



The Days of Last

A short story



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The Days of Last

The City. That's what we called it, and that was its only name – it didn't need any other, as for most of us that was all we knew. It took us from birth to death in equal contempt, we breathed its air, we even ate its food, grown in deep underground fields. The City was endless – a geographically bounded but fractally infinite maze of political, social, ethnical and religious patchworks, thrown together violently without any sort of planning or control. In the City politics was not a luxury: your survival depended on how well you understood the dynamics of the various groups that fought for control of a particular area, block or street.

We had tarmac, cement, sodium lighting. We had origin myths, historical tales, old and new, and we even had songs. But nobody controlled the City, and nobody knew how it had become what it was today: a world unto its own. Some could afford airborne travel, but otherwise attempting to leave the city was not only a concept we struggled with, but a very dangerous endeavour. A few hardened adventurers made a living of such trips, but mostly goods from outside the city would get absorbed slowly at the edges, making their way through trading, wars and pillaging towards the centre where the wealthy people lived.

This story is as much about the City as it is about me, it's as much about destruction than it is about creation. It begins outside my flat with me leaning on the humid wall, looking at my door. I wore a black dress and a grey overcoat, a style I had kept to since my early twenties: I had not chosen to survive by making myself visible. I remember the corridor's flickering light, and the red lettered graffiti in front of me: "It is happening". My flat had been broken into, the door still open, the lock ripped out, and I did not dare enter it. There, at the edge of my flat, caught in my own uncertainty, I started thinking about Maria – and then I knew what I had to do: I readied my handgun and hurried down the three flights of stairs that led back to the street, jumping over a body that had been left in the entrance hall. I remember voices were shouting and arguing in the distance, some group fighting further up the street, but I didn't pay any attention and

ran towards the station.

As I got there the entrance was crowded by a large group of people, members of a local sect. They were all wearing the same clothes, a white robe that had a certain glow to it, removing all contrasts from their shapes, making their bodies look uniform. They tried to talk to me, but I just pushed past them, and ran through the large empty hall to catch the train just as it was leaving.

Sects were everywhere in the city – they grew and spread like diseases, dying out when there was no more damage to be done. The words I had seen next to my door - “it is happening” - were the signature of an obscure sect that had been growing recently, The Days of Last, preaching about angels, great battles and the end of the City.

The train journey was mostly underground, sometimes in tunnels, sometimes running through fields where you could see humans with all sorts of cybernetic modifications working in the artificial light. They were covered in condensation, their silvery extensions glistening. Most of them would go back up at the end of their work - very few people lived underground as most of the space was kept for agriculture, and through unspoken convention usually kept out of surface wars.

Maria didn't live far, and I could have gone over the surface rather than take the train I could ill afford – but I was worried and wanted to get there as soon as possible. I spent the whole 20 minutes fidgeting, checking and re-checking my hand gun was still in my overcoat's pocket. Arriving at my stop, I jumped off the train before it had completely halted, and as I hit the ground someone called my name: “Tanya!”. I turned around, slightly anxious even though I recognised the voice. It was Chris, his silhouette made obvious by his old battered hat and his heavy looking pair of glasses. I went to him. “Anything wrong?” I asked. He looked scared. “I was looking for you. Something's happening, Tanya. The others are waiting at the old caf', we need to talk”. We left the station, paying our fare at the thoroughly guarded entrance and stepped into the street. While the city had grown organically, the scene in front of us was one that

was repeated over and over again: yellow lighting coming from tall, thin, lamp posts; groups of armed people standing at the corners; scared faces hurrying along. We made our way to the old caf', always aware of potential danger, but unconscious of all the behaviours and body language we had learned to use to navigate the city, to mark us as belonging here, as neither threat nor victim.



As we got to the caf' I could see everyone else had already arrived, including – as I had hoped – Maria. We were what some would romantically call a group of hackers, though it was more of a joint enterprise through which we tried to scrape a living. Most of our work was “porting”. There wasn't, probably never had been, one computer network that spanned the City. There were myriads of networks, often geographically constrained, sometimes large and far reaching but tightly controlled by some religious groups. All these networks ran using incompatible protocols on incompatible hardware - “porting” was about making pages and applications of one network available on another. We'd been in trouble before – each network had it's own regulations and it was easy to breach one or other while porting content.

