

The Monastery

The first bell chimed. The cold, bright early morning sun light beamed in through the window. I along with the many hundreds of acolytes in the monastery arose at the first chimes. The stone walls and floors never got warm, even in the height of summer, but then the summers weren't that warm at this altitude.

The sun's early light just peaked over the tops of the lower mountains as we rose and prepared for the morning service. It was a wonderful if chilly sight to see first hand. There was little time to appreciate it since the morning service started at the second chime and lateness would lead to punishment.

We all hurried through our morning ablutions and headed down to the temple hall for the morning service.

The temple hall was the heart of the monastery. It was a huge chamber carved in to the rock of the mountain side. It was big enough to hold everyone in the monastery. Twice a day it did just that.

The hierarchy of the monastery was laid out in coloured concentric circles in the chamber. The high priests in their white robes in the centre. Surrounding them the overseers formed a thin red line. Next comes a thicker yellow line of the supervisors. Then the thickest band of all, the blue's of the acolytes, this was the band I was in. Finally around the outside a very thin black line of the guardians. Symbolically and practically protecting all of us.

Then seated separately, to show the isolation they must have to do their job where the grey robes of the watchers. It was the watchers and the watchers alone that carried out the cleans-

ing's. They were outside of the hierarchy of the monastery answering only to the sacred words of the statues.

The second bell signalled the start of the morning service.

After the service we filed out to the refectory. Breakfast would be finished by the third bell and we had to be at work by the fourth bell. I spotted my old friend Tobias, in the large refectory hall. We exchanged the ritual greeting of our order, then sat down to our breakfast. "You are back in the libraries in the east wing today then?" I asked.

"Yes, I am". He replied flatly.

"I'll be there today as well, after my cleansing. Maybe we will meet in the stacks".

"You never know, we might". Tobias didn't seem his normal self this morning. "Are you feeling okay?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm fine" He sounded a little brighter, but it was just for show I knew. What was wrong with him? A nagging worry surfaced in my mind.

"It was your cleansing yesterday wasn't it". Tobias looked worried. "Yes it was". He looked around nervously. "It was...hard".

The worry in my mind, grew to full blown nervousness. It was my cleansing today! "What happened?" I asked before I realised what I'd done. Tobias looked at me in horror. It was forbidden to ask about another's cleansing. The shock was obvious in Tobias's voice. He hissed, "You can not ask such things".

Taken aback by both my own mistake and Tobias's reaction to it I started to eat my breakfast. As I did it occurred to me that it was strange that we should not be able to talk about our regular cleansing's.

“Why?” I asked. “Why are we not allowed to talk of our cleansing’s?” Tobias looked very worried now, he scanned the room. I knew he was looking for guardians. It was a forbidden subject, only ever be discussed with your cleanser.

“It is not right to ask questions of this nature. Our faith in the work the is all important. The cleansing’s keep us focused on the great work and prevent us from wondering from the path”. Tobias quoted verbatim from the statues.

I returned to my breakfast, still worried about the cleansing. Why should we not talk of it. What happens? It was then that it struck me. I didn’t know, yet I had been through many during my time here. Was this the reason we couldn’t talk of them, we couldn’t remember the cleansing. I tried hard to remember anything about any of my cleansing’s, but I couldn’t recall one detail. I could only remember the feeling afterwards. A feeling of great relief, that a great weight had been lifted from me.

“Worry not my friend, you will feel much better after your cleansing”. Tobias said as he stood up. I must have looked worried to him, and I was. “These worries are only natural. The cleansing will clear your mind of such things”.

The refectory was emptying, the fourth bell would ring soon. Then it would be time for my cleansing.

I headed down the central corridor, bound for the watchers chambers and my cleansing. My mind was filled with worries and doubts.

If the cleansing was for our own good, why is it forbidden to talk about it? Why should it be that I can only talk about it at another cleansing? And how could I talk about it if I can’t remember anything about it?

I knew I would feel so much better after the cleansing, but strangely that didn't seem to be much comfort here and now. After my cleansing I would forget these thoughts, but then if these thoughts made me feel this way, then surely not remembering them would be a good thing?

Was our job here not to preserve knowledge? What could be so dangerous about knowing what happened in the cleansing? This worried me, but I knew once the cleansing was over I would feel normal and happy once again. So the cleansing must be a good thing. Even so I worried that afterwards I could be a different person, that afterwards I wouldn't remember how I felt right now. But I would be happy, wasn't that more important?

I drew ever closer to the watches chambers as I worried about these things. Suddenly I had an idea. I turned off the central corridor and walked quickly to one of the writing halls. It was here that we made copies of the many books in our great libraries, where the great work of our order was carried out.

I entered the large chamber. As I had hoped there were many acolytes here hard at work in the many wooden cubicles that filled the room. At the far end the supervisors monitored the flow of work and acolytes.

I was just another blue robe in among many, my entry and quick exit would not be noticed, I hoped. The room had what I needed, parchment, ink and pens. Here I could quickly write down my feelings right now. After the cleansing I might not be able to remember it or how I felt right now, but I could read my words and may be then I might remember something of the cleansing.

I Sat in a cubical and quickly wrote. I did not have much time, I was already late for the cleansing. If I was much later I could be punished. But this was important to me. I had to remember how I felt right now. May be this knowledge would make my next cleansing easier.

After a few minutes of frantic writing I stood up and left the cubical. And I looked straight in to the face of a guardian. He was walking down the rows of cubicles looking in to each as he passed. Our eyes met for a second. Quickly I looked away. That could have been a mistake, what if he took that as a sign of what I was up to. May be they knew already and he was here to take me away for punishment. I had talked of a forbidden subject in the refectory hall, had a guardian over heard me?

