

In the Vast and Boundless Deep
by
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...I heard the Voice of God.

This tower in black, this throat, this great chimney. Yes. This high rise stone and steel, punching into the sky. Yes. This is home. This is walls and ceiling and carpet soft. Yes. This is where I praise my God. This is where I work in His name. Where I stoke the flames; feed His fires, belching thick acrid smoke, weeping tears of thick soot. My blood runs black with His name. My tears streak a face made filthy by His good work. For His honour. For His glory. I long to feel the warming of His gaze, to be in the light of him and feel His gentle hands on my brow. To soothe away the burn within. Only now there is the encroaching darkness. Nothing but that closing in of black, the enveloping emptiness. Around and down and up, the wind, the great breath through this throat, like an urgent call. To where? And why? What light now is there in this place? Nothing is real here but what you can touch. Nothing exists but what you can feel with your own hands. And I have struggled through these dark years. I have reached down into my own throat, into my lungs and wrenched the breath from my own body, if only to know it is real, that I do in fact lie here now, amongst the damp and destroyed plaster walls. The ruin and the waste of a life past. I suck in the dust and the rank odour of this place, the churning smog that rises. This place is collapse. This place is decay. These piles of apartments climbing to the sky. They fall, they disintegrate. And what of those who once filled this place? What of their movements and their sounds? I wonder long about their faces. There is nothing here but their absence. Nothing but the hole they left and the stench of their failure. My failure. And cowardice. Yes. I wake in the dark and that smell makes me sick. And sometimes I am kept warm by my anger. The few things I have left. And a servant of God does not leave his post. I have stood by the windows of these apartments, across many floors, looking out over the world, scanning for signs. And that question, should I search for them? No. What would there be to find anyway? So here I am alone, within this tower of dark and plaster and stone. I keep my fires burning. I do my work for my God, hoping, needing, longing. These fires fed with the books they wrote, the music they made, the films they shot, the words and ideas they dared to speak. The blasphemy of a Godless age. Of science and psychology, they speak. Yes. They lie. They move their mouths and slow smiles twist, and I smell the burning of television screens, the roar of radio static. My God's voice shudders the walls of His chimney, pushes air from my lungs. They used to say that His booming was destroying our home; that the cracks that we saw splitting daily our walls, were caused by his mighty Voice. Their fear was

written in their faces; it was in the way they huddled in their apartments. It is their shame that blackens this place now, their betrayal that dampens the fires. And these fires now are fading daily, low as I am on the fuel to feed them. I have burned and consumed so much of this place. I have fed to those fires all of the lives of those who left, and now there is no more. The heat dissipates. I shiver in the darkness. Receding now is the loving orange embrace of His holy flame. And so I wake on this dark morning. With the cold. The dissipating warmth. A flicker of amber in the rooms of my home. These are days full of the fading. For so many of these long years I have tended to the fire. I have burned all but my very body. Stripped this tower clean of all I could find. All for His grace. And yet now here I am. A pathetic remnant, wasted and naked, lying in the rags of my own bed. Amongst the waste of my useless body. I have lay here like this in the dark for so long. Feeling the fire fade, knowing there was nothing left for me to burn. Knowing soon it would reduce to cinder and ash, and then I would truly be alone. I have lay here like this in the dark and pondered their faces. Those who chose to leave. Those who had no choice. I have questioned the motives. Shouted wordlessly into the dark. Tried to recall the shapes of their names with my mouth, so I might call them out. I have begged, arms outstretched to their ghosts. Among their number were people I knew, cared for. Loved. Where now do those ghosts wander? Do they haunt this place? Shades drifting through the tower, watching me and my movements. Plotting against me. Those blasphemers. Sinners. My rage, my sense of abandonment. How they left me to carry on this duty alone. Here I rise from my bed and leave the rooms, out onto the wrecked walkway overlooking the great throat of the tower. Down in the dark below, the fire burns. I can still feel the heat, yet I know it is dying. I recall now the times, many years ago, when the flames roared, great columns of burning, orange and yellow and red. The intensity of the heat was enough to drive me to the higher floors where I scoured for fuel, throwing it all over the balconies and into the pit. Now I live on the sixth floor. At one time it was the twenty first. Gradually, as the fires have dimmed, I have moved lower and lower. To be close to the warmth of His fires. For in the crackling, the hissing, lives the Voice of God. It hums within the body of that fiery sound, a white noise of a carrier wave. And when you hear that Sublime sound, all else falls away and you stand exposed before the incredible power of God. And these nights as I lie here. As I paint the walls with scenes of the sinners, their faces all turned away. As I try to recall them. Their names. The Voice of God comes to me in waves. It moves through me, making my body shudder. I crouch in corners and quake in His presence. Sweat

