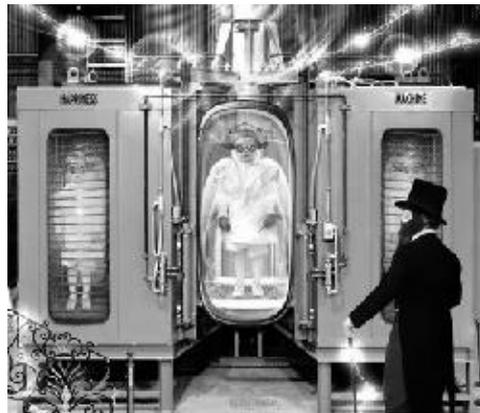


The Dionysus Machines

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This is a basic draft of what will hopefully become a much more fleshed out idea.



Published on
Booksie

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Zhanna climbed the rotting ladder - stepping over the broken step - pulling herself up past layer by layer of books with her free hand. It took little time to find the gap she'd left in the tightly-packed shelf the day before. She slipped the heavy hardback into its slot, the cover crumbling in her fingers. She held her breath for a few seconds as the resultant dust cloud dissipated, before pinching a book to the right between her forefinger and thumb. In a delicate, practiced precision, she pulled the book slowly. It made a faint brushing sound. But she'd misjudged the strength of the material; like the peeling of a label the spine stripped downwards. She halted and pondered the solution to this latest complication. It was always awkward when this happened.

Should she pull out the book further and risk destroying it utterly, or spare it and move on to another? She sighed, causing a shudder in the ladder. The book would be worth it, she reasoned, and continued the struggle. As it happened, the book parted from the shelf with ease after that initial incident. Zhanna swung down the ladder and landed softly on the dusty floor, the book tucked under her arm.

She returned to her usual chair, positioned directly under a solitary light bulb hanging from the ceiling. She sat and looked across the chamber. Everything beyond about ten metres was shrouded in darkness, which would be a problem once she had exhausted the books closest by; she didn't trust her ability to climb that decrepit ladder without the lifeline of her eyesight. She'd have to venture down to the Unit Control Complex and reroute another circuit before long - she hoped dragging a bulb into life would be less difficult the second time.

She opened the book and began to read. Phasing out the ever-present, distant whir had become as natural as breathing to her. At first it had threatened to drive her further into insanity, but she had come to regard it almost as soothing. That must have been over a year ago, now, she mused. A year of no days, no nights, no conversations and no relenting of the pain. Confined to a redundant library in her self-imposed exile, Zhanna progressed through the history of human literature, book by book, for no other distraction existed to quell the burning in her mind. She often wondered whether she would die before finishing the collection, dearly hoping so each time.

Her stomach rumbled. The stores of processed meat were a less impending issue; they could feed a civilisation for aeons. She lowered the book to her feet with the lightest of touches and made the familiar journey through the dark to the pantry.

That was when the light went out.

Zhanna spun around in horror. Darkness! No! *Eternal* darkness! There was no way she could navigate a path to the Control Complex now; the first time had only been possible due to the dim emergency lighting which had given up several months ago, and a since corroded sign of directions. She lost control of her heart which beat in terror at this prospect. But even now, a hysterical calm returned when she considered the alternative. She would choose a life of darkness, anytime.

There was not long to consider her situation before the voices started.

"Wha-appeared?"

"Wh, wh, why stop'd?"

"Who turn-ou' the ligh'?"

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Moans of confusion echoed through the walls, some closer than others. *They* were out. Zhanna backed away from the sounds, this terror far greater than that of darkness. She felt her way back against the shelf as quietly as she could. However she stumbled into the ladder which disintegrated above her. Shards and splinters fell onto her head and neck as the ladder crashed down like a falling tree. It hit the ground with a shuddering bang - feeding the wails.

Escape was futile. Backed against a corner, an intensification of the anguish told Zhanna they had breached the library.

"So cold, so cold."

"My bones, aching, aching."

"Make it stop, stop, make - please."

Mental anguish turned to physical as the figures fell over one another in their stupor, in their hysteria. Moans turned to screams as the simple pain of existing failed to cease; greater pain than these small minds could possibly envisage. Zhanna curled into a ball in the corner, hands firmly over her ears.

And then the light returned.

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes bulging in fear. A chorus of zombies snapped to a halt. Their appearance was worse than Zhanna had ever imagined. Their eyes were sullen and dead, their clothes decomposing rags, and their posture hunched to half their natural height. Instantly, their wretched necks cricked towards the light. Then came the most agonised yelps of all. They crouched and cowered but they were beyond protection now. Their skin sizzled as it melted; their eyes popped like burst balloons; they collapsed to the ground in slow, jagged motion, wrinkling into compressed stumps on the dusty floor.

Waiting a minute to ensure the danger had passed, Zhanna rose to her feet. She walked over the remains of the human race, keeping her gaze firmly in the direction she walked, and reached the entrance they had come through. She noticed in muted surprise that the emergency lights had returned. Was this what it took?

Zhanna stepped along the corridor and stopped at the first open door. She peered into her former cage. Broken straps hung suspended over a cushioned chair, as tranquillisers still squirted from tubes in fits and bursts. Another pair of steps and into the next cell; same story. She remembered well the Hellish euphoria, the sickening bliss of these prisons - before she had clawed herself out over a year ago. This underground morgue would be humanity's final resting place - where humanity had, at long last, decided to retire.

She would have to deal with the bodies before she could return to the book.

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