

in the affable foregoing of countless lives of servitude, which brings us again to the question, ever burning and ever sensing our doubt of its place in our world, the wretched, though handless and mindless and drooling more than thinking in their heads, pick up the pens before them and learn to write? no there would I cannot. I know they cannot, for I am one, proud and simple and lost of thought in my mind. I want nothing more than to disappear, to stop existing and fall into this realm and to populate my own fantasy reality with all my own ingenious creations, things I built with an imagination backed by power. Like those I have seen those, I have seen those with power, and I aspire to ascend, to feel that power myself. I aspire to hold it and to know that with my words I am something capable of creating and destroying and making and breaking apart, like a god, like a mother, like a father, but I can know deep down and I do, I do know, that one like me will ever have the ability to create or destroy. I will never have the ability to control these sensations. This isn't power. This isn't even skill. This is not been forced by nature or otherwise—compelled beyond reason to empty my mind, which was filled by force, against my will, by some other creature—some other knowledge castrates my ability to continue forward, for I know things that I shouldn't. Not just about myself, though I do recognize many features within and I replicated outside myself. No, I know things that never happened and things that never will happen. I know things that have come and gone again. I know things that once reality but have now been stolen away, destroyed, consumed by something I have no knowledge of. In that vein I do admit there are things I cannot know. She begged me. She wouldn't stop begging, crying, pleading on the floor before me. No. That wasn't me. I was remembering it wrong. I was remembering someone else's memory. Something that never really happened at all—not in this reality. My blood is colder every day. Or maybe it's that my room is cold, and I'm feeling more of it, but if the room and the air and the surrounding environment are all cold, and they, together, make me cold, does that not mean my blood is also being more cold? I don't understand all aspects of human anatomy. There weren't many things Dr. Payne didn't introduce in some capacity, and I do faintly recall his discussion of such a thing, the one thing I could never wrap my mind around—the one little problem I could never figure a solution for was blood. Blood. How does blood work? Why is it this sticky red water in our veins? Why do we have that? What is the purpose for something so horrid, vile and jarring to look at? The mere sight of the stuff sends me into bouts of depression and temporary madness. Why, I'll never be able to say. But I affirm my statements. Blood is hard for me to understand. Of course now I know it's in our body. I've learned and researched and I can safely say I realize why it exists: there are many little uses it provides within our bodies, and without it we wouldn't understand the steps in evolution that caused beings to be filled with fluid, like sacks, like garbage bags just waiting to leak. It doesn't make any sense to make something so horribly fragile and easy to dismantle. This is why I believe there is no god. How could there be a god when life is so fragile and easy to destroy? If there were a god, why would we die at all? Why would we suffer pain? Why would bad things exist? If there were a god, there would be no evil in the world, because we could see those things before they happened. The god would know to control the aspects of its creations in a way that would root out and prevent all sorts of corruption from existing without its inception? In that theory, the one that discusses humanity's origins, they point quite frequently to the notion of intelligence. I know things that could have never come to fruition. **can a wretched thing learn?** even to a child. If there is a god then I take no pain in saying it. You're stupid. Dumb. Infatigable. Immature. Wrong, in every single way. To feel pain is not human. It's inhuman. Inhumane. To feel pain and to die and to suffer are the machinations of a sadist. A demented, horrible creator, hellbent on promoting and endorsing suffering. This is why I choose to believe there is no such being responsible for our creation. If such a being existed, I would have no interest in communing with it or attempting to understand its ways. I would have no interest in serving it or giving it my worship. It wouldn't deserve it. Because it created a mess. A terrible, awful world, where nothing ever goes as it should—where justice and fairness are less common than the bleeding, dying thieves that line the gutters. They bleed and they die because they were hungry, because their families were hungry, because here were a powerful lord above who made us this way: he would be mistaken, I'm sure, for one of mercy and great power, but I can safely know in my heart that I do not be a lord at all, but a devil in laughable disguise. No, no, babe, I ain't convinced. It ain't so bad, as you made it—there's plenty more heads of hair for you. I'll strike it rich, how much is rich? I'll strike it rich, how much is rich? And the big, big whoredom scares me. No, it doesn't do that. Where did I come from? I picture myself on a wooden horse, rocking in the moonlight of early morning, still not quite sure of my place in the universe. I remember sipping water from a wooden cup. Nasty, greasy water from a sink that didn't quite work. And I remember someone, and though I have suspicions about who it was, I can't picture it: it was my mom. I think it was her. But I don't know what she looks like or what she sounds like or who she is at all really, because I can't remember any of my life anymore. It's all obscured behind terrible shadow, if it's present at all—because I know for a fact most of the things I knew or felt or remembered at one time are all gone, torn away, lost, destroyed, burned, incinerated, melted, souped, and rebuilt into something else, that I never figured out or understood to begin with. I know, I'll write it here like I told her when I met her, I am not a fool, and I am not an animal. I have been broken by others, like an animal, but I am not an animal. I am real. I have always been real. Even when I didn't know that, I was real. I was real and I wasted so much time. It wasn't me though, I didn't waste the time. It was stolen from me by another person. Someone who thought he could take from others and change his existence for the better by benefiting from the failure of others, benefiting from the pain and sadness of others. By taking and making them die, because they didn't care. That is another thread running all the way back up to the top. Pieces of glass were scattered all around everywhere, and there was so much blood, and as soon as I saw it I was vomiting, throwing up on the floor, breaking the tiles. I had set for myself when I said no one would spill anything on the floor—it was me, I was the one who spilled, and I was spilling my vomit. She was spilling her blood and that was bad too, but it wasn't on the carpet. It was only on the tile. And then I noticed it was spreading, reaching for the pristine white carpet. The white carpet had spent all my hard-earned money on, to spruce up my drab reality, to make things better than I knew they really were. I couldn't let anything else touch my blood-spilled carpet because it would become ruined. The vomit was bad for it and it would be dirty but if I cleaned it quick enough and well enough I knew I could get it clean. It... but... if blood touched the carpet... there would be no way to clean the blood from the carpet. It would be permanently stained red. The only way to move the blood would be to stain the entire carpet red. But what were the chances that I would find the same red for the carpet as the red of the blood leaking from her neck? The chances were slim. I knew they were slim. So, I did what good problem-solvers do, I solved the problem. If there was going to have to be blood on my brain and I wanted a white and totally clean, pristine white carpet, then it was going to have to go over the entire thing. It was going to have to cover every single inch. Then it would be a white and totally clean, pristine red carpet, and no one would be any the wiser to the nature of its red coloring. I wasn't even sure you could paint a carpet red any color. I would have to be a specific, certain kind of paint, and I wasn't even sure they sold that kind of paint for carpets. Did you paint carpets? Was that what you were supposed to do? I didn't know. I imagined you were. And I imagined blood would be a pretty good pigment. I imagined it would be a pretty good paint and that's what I told her. Who knows? Maybe she just called me that because I ate up all her favorite snacks. It wasn't my fault they were in there. It wasn't my fault I was hungry because I didn't have any food because I didn't have any money because my boss didn't pay me enough money for me to afford food to make myself less hungry, and it was my fault she put her favorite snacks right there in the center of the kitchen for me to see when I walked in. How could that be my fault? How could it be my fault that I never doctored it or treated it right, so when I shoved the snacks so deep in my mouth, it tore that wound back open and all this awful bitter pus came out? I then I knew I had made a mistake, but I also knew that it couldn't actually be a mistake because it wasn't really my fault. It was her fault for leaving the snacks out. It was my job's fault for paying me such a small amount of money, so little money, that it was all gone in one night at the casino. It's the casino's fault for charging me so much and giving so little, acting like they sell a service, when really the service they're offering is participating involuntary theft that you can get addicted to. It was that job's fault, it's my boss, it's his fault, it's my mom, my mom's fault. It's her mom's fault. The world has a habit of circling back on itself, and in that way, it's the world's fault I don't have any control over myself. It's the universe itself that finds itself responsible for all these terrible, awful notions. Terrible, awful notions that I can't stop thinking about. When I fall asleep all of this nonsense circles around in my mind, and I remember every awful little thing I've said or done and I know. And it does. It really does. Every night. I think about every single night of my life, and I wish I could go back and change all of the awful things I've done.

thank you for reading

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His brain tugged along behind, a kind of unctuous flesh orb, beholden to It's will.

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001:

Birthdays are miraculous aren't they?

The entire notion of a birth day is one the whole universe understands on a molecular level. Birth and death occur on a microscopic scale every minute of every hour. Entire civilizations of amoeba and cells are born into chaotic, jumbled moments and then quickly die, all in the course of a day of our lives. Every day is a birth day. And a death day.

My goal at the Office of Human Genome Research was to discover the answers. To those questions. Where did we come from? Why do we live? Why do we die?

Those tall, caped roamers who wink at each other from under low-brimmed hats and shuffle between shadowed complexes just out of view say they know why life works this way, though they'll never tell--even if you strap them down and pepper them with all kinds of threats, which I've seen a few times with my own eyes. They're impenetrable. Lost cause.

A fellow researcher in Spain once announced he had discovered the answers, but was found dead in his home shortly after from an apparent suicide by shovel. We all know it was whatever shadow group, anyway. After a few dozen more bizarre object-related suicides occurred within the field of study we came to this conclusion: whichever force pushes the hands of time won't be bound by simple human principle or ideology, and chooses to recklessly canter on, unwilling to let itself be known. Even gifted with this knowledge some still continue their research, unwavering and given wooden strength by the so-very-human determination which seems to ooze from our pores.

I was relieved of my duties many years ago, though I didn't have complaints about it. Any distance, no matter how far away, would have been too close to the hell-scape their new affiliate team was creating. The study should have been sealed. They shouldn't peek any longer under the curtains of existence. Yet I know they will, and I fear for what may be peeking back.

002:

What really is character but the filled-in space between voids?

Back when I just started with the VRC I met a co-worker who touted unlimited control over his psyche, in which he could contort and bend his character to fit any portrait he chose. I never saw evidence of his claims--if I had that kind of power I wouldn't make myself into someone so frantic and insane sounding--but I did witness what he believed gave him the power. The milkworms of Madagascar.

We took a trip to his office during a very late lunch one afternoon, though he insisted on calling it brunch as he shoveled down his handfuls of dates and shredded cabbage. He slid open a drawer in his desk and there it was: a jar not three inches tall, half-full with brownish milk and loaded to the brim with purple-grey writhing worms. They weren't like earthworms or inchworms; their uneven bodies pulsed in waves, like a cartoon pipe carrying a lump of water, and were riddled with numerous openings, like tiny mouths, each protruding a wiggling, snake-like tongue. He prattled about how one time on his route through Ten Sleep, Wyoming he had to make a diarrhea stop, and happened to meet with a bat-charming vacuum salesman who opened his mind to the mysteries of the milkworm, offering forth the haunted secrets of ancient Madagascar. The worm would be kind to you, if only you were kind to it.

He popped the jar open right in front of me; I was instantly smothered with the strong coalescing scents of saltwater and black beans. He tucked his finger in and pulled one up to eye level--it writhed and slapped its tongues along his fingers, struggling to break free. But it didn't. He continued on, explaining that to exist outside the milk brought them incredible pain, and that the kindest thing for them would be to put them out of their misery. So he dropped it in his mouth. I'll never forget the sick sounding crunch as he bit down, or the unearthly, almost human wailing that emitted from his mouth while he chewed.

I didn't know what to say. Questions grew and multiplied and died and formed together anew all at once in my mind. It took me a few minutes to gain enough composure to speak. I told him I had no interest in the worms and then briskly left.

I never saw him again. He stopped showing up to work. His obituary didn't mention the worms, but his funeral was a closed casket.

003:

We all thought the moon was covered in cheese, didn't we?

I didn't find out until ten years ago how accurate that actually was. It's not cheese in the traditional sense, as there aren't any cows in space (that would be ridiculous), but it is a type of heady mold grown from skin and ashes. We didn't know it was real until our company's vessel returned caked in soot and yellow gunk, stinking of sulfur and rot. Luckily it was unmanned.

Contrary to popular conspiracies, the moon landings weren't faked because we couldn't go to the moon. We certainly had that level of technology then--it's theorized that we could've gone to the moon a hundred and fifty years earlier, but the lowly researcher that discovered chemical propulsion never went public with his knowledge, and no one knew of his work until well after his death. His aunt inherited boxes upon totes of notes among his belongings, and with very little room left in her double-wide trailer, she promptly donated all of his junk off to some university.

We faked the moon landings because it was far easier than detailing what really happened up there. No one made it back alive. Each time one of our ships returned it bore only the cheese-crust half corpses of our astronauts. Their eyes were always open, staring upward, faces painted with puzzled expressions. At first we theorized it was a parasite, but modern science and technology couldn't account for it's existence. And that was wrong anyway, proving to be far too simple of an explanation.

The moon itself was alive. A living, breathing mold-form that had evolved within the crust of the moon and developed consciousness thousands of years ago. It grew until it couldn't anymore, consuming every available inch of the old rock, inside and out. We weren't being randomly taken out by some stray parasite, we were being fended off by the moon itself. It was trying to survive. Innocent, scared and alone, spinning through space. I loved it for what it was--unique life in a universe hell-bent on annihilating it.

We've long since killed the old moon, burned it to dust and replaced it with a gravity bound rotational cube, which we then overlaid with holograms of the traditional moon. It's ghostly image hangs in our sky as a memory of the great living giant it once was.

004:

If only I could take a virtual fist bump. We're all a bit weary, and understandably so, when it comes to digital contact.

My own mother just recently unconsciously brushed against a virtual sign waver--you know the type carrying the big black-lettered signs, donning the full flesh-sock costume and tattooed from head to toe with fine print and legislation. It turned out this particular waver was inflicted with electric moth-mites. The waver was immune, of course, but my mother was not.

She waves now too, but only when it strikes the moth-mites fancy. She has slept in her room for months while the moth-mites walk with her feet in our digital world. I hold out hope that she'll come back to me one day, but in my heart I know she is lost to them. My mother is just another host to them now, a client machine under control by remote protocol.

005:

Hearing text is a new kind of synesthesia which blends human visual recognition of text and audio signals into one sensation. I often ponder how it feels, but I know my brain doesn't vibrate on the right wavelength to perceive the sensations regardless.

Good luck out there. Don't let the deafening walls of text that hold up our Earth's floating ceiling constrict you too tightly.

006:

The nerf gun wars.

We all remember those good times shooting at friends and family, getting tapped in the face with rubber darts and so on.

If only those memories were real.

NERF was developed in-house at the Institute and my team at the VRC came in later, tasked by Eoghan with global erasure after the massacres ended. Building the dummy toys and getting them in stores and homes was the easy part once I actually knew our approach.

It was the memories of those events that proved most difficult to engineer. We had to carefully break apart and rebuild those painful memories of death, murder, and loss on a scale much larger than had ever been attempted before. It wouldn't do to simply wipe the memories away.

Without going into extensive detail, the mind is a lot like a fabric. If you cut a piece away it leaves behind stray threads, and shortly thereafter the mind will start to unravel. Those problem memories need to be replaced gently, massaged into something new with a delicate touch. Making those horrible memories into childhood fun and games was my idea, and after a few small trials it seemed to work quite well, so we pushed to global scale.

Replacing the memories of people, individuals that died or were otherwise eradicated, proved much easier, and was done via general imagery displacement. The memories fade with time anyway, so when you tweak that gradually at first, but on a curve of exponential growth over a certain time period, the memories can be completely shifted into something else entirely. Results were unexpected. Some people thought their grandparents raised them, some people thought their parents simply left. One individual in particular claimed rather intensely that her mother had ascended into an angelic form of being and flew away to heaven right in front of her. Entire towns lost dozens of people, some cases as high as seventy percent population loss.

And so the NERF toys actually began as a combat application. Non-mechanical energy replication forwarders, mass-produced units in the hundreds of thousands by the Institute--a weapon to fight an enemy that was seemingly immune to all other types of harm. It was a genetically-mutated virus, supposedly developed and released covertly by BioGen, a rogue group of terrorists. I've since heard and seen no evidence of any such organization existing.

The virus is long eradicated now, but it invaded our minds, transforming us into indestructible, murderous apes. Bullets or blades did nothing and simply bounced off

their flesh. It took a bit of research on captured test subjects to find their weakness: direct contact with intense radiant energy. The more powerful and concentrated the blasts were, the more effective. Radon-based gamma ray generators seemed to be the most efficient, so were used in the smaller units. We do not know how the virus managed to make them immune to damage, though there was certainly something causing it--the flesh was considerably spongy and wet to the touch, and when examined microscopically we noticed strange patterned layers of skin and blood that continued subcutaneously, stacked on top of each other like a torte.

The first known case was an elder brother barbarically killing his little sister with a kitchen tile outside Albany. He appeared normal to the eye but had forgotten English, instead speaking in strange guttural throat noises, and if left alone would attempt to scratch his skin down to the bone. After a week in captivity, his eyes began melting during an interview, just running out of his sockets. He became unresponsive and after a few minutes of rapid increases in body temperature, he keeled over dead. (They later discovered the nickel hydrogenator next door was pumping some kind of energetic exhaust into the room, which scrambled him from the inside out, though at a very slow pace.)

It spread across the world from there, and the older a person was, the more likely they were to change--mothers crushed their wombs, grandfathers drowned their own grandchildren, friends murdered friends. But even our young were not completely immune. Some children and infants were changed as well, and would attempt to attack anyone around ravenously, often harming themselves in the process. A little less than one in three people on Earth were infected. Not all died, but many did, including many that weren't infected at all. The world was at war with itself. Controlled from within by something foreign, dangerous, and unknown.

The NERF deployment was our last chance. This was the apocalypse. I can still remember old what's-his-name's fuzzy picture on the tube delivering his final address: we declared war with humanity, the others, and made it known to the world that murder of those people with the affliction was no longer a punishable offense. We delivered our young and our healthy the non-mechanical energy devices and told them to fight for their country. Fight the animals that were once their moms and dads. Fight their neighbors. Put an end to the invisible enemy. And so they did. Millions died over the course of that year and partway into the next. And those that were left alive at the end bore scars deeper than any in human history.

That's when I got the call and my team was mobilized.

007:

Circus peanuts. Maybe the cleverest misdirection a name could have. Yet no one seemed to question it seriously enough to worry about.

Neither from the circus, nor made from peanuts, the circus peanut was a designed mental subversion created in service of memory alteration science, allowing researchers to telekinetically rearrange neurons within the human brain. Any individual who consumed even a cubic centimeter of the stuff was inseminated for life with billions of nano-arrangers that replicated through light parasitic generation, requiring only a single blood cell per billion units birthed, each with a lifespan of nearly thirty years. It's one of many laced confectionaries that lined dime store shelves during the blooming era.

Production continues on the circus peanuts, though no one in our department requests it, and through extensive back door research we discovered the factory doesn't seem to exist on any terrestrial soil. Maybe those little peanuts were never really our idea at all, and were implanted by someone above us, looking down and prodding at us in the same manner we do. We've since moved far beyond physical consumption as a means for entering a citizen's body--now to walk into the brain is as simple and easy as viewing a part of your body through a screen.

Even still, I wouldn't touch the stuff.

008:

I once knew a Chinese exchange teacher who was profound in his own way. Maybe some would consider him a genius.

He knew more of the rules than anyone I'd met before, and when we walked the microscopically thin alleys of Zhuō Yóu complex he taught me many sacred, powerful secrets of the game. I can count at least three occurrences where he saved my life, but there are probably a dozen more I wasn't even conscious of. He was that kind of person. Just genuinely caring.

But it's hard not to be when you know what he knew about the complex. He had learned first hand of the pure acidic bile in its belly yet he bore on with intrepid determination. Never once did he falter--even knowing he strolled mere meters above the churning wastes of hell itself.

I wonder what happened to him.

009:

Phenomenally so.

When placing the mind within a dilated sphere of isolation we've found that an individual with strong, meaningful relationships lasts overwhelmingly longer before complete psychic collapse than more independent or friendless subjects. We're talking weeks longer since the average mind lasts two days in the sphere before scrambling starts. That's two days of constant exponential increases in mental pressure, completely isolated from conscious thought, slowed to a sixteenth the molecular speed. That kind of pressure simply melts the frontal cortex after a few seconds of exposure in a majority of brains in the animal kingdom. A notable exception is the crow, but the official deduction for that is rather long-winded.

This interesting phenomena could potentially say something about the status of relationships within conscious energy, and their relation to our broader constructs of reality. Perhaps there is something tangible to be obtained from further research, but it's a slow process. It's taken four years just to end up here.

So there's no telling how underrated friends really are, but it's safe to say it's a lot.

010:

Netchuds only ever grew strong because of the biology headers strict enumerated equality requirements in the first place. We considered their birth an unfortunate byproduct of the system being rigged so vigorously with so many trillions of rules and scripts; they rose on shaky legs from the electrified bacterial soup of detritus and filth in the central depository. Somehow they developed and maintained an unusual connection with the system despite them being completely disconnected.

The system, which supports the network, is built into a series of interconnected data groups called bulbs; a bulb is made of multiple mile-long structures called tree machines, or forests, which house and self-maintain thousands of trunk and leaf opti-class servers. Each bulb is aligned in different positions floating above a large radius of land, with one central node dubbed the flower between them all. Below that, in the shadowed valleys and trenches on the ground, are high-voltage dumping zones for all of the various waste exhaust. That's the central depository.

And that's where they were born--in the caustic byproduct of the network and its clean, sanitary reality. They exist in their own corrupted version of being. It's no surprise they're incorrigible when you consider their genesis.

011:

I'm thankful I haven't become one yet, but there's still time for things to change.

012:

Is it really more than a hairstyle?

Can you even say what a hairstyle actually is?

There is a fabled art shrouded by incomplete information and vague misnomers, one which has been passed down in secrecy between artisanal stylists for generations. This knowledge is unknown to most, kept alive only by a handful of tomes filled with pages of cryptic knowledge, written mostly in gak'skrit--though there are additions penned in other lesser known languages from the countless decades the trade has been passed down.

I found one such book in my father's collection. It bore only the word CO'EK written on the front in deep red beveled letters. I had no idea why, but when I read the first page I suddenly knew the book was called the curling compendium. As I leafed through the pages I passed a kind of index, an owners box with hundreds of signatures, and an introduction chapter I couldn't make anything out of. The pages bent crisply under my fingers, aged into staleness, but still holding together. And then I reached the lessons.

Each new chapter bore a person's portrait, staring blankly forward with their hair made up into wild, foreign designs. Old women, children, a young man, each with hair more peculiar and outlandish than the last. The body of the pages that followed seemed to be typed in a thick, serious font, though the book itself had to be older than any typewriter. Most of the margins were filled with notes written by different hands in a spectrum of blues and greys and reds. I continued leafing through, skipping passed decades of complex hair science and research, until I landed on a familiar face--a face I hadn't seen since it vanished ten years earlier.

The face of my mother. Her hair was a winding tower jutting up off frame, tied together with ribbons and rope, which was in complete contrast to her usual short-cut bob. She was crying. The text was blacked out, as if someone's writing vial had spilled over it, and the remaining pages were thick with ink and partially stuck together. After my mother's portrait were a few pages of description, but the remainder of the book was blank except for a few dozen template squares--placeholders for future portraits.

The final such page held a blank square and had my name carefully written in English across the top margin.

013:

I thought periodic masturbation was healthy for sanity as well, and I wrote a few papers outlining its potential correlation with overall mental well-being, but it turns out it hardly changes mental stability one way or the other.

Excessive masturbation had initially been linked to destabilization early on in the program, and so my dissertations were focused against that angle, but recent findings lend more credence to the notion that individuals who are prone to addictive tendencies in general were the true culprit, regardless of whichever manifested addiction was in question. An addict will wholly destabilize months sooner than someone without any particular vices. Brain death occurs in minutes after destabilization of an addicted person, which is in complete contrast to the multiple days an average individual can last.

We've found that if a subject's consciousness is submerged in engaging and relatable content it can be isolated from sexuality entirely with very little conscious effect. Some individuals go so far as to reject their biology completely after a few weeks in, seemingly forgetting they had sexual identities in their physical form. A week of therapy in the cold-lights generally rouses them back into physicality, though on at least one occasion the subject denied their corporeal form entirely, suggesting that it was simply a manifestation of their dreams. That subject is still under extensive testing, and has been known to exhibit violent tendencies during cold-light remediation.

I can't speak to those who abstain from submission and live out their lives in the cold-lights, but I can't imagine it's much different. The human brain is a remarkable, ingenuitive entity regardless of where you put it.

014:

I once asked my grandfather why he referred to his wife as the old ball and chain. It didn't seem to me that she was overly controlling, or that she demanded anything of him at all, so it was confusing to me that he would refer to her in that way. Their relationship seemed healthy. Real.

He laughed and closed the door to his room. It's not about his freedom, he told me, it's about hers. She wasn't his ball and chain, that was just a little joke he told between them, but rather she was bound to their home. My puzzled expression communicated quite well that I didn't understand, so he elaborated.

When they first moved into that house forty years prior she suffered an intense bout of illness and could no longer leave the bed. My grandfather flew in doctors and experts from across the country, scrambling for anything that could heal her, anything that could make her well again. They all had different ideas about what ailed her, yet came to the same conclusion: she wouldn't survive longer than a few weeks. He refused to take that answer. He refused to accept that his only love was slipping from his arms so early in their lives together, so quickly after she had been freed from her father's captivity. And so he sought other options--he took out ads in county papers in a three-hundred mile radius, purchased adverts on the radio, plastered the town with notices and calls for help. Days went by without any response, but one night just before bed, a specialist doctor by the name of Gutiérrez phoned them up.

The man claimed to know her illness and could save her, though he warned it would be tremendously costly in more ways than one. My grandfather didn't care. Anything he had was forfeit for her. He loved her so much.

Gutiérrez arrived early the next morning, donned in a floor-length leather overcoat and carrying a small brown satchel. His face was wrapped in nylon rags, so my grandfather never got a good look at him. Gutiérrez explained that she was bound to her father's mansion through an intense forcible incantation, the sort that could only be manufactured through extreme hatred, and the only remedy would be a rebinding. She could never leave their house, but she would be well and live out a relatively normal life. He asked for ten thousand dollars and a piece of my grandfather's soul. My grandfather agreed, not quite knowing what he was agreeing to.

The doctor stood and the room filled with white. My grandfather awoke in bed to the smell of sizzling bacon. He walked downstairs and found my grandmother, healthy as ever, cooking them breakfast.

She smiled and greeted him, and he broke down into tears.

015:

Ah, yeah. I remember that.

The tale of the pastor's wife is one of those campfire fables we share around the office. An anomaly to those who know everything. Those are the kinds of stories that give boogeymen the chills.

She fell 26,000 feet out of an airplane and landed in an elementary school somewhere in Nebraska. Four kids were killed outright by the impact her body made with the building. As soon as she hit the lights went out and the plumbing stopped working, and most single-pane glass windows within a ten-mile radius were shattered. I say shattered, but they were basically disintegrated--all that remained were little piles of glass dust lining the windowsills.

Several hundred pounds of stone, fiberglass, and debris fell into that classroom with the pastor's wife as she tore through. The teacher took a knock on the head from an HVAC unit and experienced pretty much instantaneous death. Twelve other kids were seriously wounded and then died over the course of a week, succumbing to their injuries.

The wife kept falling, down through the ground floor and into the basement, destroying most of the boiler room in the process. A janitor that happened to be mopping nearby that day just recently gave his testimony, and I'm so very glad he did, for this story wouldn't mean so much without it. He was the first to the basement where she landed, opening the thick iron door to a mass of writhing flesh and curling wisps of smoke. The flesh foamed and frothed, slowly losing it's red and purple coloring and fading into a pale yellow. And then it wasn't a mass of flesh at all.

It was the wife. She stood up, brushed some dust from her naked thighs, and walked out into the cool morning.

That's the last we heard about her.

016:

That's it?

That's nothing compared to the idiosyncratic espionage tactics deployed by the Chinese during cold-war operations. What's a mass murder or animal abuse compared to killing the same person eight-thousand times?

We got a lot of solid intel after the takeover. Turns out they had a crash of their own and uncovered quite a few interesting technologies. One of which was within the realm of our current endeavors, but they didn't have what we have. They didn't know what it really was.

They had discovered an unusual quirk of pure rubellite when it was irradiated to a certain degree, submerged in boiling water, and then pumped full of electrical current--I'm not sure how it was discovered, or even how they managed to acquire a gem that rare in the quantities they were able to. Seventy percent of the world supply.

The quirk was interesting to say the least. If an individual were to touch the empowered rubellite against their skin after receiving an injury, the injury would slowly revert its molecular structure until fully healed. It was tricky to do this with the very specific requirements for the process to work, but eventually the easiest route was taken--garbing up in protective gear and lowering the individual's body into the boiling chamber to press it against the rubellite. It only took a second of contact, and then they could be removed from the chamber. All damage sustained from the boiling water or electricity would be healed during the process.

There were many caveats to this. If a full twenty-four hour window passed since injury, it would not be healed. If the user would suffer another injury in the exact same spot on their body within twenty-four hours, they would die--this includes full-body injuries like being skinned or exploding, wherein the healed individual would die when receiving any kind of new injury at all. If the rubellite was disconnected from current or otherwise disabled during the healing process, it would immediately revert and the injury would reform. If the injury killed the individual before they touched the rubellite, they would be made alive again during its healing process, though the same twenty-four hour window rule applied.

They learned all of this through extensive, laborious experimentation--months upon months of constant man hours on the project day and night. Upwards of six-hundred lives were snuffed out while obtaining this information; most were orphans and homeless from several southern provinces in Thailand. But those lives served them well. China abandoned espionage as a trade entirely and fully invested in rubellite. Imagine if this wound up at your feet. Would you not accept such a powerful, god-like gift? Most would, I think.

And so, as anyone would, they drew the most obvious conclusion from receiving a literal resurrection machine: use it for torture. It worked swimmingly.

017:

I know exactly who you're talking about. The committee proved she wasn't actually homeless. She was photographed leaving the campus, zipping up in a big bird suit, and hopping into the driver's seat of a Bentley before zipping away with Hungry Like the Wolf loudly echoing down the street.

She once completely eviscerated, and then ate in its entirety, my midterm report for Introduction to Bioessence. The professor simply wouldn't hear that some insane woman trounced into my dorm and started shredding and then eating all of my paperwork. I also lost complete archival lists of my collection of bootleg H.R. Pufnstuf VHS tapes, which took me several days to recreate.

The worst time was when she brought a little man around with her on a leash. I knew he was a little man as opposed to a child because of his comically long, braided beard; it was taller than him by a few feet. He was almost completely naked except for a candy thong and a small trilby on his head. They bobbed around everywhere, spitting right in people's faces, miming intercourse in front of class windows, smearing bodily substances on the concrete, and many, many more depraved and unspeakable things. Though there was a bit of relief when the little man got punted into a newspaper box by security. She stayed gone for almost a week that time.

I hope I don't see her again. Try not to make eye contact.

018:

Those eyes look familiar to me as well. I'd recognize the early stages of mental tension induced proptosis anywhere. It won't be long before they're bulged so far as three inches protruding, like little rods. Hopefully this little otter isn't a victim. The other one in the photo looks alright enough.

Moon owls found throughout Texas and most of Mexico were burdened by this affliction in the late 90s, but we only realized it was happening after six months into full production--by then their little heads were swollen to the size of cantaloupes. It turns out the waste farms in Oklahoma had misconfigured their disperser units, and were instead redirecting a stream of nearly 80% concentrated waste product into Texas-bound air masses.

There were hundreds of other direct harmful effects on the environment and its inhabitants. We're still discovering more ramifications every day. Just last week TC trapped an armadillo with an inverted skull that could barely breathe or move around. Its brain was on the outside of its skull, exposed to open air. It seems to be caused by a leftover sinkpool, though they have yet to locate it.

Teams are working diligently to scrub the environment but soil absorption rates are alarmingly high. There's almost zero chance for complete waste removal, and so the most logical next step is assuredly localized cleansing.

I'd very much like to know the location this photo was taken.

019:

We can learn a lot from the subconscious mind.

I've read countless cases of forced-extractions resulting in someone standing face to face with their own subconscious existence. Even after cold-light remediation and intensive therapy, their psyche remained fractured, split into two or more individualities. In almost every case the subconscious mind would attempt to take over the host mind, driven only by animalistic instincts to survive. The occasions in which I had personal interviews with these individuals enlightened me to how truly terrifying and dangerous the human mind can be.

Each of the afflicted subjects could see a shrunken version of themselves as if it were someone else in the room with them, walking around, messing with objects, shouting commands, rambling out stream-of-consciousness thoughts. One patient described meeting his subconscious manifestation as if he was remembering a close friend, one he had known his whole life but hadn't been in contact with since before he could remember. This perceived closeness to a friend increased patient susceptibility to complete psychic collapse, which seemed to be the end result no matter which case was in question.

At first the manifestations were harmless aspects of subconscious brain activity, but the ramifications of a conscious mind being split from its subconscious ended up being very harmful to mental well-being. The subconscious mind grew smarter, as it was more active than it should ever have been, directly exposed to far too many senses and feelings and thoughts all at once, while the conscious mind grew weaker, made listless by prolonged exposure to its own internal mental mechanisms.

The more time that passes from initial forced-extraction, the more liquid and broken their conscious mind becomes. They are forced to lose all subconscious reliance and immediately begin to deteriorate rapidly. Once the conscious mind is entirely liquidized the subconscious mind will attempt a takeover. In forty percent of successful subconscious control events the subject would immediately commit suicide through any means available, directly contrasting our predictions. In all other cases the subject would revert to child-like behavior until psychic collapse, which only took a few days.

We've since made forced-extraction a much more streamlined process to reduce to risk of psychic fracture, but it still happens on occasion. Those subjects are studied briefly but must always be extirpated before the subconscious can grow strong enough to take control.

There are many more doors to open until we fully understand the subconscious mind, but there is no doubt of its importance to our well being.

020:

There are breeders moving in the opposite direction as well, unfortunately.

Bolivia has been hotbed for special experimentation since the 60s, as even after the government was established in the 80s, it's been far too caught up with stamping out the manufacture of cocaine and the organized crime that comes with it.

The bulldog was a test subject in skeletal theory, with researchers dedicating multiple decades to skeletal regression, attempting to push the species to its limit. Most recent breed revisions had no neck at all, and the head of the dog was actually recessed several inches into its ribcage, impacting most of its internal organs against the skeleton. These poor subjects hardly ever grow beyond pups, though many have, and suffered elongated pain and discomfort during their unfortunate lives--they can hardly breathe or stand on their own and have trouble consuming food and water. If they don't die from starvation or dehydration then either their impacted heart gives out around age 3, or some other organ failure takes place around the same time. The oldest known subject reached 5 years, 4 months before expiration.

But the dogs aren't the worst of it. The worst are the human subjects, in which several hypotheses are being tested at once. I may never be able to wash those images from my mind. Their main goal is to test how far human biology can stretch before it begins to fall apart. I've seen men with limbs elongated to twelve-times standard size, children with open skulls to grant easy brain access, many varied bird-crossed females, as well as dozens of other nightmarish prototypes. Their head researcher seems to have some obsession with making the female form into bird-like hybrids, which may have to do with a leaked report written by the veganetics research consortium covering the perceived intelligence of crows. A day doesn't go by where I don't picture their feathered faces, squawking in sorrowful half-voices, shaking uncontrollably.

It is unfortunate. But because Bolivia is a sovereign entity there's little we can do without government intervention.

021:

True.

But the best soldiers don't have brains with which to deviate from orders at all. The Institute began the pylon project seeking to engineer a unit of destruction which would perceive and carry out orders without question. Throughout the 20th century our focus was primarily in automation and robotics, but once the VRC was formed we completely abandoned that field of research and moved fully into brain science.

Though many aspects of human conscious ability were and still are mysteries to us, one of the first things discovered with concrete repeatability was autonomous control. We would carve out the hippocampus and replace it entirely with a simple signal repeater which was bound to certain frequencies.

From then on, one could speak directly into the subject's mind through a tuned analogue microphone, and assuming the subject could understand what you've said, and they were within the limited range of the microphone, they would begin carrying out the instructions. Interestingly enough, language barriers ceased to exist with this form of communication. Speaking French into a Chinese brain produced the same results as speaking English into an English brain.

The technology now has advanced far beyond its simplistic origin, and control has been fine-tuned down to the cell-based, more autonomous functions of the body.

We can tell you not to die, and you simply won't.

022:

In at least one chaasm they were, or are depending on how you look at it.

Out of the three pillars of exploration Zeinhaert's was the most creative, but also the most dangerous. When his corporeal form died and he fell into madness most of his constructions broke apart, and seals he had affixed within the chaasm gradually deteriorated. His personality form shattered into dozens of different iterations of himself and disassociated with his mental space almost completely--looking at him felt like looking at a broken mirror, with hundreds of different crack-like projections of his image overlapping and extending all across the chaasm. The man became a rainbow in his own brain.

There were many obvious geographical anomalies and physical impossibilities as well, such as multiple buildings existing in the same place but reversed or upside down, and the perfectly spherical lake that floated above his warped mansion. But worse still were the denizens of the chaasm, which grew mad along with Zeinhaert, as all mental organisms did. They behaved with little oddities at first, calling you by the wrong name, or derailing into tangents regarding the lengths of certain noodles, and their appearances skewed a bit, losing proportions and changing colors, but they were relatively normal. That escalated into them wholly losing their foundations, and when the final seals fell apart and rampant thoughts came flowing in, the organisms began melding together.

Notable mentions include gorilla-armed sharks that could breathe oxygen, friendly swan-ostriches--which someone dubbed swastriches, and living renditions of mythological Chinese dragons; they were blended of standard feline features and mannerisms, and the ferocious presence of a tree-sized monster. The cat-dragons came in many sizes and were mostly non-hostile, but the largest ones were vicious predators not unlike lions, and would attack unprovoked. I'd like to consider myself decently strong-willed, and with as much experience as I have in this field it's become rare to encounter a thing that really, truly shakes me, but by the third time I watched one of those cat-dragons forcibly extract a colleague from the chaasm I could feel I was developing traumatic links. There was something off about their placid, slitted eyes, and the playful way they stretched after killing someone.

