

Mister Volition

by Greg Egan

"Give me the patch."

He hesitates, despite the gun, long enough to confirm that the thing must be genuine. He's cheaply dressed but expensively groomed: manicured and depilated, with the baby-smooth skin of rich middle age. Any card in his wallet would be p-cash only, anonymous but encrypted, useless without his own living fingerprints. He's wearing no jewellery, and his watch phone is plastic; the patch is the only thing worth taking. Good fakes cost 15 cents, good real ones 15 K -- but he's the wrong age, and the wrong class, to want to wear a fake for the sake of fashion.

He tugs at the patch gently, and it dislodges itself from his skin; the adhesive rim doesn't leave the faintest weal, or pluck a single hair from his eyebrow. His newly naked eye doesn't blink or squint -- but I know it's not truly sighted yet; the suppressed perceptual pathways take hours to reawaken.

He hands me the patch; I half expect it to stick to my palm, but it doesn't. The outer face is black, like anodised metal, with a silver-gray logo of a dragon in one corner -- drawn "escaping" from a cut-and-folded drawing of itself, to bite its own tail. Recursive Visions, after Escher. I press the gun harder against his stomach to remind him of its presence, while I glance down and turn the thing over. The inner face appears velvet black at first -- but as I tilt it, I catch the reflection of a street light, rainbow-diffracted by the array of quantum-dot lasers. Some plastic fakes are molded with pits which give a similar effect, but the sharpness of this image -- dissected into colors, but not blurred at all -- is like nothing I've ever seen before.

I look up at him, and he meets my gaze warily. I know what he's feeling -- that ice water in the bowels -- but there's something more than fear in his eyes: a kind of dazed curiosity, as if he's drinking in the strangeness of it all. Standing here at three in the morning with a gun to his intestines. Robbed of his most expensive toy. Wondering what else he's going to lose.

I smile sadly -- and I know how that looks through the balaclava.

"You should have stayed up at the Cross. What did you want to come down here for? Looking for something to fuck? Something to snort? You should have hung around the nightclubs, and it all would have come to you."

He doesn't reply -- but he doesn't avert his eyes. It looks as if he's struggling hard to understand it all: his terror, the gun, this moment. Me. Trying to take it all in and make sense of it, like an oceanographer caught in a tidal wave. I can't decide if that's admirable, or just irritating.

"What were you looking for? \_A new experience?\_ I'll give you a new experience."

Something skids along the ground behind us in the wind: plastic wrapping, or a cluster of twigs. The street is all terraces converted to office space, barred and silent, wired against intruders but otherwise oblivious.

I pocket the patch, and slide the gun higher. I tell him plainly, "If I kill you, I'll put a bullet through your heart. Clean and fast, I promise; I won't leave you lying here bleeding your guts out."

He makes as if to speak, but then changes his mind. He just stares at my masked face, transfixed. The wind rises up again, cool and impossibly gentle. My watch beeps a short sequence of tones which means it's successfully blocking a signal from his personal safety implant. We're alone in a tiny patch of radio silence: phases canceling, forces finely balanced.

I think: I can spare him ... or not -- and the lucidity begins, the tearing of the veil, the parting of the fog. It's all in my hands now. I don't look up -- but I don't need to: I can feel the stars wheeling around me.

I whisper, "I can do it, I can kill you." We're still staring at each other -- but I'm staring right through him now; I'm no sadist, I don't need to see him squirm. His fear is outside me, and what matters is within: My freedom, the courage to embrace it, the strength to face everything I am without flinching.

My hand has grown numb; I slide my finger across the trigger, waking the nerve ends. I can feel the perspiration cooling on my forearms, the muscles in my jaw aching from my frozen smile. I can feel my whole body, coiled, tensed, impatient but obedient, awaiting my command.

I pull the gun back, then pistol-whip him hard, smashing the handle across his temple. He cries out and collapses to his knees, blood pouring into one eye. I back away, observing him carefully. He puts down his hands to keep himself from falling on his face, but he's too stunned to do anything but kneel there, bleeding and moaning.