oozes down my back, thick as oil, full of the filth of my sin. There was a time when I tried to write down what He told me. To translate it into the mortal tongue. But my hand became paralysed. Then my arm. My finger dripped thick red of my own body's ink, refusing to make the shapes I heard. But that was before I understood the nature of God. Before I understood sin. It was not always this way. Once this tower moved only to the sound of the people who lived here. Their voices, shouts, cries, passions, flooded this place in a light. So many floors; so much humanity, thrusting upwards into the sky. Those days we led Godless lives in the artificial light. Sinful and neon and electric. We were self-interested and deluded, interested only in material goals. In flesh. The tower was still, and the only light came from the electric lights we burned throughout the corridors and halls of the place. Long shadows cast. Working together, we built the tower higher and higher. We mined the rock. We dug into the great earth for the minerals and valuables, decorating our homes with the shining, the glistening, the gleaming. As eyes those sparkles kept watch over us, a thousand million glinting sparks in the darkness. Our blindness. There was community. Family. There was a value in our common cause. But it was purposeless. Without the guidance of God, our goal to build the tower higher was onanistic. It was sin. And yet we flung ourselves into the task, long into the months and years, with an urgency we knew not the origin of. The stone we mined was deep black and cold to the touch. Those skilled in the arts favoured it for sculpture. It was a fine material to build in, and the tower fed on it, climbing high and growing strong. From the mines themselves it appeared as a vast arm raised to the Heavens in defiance. Blasphemy. The various lights blinked. Pulsed. Neon throbbed here and there. Strobing orange and yellow through the darkness. And below the tower, the city. The vast sprawl of light and noise. Some of us came from there to the tower, seeking refuge, an escape from that place. Some of us left for there, drawn by the stories we heard. Of limitless pleasures. Of decadence and transformation. Stories of so much light and so many words in so many tongues. All blaspheming. Those of us who had been born and raised within these walls, who felt the black rock within our hearts, viewed these newcomers with suspicion, and spat on those who left. We who are pure. We who feel the black rock in our bones and blood. Who sweat the dirt of the mines. None remain. None but I remain. And my bitterness still hisses through my teeth when I think of those. Traitors. Cool night air drifts in through the smashed window. The floor a mess of broken glass. Another shattered apartment. Empty. This is what the tower will soon become if I fail in my

duty. A cold, lifeless place. Dark. It will hang over the city, a black shard, its presence felt only by its absence. I must return glory to this place. I must return life and fire and strength. And the people will return. They will see the Light and know He is here and they will beg for forgiveness. And he will show them mercy. I cough and spit. Taste blood. I think about that word. Mercy. Looking out of the smashed window and into the darkness of night. Looking down into the city. Down to the burned waste around the tower. There are some scraps here and there. Some old books. Some garbage. It all goes in my sack. I sit on the debris-strewn floor, I think this was a child's room, and flip through the pages of the old worn book. It has slightly burned edges. At one time the heat singed everything in this place. I forgot how to read some years ago. Or maybe I never really knew how. Maybe I just pretended, and made up all those stories I thought I had read. Or maybe God burned those words from my mind. This book has pictures, hand drawn images of small children and animals playing. I think I had a book like this as a child. My mother. I wipe a hand across my face. Bloody smears now. And my fingers. My hands. Shaking. Nails black and broken. Blessed. Bathed in fire, I am a hymn to the power of God. All the work I do in His name. All the scars and burns and bruises, they are symbols of my dedication. Yes. I am an instrument of God. I move through these hallways. I gather for this good grace, to fuel the holy fires. Yes. Take a breath. Yes. Move beyond these walls. Move above these floors. Higher. Higher still, into the gaze of His love. How I long to feel the comforting warmth of his great arms. Embracing. So I gather and search. To keep it going for as long as possible. For His eyes watch me constantly. And I must not scrimp. I must not fall into sin. I would be banished from this place. Like the others. All the contents of my bag, emptied now over the railings, down into the pit. The fire; the hiss. Still heat I feel upon my face. Still the burning and the smell. Holding now in my hand the children's book. Of stories and pictures. Hesitation. The smell of burning plastic. Returning now to my own space. To gather myself amongst the things I have allowed myself. My blankets and my bedding. The small trinkets. The light cast by a cluster of candles. A dull yellow that softens the edges of the stone. The drawings upon the walls. Many faces around me. No photographs. No pictures. Those things are sin. They capture and trap the soul. Corrupt the spirit. Coiled in my bedding, the book in my hands. Dirty black fingers trace over the words, seek out their shape in my mouth. My voice is so cracked and lost, not like the Voice of God. Yes. A great oceanic swell of sound. A myriad exploding stars. Like those books of science, burned in the beginning. The first to be cast into the fire. Their