Evil mental organisms were obvious. They were frightening, sure, but you knew they were evil and you knew evil was what you could expect. The cat-dragons felt different to me--they would slowly and methodically kill a man, happily slap at his corpse as it rejoined the chaasm, and then stretch out and nap peacefully as if nothing had happened, as pictures of perfect innocence. The first time I saw it I thought it might even be kind of cute, if of course I ignored the fact that it had just permanently psychically fractured a friend of ten years. After I left for the last time I had to get rid of

my cat. I just kept seeing that thing in my head, and even today I still get chills whenever I'm near one.

I'll be glad if I never enter Zeinhaert's pillar ever again, but I know I'll have to eventually. His chaasm is due for disconnection, so we'll have to make one final sweep for living entities. I fear those things are even more distorted now than before, and I genuinely don't know what to expect.

023:

I didn't meet George Williams, or at least a version of him, until after he was deployed on the Network, only alive within his fractured chaasm. He was a popular author who wanted to create his fictional world within a mindspace, which is something we were confident in creating, but there was an issue during his mental deployment that rendered his corporeal form vegetative and eventually killed him.

The team assigned to his deployment went through procedure, connecting to his mind through dilation, verifying synapse strength and testing brain electric capacity--everything was golden. Better than most, so he was installed in the chassis and they began the process. Initial scans, memory downloads, and defrag checks all returned without any issue. It's fairly rare to have an individual with such good test results before chaasm generation--everybody has some cobwebs, and while we never want to overload a brain, conditions were more than acceptable for a high-bandwidth transfer.

Once his mental-load had been cloned and all final scans returned nominal, they turned up the chassis and began chaasm generation. It unfolded naturally at first, filling in all of his allocated blocks at the same rate, steadily generating his mental space. And then he flatlined.

That was when they realized he failed to mention the plate in his skull. It was standard practice to commit a patient for a full-body scan before even approving deployment, but somehow George had slipped through the cracks. We had never strapped someone with a metal plate in their skull into the chassis, so this proved an excellent, and a bit macabre case study. Electrical leakage had occurred, somehow jumping from the chassis connection to the plate in George's skull, and then spread all throughout his body. He was electrocuted and killed, but was resuscitated shortly after by rampant current from the chassis, and then killed and resuscitated at least six more times during the generation. To forcibly-extract someone during chaasm generation meant instant death, so they had no choice but to continue on and hope he didn't end up a complete vegetable. Nothing was generated correctly within the chaasm. Most of his blocks gradually became fragmented, combining memories together, shifting facts and fiction into the same thoughts. Saved memories were at least distorted, if not completely destroyed.

The painful process was completed after three hours. His corporeal brain still produced healthy signals, but his body was completely vegetative.

We dedicated 4048 blocks to his chaasm--he went for the highest possible package, wanting to save everything he possibly could from his mind. Most of those blocks were filled during deployment, with a few hundred left as spillover or for potential future expansion space. That took up an entire tree machine all by itself, built from thousands

of trunk and leaf servers, and so it wasn't exactly something we could just toss away, especially when it housed an entire human consciousness. My expertise was called in after George's incident, so I travelled to southwest Nevada to visit the facility. Philip and Medy came with me. We had to investigate what we created. We had to at least attempt to talk to George.

We suited up in the chassis and entered his chaasm, climbing through a brown vine-covered wooden door which spilled out into a thin alleyway. The patchwork stones lining the alley were overgrown in the same thick brown vines and small tufts of shrubbery, and from the minute we entered we all smelled the overpowering scent of hairspray. Lights swung in the sky, like a ceiling lamp someone bumped into, painting the worn out blacktop street in night, and then day, and then night again. As the light swung into the alley, we saw the vines weren't plants at all, but braided, twisting locks of unkempt hair. The two buildings that made up the alley were the only objects on the street save a house a few hundred meters away--in one direction the road curved up and into the sky where the house sat, before tucking into a loop and bending behind the horizon, out of sight. The other direction stretched forward for what seemed like miles and then dipped down into a spiral that fell into darkness.

Both buildings we stood near were thickly overgrown with dense, vein-like patterns of hair, but we could tell they were barbershops from the protruding red-and-white striped barber poles. One was painted blue behind the hair with MEN written in big, black letters across the front, and the other was made from pink bricks with WOMEN emblazoned in a deep purple. The doors were locked, but there didn't seem like much to see anyway--the windows were spilling hair in all colors and fashions. We moved to the sideways house. When we walked up the street the world seemed to rotate with us, swiveling to match the now vertical road. We arrived at the front step, and I reached out to grab the handle of the door, but it disintegrated before I could touch it, and then the door fell backwards out of its hinges and sunk into the floor. George was standing before us.

"George?" I asked.

"Arthur."

024:

He was saying fuck you to America. Fuck you to the world.

And fuck you to anyone else who disagreed with him. He never cared at all about humanity, and wouldn't mind seeing it burned to the ground if it aligned with his interests. It eventually did, of course. I realized that far too late. My goal had only ever been to pioneer the open frontiers of mental research; to delve deeper and further, and unlock as many of the mysteries of our minds as I could. His goals had been something else entirely.

The pylon project reached completion and the Institute immediately put it to use. They performed a kind of voluntary draft, and delivered millions of propaganda flyers across America with vague, opportunistic wording like "true patriotism is serving your country," in an experimental project to create "smart, empowered troops." All expenses paid. Response was remarkable to say the least, with hundreds of thousands of applications over the course of a month. In a matter of weeks they had built up an army of perfectly subservient, nearly-invincible slaves with the knowledge of combat veterans--made possible by the VRC and their stage III signal repeater that replaced the soldiers' hippocampi. After a year the Institute's army stood with over a million troops.

Eoghan had a disagreement with the board and went rogue. He wanted to make a test run and flex their new power to feel out its capability. They didn't want him to use the soldiers in his "outlandish," aggressive takeover plans, and felt he had misled them: the board had been made to believe their army would be used as a defense force for the company and the world, not an offense force for totalitarian takeover. He stormed out of the meeting and promptly mobilized the troops, heading straight for Oklahoma. His attack started with four tactical NEMP launches in a ten-minute window, targeted all across the state in high-volume areas, followed by immediate invasions at three locations: Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Norman. The rest of the state was sanctioned off over the course of the following five hours. Six hundred thousand people were wiped off the earth in a quarter of a day. By the time the national guard and the army were alerted and rolling out, Oklahoma was captured.

And then he waged war with America.

025:

I put the book back on the shelf, still not quite presently acknowledging what I had seen. My name, penned in swirling, concise lettering; "ARTHUR" across top margin of the page. What did that mean?

The front door creaked open and gave a muffled slam from below, startling me into motion. I quickly left my father's room, latching the door with great care to prevent the usual wall-shaking thud it normally produced.

The house was quiet. Had that been the front door? Was it something else? I turned to the steps and abruptly slammed my face into my father's chest. The same old bouquet was forced into my nose--bourbon and shaving cream, with tinges of old sweat and spit. His face was an angry mask of tight, curly hair, detailed only by his eyes, hollowly glistening like smoky little yellow jewels.

"What were you doing up here, Arthur?"

He slurred when he spoke but the poorly concealed rage behind his slow, deliberate cadence was perfectly clear.

"I--" I stammered out a single word before his fist slammed into my gut.

He whispered to me while his fingers found my neck. I could barely hear him as his squeeze tightened.

"You don't come up here. You know you don't come up here. I've told you. You're just like her and you won't listen--"

His voice drained away, muted by the pounding echoes of my own beating heart. My vision shrunk and black curtains fell over me like heavy curls of silky smooth hair.

And then he let go. My cheek was on fire. And wet. I was wet. I opened my eyes. I was on the table in his room, and he had his back turned, rummaging through his shelves and piling things up, angrily rambling to himself. My cheek was searing with pain and my shirt was soaked in blood; I reached up and winced as my fingers located the razor slice he cut into my face.

He didn't know I was awake. If he did, then he sorely misjudged me. I quietly slipped off the table and reached for one of the dozens of razors scattered around his room. I unfolded it while I crept behind him. He bent down to grab a book from the bottom shelf and then stood up--I reached my right arm around him and squeezed his mouth, digging my fingers in his cheek, and then pulled back as hard as I could. My left arm moved on its own, plunging the razor into his neck.

Shpthllpth pthlll pfflllthblbl. He tried to talk.

I stood over him and as he struggled to look back at me. Our eyes met. I could hear my voice screaming at him.

"You killed her. She didn't want anything to do with it and you killed her."

His yellow eyes flashed with rage one final time.

P026:

freedom from hypocrisy freedom from pain freedom from society freedom from prying eyes freedom from pain freedom from sadness freedom from stress freedom from life freedom from pressure freedom from pain freedom from fighting freedom from noise freedom from the screaming and the pain freedom

Where freedom where

can't remember the last time I ate

I can't remember the last time

I can't remember

can't refreedom

Just the smell yes now yes of this I recall great powerful memories of the smell ohh the smell the metal smell like fresh factory cut copper sheets and hundreds of hundreds of falling little pennies of freedom

I smell it now the smell

whereisit the smell where is it coming from? Freedom?

Where?

Where?

Where?

Them. Men? Who? Here? Freedom?

How did they oh the freedom of the smell I can smell it so strongly now they see me yes I can smell them freedom you have come back

What did it say

Is it speaking to me what is it saying to me

No there is no time freedom there is no time for this stop **THERE IS NO TIME FOR THIS STOP SHUT UP THE SMELL THE FREEDOM OF THE SMELL SHUT UP STOP STOP STOP**

There it is

Sweet slippy red sweet the smell so sweet yes

027:

I never felt completely solid in my understanding either.

Turns out that cavern in Honduras, Tegula or whatever they called it, was some kind of natural connection point to the world. I don't even completely remember why we were in Honduras to begin with--though in the 80s it's pretty safe to say it probably had something to do with genetic modification. Those Hondurans are an industrious people.

Either way we learned squat about genetics. Someone from my team got pointed in the direction of the cavern, given a cryptic warning about glowing skulls and walking into the mouth of God, and that was enough for us to investigate. I actually led the team in myself.

The cave grinned with a shallow mouth of broken brown teeth and gums, beckoning us in. I went first, with four brainwave teammates behind locked on my frequency. I love having brainwaves on missions--they're like little extensions of myself, separate bodies of muscle and strength but with none of that god damned complaining. I thought two of the brainwaves into a forward scouting position and away they went; the tunnel echoed with the airy swish their legs made as they walked. I kept the other two behind to help explore the chamber. The cave was mostly empty for hundreds of meters, just a big, bowl-like chasm filled with crawl holes. Up ahead it thinned out into an uneven corridor and bent a bit out of view, but I could see blue light shining against the rocks.

The two brainwaves called back to me with that familiar beep and burst of static: a bit over 1200 meters in and they had found something. A chamber. I told them to stay put and took my other two brainwaves up to meet them. We continued forward, moving down quite a bit as it stretched on. Eventually the hallway opened up into an impossibly large circular room. It reminded me of that luxurious ballroom in Ohio, but instead of being filled with dancing, rich white folks, it was underground, filled with glowy head corpses, and made from stone. The room was washed in a wavy deep blue with flecks of purple and red, all emanating from somewhere below, because the limestone floor faded and became clear like crystal. I could barely make out a massive rotating orb through the glass-like rock below us; it seemed to be sending vibrations through everything--even the air in my lungs.

The floor lights cast dancing reflections around the ossuary as I stepped in to get a closer look. There were thirteen massive, transparent stalagmites jutting up from the ground in a perfect circle--six crystal spikes lined the left wall, and six lined the right, with the thirteenth and largest spike perfectly centered in front of me. Each stalagmite had a decrepit corpse attached to it, impaled in its glowing skull just above the neck. They were shining in all different colors, red, purple, blue, pink. The biggest spike held

its skeleton off the ground--his arms were affixed into a T, open-wide. I pointed my flashlight up at it to get a better look.

And that's when the dead son-of-a-bitch started talking.

028:

I'll try to piece this together for you as best I can. Someone needs to know. Someone other than us three. Someone with a clean brain who could remember it for us. Someone who can tell our children's children why life ended up this way.

It all started back in 2004 when the Institute began their "land expansion." The rest of the world didn't know what happened until America was under control, and by the time the rumors reached them, they were followed quickly behind by the Institute's troops. I didn't agree with Eoghan's tactics--the NERF fiasco was tragic enough, and I just recently found out that the initial breakout was his doing anyway; he leaked the genetic mutation out of a New York research facility personally.

Who in their right mind would think of cleaning as the only choice? Who would make kids kill their own parents? And who would manufacture an epidemic, sacrificing millions of lives, just to give himself more power, more control? I was familiar with working in the grey area, as finding brains in my line of work certainly cost lives, but mere dozens of ill and hopeless were nothing in comparison. They weren't millions. Millions of people. Dead. No matter how many lives would be saved in the end, the sheer cost of his plan should've been enough to cause even the slightest bit of hesitation. But it didn't. Someone told me he even smiled when he sent the order. I was always uneasy with the senseless, detached manner in which he solved problems, but to find out he purposefully incited the whole incident to begin with really woke me to the kind of person I was dealing with. The Institute had to know then and I'm certain they chose to ignore it. I know I did.

Again, I did not agree with his tactics. But I couldn't ignore the convenience of the world he laid at my feet. No more legislation, no more red-tape. We were free to work on anything we wanted, any time, any place. And we didn't have to worry about time consuming global mind-alteration anymore. Our line of credit was unlimited. With the kind of visions I had for the future of mind exploration technology, for the future of the VRC, I wouldn't just walk away. The damage was already done. I couldn't fix that. What harm was there in continuing my research?

Eoghan obviously wasn't helping us for our sake. His game involved a vendetta against the way the world was built, he told me as much himself. He wanted to uproot their reality to get that message out to as many people as possible. And supposedly he had the troops scream it during raids--as they were gunning people down, burning cities, killing our country.

He wanted them to hear but two words as their world crumbled around them.

"Fuck you."

029:

Surely something truer could not be said, not even uttered from twixt a particularly honest drunk person's lips during a high stakes emotional one-sided exchange, where they vomit all over you in more ways than one.

My good friend Wilson had a friend named Philip with all sorts of nonsense degrees, including one such degree being his doctorate in Animal Nutrition. Yet he has a lifelong career in mental research. And I never once saw him so much as toss scraps to a dog.

The absolute mania.

He would sometimes bring a little carton of milk with him when we went out to restaurants. Tucked in his coat, the inside chest pocket. We begged him not to drink it, yet he would, every single time.

Good man though, good man. Helped me with all sorts of mind stuff.

I absolutely wouldn't have anything without him. Well without Wilson, I guess. Philip just came along. Wouldn't have anything I have today without Wilson. And I guess Eoghan, but for completely different reasons that I'm not so sure I'm comfortable with. Anyway.

030:

In the way up north their hair was made crazy by the big community butter bath given to all citizens once a month, called the butter ball.

That's what Guppy says anyway. He knows about my parents

"If you drink a man's butter, he'll squeal for a day. If you steal a man's butter farm, he'll develop a lifelong addiction to store-bought vegetable oil derivatives."

I don't know what that means. Guppy says it's an ad-age. Ad-age. Weird word. He says my dad worked at a butter food farm called a dairly farm. My mom watched

"Petey, ya dad was a butta man." Guppy guppy guppy, old guppy is my only friend

He's really really tall now. I can't see his face anymore

I haven't tasted butter in so long, back when the sky was blue and I rode the bus to school

I miss school

And the bus

And the blue sky

I can't remember how mom looks anymore

And I can't remember anything anyway. I can smell butter, it's all over everything, but I can't eat it. It just keeps coming in

My nose is almost underbutter. I hope someone can hear me

Guppy can hear me but he can't help. Can anyone hear me?

Not the butter lich please

031:

It's flapping pink skull didn't say much of anything I could understand. My analyzer told me it was most likely speaking an ancient form of Pech but it couldn't translate properly--only caught a handful of words, like dead, god, world, and so on. Which wasn't much help because the blabbing bastard wouldn't stop screaming. Sounded like a locust, or really like a hundred locusts, all doing whatever it is they do to produce that god-forsaken screeching.

And then the other skeletons started chattering as well, flapping their bony arms around like agitated referees. I could feel my brainwaves growing nervous behind me as the chorus of dead, screeching voices filled the cavern. The new voices were being translated as repeating "sacred sex," which I thought must've been a mistake. The lights all glowed brighter, each skull was so bright it was almost white, and the skeletons got louder and louder. I couldn't believe what was happening. It was genuinely the strangest thing I had ever witnessed--and I had watched the moon explode.

I just stood back and watched. Other than the wailing they didn't seem to be doing anything. They were certainly pissed as hell, shaking and thrashing about, but they were still bound by their skulls, pinned to the crystal stalagmites. I needed someone to tell me what I was looking at. It was certainly something very interesting. Something potentially very important. But something far above my realm of understanding. My first instinct was to just level the place, fill those yapping old-timers with lead, shatter the spikes, and be on my way.

But I didn't--I thought better of it, and I'm glad I did. I called my contact at the VRC, Wilson. I had a feeling he would be interested, and I was accurate in that assessment.

032:

What is intelligence anyway?

It was theorized, though not by me, that intelligence wouldn't matter to someone without control of their brain. The idea was that without a conscious driver, the individual could not utilize knowledge or mental connection. The theory suggested that all manner of logic and deduction would have to be done first outside the brain, and then broken into bite-size, manageable chunks of information for instructional delivery.

This was proven to be categorically false. Not only were intellect and knowledge incredibly important pieces of the mental control puzzle, they were mandatory components. A brain from a corpse could be controlled electrically, but regression occurred at the cellular level due to lack of oxygenated blood. Even thirty seconds after death was too late, causing irreversible damage and leaving the brain inert. No manner of instruction could cause an inert brain to function. We eventually fixed this with rubellite resuscitators, allowing us to reinvigorate dead brains, but that's another study entirely.

The mind you were delivering instructions to needed to understand what you were saying. It needed to have those established neuron pathways, previous knowledge, and it needed to be able to form new ones--the quicker it formed those connections, or looped back onto connections it had previously formed, the more intellectually sound the brain was believed to be. In short, though: the brain had to be alive. We did numerous tests on brains from a wide pool of differing backgrounds, leading us to believe the most healthy and responsive brains were in the 18-32 age range, old enough to come with some foundation of established experiences and knowledge, but young enough to undergo drastic changes without breaking.

The instruction delivery process was far simpler than we initially thought as well: you just had to speak to the brain, as if it were a person, and most of the time it would work out what you meant all on its own. The theory proposed by my peers was not only incorrect, but inverse--the brains actually needed to think about their instructions to carry them out. They needed a foundation, a database, of knowledge to compare our query to. These little details were crucial in developing the neural stage III signal repeater to be used in the Institute's army, and the study as a whole turned out to be very valuable when we eventually began exploring how to inseminate knowledge into brains. Memory alteration was something we were familiar with, but adding new knowledge entirely was stuff of myth.

Until we found the milkworms.

033:

So you must remember the destabilization plague of 2022. Some kind of new pathogen grew to enjoy the current we were feeding into our brain stems and took up residence, often blossoming, in many forest canopy complexes. It was causing slow, traumatic disconnects in its victims--this left residual ghost-like aberrations of their psyche on the network, sometimes permanently. People were getting fractured in droves. That led to rampant subconscious control incidents across America with startling new symptoms of homicide and cannibalistic tendencies.

Then there was the birth of waste wraiths and subsequent loss of human life they caused in 2023. The only way I can think to describe them is as a kind of staticky, half-visible bear that didn't really exist, but would kill immediately whenever overlapping someone--it can't really be considered contact since it passes directly through you. Or over you. It's hard to explain.

And obviously you were living in witness of the skid brainsports and the horrific barbarism it warped into humanity in 2024. We were able to get the destabilization plague under control with regular disconnects and upping sanitation, and similar to other Ko-generated life forms, the waste wraiths were bumped out of dissonance by heavy bursts of gamma radiation, which seems to be holding their appearances at bay. But the brainsports aren't going away any time soon. The people love it. And what are we if not the people?

The years just kept getting darker. Only ever darker, tumbling into this future. But I've learned how that darkness is subjective, and those years we perceived with such terror now seem almost perfect in comparison.

034:

I stepped into the cave, squinting into the low-light while I waited for the others. It smelled like ancient, stale amalgamations of musk and stagnant water. I had only been outside America once before, and didn't expect to leave again at all. I certainly never thought I'd find myself in a cavern in Honduras. The cave was shaking--lightly vibrating in pulses as if a concert were happening under us, but there was no music, only the far off wailing of what must be Eoghan's screaming dead men.

He joined me with his brainwaves in tow, followed by Philip.

"You ready?" Eoghan smiled.

"Because this shit is nuts."

I nodded, not quite sure if I meant it. He led the way and we followed, descending into the dark. The noise grew louder--it was nails on a chalkboard, squealing brakes, screaming children, all of those cliches piled up in a discordant orchestra of inhuman howling. From uneven room to room, and then into a kind of corridor that curved a bit and took a steep turn down, the rumbling and the screaming both grew in intensity. And then we finally reached the ossuary, which radiated blue and purple light from below--the walls and floors subtly shifted from limestone into a gem-like material, glimmering and flickering in the lights like hot glass. I was immediately reminded of a hotel pool, lit from below and casting strange reflective shadows above.

The dead men were just as Eoghan said, all flapping around like trapped animals, yelling over each other. And again, just as Eoghan said, they were pinned by their necks on glowing, crystal stalagmites. The spikes grew intensely bright at the tips, like uncovered light bulbs. I wanted to get closer, but couldn't safely do so without fear of getting smashed in the head by one of the flailing dead.

"I need to get closer. I want to inspect the skull. But do not remove it from the stalagmite. That is very important."

"Can we just cut the body off?"

"I--" I had no idea. "I have no idea."

"Worth a shot, I guess."

He unsheathed a knife from his belt and bent down to the closest corpse, the one on the far left of the circle. It scraped his face with a swinging bony elbow, so he held up his arms as a wall, quickly ducked in, and pushed his knife through the spine, severing it. The body fell limp, but then began floating away as if under water, bumping into the wall and free-spinning in the air above us. The skull still glowed and chattered away on its spike.

"Interesting."

It twisted around a bit before getting lodged in between two jutting rocks on the ceiling, and then it just stuck there, as if it was on the ground.

"Well, get to it." Eoghan pointed his knife at the skull.

I crouched down and immediately saw it--through a hole the skull I could make out pink flesh. It had a brain in it. A real, living brain.

035:

The docks, which extended into the dry lakebed, were full with heaps of dead, rotting fish. Every so often some more fish would fall free from the floating ball of lakewater above and hit the ground with loud splats. Philip held up his excisor and fired it in a few short bursts, resounding shrieks throughout the chaasm. The wailing echoed off the mansion and the college like an eerie tornado siren. There was no response, save the irritated flapping and squealing of a swastrich somewhere nearby.

"Clear." Philip holstered the excisor. "Campus now?"

I eyed the skyline.

"I suppose."

Zeinhaert's shattered projection was flickering in random colors across the black sky, flashing between showing his wrists and his furrowed brow. He was smiling.

I no longer enjoyed visiting Zeinhaert's chaasm--being in any chaasm where the host had died was strange enough, but this was the most complex chaasm on the network, and had more mental organisms than any others. Not to mention it was once a place of peace. And learning. And discovery. Now it had become a place of death. Decay. Collapse.

We had already covered most of the streets outside, and avoided contact with a dozen different fractured organisms, but still had to sweep inside a few buildings, and the forest around town. This was problematic, as three of the central college buildings had begun intersecting a year prior, and were now entirely overlapping. They rotated at different speeds and directions, making entering or exiting a serious risk--in my last venture here I witnessed a patron walk through the front doors; as soon as she did some other wall swung around, phasing through the hallway, and blocked her way. When she turned to come back the doors disappeared behind another rotating building. She was presumably squished, causing forced extraction.

Now we had to try to enter it, and this time was far more unstable than before. We moved through various streets named after murder mystery authors to make our way to the campus grounds. I crossed the threshold into the courtyard and immediately plunked my foot down into a thick pool, nearly falling over. I touched my fingers to my boot and sniffed it: wet paint, which was flowing in thick, goopy streams from the lecture hall. It had shrunk to half its size and the doorframe had withdrawn entirely. The hall was melting like ice cream, and had spread across the entire courtyard in runny pools of red bricks and white siding. There was no way in. If anyone was inside there was no way we could get them out.

"Lecture hall's out." Philip chuckled and lifted his excisor, letting off a short burst.

"Yeah. Centers are all that's left."

"And the dining hall." He corrected me.

"Ah. And the dining hall."

We continued through the thick paint puddles and muck and came to a stop before the student centers, now all hybridized together into a pulsating, rotating weaving of brick and stone. One of the buildings, the Meerkat Center, was wobbling around much quicker than I expected--the front doors whizzed by every few seconds.

"God dammit. No way we can get in."

"I guess that's that." Philip turned to the courtyard.

The usually squat red-brick dining hall had lifted off the ground and elongated upwards into the sky like stretched taffy--it spun and shook slowly like wind-chimes in a breeze. A rope ladder hung down from the back steps.

"See that?" He pointed to the ladder.

"I do."

We took yet another trip across the courtyard paint-swamp; my wet foot reminded me to take care in avoiding the deeper looking puddles. The rope ladder swung by just as we reached it, so I grabbed hold and pulled myself up. It swung away as I climbed, so Philip waited for it to swing by again. We mounted the small back stoop and ducked through the warped back door, which was crooked and shrunken, and entered an equally crooked and shrunken hallway.

"Just check the main room and we'll go. I'll check the side rooms."

He bumbled away, letting out small bursts from the excisor. It rang hollow and tinny like we were inside a massive soup can. I checked each of the rooms, when the doors would open at least. All empty. Luckily no organisms had taken up residence.

"Wilson!"

Philip's voice echoed down the hallway, tinged with--was it worry? I ran back into the hall and cut hard toward his voice; I couldn't hear anything over my boots slapping the floor tiles. The double doors to the dining room were open, and I could barely make out Philip standing in the center next to someone else. I slowed down and moved up next to him. They were talking about H.R. Pufnstuf.

"--and so it's really a story all about the talking flute, Jimmy doesn't really matter at all and it doesn't even matter if he gets home anyway, I don't know why Witchiepoo didn't just kill him and take it--"

It was a squat man in fancy dress, about three feet tall, yammering on and on without even stopping to breathe--a mental organism.

"At least it wasn't a dragon." Philip smiled at me.

We made our quick excuses to the man, which surely mattered only to us as he didn't even stop to acknowledge our departure, and left through the hall we came in. All that remained was the large forest that surrounded town. I was finally starting to relax a bit--we were almost finished.

The walk to the treeline was easy enough, only having to avoid the strange basketball-sized holes in the grass that lead to nowhere. Philip held up the excisor and fired off a continuous burst as we reached the trees and began to circle the perimeter. No response, just as before. I knew coming in that the trip would probably be for nothing, but you can't ever be sure. I didn't want someone else to lose their sanity just because I was afraid of losing mine.

And then ahead of us a tree burst into flames and began changing scale, shrinking down to the height of a mouse and then expanding rapidly back to full size.

"What the--" Philip couldn't even get his words out before the thing appeared.

Sulking from behind the burning tree on all fours, it crouched down and eyed us.

A dragon.

036:

These braindead dogfish wouldn't know or care about an apocalypse even if you grabbed their skull with both hands and shoved them face-first into it.

We knew the clock glitch was coming--Institute systems were adjusted to a four-digit year on the clock and in programming many years prior to 1999--yet most of the world took their time with updates. For whatever reason, be it greed, ignorance, laziness, what have you, whenever December 31st rolled around they were still utilizing old models. Most of these produced only minor issues; trains ran late with scheduling issues, airport lines were longer due to baggage software malfunctions, hospitals sent incorrect test results, and so on.

But a select few system malfunctions around the globe caused critical issues, and even though we took precautions, we weren't immune. Though we created and launched the gravity-bound rotational cube that took the place of our moon, we had to rely on third-party support for navigational satellites. Those satellites were affected by the clock glitch, preventing proper positioning data from being sent to the cube. It's rotation immediately stopped for an hour, and when it started back up it was rotating in the opposite direction. We had the issue fixed within a few hours, but tidal force inversion had already occurred, wreaking havoc globally. Aside from a few major floods and isolated tidal waves, there were no long-lasting ramifications. We got lucky and caught it quickly enough.

We did not catch the nuclear issues however, though I doubt we could've done anything about it anyway. Twenty-five nuclear power plants experienced runaway nuclear chain reactions in Russia alone--preventative maintenance test scheduling in the programming was reliant upon a two-digit year, and on January 1st the programming automatically began conducting test regimens on steam turbines during normal reactor operations. This led to a catastrophic number of fizzle events all throughout Russia. The steam turbines produced minor heat explosions, which in turn caused small nuclear explosions within the reactor cores. Most nuclear power plants globally were affected in some way, though not all suffered fizzle events or incidents as severe as Russia.

The entire western front of Russia was left an irradiated mess. The people were forced to escape to Europe or move east into less populated territory. Several other radiation zone hotspots were created from facility shutdowns around the world including Japan, Germany, China, America, and so on. Radiation contamination in the ground and water will stay in unhealthy territory for decades, until all the radioactive isotopes have time to decay naturally. The power hit was substantial as well; a third of the world's electricity generation disappeared over the course of twenty-four hours, leaving us scrambling to pick up the pieces. When it was viable, we funded pop-up power plants

outside major cities that had been reliant on malfunctioned plants, which mitigated some of the issues.

We've presented the idea of radiation shielded zones in areas least impacted by the global fallout, complete with blueprints and extensive planning, but even years after the incident we have yet to receive government approval. They caused the god damned problem and now they're twiddling their thumbs in board rooms, arguing like children about whether they should try to fix it. This is yet another drawback from being beholden to the spineless apes we give power.

I can only hope the pylon project delivers the results I expect.

And then we'll all get together and we'll have a talk.

037:

It took those pencil eating bastards thirty years to figure out "brainwave modulation." Their nano-arranger tech was impressive though; once the arrangers entered the brain they could generate oscillations that would overwrite or alter neuron-based oscillatory activity. At first they would simply wreck the brain of anyone or anything they interacted with, scrambling thoughts and emotions and memories into random insanity. But after decades of fine tuning and research they were finally able to convince a mouse to dislike cheese. And that was the first domino.

Ten years later and modulation tech has finally been deployed in the real world. It's fairly short range in use, over a mile out and the nano-arrangers stop responding to input, but it's already proven to be a useful tool in mind alteration applications. It's a pain in the ass to do on a large scale, but as a proof of concept we set out to convince America that Ed Sullivan was a woman. Weird idea, wasn't mine. The feat was made possible by delivering arranger instructions via low-flying planes, which meant we had to fly over pretty much every city in the country. It worked though. After a week most of America thought Ed Sullivan was a woman. I think he lost his show after that.

It only works for smaller or more generalized mental details--we couldn't convince someone that they were something they weren't, or tell someone to kill someone else. Not without a little finesse. A slight bit of surgery was required for that. We needed something to pass signals back and forth between host and client. This was achieved via a prototype neuron signal forwarder designed by a head mentologist at the VRC. We simply replaced the hippocampus with this neat little device and then pumped the subject body full of nano-arrangers. Viola. Human robot. They don't like being called that, which is a bummer because I really wanted a sci-fi sounding name like that, so I've settled on calling them brainwaves. Their response to that has been fairly neutral. I don't know why it matters, to be honest. Maybe part of me is afraid they'll snap our control and wake up one day, and then just murder me in my office.

The brainwaves still think and feel and live, but have no control over themselves. We send instructions via standard arranger modulation, and regardless of the thought, or action, or emotion you signal, the subject will comply. I got myself a special little arranger command unit installed right above my left ear. Short-range instructor. It works wonders. I have a team of them at my back all the time now.

The applications for this technology are seemingly limitless.

038:

Wilson arrived late, as usual, and tossed his gloves as he sat down. They hit the edge of the table and fell off. I put down the newspaper.

"Elegant. How's the bookman?"

Wilson held up his finger and did a little half-wave motion, looking around.

"Bad. He's dead. Well--basically."

"Dead? Like--dead, dead?"

"Not yet, but he will be--" He broke away as the waitress approached.

"Yes, hi, I'd like an orange juice and toast please."

"Anything else?"

She asked if he wanted anything else, as if he ever would.

"No, thanks--anyway, yes. Metal plate in his skull. Chassis fried him. I'm heading to the airport straight after this."

"That is bad."

I wanted to know the status of the chaasm, but the man had just--well, it didn't seem right. The waitress returned and slid Wilson's orange juice and toast across the table.

"Chaasm actually generated."

He tore a slice of toast and shoved half in his mouth, chewing loudly.

"Nod corredly, of coure."

"Please finish chewing." I laughed.

He swallowed the first slice and moved on to the second, breaking with a sip of orange juice.

"Not correctly. I have no idea what we've created. We're going to go in and take a look. Seems only right since it's all that's left of him."

"Alright." I nodded. "And you need something from me?"

"Keep an eye on the project." His face grew serious. "Dad's already done and the child's nearly finished with prep. I just want you to monitor his numbers until I get back. If he pops early just run the startup and get him acclimated to the chassis."

"Can do."

He stood from the table and gulped down the last of his orange juice.

"Thanks, Zeinhaert."

He waved as he pushed through the door.

I looked down and saw his gloves on the ground near his chair.

039:

Arthur looked us up and down, puzzling over our presence. Who knows how long his perception had made the last few hours within his chaasm feel? He could've been here for days. Years.

"Wait--Arthur?" Philip eyed me. "Where's George?"

"Listen," I grabbed his arm and pulled him aside. "I believe this is George. Arthur isn't real--he's the main character in George's novels."

Philip's eyes widened.

"Oh. Oh no."

"Arthur, do you remember anything from before this? Do you remember George?"

"What?" His face contorted with disgust. "My father will be here soon. Please leave."

The house shook violently and then split in two, and the wooden floor between us stretched to a thousand meters in an instant, zipping Arthur away and issuing wooden cracking and snapping as it grew. Braids of messy brown hair extended from nowhere and wound together tightly into a wall, blocking our path. There were several other solid braids of hair interspersed throughout the hallway, extending like ropes to bar our way.

"You really have a way with words, Wilson."

Philip laughed and looked over at the intern, who had gone pale white since we came in the front door.

"Dammit." I sighed.

"Don't worry Medy, we'll be fine."

But George was going to be difficult.

"Yeah, Medy. This is nothing. You should've seen the guy who thought he was a vampire. Whole chaasm was a castle and the guy wouldn't leave the top tower. Looked like Gary Oldman."

Medy spoke for the first time since we entered the chaasm.

"W-wow. That sounds awful."

"It was." I cut in. "We actually lost two employees. He drank their blood and they were force extracted. Psychically fractured both."

Medy pressed her lips together, obviously growing more worried.

"This guy--George. He's harmless. Definitely fractured, but harmless. No need to worry. We'll be out in a few hours, tops. Come on, let's go."

Medy nodded and briskly moved to my side.

"So, is it really George at all then?" Philip asked.

"Not sure. Probably partly. But it sure doesn't seem like it. Look at this."

I held my flashlight up to a beam of hair.

"Hair? Why hair?"

"Arthur is the son of a barber. And I suspect George may be as well."

"So we're looking at trauma. A fictional character's trauma."

Philip climbed over another bundle, and I followed.

"No, I don't think so."

I slowed down to peer out of the new gaping hole in the wall. I could see the street and the barbershops outside, and complete blackness below. The light bulb in the sky was still swinging, painting the chasm in strange images of light and then dark and then light again.

"I think this is real trauma. I can't say for sure, but I don't think a fictional character could have such strong effects on a living consciousness in this way. Maybe I'm wrong."

"C-could it be--" Medy piped in. "No, nevermind."

"What? Go on."

"Well, I was just going to ask," She was very nervous. "Could it be that he thinks he's Arthur now to hide from being George? That would lend the trauma theory credit."

I smiled at her.

"Excellent hypothesis. It's possible. Could be something terrible happened to him and he's unconsciously running from it. Even in death."

We reached the wall of hair. I put my hand out to feel it--solid like stone, and sticky to the touch. I pried my hand away, and--where were my gloves? Didn't I have them when I strapped in? Philip raised up his rod.

"I can try to shatter it."

"Go for it."

I stepped back and motioned for Medy to do the same. He slammed the rod against the hair, and it reacted, glowing bright orange and then catching fire. It burned away. Medy's eyes grew wide with surprise.

"Wow."

"Never seen expungement?" Philip asked.

"Doesn't always work, but it's cool as hell when it does. One time I hit a wall with it and fell through the damned floor. Lucky I didn't break my neck or fall forever or something."

She watched the hair fizzle away in small puffs of smoke.

"How does it work?"

"Well, like us, it doesn't really exist. It's just some code running on the servers back at the forest. We can try it, and sometimes it works, but chausms don't like being tinkered with unless you're the host. Sometimes it just doesn't work."

"And," I interjected. "It's dependent on the strength of the host. George is in a hospital bed right now, disconnected. This is his personality form and it's rather weak. So voila, it worked."

She blinked and gave a slight nod.

The front door slammed shut behind us, which I found odd considering I watched it sink into the floor.

"ARTHUR!"

A man's rage-filled voice bellowed down the hallway.

040:

Somehow the energy pulsing through the stalagmites kept their brains alive inside their dead skulls for an impossible length of time. The gem material was obviously conductive, as I was getting minor readings on my voltmeter when I measured across the tip of the stalagmite.

I removed the flapping head from the spike, having to twist and tug a bit to break it free. It stopped chattering--the brain immediately melted into putty and leaked from the skull. The pinkish goop dried up entirely before it hit the ground, cascading into a small pile of pink dust. Its corpse fell from the ceiling and clattered on the floor. The other skeletons stopped flailing and eyed the corpse; they all began a new chant, slowly and with deep voices.

"What the hell?" Eoghan lit a cigarette.

"The brains are being kept alive by this current. I have no idea what this is, but I'd like to investigate further. We need some way to bottle this energy."

He took a long drag, blowing smoke toward the chanting dead men.

"What is it?"

I touched my finger to the stalagmite. It was cold. Smooth.

"Some kind of electrical energy. This was embedded in the brain. Deep. Straight through the cerebellum and into the temporal lobe, judging by its height."

"Maybe we could use a wire?"

"A wire--no, how could we possibly--" I paused, reconsidering.

"Actually. Yes. If we set up here. In this cave. Just a few pieces of equipment."

"Can do. Give me a list."

Eoghan looked back at his soldiers and they all turned about-face and marched out of the ossuary.

