

Adaptation ~ Part I

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This work was originally written in English in the Australian dialect but has since been converted to a North American dialect.

Dedication

For my wonderful wife and inspiration, my balance and best friend, Josephine.

Chapter 1

*“We care because we are human,
and we are human because we care.
He who shuns his brothers and sisters
is not human.”*

Sister Candice, Berwick Chapter

At a stage early on in its existence, Man decided he would be different from the rest of the animal kingdom. He was made of the same stuff, for sure, but his animalistic motivations would be forced to contend with new powers of logic, emotion and free will.

No longer was he content with ignorance, he sought truths. Fed up with barbarity, he sought society.

His base desires have deeper roots, however, and continue to abuse his motivations for their own purposes. History, it seems, is merely a landscape pitted with the outcomes of the constant struggle between the divine and the base.

In the sparkling streets of Newport, Rhode Island, a figure stood silently and watched as busy people bustled by. There was always motion. Motley crowds of individuals did important things and went to places urgently to perform more important things.

There was a hum. If you took away the cars, the buzzing lights, and all the other man made paraphernalia that filled the world, there would still be that hum.

Low toned, omnipresent, it sat just under the range of hearing, almost to the point of being felt.

It was the sound of humanity, of civilization. It had been around for thousands of years, and still it had not changed.

From the ancient Egyptians working the fields, through to the Spanish explorers crossing great seas, across nations and cultures, the hum remained unchanged.

It rippled. It bobbed. It carried on as the people that made it continued to do exactly what it was that they did, this and that.

Ryan was unnoticed in the throng. In his gray pants and black jersey he was neither threatening nor appealing. He did not look wealthy enough to rob, nor was he overly attractive.

His brown hair was cropped just so, not in the latest fashion, nor in some outmoded way. He stood against a wall, covered heavily in graffiti, and it only complemented his unimportance, hiding him in full view from the others walking, running, strutting by.

He closed his eyes and listened closely. The hum was being throttled by the ungraceful mechanical whirring and electronic noise surrounding him.

Cars honked, phones squealed, neon signs buzzed like gnats. Overhead a maglev shuttle clattered and clanked along its magnetic supports as it ferried those within to somewhere better.

There was life in Newport. Human life. It was one of the few spots in America that had been untouched by the ravages of the Hanean War. The people of the town had not been unaffected, of course.

Every citizen had family and friends lost in the disaster. Not that a casual observer would notice. In the years following the bombs, chemical and radioactive warfare, the wounds healed, the media reported less and less about the atrocities, and it became easier for the individual to go back to his life.

Life. It was and continues to be the great conundrum. It is a fallacy to believe that all things natural are beneficial and benign, and therefore anything artificial is, by default, an evil.

But life is indeed unnatural. By rights it should never have happened. Religions have grappled loosely with it, scientists have tried to put it down to statistics, but nothing comes close to explaining how it came to be.

But still it exists. Beyond any doubt.

The conundrum lies in the observations of natural systems. A rock, strong and sturdy, will

eventually be eroded to dust and be strewn across the ground without so much as a hole to remember it.

A river may bubble along for eons only to dry out, leaving a cracked bed. A gigantic star will consume all of its fuel and gradually sputter out.

Little by little a system wears against the onslaught of other systems, bashed, beaten, ground and pulverized down to nothingness, swallowed and reformed.

But life fights against nature. Gravity pulls it down, so it gets up again. The sun sears its skin, so it tans. In freezing cold climates under sheets of ice moss will grow. Next to volcanic vents deep under a crushing weight of water bacteria will thrive. Chip a stone and it will remain so, but cut a finger and it will stubbornly heal.

Death is not the opposite of life, only a stepping stone in a perpetual, mind boggling cycle. Without death there could be no life, no way for the battered being to make way for the next soldier.

No, *Entropy* is the true antagonist, a vile evil that life does battle with every moment of every day. It is an insidious evil that comes in many names. 'Chaos' it is called, and 'Disorder'. But, by far, the most popular name of this evil is 'Nature'.

Nature is a monster. It beats us, burns us, suffocates and kills us, yet spitefully we survive, struggling and fighting against the gaping maw of nothingness.

Some call it 'Mother', but what mother denies her children? What mother would sooner see them rot than grow?

And so Ryan listened. He listened to a girl chatter on a telephone about nothing in particular. He listened to a car sounding its horn angrily and the driver cursing profanities at the pedestrians passing in front of him.

A knock to his shoulder and a muttered apology from nobody in particular brought him out of his thoughts.

"These people have indeed lost their way," he said to himself, "They have grown complacent. They do not hear the whistling of the wind coming to claim their souls, but instead have glugged themselves with indulgences."

A dog scampered past, paused to sniff his feet, and then continued along. He watched as it was swallowed by a sea of legs.

His shoulders slumped as a heavy weight lowered upon them. For a while he stood, desperately trying to avoid the conclusion that was dancing in his mind.

He sighed deeply, far too deeply for a teenager, "And so the struggle *must* be reignited."

He shoved his hands into his pockets and walked along with the crowd until he came to the shuttle station at Memorial Boulevard.

A short while later he had climbed the stairs, looking out over the sea of people waiting impatiently to climb into a pod-shuttle.

A stranger amongst the strange, he blended perfectly on the outside. Inside, however, he was churning. So many people. So many sad, unhappy faces.

From high up on the stairs, the view of the water to the West would have been inspiring, if anybody had cared to look at it.

A janitor dressed in a drab orange wandered around aimlessly, picking up this and that off the floor.

Ryan laughed softly to himself, watching as the crowd dropped their waste, and the janitor picked it up and put it in his little bag. He did not laugh out of spite, rather at the irony: The lowliest among them was the also most worthy, for it was he who acted most against entropy.

To his right was a dull door leading to the magnetic levitation control facility. The handle would not budge.

"Hey!" yelled a voice, "You're not supposed to be over there! The shuttle's that way! Hey!"

Ryan turned to see the janitor marching over to him. He stood still and waited as the man puffed his way toward him.

"You're not supposed to be over here!" he said again.

"I did hear you," said Ryan.

“What are you, eh? Some kind of smart ass?” sneered the janitor into Ryan's face. He smelled like stale alcohol mixed with chewing mint. The skin on his head was flaky under a crop of thinning, dark hair.

Ryan sighed, “I am not, as you say, a 'smart ass'.”

