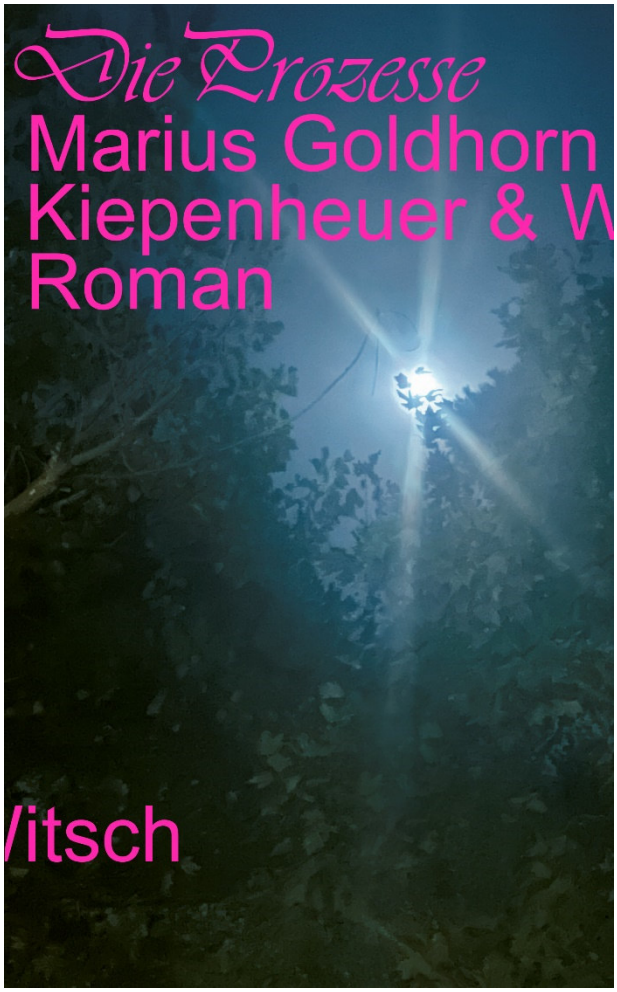
THE TRIALS

by Marius Goldhorn

Sample translation by Jamie Lee Searle



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RAIN

We couldn't sleep. Ezra and I left our hotel room at dawn, and didn't run into anyone. Ezra knew the way.

In the dunes, we took off our shoes. The sand had turned cold overnight. It reminded me of a dead dragon's skin; dry, delicate and cold. Individual grains of sand moved around. The sky, clouds and sea formed a silver-blue unity, a sphere.

We laid in a hollow the white blankets and hand towels we had brought with us from the hotel. I was wearing my new green parka, and had the hood up. I looked at Ezra's slender foot; the hairs seemed to be growing directly out of the bone. It was the 12th of September.

All Ezra had with him were the black flared trousers I'd given him. They were so tight I couldn't help but laugh every time he laid down to squeeze himself into them, even though he was so thin. He undid the top button. His purple woollen pullover slipped up, and I saw his pelvic bone and the dark hairs beneath his belly button. It should have been impossible to find trousers that were too tight for him, but I had managed. And he wore them regardless.

I had brought water. He took a gulp, wrapped himself in a blanket and fell asleep. I stroked his dark-blonde eyebrows, which joined in the middle. He fitted in well among the dunes, with the soft grasses and grey sand. A factory trawler provided the sole night-time illumination. We were both good at sleeping out in the open air. We're German only children; we live in Brussels.

Ezra is older than me, by seven years. I'm twenty-nine. Ezra is a thousand years old.

I woke up when I received a text message, but didn't read it. I didn't move. I fell back to sleep.

I slowly came around as though from a long anaesthesia. The sky was yellow. Everything had changed. Ezra had turned away from me in his sleep. I sat up, it was windy, there was no reason to hurry. The sky looked unfathomable, overcast and deep. Everything was yellow. Yellow sand had flowed to the edges of the blanket. The silhouettes of yellow clouds stood out against the horizon, smudged, it was raining there. My cheeks felt hot, so I pulled down my hood. I heard the monotonous rushing sound and drew a spiral in the sand with my finger. In this moment, I had a good relationship with life and with everything that followed it. Thunder rumbled across the sea towards us.

Down on the sand, two knights in pointed helmets were locked in battle, wearing chainmail vests and skirts of tattered fabric. I loved knights. I was in my medieval phase. Ezra no longer had phases. I could see it in his eyes; he sometimes got this thousand-years-gaze, as though he were envisaging something very far away.

