

– Rudon’s Plane –

Everything I have ever known has existed within an 11 foot tall space. 50,540 people exist within my district, in a world cut off from the heat of the sun, and the soil of the ground. The form of this space exists as labyrinthine rooms and hallways that extend for miles and miles in each cardinal direction. The ceiling is impenetrable. Sheet-rock panels give way to some sort of metallic material that cannot be punctured, scratched, or dented. The ground however is easier to penetrate given the right tools, but it doesn’t matter much, all that is down there is endless soil and stone. Life isn’t terrible in this place, we have food, education, work and entertainment. Many people have families, relationships, parties, funerals, sports, love. But that’s not to say there aren’t problems.

I watched as a series of convoluted metal doors began to open. Each layer of door loudly separating one after the other. I noted the many ways they unlocked themselves, some opening by sliding to the right, some to the left, some from the ceiling, some from the floor, the display was almost silly. As soon as this was over an armed guard unlocked my handcuffs and I stood surrounded by the malice and confusion of all those I had once known.

“Rudon Bastille” The Judge began, “you have been found guilty for the unlawful killing of Mel Dogger. You have chosen your own punishment: exile by way of the Great Path. You are to walk this path until you find the end, if you ever do. If the end is discovered you may return and be welcomed back. If you do not you may turn back anytime you desire, in which case you will serve the rest of your sentence in prison or service to the community. Do you object to these terms?”

I cast my gaze to the judge briefly, and then back to the Great Path. “No sir.”

I looked back one last time at my few friends and family and then looked forward. My backpack weighed heavily on my shoulders but I stood up straight. I stared ahead, determined, at the long yellow-beige hallway. Periodically spaced skylights let brilliant squares of sunlight onto the floor. I took a step forward.

It was during one lecture that our 6th grade teacher gave that introduced me to a greater world outside our own. “Our world is full of enigmas...” he once began, “The Great Path, for example, is the unofficial but often used name for the single hallway that runs along the right half of the district. East. It is easily the longest hallway we have ever found, that we know of.”

Mr. Cohen was a mischievous type, prone to drawn out philosophical ramblings and bouts of whimsy, good for keeping our attention but not so good for helping us retain information. He was a middle aged man past his prime for scavenging or exploring but he spoke as though he was still in the midst of his previous careers.

“It took our scouts 6 months to traverse the great path, there and back, and they still could not find anything we could consider an end. Can you imagine walking in a straight line for 6 months?” The entire class shook their heads. “As far as we can tell,” he continued “it wasn’t because they ran out of food or water, they still had plenty of that, it seems they simply went---kind of mad and decided to turn around. Many of the scouts who do these kinds of expeditions are hardened men who would not easily fall into that kind of hysteria. Believe me, when I tagged along on some of their shorter adventures they had lots of preparation. Some say it was ghosts that scared them off. Strange creatures that scratched at the supposed indestructible skylights...begging to be let in.” This brought the class to an eerie silence. “and that’s why you need to study so that you don’t get caught up in...fruitless endeavors. People are

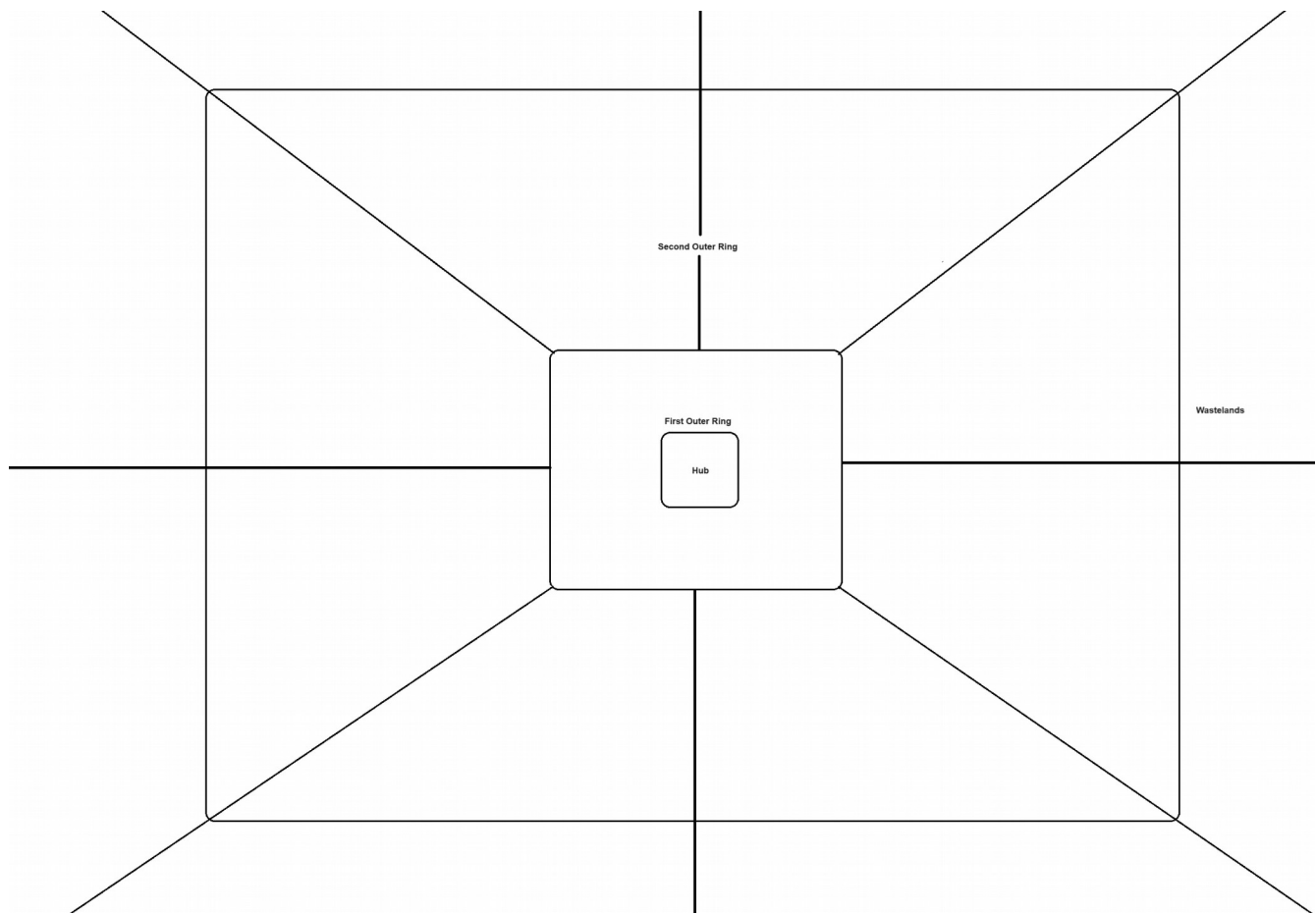
starting to give up on the explorer program, they're calling it obsolete. I don't know why with all the collapses it seems like rational people would have the opposite opinion, y'know go see what's out there! Don't tell your parents I said that."

I lived in a smaller community, at least compared to some other districts. My family came from a generation of scavengers, as did nearly everyone's. Scavengers jobs were simple, break down the walls and gather the resources that can be found behind them, usually lumber, all the while clearing the way for some long-term esoteric goal most of us had forgotten about. We were told the world didn't used to be like this. The world didn't used to be a flat endless maze of hallways and skylights. Another lesson from my teacher: "The sun, it is said, was once allowed to be felt on the skin unprotected. Imagine the warmth, the intensity of the light that would've been felt by a sun uninhibited by layers of indestructible glass. Would it feel like bliss? Would it burn?" He gave a nervous chuckle. "The radiation from the sun as it now floats above us would kill us all in a few minutes. The energy it gives off is an invisible energy that will cook you alive as well as any other creature that hasn't evolved to live in its constant presence. That's why it's advisable not to even sit under skylights for too long."

The sun was something of a morbid curiosity that every little boy and girl wondered about. Except this was never my interest. I was always interested in the architecture around me, as plain as it often was. It was this construction of miles and miles of hallways that we called our home that would occupy my curiosity. My childhood was filled with endless walking through these halls, I would literally note down every variation I found in a sketch book, a rouge hole in a wall, a piece cut out of the carpet. This is where the trouble began. This is what brought all the horrors of this world upon me.

The Great Path occupied nearly every thought I had after my teachers lecture for a week. Worse---it made me explore. It made me convince two other souls into exploring with me. Adam and Nestor were their names. Nestor was small and awkward. Adam was brooding and physically larger, a trait he would likely maintain to adulthood. Their personalities were not important to me, however, I needed them for supplies, navigation, and company.

Luceron, the name of my district, consists of four rings of territory. The Hub, the center, consisted of everything that someone could reasonably need to access in a short amount of time. Every cafeteria, tailor, factory, vendor, garden, or office was organized horizontally. One could walk from their home to any of these places within at the most half an hour. It had to be walk-able. Vehicles such as skateboards and bikes were available but required maintenance and parts, expertise and resources that were always in short supply. The First Outer Ring were places where the population significantly fell off, this is where the scavengers had begun to knock down walls many hundreds of years ago. This area extended for a mile or so, at which point our ancestors must have wised up, and started to mine in a specific direction, farther away from the Hub. Then the Second Outer Ring, was nothing but barren hallways---only sprinkled with a tiny number of rooms. This outer ring could be explored by nearly any citizen, there was simply not much to speak of---for the most part. The width of this ring was about 4 to 5 miles. Beyond this was the Wastelands, where steel doors and guards separated the district from the few hallways that extend dozens and dozens of miles away. The hallways become more sparse but as a trade-off they connect to clusters of dense rooms and unusual structures. This area was also discouraged for children to visit.



One explorer brought back a story where he found a huge empty room with an entirely steel floor and on each one of its walls was door after door, each separated by about four feet from the other, each door opening up to another door, and then another and another, until finally there was only a small room, barely big enough for a single person to stand in. These kind of architectural anomalies were not unheard of within any of the outer rings or the Wastelands but this was an extreme example. Doors opening up to more doors was almost comical compared to the more subtle glitches that could be found. In the middle of plain hallways solid boxes of drywall could be found jutting out from the walls. Explorers used to break down these boxes to see what they were for, but they contained nothing, and their purpose remained obscure, leading to explorers not even bothering with them. Skirting boards would appear down some sections and disappear in others. Vents would be placed near ceilings but would never lead to anywhere except a few feet behind the wall. Our world was one of rigid structure and routine punctuated by the most bizarre of interruptions.

The First and Second outer rings were the areas that Adam, Nestor, and I would explore. The fact that these areas were often empty of people made exploring much more pleasant but that also meant we had to stuff our backpacks with supplies, mostly snacks. I always wanted to explore further. Adam would be there to carry loads and organize us and Nestor was the one to keep us cautious and make maps of the areas we navigated fully. I was the leader of course. I would take my skateboard, a rickety and well worn thing, and glide along the two as they tried to keep pace with me. This would make us explore a little faster and save me some energy. All in all I thought we made a pretty good team. We would explore for several hours after our classes were done for a few times a week for a good year and a half. As a result, we had made a pretty substantial mental and physical map of the area. This was of course, redundant, as official scouts made far more precise maps than we ever could on our flimsy notebook paper. Eventually though, the exploring became more repetitive, interesting anomalies

became few and far between, and without a way to get to the Wastelands there was little motivation to continue. Exploration stopped for a month after the initial missions. That was until, we were confronted by a girl with blond hair. Her hair was tied up in a ponytail, making her head look like an onion.