His contempt was palpable. “Furthermore I can assure you that I have good reason to be here.”

The janitor looked unsure. The man, an adolescent really, before him had not seemed terribly important before, but, as he watched, an air of certainty, of grandness, grew about him.

He bit his lip and managed to say, “Oh yeah?”

Ryan rolled his eyes. Dealing with the general population was not something he enjoyed doing. “Yes. And those reasons have nothing to do with you. If you wish to bring this to the attention of Manager Keith Sullivan...”

“Oh, you know Mister Sully, then?” said the janitor, his face breaking into a smile, “That's all right then. Sorry about the barking and all that, you know, but we get rags around here sometimes, doing all sorts. But you're not a rag. So if Mister Sully needs you to go in, that's good enough for me. Here, let me get this, then.”

In truth he was relieved that he did not need to take the matter any further. It was out of his hands now, and he could return to the task for which he was employed.

The janitor fumbled in his pockets and produced a key, unlocked the door and ushered Ryan in. Sullivan was a powerful man about the station. He wore a dark suit, kept a trim mustache, and earned quite a bit more than the janitor did.

As a consequence, he had learned that anyone bearing 'Mister Sully's' name also belonged to such a powerful clique.

“So, you a rep or something? Only ask 'cause Mister Sully ain't so fond of salesmen, you know.”

“I will keep that in mind.”

“Only you don't look like a salesman.”

Ryan looked impatient.

“I am not,” he said, “And my business is my own and Mister Sullivan's.”

“Oh.”

“I thank you, and I will be sure to mention your vigilance to Manager Sullivan next time I see him, mister, er...”

“Ashraf.”

Ryan smiled.

“Ashraf,” he repeated, “I will be sure to remember your name.”

“It's not an unusual name, where I'm from.”

“I did not say that it was.”

“Only that a lot of people do. See, I'm actually a descendant of the great house of El Vizul. That's my last name, see? They were a powerful influence across Arabia and Syria before the war,” said Ashraf, eager to share his tale, “They owned oil pipelines, fishing stocks, supermarkets. Why, back then you couldn't sneeze without the permission...”

Ryan held up his hand for silence, “Ashraf, I do not mean to be rude...”

The janitor was crestfallen, “Oh, of course, of course. You gotta do some important stuff, then. Just be sure to close this when you're done.”

He pinched and pulled his overalls, turned and went back to picking up bits of insignificant items of rubbish and putting them in his bag. Ryan watched him for a bit longer, then went in and closed the door behind him.

A hall stretched before him, with pipes and electrical cables running the length, lit with a series of tired fluorescent lights.

Whirs and rumblings echoed throughout. The buzz of the lights mingled with the clanking of pipes while a compressor down the hall joined in with its own chorus. It was like listening to an orchestra warming up, only that they never got to the main song.

Although it sounded like discord, there was a rhythm.

It was the rhythm of machines doing what they were supposed to be doing. Individually they were insignificant, but as a whole the system came together to fulfill a purpose.

If one machine stopped making the right noise, as it inevitably would, it would be repaired or replaced, whichever was more convenient or cost effective. The parts of the old machine would be broken, stripped, melted and crushed to become, perhaps, part of a new machine, a new purpose.

Ryan made his way down the hall slowly, listening for the tell-tale sound of workers but nobody was about. The whole magnetic levitation control system was fully automated.

A primary control system was fed a myriad of data from sensors scattered about the tracks, compressors and shuttles, which it used to ensure that the shuttles stayed on the tracks. It was backed up with a redundant control center which would kick in if the primary system ever failed.

It had never failed.

A camera, recessed neatly in the wall, blinked at Ryan as he went passed, silently watching his progress. His presence was not expected, certainly not one of the normal happenings within that tunnel. In a split second the decision was made to report the incident to the security server.

Three levels up, in a small tower overlooking the station, Henry was kicking back in his swivel chair. It was a drudge of a job, but it paid money. Money meant that he could enjoy things like eating and sleeping.

It was a bonus that he often employed these two favorite past times while earning his keep.

In the past year there had only been a handful of 'incidents'. Many were concerned patrons worrying about a bunch of loitering rags.

Others had involved missing children, all of which were found without incident, having wandered off to get lost in the throng. One of the more interesting events had kept Henry occupied for a whole three hours. An actual, live crabman had made its way into the underground power unit.

A few blasts from his sidearm had made short work of it, spattering quivering bits of flesh all over. What took some time, apart from cleaning up, was figuring out how it had gotten past the barriers.

A bit of crawling and poking around revealed that the main sewage grate had several bars melted clean through. No sign of any other intruder was found, and the incident was put down to a breach by Luddite fanatics. It became yesterday's news, then last week's. Within two months it was all but forgotten, but at least Henry had a welcome distraction retelling the story to anybody that would listen, and a grisly souvenir in the form of a crabman's dried up hand.

A monitor flashed to life, beeping noisily, requesting his immediate attention.

"Intrusion Detected - Control Access Corridor," it read, showing details of a figure skulking along a corridor, the images warped from the angle of the cameras coupled with their fish-eye lenses.

It took a few seconds for Henry to put his coffee down and sit up noisily, and a few seconds more to grasp the situation. The figure did not look imposing or menacing, more like it was wandering into a store to browse.

Henry heaved himself out of his comfortable chair and strapped on his holster.

No doubt the access door had been left unlocked and this was some curious foreigner who was looking for the bathroom.

Still, if one had gotten in, there might be more, and if a bunch of rags were to cause havoc in the tunnels, he would never hear the end of it. Henry checked his sidearm, swigged the last of his coffee, took a deep breath and opened the elevator. The doors slid closed behind him.

After a few seconds they opened again, displaying the service entrance, well lit and welcoming. He stepped out cautiously and looked around. Everything was as it should be; the double doors on the other side of the room were sealed, all lights were on.

An air pump kicked in, whirring for a few seconds before coughing to a stop.

To his right he fiddled with a latch and opened the cover to a security monitor. He punched in a few keys and it brought up a map, highlighting the currently tracked location of the intruder.

Making a plan in his head, Henry turned off the monitor, closed the cover and walked to the

double doors. They slid open and he stepped lightly into the corridor.

A gush of coolant through an overhead pipe made him flinch, but he kept his eyes focused at the end of the corridor.

There were a few manholes joining corridors here and there, and there was a chance that the intruder could use these to escape, but these were inhabited by muttrats. They would be sure to let out a squeal if anything came close. No, if the intruder was around, he would be wandering the corridors.