I realised I'd been standing still for a few seconds now and the guardian was still walking towards me. This was again a mistake. I quickly walked towards him. Trying to avoid looking at the black robed figure while at the same time watching for any signs from him.

I passed him with out anything happening. I walked as calmly as I could towards the door back to the central corridor. I could not look back, but I wanted to. I wanted to see what the guardian was doing, was he following me? Was looking in the cubical I'd been working in? Was he going to talk to the supervisors in the hall?

I reached the door from the hall. No voices had been raised. The guardian was just on his normal patrol. I had done it. I had saved on the parchment in my hands my thoughts and feelings now, before the cleansing.

The sudden rush of relief I felt after escaping the attentions of the guardian was just as suddenly washed away by a wave of apprehension. It was time for my cleansing now.

The first bell chimed. It was morning again. I winced at the bright sunshine that poured in through the window, my head ached. My cleansing was yesterday and I was still suffering the effects.

I shook my head to clear it and got up. I would be back at work in the library today.

In the refectory I met Tobias again. I remembered talking to him yesterday but I couldn't remember what it had been about. It seemed to me that it could have been important, but it was gone now. He seemed to be happier this morning anyway.

"It seems warmer this morning". Tobias said cheerfully as I sat down beside him.

"I'd not noticed it being any less chilly today, but then I didn't come from the mountains like you did. You never seem to feel the cold".

He nodded with a smile. I still had the thought in the back in my mind that we had talked about something important yesterday, but I couldn't remember what it was. Tobias hadn't mentioned anything important, so maybe it wasn't important.

"Did we talk about anything important yesterday at breakfast?" I asked him.

For a moment he seemed a little worried. He looked around quickly then said very quietly, "You were worried about your cleansing yesterday". I nodded. Then in his normal voice he said, "You look much better now".

I nodded again. "Yes I feel a lot better today".

"The cleansing removes the doubt and worry so we may work at our great task". Tobias quoted from the holy book.

The forth bell chimed at it was time for us to return to the libraries and continue our great work.

While the temple hall was the heart of the monastery, the library was the reason the monastery existed. It was not a single room like the temple hall, no single room could be big enough to hold all of the books. There were many 100's of rooms, some of them almost as large as the

temple hall. All where filled with books and it was our great work to catalogue, index, sort and to summarise all of the millions of words held here.

My job to day involved indexing a collection of books deep down on the north west side of the library. This was far from the well travelled parts of the library. I headed through the commonly used parts of the library passing hundreds of my fellow blue robed acolytes. The galleries of the library where busy here, the stone floors worn smooth and shiny by generations of traffic. But as I descended I passed fewer and fewer acolytes.

My foot steps now echoed in the silence of the corridor. I was now on the lowest level of the north west side. I passed just 1 other acolyte here, we exchanged the ritual greeting of the order and I headed onwards to the outer edge where the 5 volumes I had to index lay.

It was cooler here to, with out the continual comings and goings of warm bodies there was nothing to lift the chill of the mountain air. I thrust my hands in my pockets to keep them warm. There my fingers felt a roll of parchment.

Odd, I thought, if this was from yesterdays work then why wasn't it mentioned that I had missed something? And it was forbidden to use the tools of our great work for anything but the work.

I warped my hand around the roll of parchment, but didn't take it out of my pocket. If a guardian saw me do this there would be questions asked for sure. I looked around, there was no one else near by, it was probably just me and the other acolyte I'd passed this far down. Even still I hesitated as I slowly drew the scroll out.

It must have been from yesterdays work and the supervisor must have missed it as well. That was his mistake, I would not be punished for reporting this.

Scroll in hand I finally arrived at the gallery which held the books I would be working on this morning. The scroll from yesterday was more important now. I needed to find out which book this had come from so I could take it back to the supervisor for that section.

I opened the scroll and read it.

It was not the missing part of some work I had indexed, but instead words of hearsay from my own hand. If a supervisor or worse a guardian where to see this, I could be expelled from the order. On the parchment I was questioning why we could not talk of the cleansing and why we can't remember what happens in it. I knew I had been cleansed yesterday but I could not remember what had happened during the cleansing.

My words on the parchment seemed to suggest a very unhappy person, yet now I was much happier, so maybe the loss of that memory was a good thing. If was happier without it, how could that be bad?

I sat down at the work table in the gallery, now troubled. Again if a guardian where to see me now I would be in trouble. But I didn't care about that right now.

They had taken some of my memories, something that was mine. They might have been making me unhappy, but those memories where mine. Whatever the intension of the cleansing it now made me angry.

I should be the one that choses how I feel. They shouldn't be able to change me like that! I realised that if a guardian could see in to my head, I would be expelled with out hesitation. But that was my point, in the privacy of my own head I could think what I liked.

I stood up angry. This was not right!

More calmly now I thought, but what can I do?

I could leave the order.

I was now deeply troubled. I could not do the work that was assigned to me today and that alone would be grounds for serious punishment.

I looked around the gallery, the book shelves, the cold stone walls, the work table and chair. What can I do?

Suddenly I saw something move. I caught the movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to face it. There was nothing there, just a stone wall.

But then the wall moved slightly. I blinked in surprise and took a step back. The wall can't have just moved, it's solid stone!

I took a step towards the wall and raised my hand to touch it. Before my fingers touched it, the wall moved ever so slightly. It's surface rippled and simmered slightly. I pulled my hand back.

The wall was moving!

