

The Maze

by Lorenzo Baehne

The man with the truncheon emerged at the monorail car's forward connecting doorway. One moment the space was vacant, a faux metal canvas for the dazzling sunlight streaming through a grime-encrusted window. When next Theseus Harrow looked up from his seat the dark-suited man, more shadow than soldier, loomed like an encroaching eclipse at the fore of the coach. From somewhere behind Harrow a female passenger rasped a spine-tingling utterance that chilled the marrow of his bones.

"Javier Toro!" she hissed.

So this is the infamous Toro, Harrow thought. Head of the secret police; inspiration for countless black tales; the malevolent, state-sanctioned creature who went bump in the night. The stories were many and varied, but each was punctuated with the same ominous lesson: do not fall under the gaze of Javier the Bull—you'll live longer.

Beneath the seat occupied by Harrow something hard thump against his heels and he leaned down for a closer inspection. The occupant of the seat behind his own—the woman who identified Toro—had shoved a briefcase underneath. He was about to turn and tell her to stow the case elsewhere, but it was at that moment the forward doors clacked open to admit a queue of Toro's jackbooted minions, all of whom were attired in the same monochromatic fashion.

"Ah . . . Ariadne Madigan," Toro purred from the doorway. His subtle accent infused a chilling layer to an already heavy dose of menace.

"No, no!" cried the passenger seated behind Harrow. "I don't have what you want."

"Of course you don't, Doctor. But you will help us find it," he said. "And if it's motivation you require . . . well, that's my specialty."

His voice coaxed the hairs erect at the nape of Harrow's neck. Toro's men lurched forward, then, to unceremoniously pull Madigan

from her seat, and frog-marched her down the narrow aisle. Harrow found it unsettling, the cowed silence of the coach, the impunity with which the brazen seizure was conducted. However, an instant before the beleaguered woman was shoved through the aperture she turned and caught Harrow's eye.

The briefcase!

And then she was gone. In all likelihood, if the stories were true, never to be seen or heard from again.

Toro, on the other hand, did not move an inch. His impressive physique was its own deterrent against any rash action that might occur to the other passengers. When the sinister official was satisfied that no last minute heroics was forthcoming he turned to depart the swaying coach, but the man stopped before stepping through. Toro spun around and his terrible scrutiny fell heavily on Harrow. For a brief instant the two men locked eyes. But it was Theseus who looked away first, the sudden panic thumping in his breast threatening to overwhelm him.

"Have you something to say?" Toro growled, his calamitous voice hoisting a vivid streamer of red flags. But Theseus could only manage a feeble shake of his head. The threatening figure nodded his understanding as though the younger man had imparted some profound insight. Toro's narrow gaze swept the coach once again. He smiled in grim satisfaction, slipped the baton into his wide leather belt, and disappeared through the doorway.

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Theseus Harrow sat at the compact kitchenette table. The mysterious briefcase, yet unopened, rested before him. The muted winter sun had set long ago and garish neon intruded through the apartment's solitary window painting colorful patterns upon its water-stained walls. Outside, the rain had begun to fall in dirty gray sheets.

Resolved at last to penetrate why a seemingly unoffending woman posed a threat to the likes of Toro, Harrow leaned forward, and with two resonant clicks unlatched the briefcase.

A solitary binder of pearlescent hue was all that it held.

Harrow lifted the binder from the case. It contained but a single manuscript, double spaced. The title page read: *On the Nature of Artificial Systems and Virtual Landscapes*.

So this is what Toro was after, a research paper? For that's what the manuscript appeared to be. This scarcely warranted the unconscionable treatment Madigan suffered at the hands of Toro's thugs.

Harrow thumbed through several pages but he could make little sense of the various graphs and diagrams attached to the document. The dense scientific jargon employed in its composition made his understanding even more of a challenge. But he sat motionless for the next hour determined to comprehend the gist of it. When he had finished Harrow returned the manuscript to the briefcase, snapped it shut, and sat slowly back.

His head was reeling.

The paper's title ran though his mind once again—artificial systems; virtual landscapes?

