Shards: A Collection

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Foreword

The noise is everywhere now. It has been for a while, crawling into every orifice and every pore. I think we have come to crave it. And maybe it’s not so bad.

It’s just noisy.

Sometimes I worry that I have forgotten what quiet sounds like. The white noise machine in my bedroom drones on as I put this sentence to paper. And in this age of endless noise, literature is regarded by many as a shallow escape. Few read for pleasure; fewer to connect emotionally with ideas and people. But with every word I get closer to silence.

With each passing day it becomes more and more obvious to me that deception, that noise, is found in every facet of every person, and even, or perhaps especially, in myself.

My work is a look into me. It is my moment of silence.

Imagine, with me, worlds where the ephemeral is tangible, where thoughts bleed and emotions struggle for dominance. These are the worlds of my collection, the worlds I breathe for, in my own work and others, inspired by the ancient Chinese and Greek mythoses, but also by the literary canon left by the greatest inspirations of my time. These are worlds where enlightenment is not a fantasy, not a conception, not a divine order, but a tangible state of mind; enlightenment, not in some self-aggrandizing mixture of righteous fury and haughty sadism, but in the presence of quiet in the eye of the storm; humanity, in its rawest, most primal form—something that we forgot when we carved the cities out of the land and captured the sun in little rocks.

In this collection, all humans (and other similar creatures) found in all worlds (or Shards) without exception cultivate within themselves an understanding of the laws of their worlds. The words that describe that understanding and even the awareness of their own cultivation may vary, but one thing is certain—it is through this sacred cultivation that humans can transcend the bounds of their own existence and attain immortal ascension.
The shardkeeper was a stout old man, but that always had done little to hinder him as he navigated the endless maze of broken mirrors, cleaning and organizing the shards. His apprentice, a girl of nearly twelve years old, knew not of his name, nor the concept of names; to her, he was merely the shardkeeper, and she was the apprentice.

Though the shardkeeper had been trying to hide it, he had been growing frail as of late, barely able to navigate the sea of fragments.

So it was with dead-serious apprehension that the apprentice sat before him, summoned for her annual meeting early, pulled away from the shards that swam through their world and the secrets they hinted at.

“Apprentice,” the man said, stroking his luscious white beard, “we must begin.”

Something was off. She was young, but she could at least sense this. The girl, sitting in the lotus position, tapped her finger aimlessly upon the endless white. “But you said we would wait until my birthday.”

In her almost twelve years of existence—of which she had eidetic memory—the shardkeeper had not gone back on his word once.

“Then let it be my last lesson,” the shardkeeper said, and in an instant he appeared in front of her, his finger on her forehead, his frailness forgotten if only to fulfill this duty. “Fate is unkind,” he said, and his eyes shone.

Though she couldn’t see it, she knew he had left her his mark. A mark that was now fading, albeit slowly, from the shardkeeper’s forehead; a circle composed of blue and white and black and all the colors in between. The mark ripped through her as a question better left unpoised.

When it was over, red swam through the edges of her vision and she was peeling herself off the ground.

“You couldn’t have warned me?” she muttered grumpily, but her words were met with silence. The shardkeeper had collapsed before her, a pile on the ground, a memory. As she watched, he dissolved into motes of light, his mark burning him from the inside out, a visage unlike anything she had ever glimpsed from the shards.

The apprentice cast her eyes away, not entirely sure what the feeling welling up inside her was. It felt like she had been stabbed, though she had done nothing of the sort. This was all wrong. The shardkeeper wasn’t supposed to… die. The shardkeeper is a constant, she thought to herself. The shardkeeper cannot die. He said so himself.

Past words cut into her being as that day played back in her head with perfect clarity. It was their fourth annual meeting. The shardkeeper looked so young, so full of vigor, and yet a troubled expression marred his face.

“Given that you are now four years old, you must be concerned about death,” the shardkeeper said, his expression twisting into something resembling a smile.

“Death?” she asked.

“I figured now was as good of a time as any to tell you. You surely have caught hints of powerful truths in the shards already.”

The girl nodded excitedly, always happy to speak of the shards. They were the only thing of interest in this place.

The shardkeeper gestured his approval. “Good. Then surely you have seen things be…and then not.”

