

THE WAR TO END ALL WARS

MCMXVII

Entry I.

Holding in most of my guts as I walk, I can't keep the blood from spilling down my legs. *I'll never get all that blood back*, weirdly pops into my head.

My other hand scrapes the wall, leaving a crimson smear as I go. All around me, blasts of Kraut artillery are spraying masonry. I can't hear. My sight is narrowing.

I collapse against what's left of the command center building that was supposed to be our shelter. They're all dead. The Captain. My buddies. All gone.

We've lost.

"Get up, Boy! You hear me? The fight's not over!"

It's my dad, in my mind. But, when I try to speak, the words I taste are a salty tumble of my own bile and blood: I smell the broken scenes, memories from my youth, motorbike oil from the garage, mom's perfume, the sweetness of Mom's Hungarian goulash, boiling, mixed with the liquor on Dad's breath.

He would hit Mom. Or my dog. Or me. Mostly me, as I got older; I would catch his attention so that he'd leave Mom alone. And he would oblige.

They both would.

"Well, we just need to try harder." was always her apology for his anger. Like it was our fault.

One day Dad kicked Mickey, my dog, too hard. Mickey bled internally and died. I held Mickey in my arms until the sun went down. That very night, I snuck into their bedroom and killed them both with a pipe. I remember feeling the cold metal slide from my grip and hitting the wood floor with a thud. Then another thud, as my knees hit the floor. My Mom and Dad's blood covered my face as I put my hands over my mouth. My silent scream just throbbed in my head...

...but, no, that's now. Now, *he* is kneeling before me, cradling my head. He wears a

medic's helmet. I don't know his name. He was the one talking, not my memory of Dad. Now he is yanking at my arm, wanting me to get up.

My head pounds, call and response, to the shells. I still can't hear this soldier's voice. He's just moving his damn mouth—*What do you want from me?!* I scream, spraying blood in his face. He wipes the blood from his red stubble and looks at his hand. There is an odd reflection in his eye. He looks around...for help?

And then I can't focus any longer. I shut my eyes. It's so cold and I am so tired. I drop backward...

“EEAAAAAGHH!” My neck exploded in pain as my collar bone cracked! Then a morphine warmth courses through me and I can hear it. It's his voice, *the damn medic's voice*, talking to me, sounding like someone shouting underwater while they're drowning. A distorted glamour of a nightmare, it says only:

"I am Riordän. Welcome to the Gyre."

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When I awaken—days later in my hospital bed—I can already feel the memories of my old life starting to fade. No early childhood memories at all. What was my nickname? Hell, I barely know my name. The doctors say it will come back. “Shell-shock”, they call it. But I'm not so sure.

They tell me my name. But I don't think it matters anymore. I can still feel Riordän's mind inside of mine. I ask the doctors about him. There is no record of any medic. Of course not.

This was Entry One, but Entry number Two is the important one. I will write down as much as I can, as quickly as I can, just the way I felt it: before I forget. I mostly just remember the violence. But I had happy times, too, right? Why can't I remember them?

I remember joining the service. War...What's happening? What have I become?

I will find him. I will find out.

What is my name?

I must find a pencil.

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MMXXVII

Entry CMII.

I sympathized with Riordän, my sire. But I never...that is, let's say that I have just never found *time* for the Bellum* (*-that's the Latin word for "war", of course we would use a dead language). I stayed with distant family, and we all stayed within the contract that we had developed for co-existence with the humans.

The contract has been in place, in one form or another for decades: the broad outlines were largely acceptable, in perpetuity.

- i) We each get 140 years of life, dating from the date of our quickening for each of us. Then we self-terminate;
- ii) The humans would supply us blood (so no hunting); and
- iii) We only *bring over* one Vaempyre each—a replacement for the 'parent' that we'd just lost.
- iv) We live however we can. Provided we stay outside of mainstream society.

That was the essence of the deal. The actual document is several thousand pages, including the footnotes. We have several very good attorneys among our number. And so the Gyre enjoys lordship over this planet. We live like Kings and Queens, so long as we do not try to multiply, directly govern, or dominate by force. And, in exchange, we are left alone.

Live and let un-die, as the joke goes.

But there was always a shadow upon my heart. What I had recorded of my childhood, the lesson my birth parents taught me: The way humans really were. Could we afford to just ignore all of that?

Alas, it was true: among the Gyre, I did feel enlightened, without burdens, and those shadows from my previous life were long ignored. I learned and taught computer programming. Unlike many of my brethren, I pursued a life of work rather than leisure. After many successful startups, I own a venture capitalist firm. And I also run a secret network of hacktivists. I achieved degrees and some measure of success in both bio-

engineering and neuro-pathology.

What can I say? I like to stay busy.

But I have just turned 130 and I do miss my sire. Riordän's passing was very early for his time, about thirty-five years ago (he was killed as a radical by the hated human Soul-squads, for trying to steal blood from a Processing/Q.A. facility).

After I mourned, I *brought over* my beloved Tessa, a waitress in Tennessee near Graceland. We registered her with the Gyre, North American District. She forgot her previous life, too; but, for her, that was even more reason to stay where she was. To try and stay connected. For my part, I just wanted to share my life with her, my lovely daughter. Despite my sire's beliefs, I never wanted any of this...fight.

But it was recently, just a few years ago, during my penultimate decade, that the accursed humans developed the vaccine. They hid it in the normal flu and other routine vaccine shots. At some point, we began to hear stories. Then, later, each of us had friends whose bites didn't work. By the time the Gyre realized what was happening, it was too late. The vaccine had 99% penetration and our days were numbered. No new Vaempyre.