Henry picked up the pace and trotted as quietly as his jangling harness would allow him down the hall to the corner.

He turned to the left, past the coolant recycling processor with its enormous inlet valves, and took the next right. He paused every so often to listen for footfalls or any other sign to betray the location of the intruder but above the hissing and groaning of the pumps, fans and compressors he could not make out anything.

It was unnerving. In his office above he had complete control, video and sound at his fingertips, air conditioning, coffee and a comfortable seat. Down here, in the bowels of the magnetic levitation system, his presence was insignificant.

Beads of sweat started to break out on his brow. He opened an inspection panel and viewed the read out.

It meant nothing to him, giving data relating to flow amounts and temperatures, all in green. Everything was as it should be.

Funnily enough, it did not reassure Henry. It felt like the hush of a crowd before a spectacle, the calm before a tempest. Something was not right and that something was linked to whoever was down here.

Where the hell was he, anyway?

He closed the panel silently and turned down the next two corridors and halted. Around this area was where the computer had signaled the last location of the trespasser.

Gingerly he peered around the corner to see yet another empty corridor. A blast of steam escaped from a pipe at his feet, billowing throughout the corridor before being whisked away by the air extraction system.

Instinctively his hand crept to his holster and touched the hilt of his pistol. Adrenaline crept through his stomach to his chest, creating a sickly sensation of anticipation.

Would he have to fire? Surely not. Surely this whole thing was a misunderstanding, and he would just need to give a few gruff instructions in slow English, make a few hand gestures and politely show the intruder out. That was all.

No, that was not all, and his stomach told him as much.

Quickly he checked behind him, in case anything had dared to follow. He drew out his pistol and held it at the ready, pointing toward the floor with his finger alongside the trigger.

Another blast of steam swam around his boots. He took a few steps forward, listening intently, scanning for anything that could possibly indicate another person.

From beyond, there was nowhere else to go except through a couple of manholes, which he quickly inspected, or through to the control system maintenance, and unless the interloper had a key, he would be well trapped.

A muttrat scampered away into a service tunnel at his approach. They were harmless, when not in a pack, being nothing more than a mutated product of the radioactive and toxic cocktails unleashed during the Hanean War.

He peered around the corner and saw, at the far end, a figure performing an operation upon the access door.

Henry took a breath and stepped around, sighting the laser target directly on the intruder's back.

“Freeze!” he called, walking with deliberate strides, letting his boots clank heavily upon the floor's metal grating. A blank face turned to look at him.

“Put your hands up,” called Henry, feeling more in control now that he could see the intruder

in front of him, "Slowly now."

Ryan stopped what he was doing and did as he was asked. He stood up straight and placed his hands above his head, looking expectantly at Henry.

He was relieved. No, he would not have to shoot, but he might need to put a fist in somewhere. Maybe. With a bit of luck.

"Step back from door now," commanded Henry, "And keep those hands up. That's it, slowly now."

He sighted the laser square on Ryan's chest, finger still next to the trigger.

Henry kept the ball rolling, "Your name?"

"Ryan. And yours?"

"Ryan who?"

"Ryan. And you are?"

That was exactly what Henry wanted, a reason to be hostile.

"Don't be a smart ass. You a Luddite? Huh?"

"No. I am not a Luddite."

"You know what this is? I've got this aimed directly at your chest," he said, "I don't know if you've ever seen what a burst from a S-40 does, but I can assure you, you don't want to find out, and I don't want to have to clean it up afterward. Now, what's your full name?"

Ryan remained silent with his hands above his head. Henry began to feel uncomfortable. He had caught this intruder red handed, he had the upper hand, yet the way Ryan looked through him, he may as well have been holding his coffee rather than an S-40 pistol.

"What are you doing down here? Actually, before you answer that, how did you get down here?" asked Henry, annoyed that he did not appear to be threatening.

"The answer to the second question is, I came through the door and walked down the corridors until I arrived at this location."

Henry snarled, "What did I say about being a smart ass?"

Ryan remained deadpan, "You said not to be a smart ass, and that you had your pistol aimed at my chest. You then went on to ask a redundant question in relation..."

"What? Shut it!" yelled Henry, his voice finding a convenient gap in the constant background noise, "I'm not here to play games. How did you open the door?"

"I did not open the door. The janitor outside opened the door."

"Why? You know him?"

"I know the janitor, Ashraf, well enough," Ryan nodded, "Well enough for him to open the door for me, at least."

Henry licked his lips.

"I'll have to take that up with him later," he said, "Now the other question, why are you here?"

Ryan smirked, "I do believe the question was, 'what am I doing here', and this I shall answer first. I am attempting to open this door to the control system for the maglev shuttles. To this end I have attached a resonance lock pick, fashioned by colleagues of mine, onto the locking mechanism which I was about to activate before you came along."

Henry's eyebrows furrowed as he took all this in.

"Right, OK, so we're still being a smart ass then," he grumbled, "But I guess you're cooperating."

Ryan nodded, "I am. And now I will answer your other question, 'why am I here'. I asked myself that question a long time ago. It is a question that has no single answer, but can be answered only through one's actions."

"Yeah, ha ha. I don't do philosophy," growled Henry, adjusting the pistol in his hands, "And I'm getting tired of your shit. Tell me plain and simple, why are you here?"

Ryan took a breath.

"It would do no harm to tell you, but then again, it would do no good. Still, if you insist... I am here to plant a disruptor on the two control systems, thus derailing up to twenty shuttles and causing injury to and the deaths of hundreds, potentially thousands of people."

Henry could not believe his ears. Blood drained to his feet.

"You... what?" he muttered.

Ryan took a breath and repeated, "I am here to plant a disruptor on the two control systems..."

"Why? Why would you want to do that?" blustered Henry, "You bloody Luddite!"

Ryan's face broke for a second into a scowl, but he regained it quickly. "You mistake me. I am not a Luddite. Moreover, I do not *want* to do it, I never said I *wanted* to do it, but that is why I am here. It is something that must be done, and I am tasked with it."

Henry stood silent. If this had been a crabman he could have blown it away. If it was a group of rags a simple threat of violence or a blast from his pistol would have sent them running.

This situation, however, this was something else entirely, something which he started to wish he had not come across.

"My arms are getting tired, may I put them down?" asked Ryan.