“I know what you’ve been up to.” She told us while we were all sitting around a table in the cafeteria, munching on our sandwiches.

The cafeteria was enormous and consisted of table after table in a giant pillar-less room. It was also mostly empty at the moment and she would have had to talk to us without making a sound or drawing attention to herself.

“Uh what do you think you know what we’ve been up to...” Nestor replied.

“It doesn’t matter what she knows it’s not like we’ve done anything wrong.” Adam interrupted.

“Who are you? What is it that you want?” I asked.

“I’m in your grade. I’ve noticed you’ve exploring. I want to tag along.”

“What for? There isn’t much to see out there. We’ve looked at basically everything there is. If you want to see something cool try visiting the science lab kids.”

“Oh I’ve seen plenty of those things, I’m no newbie. I’m talking about the wastelands.”

I leaned forward in immediate response. Nestor’s ears perked up and Adam crossed his arms.

“I have some relatives who are guards around that area,” she continued “I’ve always asked them if I could go exploring past those doors but they would never let me. Recently I convinced them to let me go if I can do it as part of a school project, I can really sell it if I bring some classmates with me.”

“You really think it’s that easy?” Nestor piped up.

“Well, you guys are in my grade and seem familiar with exploring so I figured we could pull it off.”

“The problem is there is no school project about exploring the Wastelands.” I said.

“What kind of project involves screwing around in forbidden areas?” Nestor added.

“Yeah it’s gonna seem mighty suspicious.” Adam added.

“Well..what if we faked a permission slip?” She retorted. I looked at the other two and they considered the idea for a moment.

“I can cut a piece of paper out of a book I own and I can copy Mr. Cohen’s signature pretty well.”

Nestor suggested.

“Sure that’ll work,” The girl said “I can do the sweet talking—and I’ll figure out which door my uncle is guarding this week. Then we can all see what’s out there.”

“Okay, well, I guess you’ve got yourself a deal.” I concluded.

The security around the entrances to the Wastelands was clearly in decline. In front of the four of us stood an overweight man with torso armor that clearly didn’t fit and a dopey smile across his face. He had just got up from a fold-able chair and was leaning on the wall just to the left of a rusting steel door. The only part of him that was intimidating was the gun in a holster to his right, an exceedingly rare item to come by. He was examining the “permission slip” that the blond haired girl had so innocently given him. We could all see the printed letters on the back of the page that Nestor had gotten out of his book as the girl’s uncle was reading the signed front. The words were cut off.

“Y’know Rebecca, I don’t know many teachers who would assign their students to go into a place like out there.” Rebecca’s uncle said in a gravelly voice while handing back the “permission slip”.

“Oh it wasn’t Mr. Cohen’s idea, we suggested it, and he agreed it would be an educational experience if we could come back and report what we would find and how it related to our last subject.

“I feel like Mr. Cohen should’ve spoken to me himself if he wanted that kind of clearance for his students.”

“We’re really not going to be gone for that long or go too far uncle Gary. We’re just taking some measurements.”

Uncle Gary looked at us as we sheepishly took out some rulers, t-squares and spreadsheets from out of our backpacks. Nestor hung on to a rolling plastic bin that was taller than his torso. It all looked like terribly boring and enigmatic work.

“Hmpf, alright little lady I can let you go outside...”

The girl gave a big smile.

“...with a few constraints. Firstly, no longer than one hour. Secondly--”

Uncle Gary began to tug at a steel cable that was secured to the wall. “You may have seen these in service areas before, do you know what these are?”

All of us shook our heads side to side except Nestor who shook his up and down.

“This is a Vibra-cable. There are stations placed about one every eh 1,000 feet or so outside for 3 miles in basically every direction, you can speak into them and I can hear you all the way at the entrance right here. If you can’t reach one you can just pluck at the cable 3 times,” Uncle Gary plucked at the cable and a strange metallic pulse rang out through the wall. “and I’ll recognize the signal. Every 10 minutes you give me that signal or speak into a station, if you don’t, I’m gonna assume you’re in trouble and I’m finding you. Do you got it?”

“Yes. Thank you uncle Gary.”

“Don’t forget to signal me and don’t go into an area where there are no cables.”

“I know, thank you uncle.”

Uncle Gary shuffled over to the door, took out a weathered key and inserted it into a slot in the wall. The first door slid to the side with a steady creak, revealing another door that slid away in the opposite direction. “Be careful and alert me if you get spooked by anything. This side of Luceron can get kind of creepy.”

We made our way in. At first it was clear there was no difference between this area of yellow hallways and those we had seen our entire lives. This was in hindsight not surprising but there was a noticeable drop in enthusiasm to push forward when it became obvious nothing significant had changed, but we pushed forward nonetheless. Soon, eager chatter arose to occupy the silence. As we walked the minutes soon began to count down, and to our dismay, half an hour had already snuck up on us and it seemed like we had barely made any progress. Every now and then we would see a station, Rebecca would speak into a tin cup and Uncle Gary would reply moments later. My eyes had begun to glaze over the walls with their random patterns of color patches and scuff marks, the only ways one could really indicate the walls were all not exactly the same.

We continued on until finally we happened upon something we could all plainly see was significant. Up ahead there was a change in the light, the hallway had a shade of deep blue at the end. As we walked closer this shade of blue began to indicate that there was a wide opening. Rebecca noticed the cable attached to the wall abruptly stopped. She looked ahead nervously and decided to push forward. As we got closer to the threshold more detail came into view, irregular patterns could be seen in the blue. Finally we crossed the threshold and were struck by the majesty of an enormous room. The room was fairly square, though it was difficult to tell, and inside the room the floor fell beneath us around 5 feet, and although that was unusual by itself what really set this room apart from others was the multitude of square podiums of every height jutting up from the floor and ceiling and a beam of sunlight brighter than anything else in the room that shot through the roof from a square skylight. The skylight bathed some sort of decoration on the wall directly in front of us. The decoration was a large engraved circle with strange irregular shapes within its circumference. At each quarter along the circle was an engraved dot. It was clearly a map of some sort, though very simplified. The place could only be described as a chapel, a place for worship of some long forgotten concept. After a pause, we fully crossed the threshold and made our way among the rectangular prisms. We spread ourselves to every corner of the room and ascended to the top of nearly every podium within our reach. We turned this place into a playground but after every few minutes there would be a pause for reverence. We could not

determine its purpose. It took hold of our imaginations. Rebecca soon hurried back to the hallway and sprinted towards the nearest cable station. Eventually we could sense our hour was waning and we packed up and left. When we returned to the door Rebecca's uncle was there ready to chastise us for being late but begrudgingly held back his comments. He was only relieved we had come back unharmed. After that each of us departed our own ways, we chatted about plans of returning and exploring more throughout the breaks between classes. Throughout the year we would go visit the Wastelands a few more times. We became more daring each time, pushing the limits of how far we could get from a Vibra-cable before we had to return home. We also built up knowledge of each other and got into all kinds of banter, a kind of camaraderie that was only formed by our shared hobby. Eventually, the anomalies we discovered became fewer and farther between. We became more busy with school and family obligations. We began to lack energy after an escalating series of disappointments, until our explorations finally ended. Nestor and Adam pursued other things and the girl was simply not around. Time passed and the ideas we had about going back to the Wastelands...slowly seemed to us to be less and less fruitful pursuits.

Until one day, almost two years later, I saw Rebecca again, though under much less pleasant circumstances. I had nearly finished my lunch by myself in the cafeteria when a high pitched scream could be heard. The scream was accompanied by a laugh and then a plethora of yammering and whispering. There were two girls and one boy huddled around a table on the far side of the room. I only just started to pay attention to what could have been going on but aside from the odd word or two the main subject of the conversation alluded me. Rebecca was in the center of all of it, encouraging the conversation with the other girl and the boy. I thought about the first time I had met her, but quickly my thoughts went elsewhere. Then, as if possessed by a nosy spirit, I would look back occasionally to see if anything was developing. None of them noticed me in this time. Eventually the other girl left, with a hug and a goodbye, leaving just Rebecca and the boy. As soon as she had left the boy got noticeably closer to Rebecca, looming over her almost, the laughs could still be heard but less frequently. It seemed that classes were starting up again and the lunch period was over because when I looked around more and more people were leaving their seats and exiting the large cafeteria room. The room grew quieter and it was eventually filled with a measly 4 to 5 people, carrying about their business.

The quiet was quickly broken by a loud smack. I spun around immediately to the direction of the sound, it was clear from the stances of the two that the boy had smacked the table in anger directly in front of Rebecca. This was rapidly followed by a raised voice that was cut short by a reassuring whisper. I was now even more alert, angered even, by the sound which had so easily disrupted my meal and train of thought. I was now staring back more than I was minding my own business. Rebecca noticed this and made an anxious glance toward me, as if apologizing with her eyes. That angered me more. The boy and the girl began to speak again at a more appropriate volume. I was close to finishing my lunch at this point and I figured I would need to head to class soon as well, but of course I was in no hurry to do so. And just as soon as it seemed like the conversation between the two on the far side of the room had quieted down, the boy threw his hand down on the table again, yelling something along the lines of "You can't---this is not fair to me! Come on baby!" I glared back at them. So invested in the conversation at this point the two were now speaking very loudly to each other with no regard to anyone else in the room. Not even the stares of the few other people in that room did much to shame them. I got up, taking my skateboard and the remains of my lunch in hand and walked in a long path through the tables. As I approached, the argument was getting more physical. The boy and Rebecca were both standing now. Although the boy seemed more distraught. Rebecca put up her hand in what looked to be a defensive gesture and the boy slapped it away. There was little in the way of thought guiding my actions, only feeling. I marched toward the two on the energy of pure hatred. Hatred for how they had inconvenienced me. The only thing I meditated on was how I would open, what words I

would say to generate the desired outcome: to instill in them feelings of utter shame. Once I was within a few feet of them I opened my mouth.

“Hey...” The word came out more weakly than I anticipated. I grew sweaty in embarrassment. They were still arguing—talking past each other the same as they had been doing the entire time. I tapped the boy on the shoulder as he was closer to me and said “Do we have a problem here?” This was more confidently said.

The boy zipped around, his hair was straight and long, long enough to cover his ears and nearly reached his shoulders. He was also taller than me, a fact that I had not picked up on until I had gotten dangerously close to him. His face showed a mixture of confusion and irritation.

“No man there’s no problem. Stay out of it!” As he said this he shoved me.

I slid back, losing my balance but still remaining upright. I paused. We looked at each other for a moment and I looked away. So satisfied in his rebuttal to my question and the action he had just taken against me that he returned to the argument, his back turned toward me. I stood silently for another moment. In this time between being shoved and looking at the things I had in my hands there was a period of seemingly eternal torment. The action I took next seemed like the only one that could have ever happened. I set my lunch bag down, I held my skateboard with both hands, and swung my skateboard at his head. The skateboard made contact, the sound was loud. He fell to the ground with such force it was as if all his insides had been instantaneously replaced with lead. Rebecca screamed. I stood there with my skateboard still resting limply in my left hand.

