

The Composer:

Armageddon in C# Minor

By

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“No! No, no, no, no, no!” The piano echoed his frustration, belching out misspoken chords to punctuate his outburst and yelling silently in pain as he slammed the lid shut. Isaac glared hatefully at the instrument, breathing in ragged gasps, his lips twisting his otherwise handsome face with a snarl. The pages of the composition he was working on fluttered to the carpet.

“I almost had it! Christ!” He struggled to keep from abusing the instrument further, and stormed off as he found himself losing that battle. Within moments, he returned from the hallway bathroom, his face still dripping with cooling water from its once-again human countenance. He took a deep breath, gathered up the sheets of scribbled notes and rests from the floor, and took his seat again. Gently, almost kindly he raised the lid that covered the keys, and started playing again a few measures before where he’d left off. He hummed along softly as the music floated from his hands.

His fingers came to their previous stopping point, and choked once more. He started again from a measure before the last notes he’d written, and again his fingers died as the unfinished melody hung in the air.

Isaac pulled his hands from the keys of the upright and stared intently, almost pleadingly at the black and white bars he had devoted his life to.

“*Dammit!*” Half from the force of his scream, half from the blind swinging of his arm, his composition went flying throughout the room. His short outburst exhausted his rage, leaving a hollow despair in its wake. He hung his head and cried silently into his hands. Absorbed in his lost creativity, he didn’t notice Karen until she placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Not going well dear?” she asked kindly. He laughed bitterly.

“Even ‘not going well’ would be alright. It’s not going at *all*. I can’t even get the *wrong* notes out anymore.”

“You’ve been working for hours Isaac; why don’t you call it a night and get some rest?” Her voice was soothing, but it didn’t kill his frustrated despondency completely. She rubbed his back gently as he stared at the ancient Baldwin upright, like a petulant child at the door of a friend who had to go home early. Finally, he sighed wearily.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I’ll be there in a moment.” She brushed a kiss on the top of his head and walked out of his studio without a word. Isaac watched her walk into the hall, and his gaze drifted back to the piano, no longer petulant, but longing, sorrowful, as though the piano were the fresh grave of a recently departed friend. He thought for a moment about trying to get the next measure written, then resigned himself to bed for the night.

He found Karen already asleep when he entered, smiling placidly at whatever dreams graced her night. He quietly slipped under the covers and turned out the light. Within moments, in spite of his frustration, Isaac was asleep.

In his dream, he stood alone on a grassy hill as sunset turned to twilight. Isaac could see the lights of a nameless city below him, which seemed to twinkle and shimmer like the countless stars that were slowly appearing above. He had no idea where he was, but that seemed unimportant as he watched the sky near the horizon change from orange to violet. Through the corner of his eye, he saw a small hairline streak across the velvet of night, and glanced over in time to see a shooting star fade away. Isaac smiled with a near child-like wonderment and closed his eyes. “*I wish I—*”

The sounds of laughter cut off his words. The sight of family members, most long since dead, smiling and staring expectantly at him greeted his confusion as he opened his eyes. He looked around in astonishment; he was sitting at the kitchen

table in the house he grew up in, the candles on a large store-bought cake in front of him welcoming Isaac to his eighth year of childhood. Uncle Casey was patting him on the shoulder, still years away from his unsuccessful fight with lung cancer. His mom was sitting across from him without a trace of the dementia that she was dealing with during Isaac's waking hours.

Not one to question a dream, Isaac smiled widely, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. He blew his hardest, wanting to get *all* of the candles on his first try this year, and started his wish again. "*I wish I could—*"

A sudden drop in temperature froze the words in his mind, and he opened his eyes again. There was smoke, and at first his mind tried to convince itself that it was only the smoke from the birthday candles. It was much too thick to be the remnants of the flames from cheap wax birthday candles, and viscous, like an oil floating through the air. As he watched, it shifted, coalescing into a vague outline. He looked around to see where the smoke was coming from, and was only momentarily surprised to see a small gold oil lamp as the source. Before he could think further about it, the outline in the smoke solidified, and he stood face to face with a rather non-descript looking man, probably closer to forty than twenty. Isaac looked at him with confusion; he was dressed in a tee shirt and jeans and staring right back at Isaac, obviously unimpressed.

"Who are you?" Isaac asked.

