

Furio

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"Carried by cosmic winds, I was drifting away, aimlessly. In this absolute darkness, I had no grip whatsoever, no references, no landmarks... My body became the centre of the universe, and its boundaries deadlocked with infinity. My body was weightless and senseless, trapped in an intractable movement. My mind, deprived of new, sensorial stimuli, was immersed in a sea of memories. There was nothing to hold on, except my past, or what I could recollect of it.

My conscious started developing an utmost sensitivity towards the life throbbing within. I was feeling everything so lively: the blood pulsating through my veins, the air getting in and out of my lungs, the rhythm of my heartbeat. The most insignificant modification in my metabolism became an event of a sweeping magnitude. Then, after an amount of time that I cannot establish with certainty, I started to actually "feel" the chemical activity in my brain.

As my body was drifting, so did my thoughts, and hence my moods. Before, on Orion, I was totally exposed and subjected to the moods affecting me, they were the somatic vectors that guided my actions, my behavior. Now, I was discovering the links, unfolding the neural nexuses. How unconscious have I been all that time, how unsuspecting! I learned the consequences of thinking something: its implications in the physical dimension. Thus, any single thought became a double experience: its associative effect, that of calling other thoughts, and its neural effect, the physiological upheaval caused in the brain. Ultimately, I grew aware of the structural link between the two.

In that imprisoning vastness, akin to a blinded spectator, I started to educate myself. At first, I started to compare different thoughts. What was distinguishing one thought from the other, besides their semantics, their expressible meanings? In this perspective, I tried to experience the difference between the act of thinking of my father and the act of thinking of my mother, tracking down the routes

taken by my particles at each thought, attentive to the infinitesimal alterations in my brain. Soon, I was so good at it that I needn't think anymore. I could "make" my brain take this or that route, and henceforth reach the essence of any thought. I had learned how to control my body down to its atomic level.

My mind had become an instrument on which I seized total control. I discovered amazing capabilities, a power so immense that thoughts themselves could not fathom, let alone express. During my lifetime on Orion, I had stocked an incommensurable mass of cerebral stimuli, and now was the time to process the information and unveil the secret links. However, I was missing something, something crucial. The key to my existence remained sealed. How paradoxical indeed: I've elevated my potencies to their paroxysm, yet the events of my lifetime on Orion that led me to this point remains an enigma. No matter how precisely I focus on my remembrances, I am stuck. My life is a Chinese book, a total conundrum that is haunting me. What were the motives of Lord Dazzle's spurious condemnation? Obviously, he wanted me to be inoperative, but what danger was I representing? Why was my father assassinated? Why was my mother seeing Storm? Why did she stop caring for me? I am capable of everything, yet I know nothing. All these questions are daunting me, it feels horrible. Adrift in sub-space, I am as inert and sluggish as my teddy bear."

Martin Weydt stood by his drawing desk. He was applying the finishing touches to "Furio", a wild epic tale filled with angry, battling half-gods. He had one day before the deadline would ring its unforgiving bell, and now he cursed Tom, because he should have been there with him. Tom Delarte had scripted the story so far, quite brilliantly as a matter of fact, but he said bye-bye in the final stage in a rather disregarding manner.

Tom's sudden departure came as a shock. There were still many last-minute decisions to be made, many rough edges to be rounded. Martin wasn't prepared to handle the job all by himself. He recalled the good teamwork, the fun they had working on that series. But a note came that morning through the fax, and Martin had trouble putting up with what it said.

Martin, this is my last "Furio" script. I quit, found another job (better pay). I told the boss you'll carry things through. I'm sure you can do it, the whole script should be in your hands by now. We all know you're a genius.

Good luck.

Tom.

A genius?! Martin had to grin at that. He was drawing since he was a child all right, but it had not been a long time since he retook the pencils. As a child, pa and ma thought he was retarded, coloring shapeless monsters in a corner of his room. Pa and ma were upset, they wouldn't let that happen, their child could devise something better than godzillas and swamp monsters, so they sent him to play football. They wanted him to mingle with teammates, develop his social skills, learn normality from his peers. But the kids were laughing at him, he was tenuous and skinny and helpless with the ball. He ended up goalkeeping. All in all, he was not bad at it, but he did not become the wholesome, loud brat his parents expected him to be. Instead, he grew silent and the monsters got scarier.

But these were distant memories. Martin was a free-lancer now, he worked for CC comics, operating from his own little studio at home. His drawing table was cluttered with the material that had accumulated during the work on "Furio". It was all there; the script, the penciled draft of "Furio", Tom's faxes... The sum of six months work, triggering remembrances of the countless brainstormings, the straining editorial meetings, the hesitations and the shared enthusiasms.