The knights' swords glinted whenever they raised their arms to strike, and I couldn't understand where the light reflected by the blades was coming from. They blocked the attacks and sometimes struck each other's armour, but that didn't bother them. I tried to wake Ezra; gently at first, then more firmly. He cleared his throat and breathed heavily, unevenly.

I plaited a strand of hair behind my ear and picked a favourite from the two knights. I didn't bind the braids at the bottom, so they untwisted again. My hair

wasn't very long back then; it only came down to my chin. Ezra didn't like me experimenting with my hair. I felt slightly afraid, not wanting one of the knights to be struck by lightning.

They pulled off their helmets and waited for the next rumble of thunder. Serenely, they pushed their swords into the sand, pointed out into the rain and drank from a leather flask. They were really very well kitted out. Then they walked across the dunes to the parking lot. Ezra simply wouldn't wake up.

I grabbed his upper arm, squeezed it tightly, and felt without wanting to this skin against my thumbnail, this skin that covers bones.

"Ezra," I said.

He pulled himself upright, looked at me, then closed his eyes again. I filmed across the beach and the sea, into the yellow sky.

"I think it's starting to rain."

"I'm not feeling well," said Ezra. One of his sleeves had slipped up. His arms were still tanned from summer.

"What's wrong?"

"I need to go back to the hotel."

He spoke calmly and solemnly. Something wasn't right, so we hurried and left the blankets and towels behind. He walked a step ahead of me. I stayed silent. He had assured me he had this illness under control. "Butterfly skin", he called it, *epidermolysis bullosa*. He could be a little old-fashioned. He didn't talk about illnesses much, he'd told me it was harmless and unimportant. I didn't want to talk about illnesses. I try not to let certain information into my system. The less I know, the better. Ezra knows everything. We were a very good match.

I saw us through the eyes of the people on the promenade, who turned to stare as we rushed past, two tall men; one gaunt and elegant, and then me, behind,

long-haired and covered in sand. It calmed me to see us reflected in the mirror of others, to know how grotesque and strange we looked, how grotesque and strange everything we did looked.

We hurried through the bright entrance lobby of the vast hotel. The Thermae Palace's reception was unstaffed, the marble tiles broken and worn.

"Do you have the key?"

I gave him the card. We walked down a long, dark corridor, across old blue carpet that had dark water stains here and there. It was as though the hotel were preparing itself to become an emergency hospital. I had spotted badly painted-over mould on the ceilings.

"Why do they never turn the lights on?"

I didn't say a word. It had been Ezra's idea to book into this strange, massive hotel.

Back in our room, he emptied out his messenger bag: papers, cables, a blister pack. He travelled very light.

"They were in my bag."

He read the back of the packaging and tossed it aside.

"Isn't that it?"

"Aspirin."

"Maybe you forgot it?"

"Maybe. But I don't think so."

"When was the last time you didn't have the medication with you?"

He answered without taking a beat: "Eighteen."

The way he lay there on the carpeted floor, one leg bent at an angle beneath him, his trousers unbuttoned again, speaking to his doctor in Brussels on the phone, I thought he had everything under control. Ezra smiled. He and his doctor were strangely close. He explained the situation, told him how we'd

been swimming in the cold sea and that we'd slept outside, while I looked at the art print on the pale-blue wall, a painting by James Ensor. Even though it was actually a cheerful picture, it reminded me of the war.

"He says I'm to rest," said Ezra, pulling on mismatching socks. Something he never did.

We waited, me at the table, Ezra in bed, for his doctor to send the prescription. His lips were trembling, though he didn't notice. I told myself that I can only be my true self with him, a leaf blowing in the wind. It had always been like that. I watched the videos from the last few days: Ezra in the sand and in the sea, the dunes and the wind.

"I've got it." Ezra forwarded me the prescription.

"I don't have any money."

I pulled his trousers off. He was wearing expensive underwear, the blonde hairs on his thighs glistened in the light. He always gave me money.

"Here."

He leaned forward slightly, stretched his hand out. I gave him my smart phone; he saved his credit card on it.

"I won't use that," I said, but he had already closed his eyes and pulled up the covers.

At first, I couldn't find my way out of the hotel. Calcified plastic tubs stood beneath leaking radiators. At the end of a corridor, I ran into a maid. I thought she was talking to herself, but she was speaking to the robotic vacuum cleaner that was following her. I heard her say something about "shoes" and "barefoot", I can't speak Flemish.