"I'm a genie, Einstein. Didn't you see the lamp? The smoke? The obvious theme in this little fantasy you've created for your slumbering pleasure? C'mon, you're a bright guy; I'm sure you could piece it together."

"But I thought genies were supposed to be..."

"What? Arabic? Big, strong upper body, sandwiched between a turban and a smoke trail? A few centuries ago, and in the Middle East, sure. Not today though. Besides, that's a racist stereotype, and if you keep it up I'll contact the ACLU."

"The ACLU handles genies?" The genie threw his hands up in melodramatic frustration and glared at Isaac with mock indignation.

“And why not? Aren’t we entitled to the same respect as anyone else? If you prick us, do we not say ‘Ow, dammit, that hurt?’” The genie waved off Isaac’s look of confused curiosity. “Anyways, on to business. I’m sure you know how this works—three wishes, no more, most anything you want. You have one wish left, what can I—“

“Wait, one left? I haven’t made any wishes.”

“No, you didn’t *finish* any wishes. Sorry, I can’t help you there; take that up with your subconscious for cutting you off. So, one wish; what’s your desire my *glorious* master?” The sarcasm was lost on Isaac as he contemplated his final wish.

“I want to make music again,” he said after a few moments of deliberation. The genie looked at him in astonishment.

“That’s all? Pfft, you can do that already. Your little tantrum tonight was more musical than any of the garbage on the radio. For God’s sake man, you could have anything! Riches, fame, women.” The genie punctuated the last word with a wink and a nudge with an elbow. “I’m sure you can do better than that. Why do you want to make music? What do you hope to achieve with it?”

Isaac thought hard for a bit before he responded.

“I want to change the world with my music. I want it to be special, to...well, change the world.” The genie considered this for a moment with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

“I think I can manage that. Is that your wish?”

“Yes. I wish to write music that will change the world.”

“Your wish is my command, master. Now, if you’ll excuse me, *House* is on right now and I don’t want to miss any more of it.”

“Wait, that’s it?”

“What did you expect? Some flashy neon lights and show girls?”

“Well, how do I know it happened?” The genie gave him another mischievous grin.

“Oh, you’ll know.” The genie paused, considering his statement. “Well, maybe

you won't. You couldn't figure out who I was, so you can't be too bright after all. Anyways, it doesn't matter. It's done, we're done, and I think Dr. House just berated one of his lackeys again, so I'm off." The genie faded before Isaac could say anything further, leaving him alone with the smoke and the lamp. Slowly, those faded to nothing as well, leaving Isaac alone in the darkness of a dreamless sleep for the rest of the night.

Isaac woke the next morning to the sound of Karen leaving for work, with the dream fluttering towards the edge of his memory. Already it was fading, and by the time he'd poured his first cup of coffee it was all but gone. He could remember, however, that he was *supposed* to be able to write again, if not why. With a fearful hope Isaac made his way back to the studio.

The composition he'd been working on lay neatly stacked on top of the piano, indicating that Karen had been in here to clean up a little as she got ready this morning. He smiled softly, lovingly, and sat down on the bench.

He glanced at yesterday's work for a moment, and then pulled a few blank sheets from the bottom of the stack. *No*, he thought as he glanced at the previous night's scribbles again, *today we try something different*. He grabbed a pen from the cup that Karen had suggested he store such items in, and pushed back the lid from over the keys. Then he wrote.

Isaac wrote like a man possessed, hands flying back and forth from the keys to the paper, wrong notes molded into his most beautiful melody ever, clunks and bangs shaped into a scenic harmony. He cursed often in artistic frustration, and giggled with glee just as frequently as the pieces fell into place.

In just over an hour he'd written a modestly short tango, in a seductively minor key with little bright patches for contrast. It was by far the best work he'd ever done, and although he knew there were a couple of places that would need a small tweak or two, it was the quickest he'd ever finished a piece from start to finish. Even his shorter ones had normally taken most of a day at best.

He played through the piece twice more, enjoying the spicy Latin rhythm as it danced from his hands. Isaac could feel the passion he'd poured into it, a passion he had started to think he'd lost, a passion that was now blazing away in the dark, smoldering swoops and dives of the melody and counterpoint. In a brief moment of further inspiration, he scribbled a title across the top of the first page—*Los Fuegos*, “The Fires.” It seemed fitting for a piece of such burning intensity.