"No. Hell no. Hell no! You can walk over here slowly, turn around and face the wall, is what you can do. Alright? Come on, and no fast movements or I'll put a hole in you so big you can stick your disruptor through it."

Ryan shrugged and stepped toward Henry, his feet barely sounding on the metal.

"That's it," said Henry, glad to be getting this over with, "Like I said, nice and slowly now. Good, now turn and face the wall."

Ryan did so.

Henry propped the pistol under Ryan's neck and reached behind him to feel for his cuffs somewhere in his belt.

In fact, he had never needed to use them in his entire career. For a split second his brain fought to remember from basic training the proper way to apply them, but as soon as his fingers grasped the familiar metallic arches it came flooding back.

"Let's get these cuffs on you, smart ass, good and proper, and then you can tell the Governor at City Hall what you just told me," Henry muttered.

He pressed the cuff against Ryan's wrist and closed it with satisfaction, pulling it roughly down. Confident that this man in front of him no longer posed no threat, he holstered his pistol to free his other hand.

Henry grabbed Ryan's right hand to bring it down, but no sooner had he done so than Ryan twisted, whipped around, slapped Henry a blinding blow across his eyes and took his pistol out from the holster, holding it firmly under his chin.

It was a terrible turn of events. Henry's head finally caught up with his racing heart, cursing himself for his situation. Ryan thrust him against the other wall where he stood, clutching his damaged eye.

"If you put your hand anywhere near your belt, I will shoot you. If you try to call anyone, I will shoot you. If you give me any reason to think that you will interfere with what I must do, I will shoot you," said Ryan impassively, "Now lie face down on the ground."

Still in pain and a little stunned, Henry slowly knelt down and lowered himself to the floor.

He was still alive, that was something, and this Ryan seemed to be reasonable to a point. He was not a raving lunatic, and he was not a junky or a rag. It seemed that there was every chance that he would get out of this with his life, if not his dignity. But that stuff about the disruptor on the control systems...

"You can't do it," he said.

Ryan responded, "I can and I will."

"What are you going to do?" he asked, "Your picture has already been taken, the alarm has not been deactivated, and any moment now the Joes will be down here, and they don't muck around."

Ryan said nothing, but stood over him and rummaged through his belt. He took the keys to the cuffs, unlocked them and then quietly cuffed Henry's arm to the floor. Henry could not help noticing how gentle and precise Ryan was. The cuffs, although secure and tight, did not hurt.

Ryan took the battery from Henry's radio, his keys and pass card.

“Henry, huh?” he said, examining the pass card, “A strong name applied to a weak individual.”

He finished the frisk and then stood up.

Henry coughed. “Why?” he asked.

Ryan stopped, “Why?”

Henry tugged at his cuffs. He twisted around slightly, “You'll kill people! Why kill hundreds but let me live?”

“You assume that you are still alive out of pity, perhaps? Out of a sense of morality? If that was the case, then I can understand your question. It would indeed be a warped sense of morality to let one live while many died, just on a whim,” said Ryan.

He knelt next to Henry's head and pushed the pistol against his skull. Henry gasped.

“I can kill you if you like, if that would help you. Right now your life is worth the light squeeze of a trigger. Do you know how much pressure is required to activate the triggering mechanism on an S-40?”

Ryan touched the trigger, squeezing it lightly so it moved ever so slightly.

The sensation of the gun against his head amplified Henry's other senses. He realized just how hard the floor was, how bright the lamps were, how very sickly impending death smelled. He listened as the trigger scraped against its railing as it moved half a millimeter.

“How does it feel, Henry?”

Henry panted uncontrollably, unsure of what to say. It felt horrible, indescribably awful. His mind raced of all the things he had and had not done. A moment of hatred for his tormentor, a moment of sorrow for the unfulfilled dreams, a moment of terror for the unknown.

He trembled. This was it. Henry Lancashire's life was to be terminated by his own pistol in a dingy corridor. How long would it be before anyone found him body?

“Can you feel it, Henry? Can you feel the waste? Listen! You can only hear it if you listen!”

The machines continued their whirring. Somewhere down the hall a diagnostics routine started.

“If you listen closely you can hear the dripping of your life as it hemorrhages away, lost to insignificance. Can you hear it? You can, can you not? Now listen, Henry, listen to the billions of lives that exist with no direction, dribbling their gift away without a second thought. Billions of lives, Henry, billions of lives in ruin. So much potential, so much waste! Salvation is what they crave. If you could make a difference, Henry, if you could stop the bleeding, you would, would you not?”

Henry felt the coldness of the muzzle against his scalp, impressing a faint, red ring into his skin. He fought to control his breathing. He fought just as hard to control his shivering.

The pistol was pressed firmly for a few more seconds, then released.

“You are alive because I have not been tasked to destroy you. You are insignificant, and your death would serve no one. Believe me, I do not want to kill you, so do me one service to make it worthwhile,” said Ryan, “Will you oblige me?”

Henry attempted a nod. Ryan leaned in close and whispered in Henry's ear, “Live! Live your life!”

Ryan stood and threw the pistol down the hall. It clattered noisily to a stop.

Henry looked back after Ryan with wide eyes as he trotted back to the maintenance door and activated the resonating lock pick.

“Don't! Please, don't!” whimpered Henry.

Ryan looked back with angry eyes.

There was not anything else to say. He turned and fiddled a bit with the lock until a light turned green on the lock pick. After a brief period the door slid quietly open and Ryan stepped inside.

Chapter 2

*God has done a bang up job, really,
and for that we are appreciative.
It's just now we can give him a helping hand.
- Doctor Gerard Jung*

Ottavio awoke to see white. It was unnerving, a startling blankness. Was he blind? Perhaps he was he dead? That could well be it. Consciousness danced wearily to life as a thousand thoughts rushed through his brain, each fighting for his limited attention.

His heart began to beat.

He tried to remember if his heart had been beating before now, before five seconds ago. For sure he could not say whether he even existed five seconds ago. Considering each second felt like a year in his world of nothingness, it was difficult to pin anything down.

His heart started to beat faster. Where was he and why could he not see anything? If he saw blackness at least he could be assured that there was nothing to see, or if his vision was blurred he could put it down to a lack of focus, but this was white distilled, a white that was so bright yet came from no source and caused him no pain to view.

It was a white that bounced off nothing, cast no shadows, and revealed no forms. It was useless, really. A light that was perfectly luminescent was perfectly useless.

