

"You sure this is the place, Doc?" Soldier's commanding voice cut through the dense forest air. She was a bulky stern woman, wearing a camo-pattern uniform, a semi-automatic gun slung over her shoulder. She scanned the trees, her eyes sharp and wary, ready for any sign of danger.

"Positive," Doc replied, his eyes fixed on his notes, oblivious to the surroundings. "This is the place. The data doesn't lie." The eccentric mathematician's eyes, usually tired and skeptical from countless failed expeditions, now sparkled with a rare glimmer of hope.

"That's what you said about the last ten forests," Soldier retorted, keeping her gaze ahead.

"Nine," he corrected her, adjusting his bowtie with a smirk of intellectual pride.

A few paces behind them a scrawny figure with massive glasses stumbled along, struggling under the weight of a pile of textbooks. "D-do you really think there's something in these dark woods?" the boy asked hesitantly. Jim, Doc's student, had joined them on their excursion. Feeling suffocated by the endless theorems and calculations back at the university, he had jumped at the chance for fieldwork,

never imagining it would lead him into a forest in the middle of nowhere.

Doc shot him a glance, his impatience barely concealed.  
“Fool, you call yourself a mathematician! You’ve seen my calculations; something here doesn’t add up!”

Jim sighed internally. He knew better than to argue with Doc when he was in one of his passionate rants. Despite his reservations, he couldn’t help but envy Doc’s fervor. Although Jim was naturally good at math, he never felt the same spark.





Suddenly, Soldier raised a hand, halting their progress. They stood at a junction with paths branching off in multiple directions. "Which way, Doc?"

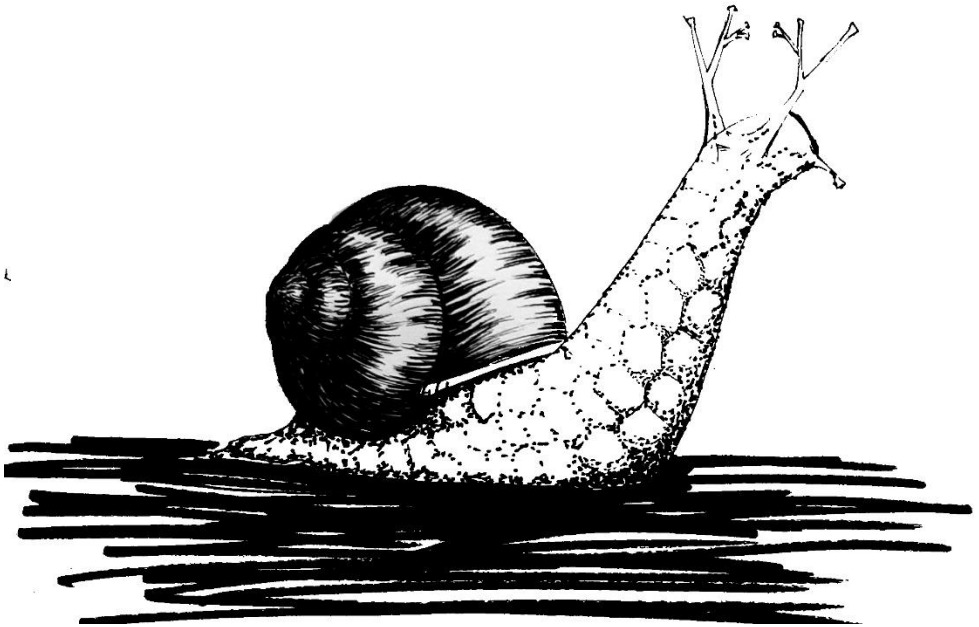
Doc plucked a leaf from a nearby tree, examining it closely. "Incredible," he murmured. "Look at the way the veins split." He grabbed a magnifying glass from his pocket. "Unreal, it just keeps splitting," he muttered, his eyes wide with fascination. He fished a microscope from Soldier's bag, ignoring her irritated sigh, and placed the leaf under it.

While Doc studied the leaf, Jim noticed something on the ground—a small snail tucked away inside its shell. "Hey, little guy," he murmured, picking it up. "Scared? Luckily, you've got a shell to hide in." Staring at the snail's spiral, Jim couldn't help but think his life had followed the same unremarkable, predictable path. His musings were interrupted by Soldier's commanding voice.

"Tempo, Student!" she snapped, her patience clearly wearing thin.

"Coming!" Jim hurried along, dropping the snail onto the soft forest floor as he caught up to his companions.

On the ground, the snail emerged from its shell. Its eyes extended on long stalks, but halfway up each stalk branched out smaller stalks with their own tiny eyes, repeating infinitely. The cursed creature watched Jim disappear into the dark forest, leaving a bit of its slime on his fingertips.