My parents were not happy. It was hard to tell who was more stricken with disappointment; my mother or my father. But I think it was my father who tried his best to rationalize it: “He touched you first right?” He would plead, “He must have started it, he was known for being a trouble maker right?” To his dismay I couldn’t provide a good reason for why I had done it. I had simply found the boy annoying. My mother made no such pleas. She had been shocked into silence. Throughout the next few days she would simply sit in the corner of the room with her head in her hands.

The events that had unfolded that evening went about as expected. Medical personnel and community investigators arrived at the scene after the girl and two witnesses alerted them. The boy was found to still be alive, barely, and was rushed to a hospital area. I was lead to my parent’s home and kept under a watchful eye for the rest of the night by a guard and my parents. The next few days after that consisted of explaining myself over and over again to different people, to the point where by near the end of it I had streamlined my story to a few sentences: “He was arguing with some girl—being annoying, making loud noises, he shoved me when I confronted him, and I swung my skateboard at his head.” The standard procedures of investigation would drag on after that.

Because I had turned myself in, witnesses abounded, and the order of events was clear to everyone, reconstructing the scene was a simple matter. What took up the most time was determining what to do with me. My fate was in limbo for a few days as we still did not know whether the boy would survive. The bureaucracy of it all filled me with stress, and even relief in the form of punishment evaded me. By the third day the hope I had for some sort of swift sentence was diminishing as the people who spoke to me became noticeably more solemn. One day, slightly before noon, as I sat in my room bored out of my mind—a well dressed man entered.

“Good morning Rudon,” he said, warmly stretching out his arm. I looked at his hand as it hovered for a second, once he realized no shake was coming he set it down. He was a man with an angular face and a suit properly fitted to his slim body. “I’m Sam Alman, one of the investigators on this case. I’m sure you’re tired of talking to people like me but I think there’s a chance I can relieve some of your worries—are you worried?”

I stayed silent for a bit, but I knew at this point withholding any more information wouldn’t make much of a difference. “I guess. I just want to know what you’re going to do with me.”

“That’s natural. Your case is a strange one. We’ve been considering a lot of factors to enact justice in a way that benefits you and the...boy.”

I blinked and said nothing.

“Listen son, we know you acted out because he tried to hurt you first. We know that he is still alive and between you and me it looks like he’s going to pull through—and we know about the lady. It’s not an uncommon motivation---”

“What do you mean ‘we know about the lady’?” I interrupted.

“The girl you were defending—Rebecca—right?”

“No NO I did not do it because of her. That’s not the reason.”

This was the first thing that seemed to catch Sam off guard. “Then what—was the reason?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

Just before he got any deeper into probing Sam redirected the conversation.

“Whatever the real reason, we investigators have to go by people’s actions, and you’re actions tell a complete story. One that I don’t think even you are giving yourself enough credit for. Let me get to the point, because you’re very young and because of the ambiguity of the assault, if things go south, we’re considering not just throwing you in a cell—we want to put you to a worthwhile task—a job.”

“A job?”

I relaxed my stance. He continued.

“I’ve been going around the district attempting to bring troubled youths into the light so to speak—give them a chance to be useful members of society. Now a typical sentence suggestion, especially for something this serious, would consist of a mentor, a trade, and strict monitoring for many years. You can become the apprentice to someone in Luceron and gain a skill—you won’t be paid and you won’t be able to see anyone and you will be monitored for the first few years BUT it will be far more preferable to being in a small room like this one for a long time let’s just say, an amount of time that you will deeply regret wasting.”

“So it sounds like you’ve already made up your mind about who I am.” I responded coldly.

“No not at all!” The investigator retorted “This is simply a possibility for if things go bad—the worst outcome really. It things go even slightly well for you then you can forget all about this. I am simply describing the worst case scenario...and the punishment for that worst case scenario is really not that bad. Surely, that gives you some ease?”

This did not give me any ease as the difference between a cell and being the slave of someone else was intangible to me but it did start to give me thoughts of my life beyond all of this.

“I guess.”

“I think it’s best you know a little bit about the Dogger family. The father comes from a line of miners, the mother comes from farming. They had two sons. One of them, Abram, died in a mining collapse many years ago. That left Mel to be their only son.”

I couldn’t tell why he was explaining this to me, and it must have shown in my face, but he continued on anyway. “The Doggers are not hateful people, they are upset, of course, but if you show your intentions were pure and you are remorseful, and I don’t doubt you are, then things could look better for you. Think about what they’ve lost. What more they could lose.”

The man got up and paced around the room for a bit. He stopped and bent down in front of me.

“I’m trying to help you out here.”

I stayed silent.

“If you come up with some sort of preference, some sort of direction on what type of reform you think best suits you--again--if this all goes south, just call for me.”

He got up and just before leaving the room, looked back and gave me a nervous smile. I felt disgusted.

By the next afternoon I was informed that Mel was in a worsening condition. I was told the medical tools for this kind of cranial injury weren't precise enough and the availability made treatment slow. All the advanced stuff was reserved for only the most elite and hopeful cases. Nevertheless I was told he had a chance, that some sort of miracle could be pulled off. I was thinking about all the time that was being wasted hoping for a miracle. "Tell me whether I'm going to be locked up for life or not." I would think to myself. Eventually my mind wandered to my ambitions, the few I had. All that exploring I used to do returned as a prioritized thought. No sooner had I seriously begun to consider my options when I heard a knock and a feeble voice asking to come in. I told them they could come in and Sam, the investigator, stepped in again with another grotesque nervous smile. He closed the door behind him.

"I hope you've been pondering about what I told you in our last meeting."

"A bit."

I replied with as little enthusiasm as possible.

"Well I wanted to bring in a visitor so we could square something away." He opened the door again and let in two people. Another investigator and the girl, Rebecca. My eyes immediately widened upon seeing her familiar face. I stood up from my bed. She stood in the florescent light with her hair down. Even that cold, unnatural light made her golden hair sparkle brilliantly. She rubbed her arm in a pacifying gesture and avoided eye contact.

"She wanted to speak to you and I felt it was necessary you two meet." Sam said, breaking the silence.

"What is it?"

I said in a still unenthusiastic but gentler tone.

"I wanted you to know that you shouldn't beat yourself up over this," she began "Mel had been... harassing me for sometime, but some of it was my fault but he took things too far. What I mean is I know you didn't mean to hurt him so bad—I know what you meant to do."

"What do you think I meant to do?"

She finally made eye contact, and when she did it scared me a bit.

"You just wanted to protect me."

There was a pause. "I don't really see—I suppose I could see how you could think that."

She blinked, opened her mouth to say something, closed it, abandoning the thought, and opened her mouth again. "I don't understand. What is this all about then? Did you know him? Were you angry with Mel about something?"

"I didn't know who Mel was before I hit him."

"You knew who I was. You saw me and you thought I was in trouble. When he attacked you, you were just doing what anyone would have..."

"Well...attacked...?"

I winced at the word and shifted my hand back and forth.

"I think there was some justification for his response and maybe some but less for my own. If we're being fair."

"What are you talking about? Why on Earth did you do it? Why go up to him, interrupt us, and then nearly kill him?!" Rebecca squeezed at her arm more.

"Well he was being a bit of an asshole in my opinion—was annoying me greatly."

Rebecca stared at me for a while with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

"Stop pretending to be mysterious! What is wrong with you?!"

"I made a mistake...I guess"

Sam butted in, clearly jittery and nervous about where this interaction had gone.

"Well," He chuckled nervously "we really don't need to get into the specifics of things right now, do we? I do apologize, this may have not been the best time, a much more formal meeting is in order."

Sam placed his hand on Rebecca's shoulder and lead her to the door with the other investigator taking

her and leaving the room with a prominent raised eyebrow on his face the entire time. She looked at me one more time and left. As soon as they left Sam spun around and looked at me square in the eyes.

“I don’t know what to say.”

I looked at him with disgust once more.

“You need to...mmm,” He scratched his head briefly, “I don’t care what you really think, okay? That’s me being honest here. I don’t care what you really think about yourself. You’re too young to judge that kind of thing. You’re too young to be in this kind of situation, I don’t want to see you waste your life away. Why are you denying the real reason you assaulted Mel?”

I was silent.

“Is this an effort to make yourself look wounded or something? Stewing in your own guilt? Well, if you don’t want my help then just tell me straight, eh?”

I was still silent. He turned around and grumbled.

“Will Mel die?” I asked as he started to leave the room.

“It’s likely.” He said in a breathy way.

“How well will that affect my chance to...get away from this?”

“Whether he dies or not you’re going away, either you work or you’re kept in a cell. After that little stunt, the only real factor is for how long.”

“I think I have a suggestion for my punishment.”

Mel died less than 24 hours later. Shortly after, a meeting was called between me, the Dogger family, investigators, my own family and the judge. I had never known much about the legal system in Luceron but today I would experience it all first hand. The proceedings began with a read out of the objective facts of the events that had taken place on that fateful day. After that every investigator gave a short recap of their findings. One side, headed by Sam Alman, did their best to defend me. The other did their best to prosecute. The jury and the investigators adjourned and recommenced and adjourned and recommenced. Near the end the judge made a series of not-so-subtle remarks about the large amount of evidence against me and the little evidence in favor of my innocence. Throughout this ordeal I sat in silence, staring at the wall in front of me and trying my best to avoid eye contact with my family or the victims family. Eventually the judge gave a statement that peaked my attention: “After considering all the factors at play, the testimonies from the families, and especially those of Ms. Spector and Mr. Bastille, I believe we are now nearing a conclusion. The verdict will be given after what should be a short meeting between me and the investigators.”

After what seemed to be a long lull of activity this got everyone to straighten their postures in their chairs.

“Does anyone wish to make a statement before we begin the private meeting?” The room was silent, everything had been said.

“Alright. You are dismissed.”

Nearly everyone left. I waited an hour in another holding room. It was a long hour, of course, and every thought I had, no matter how much I tried to distract myself, was on what my future would be if I was found guilty. In the middle of one of these repetitive thoughts Sam opened the door to my room. My nervous boredom was finally cut off with this action. As I entered the judge’s conference room I felt the stale air rush over me as everyone returned to their seats. I sat and stared at my feet and the judge began with a typical opening remark “something something here the accused stands...something something...under the laws of Luceron...” Then finally he arrived at the crucial sentence. “Rudon Bastille...we have reviewed the evidence, the testimony of the witnesses, and the testimony you have given yourself. We, the investigators and the jury for the West Court of Luceron, find you guilty for the unjustified killing of Mel Dogger.” It took a few moments for the comment to register in my brain especially since he continued shortly after handing out this judgment. “Because we

believe that since there was a clear case of aggravation on the part of Mel Dogger we have granted you a sentence suggestion courtesy of your defendant, Sam Alman.”

The reality finally dawned on me. My life as I knew it would be over from this point forward. All I could do was stare at my feet, but I knew the show wasn’t over yet.