A rhythmic hissing reached his ears. Only after a few seconds did he realize that it was his own breath. He tried to feel around but found that he could not. His arms, torso and legs had been firmly bound, it seemed, preventing him from so much as wriggling. A voice blared into his ears, "Stop struggling please, we are almost done here."

In an attempt to talk back to the voice, he cleared his throat. His tongue, however, was pressed down, and his jaw was clamped in a restraint.

"And do not speak, please, it will only delay matters," came the voice again.

It was female, clinical and unfamiliar. At least it was polite.

He rested, trying to calm himself down as he waited for the voice to return. He fought furiously with his brain to try and remember anything about his present situation. The last thing that came through the fog of memory was his graduation from Shawcroft Military Academy.

It was not a chalkboards thrown in the air moment. Rather a hurried ceremony, a quick speech relayed via the internet and a certificate and code messaged to him. The military was in great demand in those days, and as a young lad Ottavio convinced himself that it was for the benefit of all that he lend his life to saving others.

Besides, college had not been an option. It was not because he did not have the grades, nor the drive, for academia, but rather because the three nearest campuses had been reduced to a smoldering pile of rubble ten years before he had a chance.

His graduation stuck in his brain. It was the moment of truth, the day when he would be an active member of society, the day he could stand up and be counted as one of the good guys. It was also the day when he and his fellow mates fell into a seedy, underground bar and spent the rest of the night in a lockup for disorderly conduct. Youth was a hell of a thing to shake off.

Surely there was more to his life since then, he was convinced. He searched deeper into the bunkers of his mind but came up empty handed. It was like looking through the pages of a diary only to find the words had jumbled themselves, making no sense, not revealing anything. Name, faces, places, they were all there, just not in any recognizable way.

His eyes shot to black, like someone had flicked a switch. He flinched uncontrollably. In the darkness he did his best to control his breathing, waiting for something, anything, to help him understand where he was and what was happening to him. First white, now black, but still nothing to see.

A sharp pain at the back of his head made him gasp. A bolt of electricity shot through his

spine reaching every extremity in his body. His body convulsed against restraints.

“Hold still now, we are about to bring you back. You might feel some discomfort as we return sensation to your nerves,” said the woman. The pain in his head intensified, throbbing, searing.

It crept down and around his face. His teeth exploded in his mouth, his jaw clenched in indescribable agony. Fire and ice raged through his lungs and up his throat.

His fingers jittered and wiggled, his jaw ground down on its restraint.

“Haah!” he moaned, fighting the urge to scream.

Saliva drooled out from his mouth piece. The agony reached a crescendo, thrilling his whole body, and then quickly dropped away, leaving him breathless, moaning.

The pain was gone. The electric sensation had subsided. He felt, apart from a little nauseated, breathless and scared, quite normal.

The voice returned, slightly more animated, “Welcome back, you can open your eyes now.”

After a second he remembered how to use his eyelids and they shot open to see the faint image of a woman in a lab coat. His eyes focused and he blinked a few times. Her face became clear. It was pale, but not white, underneath a head of neatly shaped hair. Her eyes looked stern but friendly, shielding the gentle woman inside by an air of professionalism.

She spoke, “Let us get that uncomfortable mouth piece out from there, shall we?” She reached up and unbuckled a clip near Ottavio's mouth and pulled the restraint out, trailing saliva behind it. Immediately his jaw began to ache. He opened and closed it to get some feeling back. The woman before him merely placed the restraint in a glass container on the bench and got to work on his head and arms.

“You have undergone surgery. I am sure that you have many questions, and all of them will be answered soon, I promise you, but not by myself. I will, however, remove you from your restraints,” she said, “You may feel weak at first, but believe me you are fit to stand and walk around. I encourage you to do so. If you do feel like you cannot proceed at any point, however, please do not hesitate to tell me.”

She had said those words many times before in much the same fashion.

She unclipped his head, then his arms. As she got to work on his legs he held his hands in front of his face, moving them about, retraining himself how to move.

“Penelope,” he croaked.

It was unintentional, and surprised himself. The woman before him, though, her name *was* Penelope. Penelope... something. He was not sure if that was even significant, but it was the only thing that could remember clearly.

Penelope looked up at him and smiled for half a second, before dropping her head and getting back to work on his leg restraints.

“Miss Penelope, Agent.”

He swallowed, trying to ease his throat. “I'm sorry,” he breathed, “I didn't... I mean, I don't know why...”

“Do not worry, it is merely your memory returning. It usually takes a good while, over a day or two, for one's brain to get completely over the trauma. Until then you will have many more episodes of involuntary utterances,” she said, undoing the last strap.

“In a way,” she said, turning back to a bench and typing on her tablet, “It is like looking through a box in the loft and stumbling across an old photograph or two. Personally, I think I would find it interesting.”

“You called me an Agent?” asked Ottavio, becoming annoyed at her nonchalance.

She looked back at him, as if ready to have a chat with an old friend, but she regained herself, professionalism winning over.

“As I said, all your questions will be answered. Until then you had best work on walking around and trying to remember as much as you can. Start with little things first, the basics. Like breathing, walking,” she said, indicating a robe on the bench next to him, “Putting on clothes.”

Ottavio followed her finger and then, with a start, looked down at himself. He was naked. His cheeks went red as he scrambled over to the bench, throwing the robe over himself and tying the

cords awkwardly. His fingers felt like sausages, still tingling and complaining about being told what to do. The back of the gown was open so he kept himself facing toward Penelope.

Penelope smiled wryly and typed a few more notes onto her tablet. It beeped and whirred softly as she did so, lighting her face with greens and blues. There were a couple of perks to her job, mundane as it was sometimes. She pivoted on one foot, picked up some strange looking instruments from off the bench and walked briskly toward the door.

“Wait,” croaked Ottavio feebly. His throat felt like sandpaper.

Penelope did not. She keyed in a number into the locking keypad. It turned green and the door slid open with a breath. She walked out and turned around, and the door closed behind her leaving Ottavio and his bare behind alone in an ill-fitting robe.

He sighed and looked about him. The room was for the most part bare, with uninteresting gray-white walls, fluorescent lights coming from recesses and a clinical, stainless steel bench.

Where he had been restrained was an upright bench, leaning slightly backward, the straps now dangling loosely. The mouth restraint grinned at him garishly, glinting in the cold white light. Behind where his head had been was a glass cylinder affixed to the wall. Inside was a savage looking array of blades, actuators and needles. He shuddered to think what they could have done to him.