blasphemy. Their hollow sin. Stories of planet and galaxies and stars; claims to be higher than Heaven itself. Higher than God. No man can understand, can perceive the nature of Him. Arrogance. Those texts are the things that led the people of this tower to empty lives. To decadence and corruption. How they paid. Thinking now that there is no wrong in keeping this book. There is an innocence here. The images bring a thin smile. Remind me of. And yet the raging, the roar of fire rises. Sobbing I crawl to my knees, huddled to the vast orange flooding through my doorway. Face against the black stone floor; black stone hewn by the hands of many hundreds, thousands. By me. Cold against my face. Yet the heat. The wrath of my God. Hands clenched and intertwined, a pleading. The words form in my mouth, those apologies I know so well, but fail to form. All words lost. And the tears I have shed, coursing through the soot upon my face. Such overpowering noise. Such overwhelming sound. The urgency of His demands make my muscles twitch, and I feel my body shaking. Nodding. Yes. Now I understand. Yes. All words. All are sin. There are no exceptions. Uncontrollable crying, babbling, and snot, as the book arcs through the air and falls, down into the flaming embrace. And I see the face of my mother. And I hear her soft words in my ears as she reads to me. Her hand upon my brow, soothing the fever. Hands grip and twist on the hot metal of the railing; my knees grazed and bloody. I weep for those I have lost. For the family I no longer have. That I abandoned. For my duty. For my calling. Yes. They did not understand. They did not accept. How could they not see, not feel, the pain in my breast as they turned away from me, as they rejected not only my love, but the love of God? How could I go on? And then the Voice of God found me and gave me strength. Filled my muscles and my bones. I carried them with me forever. I carried them in my heart, despite the great space He took. How the breath pushes from my lungs when he calls to me. How the air grows livid and the metal glows. When I touch the surfaces, the static charge is incredible. I must pay penance for my transgression. Punishment for angering God is severe. To be out of his light. Out of his gaze. Isolated and alone. It is the thing I fear the most. And there is only one place where the absence of His light is most complete. I must descend into the mine and meditate on my sins. I must crawl into the darkness, the vast empty stone shell. Lie there and wait. For purification within those halls. That labyrinth awaits below. And outside. Beyond the tower and into the hill. Down and into the ground. Away from the light of God. Away from the light of the day. The city. The sound of the tower. Its hum. My heart races at the very thought of not feeling that thrum through my body. No heat. No fire. Just the blackness. The void.

