SOMETHING GREATER THAN ARTIFICE

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What, you want to hear the Ros story again? Surely you have to be sick of that one by now.

How about instead I tell you about Genevieve IV and how she staved off the fell necromancer Belkanus? I also have a little tale about a man named only as Joe, and how his actions influenced the Plas wars of ’89, or…

Fine, Ros it is. Again. But let’s tell it from a different angle this time…

It all started with Gregor, I suppose, him and Anatoly, way out in the tech republic hinterlands. A small place, as I recall. Little more than a tarpaper shack with a Feed line running to it. Which, if you’re of an Artificing bent, is really all you need.

They had a name for it, back then. Something Greco. A deity, perhaps? Ah yes, Janus, the two-faced god of time and transition, of birth and of death, of endings and beginnings.

Which is pretty fitting when you get right down to it.

Because Gregor was there at the beginning, and he was there at the end.

In fact, I have, over the years, come to think of this as his story as much as anyone else’s.

And why not? Ros was never really of the TR, nor was that pedant, Mikhail, and while Moses Driver played his part, Moses is still Moses, and therefore a part of no one else’s story but his own. Which was is not to say that each didn’t have an important role to play in this tale, no?

Our story, if it can be said to have any true beginning, began in that small, selfsame shack where the Brotherhood of Janus (that was the name! I knew it would come to me) plied their trade.

In fact, if we concentrate, I think we can look in on that little shack, and see the strange things that occurred there, once upon a time…
GREGOR NEVER REALLY BELIEVED IN **SILOS**.

HARD TO BELIEVE? WELL HE DIDN'T.

DON'T ASK ME WHY.

BUT HIS PARTNER, ANATOLY? ANATOLY **BELIEVED**.

**SILOS, ANATOLY? REALLY?**

**MIGHT AS WELL BELIEVE IN THE BOOGEYMAN. AIN'T NO WAY THAT SOME FACELESS DARK FORCE IS GONNA SWEEP IN HERE AND Gobble US UP.**
Hmmm...

Nope.

Not in there...

Nuh-uh.

Not in there...

Nope.

Good news! I think we're monster-free.
Having chastised his friend, Gregor went back to his work, which at the time consisted of mucking with the fundamental laws of the universe.

They called it Artificing, but I still think of it as Magic.
BUT EVEN MAGIC TAKES ITS TOLL.

GREGOR PACKED UP HIS TERMINUS...

...STRETCHED...

...AND REALIZED...

...THAT ALL WAS NOT WELL WITH ANATOLY.
Concerned, Gregor approached Anatoly and attempted to discern the real cause of his consternation. Only to find that Anatoly was, in fact, terrified of the SiLOS threat. And Gregor—in the callous way that young men sometimes have—dismissed his friend's fears...
...and walked away...

...paying the matter very little mind...

...only realizing the folly of his actions...

...when it was too late.

Because silos had come.
MEANWHILE NEARBY...

A woman known only as Ros was making her way through the wilds of the eastern woods.

HER MISSION...

To head off the Silos threat before it could devour the entire world.

HER PATH WAS FRAUGHT WITH DANGER, PERIL LURKING AROUND EACH TURN.

LITTLE DID SHE KNOW, TONIGHT WOULD BE NO DIFFERENT...
The tide of blackness came out of nowhere...

...and Gregor was forced to watch as it took his friend.

...and Gregor was forced to watch as it took his friend.
ROS HEARD A SCREAM IN THE DISTANCE, AND WITH NOT A SINGLE THOUGHT AS TO WHO—OR WHY—SHE BROKE INTO A RUN.
Ros reached the top of the deadfall and looked into the distance...

And saw the thing she’d feared most:

Silos towers—The hallmark of her hated enemy, rising in the distance.

No time to waste. She lept into space.
THE DARKNESS TOOK GREGOR

WRAPPING HIM LIKE A SHROUD

IT PENETRATED DEEP INTO HIS SOUL, RENDING IT WITH ICY HOOKS, RIPPING AWAY AT HIM.

AND WORST...

...IT BEGAN TO FEEL...

...SORT OF NICE.
BUT THEN...

A CHORD LIKE A BOLT OF SILVER
RANG OUT IN THE AIR,
PUSHING BACK THE BLACK...

AND SUDDENLY GREGOR
WAS FREE.

HE RAN FOR HIS LIFE.

ALONE...

...FOR ANATOLY WAS GONE.