Carefully he put his hand to the back of his head, feeling for any sign of damage. All he felt was a slight tinge of pain, a scratch really, on both the left and right side. And a lack of hair. His scalp had been clean shaven leaving only a faint dark dust on top.

Behind him was a large mirror. He walked up to it and looked at the rest of his body but, apart from a couple of needle marks on his hand and arm, everything appeared how it should. Or at least how he thought it should.

It was like looking at a lost friend. He knew it was himself in the mirror, but there was something unrecognizable, something intangibly different. The kind of something that a distant acquaintance would be rude enough to blurt out during polite conversation.

“Ottavio,” called a voice, male this time, “I am so glad to see you up and about.” It came from his right, a black speaker box.

He walked over to it and prodded it with his finger. The voice chuckled, “I am on the other side of this mirror. Just talk openly, and we can converse.”

Ottavio looked at the mirror closely.

“Hello?” he said cautiously.

“Hello indeed, Ottavio. Tell me, do you know who I am?”

He shook his head.

“No? Well, I am not surprised. I am Doctor Gerard Jung, and I have been your surgeon for the past five days. It was quite a delicate operation, but your gray matter is of a good sort, the kind that takes well to this sort of, um, punishment, er, if you will excuse the expression. But it was quite straightforward, quite a neat brain you have. Why, um, only last month I and my team operated on another subject for over thirty eight hours straight just to navigate the cerebellum.”

Ottavio looked at the mirror blankly. It was hard to talk to a person he could not see, harder still since he had not the faintest recollection of who he was.

“What surgery?” he managed to ask, his throat hoarse and dry.

“Well we did not perform a mere appendectomy, Ottavio. What you have been through, as you will soon remember, has been a series of enhancements, er, *adaptations* if you will.”

“Adaptations?” managed Ottavio.

“You must be parched,” said Jung, “We have kept you sustained intravenously, which is very adequate but not at all comfortable. Here.”

A plate on the wall to Ottavio's right slid up revealing a tray with a bottle of clear liquid.

“Go on, I will be right here.” Ottavio looked at the bottle suspiciously, smelled the contents and took a sip.

His throat immediately felt better. He took another few swigs and turned back to the mirror.

“What is this?”

“Water. I'm sure you remember what water is?”

“Doctor Jung,” he said, taking another drink, “Where am I?”

“In a room. Specifically, a, er, recovery room.”

The panel slid closed.

Ottavio coughed. It cleared his throat some. “Can we be a little less specific?”

“Ha! Of course. I was being facetious. You are within an underground facility surrounded by the finest of surgeons who have worked tirelessly on you for the past week. But enough of this, we have much that needs to be done,” said Jung, “Please listen carefully. We had to, ah, *disable* your memory for a bit. It is nothing permanent, I assure you, and you will begin to feel more like yourself soon enough. I have to go now and, er, prepare your next room, but I will return. Do try to remember, yes? Concentrate. Work on smells and, um, textures. The brain responds to, um, those kinds of things. In the meantime you can speed up the process with a bit of a bite to eat. Hmm... where did Maxwell put – *click!*”

Next to him the panel slid open again, this time presenting an unappetizing looking stew. Ottavio scratched his head, took a swig of the bottle and put it down on the bench. He picked up the tray, set it on the bench and had a nibble. Although it resembled glue, it was quite tasty. Very soon he had finished the bowl.

As he set it down a memory came floating to the front of his mind. It settled there, a fleck of a seed. Little by little it grew, dropping roots and spreading out fresh tendrils. This facility, Miss Penelope, Doctor Jung. An image flashed in front of him. Of course, Doctor Gerard Jung. He wore stained shirts.

Ottavio was not sure why that was significant, but it seemed to make sense, and so he clung to it. Stained with yellow nicotine from the way he held his cigarettes too close to his chest when he was thinking. The smell of stale tobacco on his breath. His missing eye that he did not bother to cover up with a patch, or use a prosthetic, preferring to let people see him as he was.

Ottavio swished his finger into the bottom of the bowl, drawing up the last remnants of stew, and sucked on it. It had been more than a little strange, but these people were not enemies, and this place was not altogether unfamiliar.

His memory was returning, as promised, and he was starting to feel at ease. He perched himself on the bench and shuddered.

The cold steel against his naked rear was like a knife. He sat on his hands and looked about, waiting for Doctor Jung or Miss Penelope to return, and keeping himself occupied by examining any thread of memory he found.

Over the next fifteen minutes his thoughts became progressively clearer. He was Ottavio Manieri, operative Agent for Houston Corps, one of the great forty Entities, the largest in America.

Among its many roles, all of which turned profits, was Social Peace and Enforcement of Common Law. It was in this branch that Ottavio was enrolled.

He had been recruited eight years ago and had since worked his way from being a general grunt, to a field agent and now an operative Agent.

Miss Penelope, he was sure, was a senior somewhere in the Research and Development division. He remembered meeting her at a cafeteria along with Doctor... Oh, the name started with a W. Winchester, Winfield, no. He tried to look at the face in his mind from another angle, sneaking up on the name he had associated with it. Winifred. Doctor Winifred, head of some department or other.

“Well met,” he had said. He was a little odd, and his accent reminded Ottavio of a character from a period movie he had seen. Head of Surgery? Biology? He was the head of something.

Satisfied that he was where he should be, Ottavio let his mind wander a bit, hoping it might lead him back to exactly why he was here. He let out a sigh and closed his eyes.

The speaker box broke his daydreaming, “Ottavio, please come over to the box.”

He did so.

“How are you feeling now?”

Ottavio rubbed his eyes and scratched his ear. How did he feel? Like he had just been born.

Shaky, slightly sick and utterly confused.

“Alright, I suppose,” he lied.

“If you would be so kind,” said Jung, “I am going to ask you to go into the next room. In there you will find a shower and a set of clothes. Wash, put them on, and, um, we'll go over... no, hang about. Um, yes, wash yourself and put some clothes on. Then, ah, you know, await further instructions. Ah, I left it right there all along.”

The door at the other side of the room slid open, revealing another room, much like the one he was already in. He stepped cautiously in, waited for the door to slide closed behind him and headed to the waiting shower recess.

The feeling of warm, cleansing water on his skin was like rain on a dry river bed. His pores opened and he gasped, letting the steam fill his lungs. For a while he did nothing but let the water work its wonder.