After Isaac's second run of his new tango, a loud growl from his stomach reminded him that he'd skipped breakfast and was on the verge of missing lunch. He stood up and stretched, satisfied with what he'd accomplished, and walked out to the kitchen. He stopped to turn on the television for some background noise as he fixed a sandwich, and the “Breaking News” banner caught his attention as he came back from the kitchen. An attractive female reporter was standing in front of a large, burning building. The superimposed lettering denoted her as Tina Lockhart.

“...one of the strangest coincidences I've seen in my years of reporting Elliot. The fires here at this warehouse on Johnson Avenue appear to be dying down now, and I'm getting reports that most of the others are showing similar signs of being controlled. Can you confirm that in the studio?” A man's disembodied voice came from the TV.

“We're getting mixed reports on that Tina, so we can't really confirm or deny it. Do you have any information on how it started yet, or any casualties?”

“Right now the police and fire crews are more concerned about controlling the blaze, which as I said, it appears they are managing. They have no official cause as of this point, but are not ruling out arson.

“There have been some casualties; mostly minor injuries, although one firefighter was killed when part of the roof collapsed about 20 minutes ago, and two people—civilians—have been taken to Western Memorial Hospital where they are being treated for smoke inhalation and other injuries. They are both listed as critical, but stable.”

“Thank you, Tina.” The camera cut to the news studio, where a well-dressed

man with graying hair and a grandfatherly but somber appearance was adjusting some papers on his desk.

“If you’re just joining us, our top story today is a series of fires which, in what has to be one of the strangest coincidences ever, are spanning across the globe. We have reports coming in from London, New York, Charleston, Johannesburg, and Moscow to name a few of the larger blazes. So far, over one-hundred-seventy cities and municipalities around the world have reported large fires in a variety of settings. There have been no indications that this is a coordinated terrorist attack of any kind, although officials have yet to rule out any causes for any of the fires. There have been over fifteen hundred confirmed deaths, and an estimated seven thousand injuries reported from the blazes, most of which started within the past two hours. In other news...”

Isaac turned off the television as he finished his sandwich. He thought about calling Karen to make sure she was alright, and decided against it. She was across town from that particular warehouse, and would most likely get in trouble for taking a personal call. He put his plate in the sink and walked back to his studio.

“Okay,” he said aloud, sitting at the bench and cracking his knuckles—a habit Karen had long since given up trying to break him of. “Let’s try something a little different.” He grabbed another handful of the lined paper and his pen, and took to the keys again.

Again, the music flowed smoothly from fingertips to keys as it had earlier, although this wasn’t a tango pouring forth, or any of the more popular styles of “classical” music. A dark rain was washing over the piano this time, triumphant but angry, a self righteous rage that he could not understand and didn’t argue. He didn’t care where the music was coming from—he was certainly much happier than the moody outpouring he was watching—but it was still coming, and that was the important part. Visions of future critics comparing this work-in-progress with something from the pen of Chopin or Rachmaninoff danced through his head, and he

failed to restrain a grin even as he chided himself for his narcissism.

Three hours passed before he drew the final bar line. Although a much longer piece than his earlier tango, it still came through much quicker than Isaac would've expected, especially for sounding more like a performance-ready final draft than the rough sketch he'd normally complete in such a short amount of time. He played it from start to finish twice more, as he had with the tango, and thought for a moment, searching for a title for this new composition. Finally it came to him: *Prélude aux Révolutions*. He silently thanked the French for giving him such a beautiful language to title his piece with, and stood up, smiling and very pleased with himself.

He answered the insistent call of nature and went to the kitchen to find a drink. It was still early, but after completing two new pieces from scratch, he felt that a beer—or maybe a tumbler of scotch—was well deserved. He settled on the scotch, and, curious to see how the fires were panning out, he turned on the television. Ms. Lockhart and her cameraman were standing on a street corner Isaac recognized as being a few blocks from the earlier warehouse fire, and he could see that Tina looked a little frightened under her stoic journalist's façade.

“...utter chaos here, there really isn't any other way to describe it Elliot. Not long after the fire department seemed to have the blaze under control, a large group of people started up Tieton Avenue and—” Elliot cut her off, as the camera cut back to the studio.