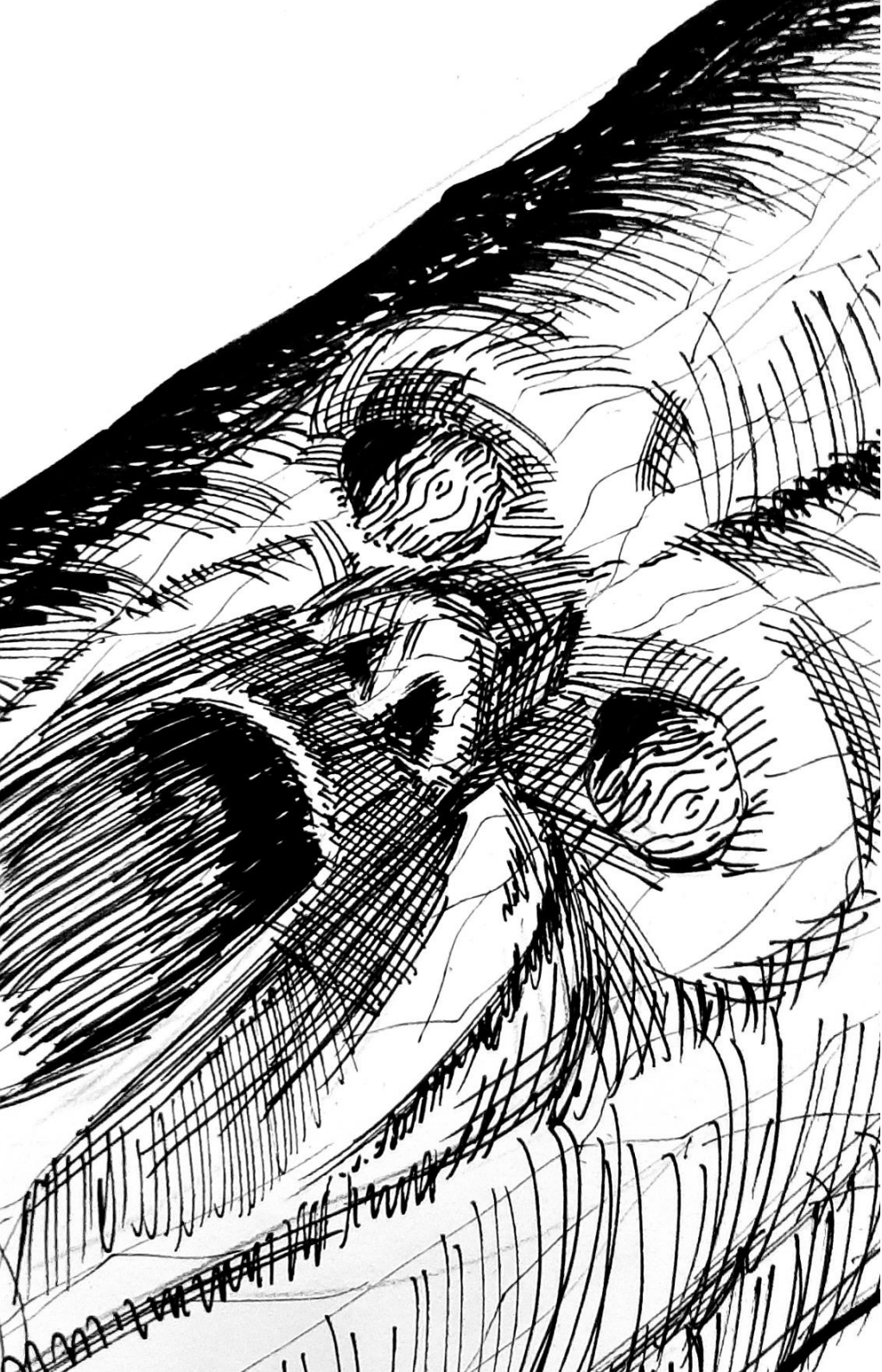
After half an hour, the path opened up into a clearing. The trees here looked mighty unusual. The trunks had turned perfectly vertical, splitting in a geometric pattern every half meter upwards. Their organic nature had almost entirely disappeared.



Doc stood in awe, quietly whispering, "It is true..." He raised his hand and started laughing. "I was right!" He grabbed Soldier by the shoulders, his excitement palpable. She remained unfazed. "Can you believe it?! I was right! This place really does exist!" His celebration was interrupted by a loud, nerdy scream.

Jim had fallen backward, shivering. "T-t-there," he said, pointing shakily to a tree.