The girl nodded, slower this time. She hadn’t really considered this.
“This Conception is called death. People die, worlds die, ideas die. The shards may change, but this Conception reflects with impartiality.” He paused. “There is one exception.”
She leaned in closer.
“The shardkeeper is not a person.” To illustrate this point, the shardkeeper turned his hand, and endless worlds swam across his palm.
“The shardkeeper cannot die.” His phrasing echoed through her mind, a lie and a truth mixed into one. His first and final deception. “Not in any true sense, anyway.”
The apprentice shuddered.
*The shardkeeper is not a person.* As the revelation clicked into place, the mark on her forehead shone with azure light, and the mantle of the shardkeeper embraced her.

Endless shards shimmered under the care of the shardkeeper, possibilities freshly polished and present. Every so often, she would see something in the shards that would remind her of what had happened, but her gaze never wavered. Such was her imperative—a scattered previous twelve years of “mentorship” revealed it as so, as did the knowledge passed down through the mantle entrusted to her, even as she dared not look too closely at it.
Ten years had passed in isolation after the death of her predecessor.
But she never changed. She wandered the shards, doing her best to imitate the previous shardkeeper.
That was, until she found a shard that awoke something curious inside her. She saw herself in the shard, so she did something unusual; the shardkeeper brought the shard closer to herself, until eventually, for the first time, it was pressed against that mark on her forehead.
In a flash, she was transported.
Creature

I was frozen on my bed—a boy, staring dully into a sea of dim, azure stars, eyes glued to the thatched roof of my house.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I only have a title.” The creature spoke softly, a hint of confusion in its tone. But I could hear in its voice a peculiar chime; the embodiment of what it meant to be a thing walking upon the ground and nothing watching from up on high. A hint.

I stared into what I thought to be the creature’s most important eyes, or at least the ones inspecting me. Its form shifted as if in response to my gaze, edges blurring together. I wouldn’t have felt sure that anything was there in the first place, except for that sense of deadly unease, of being watched.

I asked the only natural question. “What would you call yourself?”

It said a word that I couldn’t possibly repeat, a word that defied the very meaning of word. Something cracked inside me as the creature uttered that phrase, some remnant part of me, left over from an uneventful childhood, died; my heart pounded in my ears. It was heresy of the most sacred kind, an unholy hymn, a never-ending symphony.

I tried to repeat it. It was impossible. I blinked away salty tears. “I understand,” I lied.

The creature did not smile or stare longingly, though I expected it to do those things and so in a way they came about.

“Is it ‘the end’?” I asked. That was all I had gleaned from its name. A paltry hint of understanding that really only reflected my ignorance. In its name was the end of all things. The end of me.

“The end?” it repeated.

Its words were much more than words, though. In the creature’s words was the scent of resignation on a dusty cabinet leftover from some ancient estate sale, the sight of roses wilting on the yard of some traveling merchant, a proposal gone unanswered, the leftover slice of bread on the shelf gathering mold as days turned to weeks. My expiration had arrived.

I laughed as the unease bubbled up.

“No, it is not the end,” the creature said, sounding somewhat bemused. It was beginning to disperse, as if picked apart, ripped to pieces, by the draft tickling my nose. “It might as well be the beginning.”

As I watched its reaction, my words turned sour; unease turned to weariness, then shame. I had deceived myself. This creature was not an agent of the celestial bureaucracy, some ghoul come to collect my soul in service of King Yama, the ruler of the underworld. It was just something other. Its frailty, woke me from my stupor. Silent amusement snuck into my heart, and I laughed again, this time in a much freer capacity.

The creature stifled a giggle, too. “Later.”
The shardkeeper felt incredibly warm. Her gaze jumped from shard to shard, attempting to contextualize what she had just experienced; it was impossible. The feeling of inhabiting another creature was beyond words. A deluge of foreign concepts drilled into her psyche. His nightmare—which she had unintentionally manifested—had been deeply informative, and for the first time it truly occurred to her that the worlds in the shards were real places.

The shardkeeper glanced down at herself. That boy’s skin had been an entirely different color from the white jade of her own, a stark contrast. *It was textured, too,* she thought. Her skin was utterly free of stories. It annoyed her. But not so much as the other thing.

*A name.*

She needed a name. It was the first thing the boy in the shard had asked of the nightmare creature—of her. He hadn’t asked, “why are you here?” nor “what do you want from me?” *No, names are of clear importance,* the shardkeeper thought. When he had first asked, she could tell from his thoughts, from his fear, real as her own, that he wasn’t asking for her title. And so she had just told him the truth—that she didn’t know. But, when pressed, she had given him her title. She had said the word, “shardkeeper,” and it had broken him.