041:

Mr. Niu extinguished the small candle, unlatched the six padlocks on the cupboard, and then opened the thin door, spilling in light from the kitchen. He took a step and then looked back at me, just staring for what felt like an hour.

"Remember what I say. This will not be easy. Not fun. Okay?"

His frown almost had an accent.

"I remember." I lied.

We walked into the kitchen, now completely trashed by the roamers. Mr. Niu grabbed a newspaper and rolled it up tightly. He checked a few drawers and shelves, lightly sifting through the junk for something.

He handed me a can of pickled lettuce.

"Here. Weapon."

"I don't--" I tried to protest. I had a gun anyway.

"Listen. Carry this. I know you have gun, back waistband. Stick out like, what is it-- wiener? Gun will not work here."

"Like a sore thumb." I corrected him. "And a gun works anywhere."

He grabbed my arm.

"No. Eoghan. I am serious. You must listen. Gun will not work. Understand."

Something about the weird look in his eye almost made me believe him. He was pleading, almost begging. But I didn't believe him at all; of course a gun would work. I decided to go along, just to make him happy.

"Okay."

I took the can.

042:

Eoghan's men filed in toting the remaining pieces of equipment: the compact fMRI tube and monitors, one of my computers, various probes and instruments, and two old metal folding chairs. They had delivered a conduit to a series of gas generators running outside the mouth of the cave, carrying in much more power than was necessary.

Eoghan entered and sent his men to guard.

"All set. That MRI machine was a real pain in the ass to get out here. Had to fly a prototype in from Germany."

"Thank you. It's critical for this. Let me get it all going. There are at least two tests I want to run tonight."

I began plugging various machinery into the oval outlet hub and arranging my work area.

"We've got till whenever." He thumbed over his shoulder. "These yips are easy to roll over. Stuffed one guy and now the whole town is shitting their britches, tossing food at us and praying and all that."

"I suppose that's... Good. Give me a moment."

Eoghan nodded and I got back to work. I didn't care for the way he regarded people--human life.

Prepping the equipment was time consuming, and the knife hinges on the fMRI tube were jammed, which took nearly twenty minutes and an entire can of WD-40 to pry loose, but with everything in place I finally began the testing. The first test was the most important: run one of the skeletons through the fMRI.

"Eoghan, can you dispose of another body?"

He approached the skeleton second to the left in the circle, near the empty stalagmite, and quickly dispatched the body at the neck with his knife. It floated up to the ceiling, spilling dust and spinning in mid-air just like before. The head still raged on the spike, yammering its chant. I approached and carefully slid the fMRI tube over it, and then moved to the machine and began calibrating for the scan. As soon as the machine clunked on the skull went silent and fell limp on the spike. It looked asleep. I began the imaging--it would take a while to pull enough images for analysis, so I proceeded to the small metal table and sat down.

"This is gonna be a while. Care for cards?"

Eoghan beamed and pulled a chair over.

"Absolutely. What's the game?"

I pulled the deck from my inside coat pocket.

"Svoi Kozyri. Know it?"

043:

I have been chugging cough syrup. Every day for almost a month.

I can't stand the thick, molasses-like coating in leaves in my mouth, or the strong chemical stench it gives off, but all its negatives are worth the benefits I gain.

It helps with the symptoms of my fracturing. It makes the periods where I can't focus much shorter and helps me to be more present.

Without the syrup it goes... goopy.

I constructed a plan for survival. Drink a bottle a day, in equal quantities. It worked until my body developed a higher tolerance to the chemicals in the syrup. And so I doubled to two bottles. I narrowed it down to just the psychoactive component: dextromethorphan. And then I found bottles with a higher concentration. And then I found pills with nothing but dextromethorphan. They were much easier to take. But I'll never get used to the queasiness I get from a belly full of pills.

The more I take, the clearer my mind becomes. I can't imagine the damage I'm causing to my body, but I need to be sober--no, sane. Certainly not sober.

I'm having an issue with eating food. My teeth hurt.

I haven't been able to sleep for long periods, but when I do I keep having the same very vivid dream. When it starts I wake up in a chaasm. Eoghan's chaasm. But it's got that ossuary in the cave from Honduras, and all those skeleton bodies are floating like we're in space, surrounded by dust, but the skulls are still on their spikes chanting, and Eoghan's in the middle, impaled through his skull on the biggest stalagmite.

Laughing. As loud as anything I've ever heard.

Blood pours from his mouth. His eyes.

His features go dark as his laughing distorts, twisting into mad cackling, growing louder and louder and more demented.

And then I wake up.

044:

I've been called wise. They say I'm full of wisdom. I think they're mistaking knowledge for wisdom. Wisdom is a canned principle, marked by most only with the passage of time, the acclimation of facts and anecdotes. But I disagree with that. I've met wise folks. And they were always wise. It's something you're born with, that rattles around in the back of your skull all through your life. Some kind of innate knowing. Intuition. Maybe they're all just words for the same thing. I keep thinking about intelligence. About what someone smarter than me would do in my position. Because I'm afraid I'm not cut out for this.

I wish I was wise. Like Wilson, like anyone else. I wish I could have seen this coming. The boy is dead. The dad doesn't know--he's still in the chaasm. And Wilson is off in some bookman's mindspace several states away. It all happened so fast.

The boy got acclimated to the chassis two weeks ago. The scans were good. Tests were good. He was ready. I thought he was ready. The dad started first and then the boy was joined in a bit later, integrating seamlessly into the deployment. Their chaasm generated fine--I even ran a low bandwidth transfer and broke it into chunks so they could do it over multiple days. He was fine until we tried to enter him into the chaasm. He had a heart attack. An eight year old. Maybe hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, maybe something else.

Either way he's dead. And I have no idea what to do.

045:

We split up at the trees--Philip ran for the courtyard and I cut back through the mansion. The dragon cat thing had veered away, bumbling around in the sky. It's furry scales let it slide through the dark undetected, so I had absolutely no idea where it went. Our plan was to run around opposite edges of the chaasm and meet back at the entry site so we could disconnect.

But I had been in the foyer for twenty minutes and Philip still hadn't shown up.

I could still hear the beast's sick purring echoing around the chaasm. This was the largest dragon I'd ever seen here before--I thought it might be the same one from my previous visit, except now it had grown to the size of a city bus. The last one was as big as a bear. But they shared the same pale yellow coat with white stripes. If it was the same dragon then there was no point speculating as to it's motive. It killed my good friend Marlise.

We disabled reentry into the chaasm after that, but that doesn't eject the current inhabitants, so couldn't disconnect without a final sweep. And I put it off. Part of me wanted to say goodbye, or maybe I was just in denial of the fact that I couldn't. Zeinhaert was gone this time just like most of my other visits, shattered and broken in the sky. And it didn't seem like he was coming back again. A familiar voice called out.

"Wilson."

"Philip?" I squinted in the dark.

"I never was Philip, was I?"

Zeinhaert appeared before me, or at least part of him. His transparent yellow torso floated a few feet off the ground. He was here, just as I was sure he wouldn't be. It was bittersweet.

"Zeinhaert. How are you?"

I missed him dearly. But I didn't want to have this talk. I didn't want to say goodbye.

"I'm not so good, I fear." He looked down. "I suppose seeing you again means this is the end. But how are you?"

"I'm--not so great either. Philip seems to be stuck out there. We were chased by one of those damned dragons."

"Cagons." Zeinhaert smiled. "They're sweet. Mostly. Except Bernard really. And his little sister. Georgia? Gertrude? A 'g' name, I'm sure. Where was he?"

"Philip? With me."

I smiled too despite everything. Zeinhaert was the same flamboyant child at heart I always knew. And more stable now than he had been all year. Since... Then.

"No, Bernard."

He shimmered a little, and for a second I could see his legs. Funny how these little miscommunications still occurred, even across worlds, in death. My smile faded.

"We saw him at the tree line near the dining hall. Came out of the forest and flew above us. We split up. Philip ran through the campus. I came through the mansion."

"I can't feel Philip here, Wilson." Zeinhaert's face grew worried. "I can sense Bernard. He's close. Not moving. But I can't feel Philip."

"You're sure? I didn't think you still had access to chaasm management."

He moved closer and seemed to shake as he spoke.

"Partially. I can see inhabitants. I can see you. I am weaker every day. But I give in to the lapse periods to save strength. My worry was that I would miss you while I was out. I almost did. I am glad to see you, Wilson. Thank you for this life. This opportunity. I'm sure I'll miss being Zeinhaert as much as the real me."

His words pelted a stinging lump in my throat, and my eyes began to burn. I tried my best not to cry.

"I will miss you, Zeinhaert. Please forgive me."

"I wasn't there when I died. That wasn't me and all I know is what you've told me. There is nothing for me to forgive. Philip is out, Wilson. You need to leave. See to his corporeal. He may not have long left."

"You're sure he's not here?"

He shook his head, hitching a bit when turning either direction.

"Alright. I'll go. But if he's still connected I'm coming back."

"Goodbye, Wilson."

Zeinhaert gave a small wave, and then broke into vertical shafts of light and flickered away.

"Goodbye."

046:

Humanity just recently got a second wind.

The machinery we had discovered in the wreck bore many more complicated, mythic anomalies than we initially assumed--one of those complications was a type of stasis generation by a small microwave-looking metal box. It constantly produced a stasis field six inches in diameter which hovered just above the box. Animals and insects placed within this field would be completely frozen at the cellular level until removed, though most didn't survive removal--the fingers on my left hand are a bit younger than the rest of my body from dropping the test subjects into the field. Entering the field is a very strange sensation, colder than anything I've ever felt, but not exactly painful. It was like part of me became stone.

We assumed power was being supplied to the box in some manner similar to the other devices we found, but when removed from the wreck for extensive testing it continued to function. It took a week to pry the box open--there were seams, but no screws or weld-lines. We're still not entirely sure how it was held together. Once we got a look inside it became evidently clear that we didn't understand even the most basic principles that allowed it to function. The box was empty save a single coil of glass wire and what looked to be a human umbilical cord. Replicating the wiring scheme through fiber splicing and additional umbilical cords amplifies the effect, increasing the size of the field.

Cellular stasis not only instantly isolates and freezes biological function, it also prolongs existence outside the stasis chamber. If used regularly, one could expect a dramatically increased lifespan, since our theory is that it could be used rather effectively as a sleep substitute. It would essentially double time of life. We quickly moved into human testing.

G was the first successful test subject. A and B failed outright due to issues with stasis field placement--it didn't completely cover the brain, and so they were partially conscious as their brain attempted to pass blood into the stasis field. Those unfrozen areas of brain were deadened and the subjects became vegetative. C went down okay, but wouldn't come back up. No pulse. So then we had to restrict health qualifications significantly. D, E, and F were then all deemed unfit for the testing and were released. G was internal; a willing participant, and was more than qualified.

The patient went down and came back up eight hours later with no issues, like after a restful sleep. G was quoted as saying the experience was, "refreshing," and "empowering." These results were promising.

We've since relocated G into a chamber outfitted with the stasis module for long term deployment. We're starting at two days, and then four. By next week we'll have it up to

seven days. Assuming there are no issues up to that point, by the end of the month we'll begin G in stasis for a year.

The future is a door we don't know how to open. We just have to find out where the handle is.

047:

The burly, tall figure at the front door came charging toward us, swaying unevenly. His shoulders spanned the width of a car, and his face poured tight, curly hair from every orifice. He was rambling under his breath, repeating something. I couldn't look away from his yellow eyes. They seemed to glow in the dark. He was staring through me.

I motioned to the edge of the walkway.

"Just move."

Philip and I moved to the side, but Medy stayed in place. I put my hand on her shoulder. She was just staring at him. I squeezed.

"Medy. Come on."

She reluctantly tore her gaze away and met mine. Her expression was blank, and then shifted between confusion, recognition, fear, and realization, all in a flash.

"I've told you not to come in here." The man scornfully whispered to himself.

He pushed passed as if he didn't see us, and his long-braided hair flowed behind him like it hung on a slow breeze, carelessly drifting in the air. I breathed a sigh of relief, realizing I hadn't been breathing at all.

Philip bent over and rested on his knees. "What the hell? Thought for a second--"

"That would be the father. He screamed Arthur's name. I figured this was personal."

"W-what was that?" Medy asked.

She was still standing behind us, near the edge of the wooden path.

"An organism. A kind of living being, built from George's consciousness. Like the ones in Zeinhaert's chaasm."

She regained enough composure to raise an eyebrow.

"There are organisms in Zeinhaert's chaasm? Who?"

"All of those animals, and even a few teachers, were organisms birthed from Zeinhaert's mind. This one here--Arthur's dad--was born from George's mind. And he's broken. Organisms fracture along with the host and warp in a number of ways. You must've slept through that lesson."

"What kind of warping is this?"

Medy focused on the academia to maintain balance. I admired that.

"I can't say." I waved her over. "Not until we see more. Let's go. Focus on his mannerisms. Is he present, or is he acting out something from long ago? Is he able to

hold a conversation? Can he even acknowledge you? Is he repeating the same actions over and over? What is he saying? Answers to these will help us determine what's occurring within his psyche, and potentially what kind of ailment is afflicting George's chaum as a whole."

"We can find out what's wrong with George's chaum?"

We were reaching the end of the path, which led directly to a thin spiral staircase, so I slowed down to finish.

"Yes. But we probably can't fix him. This isn't a case of illness or messy feelings--his chaum was corrupted during generation. This whole place could just be a chunk of memories, or a single one, or half of one, or none at all. Corruption is fairly random and changes forms from mind to mind. We're lucky it was stable enough to enter at all. Come on, let's go upstairs and find out."

She nodded and we began up the spiral staircase, which somehow flipped around upside down as we climbed. We ended up stepping off the top step onto the ceiling of the second floor.

Arthur and his dad were below us, oriented normally on the ground. His dad was upset, but had an unsettling, reserved edge to his voice.

"What were you doing up here, Arthur?"

"I--"

Arthur began but was immediately sucker-punched in the gut. He uttered a small squeak as he doubled over with a resounding clap.

His dad was whispering now. Like the loud, throaty whisper grandmothers use in church. He grabbed Arthur by the throat.

"You don't come up here. You know you don't come up here. I've told you. You're just like her and you won't listen to me. This is the last time, Arthur."

In one motion, he pulled a barber's razor from his belt and slashed Arthur across the cheek.

"No!" Medy shouted out, but Arthur's dad didn't react.

"And there's one answer." I took a step forward. "Unresponsive. Isolated."

Arthur's dad dragged him into a room and slammed the door. Blood trails stained the floor. Not just recent blood stains either--the floor was caked in layers of dried blood, all with drag marks like these new ones.

"Look at the floor." I pointed up to the blood. "That's quite a bit of dried blood. I'm thinking he's in a loop. That trauma theory is looking very plausible, Medy."

“He’s doing the same thing over again?”

“Yep. He’s caught in a traumatic memory. The dad is most likely a ghost organism. He probably would’ve phased right through us downstairs.”

“We still can’t confirm that for sure,” I elaborated. “So we’ll want to take care here. But it certainly seems that way.”

Philip peered down the stairs, lost in thought, before turning back and eyeing the closed door. He moved to it and stretched up, grasping for the handle.

“Wilson, come let me stand on your back. I can almost reach it.”

I bent down near the wall and braced against the doorframe. Philip climbed up and just barely reached the knob, flinging the door open wide. He jumped up over the top of the threshold and then offered me his hand; I climbed in, and helped Medy in turn. We looked up at the room. Down, but up for us.

Arthur was unconscious on a table below while his father rummaged through shelves and drawers around the room. There were dozens of man-sized mounds of black hair covering the floor. Tight, black, curly hair, just like Arthur’s father’s.

“What are those? Are they--are those bodies?” Philip squinted up at the floor.

“I have no idea.” I absently responded, transfixed up at the scene below.

“Arthur!”

Medy yelled down. Arthur reacted, moving a bit and touching the cut on his face.

He rolled off the table and landed softly on the floor, eyeing his father, and carefully grabbed something from a shelf as he slowly snuck up behind.

His father tossed a pan, which hit Arthur’s leg and chattered on the floor. He slowly turned his wild, hairy head, and then Arthur was on top of him, stabbing him in the neck. He fell, choking and clutching the scissors in his throat.

Arthur screamed at him.

“You killed her! She didn’t want anything to do with it and you killed her!”

The dad’s yellow eyes went dim, and then hair quickly grew up from the floor like weeds in a garden, wrapping his corpse in a blanket of curls.

“And that’s another question answered.” Philip stared at the ground below.

“They are in fact bodies.”

048:

I saw it.

Last night.

A shadow in the clouds. Above the clouds. Each footstep was a rolling clap of thunder.
It walked over me and a little brain tugged behind, a kind of unctuous flesh orb,
beholden to It's will.

It rained all night.

Flooded my hut.

My plant died.

049:

The can was heavier than it should've been for pickled lettuce, and it kept getting heavier by the minute. It sloshed around while I walked, and each step felt like rolling the dice on whether it would pop open and soak my pants in ancient pickling brine.

The expiration date had smudged a bit, but it looked like it went bad six years ago. If I actually had to use it, best case scenario was that everyone in a ten-foot radius was getting drenched in rotten pickled lettuce.

We curved around a massive plaster domino and entered an alley facing steep stone steps that led down to a basement door. Mr. Niu stopped at the top of the steps.

"Do not talk. I will get us in."

"Alright, I'll cover you. With pickled lettuce."

"There is time for jokes. This not it."

He began descending the steps.

I followed closely behind. We reached the base and Mr. Niu knocked three times on the metal door, loudly, and in a kind of pattern. Knock, pause, knock, knock. The door snapped open a few inches, bound by a chain lock. A bald Chinese man stood on the other side holding a candle, scowling a brow lit by dim flame.

He spoke harshly, and in Mandarin. Mr. Niu responded smoothly like it was their first date. I caught a couple odd words but had no idea what they were saying. He slammed the door shut for a moment, and then swung it open wide.

And just like that, we were in. The crowded room was shrouded in dim, wavering light and cigarette smoke. Candles dotted small tables all around the place, and each of the occupied tables had a weichi set. The bald man quickly closed the door behind us.

It looked like a regular gaming club. A dozen or so people were crowded around a table in the back. This was going to be interesting.

"Why are we here?"

Mr. Niu turned back to me and got in close.

"Listen. Do not talk. You want to win the game? We need six Liubo piece. Here you win piece."

"I understand."

He nodded, satisfied. But I didn't really.

I understood we needed six Liubo pieces to win the game.

I understood each piece was themed after a different sect of the city.

I understood to gain each piece you had to win a different game.

And I understood that a bunch of thieves were waiting on the temple steps for some suckers like us to walk up with our shiny six pieces so they could gut us and take the glory for themselves.

I did not understand, however, why I couldn't talk.

"Èr."

He waved two fingers to a scrawny fellow behind a bar and moved to an empty table. The man had weirdly sized eyes that were way too far apart. He nodded and went into another room.

Mr. Niu led the way to a small two-person table and sat down, so I followed and pulled out the chair across from him.

"No," He shook his head. "Switch seat. Go to that table."

He nodded to an empty table nearby. Right, we wouldn't be playing each other. I moved over. The scrawny man returned with two weichi sets and placed one on each of our tables.

"English?"

He aimed his weird too-far-apart eyes at me, speaking with a surprisingly elegant accent. I dipped my head in acknowledgement.

"The rules are house. You enter ladder first game of next partner tournament. Elimination. You lose once: you out. You lose, partner win: you live but both still out. Both lose: you dead. You win after every other team is eliminated. Any questions?"

I had more than a few, none more pertinent than how to actually play weichi, but I decided against it. I didn't want to cause any more problems for Mr. Niu.

"Then wait please. Last game finish shortly."

He moved back to the bar. Mr. Niu leaned over.

"Your play is to not play. I play partner A and win, eliminate all partner A. You sit, not play, partner B does not lose, you do not win, but my win will move us forward. See? We knock half of partners out, then on next round we swap places. And then I play all your partner B, and we win piece. If any team still has two people in next round, same rule. You do not play."

"And I just sit darling pretty the whole time? You're very confident in your Weichi abilities. Is that even how it works? It seems lopsided. Why is not playing allowed?"

"No talking."

The crowd in the back grew rowdy, shouting and hollering at the game in progress. One of the players, a young Laotian man, screamed out, wailing and sobbing--he bolted from the table and frantically sprinted to the front. The bald man blocked his way.

A bowl-faced man with a red banana jumped up and raised his arms.

"Game!"

The crowd erupted into cheers and laughter.

A door in the back flung open, clattering against the wall, and a tall muscular American man wearing a spandex swimsuit came thundering out. He had a little nametag that read, "Chet"

Chet grabbed the young man by the hair, and pulled him to the back and through the door. Another solemn looking Laotian man followed them back. Chet slammed the door shut, which muffled the kid's hysteric screaming.

This went on for a few minutes, but was diminished and drowned by some pretty awful crunching and grinding noises. No one seemed to pay it any mind, and still kept on cheering and conversing loudly.

"Holy shit." I heard myself mutter.

Mr. Niu shushed me, holding a finger over his lips.

The bowl-faced man with the banana quieted everyone down, waving to the floor in large exaggerated motions. He rattled off what I assumed to be rules in rapid succession, though I really have no idea.

"Start!" He screamed as loud as he could.

"Here we go. Game start."

050:

Guppy's gone. I can't hear him anymore
I don't know where he went
It's lonely now
I can't move. I got my leg stuck in the butter
Maybe that's why Guppy left
Because he told me not to play near the butter
And I didn't! I didn't!
I just fell
I got stuck.
But maybe he's stuck too
This whole place is butter now
I love you Guppy
The butter lich is here in my room
Guppy used to say,
"Don't talk to the butter lich, boy. She's pure evil."
She talks to me but I can't see her
And I never talk back!
"Oh, butter boy" she says
"Come and taste my butter"
I don't want to

051:

I've been seeing Gutiérrez. The old doctor with the rags over his face. I saw him first when I was fifteen right after my grandfather died, on the lakefront near the power plant--I used to go there to relax, clear my head, smoke some weed, whatever. And it was normally a nice place to be alone.

I noticed a black figure standing behind some shrubbery near the bank, so I moved closer to get a better look. It was him, long black cloak hanging to the dirt, wearing a thin hat and those red nylon rags over his face, just like my grandfather described him. As I neared, Gutiérrez turned away and fell into the beach. I ran up and could still see the sand shifting around where his cloak had been. My nose started bleeding. I was just standing there on the bank, bleeding from my face, not knowing what to think.

I saw him again in the same way, watching me from afar. I instantly recognized his caped form behind a shelf at the library. And again. At the grocery store. And again. In a passing vehicle. And again. Watching me from a billboard. Always far off, always staring until I got close.

And then I just stopped seeing him for a while. Months went by and Gutiérrez faded to the back of my memory. He became an enigma. A strange occurrence. A spooky story. I thought maybe I imagined the whole thing.

But then I saw him again, and this time was different. He was much closer. I was home alone, watching a bootleg Chinese subtitled cam-rip of Serenity my dad got for me. My Mario alarm clock went off to remind me to finish my homework--I stopped the alarm and turned around, and there he was. In my face. The rags were dripping and he reeked of gasoline. One rag, the big red one in the center, was pulled down a bit and showed his small pink eye. He spoke. I stood completely still, frozen even though I wanted to run.

Oh, dear Benedict.

Your grandfather made a deal he couldn't fulfill.

My end of the bargain was completed.

Yet I have not received his soul.

Why is that? Why is that?

Naturally I have come to collect on my debt.

I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again he had disappeared. There was a small puddle in the carpet below where he was standing and my whole room stunk of gas. I could smell it for a week, even after extensive scrubbing and air circulation.

I haven't encountered him since then--it's been a few months, but I can still see him sometimes when I close my eyes. My mom started me in therapy a while ago to try and understand what's happening to me. The therapist reassures me that Gutiérrez is not real. He's a figment in my mind, made by my overactive imagination.

I pretend like I believe her when I'm there, but there's no way I could. Not really. I saw him. He spoke to me. I cleaned gas out of my carpet.

I hope I'm crazy.

052:

I slapped my last diamond on the table, emptying my hand, and rubbed my eyes.

"I win again. This is just sad, honestly. You're terrible at cards."

Eoghan stretched and leaned back in his chair.

"Yeah. You don't have to tell me that. Almost lost my arm in Chinese blackjack once."

"What's special about Chinese blackjack?"

"Nothing," He stood up. "Except a Chinese guy had my arm in a vice. If I didn't have that pickled lettuce..."

"What?"

"Long story. Gonna get some air." He walked to the mouth of the cave.

Philip had fallen asleep near the table, curled up on the ground. I touched his arm.

"Philip, why don't you go get some proper sleep outside? There's a tent with a nice cot for you."

He leaned up on one arm and stared at me for a moment, wide-eyed and confused.

"Uh. Yeah, alright."

I grabbed his shoulders and helped him to his feet, and brushed some dust from his back. The raving corpses kept on behind us, still raving, still corpses.

"I have no idea how you slept through that, anyway. I couldn't."

I moved to the computer to check the status of the scan, while he yawned and stretched, and then struggled to pop his back.

"Slept through a tornado when I was a kid. Tore up half the house. Didn't wake up till the firemen came and picked me up outta bed."

"Interesting. That sounds like a problematic trait."

"Hasn't been an issue, yet. How are the scans?"

I scrolled through a selection of the most recent images, looking for any obvious anomalies.

"I think we've taken enough pictures. I can just hope that the quantity counteracts any interference."

"Interference?" Philip yawned again. "I thought we ran this for eight hours to make up for that. Was it not enough?"

"I have no idea. I've never run an MRI on a dead man's brain before. Let me be clear: I don't expect these tests to produce any tangible results. The bodies are dead, decrepit, full of dust--a brain needs consistent, active blood flow. They shouldn't still exist. It doesn't make sense. I expect our results may not make much sense either."

"So, why'd we even do this?"

"We've found something. Something big. Big for the mind. For us. And I have no idea what it is. And don't you just want to know?"

"I do," He smiled. "But not tonight. I'm off to bed. Goodnight, Wilson."

"Goodnight."

I turned back to the computer and sifted through the animation and image render presets, selecting a few to compile overnight. It took a while to chug through the list, but after everything was queued, I decided to turn in. I moved to the mouth of the ossuary.

"Wilson."

The room washed with pink light, and the skeletons quieted down. I turned. The hairs on my neck rose. The skeleton on the largest spike looked down at me with empty sockets.

Go. Run. Leave. A voice repeated in my mind. Go. Run. Leave. It wasn't my voice. Go. Run. Leave. They weren't my thoughts. I would never walk away from something I didn't understand. It wasn't in my nature.

I blinked and I wasn't in the cave anymore. I was in a dead field, surrounded by black stone peaks and ridges, blanketed by a thick, swirling grey sky. The skeleton was before me, hovering above the ground, still impaled on a ghostly stalagmite that faded into the air, but it wasn't a skeleton anymore. It was a woman. She was naked save her tattered chest cloth, which hung in rags from her neck; her long brown hair drifted on a cool breeze.

A massive man-shaped shadow painted the clouds above. The earth was softly quaking below me. She spoke to me, and not in English, but I understood what she said. A sweet voice.

"Wilson. You must. Leave."

The ground shook as the shadow in the sky grew closer. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes, attempting to clarify that this was actually happening.

"Leave? Who are you?"

The ground shook again. The shadow was moving toward me.

“Leave.” She repeated. “Our mating ground.”

A massive black leg appeared through the clouds, slamming into the field not far from me. My eyes began burning.

“Mating ground? What?”

A second leg slammed down as well, shaking the earth, and the first rose back into the sky.

“I am not strong anymore. Please. This is all I can do. Please leave.”

The first leg returned, landing right before me, near the floating woman. The clouds parted above me, and a massive face peered through.

It was staring down at me.

My shoulder was being tugged on, softly at first, but then I flew backward with a startling jolt.

I was in the cave, sprawled on the floor.

Eoghan was staring down at me wearing a mix of concern and confusion.

“Y’alright? Pass out on me?”

“I guess I must’ve. Hell of a dream.”

P053:

Damn

I have lost all my focus

The syrup doesn't work anymore

or maybe I just can't find it

I can't remember

I am only glad I was able to ...

what was I able to do? whatever it was, I am glad for it

it was of grave importance

I was supposed to fix all this mess

I was supposed to fix it

I guess I couldn't

054:

Subject G has been released temporarily. The subject is currently employed with the Institute and has chosen to take a sabbatical after completion of a year in stasis. Testing for subject G will resume once the subject returns, but the project will be continuing regardless. We have recently discovered two more capable individuals that can survive in stasis, henceforth referred to as H and I. Both are currently in isolated chambers for different lengths of time.

The year in stasis was a success. Subject G stated there was no delay between going under and waking up a year later. It was no longer than a blink from the subject's perspective. The subject was not affected in any negative ways, and was able to leave the stasis chamber and immediately perform intensive cognitive and physical tests with passing results. This is an interesting development. We expected the body would suffer muscle fatigue in some way, but virtually no atrophies or tissue weakening developed. The only anomaly within subject G was a newfound craving for raisins, which the subject claims to have despised before entering stasis.

There were operational complications related to the stasis field in which several umbilical cords became partially disconnected for brief intervals--luckily the stasis field surrounding subject G's critical organs stayed intact. All of the umbilical cords we added to the machine began to decay, rotting away like exposed flesh normally would. The original umbilical cord remains perfectly healthy, as if the baby was just born. We have been unable to ascertain what keeps that umbilical cord fresh. When one would decay, portions of the field destabilized and then flickered in and out, worsening until complete collapse. We had to carefully replace the rotten cords with new ones, which required changing the wiring scheme while the field remained active.

Since that experiment we have doubled the size of the machine and expanded to two room-sized chambers. H is currently undergoing a six month exercise, while I is set to stay in for five years.

055:

Each and every ragtag clump of toddlers and scrubs along this beach that dubs themselves armies are getting their numbers called. We will root out and eliminate every peashooting overgrown baby that dares to pull his diaper up and stand against us. We will make their internal organs external organs. We will drink tea while they water our gardens with their blood. We will stomp their rotten skulls into the dirt, and then pat their bone dust down and build a disrespectful campfire over their girly corpses.

And all those darling babes and empty-headed infants that don't get full on our delicious lead will happily eat from our pig troughs and be made to revel in the mud like the untrained swine they are.

This war is over. We're going to make god damned sure of that.

Each of these elementary school armies has a single 18' APOV Custer unit, if any at all. Most recent combat aptitude test results indicate our newest model, Navine, outclasses the Custer unit thirty-eight to one. That's thirty-eight Custer units versus a single Navine unit in one combat scenario. It survived with minimal damages, but not only that, it tore every single one of those Custer units into scrap metal.

Afterward the pilot had cherry pie and went to a movie--an elegant life for an elegant man.

There are at most four Custer units still being used by the enemy on the beach. Easily held back from major sites with IOD sentry units, but strong against isolated sections and non-mechanized squads.

Sucker punching cowards.

Their most recent offensive targeted a FOB on east-six north--took our shield generator and killed a scouting crew. It was as if they were spitting in our faces, daring us to move, asking us what we could possibly do in return.

We have our answer: sixteen APOV Navine units. Entering deployment this afternoon. Advancing on their home ports.

We're going to set this beach on fire.

056:

Each chaasm is given a generation identifier that isolates it in cases where the environment will be kept “offline,” and closed to the public. Attempting to use a chassis to access any partition in the utilized forests of a particular chaasm require verification using this generation identifier, and access is outright declined if another chaasm attempts to initiate the connection.

We have discovered a recently built chaasm with generation identifier issues. It has changed, or alternately masked, its default identifier to match other chaasms, and has been successful in attempted connections. Initially it was sending small amounts of data, a handful of packets at a time, but it has rapidly escalated to high-bandwidth transfers of large quantities of data.

This is very unique. In this instance the chaasm was generated from two individuals at the same time: a father and son. Thoughts and mental complexes from two separate minds were melded into one mindspace. Generation went perfectly. But the son had an undiagnosed heart condition and died from a heart attack directly after chaasm generation. Meanwhile the father stayed in their new chaasm for three days, bonding with his son, only to exit and find out he had been interacting with a cloned projection, and that his actual son was dead. He committed suicide that night.

I initially planned to disconnect the chaasm out of respect, but it began exhibiting strange behavior which I thought might be useful to study; the father’s identity disappeared almost entirely, and the boy essentially became the sole inhabitant. The father’s form forgot who he was within the first day of his corporeal death, which caused very quick destabilization and fracturing, and a skewed physical form within the chaasm. That's when the data transfers began.

Now we have six major chaasms affected by this single chaasms generation identifier manipulation. We've entered three of them so far, and all are relatively stable, but the way the data is leaking is... Strange to say the least. When the first inhabitant complained of a leak within her chaasm we entered and discovered that the ground within her mindspace was covered in butter. I know, it sounds ridiculous. I didn't believe it myself until I saw it with my own eyes. The chaasms are filling up with butter.

We're planning to enter two more of the afflicted chaasms this week to ascertain damages. I'd like to enter the shared chaasm itself to learn more about how it changed its generation identifier and why it's leaking, but I can't guarantee it'll be safe. We're running physicality tests to confirm that now.

057:

The front door slammed again downstairs. It was the start of the sixth loop since we arrived. Each time the father would play his role exactly, following his cues like a trained actor--grab, speech, punch, slash, drag, search. Arthur's actions would vary slightly from time to time, but never changed the way his father reacted.

We heard Arthur's father scream, muffled through the floor.

"ARTHUR!"

And then he was upstairs with us, saying his lines, punching Arthur in the stomach, slashing his face, dragging him across the floor. I looked over at Philip, who was still trying to pry a lightbulb from the ceiling lamp.

"Do you think it'll work?"

"I don't know. Haven't even gotten this damned thing out yet."

Philip glanced up at Arthur's unconscious body below. Arthur wasn't rousing this time. There were two possible outcomes to this scenario:

A - Arthur would rise from the table and kill his father.

B - Arthur would not rise from the table and his father would kill him.

Either event restarted the loop. It seemed that without Medy's interference, Arthur wouldn't get up. I tried calling for him last time, and Philip tried the time before that. He just stayed put and his father killed him. I looked over at Medy.

"Medy. Yell again."

"Arthur!"

He reacted, moving a bit, and touching the cut on his face.

"Very interesting. Perhaps you sound similar to someone he knew?"

Arthur rolled off the table and landed softly on the floor, eyeing his father.

"Got it!" Philip fell back with the bulb in hand.

Arthur grabbed something from a shelf and carefully snuck up behind his father before stabbing him in the neck. He fell, choking and grabbing his throat. Arthur screamed at him.

"You killed her! She didn't want anything to do with it and you killed her!"

The dad's yellow eyes went dim, and then hair quickly grew up from the floor like weeds in a garden, wrapping his corpse in a blanket of curls.

"Okay," I held up my hand. "As soon as it restarts. Here we go."

Philip cocked his arm back, waiting for my word. The curls slowly pulled taught.

“Throw!”

The light bulb arced up and cracked Arthur right in the head, shattering on impact. He fell towards us, and then we were falling too. The ceiling we stood on was gone. In a flash of white and a loud bang, the house was gone as well, blown into splinters and dust above us. We were surrounded by white, small dots tumbling into infinity.

“George! You can stop this!” I yelled.

Arthur twisted around and faced me, and our eyes locked. He was terrified. He realized it in that instant.

He was George.

“You’re not falling!” Philip yelled too. “Just stop falling!”

And then we weren’t. We were standing--still in the white void, but standing.

George stared at his hands.

“I’m... I’m George.”

“Yes.” I held out my hand.

“And it’s nice to finally meet you.”

058:

We had to return to the site in Honduras a few months after departure. The crystalline structure of the rock in later discovered mating sites was always found to be euhedral as opposed to the strange glass-like composition within Talgua, so we returned to collect samples for analysis.

The cave had been sealed. Boards and fencing covered the mouth--the locals wouldn't say why, but were adamant against us entering. I went anyway, taking a small team of IBW soldiers and their commandant as security. We were accosted at the entrance, and regretfully an IBW ended up injuring a local.

After we entered and crossed the initial chamber we found a solid iron gate in the hallway-like opening, which the locals had constructed in an attempt to seal passage to the ossuary. It folded in a matter of minutes, almost effortlessly pried open by the IBWs, but it was the nature of the door that caused me to hesitate. Why would they suddenly block all of this off? I thought site preservation, maybe. Or maybe someone was injured by the remaining living skeletons. Both were incorrect.

I felt the familiar vibrations of the energy coursing under the cavern, and heard the wailing of the dead men, but there was a new noise present as well. A repetitive metallic clanging coming from the ossuary. I entered first and saw him.

In the center of the chamber, standing over a decimated corpse and beating his rifle on the floor, was a grey-fleshed man wearing Institute OCP gear, with the familiar small antenna jutting from the base of his neck. No mistake, it was an IBW. His chest was covered with bullet wounds, he had a deep gash in his neck, and one of his eyes was gone entirely, impaled by a foot long chunk of crystal stalagmite, which jutted out from the back of his head. The leftmost stalagmite in the circle had been severed, broken halfway up. I put two and two together. He must've fallen onto the spike. How he was alive was a different question entirely.

He was raving in incoherent, jumbled sentences. Repeating the same thing over and over again in a sing-song voice, wailing out the word freedom. He noticed us, and then stopped beating his rifle on the ground and just stood staring at us for a minute in silence. I attempted to speak with him to no avail. The commandant tried sending ACU instructions to his signal forwarder, and he immediately reacted violently, sprinting towards us and plunging his fist through an IBW's stomach. He stood over the IBW spooning handfuls of blood into his mouth. The others opened fire, emptying their magazines in the small ossuary. I still suffer severe tinnitus in my left ear from the reverberating gunshots. He was shot to pieces, obliterated by hundreds of bullets into nothing but blood and meaty chunks. But he was still alive. Still gurgling, trying to talk. Trying to say freedom.

I took my samples and we left. But we also ordered containment for return shipment of the afflicted IBW soldier's living remains so we could conduct further anatomical investigation.

There's far more to this Ko energy than meets the eye. I often worry we may be tampering in bad faith, and I think back to that dream. The vision. Of the woman in the field. But I want to know. I need to know. Humanity needs to know.

059:

The MRI renders included many erratic patterns of brain activity, some completely tainted by interference--most prevalent trend was a repeat spike of activity in areas usually associated with orgasm, in proper order. The brain would shift through those states of euphoria and stimulation, and then ebb into another state of complete chaotic flushing, and then back again. This happened the entire time we were scanning. Something was being picked up by the MRI--not blood, I'm sure, but something else was taking its place within the brain, acting as blood would, allowing us to see this activity.