“A typical sentence for this type of crime is 10 years. The sentence I am giving you is 8 years, be aware that any misbehavior could increase the amount of time served beyond the initial 8 years. Are there any further comments or questions from the jury or investigators regarding this sentence?”

There was a long silence followed by some murmurs and then silence again. The judge continued.

“During this time you will be assigned to Mr. Tully and his team for mining unit 40 you are to work with him and obey his commands. Every two years you will be consulted for behavior evaluations. Are there any further comments or questions from the jury or investigators regarding this sentence?”

“Yes.” Sam stood up with a sheet of paper in hand.

“I am filing a new request for sentence suggestion.”

Sam looked around the room, observing the disarray of emotions in the faces of all present, trying to gauge the overall mood. The mood seemed mostly calm, but still more tense than he had hoped for.

“Typically I consult with the accused before a sentence is given to find something that matches them. This is the first time I have been given such a unique proposition from the accused and I felt it needed to be heard.”

“Mr. Alman, why are you bringing this up now?” The judge was gritting his teeth. “I asked for comments not a brand new request.”

“Your honor, it is still up to you to approve this new request I just felt that it was imperative that all parties involved heard this one first hand.”

“What in God’s name kind of request requires this kind of disruption?”

Mr. Alman took a deep breath, brought the paper up to his chest, and blurted out the words.

“Rudon Bastille has made a request to become an explorer, to walk the long and un-mapped halls. He has especially shown great interest in walking The Great Path for the benefit of the district.”

Responses came from everyone all at once. A sea of “what’s?” and “why’s?” followed by every expression of outburst imaginable came pouring from the round table. The judge desperately tried to regain control. “Excuse me? Excuse me!” He yelled out. “Excuse me! Excuse me! Excuse me!” He slammed his hand repeatedly on his desk.

Eventually the repetition from this authority was enough to quell the commotion.

“Explorers are not a common trade they are a dangerous and increasingly obsolete profession that requires discipline and a high degree of independence and most of all we do not send out juvenile delinquents to do such tasks.”

“I do not expect the explorers to simply cast him off without training.” Sam Alman said these words with a steady rhythm. “They have been looking for volunteers recently and I say if the child is brave enough to want to venture into the great unknown let him do it.” His anxious demeanor from before had melted away.

“The Great Path is not traversable—it wasn’t traversable with a well prepared party it will not be traversable by a single child. It is a silly dream. I will not entertain it in this court.”

“It was not traversable because the party turned around!” I got up from my seat and yelled—cutting off Mr. Alman right as he was about to retort.

“The convicted cannot argue with a judge in open court.” One of the investigators snapped back.

“If Mr. Bastille wants to share his reasoning, on this, we should allow him to do so. It is his livelihood we’re talking about.”

Mr. Alman said with incredible speed. I followed him shortly after.

“Everyone knows that those explorers turned around because they couldn’t take it not because they ran out of food, not because of any roamers, they turned around because they had walked in a straight line

for 3 months and because they had a society and comfort to welcome them when they returned. I will not turn around because I am condemned!”

This caught everyone’s attention.

“I am just a kid and my life is already over!”

The judge tried to interject.

“Your life is not over, you--”

“I’m not a miner. I’m not a scavenger. I-I don’t care about anything here really...” I could hear my parents let out a gasp. “Let me make my contribution. I will pay my price.” I could sense my mother and father staring at me, in tears most likely, but I would not allow weakness to show by turning my head towards them to find out for sure.

“I will not turn around.”

The judge stared for a solid six seconds, he narrowed his eyes, threw up his right arm and swiveled to the other side of the room in the same motion.

“Does anyone in the Dogger family want to comment on this new request?”

Mrs. Dogger scooted forward, her eyes were wet and her stance which had been feeble before was now rigid and commanding.

“My other son was killed because of a mining collapse. There’s no point in putting you in the same danger. I don’t believe in revenge. There’s no point in putting you in a cell either.” She looked around the room and paused for a breath “Is this truly for the betterment of Luceron, or is it for yourself?”

The judge was certainly surprised by this, and awaited my answer with utmost curiosity.

“It’s for Luceron ma’am, if that is what you think my penance should be.” These words felt dry in my mouth. I had not expected this kind of question from Mel’s mother of all people, but I should have. I tried to make myself look remorseful I tried to stare like I was begging to be forgiven. I tried to do something with the way I carried myself to denote honesty but the instincts never came. I felt nothing and she was letting me go.

“If that is what you think is the best way to repay my son, then so be it.”

The judge quietly turned around and sighed.

“If you can show discipline while you are being trained by the explorers, I will consider your request over the following days and add it to the official sentence. The explorers may outright deny your request to walk the un-mapped halls, especially the Great Path in that case we will send you back to the previous sentence. Will I get protest from that as well?”

“No sir.”

“Then let’s conclude this meeting.”

After that fateful meeting there were a series of appeals and discussions about the decisions that had been made, but nothing swayed anything or anyone off course from the direction that initial meeting had taken. About a week later I met with the main exploring unit. It was comprised of a few well traveled senior explorers and a few dozen workers who’s job mostly consisted of supplying them. Most of them welcomed me with a confused enthusiasm. Enthusiastic because a new daring volunteer was there to maybe expand the horizons of their profession. Confused because such a morally dubious child was the one who volunteered for this particular position. I quickly met with one of the senior officers in a cramped office at the end of a room full of scientific equipment.

“Why is it called the Great Path?” The salt and pepper haired man opened with.

“Well because it’s the longest path in the Luceron District, if not the world.” I said, trying my best to meekly answer a most obvious question.

“IT is called the Great Path because it is the longest path in this district and any other districts we’ve found *so far*.” He lifted his finger as he emphasized these last two words. “The second longest took a month to travel down, the third longest took 2 and a half weeks. At the end of these arduous,

monotonous journeys our reward was a blank wall, we tried to break it down to see what was behind it and after the first layer we just found more ceiling material—Agarite. The Great Path could be significant because the longest recorded journey down it was 3 months—it could also just lead to another dead end. Another ‘Great Path’ could exist somewhere else that we haven’t found yet. There’s many corridors that we haven’t walked down still.”

I sensed this as a way to scare me but I knew these basic facts.

“You’ve decided to join our guild, and that is admirable—but do you really want to play hero in this instance?”

“It’s not about being a ‘hero’ sir.”

“In the reports I have been given you said you want to ‘walk long and un-mapped halls, especially The Great Path.’ is that not correct?”

“Yes...that’s correct.”

“A lot of explorers have a similar—though not as extreme mentality, they think they are doing a great service, but when they train with us they realize what is actually useful to us. Expanding the domain of our knowledge around our immediate home. Do you think you are capable of doing this great service?”

“Why does everyone insist on insulting me about this?”

“I’m simply telling you what you’re in for. Do you think you are capable of doing this kind of service?”

I looked up for the first time in a while after staring at my feet.

“Yes. Whatever it takes.”

“It will be difficult, it will be tiresome, most people spend weeks walking with no rewards. That’s longer than I would wish on anyone. We can train you—but I can’t train you to keep at it. That’s up to you.”

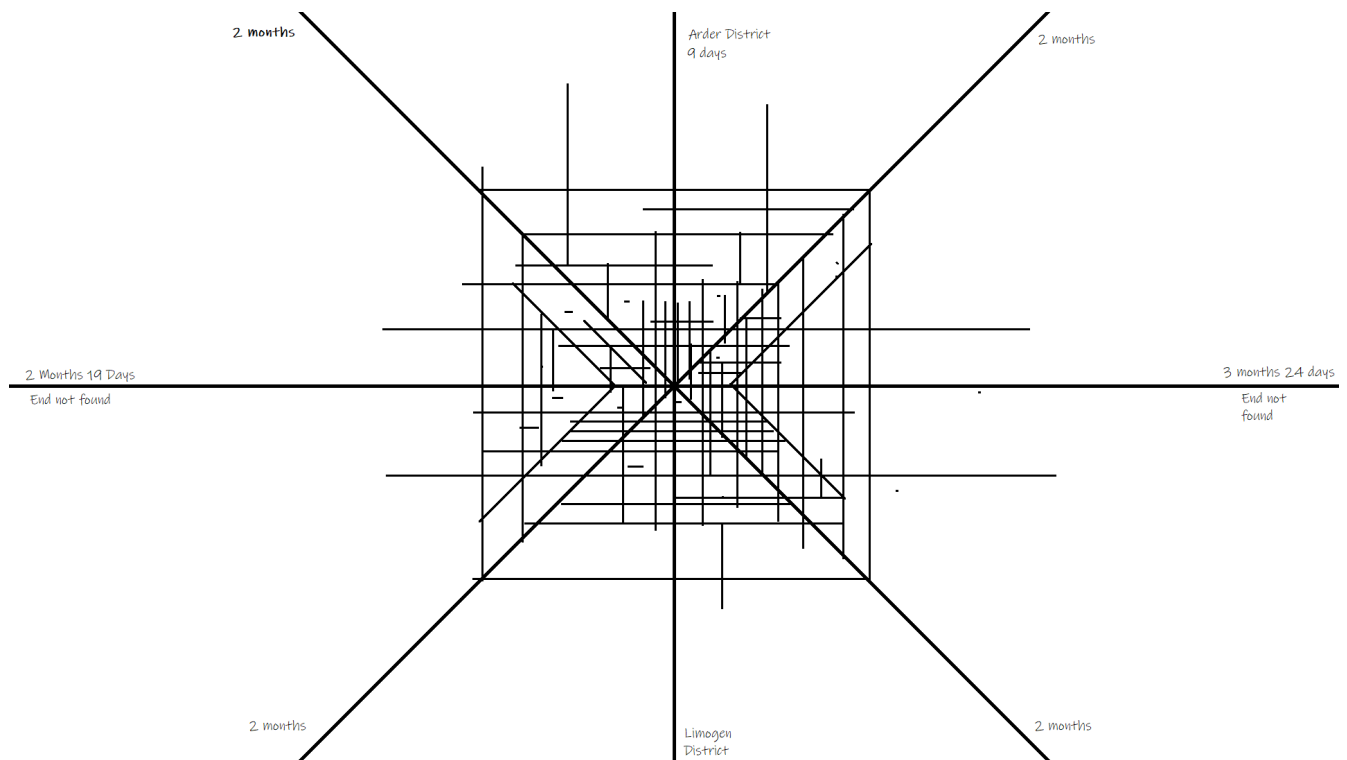
“Alright. I’m ready for anything at this point.”

For the next few weeks I was brought along on journeys to corridors farther outside the district than I could have ever imagined. The mapping of these corridors was in a word: boring. Most corridors would often go on in one straight direction for an hour or more by which point the team and I would reach a dead end, someone would mark it in a notebook, and then make our way back in the opposite direction. Each of these trips would take nearly the whole day, by the end of the day we would return to the hub, mark off the hallways we had covered on a large paper map, and then evaluate if this had changed or revealed any new information. Often it did not. I found the map-making usually mind-numbing, but it familiarized me with the process, the tech, and techniques the explorers used. One technique was to mark the left side of the wall with a piece of chalk so that if we ever encountered any intersections we would know how to reliably come back the way we came. Someone would place a red chalk mark every quarter mile or so. If we walked forward and found a mark on the right side of the wall, that means we had been there already and would then turn around and make sure to note the chalk remained on the left side of the wall. Most of the construction work we did was dedicated to Vibracable installations around frequently traversed areas. The few who rode bicycles would follow us with huge drums of steel cables attached to the fronts. Bicycles were a rare commodity because of the precision required in machining the parts and the shortage of materials available to make them.