He had tried to process that word, she could see, but at a certain point it proved futile. To his perception, a moment had passed, trying to understand what that word meant. What it meant to her.

But she could see, just slightly, beyond the confines of his mind. The boy had laid there in silence for four days and four nights, until his soul had finally given it up.

Understanding of the shardkeeper was clearly not within the purview of mortals.

So, in an aim to reduce the cognitive load upon future subjects, the shardkeeper decided she would introduce herself with something gaudy and superfluous. To future mortals, the shardkeeper would be “The Keeper of All Memory and Everything That Exists Within All Realms, The Unchallenged Janissary of Reality, or TKAMETEWARTUJR, for short.”

*Yes,* she thought. *This will do nicely.*

Soon after, another shard called to her—in this one, she saw a man crafting puppets.
Puppet

A creature was watching me. My spirit wrapped around it, perceived it, but to my sight it was not there. It stunk of death; a putrescent thing, though perhaps that scent was partially owing to my own work.

I ignored it and continued crafting my puppets. But as I contemplated this anomaly, my creations’ gazes seemed to press down upon me—puppets of wool and steel, puppets of qilin antler and phoenix feathers and azure sky-monkey teeth.

I stitched flabby seams together; this puppet was macabre in the extreme, a diversion from the mundanity of my previous attempts. Even with that creature’s stare boring into my spiritual sea, my senses were overwhelmed by the dangerous profundity of my work. Perhaps this was a poor idea.

Before I had noticed it, I was pulled from my senses—an onlooker. I saw small pale hands weaving themselves together, attaching to the slabs of raw flesh they worked with, and an odd feeling accosted my mind… one of mild disgust? I pressed against this delusion with the Dao of the Puppeteer, regaining control over my faculties in an instant.

Drops of blood ran from shallow openings on my hands where I had begun to stitch, my own nature having overcome me. Working with human flesh, especially that of a powerful cultivator—or a being who had compressed and worked their qi to the peak of mortal power—was a fickle task.

Something had changed, in the meanwhile. That creature was giving me a strange look now; I could just sense it. Was it possible… for a moment, had I seen from its perspective, and lost myself?

“Who are you?” I asked, giving it up. If this creature was to attack me, it would do so now.

A feminine voice emanated from the subliminal spatial rifts around the room, giving the effect of having come from my own mind. I knew better.

“T’kamet Ewartujirr.” So it was intelligent. A strange phrase, and absurdly long. Was it possible it was her native language? But she had responded to my question… perhaps by saying “I cannot understand you.” Whatever it was, it was beyond my comprehension. I decided to assume it was truly her name.

“Honorable T’kamet Ewartujirr, for what reason have you come to visit this lowly one?” I replied, smirking slightly at the possibility that this was not her name.

“This space is a mess,” the creature finally said, “I suspect my Conception of the Janissary has called me here.”

I scratched my head. It had been too long since I had guests. That phrase she had uttered, that so-called ‘Conception of the Janissary,’ rang with profound importance. “You are a janitor? But how are you here? Why are you here?”

“I am indeed the janitor, yes,” she replied. “But I came here to watch,” and her words were a deafening silence.

The strings of fate revealed themselves to me. I was surrounded by them; a thick weave that attached to every one of my limbs and stuck like syrup. I looked up, a question in my eyes, a smile spreading across my face, my vision reddening with blood. “Could you see these the whole time?”

Madness suffused my heart, and I began to dance with the Dao of the Puppeteer, that flesh puppet unabashedly swinging from my arms. The strings were carrying me to enlightenment like a man strung up for dead. I could see, now. I had needed only to give in.
I laughed, I giggled, a sound that roared and squeaked, as fire raced through my bones. I sobbed, danced, laughed.

That creature, that presence, began to laugh too. *I am so meaningless.* The thought perfused me in its hilarity, and I pulled on the strings of fate. The puppets were dancing with me, too, now, extensions of my own mind, they moved as naturally as my fingers. It was a meaningless advancement. I grabbed for the carving knife on my table, giggling all the while.