I followed Chris into the caf'; we sat down and I briefly went over what had happened at my flat. “Similar things have happened to half

of us” said Joe, a tall thin woman with short white hair who often took the lead when such situations occurred. She had founded the group some 50 years ago, and we all trusted her. “This is not the usual stuff though”, she continued, “partly because it’s been happening to other groups too. The Days of Last have been hacked, something was taken from them, and they’re looking for it. They just don’t know who did it”. “That doesn’t sound like much” I pointed out. “Not like this”, replied Chris, “but there is more. I’ve uncovered something: The Days of Last have infiltrated food networks, and it seems they’re using them to spread mutation agents in the population. They’re ” - “They’re creating angels” Maria interrupted, and we looked at each other.

She took out a number of press cuttings with gruesome pictures of mutilated bodies. “A number of unexplained deaths that have been happening over the past few months. It seems they died while their body was mutating. Trying to grow wings”. As the implications of what we were discussing became clearer, I realised this meeting was a bad idea – too late. The window of the caf’ exploded as a group of five people outside began unloading their automatic weapons on us.

I don’t know exactly who was killed, injured or who escaped. Blown by the initial blast, I managed to crawl to the back of the caf’, shortly followed by Maria and Chris. Chris was limping, and his trousers were soaked with blood – he’d been shot, but we didn’t have time to deal with that straight away. We went out the backdoor, and crossed to the building opposite under a rain of bullets coming from the far side of the street. Whether these shots came from the group who initially attacked us or some other group who joined in hoping there was something to gain we couldn’t tell, but the result was the same: we couldn’t go down that road, so we started climbing up the stairs to the roof of the building, hoping to find some escape route, with Maria and myself both supporting Chris. Conflicts in the City knew no scale: sometimes spanning entire areas of the City and involving millions of people, and sometimes between two floors of the same building. There was no knowing when a floor of your building would convert to a new religion that happened to hate you. For that reason each floor of the building had it’s own locked gate. I had my terminal

with me and, when you knew how, such gates were easy to open: two wires to cut off and plug into the terminal on which I could run a program that would break the code. For old models such as those whose encryption algorithms had been cracked long ago, it was quick to do and we got to the top of building in no time. As soon as we got there Chris passed out and Maria bandaged him as best as she could.

I scanned around to see if I could find anything helpful - the view from the top was dark, the penumbræ contrasting with the splashes of yellow light down the street. Most flats were either empty, had their windows blinded or had their lights switched off to save on electricity. While I was still looking around we started hearing shouts coming from the staircase we had climbed up. Maria got up, calmly, walked to the door, opened it, and threw a grenade down the staircase. The shouts became screams, and then died out. "What next?" I asked, looking at her, in awe of how calm and present she was walking back from the scene of destruction she had just caused. "Call an E-merg cab", she said.

E-merg was a company of hover cabs that specialised in getting people out of tricky situations. The fee was high – in that case all I had on my bank account – and they didn't guarantee they'd pick you up if it was too dangerous, though they had a reputation to uphold and usually tried hard to get you out.

We stood, waiting, anxious and calm at the same time, accepting of whatever fate would bring us: death or life, abduction or freedom. We didn't wait long though – less than a minute later a string ladder came down from above. Chris was still out, so we had to hang on to the ladder with him being held between us. The hover cab pulled us away just as people erupted on the roof of the building; shouts and gunshots came from below, while the City unfolded beneath us, patches of lights and darkness. But it all seemed quite distant, as I was lost in Maria's gaze. "Kiss me", I said moving my lips close to hers as she did the same.

We got the E-merg cab to drop us off near Carni street – where we knew of a clinic that would help Chris out without asking too many

questions regarding where the money came from. Nobody cared about where the injuries came from – but being the recipient of dodgy money could lead one into trouble, and that particular clinic was actually underground and well armed. As it happened we didn't even have the money yet – we sat in the waiting room with our terminals taking some unusual risks to hack some money off a distributed exchange network, redistributing it to various shops across the city, getting the goods traded in pawn shops and the money wired to an account we had hacked in the past, then sent on to the clinic. These things could happen quickly in the City, but they left traces and there was no doubt we'd get in more trouble for this later, but we had to save Chris. We waited another couple of hours and eventually the doctors told us he was out of danger, and that they would keep him for a couple of days while he recovered.