The speaker sounded, “Sometime today, please.”

His joints and muscles ached as he lathered up and rinsed. Reluctantly he got out of the shower and got to work getting dressed in the bright orange jumpsuit laid out for him.

It felt instantly humanizing to wear the clothes. His feet felt snug and protected inside boots, the underwear awarded civility. He tossed the white robe on the table and looked to a mirror on the wall. The collar on the jumpsuit was flipped, so he straightened it instinctively.

And there he was, Ottavio Manieri. Much like he had last seen himself, only void of hair, from his head to his eyebrows all the way down his toes. He wondered whether the man looking back at him was as bewildered as he was, trying to make sense of it all. If only someone would help them out.

He did not have to wait long.

“Well done. Your comprehension and motor skills appear unaffected,” said Jung, “Not that we have need to worry, but you, um, understand that we must perform all post-operative tests before we, ah, can give you the all clear. Now if you are feeling up to it, can you please tell me who you are?”

Ottavio cleared his throat. It came out from him before he even realized he was saying it, “Ottavio Manieri, operative Agent four ought eight, Social Peace and Enforcement of Common Law of Houston Corps.”

Something else slid up his throat and out of his mouth, “Sir.”

Jung sounded satisfied, “Mm hmm. And do you know who I am?”

“You are Doctor Gerard Jung, head of Biological Adaptation and Enhancement sector, sir,” said Ottavio. That took a little more effort.

“Very good, very good,” muttered Jung, “Your memory is coming back nicely, I see. That means we, um, can meet face to face.” In an instant the mirror dissolved to nothing and there stood Doctor Jung, squat and dumpy, hands clasped in front of him.

He nodded his head lightly. A little puff of light hair flipped down over his dud eye. He brushed it out of the way impatiently, beckoning Ottavio to come through.

Ottavio stepped through the opening where the mirror used to be.

Doctor Jung nodded and hustled him through, “I do apologize for the security. Sometimes the subject panics, you see, ah, being in an unfamiliar environment and all. The basic animal instincts have a tendency to take over but you, um, seem to have your wits about you.”

Jung turned and walked over to a desk, flicking a few switches. He beckoned to Ottavio, “Come, come! I want you to see what we have done. There are others watching this, too, so, um, do not delay. Come on!”

He pressed some more buttons and a body burst out from the desk, hovering gracefully over the two of them. It was clearly a hologram but that did not stop Ottavio from flinching. He looked closely and realized that it was actually a hologram of himself, standing straight and tall.

Jung gave a little laugh, “Do not be alarmed. Ha! It is merely a generated reconstruction of you. See?” He waved his hand straight through the apparition's leg.

“It is the latest in projection technologies. We use this before and during the surgery so we can spot complications earlier rather than, um, later. And afterward, as an added bonus, I can perform

demonstrations like I am now.”

Jung put his thumbs into his suspenders and stood back, allowing Ottavio a chance to show his admiration.

After an awkward silence and a look of slight confusion on Ottavio's part, Jung cleared his throat and continued, “Well, hum. Yes. Ahem. Ladies and gentlemen of the Board, I thank you for your time.”

He fiddled with some controls. “Is this thing even working? Hello?”

“Yes, Doctor Jung, we are here. You can proceed with the demonstration,” barked a voice from his console.

“Ah, yes. Ah, sorry, I thought I'd lost you. Um, where to begin? Um, yes. I'm here with Agent Ot... Agent four ought eight, who has just come out of, um, surgical stasis. After a brief introduction, I shall demonstrate the latest update in calibration techniques.”

“Yes, keep it brief, Doctor. We are interested in this update, especially the optical display.”

Doctor Jung jumped, “Of course, of course. A lot of the operation had to do with, er, modifications along the optic route. Let's begin with that.”

He moved a mouse and clicked around while the image spun and grew, revealing a close up of Ottavio's head. Hair, skin and bone dissolved away to reveal a gruesome brain, shiny and sticky.

A bulbous part started to glow softly. “As you can see, this part highlighted in orange is the cerebellum. A little up and over, through a few sensitive areas and along this route we find the optic center.”

A red line wiggled its way along, terminating in a pulsing circle.

“This is the path from his eyes to the part of his brain that processes the signals. And we have inserted the two optic interceptors, here and here.”

Two dark, metallic cylinders appeared, animated clumsily toward the brain and clamped themselves over the nerve.

Ottavio instinctively touched the back of his head. He tried to imagine he could feel these little devices under his skin, but he could not. “What do they do?” asked Ottavio, regretting the words as he spoke.

Jung smiled broadly, “Ah! An excellent question, an excellent question indeed. These interceptors receive the signals coming in through the optic nerves. These are the upgraded model from, um, Agent three nine five's own insertion.”

A member from the board spoke up, “Speak only of the current iteration, Doctor.”

He fiddled a bit, replacing the image with a complicated diagram.

“Your eye is a sensor, yes? And a sensor reads in data from the outside world and sends it back to be processed. In this case, the sensor is your eye, hmm, and data is sent as electrical impulses to your brain to be, um, processed, yes, processed into information. The optic interceptor manipulates this data along its route, adding, removing and filtering to, ah, provide better data that will ultimately result in better information.”

A Y-shaped device animated in and attached itself to the interceptors via barely visible fibers. “This fine fellow is the processing unit. It is also attached to auditory interceptors here and here, along with other sensors placed throughout. The interceptors themselves only receive and modify the data signal. The original signal is sent to the main optical unit where it gets processed. This, as you can see, is fitted close to the brain stem.”

Ottavio looked suspicious. He said, “But... everything looks normal. I mean, nothing looks different or anything.”

“Quite right, quite right. That is because they have not been switched on.”

“There's a switch?” asked Ottavio. He felt again the back of his head. There were no surprises.

“Of sorts. And you can stop doing that. The units are underneath the skull, encased in a protective shell which are further encased in biologically neutral membranes with no contact to the outside world except through what is received via the sensory nerves. The power comes from your brain itself, only a small amount is needed, really, which means that we could leave them on indefinitely. Well, so long as your brain keeps ticking along,” said Jung, adjusting the diagram, “See

here. The interceptor is on standby, as it were. What we need to do is, um, run the startup and calibration routine. There are many, many modules included, but we shall only activate a few for now, and more as you proceed through training. If we had it turned on after the surgery, without proper calibration, well, you can imagine. Ha!”