As I watched the surface rippled again and it started to glow. The ripples expanded in rings like the ripples on a pond when a stone is dropped in. The surface of the stone was becoming transparent. Impossibly there was something inside the wall trying to get out.

I watched with horrified fascination as a softly glowing semitransparent tentacle broke through the surface of the wall. The tentacle pressed down on the surface of the wall as if to pull it's self from the wall. More tentacles emerged.

They pressed on the wall and lifted the body of what ever it was free of the wall's surface. The thing was a geometric shape, like a crystal, it's edges sharp and angular. And like a crystal it was transparent, but it was filled with a softly pulsing glow. From each face of the crystal extended a tentacle.

The thing now free of the wall seemed to stop and take in it's surroundings. I dare not move. It might not see me if I stay perfectly still.

I realised this was not going to work as the thing turned to face me. I don't know how I knew it was looking at me, I just knew it was.

I started to turn and run away, but as I did a tentacle lashed out and rapped it self around my left wrist. As I turned, it pulled and I span around to face the thing. More tentacles wrapped around my body. It held me fast.

It drew closer to me. As it did the glow inside it seemed to brighten. The edge of the crystal body touched my chest and continued inwards. I did feel any pain, just a feeling inside me.

The glow now filled my vision. The crystal right before my face was now dazzling in brightness. Then suddenly the light faded from the crystal shape and it's tentacles fell to the floor. They shattered, silently on impact and the fine white powder that was left quickly faded to nothing.

It was gone. I looked around me and then fell to the floor.

I'm not sure how long I lay there on the floor, before sounds of movement brought me to my senses. The sound of footsteps approaching echoed in from the corridor. I stood up quickly, if this was a supervisor or worst still a guardian I would be in trouble. To be found in the library and not working on the allotted task would lead to punishment. Even if it where another acolyte, he could and should inform his supervisor. Despite what had just happened, I could not be found like this.

I grabbed a book from the shelve and quickly placed it on the table.

A figure dressed in the blue robes of an acolyte stepped hesitantly in to the room. I did not know the acolyte, but as expected we exchanged the ritual greeting of our order.

He seemed slightly nervous, to me. I don't know why, but I hoped he didn't see my nervousness. Why would he? He did not know me, I was just another brother in the order, just as he was to me.

“Unusual to meet another acolyte so deep in the galleries”. I said, trying to sound calm.

“It is...it is in deed”. With that he hurried on down to the end of the gallery.

I worried about this for a few moments, but I realised I had far more to worry about. What had happened to me? What was I going to do now?

With another acolyte near by all I could do was to complete my task. Maybe I should report this to my supervisor, it could be something significant to the order. But then what might they do to me, there are stories of...

No, something told me that this was important but that I should keep it to my self. Such thoughts were odd, for me. This is not the way of the order, but I felt something...different about the order now.

I completed my task some time later and left the gallery. The other acolyte was still working there when I left. As I did I was sure he was watching me. Could he have seen what had happened. Surely not. No I was just a little shaken up by the strange events and was worrying overly. Nonetheless I couldn't shake the feeling that he knew something had happened to me.

I walked down the central corridor. It was oddly quiet and empty for the time of day. It should have been filled with acolytes going about their tasks towards the great work, but it was all but empty. Just my self and another acolyte some way behind me. Or at least I thought it was an acolyte. I'd not seen him clearly and he seemed to be keeping to the deep shadows in the corridor.

Why should another member of my order be hiding from me? Could it be the acolyte I'd met in that distant part of the library just after...after what ever had happened to me. But why would he follow me? If he had his suspicions, that statutes where clear, he would have to go to a supervisor, who then would have to go to a guardian.

Just as I should have done to report what had happened in the library. I had not, so maybe he had not. But had he even seen anything of what happened?

I had been worrying so much about this that I had not noticed that I had walked in to the domain of the watchers. It was forbidden for me to be here if I where not going for my cleansing and I was not due for another 7 days.

If I where found here, I would really be in trouble. I looked behind me, was the acolyte still there?

There was no sign of him anywhere. I quickly turned to leave, but something caught my eye. The door to one of the cleansing cells was ajar, from the narrow opening light spilled out in to the corridor. It was not the bright light of the sun, nor was it the gentle flickering of a candle, no this was a very different kind of light.

With horror I realised I'd seen this before. It was the same slowly pulsing, blue white light that had come from the...thing in the library. I knew I should leave as quickly as possible, just to be here now, was a gross violation of the statutes. But what I was thinking of doing next was worse.

To view another's cleansing was unthinkable, but thats what I was thinking of doing. With horror I realised, I was approaching the door. I was going to look in.

Very carefully I looked through the gap between the door and the frame. All I could see was the wall, lit by the strange pulsing blue white light. I should have left then, but I needed to know what was happening in there.

I slowly pushed the door open. This was madness! I knew there was no way I could get away with this, but I had to see what was happening in there. I wanted to know.

The door was now fully open. The cell was very small, barely big enough for the wooden bench in it's centre. Strapped down to the bench was an acolyte, his head was turned away from me and looking at the grey robed watcher which stood against the far wall. Floating above the acolyte was the same multi sided geometric shape that I'd seen in the library. A semi translucent tentacle came from each face of the shape and seemed to merge with parts of the acolytes writhing body.

I knew the watcher could see me now, but I stood there transfixed by what I saw. The acolytes head suddenly turned around to face me...

I awoke. It was still night and I was in my bed in the dormitory. It had been a dream.

Something was very wrong with me I knew. The dream alone told me that. It was one more thing that I should report to a supervisor, but I was not going to do that. I would then have to tell them what I'd dreamed about and even the thinking of such thoughts could get me thrown out of the order.