I turn and run, tearing off the balaclava, pocketing the gun, speeding up as I go.

His implant will have made contact with a patrol car in a matter of seconds. I weave through the alleys and deserted side-streets, drunk on the pure visceral chemistry of flight -- but still in control, riding instinct smoothly. I hear no sirens -- but chances are they wouldn't use them, so I dive for cover at every approaching engine. A map of these streets is burnt into my skull, down to every tree, every wall, every rusting car body. I'm never more than seconds away from shelter of some kind.

Home looms like a mirage, but it's real, and I cross the last lit ground with my heart pounding, trying not to whoop with elation as I unlock the door and slam it behind me.

I'm soaked in sweat. I undress, and pace the house until I'm calm enough to stand beneath the shower, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the music of the exhaust fan. I could have killed him. The triumph of it surges through my veins. It was my choice, alone. There was nothing to stop me.

I dry myself, and stare into the mirror, watching as the steamed glass slowly clears. Knowing that I could have pulled the trigger is enough. I've faced the possibility; there's nothing left to prove. It's not the act that's

important -- one way or the other. What matters is overcoming everything that stands in the way of freedom.

\_But next time?\_

Next time, I'll do it.

Because I can.

\* \* \* \*

I take the patch to Tran, in his battered Redfern terrace full of posters of deservedly obscure Belgian chainsaw bands. He says, "Recursive Visions Introscape 3000. Retails at 35 K."

"I know. I checked."

"Alex! I'm hurt." He smiles, showing acid-etched teeth. Too much throwing up; someone should tell him he's already thin enough.

"So what can you get me?"

"Maybe 18 or 20. But it could take months to find a buyer. If you want it off your hands right now, I'll give you 12."

"I'll wait."

"Suit yourself." I reach out to take it back, but he pulls away. "Don't be so impatient!" He plugs a fiber jack into a tiny socket in the rim, then starts typing on the laptop at the heart of his jury-rigged test bench.

"If you break it, I'll fucking kill you."

He groans. "Yeah, my big clumsy photons might smash some delicate little watch-spring in there."

"You know what I mean. You can still lock it up."

"If you're going to have it for six months, don't you want to know what software it's running?"

I almost choke. "You think I'm going to \_use it?\_ It's probably running some executive stress monitor. \_Blue Monday\_: 'Learn to match the color of the mood display panel with the reference hue beside it, for optimal productivity and total well-being.'"

"Don't knock biofeedback till you've tried it. This might even be the premature ejaculation cure you've been searching for."

I thump his scrawny neck, then look over his shoulder at the laptop screen, a blur of scrolling hexadecimal gibberish. "What exactly are you doing?"

"Every manufacturer reserves a block of codes with the ISO, so remotes can't accidentally trigger the wrong devices. But they use the same ones for cabled stuff, too. So we only have to try the codes Recursive Visions -- "

An elegant, marbled-gray interface window appears on the screen. The

heading says \*Pandemonium\*. The only option is a button labeled \*Reset\*.

Tran turns to me, mouse in hand. "Never heard of \_Pandemonium\_. Sounds like some kind of psychedelic shit. But if it's read his head, and the evidence is in there..." He shrugs. "I'll have to do it before I sell it, so I might as well do it now."

"Okay."

He fires the button, and a query appears: \*Delete stored map, and prepare for a new wearer?\* Tran clicks \*Yes\*.

He says, "Wear and enjoy. No charge."

"You're a saint." I take the patch. "But I'm not going to wear it if I don't know what it does."

He calls up another database, and types \*PAN\*\*". "Ah. No catalog entry. So -- it's black market ... unapproved!" He grins at me, like a schoolkid daring another to eat a worm. "But what's the worst it can do?"

"I don't know. Brainwash me?"

