

Fear Machine

by Joel Schanke

The hextech cipher's intricately designed metallic fragments remain stagnant despite my efforts in deconstructing it. The unbalanced manner in which the gaps of the metal are dispersed suggest the design of one with a masterful hand.

I see our objective tucked away within the cage, giving off a hypnotizing hum. The sound leads my thoughts to a dark and empty place, one standing dauntingly on the edge of my perception. Yet, it feels as soothing as a glimpse of the sun.

When my mind snaps back to the machine this time, I see Shan's eyes jump in my peripherals. I sense an anxious presence in his gaze, as if the timeless dance between the Void and Runeterra that the Elders of the Umbra Society preach about is consuming his nerve.

"Yes?" My voice is piercing.

"We're running out of time." He looks at his timepiece and points to the cracked screen. "Security may be slow down here, but not that slow, and the other Hoods..."

"I know what they'll be thinking. But they—you—know my method of hextech deconstruction is unmatched. I'll get it done. Be patient."

"Patience will get us killed!"

I note his concern but continue to experiment with the smaller cogs, levers, and springs dispersed with insufferable abundance all over the cipher. Only one layer of metal for me to unravel remains.

The scent of decaying hextech metals continues to fill my nostrils. It isn't a nuisance, though. It's a stir within me that has always filled my weary senses with purpose. If the metal is worn down, then it can be disassembled and reassembled into an apparatus with a function. That's as gratifying a thought as any of the Hoods' impractical endeavors.

I manipulate my slim fingers through one of the narrow gaps I haven't investigated yet. My index finger slides across a pinhole hiding underneath a cog. It's smooth and empty, as if a piece is meant to be placed within it. On the other side of the gap, a matching mechanism sits idle.

"Shouldn't be much longer now. Keep an ear on the door."

"Quick, let's get out of here." Shan's voice crackles with urgency.

I remember my hands investigating a pair of levers with the specific shape I'm looking for. I find one and detach it with a slight flick of my wrist, then attach it to the pinhole. I test the lever, and it spins with the motion of my hand. In reflex, my hands dart for the other lever and place it in the pinhole on the other side of the gap.

I turn both levers at the same time. The gears respond with a series of ticks; the barrier sheds away.

I'm instantly transfixed on the object inside: a metallic oval that flickers with a dark, purple light. The glow is replaced by a streamline of various symbols and shapes after I brush my fingers across its surface.

"Wh-what are those?" Shan questions in brooding whispers.

I feel perplexed, but... for a reason I cannot explain, I understand the alien text. It's not the form of comprehension I possess when deconstructing a device: knowledge that's second nature to me. These are different. Like learning a foreign language, the symbols pull the *knowing* out of me, as if I'm digesting the data in order to then have it restored back to my brain. It's an

instantaneous connection that I cannot grasp. I feel the symbiosis nearing its climax as the symbols gravitate towards one another.

The dank odor, the room's eerie lighting, the faint noises of Zaun's shady activity filtering through the cracks of the room's stained glass windows... Shan's twitching body. Crowded with physical sensations, my mind flashes between images of a gloomy world and a lake comprised of cold, black goo. My body and mind connect; a feeling of explosive power erupts from my veins.

"Damn it to Janna, do you remember when we had to blast our way out of Piltover? Do you remember what happened to your eye? Do you?" Shan pleads with me; his fear palpable.

I glare at him with my one eye, wild with furious passion. "This face. This skin. It is not mine to... It is not yours to consider!"

"The Umbra—"

"They know nothing of the power I now possess; they've always known nothing." New areas for the neurons in my brain to focus open before me; preparing, engraving.

"I don't understand. Grab the damned thing and please let's go." Shan inches closer to the cipher.

There's a weak buzzing as the symbols connect. The sound gradually intensifies, until a cloud of gaseous elements the darkest shade of purple spew out of the oval device like a volcano concocting a fiery potion of eruption. Sultry friction fills the room.

Shan burrows his head in his hands, unable to face the wave of heat.

"Coward!" I scream at him. "This is what true power feels like!" Hysterical, I can feel the presence inside me, growing and reacting to the warmth.

Shan stumbles back towards the doorway, but before he reaches the archway my limbs erupt in a bloody mess of tendrils and guts, causing him to slip and knock his head on the hard floor. My head is the last to mutate. My singular vision remains intact, yet more precise through its cyclopean lenses.

My gaze falls and I'm confronted by my new form: a creature resembling an upright octopus, coated in black sludge.

There is no pain; only a craving for... for *more*.

"Vel, please..." Shan's hands clamp onto his bleeding skull.

"What was it the Elders once told us? 'Your body's potential lacks power without careful inspection.' Humorous." My tentacles glow against the heat of the thick gas. I lash one at Shan's defenseless body and his essence evaporates into the air in a dark, red vapor.

"Worthless being." I reach one of my appendages out to absorb Shan's gaseous remains. "His fear, though... That I can use."

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