Doc and Soldier took a closer look. In the bark of the tree, they saw something resembling a face. Upon closer inspection, the branches were not yet fully geometric like the others. They had some knobs and bends, vaguely resembling arms and legs.

Soldier stepped closer, carefully pressing her fingers against the neck. After a brief silence, she spoke. "It's breathing."

The face seemed to pulse with life, each movement creating a distortion that seemed to delve into another dimension. The sight was hypnotic, almost drawing them closer.

Jim broke the silence. "Let's go back, guys," he said, his voice trembling. "This place isn't safe." Panic surged into Doc's eyes.

"Are you crazy?!" Doc jumped on him, aggressively shaking his shoulders. "We've made the discovery of a lifetime! We need to venture deeper."

"Calm down, Doc," Soldier interjected, separating him from the frightened boy. "If he wants to turn back by himself, he can."

Jim glanced back, terror seizing him at the thought of navigating the dark forest alone. He thought of what awaited him at home – the boring lectures, the esoteric papers, the meaningless theorems. Even if he went back, his life wouldn't be much better and besides he already got in this far, might as well continue the journey. "N-no, thank you. I guess I'll tag along a little longer."

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They pressed on, the forest growing denser and more surreal. As they walked, Jim started to notice a burning sensation on his fingers. At first, he ignored it, but soon it became too strong to dismiss. He stopped to look at his hands. They seemed normal at first glance, but the burning sensation intensified, as if his skin was being etched by an invisible force.

"What's wrong, Jim?" Doc asked, peering at his student's hands. His eyes widened with a mixture of excitement and dread. "Look closely boy. Your fingertips—they're changing."

Jim stared at his fingers, watching in horror as his fingerprints shifted into intricate, branching patterns. Panic set in. He grabbed a bottle of water and desperately tried to wash them clean, but the patterns only deepened, sinking into his flesh.

The tips of his fingers began to dissolve, leaving behind stumpy holes. He screamed, the sound echoing through the silent forest.

New flesh started to grow from the holes, twisting and warping into grotesque shapes. Fingers sprouted into smaller fingers, which in turn grew even smaller appendages. His forearms bubbled and swelled, forming new torsos with tiny, screaming faces. The added weight pulled him to the ground. He bit into a stick, trying to stifle his screams as his legs petrified, turning into a tree trunk.



Doc watched, torn between fascination and horror.  
"Incredible," he muttered, unable to look away.

Jim's mind raced through his life choices. He had chosen math because it was easy, not out of passion. He realized he would remain average, stuck in a between two dimensions. "One dysfunctional brain is enough," he thought, staring at a copy of his own twisted face. Gathering his willpower, he looked Soldier in the eyes and forced out, "S-shoot it!"

Soldier hesitated. "You sure, kid?"

He nodded resolutely, closing his eyes. Soldier aimed her gun, but as she pulled the trigger, she noticed something strange. The barrel of her gun had twisted into a branching structure.



Before she could process it, the gun exploded, and Soldier's brains splattered on the ground, landing in front of Jim's feet.

Jim looked in horror. The fragmented pieces resembled broccoli florets, each containing smaller brains. He wanted to run, but his legs had rooted into the ground. He was stuck, both in life and physically. Jim's final thought was a bitter realization: "I should've just had fun. Screw math."

In between all of this, Doc sat on the ground in shock, devastated. "Why, why is this happening?" He watched as Soldier's body dissolved into intricate, branching patterns and Jim's form twisted into a grotesque, multi-limbed man-tree. They were consumed, becoming one with the forest's endless maze of recursive designs. "Why is this happening to them and not me?"

As dawn approached, the first light of the rising sun pierced through the canopy, its intensity igniting the dry underbrush. Doc's eyes widened in horror as a small flame began to spread, catching onto the leaves and branches. "No, no, not now!" he cried, scrambling to save his precious discovery.

He frantically tried to stamp out the growing fire, his obsession blinding him to the danger. "I can't let this happen! Not when I'm so close!" But the fire spread rapidly, the

flames hungrily consuming the beautiful geometry he had been so obsessed with.

In his desperation, Doc's clothes caught fire. Panic set in, but he continued to try and beat out the flames engulfing the forest, ignoring his own burning flesh. His screams filled the air as he was consumed by the fire he couldn't control.

"So close," he whispered, his voice choked with smoke and pain, as the flames consumed him completely. His body burned to a crisp, his ashes scattered by the rising heat of the forest fire.

The forest, now ablaze, continued to burn, its endless patterns disappearing into ashes. Doc's remains, Soldier's fragmented form, and Jim's twisted tree-body were all that remained.

END

Hello, I hope you enjoyed the booklet. It is a bit of a mess, but perhaps still somewhat interesting, nonetheless.

Have a nice day!

-Damian