

Fear Machine

by Joel Schanke

The hextech cipher's intricately designed metallic fragments remain stagnant despite my efforts in deconstructing it. The unbalanced fashion which the gaps of the metal are dispersed suggests the design of one with a masterful hand. But I'm certain I can solve it, because I can see our objective tucked away within the cage, giving off a hypnotizing hum. The sound leads my thoughts to a dark and empty place. Ah, but 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, like the timeless dance between the Void and Runeterra that's constantly preached about by the Elders of the Brotherhood is consuming his nerve.

"Yes?" I ask.

His hands hover around the cipher. "We're running out of time." He maneuvers his arm to look at his timepiece and points to the cracked screen. "Security may be slow down here, but not that slow, and the Brothers..."

"I know what they'll be thinking. But my method of deconstruction has been proven to be the most efficient way. It'll work. We must be patient."

"Patience will get us killed!"

I note his concern, all the while experimenting with the smaller gears, levers, and springs in attempt to open the remaining layer of metal from the cipher.

The musty smell of old machinery continues to fill my nostrils, but it isn't a nuisance. The scent of decaying hextech metals is pleasant to my senses, filling me with purpose. If it's broken then it can be disassembled and reassembled into an apparatus with a function. That's as gratifying a thought as any of the Brother's impractical indulgences.

I manipulate my slim fingers through one of the narrow gaps I hadn't gotten to yet. My index finger slides across a groove hiding underneath a gear. The groove is smooth, empty, as if a piece is meant to be placed within it.

"Shouldn't be much longer now. Keep an ear on the door." Shan obeys my command willingly, his head nodding in a jovial fashion.

I find a small lever on the other side of the cipher, detach it with a slight flick of my wrist, and attach it to the empty groove. I test the lever and see that the gear now spins with the motion of my hand. I repeat these steps for the matching groove and gear on the other side of the gap.

In order to be formed, an element must be first deconstructed, I remember.

After both grooves have been filled with their missing parts, I turn both levers at the same time. The gears respond instantly; the inner shell that I hadn't been able to remove from the cipher now sheds away.

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

"Wh-what are those?" Shan questions, his dirtied fingernails scratching at the door across the room.

I feel perplexed, but... for a reason I cannot explain, I understand the alien text. It's not the form of comprehension I experience when I figure out how to break a code: knowledge that's

Comment [JS1]: End Beginning

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 through my skull and into the neurons firing from one section of my brain to the next. It's an instantaneous connection that I cannot grasp entirely.

The dank odor, the room's eyrie lighting, the faint noises of Zaun's shady activity filtering through the cracks of the room's stained glass windows... Shan's twitching body. My mind flashes between images of a dark world danker than the room I'm in and a body of water comprised of black goo. My body and mind connect; a feeling of explosive power erupts from my veins.

"Damn it to Janna, do you remember the last time 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. "Do you see this face? This skin...! It is not mine to... It is not yours to consider!"

"The Brother—"

"Shut up, now."

The cipher has opened new avenues for my neurons to focus. New perceptions allow me to understand the implications of being exposed to the device at such a close proximity.

"It's beautiful... the symbols, the power," I speak aloud.

"I don't understand," Shan inches his way to the cipher.

I notice that the symbols are creeping closer and closer to one another.

There's a weak buzzing as the symbols connect. The sound gradually intensifies, until a white, white cloud of gaseous elements spews out of the oval device like a volcano preparing to erupt. 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 dark 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 all over him, causing him to slip and knock his head on the cement floor. My head is the last to change, but my vision remains intact, better even. I look down with my one eye to gaze upon what I've become: a squid, coated in black sludge.

"Vel, please..." Shan's pleas have turned pathetic.

"What was it the Brotherhood once told us? 'Your body's potential lacks power without careful inspection.' Humorous." My tentacles begin to glow against the heat of the luminous gas. I lash my tentacle out at Shan's defenseless body. His essence evaporates into the air in a dark, red vapor.

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

END

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