"I doubt it. Patches can't show naturalistic images. Nothing strongly representational -- and no text. They ran trials with music videos, stock prices, language lessons ... but the users kept bumping into things. All they can display now is abstract graphics. How do you brainwash someone with that?"

I raise the thing to my left eye experimentally -- but I know it won't even light up until it sticks firmly in place.

Tran says, "Whatever it does ... if you think of it information-theoretically, it can't show you anything that isn't there in your skull already."

"Yeah? That much boredom could kill me."

Still, it does seem crazy to waste the opportunity. Anyone with a machine as expensive as this probably paid a small fortune for the software, too -- and if it's weird enough to be illegal, it might actually be a buzz.

Tran's losing interest. "It's your decision."

"Exactly."

I hold the patch in place over my eye, and let the rim fuse gently with my skin.

\* \* \* \*

Mira says, "Alex? Aren't you going to tell me?"

"Huh?" I peer at her groggily; she's smiling, but she looks faintly hurt.

"I want to know what it showed you!" She leans over and starts tracing the ridge of my cheekbone with her fingertip -- as if she'd like to touch the patch itself, but can't quite bring herself to do that. "What did you see?"

Tunnels of light? Ancient cities bursting into flame? Silver angels fucking in your brain?"

I remove her hand. "Nothing."

"I don't believe you."

But it's true. No cosmic fireworks; if anything, the patterns became more subdued the more I lost myself in the sex. But the details are elusive -- as they usually are, unless I've been making a conscious effort to picture the display.

I try to explain. "Most of the time, I don't see anything. Do you 'see' your nose, your eyelashes? The patch is like that. After the first few hours, the image just ... vanishes. It doesn't look like anything real, it doesn't move when you move your head -- so your brain realizes it's got nothing to do with the outside world, and starts filtering it out."

Mira is scandalized, as if I've cheated her somehow. "You can't even see what it's showing you? Then ... what's the point?"

"You don't see the image floating in front of you -- but you can still know about it. It's like ... there's a neurological condition called blindsight, where people lose all sense of visual awareness -- but they can still guess what's in front of them, if they really try, because the information is still coming through -- "

"Like clairvoyance. I understand." She fingers the ankh on her neck chain.

"Yeah, it's uncanny. Shine a blue light in my eye ... and by some strange magic, I'll know that it's blue."

Mira groans and flops back onto the bed. A car goes by, and the headlights through the curtains illuminate the statue on the bookshelf: a jackal-headed woman in the lotus position, sacred heart exposed beneath one breast. Very hip and syncretic. Mira once told me, deadpan: This is my soul, passed down from incarnation to incarnation. It used to belong to Mozart -- and before that, Cleopatra. The inscription on the base says Budapest, 2005. But the strangest thing is, they made it like a Russian doll: inside Mira's soul is another soul, and inside that is a third, and a fourth. I said: This last one's just dead wood. Nothing inside. Doesn't that worry you?

I concentrate, and try to summon up the image again. The patch constantly measures pupil dilation, and the focal distance of the masked eye's lens -- both of which naturally track the unmasked eye -- and adjusts the synthetic hologram accordingly. So the image never goes out of focus, or appears too bright, or too dim -- whatever the unmasked eye is looking at. No real object could ever behave like that; no wonder the brain shunts the data so readily. Even in the first few hours -- when I effortlessly saw the patterns superimposed on everything -- they seemed more like vivid mental images than any kind of trick with light. Now, the whole idea that I could "just look" at the hologram and automatically "see it" is ludicrous; the reality is more like groping an object in the dark, and attempting to picture it.

What I picture is: elaborately branched threads of color, flashing against the grayness of the room -- like pulses of fluorescent dye injected into fine veins. The image seems bright, but not dazzling; I can still see into the shadows around the bed. Hundreds of these branched patterns are flashing simultaneously -- but most are faint, and very short-lived. Maybe ten or twelve dominate at any given moment -- glowing intensely for about half a second each, before they fade and others take over. Sometimes it seems that one of these "strong" patterns passes on its strength directly to a neighboring pattern, summoning it out of the darkness -- and sometimes the two can be seen lit up together, tangled edges entwined. At other times, the strength, the brightness, seems to come out of nowhere -- though occasionally I catch two or three subtle cascades in the background, each one alone almost too faint and too rapid to follow, converging on a single pattern and triggering a bright, sustained flash.