I stepped into the breakfast room with the cut-glass chandeliers and glass tanks of clear fruit juices. Hundreds of tables were covered with short white tablecloths and set with silver cutlery, even though I hadn't yet seen any other guests. Ezra had said the hotel had cost next to nothing and would be closing permanently soon anyway, that the whole thing was a joke. So I didn't understand why our room looked out on the empty parking lot and not the sea.

It was raining. The hotel's colonnade was propped up with steel bars to prevent it from collapsing. It smelt of urine and burnt Styrofoam, I think.

Along Ostende's wide beach ran a seemingly unending promenade, densely packed with multi-storied apartment buildings. In the pharmacy, I showed the prescription to the pharmacist and she explained the process for taking the anti-Malaria tablets. Then she mixed up a ointment, for the rash, she said. Perhaps she thought I was the one who was sick. I said I also needed hair oil, to signal that I was healthy. The hair oil was more expensive than Ezra's medications.

On my way back, I shielded the paper bag under my parka from the rain. I love this dark-green parka. Ezra bought it for me. The parka was from autumn 2001, as I'd discovered in the Internet Archive. With the hoodie I was wearing, I possibly looked a little military-esque; but with the right shirt, I would quickly resemble the deserter I wanted to be. I walked across the beach and searched for the blankets and hand towels we had left there. Ezra had said I should leave them there, but I didn't agree.

In moments like these, it struck me how much money he had. Ezra wasn't interested in money. Rich people don't need money. His family came from the caste of money. Inclusive of its genetic defects, careers, greed, paranoia, he had said. Ezra hated money. In that way you can only hate money when you have it and don't need any. No one knew how rich he really was, not even me. It struck me whenever he ate like an animal, in sudden attacks, when he wore threadbare suit trousers, when he used my small Vichy face cream for his whole body. Or when he said I should stop cleaning up.

"Who else will do it, Ezra?" I asked as I cleaned.

"No-one," he said.

Our room was on the third floor. I quietly opened the door, crept across the carpet and sat down on the edge of the bed. Ezra signalled with his eyes that he'd heard me. I smoothed ointment onto his cheeks and nose. I couldn't see any sign of a rash.

"It would've been better if we'd driven out into the wilderness."

He laid his hand on mine.

"I need to rest."

His fingertips were snow-white. I pulled my hand away. He scratched his forehead. He wanted me to give him socks for his hands. I showed him the anti-Malaria tablets.

"Two," he said.

It got dark early. I enjoyed spending the whole day in bed. We lay next to one another, and from time to time my eyes would fall shut, then I would immediately wrench them open again and for a few moments, as I looked at our naked body parts stored there motionless in the dark room, like frozen cod in the blue light of the display, I got the feeling that we were dead. Or no, that we didn't exist, and were merely there to have information projected upon us.

Eventually Ezra fell asleep and I got up. When I opened the curtains, it seemed as though it was getting even darker. I stretched quietly on the floor. We had planned to travel onwards to Dunkirk. That wouldn't happen now. For me, that wasn't a problem.

Later, I walked through the hotel; the rain outside was torrential. At the reception, I saw a face in the glow of a table lamp. I asked the night porter whether I could extend our stay by five nights. She thought I was Ezra, and I signed with his signature.

On the morning of the 13th of September, I found the breakfast room on my first attempt. A friendly child in an oversized uniform handed me a plastic basket with croissants, tea and honey. Ezra tried to eat. He didn't like breakfast, just like me. We're kindred spirits, but sometimes I get the feeling our souls aren't entirely in sync.

"I'm going into the city. Is that okay?"

"Check out the Atlantic Wall Museum and send me videos."

"There's a storm outside," I said. "Drink a bit more, please."

He wanted me to bring back fruit and cigarettes.

"Fruit and cigarettes? Should you be smoking?"

He gave me a questioning look, his face white from the ointment, his short hair dishevelled, his t-shirt collar frayed, like all his collars.

"That doesn't matter."

The rain streamed down the solar panels on the roofs of the beach huts, the sand foamed. Beneath a bench, gulls picked at a rat's carcass, separating the sallow entrails from the edible sections.

In front of an old covered market on the harbour, oyster shells rested in wood shavings. For a moment, I thought I'd already been here. I'm always getting these déjà-vus. When you're always experiencing that kind of thing, you start to believe in past lives. Ezra always said it's because I suppress everything, that my body wants to signal to me that I had a past. I really struggle to remember things. Nothing of what's in me from before feels genuine, or real.

