The Crib of Goliath

Sure he had never killed anyone before, but goddamn it if that was going to stop him. No room for pity, and no room for mercy. He had a clear picture of the dead man in his mind. It would not be difficult. He’d walk in, kill him, and return to his life. It would be easy, wouldn’t it? The Commandments didn’t apply to monsters.

“Iwański!” The shout shook him out of his daydream in time to narrowly dodge the wrench that was flying toward his head. It crashed against the rack of tools behind him, causing the implements to rattle. “Pull your head out of your ass and focus!” His companion screamed in a cracked voice.

“Do that again,” Iwański replied with clenched teeth. “...you better pray it takes my head off. Under a lot of stress right now.”

“Stress... Stress?”

Iwański realized his mistake. “Dolek...” was all he managed to get out.

“I have not seen the sun in I don’t know how long, and I can’t remember the last time I ate real food, all to ensure that when we turn this thing on your insides don’t paint the fucking walls...!” Dolek stopped himself from whatever insult he was about to levy. Instead, with trembling soot-stained fingers he placed a cigarette between his lips and gingerly lit it. Instead of being angry, his eyes looked as if they were pleading.

He did not speak but those eyes said enough. Despite feeling tempted to cave in his skull in kind, Iwański was reminded that this man was going through almost the same torment as himself. Perhaps it was even worse. All Iwański had to do was take a life. Dolek had to preserve one.

“Sit down for a minute.” Iwański pleaded. Dolek nodded.
“Yeah...” He sat himself in one of the uncomfortable wood chairs they had stolen from one of the lecture halls.

Iwański could understand the strain this task had caused his colleague. Dolek had clawed his way into Princeton despite his babcia’s protests. She knew all too well what happened to Jews who studied too much. Yet here he was, risking expulsion—and likely jail time—having stolen thousands of dollars worth of equipment to make the pod. Granted, Iwański was taking the same risk and despite some close calls had not lost his temper. That was why he would be going into the pod.

The two sat quietly in the dim basement laboratory. Most of the other students had gone home to enjoy Christmas with their families. By now they were probably sporting rosy red cheeks from tobogganing, skiing, and enjoying hot cocoa after the brutal midterms. Iwański and Dolek sported pale, sunken in faces, with rounded shoulders and hunched backs, as if the weight of the entire universe were sitting on their shoulders. In reality, they were carrying a far greater burden: the hopes of an entire people.

There was a bottle of soviet vodka on the table, to which Iwański nodded. Dolek looked longingly at it before shaking his head.

“No. Can’t. Has to go right. Has to be precise. Almost done. Let’s go.” He smushed the filter into the ashtray, which by now was a mountain of dead cigarettes and ash. The two worked in almost utter silence for the next three hours.

Things had not always been so somber. At the beginning of this project the two had actually been brimming with hope. There was the excitement of being on the cusp of a breakthrough that would propel them to even greater heights than Einstein, along with the knowledge that for once in their lives they were doing something that was indisputably, unarguably good. How many men on their deathbeds worried about whether or not they had made the world a better place before their passing? Before the start of the winter semester both of them would be able to confidently answer that question.

That was before they had put themselves through two weeks of poor nutrition, little sleep, and lack of sunlight. Now their eyes had
retreated into their skulls, and they carried on their work with the same enthusiasm as a condemned prisoner. At some point in the past week they began to see past their own vanity. The Nobel prize was far from their minds now. This was a task that they were obliged to accomplish.

Neither of them had experienced terror. Dolek was born and raised in the peaceful American East, while Iwański had been smuggled out of Europe as an infant. He had witnessed no humiliation and suffered no hunger, but the monster had robbed him all the same. The sight of his proud parents at graduations or excitement of the coming hanukkah gifts—he never had and never would know such joys.

No matter how close they came it seemed there was always some measurement that was slightly off. The two would take ten minutes for a meal of coffee, cigarettes, and bread before more work.

“It...it’s...ready,” Dolek whispered. He’d spent the last ninety minutes re-reading every page of the blueprint, and fiddling with every nut and bolt. There was absolutely nothing else to check, but to say it was ready seemed almost sacrilegious after so many setbacks.

Had their lighting not been so dingy, the device might have looked more like the marvel it was. A hard metal pod with a sliding door large enough for a man to enter with two large levers, one on the pod’s exterior and another inside the chamber. Iwański thought it looked like some kind of mechanical egg out of a ghastly pulp novel.

“Set the coordinates,” he muttered. There was no rush. The campus was a ghost town for three more days. The two had time to sleep, eat real food, and evaluate their plan a final time. But something inside Iwański feared any kind of stillness. His mind had been too preoccupied with building the machine to think about anything else. He’d been constantly working, measuring, analysing. Now that he had time to think, he felt as if the mission was in peril. The more time he had to think, the greater the chance he would prove a coward. Better to charge at it like a boar from hell. Dolek didn’t object. Hunched over the machine he poked at the panel next to the sliding door.