The board member spoke sternly, “Doctor Jung! Stop your chit-chat with Agent four ought eight and proceed with the demonstration!”

Jung closed the diagram, apologizing profusely and walked over to a head brace facing what looked like an alley in a firing range, flanked with dully glowing lights embedded in the walls.

“Please,” he said, “Sit here, place your head in here, and we can begin. To tell you the truth, I am very excited to see this in action. We have refined the software a fair deal and upped the specs of the hardware to new heights, you see, which should cut the calibration time down by over three quarters. It put a bit of a dent in the budget...”

“Of which we are keenly aware...”

“But I am sure the Board is willing to overlook such trivial financial details if the results... ah, yes, sorry, please sit down, Agent, come on now.”

Ottavio walked over and sat down, placing his head in the vice. It locked behind him, holding him firmly. While it was not causing him pain, it certainly was not the most comfortable position to be in. His sudden immobility caused a pang of fear. He worked hard to convince himself that Jung meant no harm and, moreover, knew what he was doing.

“What the Hell is this thing, Doc?” grunted Ottavio.

From the back of the alley a screen zoomed in, racing along a track in the roof of the alley, and stopped before him showing a pattern of concentric rings in glowing red.

“This will take a bit of a while, but we want to make sure that everything is properly calibrated. Oh, what now?” Jung fluttered his hands abstractedly as he examined the readout on a screen. He alternately tapped at a keyboard and fiddled with a mouse, muttering quietly to himself.

“It won't take a minute, members, I am sure. It's only a safeguard on our integration server. There! Now, um, to do this calibration. Um, yes, this will take some time, but it is not difficult, really, and you will be up and out before you know it. Until then you must follow orders to the letter,” he urged, flipping this switch and tapping on that, “Now, members of the Board, I will demonstrate the reduced calibration time.”

“Just tell me what I need to do,” muttered Ottavio through his teeth, his jaw restricted.

After a few more keystrokes a small red light appeared above the screen. “Agent, look directly at that little light that just came on,” ordered Jung.

Ottavio tried his best but, being unable to move his head, found it difficult to get a focus on the red dot. “Good, good, try a bit harder, Ottavio. Don't try to move your head, just your eyes, that's it!”

The light disappeared and reappeared at the bottom of the screen. “Now look at the bottom one. Try to focus as best you can.”

Ottavio continued to follow the lights with his eyes as they appeared at various points on the screen. Little by little the screen moved further away until finally it stopped at the far end of the alley.

“Good, good. That seemed to work out fine. How do you feel?” said Jung.

“Fantastic,” came the muffled reply, “Didn't feel a thing.”

“Excellent, excellent, good to hear,” said Jung, oblivious to the sarcasm, “That's the first part done. Notice, esteemed Board, that the total time for the primary calibration has reduced from hours to mere minutes! Now I am just going to activate the primary optical display.”

The screen slid back up the alley and paused in front of Ottavio.

“Please look directly at the dot in the center of those circles. The screen will flash, but do not look away from that dot or we will scramble your brain,” instructed Jung. He laughed heartily.

Ottavio did not laugh. Neither was there a chuckle from the Board.

Doctor Jung nodded, “No, sorry, um, that was in bad taste. Yes, we, ah, in such a situation we would just have to run the calibration again, um, yes, ah... Just look at red dot and don't look away.

Ready?"

Ottavio grunted assent and the screen flashed a series of shapes and symbols before displaying a red rectangle enclosing the words, "Calibration complete, standby."

The screen turned off and whizzed back down the alleyway.

"Doc?" said Ottavio, "Did the screen just turn off?"

Jung mused, "Yes, it should have. That is part of the calibration routine. Does something, ahem, concern you?"

He could barely contain himself.

"Yes. I can see 'Calibration complete' in red. I mean, it was on the screen, but now the screen's off but it's still there!"

"Ha! Impressive, is it not?" laughed Jung, "That is the primary display kicking in. It will take a few minutes for its own internal calibration, but after that you will experience the full deal. I suppose I had better run you through it."

"That'd be swell."

Jung cleared his throat, "Members of the Board, notice, please, the significant reduction in activation and acceptance by the candidate!"

"We are noticing, Doctor, please continue."

"Right now the main optical unit is using the data we just sent it to align its coordinate system based on the, ah, secondary field of vision. What this means is that the display it inserts remains in a fixed orientation and location relative to the position of his head, and not his eyes."

"Slow down and run that by me again," said Ottavio.

"No, the presentation must continue, and this is as much for yourself as those who are looking on. You will understand in a couple of minutes anyway. Now where was I? Oh yes, um, the display will act very much like a projection screen, overlaying information across what the agent actually sees."

The board member sounded curious, "What kind of information?"

"I was getting to that. Preprocessed data from other sensors, conditional reports, and our new 'friend or foe' highlighting. There really is no limit, no, very state of the art. Many of the results of Minnesota's work has made its way in there," said Jung.

He typed a couple of keys and the seat and brace holding Ottavio swung around to face him. "The unit, the latest model, has a Tactical Coprocessor, amongst the usual collection of processing modules. We will run through that in a short while. It, too, requires an initial calibration."

"These calibrations," the Board member asked, "How often does it need to be done?"

"That's the beauty of it! It is only performed once, to give the units a head start, ha! After that, the units constantly correct themselves based upon the incoming data... not like the gamma models," grimaced Jung.

Ottavio's face matched Jung's. He was not entirely sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

"Oh," said Ottavio, "Doc, something's up. I'm seeing... I don't know what."

"Yes? What do you see?" asked Jung.

In front of his eyes a set of characters came into view, glowing softly red, semitransparent over the rest of the room. He tried to read a few. "Um, a whole lot of words and numbers. Wait, axis orientations?"

"Ah, a perfect one to start on. Hold on... there. The seat our Agent is in will turn and tilt. Agent do try to, um, hold on tight. We commandeered it from the Aerospace Division and made our own special modifications. Just, ah, one of the measures we've taken to keep within budget."

A few keystrokes later and the seat and brace swiveled slowly, panning and rolling gently.

"The accelerometers and geographical locators will provide detailed information on the orientation and location of your homunculus in the world. Note how your bearing is slowly changing depending on the rotation of your chair. Note, too, that the geographical location is not constant, since the unit is based within your head, and your head is not at the center of your rotation. Is this making sense?"

Ottavio muttered, "I would nod if I could."

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