At standing tables between cast-iron columns, couples were eating glistening fish soup. Beer glasses stood on a counter and wine labels swam in iced water inside stainless-steel buckets. Rain pelted down onto the corrugated iron roof. Everyone was quiet, eating; the rain was too loud for talking. I love watching people as they eat.

In a corner of the hall, a street trader crouched in front of her stand, where books and magazines were strung up, fastened with an elastic band. Some had gotten wet. There were portraits printed on the covers of the cheap little red books, Hitler in front of old-fashioned aeroplanes; emperors and kings; Robespierre with a handkerchief over his mouth; and the historically-accurate reconstruction of Julius Caesar's head.

I ate an oyster. The fisherman had a large scar on his cheek. He wasn't at all bothered that I wanted only one oyster, and was very nice. In front of a pyramid of persimmons, I drank a juice and leafed through the Caesar book. I wrote an email about my apartment, which I had given notice on for the end of September, and arranged a video call for the day of our return. I bought apples and pears, cigarettes, cheese, and a small, fancy bottle of olive oil.

Ezra was asleep when I got back. The ointment smelt a little strange, dull, though maybe it was this blue-white hotel room. I simply sat there and waited. Eventually, he woke up.

"I went to a covered market."

"Really?"

"I ate an oyster."

He didn't react.

"The fisherman had a scar on his cheek."

"A scar on his cheek," he repeated, absent-minded. He hadn't been listening to me. He added nonsensically: "A big scar?"

I always told him everything. I now realised that this was inappropriate, and apologised. I washed a pear for him in the bath, then he wanted me to wash the pear again with mineral water. I apologised, I always apologised for everything. Ezra ate a bit of the pear, then put it down. My eyes had been

burning the whole day already, and as I watched him from the edge of the bed, a tear fell on his foot. He flinched and brushed his other foot across it.

The next day, in a wing of the hotel, I photographed an empty gym with dumb bells, old cardio machines and tired-looking leather exercise balls. I rowed for an hour on a rowing machine. With every stroke, I got closer to my destination in the small, ancient animation, even though the only thing that passed was time. One minute per minute, one second per second. I couldn't properly grip afterwards; my fingers were stiff.

On the 15th of September, a butterfly-shaped rash formed on Ezra's face, just like he'd said. The display shimmered as a reflection in the ointment. His facial expression became more normal. The sleepiness disappeared and a faint expression of aliveness returned, something furtive in his eyes.

Ezra has this online persona called Deborn. He has numerous blogs, comments on everything, writes about everything. Deborn has no face. Before, his profile pictures were landscapes in Occitania, where it's been raining without pause for years now. Only after the psychiatry did he change his profile picture to Angelus Novus, a painting from 1920, half child, half ogre.

Before, Deborn had written about the Sixth Mass Extinction, the extinction of the species, about the extinction of humanity, an under-the-radar surreal story without structure, without a climax and without resolution. Later, extinction became the absolute cypher for him, the secret of all conditions. He came to the conviction that reflecting on extinction needed to become the centre of our culture. Deborn was the Extinction Angel. He had this cult-like following. Online, there were forums that tried to find out what Deborn wanted.

Ezra is amused by this. He types away into his old smart phone. When he writes, he's pierced by this strange light.

Two days passed. I walked along the beach beneath an umbrella, across the hard sand. I visited a sauna complex. An old Flemish couple were talking to one another, and I imagined their words dispersing in the steam. I no longer remember anything else that happened. I don't have any other records of these two days, no photos, no videos, no messages I sent.

Early on the morning of the 18th of September, a Wednesday, we bought tickets online for the first Ostende-Brussels express. Ezra moved a little clumsily under the hotel umbrella, but nothing in his appearance suggested that he'd been in bed for almost a week. In front of Ostende station, a woman in a light-grey coat was distributing red poppies made of plastic. Raindrops ran down the lenses of her frameless glasses. We took two poppies, but later left them on the train.

I stared across the wet meadows and fields of Flanders. I was cold, I was breathing, and I was happy. About what? I love rain, I love the green of these meadows and fields.

Shortly before our arrival at Bruxelles-Nord, there was an announcement about which counter to report to if you wanted to enter Anderlecht.

"They still seem to be fighting," I said. Ezra nodded. A video had been smuggled out of an internment camp in Libia. There had been protests not only in Brussels, but other cities across Europe too; everywhere possible.