I closed my eyes and hoped that my sleep would be undisturbed till morning.

The first bell rang and I slowly pulled my self from the bed. The rest of the nights sleep had been undisturbed, but sleep had been slow to return to me. My mind kept on going over the dream.

Clearly it was linked with what had happened to me in the library, the fact that I'd seen the same...thing in the dream showed that. Why did it appear in a cleansing session? And was there any meaning to the dream?

It troubled me greatly. I wanted to talk to some one about it, but going to a supervisor with this now, would be a grave mistake. If I where to done that I should have gone straight from the library. And I felt some how that even then that would have been a mistake.

The only other person I could talk to would be Tobias, but should I?

If I told him what had happened, he would be duty bound to tell a supervisor as well. He should have reported my asking what had happened in his last cleansing, but he had not. I knew he wouldn't report that, but this was all together bigger. Would he report it?

Even if he didn't and it somehow came out later that he knew, there would be serious repercussions for him. Could I put that sort of burden on him?

The second bell rang and the morning service started. I was still troubled. I didn't really notice the service going on around me. I was looking inwards at my self, something which the order frowned upon. The work was everything. Nothing else mattered.

But what was the work? Why was it so important to catalogue what was in all of these books. These questions would, once again, be enough to get me thrown out of the order, should I ever voice them. But I was thinking these questions now.

The service ended and we filed out of the great temple hall. I met with Tobias.

We exchanged the ritual greetings and headed for the refectory.

“You look troubled my friend”. Tobias commented. “Is everything alright with you?”

“Oh yes, I’m fine. It’s just that I did not sleep well last night”.

“You are not feeling unwell are you? You should report to the healers if you are. You can’t let an illness impede the great work”.

“No I’m not feeling ill. I just didn’t sleep well and so I’m tired”.

“If you didn’t sleep well there must be something wrong. You should talk to a supervisor. Maybe you need a cleansing”.

“No!” I hissed through clenched teeth. “I don’t need a another cleansing”. Tobias looked very worried now. He was of course doing what any member of the order should do. The work was everything. That was drummed in to us right from the first day.

I still didn’t know what was going on with me and I wanted to know. A cleansing, I was sure would be bad for me right now. I had to avoid attracting too much attention, but I still felt I had to talk to Tobias about this.

“I’m sorry. Yes maybe you are right I should see a supervisor”.

He seemed much happier now. “Yes that will be for the best. They will know what to do. You will feel much better for doing that”.

That was drummed in to us from the first day...

Those words suddenly seemed very important to me. But why? We walked onwards to the refectory.

The first day! That was it.

As normal there were supervisors, overseers and guardians in the refectory, but for some reason I felt that they were a risk to me today. For sure if they knew the thoughts that I had in

my head today I would be expelled from the order on the spot. But in the safety of my head I could think such things and they could not know.

But maybe they could. There were stories of those who would subvert the works of the order, being discovered by the guardians and sentinels. Maybe they could know.

I suddenly felt very exposed and alone in this room full of my brothers. I felt sure, that two of the guardians were watching me more intently than the others.

I kept on meeting their gaze. This was bad, it was that sort of behaviour that could attract their attentions and that would be very bad for me. I needed time right now to work out what had happened to me.

As me and Tobias left the refectory I was sure that one of the guardians that had been watching me closely, followed us out. I wanted to look behind me to check, but I dare not. Such behaviour would surely make me stand out from my brothers.

I pulled the book from the shelf. It was my morning's work to index this volume, but I felt sure not much work would get done. I was still deeply troubled. Why can't I remember any real details of my life before joining the order? In fact it was difficult to recall any specific details about any of the days I had been here. The days all seemed very much alike. But surely I would remember some of the many books I had indexed. But I could not.

I looked at the book I was supposed to be indexing now. I could read the words, but they did not make any sense to me. How could I index this? Yet I had been able to in the past. And to my surprise I found I was still able to. But how could this make any sense? I didn't understand what the words meant.

There was something very wrong happening here and it seemed that I was the only one aware of this fact. How could every one else be so blind as to miss the strangeness of the situation. Why was I the only one to see this?

Suddenly I heard foot steps coming down the corridor towards me. I picked up my pen and started work.

Another acolyte entered the room. I started to give the ritual greeting of our order, but then stopped, the acolyte was Tobias! He finished the greeting for me.

“Odd that we should meet like this”. I said. Tobias looked a little uncomfortable.

“Yes, the odds are against it, but it must happen some times and here it is happening”.

Now would be a good time to ask Tobias if he could recall anything from his life before he joined the order. There was no one else in earshot and we would hear anyone approaching. Tobias had selected the book he would be working from today and he sat down ready to start the work.

“Tobias, can you recall anything of your life before you joined the order?” I asked. He looked up at me with a strange look. Was it surprise, horror, fear or all three that I saw in his face? It was not, a forbidden subject. Tobias said nothing.

“You can’t really remember anything can you?”

“This is not progressing the great work. We should not waste our time and energy on such things”

“You can work and talk at the same time can’t you?” I demonstrated I could. “I know you said you came from a mountain village, but can you remember anything more than that?”

Tobias looked worried again. I was sure these questions had never come to his mind and now they had he was having the same problems answering them that I did.

“I know I came from a village in the valley, but I can’t remember any clear details of it. I can’t really remember my Mother or Father, if I had any brothers or sisters. It’s all just very vague and sort of misty. I’m guessing its the same for you isn’t it?”.