There wasn't anything left for us to do at the clinic, so tired as we were and having quite forgotten the events that had led us here in the first place, we went out to get a coffee. No sooner had we stepped outside that a strident sound resounded. We froze, as crowds of faithfuls from the Days of Last started appearing out of every building entrance, out of every corner and shadow the street had to offer, coming for us like an unstoppable crowd of ghosts. Despite everything that had happened so far we still had some fight within us. We broke the window of a car, which triggered it's self destruct mechanism and Maria hot wired it while I kept the crowd at bay with the last bullets in my hand gun. Maria set the car driving towards the crowd as it was beeping it's countdown to self destruction. We hid behind more vehicles as the car exploded, sending a rain of human debris falling across the street. But they weren't finished: faithfuls kept coming, from the side streets, gliding down from building. We used the confusion caused by the explosion to open up a sewer passage and slid down the damp, stinky darkness of the City's waste waters.

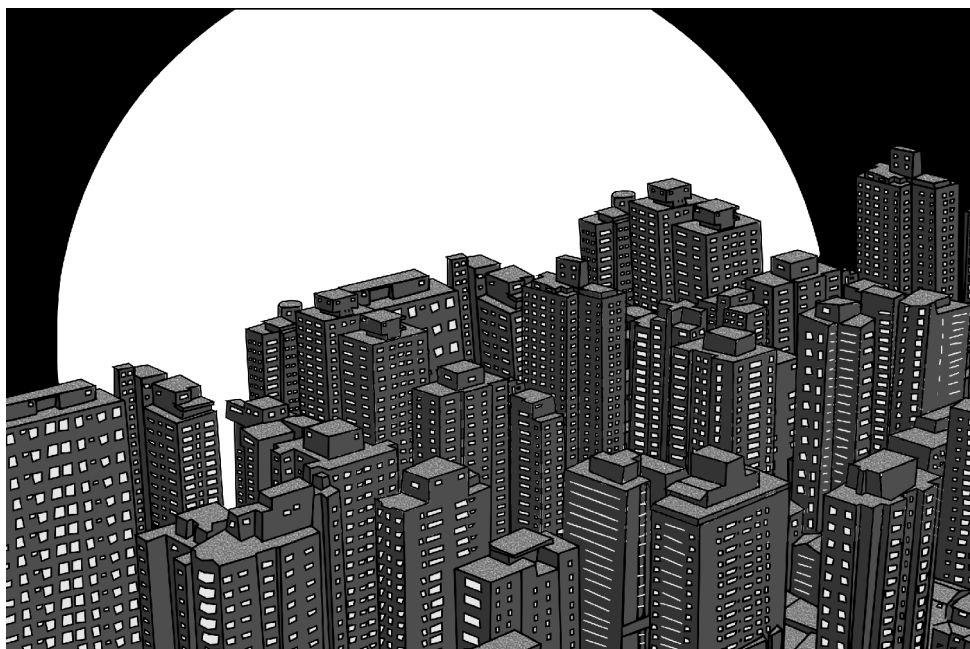
We were hoping to make it down to the fields, but unfortunately met a dead end straight away. The situation was hopeless: we were soon surrounded and subdued. I passed out.

I don't know how long I was unconscious, I don't even remember waking up. But I remember the moment that followed as vividly as if I could see it in front of my eyes now: It's raining, there's a storm, and I am outside the city, even though I can barely comprehend that. I can see it's shadows and it's skylines, shifting with each strike of thunder. I can see a neighbourhood where a local war adds to the luminous chaos. I'm on a hill, a hill of metal, a junk yard, outside the city. All around me the rain is hitting metal in a cacophony of screams, all around me blood is mixing with rust. I don't remember how I got there. I am screaming, I think, though I can't hear myself. I'm kneeling, holding Maria's dead body, feeling like I'm being ripped apart by the pain inside me.

From there on and for quite a while my memory is hazy and confused – I don't know how I got back in the City, though I have visions of myself in my black dress, half covered in blood, climbing through a gap in the City wall. What I know about what happened next, I know from the myths and tales that surround it. Stories of a woman in a dark dress, with long dark hair, walking alone across the city with a sword in her hand, leaving death and destruction everywhere she passed, unstoppable. The stories say that she – I – went through war zones, that she crossed the most dangerous parts of the city and fought the most ruthless gangs. I have little memory of this, and I don't even know which of those myths were really about me, were really written after the events or merely adapted from existing stories and prophecies. So many people in the City lived inside tales that they created as they went along it was hard to tell what had actually happened – and in a way, it didn't matter because it was the myths and stories that would forge the future.

It's not until I got back to the clinic where we had left Chris that my memory gets clearer. The clinic had been destroyed, all that was left was a crater and a pungent smell of destruction. I don't think I even thought about Chris as I went down that crater, feeling both purposeful and at a loss as to what I was going to do next. This is when it happened. There are few words to describe this beyond the discourses of religious miracles – yet this was neither the graceful revealing of the angel, nor the gruesome arrival of a demon.

