

GOD JR. AND THE VIEW FROM THE END OF THE WORLD

THE END OF THE WORLD had come just as swiftly and successfully as anyone could have predicted, which naturally, someone had. With total obliteration imminent within the year, life on planet Earth had become, to most, on par with how St. Peter might feel having just put in his two-weeks, after his wife decided they would soon be moving to Hell. In an attempt to displace some of these widespread anxieties, citizens of Earth took to forming a circum-continental betting pool, as to what the exact date, moment, and vessel for destruction might encompass the End of Days. The winner of the End of Days Circum-Continental Prediction Pool was to be given what was termed, 'a God's eye view of humanity's resolute conclusion,' by means of an impregnable Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress—capable of traveling to any distance on the globe in under thirteen and one-half minutes, and which could also pick up any and all radio broadcasts being beamed from across the Earth and Abroad.

The winner of the E.O.D.C.C.P.P. was a woman named Agnus Beechstow—Anglo-German—recently dead at the age of one-hundred-and-four from a combination of old age, and an impaled lung. Being one-hundred-and-four, Agnus had lost much of the mobility and dexterity she had once had, which contributed to the impaled lung she sustained while deep sea whale hunting, and subsequently caused the honor of witnessing the E.O.D. to pass on to her oldest living relative: sixty-seven year old Josstone Beechstow—American—her great-nephew.

As expected, the E.O.D. was celebrated with moments of monumental terror, widespread confusion and informational disorientation, as well as lots of yelling towards the sky. Accordingly, a short while after the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress appeared looming overhead the home of Josstone Beechstow, his surrounding neighbors assumed invasion, and began shelling it—to little effect—with Electron Rockets, and Fission-Propelled Grenades. Only after the fortress began playing the commercial jingle for the Nicotine Soda Corporation, sponsor of the E.O.D.C.C.P.P., did they stop their shelling, and reserve themselves back into a quiet, dignified panic.

"Just let me grab my shoes," said Josstone, holding his palms out toward the sky in a symbol of gracious submission, and was thus then depariclied and reassembled ten-thousand meters above the ground, barefoot.

Once aboard, the Onboard Artificial Companion let Josstone know that the E.O.D. would be commencing shortly, and began listing the drink options available to him while he waited. Unaccustomed to the rate of speed at which the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress was moving, Josstone attempted to pay attention to his choices, but struggled, as he couldn't stop falling down. Minutes later, as Josstone began to tentatively gather his footing, the ship bounding through the Earth's atmosphere at 182,000 km/second, the World Broadcast began. It was beamed directly into Josstone's head.

It said the following:

"We now turn our ears and our hearts towards the edge of the ineffably unknown, as we bring you this special, and very final broadcast from our very own Ghost Reporter, live from the end of the world."

A second voice, somewhat ambient and echoing began to speak.

"Today, sometime between the sky-lit hours of Orange and Indigo Blue, just as the day gave its resounding, retired sigh, thousands gathered to commemorate the memory of celebrated Dream Analyst Fr. Gildred Ainsle, who died tragically earlier this week at a werewolf sex party.

"Fr. Ainsle is most notably remembered for his inspirational self-help novella The Anonymous Eulogy, a book which, according to Fr. Ainsle supporters—as well as its infamous book jacket—'saved a whole doomed generation from certain suicide.'

"Tonight marked the 111th anniversary of the book's release, in which he groggily commemorated mankind's rise to existential confusion, and outlined the importance of well-plotted geopolitical fiction, by way of the story of two autocratic dictators, falling in love with the same woman.

"Loyal followers set off blue fireworks, in memoriam to Fr. Ainsle's 'Glass Orb Exposition,' during which he spent the entirety of one week isolated within a fifty-cubic-foot glass orb, suspended high above Belgium's Eastwatch Memorial Museum, while getting over the flu. General consensus states that he will be missed.

"Now for a point of verity. There has been, of late, an overwhelming and ubiquitous abuse of the common metaphor. 'The Earth is'—has become a popular target for such ho-hum, and this reporter would like to, at long last, reconcile this great perversion. You see, the danger in the allowance of metaphoric abuse is that things such as 'The Earth' can become whatever one can dream it to be, and not for a moment, what it truly is: an infinitely tiny collection of matter, impiously populated by creatures driven in unified force towards self-destruction, and perhaps a place of such galactic insignificance as to scarcely deserve the epithet of 'was.' To speak plainly, I've lost taste for the whole bloody affair.