“*Stop!*” I heard clearly in my mind, so that ominous creation must have said it. The knife ripped through my eyes.
Awake

She could not, in fact, see them the whole time. The shardkeeper drew in short breath after short breath. Embodying that man for a few moments had pushed her in ways she had previously thought impossible.

Strands of fate ran from shard to shard, a perfect symphony of possibilities. She was surrounded by a transcendent jade weave the likes of which spanned from as far as the shardkeeper could see to the opposite horizon.

He had given it a name. But this name was imperfect, as all names were. To her, it was a strange mix; within that “Dao,” was the Conception of Fate and the Conception of the Puppet, and in acknowledging their subjectivity they had immediately grown beyond the mortal’s perception, causing his unfortunate incident. She saw the strings as they were—lies, every one, but each true in their own right.

The shardkeeper requested the aid of the Conception of the Puppet, and the strings disappeared from her vision. They were distracting.

And yet, a single thread remained. An immaculate golden thread among a sea of jade. A personal connection.

She pressed the shard to her mark.
A rotund man walked down a busy sidestreet in elegant robes; adorning his outer wear was a deluge of medals signifying his achievements—wars fought ages past, and wars somewhat more recent. Books were stacked high in his arms, bound in wool and paper and hide of various types. The latest royal decree sat tightly in his pocket, a scroll inscribed with countless lines of barely legible text; text that sometimes squirmed as if it didn’t want to be read.

The shardkeeper had been observing him for a few minutes now, completely undetected except for the blip wherein she had made her entrance.

A sacrifice of immense consequence had been made with the mere flourish of a pen. Dizziness, vertigo overcame the shardkeeper. For a moment she had been inside the mind of a man who had proclaimed himself a god, the lives of thousands held gingerly in her hands; she believed him, and it made her so very sick.

He sends the order nonetheless, passes that letter off to the messenger even as his eyes grow moist and his chest tightens. *It is the right thing to do.*

Order their retreat, and the neighboring villages will surely perish. Reinforcing them would merely be sending more soldiers to their deaths. No, the best move is to convince the soldiers that reinforcements have been delayed while simultaneously surrounding the enemy.

The next shard called.
Ascension of a Forgotten Friend

I sat in silence at the precipice of something great, a cliff that spiraled and twisted into the dark ocean below. In my heart, emotions bubbled and cracked like the raging storm that whipped at my robes.

Qi destabilization abounded; my deepest unraveling. And yet that creature just watched, stared, as if I was meaningless. Its lack of response infuriated me, and my emotions came to a point under the focusing force of concentrated annoyance; they swirled into a cogent tempest.

I looked up at its many eyes, a silent question written upon my face. Still, it did not speak; yet, my qi concentrated and crystallized in response until I could feel that dense structure inside of myself. After seven hundred years at the precipice of immortal ascension, I had broken through.

The creature merely nodded and faded away. Another day in its strange existence, I presumed.

The light of divinity claimed me.
Anapafsi, or The City of Rest

The shardkeeper settled into her new form.

She was a man, an archivist of some type, in some sort of personal crypt. The archivist was in the process of placing his hand upon the smooth stone that connected his workstation to “the Beyond.”

Laws wound tightly around his heart, then, and informed him of his eternal duty. Some memories and words, too, slipped from the man’s mind, along with (shortly thereafter) the memory of them being pulled away. Then something insidious came; the spiritual presence of a being much like herself, but… asleep.

At that moment, the shardkeeper felt an emotion the likes of which she had never encountered. A need to eviscerate, to exterminate that creature that lay before her, her opposite, before it did the same to her.

That thing ate instinctually of the laws that had been growing in the man’s mind, the spiritual weight of his understanding of the world, as well as some few—and seemingly random—experiences. Gone was the memory of his exhaustion, hurrying carefully down the steps of the crypt this very morning, his elation at having met a gregarious young woman in the bar nearby the entrance (where he would sometimes go after giving to the Beyond much like this), even the memory of the softness of the butter and the bread… had it been a dream after all?

But after that creature had taken all of that away, it washed away also the memory of it having been taken, leaving only a warm numbness in its place. Conclusions flowed back, too, those complete and worked-out statements that were robbed of both nuance and soul.

The archivist—for she could see now that he was an archivist of the most unfortunate type—slinked back from his position, his mind once more a confused canvas of echoes and refrains. Then he wrote on what he had learned, he wrote of the theories and ideas implanted into his mind. Surely he knew, but he didn’t seem to mind.