The wafer of superconducting circuitry buried in the patch is imaging my entire brain. These patterns could be individual neurons -- but what would be the point of such a microscopic view? More likely, they're much larger systems -- networks of tens of thousands of neurons -- and the whole thing is some kind of functional map: connections preserved, but distances rearranged for ease of interpretation. Only a neurosurgeon would care about the actual anatomical locations.

But -- exactly which systems am I being shown? And how am I meant to respond to the sight of them?

Most patchware is biofeedback. Measures of stress -- or depression, arousal, concentration, whatever -- are encoded in the colors and shapes of the graphics. Because the patch image "vanishes", it's not a distraction -- but the information remains accessible. In effect, regions of the brain not naturally wired to "know about" each other are put in touch, allowing them to modulate each other in new ways. Or that's the hype. But biofeedback patchware should make its target clear: there should be some fixed template held up beside the realtime display, showing the result to aim for. All this is showing me is ... pandemonium.

Mira says, "I think you better go now."

The patch image almost vanishes, like a cartoon thought-bubble pricked -- but I make an effort, and manage to hang on to it.

"Alex? I think you should go."

Hairs rise on the back of my neck. I saw ... what? The same patterns, as she spoke the same words? I struggle to replay the sequence from memory, but the patterns in front of me -- the patterns for struggling to remember? -- render that impossible. And by the time I let the image fade, it's too late; I don't know what I saw.

Mira puts a hand on my shoulder. "I want you to leave."

My skin crawls. Even without the image in front of me, I know the same patterns are firing. "I think you should go." "I want you to leave." I'm not seeing the sounds encoded in my brain. I'm seeing the meaning.

And even now, just thinking about the meaning -- I know that the sequence is being replayed, faintly.

Mira shakes me angrily, and I finally turn to her. "What's your problem? You wanted to screw the patch, and I got in the way?"

"Very funny. Just go."

I dress slowly, to annoy her. Then I stand by the bed, looking at her thin body hunched beneath the sheets. I think: I could hurt her badly, if I wanted to. It would be so simple.

She watches me uneasily. I feel a surge of shame: the truth is, I don't even want to frighten her. But it's too late; I already have.

She lets me kiss her goodbye, but her whole body is rigid with distrust. My stomach churns. What's happening to me? What am I becoming?

Out on the street, though, in the cold night air, the lucidity takes hold. Love, empathy, compassion ... all these obstacles to freedom must be overcome. I need not choose violence -- but my choices are meaningless if they're encumbered by social mores and sentimentality, hypocrisy and self-delusion.

Nietzsche understood. Sartre and Camus understood.

I think calmly: There was nothing to stop me. I could have done anything. I could have broken her neck. But I chose not to. I chose. So how did that happen? How -- and where? When I spared the owner of the patch ... when I chose not to lay a finger on Mira ... in the end, it was my body that acted one way, not the other -- but where did it all begin?

If the patch is displaying everything that happens in my brain -- or everything that matters: thoughts, meanings, the highest levels of abstraction -- then if I'd known how to read those patterns, could I have followed the whole process? Traced it back to the first cause?

I halt in mid-step. The idea is vertiginous ... and exhilarating. Somewhere deep in my brain, there must be the "I": the fount of all action, the self who decides. Untouched by culture, upbringing, genes -- the source of human freedom, utterly autonomous, responsible only to itself. I've always known that -- but I've been struggling all these years to make it clearer.

If the patch could hold up a mirror to my soul -- if I could watch my own will reaching out from the center of my being as I pulled the trigger --

It would be a moment of perfect honesty, perfect understanding.

Perfect freedom.