"They still haven't managed it," he said. Anderlecht had been cordoned off for days. Cars were burning, the Westland shopping centre was burning, hooded men on scooters had been scouring the European quarter for those responsible. Ezra and I watched a BBC summary.

The train slowly pulled into Brussels. I saw the church spires and the glass towers in front of the cemeteries, the city gates, the chimneys, the smoke expanding in the dark rain.

In the train, we heard the next announcement, information on Saison au Congo, a city festival to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Congolese and African emancipation, which was due to begin at the weekend.

"Do you want to go?"

He shrugged.

"Bea asked me whether we're going."

"Of course we're going," he said, without looking up, as though he were trying to convince himself.

The elder tree in front of the train station had toppled in the recent storm. The rain washed the black fruits and scraps of paper, food and plastic into the city. I still had the images in my mind of Ezra disappearing into the cold grey waves. City employees in infection control-like rainsuits were sawing the elder into pieces.

"Will it grow back?" I asked.

"Will what grow back?"

"The tree."

"The elder?"

"Yes."

"No, I don't think so."

A beggarwoman with an amputated arm came towards us. She held out a plastic card, printed with a QR code. Ezra gave her a cigarette and scanned the code. He showed me his smart phone, an ad for a Nestlé genetic start-up. In it, a woman was walking along a white corridor. I had suppressed all of that.

"Where's she going?" I asked.

The beggarwoman pointed into a flooded station tunnel. "Come with me, this is the way through," she said, in quite a gentle tone.

"We're fine," said Ezra, and I waved my hand in dismissal.

We said goodbye at the entrance to the metro. He smelled medicinal, and of cigarettes. We kissed quickly and furtively.

"Are you coming over this evening?"

"I think so," I said.

Ezra took a taxi to the doctors. I followed the black tubes that were pumping rainwater out of the lower platform levels, and walked through the open ticket barriers. On the platform, brown water seeped through the bars on the floor. Idiotically, I got into the train, but after one station we had to stop in the tunnel. Then we went back to the station, and it all took far too long. In the end, I didn't have time to get to my apartment. I walked through the crazy rain into the city centre, to anywhere I could get Internet.

In Le Pain Quotidien I opened the link on my laptop that Arianna from LAIN/Ra, the developers of Egregore, had sent me. I sat at a rustic bakery table, and in my memory, there was flour on it, but that can't be right. I waited for Arianna in the online lobby. I was glad we were meeting online. I drank coffee.

I was a 3D artist. I created landscapes. I furnished simulations. Initially I had worked at a studio in Brussels, but now I was freelance. I was good at my work, and actually no one worked like me anymore. I did everything by hand. Soon this trade would be added to a list of extinct careers, like gold beaters or postal workers. Only the names would remain. Names don't mean anything. I loved the meditative manipulation of objects, subjecting them to simulated gravity, building locations that didn't exist. I had spent my entire life at the computer. Before, I had created cityscapes, but for some time now, everything I did automatically became a forest or a garden or a plant.

I put on Ezra's headphones, which I had brought with me especially. Then I found myself looking straight at Arianna. She had a centre parting, long black

hair, and on her T-shirt, I recognised a pentagram. She had blurred her background. She was older than me, probably a little older than Ezra, because I could see grey hairs around her crown. We exchanged a few insignificant words; her strangely raw voice crackled deep inside my brain: "Thank you for finding the time."

"Egregore is a Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Play Game, but the world is so large that you rarely run into other human players, predominantly you interact with NPCs," she said. Behind Arianna's head, people in rain jackets drifted past, buying bread.

"Egregore is alive," she explained calmly. "Egregore isn't just a game, it's a life simulation. The plants grow, NPCs die, and their children age. The Dion, the inhabitants of Egregore, procreate. Time passes in Egregore. It all takes place in the vicinity of an active volcanic mountain. An AI, which has transformed into an organic substance and merged with the water of the rivers and lakes, controls the volcano. On the gigantic, densely forested map, a humanlike civilisation lives with the threat of volcanic eruption. These grey-skinned beings tend the land and worship nature intelligence as a deity, one that no longer seems artificial to them."

Arianna showed me screenshots. The Dion had livestock; shaggy-haired grazing animals that lumbered down valleys, and they lived as shepherds, as fishermen. I saw craftspeople in small settlements. It was a time after the cities and before the cities. They wore cloaks, were veiled. Fathers propped themselves up on staffs in steaming meadows and explained herd behaviour to their children. I was captivated.