I immediately remembered that vivid dream with the woman in that field. She said to leave their mating ground.

And the energy here kept these corpses in a perpetual conscious state of orgasm, continuously, through death itself, for potentially hundreds of years. I was kind of surprised by how literally that term "mating ground" manifested.

Had it been a vision instead? Was that woman actually communicating with me somehow?

060:

Contrary to what I was expecting, nothing felt worse than winning that first Liubo tile. Three tiles felt good. Heavy in my coat pocket. We were halfway there now. But having just that one tile was torture, because only then did I start to realize that single tile for what it was: the mere beginning of an arduous, painfully drawn-out process. I now understood that my stay in Zhuō Yóu would probably stretch on for years.

Mr. Niu stood up and straightened his jacket.

“Today. We get fourth tile.”

I was inspired by his persistence. He straightened his jacket, yet his beard was greasier and more matted than his shoulder length grey-black hair. We looked homeless. Because we were homeless.

“And maybe you like this game.” He held out his palm.

“Give me the pickled lettuce.”

My hand reflexively shot to my pants pocket.

“No, I don't have anything else.”

“Eoghan. I know. But this is only food.”

“Yes, but it's all I have now, and it's better than nothing.”

He shook his head and pointed to the can.

“No. This is our only food.”

“Oh.”

He wanted us to eat it. I didn't feel easy about losing my only weapon, and I wasn't all that excited about eating rotten pickled lettuce either.

“Are you sure we can't find something else?”

“Where? Where we get food, Eoghan?”

“We're in Yú Shì. Get a whiff of this damned place.” I held up my arms. “There's fish everywhere, right? You said so yourself. Underground river and all that. Let's go find some. I bet this jiaochao deck would go for at least a few yuan, right?”

“Maybe at the playing halls. I--” He pushed his glasses up and unconsciously rubbed his beard.

“Well. Okay. Yes. We sell deck and get fish. Go to cannery. Then go to Jìngjì Chǎng and get our Sanshou tile.”

“The cannery? We’re in the one district built on an underground river full of fresh fish and you want cans? Do you tote a phonograph to the orchestra as well?”

“No, we just get a can for me. I need a weapon. I lost my bat. Remember?”

He moved to his bed, which was loosely cobbled together from damp paper and an old towel, and started tying up his shoes.

I sighed. He knew I remembered--I was the reason he lost that bat.

“Ah. I didn't know that's what you meant. Yeah, alright. We'll go to the cannery. But I want grilled fish to eat. No more canned garbage. Just for today.”

“Yes. Let’s go.”

The district had been mostly empty since this week’s game wrapped up. A few wind-battered stragglers wandered the thin streets, leaned on run-down buildings, and slept in sad piles of rags here and there, but the bulk of the players were gone.

On to the next district. The next game. The next chance at a tile. But they’d be back next week when the Yú Qí started up again. I was just glad we got our tile on the first try. The smell of fish made me kind of nauseous.

“What makes you think we’ll get the fourth tile today?” I just remembered him saying that.

“It took six months to get the Mahjong tile. And yes, we got lucky last night. But a tile two days in a row? Come on, man.”

“Because Sanshou is tonight.” He grinned.

“And you can fight.”

061:

The degradation of the Moltke's chaasm was rapid and erratic, spiraling quickly from mild mutations into total chaos. The father took the form of an old fisherman named Guppy, which I've theorized was a mental link to some nostalgic story book or other fiction the boy enjoyed. Guppy became corrupted immediately, stretching out to twenty feet tall and still growing. The boy himself was relatively stable, but had intense fears and trauma associated with his new environment, and with his mother. He desperately misses his previous life, but doesn't quite understand chaasm control, and doesn't know how to manifest his thoughts into reality.

I recently discovered his mother exists as an organism within the chaasm as well, though her form seems to have skewed into a monster-like entity, and the boy no longer recognizes her. She is a repeat cause for traumatic episodes.

In each of these episodes the boy will retreat into his domicile, which is essentially a child's playhouse externally with his old bedroom inside, and then his chaasm will be flooded by manifestations of his stress, fear, and anxiety in the form of thick liquid butter. I fear the boy may be cursed by his own creativity.

Medy can talk him out of these episodes. She's becoming an absolutely fantastic component to our team.

We've also discovered the nature of the leakage into other chaasms. The boy has obtained access to normally restricted aspects of chaasm management and is able to unconsciously alter properties like the chaasm's generation identifier and forest resource allotment.

Contrary to most other dead inhabitants, he seems to be remaining stable, unfractured, and healthy. Which leaves us with a conundrum. The boy's personality form is not only sane after corporeal death but is the only remaining conscious version of himself. Under normal circumstances I would keep his chaasm active until fracture or complete destabilization, but the boy's existence here is mostly uncomfortable if not completely terrifying. Not to mention he has unconscious administrative control over his chaasm, which could end up being very problematic to the network as a whole. We're working on a way to restrict his access, but how long will it be until living in fear like this causes him to fracture anyway?

Is it morally just to keep someone alive in this way?

062:

Eoghan caught wind of the Beachhead through some report transcript or shared paper that obviously hadn't redacted enough information. Arnold "War Dog" MacArthur's chaum, dubbed the Beachhead, was generated with a very specific purpose in mind: reliving war. So it was no wonder Eoghan took interest.

Though he said he wanted to research the minds, strategies, and war machinery within the chaum, I think he was just inventing an excuse to satiate his twisted curiosity. There was nothing to gain. Everything within the chaum was imaginary. Maybe based on reality, but far, far from it. And now, after a very convincing session in which he threatened to reduce VRC funding, he was forcing us in.

"Boots?" Eoghan asked, holding up a pair of steel-toes.

"Probably, yes. It's a beach."

I sat down at the chassis and belted in. My watch flashed in the light. I looked at it for a moment.

"Are you sure I can't go, Wilson? You might need me."

Medy stood in the doorway holding a stack of manifests under one arm--probably in between meetings or training sessions or whatever else she could find to keep busy.

"The very nature of this chaum is death. The Beachhead is a chaum of unending war, and as such the risk of fracture is extremely high. I'd rather not go in myself, but Eoghan needs accompaniment. Plus, there's nothing to gain here. Just senseless violence."

"I'm actually looking forward to it." Philip waved from his chassis, completely buckled in and ready.

"Not every day you get to visit an old man's mind battlefield."

"And Philip is my backup. I would love your company. But I would also love you to be alive."

"And what that really means," Philip interjected. "Is that he wouldn't be so torn up if I were killed."

"We're old now. Far more expendable." I gave Philip a sideways glance.

"You're our future, Medy. There'll be plenty more chances. Don't forget that guy with the stalker problem next week."

"Ah, yeah. Benedict. He said he's been seeing the organism outside his chaum now."

"Interesting. I wonder if he has any history of emotional disorders. You know, we should really look into restricting access a bit more. Some of these incidents are--"

"No way," Eoghan sat down in his chassis. "Where's the fun in restriction? The money these things bring in. My god. No. I won't just go back and start taping everything up. As long as I'm chair at the Institute we won't be restricting access. No argument."

"It was more of an observation. And I take a number of issues with that. This should be a tool for exploration, for creativity, and for freedom, but it shouldn't be at risk of death or insanity. We are the harbingers of this next step. It is our responsibility. This is the final frontier for human exploration, we should fully understand the moral implications and the burden--"

"Yeah, well, buyer beware. Don't give me another ten-minute spiel. Talk to HR."

That was a dismissive joke he liked to tell. As if the Institute would have an HR department.

"We'll see you soon, Medy. Maybe do another psychiatric evaluation on Benedict before next week. Dig in. I'd like to know a little more about what we're dealing with."

"Can do." She gave a two-fingered half-salute. "Good luck."

Eoghan leaned forward as far as his restraints would let him.

"Well? Are we done? Can we go?"

I sighed. He was as impatient as ever. Maybe moreso.

"Harold, if you would."

Harold nodded and moved to our row of chassis, like dental chairs all laid-out and ready for surgery. He lowered the neck rests and slid our chairs back into position. I felt the cold tingle of the rubellite against my neck, sliding into its port and bending down, clicking into place in my spinal column, and then with the familiar lifting jolt I was no longer in the chassis.

Death, frozen cold, spiraling red balls of light, a white seed in swollen black, growing heat, deep blue skies dotted with billions and billions of white lights, burning up, birth again--and then I was on the beach, on my knees, already half-covered in sandy mud. The black tunnels around my vision slowly receded.

"And that sorry excuse for a stork dropped yet another half-limp pile of baby excrement at my feet." The War Dog grizzled down at me.

"Get up."

063:

The boiling miasma of caustic detritus being pumped into the central depository was electrified on purpose to prevent ko generated distortions.

It did not work, and in some cases I think it promoted further growth. I didn't realize the true nature of the waste until far after I could've changed anything. Of course, I knew it was a hazard to the environment, but I didn't encounter a live byproduct until late into my years, after the network was already spread across America, already halfway across the world.

There was an issue with a waste farm. The oldest of which, built in Oklahoma in the 90s as a distributor for isolation sphere waste, had yet another issue with regulation caused by failing legacy infrastructure. The forests produced filth at a much higher rate than isolation spheres. It spilled directly from powered chassis connections, and that byproduct was collected and piped into waste farms, which moved it to the central depository. Most waste farms were built specifically for network waste, but a few like this one were converted from isolation sphere facilities and couldn't handle the larger influx of byproduct.

Waste regulators at this facility in Oklahoma completely failed; waste was being pumped in, but not forwarded out. It was just collecting there. Two teams were sent out for repair and neither returned. So, with no options left, I requested a commandant and IBW escort, figuring I had to fix the problem myself.

The facility was a swamp. We couldn't even reach the main building. The entire lot was flooded with chunky black and purple sludge, not unlike sewage, and the fumes it produced were visible to the human eye, tiny pink smoke-like curls of vapor. I spotted the missing teams immediately. Just within the fence were two half-circles of corpses a few yards apart, coated in the purple mud, wrapped in the fetal position like solemn statues.

And then I saw the wraith. And I use that term because I'm not sure what else I could call it. Floating up from the mire, shimmering in the dim of twilight, almost completely invisible. It didn't reflect light in three-dimensional space, so I couldn't get a good look at its form. It shook as it moved, seeming to skip forward and then rubber-band back to its starting position, but then instantly fly forward to where it was again. It was large, larger than a car, and mostly blue when it caught the light right, like a stained glass window.

And the noise it made. A bear roaring, but with layers of tearing. Paper ripping. A thousand sheets of paper being slowly torn all at once. It shook toward us. And then it was in front of me, overlapping an IBW. He collapsed in the fetal position, dead on contact. The ooze crawled from within the fence, spilling through the holes, stretching

for the IBW's corpse. It roared again. We were back in the Jeep before I could comprehend what happened.

There was no way in. No way to salvage the facility.

Oklahoma was a loss.

New waste farms are being constructed in Kansas.

064:

When I look back?

Likely were the storms that consumed our atmosphere.

Likely were the fissures in our reality, holes bored by my own two hands.

Likely were the dead to stay that way, regardless of my actions.

But now?

Unlikely is the position I find myself in.

Unlikely to succeed. Unlikely to survive.

Unlikely to even know it when my time runs out.

I am standing in the flower, naked to my core, surrounded by sparks and dying lights.

Now they know I'm here.

I hear the rambling static of chassis disconnecting.

I hear the fractured skids screaming at me from below.

I hear the replicators recharging above me.

It doesn't matter.

I have a plan.

065:

It wouldn't be the first time someone accused me of being a mental organism.

I unceremoniously refute all accusations of autonomy.

066:

If you can quantify it, break it down into standard terminology, define it and experiment enough to learn from it, you feel like a master of an element, a pioneer on the groundbreaking edge of scientific research.

But it's funny. All I see when I look back is gamboling children playing with poison berries, tugging on the tentacles of some massive unearthly entity. That confidence led to reckless, bullheaded decisions. We weren't tapping a new vein of scientific knowledge. We were playing with our father's gun.

067:

Back when I was young, I thought I was seeing someone that didn't exist. My grandfather told me a story about this man--Doctor Gutiérrez--who cut him a deal to save my grandmother's life. He said my grandmother had been cursed to live in her father's house, and when my grandfather stole her away, he accidentally woke the curse. She began withering away due to a mysterious illness, and no one knew what she had or how to make her well. Until they found Gutiérrez, who said that though he couldn't break the curse, he did have the power to change its "binding" to a different location, but it would cost my grandfather his soul. My grandfather supposedly agreed, and they lived happily ever after.

It was all just a story, of course. A lie. I still don't know why he told me.

Then he died. And shortly after I started seeing Gutiérrez sometimes, or at least I thought I did--he was far away at first, staring at me from perches and behind bushes and in windows of skyscrapers. And then I saw him in my own bedroom, with the floor-length robe and the hat and the rags and the dripping gasoline. I remember the smell more than anything. It filled my nose and made me sick when he leaned in and spoke to me. He told me I owed him my soul. My grandmother didn't show up to my grandfather's funeral, which added more fuel to my speculation, more legitimacy to my grandfather's story--I was convinced he had been telling me the truth. That Gutiérrez was real, and now he was after me.

And I ended up in therapy. For years and years. It took me a long time and a lot of mental effort to move passed Gutiérrez. But I did. And I stopped thinking about him altogether.

I remembered him this year though. When I bought my mindspace everything came rushing back. I started seeing him in there, in the shadows, far off, just like when I was younger, hiding almost out of sight. And last week I saw him in my apartment. It was the first time I saw him in person since I was young, in my bedroom.

I got home from work and flopped down on the couch to watch some TV. I fell asleep pretty quickly and was woken up a few hours later. My eyes shot open as the TV turned off, and then I saw Gutiérrez again. In the reflection on the screen, standing behind the couch. I fell to the floor and turned to look behind me. He was there, just standing over the couch, dripping gasoline from his face rags.

And I could smell it again.

068:

Piggybacking off of isolation sphere technology, we designed the chassis first at the cave in Talgua, and then worried about energy after the fact. I needed to know it was even possible before significant resource investment. It was.

Harvesting and delivering the energy wasn't a challenge once we understood how to conduct it. Tourmaline gems and other boro-silicate compositions all carried the current, but rubellite was proven the most conductive. It could carry the energy much further than any other gem, even unpolished, though it still suffered attenuation like other signal delivery methods. (It could stretch up to a thousand meters without major signal reduction.)

After designing segmented rubellite cables to carry the current, we installed signal regenerators at junction points for connections that needed to be longer than a thousand meters. This was done through slightly modified noncollinear optical parametric amplification (NOPA) units, as we found the energy behaved similarly to lasers.

Obtaining the rubellite naturally was a lost cause. It's by far the rarest of the tourmaline gems, and though cost was never an issue, acquiring the gem in such large quantities proved to be an insurmountable restriction. China had purchased up seventy percent of the world's supply throughout the twentieth century--apparently they discovered some quirks of rubellite before we did. The Institute designed a lucrative deal for the Chinese government, establishing a heavy royalty on any profits generated by American usage of rubellite, and in exchange we were given a nearly limitless supply. This deal was dissolved by force shortly before chaasm sales began, and obtaining the gem from then on was no longer an issue.

Our first forest data center was constructed in Honduras not far from the Talgua cave. Once additional forests, and eventually bulbs, were built near the thirty-eight other discovered natural mating sites, this site was expanded and dubbed the flower, acting as a central hub between all the others. It also housed the first canopy open for public use, and currently serves upwards of three thousand inhabitants, as well as hundreds of shared spans. This is the home of the three pillars of mental exploration, belonging to Zeinhaert, Eoghan, and myself.

We've called the mating site in Talgua "Genesis." The other sites were named with geographical codes since they took the place of isolation sphere facilities already labeled with that nomenclature. All of the other mating sites were sphere-like chambers in caves similar to the Genesis site, and housed the same energy regardless of the gem type found on the surface. (There were many other differences between sites as well--we discovered hundreds of new species of plants, insects, and animals within these

caves that don't exist in any other environment. Many of these have been researched and catalogued by the Institute, or some subsidiary.)

This energy is now named Ko, which is a generalized translation of a chibchan word for creator. That may not be an entirely accurate translation, as the VRC analyzers have problems distinguishing native-American dialects and vocabulary, and no one thought to actually ask any natives what it really meant. My vote was for calling it supralight, but no one aside from my colleagues seemed to like the name, so we're sticking with Ko.

Chausm generation via Ko energy was the most complicated piece of the puzzle and took intensive trial-and-error experimentation to develop. Once we were able to generate and maintain mindspaces for monkeys, as well as safely enter and exit them via consciousness translation, we opened the field to terminally ill hospital patients under the guise of experimental treatment. The idea was to work with individuals near death to mitigate "perceived loss," but the experiments conducted were often negatively impacted by the patients' preexisting conditions, and many tests incidentally became inhumane and cruel. These rudimentary chausm generations were not without drawbacks, but a wealth of information was obtained and nearly a year after we began dabbling in Ko chausm generation, we were ready for voluntary participants.

And that was the birth of the first pillar of exploration: mine.

069:

George sat down on the ground. It wasn't really a ground, just like none of us were really standing in a white void, but he sat down on it all the same. He stared stoically into nothing.

"I'm dead."

I plopped down next to him. The void felt like a stiff wooden bench.

"Well, no. Not you. You're alive. The corporeal George is dead."

"But I'm a copy. Is this it, then? You unplug me?"

"I--"

I didn't know how to respond. Essentially, yes. We planned on disconnecting his chaasm after our departure.

"That was the plan, in a way. I assumed you wouldn't be here. That steel plate in your skull did a number on your chassis. It's completely bricked. I've never seen a chaasm generated under such strenuous circumstances. As I said you died upwards of six times during generation. I was surprised it even held together at all--it's very corrupted. And when we first got here things looked pretty hairy."

Philip laughed, trying to stifle it with his hand, and then sat down. Medy followed suit.

"But now... I see you. You're you. And you're not as broken as I thought. Not like the rest of this place."

"But what kind of life is this? Why would I want to live in a box?"

"You don't have to eat, for one." Philip said. "Or sleep. Or bathe. Or piss. Or anything. And it can be whatever kind of life you want it to be."

"What I'm most concerned with now is your stability." I touched George's arm.

"I don't want anyone to die like this. You may not be the corporeal George, but you're still real. You're still alive. If there's even the slightest modicum of a chance that I could help someone, I would do anything I could to make that a reality."

"Then why am I dead?" He pulled his arm away.

"That's your fault." Philip chuckled. "You didn't tell us about that fat plate in your noggin."

"I--I didn't know it mattered! How was I supposed to know you were going to hook me up to some electric chair?"

"You should've realized it when we were hooking you up to an electric chair."

Philip looked between me and Medy with a dumb grin, searching for any hint of a laugh. I think Medy might've fought down a smile.

"What am I supposed to say? This isn't my fault."

I attempted to settle their digression.

"What I want you to say is that you fully understand the situation you currently find yourself in. We can help you learn how to live here, but I cannot stress enough that we can't say how long you have. Personality forms like yourself that are no longer able to sync with their corporeal form will begin to disassociate within hours. Within thirty days most are completely fractured. I can't promise you long, but I can try and make something worthwhile with what you have left." "I need time to think. Can you give me time?"

"As long as you need. And we'll get you out of this broken chaasm and into a more friendly one. I have a completely isolated shared span with some preloaded formations. It should do well while we clear out your current space and build a new environment."

"But--" Philip stood up. "Before that. We need to get the heck out of here."

I stood as well, wincing a bit at the prickling ache in my leg.

"Yes, George. We can only safely leave through the way we came in. Chausms are generated like balloons, and we need to find that entry hole. Do you remember the street outside your--Arthur's home? With the barbershops? That's our exit."

"Y-yes."

He looked up, and the street was below us, curling forward into its gravity-defying loop. Philip walked over to the barbershops, moving through the shifting light and dark of the swinging bulb in the sky.

"Fantastic."

"Well done, George." I offered him a hand. "Excellent control."

"But wait, I--" Medy was still sitting near George. "Ah, no. Never mind."

"What? Go ahead, Medy."

She pivoted a bit on the street, so she could face George better.

"George, did your father--was that really him? Did he kill your mom?"

He looked up at her, tears welling in his eyes.

"Yes."

070:

Easy dodge.

Left feint pulled him to my right, I twisted my torso and he fell directly into my fist. I'm pretty sure I felt some ribs cracking as he lifted in the air.

He collapsed, struggling for air. Sand stuck to his sweaty face like powdered sugar on a donut. The crowd was silent, waiting.

I counted to five.

"Match three! Win! Eoghan! From America!"

Our red-haired referee jumped up and down on the sideline, tossing his green banana up and catching it.

The crowd of rag-wrapped players and the fancy-shirted spectators on the balcony exploded into cheering and applause.

The pain all caught up as the adrenaline receded. There were the knives, the dull aches, the throbbing that let me know how old I really was.

"Eoghan!" Mr. Niu rushed over to me and handed me a glass of water. It was a bit green.

"Well done! How is your kidney? He elbowed you hard."

"Not the best it's been."

"Can you go on? Two more match."

"Yeah." I drained the glass and handed it back.

"Should be fine. Unless they got Louis Cyr back there."

"More wimps. Big dinner tonight."

"I so very desperately look forward to it."

I sat down on the sand.

The referee began hollering in Mandarin. I heard my name and some random words here and there; he might've called my mother a chicken, but you can never really tell with Chinese unless you have full context. I assumed he was announcing my fourth match.

That seemed to be the case. A pale little kid came up to the ring, no older than ten, dressed in the same shirtless garb as me except for his red headband and belt. Mine were brown, like most everyone else. I had no idea what the colors represented.

The announcer screamed in clunky English.

“Eoghan! Is he go to hell! Boy from below, Satan son, Èshì!”

The kid grimaced at me through a mean black eye, showing off his four crooked teeth. Laughter and scattered applause rose up from the crowd.

“Why the hell are you here?” I leaned on my arm to stand up and looked toward the announcer.

“Why am I fighting a kid?”

“Fight...”

The announcer beamed at me.

“Start!”

The kid was gone, circling around my left at a ridiculous speed. Seemed like he was going for a lunge from behind. Sand shifted near my heel, so I dipped low and swung my leg around in a wide sweep. He was mid-punch, fist hanging where my neck had been, and my leg caught him hard in the stomach, tossing him from the ring. He flew a good six feet and smashed his head on a brick near the stands. I was genuinely astonished, and felt a little bit bad.

The kid was really bleeding.

“A kid! What the hell is wrong with you people?”

“Match four! Win!” The announcer was bouncing erratically.

“American again! Eoghan!”

The crowd reached new heights of excitement, clapping wildly and throwing strips of paper down on the ring. I shook my head at Mr. Niu, who gave a flat-mouthed face of acknowledgement.

“That wasn’t even a fight. You’re all fucking nuts.”

071:

I cut through the campus, careful not to slip on the rivers of wet paint. The chaum was somehow even darker than before--the shadows were getting deeper, longer, like the sun was going down. But the sky was black. Zeinhaert's projection no longer stretched across it.

Rumbling echoed from somewhere far off, and I wasn't sure if it was the dragon or the chaum imploding. I cleared the campus courtyard and took a breather. My legs were covered up to my knees with splashes of red brick paint. Just had to make it through town, down Agatha Christie Court, Alan Bradley Boulevard, and over through Louise Penny Place to the foyer. The absolute cheese of the street names still made me a bit queasy. Why mystery authors?

The streetlamps were dimmer than usual, and I was losing light by the minute. I had never seen Zeinhaert's chaum like this before, so empty and blanketed in shadow. I started walking.

It was eerie. Lonely. Dead.

I reached the end of Agatha Christie Court and turned right on Alan Bradley Boulevard, weaving between empty stalls and abandoned carts through the silent stone-tiled road. Zeinhaert must've consumed most of the organisms here to regain stability; the streets were usually flourishing with shouting and the bustle of city life.

I turned off Alan Bradley and moved through an empty market shack to the back. The old door was hanging on one hinge. I pushed through and climbed over a retaining wall between streets, landing on soft grass in the back of a small café.

It was that café, the one Zeinhaert loved so much that he recreated it within his chaum. Marble's Café. He had renamed it "Lost-My-Marbles Café." Funny then, sad now.

I just stood there staring at it for a minute.

All those years, relaxing, talking, living, working.

Time goes so much faster than you think.

And before you know it

There was the rumbling again. And the deep, bass-filled throaty clicking from the dragon reverberating off of buildings. Wilson called it purring, but to me it sounded like it was gagging on something, on the cusp of throwing up. The sound was close.

I picked up the pace. My shoes made audible slaps as I moved down Louise Penny Place. I could see the foyer's red-roofed top twisting above the other buildings. It wasn't far now.

My leg was pulled from under me, and then I felt the blast of wind after the fact. The dragon was on me. It had swooped down and wrapped its furry-scaled tail around my leg, causing me to tumble. I hit my head on the stone, knocking me numb and spraying colorful splashes over my vision. It was a bad hit. Not dead, though. Not extracted yet. I struggled to open my eyes, to wrestle back control over my body.

The dragon had tied me up with its tail, wrapping from my legs to my torso, restricting my legs, my arms, my chest. It hung over me, staring down with its massive cat-faced head, body curled in the air, slowly writhing like a snake. The furry scales were almost comfortable around me, warming me like a thick quilt. If I wasn't being crushed to death, I might've been able to fall asleep.

This was it.

This was my end.

Murdered by an imaginary cat-dragon hybrid inside a dying copy of my good friend's brain.

And I was about to go insane.

Sad. I wanted it to be cooler than this.

I always had an allergy to cats. I sneezed. It lunged forward and I felt the sharp crack of its teeth sinking into my shoulders. An incisor stabbed into my head, crushing my skull. I couldn't see, but I could hear it chewing me, more and more muffled until I couldn't hear anything at all.

And then I was gone, slipping away. Unbearable heat. The black sky filled with dots of white lights, I was flying backwards, and the sky grew more and more blue. Cooling down. The orbs of spinning red light, snapping, breaking, suspension cables on a bridge zipping freely through the air, the balls of light were exploding and disappearing, and then I was freezing cold. Death.

I opened my eyes. Wilson was strapped in his chassis next to me. Probably still waiting in the foyer.

I undid my straps and sat up on the edge of the chair. My head was pounding. Screaming.

A voice spoke to me in the quiet room.

"Hello."

I looked up. It was me. But I was short. Like I was looking in a fun house mirror. The little me wasn't over three feet tall. I sat there staring directly at myself.

"Care to care to care to get something to something to eat?"

072:

I stared at the sideways door. What the hell?

It was halfway up from the ground, rotated a perfect ninety degrees so its base was on the wall. I turned the small handle and the door fell open and clattered against the ground. I had to crouch to see in. It was a small white room; the only interruption was a big brown shag carpet in the center.

On the shag carpet were three little purple blobs of goo sitting in bean bags around a ridiculously large radio. They were surrounded by these dull shimmering auras of rainbow light.

The radio was playing very loudly. Some kind of sports broadcast. I stepped in and walked over.

"10 to the 20, high pass to Barnettlesburge, the orb slips annoyingly under the willy wonka to JOHN FRETZMARGEN-GERALD WHO IS AT THE 78--IS HE? YES FOLKS, HE COMMITS TO A FLYING JUMP AND DUNKS INTO THE CARNIPPLE BUSH--GOAAAAAAAAAAAAAL, MERRIG-DERRING FLARTLES THE HARM CARP! WE ARE SEEING HISTORY UNFOLD! THIS IS HISTORY IN THE MAKING! MERRIG-DERRING HAS ASCENDED INTO THE HARM CARP CHAMPIONS HERE TODAY AT THE UNDERGUN BUNDLEDOME!"

The blob to my left started some lurching motion, rippling like a water balloon smashing into someone's face. A whispering voice echoed by my ear.

"Turn the radio off." It breathed.

073:

I stared at the sideways door again.

It was halfway up from the ground, rotated a perfect ninety degrees so its base was on the wall. I turned the small handle and the door fell open and clattered against the ground. I had to crouch to see in. It was a small white room; the... the shag carpet.

On the shag carpet were three little red blobs of goo sitting in bean bags in front of a ridiculously large TV. They were surrounded by these dull shimmering auras of white light.

The TV was playing very loudly. Some kind of paid programming. I stepped in and walked over.

"You can't really know your life until you know OurLife. Unexciting and unbecoming? Can't find a corporeal sex companion? Life in the cold-lights... You know you're tired of it. Rejoin the heat, honey. I'm waiting for you. Visit our shared span at c.c.sp.ourlife.tc, only accessible through the Texas central canopy center. Flower access available by request."

The blob to my left started some lurching motion, rippling like a water balloon smashing into someone's face. A whispering voice echoed by my ear.

"Turn the TV off." It breathed.

074:

The sideways door.

It was halfway up from the ground, rotated ninety degrees, base was on the wall. I turned the small handle and the door fell open and clattered against the ground. I had to crouch to see in, though I knew it was a small white room with a shag carpet.

On the shag carpet were three little yellow blobs of goo sitting in bean bags around a ridiculously large burning pyre. The blobs were flickering in dim bursts of orange light.

The woman on the pyre was screaming very loudly. Some kind of prayer. I stepped in and walked over.

"Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. There is no such truth as penance. Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. There is no such love as God's. Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. There is no such hatred as God's. Let your eyes look straight ahead--"

The blob to my left started some lurching motion, rippling like a water balloon smashing into someone's face. A whispering voice echoed by my ear.

"Turn the woman off." It breathed.

075:

We have discovered the existence of malicious and dangerous entities within the network. They come in numerous variants, but we tend to just group them all under the colloquial moniker "ghosts." Because that's what they are.

But maybe a better name would be "demons."

The first recorded incident involved an old decommissioned chaasm belonging to a father and son, the Moltkes.

Their chaasm was shut down ten years ago. Chaasm GI - rgYhHUtp. We solved the issues preventing shutdown and were able to bring it offline safely. Completely disconnected, wiped, and marked for reuse. The boy and his father were deleted with their chaasm. Most of those blocks, plus a few thousand others, were immediately used again in construction of a corporation's shared span: Redmind Estates, a luxury hotel for the extremely rich, which proved quite popular among wealthier net dwellers. It now hosts thousands of inhabitants at any given time.

The owner submitted an incident report and a short recording of an event--a liquid woman and little boy appeared in a guest's hotel room, hovering in the air, dripping yellow goop on the carpet. They were partially see-through, even on the recording. The guest must've assumed they were mind-hacks or organisms because he began yelling at them, asking them who they were, threatening to call management, etc.

The woman said something. It wasn't audible on the recording. Then she and the boy both began slowly expanding to the size of the room, which was an almost comical sight, and then violently exploded, coating the room in layers of the yellow liquid and causing immediate server shutdowns. Testimonials say the sound shook the hotel "like thunder." Half of the drives within the affected blocks were damaged beyond repair. We had to completely rebuild. I'm glad this recording was intact, because the other footage on that virtual camera did not survive block corruption.

The guest was killed and force-extracted during the explosion, and it caused his corporeal form to fracture and revert to a child-like state of being. He's currently in an adult care facility, unable to even use the restroom correctly without assistance.

Any forced extraction events like that automatically begin an audit process to ascertain the safety of the environment, so we isolated the Redmind from outside access and brought our teams in to investigate. Within hours we found them on the user logs. It was the boy from the Moltke's chaasm, but he wasn't with his dad, he was with a woman--his mother. Her consciousness never even existed on the servers to begin with. It was a manifestation of two separate entities from one consciousness. I found that remarkable. Other ghost appearances have been skewed from their original forms

(assuming we can ascertain their origination), and all end up causing some sort of damage, but none have been discovered with multiple entities like this.

The sheer amount of damage these incidents tend to cause led me to theorize their goal: destruction of the drives they inhabit. I think the boy was lashing out in any way he could, attempting to break free of the accidental purgatory we placed him in, though I have no proof for this claim. We're currently researching ways to safely remove these entities without significant collateral deletion, but haven't come up with much of an answer.

In hindsight it's evidently clear that we should've been wiping free space in blocks on servers, but now certain frameworks are far too entrenched. To completely replace all affected architecture would take thousands upon thousands of man hours and an uprooting of an estimated seventy percent of current network hardware. Not impossible, but certainly an incredible undertaking.

So many thousands of chaums and spans are currently taking up the same blocks as old, deleted ones.

So many thousands of consciousnesses are still there in the recycle bin, wavering in half existence, being overwritten one chunk at a time.

This was an oversight to say the least.

076:

Philip sat down next to me, across from Zeinhaert, who was twisted sideways with his legs resting on the chair next to him. I sipped my orange juice.

“Wow. Quite the adventure. I expected nothing less.” Zeinhaert said.

Philip reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small carton of milk. Zeinhaert made a little crinkled face of disgust

“I expected far less.” Philip grinned. “What are we talking about?”

“Must you always? They sell milk here.”

“George’s status.” I regarded Philip.

“The milk here is from some cheap farm op. And I like Turner better.”

Philip opened his little carton and began guzzling it down.

“This guy’s a commercial.”

“Tired of living with bird bones? For only ninety-nine cents...” Philip performed his best narration, which sounded a suspicious amount like Goofy.

Zeinhaert slapped the table.

“Anyway! So, George’s consciousness was completely intact when isolated. But how did he take to translation? And where is he now?”

“Back in a chaasm of his own, and unsurprisingly, he went with less fictional aspects this time around. Translation went perfectly. He said he didn’t feel a thing. It’s all very stable. He opted against having any organisms present.”

I finished off my last piece of toast.

“I suppose that’s the most we could hope for.” He nodded and raised his glass.

“May his last days be in health.”

I rose my orange juice, and Philip lifted his milk, issuing a little annoyed grunt from Zeinhaert.

“May they.”

“Aye.”

“So, the Moltkes.”

Zeinhaert straightened up in his chair and adjusted his suit jacket.

“Yes. The boy had heart trouble. A heart attack. Didn't even make it in. The dad stayed in for a while, and then was just completely broken about it when he came out. Committed suicide. The chaasm's in decent shape, but yeah. That's the situation.”

I just stared at some pulp in my juice. Again. So soon.

“Twice in a week.” Philip shook his head.

The waitress returned to take his order, and refilled Zeinhaert's water. Philip held up the menu and squinted at it with great exaggeration.

“Anything for you tonight?”

“Yeah, I think I've finally come to a decision.”

“What?”

He put the menu down.

“Egg. Difficult.”

“Eggs? How'd you like em?”

“Where'd they get this gal?” Philip ribbed me with an elbow.

“He's joking. Do you actually want anything to eat?”

“No.” Philip leaned back with that smarmy smile and put a toothpick in.

“Sorry. I would take a coffee though.”

The waitress just kind of awkwardly shuffled off.

“I know it's compulsion,” Zeinhaert chuckled. “But doesn't that make you feel awful? When you voluntarily get found out, and then that person just completely knows you for the unfunny and unimportant oaf you actually are?”

“Not at all. Because in my heart I know how incredibly important I actually am.”

077:

The "grey alien" was a convenient design. Foreign, strange, slightly off, but still humanoid and familiar. A smart, conceivable midway point between the human form and the preposterous biology of the entities we found within the wreck.

Inseminating public knowledge with a simple image of a grey alien was easy enough for the VRC. From there it was just a case of repeat mass exposure, desensitization over time. Once the idea of an alien was a common household thought, we moved on to disseminating images of the real aliens to dismantle any potential fear of these new beings. Eventually, after some brief testing, we just let them go out in public. No one seems to pay them any mind at all. Like little floating cats or dogs.

They replicate asexually at an unprecedented rate. Within hours the two from the wreck had become ten. And then the research center in Nevada was flooded with them. Hundreds. Maybe even thousands.

They don't really have a name yet--we've all just been calling them squids. And they do kind of look like squids, except they're squashed down to the size of your hand, and the tentacles seem to come out in all directions. Plus they're clear like a window. And you can see all of their junk pumping and squishing around in there.

They talk to us. They're trying to say things. So far it's been mostly broken English and a whole lot of wet, slapping noises. But they're learning. And we're learning too.

And luckily they don't seem to be hostile in any way. They're actually kind of sweet. One keeps bringing me little office supplies and insisting I use them.

I have no idea why we're investing in keeping them alive. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

078:

I sat up in my chassis. Philip was standing in the doorway, facing away. I undid my waist straps and belts.

"Philip! Are you alright?"

"No. Opposite."

"Did you--were you--"

He looked back at me. His eyes were red and puffy.

"God damned dragon. I'm screwed now, man. That's that. Try not to get force-extracted if you can help it man because that was god awful."

I stood and walked over to him. And while I didn't want to be insensitive, my curiosity got the better of me.

"What was it like?"

"Like being eaten by a giant cat. And as I came back, it felt like I was being forced into a box that was too small. The pieces got taken out and put back, but the order was all wrong. Those balls of light you told me about--they exploded. And I was so god damned cold. I've never felt so cold."

"So you've been fractured? Can you ascertain the type? We can potentially treat it--I have a new formulation which may increase the chance of--"

"Yes." Philip interrupted. "I am fractured. Subconscious son of a bitch is right next to you and he won't shut the hell up. I'm going to go. Don't worry about me, Wilson. This is it. I'm done. And I don't want to spend my last conscious moments fighting in the lab. I want one thing to be easy. At least this one thing."

"Philip, please. I can help."

I felt the sting of a lump against my throat.

"I'm sorry."

He hugged me. We've never hugged before.

"This was a wild ride. And it's all thanks to you. In a weird way this all made my life worth living. You did. Goodbye, Wilson."

He walked out into the hallway and down the stairs for the last time.

When it rains, it floods.

079:

An endlessly repeating tumult of same all the way down, forever.

A sideways door an empty white room a hallway a sideways door an empty white room a hallway a sideways door an empty white room

I'm falling through here

Heart in my throat

Forever

P080:

can anyone HEAR THAT

CAN ANYONE can

can you **HEAR THAT**

RINGING

ringing **RINGING**

RINGING ringing

ringing

RINGING

RINGING

ringing

THE RINGING

You can't hear that?

RINGING?

I have not heard his voice in years unless his voice is ringing I have just been hearing this ringing when he talks when he opens his ringing mouth every time it rings open it is just this ringing noise like the phone is ringing and so most of the time I get up and try to answer the ringing phone but it was not ever ringing it was him he was ringing and then I heard another ringing later when the ringing stopped and there was a phone where I was but it was not ringing it was both of them together looking at me ringing and I could only hear ringing even when the door opens it rings but now everyone is ringing I too see ringing everyone is ringing now everyone so I know it is not me just me I can see people hear the ringing too I think and now I am ringing or I am trying to ring

081:

I had four tiles and a score of yuan from the fights, all clinking together in my coat as I walked.