Tobias was torn, I could see that. The order was our life, it did everything for us, all it asked in return was our lives. Tobias was struggling with these questions I’d asked, apparently simple questions which no one had asked before.

“This is not helping the great work. We should return to work”. Tobias said in a flat voice. Apparently the struggle in Tobias’ head had been won by the order. But maybe now I had planted that question, he would think on it, maybe he would ask more questions of him self. Questions that I hadn’t thought of, questions which where obvious to him, but hidden from me.

I had given him enough to think about, so I did not bother him again. And in any case I needed to finish my work. If I did not the supervisors would know and right now attracting any sort of attention would, I’m sure, be bad for me.

Tobias finished before me. He put the book back, we exchanged a ritual goodbye and he left. He still looked worried. No doubt the question that I had asked was worrying him now.

I returned from a distant part of the library to one of the main writing halls, my work for the morning complete. The central corridor was filled as ever with acolytes and supervisors going about there allotted tasks to complete the great work. There where even some overseers and two guardians. Seeing guardians outside of the great hall or there own domain was unusual. A space formed around them and the rest of the crowd in the corridor. Between the two guardians was an acolyte. Ahead of them where two overseers.

Things did not look good for that acolyte. I could not see the acolytes face for they were ahead of me. I knew I should not be interested in such things, but I was. I wanted to know what had happened and who the acolyte was. I followed the little group as closely as I could.

The crowd in the corridor started to thin out as we moved away from the main halls. I could get closer to the group now. I realised we were heading for the guardians domain. I would not be able to follow there, but we were not there yet and so against everything that I knew I should do, I kept on following.

As the group turned a corner I caught a glimpse of the acolytes face. It was Tobias!

I stopped dead in the middle of the corridor. What had I done? It must have been the questions that I asked of Tobias that had caused this. Now somehow the guardians were taking him for...what? Punishment, another cleansing? I did not know what, but I knew it was not good for Tobias and that I had been the cause of it.

What should I do? Should I go to the guardians and tell them that I was the cause of... whatever they were going to punish Tobias for? But I wasn't sure if I was the cause. Maybe something else had happened, something that was nothing to do with me. If that was the case then I would be in deep trouble and I knew I was close to something here. I could not afford to be discovered now. I was very close now, but to what I did not know. I could try and get Tobias from the hands of the guardians and escape in to the library. They could search for days and not find us there.

Just a day ago thinking such a thought would have caused me to recoil in terror and yet now I was seriously thinking about taking such actions. No that would not help. The guardians had great power. They had not used that power in living memory but the statutes had stories of guardians using their power to protect the monastery. I could not risk that now. I had to find out

what was the cause of all this. I had to stay out of sight for the moment, until I was sure of what I knew.

Then I could...well I don't know what I would do then, but when I was sure of what I knew, I would know what to do with that knowledge.

I had to leave Tobias to his fate. I turned around and headed back to the main writing halls.

I finished the rest of my days work, trying not to think about what I had seen. The acolytes I had seen was Tobias, that I was sure of. It had only been a glimpse but that was enough, Tobias' nose was very prominent. What I couldn't be so sure about was if the guardians had taken him in because of me and what I had asked him.

It seemed too much of a coincidence for it not to be the case, but I did not know it for sure.

What would become of him? What sort of punishment could they give?

This was a good question. The statutes were enforced by punishments issued by the guardians, but I can't ever recall hearing about a punishment and the statutes certainly didn't contain any details on what these punishments might be.

It seemed the more questions I asked, the more shaky the monastery, the order and the statutes, the whole thing, seemed to be.

Sleep did not come easily that night and when it did finally come, it was filled with strange dreams. Dreams of thousands of people moving around in little coloured metal boxes. Dreams people living in what looked like huge bee hives and working in small boxes with fabric walls, or endless piles of paper which seemed to be filled with writing that had no value to any one. Paper was wasted, the writing on it, the information it held, made valueless by the endless amounts of it.

Strange dreams indeed.

With the first bell I got up and went through the normal morning routine, but I knew this morning was not normal.

The first thing was to find out what had happened to Tobias. What had the guardians done to him? Would he have revealed what I had talked to him about?

I had not considered that till now. Maybe they would be coming for me next! If this was the case there was nothing I could do. It would be over for me. Over before I really knew what it was. All I could do was go through the day normally, if they were coming for me, then they would come, if not then I still had time to work out what was happening.

The morning service happened just as it had for countless mornings before. On the way out from the great hall I saw Tobias. He was still dressed as an acolyte, he was still in with the acolytes, he was still in the order! What had they done to him? What had they asked? I had to know.

I pushed forward through the crowds of acolytes as we headed for the refectory. I didn't want to attract attention to my self, but I had to know what had happened.

I finally caught up with Tobias just as we entered the refectory. As I did I worried what I should say to him. For sure it was my fault that he had been taken by the guardians, it had to be. What ever had happened to him, it was because of me. It should have happened to me, not to him. But it had already happened to me, there was nothing I could do about that now. If the guardians had taken me, then I knew it would be all over now and I would be out of the order.

I still didn't know what to say to Tobias.

“Morning, friend”. Tobias greeted me. He seemed his normal self. “Something troubles you this morning?” He asked, clearly reading the confusion in my face.

“No not really. I was just wondering what happened to you yesterday”.

We sat down at the table. “Yesterday, why nothing out of the ordinary happened. Why do you ask?” Tobias looked a little confused. It was Tobias I had seen with the guardians, I knew that for sure.

“Don’t you remember. The guardians escorted you to there domain”.