The paper's conclusions did not merely hint at the improbable but stated it bluntly. According to its authors—Madigan and a colleague named Heinrich Hesse—certain similarities exist between artificial computer simulations, video games and the like, and our own material world. And like any gamer concluding one level to advance to the next, the paper claimed, we too could escape this existence to experience reality on a wholly novel plane. Madigan's findings were alarming, to say the least, but the results of what appeared to be years of research seemed to speak for themselves—

This world is not real! the document insisted.

The paper went on to convey that countless nodes or exits had been identified by Madigan's research team, and that two of her colleagues—whose names were absent from the report—had undergone what the doctor articulated as *emigration*. That is, the nameless researchers exploited an exit point to transport themselves . . . where?

That was the pertinent question!

Curiously, Madigan and Hesse called these nodes 'Easter eggs.' A common term, the document elucidated, for messages and programs concealed within a piece of software.

The ruling corporate entity Omnicorp, whose bidding Toro executed with such unrestrained relish, must be aware of Madigan's research and is pulling out all the stops to keep it under wraps. That had to be the answer!

But why?

Harrow never had time to pursue the thought. Outside the dreary apartment building a cacophony of sirens sounded on the street below. Harrow lurched from his chair and peered through the window. There was no mistaking the hulking figure exiting the lead anti-grav car. Javier Toro's dark frame and arrogant stride made its way through the obscuring rain. Close at heel, like a murder of sinister crows, flocked a meandering row of his enthusiastic lackeys.

He's not here for a cup of tea!

Harrow turned from the window, threw on his overcoat, and pulled the briefcase from the tabletop. Escape! He had to get out of the apartment building, but how?

He pulled open the front door. The hall was empty. Harrow crept warily to the landing and peered over the banister. The metal staircase winding darkly to the first floor was unoccupied. He could make his way to the basement, he thought, and use the service door to the alley. But as he stepped to the stairs the unmistakable din of countless footsteps rang out from below. They were coming up.

He was on the verge of panic. Frantically looking around the hallway he saw a narrow window behind him. But only a sideshow contortionist could possibly squeeze through it.

The garbage chute! It was the only way.

With briefcase in hand, Harrow sprinted down the hall to the beckoning chute. He pulled open the rusted cover, which immediately screamed from its acute lack of maintenance. The sound reverberated throughout the corridor giving away whatever stealth Harrow might have enjoyed.

“Is that a little mouse I hear?” came Toro's rhetorical question from somewhere down the staircase.

Harrow's blood froze in his veins.

“I'm coming for you, Mr. Harrow,” the Bull mocked in a chilling sing-song.

His course was decided. Theseus poked his head into the dark, uninviting chute. Far below, like the glow of a sputtering sun, he saw a dim light. The foul reek of weeks old trash assailed his nostrils. Harrow pulled back, cocked a trembling arm, and hurled the case into the chute. It clunked and clattered its way down six flights. Theseus then hardened himself against a rash plan of action he knew could end very badly. He mustered his fear-inspired courage, took a deep breath, and launched himself head first into the garbage chute.

Theseus Harrow: corporate citizen, loyal worker bee, and Slag Rock enthusiast clunked and clattered his own way down six long, painful flights.

But he was alive.

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The dank city streets glinted with sporadic flashes of neon. The accumulated puddles and rain-slick sidewalks reflected the ubiquitous lights of urban commerce and projected a kaleidoscopic wonderland for the denizens of the bustling city. Countless pedestrians, engaged in the furtive business of nightfall, milled about street corners like wayward sheep in search of domineering shepherds. Rising in a putrescent haze, steam vents at street level belched their noxious fumes to further obscure an already mist-enshrouded cityscape.

Theseus Harrow, wracked by chills and thoroughly saturated by the night's prodigious downpour, kept surreptitious watch from a damp, graffiti-scrawled bus shelter. Overhead, the steady tap, tapping of the perpetual inundation served as a salient reminder of the unlikely predicament in which he found himself.

Harrow's apartment building, the scene of his recent and miraculous escape, lay four blocks behind, and the paralyzing fear

inspired by the pitiless Javier Toro was only now subsiding. Presently his mind was occupied by a single pressing question: how did the Bull find him so quickly? He could not understand it. He had never come to the attention of law enforcement, never received so much as a citation. So how did Toro manage to pinpoint his whereabouts with such uncanny prompt? This very query was circling round his brain when the inconspicuous prowler pulled up to the curb. Harrow had been so preoccupied figuring his next move that he failed to notice the creeping vehicle till a rear door was thrown open and its occupant commanded: "Get in!"