"In other news, today was a dreary as would be expected."

THE TRANSMISSION CLICKED OFF.

The main problem with the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress, Josstone decided, was that it was, for obvious protective reasons, completely soundproof. As he watched the fifteen television screens suspended in front of him, he found himself oddly disappointed by the lack of soundtrack he now realized he had been expecting to accompany The End. The parades of mushroom clouds and toxic-colored gasses, the Electron Bombs showering lightning-shaped tentacles across scattering crowds, the carefree scores of death being dispersed with reckless abandon were all made sadly artificial behind this unwanted veil of silence.

After a few unenthused hours of viewing, sometime shortly following the borders of most major continents fleeting away into the mad waters, Josstone powered down the television screens, and retired, disenchanted, to his Death Chamber.

Josstone thought the Death Chamber was nice enough. It had an artificially operated department store, food market, and six-star hotel. It also had any pharmaceutical, opiate, and street drug obtainable, as well as a full stock of *MacArthur Year Three-Hundred-Sixteen*—generally accepted as the most proficient liquid with which to reduce yourself to a blinded, aimless maniac.

The single let down, Josstone conceded, was the absence of a decent pair of shoes.

The most generous reward of the E.O.D.C.C.P.P. was, however, access to a machine called the *Neural Shower*, or Collective Japanese Territories Military Code SWG4685—a piece of military equipment once referenced to by one United States General of Psychological Deterrent as '*religiously expensive.*' What the machine actually did, according to its manufacturer, was everything the human body could possibly desire, by way of neuroreceptor-laced water droplets, capable of penetrating to every pleasure receptor of the Motor System, to the molecular level.

The slogan of the *Neural Shower*, which was by the time of the E.O.D., global mindshare, was written across the top of the doorframe apparatus in bright yellow letters.

The slogan said: 'SO LONG, CRUEL WORLD!'

Once its initial cycle was completed, the second function of the *Neural Shower* was to clean and sanitize what was left of the seized, ejaculate, excretion, and urine covered user, in order to prepare them for their Death Pod.

Unfortunately, when Josstone began attempting to enter his information into the *Neural Shower's* blank computer terminal, he noticed the small, handwritten sign lying on the floor, apparently having fallen off the screen. The sign said: 'OUT OF ORDER.'

Increasingly crestfallen, Josstone poured himself a generous glass of Nicotine Soda, and began perusing the provided pharmaceutical supply.

He then re-categorized each medicament by their respective Regional Provider, and counted forty-seven prescriptions named after members of his family.

It had been decades since the Beechstow family origins had been lost to history. So came the uniform Beechstow answer to any inquiry of family lineage being, simply, "We are descended from Hypochondriacs." The explanation to this being that compounded centuries of year round antibiotics, immunizations, and vaccinations had, against all scientific reasoning, fortuitously altered their

genetic makeup, and formed a nearly flawless immunological support system. Because of this, it was long suspected that the Beechstow lineage was not only immune to every known illness, but also impervious to any form of radiation sickness, as well as most harmful Biological Agents.

Josstone had never in his life had so much as a blemish.

After spending two full hours inside his Death Pod—a cylindrical chamber long enough to lay down in, and which, according to the Onboard Artificial Companion leaked a painless, forty-five-second-fast-acting-neurotoxin throughout the bloodstream—Josstone came to the unfortunate conclusion that the rumors were true.

He climbed out of his Death Pod, the voice of the Onboard Artificial Companion cheerily announcing, *"You are now dead!"* and made his way back towards the Bow of the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress, hoping that some new developments might be seen on the television.

It was then that he heard the sound of knocking, coming from outside the ship.

At hearing this, the Onboard Artificial Companion continued its looping of *"You are now dead!"* however it also began, excitedly, to add in the phrase, *"The Nicotine Soda Corporation wishes to congratulate you as winner of the End of Days Circum-Continental Prediction Pool, and welcome you to the patented Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress."* This rang continually all throughout the ship, as well as directly into Josstone's head.

"The Nicotine Soda Corporation wishes to congratulate you as winner of the End of Days Circum-Continental Prediction Pool, and welcome you to the patented Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress."

"You are now dead!"