The nothing. And only my own voice, that pathetic wordless mewling and whimpering. Only my own memories in the pitch. To be alone is to be truly haunted. The descent of the tower, through the carcass of what once was, picked clean by my hunting. And as the flames of His fire draw closer, my body sweats, pushing out the dirt and the filth of my sin in caustic rivulets that singe the very skin on my back. I have not seen the fire this close in many years now. Not felt its touch so close. So perfect. The yellow and orange and red arcs like so many demonic creatures, and I gasp. I cough. Now I spit and it is black and thick. For these long moments, standing in the awesome presence of something so powerful, so alive. This is the thing I have fed, kept alive. I have nurtured this as a parent tends to a child. I have raised it up to the level of my God. I have built this in his honour. For such glory. And such incredible heat. Tightening my skin. Pushing into me; moving through me. I feel that heat deep down in my lungs. This fire burns on such a scale. Filling the entire area of what was once the tower central plaza and gardens. All scorched away. All now blackened and engulfed by the cleansing flames. It has shrunk back from what it once was, a roaring column of orange, like the red hot heart of this place. Now it a sea of smouldering embers and ash. A field of shallow flame. The slow moving seep of a volcanic eruption, pushing up from the mouth of the earth. I drop to my knees and force myself to vomit. Filthy fingers itch. In the presence of this great wall of flame, I empty myself of all impurity. Yet I must turn away and leave. Begin my descent. For to descend is to become pure again. In darkness there is sin, hidden, unseen. Without form. It must be faced and challenged. I must meet that which I fear. In the deep and the dark, a netherworld where things both exist and do not. Where I will cease to exist. I am smiling lips and movement; a sudden arc of shadows. And outside a scene of waste. Outside is burning and decay and rot. Outside is sin. And I am running. Over ground, blackened and scorched, embers still glowing, still smouldering. And the stench. Choking back the clot that rises in me; that pushes against my chest and forces the air from my lungs. Here and there the metal shapes of burned out hulks, lined up in rows, neatly arranged as if by the hand of God Himself. The ground all glass shattered, littering the broken concrete of ground, split open like the angry maws of giants. And my lumbering gait. And my pathetic mewling in darkness. The path to the mine is memory. Is fixed. For years I walked that route, back and forth, dirty and black, filth ingrained in my eyes and nose. No danger of getting lost out here. Amongst the ruin. That would truly be the end. No fear would plague me if my God were with me, in my heart. Now, outside, beyond His reach, I am panic and

longing. My mind is racing with the faces and the voices, but not of holy origin. My tears are not new. Well practiced now. And this is the point. To be excluded and removed from his good grace. To be cast out into the wilderness. Tempted. To prove myself worthy and welcomed back into His loving embrace. The tower. Its stone. His hymn. A need for this pestilent ground. Yes. A torture path. Yes. This way I must go, must walk – not run. Be courageous. Be noble. And some hours will pass. The sun will partly rise before the mine shows in the hillside. And I will hold myself to a walk. Hands firmly at my side. Fists clenched. Soon all the rot will be behind me, and in front will be clear. A calmness. Things live in the sky out in the wild parts. Swooping birds and bats. Their eyes peer out of black, yellow and red and orange. They have grown fat on the rotten. They have developed unnatural appetites, and they hunt. Sounds of sudden screeching. In surprise, those high pitched cries. Sharp and piercing. Shivering skin and a heavy breath. My heart thumping. They have never struck out at me. In daylight they always appeared wary, circling high above but staying far away. They prey upon the small rodents that scurry. On the rats and mice, the wild dogs and foxes that rummage through. Sometimes it is those ground animals that come close. To investigate my smells, to beg for food. My hands are empty and so are their bellies. Often they fill mine. The meat is tough but good. And I give Him thanks and praise. A companion though, sometimes seems appealing. There were many of these domestic animals in the tower before. The cats, dogs, caged birds and rats and mice. No longer. And their faces, so sad and friendly, when teeth are not bared and snarling. When I am pure. When I return and am welcomed, perhaps then a companion will be granted. Longed for. So the birds and bats tonight are not my enemy. They keep their distance and flee from my shape. The sounds of their hunting crisscross overhead and around, but always some way away. They are not God's creatures, but they nevertheless fear His messenger. Now as the first amber of dawn begins to slowly arc across the horizon, the great opening of the mine opens on the side of the hill behind the tower. Hewn of the same black rock as the mighty Pylon of God, but older. Ancient. Some say impossible. Always my hands on the surface. Always the caress, the touching of those symbols and shapes carved into the stonework. Those cold, seamless surfaces. And the power contained within. The energy that flows even now. So many years. To bless myself before them. To kneel and beseech their builders, for they surely are the ones who went before me. Who uttered the name of God and called Him *Father*. To descend within these halls is as holy as rising into the heights of the tower. Into the darkness and the