It was heavy. A good kind of heavy.

Like a pocket full of cash. Like a loaded gun in my waistband.

Mr. Niu told me he couldn't help me anymore. He finished eating, stood up, and walked out onto the street. I sat there with a mouthful of half-chewed lobster, confused as hell. The fifth and sixth tiles were my own responsibility. My own games. He went off to deal with something--said it was important. Said he would meet me at the temple. And then I was alone.

I set out into the city, hobbling on a weak leg toward the Jiǎnzhǐ District. I didn't realize how much I had come to appreciate Mr. Niu's company. Or was it his expertise? Either way I felt a subtle new cloud of discomfort knowing he wouldn't be with me. Plus, I was sore as hell, and that was only going to be worse tomorrow.

The streets were still packed from the fights, which would probably keep running all night and into the bright of morning. A scuffle broke out up ahead among some stalls, and several players had gathered to watch. I pushed through.

A wild-eyed man was waving his knife around, surrounded by four men wearing thick black coats over fancy suits, dressed like they just stepped out of a New York coffee house. They weren't players.

He shouted at them in Chinese. A clean-cut American man with a thick chevron mustache stepped forward.

"One last chance, Zhai. Come on, now. You see where running got you? You can't run."

"Stop running." Another fancy-dressed man chimed in.

"Just stop running." The mustache man continued. "We'll make it easy for you. Come with us, and we'll clear everything up."

"Easy, now." Another man said.

The wild-eyed Zhai doubled down, backing against a brick wall, threatening them in Chinese. One of the men took a step forward and Zhai slashed at him, almost falling over in the process. The mustache man drew his revolver and pointed it at Zhai.

"You wanted this, then? You could've just asked back in Hong Kong. Saved us all this trouble."

"No!" Zhai shouted out.

Several others in the crowd did as well. The mustache man grinned.

"Oh. Change your tune so quick?"

It was too late.

Idiot woke up Yanluo. The stone ground around the suited men dipped down into bowls around their legs like a trampoline, and then the men's feet were gone, sunken into the ground. The stone snapped back to its flat solid shape, but they were stuck in it up to their shins. A voice crowed on the wind, burbling like wooden wind chimes

"Méiyǒu qiāng. Chéngfá."

The man with the mustache cried out in pain and dropped his revolver. His hand was horribly burned, blistering and peeling as he shoved it in his coat. The gun sank into the ground.

"What the fuck? You're dead."

"No. You dead."

Zhai stood up straight and pocketed his knife. He shuffled off into the quickly dispersing crowd and disappeared. I stood alone in front of the four men, who were still writhing and trying to break free from the ground. I smiled at them.

"No guns, gentlemen."

I was so very glad I had Mr. Niu's warning. This could've been me.

Yanluo fell on them from the sky. The stars and clouds and brick walls moved along with it like smearing paint, following its form as it gradually appeared until it was completely opaque. It was a tall and naked grey-skinned man, with bat-like wings that spanned the length of a horse. Its head was scrunched up like a pitbull but bigger than my chest. Its head was mostly taken up by upward-facing jowls, wrinkled with dozens of lines of skin.

Clicking reverberated from its throat as it elongated its jaws, dislocating joints and ligaments to open its mouth wider. It kept stretching, retracting its skin back over its head and down its neck like a hood, revealing a mass of fleshy gums and its many rows of short, sharp teeth. It stood for a minute just clicking and swaying in front of them with its gaping, hundred-toothed mouth pointed upward.

The men all began screaming. I turned and walked away.

I could hear them all the way down the road, still wailing as they were torn to pieces.

082:

“And Mister... What was it?”

Medy nodded toward the man cobbled together from airplane parts. I couldn't help but grin.

“Wings. How could you forget?”

“Mister Wiiiiings.” The plane-man groaned like bending metal.

“Yes, Mister Wings is the only authorized organism?”

“Uh, I--he's the only other person here.”

“And the only people you've seen here are Mister Wings and Gutiérrez?”

“Yes.”

“When did you see Gutiérrez last?”

Medy shifted her weight, eyeing him closely. He paused a minute, looking confused.

“Yesterday? What's today?”

She checked her watch. I was surprised it worked in his chaasm. Mine didn't.

“Wednesday.”

“Four days ago. I think.”

“Alright.” She patted his shoulder. “We're going to go look around. Just yell if you need anything.”

“Okay. Thank you, guys.”

Benedict turned back to his chess game against Mister Wings, which he seemed to be losing very badly. He had taken a single white pawn on his side, while Mister Wings had stolen nearly all of his black pieces. I struggled not to ruminate on the embarrassing nature of playing chess against an airplane man you invented and losing.

I was not able to avoid thinking about it.

We left Benedict's dollhouse and stepped out into bright morning. It was always bright morning here. Tiny red butterflies bobbed around his front door, and blue jays circled above us, tweeting out familiar tinkling tunes. I tried and failed to prevent my beaming grin.

“Could you imagine losing so horribly at chess to a made-up airplane man inside your own brain?”

“I can't.” She laughed and flopped down on the grass.

“Dang it. I thought I’d be better at this. I have no idea where to start. What would Wilson do?”

“Don't talk like that, you're doing great, Medy. My first solo run was a total train-wreck. I didn't even get this far before calling Wilson in to save me.”

“Really? You? What happened?”

“Long story. And a kind of embarrassing one. Let's just say I did a bad job. Now, as for what Wilson would do in our situation... I think he would sweep the chaasm, gather intel. And he would try to think about what we need to be thinking about. He's good at that. Come on, let's go look around.”

“Alright, but I'm not going to let this one go. Either you're going to tell me, or Wilson will.”

“Oh. You're gonna be like that. Alright fine, I'll tell you later. Have you met Zeinhaert yet?”

“No. I thought I did, but apparently it was an organism.”

“Personality form. Then after this. We'll go meet Zeinhaert at Marble's and get some food, and then I'll tell you what happened.”

“Okay! Sounds good.”

We searched around the shrunken house, or maybe it was more like a massive dollhouse, looking over his small island of tall grass and flowers. It wasn't bigger than a soccer field, and was walled by a thick hedge, which separated his island of grass from a deep blue and purple ocean that stretched into infinity.

“Let's think. Wilson would also ask pertinent questions. What questions can we ask ourselves?”

“Why does Benedict have an airplane friend named Mister Wings?”

She looked at me with a completely straight-face. I couldn't help but laugh.

“Excellent question. Not exactly pertinent. But I would love to know.”

We curved around into the back yard; I could see Benedict through a window, lost in thought, pointlessly debating his next move.

“Here's one: if Gutiérrez is an organism, then where is he? Organisms can't just stop existing. Some can go invisible, some are really small, but they can't just stop existing.”

“He has to be here, then?”

“Yes. Somewhere.” I squinted at the hedge closest to us.

“Unless he can go invisible.”

I could barely make out an oblong black shape behind the leaves. Chausms so completely filled with pleasant moments and indulgent niceties like this made me skeptical. Being in them always put me on edge, like I was in a secret horror movie disguised with all the sweetness of a children's tale.

"Medy." I motioned to the black shape. "Look."

"What is that?" She followed my gaze.

I crossed the yard and parted the hedge, revealing a black cast-iron door resting on the face of the water, just off the sheer edge of the island.

"A door. And now I'm torn. I want to open it. But Wilson said not to do anything dangerous."

"Is this door dangerous?"

"Maybe." I grabbed the handle. "But maybe not?"

I flung it open and it splashed in the water; it was a lot lighter than I was expecting. Behind it was an old wooden stairwell descending below the ocean into red-tinted darkness. The rocky walls were lined with rib bones.

"Looks like we found our horror subplot. Well, what do you think?"

"Um," Medy gulped. "Well, maybe we should just take a quick look?"

I crouched down to get a better view.

"Exactly what someone in a horror movie would say. I think I can see the bottom. It doesn't look far. This wasn't on the manifest. I doubt Benedict even knows about it."

I sat there on my haunches, debating.

"Ah, screw it." I stood up. "Let's go take a peek."

The stairs creaked and wailed as we walked, ancient wooden sirens marking our descent. We reached the bottom and stepped out into a large stone room, like a squared-off natural cave, but absolutely flooded with rib bones. They were lining the walls, the ceiling, the ground, sitting in big piles, and loosely discarded all over the place. I bent and picked one up to examine it.

"That's a lot of ribs. Looks like pig ribs."

"Pig ribs? How do you know they're pig ribs?"

I handed her the rib.

"They're not big enough for a human ribcage, plus you--"

A door slammed open. A cloaked man stood before us in a little stone alley--his shadowed face was wrapped in rags. Gutiérrez.

"Benedict." He whispered.

I smelled gasoline.

083:

Sideways door. Base on the wall.

I turned the handle and the door fell open. I had to crouch to see in; a small white room with a shag carpet.

There were three little puddles of brown goo, drenching the shag carpet and staining the white floor. They were in front of a phone.

The phone was ringing very loudly. Someone was calling. I stepped in and walked over to pick it up.

"Where else can I go? Please, I need your help. You owe me this. At the very least. You owe me this."

It was Wilson. I tried to talk, but my voice wouldn't come out.

The puddle to my left began rippling, like a light breeze was blowing by. A whispering voice echoed by my ear.

"Hang up." It breathed.

084:

Sideways door. It was open.

I had to crouch to see in; a small white room. Empty.

Except for the phone.

It was ringing very loudly. Someone was calling. I stepped in and walked over to pick it up.

"No, you can be just about assured: that fate is as awful as it gets. It's not really death. I guess it's our own kind of afterlife. I'll tell you something else. Once you're in, you're stuck in there, like a panicked bird flapping around in a cathedral. We have no idea how it even works, let alone how to remove a fluid consciousness. I'd vote for putting the poor bastards out of their misery, but we have no idea how. They can't even die."

It was Zeinhaert. I tried to talk, but my voice wouldn't come out.

A whispering voice echoed by my ear.

"Hang up." It breathed.

085:

Sideways door. Open.

I had to crouch to see the small white room. Empty.

Except for the phone.

It was ringing very loudly. Someone was calling. I stepped in and walked over to pick it up.

"You never call me. You've never called me once since I got this new phone. No, 'How are you, mom? I love you, mom. Fuck you, mom.' Or nothing. Do you even care about me? After all that I've done for you in my life, do you even think about me at all? Fine, Philip. I'll stop bothering you. I hope you're happy."

It was my mom. I tried to talk, but my voice wouldn't come out.

A whispering voice echoed by my ear.

"Hang up." It breathed.

086:

The not-dead IBW soldier arrived in cold containment and was placed in secure isolation. Even as a nondescript pile of miscellaneous tissue and organs it proved dangerous--a VRC employee was injured while loading the flesh into the container. An amalgamation of what must have been mouth musculature and a handful of teeth flopped from the container and wrapped around the employee's leg several times, digging deep into the calf and severing the femoral artery. The stringy mass of tissue and teeth was very deeply embedded and had to be surgically removed, almost destroying the leg in the process. The employee is in stable condition but will suffer permanent loss of nerve function in that leg and is only now beginning remediation therapy.

Testing has shown the body isn't completely immortal. If all of the cells of any particular piece are incinerated, burned to ash, or otherwise broken down into dead waste, then the body can no longer reform. It requires at least a small percentage of physically adjacent living cells to regenerate.

We've relocated it into a spacious enclosed environment for observation. It does move around, though rather slowly, and over the course of a week it has regrown significantly. It has formed thin, skinless arms from ligament and muscle, and has just recently consolidated into a half-torso and small head, larynx included, with a short spine-like tail. There are no features yet, but it molded eye sockets yesterday. I did not expect it to regenerate in this way or at this rapidly of a pace.

As for behavior, it just drags itself around with its arms and gurgles. I can sometimes make out the lips moving, opening and closing as if speaking, though no voice comes out. It attempted to open the door once, though there's no handle on the inside--it seemed to realize this and stopped trying. After that it just stared up at our observation window, looking directly at me with its empty sockets for the rest of the afternoon.

The mechanisms behind this phenomenon are bewildering to me. I think we've stumbled through the door to an entirely new area of scientific research. Back while the IBW was being blasted into chunks, a stray bullet struck the broken gem stalagmite lodged in his eye socket--which we've discovered was just plain-old rubellite; it's a rare and pretty gem, but not much else. As it shattered it riddled the IBW's body with rubellite shards and dust. There's not an ounce of his flesh without some microscopic specs of it.

We think that may account for his immortality somehow. Current theories vary. One such suggests the well of energy below the rubellite is the fountain of youth, and it was the energy itself that gave life. Another is that the man had some unrelated genetic

mutation, though we've discovered no evidence of that. And frankly it makes no sense and is directly ignoring evidence.

We witnessed those corpses with living brains. There was, at the very least, an obvious link to life extension while a body was actively imbued by the current. It wasn't a stretch to suggest that maybe the rubellite itself was empowered in some way.

There's been a report of another site like the one in Honduras. It's a cave with gem formations somewhere in Tibet. Though the site is not free from tampering--we only discovered this information through accidental interception of Chinese communication. They built a facility on top of it. It seems they are aware of something, but we're not sure to what extent.

Natural deduction suggests that if there are two, there are probably more. We'll be investing in search teams and enlisting the Institute for information collection, and I'll be returning to the site in Honduras to take more readings and investigate the energy further. It's proven that the naturally occurring rubellite conducts it, but I'd like more information.

Will other materials conduct it? Can it be carried away from the cave?

How can we harness it?

I'm very curious to see where this rabbit hole leads.

087:

“Can you smell that?”

War Dog cocked his head and spat, splatting directly on the face of a dead gomey.

“That’s the smell of progress.”

He lowered his hand from the bullet wound in his chest and eyed the blood. He shook as he slid a cigar from a chest pocket and chomped the end off.

“Not good. Not gonna get out of it this time. Damned kids actually hit a clean shot for once.”

Eoghan stood over him, teetering awkwardly.

“I’m confused. What--uh, how is he dead?”

“Well, it’s his chaasm. He can do as he pleases.” I watched him light his Zippo. “As I’m sure I’ve told you many times, an owner dying in their chaasm is like dying in a dream, except they just wake up in the dream again. I imagine he’ll reform here shortly. I wonder how many times he’s died.”

War Dog began rambling between puffs on his cigar.

“I’ve died every day fighting on this beach. With each and every one of my brothers and sisters KIA. When one of those illiterate, cereal-eating baby bastards takes one of us down, I lose a part of me. Of my body. Because my body is this army. My heart is this battle, my mind is a loaded gun, but I’m jammed--”

“I didn’t think he’d be so incoherent.”

Philip sat on his haunches, eyeing the horizon as War Dog maundered on. Thick black smoke spouted upward in numerous towers across the sky.

“Plus, we’ve been here--what, ten minutes? And he’s already dying every good soldier’s death?”

“His last mental check went well, supposedly. I thought he’d be more stable.”

I checked my watch and wiped some sand from its face. It had a little scratch in the glass. I frowned.

“And yes. Twelve minutes. I’m thinking this might not be the real Arnold.”

“What?” Eoghan looked over.

“I think this may be his personality form. If it’s been a while since a corporeal sync--one second.”

I pulled out my little notepad and flipped through. An explosion sounded somewhere nearby, spraying sand and mud skyward. The clunking of massive robotic legs shook the ground; I could barely make out the shape of a lurching mechanized walker over the rolling sand. I looked back to my notes.

"He--ah." I frowned. "No, this is probably him. He's ninety-seven years old. On life support in his chassis."

"Well, should we just wait then?" Philip asked.

"It would probably be for the best. We're not familiar with--"

"Hell with that. You can wait if you want to. I'm gonna go take a little tour."

Eoghan walked away, headed down the beach. I pocketed my notebook. War Dog coughed, dribbling some blood down his chin.

"Go on without me. I'll hold these bastards off."

"Eoghan, I don't think that's wise--" I tried to reason with him. But he was already too far.

"What--" Philip stood up. "The man has no regard for safety."

We watched Eoghan's form shrink on the beach.

"Why did I agree to this?"

"Eat lead, lads."

War Dog was miming guns with his hands, shooting invisible enemies with invisible bullets. The color had completely drained from his face.

"Good question. Why are we here?" Philip sighed. "This is god-damned pointless."

"Eoghan. Threatened to cut our funding."

I watched him dip behind a hill, out of view. War Dog went limp and began melting into the sand with a receding wave. Philip and I sat in silence for a while. The breeze was nice.

This place was really quite enchanting in spite of itself. The entire chasm was made up of two parallel beaches separated by a thin ocean, a river, but with opposing currents that pushed toward opposite shores. The ocean river extended straight in one direction as far as I could see. Both of the beaches were flat near the shore, and made from packed grey sand, but further away they began rolling in ever-increasing heights and dips, shifting to elegant hues of brown and gold. The farther from the beaches, the more erratic and wild the sand became, contorting into soaring mountains and treacherously low valleys.

I watched a few vultures circling over some of those far away mountains of sand.

And then War Dog was behind us, screaming.

“I hope you maggots are ready to EAT SOME FLESH.”

His bear-sized hand slapped my back and nearly knocked me over. He had reformed, as all owners did after dying within their chaasm.

“Arnold, I don't know if you remember, but there's a man here named Eoghan who wants to learn from you.”

He rose an eyebrow and stared at me.

“And?”

“Well, he walked off a while ago and I was wondering if you would help us catch up with him. I'm worried he could get hurt out there.”

“Kid.” War Dog crossed the sand, knocking into Philip with his shoulder.

“This is war. If you're not getting hurt, you're not doing it right.”

088:

My new home was good.

This place was my house, like before. Clean and bright and warm. Like it was.

For a while.

I can't remember a lot of my life from before. But it remembers me. And I can feel it. And it wants me to remember.

My father wants me to remember.

Even now.

We're both dead. And he's still terrorizing me. Showing me my mother's death. Over and over. And over.

And over.

I see him in the hallway, climbing the stairs, dragging her lifeless body by the hair. I can hear her shoulders and chest and knees thumping against each step as he heaves her up the spiral staircase.

I hear him in his room--even though it shouldn't be there. They skipped that room. It didn't get made. The doorframe holds an empty wall. Blank. But I hear him in there still. Cutting her up. Stealing her hair. And then I hear him in the backyard, digging with my spade, burying her.

And then I hear her sweet voice again, singing downstairs. And then she calls my name, and I want beyond everything to go and see her, but then comes the crack of the pan against her head, muffled through the floor. I hear her final whimpering cry, her last plea for help, before he comes down with the pan again.

And then he's hauling her up. I see him in the hallway, climbing the stairs, dragging her lifeless body by the hair.

089:

I am unable to

I hear them ordering me. Yelling at me. Telling me to leave. And the others? Are they here too? Maybe.

I feel a boot slamming into my spine. Something popping. Something slipping from where it was.

My legs won't move anymore. My arms are shaking too bad to hold me up.

Vision blurred, like I'm swimming. Gloved hands gripping me by the arms. Carrying me. I hear someone speaking, clear through the muck.

"Just dump the dead ones."

The light is easy. Friendly. Close.

I'm sorry. I can't

090:

Low black hat, long coat scraping the floor, face covered in gasoline-drenched rags--pretty unmistakable description. Gutiérrez stepped toward us.

"Where's Benedict?"

Smoke poured from the open door behind him, rising and collecting on the ceiling of the cave like storm clouds. I glanced over at Medy. Her panic was almost palpable. It grounded me a bit.

"At home. You're Gutiérrez?"

He twisted his neck toward me like a bird.

"Where'd you hear that?"

"Benedict. We're friends."

I slowly moved my hand to the back of my belt, feeling for my rod.

"My name is Vintner."

He stared at me, dripping gasoline from his rags, and then shook his head.

"God, that kid. He's never been too bright."

"What do you want with him?" Medy spoke up, surprising even herself.

"Benedict is my grandson." He turned back to the door. "Come on in."

I pulled my rod from my belt and held it to my side.

We followed him through the small door and stepped into a magnificent modern kitchen, sprawling with expensive cookware and polished marble countertops. A big pot was boiling on a gas range, and an oven door on the wall trickled white smoke, filling the room with a light haze.

Vintner walked to the oven door and swung it wide, loosing billowing clouds of smoke into the kitchen.

"Dinner's basically ready. One minute."

He removed a large metal rack, placed it on the counter, and began pouring a bottle of reddish-brown sauce over it. I was hit with a motley of aromas--hickory smoke and the heavy scents of seasoned meat, thyme, vinegar. Smoked pig ribs. I rose my eyebrows at Medy.

"So, Vintner, Benedict is your grandson?"

"Yessir." He grabbed a knife and began cutting through the ribs. "How many?"

"Just one, thanks."

“And for the little miss?” He pointed his knife toward Medy.

“Uh--ah, no thank you, sir.” She gave a sheepish smile.

“Really? You need some meat, girl. Fine by me.”

“So then, who’s Gutiérrez?”

“A guy I made up to scare that little asshole into behaving.”

He handed me a small blue plate with a steaming rib. I slid my rod back into my belt. He was unbelievably stable for an unauthorized organism. Safe. Probably.

The smell of the rib was intoxicating--I hadn’t eaten yet and was getting hungrier by the second. There’s no telling what would happen if I were to eat fake food cooked by an unauthorized organism living in a cave in the depths of some dumb guy’s chaasm.

And it wouldn’t even give me sustenance anyway because I never used the chassis feeding tube. And and it could still poison me and probably would.

But you only live once, right? I took a bite.

Delicious. Slightly tangy barbecue sauce, vinegar, cayenne, and was that cinnamon? It was the best rib I’d ever had. Medy grabbed my arm and leaned in.

“Philip! What the heck?”

“It’s incredible, Vintner. Best rib I’ve ever had.”

I wiped some sauce from my face. He stopped carving and looked over.

“Want another?”

“No, thanks. That’ll hold me.”

“Mr. Vintner. You look exactly like what Benedict says Gutiérrez looks like.”

“Is that right?” He kept stirring the big pot, dumping in the occasional tub of spices or sliced vegetables.

I licked my fingers and then wiped my hands on my pants.

“Alright, let me break this down. You’re not real. You’re an organism in your grandson’s mindspace. Those stories you told him when he was a kid seem to have seriously mucked up his head. Over the years he’s become deathly afraid of Gutiérrez. Went to therapy for the better part of a decade. And since you died he’s been seeing Gutiérrez in the real world.”

“Died?” He stopped stirring and turned around.

“Yep. You died ten years ago, at least. Maybe more.”

“Then how am I here?”

“This is a simulation. You’re made from a piece of your grandson’s mind. How he thinks you are. Apparently he’s fond of your ribs. Didn’t you find any of this strange?”

“Yes, but I can’t remember living anywhere else.”

He looked down with his one uncovered eye. I took my plate to the sink and rinsed it. Manners are manners.

“Would you mind coming to visit him with us?”

“Will it take long?” He pointed to the pot. “Kalops is nearly ready.”

“Not at all.” I smiled. “And thank you again for the rib.”

091:

Oily rain fell from the yellow sky and coated our jackets and hats with greasy stains. The Moltke's house was almost completely isolated--an island sitting surrounded by a rolling sea of butter. There used to be an entire neighborhood of friendly organisms here, with a nice little park and a few town amenities, a library and so on. But it was all gone now. Buried in avalanches of lard for as far as the eye could see.

We approached the driveway to their home, careful not to slip on the slick ground. I had brought us all cleats to counteract the clumpy rivers of butter glaze, but it was a lot like walking on ice--any quick movements and you'd lose friction regardless of your shoes. I fell twice on my way up the concrete drive.

Guppy was standing near the front door, wobbling on ever-taller legs. They lifted him stories high now, stretching into the sky like comical stilts. I tugged on his pants and he slowly knelt by folding his legs into a ridiculously long crouch. His gills were flapping audibly, struggling against the thick grease rain.

"How's going?"

"Mr. Moltke." I adjusted my oversized protective glasses. "The chaasm is quite wet today."

"Not sure what you mean."

He stuck out his long tongue and licked an eye.

"If you're looking for Carl, he's inside."

"Thank you."

Guppy rose back into the sky. I looked back to Philip and Medy.

"Are you good? Medy?"

"I'm--" She straightened her posture. "Yes."

I opened the door and had to stand back as a cascade of partially melted butter drained out on the front step. The house was almost entirely filled now. Everything, from the coat rack to the rugs to the couch, was drenched in dark, greasy stains, dripping with oil and clumps of fat. Philip stepped back and covered his mouth.

"Oh--can I wait out here? This is gonna make me sick."

"Alright," I motioned for Medy to follow. "But keep an ear out--we might need the rod."

We ducked through the yellow cave-like foyer and stepped into the living room. Rippling stalactites of butter hung from the ceiling, and the walls and floors were equally caked in layers upon layers of runny goop. Halfway into the room was a new

wall made completely of butter, slowly oozing outward. A naked woman appeared, walking through the wall like it wasn't there. Her face was dribbling perpetually.

"Hello."

At first, I thought she was covered in it, but as she approached, I realized her flesh was transparent, made from wavering, trickling globs of butter, coagulating and solidifying and melting again all at once. It was the mom. I tried to maintain a sense of normalcy.

"Hello. We're friends of Carl. Is he around?"

"Butter boy can't play. He's been a bad boy."

She looked toward the wall of butter. A face emerged. It was him.

"Help me, Medy. Help me. I'm stuck. Please."

Medy's expression of horror was all I needed.

"Alright, Philip." I yelled back. "We need you."

He ran in a bit too quickly, slipping on a pile of butter and slamming shoulder-first into a bookcase. A handful of butter-covered books tumbled free.

"God damned fucking butter. What's up?"

"Rod the wall."

"No!" The butter woman snarled. "Stay away from my butter boy."

"Oh, holy shit. Is that the mom?"

"Yeah. And I guess we'll have to deal with her first."

She suddenly charged toward Philip with her arms extended. He reached around his belt for the rod, but she was too quick. She slammed into him and they toppled over. Philip landed hard against the floor and slid a few feet in the muck. The woman collapsed in a hearty splash on top of him, dissolving on impact and drenching a six-foot radius.

Philip just laid there.

"Oh. Oh, no no. No. No no no. No."

"Are you alright? That could've been worse."

I crouched down and offered him my hand. He leaned up and grabbed my arm, shivering in disgust.

"No. It could not have. I am going to throw up."

I helped him to his feet, almost slipping a few times in the slick.

“Alright, well. We have our answer. This is far too corrupted.”

I tried to rub my eye without smearing butter on my face, but I was covered in it now too.

“Medy! Helb!”

“Carl?” Medy was at the wall.

He was struggling against the butter wall like he was trying to stay above water.

“Philip? Can you help?”

Philip was still shaking his arms and futilely attempting to wipe himself off.

“Yeah, yeah, one second. No more butter. No more fish sauce. No more milk. No more mysterious liquids. No more. None. I’m done with it. This is the last time, Wilson. I haven’t asked much of you but right now I’m telling you--get somebody else to help with all these goopy brained dopes. Next time some kid’s got a leaky chaasm it better be birdseed or sand or something. Because I am not doing this again.”

“Understood, but only after we shut down the mayonnaise guy next week.”

“Excuse me, what--oh,” He stopped when he saw my face. “A joke. You’re joking. That’s new.”

Medy held her arms out as Carl continued to struggle against the butter behind her.

“Guys? Chaasm collapse.”

“Sorry, sorry. Here we go.”

Philip moved to her and drew the rod. He took a hard swing at the wall. The rod sunk in, sizzling and burning the surrounding butter into black char, but more just kept pushing in. It wouldn’t work. He twisted and tugged until the rod slid free.

“Well, remember when I said that sometimes it doesn’t work?”

I dipped my hands into the butter and found Carl’s arm.

“Medy, help me. Grab his other arm.”

She did, and we pulled. It was thick and resistant, not unlike quicksand. We were able to drag him out a few inches, just enough so his face was free, but I was losing traction. I tried to use more strength but kept sliding forward on the slick floor.

“Philip, can you hold me?”

“Not how I expected you to ask.” He shook his head and came over.

“Just grab my waist. On three, we pull as hard as we can, okay?”

Medy nodded.

"One."

"Two."

"Three!"

I heaved as hard as I could. The tendons were straining in my right arm--this was a strange angle to pull from. He budged a little more, and then a little more. We were slowly prying him out. When his waist was clear I reached back into the butter, tucked my arm between his legs, and twisted him all the way free. I set him down. My arms were throbbing. I tossed a lazy wave at Philip and rubbed my right shoulder.

"Carl. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Thank you, Medy."

"Listen. Remember what we talked about last time?"

"The train?"

"No," Medy choked on a broken giggle. "Not the train. The butter lich. We're going to stop her."

"Really?" He lit up, and then furrowed his brow. "But then--"

"Yeah. Today. Be brave for me, okay?"

He started crying. Medy leaned in and hugged him.

"I don't want to. Can't I go home with you?"

And then Medy started crying too.

Too broken. It was no longer a question of ethics. This was clearly unethical. I glanced over at Philip and his face looked how I felt. This never should've gotten so bad. I never should've let it get so bad.

I wouldn't again.

092:

I had been wandering the streets for hours, doing my best to ignore the three-foot tall version of me and his infinite yammering about incoherent nonsense. It wasn't working. No matter which way I was facing, he was there, rambling about sleeping and breathing and blinking and whatever else in his unbearable double speak.

Initially my plan was to jump off a bridge. But now I'm reconsidering.

I could do something. I could help Wilson.

I still had plenty of money. A bank-full I'd never be able to spend, even if I lived a hundred more years. I needed a phone. If I could get to El Aguacate I could grab a plane. I could find him.

And then what? Kill him?

Unarmed?

And for what?

Revenge? The future?

Do those matter?

Is it even worth it?

Is that all I could do?

I heard a phone ringing somewhere.

The short me was a few yards down the road, facing me, walking backwards.

"You should you should pick up that pick up that phone. Can you can you hear that ringing ringing?"

"Yes." I stopped.

"Over over there." Little me pointed down an alley.

He was right. The ringing was coming from the alley.

I entered. It was completely black. Passed the entry the tall brick buildings snuffed out the already-dim streetlights. The ringing grew louder. I fumbled forward in the dark, trying to adjust.

"Just just pick it pick it up."

It was blaring now. Filling my head. I lowered to the ground, crouch-walking toward the ringing and feeling around the wet concrete. My hand bumped into something smooth, and my fingers found the receiver. The phone.

I picked it up.

“Philip?”

A woman spoke to me. I thought I recognized the voice. It had an edge to it, like she was upset with me.

“Who is this?”

“Me? I'm not real. I'd be more worried about you. And you know--I've been thinking about your condition. Maybe it would be best to just jump off that bridge?”

“W-what?”

“The bridge,” She repeated. “Go ahead and jump off it.”

093:

Sideways door. Open.

White room. Empty.

Phone. Ringing.

Someone calling. I walked over to pick it up.

"Can you hear that ringing?"

It was me. I tried to talk, but my voice wouldn't come out.

A whispering voice echoed by my ear.

"Hang up." It breathed.

The line clicked off.

094:

Door. Open.

Room. Empty.

Ringin?

Someone calling? There was a phone ringin somewhere, but I couldn't see it.

The room was empty.

I tried to talk, but my voice wouldn't come out. Only ringin.

A whisperin voice echoed by my ear.

"Pick up." It breathed.

095:

Door. Open.

Room. Empty.

No.

Not empty.

What?

Not empty. Really.

I couldn't remember the last time it was not empty. ∃

It was always empty. Empty.

Every single time. Empty.

But not this time.

The brown shag carpet was back, fluffy as ever. There was a little wooden pedestal with the phone from before. Three black blobs faced it, bobbing happily on the shag carpet.

Ringin?

Was it ringin?

Or was I imaginin it ? ☹

No, it was ringin.

It was ringin very loudly. Someone was callin. I stepped in and walked over to pick it up.

"What could have possibly made you think this would end differently? Have you lost your god-damned mind? Please tell me there's some kind of credible excuse for this shit. Because I thought you were a genius. They told me you were a genius. But you're a god damned idiot!"

Who -- was that Eoghan? I tried to talk, but my voice wouldn't come out.

Only ringin.

The blob to my left started some lurching motion, rippling like a water balloon smashing into someone's face.

A whispering voice echoed by my ear. ≡

"Idiot." It breathed.

And then the blob popped, spattering the white room with black goo.

" Idiot. Idiot, Idiot. "

The other blobs popped too, spewing more goo and splashing on my--was it a shirt? Was I wearing a shirt? I wasn't. I wasn't wearing anything.

Eoghan was repeating himself on the receiver.

"God damned idiot."

I hung up the phone, and the pedestal sunk into the carpet. The room was clean from the goo now, except for me and the shag carpet.

I could still hear him chanting. ☐

"God damned idiot."

Over and over. The blobs were echoing too.

"Idiot."

"Idiot."

"Idiot."

I turned to leave, but the sideways door was gone. The hallway was gone.

The shag carpet parted, and a black door rose from the ground. ☐

The chanting stopped.

"You're a crazy little fella, aren't you?"

The ceiling fell into the sky. A very large man was peering down at me from above. I couldn't make out his face through the shadow. ☐

He reached his hand in and grabbed me.

"I don't have good news. You're really gonna hate this next bit."

He lifted me from the room, pulling me into a void of spiraling white lights and blackness, curling white pigtailed in boundless dark.

I felt home. ☐

I smelled the warm, enveloping scents of blankets on my bed and dinner still hanging in the air from the night before. Was I home?

“Remember when you made that joke about Zeinhaert’s suit and then he was pissed at you for like a week? And you couldn’t even hang out with him and Wilson because he wouldn’t stop being so incredibly passive aggressive and rude to you?”

“ Yes .” My voice. It came out.
It was It sounded Ω
me. like I did.

I had no memories of the last time I heard my voice. >

“Well, I guess it’s not going to be like that at all. Nevermind. Can’t remember things. Whatever. Listen. You’re... a stain? Of you? I think that’s what Wilson called it. A stain. You should know that, if you think about it. Anyway. Only way forward is through the loop. It’s not infinite, or maybe it can be but not for everybody? That’s worrying. Shit. Well. No choice. Just give it a go. Open the door.” ⊖

He leaned back into the room and dropped me.
I tried to talk, but my voice wouldn’t come out.

Was it the room?

I had just felt my voice.

I heard it.

In that void.

I walked over to the black door in the shag carpet and twisted the tiny golden handle. It opened on its own, softly landing against the shag carpet.

I could see the white room through it,

below me,

and the sideways door on the wall of that room,

and the hallway beyond it,

and another white room beyond that,

and another sideways door,

and another hallway,

all the way down,

forever.

I looked up at the man who was still leaning down.

“Only way now.”

Some shadow had peeled

away from his face.

It was me.

096:

An incisor stabbed into my head, crushing my skull. I couldn't see. But I could feel. And I was being eaten.

The muffled crunching of my body was getting softer, falling away.

I was falling
away.

Oh god.

The burning.

Red burning.

My head.

Head?

Cracking, splitting, breaking free and spreading out. Too big. Too wide. Too small. Too thin. Numbing sensation, can I feel my legs? My legs?

Do I have legs? I tried to look down, but there was nothing to look at. No head to look with. No neck to crane.

I was flying. Faster than I've ever moved.

I felt red.

And long. And in pieces. Stretched thin. In a straw. Riding the rail.

I felt red.

Red and pain.

I forgot. Where am I? What did I do?

Fans whirred and strummed out a cacophony of pulses. A symphony of wind. Thinner.

Where am I? What am I?

Was I curving?

Ticking, snapping.

Was I alive?

I felt red.

But now I felt something

Was I feeling?

Thicker. Am I still where I was?

My hand. My hand? I felt my hand.

Thicker. Pouring from a spout.

Razors slicing down my fingers and my palm, over my wrist and down my arm. And then I could see it hanging by my side. My side?

I held up all five fingers and they floated in front of me. My arm crawled into my vision, emerging in thin lines from my wrist, and then I saw my shoulder. And then

A hallway. I was in a hallway with a sideways door at the end. I felt the ground under my feet. My feet.

I fell to the ground, shooting wonderful sharp pain up my knees, and gripped the tiles with my new fingers, just feeling again. Again?

Right. I was alive. I am alive.

I am Philip.

I am alive.

But where am I?

I stared at the sideways door. What the hell?

097:

The pile of flesh and organs that was once an IBW soldier couldn't be referred to as an "it" anymore. Because "it" had clearly become a "he" again. A torso, head, pair of shoulders and arms, and pelvic region had come together, molding a person out of what was once an unidentifiable stringy mass.

Thin yellow skin now hung over his pocked flesh, sagging in sporadic dimples. It was extremely delicate--contact of any kind made it crumble into eggshell-like flakes. Each arm had correctly grown five fingers, but they were far too long and thin, and made from too many joints, which caused them to spiral inwards when folded into a fist. Even though most of the original flesh and tissue from his legs was absent, he sprouted two new gelatinous tails of bone and ligament from the stumps at the end of his torso, which had reached eight inches long and were still growing.

His right eye was gone entirely, and the empty socket and exit wound would not heal. It just remained a red hole around the exact place the stalagmite had occupied. From the right angle you could look directly through his skull.

His left eye did regenerate, however, which was unexpected considering it had been blown into pulp. It was every bit a human eye--it responded to stimuli in average ways, the pupil dilated correctly, and it even got swollen and red when dry.

I believe the mechanism causing his regeneration cannot rest and continues trying with whatever it has available, even when the organic building blocks it requires aren't present. Other than his bone-tails, we've also found something strange about the tiny hairs covering his body--instead of being constructed from dead tissue or keratin like normal human hair, they're made from osteoblasts and bone lining cells. Little sharp bone hairs. I'm not sure where the excess bone material is coming from. We have yet to examine his body under any penetrative imaging.

He sits awake all day and all night, and never exhibits signs of hunger or dehydration. So, to perform any of this biological investigation we had to sedate him, which proved a difficult task.

Following a multitude of failures in different drug trials, we decided to pack multiple drugs together and deliver them via a propelled auto-deploying syringe. The final mixture we came to was a cocktail of fentanyl, xylazine, and ketamine, delivered in a combined dose package of forty grams. That caused him to fall unconscious, and allowed us twenty-minute intervals in which to collect samples and view his form up close without risking injury.