“Tina, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but we're starting to get reports that other cities are rioting as well. The reports I have indicate no relation to the earlier fires, most of which have been put out at this time. There also seems to be no motives for any of the uprisings, although sources in Istanbul— where police and emergency crews are dealing with one of the larger revolts right now—say that their incident *is* related to an earlier political demonstration, although they have yet to state the nature of that demonstration or the relationship to the revolt.” He paused, pressed against his unseen earpiece for a moment, and nodded his head as if merely acknowledging directions to someone's house.

“I’ve just been informed that Tina’s location is not the only area here in town where people are rioting. We’re getting word in from Market street that a car has been set on fire; there is a small structure fire at 1st and Widdicent, which is apparently the result of looting; and—” He took another hand-to-the-earpiece pause, with a quick nod thrown in for good measure, and continued “and it appears a rather large crowd has gathered down Sierra Madre Way. Folks, please—”

Isaac didn’t wait to see what Elliot was going to implore of his audience; Karen’s offices were near Sierra Madre, and it was already time for her to be on her way home from work. He grabbed the cordless phone from its cradle in the kitchen, misdialed the numbers to her cell phone twice, and breathed a sigh of relief when he finally hit the right numbers and she answered.

“You’re alright. Oh, thank God Karen.”

“Oh, of course I am hon, don’t worry about me. How is it looking there by the house?” He looked out the window to the sight of the man across the street checking the mail, topless and scratching himself unselfconsciously. Although the site was quite revolting, it wasn’t quite the uprising happening around the city.

“It’s fine here. Where are you?”

“About two blocks from the office. I—oh crap.”

“What? What’s ‘oh crap?’ No ‘oh crap’, honey.”

“I just turned the corner, and there’s a large group of *them*.” She spoke quietly, as though her voice would alert “them” to her presence before the Honda’s little four-cylinder engine would.

“Honey? Keep cool, okay? Can you back out?”

“No, I’m gonna try—oh crap.”

“What ‘oh crap’ this time?” Isaac’s voice was rising, both in pitch and volume, as hers got calmer and steadier. One listening in on the conversation could almost expect the roles reversed, with Karen sitting safely at home and trying to calm a panicking Isaac while he sat in a little car in the middle of a riot.

“They turned towards me; they’re headed over here.” Her voice was a soft

rock now, steady and firm, but little more than a whisper.

“Karen, back up! Get out of there!” He was almost yelling now.

“I can’t; they’re all around the car. They’re starting to—” A loud clunk cut off her words. Isaac could still hear her in the background, although distant; he figured she must’ve dropped her cell phone.

He could also hear the loud squeak-thunk of what sounded like the car rocking on its springs, and the thumping of hands on hard glass. Under these eerie sounds, like the strings of an orchestra playing harmony under a percussion solo, was the mindless yelling of a multitude of people. There was no chanting, no cries for exoneration or punishment of some figure; what few words he could make out were obscene vulgarities coming from ageless and genderless voices.

And, of course, he could hear Karen as well, her steady façade now crumbling into panicked groans that rose and fell with the squeak-thump of the rocking of the car. His mind’s eye could picture her bouncing side to side, staring helplessly at the people, those trying to get in the car and those just there to see something break. He put the picture out of his mind and yelled to her more, telling her to back the car up, but only the tinny performance of this private, grotesque symphony playing over her cell phone answered his cries. Karen’s groans suddenly turned into quick, high pitched speech, the words all blurring into chunks of sound.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, hesgotta—” There was a soft pop, like someone setting off a firecracker under a blanket two blocks away, followed immediately by the tinkling of glass and a loud, painful shriek that Isaac almost couldn’t recognize as coming from Karen. He screamed her name into the phone, not knowing what else to do. The mob was slightly louder now, although no more intense.

There was another pop, slightly louder this time and with no glass falling afterwards. Karen answered with a pillowy “oomf,” cutting short her wail of pain. He could hear her moaning softly and painfully, like she was waking from three days of mindless binge drinking.

Although only a second or two passed as he listened to his life’s love uttering

her death moans, it seemed like an eternity before the final soft pop came through the earpiece of the phone. It was swiftly followed by the sound of something heavy hitting something soft and cushioned, then apparently bouncing off that and smacking against something hard. The steady blare of the Honda's horn told Isaac that the latter must've been the steering wheel. Although he knew it was useless, he screamed Karen's name into the phone for several minutes, competing for his dead love's attentions with the dull roar of the mob, which itself was almost drowned out by the horn.