Food was not the greatest. On longer trips the district’s labs would cook us up what can only be described as some sort of hyper-preserved bricks of dried food, these would be stacked in boxes we would carry in our backpacks, these bricks would be made wet and warmed up with our portable stoves, though one could eat it cold if they wanted to. The first time I ate them they were almost quaint and charming in their simplicity. The 20th time I ate them I had no feelings towards them whatsoever. My taste buds became inert to their bland flavor. Thankfully, we all had real food to come back to when our trips were over and even then people often brought other snacks with them when we were on shorter trips. Water was a different story, while we would always take jugs of water with us, a heavy addition to our backpacks, there were also areas around the maze where rain water could be collected

and filtered. These areas would consist of a metal funnel on the other side of the ceiling, completely exposed to the open air, from that funnel there would be a small pipe that would descend to about waist level which would drain into a bowl. This was a construction that, I was told, was built permanently into the structure by the original designers, a fact I found fascinating. From this bowl we would scoop water into a filtered jug and then drink. They were based off the original, much larger rain water collectors in the center of the district. This could only be the intention of the designers, a clear sign that exploring these halls was important for our civilization.

The only thing that kept monotony at bay was taking time to eat and the long conversations that we would have along the way, often about things that were not particularly exciting, but still it was a necessary component of keeping our wits. After three weeks of this, three weeks of learning the fundamentals, I grew restless. I began to start looking into the maps more. The explorers had the privilege of keeping a large library of every paper map that had been made since the founding of the Luceron district. And at the very back of the library, behind a gate, was a machine. It was the only one of its kind in the district and it used a glass window with some sort of lighting behind it to display a larger map with more detail than any sheet of paper could possibly contain. After most of the crew had gone home I would be left alone with access to the machine. Each section we explored would be cross referenced with this map of the district. It was astonishing how symmetrical everything was when I zoomed out of this big map. The lines all sprouted out from the center at 90 degrees and 45 degrees until they left the edges of the map. In all four corners the ends were marked “2 months” indicating how long it took to travel there on foot and meet the end of that straight line. I had difficulty wrapping my head around how far one could travel in that time. How many miles was that?



As I poured over the map old ambitions began to flare up within me again. I looked back at the smaller map with the puny section we had covered today and thought about how fruitless it all was.

“What are you doing here?”

It was the senior explorer. Annoyed at my presence as usual.

“I’m just looking at some maps before I head off to bed.”

“Yeah there’s nothing new your big intellect is going to find. I’m surprised you even got that thing working again. It’s ancient.”

I returned my eyes to the map. “All the parts were here, I just needed to put them together correctly. Anyway, there’s this old theory I have. About the paths that run east and west.”

The senior explorer approached the screen and joined me in my observing. “The Great Path is only called that because it’s the longest we’ve ever gone down one path. The one directly opposite to it we still haven’t found the end to that one either. What if they connect?”

“And how would they do that?”

“You know this symbol that the builders left in all kinds of places...what if it’s not a map of our entire world...but only part of it.”

I grabbed a sheet of paper and a pen.

“This plane is our world right? What if instead of the circle being the borders of our world, the path itself is a circle? Maybe the paths start to curve—in some way. Like yeah they seem straight but after walking for so long they could curve at such a slight rate that we wouldn’t notice. I’ve noticed slightly curving paths on our maps before. This square, that’s out district. The other shapes correspond roughly to the other districts too...it’s not perfect but it’s a simplified version. And these dots---they’re just the mid points.”

“Quite a theory. Do you have proof?”

“No, it would have to happen after a great distance. Seems like it could come back and connect the two. And along the midpoints there would have to be something. Something. That’s why they pointed it out.”

“Or it could just end at some point in infinity. You really want to do this? By yourself? Because no one will want to go with you, everyone thinks its a dead idea.”

“I’m going to do this. I’ve already declared its my penance.”

“And if you make your way down that hall, walk a day, get scared, change your mind and come running back to momma it won’t reflect well on me...or you.”

“Then I won’t turn around.”

The sending off was scheduled a week later. The explorers did their best to prepare me with supplies, expertise, and good luck. I was informed a week long trip by oneself could be quite the undertaking so a trip 3 months or longer was unheard of. Some offered to stay with me a part of the way, but I declined. There was nothing else that could take away the importance of doing this task then to have someone help me a part of the way. This was my price to pay no one else could share it. The cubes we ate were made to last for at least several years, but this was overkill. It was designed to allow for some leeway for longer trips. In my case it would help keep me fed with relatively fresh food for my journey. That was most important, light, sleeping arrangements, entertainment—that was all secondary. I was granted to bring a skateboard but not a bicycle because of the unlikelihood I would return it, despite how bad it looked to the public to allow me to have a skateboard again. Before I knew it the day arrived and I was allowed to briefly meet with my parents and loved ones before I left. My parents were distraught as I had expected, they had fought with me about this every step of the way, but they managed to pull themselves together for a moment to say their goodbyes. We all met at the mouth of the Great Path. I was surrounded by people, explorers I had met and some friends but mostly people who were just spectators, all waiting to get a last view of a person who had been condemned to such an odd fate.

I watched as a series of convoluted metal doors began to open. Each layer of door loudly separating one after the other. I noted the many ways they unlocked themselves, some opening by

sliding to the right, some to the left, some from the ceiling, some from the floor, the display was almost silly. As soon as this was over an armed guard unlocked my handcuffs and I stood surrounded by the malice and confusion of all those I had once known.

“Rudon Bastille” The Judge began, “you have been found guilty for the unlawful killing of Mel Dogger. You have chosen your own punishment: exile by way of the Great Path. You are to walk this path until you find the end, if you ever do. If the end is discovered you may return and be welcomed back. If you do not you may turn back anytime you desire, in which case you will serve the rest of your days in prison or in service to the community. Do you object to these terms?” I cast my gaze to the judge briefly, and then back to the Great Path. “No sir.”

I looked back one last time at my few friends. Adam, Nestor, and Rebecca were there and so was my family. I then looked forward. My backpack weighed heavily on my shoulders but I stood up straight. I stared ahead, determined, at the long yellow-beige hallway. Periodically spaced skylights let brilliant squares of sunlight onto the floor. I took a step forward.

And so I began my walk. I resisted the temptation to look back as I passed the threshold of the steel doors. Once I had made it past, I made my way into an area that looked disappointingly familiar. The hallway was perfectly rectangular, with yellow walls and skylights placed every fifteen feet or so. The floor was dull concrete. There was no ornamentation, no deviation from the flat walls, only decay. It was obvious that this journey had been started many times over, there were scuff marks along the walls and floors, and some bits and pieces of unidentifiable trash, but as I moved forward these debris and scuff marks began to dissipate, very gradually. It wasn't until I heard the loud clanking of the doors being shut behind me a quarter-mile back that I was snapped out of this trance. I finally allowed myself to look backwards; it was nothing but straight lines closing in...and at the end a gray rectangle. I then looked forward...straight. The lines that made up the four corners of the hall continued on until they dissipated into a pale yellow-grey point far off in the distance. I would be chasing that point until the end of my journey.

I walked two miles and made it to the first and last Vibra-cable, I spoke into it “This is Rudon, I've double-checked all my supplies and I am ready to head off.” I pressed my ear to the funnel and heard a muffled but discernible voice of an officer. “You are clear to proceed. Good luck.” “Goodbye.” There was a long pause. “Goodbye.” And so I walked.

About two hours in I noticed that no sign of decay could be seen on the floors or walls anymore. It seemed I had made it past the point where most trips turned back. The sun streaming down from the skylights was gradually becoming less intense. My mechanical watch told me that it was around 6 PM. I decided to set down my backpack and take out a meal. Within my backpack was a stack of boxes, I took out one of these boxes and within that box was a smaller box, and within this smaller box was a cube, no bigger than a half-inch across. I took some water from my bottle, which had a built in filter, and then took out my portable stove. I set the cube on the stove and poured some water over it. After stirring it around a bit with a spoon it expanded to ten times its initial size. The final color was a reddish brown with bits of green and yellow; all the nutrients I needed for that day. I ate rapidly, cleaned off my plate with a sanitizing rag and continued on my way. Once again there was little change for the next few hours. The light coming into that corridor grew more and more faint until eventually I could hardly see what was in front of me. As my vision adjusted I kept moving, pushing myself to cover as much distance as possible until finally I grew exhausted enough that I thought I had earned some sleep. From my backpack I unrolled a thin mattress and a sleeping bag. This bag also came with

one pillow. This was one of the only luxuries I was afforded. One luxury I would have to look forward to for the next 6 months. At first I thought I would fall asleep rather quickly but I was unaccustomed to the silence. The silence was unlike anything I had ever known. Back in Luceron sleep was quiet yes, but the hum of motors and muffled noises of people moving about just beyond my bedroom walls was a near constant. This was radically different. I could hear even the slightest creak in the panels that made up the ceiling and hallway—a sound that did not occur often. I had to think and think constantly to make up for the lack of any other stimulation. It's something I would have to get used to.

When I woke up a panic came over me. I looked down both sides of the hall, nothing had changed, but I felt disoriented. Which way had I come and which way was I supposed to be going? Thankfully, it took less than a minute of walking to find a signature collection of marks at waist level on the left side of the wall. Explorers marks. I knew I was facing the right direction. I figured this was a good point to take out my red chalk and begin marking the left side of the wall lest I lose my orientation in sleep again. Sure, I could follow the older marks, but I had a sneaking suspicion that the further I went on, the more sparse and faded these marks would become. So I decided to renew them for myself.

There was little change in scenery. The yellow-off white walls continued in the same boring way down and down, hour after hour. I remembered the advice of some of the explorers: "Focus on your walking. Keep the legs moving at a steady rate and think about how you are moving forward—it will ease the boredom and keep you going at an efficient pace." I tried doing so and decided instead of walking I would start to run, get the exercise, start building up some serious trekking muscles. This too became monotonous fairly quickly. Once I grew tired enough I returned to my brisk walking pace and decided to devote my brain power just to that. Very quickly my thoughts went elsewhere. Their advice was bullshit. I took out my skateboard and sped along the hall at a greater speed for a good hour or two. At some point I stopped by a rain funnel. There was some water at the bottom that I knew was somewhat fresh because I had noticed it rained earlier. I decided to scoop it up and put it through my filter just in case. I took a gulp and looked both ways again. Now there was nothing, besides the red chalk that indicated whether I was going the right way or not. Everything was exactly the same. Pristine in its sameness. I continued on.

This time I went to bed about an hour earlier than I did the day before. I felt significantly more tired. My feet were aching severely. The only thing I was grateful for was that I didn't need to speak to anyone anymore, no more energy would be wasted on useless conversations. I went to sleep a little easier that night.