It had not been drudgery. In retrospect, Martin had enjoyed himself, they had been working on strong characters. Atlas had provided a good deal of the diversion, for Atlas was a superhero with a teddy bear. And the teddy bear was far more than monkeyshine. Tom had used it as a side-kick along the lines of a well-established tradition in the comics world, a narrative device helping expose and underline the protagonist's thoughts and actions. Martin, in turn, exploited the unusual visual troves retained in a superhero with a dull doll loosely lashing from his hand. Martin and Tom taken together had been a dream team, but now that they were thrusting the finishing line, Tom crudely cleared out, and Martin felt betrayed.

There was another problem. Martin couldn't focus solely on "Furio": his one year old baby needed and deserved some attention too. Sylvia wasn't fit lately. During her bad

days, she was behaving awkwardly, being absentminded and depressed. In these conditions, Martin was the one that had to figure things out.

Martin's passion for Sylvia appeared transfixed in the past. They had been a good couple for three years. Martin had adored her, but the intensity of their passion had weltered, as well as the professedly unsinkable trust that tied them together. Back then, they meant everything to each other. They had been more than mere lovers, they had been friends, brother and sister... It had been a total experience. Love had infiltrated through every chink of Martin's soul. And that plenitude hadn't been only spatial, it had a time axis as well. Everyday, Martin had felt the steady wholeness of their love ticking like a clock. Sometimes, it had been too much, he couldn't have taken any more of it, as if his feelings had gotten too wieldy, and threatened to flow over the brim of his being. But now it was over.

Their love didn't vanish on a wink though. It diminished gradually, painfully... For Martin's perspective, the decline started after the understanding that their relationship wasn't that balanced as he thought it to be. Sylvia was a sensitive woman, and she excelled in soothing Martin's torments. She was the one who got Martin on the move. Before Sylvia, he was on social welfare, an intellectual misfit bragging over the injustice of the world. He'd drink and chainsmoke in bars, complaining to whoever cared to listen that really, no really, there was no place for people like him in the world.

At that time, Martin wasn't drawing, he had stopped sketching monsters long time ago. But the monsters appeared in his nightmares, and Martin suffered from anxiety and depression. It was Sylvia who cured him. Day after day, she nursed him. She showed him understanding and heedfulness, always listening to his torments, quieting his pain just by staring in his eyes. It was like magic. She was his voodoo priest, bandaging his wounds with the devotion of a saint. When they laid satisfied on the bed after making love, Martin would remain silent, wary of the emptiness, the vacuity into which the orgasm had tricked him. But just before turning off the lights, she'd whisper tender words in his ear, so as to exorcise his ghosts.

She encouraged him to resume with the drawing the day she had discovered in a defected drawer a couple of sketches. Martin had forgotten all about these drawings, but Sylvia was in awe. Strong with her support, he shook the dust off of his pencils' box. It took him much time and effort, but she stood by his side, and the drawings got better. With the money she earned, she'd offer him art books and comics

he liked. Bit by bit, he perfected his technique, always attentive to her insightful comments, building a distinctive style that finally brought him a contract with CC comics.

There, he slowly climbed up in the hierarchy. At first, he was allowed to do the sound effects, then they gave him lettering tasks, and from there on he did the inking on several ongoing series. Tom Delarte, who was a member of the editor's staff, liked his work, and proposed him to draw a series he'd written. It was called "Furio", and it was staging a superhero with a teddy bear. Martin gave his keen consent immediately.

Furio's stage was set in a dark universe inhabited by two rival gangs of half-gods. Remote from human affairs, they were settling their business at the outskirts of the Orion constellation. Lord Dazzle was Orion's ruler, a position he achieved and safeguarded by means of brutal extortion and blind persecution. "Furio"'s masters of ceremony were Lord Dazzle and Elektra. They were lovers, engaged in a passionate relationship until Elektra succumbed to the charms of the Duke, an empowered dandy-like figure. Offended at the deepest in his pride, Lord Dazzle sought retaliation. In the third episode of "Furio", he contended the Duke in a sixteen-panel-long duel, and eventually destroyed him. Elektra, sad-hearted and desperate, swore to avenge her assassinated lover. She travelled across the seven rings of Orion and recruited uncanny soldiers of fortune that she put under Storm's executive command. Storm was a devoted officer and coincidentally a remorseless killer, dreaded across the entire constellation. Then she engaged battle. All hell broke loose, and Martin's superior drawings exploited fully the violent and ardent corollaries of the celestial action.

The combats were fierce, but neither side could overtake the other. Atlas appeared relatively late, in the fifth episode, just before the finale. He was Elektra and Lord Dazzle's secret son, although he was born when Elektra was flirting with the Duke. The identity of his real father was kept away from him. At the age of fifteen, he witnessed his progenitors' uncompromising conflict without knowing what was at stake. Young and inexperienced, he watched his mother team up with the cold-blooded Storm, conducting her personal and arcane war. His bewilderment reached its climax when he got kidnapped by Lord Dazzle's special forces, and subsequently accused of conspiring against his dominion. Lord Dazzle wanted to rule out the chance that Atlas would turn against him the day he'd discover the truth. He hated nuisances, and defusing perils to his sovereignty was second nature to Lord Dazzle. In the last two panels of

episode five, subtitled "Judgment Day", the readers discovered that a bogus trial against Atlas was in the making. Lord Dazzle presided the commission that assembled and decreed the fate of the disgraceful son. At the end of the supreme court session, Lord Dazzle gave the sentence of the jury, and these were the episode's concluding words: "And you shall dwell forever beyond Orion's seventh ring, where no space nor time will mitigate your expurgation, for you have betrayed Orion's commandment in your dim lust for power, and you must now pay the price."