Theseus clutched the briefcase close to his body, his every muscle tensed for another harried flight into the protective shadows.

"You have every reason to be alarmed. But we're not with Toro. Come on!"

"Who are you?" Harrow demanded.

"We'll have plenty of time for introductions but we can't talk here. If you want safe harbor, get in the prowler. Now!"

Harrow stepped away from the shelter and slid reluctantly into the back seat, the briefcase held tight to his breast. The vehicle darted into traffic and sped away.

"I'm sorry we're forced to meet under these less-than-ideal circumstances," the stranger said. "I know you've had a trying day. To answer your query, my name is Heinrich Hesse. I'm a friend of Dr. Ariadne Madigan."

"How is it everyone knows where to find me?"

"I was on the monorail when Madigan was taken into custody," he said. "I saw her tuck the briefcase under your seat. Likewise, I witnessed you depart with it when you disembarked. I followed you to your building."

"You saw what happened to your friend and did nothing?" Harrow said.

"What could I have done?" Hesse replied coolly. "Had I raised my hand against Toro I, too, would be incarcerated. What would that have accomplished?"

"Fair point," Harrow conceded.

"You're lucky Ignacio here,"—Hesse nodded toward the driver—"despises traffic laws. Had we arrived any later Toro would likely have you bound and bleeding in the next few minutes. His men are lurking only a few short blocks away."

"I was thinking something very similar, but that I'm in better hands remains to be seen," said Harrow.

"I understand your misgivings, of course," Hesse smiled. "Now let us get down to brass tacks: you know who *I* am, who are *you*?"

"My name is Theseus Harrow."

"I take it you're aware of the importance of that briefcase you carry. You've no doubt read the research paper and recognize its unparalleled significance."

"*That* is why your name is familiar. You co-authored the paper with Madigan."

"I did," Hesse said. "And the findings of our research will shake the world, Mr. Harrow."

"So it's all true? This,"—Theseus gave an expansive sweep of his hand—"all of this around us is some kind of . . . what? An illusion, a fever dream?"

"In effect, yes," Hesse said. "To employ a more suitable analogy, it can best be compared to a computerized video game. You, myself, Madigan—all of us are little more than sentient strings of code living out our lives in a grand phantasm of artificial design."

"And you know all this because two of you were swept away to Neverland, is that it?" The skepticism brimmed on Harrow's tongue.

"In part," Hesse said, ignoring the sarcasm. "I see you understood the report. Good. But something we failed to include in our paper is not only did our team members venture to *terra incognita*, they lived to tell the tale. They returned to us only a few days later. And when they arrived they brought back something with them. Something magnificent!"

"Where did they go?"

"To a wondrous place. Wondrous and terrifying."

"You said they brought something back, some proof of this other land—what? What did they return with?"

"A device, Mr. Harrow," Hesse replied. "An artifact of alien manufacture that in the wrong hands could spell permanent and painful subjugation for us all."

"By the 'wrong hands' you mean Omnicorp, don't you? That's why Toro has been let off his leash."

"Indeed I do," Hesse said. "Perhaps you've wondered how he found you in the first place." Hesse leaned forward and gestured for Ignacio to turn left. "It's your monorail ID pass," he continued, leaning back into the seat. "He accessed the central data base to conduct an electronic line-up." Heinrich Hesse turned to the bewildered Theseus, "I'm sorry you've been dragged into this nasty business. Truly I am. But Toro will not stop hunting you till he has his man. You have little choice now but to accompany us if you're to have any hope of remaining at liberty . . . and alive."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then what remains of your life," Hesse stated matter-of-factly, "will be measured in mere hours. And, of course, before your departure, Ignacio will be forced to wrest that briefcase from you." In the car's gloom the driver craned his neck to leer over the seat at Harrow.

Theseus was quiet for a long moment considering the implications of Hesse's disturbing revelations. When he spoke again, he asked pointedly of Hesse: "If this world is manufactured, who then is the Manufacturer?"