The third day was, surprise, just the same. I decided this would be the day to take out one of the books I had brought along with me. Books were a fairly expensive commodity in Luceron, but considering the task at hand, the explorers figured that lending me some portable entertainment was the least they could do. Reading the book while walking was difficult at first. I wasn't accustomed to this kind of physical and mental multi-tasking, but eventually I got used to my own rhythm of walking and my own rhythm of reading, and I could do both things at a consistent pace. By midday I made myself another meal, one with a slightly different flavor. Excretion of course came a little later. The hallway had another structure placed every hour or so, a small human sized area that jutted into the wall. At the bottom of this area was a hole. The explorers had told me of these and it was one of the strangest sights to me. It signaled that the designers of this corridor expected, in some capacity, for people to travel down this area for long periods of time. I guess they didn't want people making a mess. This was farther than I had ever been from the official borders of the district. At the end of the day I was exhausted once again. This time I took off my clothes, folded them, and set them aside. I was feeling more and more comfortable with this routine.

A week passed. I had finished reading my book. It was about a bunch of drunk people and moral dilemmas. It was nothing great but enough to keep my mind occupied for a little while each day.

It was good I finished it because I think reading that book may have been slowing down my walking speed. I started running again, more frequently this time. Although every part of my legs and feet would ache at the end of each day this pain started to diminish and I could feel my leg muscles getting stronger. I was also becoming more observant of my surroundings. Sure nothing fundamental changed, but the textures and colors of the floors and walls would differ slightly the more I paid attention. At one point I noticed an area with more cracks in the concrete than usual. I wondered why that may have been the case. Was there shifting under the ground somehow? Did some explorer in the distant past drop something heavy there before? Even more exciting is that half way through the week the floor turned to carpet. The transition was abrupt, a simple straight line between skylights. On one side of this line was a brownish-grey carpet and on the other side was concrete. I studied this change for a good minute, and then I pressed on. We had carpets in Luceron of course, but the predominant material for floors was concrete and wood paneling. I took off my shoes at one point to feel the different texture underneath my feet. I walked on carpet until I forgot that I had been walking on concrete just a few hours before. The carpet was soft but with enough stiffness to not hinder my walking speed or mess with the wheels on my skateboard. At some point the bottoms of my feet started feeling irritated by the stuff and I put my shoes back on. I set my backpack down again and had a meal. The food was starting to become less and less pleasant to eat. The flavor was expected. It had been about two weeks at this point. My routines were now firmly etched into my thoughts. Wake up. Walk. Skateboard. Have a meal. Read a passage from a book. Walk. Skateboard. Run. Sleep. I knew almost exactly what I had done the day before and I knew what I would do the day after and nothing about the hall I was walking down had changed. It was becoming infuriating. For the first time, surprisingly, I started to think more deeply about the events that lead me here. That girl. The man I had killed. What was the point of a civilization like Luceron? Filled with people so content in their own routines. When was the last major discovery on our plane of existence? A hallway with a slightly narrower width? What I was doing was the real progress. Or maybe I was deluding myself and there wasn't anything else at the end of this hall or, if it wrapped around, at the midpoint I would just find myself right back at the beginning of the West side of Luceron, just three months older...or more.

And as soon as I was finished with this line of reasoning I happened upon the first major change on my endless route. An intersection. The explorers had told me about this beforehand. There was a series of minor intersections along the path they had walked. This was the first. I looked down both halls, they seemed to go on further than I could see. They were the same as everything else except this time they branched out from the main path. I stared at them for a good minute and then walked passed them, continuing straight. I had read earlier on my map that each path ended after about 20 minutes of walking. There was no need to bother with them.

I continued for another week. And then another. I was still marking red chalk on the wall, but now at much longer intervals. I was becoming more and more confident that I would never get confused and start walking in the opposite direction. How could I possibly mess this up? Still, I had gone through five pieces of chalk. My legs no longer ached from all the walking. I had built up enough muscle at this point to be tired at the end of everyday, but nothing was sore. At this point I was probably making progress at around 30 miles everyday and yet the hall still continued. I would stare as far as my eyes could see until all the vanishing points would meet up. Each day I would think to myself "I've walked about four weeks now. I've walked about four weeks and one day now. I've got about 8 weeks left. I'm about 1/3rd of the way there. 1/3rd of the way there is close to 1/2." I would occupy my mind with all these absurd math problems to ease my mind about just how much I had left to go until I had reached as far as any other explorer had gotten. But the boredom was becoming painful now. It was like an itch in the mind that couldn't be scratched. I knew I would run into serious trouble as soon as I had completed reading the books I had, which were beginning to dwindle in number.

I found myself at many more intersections, each just as uneventful as the first. I carried a small map with me which was a copy of another map back at Luceron which went into detail about the Great Path. It was like a pamphlet for this particular side of my world. The halls that branched off the Great Path varied greatly in length. One took an hour to find the end, the other five minutes, another six hours. But each ended with little notes of interest at those ends. One end I was told had a series of shelves built into it. I actually went down that one. The shelves were built into the end, but there was nothing on the shelves of course that would be too interesting. Another had a ramp at the end that if you slid down would stop at a wall about twelve feet deep. This one was more worth the time it took to get there. I thought about what would happen if I slid down that ramp, crashed through a false wall and just kept going down and down, never being able to stabilize my footing and climb back up...just sliding forever. The sun began to change. I was starting to notice that daylight was getting shorter and shorter and the nights were growing longer. I found myself walking in darkness for many more hours than I would have liked. There was not much difference between the hall at night and the hall at day. At least the light of the stars comforted me. The noise level was the same. Back in Luceron nights were quieter and days were noisy people went along with their daily routines close together. Here it was all equally silent. Dead. This silence also ground away at my sanity. Before I knew it another month had passed.

I had finished about half of my books by this point. Perhaps I shouldn't have been so greedy in reading them. Food was dull, hard to swallow at times, but my body needed it. The only pride I could take in myself was that I had traveled this far already, more than halfway through what any other explorer had accomplished. This kept me along for a short while and then the monotony returned just the same. My skateboard was beginning to show signs of wear now. Although I had hoped on keeping it maintained during the trip there was only so much I could do with the tools and parts allotted to me and the handmade nature of the thing. I spent more time walking than skateboarding. Along this path the floor turned back to concrete, and then carpet again for another week, then at some point wooden floorboards, and then back to concrete again. The skylights were always at the same distance in the same configuration the entire way through. I started to count the skylights to occupy the time, I estimated I passed by two about every six seconds. I got to about 1,800 skylights. Then I thought I was seeing things scurry across them. It may have been a bird, as rare as those were, but it made me freeze in my tracks every time. I would see a small piece of a gray shape move across the glass and cast a shadow very briefly. Sometimes this would be followed by knocking. I had no clue what produced the knocking, I had no clue if whatever was up there could somehow penetrate the ceiling and find me. I never had the time to investigate what it was, it was too fast. It happened two times and then it just stopped. This made me pay closer attention to the skylights, until eventually I looked up and saw that one skylight was strangely curved outward. I took my time to contemplate how I would increase my height to get closer to the ceiling. I stacked my books and tip-toed on top of them until I could just barely peak over the edge of where the skylight met the roof. When I peaked over all I could see was the blinding light of the white roof that stretched out into the distance. I could see nothing of interest, I figured I just couldn't get high enough. I packed up my things and continued.

And then, the third month crept up on me. For so long I thought the third month would never arrive and then, just like that, I woke up one morning and it had been 92 days. I had thought of this moment at the very beginning of my trip and then threw that thought to my future self. I now caught it. I checked my map, there was an intersection they marked as the turn around point. They had walked down the right side of the intersection for 6 hours and then decided to turn back. Once they had arrived back at the intersection they continued on their journey for another mile. The rest of the small section of my map was colored in and labeled "blackout". I was told this meant there were no skylights past this point. I found the intersection, marked the left side of the wall with red chalk and moved along. Only a short while after, I saw ahead of me the hall getting gradually darker. I found myself at the threshold between where the last skylight and where the ceiling blocked the sun for as far as I could

see. Up ahead was cavernous darkness. I removed my flashlight from my backpack and grasped it. It was battery powered so I certainly would not be using it the whole time if this dark tunnel continued for any longer than a full day. I would be using it intermittently, just for emergencies. I was never scared of the dark in Luceron and hopefully this wouldn't be too different, I would just continue on, calm and steady. There had been nothing in the 3 months leading up to this that had been an obvious danger. I had walked at night many times. This should not be any different. And so I stepped forward, and very quickly I could not see what was ahead of me. Very quickly after that I could not see where my feet were stepping. Very quickly I could not even see my hands 6 inches away from my face. Overwhelming could not even begin to describe the next few hours of walking in pitch black. It was like I had been utterly crippled by my loss of sight. I walked far slower, far more careful not to trip over anything or myself. I tried in vain to 'sense' things with my hearing, but there was nothing to hear except the movement of the fabric of my clothes and the sound of step after agonizing step. I used the wall to guide me, just touching it with the tips of my fingers gently. I could not tell how long I had been walking until I finally grew tired enough to sleep. I allowed myself a few seconds of using my flashlight to scout the area before I set down my sleeping bag and backpack. The area, from what I could tell, was in pristine condition and just the same as most of the hallway I had walked through already. I closed my eyes, and what would you know, it was just as dark as everything else.

Sleep was rough. When I woke up I hesitated as I didn't even know if I was truly awake. But with one switch of the flashlight I knew. I think I forgot myself for awhile. Forgot everything that had brought me to this point and any hopes of the future I had. All there was was the steady shuffling of my feet. Soon all of my senses began to dull. It was like the darkness was poisonous. I started to feel dizzy, nauseous. I flashed the light on my watch and realized I had been walking for more than 24 hours in darkness. I truly did not know what I would do if it continued on like this for another day or more. I started to feel violently ill, I started taking ragged breaths. I paused.

I shivered as the reality of my situation dawned on me. Maybe an hour passed, maybe 15 minutes, but eventually I recovered and decided the only thing I could do was focus on walking forward. I concentrated solely on moving, actively thinking about where my legs were and where they were going to be next. I carried on for the next few hours like this. Just as soon as my health and energy improved did I start to grow tired, my legs gradually lost stability. But I didn't want to stay here in the darkness for another night. If it even was night. My watch said it was "5 PM" but I had been growing suspicious about its accuracy. So I continued to walk and walk until I felt I could walk no longer. I walked for many more hours hoping desperately to see a speck of light. I decided to sleep, I didn't bother to get a sleeping bag out and laid down with just a pillow, as soon as my head touched the pillow I was asleep. When I woke up I was in a full panic. I didn't want to be here anymore. This was it. This was the decision that was going to kill me. I should have pleaded to go with a group. I shivered and I looked around, wondering which way was the correct way. Which way was out? I turned on my flashlight and looked at the walls. There was no red mark on either side. I grew very worried. "Where is it?" I whispered to myself. "WHERE IS IT?" I yelled shortly after. I could have sworn on the world-- on everything that I had put a red mark on the left side of the wall just above where I was sleeping. I walked up and down the area and then shut my flashlight off. Okay. I would only have to walk in either direction for a little while until I encountered another mark. And so I walked for a good 15 minutes in the darkness once again but I had to keep my flashlight on nearly the entire time in case I missed it, and I would not want to miss it. Finally I saw it. The faint mark was on my right side. I calmed down. I had a decision to make. I could walk back in the direction of Luceron and make it out of the darkness, yes it would be another day but I would know it would end. I would spend another 3 months to get back and I would be ashamed of myself and would stay in a cell or some other job I didn't care about for the rest of my life...but I had gone further than any explorer had before, and, more importantly, Luceron had light. If I continued to walk the Great Path, who knows what more horrors awaited me. I made the decision. "I had a good run." I said to myself, whispering. I then walked forward, back to Luceron.