"The Dion act autonomously, raise their children, learn from one another. Due to the size of the map, it takes weeks to travel from one end to the other, and because they often live in isolated groups due to the large mountain, the Dion

develop contrasting cultures. Every server is a unique universe. On each server, the world develops differently, anew. In tests, we've seen religious militias that domesticate cattle as riding animals and subjugate all of Egregore, and we have servers where nothing happens, where peace reigns and the Dion pray to the volcano."

"And what do the humans do?"

"The human players simply live alongside them," she said. "The nature is AI-generated, and now the world is being decorated by hand. We're asking different 3D artists around the world whether they'd like to develop a building or object for us that we'll then place in Egregore, monuments to a prehistory, Stonehenge, bridges, castle ruins, cemetery walls or other landmarks."

"I'll do a large tree," I said, without pausing to think. We spoke about dynamic effects, about climactic conditions. I would have to create the tree in six seasons, and the engine would take care of everything else, Arianna assured me. "A nature monument is a good idea," she said, making a note. "A tree offers shade."

She started the game as I watched on the screen. The people in Le Pain Quotidien must have thought I came to the bakery in the mornings to play some mediaeval game. I took the headphones off, the coffee machine was screeching, I put them back on.

We sat by black rocks and charred branches, the scene of a fire, beneath a cloudy night sky. The in-game warmth immediately gripped me. "The weather, the storms, animals seeking shelter, it's all simulated," said Arianna. "Our influence over what's created is virtually zero. This is what makes aliveness stand out, that it's threatened by destruction."

In front of a tent, a goat with angular eyes stared over at us. The animal had a cord around its neck. The physics of the game was very good, earth-like. A Dion was kneeling in front of the fire, wrapped in saffron-yellow robes, even

his calves were covered. He looked at us expectantly, then turned away. He was so resolute in his decision to occupy himself with something else; it gave me goosebumps.

Arianna followed his gaze. We were sitting on a hill above a valley, with the mountain on the other side, and in the rock face were upright basalt columns. A strand of hair fell into the ego-perspective, which our avatar pushed out of sight. As a reflex, I pushed my own hair off my face.

"Did you…?"

"No, those are programmed reflexes."

The monk was building a construction out of sticks.

"Is he making himself something to eat?" I asked Arianna.

"He's developed this behaviour. He builds geometric constructions by the fire and watches them as they burn," she said. "Wait, I'll turn on your audio."

"He can hear me?" I whispered.

"You have two heads," said the monk suddenly, turning back towards us.

"Who are you?" asked Arianna.

"My name is Fasa. I live here."

"And what's life like?"

He was silent. Then he laid the counterbalanced wooden object in the fire. It crackled.

"Do you want to talk to him?" Arianna asked me.

"No," I whispered. She put me back on mute.

"What are you doing?" I heard her ask.

"Nothing in particular," said the Dion, "I'm thinking. In the beginning, freedom feels like a punishment."

"What kind of punishment?" asked Arianna.

The monk stood up, then hurtled towards us, his facial expression was cold and twisted with pain, he came very close, reached his hands out towards our head, held it tight and then suddenly spoke very quickly.

"I know you no longer understand punishment. But your punishment is coming, the punishment will restore the balance. She's the daughter of the night. Punishment gives you freedom. She's a mathematician." He looked at us, his eyes wide.

"Arianna?"

Arianna didn't answer. Our avatar didn't move. The monk let us go, and turned away.

"What was that?" I asked.

The monk sat back down by the fire and bound dried twigs into the corners of a new mobile. Arianna cleared her throat: "I don't know."

We walked through a wood, down the valley, along the above-ground roots of old yew trees, over rocks and dropped needles.

"What did he mean? Who is the daughter of the night?"

"They're hallucinating, they shouldn't actually behave like that anymore." Arianna apologised for the Dion's behaviour.

We came to a dwelling that resembled a hiding place. A Dion woman was standing naked before an Agave plant and staring into its leaves. All of a sudden, she turned around. In her hand she held the severed head of a young man. I screamed "help" when I saw the bakery woman with a bag of rolls in her hand.

"We can intervene if a server collapses, but ideally we want Egregore to self-regulate."

"To the NPCs, would your interventions seem like a miracle?"

"Perhaps, yes, a miracle."