To further display its increased excitement, as it sang, the Onboard Artificial Companion dimmed the overhead lights of the cabin, and began listing the available musical tracks. Praying that the knocking sound, as well as the transmogrification of the Onboard Artificial Companion were both some sort of technical glitch, Josstone continued perusing through the feeds of the television screens, all of which were, by this time, completely blacked out.

Again, there was a knock, which resounded heavily throughout the Carbon-Steel shell of the cabin.

"Artificial Companion," Josstone said, straining his voice to yell over the overlapping announcements. "Where are we right now?"

The volume of the Artificial Companion's loop decreased, as the voice in Josstone's head was beamed through, clear. *"Our current coordinates, Mr. Beechstow, are Longitude, 11.4798° S; Latitude, 15.6241° E—over the previously sovereign nation of Angola."*

"How far up are we?"

"We are currently nine-thousand-four-hundred-and-thirteen meters above the Earth's nearest surface, Mr. Beechstow. We are aboard the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress of the Nicotine Soda Corporation, and you are dead."

The knocking was becoming increasingly impatient.

"Is there a video feed of the outside of the ship?" asked Josstone.

"The Nicotine-Soda Corporation wishes to issue you a formal apology, Mr. Beechstow, as all satellite feeds were terminated shortly following the End of Days."

Josstone began pacing around the Viewing Chamber, nervously sipping at his sixth glass of Nicotine Soda, and pondering which of the thirty at-war nations would have deployed sentries to take control of the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress.

"Are you—are you a person...out there?" Josstone asked, feeling foolish.

"Would you like me to open the outer doors?" asked the Onboard Artificial Companion.

"Please do not do that," said Josstone.

"Do what?"

"Open the outer doors."

"Opening the outer doors," said the Onboard Artificial Companion, ending its transmission with Nicotine Soda's signature slogan: *'DRINK UP, KIDS! DRINK NICOTINE SODA!'*

Before Josstone could issue any formal protest, the air was ripped from his lungs, his body wrenched sideways as a great vacuum pulled him towards the starboard end of the cabin. Air tearing past his ears, he wrapped what parts of his body he could around one the mini bar and held on for his life, until the vacuum suddenly released, and the contents of the cabin settled noisily to the floor.

Within seconds of the outer doors closing, frazzled, and face down, he was overwhelmed by a profound awareness that he was no longer alone inside the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress. Getting to his feet, Josstone glanced toward the direction of the ship from which the vacuum had been attempting to expel him.

The Lord Jesus Christ was standing by to the door. He was waving at Josstone, somewhat apprehensively.

JOSSTONE BEECHSTOW'S CLOSEST FRIEND had been a man named Raymond Faustern. (A man also speculated to be Josstone's second or third cousin). When he was sixty-nine, Raymond was hit by passing Freight Carrier while walking his dog, and was held in Death Stasis for twenty-two hours, before his medical team was able to reassemble and stabilize his body. While visiting Raymond in the hospital, Josstone had asked him, "When you were dead, what was it like—Meeting God?"

"I don't recall much," said Raymond with a shrug, "other than she's black."

It had been roughly 25,000 years since Man had been made the promise of Christ's return to Earth. Once it had become clear that The End was pointedly nigh, a popular scholarly exercise had emerged, involving the theorization of exactly what the Lord's first words to mankind would be upon his return. The general academic agreement was that, as time was soon to be up, it was—proverbially speaking—now or never. On seeing Him, Josstone fell to his knees, and began reciting the words that he, along with all other now newly-deceased inhabitants of the planet had memorized since they were able to speak.

"Yahweh," said Josstone, "Savior of Man, Seed of the Creator, what news have you brought from your travels to Paradise? What is the word of the Lord?"

The Lord, donned in short lime green racing shorts, an all black taffeta sprinter's jacket with lime-green frill, along with oversized, slightly crooked sunglasses and an incredibly disheveled backpack, spoke, still waving at Josstone with his slightly disproportionate, slightly lame left hand. As He did this, the voice of the Artificial Companion powered down, leaving behind a perspicacious silence, which seemed to echo all-knowingly from some proverbial sense of Everywhere.

He set his backpack on the floor next to him, and asked what the hell was going on.