“48.2557 North...” He spoke in a hoarse whisper. “...13.0443 East. 1890.”
“1890?” Iwański repeated. While they hadn’t discussed the date before, this seemed so early. Would the bastard have even been born? Dolek looked at his companion with burning hot coals for eyes.

“Have you ever so much as hit a man?”

“I...”

“You think you’re going to murder a fully-grown man? When would you like to do it? When he’s a soldier in the trenches, alongside his brothers? When he’s standing on the podium surrounded by brown nosing goose-steppers? You’re going to kill a fucking baby, got that? And if you start to get sentimental, just think about all the babies that—”

“Don’t!” Iwański screamed at the top of his lungs. “Don’t! Don’t!” He screamed a third time. He had wanted to say more, to tell Dolek to keep his mouth shut about a task he could never hope to stomach, but “don’t” was the only word that would come to him.

Two of the most brilliant students Princeton had ever admitted stood looking at each other, fuming with hatred. Though what it was that they hated about each other, neither would be able to explain if asked. Dolek broke the silence.

“Get in.”

His own feelings of anger having barely vanished, Iwański stepped into the pod and swung the heavy door shut behind him. Dolek, feeling as if he were about to release the trap door of a hangman’s gallows, flipped the leaver.

The machine began to breathe. He heard the groan of metal as the platform beneath him began to spin. Iwański closed his eyes to shield them from the light that was now filling the pod. The floor began to spin faster and faster. He was sure that he would vomit if he dared to open his eyes. He had to force himself to keep his hands at his side as he felt that any moment he would fall and be smashed against the pod’s unforgiving metal walls.

He could see the white light even though his eyelids were shut tight. He could feel the warm glow envelop him. Heart pounding, he did his best to calm himself by imagine what it would look like to see his sister walk upright for once.
The pod had ceased to hum. Dolek, having to shield his eyes from the glow of light that emitted from the machine, frantically ripped off his safety goggles and swung the door open as quickly as he could.

There was nothing inside. No Iwański, and none of his entrails spewed about the pod’s interior. Nothing save for the rotating platform, which had begun to slow. He stepped away from the machine before stumbling onto his backside. He didn’t even have time to appreciate their unprecedented accomplishment before a rush of questions filled his mind: did it send him to the correct coordinates? Or was there a miscalculation, and had he instead teleported the fool into the heart of a black hole on the other side of the universe? Or had he been sent forward, to this very same spot just as the Sun died, consuming the Earth in the process?

“Oh fuck…” He panted, trying to climb onto a chair, his entire body trembling as he fumbled with another cigarette. He had no idea where Iwański was, and he would not know until the man returned.

If he ever returned.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck…”

At first he wasn’t sure it had worked. The light had enveloped him and now it was gone. Did he pass out from nausea? No, he was still standing. He worked up the courage to slowly open his eyes. The sunlight which shone through the window stung, but other than that he was fine.

Sunlight...?!

Having not seen the sun for days Iwański was filled with a sudden burst of energy. His hands fumbled at the door’s handle before yanking it open and stumbling out of the pod.

Falling to his knees he felt a light breeze brushed against his face and soil beneath his hands. A peaceful, homely little town lay before him and a signpost which read “Braunau am Inn.” He had done it! All feelings of weariness vanished from body. Whether it was adrenaline, the strength of God himself, or the rage of fourteen million souls, he rose and was pushed forward by something greater than himself.

Three stories, seventeen windows, and a beige exterior. Was this even possible? It seemed only moments ago that he and Dolek had first ever discussed the idea. It was an interesting theory, something to ponder
as they waited for their professor to start his lectures. Yet here he stood, in front of the house. Doubts be damned, he could feel in his bones that this was the time. He knew it was on one of the upper floors, but he had no idea which room. He climbed the stairs to the second floor and knocked on the very first door. No answer. He knocked again. An old man with a grey beard opened the door and squinted at the visitor.

“Was willst du?” he asked. Iwański could already tell this was not the room. He shook his head and moved on to the next. There was no answer. He went to the third. Before he could knock Iwański heard one of the doors open and close down the hallway, and saw an older man make his way down the hallway. He recognized the face. It was one of the only three in this entire country that he would recognize.

The man had lazy, dead eyes, and wore a stupid mustache that made his fat face look like a walrus. Stinking of cheap beer, the man walked with a slight stumble down the hall. The man didn’t seem to notice the foreigner glaring at him.

“Geh mir aus dem Weg,” was all he growled in a slurred voice, before disappearing down the staircase.