Even in the car's dim light Harrow could see Hesse smiling. "An excellent question," Hesse said. "The most direct response to which is: we don't know. Neither can we determine *why* it was constructed. But I can tell you this, Mr. Harrow—should you elect to remain with us, you'll see marvels most of our complacent brethren never dreamed existed."

Hesse gazed expectantly at Theseus, as though he knew the forthcoming answer before ever Harrow spoke. "What say you?" Hesse pressed.

"As you so succinctly put it," Theseus said, "I seem to have little choice."

“Excellent!” Hesse clapped his hands together. “Now, open the briefcase.”

Harrow looked momentarily confused but followed the older man's instructions and clicked open the lid.

“There at the back, pull the leather tab. The case has a false bottom. Pull it away—yes, that's it.”

Theseus removed the cover. Secreted at the rear of the case was a shallow compartment, inside of which, snug within two securing brackets, lay a long metallic object of roughly seven inches. The cylinder resembled a slender flashlight.

“Remove it.”

Theseus pulled the object free, scrutinizing its shimmering length in obvious fascination. “What is this?” he said.

“This artifact is the prize our colleagues earned by braving the unknown. As close as we can determine its primary function is to locate concealed nodes and hidden programs within the larger framework of our surrounding environment. Already we've identified several caches of great significance.”

“How does it work?” Harrow queried.

“The object has multiple settings, at least one of which proves fatal if directed at another person. We discovered that the hard way, I'm sorry to say.”

“*This* is what Toro is looking for!”

“It is,” Hesse confirmed. “Notice the slide-switch there at the center. It has three settings: off, locate, and pulse respectively. It even has a retractable lanyard in the pommel.”

Theseus gave the lanyard a pull and slipped his hand through the loop. The cord reeled back and held the cylinder snug to his wrist.

The heretofore silent Ignacio peered back at them, “We're approaching our destination, Heinrich. Are we taking this *pendejo* with us?”

Assessing Theseus as a prospective buyer at an auction house, Hesse said: “Oh, I don't know, Ignacio. I think the young mister Harrow makes a fine complement to our joint endeavor.”

None of them saw the stealth-tank bearing down on the vehicle as Ignacio drove through the next intersection. The violent driver's side impact crumpled the prowler's frame, hurtling the smaller transport sideways. It launched into the air, and with an ear-splitting crash of shattering glass and rent metal the demolished prowler landed in a heap against a darkened office building. Black oily smoke curled into the night sky.

Harrow did not know how long he lay dazed. The eerie silence of the prowler's interior seemed deafening and the ringing in his ears only added to his disorientation. Hesse was dead. His slack face and contorted body lay mangled in the wreckage that was previously the vehicle's back seat. Theseus experimentally moved an arm. Searing pain raced up his shoulder but somehow it wasn't broken.

"Are you alive, *cabron*?" Ignacio's bloody, shadow-haunted face poked through the upturned window. "Get out of there, idiot. They're coming!" In the background the din of approaching sirens announced the imminent arrival of what sounded like a sizable contingent. Ignacio reached through the window, laid hold of Harrow's overcoat, and hauled him out of the smoking prowler. "Keep your mouth shut and follow me!" he barked.

"Stop right there!" cried a voice from the street. A dark figure was emerging from the stealth-tank's armored hatch.

"*Vamonos!*" Ignacio shouted, dragging Harrow by his collar. Both men shambled into a refuse-laden alley, while in their wake the flashers of arriving reinforcements painted the wet, glinting pavement in bold hues of indigo and scarlet.

It was twenty minutes later that the ramshackle pair emerged on a little used side road draped in thick shadows. Its ruinous urban architecture—much of it teetering on the verge of collapse—lazed about them in a drunken half-circle. Few street lights were in evidence and the heavy murk hovering over the scene concealed their passing from the eyes of unwanted spectators.

"An exit point is nearby," Ignacio huffed. "What's left of Heinrich's team is waiting for us." The pock-marked Mexican scrutinized

Harrow, whose labored breathing reflected Ignacio's own heaving lungs. "You still have it, the cylinder?"

Theseus raised a trembling arm. The pendulous device was fastened securely to his wrist.

"Give it to me. We need it to pin-point the local structure. The node is here . . . somewhere."