A shock rippled through my body, two long vertical lines tore open my back, spurting blood meters away, and I fell down to my hands and knees, shaking and vomiting. The wings unfolded, in one smooth motion that tore a final scream of pain out of me. The wings were wide, spanning several meters in total, and made of bones and pale skin through which blue veins could be seen. I got up, finally, silently, having recovered my breath. I stretched my wings and looked up to the moon. A second later I was flying in the sky, a red trail of blood behind me.



The City grew smaller underneath me, inconsequential, as I flew for hours and hours with only one objective in mind, regardless of how unrealistic it would appear: the moon. It was as if I finally knew what had been missing from my life all these years, and finally, finally, I was going there. The hours turned into days, my resolve grew stronger, and the oxygen disappeared. What ether my wings were beating against, what substance my lungs were breathing, I do not know – it seems my body had mutated in more ways than I realised – but neither the cold void of space nor the floating space debris of past technologies stopped me from reaching my destination.

My arrival on the moon was silent, all things were silent there, despite the battle that was raging on. The battle stretched as far as I could see – winged creatures battling hefty cyborgs, humans in armour struggling against beings that seemed to be made of pure light, flying crafts causing large scale destruction as far as the horizon, volcanoes erupting with beasts of fire, ripping through the ranks of medieval soldiers. Maybe it was the low gravity, but it felt like everything was happening in slow motion, like a macabre dance of destruction. I could almost hear the music as I joined in, having never felt a stronger sense of purpose in my entire life.

I danced with giant cyclops, leaving none alive. Flying above the battle ground, I marked the beat of destruction through formations of acid spraying hover crafts. I personally silenced the king of Goblins forever, and in all the cacophony a trail of silence followed my improvised steps. The battle lasted forever, pitching the real against the imaginary, the mythical against the technological, myself against the rest of creation. Forever ended, and I remember myself, alone, standing at the top of a mountain of body parts, breathing heavily. Nothing was moving, nothing was alive, blood was everywhere. Warmth, light, a sense of peace and fulfilment overflowed me. I slowly turned around to see a door, a door so large and bright perspective made no sense, opening up in the air behind me, causing ripples in the ether. It was then, finally, that I came to myself.

Their hero. The Days of Last had made me into their hero. They'd poisoned me, killed my friends and lovers, and manipulated me into joining their fight, into fighting it for them. All of it had been planned so that, at this instant, I would be exactly where I am. I knew what I was supposed to do next: the sense of purpose was strong as ever, and it was driving me to go through that door. I knew I wouldn't be able to resist for long. I thought of what they had done to Marie, to Chris, to all of my friends back on earth. I took my sword, held it with both hands, it's pointed edge against my stomach, and without giving myself time for regret I plunged it through myself. I fell, but I did not die.

The ground started shaking beneath me as I lay in the blood of a thousand warriors, and then I was suddenly swept away from the ground into the ether, floating away from the surface of the moon. I watched passively the dead battlefield as it got further and further away from me, wondering how many millennia of planning and smaller conflicts had led to this end. It took me an hour to realise I was not floating away – I had stayed in place. It was the moon that was moving, falling down to earth. I removed the sword that was still through me, not feeling any pain, and it floated away as I watched the most cataclysmic of events imaginable, the moon colliding with earth. Human languages do not have the words to describe such an event – destruction on an incomprehensible scale, so far removed from anything our lives had prepared us for, it was simply unthinkable. And I watched it all happen, in all its majesty, and within me I could hear every single scream, I could sense every single thought, I could feel every single last kiss.

Time seemed to accelerate, things started happening faster and faster, until the motions of the stars in space were just a mere blur of faint light. And then everything disappeared; I was left alone, floating in a sea of emptiness, of absolute darkness.

This is when the story begins. There is only one story, that of time, that of space, that of pain. My body was not my body anymore for it was all that there was, yet I could feel its pain and I screamed as it started exploding apart, each molecule, each atom, each particle ripped away, my body ever expanding, creating time, space and pain. And as they stretched further and further into the void, the particles of my body started splitting, fusing, multiplying, forming vast gas clouds, at times coalescing into matter, forming, finally, stars, planets, moons, solar systems, galaxies, comets, worlds, life.

This is me, this is my creation, this is my universe. And through all of this I never stopped screaming, the background noise that would fill the emptiness of space, invisible through its omnipresence, the universal pain that sustains creation.



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