It was Tom who had imagined this cynical, unethical epos, and Martin had drawn it. He had done the penciling, the inking and the lettering as if he were a team by himself. Each episode started with a splash page and ended with a cliffhanger. The clash of the titans was depicted in an elegant and minimalist way, proper to Martin's style. Every single panel was a showcase of the emotion and craftsmanship that had been involved. The result was an intense and ornate strip, and the sales went up after every issue.

Just two days before submission of the last episode, Tom departed from CC comics, leaving the project without editor. Martin resented his defection. It was bad timing. Sylvia had been very depressed, and although signs of betterment did manifest, she was still incapacitated in many ways. There was irony in the situation, their roles had unexpectedly inverted.

Sylvia had stopped nursing Martin shortly after his admission at CC comics. It wasn't necessary anymore. Her treatment turned out to be a full-scale success. She had turned him into a happy man. Martin's nightmares were defunct, he slept like a child. For the first time in his life, Martin woke up lightheartedly. And soon enough, he woke earlier than Sylvia. Full of lust for life, he'd prepare breakfast and bring it to Sylvia in bed. Then he'd draw. He'd draw the entire morning, and soon after lunch break, he'd carry on with drawing the whole afternoon into the evening. At CC comics, they were grateful for his hard work, and he received more tasks and bigger responsibilities.

Sylvia didn't share his eagerness. Martin was covertly disappointed, and thought how strange it was: on one hand, it was she who straightened him out of the slump into which he was trapped, and now that he was set free and going ahead, she ceased with the encouragements. Even more so, she seemed to copy his past dismal. She looked pale, and she fell sick often. It was as though she had lost something, something essential to her being. Martin was concerned, but when he'd ask if something was wrong, she'd reply she was all right. But she wasn't all right. And

Martin had to wonder if the law of preservation of energy was applying here: she was strong only if he was weak, and if he was strong, she'd have to be weak. It didn't make much sense. But the fact was that her energy was withering.

When Sylvia started talking about having a baby, Martin wasn't sure. But he saw how each time she'd bring up the subject, her eyes were sparkling again, and that was what made him go for it. After all she did for him, he didn't feel entitled to refuse her anything. She had saved his life, in a way he owed her one. And if her happiness laid in giving birth to a child, then his too, herein laid.

The baby came, but things didn't improve. Sylvia remained low-spirited and beat. Martin felt helpless. He could not cheer her up. He could not do what she did for him when he was the one in need. He lacked the patience, the devotion. The allegiance Sylvia had shown to him was something that he categorized as sainted, almost holy, certainly out of his reach. He tried to act like she did at the time, but after a while he felt empty, discouraged. None of his attempts reached the effect he was hoping for. Sylvia was down and their sex life was bleak.

"You've done so much for me, Sylvia, and what am I giving you in return?"

"I'm not expecting anything in return, Martin, we're not playing monopoly."

"Ok, but what made you stay all that time?"

"I used to love the way you were looking at me..."

"What was so special about that?"

"Not always, sometimes."

"What sometimes?"

"Sometimes you looked at me like a wounded animal, and it turned me on. Other times, I saw a crack in your eyes, fear I guess, or something broken deep down. And that made me want to weep, and at the same time, it made me want to lay your head on my breasts and sing you a lullaby... I don't know..."

She had been his savior, but now that she was in distress, he sensed he wasn't up to the task. In a way, that wasn't wrong in itself, his commitment wasn't necessarily inferior because of limited therapeutic abilities, and yet he felt guilty. She had raised him from the dead, and he took it straight off from there. He came back to life, he would experience pleasure from it, he had no indulgence for the gloominess in which Sylvia seemed to sink. In order to stay healthy in his mind, he couldn't take on him the burden of mothering Sylvia. It was costing him too much. He had to deal with new sensations, he was a man with desires and impulses that he never knew before. Once in a while, he'd cheat on her, but he'd never tell. He felt egoistic

and mean.

Home was becoming hell. Now and then, Sylvia was losing it, and in those moments, she had no faith in anything or no one. Martin was treated as a menace. No matter what he did, she was convinced that he wanted to hurt her. In those moments, she ran wild and conducted herself destructively. She would sob long hours and stopped feeding herself. Worse, the baby ceased to exist.

