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Bellum Invictum

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Sunshine bathes the green hills in a blinding white. Gray clouds slightly laden with rain pass overhead providing shade, promising refreshing rain. As the wind blows gently and the autumn leaves rustle, a distant alarm mixes with the sigh of the breeze. Yesterday was much like this. People solemnly picnicked in the park, watching with desperate earnest the rippling of the water upon the shore of the pond. People walked about the bright streets, picking out the most extravagant breads and wines to eat for their meals. People breathed in the recycled air at the Metro, going to work with a dazed look on their faces and heightened senses in their minds. Yesterday was much like today. Except today the park is empty. No one enjoys the beauty of the dandelions swaying in the breeze. Why? No one watches the water lap against the mud and grass shoreline. Why? Not even the squirrels, the birds, the rabbits are present to regard the beauty of nature man has allowed to survive. Why? The city is filled with the finest bread and wine, but nobody buys it. Why? The Metro is filled with masses of huddling people trying frantically to get, or stay in, a prison-like room with thick steel doors and high vaulted ceilings. Why? Outside, a distant alarm mixes with the sigh of the breeze.

The sun beams down upon this city, this pinnacle of man’s modernity, while the bombs silently fall. They strike everywhere. Killing in the green park. Why? Killing in the gray streets. Why not?
Killing in the high vaulted room in the Metro. Why not me? They came and took life like some vengeful gods of war. If I were less civilized I would worship these fragments of sudden war as my redeemers, the ones who spared me. I would cast off memories of the Before and devote my life to the service of the Weapons in the present. I would shun the ghosts of the past that I see gliding down every alley. I would be their servant, lone and destitute, but an apostle nevertheless. But I am too civilized to be swayed by the power of these gods. I defy them, spit on them lying in the park, in the streets, in the Metro. I will never bow. I will never give up my ghosts.

I awake.

The room is dark. The darkness pushes me down deeper into confusion. The room is dark. I can definitely smell something coming from over there—from the walls. Those rats again. I can’t keep them out. More rats on this planet than—of course. Hunger grabs my stomach. Grabs with stony fingers balled into a tight fist. The rats. They’re so weak, so small. They can see here and I cannot. They are in control. I am an outsider. I am a pillager. Something...something...like a Viking, I am here for something. Not their fields—not their women—water. Thirst is the only thing that distracts me from the pain of the strong fingers twisting my empty stomach. I need water. **

I walk to the smog green pool of stagnant water. I regard my face in the toxic mirror. A rigid face scarred with time and visions of horror. I peer closer. Past the wrinkled skin, past the radiation burnt ears. Past the patches of hair clinging to my scalp into the center of my eyes. Around this window to my soul, the once green iris is starting to take on yellowish tint like some jaundice. The Sickness. It is beginning to set. I have averted it (rather, put it off) before. The crisis nears. I need water.

They cannot live off this. How can I? The rats—they snicker at me as I fill my canteen. Emerald green eyes of their Assembly congregate to watch this decline of man. A joy runs through the crowd. The Emperor declares that the Enemy is in ruins. All praise is to be directed to the god of war. A holiday is declared. Two hundred slaves are massacred in glee. They celebrate their continued existence with death! Barbarians. The room is dark.
I leave quickly. The chants of the masses call for my head as a final sacrifice to the bloodthirsty, benevolent god that perpetuates their existence. Their poets sing dreadful dirges. Their craftsmen shape molten metal into elegant blades. Their politicians spit inciting rhetoric at the crowd who, waiting with starving ears, crave a reason to swing a sword with hands grown too idle. The room is dark.

I emerge from Hell through a manhole. The streets are deserted. Below, the world thrives. Above, the world dies, and a letter from the emissary says the greedy Barbarian hordes grow every day at our border. Our?

“What am I saying?”

Night falls suddenly over the sky like the last curtain of the show. That’s a good simile—the last curtain—I should write that down, but they won’t understand. There I go again—They. Every new day the weary actor (singular) wakes up to find that it was indeed not the last curtain—but tonight will be. And then it won’t—but tonight will be. And then it won’t—but tonight will... what the shit?

“What the shit?”

I heard a noise. Who’s there?

“Who’s there?”

I walk across the street towards the sound.

I crawl (relating to the speed at which I am walking. I am, in fact, not actually crawling) to the shadowy canyon between decrepit buildings. Who’s there?

“Who’s there?”

The anachronistic street signs shake their stiff, aging heads at me. Their eyes were watching me. Do you know something I don’t?

Hushed voice. “Do you know some—?”