Something was moving toward the door the kraut had emerged from, but Iwanski could not feel himself walking. In fact, it felt as though he had lost all control over his own body, as if he was outside of himself watching his own actions. He knew what was going to happen: he would enter. He would kill the monster. He would kill the mother if she got in the way. What happened after didn’t matter. Even if Iwański never got back to meet his parents they would still live. That was all that mattered. His hand touched the doorknob, but he did not feel it in his palm. Something else was doing this. Fate was doing this. Fate opened the door, and Fate stepped inside.

It was resting in its mother’s arms, wearing an all-white onesie with white cotton socks, sporting a bowl-cut with rich, baby-fine black hair.

“Hallo?” The woman holding the creature asked.

Iwański paused. For the first time since he had climbed out of the pod Iwański felt the world around him. He felt the wooden floorboards beneath his shoes, and the sweat in his palms. He no longer saw his body
from the outside. Now all he saw was a fat baby, held by a confused woman.

“Wer bist du? Arbeittest du für das Gasthaus?” She asked. Iwański couldn’t do or say anything. He noticed that something was wrong with her face. One eye was black, and one side of her face was red and puffy. Both of the woman’s eyes were red, like she had been crying. “Wer bist du?” she repeated, this time with the sound of panic in her voice as she clutched the tiny thing to her chest. “Wer bist du?!"

Iwański took a step forward. All of a sudden it wasn’t Fate standing in this room, nor was it God about to do this terrible thing. It was him. Every step he took, it was a decision that he was making.

Right?

“I…” he began, and damn near swallowed his tongue trying to speak. “Arzt.” He’d never had any interest in this disgusting language, though he had heard many cry that word in their sleep. It was difficult to forget. Suddenly the woman’s face lit up.

“Gut! Ich machte mir Sorgen wegen seines Fiebers.” She stood, walked right up to this “Arzt,” and thrust the small bundle in his hands. It had been right in front of him, and now it was in his hands. Defenceless. Iwański felt revulsion, as if he was tainted by simply touching this monster, yet he also felt exhilaration. The final part of his mission was here. And it would be easy. So easy. He didn’t need a rock, or a gun, or a gas-chamber. He had prayed for this moment, dreamed of it since he was a boy, and now it was finally here. How many men ever got to see their wish fulfilled? He imagined how easily he would squeeze the soft flesh until the creature’s eyes popped out, all the while the mother would kick and scream at him. He could imagine the “pop” that the skull would make after crushing it under the heel of his shoe, or the crunching noises from the head being slammed against a wall. It was time. He was ready.

Then why aren’t you doing it?

For some reason he could not move his hands. The little bundle wiggled, and instead of smashing it, his hands were being very gentle with the creature, almost as if he were trying not to drop it. Why?

Because killing a baby was wrong?

Don’t call it that!
Why not? That was what he was doing, wasn’t it? Why not get comfortable with the phrase?

He—not Fate—was going to kill a baby, and something he could not describe told him it was wrong. Was it something he knew deep down in his soul, that he was trying to drown out through all the rationalizations? Was it God himself, come to stop him from making a mistake? Or was God the one screaming at him to do it?

This baby is going to kill hundreds of thousands of babies, and it is not going to think twice like you’re doing now!

“Is going to kill” was not the same as “has killed.” This baby that he held in his hands, this thing that burped and stretched out its fat little arms, it had gassed no one. It had shot no dogs and made no man cut his lawn with his own teeth. The only thing this baby was guilty of was robbing its mother of a full night’s sleep. Nothing more.

“Er ist ein wunderschöner Junge.” The mother prattled on. Turning to look at her, Iwański saw nothing but love on the woman’s face. To him this baby was the most disgusting thing that had ever lived, yet she looked at it as if it were the child of God himself. It would be cruel to take it from her.

Cruelty!? What the fuck has that got to do with anything? Kill the krnat bitch then, send her to hell so she can be with her little monster!

But hadn’t Iwański come here precisely because killing babies was wrong? Wasn’t that what started him on this long, hellish mission to start with?

There’s a window right next to you. Take five steps, and let go. That’s all it will take. Walk five steps and you’ll finally know what Mother’s voice sounded like.

What if Mother saw him right now? What if she saw him five steps from now? Would Iwański even want to hear what she had to say to him?

His hands started to shake. The woman said something, but he didn’t hear. He felt like he was going to be sick. He was sick. The room, the woman, none of it existed. It seemed as though the entire universe had closed in on him, and nothing else ever had, or ever would exist save for what was in his hands. The baby burped. Iwański closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.
The pod was in the same spot. Sapped of all his will, Iwański crawled inside and collapsed on the platform. With his last ounce of strength, he pulled the door shut, and flipped the return switch. Would the machine still work if he was curled in a ball, lying in his own vomit? He found that he did not care.

The pod began to hum. The platform began to spin. He closed his eyes as the light began to envelop him.

He had made the right choice. He just hoped that he would be able to live with it.