ROS FILLED HER LUNGS AND SANG HARDER,
BUT ONE CHORD OF A LARGER WORK
FORGED LONG AGO FOR THE
EXPRESS PURPOSE OF COUNTERING
THE SILOS THREAT.

THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR,
GREGOR SAW HIS SAVIOR.

HE RAN TOWARDS HER

BUT NOTHING IS EVER EASY.
but Ros was not to be dissuaded.
Ros reached out to him in a gesture that looked something like supplication.

Take my hand.

Gregor took her hand and together they ran.
hours (and miles) later...

ros and gregor rested and
nursed their wounds.

"What's wrong?"

"my hands. dammit."

"...but i must have lost
my bandages in the fall."

oh, is that all?

i might just have
something for that.
GREGOR OPENED HIS POCKET TERMINUS...

...CAREFULLY PLACED HIS TIE IN IT...

...AND SET ABOUT DOING WHAT HE DID BEST.

CHANGING THE FUNDAMENTAL STATE OF MATTER...

...AND SHOWING OFF.
The Terminus scanned the tie and set about breaking it down into its component parts.

And in less time than it would take to tell... transformed it via obscure alchemies into a small, neat bandage.
As they traversed the perilous wasteland of the eastern foothills, Ros availed Gregor of her plan: to travel to the Writers’ Bloc, there to acquire the mysterious artifact known only as The Book. With it, she intended to push back the Silos threat for good and for all.

Weeks later, Ros and Gregor crested the apex of one last, staggering group of foothills and began their final descent into the river valley leading to the Bloc.

The air grew cool and moist, soothing their parched skin, the leafy canopy of low-lying coniferous trees blocking the harsh rays of the afternoon sun.

Ros was excited as she ever got, bounding up that last mild incline. To ask Gregor, the taciturn young woman was a study in somber gravity, all singular intent.

But at the edge of the woods, traipsing through the opaque thicket that served as a verge between the wooded wilds and the fringe of the Bloc proper, he would have thought her a young woman on the eve of some happy reunion. Which—he supposed—she was.

Which made what happened next that much worse...
The bloc, as it had been in her memory, a glittering city on a hill, a beacon of reason and light for all mankind...

"No..."

...was gone.
Gregor didn’t know how to comfort his friend...

...nor how to react...

As she broke and ran through the smoldering ruins of the Writers’ Bloc.

Ros—wait!
ROS RAN WITH A PURPOSE TOWARDS THE SPIRE, A MASSIVE REPOSITORY OF KNOWLEDGE FROM THIS AGE AND THE LAST.

A LIBRARY BEYOND IMAGINING.

"IT COULD STILL BE HERE," SHE TOLD HERSELF AS SHE PUSHED OPEN THE ANCIENT OAKEN DOOR, SCORCHED AS IT WAS WITH THE TELTTLALE SCARS OF COMBAT.

"WE MIGHT STILL HAVE A CHANCE."
She told herself these lies, and as she stepped through the portal...

...she almost believed them.

Ros!

But Gregor needn't have worried. For when he followed her into the spire, he found her standing before an empty lectern, her hand resting in a space where a book...

...the book...

...should have been.
Seeing Ros’ rage, Gregor tried to comfort her... until a voice spoke up from the shadows, insisting all was not lost.

He called himself Mikhail, a librarian of the bloc, and keeper of the Book.

He knew they sought it for benevolent purpose, but when they entreated him to deliver it unto them, he had naught but ill news.

Who’s there? Show yourself!

Tea first. Then explanations.
And that worse, the book—while having survived the destruction—had been nonetheless weakened by the onslaught...

Over tea, Mikhail told the tale of the invasion, about how silos and their catspaws—the frontmen—had simply emerged from the southern woods and laid waste to the bloc with no more effort than it took to tell it.
...and although Ros made a fervent case for its use...

...Mikhail refused to divulge its location...

...no matter how dire were the circumstances.
and for the tenth time in as many weeks, all seemed lost.

until, that was, gregor happened upon one last slim ray of hope, secreted away in an ancient tome.
The book foretold of a gathering of diverse peoples...

...a conclave known only as...

The Conference.

...and yea, I say unto you that if you call unto them, the people of the divided nations shall come to your call, and shall gather themselves unto the greater tech republic, there to forge whatever weapon is needed to defeat the enemies of peace and prosperity for good and for all...

It was a long shot, to be sure.
The journey was a long and arduous one, and fraught with hidden perils besides.

Ros and Gregor encountered manifold dangers and obstructions but let little stand in their way...