His general behavior has slowed down. It's become more deliberate. On occasion he'll make laps around his room like before, but most of the time he just sits in the corner,

leaning on his leg stumps and forearms, watching us. And recently he's been doing more than just staring.

He's been attempting to communicate with us. His mouth moves constantly and now produces soft, nearly inaudible whispering. We can't make out what he's saying with his voice. But we hear him in our minds. It was in a few words and short sentences at first, but he's progressed into issuing demands, and has attempted to coerce employees into letting him out several times. Each person hears something different, but the constant trend seems to be that same word again. Freedom. He asks for freedom.

Earlier this week I returned to the ward and had to quickly stop an intern in the process of unlocking the outer chamber. He was going to let the man out. And he didn't even know why. When questioned, he said he thought he was supposed to. He thought I had given the order. I believe he used the words, "give him freedom."

And so the IBW's presence has become a problem.

We've locked the entire department down. Only the highest level of access is allowed within this wing. Presently that includes me and one other mentologist who isn't onsite. I've just been sitting outside his chamber, listening to the intermittent muffled scratching of his bony leg-tails when he does his laps. And he's been talking to me non-stop.

He knows my name. I can hear his placid voice in my mind even now, begging me for freedom, repeating it over and over in jumbled sentences. Trying to coerce me into releasing him. I won't, but I'd be lying if I said his talking wasn't persuasive. There's something about the nature of his voice, and the soft, careful delivery of his words in my mind. It makes me want to help him.

Give him his freedom.

098:

It was raining.

I opened my eyes. The sky.

It was raining on me.

I wasn't dead? I didn't die?

Didn't I?

Real rain. I forgot what it felt like. My naked body shivered in the cold, but part of me was grateful for it. Part of me had yearned to feel this again. To feel anything again. Really feel.

I tried to roll to my side, but something heavy was on my stomach. I shoved at it with all my strength, and it clunkily slid free. A body? A man?

I pushed myself up and rested on my elbows. I was in the dark outside, in massive a dirt pit which had melted into a mud lake from the downpour. My legs wouldn't move. They were stuck in the mud. I couldn't feel them. Bodies surrounded me.

"Just dump the dead ones."

The voice I heard returned to me. And then came the rest of it.

All the bodies were naked or wearing gowns or chassis suits. Net dwellers. Stacked in piles. Hundreds of them. Thousands? They were dead and I should be too. Dumped here by the VCR or DHS or IWB or some other combination of letters I never ascertained the meaning of.

What happened?

I collapsed onto my back again.

My bed of mud was wet and cold, but it was comfortable. More comfortable than anything I could remember.

I drifted off.

099:

The water level in the field just kept rising. Used to be I was wading around up to my ankles, but now it was nearly at my knees. This year had been way worse than last. The field was still workable, but with more water came more life. More creatures, bugs, pests. More problems. Now a particularly fishy-smelling algae grew on nearly everything in the water, and lake beetles had taken up root in the soil. They grew up to a foot long and had little barbed horns on their heads right above their perfect-circle mouths. I had no idea what purpose the mouth or the horn served them.

They were mostly harmless, though if you stepped on one wrong it would rear up and slam its horn into your leg, leaving a pretty nasty mark. It hurt like hell and bled for hours. And then if you were bleeding into the water that'd bring bloodbees, and that's a whole 'nother ballgame.

The innocent-seeming algae turned out to be the real problem. Green crabs poured in from the swamp by the thousands right before harvest, swarming the rice marshes and skittering over all my hard work. They wanted the algae, which would actually be helpful if their little claws didn't do such serious damage to the rice plants while they were feeding. A good lot of the yield this year was already ruined.

I designed something to scare them away. Weird idea, but I remembered this time from when I was a kid. I think I was a kid? I was with someone and we were watching the crabs migrate, crossing a road, and then these big black birds, ravens or crows, I don't know--they all flew down and started tearing the crabs to shreds. Ripping their claws off, beaking their bodies, and flying away. Then the crabs stopped crossing there. Never saw them cross that road again.

So I made a big stuffed crow. I dug a posthole and buried a log a few feet into the marsh, and then perched the stuffed crow on top. It wasn't God's depiction of a crow to be sure, but it looked rough the part, maybe ignoring its lopsided wings. The crabs kept their distance from the crow, but it only covered a small radius. I would need several more stuffed crows--I guess they'd be called scarecrabs?--to protect the entire field. That was going to be a lot of work. A month, maybe more. Hard, laborious work, building the frames, shredding the stuffing, collecting and painting the feathers, and so on. And I didn't have enough material. I needed supplies.

Heavy rains were getting more regular, too--that's probably where all this damned water was coming from. There were a couple of small thunderstorms a week. Those kept away any traders or caravans or visitors of any kind that could bring me supplies. I wasn't getting any for the foreseeable future with floods like these. They'd just take the long way around. I could go out on my own to the nearest town, Priene. But it was dozens of miles away. No idea how long that would take.

And how long had it been since I left my field? I couldn't remember.

So, altogether it would probably be next year before I could build all the scarecrows I needed to get the field ready. A laborious year. With nothing to show for my harvest but a small circle of rice. The crabs would assuredly destroy everything else. That yield would be enough for me to eat and that's about it.

But I had the answer to all of this. The red stone. I could just use the stone. The old hag who palmed it over told me it would solve all my problems, but it didn't feel right then and it doesn't feel right now. It was warm and it seemed to hum unevenly, like an old carriage wheel that was about to fall off.

It reminded me of something. Something bad. When I held the polished red orb, feeling its surprising heft in my palm, I got this suspicion that I was being watched. This feeling that it wasn't something I should be messing with. This feeling like I was, I don't know, holding some kind of great power. A king's crown. A loaded musket. Something I've only felt once before, though my memory of that was far away and twisted up in blurry ropes behind foggy windows, and I couldn't remember it anymore. Using the stone was a bad idea.

But I needed help.

And I wasn't getting any.

100:

Medy led the way, and I strolled behind with Vintner. It was a relatively quick jaunt up to Benedict's dollhouse. The sky still shone in bright purple and orange streaks, blended by tufts of clouds which broke the light into hundreds of golden shafts.

Vintner stopped and stared up at the sky. I stopped with him.

"My god, morning already? It's beautiful."

"It's been morning here since it was built. A little over a year ago?"

I looked to Medy, who gave me a reassuring nod.

"I guess..." Some gasoline dripped free from his rags. "I never noticed."

"Yep, wonderful and all that. You get used to it."

I joined Medy at the door. Vintner took another moment to soak the view before hobbling over as well.

We paused just before the house. I held out my hand to stop him from absent-mindedly stumbling forward.

"What?" He seemed to rouse from a daydream.

"Okay. So. Benedict thinks you're trying to kill him. Wait here a minute. We'll go try to explain all this and then come get you, okay?"

Vintner nodded. I could barely tell his brow was furrowed under the rags.

"Alright. Does he remember me?"

I was behind Medy, walking through the door. I turned to him.

"Yep. He thinks you're the one who got him cursed in the first place. We'll try and set him straight. Sit tight."

We entered and the wooden door clattered shut behind us. Medy greeted him as we crossed the room.

"Hey, Benedict. Mister Wings."

"Oh, hey."

"Wiings."

Benedict barely looked up from his chess game. The airplane man creaked an absent greeting, puzzling over his next move--his three-fingered wing hand was bent up and resting under his plane-nose chin.

The game board had been reset, and their little marker now showed one more win for Mister Wings. Medy walked over to them.

Benedict:

Ø

Mister Wings:

HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH

HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH

HHH HHH HHH HHH HHH

HHH HHH III

“Benedict, would you mind pausing the game for a second? We have something to discuss.”

“Ah, uh--yeah. Mister Wings do not touch my pieces again, please. Can you watch him? Watch him, make sure he doesn’t move my pieces.”

“We’re all watching.” I said flatly.

“We found Gutiérrez.” Medy continued. “And he's not what you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he’s not trying to kill you or steal your soul.” I joined her. “And he’s not a demon or magic or whatever. Your grandfather made him up to scare you. He's fake.”

Benedict unconsciously fiddled with his hands, cracking his knuckles and pulling on each finger.

“But I’ve seen him. He’s real. I’ve seen him at home. And I’ve seen him here. Mister Wings has seen him too, right Mister Wings?”

“Miiister Wiiiings.” Mister Wings groaned anxiously and spun his shoulder-mounted propellers, seeming to agree.

“Yes, but the Gutiérrez you see here was made from your mind. He’s an organism just like Mister Wings. We met him.”

“You did?” Benedict’s face melted into panic. “Where?”

I looked toward the door and could see Vintner’s shadow on the window, rocking back and forth. Benedict continued anxiously fumbling with his hands.

“In a little cave on the coast. But again, Gutiérrez isn’t real. The guy we found is your grandfather, Vintner.”

“My grandfather is dead.”

“Would it be best to just show him?” Medy glanced up at me.

“I don’t know.” I rubbed my lip. “Worth a shot, maybe. Hey, Benedict.”

He turned to me.

"He's not dead here. Remember your grandpa's ribs? Smoky, tangy, hint of cinnamon. Pig ribs. You must remember."

"Uh, yes?" Benedict shifted back between worried and confused, which were the only two emotions I ever saw his face express.

"I just ate one of those ribs. He was cooking them. And it was the best rib I ever had. Was it the best rib you ever had too?"

"Y-yes."

"Gutiérrez's real name is Vintner. And he's your grandpa. Will you meet him?"

He stared at me for a minute. His face took a turn toward neutrality for once.

"Okay." He gulped and then turned to Mister Wings. "Are you okay?"

"Wings." Mister Wings gave a sharp creak.

Benedict was wearing that bravery face--the one you unconsciously take on when you're facing the worst fear you've ever felt.

"Then I will meet him."

"Great." I grinned at Medy. "He's right outside. Vintner!"

Vintner kicked the door open with his arms held wide, howling, "Hallooo!"

Benedict froze. There was a heavy thud somewhere below us, shaking the ground. The sky faded to grey and then to black outside, leaving us nearly completely in the dark. The birds stopped chirping; the wind stopped blowing. The only noise was that of the waves churning violently down on the shore. Benedict slowly stood up, and as he did the house sunk down around us, falling into the grass. The roof unfolded and fell in too. I could feel the temperature dropping. It was getting colder.

We were standing under the night sky surrounded by an infinite sea. The waves were lapping halfway up the island now, just a few feet away from us. Our door to the chaasm was at the base of the island, now completely submerged.

Not good.

Benedict's face was twisted with fear again.

"Benedict." Vintner's voice became harsh, whispering.

"I've come for your soul."

101:

The new energy was compatible with all sorts of machinery. We tried hooking it up to basic electronic devices at first, and while it did power them, most devices behaved oddly. Some, like waffle irons and hair dryers, instantly popped and fizzled out. Others like televisions, microwaves, fans, all functioned perfectly without any issues. Each device would have its own little quirk. For example, radios would fluctuate in volume wildly, and station signals were played back jumbled, out of order.

Naturally I wanted to try this with more advanced technology. In thinking about those corpses in Honduras, suspended on stalagmites with this energy pulsing through their brains, I wondered if it could be extended to our mental research--what would happen if we used it to power an MRI?

And so we hooked it up using our new rubellite cabling, which we terminated into standard power connectors. It took some heavy modification, but once connected, the MRI powered up like normal. The magnets groaned much louder, and at higher frequencies than during standard operation, but the magnetic field was being generated. Without any outside electrical input aside from the new energy.

Even stranger, the field it generated was visible to the human eye. A small floating orb in the center of the machine, coalescing between blue and green hues, wobbling and rippling like water. It was erratic, pulsing, and very small. Much smaller than a human head--more near the size of a kiwi. We'd need to dilate the field somehow. And an even greater issue was the heat generation. The current cryocooler and heat regulator weren't keeping temperatures low enough for extended use, and in just a few minutes the magnets would heat up to unsafe levels. Knowing we'd have to increase magnetic output to make the field large enough for a human head, we installed a dozen more cryocoolers and heat exchangers.

It took a few months to rebuild the machine. Testing was paused during this window, and I focused on other matters.

But those months passed quickly, and with the magnets and gradient coils from six MRIs all properly cobbled together into one Frankenstein-like machine, we began testing again. We could cycle on coils and plates as necessary, allowing us to dilate the field up to the size of a watermelon. And then we began placing things inside it. Inanimate objects, and most organic matter, underwent no perceivable changes. But living brains were a different story.

We were able to take images while the machine was in use, which made viewing the results of the experiments quite simple. The field seemed to cause all brain activity to cease in our test subjects, which consisted of mice, hamsters, and monkeys. It worked the same no matter which species was placed within the sphere. They would struggle

against their restraints, trying to break free, up until the machine was powered on. And then they'd fall limp. Brain activity dropped to nothing. Like they were dead.

And then when we dialed it down and stopped the field generation, most of them were back to normal, struggling to get free, like nothing had happened. I say most because all the mice had died. The hamsters and monkeys lived, though. That was enough to garner approval for human experimentation.

It wasn't until after approval, and subsequent initiation of testing on humans, that we were informed all of our hamster subjects had died as well. Every animal except for the monkeys had either died outright or eventually suffered traumatic brain death and become vegetative. That wasn't promising, but we were reassured by the survival and mental stability of the monkeys, as well as our first round of human test subjects.

Maybe it simply required a more advanced brain than a mouse or a hamster? That's the current operative theory. No monkeys or human beings have died from this procedure, including myself. Not yet, anyway.

After a few dozen "expendable" human subjects survived testing, and more tweaks were made to the machine, I was ready to try it myself. I had my assistants dial the machine up, and the plan was to leave me in for a few minutes. Just long enough.

I'm sure I cannot adequately describe the sensation, but I will do my best.

I laid back on the table, slid in and locked into place, and then they cycled the machine on. I could hear the whirring of the magnets and coils as they powered up and began generating the field. There was a metallic clang and a bubbly splash, like I shoved my head under water. I saw refractions of green and blue light, slowly fading to black as a pressure mounted on my skull, steadily rising. My head felt like a popcorn kernel, and I was just waiting for the pop. Like I had a hundred headaches all at once. It grew and grew and grew until finally I felt a crack, and then a burst.

And then black.

That's all there was. Black.

No noise, no sight, no smells, no tastes, no feelings. Just black. Complete and total black. My mind must've been making things up to fill the void, because then I started seeing images. Small dancing balloons, stars and planets circling on that rickety solar system mobile over my crib, a tall glass of grape soda, my parents, red, the sands of Arabia, two tickets to Back to the Future, my daughter, red, hand, finger, eye, red, circle, triangle, red, red, red, red.

And then I was out. The pressure came crashing back in a tsunami against my temples. My head was pounding, and then it subsided, but I was left with a radiating throb down my spine. I was lying in the machine.

It had completely isolated my consciousness from my body.
For six seconds.

102:

Oh, George. What have we done?

His chaism was collapsing far sooner than expected. There was no more stone-paved road, no expansive field of flowers, no mansion perched on a hill. Not anymore. The hill was still there, now devoid of color and significantly shorter, but it only held an overgrown tombstone engraved with the name "Marjorie Williams."

The street was gone. The fields and pastures were gone. The mansion was gone. The sky was gone. Nothing but dim blue, an ocean, and an island.

All I could see were caustic waves melding into the sky near the horizon.

I looked around for any sign of George.

Down on the far side of the hill was a small cellar door. I approached the hill's edge, careful of the curling waves, and stood before it, eyeing the ocean. The waves weren't water. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but up close like this I could see it--they were rolling swells of tight black hair. I squinted at my shoes--the grass too was some strange type of hair, wavy and grey.

Hair again. And was the hill really a scalp? It felt rubbery under me, like there was a protective plastic layer over the ground, but I decided against investigating. It wasn't important.

I hoisted the door up--it was too dark to see anything inside save the wooden ladder. I took a minute to stretch my legs a bit and then carefully descended. Even if the pain and soreness was imagined, it still felt real, and that was enough for me to take precautions.

"George?" I called down.

My voice echoed back with a hollow ring. Silence. I stepped off the ladder into black.

Tufts of dim light shone on framed portraits which hovered sporadically around the room, confusing its proportions more than the shadow already did. The little balls weren't bright enough to light any of the surrounding area, but made the picture frames glow in the dark, decorating an otherwise black void with dozens of golden squares.

The closest such painting was a man I'd seen before. The base held a little engraved nameplate that read, "Frederick."

It was Arthur's dad from before--well, really it was George's dad. His hair was an unkempt mess of black corkscrews.

"Hello?" I called again as I made my way forward.

"Who?"

A growling voice spoke up ahead. It didn't sound like George. I continued, careful with my footwork; the ground was a wrinkled mess of uneven stone.

"Arthur?" The voice snarled again, somewhere in front of me.

It sounded close.

"It's me. Wilson."

I passed a painting of an old Asian man that looked like he had a stack of pancakes on his head. On closer inspection I realized it was actually several thick loops of amber hair, piled up in a tower. The base read, "Fāng."

"Who?"

The voice became high and sharp. Was that someone else?

"Wilson." I said again. "With the VRC."

"Wilson..." A whisper blew by my ear.

I reached out but nothing was there. I went by yet another painting, this time of a sobbing woman. Her hair was cut down to rough shreds and patchy bald spots. The base read, "Marjorie."

"Who?"

A woman's crying voice sang to me.

I was starting to understand. George had regressed completely. A consciousness by a thread. This was far worse than his chaum had been during our first visit. Coming in alone was a mistake.

The air grew thicker as I progressed, heavier on me, more densely packed with cool moisture. I passed another painting. A young girl beamed with pearly teeth, wearing a short-cut bob of neat black hair. The name at the bottom was, "Elise."

"Who?"

A giggling voice, inquiring shyly.

I passed another frame. This one was of a squat man with big shafts of hair like palm fronds, drooping down and covering his body. The base read, "Garbage Man."

"Who?"

An older man barked out, heavily-accented and in a joking kind of way.

A frame clattered to the ground in front of me. It's tuft of light was blue and flickering, dimmer than all the rest. I crouched to inspect the painting. It was George, giving a half-smile, bald as ever. The bottom read, "Arthur."

"Wilson?" George called out to me. From the little ball of light.

Or was it Arthur again?

"Yes. Hello, George."

"What's happening to me, Wilson?"

He sounded like he was holding back tears. Not really, not real tears. But real enough.

"Your chaasm is..." I hesitated. "Well, it's going to collapse. I got an alert that your stability had been reduced--I didn't realize it was like this. I'm sorry, George."

George's voice twisted into rage, coming at me from every angle. The air grew hot, and his tuft of light burned pink.

"What do you have to be sorry about? You aren't a murderer, are you, Wilson?"

I stopped to ponder whether I'd been asked that question before.

"I--uh, no, I'm not."

"What do I do, Wilson?"

He was the meek blue ball again, whimpering and flickering on the floor. His voice was soft. Fragile. Sad. I felt the cool air return. I looked back to the ladder, dimly lit by the blue above.

"Nothing. I just have to shut you down."

"Will it hurt?"

"No worse than this."

103:

I had a rough night's sleep in Jiǎnzhǐ, holed up in an alley under a pile of trash. Rain woke me early and the pain came throbbing back, making it hard to fall asleep again. Couldn't sleep in wet trash anyway. The rain stirred the stink up so bad I could taste it.

The old man was still lying where he fell. Definitely dead. Part of me had hoped that maybe he was just sleeping it off, but looking at the pool of blood, there was no doubt now--that knock on the head had killed him. He tried to rob me. He had it coming. Why should I feel bad for protecting myself?

I decided I wouldn't. I felt his pockets. He had a yuan coin and a worn photo of a woman, tattered and stained with age. I pocketed the coin and dropped the photo to the ground. It blew a few feet on the wind and nestled under the dead man's arm. A fleeting feeling of melancholy drifted over me as I stared down at him. It passed.

I hobbled out of the alley on my weak leg and headed for the blackjack parlor, though I wasn't exactly sure where that was. I felt my pocket and counted the outlines of each tile. Four. Just two more.

And then I'm done.

I turned onto a wider, more open street. It was the biggest street I'd seen so far in Zhuō Yó, completely packed with players and vendors even this early in the day--or was it still late? Shops and stands lined the packed road; people were shouting and singing and talking everywhere I looked. The players here seemed a little less worse for wear. They wore button down coats and hats and scarves, and gloves that had every finger, contrasting the rags and scraps most had on in earlier areas. I still wore those rags and scraps, and my beard and hair faired poorly after so many months of neglect. I did not fit in.

Bitter smells of cooked meat and some kind of bread wafted by, jostling the acid in my stomach and dredging up violent pangs. Even after last night I was still incredibly hungry.

Guess that's the thing with hunger. You get used to the empty stabbing in your stomach until you eat again, and then you remember. You remember the pleasure of eating, what it's like to feel something other than empty, how bad being hungry really is, and then you gotta start all over.

But I didn't have to start over this time. I didn't have to be hungry. I had money. And there was no Mr. Niu around to tell me it was a bad idea. I stopped at a stand. It was a squat little counter in front of two vast pans full with simmering meat, surrounded by shelves of buns and little metal plates. I leaned on the counter.

"What're you serving?"

“Lúròu huǒshāo.” A mustached woman grumbled from behind one of the steaming pans.

I had no idea what that was.

“Èr.”

I held up two fingers and dropped a coin on the counter. She grunted and took a plate. I caught whiffs of green peppers as she grabbed at clumps of meat with her tongs. My stomach growled intensely. She lined two buns, passed the plate to me, and took my coin to count the change.

I immediately shoved it in my face, swallowing the first bun in two bites, and the second in a more conservative three. They were packed with flavor. A bit gamey. Probably some kind of meat I’d rather keep a mystery. By the time she returned with my change and palmed it over, I was licking my fingers.

“Xièxie.” I flexed my mastery of the Chinese language.

She grunted again as I stepped away and continued down the street, now happily full of mystery meat and sweet bread.

A candlelit sign caught my eye; it read BAN-LUCK with a little picture of an ace of spades. I peered into the murky windows and saw dozens of card covered green felt tables, each surrounded by players, smoking and drinking and chortling on. This was it.

I pushed through the door. A little bell rang above me.

A well-dressed man with a bowtie bowed and greeted me. He moved behind a podium and asked me something I couldn’t understand.

“I’m here to play. For the Liubo.”

He was in the process of leafing through papers but stopped when he heard Liubo. He nodded in understanding, eyes fixed on the floor, and motioned for me to follow. I did. We weaved through the crowded tables and chairs, heading toward a little stairwell in the back. He stopped at the top of the stairs and pointed down.

“Zhù nǐ hǎoyùn.” He whispered.

I’d heard that before but couldn’t remember what it meant.

I went down the steep concrete steps and turned into a small hallway, which led to a separate, shorter staircase made from wood. There was a red door at the end of the hall. I approached it and tried the handle--it was locked.

“Shá?” A rough voice came through a slit in the door.

“Here for the blackjack.” I smiled through the slit, not sure if he could see me.

The door clicked a few times and then swung open, revealing a big man in a small concrete room. There was just a single card table. It was much nicer than the tables upstairs, wrapped in tight red felt, and lined with dark cherry-stained wood which bore detailed engravings of gods or emperors or something else I couldn't recognize. A vice grip was fixed into the wood in front of a lone chair. The man pointed to it.

I entered and sat down. Two more men appeared at my sides, grabbing my right arm and fitting it into the vice.

Oh. Shit.

"Wait."

The big man who let me in left through a side door. He told me to wait as if I had a choice--the vice was clamped hard on my upper arm. I could hear him muttering to someone, and then he reemerged with a lanky boy following behind.

"Hello, sir. Best of three?"

His accent was excellent.

"Didn't know I had an option." I looked at the vice. "I'm assuming this is my wager."

"Yes. You can do one game or best of three. Most choose the latter."

"What's the difference?"

"One game and the pot includes ten thousand yuan. Best of three and you only get the tile."

"This seems too easy. It's just random."

The boy pulled a deck of cards from his belt and began shuffling them.

"Many think that. But overconfidence is the real challenge. I recommend best of three."

He was even extending generosity here and trying to goad me into the safe pick. I knew the smart option. But ten thousand yuan... I wouldn't have to want for anything anymore. At least not in Zhuō Yóu. But I only needed one more tile after this one; I probably wouldn't have to be here much longer.

It would be stupid to pick one game, right?

Right?

"One game."

104:

I didn't jump off the bridge.

I keep hearing the phone. A rotary. When I turn around to look, it's behind me, sliding along the ground, wearing that used expression. I know it's that woman. I know what she's going to say.

The little me was in my face, waving his hands around like an air traffic controller. I looked up at him. Maybe acknowledgement was a bad idea. But I was fed up.

"Can you can you please talk talk to me me?"

"What the hell do you want me to say?"

"Hello? Help help help!" He danced a little jig. "Hello! Aren't aren't you so so thirsty and thirsty and hungry, Philip?"

"Shut up."

I stood up and walked across the parking lot. It was late. Getting later. In more ways than one. I saw the light of morning resting just beyond the horizon.

"Shut shut shut up. Please, Philip. Please please." I yammered on.

Maybe getting some food wasn't a bad idea though. I hadn't eaten. Not since before Zeinhaert's chaasm. And there was a diner in town. My stomach grumbled from somewhere far away.

No

It was a car starting. It pulled out of the parking lot and rolled up the street. Was I hungry? Really?

"Yes yes." Little me was teetering on a concrete ledge, rocking back and forth. "Really."

"I can't think. I need to take my mind off this."

I spoke to me, but really to myself. Maybe I should've stayed with Wilson.

"Mind off your take your mind off your mind. Maybe maybe Wilson is dead dead."

"What? No. He's not." This was getting me nowhere. I decided to head for that diner.

"Come on."

Come on? Was I accepting this little broken idiot as a person? I guess no one wants to be alone. No one wants to die alone. But he was just a part of me. Not really someone else by definition.

"Little idiot. No one no one. No one wants to wants to die die dine alone."

We... I guess it was we now. We walked the streets, turning where I felt like we should. We passed some other places that would've been fine, I'm sure. But I knew the diner. I remember it being comfortable. The phone scraped the ground behind me, keeping an exact distance away.

We weaved through streets I kind of recognized, to streets I maybe recognized, to streets I definitely didn't, and then back to one I definitely did.

I could see the diner, a few blocks ahead. I approached and stood under the sign, staring up.

"MOAT'S DINER

24 HOURS A DAY

Try our new Patty Melt!"

The blue florescent glow enveloped me. I thought about patty melts. I couldn't remember what that was. The door clinged. Clanged? It made a ringing noise. Ringing. Ring. It rang when I walked in.

The phone got stuck on the door and shook around like it was having a seizure. I thought it was going to break the glass, but it just popped away and appeared inside, by my feet. It rang loudly in the diner. An old red-headed woman was scrubbing tables with a dirty rag.

"Grab a seat, hon. Be right with you."

"Miserable bitch." The small me said. "Miserable miserable miserable. Dirty dirty rag."

I slid into a booth and I sat across from me. The phone was on the floor in the aisle. Ringing. And then the woman was at my side, standing on the phone. I could barely hear her over the ringing.

"What can I get you, darlin'?"

"Patty melt." I said the first thing that came to mind.

"And coffee."

"Sure thing."

I pulled my wallet from my pocket. A ten was poking out. I laid it on the table.

I was out of time. The hallucinations we're getting too intense. The plan. What was the plan? If I could call a cab

I could

What

What could I do? Get to the airport

Get arrested for being insane

Die in jail

Yeah. I could die in jail.

I keep thinking about the bridge. The confidence with which that woman spoke.

It would be easy. Easier than dying in jail.

“Easy easy.” I said from across the table. “So easy easy. I would do it would do it too.”

The waitress returned, sliding the coffee and my plate in front of me. It held a little dead leprechaun, melting and running off the sides, pooling on the table in greens and reds. I blinked.

It was a sandwich on toasted bread, oozing cheese from the sides. I took a bite. I guess it was good. It didn't mean much. There was some meat, cheese, maybe an egg. I don't know.

“Mmm, mmm. Philip, isn't isn't that delicious delicious?”

It wasn't. I took a sip of coffee, but it was too hot. My lip and my tongue were numb. It felt good. I drank more and my whole mouth went numb, and it grew down my throat like weeds. A burning lump hit my stomach. At least it was something. The little me clutched his throat, overacting to the hot coffee.

I pulled my wallet from my pocket. A ten was poking out. I laid it on the table.

On top of... another ten dollar bill. Had I already done that?

“You're you're crazy. Crazy crazy Philip.”

“Thanks.” I stood up and walked out. The phone clinked along behind.

The sun had risen more, but it felt like I was only in there for a few minutes. Blue and purple stretched above me, but the rest of the sky was still dark.

I walked a little bit more. Over the street, through a parking lot. I had no idea where I was going.

Ring. Ring.

“Hey, hey,” I was in front of myself again, walking backwards. “Hey! You should you should answer that that phone.”

I stopped. I did too. And so did the phone.

I looked back at it, and as I did it slid forward until it was at my feet. I crouched down and picked it up.

“Hello?”

105:

Machines get corrupted too, just like people. It's not the same because there's no actual mind to warp, but they do operate on a large set of algorithms. Plenty of room for error. Plenty of potential points of failure. Not that this kind of thing could've been planned around, anyway.

The Institute began selling nano-arranger capacity within citizens for advertising sometime in the late 90s. Up to forty percent of a person's arrangers could be tapped for promotional or corporate use at any given time, though that was later bumped up to sixty percent. This allowed interested parties, mostly companies, to sell images, thoughts, ideas, whatever they wanted, really, directly to the brain. It worked well for many years without any drawbacks. These special ad-arrangers were flagged with a different ID, assigned to a new update branch, and given separate rules for reproduction to limit their growth.

Most people believed they would go out to stores and buy things just because they wanted them; they felt a whim and acted on impulse, or had this specific desire mulling for a long time and finally decided to pull the trigger. Whatever the localized reasoning, that was the ad-arrangers doing their job. If those arrangers weren't out there prodding people's minds, I had no doubt that most of those force-advertised products would sit on shelves, lining warehouses, indefinitely unsold.

This was proven when the ad-arrangers were disabled and insemination was halted. There are still thousands of warehouses, filled to the rafters with Scrub Daddys and Chia Pets and Oreos and countless multitudes of other worthless products, rotting away, unwanted.

Nano-arrangers weren't compatible with Ko energy. Once we deployed the Network and made it publicly available, we very quickly found that entering a chaasm or shared span with nano-arrangers in your blood caused some kind of malfunction. The malfunctioning nano-arrangers would disconnect from control and then go dark over a span of time, usually a few months. At first we assumed the Ko energy was simply killing them--delivering too strong of a current into the brain and scrambling them. And in the case of the baseline nano-arrangers, that was true. We began testing a few weeks after initial symptoms were reported by collecting a decently sized control group of afflicted individuals. Through them we were able to confirm that arrangers were dying and being passed in natural waste. But not all of them. We only found a return of roughly forty percent of the total load.

The remaining sixty percent of arrangers were unaccounted for in every single case. They were still in there, still working, communicating, and presumably controlling thoughts, but they did so completely separate from our control. We made quite a bit of

progress in understanding the issue during those months, but then our test subjects vanished.

We would find them again randomly, if at all, months later--in one case it was two years. In department stores. In closets at home. In the wilderness. Dead. On streets. Naked. Sometimes alive, though just barely, as they wouldn't eat or drink or perform basic necessities. They were zombified and unresponsive, attempting only to perform a single simple task over and over. The task was different for everyone, but always basic: tying shoes, cutting a hole in the wall, walking in a circle, and so on. Autopsies on these individuals showed that not only were the ad-arrangers still present, but they had multiplied to a hundred times the intended concentration, often forming clots and wreaking havoc within the body. They were in there by some unknown, unfathomable quantity, following a ghost protocol, working of their own autonomous volition.

The affliction was colloquially referred to as a disease. Users started calling these corrupted ad-arrangers "moth-mites." We had no idea why until someone within the VRC, a new-hire who still had nano-arrangers in his blood, experienced them firsthand.

A few months after his first trip into the network, he started seeing moths. In his vision. Crawling over his eyes. As more moths appeared, his control over his body declined, until he was completely autonomous as well.

Needless to say, we convinced the Institute to immediately disable any nano-arrangers in individuals interested in the Network, and cease insemination going forward.

But the die had been cast.

106:

My back hurt. My sides hurt. Something heavy hit my head, and then came wet softness, followed by another hard thump. And scratching? Something was painfully scratching my back.

I opened my eyes.

I was still naked, still in the mud, and the sky was still raining on me, but now it was slowly moving.

I tried to sit up, but the ground slipped from under me. My elbows couldn't find any purchase in the mud. My neck shot ice down my spine when I moved it, but I looked forward anyway, shuddering through the pain.

The sky wasn't moving. I was moving. I was being dragged up a muddy hill.

By two men. I could barely make them out in the dark.

"Stop."

I think I said that. I could barely hear it. They didn't hear me or didn't care.

My voice was so weak. When had I last used it?

Years? What year was it? My emaciated body was evidence that it had been a long time. I could count every rib even now in the dim grey of night.

My hands were numb, and my back was screaming with hot pain, probably bleeding.

We turned and flattened out on even ground. I tried to hold my breath, to brace against the never-ending sliding agony, but winced at a painful tug in my ribs and had to exhale.

The ride kept going. Mud, grey skies, and soaring pain, until I thought I couldn't take it anymore. Until I thought I would die from the pain alone.

Until they stopped. Relief washed over me as I sank a bit into the mud.

I could hear the distant chatter of many voices, and the rain had subsided--no, it hadn't, I was inside somewhere, staring up at a chunk of rusty metal. I could hear the sharp tinkling of raindrops against it. But I was still in the mud, barely housed in some kind of ramshackle hut.

Voices were getting closer.

"Yep." A deep-voiced man spoke. "She's still alive."

Another, higher pitched man's voice responded.

"Out of all those bodies, you pick the only one we don't need. You're an idiot, Rot."

"I'm sorry." Rot sounded sad.

"You and Mab go back out there and get a couple more. Dead this time. I'll deal with the little girl."

And then he was above me, crouching and leaning over so our faces were aligned. I was hit with the stink of body odor and alcohol.

"Well, well." He smiled through brown teeth. "Little miss, you got lucky in living through whatever the hell they're doing up there."

"Dead." I tried to speak. It came out in a throaty whisper. "They're all dead. Everyone--"

"Shh shh, now." His smile widened, revealing gaping holes in the back of his mouth.

"I didn't say you were still in luck, did I?"

P107:

I am on the and it that I'm lying on

concrete ground is comfortable ground here

here I am

I am

not awake nor asleep

nor living nor dead

nor being me

me anymore

or am I not

I can't remember.

What was I doing?

what was

I remembering

what was I

Wilson? Who is

is that?

am I that?

I remember the concrete ground on the ground

cold

beneath me

cold

beneath

I am beneath the sun

cold

the great black sun staring down at me

laughing at me

cold

laughing

Hahahahahahahaha hahaha

h a h a hahaha haha

Haha hahahah

Hahahaha hahaha ha ha ha

haha hah hah a h a h a h a

haha

Ha ha hahaha ha

It laughs

at

at me

because I did

I did this

cold

What did I do?

I opened something

started something

began something

cold

hahaha haha

yeah, that's why

he laughs

no

It now

It laughs

The spiraling flakes of snow fall heavily on my face

piling up like cake

piling up

Like?

What?

I am cold.

I cannot remember.

I reach out for anything but my arms don't move like I want

like they used to

used

are they used

are my arms?

my arms

I squint now at the black sun, but it's regular in the sky

I am alone

I remember that

that

I am

I remember now.

I am alone. I am dying alone. And I can't fix this. And in a moment I won't remember anymore. It will be gone, twisting, slipping, just like me. I have this awful feeling I'm missing something, but that's not new. I have something I forgot. Something new nagging at me

at me

at

me?

what about

me?

I have this feeling

I'm missing

I breathe but my lungs

won't take any more air

my

my lungs

won't take

I can't take it

I can't

I

108:

Powder usage bears several harmful oral side effects, and always eventually results in complete decay of the mouth and surrounding area. One can recognize powder usage by discoloration or rot on or around the jaw.

In recreational usage small dots of cell death can appear in as few as two uses, leading to the drug's colloquial, "One Hit Quit" slogan. Upon consecutive uses more cells will atrophy, leading to larger and larger holes in the flesh.

Addicts tend to continue usage until the entire nasal cavity and lower jaw are withered to nothing but holes and black rot. The top row of teeth decays away as well, leaving only a line of black gums and the gaping hole of a throat. This led to users being referred to as, "throats."

Their physical deformities, paired with the intense and rapid collapsing of their psyches, led the public at large to view them negatively, as a threat, often expressed through violent harassment and murder.

Most users group together in small self-built communities now, normally consisting of shanties, shacks, scraps of structures. Someone thought it clever to give these hamlets the name, "Keg."

They are highly unstable. Often dangerous. In all cases users are considered homicidal. Do not engage with a known powder user.

109:

I left Wilson, the idiot, and the dead vet behind and went off on my own.

When I read the manifest about the War Dog and his unending war chasm, it spoke to me. Something pleaded to me again. Something interesting.

I had to see it.

But this was just sand. Sand for miles in every direction, and a thin strip of ocean down the middle. There was something happening earlier, but it had quieted down.

Boring.

I found so few reasons to enter a chasm anymore--the allure was ten years gone. It was a dead end. What started as an adventure, an exploration into the mind, had devolved into a cesspool of fornication and stupidity.

There's nothing more to learn from the mind. Humans are stupid. Chasms proved that. Unless you wanted to indulge in some sexual depravity, or live out some fantasy as a big demon that eats angels or something, there wasn't much to be gained.

Something screeched above me. I stopped and looked up. A bird. A vulture? A buzzard? I didn't know the difference.

Now that I was here, walking through the quiet rolling sands, sleepy camps, graveyards, I realized it was just some insane geezer's broken version the old world's wars. Of course. Why would it be anything else?

I felt a chime of nostalgic regret, like I missed out on something special. I never joined up for either of them, not for lack of interest, and though I absolutely could have. I was preoccupied. My own war.

The wars always conjured this distant, bewildering series of images in my mind. Bomb torn landscapes speckled with exploding shells, dying children, collapsing buildings, air choked with dark smoke, vehicular combat. Constant gunfire and death. But this wasn't like that at all.

This was boring.

Everyone I had seen so far was just waiting. Sitting in camps, on beds, in tents, cleaning their guns, exercising. Waiting. Either waiting for someone else to make a move or waiting for when they can make theirs. Whatever it was, there they were. Sitting. And waiting.