\* \* \* \*

Home, I lie in the dark, bring back the image, experiment. If I'm going to follow the river upstream, I have to map as much territory as I can. It's not easy: monitoring my thoughts, monitoring the patterns, trying to find the links. Am I seeing the patterns corresponding to the ideas themselves, as I

force myself to free-associate? Or am I seeing patterns bound up more with the whole balancing act of attention -- between the image itself, and the thoughts which I'm hoping the image reflects?

I turn on the radio, find a talk show -- and try to concentrate on the words without letting the patch image slip away. I manage to discern the patterns fired by a few words -- or at least, patterns which are common to every cascade which appears when those words are used -- but after the fifth or sixth word, I've lost track of the first.

I switch on the light, grab some paper, start trying to sketch a dictionary. But it's hopeless. The cascades happen too fast -- and everything I do to try to capture one pattern, to freeze the moment, is an intrusion which sweeps the moment away.

It's almost dawn. I give up, and try to sleep. I'll need money for rent soon, I'll have to do something -- unless I take up Tran's offer for the patch. I reach under the mattress and check that the gun's still there.

I think back over the last few years. One worthless degree. Three years unemployed. The safe daytime house jobs. Then the nights. Stripping away layer after layer of illusion. Love, hope, morality ... it all has to be overcome. I can't stop now.

And I know how it has to end.

As light begins to penetrate the room, I feel a sudden shift ... \_in what?\_ Mood? Perception? I stare up at the narrow strip of sunlight on the crumbling plaster of the ceiling -- and nothing looks different, nothing has changed. I scan my body mentally, as if I might be suffering from some kind of pain too unfamiliar to apprehend instantly -- but all I get back is the tension of my own uncertainty and confusion.

The strangeness intensifies -- and I cry out involuntarily. I feel as if my skin is bursting, and ten thousand maggots are crawling from the liquid flesh beneath -- except that there's nothing to explain this feeling: no vision of wounds, or insects -- and absolutely no pain. No itch, no fever, no chilled sweat ... nothing. It's like some cold-turkey horror story, some nightmare attack of DTs -- but stripped of every symptom save the horror itself.

I swing my legs off the bed and sit up, clutching my stomach -- but it's an empty gesture: I don't even want to puke. It's not my guts that are heaving.

I sit and wait for the turmoil to pass.

It doesn't.

I almost tear the patch off -- \_what else can it be?\_ -- but I change my mind. I want to try something, first. I switch on the radio.

" -- cyclone warning for the north-west coast -- "

The ten thousand maggots flow and churn; the words hit them like the blast from a firehose. I slam the radio off, stilling the upheaval -- and then



the words echo in my brain:

\_ -- cyclone -- \_

The cascade runs a loop around the concept, firing off the patterns for the sound itself; a faint vision of the written word; an image abstracted from a hundred satellite weather maps; news footage of wind-blown palms -- and more, much more, too much to grasp.

\_ -- cyclone warning -- \_

Most "warning" patterns were already firing, prepared by the context, anticipating the obvious. The patterns for the height-of-the-storm news footage strengthen, and trigger others for morning-after images of people outside damaged homes.

\_ -- north-west coast -- \_

The pattern for the satellite weather map `_tightens_`, focusing its energy on one remembered -- or constructed -- image where the swirl of clouds is correctly placed. Patterns fire for the names of half a dozen north-west towns, and images of tourist spots ... until the cascade trails away into vague associations with spartan rural simplicity.

And I understand what's happening. (Patterns fire for `_understand_`, patterns fire for `_patterns_`, patterns fire for `_confused_`, overwhelmed, insane\_ ... )

The process damps down, slightly (patterns fire for all these concepts). `_I` can grasp this calmly, I can see it through `_` (patterns fire). I sit with my head against my knees (patterns fire) trying to focus my thoughts enough to cope with all the resonances and associations which the patch (patterns fire) keeps showing me through my not-quite-seeing left eye.