For they knew that should they fail, all the world might damn well fall under the grim thrall of Silos.

On the last day of their journey, they crested the last hill leading to the narrow pass—and the TR beyond—only to find themselves face-to-face with a sight each had hoped never to see again.
THE ENTIRE VALLEY BELOW, FROM HORIZON TO HORIZON, STUDDED WITH SILOS TOWERS.

AND FACED WITH SUCH RELENTLESS OPPOSITION BETWEEN THEMSELVES AND AN ALL-TOO-CLOSE GOAL, THE TWO COMPANIONS DID WHAT ANYONE IN THEIR SITUATION WOULD DO...
THEY RAN HARD.

HARDER THAN THEY EVER HAD.

SALVATION—SUCH AS IT WAS—
TOO CLOSE TO HAVE DONE
OTHERWISE.
But then Ros' keen ears picked up something.

A familiar sound, almost too faint to hear.

Something that caused her to stop dead.
“What is it?”

Nothing, maybe...

Hang on.

Ros directed her eyes back toward the way they came, trying to discern the source of the strange aural signature.

What are you waiting for? Let’s go!

Paying him no mind, Ros peered again at the seemingly barren horizon...

...but this time, she saw something.
FRONTMEN!
GO!

SILOS FRONTMEN.

EMOTIONLESS.

RELENTLESS.

INVINCIBLE.
They fled as fast as they could...

...but soon realized...

...even their fastest would not be enough.

And so, faced with impossible odds...
...ROS DID THE BEST THING SHE KNEW HOW.

SHE READIED HERSELF...

GET OUT OF HERE, GREGOR. I'LL HOLD THEM OFF AS LONG AS I CAN.

FOR WAR.
Knowing full well he owed her his life, Gregor refused to leave her side.

To which Gregor replied as best he knew how.

But Ros was having none of it.

Dammit, Gregor. Just go!

The conference is more important than me. More important than any of us.

There's nothing that important. C'mon. I have a plan.
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO IN FIVE MINUTES?
COS THAT'S ALL WE HAVE LEFT.
WHAT ELSE?
I'M GONNA SYNTH SOMETHING.
GREGOR...

GIVE ME TWO MINUTES!

TWO MINUTES...?

“TWO MINUTES I CAN GIVE YOU.”
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT, YOU ASK?

WHAT ELSE?

THEY FOUGHT.
COME ON...
COME ON....!
It wasn't enough.

And as the frontman's hand closed inexorably around her skull, the world began to go dark.

Ros fought like a warrior possessed.

But even with her uncanny speed, strength, and agility, against the tidal wave of frontmen...

Let go... you bastard!

...It wasn't enough.

And as the frontman's hand closed inexorably around her skull, the world began to go dark...
...until a strange sound pealed out across the blasted plane...

THE SOUND...

of an ENGINE!
Gregor pulled his motorcycle around in a screaming arc...

...and ran the frontmen right the fuck over.

The threat neutralized—however temporarily—Gregor stopped just short of his supine companion...

...and reached down to her an all-too-familiar gesture that—if I had to describe it—probably looked a lot like supplication.
ROS CLIMBED ABOARD...

...AND TOGETHER...

THEY RODE HARD FOR THE TR BORDER...

...AND SALVATION.
AFTER THAT THINGS GET A LITTLE MURKY.

HISTORY TELLS US THAT ROS, GREGOR—AND EVEN MIKHAIL!—MADE THE CONFERENCE.

AND WE KNOW OF SOME DOINGS OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OCCURRED THERE.

SOME POSIT THAT DURING THE FESTIVITIES, A TRAITOR WAS FOUND IN THEIR MIDSST.

SOME SAY SILOS REARED ITS UGLY HEAD AND WAS DEFEATED, FOR GOOD AND FOR ALL.

AND SIGH, YES, SOME SAY THAT SOMETHING GREATER THAN EVEN FRIENDSHIP BLOSSOMED BETWEEN ROS AND GREGOR.

BUT WHO’S TO SAY?

THE HOUR GROWETH LATE, AND MY THROAT IS PARCHED.

BUT YOU ARE YOUNG AND CURIOUS, AND FOR SUCH PEOPLE, THE MYSTERIES OF THE PAST EXIST ONLY SO LONG AS YOU REFUSE TO PURSUE THEM.

PERHAPS THERE ARE OTHER WRITINGS ON THIS SUBJECT, LYING IN SHADOW, JUST WAITING TO BE UNEARTHED...