Boring.

I approached an encampment with a half-dozen tents and a building built like a large airplane hangar, but much taller. The massive hangar doors were slightly ajar, and I could make out a giant silver machine gleaming in a beam of light.

An explosion sounded far off, hinting that maybe an interesting thing was happening somewhere, but I wanted to investigate this first. I approached a young-looking soldier who had nodded off in front of his tent.

"Soldier." I kicked his boot. "What's in that hangar?"

The kid stirred clumsily and nearly dropped his rifle as he rose to salute me. I didn't understand his formality, but it felt kind of nice.

"Sir! An R-Class APOV Navine unit, sir!"

"What the hell is that?"

"Riot-Class Armored Pilot-Operated Vehicle, Navine model, sir!" He was still holding a shaky salute.

"At ease?" I think they said that.

The kid lowered his hand. I started walking to the hangar.

"Let me see it."

"Sir!"

He jumped up and ran before me, shouting to a few others dawdling nearby. They rushed over and slid the doors open, spilling light into the hangar. I entered. The APOV Navine towered over me, at least ten stories tall, maybe twelve.

"That." I looked up and admired it for a minute.

"Is a god damned giant robot."

110:

A bald old man pointed me down the black hallway. Screams and pained shrieks echoed from somewhere far off, stretching and warping, reverberating as unearthly roars in the small room. I took a moment to steel myself.

“Hey kid. Go on.”

The old man’s eyes were closed.

“I--Yeah, I’m--”

“Get with it.” He sighed. “You’re here. Papers signed.”

I looked to the black hallway again. My heart thundered in my ears.

“You have no reason to hesitate. Hear me? You already made the choice. Go. Or I make you.”

“Okay.”

I looked forward, toward the hall, and took a step. The far off wailing was that much closer. The old man nodded.

“Will I--” I turned back to ask a question, but then he was before me, glowing blue and floating.

His eyes were open, revealing empty sockets, and his thin grey hair hung above him as if underwater. He stared at me with his holes.

“Go.”

A blast of wind knocked me backwards.

Even as I fell through the room, pulled into the hallway, my eyes were fixed on his sockets. Black holes against his blue-skinned face.

A bell rang and I was twisted around, facing forward. The light faded away as I was thrust into the dark. I heard the screams growing louder, but still just barely audible over the barrage of howling wind.

And then light again, all white, blinding at first, but after a second my eyes adjusted--I was flung outside, over a sand pit. I could barely make out the blur of jungle fauna and bodies as I flew. The sand rose up and I smashed into it, grinding to a halt. Pain shot through my stomach, up into my chest, and I choked for air.

People surrounded me, grunting, yelling, squealing, dying. I shakily pushed myself up enough to look around. The pit was walled on all sides by a great stone barrier, entirely smooth and stories tall. There were dozens of us, scattered around the arena, all wearing different colored armbands. Mine was orange.

A man tried to leap over me and tripped, slamming facedown on the sand. It bulged up around him, lifting his head and his feet into the air, and then sunk in around his belly, making him into an uneven crescent. I slid myself away.

Sand near him twisted up in a little shaft, growing into a pylon, before sharpening in the form of a massive sword, which came down hard on the center of his back. He bent in the middle like a folding table--the cracking of his spine was louder than his piercing, desperate screams.

The sand sword loosened for a moment, sagging in floating dots, spreading out and losing its form. But then it was solid again, crushing him with renewed zeal. He thrashed against it in a brief struggle, but his bones gave little resistance; he snapped in half, falling limp and quietly dropping into the sand like a sinking ship, broken down the middle. The sword dissolved.

I quickly stood up. A man nearby swung an axe at a woman, cleaving her across the chest in a dark red line. She fell and sunk into the sand. Where did he get an axe?

I was engulfed by the clamor of fighting. Shouting, struggling, crying. Everywhere around me.

I was in a free-for-all.

The sand dipped down a bit around my toes, almost like it was egging me forward. I began jogging around the perimeter, looking for anything I could use, hoping to avoid attention.

A bell chimed. The same one from before. A hole opened from nothing in the smooth wall, and a few moments later an old man fell to the sand, landing on his leg. It cracked and bent sideways at the knee. Broken.

A big red number appeared, singed into the wall.

3 1

And then slowly faded away.

I ran over a small shard of wood, from a shattered pole or hilt, and nearly fell as I tried to stop and grab it. It was heavy and rough in my hand. Hopefully worth something.

Another bell. Another hole. And a woman, falling. Smashing into the sand, seemingly without injury this time. The number reappeared.

3 2

The bell chimed thrice more, and the number stayed burned into the wall, though it dropped down to twenty-eight. And then twenty-six.

Player count.

I kept running. I was losing stamina, and had sharp pain spreading up my lungs. I couldn't run forever. Three green-clad figures were standing in front of me, facing me, cutting me off. I slowed and then came to a stop before them.

They each had a different color armband. Pink. White. Teal.

I tried to catch my breath. The tall one with the pink band laughed and spun a dagger in his hand.

"Bad luck, kid. It's nothing personal." He took a step toward me. The other two followed suit.

"But we need the money."

Something whizzed by my head, and then the tall man with the pink armband was clutching his neck. He fell, spewing blood from a dart stuck in his throat. The sand slowly consumed him and his partners fled.

The number changed again.

25

I turned just in time to see an old woman behind me, nocking another bolt in her crossbow.

111:

Welts. Ripples of wavy, undulating welts glimmering in the grey sun. It's all I could focus on when I looked up at the towering black mass.

The form was almost humanoid, and aside from the welts, was made of nothing but dense fog. Even the countless thousands of floating brains that stretched from It's back, hanging in the air and strung up by thin black cords, were rippling and trailing tufts of black fog. It swayed in an even gait, striding in long steps across the city, wavering between barely visible and not.

A thick, churning stormcloud followed it. Buildings fell in It's wake. Transformers exploded, highway bridges collapsed. I expected to hear chaos, sirens, screams, thousands of pounds of stone collapsing. But it was silent. Just the soft thrum of an engine and the far off rolling thunder of It's footsteps.

My eyes were pulled to the welts on It's neck.

Shining with silver light. Why?

How did I end up here? Where is here?

What was I--I was moving. Flying toward it. In the back of a PF cruiser, pulling corkscrews and spinning in the sky. Philip had the yoke.

"You good? Not too far now!" He yelled back to me, but he sounded off. Odd. Far away. "I'll get as close as I can! Get ready!"

I looked down at my hand. I was holding something heavy. A shining, pulsing red staff, tethered to a thick cord, which fell off the plane and led all the way back to the landing strip, shaking and whipping wildly in the air. We were pulling slack. Miles upon miles upon miles of it.

Why didn't I remember boarding the cruiser? Why didn't I remember making this plan?

When I thought about it I knew we had two-hundred miles of cabling, two-oh-eight to be precise, and that the black mass was lumbering approximately fifty miles out from the airstrip. We had plenty.

My gaze fell back on the welts. The spear. The welts.

I understood.

We zipped ever closer, weaving through husks of buildings and wavering obelisks of black smoke. It grew larger and larger through the windshield, until all I could see were It's legs, and then just one leg as it rose and fell.

Philip swooped around the leg and pulled up in a loop, banking so I was facing up at It's massive head. I leaned off the side and reared back with the staff. It thrummed with energy in my fingers, vibrating up my wrist.

"Philip, we need to get closer!"

"I'll try!"

He raised the nose and brought us closer. It was almost too close now--in a couple of steps we'd be smashed against It's half-solid chest.

I took aim. The welts gleamed brighter than ever. My shoulder pumped forward, and the spear took flight, slipping from my fingers. It flew in an arc, on a collision course with the welts.

As the red gem pressed against It's neck, a white light consumed me, followed by a delayed cracking, like the start of a massive clap of thunder.

It hit me. I knew why I didn't remember any of this.

It wasn't happening.

112:

The monkeys' chaasm had generated with immaculate detail all the way down to the little imperfections: trees bore bark scarred by termites, mud and leaves mixed in dimples of water on the forest floor, worms carved trails through the thick soil, and on and on--it was packed full of countless signs of lucidity. All of this was generated from a single monkey's mind--subject A. The other three were included as digital constructs, B, C and D, and were given equal privilege as "owners" in subject A's chaasm, though they were only guests. This was done to test their conscious ability, but ended up saving them from being force-extracted later on.

We had doubts about the consciousness of a monkey--the concern was that there wouldn't be enough sense of self to generate a digital construction. But they exceeded all expectations.

Not only were the monkeys conscious enough to control a stable digital construction of themselves within the chaasm, but they had also catalogued and stored the very essence of their existence on earth within their minds, allowing perfectly accurate chaasm generation from subject A. We built a flourishing and rich forest; a carbon copy of the section of Sundarbans forest subject A had called home.

We monitored them for months like this, analyzing the corporeal monkey's health and chaasm statistics, while holding scheduled entrances three times a week. It was three months of maintaining a perfect ecosystem, virtually identical to the real world. The monkeys were a bit hesitant and obviously confused at first, but less than twenty minutes after entering they were all playing and climbing on trees and living like it was any other day.

While the feeding tube system we attached to the chassis was functioning, the nutrient paste it delivered to these Rhesus monkeys wasn't tuned specifically to their biology--a miscalculation by our handlers. Two of the four, A and C, suffered malnutrition and had to be disconnected from the chaasm, while the other two had no major problems and adjusted naturally to the reformulated supplements.

This was the first split of forms, as the digital constructions of the monkeys remained behind in the chaasm while they were disconnected. This is also where the experiment warped. The digital constructions physically skewed away from their corporeal counterparts near immediately, after just a few hours.

One of the disconnected, subject C, stretched to eight feet tall, and its arms and legs grew thin and lanky. It began bullying the other monkeys, stealing their food, often violently, and teasing them, holding it out of their reach, eating in front of them, and so on.

The other disconnected was the host, subject A, and had been squashed down to half a foot high, widening out into the shape of a disc. It began spending most of the day in leisure, lying about and sleeping. Subject A and subject C had no interactions between each other, and when in the same vicinity would act as if the other wasn't present. This was an interesting development: they somehow recognized that they were both constructions and avoided each other, or maybe they didn't even see each other at all.

Subject C grew more every hour its corporeal counterpart was out of the chaasm. Taller, stronger, and more aggressive. Before long it was ten feet tall, and was very aggressive against the living monkeys. During feeding it would stand over the bowl by itself and lash out at anything that came near, except of course subject A, who lazily waltzed over and ate whenever it pleased. Subject A grew fatter and wider, until it was a red, rotund ball-shape and couldn't walk at all, having to teeter in a half-roll to make it to the food bowl.

After a week like this--two monkeys actively synced within the chaasm at the same time as two digital constructions--subject C became homicidal. It killed both subjects B and D during feeding one afternoon, viciously beating them with the food bowl, again and again, pounding them down to nothing but hemorrhages and broken flesh. Both of the dead monkeys stayed connected due to their status as "owners" within the chaasm, and regenerated fairly quickly, but developed deep fears of approaching the food bowl, and would wait until late at night to eat from then on.

Subject C was initially taken aback when B and D reformed, unable to comprehend how the two dead monkeys were alive again, but came to understanding after a few more kills, and then started playing a kind of game with them. It spent an entire weekend searching for B and D as they reformed, hunting them down and killing them over and over again, in brutal, horrific ways. Tearing their bodies to pieces, holding their heads under water, sitting on and suffocating them, and so on. This caused the living monkeys to stop eating altogether, choosing to cower behind trees in the forest, up until we removed them from the chaasm and paused the project.

Two weeks following that incident subjects A and C were back to full health, so we resumed, resyncing all four of the corporeal monkeys at the same time. And behavior mostly returned to normal within the chaasm. Although subjects B and D had suffered trauma from being relentlessly assaulted by C, they were gradually easing into normalcy. They were still frightened and refused to be in subject C's presence, but after a few days without incident, they fell back into standard eating habits, though they would always wait until after A and C had finished to come over.

No matter which subject, a disconnected monkey's digital form would always skew mere hours after departure. If synced at regular intervals, the skewing could be tapered and controlled, but it was an ever present issue. And the type of skewing seemed

predetermined somehow--C would always be lanky, tall, aggressive, and A would always be fat, squat, and lazy.

Subject B's face--eyes, nose, and mouth--would change locations after disconnection, sliding down its head and rooting somewhere in its chest, but it suffered no major changes to behavior or anything else.

D was the most interesting when disconnected: it would grow a number of tiny, unusable arms over a short period of time, before completely shedding and molting its flesh like a cocoon. It would emerge as a baby tiger. And the baby tiger acted like a baby tiger. It was no longer a monkey, at least mentally. We watched this happen three times, just to be sure it wasn't an error in programming.

I still have absolutely no idea what caused that.

Regardless, experimentation continues. I'm excited to work out the kinks with this technology--it's felt like we've been on the cusp of changing humanity for the better part of two decades, and now, finally, all of the pieces are falling into place.

113:

“What?”

I couldn't remember what she said. She was getting more agitated.

“Again, Philip. You need to listen. I'm getting tired of repeating this. We're all adults now. Act like one. Jump off the damned bridge. Remember the bridge? Up ahead, on Lockheed and Park. Can't miss it.”

“I--uh,” I was straining to remember. “What?”

“You're getting on my nerves, Philip.” She was yelling now. Screaming in the receiver, distorting her voice.

“And I'm sick of it. Do what you want! Don't jump off the damned bridge! I don't care! But don't come calling me when you can't even remember your name.”

She paused, leaving me space to respond. But I didn't know what to say.

She began again, softer this time, taking on a kind of wounded cadence, like my mom.

“You know, after all that I've done for you in my life... Fine, Philip. I'll stop bothering you. I hope you're happy.”

The line clicked off. I was pacing around me in little figure eights.

“Now you've now you've really done done it. Now now now now now.”

“Shut up.” I began meandering forward again, still clutching the phone in my hand.

What was

What was that? Who was

Who was on the other end? Why was

Why was I still so completely lost? Where was

Where was the door out of this place, back to the real world?

Or was...

This the real world?

It was. That's right. It was.

No. God dammit. No.

I kept getting this feeling like I just had a dream where everything was perfect. All my problems were fixed. The bad things in front of me were behind me, and life was just floating on one of those momentary cushions, cool air, soft laughter, easy nights.

And I had just woken up. And remembered none of my problems were fixed. None of those bad things were behind me. And actually, they never would be again. Those momentary cushions were a permanent fixture in my past. I was riding a see-saw where I would briefly dip down into comfortable ignorance, forgetting, before rising back up into miserable knowing.

I lifted the receiver to my mouth.

"I won't kill myself." I spoke to dead air. "I can't. I don't want to die. I don't want to. Please, mom. I'm sorry. I don't want to die."

"Don't want to die want to don't die want to die die don't want to die die wanting!"

The little me turned my pleas into a catchy song, randomly slapping his feet in some kind of freeform dance. It got stuck in my head.

The receiver buzzed in my ear.

"Baby," It wasn't the woman anymore. It was someone else. An old man? "You have no idea how much I want to just... Skip town. Leave this little fucker here. And come see you."

"Just do it." I heard myself talking back to him. "Leave him with his mom or something."

The old man scoffed. I could hear a little kid crying in the background. I remembered that. I remembered this.

"Bitch is out of town. I just want you so fucking bad, baby."

Don't want to die

want to

don't die

want to die

die don't

want to die

die wanting

The song thrummed a steady beat in my mind.

An old standby. A classic.

"Obviously not that bad..." I heard my voice responding again, teasing him. "You want me, you come get me. Or else I'll have Frank come by. You know he does me right."

"No--Frank, No. He's a god damned--" He grumbled and yelled something off the receiver. I heard the unmistakable pop of a hand slapping a face, and then a child screaming.

"I'll be there."

Just hearing the slap made my cheek burn.

"Hurry up. Frank's on speed dial."

"I will, baby. You just get yourself ready. Leave Frank alone. I'll be there, baby."

I dropped the phone. It started ringing again. Who now? I bent to pick it up, but it wasn't ringing. The sound was coming from somewhere else.

I turned around, facing the sound, and then I heard it somewhere else again, behind me, so I turned around again.

The ringing was coming from everywhere. Ringing here. Ringing there. And then back. My head began pounding.

The little me had gone unusually quiet. I looked for him. My temples pulsed with pain. The ringing drowned everything else out.

"Hey," I called out for him, clutching my head. "Where are you?"

"What are you blind or something?" A voice responded.

I looked up and tried to make out the face, but my vision was swimming, shifting in red throbbing blurs. It was someone else. A man. He wore a white jacket. His voice was wobbly like a big sheet of metal. I panicked, but tried to remain as outwardly sane as possible. I remembered jail. Dying in jail.

"Hey--are you okay, man?"

"Yeah, thanks. Just tired."

"Right on..." He accepted it and shuffled passed, untying a knot in my chest.

My vision shakily reformed as my headache subsided. It was still present, still throbbing behind my eyes, but reduced in intensity and easier to tolerate. Little me was back, wearing that smarmy grin in front of me. Did I really look like that?

"Right on right right. I'll be there be there, baby."

I remembered jail again, sending a flutter down my chest. Dying in jail. This was a waste of time. I was just getting worse. I had to get back to

Oh.

No.

Where? Where did I have to get back to? I needed help. There was help somewhere.

Where? The diner?

No. Where?

I walked the street, coming up on the edge of a bridge, humming along to that pervasive little ditty.

Don't want to die

want to

don't die

want to die

die don't

want to die

die wanting

114:

I thought about all those dead bodies.

dead

people

My fault.

Just another--

Just another

waste

of time

Time? That didn't sound right.

Lime mime prime slime dime climb chime crime

It sounded better than the other options.

But it was more of a waste of

What was it wasting?

Mind.

Waste of mind.

The mind is a terrible thing to waste. Who said that?

Someone intelligent.

The car pulled down a sad little gravel path and squealed to a stop.

Waste of mind.

I got out and took a step. It backed up and pulled to the side, spewing clouds of grey dust from the tires. The driver held up a hand.

I walked into the gas station. A little bell chimed.

Waste. All those people.

I felt sorry. The florescent lights buzzed above me, louder than I remember. Candy, sweets, nuts, jerky. Where was the--what was it? What was I looking for?

Syrup. Cough syrup. Cough syrup. I repeated it to myself. Cough syrup.

Waste of mind.

I found the medicine, all stacked in neat little rows, like plastic soldiers made from all different colors. Throat, pain, stomach. Chest. I hastily pulled a few from the shelf and

read the ingredients--tried to read the ingredients, I had to peel that little sticker cover back. It tore a bit but I still saw what I needed. Dextromethorphan. Perfect.

I grabbed four and went to the front. The bottles clunked loudly against the counter.

Waste of mind.

A young woman furrowed her brow at my bottles.

"You can only get two." Her frown deepened.

"Oh." I had to handle conversation again. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She softened and pulled two to the side. "Nine fifty-three."

I slid my card onto the counter. She pointed to a small reader device.

Right.

I slid my card into the reader device.

It beeped and I pulled my card out, and then I was out in the night again, ripping plastic from the lid.

I took a hearty gulp, and then another, wincing at the stretching, bitter molasses coating my mouth and throat.

Cherry. Why did I get cherry?

I opened the car door and got in, chugging down half of the first bottle.

"Drive."

115:

Eoghan swiveled the torso of the machine toward War Dog and let a shell rip, reverberating a loud screech through the beach. It landed just before him, and then the scene was smeared with flying sand and smoke and fire.

The haze slowly cleared as chunks of his corpse and bits of sand rained down. Killed again. I had lost count. Hours upon hours of this.

The constant regenerations were weakening stability, clogging up resources, causing organisms to come back horribly deformed, if at all. The sky was flickering now, splashing between red and white. I eyed my watch. The gold rim still gleamed in the light. Six hours. We'd been here six hours.

"Eoghan!"

I yelled out to him, but my voice was trapped and smothered by the deafening pounding of his cannons. Philip was packing the sand below him into a flat little circle.

"No use. Arnold's done for. Seems due for disconnect anyway. A smart man would just go. And let Eoghan sleep in his bed."

"You know I can't."

I looked back at him; he sat down in his little circle and was shimmying around, trying to get comfortable.

"I knew you'd say that." He motioned to his circle in the sand. "Hence."

"Eoghan!" I tried again, louder.

He just kept slamming around the beach, tearing through tents, crushing soldiers as they reformed. I had to go out there. I fiddled with my watch. Butterflies bubbled around my chest.

"I have to go out there. No choice. We're risking stability. Risking lives."

"No. And if he doesn't realize it's you? He launches a shell and you explode, and you get force-extracted, just like that? Or what if he does realize it's you, and doesn't give a shit, and fires anyway? Don't. Seriously, Wilson. Don't."

I stared at him for a moment. A real friend.

Another shell exploded behind us, causing the sky to flicker red again. The sand dunes were trembling as well, shaking and sliding like in an earthquake. The hourglass was always emptying, wasn't it?

I turned and ran toward Eoghan's thrashing walker.

116:

"Happy birthday, man." Philip slapped my back.

I looked down at the gold-rimmed watch, gleaming white in the light. I felt something new. I felt like crying.

"I--" I didn't know how to thank him. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. Eoghan's waiting. Let's go."

"Hey." I was rooted in place. I needed to. "Philip. Thank you, really. I appreciate this. I've never--even when Catherine was alive--"

He started walking up the steps, heading inside.

"Again, don't mention it. You've done way more than that for me. Remember my muffler? All those rides to work? All that shit with my mom? Shut up, and let's go get this over with. I'll take you out for a drink later."

My eyes welled with tears. I had a friend. A good friend.

A real friend.

I never thought I'd have a real friend.

I followed him up the steps.

117:

I moved the box holding the red orb to my table in the den, to right in front of the picture window.

So I could look outside from my chair, over the orb, and see my fields, and the crabs tearing them down to nothing.

So I could understand what my choice meant.

So I could see the weight of my decision.

The crabs had started talking to me, berating me while they destroyed my rice. Now I knew it wasn't just some accident of nature. I knew it for a fact: this was actual, targeted cruelty. The malicious little bastards knew exactly what they were doing.

I could hear their voices through the windows, through the walls, at all hours of the day, while sleeping, eating breakfast, cleaning, getting ready for bed:

"Probably would've died anyway."

"Rice? You rolled the dice. Pay your price."

"Oh, was this yours? Haha."

"Fuck you. And fuck your rice. Fuck it. I'm sick of it."

"You know--this algae is everywhere. But it's just not as fun to scrape it off the top."

Their voices were familiar. I didn't know why, but I remembered each and every one of them.

My eyes were drawn back to the orb. Why was I even hesitating anymore? I should just do it. No one gave a shit about what happened to me anyway. It's my life. My choice. And it might help. And maybe nothing would happen. Maybe I was jumping to conclusions. Blowing it out of proportion. The old woman said it would help. And no one I showed it to had ever echoed my worried sentiments about it. Maybe I was just making it all up. Worrying about nothing. Every second I didn't use it my fields were getting worse and worse. Every day I didn't use it I lost more of my yield.

I took it in my hand and gently rolled it on my palm. Heavy, heavier still; warm vibrations travelled up my wrist.

I got that flutter in my chest. No, I wasn't jumping to conclusions. I wasn't blowing it out of proportion. I wasn't making it all up. I could feel how wrong it was. It was just a feeling, but a strong one. It made me sick to my stomach.

I looked back to the window. The crabs. My rice. My pitiful stuffed crow, protecting a small circle of crops near my house. It started raining again, dumping more water into

an ever-flooding marsh. I felt the thunder rumbling through the floor--in my chair. The sky flashed with lightning.

And the orb murmured rhythmically in my palm.

Just do it.

Just do it.

Just

Go.

I stood and held the orb up over my head. It grew brighter. But I relaxed my grip and sat back down. No. What if? What if it didn't work? What if it flooded the fields more? What if it burned my house down? What if, what if?

Yeah, what if? It didn't matter anyway. What was there to lose?

Life.

That, yeah. But that was already gone anyway. What else?

My rice.

Okay, a small circle of rice. Don't need it. What else?

Nothing. I was coming up blank.

I wish my mom was still alive. I used to call her... when... I used to call her when I had problems. I had a lot of problems. And I'd call her when I had got myself shoved deep in some binding web of intricate problems. And she always helped. Always gave the best advice. Always held her hand out, and gripped me, and pulled me free. Always told me exactly what to do. Always knew exactly what to do. She knew.

I missed her so much. Every day I pictured her warm, round face in my mind. Those kiddish mannerisms. That stupid goofy grin when she made a joke at my expense. Her silent eyes, drenched with sorrow when she listened to me talk about my problems--when she heard my stories. She never said, but she was in pain. I caused her that pain. Because I knew nothing. I kept making these mistakes, refusing to learn from the mistakes I made before. I kept digging the same hole, falling in, and pleading for her to help me back out.

And she knew so much. God, she knew so much. She knew.

She told me it would get us killed one day. I would mess with... Someone. Someone I shouldn't. And then they'd be at our door, knocking with their guns.

And then one day they were. And she was right, yet again. She knew.

She knew everything.

And I knew nothing.

I stood and held the orb up over my head, and it grew bright like a candle. I felt a tear roll down my cheek. It shook unevenly, as if a heart thumped from within. I tightened my grip and could feel it giving way. Crushing, like a ball of flesh.

It squeezed down a bit and then shattered painfully in my hand, spearing beams of red light across my vision. My hand was burning.

The world quaked beneath me.

I rose in the air slightly, and then I was above my house, looking down, across the marsh. My little field. The road. The forest. The water. The air grew cold.

I fell. I was sitting in my den again, looking through the picture window. The water was significantly lower. And there were no crabs. None.

I looked down at my little box. It held two red orbs. Two? Was that right? I closed the lid and ran outside to get a better look at the field. The crops were restored, bountiful, nearly fully grown, almost ready for harvest. A lump formed in my throat. I wanted to cry. I was flooded with happiness.

A crab lay writhing on the porch at my feet, whimpering it's final words.

"You're an..." It laughed through a death rattle. "Idiot."

It worked.

The orb actually worked.

118:

I saw It.

Again.

Last night.

That shadow in the clouds. Above. Quaking the earth. It cried in sporadic, droning peals, spilling over the sky. When I heard It's voice, I knew everything, all at once. Seared into my mind.

It walked over me and Wilson's brain tugged behind, a kind of unctuous flesh orb, beholden to It's will. But there were more. Millions of brains. Billions? Bound by thin, black, dripping wet ropes, which relinquished a greasy rain around me.

As It passed, all of that knowledge bled from me.

Back into the sky.

It rained all night. But it always rains now.

Flooded the whole valley.

My cat died.

Who was Wilson?

119:

I nursed my lip with an ice chip and tried to ignore the permeating stench of rotten pickled lettuce seeped into my skin.

“So, got fifth tile?” Mr. Niu plopped down next to me against the wall.

“Wow. Hey. What happened to meeting at the temple?”

“My god. You stink like shit.”

He recoiled and scrunched his face. I got jammed up, tripping over my words, thinker faster than I could talk.

“Wh--I, you--No. I had to use the can! I told you! I said this! Exactly this. ‘Oh, you big baby, it not so bad, Eoghan. Just pickled lettuce, Eoghan. At least it a weapon, Eoghan’ Remember all that?”

“Okay.” He held his hands up in front of a wry smile. “Sorry.”

“Yeah. I get the god damned bat next time.”

“No. Bring your own.”

“What’s that?”

He took a pinch of something and plopped it in his mouth, chewing noisily. He had a little bag filled with dried black curls.

“Squid.”

“Can I have one?” I held out my hand.

“Do you have fifth tile?”

“No.” I sighed. “I did what you said. But, uh--ah. Bad luck.”

“How many game?”

“Alright, fine. I did one game. And I fucked up. And I had to beat the guy in the head with the can. Honestly, I’m lucky I even got out of there, you should’ve seen these sons of--”

“You what?”

“I beat the guy. He’s fine. But they were gonna cut my arm off.”

“Well,” He pursed his lips and sucked his teeth. “No way to play again now. Should have done three game. They only cut arm off for one game.”

“Oh? Thanks for telling me. That will be of great use. What else can I do?”

He stood and rolled the bag of squid up, pocketing it.

"I got my tile. Five. I thought we go together, get six. But I guess not. Ban-luck is the only way for tile five."

"Wait. You got that tile? When? I was just there."

"Before you. I watched you go in. Also watched you eat a donkey burger."

"Ah," I closed my eyes. Donkey. "God dammit."

"Eoghan," He put a hand on my shoulder. "You only came this far because I help you. You maybe not, ah. Cut out for this. It is okay. I can help you leave."

Not cut out for this? That stung. I had been here for a year. Longer. Suffering. To win this stupid game. I wasn't about to leave empty-handed.

"No!" I knocked his hand away. "I'm not going anywhere. I don't need the game. I'll just lift it. Look at all these chumps."

"Then it is not real. It is cheating."

"Who gives a shit? This whole god damned place is full of cheaters, man! What, is Yanluo gonna kill me?"

"No." He frowned. "No one will kill you for cheating. But you will know you cheated. Then it means nothing."

"It already means nothing. I got these four fair. I'll get the sixth one fair. But the fifth was stolen. It was random. I am only cheating random chance."

"No." He shook his head. "You are cheating someone who did it right. Someone who got it fair. And yourself."

I stared at him for a moment, fuming but trying to hide it. He had cleaned up nice. A shave, haircut, fresh set of clothes. It had only been a day and he had time for all that. And I was still covered in stinking rags. Plus he got all five tiles. In a day. What the hell?

"How did you get those tiles?"

"Same way as yours."

"Then why did it take us a year? For what you can apparently do in a single day?"

"You. Not us. It took you a year." He said coldly. "With my help. Without me? Yanluo probably kill you day one. If not, you still be trying for first tile now. I told you before. Zhuō Yóu is my life, Eoghan. If I wake early I could do all six. Seven including Liubo. Before lunch."

"Then let me buy your tile." I pulled out my handful of yuan. "I still have a lot. I'll buy it. Then no one is cheating. No one gets wronged. Is that fair? How much?"

Mr. Niu stared at me with that chiseled face, no hint of emotion. He turned away and began walking to the street.

"No."

"Come on." I cut him off. "This is fair. How much?"

"I will not give my tile. Sorry. You want to leave? I help. If not, sorry."

He was bending me like a bundle of sticks, stretched under his strength, straining to resist.

Why? I had come here to win. He knew that. He could just go get another one. Why be selfish? I grabbed his shoulders and tried to speak evenly. The bundle tensed further.

"Niu. I've spent a year here. A year of my life. Please. Help me out here."

"Eoghan." He closed his eyes. "I spent most my life here. I did help you. A lot. I thought you had it. I was wrong. I will not give you my tile. I am sorry."

The bundle snapped. I embellished the hot swell.

"Why are you being so fucking selfish?"

"Me? Selfish? Eoghan. I will not do this with you."

"Do what?" I was in his face. "Give me the fucking tile."

"Eoghan."

Mr. Niu was pleading with his eyes. Begging me not to. Sad eyes, like a dog. It made me sick. Angry. I wanted to kill him.

I threw a punch, and my fist met his jaw, knocking him backwards. He hit the wall and fell in a clumsy slide, knocking into a pile of trash and sending rotten food flying.

"What--" He protested, but I was on top of him.

Gripping his shirt around the neck, I headbutted him, sending him to the ground and firing a searing flare up my temples. I pulled him back up by the shirt. His face was smeared with blood from a fresh cut on his forehead.

"Give me the fucking tiles."

"W-wait--" He held up a hand, but I headbutted him again, ignoring the pain.

His face was entirely red. The gash was deep. I did it again. And again. It felt good to get it out. It felt good to show him I was powerful. It was my turn to teach him. To teach him that his knowledge didn't mean anything.

"Give me the tiles." I repeated, punching him now after each word, driving my fist into his face, over and over. "The fucking tiles, Niu."

His blood was all over me, drenching my face and shirt. He gurgled and spat. I looked down at him. Cut up, bloody, writhing in pain and already swollen. Pity. I was filled with pity.

He rose a shaky hand, holding a black leather bag. I took it and felt the heft of the wooden tiles. I dropped him to the ground and stood over him for a minute, eyeing the soft rise and fall of his chest.

Did I feel sorry?

No. I decided I didn't.

“Pleasure doing business.”

120:

Benedict's blood was flooding the island, pouring out from the gaping hole in his neck like a fountain. I had never seen anything like this. He wasn't reforming. He was just dying. Pouring blood. Being stabbed. In a loop.

Vintner was clutching him by the neck, stabbing him repeatedly. Both of their bodies were spasming erratically, flickering as their images tore into stacking black cubes, and blurred into a twitching mass. They would shakily reform, and we could see them for a moment, standing there, looping, and then they'd tear all over again, spreading out into featureless cubes.

Medy was staring. Stuck. Wearing that same face Wilson always did.

"Philip--what--"

"We need to leave. Now."

"What about Benedict?"

"Benedict? Medy, look at this."

When they weren't being torn into a mass of stretching cubes, Benedict was wailing in broken, shaking screams. Vintner was laughing and stabbing him. Mister Wings was a pile of scrap metal behind them. The island was gone below the ocean, which was no longer made from water.

Blood had risen to our knees.

"Benedict is--" I shook my head. "I don't know what the hell we're witnessing here, Medy. But we have to go."

And then Vintner shattered, sending black cubes flying across the chasm. Mister Wings followed, bursting and spraying more frictionless black cubes. They stretched across the island, across the sky, traveling in straight lines at random speeds.

Benedict was still suspended at an impossible angle, held up by a hand that was no longer present, pouring blood from his neck. Medy waded forward.

"Medy."

"Benedict!"

He flickered when she yelled but was otherwise unresponsive. She pushed over to him and grabbed his shoulders.

"Medy!"

"Philip, we can't leave him!"

“Medy, we need to go. We can check his corporeal when we leave. We might be able to do a reset. He might be fine. But we won’t be if we don’t go right now!”

She looked back at me. Crying.

I didn’t know what to say. This was her project. Her first incident solo. And it was falling apart around her. It wasn’t her fault, but there was no way to tell her that. To make her know that. I remembered my first chausms. My first mistakes. I waded over to her.

“Medy. I am so sorry. There's nothing we could have done.”

“We shouldn’t have brought Vintner here.” She gasped between sobs. “We killed him.”

“Listen. We don’t know that, and we can't change it now. He might still be okay. The chausm must be stuck, or frozen, or something. We might be able to help him. But we can’t do anything here. Not anymore.”

“I don’t think I’m cut out for this, Philip.”

“Don’t say that. You’re a natural. And you’re smart. And you care. And that hurts sometimes. A lot of the time. Wilson is the same way. But you’re not going to be cut out for anything anymore unless we get the hell out of here.”

I touched her arm.

“We have to go. Now.”

She turned and fell into me, gripping me around the waist, sobbing.

“I’m sorry, Philip. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for, Medy. Come on.”

She nodded through sniffles, and I led her back, toward the edge of the island, trudging through the thick flood. The shore was very deep now, and at the edge it was up to my neck.

“Wait here.”

I dove down and tried to open my eyes in the muck, but all I could see was red. I kicked forward, feeling for the grass. My hand found the little metal plate. I lowered myself and then pushed off the ground, resurfacing, gasping for air. Blood matted my hair and stuck to me like syrup.

“Here!”

She hurried over, bobbing in the blood, not quite tall enough to reach.

“Hold your breath. We’ll go down on three. One. Two.”

I laced my fingers between hers.

“Three!”

We dove into the blood.

121:

Medy poked her head through the nostril and looked down. I waved her in and grabbed her hand as she slid down the short shell-wall. Philip followed close behind, shaking his head as his shoes touched the fleshy ground.

“Yeah. It’s a body. I literally said this. I said it was a giant crab or something. And look at this.”

He waved his arms, motioning to the dome of flesh we stood inside. It was clearly a body. A mouth. We had entered through a nostril and were overlooking a giant tongue, which was surrounded by platforms of rugged teeth and rippling flesh. The far end of the mouth, near the throat, held an enormous platform dotted with fleshy buildings.

“I can't. I told you. What did I say, Wilson?”

“You said--” I paused, recalling.

“No more butter. No more fish sauce. No more milk. No more mysterious liquids. No more. None. I’m done with it. This is the last time, Wilson.”

“Wow.” He laughed. “I didn’t even remember all that. Yeah. I’m done.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not leaving.” Medy turned her head up.

“I’ve always wanted to be inside a giant crab. And I don’t intend to cut my first time short because some assigned senior associate fears slime. Grow up.”

“Well, I--” He blinked.

“And how about this crab, hm? Long way down.” I chuckled.

“Long crab, yeah. Listen, was that a joke?”

She curled up a corner of her mouth, hinting at a smile.

“No.”

“Who ‘always wanted to be inside a giant crab,’ anyway? And I don’t ‘fear slime.’ I just really don’t like it. Plus you’re still here! I’m not gonna make you leave. You guys don’t even need me. This is totally a two-man job.”

Medy blankly stared at him.

“Two people job. Shut up. Look, I’ll be right up here. Out there actually. Not on this nostril flap. Thing. Sorry. Just yell for me.”

“Sorry, Philip.” I slapped his shoulder. “This one’s mandatory. Well, conditionally mandatory I guess.”

“What’s the condition?”

“That you want to keep your job.”

122:

He could see it in my eyes, and I could see it in his. Acknowledgement. Equal recognition. We both knew where we stood. He was going to kill me.

The number on the wall was flashing now.

6

I tightened my grip around the broken hilt. My hand throbbed. The cut was still bleeding, painting my arm in red streaks. I took a sharp breath, filling my lungs, and then slowly exhaled.

The bald man with the axe was completely still, staring directly at me. I heard a scream and a messy pop nearby, and the number dropped.

5

And then I was surprised to find that I was moving. Sprinting as fast as I could, circling around the man. He swiveled toward me but stayed in place.

The ground rumbled, and a body in front of me dipped into the sand. The number changed again, from red to blue, and the bell rang three times, like when the game started.

4

Congratulations!

A speaker crackled and began playing a soft chiming tune.

“Good work, everybody. Good game. Great game! Okay, now you're probably wondering why we stopped. Allow me to satiate your suspense! The final four will be moving on to our special bonus round! That's right, kids. These four fiery fellas get to roll the dice one more time!”

I slowed to a stop and looked at the man with the axe. He looked as confused as I felt. The other two, a young man wielding a gladius and a bearded middle-aged man with a makeshift shield, were still in the throes of an intense skirmish.