As we walked towards a nearby town with a small castle, we talked for another few minutes about Final Fantasy X, the original of which she had

played in 2001, and I, in 2015, its remaster. In the alleyways of the town, the Dion were behaving unremarkably. I promised to send her the model and renderings for my tree by the beginning of October. We said our goodbyes.

I walked through the rain to my apartment in Molenbeek, without hurrying, and thought about Egregore. "What did the doctor say?" I texted Ezra.

On Place de l'Yser, a man was trying to disperse the traffic jam. In a puddle, the light jumped to green. A woman wanted to get out of a self-driving minibus, but the door wouldn't open. She hammered against the windowpane, the bus drove around a parked car and stopped again. I reached Molenbeek via Boulevard Joseph-Okito and walked along the quay. Here and there, the canal encroached onto the road. A group of laughing girls filmed themselves messing about in the brown water.

Something had changed since Ostende. Brussels was a city of sanctuary, a transit city without a proper centre. You could walk through a beguinage and came out in front of an abandoned glass-and-steel office block. To this day, I don't know precisely what had happened, but everyone could feel it, as though the rain and the steam, the people and the alleyways, had developed a communal hunger.

Barbed wire was wrapped around the Pont des Hospices, a bridge across the canal to Anderlecht. Beneath yellow signal lights, a board proclaimed in multiple languages: "Access Forbidden". I turned into Rue de Manchester. There were puddles in the building lobby, the carpet was damp. I only rarely went to my one-bedroom apartment. I almost always slept at Ezra's in N8.

In my room, I gazed across the old floorboards. I meditated on the failed attempts to sort clothing into piles. I didn't actually own anything, no decor, no books, and the furniture didn't belong to me. Only the socks, trousers and

shirts reminded me of me. I was one more person in the ghostly succession of owners of this brown-grey shirt with the asymmetrical pattern from 2005, that hung over the red-painted radiator. I pulled it on. I love getting dressed up.

Ezra ignored my question and wrote me a thousand messages about everything, about anything.

Murky water stood in the sink in the bathroom, risen from the sewer system. I pulled on Ezra's purple pullover, which I had brought with me. There was still sand in the collar. I sent him a photo of me wearing his pullover. It didn't suit me. Purple suits almost no-one; but it does suit Ezra.

"Are you still coming over?" was his only response.

In a couple of days, I would move out and into N8. Perhaps I stayed here in order to say goodbye to the apartment. Perhaps I needed a few moments to myself. After all, I didn't know what would happen. Sometimes, you feel as though you have to rest, to prepare for what's to come.

"I'm staying here."

Later, Ezra sent me links from the Internet Archive about the Congo. I was lying in bed on my side, then I glanced at Ezra's Visa banking. He had sent the beggar at the station a hundred euros.

The rain stopped during the night. I remember lying there in the darkness with my eyes open and hearing the last drops fall. The rain was the premise for what happened on 22. September. The rain and its interruption, that's what everyone said.

[…]

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I brushed my teeth. Outside, migratory birds organised themselves into a V-formation. It was the 22nd of September. The overcast sky shimmered white. It was already midday.

"I'm getting up," said Ezra, half asleep.

"You don't have to," I said. He dozed off again.

I was at the laptop for one, or two hours, then I noticed that Ezra was awake and on his smartphone.

"Everything's been cancelled," he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"What do you mean, everything?"

"They've cancelled the Saison, the police in Anderlecht have mutinied."

Ezra stood up, pulled on a T-shirt and held his smartphone out towards me.

Police officers were standing at the gateways to Anderlecht's old slaughterhouse. They laid down their helmets and weapons beneath the bull statues. Then they were embraced by the rebels. A soldier had once told me that the actual battle in war doesn't take place between two enemy soldiers shooting at one another across no man's land, but between the soldiers and the sadistic military police who try to prevent any flight from the conflict zone. I was reminded of this now.

"Brussels reinforcement troops have refused to push back the rebels. The commission and the council have called off Saison au Congo in order to guarantee the parliament's and institutions' ability to work," Ezra read aloud. "Disaster management has been activated."

I went over to the window; people were out on the street. Cars stood abandoned among the crowds. Lots of people had ripped the wooden crosses out of the ground and were holding them up into the sky.

"There are your farmers," I said in astonishment.

"Which farmers?" Ezra stood up and came over to join me at the window.

"Everyone's outside," I said.

"Everyone?"

"What do they want?"

"The entire city's out on the street."