Martin didn't know what to do, but his forbearance dwindled further. He'd dream of loneliness now, he wanted to leave her. But he couldn't. He had betrayed her doubly, by sleeping with other women, and by renouncing to keep his faith in her alive. Yet he felt that he could not commit the highest betrayal of all: saying goodbye. No matter what would happen between them, no matter how bad the situation would turn, he'd go to the end, but he wouldn't relinquish the ship.

The baby neared its first birthday, and Martin came to the obvious acknowledgement that there was no possible productivity during daytime. Sylvia had good days and bad days, and on bad days she wasn't taking proper care of the baby, leaving Martin in charge of the daily chores. Lately, the bad days took the lead on the good ones. There were many routine duties to carry through and the baby claimed a lot of attention.

Martin had to wait for the baby to fall asleep before thinking about the drawings he had to do. Around seven, only then was he able to unshut his pencil box and work on "Furio".

Martin was working on Atlas' costume. He had drawn it black. Lord Dazzle had doomed Atlas into the sub-space above Orion's seventh ring, so Martin figured black ink was well suited to symbolize that creature whose punishment was the most terrible of all: exile beyond space and time. The problem was that Atlas' black tights were getting blurred in the already dark sub-space. So Martin came up with a yellow glow outlining the silhouette, at once solving the contour problem and gaining the effect of some uncanny aura. On the other hand, it meant that all the character's appearances needed some fixing.

It was past midnight when Martin finished redrawing Atlas' newly acquired yellow blaze. He went to the kitchen, and prepared tea in the dark of the night. He sat at the kitchen table, put a light on, and noted the things left to do:

check consistency
check rhythm
check colors

Tom sprung into his mind again. He was a gifted storyteller. Script after script, he had nurtured the "Furio" episodes with sheer delirium, helping the series to gain momentum and a considerable cult following. True, the completed script was in his hands. True, he had showed himself competent, contributing no less than Tom to the atmospheres and even the plot-line. But no matter how appreciated Martin's own vision was, it was blind in the absence of an experienced counterpart.

Now, all Martin got was Tom's script. But the script was a bunch of chaotic memos, notes and monologues, all rather suggesting things than establishing clear guidelines. Martin liked that way of working, on the condition that Tom would be available for deliberation and feedback. Until now, they had regularly met at the office or at each other's places, and they had settled matters by clarifying things together. Why had Tom to quit now? Couldn't he have waited two more days? But there was no use in lamenting, and certainly there was not a minute to waste. Martin was on his own, and that's how it was: one more night and one more day, full stop.

Martin returned to his studio with a cup of tea. He needed to immerse himself in the story one last time. He read the monologue that Tom wrote in order to give a feel of Atlas' compelled sojourn in sub-space, then, sipping on his tea, he grabbed at another piece of the script, and continued reading.

As a kid, Atlas had sweet memories from his parents. His mother was kind and tender, the Duke was kind to him too. It was the Duke that brought him his teddy bear. The boy had buried it under his mattress, afraid that somebody would take it from him. That same day, Elektra took him in her arms, and with Duke they flew across the Orion skies. It was a beautiful day, the sun was shining splendidly in the firmament and Duke wouldn't stop making silly jokes. The kid's head was leaning against Elektra's soft breasts, taking in the sweet smell that emanated from there. His hair was waving in the wind. He heard the adults laughing out loud.

They stopped on a mountain hill, where the air was pure and chilling. They held a picnic right there, atop of that beautiful valley. Everything was so right. He remembered his mother, her face was radiating happiness and

satisfaction. She was loving and tender, pecking him on his little forehead. The kid was carelessly playing in the grass, running back and fro the adults. He remembered tumbling on something in that sappy grass. He bent down and took the offending obstacle in his hands. Then he ran towards his mentors, waving his trophy in the air. Their faces paled, the look in their eyes changed in a whim. No, he didn't call for that, he remembered feeling that terrible grief, an abyssal regret: please, go on, you haven't seen nothing, it's nothing, really. But it was too late for that, they had seen the skull. Elektra and the Duke raised to their feet and walked in the prairie head downwards, their eyes scanning the ground. They started to pick up things from the land, the same sort of thing he had stumbled upon. There were hundreds of them scattered all around. It was an open air cemetery, the remains of a terrible war. They were having picnic on a battlefield. Some of the skulls had rotten lumps of flesh still clenched on them, frying in the summer air.

Much later, Storm told him that on that particular day, he and her mom and the Duke had unknowingly visited the war campaigns of Lord Dazzle. His conquests drove his armies to these plains, and a terrible bloodshed had ensued. Storm saw it all, of course, as he was Lord Dazzle's main strategist.

The picnic was just one particular event that Atlas remembered from his early childhood. There were more. He remembered his mother and the crush he had for her as a little child. She was beautiful. He'd spy on her through the smoked panes of the bathroom. She'd dry her long black hair and he'd watch the slim silhouette drawing slow movements in the blur of the dampened room. It was like a dance, a magic ballet.