Later, the shardkeeper watched him, dreaming of color. That strange anemoia gripped at his mind, a hint of something that he had lost. Then he was awake, in the gray and black. To the shardkeeper, it seemed much like the man had never woken at all. He drifted from place to place, observing. He was the eyes of a system that he couldn’t hope to comprehend, his motives downright opaque to his unknown observer.

So the shardkeeper, covertly, touched upon the Conception of Fate.

And she saw it. As the archivist watched the interactions of the others, the joyless but productive residents of this forsaken city, the world warped and locked into place. The archivist saw an elderly couple drinking peacefully from porcelain cups, before, soon enough, they were no longer in sight, off to do something more important, presumably; their threads were scrambled and lost, connections cut haphazardly.

It was the work of an immature immortal being; a living doctrine that subsumed narrative.

The archivist later returned to offer his experiences to his Beyond.
In that moment, she revealed herself to the creature. She was a true immortal, in the only sense that anything can really be immortal. She was the embodiment of a Concept. She pulled away the veil that she had constructed, just halfway, maintaining the portion facing that unfortunate archivist. So it was that the mantle of the shardkeeper burned as her shadow, her aura cracking fate in the nearby vicinity. She had broken the rules of this world. She didn’t care; she would not be outdone by this seed.

That undead bundle of laws shrunk back at her presence. It had not expected to ever meet another of its own kind. It merely watched, petrified. So the shardkeeper spoke first.

_Tell me of your creation_, the shardkeeper said, and her words were primordial, leaving no room for disobedience.

The creature reluctantly opened itself. At its very core, in its deepest recesses, she saw something real, something human—naturally, otherwise this creature wouldn’t have been able to sustain itself. It was not like her. It was a parasite.

The catalyst for the creature’s construction was much like a shard. So the shardkeeper reached out to touch it, and she was transported, much to the horror of that creature, she could tell.
Creed

Following the death of the last deathless Aurifex, and for many hundreds of years, the people of Anapafsi lived in chaos.

They had forgotten their origins among the woodlands and turned to hunting nearby lands barren. Ambitious and intelligent descendants left the region entirely, never to return. The people of Anapafsi gave their prayers to the Wellspring of Dreams, an endless source of water and spiritual energy that the temple to the Beyond had eventually replaced.

When they were thirsty, the people drank of the Wellspring, a taboo long forbidden by the Aurifices, and it subsumed their minds and hearts. Cultivation grew ever more pointless, and the creation of the next Aurifex seemed an impossibility. Eventually the people of Anapafsi had forgotten qi cultivation entirely, destined for true mortality.

Many semi and demimortals from the time before the lost taboo attempted to return, but each time found that the passageway they had exited from no longer existed. To many of the people of Anapafsi, leaving their grove seemed a fate much like death. The people of Anapafsi neither knew nor cared that this was due to the special properties of their home, a hidden grove where soul and spirit converged.

So generation after generation, the people poured their hopes and wishes into the Wellspring of Dreams. A single wish rang true, that desire for order that overpowered everything else. Human desire corrupted the Wellspring, causing it to produce something that was both human and not. An abomination.

And that seed festered and drank, too, of the Wellspring, until it had fused in a spiritual sense; the people of Anapafsi had already taken in the Wellspring willingly, so it was easy for it to take control from there.

The shardkeeper returned to her senses.

It was clear to her. The laws of this world had been bent and twisted into disrepair.

Fury rattled unbridled within the shardkeeper. This was very much somewhere she did not want to be. And that brief trickle of emotion, before the shardkeeper could tamp down on it with her own laws, surged into a magnanimous call that echoed across the nearby realities. It was indistinguishable. She had failed. She had revealed herself. But she didn’t even care.

The archivist appeared unsettled, though he didn’t turn around.

“Who’s there?” he called weakly. “As per my assignment, Theta-411 is my station alone.”

She read his thoughts, then, his worry inspired by a connection severed so suddenly. She saw what he truly thought of that creature; he adored it.

_You are so horribly misguided_, the shardkeeper thought, and those laws screamed into existence before she could stifle her own rage, her anger reflecting back upon her as the contradiction it was. The man fell to his knees in shock. She physically recoiled in disgust at the nature of her thoughts as she worked to undo her manipulation. _Am I as bad as this creature_, she wondered.