Unaware of how hard he was crying, he hung up the phone, intending to call 911, then cursed himself heavily. What were they going to do? Surely they had too many other calls; they couldn't handle everything. On top of that, he'd just severed his last connection with Karen by pushing the "End Call" button. He sat on the carpet and unconsciously wiped away tears he didn't even know he was crying.

He sat on the floor for quite some time before his shock turned to the anger that only the grief-stricken know, that futile, dark rage that wells inside, needing release and never finding it completely enough. Knowing he probably should call the police and file a report in spite of their assured overload, Isaac instead stood up and did the only thing that seemed rational to him. He walked back to his studio.

He didn't bother with the light, although with the studio's curtains closed, the room was much darker in the evening light than the rest of the house. He didn't bother with pen and paper either; he had no plans of recording his grief for posterity. He sat at the bench, pushed the lid back from the keys, and started to crack his knuckles. He could hear Karen's voice in the back of his mind, warning him about a future with arthritis, and with a deep breath and a silent tear, Isaac skipped his normal pre-performance habit and played.

The moment his fingertips touched the keys, he knew nothing but the music pouring from the instrument, an Armageddon of sound, melodies and harmonies fighting the ultimate battle of an untold war. Scales and arpeggios fought relentlessly

up and down the battlefield of the keyboard; big, fat chords cannoned throughout eternity, hushing into the most mournful melody line never heard by another soul, then roaring to life again as new reinforcements of anguish and rage swept through him.

With the persistence of the ocean, Isaac's battle raged on, waves of music crashing freely on the ebony and ivory shoreline in front him. From violent crest to sorrowful trough, as one battalion of scales won ground against a company of trills and tremolos, only to lose it again to an artillery barrage of chords, he played each wave with a passion he never could've put to paper, nor performed for others, even his all-too mortal beloved.

It could be said that it was technically a heart attack that silenced the keys in Isaac's studio, a combination of physical strain from playing as dramatically as he had and the emotional strain from the loss of Karen. However, a broken heart may be more accurate, although considered too romantic to find itself as a coroner's official cause of death. Regardless, shortly after the sun rose, a final chord rang loudly through the house, and Isaac's final composition finished its coda. As the ringing sound drifted through the air, fading slowly as though wanting to keep the composer's memory alive just moments longer, the somber, weary voice of the news anchor came from the television.

"...no information on where the missiles came from, or what cities remain targets. Tina Lockhart is speaking with Staff Sergeant Howard, acting press liaison for the National Guard unit sent in to assist with the earlier riots. Tina?"

"Yes Elliot. Sergeant Howard, what details can you give us regarding these attacks, such as perhaps the source?"

"There really isn't much I can say about the attacks at this time. All we know is that we've been tracking missiles coming both from inland sources and from various off shore targets."

"What cities have already been hit?"

"U.S. or global? Here in the states we have confirmed strikes throughout most

of the eastern seaboard, the western half of the Great Lakes region, much of the Gulf Coast, and unconfirmed strikes around St. Louis and Memphis. We—oh Christ...” Tina turned and followed his gaze to the sky as the soldier started running in the opposite direction.

“Oh God. Danny, are you getting this? Turn around, dammit! And keep rolling.” Obeying her commands, the camera moved with a sickening lurch. A small pinpoint of light drew a white hairline across the early morning sky for a brief moment, disappearing from view as it fell silently behind a nearby building. There was a brilliant white emanating from the screen in the empty house for a fraction of a second, and then only static as the missile erupted. The last strings on Isaac’s piano ceased their now inaudible vibrations as a distant roar swelled through the house, growing from silence to a bellowing thunder in less than a breath of time.

Although the blast destroyed much of the area beyond any recognition, one object stood like a monolith in the scorched neighborhood. As a gentle breeze blew some of the ashes of the instrument’s former owner off its keys, Isaac’s piano, thoroughly untouched by the explosion and resultant fires, played a quiet nocturne in the evening aftermath. The haunting melody floated on the soft, cleansing wind as its keys bounced lightly, moved by unseen fingers. The last, brittle remains of the composer fell from the keyboard to join the ashes of his studio as the nocturne came to its soft climax, and Isaac became part of the wind as the breeze floated the final, mournful chord into the air.