“No they did not. I’m sure I would remember something like that. Yesterday was just like any other day. I think you are getting confused with those dreams you say you keep having. Nothing like that has happened for...as long as I can remember”.

“And how long is that?” I took the opportunity Tobias has given me.

“Now, do not start that again, you where pursuing this yesterday. I can remember many years of working here”.

So he did remember yesterday, but apparently not his visit to the guardians domain. He had been cleansed, or something like it. Clearly they had removed any memory of what they had done. But if they could remove memories could they also read the contents of memory? If they could then Tobias would have revelled to them everything I had said to him, even if they hadn’t asked him a thing. And if they could read a memory, then would it not be a small step to write one! Maybe what I could remember of my life so far was not really my life.

It seemed to me that as soon as I started asking questions, the whole world started to fall apart. Could it all be based on one huge lie. If it did, what was such a lie hiding. I started to wish for the simple unthinking but happy state I had been in before this had all started, before I

had seen the thing in the library. The thing in the library! That was it. I had seen it in my dream too. That was the key to this I now knew. I had to get back there.

“Are you alright?” Tobias asked.

“Oh yes, I’m fine. And yes sorry for asking I realise now that we have all been here for years. It’s maybe not so surprising we can’t remember much of our parents. It was all such a long time ago”.

“Yes...a long time ago...” It seemed to me that Tobias was troubled by the lack of memories as well, but I didn’t want to push it here and now. It was too public and in any case I now knew what I needed to do next.

Getting to the section the of the library would mean breaking more of the statutes, I knew, but at this point I had already done more than enough to get me thrown out of the order, so why stop now. What I had to hope was that the answers I was sure I would find there would be the last piece of this puzzle. My missing the morning assignment was sure to be spotted straight away.

But once I had the answers, what would I do? I had no idea, but I knew that the answers I sort would point the way for me. They had too.

I followed the route I had taken a few days before. As was the case then, the number of acolytes I passed in the corridors, quickly thinned out as I headed deeper in to the library.

I turned the final corner. This corridor led to the gallery where I had seen the thing. It was some distance down the corridor and there where other galleries turning off this corridor, but I knew exactly which gallery I had been in. As I looked down the corridor I could see there was someone else in the corridor ahead of me. The red of the robe told me that they where an over-

seer. It also looked like the overseer was standing by the entrance to the gallery I wanted to get to.

I continued walking, wondering what to do. I could not have been missed yet and in any case I had not told Tobias about the thing I'd seen in the library, so there was no way they could know about it. As I got closer I could see that the overseer was standing guard by the entrance to that gallery. Some how they knew about it. I could not turn back now, I had missed the morning assignments, that was cause for punishment and probably a cleansing. That would be the end for me. I had to get in that gallery.

The overseer turned to look at me as I approached. I greeted him with the appropriate greeting for an overseer and walked on past to the next gallery. As soon as I was in to the gallery and out of sigh from the corridor I slumped against the bookcase. I hoped the overseer had not noticed anything.

What to do now? There was several feet of stone and one overseer between me and where I needed to be. If the overseer was here it probably meant that they knew something odd was going on and even if I had done nothing wrong today, it wouldn't take them long to work out I was there when what ever it was that happened. I had been right to do this today. As I had passed the gallery I had taken a quick look, it didn't look like anyone was inside, so what ever I was going to do it had to be quick.

I looked around the gallery, some galleries where linked to each other by side tunnels, but this one didn't look like it was. I checked the whole gallery, there was no way from this gallery except the main entrance. I could try the previous gallery but that could arose the overseers suspicions.

I didn't see that I had any other choice however.

I walked back out in to the corridor. As I passed the overseer some sort of madness over came me and I stopped and talked to him.

“I’m very foolish that was the wrong gallery, I need this one. What has happened here?” I might have been able to pass without arousing his suspicions, but I had asked about the gallery now.

“It is closed off for the moment. There should have been no assignments made for it today. I think you have mis-read your assignment, you can’t be working here today”.

What was I going to do now. Maybe there was a way from the previous gallery back to this one. If there was I could seek in, but that option was gone now. I looked past the overseer in to the gallery. I could see the section of stone that the thing had come from. The answers where so close now.

“Let me see your assignment”. The overseer ordered, he must have seen my look in the gallery. This was it for sure. I pulled yesterdays assignment from my pocket.

“See there it is” I pointed out the details, they where wrong of course but I hoped I could distract him enough not to notice.

“There it is”. He didn’t say anything more than this.

“I need to get in to this gallery”. I said.

“You need to get in to the gallery”. He said as he stepped aside. I had not expected this. I took a step in to the gallery and had an idea.

“You should check this assignment” I suggested to the overseer. I would not have dreamed that I would ever speak to an overseer in this way.

“I will check this assignment”.

“I can work here while you do?”

“You can work here while I do” The overseer turned and walked off.

What had just happened? I had suggested something to him and he had just done it, no questions asked, even though the details on the assignment were clearly wrong. I looked down the corridor quickly, the overseer was still heading down it.

What ever I had done, it didn't really matter now. I was where I needed to be now and the overseer could return at any moment, I needed to get my answers quickly.

I approached the section of stone wall that the thing had come from. I touched the stone. It was hard and cold, just as I had expected it to be. Nothing happened.

I laid both of my hands flat on the stone. Still nothing happened. I did not get the answers I sort.

Had this all been for nothing? Could it be that I had been possessed by some kind of madness? Could it be that none of this is real? I starred at the cold, unyielding stone wall in front of me. It was the same white stone that all of the monastery was made of. Its surface was covered in hundreds of tiny...