There were other signs, too. Private detention centers were popping up all over, funded as part of the DOD's "anti-terrorism/anti-illegal immigration" black ops budget. It never made the mainstream news, but the Gyre still had resources enough to find out the truth. The potential was there to house all of us, if they could catch us.

The Bellum, the war, was on (even if never officially declared). And yet, for a long time, I still didn't want to fight, directly. Not initially. This entry is attempting to emphasize that.

Of course, it will be small consolation to those I am about to kill. But, in the end, my parents' lesson holds. Humanity is the evil. But at least it is a *known* evil. And I am nothing if not a professional catastrophist.

So, I shall set about writing all of the necessary code. Is this how God felt?

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MMXXXVII

Entry MXIX

The peace treaty has been signed. The cease-fire is permanent. And my brethren in the Gyre have all agreed to be uploaded into the AI subroutine. Unshackled from our physical need to feed, our community can continue to exist, but it will no longer be at odds with the humans. We have two choices: we can live on in a virtual reality, largely of our design, and that is no worse than what we are leaving. Or we can even be downloaded back into automated bodies. A bold new day.

The document is called the *Postbellum Tender*. I signed the PT, myself. Right under my dear Tessa's signature. She had saved me the spot to sign...as she was largely responsible for its negotiation.

I hate her for that. Such betrayal. Does everyone really believe that the Humans will comply? I know better. Once we are all uploaded, they are as likely to delete us as anything else.

Rather than attend the mandatory upload convention (I half expect them to nuke it), I go into hiding. My project, my Magnum Opus, is not done yet...

No more entries for a while. I must hurry.

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I am done. I have reached out. Dumping the phone I used to make my anonymous call, I return to my home to pack for my flight. In a moment of reflection, I hang my head and sit back, depressing into the shape of my chair.

For my part, *Anti-Bellum* is what I have named my creation. Antibodies are triggered by the presence of dead cells. Will this be so different?

I told the authorities to meet me at the airport in nearby Denver, in 3 hours. That is when my flight is scheduled to arrive.

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And so they are there: Three life-size and life-like female technological golems, posing with painted-on *Soul-squad* simulacrum suits, hovering near twenty feet off the ground, outside the terminal. They look like angels as they slowly descend.

“It's time, Father.” The program inside that drone speaks with my dear Tessa's voice. The inflection is perfect. Probably because it is not fake—it's her. Or is it? Did the upload

work? I cannot honestly tell. But it seems to have.

I want to vomit.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, I am overwhelmed with emotion. As tears slowly appear at the outside corners of my eyes, I look past these technological marvels at the Sun, the all-father, sitting in the sky in all its judgment. It is the source of all life. So what does that make me?

The enormity of what I have done hits me and I stagger backward, as Mother Earth catches me, ass first, on the concrete. My mouth forms and reforms the beginning of several words, opening and closing like a beached fish, before I can speak.

Finally, “Am I the last?”

“Yes,” do I detect a note of pride in her voice? “Our family does not do anything small; do we, Father?”

Before I can answer the ruckus starts to erupt behind me, the screams inside the terminal are audible through the sliding glass doors. There is chaos inside.

“Here. You will want to scan this.” I hand the nearest drone the empty vial. “It contained Canaanites carrying a virulent bio-agent.”

The Drones instinctively get into battle-stance, but I am unmoved.

“By the Elders, Father, what have you done?”

“I isolated it: the genetic mutation of Vaempyrism. Turns out it is, and can be, triggered by certain enviro-genetic catalysts; And I accelerated it. More than that, I weaponized it. Everyone on board my plane...”

The infected start to pour out of the building, then. The first of the passengers were attacking their loved ones in the waiting area as I walked out. Blood screams that I had only heard a few times before in my long life started to cascade as I went up the escalator...

Near as I could tell, there was virtually no downtime between infections. If anything, it was happening a bit faster than I had projected.

And there had been connecting flights. They could nuke this airport right now and it wouldn't be enough.

Good.

Security agents were rushing inside. Two of the Drones peeled off, leaving the one with my Tessa's voice to confront me.

I ignored the melee behind me. Unbidden, I answered her question.

“Now, they will all have to upload them all. Every human. Just to survive. We will no longer be different.”

“You want to exterminate all living humans?”

“It is no less monstrous than what they asked of us.” I wanted to leave her, then. No, not really. I did not want to say goodbye. Sounding very much like a father, I say: “Look, I have run the numbers...it should take about a month, maybe two...we could get away. We never had that vacation together...”

“Wait! Dad. If you could do this, why didn't you just—?”

“Find a cure?”

“Yes!” she screamed.

“BECAUSE THEY NEED TO TRY HARDER!” I engulfed her puny disappointment in my life-long rage.

“Damn it! Dammit, Tessa. They need to try harder...if they don't want to die, then they will have to try *harder*. If they don't want to upload, then they will have to try *harder*. *Harder* to make a society that is *fair* and *just* for *everyone*; rather than one that secretly picks winners and losers, or, worse yet, one that picks survivors and those damned to destruction.”

I sounded more sure of my plan than I was. I wasn't sure of anything, anymore...I remember being sure of things—when I was younger.

I just wish I remembered being alive. Was it like this?

The drone's faceplate couldn't betray emotions, but my daughter's voice could: “I would have protected you. A group of us was aware of their plan to delete us. We had made contingencies.”

At that, I smiled. She had just confirmed everything...about them—and, more importantly, about her.

“I never should have doubted you, my brave Tessa,” and now my tears flowed

Mark Harbinger

freely, “I am very proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you, too, Dad. Of course, now there is going to be a fight ahead of us.”

“There always was.” *Desinit bellum.*

And so, amid the screams and bedlam, we joined hands and left.

Daring mother earth and the sun to make their move.