enveloping silence. To feel the breath in your body frozen. To feel the sound of your voice flatten and then vanish into an abyss you can barely fathom. The vastness. And down into it I must journey. For how long I do not know. As long and as deep as it takes. Never have I seen the extent of these caverns. Never known their reach. Yet in them I toiled for all the years of my life. Before. And now. Returning as a new man. Enlightened. Made whole by the grace of God. They have been empty now for all the time since. All the after. Nothing stirs in here. I have served penance down in the depths precisely three times. A fourth now is a shameful stain on my duty, yet also a kindness. For God knows that within the vast and boundless deep, I will rediscover what brought me to His Light. And yet a hesitation as the sunlight gives way to dark. A fear that this may be my last journey into the caverns. That this time a collapse may take me. Trap me. This time I may fall into one of the many shafts, their depths unknown. And fall forever. Such dreams of falling. Never ending. A scream in my throat that is never allowed. And when I wake, to sweat and piss and coughing and entangled bedding, it takes long moments before I realise that sound is me. As familiar as I am with these tunnels, I am not so surefooted. It is as though these halls and galleries reshape themselves; shift and move. Sometimes it is as though there are new passages and rooms, spaces that did not exist before. And in this blackness my feet fail to find proper pathing, and trips come, catching me off balance. And stumbling. Into the dark. Out of sight of the light. Once I would have allowed myself a lamp, to cut through the fog of black and reveal what was hidden. But God demands more conviction, and I am compelled to make my proof. And light renders all it touches real. It allows that which lives in the shadow to take shape. I must not allow the sin of this place to take on form. If it should then it would escape and all the world would fall to darkness. These rock walls run with cold. Wet hands go to my face; I can taste the bitterness of the stone in my mouth. And through the dark these walls guide, through long passages, and down, deeper into the earth. Into the rock. And as I descend, it is not only through the ground, it is through the years. Far into the past now. The many voices of those who worked the rock. The hammering and drilling. The blasting. The opening of caverns, voids in the earth, hidden until the moment dynamite shook the walls to dust. The wonders uncovered in brilliant fluorescent lighting, arcing through the mine. And yet the search for rock, black rock. More valuable than any precious stones or gold or silver; more useful than any metal or ores. Strong enough for construction. Delicate enough for carving, and sculpture. A brilliant, shining black, almost a glow to its lustre. These halls rumbled to the sound of carts, the boots of

men, their shouts and laughter. Names all forgotten. All gone. Voices lost to the deep. Complete darkness now. Beyond the entrance arch, a series of passages down, through chambers and great galleries, where the space is felt in the huge expanse of air, and the intense cold. This is the silent place where penance can be paid. When cast in light these incredible halls are like the pictures of cathedrals I have seen, in drawings and etchings, in the books we had before. All ash now. Standing within the heart of these places, and the ceiling so high above, unseen, like the face of God, and as unreachable. These things we took for granted. We didn't understand their significance, nor the gifts within. Not until it was too late. For them. I have stood in these subterranean churches and called the name of God into the dark, a wordless sound of a name, a name that no mortal can understand. I have stood here and raged for days, pleading. And the isolation made me better. The silence that was my answer, filled my soul, pushing out the fear and all the rot, that over time does gather in a man's heart, a sick canker that needs breaking down, and flushed out. Yes. This is my punishment again. To cry for forgiveness. To beg and plead. Pushing deeper into the underground night and find my God. Again. Find that which man has pushed away and ignored. Banished from his heart. And my breath is warm, billowing out into these cold chambers. It appears to fall as ash to the ground. And the sobbing in my chest. And the hard stone against my back, lying and staring, as if flat out on a glacier. Black as tar. I have been alone for such a long time. I forget how. The tower keeps me busy, its many tasks and duties in His name, time to wonder and reflect is short. These times down within the ancient mine, there is nothing else but reflection. How unfathomable my loneliness is. How intensely it is felt. Within the void of dark the world feels smaller. Concentrated. There is me at the centre of a universe of dark matter and black flame. A coiling of ash encircling me. There is me reaching for something beyond my reach, within the embers of orbiting debris. But it always moves beyond me. Always just achingly close, never to be grasped. How I cry. How my tears stream from my face to the black rock of my cathedral floor, hand carved over decades, so smooth. Unyielding. Like the power of God. Like his love. For hours, this sobbing and curling on the floors. This crawling through the dark. For hours, just the silence and the sound of me. And moving further into the mine. Further into the chill and the stone earth. Over the metal of tracks, the overturned carts left where they fell, their contents spilled out into the chambers, lumps of hard, angular rock that bruises and grazes, trips. Then the idea of vast empty space. And a rising breath on my face, coming up from below.