There was never any need to do the impossible: to sit down and draw a dictionary on paper. In the last ten days, the patterns have etched their own dictionary into my brain. No need to observe and remember, consciously, which pattern corresponds to which thought; I've spent every waking moment exposed to exactly those associations -- and they've burned themselves into my synapses from sheer repetition.

And now it's paying off. I don't need the patch to tell me merely what I'd tell myself I'm thinking -- but now it's showing me all the rest: all the details too faint and fleeting to capture with mere introspection. Not the single, self-evident stream of consciousness -- the sequence defined by the strongest pattern at any moment -- but all the currents and eddies churning beneath.

The whole chaotic process of thought.

The pandemonium.

\* \* \* \*

Speaking is a nightmare. I practice alone, talking back to the radio, too unsteady to risk even a phone call until I can learn not to seize up, or veer

off track.

I can barely open my mouth without sensing a dozen patterns for words and phrases \_rising to the opportunity\_, competing for the chance to be spoken -- and the cascades which should have zeroed in on one choice in a fraction of a second (they must have, before, or the whole process would never have worked) are kept buzzing inconclusively by the very fact that I've become so aware of all the alternatives. After a while, I learn to suppress this feedback -- at least enough to avoid paralysis. But it still feels very strange.

I switch on the radio. A talk-back caller says: "Wasting taxpayers' money on rehabilitation is just admitting that we didn't keep them in long enough."

Cascades of patterns flesh out the bare sense of the words with a multitude of associations and connections ... but they're \_already\_ entwined with cascades building possible replies, invoking their own associations.

I respond as rapidly as I can: "Rehabilitation is cheaper. And what are you suggesting -- locking people up until they're too senile to re-offend?" As I speak, the patterns for the chosen words flash triumphantly -- while those for twenty or thirty other words and phrases are only now fading ... as if hearing what I've actually said is the only way they can be sure that they've lost their chance to be spoken.

I repeat the experiment, dozens of times, until I can "see" all the alternative reply-patterns clearly. I watch them spinning their elaborate webs of meaning across my mind, in the hope of being chosen.

But ... \_chosen where, chosen how?\_

It's still impossible to tell. If I try to slow the process down, my thoughts seize up completely -- but if I manage to get a reply out, there's no real hope of following the dynamics. A second or two later, I can still "see" most of the words and associations which were triggered along the way ... but trying to trace the decision for what was finally spoken back to its source -- \_back to my self\_ -- is like trying to allocate blame in a thousand-car pile-up from a single blurred time-exposure of the whole event.

I decide to rest for an hour or two. (Somehow, I decide.) The feeling of decomposing into a squirming heap of larvae has lost its edge -- but I can't shut down my awareness of the pandemonium completely. I could try taking off the patch -- but it doesn't seem worth the risk of a long slow process of re-acclimatization when I put it back on.

Standing in the bathroom, shaving, I stop to look myself in the eye. \_Do I want to go through with this? Watch my mind in a mirror while I kill a stranger? What would it change? What would it prove?\_

It would prove that there's a spark of freedom inside me which no one else can touch, no one else can claim. It would prove that I'm finally responsible for everything I do.

I feel something rising up in the pandemonium. Something emerging from the depths. I close both eyes, steady myself against the sink -- then I open them, and gaze into both mirrors again.

And I finally see it, superimposed across the image of my face: an intricate, stellated pattern, like some kind of luminous benthic creature, sending delicate threads out to touch ten thousand words and symbols -- all the machinery of thought at its command. It hits me with a jolt of deja vu: I've been "seeing" this pattern for days. Whenever I thought of myself as a subject, an actor. Whenever I reflected on the power of the will. Whenever I thought back to the moment when I almost pulled the trigger...

I have no doubt, this is it. The self that chooses. The self that's free.

I catch my eye again, and the pattern streams with light -- not at the mere sight of my face, but at the sight of myself watching, and knowing that I'm watching -- and knowing that I could turn away, at any time.