He'd marry her when he'd grow into a man.

But Elektra had eyes only for the Duke. How could he challenge that elegant man of forty, who dressed like no one on Orion. His clothes were flamboyant, he had his own private tailor, a real genius that wouldn't accept commands from anyone except the Duke himself. Women were crazy for the Duke. Whenever he went, a tremble unleashed in the air, then there was a silence

interrupting the ongoing conversations. The nobles of Orion would look at him with envy, their wives would readjust their gowns. They couldn't get their conversations flowing in his presence. He was like a majestic cat, screening sexuality, casting his natural grandeur. How could Atlas deal with him? The conclusion he came at the age of six was that he'd have to kill him. But Atlas didn't had to kill him, Lord Dazzle did.

After Duke's assassination, Elektra stopped feeding herself. Worse, she stopped caring for her son. The boy was desperate. He'd come and say sweet words to her, but she'd cry and cry and nothing soothed her grief. He remembered feeling that horrible powerlessness that gradually turned into frustration, then humiliation and finally silent rage. He never mourned over the Duke, he had wished him dead, and now that his wish came true, it was too late to step back.

Elektra wasn't the same woman anymore. Her face grew blunt, her line lost in finesse. Something in her eyes died forever. Atlas was older, he was a vigorous lad now. He didn't love his mother that much anymore, he'd find himself another woman to marry.

Storm would come into their house. The boy didn't like him, he was frightened of him. He looked so mean and brutal. Yet something was fascinating the boy, that arrogance, the way he was behaving, as if he was on his own, no matter how many people gathered around. Storm didn't give a shit about social codes and formulas. He had no manners. He was like a general in the field. Wherever he'd sit, that was his HQ. He'd smoke big cigars and didn't bother to ash in the ashtray. He spoke loudly, but never said a word too much. His eyes were alert, responsive to the slightest motion. Real bat eyes. Mother and him discussed endless affairs, but the boy did not know what these matters were. Sometimes, other men would join. Men he'd never seen before. They had a particular smell, something that reminded him of the skulls on that picnic day. Then they'd vanish and he'd never see them again.

Storm never spoke to the child, it was as if he didn't exist. That pleased Atlas. That way,

he could wander about and never have to worry what he'd say to him. One day, Storm was drunk and started to tease his mom. He stroked her hair and pawed her parts. Elektra slapped him in the face, and he burst in a roaring laugh. Then he turned to the kid and addressed him his very first words, "Your mom, now that's what I call a pussycat..."

The boy remained silent. He'd never dare utter a word. Storm belonged to another world, and each time he appeared, it was as though he had emerged from some gloomy underworld, and when he left, he'd descend into darkness again. The boy had no clue as to where Storm lived.

Storm appearances became more frequent. He hated him, but a hatred towards his mom was shaping too. Why was she letting this man enter their house? What good could he bring to them? He wanted to tell his mom, "we don't need him, stop seeing him, he's no good for us, let me help you out, whatever it is that bothers you that much...", but he couldn't talk to her, she was so different now, or rather so indifferent... When it struck the boy that Storm and Elektra were having some kind of secret liaison, the boy lost all confidence. He would walk hours on endless roads that eventually led him to the prairies. Under giant trees, he was trying to understand. What was happening? How could his mom team up with a brute like Storm? Why couldn't he talk with his mom like they used to? What had he done wrong? And when his mind struck on roadblocks, he'd start running. He'd run and run until the air in his lungs came to miss, and when his chest was burning and his legs felt like slabs of lead, he'd crash on the ground. And there, on his back, he'd fixate the Orion sky. He'd watch the clouds passing by high above, and tears would fill his eyes. Eyes that saw nothing anymore, nothing but an aching smear of grey.

Martin felt his eyelids closing upon him. He needed sleep. He undressed in the bathroom, and tiptoed to the room. He got into bed without making a sound. For a brief moment, he watched Sylvia sleeping. She was enfolded in the sheets and only her head popped out. Her face looked pale in the twilight, but some sort of tranquillness prevailed. Then he stretched out for the night.

Martin was dreaming of rosebuds when the baby's crying woke him up. He staggered to the cradle and took hold of his child. Standing there with the baby against his chest, Martin patted him in the back until he silenced. He went back to sleep, roused at nine, and saw that he was alone in the house. He felt relieved. He could work during daytime, and also, it meant that Sylvia was getting better, connecting with the baby again, regaining her wits.

At his desk, Martin continued reading from where he had left the previous night.