I almost asked aloud. I almost asked aloud. I need to ask somebody aloud.

I look down the alley.

I wonder of which I should be more frightened: the alley from Before, or the alley now? Before now, in the Before, it was only immoral. After the Before, now, it is dark. The alley was dark. The alley is dark. The alley will be dark. Perhaps after I find the
sound, I will ask the street signs which was worse... I think I should very much like to be mugged right now. Hello?

"Hello?"

A man with a blue cap and suit jacket steps quickly into the light. He speaks into a phone—no, he yells into a phone. He does not meet my gaze. Passes through me. Subsequently stealing the warmth of my soul and giving fuel to my fear. He does not notice my mouth open in amazement. He yells about a lost sale and—he yells about a lost football game and—he yells about a failure of a friend to get him the right length of putter and—he yells about the sheer magnitude of the bills the shop is charging him for repairs to his car and—he yells about his kid’s poor grades in school and—he yells about his steak dinner, ordered medium, served medium well and—I yell at him about his dying grandmother and—I yell at him about his wife’s love now grown weary with his work. I yell at him about his son’s antidepressant prescription and I yell at him about all the human beings that were around him and how they are so familiar, even if they are so strange. But he does not meet my gaze. He storms off down the street. The warmth of my soul trailing not far behind.

After the man in the suit, a man in a military uniform resolutely steps into the light. He looks into the distance. He does not meet my gaze. He walks with steps that used to be his, now directed by a faceless politician. He thinks with a mechanical purpose that used to be guided by patriotism’s zest, like a father instructing his son how to throw a baseball. And that son becoming the star left fielder on his little league team. The wet air of the Saturday morning games. Hopes of victory superseded by the guarantee of warm praises of performance by his family after the game and, more importantly, pizza for dinner! But the more times the son plays, the less he thinks about congratulations and adoration from his family. No. His mind soon dwells only on moments suspended high on the shoulders of his victorious teammates, lifting him, their star, upon dirty hands into the bright heavens of true happiness. His father emphatically exalts him too. Never forgetting nose-fulls of pride and fresh spring mornings. Never forgetting how it was Before. The soldier is tired now. Tired of arduous treks here and there carrying survival on his
back and death in his hand. Tired of faces sneering hostility. Tired of psychologists and philosophers trying to define human nature. Tired of knowing human nature. Tired of being away from home. Tired of his son asking *When's Daddy gonna? When's Daddy gonna?* Tired of being the hero, weary like Odysseus—weary like a man whose journey home hasn’t even begun, weary like a man whose Penelope must fend off thoughts of sinking more than she must fend off suitors, weaving a beautiful tapestry of stoicism that she destroys every night just before falling asleep. Tired of the dusty midnight trips guided only by the dull green pulse of the GPS. Tired of being hurt. Tired of hurting. Tired of tired. He does not meet my gaze. And I fall to my knees.

The men pass me in my lamentations.

Another man comes crawling out of the maw of the alley (relating to the speed at which he is walking. He is, in fact, not actually crawling). He dangles, with limp arm, a canteen filled with water of a smog green luster. He walks, not with direction or purpose, but with the magnetic pull of instinct, his body seemingly non-compliant with the aching feet that drag him along. He stops. Looks me in the eyes, meets my gaze. His entire history encoded on the disks of his yellowing iris. A home, small and not paid off, but cheery. People everywhere. A car with a broken speedometer and terrible fuel economy, but functional. People everywhere. A wife, beauty’s remnants waning behind the nebulous cloud of age, but loving. People everywhere. A job, days crawling by (literally, crawling) and becoming filled with craning necks glancing at clocks, but it pays the bills. People everywhere. Streets, overcrowded with people – those impregnable vaults of information, experience, emotion, deviation, hope, vice, triumph, possession, perception, reality... People everywhere. But what good is history if nothing is to be learned by it?

“What good is it?”

Just reality.
Just survival.
Just Void.

The man looks at his doppelganger. His face a leaf, sitting slick on a wet branch. In the black distance a broken bomb shelter in the depths of the Metro crumbles. As toxic air floods the station, the sky thickened with black night. Just as the stage-hands were beginning to lower the curtain on the final act of the final show, just as they had done the night before, the man spoke.

“What is there to live for now?” he asks.
“Memory, and the water in your canteen,” he answers.

In the cover of the soupy toxicity of the night, the emperor Rodentus III leads his legions into the vast expanses of the vacant bomb shelter. The crimson banner of his god, Bellum Invictum, leads the way.