THE END HAD NEARLY COME BY ACCIDENT three generations earlier, after several social media conglomerates began marketing directly to infants. This campaign was carried out with great initial success, in the form of a microscopic implant, which would in theory project all conscious thoughts, instantly, to every other person on the planet. When the self-destruct button was tenuously prodded by a low-level programmer—a failsafe understood by most employees of the conglomerate to be nothing more than an office urban myth—the population of the Earth dropped by half.

The actually E.O.D., however, had begun once Australia decided to make an attempt at sneaking around the back side of The Globe, in order to attack Greenland from the northwest, and were spotted. Once they crossed their Troop Carrier Ships over the South Pole, Greenland declared open war, initiating the automated Allied Defense Protocol, and activating the missile systems of Mongolia, Burma, Saudi Arabia, the Ukraine, and Turkmenistan. Simultaneously, all other established nations of the world fell in line, and together contracted the long-awaited destruction of the human race.

Within an hour of Greenland's declaration, thirty nations were playing out the bitter end, and Josstone Beechstow was aboard the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress of the Nicotine Soda Corporation.

(Notably, in the years leading up to the E.O.D., the term 'Mutually Assured Destruction' had taken on an entirely different connotation than had

been previously established—as it was also the name of the then most famous Post-Hip-Rock-Alternative-Techno-Country-Program group in the world.

Each night, the same question was screamed out into the vast open void of air, as the group held giant, floating concerts, spreading themselves across the entirety of the Mediterranean. These concerts were marked by the whole of the surface of the water being covered with filthy, hairless, piously deranged fans, listening wantonly from an overhead satellite, and watching the performance as it was beamed across the night sky from nearby Italy, Greece, or the Republic of Societal Abstainers—a nation that, while still doomed to the E.O.D., had successfully ended all homeland hostilities, and maintained relative cultural civility after the initiation of every citizen having two-years mandatory training in the Food Service Industry.

The question being screamed every night was: 'ARE YOU PEOPLE M.A.D.!?')

Josstone explained this—in flustered, nervous detail—to The Lord, all the while attempting to reposition his body into one more demonstrative of his unfaltering humility. His main obstacle was still being able to speak, while remaining as close to the ground as possible.

"...and I won the Circum-Continental—well, really it was my Aunt. But anyway, Lord, I don't know how to put this, but I believe that I may be slightly immortal. Not immortal in the way that you are—that thou ist—are. Much a lesser percentage of immortal, Lord."

"Call me God Jr.," said the man standing at the door.

"Yes, Lord," said Josstone, then, "What?"

"I'm trying out God Jr. I think that it sounds better—and either you should stand up, or we should both lie face down like you're doing. I'm fine either way, but I think we should make a definite decision on how were going to talk to one another."

Josstone hesitated for a moment, then said, "I worry that you are testing me, oh Lord."

"God Jr."

Josstone continued his reverent trembling, now silent, his body completely prone, with his nose and mouth pressed firmly to the ground.

"Alright," said God Jr., lying down and mimicking Josstone. "There, now we're both on the ground."

"Are you here to take me to paradise, oh Lord. Oh God Jr.?"

"Well," said God Jr., his voice sounding as though it was in the process of removing a metaphorical splinter. "Not really."

"Are you here to tell me the secrets of the universe?"

"Sort of. That is to say that our conversation is solely dependent upon your own definition of what is secret."

At saying this, there was a pointed lull in dialogue, the two of them staring into the floor of the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress, the tops of their heads evermore nearly touching, both apparently unsure of what to say next.

"I am forever in your sacred hands," Josstone whispered, feeling both oddly intimate and astronomically distant, as well as on the verge of spontaneous combustion.

"Right, so I'm here because—"

"THROUGH HIM, WITH HIM, IN HIM! IN THE UNITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT!"

"Please, you really don't have to—"

"ALL GLORY IS YOURS ALMIGHTY FATHER! FOREVER AND EVER!"

"Okay, why don't we just..." said God Jr., getting to his feet, and picking up Josstone by the arms, which were, by this point, flailing wildly around his head, as to mimic tortured serpents. "There are some mildly serious matters that I need to discuss with you, Josstone, alright? Now, put your arms down. Just keep them at your sides. Like a person. Just leave them there. No, your palms don't have to be shaped like bowls, just relax. Thank you. Now. Why are you still alive?"