"Trapped in sub-space, facing himself and his past, Atlas started developing his uncanny powers. (What you have to stress in the drawings, Martin, is that Atlas is doing nothing else than realizing things about himself.) His powers are not the legacy of some natural superbeingness, neither are they the result of some nuclear accident or a mutated insect's bite. No, Atlas has found Yoda within. He's leading his own initiation in zero gravity, mentally expanding his powers by himself. This process is akin to a revelation. Where does that lead? Well, extreme frustration, because he realizes that his powers are useless in vacuum, that the basic need of understanding oneself is left unfulfilled. He feels betrayed by everyone he knew on Orion, and yet he senses that he's the one to blame. He wished he had developed his supersenses on Orion, when it mattered. Because these powers were always his, and the fact that sub-space acted as an incentive to their flourishing looks like an excuse. But an external factor is going to agitate the nirvana of his meditations. A voice is intruding his mind. Very feeble, it gradually gains in clarity, and Atlas is now having a telepathic communication with someone on Orion. Someone who is refusing to reveal his identity. In spite of that, the anonymous counterpart states that his intentions are good. Atlas understands that it is someone with mightier powers than him. The telepathic sessions are always initiated by the other party, and while being totally ignorant about that person, the latter seems to know every bit of him. The sessions resembled this:

Begin of transcript.

Atlas: "All my life I've lived in lies. I want to know the truth. I feel you can help me."

Anonymous: "There's nothing I'd like to do more, but there are some things I can't tell you, things you'll have to find out by yourself. Truth is your quest, but be prepared for a dark truth, as dark as truth can be."

Atlas: "Isn't my jail dark enough? How come I see no truth then?"

Anonymous: "Try Eddy Baret. He too lives in the dark, yet he knows."

Atlas: "Who is Eddy Baret?... Please... Don't leave, no..."

End of transcript.

Martin paused and pondered. Atlas' tragic destiny took Martin back to ancient memories he could not pin down. It was awkward. There was a certain nobility about the figure, as well as a refrained savageness. Atlas held the promise of great deeds, but something in him was untamed, mysterious. Sure, he was just a character from a comics, but Martin couldn't decide whether he liked him or not. Was it a seed of hope or despair that Atlas was breeding in his dark jail? Was it freedom or chaos that was heading his way?

Martin left his studio, and went out for a walk. When he came back, Sylvia and the baby were in. The baby was asleep and Sylvia was bathing. Martin entered the bathroom. For a moment, he looked at the ceiling, catching a glaze of the fungus creeping in the moisturized corners, enlarging their territory by the year. For a brief moment, he assimilated the organic life on the walls with their own history. The years, only years can make things grow and expand like that...

Sylvia had painted her toes red. Her long black hair was gathered in a fastened knob. She smiled at him. Martin undressed and let his body slide into the water, under Sylvia's body, head opposite of hers. Sylvia stuck her foot in Martin's face and gently rubbed and pressed his nose. Martin kissed her toes, one by one.

"Where have you been today?"

"Nowhere special, I was touring our child in the world."

"Never too early, I guess."

"You said it."

Sylvia wasn't hostile, she was relaxed. Martin thought she was giving him a chance, she was making a breach for him. He was eager to open it up further, to get closer, to talk.

"Sylvia, there's something I want to discuss with you."

"I know."

"What's wrong, Sylvia? We lost it, what happened?"

"You don't love me anymore, Martin."

"You don't want me to love you, Sylvia. You're acting different. You don't allow my love to reach you. Why is that? Things have changed. I'm not the broken man I'm used to be. I feel strong, and I'm largely indebted to you for that. You changed me, but it's as if you don't like the result. As if you don't like the new person I grew into. As if a balance has been broken, and the new equilibrium isn't fertile to your love. And maybe you regret having stood by me all that time."

"You don't get it, Martin. It's not like that at all. I didn't do anything for you, all I ever did was for me, for me alone. I didn't act out of compassion. I'm not some mother Theresa. You got it all wrong if that's what you think. I cared for you. I helped you grow. But you've been working on those books for so long, now. I can see how important it is for you. Maybe that's what so difficult for me, to watch you invest something with all of your soul. I admit I admire that, but it leaves no space. It doesn't suit me. Before, you were desperate, but it didn't matter. On the contrary, I loved that in you. Sometimes, you still have that crack in your eyes, but you're so much more balanced now. Responsible. Organized. In a way, I need some chaos. Despair is what is driving us all. I don't like objectives, I don't have any. I can't relate to your quest for achievement or sense or whatever you're pursuing. And nothing will change that. I've been disillusioned in the past. I've drawn my lessons."

"How is it possible, Sylvia? I thought you were struggling for us, I thought you wanted things to get better... Don't you see we're on our way to happiness."

"We don't have the same perception as to what happiness pertains. I am happy. I was happy before ever. I enjoy every bit of life, but I need those bits detached, I need them to come as separate entities, like monads, or contraception pills. One different pill every single day, and you can never tell how they interfere, you can never see the secret link that ties them together."

"How philosophical..."

"Yes indeed. There is a time to wake up, and there is a time to go to bed. The adventure is in between, Martin, not beyond, neither yore. Before CC comics, when we woke up, you didn't know fuck about the day that was coming. Everything was possible. You could get drunk in the morning hours, or you could fuck me all day long, or we could walk in the forest and you'd tell me everything about the monsters in your head. Everyday was a different story,

emerging from yesterday's, vanishing into tomorrow's. Every day was a story unfolding in many mysterious ways, hinting at thousand things that made sense, or didn't. And I loved that."