I stand and stare at the wondrous thing. What do I call this? "I"? "Alex"? Neither really fits; their meaning is exhausted. I hunt for the word, the image, which gives the strongest response. My own face in the mirror, from the outside, evokes barely a flicker -- but when I feel myself sitting nameless in the dark cave of the skull -- looking out through the eyes, controlling the body ... making the decisions, pulling the strings ... the pattern blazes with recognition.

I whisper, "Mister Volition. That's who I am."

My head begins to throb. I let the patch image fade from vision.

As I finish shaving, I examine the patch from the outside, for the first time in days. The dragon breaking out of its own insubstantial portrait to attain solidity -- or at least, portrayed that way. I think of the man I stole it from, and I wonder if he ever saw into the pandemonium as deeply as I have.

But he can't have -- or he never would have let me take the patch. Because now that I've glimpsed the truth, I know I'd defend the power to see it this way, to the death.

\* \* \* \*

I leave home around midnight, scout the area, take its pulse. Every night there are subtly different flows of activity between the clubs, the bars, the brothels, the gambling houses, the private parties. It's not the crowds I'm after, though. I'm looking for a place where no one has reason to go.

I finally choose a construction site, flanked by deserted offices. There's a patch of ground protected from the two nearest street lights by a large skip near the road, casting a black triangular umbra. I sit on the dew-wet sand -- and cement dust -- gun and balaclava in my jacket within easy reach.

I wait calmly. I've learned to be patient -- and there are nights when I've faced the dawn empty-handed. Most nights, though, someone takes a shortcut. Most nights, someone gets lost.

I listen for footsteps, but I let my mind wander. I try to follow the

pandemonium more closely, seeing if I can absorb the sequence of images passively, while I'm thinking of something else -- and then replay the memory, the movie of my thoughts.

I make a fist, then open it. I make a fist, then ... don't. I try to catch Mister Volition in the act, exercising my powers of whim. Reconstructing what I think I "saw", the thousand-tendrilled pattern certainly flashes brightly -- but memory plays strange tricks: I can't get the sequence right. Every time I run the movie in my head, I see most of the other patterns involved in the action flashing \_first\_ -- sending cascades converging on Mister Volition, making \_it\_ fire -- the very opposite of what I know is true. Mister Volition lights up the instant I feel myself choose ... so how can anything but mental static precede that pivotal moment?

I practice for more than an hour, but the illusion persists. Some distortion of temporal perception? Some side-effect of the patch?

\_Footsteps approaching. One person.\_

I slip on the balaclava, wait a few seconds. Then I rise slowly to a crouch, and sneak a look around the edge of the skip. He's passed it, and he's not looking back.

I follow. He's walking briskly, hands in jacket pockets. When I'm three meters behind him -- close enough to discourage most people from making a run -- I call out softly: "Halt."

He glances back over his shoulder first, then wheels around. He's young, 18 or 19, taller than me and probably stronger. I'll have to watch out for any dumb bravado. He doesn't quite rub his eyes, but the balaclava always seems to produce an expression of disbelief. That, and the air of calm: when I fail to wave my arms and scream Hollywood obscenities, some people can't quite bring themselves to accept that it's real.

I move closer. He's wearing a diamond stud in one ear. Tiny, but better than nothing. I point to it, and he hands it over. He looks grim, but I don't think he's going to try anything stupid.

"Take out your wallet, and show me what's in it."

He does this, fanning the contents for inspection like a hand of cards. I choose the e-cash, e for easily hacked; I can't read the balance, but I slip it in my pocket and let him keep the rest.

"Now take off your shoes."

He hesitates, and lets a flash of pure resentment show in his eyes. Too afraid to answer back, though. He complies clumsily, standing on one foot at a time. I don't blame him: I'd feel more vulnerable, sitting. Even if it makes no difference at all.