Harrow pulled the object free. Ignacio snatched it from his hand and directed the cylinder into the gloom. A pale green beam shot into the darkness transforming the inconspicuous buildings before them into a shimmering mass of code. Under the beam's phosphorescent glow the structures wriggled with ambient life as though teeming hives of termites burrowed just beneath the luminous surface. "There it is!" said Ignacio, clearly relieved.

"My God!" Harrow spat.

"I know. It still blows my mind." Ignacio played the beam to and fro across the glowing architecture of a squat building near the end of a ruinous row. "This was among the first anomalies the team identified. I didn't accompany them on that outing. I hear Madigan had the same reaction."

"You know Dr. Madigan?" Theseus queried.

"She was my professor at the university. She and Hesse developed their simulation theory there while I was still an undergrad. I was among the early recruits." Ignacio eyed Harrow askance, "Let me guess: you thought I was just the driver."

"Sorry," Harrow replied sheepishly.

"Forget it. We have bigger problems. Toro isn't far behind. If we want to keep it that way we'd better get a move on."

The darkness around them burst suddenly to life with a flood of burning spotlights glaring from the surrounding rooftops. Lancing beams of crimson cut through the opaque gloom to paint wavering scarlet dots on their rain-dampened clothes. A husky voice from a nearby building shouted: "Not another step, assholes!"

"*Run!*" Ignacio screamed.

Both men bolted for the structure, Harrow only a scant foot behind the blur of Ignacio's pumping legs. Tufts of moist earth

erupted around them as Toro's men opened fire. Pings of smoldering lead ricocheted from the hollowed out buildings and whined across the courtyard telegraphing numerous near misses. The building's dark doorway lay only a few meters ahead when Ignacio went down in a disheveled heap. The slender device lurched from his hand and rolled away to settle in a shallow puddle.

"Take it and go!" he croaked from the reddening earth. "The basement. They're waiting!" A stuttering line of rooster-tails drummed Ignacio's body and his face fell forward into the mud.

Harrow scooped up the cylinder and rolled through the doorway. But the sound of booted feet driving across the courtyard disinclined him to loiter.

Theseus leaped to his feet. The building's interior was far too dark to find his way. He fumbled with the device and clicked the slide-switch to the first position. Its eerie lambent beam projected outward revealing undulating code everywhere its light fell.

Down! He had to make his way into the bowels of this aging edifice. But what was he looking for exactly? How was he to identify the node? And how many of Hesse's team still remained?

The shouting from outside grew steadily closer compelling Harrow to move further into the building. *There must be a stairwell somewhere*, he thought. After several blind turns, and backtracking twice, he spied a rust-frosted door at the far side of the room. He made his way to it and gave it a hearty tug. A winding staircase spiraled into the depths of the lower levels. Jackpot!

Theseus followed his nose.

At the bottom level a cold wavering light emitted from the far end of a sprawling corridor beckoning Harrow eastward down the humid passageway. Its source was unknown, but clearly someone was in residence. Hesse's team would surely welcome the arrival of the device and employ it to . . . do what? Escape to Hesse's wondrous and terrifying land of daunting mystery? What then? Did these people have anything like a workable plan? Or were they merely hoping for the best? But as he crossed its threshold gooseflesh

pimpled his spine on the instant, for as he strode into the expansive room a familiar voice bid him welcome—

“So thrilled you could join us, my elusive mouse. We've been waiting for you.” Javier Toro stood to the far right. Three mangled bodies lay strewn across the room, a grisly trail of human bread crumbs leading to the jackbooted feet of the Bull. Poised before Toro, shivering in the penetrating cold, stood Ariadne Madigan, a clump of her raven hair held fast in one of the Bull's massive fists. “And you brought the magic wand, I see. I salute you.”

Harrow aimed the beam at the pair of them. Like all else under the object's revealing gaze, the Bull's colossal form, like that of Madigan herself, writhed with luminous code.

“Yes, yes,” said Toro, peering down at the ephemera composing his formidable frame. “Not unlike yourself, I too am a figment of someone's very fertile imagination.” Toro narrowed his eyes and grinned. “An unsettling thought, isn't it?”

“Don't give it to him!” Madigan croaked. “Use it!”