"Things changed. You tend to get lost in your drawings, now. You give them a sense, you give them a framework in which they tell a story. I respect your ways. But I cannot subscribe to it. I just feel so lonely, abandoned. I need our story to untwine between dawn and eve, but you're devoted to the one that unfolds amidst the panels of a comics book. It takes so much out of you. I thought the baby would change things. I was mistaken. You evaluated the new situation as an organizational challenge. As if it was some problem whose solution could be reached if only you gave it enough thought. You tried to adapt, marshalling the hours of the day as soldiers under oath, arranging all our activities around and according to your work. It has become so methodical. I can't stand it anymore. It's killing me. I'm so sorry, Martin."

"I don't believe you."

"That's your right. You don't know me well enough in that case. For some time, I thought I needed order, but you should know that order is not absolute. The thing that you call order isn't order to me. Neither is it chaos, it's just something I don't need. We both have our own obsessions, but yours deviate more and more from what is dear to me."

They made love that night. It was the first time after a long period of abstinence, more or less maintained by Sylvia. Their discrepancies had intensified their love-making, creating a tension that acted as a stimulus. Sylvia was passionate, clawing her fingers into his butt, licking and gnawing at his ear. She rubbed his prick with a wet finger, and took him in. Martin started slowly but gradually accelerated the pace until he was ramming her madly, chirping of delectation. In the heat of the moment, almost unconsciously, he retrieved and attempted to penetrate her anus, but she gently said 'no' and put him back. Then he burst into an incandescent orgasm and shuddered on her body long and deep. He didn't know if she had come too, but he didn't ask neither. That night, Sylvia didn't whisper anything in Martin's ear. And in the morning, Martin woke up with flashes of a haunted dream.

In his dream, he saw Atlas. He had escaped from sub-space and descended to earth. He had impossible claims. He wanted an end to the punishment. He wanted justice to be restored. He wanted vengeance. Atlas wanted Martin to redraw the story, and if he didn't execute, he'd kill his family. In

the dream, Martin was helpless and fearful, because he was expecting Storm to burst in at any moment, and he didn't want to imagine the consequences of having two mad super-beings in his flat. But Atlas forced him to draw, and he was feeling his exhilarated breathing over his shoulder. With every frame, Atlas' euphoric mood got more intense. He was intoxicated by Martin's visual art, by the way his lines and shades were rendering the powers at play. Atlas kept on requiring more troops. Martin executed, soliciting every copyrighted CC comics hero known to him. All that time, the menace of Storm's advent was hanging in the air, almost palpable. Martin told Atlas to stop by Tom Delarte, his creator, the one true responsible of his fate, but Atlas replied he had paid him a visit, that he had been uncooperative. He didn't specify what he had done to him. During a moment of inattention, Martin drew Storm attacking Atlas, but then he felt a push in his back. Atlas said, "you thought it was that simple, huh?! I could crush you with my thumb like a crumb, you miserable earthling". Martin replied: " I've just made my point. If I can't defeat you, how shall I bring you victory?" But Atlas explained that his drawings would come in effect and change the course of things only after publishing, which made sense to him. It was terrifying. Then came a sequence in his dream that rolled in fast forward: Martin drew two separate plot-lines, one according to Atlas' demands, while the other ended with the massacre of all parties involved. His plan was to hand over the second one for publication. The other problem was how and what to tell Sylvia. By then, the rhythm of the dream slowed down to normal. Sylvia was sleeping, he sat down next to her, the mattress sank on that spot and Martin broke her sleep. "Sylvia, there's somebody in the house." She said, "that's not funny... stop frightening me that way." He tried to explain that they were Atlas' hostages, but Sylvia didn't believe him, she said, "Please Martin, not now..." But after she got dressed, Sylvia crossed Atlas in the hallway. He had made coffee and handed her a cup right there in the corridor. Atlas said to her, "Hello Sylvia, let me introduce myself: I am Atlas, misjudged and unduly punished by Lord Dazzle, condemned to maunder outward the space-time continuum for a sin I did not commit. But eventually, I found the hidden portal in sub-space, escaped, and am now preparing my retaliation. And your husband will help me in doing so." Sylvia took a long look at the guest. She turned her head interrogatively towards Martin and asked, "Who is this madman? what the fuck is this circus?" Martin said, "It's like he said, Sylvia, just like he said." She went for the door, but Atlas took her by her arm and hurled her back-

wards. Her head bumped against the wall and she fell heavily on the floor. Martin rocketed at her and helped her stand up. Martin turned towards Atlas. "What is this? Are you crazy? That was my wife for god sake." He said, "Nobody's going nowhere. Not without my permission. Shut your wife in the bedroom, or else I'll tighten her up. You choose. Now get out and bring the drawings to CC comics. I'll be waiting in the studio." Martin went on his way sickened to death. He ran as hard he could towards CC comics, but the city was a maze. It took him an eternity to get there, and on his way back, he was convinced that Storm had caught up on Atlas in the meantime and butchered everyone else. But when he entered the house, he saw Atlas and Sylvia naked in bed. Sylvia was crouched against him and she was moaning, not from pain but from pleasure. Froth covered her lips, and her face contorted blissfully. Atlas didn't notice his entrance, but Sylvia did. She turned her head towards him, and from under hooded lids, she smiled. He realized Atlas was fucking her in the arse, and that's when he woke up.