While I tie the shoes by their laces to the back of my belt, one-handed, he looks at me as if he's trying to judge whether I understand that he has nothing else to offer -- trying to decide if I'm going to be disappointed, and angry. I gaze back at him, not angry at all, just trying to fix his face in my

memory.

For a second, I try to visualize the pandemonium -- but there's no need. I'm reading the patterns entirely on their own terms now -- taking them in, and understanding them fully, through the new sensory channel which the patch has carved out for itself from the neurobiology of vision.

And I know that Mister Volition is firing.

I raise the gun to the stranger's heart, and click off the safety. His composure melts, his face screws up. He starts shaking, and tears appear, but he doesn't close his eyes. I feel a surge of compassion -- \_and "see" it, too\_ -- but it's outside Mister Volition, and only Mister Volition can choose.

The stranger asks simply, pitifully, "Why?"

"Because I can."

He closes his eyes, teeth chattering, a thread of mucus dangling from one nostril. I wait for the moment of lucidity, the moment of perfect understanding, the moment I step outside the flow of the world and take responsibility for myself.

Instead, a different veil parts -- and the pandemonium shows itself to itself, in every detail:

The patterns for the concepts of \_freedom, self-knowledge, courage, honesty, responsibility\_ are all firing brightly. They're spinning cascades -- vast tangled streamers hundreds of patterns long -- but now, all the connections, all the causal relationships, are finally crystal clear.

And nothing is flowing out of any fount of action, any irreducible, autonomous self. Mister Volition is firing -- but it's just one more pattern among thousands, one more elaborate cog. It taps into the cascades around it with a dozen tentacles and jabbers wildly, "I I I" -- claiming responsibility for everything -- but in truth, it's no different from any of the rest.

My throat emits a retching sound, and my knees almost buckle. \_This is too much to know, too much to accept.\_ Still holding the gun firmly in place, I reach up under the balaclava and tear off the patch.

It makes no difference. The show plays on. The brain has internalized all the associations, all the connections -- and the meaning keeps unfolding, relentlessly.

\_There is no first cause in here, no place where decisions can begin.\_ Just a vast machine of vanes and turbines, driven by the causal flow which passes through it -- a machine built out of words made flesh, images made flesh, ideas made flesh.

\_There is nothing else: only these patterns, and the connections between them.\_ "Choices" happen everywhere -- in every association, every linkage of ideas. The whole structure, the whole machine, "decides."

\_And Mister Volition?\_ Mister Volition is nothing but the idea of itself. The

pandemonium can imagine anything: Santa Claus, God ... the human soul. It can build a symbol for any idea, and wire it up to a thousand others -- but that doesn't mean that the thing the symbol represents could ever be real.

I stare in horror and pity and shame at the man trembling in front of me. \_Who am I sacrificing him to?\_ I could have told Mira: \_One little soul doll is one too many.\_ So why couldn't I tell myself? There is no second self inside the self, no inner puppeteer to pull the strings and make the choices. There is only the whole machine.

And under scrutiny, the jumped-up cog is shriveling. Now that the pandemonium can see itself completely, Mister Volition makes no sense at all.

There is nothing, no one to kill for: no emperor in the mind to defend to the death. And there are no barriers to freedom to be \_overcome\_ -- love, hope, morality ... tear all that beautiful machinery down, and there'd be nothing left but a few nerve cells twitching at random -- not some radiant purified unencumbered \_Uebermensch\_. The only freedom lies in being this machine, and not another.

So this machine lowers the gun, raises a hand in a clumsy gesture of contrition, turns, and flees into the night. Not stopping for breath -- and wary as ever of the danger of pursuit -- but crying tears of liberation all the way.

\* \* \* \*

\_Author's note:\_ This story was inspired by the "pandemonium" cognitive models of Marvin Minsky, Daniel C. Dennett, and others. However, the rough sketch I've presented here is only intended to convey a general sense of how these models work; it doesn't begin to do justice to the fine points. Detailed models are described in \_Consciousness Explained\_ by Dennett, and \_The Society of Mind\_ by Minsky.