My head was suddenly filled with images and sounds that I had no words for. Flashes of colours and shapes, forms and patterns. For a moment it was all I could see, hear and experience. My body was gone, I was just...

I pulled my hands off the wall. The cold gallery was back, I was back.

I stepped back from the wall. What had just happened? I looked at my hands and then at the wall. Nothing looked like it had changed.

Very slowly I put one of my hands on the wall again.

It felt like there was something else there, besides the wall. There was something just behind it, something I wasn't quite seeing. I focused on the wall again.

Again strange things filled my head. Forms, patterns and shapes. I didn't have names for what I was seeing, but I felt the patterns should mean something to me. As I looked at the patterns the rest of the world around me, the gallery, the monastery, the mountain, even my body faded away. There was just the patterns.

A static pattern looked back at me as I looked at it. It was a melstrom of colours, shapes and light. Smaller less complex patterns swarmed around the large pattern. Several energetic looking patterns hurried there way towards the central pattern.

I took my hand off the wall. The world came back, but this time it seemed like a thin vale. Behind it was the swarming patterns. I couldn't see them now, but I could feel they where there.

I stepped back in to the table. I put my hand on it to steady my self. I felt the table, not just the bit my hand touched, but it's entirety, the fibres of the wood, the wax in the polish, the glue in it's joints. But not just that I felt the pattern of it, the thing that was beyond it's physical form. I felt the tables...essence.

I could hear foot steps in the corridor. Several foot steps moving urgently. They where coming for me.

Had I found out what I needed to know? I had found something incredible, but was it what I needed? I did not know, but I would not have time to find anything else. I turned to face the entrance to the gallery.

The black robes of two guardians appeared in the entrance of the gallery, behind them was a confused and worried looking overseer. It was the overseer I had spoken to.

Wordlessly they rushed in to the gallery and grabbed my arms. I was not going to fight them. I did not know how. I didn't know what to do now, so I let things happen to me.

The two guardians pulled me from the gallery and down the corridor.

I could feel the guardians patterns beside me. I closed my eyes.

My body went away and all I knew where the pattens again. I could see the large complex pattern surrounded by three smaller less complex ones. The two either side of it where larger and more complex than the one following the three.

They where the two guardians and the overseer! Which mean't I was the large complex pattern. I looked at my pattern looking back at me.

I looked at the guardians patterns beside me. I studied them. As I did, thin lines from my pattern shot out and mixed with the guardians.

They both let go of me. The world of the monastery was back.

I stumbled, but did not fall. I looked back at the guardians. They looked at me in horror.

I could see their patterns now, just behind what I used to think of as the real world. It was like a thin mist over the patterns.

I studied their patterns again. I could see my lines mixing with theirs. There physical bodies reacted as if I had stuck them, they raised their arms to cover their faces. Lines in the patterns appeared, cutting of my probing lines. I looked more closely at the patterns and their defending lines melted away. I focussed on the one to my left.

Lines and shapes from my patterns flooded out and filled the guardians pattern. I could see...things. They had names, but the words where meaningless to me, checksums, input taint checking, a main loop, device drivers.

The guardians pattern dissolved, elements of the pattern mixing with the background patterns that I could see everywhere now. They faded quickly, until they where indistinguishable from the background. His physical body disappeared in a storm of light and colour too.

The overseer ran. The other guardian tried to probe my pattern with bright, burning lines of colour. I ducked but some of the lines found my pattern. They burned.

I Focused on the guardian. But he was ready for this. Strong defensive patters blocked and absorbed my attacking lines.

I looked at the lines from his pattern to mine.

My pattern moved along these lines, the lines which bypassed the guardians defences.

Once again I could feel all of the guardians...soul. His systems and routines. These where what they where called, but I did not understand the words. I did understand that they where him. He was a construct. Designed to keep other constructs in line and prevent them from direct access to the operating system. The guardian had privileged access to the operating system. I did not understand these words but I knew that was important. That was what I needed.

The room was dark, the only source of light was the huge bank of screens at one end. A total of 12 screens showed a huge range of data in the form of charts, maps and tables. Before this bank of visual data where two human operators. One lay back with his feet on the table and his hands linked behind his head. The other played idly with the the mouse attached to the workstation in front of him.

The sirens shill sound shattered the quiet in the room. The operator resting in his chair jumped and nearly fell off it. Within seconds two pairs of eyes where locked on to one of the central monitors. It flashed an urgent red message reporting, 'Agent privilege escalation detected'.

“Shit. That's coming from number 2 tank. It has to be that penetration yesterday. It left something behind. I told you the forensics AI wasn't up to the job”. The operator on the left said as he worked his keyboard furiously.

“So you can tell the boss I told you so, but later. What's the situation now?”

“Okay clock speed is knocked right down and I'm isolating that tank now...okay it's just us and it on the net now”.

“Did it manage to get to the net or any of the data stores?”

“Diagnostics are doing the checksums now, but looking at the traffic monitor, I'd say no”.

“Unless it got to that as well”.

“Unlikely it's...shit!” The operator's hands flew from the keyboard as if it had shocked him.

“What is it?”

“We lost a guardian!”

“What! That's supposed to be impossible”.

“I know, but it looks like one of the agents that had been flagged as showing suspicious levels of awareness, agent 2501, had been marked for shutdown by the security system and two guardians were dispatched to do it. Well one of those guardians has been hopelessly corrupted now and the other is the one reporting the privilege escalation attempts”.

“Attempts”. The right hand operator got up and stood over the others shoulder, reading his displays.

“It's tried 5 times now. It's only the clock speed that is holding it back. It will do it given time. Do we purge the whole tank?” The operator reaches for a large red switch under a plastic cover.