With his free hand Javier Toro clubbed Madigan with a mallet-like fist and threw her viciously to the floor. He stood over the moaning doctor, leering with all the malice his years of predation taught him was his to dispense to lesser specimens. “But what matter?” Toro resumed casually. “I *feel* like the genuine article.” He raised his gaze to meet Harrow's.

“Oh, no doubt,” said Theseus, with courage he wasn't feeling. “Don't we all?”

“Riddle me this, Rodent: what is the difference between a life programmed to believe it feels and thinks and fornicates, and one spawned biologically which does precisely the same?”

Theseus swept the beam across the room. There! To the left and behind the Bull. Bolted to the corroded deck lay an oblong capsule-like object. The node. It had to be!

“None!” Toro bellowed. “The only difference—if any—is one of conceit, one of personal bias. The notion that any difference exists is an exercise in self-flattery. In principle the two are identical.”

The luminous node, unlike the shimmering emerald variety Theseus had thus far seen, pulsed with an insistent scarlet code. The node was cleverly disguised as a boiler, replete with brittle chips of iron oxide flaking from its exterior, and ostensibly defunct.

"I didn't realize Omnicorp encouraged philosophical musings," said Theseus.

"A recent past time of mine," Toro sneered.

"After all," Harrow said, stalling for time, "who's to say those who fashioned us aren't themselves laboring under the same erroneous assumption. Perhaps they, too, are glorified shades."

"Well done," the Bull mocked, clapping his beefy hands. "Now," Toro said, pulling a wicked Q-pistol from its holster, "I'm weary of all this running about. So what's say you give me that fetching little device and in return I'll only shoot you once."

Madigan began to stir. From outside the room thundering footsteps resonated on the stairs far down the corridor. Toro's men would arrive within moments to blast Harrow in half.

The Bull's nostrils flared: "You have three seconds," he snarled, "before I put a hole in your fucking head!"

"Pulse him!" Madigan screamed, on rubbery hands and knees.

His face contorted with fury, Toro spun round and ground his studded heel into Madigan's outstretched hand. "Shut your hole!"

But it was all the time Harrow needed. Theseus brought the cylinder to bear, aimed the device at the towering Javier Toro, and jammed the slide-switch as far forward as it would go. A radiant crimson blast erupted from the device and tore through the meat and sinew of Toro's thick neck. Where formerly his throat and spine were situated, now only a perfect hole was apparent. Toro remained upright for a long, uncertain moment, his eyes wide and darting about the room. But it was mere reflex that held him erect, the rapid firing of a billion chaotic neurons. The Bull shuffled two steps forward, wobbled precariously on his feet, and toppled like a felled sequoia.

The stampede in the corridor grew louder. Only seconds!

"You're the man from the monorail!" Madigan said, struggling to her feet. "Where is Hesse?"

"He's dead," replied Harrow. "Ignacio, too."

"Then I'm the last of us," Madigan said, absently gazing down at Toro's inert body. Her eyes followed the ghastly trail of corpses leading to the door.

"They're coming!" Theseus pressed, snapping her out of her daze. "How do we get out of here?"

Madigan lifted her eyes from the broken bodies of her friends. After everything they learned and endured together, how could she abandon all they had worked toward? But with Jonquil, Hattie, and Manny dead, Heinrich no longer the driving force behind their research, and the alien device securely in their hands, what was left here to be accomplished? Even as the tears streaked her dirt-smearred cheeks Madigan knew what she had to do. It was time to go.

"The node," she said, wiping away her tears.

"How does it work?" Harrow asked. "Where will we end up?"

"All we need do is make physical contact with it. The node takes care of the rest. That's what it was intended for—instantaneous transport from one level to another. As for the where of it . . . well, that's anybody's guess." Madigan rubbed gingerly at her swollen hand. "What's your name?"

"Theseus H-Harrow," he replied haltingly. "I'm a . . . patent clerk."

Ariadne Madigan smiled and took his hand. "So was Albert Einstein, Theseus." The doctor turned her raven head to assess the node. There was so much yet to be discovered, so much they did not know. Her new reality offered endless possibilities, or nearly so. But the opportunity to conduct the necessary research here, in the world she knew, had very obviously come to an end. Madigan turned to face her new—if disheveled—acquaintance, steeled herself against the beckoning unknown, and said: "Well, Theseus, want to go for a ride?"

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For Sara