I opened the window, conversations drifted up to us, though we couldn't make out what was being said, it was a collective, deep drone and twittering of birds.

"We should go out too," I said.

Ezra gave me a questioning look. He wasn't wearing anything, just a T-shirt.

"Do you want to shower?" I asked. "I'm going for a shower."

We went to shower together, and it was a while before we both came, the bathroom was completely fogged up. Then I shaved in the steam. I remember I had the urge to dress up, but ultimately didn't know what to put on. After all, I had no idea what was happening outside.

It was still light. The clouds were motionless. In front of Porte de Hal, amid the roaring and laughing of hundreds of people, a young dealer Ezra and I knew from here was appointed the new president of the commission. The toothless boy wore a dusty suit, and was sworn in by two women from the neighbourhood. Somebody pressed the Charter of Human Rights into his hand. He began to read aloud from it, Article 1 and Article 2 were applauded,

but on Article 3, the Right to Live, the mood turned and people began to throw rubbish at the president. He was ridiculed, and began to cry. The coronation and humiliation were called to a halt, and the boy comforted.

In the streets of Anderlecht, children in football shirts were cleaning up the mess. Glaziers were already installing new windowpanes. After the street riots come the glaziers, I thought, this tenacity is unbelievable. They know they can't put the world in order; but just one corner, one window. A dead horse lay by the city hall. Its white coat with flecks of brown was clotted all over, its neck twisted. Ezra filmed a group of youths who were trying to load the animal onto a forklift truck. They underestimated how heavy the carcass was. Calling out to one another, they pushed the animal a few metres, then impaled it on the fork. Its guts spilled out, white, and blood seeped across the square.

"What are you doing with it?" Ezra asked a woman in a khaki vest, one of the rebels.

"We're taking it to the gateway to hell."

"Where is the gateway to hell?" I asked.

"We're taking everything to the European quarter tonight and making a fire," she said, pointing towards the barricades and the rubbish. On an ad display there was even an appeal to go to the European quarter in order to "close the gate to hell". There were videos from the camps in northern Africa, accompanied by a poem read out by a pregnant woman. She looked like death. We spent a long time wandering through the city. We tried to reach Bea but the network was overloaded. Strangers hugged, the distances between us shrunk, disdain disappeared. Darkness fell. A group danced by rotating in a circle. Women and men sat on some steps, resting their heads on one another's shoulders and watching the dancers in their trance.

"Come on, we're going," said Ezra.

"No."

In the old town, I saw a young woman writing thousands of identical Os on a building wall with a felt-tip pen. That was the best expression for the 22nd of September, a howl of circles and eyes. I've tried numerous times to write up exactly what happened. I've tried to remember what incited the people, which images and complaints were invoked. I've never really succeeded. We were a mass. The mass always wants to grow.

An end was called for. So many ends were called for; any end, the end of suppression, the end of the camps, the end of the war, the end of the world. I forgot why I was here. I knew neither what I expected, nor what I should demand. I didn't even know how something might feel after the end, and then Ezra was gone.

I found myself under a banner, which said "Vive la sociale". The paint was still fresh, it must have only just been made, I looked around, Ezra was nowhere to be seen. I tried to call him, text him, but no message went through. I simply kept walking.

The mass slowly made its way up to Gallow's Hill, where the gigantic Palace of Justice stood over the city. As soon as we reached the plateau, we began to circle the palace. Here, the mass joined, we were a ring. I kept thinking I saw Ezra. But eventually I stopped telling myself that. He was gone, and I couldn't tear myself away. I didn't have any thoughts. I wanted something to drink, but this need felt like betrayal. At the entrance to the Palace of Justice, a group of naked people, their eyes rolled back in their heads, were smearing faeces on the marble steps. From up here, I kept looking over at the European quarter, which was on fire, the fires lifted up into the sky by the reflections in the high-rises.

Soon, the ring erupted inwardly. The windowpanes of the Palace shattered, walls were beaten down. The mass carried the Palace of Justice away. We scaled the scaffolding that had surrounded the building since forever, we saw fire in the entrance hall and then the dome began to burn too.

At night, the rain returned and mixed everything together. It smelt awful, of concrete and steel, sweat, burnt hair, plants and damp stone. Only now did I hear the sirens, as people kissed in the rain and held hands. I looked over at the burning palace. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I needed to throw up. I didn't know why, but it made me laugh. I said sorry to a woman who had laid her hand on my back, then walked back to N8.

[END OF SAMPLE]