"Well," said Josstone, his body simultaneously attempting to maintain a rigid and respectful posture, while at the same time, the fetal position, "like I was telling you, I think that I might be immortal. Accidentally. Accidentally-ish."

"Right," said God Jr.

"Is that...alright?"

God Jr. squinted behind his sunglasses, and made a gesture of tossing a ball back and forth between hands. "I mean..."

"What would you have me do, Lord?"

"So," God Jr. said, unzipping his backpack, "I have this snake." The serpent was long and muscular, seemingly far too large to have fit in so small a bag. It wound itself around God Jr.'s arm and torso, studying Josstone with its ancient black eyes.

"What's his name?" said Josstone, which to him seemed to him like the polite thing to ask.

"He is the serpent of evil, the Deceiver, the Catalyst.. He is poison, and sin and—stop that," he said, smacking the snake, who had begun to eat its own tail, on the head. "Also, he bites."

"I have no fear, Lord."

"Great," said God Jr. and handled Josstone the snake.

Josstone held its heavy body with outstretched arms, hoping for a bite away from his throat. It peered at him, seeming looking directly through him, to his secrets, with its marble-black eyes. For a moment, Josstone was sure that it was about lunge at him to bite him on the face, but instead, it wound through his hands, fell to the floor, and slithered, uninterested, away.

"Should I go get him?" asked Josstone.

"No," God Jr. said, "don't bother. Once he's made up his mind about something..."

He reached again in his backpack and this time wrenched from it a flaming sword, the length of two men's arms. Its flames were the color of all the suns of the universe, and it filled the cabin with a violent, golden light. The Lord motioned for Josstone to kneel, and even with his eyes tightly closed, Josstone could still see the light creeping in, and feel the heat of the sword somewhere high above his head. A moment later, he felt a sting on the back of his neck, like a very specific paper cut, but when he lifted his head, he saw that the flames had gone out, and the Lord shoving its steaming remains back into his ratty backpack.

"Hang on," said God Jr. Carefully, and with both hands, he dipped again in the bag, lifting out a fist sized stone, which he held out before him reverently between both his palms. It was smooth, with a darkly opaque sheen that seemed, impossibly, to gather all the light of the cabin to it. "This is the stone that was thrown to set the universe in motion. It holds the weight of all space and time and has seen the birth and the death of a million-billion stars."

"It's a very nice stone."

"Yes," said God Jr. "And I should be able to crush your skull with it." Again, Josstone closed his eyes and waited to feel the weight of the universe crash down on him. Instead, he felt nothing more than a very small thump, as one might feel hitting their head on an open cupboard door. He tentatively opened his eyes, and saw God Jr. looking very peeved, holding two broken shards of unimpressive rock.

"Are you even trying here?" said God Jr. "Because I feel like I'm the only one trying." He returned the shards to his bag, ran his hands through his short crop of curly, crunchy-looking hair, and put his hands in his sprinter's jacket pockets.

"What do you mean, not trying?" said Josstone. "I got in the Death Pod, didn't I? I didn't ask for any of this. This isn't my fault."

"Alright, I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated. I'm under a lot of pressure."

"Well, frankly, that really isn't my problem."

"Fine. I've got one more idea," said God Jr., as he pressed a series of buttons into the computer terminal.

HAVING ALREADY BEEN DEPARTICALIZED EARLIER in the day, Josstone did not experience the same briefly euphoric sensation that most did when being relieved of their bodily cohesion, and instead was a bit surprised to find himself one moment safely onboard the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress, and the next, plunged headfirst into the middle of the ocean.

As he breached the surface, he looked out over the water and saw the sky blazing in a red and orange mess, with mushroom, and cauliflower shaped masses shifting themselves almost imperceptively, like weightless glaciers carving their way across the Heavens. Everywhere was fire. The human flotsam covering

the surface of the water, Josstone noticed, was not all that disturbing, as it was no longer reminiscent of anything that had ever been living.

It was much more so reminiscent of garden mulch.

What it was that made Josstone regain his composure, although he could not formulate exactly why, was the knowledge that God Jr. could not actually walk on water. Not exactly, anyway. He bobbed, like a cork. Taking giant, exaggerated bounds through the water, and looking much like a man performing an imitation of leaping across the face of the Moon.

"Where are we?" asked Josstone.

"Give or take the Jordan River," said God Jr. "It's about 2,000 meters below us."