Deadline day was a rainy day. Sylvia was pampering the baby. Martin prepared breakfast. Through the window, he saw big clouds gathering high in the sky. Sylvia joined him in the kitchen. They spread jam on slices of bread without a word. Martin was puzzled by the dream and wondered if the monsters had returned. Sylvia seemed to be in a good mood.

"It's today, isn't it?"

"Yup."

She was supportive, and declared that she'd take care of everything. Martin had the entire morning to finish what needed to be done. He'd have to deliver in the afternoon. Martin gulped the smoking coffee, and rushed to the studio. At his desk, tugging his dyes out of the way, he clasped the last part of the script and compared it with the last panels he had drawn.

Atlas had found himself a friend in sub-space. The communication between the two telepaths became more frequent, and the vibes were getting better and better. It wasn't a strictly intellectual relationship, the streams carried also emotional laden pulses. Atlas felt increasingly comfortable with his mental correspondent. Every time they plunged into their psychic ballet, Atlas felt reborn, like a new man. There was love at the other side, he'd swear it. It was a woman, that was clear too. Had to be a woman, that warmth, that sensual-

ity... He declared his flame, proposed her to get married, but she refused, said it was impossible. Again, he asked where he could find Eddie Baret, who he was. She blocked his thoughts, and put an end to the romance.

Atlas finally cracked the Eddie Baret puzzle. Eddie Baret was an acronym for Teddy Bear. He turned to his doll, and started interrogating it, but it was mute, so he tore it apart, and there, hidden in the fluffy filling, he found a note. The note said: "I am not your father. Lord Dazzle is." That was Duke's writing. Duke had spoken to him from beyond his grave, and Atlas had solved the riddle.

Atlas' second monologue went like this:

"Everything was so clear now. When mother ditched Lord Dazzle for the Duke, she was pregnant with me. She never dared tell me the truth. All that time, she felt guilty, and maybe secretly she wished I really were Duke's son. But when he got murdered, she lost everything, turned sour, and had only one thing in mind: vengeance.

But it wasn't that easy to reach Lord Dazzle. He was guarded and well protected. Elektra needed help, and Storm provided just that. In her despair, she may have flirted with him, but really, he meant nothing to her.

Only Lord Dazzle remained untouchable. Worse, he got rid of me, his prodigal son. So I'd never know, and even if I'd discover I'd be as good as dead, ensnared in sub-space. But he miscalculated one thing. By sending me to infinite exile, I unleashed my uncanny faculties. I am now a powerful man. And I'm not alone. I've bridged with an ally, much more powerful than myself. Lord Dazzle may be my father, but he ruined my mother's life and tried to annul his own son. He'll have to pay for that."

Martin was reviewing the epilogue. He looked at Tom's notes. Ah yes, Atlas kills Lord Dazzle, succeeding in the task that Storm failed to accomplish. Elektra is thankful, but does not break up her liaison with Storm. Atlas can't bear it, interferes and finally duels with Storm. Both get killed. Atlas dies without knowing that his psychic partner

was his own mother. For the third time, Elektra is a widow, except now she mourns for the loss of her son as well.

Things seemed to be ok, and Martin decided that that was it. "Furio" had been brought to completion. He could bring the lot to CC comics. He snatched his coat, and stepped outside. The rain had stopped, but there was a strong wind. Martin squeezed the drawings tighter under his armpit. He had worked hard, and he should have felt relieved, but he only could think of Sylvia. It had never struck Martin how strong-minded that woman was. He reckoned there was pertinence to her arguments, yet he thought they were extreme, too radical. But he'd have to adjust, because at the end of the day, that was how she was, that was the woman he loved, and probably still did. But how long could they go on like that? A sadness invaded him. He recalled the first days of him and Sylvia, when he wasn't drawing yet. He couldn't decide if they were good or bad memories. So many things had changed since then. But what was the future bearing for them? Who was drawing the odds? He thought of his baby, and wondered what kind of person he would grow into. Martin started to run. He ran and ran until the air in his lungs came to miss, and when his chest was burning and his legs felt like slabs of lead, he found himself facing CC comics' offices. And there, with a finger on the doorbell, he sensed tears filling his eyes. With the back of his free hand, he wiped off the tears. Then he rang the doorbell twice.