Half an hour into the darkness I stopped. I completely froze up. Because for the first time in 3 months something was blocking my way. It resembled a person. A visage of pale forms somehow visible in the darkness. It was standing completely still as if mirroring me. As my eyes adjusted I could see more detail. Its face had a lopsided open mouth and eyes that were hollow and tired-looking. Stringy bits of hair hung over the forehead. It was male. I soon realized, despite it being so far away, that it was Mel Dogger or at least an imitation of Mel Dogger because this thing was distorted, decayed, it looked like it had all the body parts of a human but not put together quite right...but the face was the worst offender. It wore his face.

I could hear my heart beating clearer than ever before. I walked backwards, slowly, keeping my eyes locked on it. It did not seem to follow me. After I had made some distance, I turned around and ran. As soon as I started running I heard rapid footsteps behind me as well. Naturally I assumed it was chasing me, so I turned around but it was just black. Black with the sound of running growing louder and louder. I ran faster than I had the entire path. It was sloppy. I nearly tripped over myself dozens of times. I ran for what seemed an eternity, and then, light appeared at the end of this dark abyss, more beautiful than an angel. I ran to it, the running behind me seemed to grow louder, and just when things started getting more visible I practically jumped into the glowing beam of the first skylight. I whipped around to get a good look at my attacker and there was nothing. The sound of running ceased immediately. I slowed down, caught my breath, and collapsed. I stared back at the darkness of the hallway for a good while, taking everything in and then looked forward. The rest of the Great Path was in front of me, the same yellow walls, gray concrete floors, and line of skylights stretched on and on. There was no force on Earth that could convince me to turn back now.

One year passed.

At least I think it was a year. My watch had stopped working about 6 months after I left the section of dark hallway. I had tried winding it, opening it up, closing it back. Nothing worked. I tried keeping track of the days and the nights I slept. But after 380 days I figured it didn't even matter anymore. I kept loose track but sometimes I may have counted a day or two over or under. My skateboard also broke around the same time. It was one of the more used boards anyway, just some barely finished wood panels on some plastic wheels. One of the supports cracked in half and I didn't have the means to repair it. Most of all my mind seemed slower in every way. I had finished all my books and I was suffering for it. My thoughts were jumbled and repeated. My senses dull. My focus nonexistent. It was difficult to remember any fine details of life back at Luceron. I started to wonder if such a life had ever occurred. Maybe I was just born into this role. All my memories of Luceron were planted there but really it had always been just this. Oh yeah, I suppose my Birthday had come and gone.

My health was more or less the same. My body was now nothing more than a machine for walking. If any part of the Great Path had changed along my journey it was too insignificant to remember. That was until I encountered a split in the path. It was certainly a unique sight. The path continued on straight, but there was another that split off to the left at a shallow angle. There was no discernible difference between the two but this was such a unique construction that I took my time, considering my options. I decided I would walk down the path that diverged from the straight line—maybe for a few days, and if it didn't end I would return to this fork in the road and continue straight. And so I walked down the left path.

I kept marking the left wall with red chalk as hour after hour passed. I slept, washed my clothes in a filtered rain collector with some bar soap, ate yet another nutrition cube meal, re-read a book, walked, and ran. I had a beard now. Nothing impressive but enough that I could run my fingers through it. Several days went by, maybe a week. Until finally I looked ahead and saw something different...a solid color at the end of the hall. This immediately peaked my attention. Was an end really possible? As I got closer it dawned on me that this was just another solid wall that I was infatuated with. Finally, two

other spaces peeked out. This was an intersection, a three way intersection, not a four way. I looked to the left and right, all the same thing, not a surprise, but then I inspected the left wall on the left path and felt my heart sink. There was a red mark on the wall. I had been here before. This confused me greatly. I started walking down the left path and in short time (relatively speaking) I found myself right back at the fork in the road. I had made no progress, I had ended up at the same place. Was this my mind playing tricks on me? I thought about it more and I suddenly realized that I had probably followed the left path which curved gradually, so gradually that I didn't notice it, and the path curved in on itself and lead me right back to where I started. I grew incredibly angry. Why would anyone design something so completely useless? In a fit, I pounded and scratched at my head with my own hands. What a waste of time this had all been. This must be some form of hell. I had killed Mel Dogger and somehow, somewhere, someone was torturing me for it. Some omniscient being who somehow knew these events would take place and made these traps well in advance—a hallway of darkness--a path that curves on itself...just to mess with me. I marched forward, going completely straight this time and entering the right hall, as I did this I calmed down and gathered my thoughts. I made a mark on my map warning of this trap. Of course this was a punishment, the price for taking someone's life needed to be paid. Clearly, I had not earned my freedom yet.

The walk went on. My life became a blur of rectangles and straight lines. The bleakness of my situation wore down on me, widdled me down until I was a nub of a person. A brain and some legs. My mind did not stir. My thoughts were nothing. Whoever I was before did not exist.

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At some point I forgot to eat for some time but the pain in my stomach was enough to snap me out of my trance and made me prepare a meal. I opened up my backpack and took a long hard look at the stack of boxes filled with nutrient blocks. The food supply looked about half-way done. Half-way done. Half-way. The midpoint. I could consume as much food as I had consumed getting here and no more. I looked back, and looked forward. I continued down the Great Path.

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My world was a hall that only changed as the sun rose and fell. Along this hall there were only momentary physical differences in the texture of the walls and floors but every now and then there were structures I would encounter. Once I encountered a long shallow room built into the left side of the path. The room had a row of seats, bar stools, bolted to the floor alongside a counter. Beyond that counter was some cupboards as if people somehow used this place for living at one point. Beyond that was solid wall. Another time I encountered, what I can only describe as, an abrupt transition into a glass path with gallons and gallons of water flowing underneath it. The water was blue, blue in a way I had never seen before and seemed to move in a way that produced a white foam. At one point I even came across an opening to the outside world, at least I thought it was. To the left of me the hallway had a large rectangular opening cut out of it. For a brief moment of hope I thought this might be the end of the path. I cautiously approached it, the sun was out. I peered out, I could feel the warmth of the sun but I didn't feel ill. Eventually after a few minutes of bewilderment I found the indirect light was having no effects on me. I looked out and saw a wide area, wider than my eyes could see, filled with this water flowing violently. I had seen nothing else like it. There was nothing I could do with this new information so I just kept moving.

This welcome but strange change of glass and water went on for a few days but then stopped and turned back into brownish carpet. This carpet went on for another few days. Another time after this I saw the floor change into a metal grate. Beneath this grate was a void, a dark abyss that I could not see the end of and which produced a howling wind that rushed through the holes in the grate. It frightened me deeply and I could do nothing but walk across it, hoping that the floor would not give way into whatever cavern was down there. Eventually the floor returned and peace overcame me again. Then I suddenly entered a room with a soft light. This room was filled with columns, an endless series of concrete cylinders placed in a grid like pattern, holding up the ceiling. There were no windows. The only light came from a gentle glow alongside the path that ran through them. Some sort of artificial lighting. My footsteps reverberated with such ferocity they sounded like a roaring animal. I could not tell you how far to the left and right of me those forests of columns stretched on for. I simply kept walking for another day until the room turned into blank wall once again.

Another time the hall abruptly produced another hall, except this time it was offset by a few feet to the left and down and carried on for another day. But the most astonishing discovery was far beyond these. Along my path I noticed that halls were branching off from the main path more and more frequently until I eventually walked down one of these paths and found rooms with windows and sparsely occupied by pieces of dusty furniture. I soon realized this was a district, like Luceron, only smaller and as far as I could tell, completely void of inhabitants. For a moment I falsely believed this was the end of the Great Path until I walked forward and saw that the branching off seemed to cease. I spent several days inspecting the place, every room, every hall, every path that branched off from every hall. There was no sign of people except for the brief muffled sounds of commotion that would inevitably be silenced as soon as I started making my way toward them. Other than that the place was dead silent. Everyone who had lived here, if they ever had lived here, was gone. And once all my hope for an answer vanished, I walked down the Great Path once more.

It wasn't until this precious break in the repetition of the hall was a distant memory did I find, what seemed at first to be a solid wall. All at once I was enveloped in a flurry of thoughts. Had I reached the end? Could I ration enough food to make it back if it was? Why is the end so disappointing? When I got closer it did indeed look like a solid wall, only this wall extended down, well below the floor I was walking on. I approached a widening gap in the floor. The path did not end, it was now just 20-30 feet below me. The floor gave way to what was essentially a mine shaft.

I walked away from it. Turned around and started rubbing my face in frustration. Then I turned back and peered down the square hole, perfectly flush with the walls around it. I noticed there was light at the bottom of the hole, light that more likely than not, meant there was more beyond this shaft. More of the Great Path.

I had made my decision, in fact I had made my decision several times over by now. I bent down and let my backpack fall to the ground. It landed with a thump and a cloud of dust billowed around it. I crawled over the edge until my shoes were digging into the wall and my arms were hanging on to the ledge. I tried not to look down as a violent shiver ran up my body and I began to sweat profusely. For the first time in a while I thought about everyone I knew back home. "If I survive this," I thought "I will make an effort to know people, I will do good to them. I swear it. I will make it through this hall." The thought was not good enough for me so I verbalized these exact words, first in a whisper then in a yell. And then, I let go and fell.

I landed on my side, thoroughly breaking my arm, the pain shot through me and I was left gasping for air. I squirmed for a good minute, and then looked up. I almost immediately noticed that there were some holds carved into the wall that I would have seen if I had leaned over the gap just a little more. I stewed in my anger for a good half an hour. After this the pain subsided just enough for me to hold onto my arm. I used some rags to tie it to my torso. I picked up the backpack and got up on my own feet. My broken arm would make me slower, and I would have to only use one strap on the

backpack, but I was alive and mobile. I looked ahead, the hallway did indeed continue. I moved forward only a few feet and looked up, a skylight was above me, only this time it was built much higher into the ceiling, higher than the distance I had fallen. The light was much dimmer down here but still visible. And so I continued.