"Oh," said Josstone.

"Now what I'm going to do is hold you under the water until your drown, and we should be able to get on with this mess. Alright?"

Josstone shrugged, and paddled closer to him.

Somewhere around twenty minutes in to being held under the water, Josstone realized he had grown gills. He patted God Jr. on the wrist, and delivered the bad news.

"I'm trying here, I really am," said Josstone.

"Well, we both screwed until we figure this out."

"What do you mean?"

"If you haven't figured it out yet, Genius, I'm only here as a representative of The Powers That Will Be."

A century earlier, mankind had made the accidental discovery that their race had actually been the creation of a future alien society, which humans took to calling The Powers That Will Be. The plans made by The Powers That B, according to intercepted radio transmissions, were to use the fully developed human brain as an energy source for the entirety of their system of planets. In order to stimulate the brain's development, The Powers That Will Be introduced Man to the exercises of philosophical theory, gender division, physics, and religion. Eight-million years into project trials, however, the endeavor was cancelled, once it was made clear that human beings were genetically opposed to intellectual evolution.

"As you may imagine," he went on, "it's really quite easy for someone in my position to lose track of the time. Now, this is not to say that I am making excuses for what went on here. All I am attempting to express is that, while I did say I would—traditionally speaking—'be right back,' it would be foolish for one to harbor the assumption that our respective understandings of the phrase 'immanent return' were completely aligned."

Josstone remained silent.

"Basically, what I'm saying is that I've been on a vacation, which to you, I understand, might seem long, but to me feels, and I'm just trying to be honest here, short lived."

"A vacation."

"The good news is that The Powers That B generally agree that the End of Days was a success. The main misstep, of course, being that someone survived. This is not me telling you that this is your fault, I know that you did everything in your power to help do your part."

"What about repopulation? It's not too late. You could make me a wife, right?"

God Jr. explained to him that there were no plans to repopulate, then added a glance that seemed to say *and why would we?* "I mean, if we're going to talk percentages, one survivor out of the entire population is more than a fair success rate. So good work."

"Well what was your plan for the Earth then? If I had died?"

"We were planning to use it for a garbage heap." "

Josstone's mouth fell open, which caused some apocalyptic water to seep in.

"It was my first job," said God Jr. "I was young. But it was only meant to be an experiment, you know. When it's over, you write it all down, dispose of the hazardous materials, and start something new."

"So the Earth is just some piece of hazardous material, then?"

"In a way, yes."

"And when you say dispose, you mean—"

"We're going to have to disintegrate the planet. It wasn't the plan, but we can't just have you hanging around here in case someone shows up and starts asking questions."

"But why? I'm still here. We can rebuild. We can start over the human race. I have a perfect genetic sequence. It would be different. We would be better."

"Listen," said God Jr. "I really wish I could, unfortunately, I'm being forced to follow procedure. It's really out of my hands. Plus, it doesn't really seem worth it. So long, cruel world."

"What? What do you mean? Where are you going?"

"Not here."

"You would abandon me?"

"My personal advice would be to get creative with your remaining minutes."

And with that, God Jr. vanished, leaving Josstone alone with the Earth all to himself.

For a while, Josstone laid his body back in the water, staring up at the sky, and contemplating his next move. Having one bleak idea, Josstone called out to the Onboard Artificial Companion of the Floating Carbon-Steel Fortress, which he could barely see through the thick, rust colored clouds.

"Hello again, Mr. Beechstow," came the voice from inside Josstone's head. "You are decidedly dead!"

"Do you think you could get me back aboard the ship?" Josstone asked.

There was a moment while the Artificial Companion seemed to contemplate the merits of this. Finally, it told him that since it was too about to be destroyed, it would appreciate some time alone, and quietly shut itself off.

As a boy, Josstone had often thought of what his death might be like. What it might be like for everyone. And here, at the very end, floating all alone, he remembered what it was to be small, and unfamiliar, and curious of what it might be that came next—not the feeling of it, but the sound, the resolution, the screaming silence.

"I understand," he said to no one.

The sky above him was churning, and Josstone found himself wishing that this last moment could stretch on—the artificial clouds rolling softly against one another, lightning crashing in small, delicate bursts, and the storm holding out until forever. He listened to the sound of the water over everything, and waited for the storm to roll in.