

## Simulacrum EN

"Old Jake's fallen asleep again. Someone better wake him up or carry him home, he's not staying at my inn again." She turns back to the man at the bar. "Jacob does it every time. Asks for a second drink, we say, 'are you sure?' Takes it anyway and halfway through he sags, eyes closed. And it's hardly evening yet."

The door at the far end of the room opens, letting the autumn cold invade the warmth of the inn. A shadow stands in the doorway, quickly morphing into a young man dressed in clothes marked by travel and carrying a pack off his shoulders.

"Welcome to the Boar's Head. What can we do for you?"

"A hearty meal is what I would like," the traveller says.

"Certainly. We have a nice stew simmering on the fire. If you want to know how nice it is, just ask one of your fellow travellers here," the innkeeper says with a move of her arm taking in the room.

"They look healthy, weary but healthy, so there should be no doubt about the nicety of your stew," says the man while sitting down at a small table.

"Alright then, Anna will get you a bowl and some bread in a moment. You look weary yourself, are you staying for the night?"

"No, I have to get to the city this night, I can't stay long"

"Are you sure? The weather's going to turn for the worse soon. You shouldn't be out on a night like this"

"I'm sure .. oh, thank you. And some beer please."

In the corner near where the traveller had sat down one of the regulars breaks conversation. He turns towards the traveller and says, "I know a tale of a man not unlike you, which happened on a day much like today. It was in the mountains not far from here where one day a lone man struggled along a path. The sky was grey, turning to lead evermore, the rain thickened till nothing could be seen and every step became treacherous. Then, the invisible path was suddenly lit up by crashing lightning. In the brief flash of daylight the soaked, tired traveller could make out a deep hole in the cliff not far from him. It took him a couple of daring leaps to get to the cave and just as he lunged in lightning struck again."

There was a loud, deafening crack behind him, followed by a rumble and crash that shook the stone floor. Something sharp and heavy hit him on his calves, and he was knocked off his feet.

A bit dazed, he stood up and looked around. It was completely dark. He opened his pack, and searched for his lantern and tinder. As he found them, he put the lantern on the floor next to him and tried to light it. It took a few tries before the oil in the wick started to burn, and a soft glow lit the cave. Behind him, the opening he jumped through was filled by rocks big and small. On his sides was a solid rock wall, glistening with moist. In front of him he could make out a corridor. And the silhouette of a man.

Startled, he fell backwards and he shuffled back to the blocked entrance. There was a man standing there, a familiar looking man, facing the corridor. "H-hello," he uttered. No response, not a stir. He slowly crept back to the lantern. The man didn't move. The man was wearing the same clothes as his, had the same height and posture, the same hair. Still crouching, he made a grab for his lantern. And saw his hand pass right through the handle.

What was happening here? What has happened to him? It seemed like he was looking at himself from the outside, but that's impossible. The traveller sat down in despair, eyes closed. After a while, he opened them and saw his self again. Shaking his head in disbelief, he started to think what to do next. So, if that was his body there, and he was here also .. he should act like he was over there. He stood up, and walked towards his self until he was standing right behind it. Then he focused on the .. his body and the lantern behind him.

He passed right through himself and grabbed the light.

Still terrified, he started to let himself walk towards the corridor. Lit by the lantern, the walls became more regular and it seemed like he was in a man-made tunnel. There might be another exit then, he thought. As he walked on, he saw a few other tunnels branching off, but as he followed these they all came to a dead end. In the meantime he considered he was in an underground stone quarry. And he hoped the collapsed cave-like entrance wasn't the only one.

Then, after he had rounded a corner, he saw a dim light shining ahead. He followed the tunnel and the dim light appeared to shine from above. Daylight. Indeed, as he arrived at the light he saw a shaft above him, the tunnel floor was wet with rain and water was trickling down.

He started to shout. He shouted for help until his throat went sore, and then some more. No response. Helpless and hopeless, he sat down and waited.

Then, after what seemed like days, he heard the bleating of sheep. A dog barked, then a whistle.

"H-HELP! Help me please!" "Hello? Is somebody down there?" a man called. He looked up, and saw the light of the sun being blocked, the shadow of someone standing at the top of the shaft.

"Yes! I'm stuck here. Please help me out!"

After a while, a rope was lowered down the shaft. As it reached the bottom, the traveller let himself climb up hastily, staying below at the same time. What would happen once his body would reach the top. Would he be there as well, would he be whole?

Then, just as he should be free, there was a shriek. The rope flew up and as the traveller made a grab for it, he just managed to hit the very end of it.

"Eventually he died of hunger, no-one dares to come to the mine anymore because of the ghost," the storyteller concludes.

"Well, thank you for this story. I'll be sure to watch where I'm going if indeed the weather turns bad."

The traveller stands up, takes his backpack and walks to the bar. "And thank you for the food and drink, dear innkeeper. How much do I owe you?" As soon as he has paid, he quickly leaves the inn and goes on his way. He takes up the road towards the city. If nothing out of the ordinary happened, he should make it there before darkness had completely fallen.

After an hour or so, dusk had set in. The sky is getting darker than it should be though, and as he looks back to the north he could see leaden grey clouds forming and blowing towards the setting sun. Not far to go anymore, but whatever was in those clouds could hit him long before he would reach the city. The traveller increases his pace, and it seems like the clouds do the same. They're going to overtake him surely. And there's hardly any cover in the fields besides the road. No buildings, only a sparse tree. But what is the worst that could really happen? He'd probably only get soaked, and in the city his clothes could dry by the fire.

It wasn't long before the dark clouds were also ahead of him, and indeed it starts to rain. Still no cover to be seen, or is there? Yes, just behind a rise in the fields, not far off the road there's a roof. Then it

starts to hail as well. And the rain stops. This is getting worse by the moment. The little drops of ice are first stinging, then hammering on his head. He turns towards the supposed building and quickly moves on. As he crosses the rise, he sees a ruined house or suchlike, made of stone, no windows or door to be seen and with the roof mostly in place. The drops of ice are still getting bigger. He shields his head with his arms, and runs for the cover. Where's the door? He goes around the building, there it is.

Doubt strikes him, but the hail does as well. There's no cover outside of the stone walls, he has to get in. As he pushes through the door, which fortunately is unlocked and ajar, he feels relief. A few steps later, he doesn't feel solid ground under his feet. He falls, not very deep, but lands full-force on his right leg, twists his ankle and shrieks in pain. And as he bites through his pain, he looks around. In the dim light he can see the four sides of what seemed to be a cellar. He also sees a very familiar figure crouching beside him.

The traveller grabs his knife from his belt and thrusts it in the back of his new companion.

The world goes dark.