This was a subtly different environment. It was darker and the new height of the skylights was a curiosity. Gradually I got used to this deeper state of existence. Night came sooner, and I slept more, but I made progress. It took a week or two but my arm healed significantly, my movement was still severely limited but the arm no longer stung as much. At some point the floor started to be populated with bits of trash. Some broken glass here, some torn material there, bits of string. I couldn't come up with a reason for why these things suddenly appeared, and as soon as I forgot the hall had been any different, the rubbish started to disappear. At some point along my journey I looked up at one of the skylights, really studied it, I then remembered what they looked like after my descent. I couldn't know for sure, but that square window, my only source of light, seemed higher than the one I had seen when I first fell down the hole. Of course that was countless days ago, but I had the unshakable feeling I was going deeper at a rate so gradual I could hardly detect it. Even the hallway might have been darker. One day later I looked up again. Yes. It looked higher, and as a consequence, smaller. A few days later I started to look at the ceiling itself. Now I was really scared my mind was playing tricks on me, because for whatever reason, it looked like the ceiling had come closer to me. I reached up with my working arm and tried to touch it, I couldn't. Skeptical of my own senses, I continued unperturbed. Another day passed, and around the same time I looked up, and tried to touch the ceiling. This time I was just an inch or less away from scraping it with my fingernails. I looked at the skylights, they were higher, smaller, less light. Yet another day passed and again I tried to touch the ceiling, this time my fingers just barely touched it, it had a rough texture. I started to grow worried in the face of this architectural anomaly. Had the builders of this path made some sort of mistake? I could only continue.

Before I knew it my hair was scraping against the ceiling, then the top of my head gently shoved up against the ceiling. Everything pointed to a downward angle so shallow I could not detect it with my vision. The skylights seemed to rise higher and higher with each passing day, the light in the hallway slowly dimmed and dimmed. I had to crouch my way through the path. My knees hurt from the endeavor and I had to take frequent breaks. Soon, there was little light in the hall at all. As I trudged forward I nearly became crippled with fear, the only thing that kept me going was the determination to finish this task, and the theory that this was simply another challenge, like the obstacles beforehand. I held onto this theory even as the ceiling seemed to gradually smush me down. I had heard plenty of stories in Luceorn about mine collapses, suddenly those stories were all too relatable. I had heard about rapid bodily destruction at the hands of poorly placed beams, and the slow suffocation of those who could not be rescued. While they were more often trapped by other people's foolishness, I seemed to be walking into this trap by my own. The hallway squeezed at me more and more. I couldn't measure time. I couldn't see what was in front of me. I couldn't hear anything except my body and clothes scraping against the ceiling. I feared I would encounter Mel again, or some other corpse come back to visit. Eventually the ceiling got so low I had to crawl on my stomach. When the ceiling got lower I had to take off my backpack and push it in front of me. I had eaten enough food and used enough supplies that the backpack was thinner now. Soon I found myself squeezing through a tiny gap in pitch black, inching along at an unbearable pace. Everything hurt, I was sweating, my breathing was irregular. My muscles spasmed and I shook violently. I swear it felt like I was being crushed. I prayed that the gap would not get any smaller. I wanted to go home. Dear God, I wanted to go home. I could not tell you how long I was in there. My mind clouded. I was running out of energy. I had to sleep between crawls. When I awoke, I was in a nightmare. I thought about what would be left of me if I ever got out of this. Could I ever be the same? Did I even remember what I looked like? No, I didn't. I hadn't looked in a mirror or even in a subtle reflection in a piece of glass in an eternity. I forgot my face.

In a fit of panic I turned on the flashlight for a few seconds. All I could see in front of me was the tiny shaft I had to squeeze through. It looked like it was getting smaller but maybe that was a trick of the light. I decided to keep the light on, this was an important maneuver. Maybe an hour later, it ran out of power. I kept pressing the on switch in a panic. In frustration I threw it behind me, there was no point in carrying extra weight now. The light from the skylights had disappeared completely. I was now in complete darkness, somehow even darker than before. And then, I got stuck. I had squeezed my head through but the rest of my torso didn't want to move. I tried to crawl backwards but my arms were in such an awkward position I couldn't move them enough to force me out either way. I was stuck. Here it was, the bottom of the ramp. I shook violently in sheer panic and then started to cry. "Alright!" I yelled into the darkness, "Alright! I get it!" I tugged at my backpack, it barely moved. "Help! Help! Help! Help me!" I yelled until I ran out of energy, my head felt faint, and I fell asleep.

When I awoke I shook and then realized I was still trapped. I remained still this time and looked ahead. Something had caught my eye. My backpack formed a wall in front of me but there was a tiny gap in that wall near the top, beyond that gap I saw a light. An exceedingly faint light that may have well been my brain's last moments producing comforting hallucinations, but a light nonetheless. I took a deep breath, prepared my arms and legs, and then pushed with all my strength against the walls. An aching pain enveloped me as the rest of my body was pulled through the gap. I felt like fainting again but the light beckoned me forward. I crawled, then the ceiling seemed to get higher, and then I crawled with my backpack on, then I got on my hands and knees, and then I crouched, and then I walked. This took only minutes compared to the eternity I had spent doing these maneuvers in the opposite order. I limped along into the daylight at a frustratingly slow pace but there was nothing stopping me now. I arrived at the first skylight, the one that had produced the faint light. I had never been so happy to see a skylight. I looked ahead, more light and a straight uninterrupted path were in front of me. It was over.

Even though I was in great physical pain, I never felt better about my situation. It was all the same but I was determined to walk. The pain was a driver. Of course I might run out of food, of course this could all lead nowhere at all, of course I might just die before I ever even get close to the end, of course it was all bullshit, this world was bullshit. This world physically did not want me to continue down this path. Every step I took was an act of defiance. Let my skeleton be a marker for the next explorers to go down this wretched gauntlet. Let me be the eternal example of foolish ambition in the face of unrelenting obstacles. And so I continued.

I don't know how much longer I went on, but it was long enough for food to run out. I ate my last nutrition block meal at the same type of rain spout I had eaten at thousands of times before. A few days later I slept that night wondering if it would be my last. The hallway was all the same. It was an unchangeable constant. I was simply its passenger. My body was wasting away, all I was was a brain with legs, walking my last until I gave out. Then my adventure would end. At least I could die knowing I had gone much further than any other explorer before me, if only I could send a message telling them not to try going down this path for answers anymore. No more people needed to be sent. It was all a scam from the beginning. Don't bother.

And then the floor changed. It changed into something I had never seen before, black tiles. I stopped in front of black square tiles that extended beyond my sight. They were clean and beautiful. They reflected the sunlight—I could see my face in them. I picked up the pace. In no time at all I was at the entrance to a large round room. It had skylights all along its curved borders. Curves, something I thought I might never see again. I studied the environment for a good few minutes. The hallway did not go any further. It seemed to...end. I walked into the center of the room and my feet touched some sort of movable plate on the floor, it pressed in and I heard a series of machine whirring come from below me. A platform rose steadily from the floor and on this platform was a switch covered by a transparent case. The case was dusty but the switch could clearly be seen. I fumbled with the case for a moment before opening it on its hinge. The lever was made of cold metal with a long rubber handle. There seemed to be only one thing left to do. I lifted the handle and wrapped my fingers along its grip, and

then slammed it down to the opposite side. At first nothing happened, then the machine whirring returned and a collapsible staircase descended from the ceiling, opening the room up to the sunlight above. Startled, I leapt back from the staircase, then, pausing, I approached cautiously. I had never felt direct sunlight unshielded by glass before. I wondered if it would burn me. I reached out my arm. The sunlight felt warm, but no burning sensation. I let my backpack slide off my shoulders and took my first step. The staircase was sturdy but looked weightless. As I walked up each stair more and more of my body was bathed in sunlight, it was warm, pleasant even. Finally, I peaked out over the roof. My world...my entire world was white. In front of my eyes was a white, flat, desolate, plane that extended forever. I was struck with how bright it all was. I stepped out onto the plane. The floor was hard. The sun was incredibly bright but I didn't feel ill, much less cooked. The world was completely silent, except for the air. The air flowed past me and produced a howling sound. But this air was stronger than the conditioners I knew at Luceron, it seemed to flow through the entire environment. This too was strangely pleasant. The great blue of the sky was cut into by the straight white plane, it was heavenly, what I imagined freedom as a concept looked like. I looked around and saw, in the distance, a building of some sort. I walked toward it. The building was colored in a dark bluish hue, it had a domed roof, and spaces for windows but with no glass. I walked underneath it. It was constructed in an ornate way I had never seen anywhere else before. The underneath was filled with timbers, I assume, for support. It produced shade, a welcome respite from the heat of the sun. On the floor was a plaque that covered up the entire footprint of the building. An army of symbols had been carved into it. In the center of it all was a large circle with a line carved straight down the middle, at the midpoint of this line was a small dot. Bewildered, I came out of the building and looked out. At this slight elevation I could see more detail in the white plane, there were lines marked in the floor that went out into the distance. I noticed a gap in the endless stretch of white. I walked towards it. I found that this gap contained a staircase descending down just like the staircase I had taken to walk up. Worried I had just made my way back to the same place I walked in the exact opposite direction. I found another gap and a staircase that went down, I walked down the stairs and saw my backpack on the floor. I confirmed that there was indeed a different staircase that mirrored this one. I walked back toward that staircase and walked down it. It had the same round room and a hallway. A hallway. Another hallway. I looked down this hall and saw the corridor extend on and on, the skylights casting beams onto the floor. It couldn't be...

In a panic I returned to the building. I studied the symbols more. Some of the symbols looked strangely like letters. I soon realized these were letters. I started to look around more and I found letters that looked almost readable, but not quite. Then, I found my own language.: "You are at the half-way point of this Design." The inscription read. I froze. I re-read the first sentence. "You are at the half-way point of this Design – 20 Codename: "Rat Maze" Congratulations traveler. The key station coordinates and instructions are inscribed below..." The rest of the text was readable but consisted of so much technical jargon and information using vocabulary I never heard of that I had no hope of understanding it.

When I exited the building I looked up at the sun. It was bright and hot as hell. I walked back down the staircase from which I came and to the lever. I flipped the lever back and forth in desperation. Nothing worked. I grabbed my backpack. There was not a single speck of food left in it. I returned to the surface. The world around me was completely devoid of life. I had no clue if I could walk for even another day before I gave up my spirit. I threw my backpack with such force I thought I dislocated my bad arm. My eyes welled up with tears and I fell to the ground. I pounded my fists on the floor that had been my ceiling for so long. "Goddammit! Goddammit! Goddammit!" I yelled into the void. I remained in a fetal position for a good half an hour. A great wave of energy had been spent. There was no hope of getting myself out of this. It had all been for nothing. I laid down on my back and faced the sky. There were big voluminous clouds moving across that great blue expanse which mirrored the great white expanse around me. I stared blankly at the sky waiting for my demise. The sun shone and cooked the surface. I felt my body drying up.

[And if we were to rise above Rudon, we would see his tiny body a black speck against a great white sheet. As we rose we would ascend through the clouds, a mist of even more white. As we rose further we would see that the great white expanse would gradually begin to curve, and we would see the plane is actually a sphere, floating gracefully in an endless black void. This white marble would be surrounded by machines floating in low orbit. And beyond this, unbeknownst to Rudon, we would see ships appearing from the darkness. These space vessels approach the planet, first only a few arrive, seemingly by magic, then more arrive, and more, and more. So great their numbers they almost eclipse the sphere itself. They speed towards the planet eager to land and introduce themselves.]

The End