you what's what, I go out of my way to orchestrate this whole affair for the benefit of all sapient life, which I don't usually do by the way, just by itself that tells me I'm losing it; and look, I even paid for the drinks! What's an awe-inspiring primordial goddess got to do to get a little respect around here? I've levelled civilisations for less!"

"Come, come! You don't have to hide it, we're all friends here. We all know you're a big softy at heart. Hey. Want a zombie-hug?"

"Don't you dare."

"Aaww – there! You see? Everyone loves Majora."

The noisy slurping paused, as a nervous waiter was beckoned for a refill.

"I have to ask though..."

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Epilogue

“Ugh. Of course you do. Fire away, *General*.”

“It’s a good point. Why did you do it? I mean, it’s not that I don’t appreciate it; not at all, we each know just how much the other Bóro means to us. But in the grand scheme of things – which for you, if I’ve understood, is rather freaking grand – isn’t he still just, you know, one guy? Why go to all the trouble?”

“Meh. I believe we went through this. That means we did, by the way. When I believe things –”

“You went through it. I’m just wondering if you could find a way of doing it again while sort of...you know – bringing us along with you.”

“Excuse you? I made it perfectly clear, the integrity of all-that-exists is entirely reliant upon –”

Slurp. Slurp. A satisfied gurgle. “It’s because she cares!”

Stunned silence.

“Hah! That’s it, isn’t it? Look at that face! She won’t admit it, but it’s true!”

The scrape of a chair. Apparently someone needed the lavatory.

From anyone else it might have been convincing.

“Mehh, what can I say?” she threw out before walking away. “I just do what I feel like. Glad if it makes people happy.”

The Army of the Thousand Worlds, he titled it. It was so wide they had to erect a new wing at the Bóro Gallery just to house it, to say nothing of the reforms it would incite in seven major religions, the revolutions it would inspire, the cosmological discoveries it would set the stage for, the philosophical movements and constitutional amendments that would spring up in reference to it, and the treaties that would be signed beneath its ranks of soul-interrogating gazes.

What more to say of it? Iorialus Bóro’s final fresco, destined to go down as one of the most beautiful and terrifying outputs of the entire human creative journey, exposed spoken and written language for the deficient phenomena they were. No, this work had to be experienced, and even then showed up the limits of the human senses. It felt much like it must have for those who first realised that visible light, that range of wavelengths long assumed by the human eye to represent all there was to see, encompassed merely a fraction of a vast spectrum of electromagnetic realities visible only to the mad till realer ways to look were at last imagined.

However, if your line of work absolutely depended on your communicating the power of this work, it was all there in its central figure. Oh, how she regarded you, returned to the fore after an absence of decades, just in time for this supreme apotheosis in a flapping purple greatcoat amidst the tolling of bells in the light of

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the Moon and the Sun! She'd aged of course, much as the Old Master himself, and there was still that ungainly twist in her lip which suggested it was all a chore, that snoozy old Iorako was the very last person you'd ask to fill such boots. Yet would you take that chance, while the weight of the earth in her eyes and the hooves and treads of that storming host told you just what trouble your world was in if it failed to take a long, hard look at its misdemeanours?

This was one question whose answer mattered. No, you would not.

And then, three days after *The Army of the Thousand Worlds* went on display, Iorialus Bóro passed.

The planet spun on. Years rolled by, then decades, while the memory of the great artist never faded. But as the decades turned to centuries, and the centuries to millennia, something peculiar happened to that memory. Bóro the great artist morphed into Bóro the great shaman.

We might imagine that by this period, people were hopping across worlds as casually as they crossed the plaque-adorned meadows and refugee memorial gardens that came to replace the fictional borders of a more benighted age. We could theorise then that the change in Mr. Bóro's historical persona reflected the new prominence in public memory of his seminal role in opening those ways, and humanity's eyes, to the wide-open multitude of realities, in which their own – oh, how they'd taken their time to learn it! – was not god, not emperor, but citizen.

Then again, who knows the truth of it? Who is to say you should believe a word of this story? Be honest: who in your world would give credence to the tale of Iorialus Bóro, any more than people believed the claims about his art that, only days following his death, were already doing the rounds of the magazines, evening talk shows and online forums? They were just too crazy, too full of nonsense: of people jumping in and out of his paintings; of portraits or sculptures coming to life in their owners' absence, and raiding their fridges or pantries to the bewilderment of their infrared cameras; of enormous hands, reaching from canvases to take them from their beds in the night...

Which is to say nothing of the wildest legend of all: that veritable conspiracy theory which had it that Iorialus Bóro never actually died. His coffin in Ottawa's Imperial Necropolis was empty, his grand public funeral and three days of mourning all a government sham to delude the gullible; because – they'd researched this, you see – somebody's uncle or cousin hurrying through the Bóro Gallery ten minutes before closing time had spotted the Old Master leaping through one of his paintings: in some tellings with a suitcase, in others with his

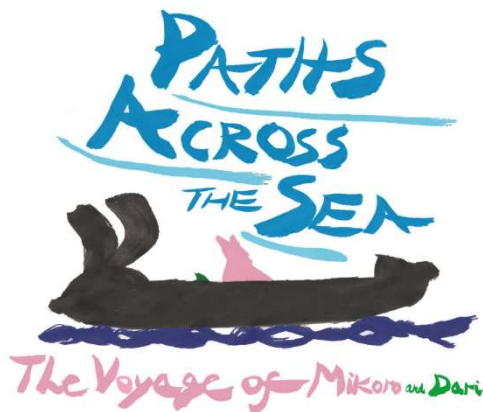
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coffee press and an armful of white chocolate, in a daring minority a pair of walking sticks; and where he'd vanished – Cyania's casket-lid shield, Creame's elated maw, Majora's great divine arse, a rowan tree or penguin in the background – the surface rippled, gentle, like coloured water.

But of course these are just rumours and hold no interest to realistic people.

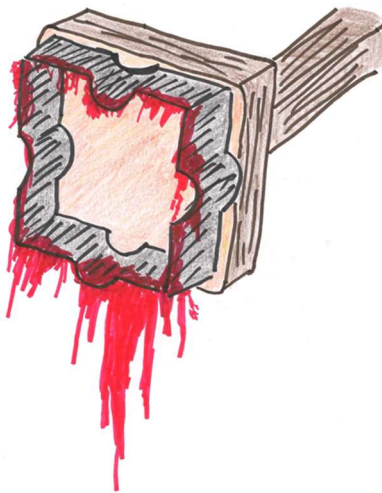
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