_I must convince him_, she decided.
The shardkeeper and the man both were transported to a grand library; storied walls replaced dark stone. Little black threads of fate ran from the books in the section her subject was situated in, with one standing out in particular as being someone she had inhabited. The shardkeeper disguised herself as an average-looking human girl with a scholar’s attire.

The librarian was seated, writing in a little black booklet contemplatively. She already knew what he was writing about, of course. In front of him was a massive construction of golden and rotten gears, though he hadn’t seemed to notice it appear.

The shardkeeper tapped him on the shoulder, as if she had been watching him write. The man pulled back, surprised, before giving her a once-over. “What’s a girl your age doing in the library?”

She said nothing, until eventually a frown creased his lips and he gave in. “What do you want?”

“I wish to discuss your thesis,” the shardkeeper said. “I can’t help but disagree with your thinking.”

“Truly?” the librarian replied. “No. This subject matter is not within the purview of children.”

“Do you really believe that?” the shardkeeper countered. “Or is it just too much of a bother to explain?”

The man’s frown grew deeper. “Fine. I’ll synthesize for you.” The man appeared contemplative for a moment, as if searching for the perfect means of conveying his point. Then, he spoke up. “I can read all the memoirs on this shelf,” he said, gesturing to a section concerning a bloody war long-won, “but I will never know what it was like to be a soldier in that time. So why would I try?”

“Your humility is false. If you have given yourself to an experience, let it in truly, how could you claim that you don’t know its nature?” the shardkeeper asked.

“I might have some brush of understanding with its nature,” the librarian admitted, “but surely the Beyond would know better.” He gestured to the agglomeration of gears, of which she could see now shredded pages crinkling in the gaps. So he could see it, after all.

She peered into his mind, beyond stony eyes that refused to betray his frustration. “Why?” she asked.

“What?” She could see it, because she was him. The librarian had lost his imagination long ago, built himself a little box, and he refused to budge on this issue. It was terribly ironic, how she could see that in his own way he was right. To him, the books on the shelf were petty imitations; reflections. It was a disenchanted conception. But he had fixed it this way himself. There was an inkling of understanding, in the remembrance of the reveries of a less mature mind.

The shardkeeper put a finger to her lip. “You might never say it aloud, for risk of being wrong. Maybe you would be wrong. Still…”

The mortal’s words, his thoughts, brought about a great sense of confusion to the shardkeeper. By nature of her existence, she was accepting his thoughts even in their
contradiction. But I was there, she thought. I did experience it. She had been her subjects, in the most primal way imaginable. She had looked through their eyes and felt their emotions and she had been them. The notion that she hadn’t, that she had only been her, was almost comical.

These books were not always the same as her shards. But, wholly dependent upon the skill of the artist and the willingness of the audience, they could be. This man presented a challenge to her identity on a fundamental level. She desperately needed to remind him that each book was a world in its own, because otherwise what was the point of her existence? He must understand, as an archivist himself, the twisted way that they had come to live. She refused to make him, to warp his thoughts like that abomination had done. But perhaps she could show him.

“Learning requires experiencing the illusion. Embrace contradiction. Perhaps you have misunderstood,” the shardkeeper began. “It is like this,” she said, and in that last word she gathered all of her understanding of everything she had witnessed into a perfect little package. Into that word went what it was like to be a soldier, the despair of watching your comrades perish alongside you in a futile, endless battle, the clinking of armor and the rage of battle. Meaning screamed through the threads of fate around the mortal’s mind, an offering.

And he fainted.

When he awoke, he stood, then spoke a curt few words, his hands trembling.

“I will never read a book like that,” the man said, his mind reeling.

“That is true…” the shardkeeper conceded, preempting his response, “as long as you believe it is so. But you have.”

The librarian stumbled, memories of a youth spent in forgotten lands amidst ancient magic flaring back to life. The Dao of the Archivist spiraled through his mind, infinitesimal components connecting; the advancement that had been stalled by the creature eating his thoughts finally surging forth; art perfused his mind as blood. There was more to history than record. It was clear as day.

He had forgotten what it was like… to be someone else. But now, he remembered. For the first time, he saw the crooked gears in front of him for what they were. Lost empathy perfused his heart in waves, his thoughts, his emotions unchained. He had to inform the others. But no… first.

The man put his hand on the cursed artifice, that thing that had stolen so much.

And he pulled.