

## Fear Machine

by Joel Schanke

My objective hums through the gaps of the hextech cipher's remaining metallic fragments, as if it were a songbird trapped inside a cage. The hypnotizing sound leads my thoughts to a dark and empty place, one standing just on the edge of my perception. Ah, but soothing... like catching a glimpse of the sun.

When my mind snaps back to the machine this time, I notice Shan's eyes jumping in the corner of my peripheral. Perhaps the pressure from the Elders of the Umbra Society to complete our mission undetected is consuming his nerve. He has to manage. I can't have him in this condition, not when I'm already distracted.

"Yes?" My voice pierces through the cipher's soft hum.

"We're running out of time." He points to the cracked screen of his timepiece. "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 and continue to experiment with the smaller cogs, levers, and springs dispersed with insufferable abundance all over the cipher. The one layer that remains has felt like six.

Hopeful, I manipulate my slim fingers through one of the narrow gaps I haven't investigated yet. My pinky slides across a pinhole hiding underneath a cog. It's smooth and empty, as if a

piece is meant to be placed within it. A matching mechanism sits idle on the other side of the gap.

“Yes, interesting,” I think but say aloud. “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 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, and the barrier sheds away.

I’m instantly transfixed on the object inside: a metallic oval that gleams 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 the molecules deep within me boiling in an outburst of concentrated mania as the symbols gravitate towards one another.

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. This is different. Like learning a foreign language, the symbols pull the *knowing* out of me, as if I’m digesting the unknown intelligence to then have it inserted back into my primed mind. It’s an instantaneous connection I cannot grasp.

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 the desolate place invading my thoughts and a lake comprised of cold, black goo. My body and mind connect; the explosive power flowing through my veins nears its climax.

"These... This is an ancient text you're too feeble minded to understand," I say softly, still mesmerized by the symbols.

"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."

"I don't understand. *Power?* Just grab the damned thing and please let's go." Shan inches closer to the cipher.

A muffled buzzing spreads throughout the room once the symbols connect. The sound gradually becomes louder, until, at its apex, a cloud of gaseous elements 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 it my limbs explode in a bloody mess of tendrils and guts, causing him to slip and knock his head on the hard floor. My singular vision remains intact, yet more precise through its cyclopean lens.

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... *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."