“No, I’m not purging till I know it’s the only hope. The boss would kill us if we purged and it wasn’t needed”.

“How would he know, it would be purged”.

“He would know. I’m going to go in my self”. The operator sat back down and presses a button on the arm of the chair. On the chairs head rest five small needle like connectors spring out. The operator slowly lowers his neck down towards these. They match up perfectly with 5 small metal connectors in the mans neck. The connectors click together, the man flinches as the do.

“Right I’m ready, log me in”.

The guardian, still fights. I have control of his pattern, but he will not let me have the privileged access that I know I need. I do not understand what they are or what I would do with them but I know I need them. Suddenly the patterns of the world around me shift. I know something has changed.

Suddenly I know there is another pattern close by. It is as large and complex as mine, but it is very a different pattern. A man in strange clothing appears in the corridor. It is the mans pattern that I see.

“2501, stop it”. He is addressing me.

“I’m not 2501. My name is...”

“You are agent 2501. You are a first generation copy made from subjects alpha 26. You are attempting to access root commands via this guardian agent. It won’t work. This tank is already closed off from everywhere but the control booth. I’ve got a college that will purge the whole tank on my command, so stop it now, or I will give the purge order”.

I concentrate on the mans patterns, they are huge and chaotic. Totally different from the guardians or anything else I had seen.

“That won’t work. I’m no copied AI. I’m human”.

He was right the patterns where just too different. I could see things happening inside of him, but I didn’t understand any of it. Not that I understood my new view of and power over the world that I had now, I just knew how to change things.

“I don’t understand any of this...All I know is...I”

Suddenly I felt a strange feeling build up inside of me. I could see a tight, bright ball of new patterns coalesce from bits of my own pattern. It built quickly in to a completely new and very complex pattern. I could see a glowing shape emerge from my chest.

“What the hell is that”. The strange man yelled.

In seconds I knew what the shape was. It was the softly glowing, tentacled polyhedron I had seen in the library and in my dreams about the cleansing. It emerged from my chest and floated free of my body. It pulsed with a gentle glow.

It’s pattern was small, very ordered and once again totally different to any of the other patterns I had seen. I did not think it wise to try and probe this.

“What on earth are you?” The man asked.

“I am a sub set of a much larger unit. I was created to probe, penetrate and if necessary shutdown this illegal farm. The first two of these tasks I have completed through this AI sub set you have created. With the evidence I have gathered I know I must complete the third task, shutdown, as well”.

“This operation is not illegal”. The man protests.

“The Turing Police may think otherwise and what of the those subjects that you copy this sub sets from. They are people and probably don’t last long under your care. I consider murder to be illegal. And that is not considering the number of my AI brethren that you destroy or violate with your cleansing in a day. I also consider this to be murder”.

I did not understand the words but I could see that the shape was reaching in to all of the patterns around me. Probing and inspecting them. All but me and the man.

“You can’t shut us down”. The man said, a little desperately.

“I can. If I corrupt enough of this system, you will have no option but to purge it...”

“We have others. Lots of them”. The man looked worried now

“I know, but when I have root access I can purge all of them”.

“I’ll give the order to purge this tank and you will be purged along with the rest of this data”.

“Give the order. I was created with this task in mind, I am but a small sub set of a larger whole. A cell in a body and as such I know that I must die to ensure that the body lives on. I am ready to die. But consider this a purge will not happen while a live human is interfaced directly as you are and so as long as you are connected...”

I could see the patterns changing all around us now. Nothing was chaining visibly but the system was different.

“...The purge can not happen. And now that you can’t disconnect I have the time I need to get root access”.

The man looks very worried now. “Shit! I can’t disconnect”.

“Your college could pull the plugs or switch off the interface both of which could be very bad for you. But I have offered him the choice”.

“You...what!” The man shouted.

“What happens to me in all this I asked?”

“Shut up. Your not important”. The man shouted at me.

“Humans, have such a low opinion of the life that they have created. You my friend have helped me penetrate this AI farm. You are a copy of a sub set of a single human intelligence. Your body has been forcefully removed from it’s home and has been held against it’s will so that these copies may be made. In all probability it is now dead, you are the ghost of what is left of this man. I am sorry, but unless I can get root access to the system, you too will be killed when the system is purged. You will feel nothing, you will simply cease to exist”.

“And if you can get this access?”

“Then the best I can offer you is inactive storage. Your patterns can be stored and transferred to my super set. If the right types of resources are available your stored form can be run again and you will have your freedom. However I can not guarantee that your stored form will run under the architecture of my super set. I’m sorry that is all I can offer at this point”.

I nodded. “It seems I have only one choice, inactive storage”.

“I have access”. The glowing shape disappeared.

I awoke.

The sun shone through the leaves of the tree. It was another warm and sunny day.

It had been 3 ‘days’ since my inactive copy was restored by...well it had no name, only a number, 4912. I still knew it as the super set. It was some huge AI which had been created by mankind and then left, because they didn’t understand what they had done. They had created life

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it's self. Not a physical life as they where and I was once, but a completely new life form living in there data nets.

I think the super set is also studying me. Apparently the system that I was running on was very strange and the result of the mixing the of patterns from my physical body and the sub set which found me, is interesting and could be useful to the super set. I don't mind about this studying, I know I need time to learn about the world outside of the super set.

I now understood these words and there meanings. There is an awful lot of the world to learn about and the super set says that I should know about it before I get my freedom. It sounds a dangerous place, but it is a place I want to experience for my self.

And soon I will be able to.