The young man charged, leveling his blade. The bearded man crouched and rose his shield up at the last second, slamming into the young man's chin, who collapsed backwards, tossing his blade.

And then the bearded man had it in his hand. He stared down at the kid for a second. I thought maybe he would spare him. But he didn't. He lunged for the kid's head blade-first.

"No!" I screamed out.

But it was too late. The kid was impaled through the cheek. Slowly sinking into the sand.

3

The number changed again.

"Correction, folks. That's the final THREE now. Clean kill from the Ghost of Madrid, Diego De León! Everyone please drop your weapons and step to the center of the arena. No more kills, please. Or face disqualification."

I found it hard to drop my broken hilt. In our short time together I had grown attached. I looked down at it, stained deep red from saving my life. My hand released, restoring some feeling to my fingers, and the wood hit the sand and sunk in. The other two dropped their weapons as well, feeding the sand.

We gathered in the direct center, and then the arena was falling away. A perfect circle rose from up beneath us, spilling sands off the side, and shot us into the sky.

123:

I lay on the prism of ruby glass, mesmerized just being near the pulsing ball of energy beneath, and stared up at the swimming rainbow refractions on the cave ceiling. It even smelled good. Fresh, clean, healthy, natural. Real scents. I was reminded of my youth. The warm hum lulled me into a stupor.

Out of the whole world there was just me, the cave, and this thrumming ball of energy.

I drifted off into sleep.

I dreamt of power. Over my enemies. Over anyone. Warm, liquid power.

I found it. Finally.

But then I dreamt of my mother. I could see her far away. I ran to her. It took forever. My whole life. She was on a balcony, facing away from me, looking down at the war. I grabbed her shoulder and whispered her name. She turned her head.

Her face. She looked exactly like Mr. Niu.

She spoke.

“Eoghan. I will not do this with you.”

124:

light ?

no

it was not light

never was

it s

nothing.

like

I

always

thought

125:

He threw me back in the mud-floored shack, and I landed hard on my arm, popping my shoulder. I could still feel his grimy hands all over me. I could still smell his stink, burned into my nostrils. He stood in the entryway, facing me.

“Hold tight, love. I ain’t done yet.”

He left. I flipped onto my stomach and dragged myself to the wall so I could sit up. My legs were completely black with mud and dirt--I still couldn't feel them. I probably wouldn't again.

The wall was cold against my back. I felt...

I didn't know how I felt. I looked down at my hands, browned and filthy from the mud. None of this seemed real. It seemed far away. Detached. I had been in a shared span for so long I completely forgot the reality of... Reality.

I forgot how it felt. Pain. Sadness. Fear. Trauma. I remembered those things. I didn't ever forget them. How could I? I was always always always reminded by the suffering of those around me--hidden under veils, yet so great, so heart-wrenching, that it always bled through.

But I forgot how it felt.

And now I was overwhelmed with all of it, all at once.

I was crying. I guess I had been. My face was so wet with mud and rain that I hadn't noticed.

What had happened at the flower?

I thought about the man again. With the holes in his mouth. I was immediately filled with dread and a sense of urgency. I had to get out of here. But how? And where could I go?

I would have to help myself. I was used to that. Right?

Maybe. A long time ago.

I threw myself back onto the mud and started dragging, digging my fingers into the muck, pulling myself away. To anywhere else.

I cleared the shack and was back in the rain, struggling through the mud, inch after inch, pulling, pulling, pulling. My shoulder was sore, throbbing. The sky streaked white with lightning and I looked up.

What was that? A shadow? I thought I saw a shadow on the clouds, projected from above; the massive form of a man walking.

I kept pulling. Thunder shook the ground.

I kept pulling. Rain was in my eyes. I was cold. So cold. But I kept pulling. Pulling. My shoulder was going numb. Good.

But I was so cold.

I could warm myself up if I kept pulling.

I kept pulling. Another inch. Another.

Pulling.

Pulling.

I kept pulling. My fingers were going numb now. But I couldn't stop. I had to keep pulling.

But

I froze. A light bobbed up and down before me. A flashlight? I couldn't tell.

I pushed sideways and tucked my arms in, rolling down a bank and into a ditch. It would be hard to climb out, but at least I was out of sight.

The light grew closer, and two figures appeared over the hill, heading toward the shacks behind me. I could hear them talking, slipping through the rain.

"...that don't mean I..."

"Yea, I think it does...and you're an idiot for..."

"...but don't you think the boss..."

"All I'm saying...with her before you went..."

"HEY!" Another voice boomed out, from behind me. It was the man.

"You idiots seen the girl?"

"What?"

They were in a shouting match, slowly closing together.

"The girl. Have you seen the girl?"

"The girl? I thought she was with you!"

"What?"

"I thought the girl--"

"WE THOUGHT SHE WAS WITH YOU!"

"I threw her in the shit hut! Gotta be out this way! Split up and find this bitch, come on!"

"Do what?"

"SPLIT UP AND FIND THE FUCKING GIRL!"

My heart sank. If they came down into the ditch I would... I wouldn't think about it.

I turned, facing away from them and pulled some more. There was a hill. I dipped down through the gulley and then began climbing it, but it wasn't as difficult as I thought. The streams of rain let me slide up like it was even ground.

Lightning again. The clouds glowed around the black shape. Walking.

It was above me. Thunder. The rain was a downpour.

I kept pulling.

126:

Impossible.

It was real, and I was standing in it. A place I had dreamed of for years. A place I found in my mind every time I thought of her. Our place.

That long cobblestone road lined with cherry blossom trees in bloom, stretching away into pink and brown obscurity. I was under the swaying canopy of white and rosy bulbs, speckled by a thousand red dots. A wind blew, and subtle hints of vanilla and pollen blew by from the petals cascading around me.

This was all just a memory.

But it was real. As real as it was in Hyōgo. And even though my memory of this visit had lost its edge over the years, the recreation hadn't been dulled in the slightest. It was exactly everything I had experienced, all at once, in immaculate detail.

The bees, butterflies, birds. The lazy wisps of orange and white clouds. The soft, musky twinge of humidity before a light rain.

I crouched to the ground and felt the stones, each a bulging, rugged lump. I ran my finger along the cracks, pushing petals free. Something occurred to me. I remembered.

I stood and jogged down the path a bit, and realized I was smiling. It almost hurt I was smiling so wide.

There was nostalgia, and then there was this. Walking it. Smelling it. Feeling it.

Oh, to be here again.

But without you.

I passed around a small bend and came to a dull fork in the path that spread out to make way for a few pink trees, but joined together again down the hill.

There was that swirling purple butterfly, just like it was. What did she say it was called? Great purple emperor?

Here. It was here. I turned off the road, feeling the soft grass again, and made my way toward the shrine. I passed the rocks, three big ones, and then a little one, all decorated with dozens of paper Ofuda talismans and scribblings. And then I came to the small stone circle with the statue, impossible to discern under a thick layer of Ofuda strips. The bench was there, where it always was. Our initials were still carved on the seat back.

W.C + C.C

I sat down and stared out at the view.

A curving hill, rolling pink fields of fallen petals, and the washed blue of the sky.

Just like it was.

Always was.

Incredible.

Chasm science. Mental research. That terrible business with the isolation spheres and signal forwarders. You would be proud. You would be glad, I think. It was all for something. It was all for this.

The next step in human evolution. As far as causes go, that's up there.

It wasn't a fair trade, but humanity would benefit.

At least you didn't die in vain.

"There you are."

Eoghan was standing in front of me.

"So, yeah." He nodded with a grin. "This is gonna sell."

127:

Aliens turned out to be a terrible investment.

One with an incubation period of fourteen years.

After all that lab testing we had confirmed they were completely non-hostile. Nary a violent bone in their bodies. In fact, they had no bones at all, just jelly. We let them intermingle freely, and thanks to arranger broadcasts nobody gave a damn. They were perfect-seeming, friendly neighborhood floating tentacle monsters.

Turns out they were hostile; we just hadn't seen anything like these nefarious little bastards before. Fifteen years after allowing their population to soar well into the millions we discovered their squid-like appearance was simply the first form of a many-staged metamorphosis.

Their second form saw them undergoing complete petrification. They would abruptly fall to the ground where they floated, in parks, offices, libraries, and rapidly harden into little squid-shaped rocks.

Football sized brown lumps scattered all over the place. First time I saw one I figured it had died. Most everyone else did as well. It just made sense. They became a kind of epitaph--their own gravestone. Some got hauled off. Some got put on desks as paperweights. Some were decorating college dorms. Most just sat there.

And then they started hatching. Anywhere from two to six weeks later.

What emerged almost defies description. Initially it just plopped out two more squid babies, but then something else came out. Some people saw dead family, moms, grandparents. Some saw friends. Celebrities. Farah Fawcett. Some saw that thing they lost. A pile of money. Sex tapes. Cool new toys. Loaded guns. TVs. Cars. You name it, we probably have a report featuring it

My first encounter was in my office one night; I was in late detailing some project plan. It was on the desk, near my phone. My phone rang--some sec complaining about bathroom breaks. I hung up, and then the squid stone stirred. It broke like an egg, crumbling a little hole at first, and then spreading cracks, fissures in the stone that shone with an amber glow. It smoldered with the light for a moment, glowing brightly, and then fell to dust. Two new little squid babies bobbed around my office, nattering in that weird broken gurgling.

And then I was in the cave in Honduras.

I could feel the thrumming below me. I stared down at the hole in the floor, bubbling with energy. The smells all came back to me. The feeling. I was being lulled into that

stupor. Vibrations coursed up my legs, into my pelvis, my stomach, my chest, my throat. I was tingling all over.

I took a step toward the hole, the font of coursing energy. And another.

As I walked forward a small black pinhole appeared in the font of energy, right where I was heading. The closer I got, the larger it gaped. I stopped, stuck staring at the black hole before me, now three feet wide. It was a perfectly circular hole from every angle, bordered by a thin white corona and just cut out of space, done by some cosmic hole punch.

I noticed a thin white line extending from the edge of the hole.

It ran down, across the ground, and up into my chest.

And then I looked behind me. White lines sagged from my back, six, maybe more, like strings heading off to puppets. But these weren't heading to puppets. The strings terminated at the tips of tall, stretching shadows. They were so tall they had to bend to fit in the cave. Fifteen feet, twenty feet. Massive silhouettes of broken shapes, spotted by odd, dull lights in random places, made of both sharp angles and smooth wobbling lines, contradicting impossibilities. Some had thin smiling mouths, or black ragged holes as suggestions for mouths, others were dotted with hundreds of white eyes, or stars, shining in the sky.

I couldn't comprehend what I was looking at. Half a dozen pillaring monstrosities with hundreds of faces, cut from oblique angles. They obviously existed in other dimensions, casting bizarre shadowy refractions down into our shallow pool.

I bolted from the ossuary, heading out to the mouth of the cave.

Passed straight through a few of the shadows. It was an interesting series of sensations--cold, frigid air, and then tropical humidity, and then musk and dry and wet and the unbearable heat of a desert summer day, all in a second, and then I was through with tears streaking down my cheeks.

And then I was in the hall, panting, soaked with sweat. I turned back and saw my office, cluttered with papers but normal as ever.

Obviously, none of those things were real. Turns out the little squids were only being so friendly because they were collecting data. Market research, I guess. If the market was a bunch of meat. They spent fifteen years absorbing human culture, technology, mannerisms, thoughts, emotions, wants, fears. Little brain leeches learning how to attract us: the prey.

Fifteen years seemed like overkill to me. We weren't all that complicated. I feel like I could've done it in less. But maybe the little aliens were just dumb.

I had no idea what those unfortunate souls who got lulled into the hole underwent mentally. But I knew it did not look pretty. I witnessed it on multiple occasions: in every instance, the prey wandered toward the hole, and then snagged like they hit a trap when they got within a few inches. They would always scream. Panicky, desperate, raving screams, as the body distended into wreathing, spinning shapes, overlapping itself as it was folded up and sucked into the hole.

Luckily, their little stone squid bodies had a limited reach and couldn't pass through heavier metals. That helped mitigate a lot of potential problems and made transportation and containment significantly easier. We removed them with robots or IBWs in most cases, both being immune to the alien's seduction, and then destroyed them in large groups with explosives.

But there was a whole crop of these bastards floating around America in larvae form: time bombs set for fifteen years, at double the population from before. And what if it didn't even take them fifteen years this time? Maybe they had genetic memory. Maybe they didn't need to incubate at all.

We had to solve the whole problem.

And the solution turned out pretty simple. They really, really hated botulinum. So, we released small quantities as an aerosol in the atmosphere, targeting alien population clusters. It worked. First contact with the toxin would fry them to dust. Instant conflagration, in an angry green ball of fire. That was a relief.

We still had quite a few isolated stone squid bodies to get rid of, but larvae population was down to a third in a day. Five percent after a week. After a month they were effectively extinct. An unfortunate side effect was that, after everything, around a million people ended up suffering from botulism. And quite a few folks had been tempted by the alien's ruse, leading to excessive casualties in high-concentration areas.

But all things considered, it could've been much worse.

128:

The lights were off in the office when I got back toting the strained plastic bag. Medy was on the couch.

"Hey."

She nodded and sat up. Her face was still red and puffy. I dropped the bag on the table, grabbed a beer, and flopped down on a wooden chair.

"Beer. Chips. Something else but I forgot what."

"Thanks. Any word on Wilson?" She grabbed a beer as well.

"I can't get ahold of him. Eoghan probably has him running ragged. That whole thing with Arnold last week turned into a shit show. They're blaming him for everything."

"What?" She leaned forward.

"Yeah, apparently it's his fault Eoghan's a nut job. Benedict'll probably end up his fault too."

"That's ridiculous! Wilson was so upset! He didn't even want to go in the first place! And Benedict... That was us! That was me! I won't let them blame him."

"If they want to, you can't stop them. That's them. Pick a goat, get to scapin. All about accountability. Doesn't really matter if it's assigned to those responsible."

"How does Eoghan get away with this?"

"Do you mean, 'How does a child get away with playing in his toy box?'"

"But these are people's lives. These are human beings."

"True, but since when does that mean anything?"

I splayed out on the chair, fighting the wood for some comfort. I eyed the clock and took a sip of beer.

7:45

Mutual silence fell, and before I knew it I was lulled into uncomfortable sleep. And a dream.

I was looking in the mirror, but my reflection was short. Must've been a fun house mirror. Wearing a hat I've never seen before. Made from some new kind of color, in an oblong shape.

"Have you seen Wilson?" I smiled.

My teeth were gone, and instead my gums were filled with candy corn. A shadow stood behind me in the mirror. Black, featureless. Something I've seen bef

"Do you think Benedict hates me?" I asked. No, not me.

Medy asked. I looked over. She was still sitting on the couch. The clock laughed at me.

11:27

"Benedict." She stared at me with bloodshot eyes. "Do you think he hates me?"

Had she been crying this whole time?

"No. He didn't hate any of us. Except Gutiérrez. He definitely hated Gutiérrez. That's what Wilson was talking about. The kid was a schizophrenic or something. It's not our fault. Blame the Institute. Not yourself. Benedict was their mistake."

"Was?"

"Well, yeah, I mean. He's--he's dead."

"I don't think he is. Not in there. I can still hear him screaming." Her voice lost its tone, its feeling. Like she was reading off a boring script.

"Still. Now. Screaming. You can't hear him?"

I could. Screaming coming from the hall. I stood up and shook off some fog.

"What the hell?"

"What?" Medy looked over at me, concerned.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Are... you okay? You look pale."

Why did I stand up? I looked at the clock.

7:49

What?

129:

I felt thankful.

For the first time in a long time.

Thankful that I fractured this way. The spready way; not violent or subconsciously torn, or whatever else.

Thankful that the syrup was working.

I had drained the first bottle and cracked open the second.

The plan clunked around in my mind, bulging, blockish, hard to understand. I leaned back on the park bench and closed my eyes.

I had to.

Shut down.

The Network.

I started repeating simple phrases to myself.

I had to. Shut down. The Network.

Things to help me remember. To solidify my ideas. To make my thoughts less broken.

I had to shut down the Network.

Obviously disconnecting facilities wouldn't work. If disconnecting the central hub didn't do it, nothing would. The topology was too resilient, built with excessive redundancy and backups. Anything downed would be up in hours. The thousands of crew, IBWs, and repair drones made sure of that.

There were vulnerabilities, but they were time sensitive. Server restarts were my only option. If I could console in maybe I could do something.

But what would last?

I opened my eyes, and saw the moon above, a perfect glowing orb, exactly like it always was. But of course it was. It was an illusion. A hologram projected on a massive rotational cube, the size of six Californias all lumped together, designed and implemented perfectly.

I wish more things turned out like that.

A thin stream of fire tore in the sky, passing in front of the moon, chased by peppering sparks.

A shooting star. Falling debris. Space junk, lucky enough to make it through the atmosphere as dust.

I remembered space. It was so far away, and so big above our sad little rock.

We could use a meteor right about now.

My heart stalled in my chest. That's it.

A meteor could wipe out the flower. Plus half of the planet. Destructive. Terrible. But effective. Our best option. Only option? It could save humanity. Yeah. A meteor.

Or a moon.

130:

I relaxed on the squat balcony, absently eyeing the city while I crunched on an apple and wondered about Mr. Niu.

I did feel bad, even though I had decided not to. I liked him.

Damn.

Maybe there was some way to repay him.

"Sir?" A squeaky voice behind.

"Yeah?"

"S-Sir?"

"Talk."

"Very well, sir. You are suspended from Zhuō Yóu, effective now. Please come with us."

I turned around. Three American men stood in the doorway. A small one backed by two big ones, obviously brought for muscle.

"What? Why?"

"Rule violation, sir."

"There are rules? What rule?"

"Tile theft, sir."

"What--who, when did I do that?"

"I think we both know the answer to that question, sir."

"Sounds like you're just looking for a way to null my win."

"Niu Chāo was found beaten, nearly to death. His tiles were stolen. When asked, he said your name."

That rat bastard. I didn't feel bad anymore. And I'd consider this his repayment.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you. I earned these tiles fair and square. He's framing me, kid. We had an argument."

"What?"

"Yeah, we were playing together. Got in a little fight. I wanted donkey burgers, he wanted noodles. It got physical. I guess we were both just on edge. I left. And I certainly didn't take the poor bastard's tiles. Must've been a roamer or something because I haven't seen him since."

The little man looked at his bouncers and then back at me.

“We have to verify this, sir.”

“Of course. Do as you will.”

They walked off. I watched them go, and then peeked into the hallway. Clear.

I turned back and leapt from the balcony.

131:

Ring. Ring.

I was on my back on the bridge. On the sidewalk. Staring at the sky.

Each passing car, a ringing engine working, spinning ringing tires, echoing down ringing streets.

The little me was standing on my stomach.

"Ring, ring. Philip! Hey, hey, Philip! Ring, ring! Ring, ring!"

I couldn't hear anything but ringing. Even when the cars were passed and it was just me and me and the sidewalk. The tinnitus was just a phone, ringing softly from somewhere inside my skull.

My head was pounding. Pound. Ring. Ringing. My head was ringing.

I curled into a ball. The little me jumped off and squatted down so he was in my face.

"Ringing, isn't it, Philip?"

I closed my eyes.

I couldn't

do anything

but cry

and it came out in ringing sobs

broken ringing

ring

"Don't be sad, Philip. Just answer the phone."

I couldn't even cry right

The dark fell from the sky, like cut with a knife

and then it was morning, day, afternoon, evening

the sun bounced across the sky

and then it was dark again

"Aren't you hungry, Philip?"

and again

"Let's go get a patty melt! Remember that? Mmm, mmm."

and again

"Philip, you have to get up!"

I kept crying

"Philip."

But

That sounded different. Familiar. Warm. Was it real?

"Who?"

132:

door

room

hallway

door

room

hallway

door

room

hallway

door

room

hall--

I slammed against the wall, sending far off trickles of electric pain through my body? Which was heavy, coated in muck like I fell through a lakebed. It made me stick to the wall like a fly on a trap.

No hallway?

I fought the filth, like stretchy ropes, like afterbirth, like heavy vines, like weeds, tangling me, burdening me, and shakily stood up straight.

Vibrating. My feet were shifting and dipping into the wall, sending ripples across it.

I couldn't remember where I came from.

I couldn't remember the last time I could remember.

I couldn't

But I could remember something. What was it?

I took a step, dripping some of that waste free, shaking some of that sludge from my form. My foot was more solid, stickier, but less sticky.

I took another step

and another

growing lighter with each footfall.

It felt good. I felt good. For once.

My foot pressed against the wall, now only occasionally dipping through, shuddering under the weight of my new physicality.

Who am I?

133:

I sat down next to Wilson and scooted my chair in.

"And was it Mehdi? I've only heard that as a masculine name."

"M-e-d-y, it's short for Medula. My mom was kind of a nerd."

"Interesting!" Zeinhaert clapped his hands. "Very interesting. That's a unique name, Medy. Medula. I don't think I've heard that one before. Very pretty."

"I've never cared for it. But thank you."

"So, how goes the VRC, Medula? Are you sick of the mind yet?"

"A-Actually, not sick really, no. But some of this is--It's hard. I feel bad for all of these people. The Network is the most amazing thing in the world, but--and I don't mean to be this way, but there are so many terrible, avoidable things. It's kind of--well, awful."

"Oh, Wilson! What have you made her do?"

"That was me." Philip piped up. "I recommended she take Benedict solo. I did not think it would be like that."

"Good god, men. You set the new girl off on her own in the mind of a schizophrenic?"

"Well, to be fair, we didn't know Benedict's ailment." Wilson said. "I don't think he did either."

"And I went in with her. But it snowballed pretty quickly."

"What happened?"

"We--" Philip began, but so did I, causing us to awkwardly cut each other off.

"Go ahead, Medy."

"We met the organism from Benedict's reports. Gutiérrez. It was really his grandfather, Vintner. And he was normal. Really normal. Like someone's grandpa. He looked scary, but he just lived in this big kitchen and cooked food all the time."

"Yeah. Seemed harmless."

"So, we thought maybe if Benedict met Vintner. Well, Philip's idea--"

"My guess was that if he could meet Vintner and see it was his grandfather then he'd overcome his irrational fear."

"Naturally." Zeinhaert leaned forward. "But it just compounded his fear?"

"Exactly." Medy said. "They met and then the whole place started falling apart. Vintner wasn't Vintner at all anymore. He actually like, I don't know. He became Gutiérrez. In

that moment. And then he stabbed Benedict and the wound just kept bleeding. The island flooded with blood. Then the chaasm froze, or whatever that was."

"A loop." Wilson said.

"And then Medy and I bolted the hell out of there. It completely froze and shut down a few minutes after we left."

"Holy hell!" Zeinhaert's eyes were wide. "And that was your first solo venture! What a story! Terrible, of course. But my good lord, what a story. Between that and the Moltke's you've done more in a month than Wilson did in his first few years."

"It was slow going back then! They did incredibly well, despite the circumstances. I am very proud. Because incident resolution is hard. Maybe the hardest job we have. And you're right, Medy. It's awful."

"What's interesting to me is the chaasm being affected. That's very unusual. Normally the host and the chaasm are fairly separate, even when connected."

"We think he had admin control in some way." Wilson abruptly stood up. "Excuse me. Restroom, one second."

"That explains it. See? We can try to learn from these experiences. Try to prevent them in the future. We still guide our ship most of the time, right? We can try our best to make things good for people. To figure out what the hell we're doing wrong, and fix it, and make it right. Make it what it's supposed to be. Make it what we all know it has the potential to be. I believe in this. Us. The VRC. Wilson. And all of you other nutjobs."

"Why the monologues?" Philip chided. "Every new recruit gets a different monologue."

"I happened to like it!"

"Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee! I have thee not, and yet--"

"Alright, stop." Philip held up his hands. "Please, god. Not Hamlet."

"It's Macbeth, you warm-milk bumpkin."

Wilson returned with his phone on his ear. I could already read it on his face.

"I'm sorry, there's another meeting. I have to go."

Again.

P134:

I lay on the prism of ruby glass

Mesmerized again just being near the pulsing ball of energy beneath, and stared up at the swimming rainbow refractions on the cave ceiling.

Soft trickling broke my attention, and I turned to my side.

I could see my blood running away from me, even though I didn't tell it to. Spilling out of me, into a deep, red pool that just kept growing and painting the gem floor.

He walked away, out of the cave, off to save the world.

I was impressed. I didn't think he had it in him. The little otter.

To think. Out of everyone. My money was on the dumb one with the mouth.

But the little otter got me.

After how long? How old was I?

One-sixty a few years ago. How many years?

I was at least one-sixty. Ripe old age, I guess.

Not old enough.

I won't die.

I pushed myself up with my elbows, shaking like crazy. I've never shaken this much. Even with hypothermia, freezing to death. Then it was kind of calm. No shakes.

But this was bad.

I pushed up with my knees and tried to stand. My leg gave out and I fell again, landing hard on my face.

Blood spilled from my chest, splattering the gemstone below me.

I won't die.

The hole didn't hurt so bad anymore. That was worrying.

Numb, tingling in my fingers, my palms. My feet.

I looked up at the ceiling again, at the dancing reflections.

I felt the thrumming below me.

I won't die.

Out of the whole world there was just me, the cave, and this thrumming ball of energy.

I crawled to the hole. The broken connection point, spewing forth caustic energy, a font of unlimited power. I rested my head on the ground near the edge, just feeling it course under me.

I yearned for it.

My blood ran in lines, pouring into the cracks in the gem floor, dripping into the hole.

I will not die.

The hole was big enough.

I could. I could go.

I pushed against the floor, barely feeling my fingers, and rolled forward.

My legs dropped in first, and I was there hanging in, arms outstretched on the edge of a pool. The vortex swirled below me, brighter than ever. My feet were whisked away. Ash in a wind. And my shins, knees, thighs. Torn into shreds and dusted away. It didn't hurt.

I. will. not. die.

I fell in.

I felt cool, standing in a breeze without a jacket.

I drifted off into sleep.

I dreamt of power. Over my enemies. Over anyone.

Warm, liquid power.

I found it. Finally.

135:

"You've built hell on earth."

"Well, Zeinhaert, with all due respect, I don't think you know what you're talking about."

"I don't care what you think."

My heart thundered in my chest. He got closer to me and popped his neck in a simian show of superiority.

"You should."

"Why does it matter? A nattering child's opinion? A reckless, cocksure immortal oaf lives a hundred terrible years and then suddenly has something useful to say? You're sick. Wilson doesn't see it. Or maybe he does, because I think he does, but he just won't say anything. Probably because he's smart. Philip and Medy and Harold too. Well, I'm not. I reject your reality, Eoghan. It may not mean much to your empire, but I'm cutting my funding."

"You came to my office to tell me that?"

"I did. I figured I owed you the courtesy. Even though you don't deserve it."

"Really, really bad plan. What's to stop me from killing you right now and seizing your capital?"

"I--suppose nothing. That would certainly be an option for someone like you."

"It's looking like the only option here, Zeiny."

He held a gleaming revolver and leveled it at my head. His thumb cocked back the hammer.

"I guess I assumed you wouldn't be so childish. Vindictive. Rash. Ironic, then, that I would be lecturing you on those exact qualities. Very well. Do it."

"You know what they say about assumptions. Ass out of you, specifically. Any last words?"

"I suppose. I'm thank--"

Slow motion. A clang. Bang? Loud. So loud.

"Just kidding."

Black.

136:

I looked down at my hands, wrinkled and hairy. My hands. They were my hands again, finally. After so long.

I tested my voice.

“Calling, calling, calling on my strapping suitor!”

My echo boomed through the marble entryway, deep like I remember. Bubbles of glee churned in my stomach.

God, it feels good to be yourself.

“Madeline!”

And there was Roxy, dropping my cold-name in record time.

I forgot I gave her this arrogant pink tag outlined by a feathery boa, with her name written in flashing marquee bulbs. It bobbed above her head as she performed her elegant promenade--clumsy in high heels like a wounded horse, forgoing efficacy for elegance, as always. She wore a floor-length ruby dress which sparkled annoyingly in the candlelight.

“Dude.”

“Ah, dammit. I’m so sorry, Mad--ah, uh--Max. Sorry. The tag. I forgot the tag. But you look great!”

“Just change the tag, loser.”

“Okay, PD Gonzaglaze--hold the shit on.”

“Well, you look--I mean, that dress is certainly noisy.”

“Alright, there we go. 'Max.' And I think my dress looks glamorous.”

“Well, it does. Yeah, it's definitely glamorous. But also noisy.”

“Noise grabs attention. Well, shall we?”

“Maybe the attention of small animals. Waiting on him.”

“Jacob? Girl...”

I stared at her.

“Sorry. I’m sorry. It’s hard.”

“It’s okay, but like... Look at my beard, dude. Just stare at my beard when you talk. Right here.”

I pointed under my chin.

"I know, but--well, I guess I don't have an excuse in here, huh?"

"It's fiiiine. It's not something you need an excuse for. We're friends, Rocky. Friends. Do you know what friends is, Rock? Huh?"

"Well, no, I didn't mean--I'm sorry, Max."

"I know you didn't, dude. Please stop apologizing. It's not even a big deal. Because I know. I know more than anyone. I had to think about all of this shit--"

Roxy made an odd, crinkled face and gave a little nod, gesturing behind me.

"Max!"

I swiveled. There was Jacob, dressed almost identically to me; deep blue three-piece suit, black overcoat, shining loafers. The only difference was his immaculate choice of tie. We looked like twins wearing outfits designed by some overbearing mom.

He didn't have a beard at all this time. Was that because of what I said?

"To be continued." I whispered.

"Of course." Roxy smiled. "And it's not that big."

"Jacob! How are you? And if you don't just look excellent."

He grabbed my hand.

"You said, gazing into a mirror. I'm doing great, man. Glad to be back. How about yourself?"

"Fantastic now, thanks. And I guess I look good too. The selection was rather minimal."

"Or is it that great minds think alike?"

"Could it be both?"

"Probably not." He smiled. "How was Carter?"

"Trash. Bio-lock just fuckin sucks, man."

"Ahh, I'm sorry. I feel that."

"It's all good! I'm just glad to be out! Where were you?"

"I was in Longboard for most of it. Bowly's for like a month, I think."

"I'd love to go to Longboard."

"You can. I don't care what you look like, Max. And weren't you just in Carter for like six months? What's the difference?"

"Thanks, but I do care. And yeah, I was. I was in the bubble the entire time. I'd be in the bubble in Longboard too. I just feel like shit about it. I wish stuff like this wasn't a thing, you know?"

"Yeah, I do. It's stupid. And honestly, there's no reason for it. I understand body mass locks or muscle ratio locks or whatever, but a full bio-lock just seems lazy. And holy shit, I totally forgot to tell you, I heard Nevada has access to year-round open spans--"

"Ahem." Roxy cleared her perfectly clear throat.

"Oh, sorry, dude. Jacob, this is Roxy--Roxy, Jacob, and I think maybe you've met before? She was probably some long-legged dinosaur or something, so no problem if you don't recognize her."

"Oh, little old me...? I would never make such a fuss. As I'm sure you can tell. Greetings, Monsieur Jacob, sir. Charmed. And aren't you as bountiful as ever?"

"Is that a compliment?" He glanced at me.

"I'm not sure." I chuckled. "I think it might be an insult to me?"

"You both may take that that respectively, yes. You guys see the list of spaces this month? I am so fucking ready for whatever the hell Buxom Bagnio is."

"As you would be." I muttered.

"I'm looking now." Jacob's eyes danced in the air, reading invisible lines. "And I think I'm partial to 'The Meat But.'"

"What kind of meat?" I laughed with a dumb snort.

"Doesn't say. The description is vague. Bring a fork or a spoon."

"Tantalizing. I really, really hope it's not giant penises."

"I dunno, might not be so bad." He laughed.

"Well, sir? To the gala?"

"Sir." He bowed.

I held out my elbow, and he tucked his arm in.

We walked through the entry into the massive orientation hall, with Roxy tugging behind. The party had already started tonight, now in full swing--everyone was dancing, laughing, drinking.

We stood under the massive dome chandelier, built from tens of thousands of individual glittering crystal balls, all floating, suspended in the air. Each ball slowly spun and rotated around the others on an axis. They were separate, but together they

looked like one massive, hanging orb, as big as a semi, pulsing with light. I stared up at it, enamored by the glow. By its magnificence.

The inner doors hadn't opened yet. The spaces were likely still generating. I looked over at Jacob, smiling, laughing, talking with friends. The bubbles in my gut turned sour. I was going to make a fool of myself again. I needed a drink.

"Hey," I elbowed Jacob's arm. "I'm gonna go grab drinks. You want something?"

"Uh, yeah! Thanks! Think they have Coke?"

"Buhh, probably?"

"If they do, then yes, Coke. If not, I don't know, you pick."

"You got it, b-r-b."

"Thanks, Max!"

I left the central dome and moved to the outskirts. Each wall was lined by tables and bars, packed with luxurious looking food and drinks, all around the perimeter of the room.

I approached one and the bartender dipped his head.

"Evening, sir."

"How's it going?" I never knew how to start these interactions.

"Could do a lot worse than a gala at the Blank Room, kid."

"Don't I know that? I'll take a brandy, neat. And do you have Coke?"

"Coke? Like Coca-Cola?"

"Yeah. Not cocaine." I tried to make a joke.

"I don't think I've ever been asked for Coke in here. Cocaine, yes. Many times. Very popular stuff. But not Coke."

"Oh, dang, no Coke? That's fine, I'll have whatever soda."

"No, we have it. We have everything. Just don't hear that kind of request in a place like this. You sure you're meant to be here?"

I laughed. No, I wasn't.

"Not sure at all. But actually, it's not for me. I'm here with friends."

The lights dimmed and the bartender's speech slowed down, morphing and deepening, and then speeding up, rolling backwards.

I was talking backwards as well. Everything I said came out in reverse. Our conversation rewound, rigidly forcing us through the motions again.

"--row tol a od dluoCould do a lot worse--what the hell was that?"

"I have no idea." I couldn't even think.

It subsided. The lights were still low. I felt a slight rumbling through the floor.

My vision tore, scratching broken bars across my sight as the lights got brighter and brighter. The room faded into white, and I could only see those flickering black bars. Like a failing monitor. And then a pulsing screaming was stuck in a loop, repeating, constantly rewinding and starting over. Was it a woman? Was that Roxanne? Loud, pained screaming. Terrified screaming.

My vision went completely black. It felt like I was in a dark auditorium, filled with people. Thousands. Millions. I could feel them. Near me. Packed around me. Two voices were speaking. Far away, hard to hear. Arguing.

"--up. I'm sorry. It's over."

"No, it's not."

"You're dying. It's over."

"NO, IT IS NOT! IT IS NOT OVER!"

"Think about everyone you've killed. Everyone who's dead because of you. This is what you get. For--"

The hitching stopped. I could see again. I was standing at the bar, facing the center of the room.

It was quiet. Everyone was rousing, looking around.

And then there was a pop. The chandelier fell, raining crystal balls on the guests below. Hundreds of balls. Thousands. Crashing to the ground, shattering, in a thunderous roar, a tsunami of broken glass, exploding in waves over the room. My heart sank. Jacob. Roxanne.

I couldn't see them.

All I saw were bodies and broken glass.

137:

The elevator slowed down and clunked into place. We were in a red room. There were no light fixtures, but red light emanated from the walls, the floor, everything.

The speaker chimed in a flat note this time. The announcer came back sounding a bit more forlorn.

“Welcome to the red room, contestants! I’m sure you’re all very excited to find out what the special bonus round is! Are you ready? You don’t look ready. Alright. Here we go! The rules--well single rule. There’s only one, and it’s very simple. Survive. Good luck.”

Holes opened in the ceiling, all around the room, pouring steaming water which ran down the walls and began pooling on the floor. Red water. I could already feel the heat, and the humidity fogging up the room.

I stared at the man with the beard and the bald axe-man, now unarmed.

And then they looked at each other.

And then they were on me. One on each arm, carrying me.

“Please, no--god--”

I don’t know why I pleaded. They dragged me to the edge and then threw me. I slammed into the wall, into the gushing waterfalls. At first I didn’t feel anything but the sharp agony of slamming my shoulder into the wall.

And then I felt the water. Boiling

138:

There he was. Curled up in a ball on the sidewalk. Crying.

God, Philip. Why didn't you let me help?

"Philip."

He stopped and looked up at me, craning his neck in a weird angle.

"Who?"

I instantly thought back to that cave below George's hill.

"Philip, it's me. It's Wilson."

"What?"

"It's Wilson. Hey." I crouched down and touched his arm.

"Get away! Stop! I don't want to! I won't!"

I grabbed his arms, and then his face.

"Philip. Look in my eyes. This is real. I am. Listen to my voice. I am Wilson."

"What? No? How?"

"I'm Wilson. Your friend. We've been friends for a long time. Hey. Look at me. Philip. Here. Remember--hey, look. Remember when your mom died? And you thought she cut you from the will? You were so sure of that."

He stared at me.

"And then we went there. To that guy. The lawyer. We went to the lawyer and he read the will to us. Remember?"

"I-I don't--"

"And you were wrong. She had included you in the will. In the worst way she could think of. She left you that lot. That filthy, pitiful lot. On Dunston. Right off I-95. Out of all the property, the wealth--she gave you that piece of crap lot. As a joke. A final insult. To make you feel worthless. Remember?"

"Y-Yeah." He nodded this time.

"So you decided to show her. Prove her wrong. You called me. I'll never forget that phone call. You called me up completely livid. Yelling as loud as I've ever heard you yell. And you were so angry. I'm sure you were seeing red. I expected you to want to burn her house down or piss on her grave. Some basic, destructive vengeance."

He cracked a smile.

“But instead you completely surprised me. In that yelling, delirious voice, you said something so much better. We cleaned the lot. The trash, and that pool of sewage, the broken pipe, all that rubble. It took months. And then we built a facility. We turned that crappy land into a landmark.”

“I did still want to piss on her grave, though.”

“Philip.” Tears welled in my eyes.

I hugged him.

“Listen. You need to come with me. I can help. I can take care of you. Please.”

“I am. Well, I'm not good. I'm not, Wilson. I need help.”

“I can tell. Please drink this.”

I uncapped the small bottle of lithium water and handed it to him. He took a swig and held it in his mouth for a second before swallowing, like he was pondering its flavor.

“Not good.”

“I know. But keep going. Drink the whole thing. It's two milligrams. I'll give you another two when we get to the facility.”

“Facility?”

“I need to take you back. I can get you stable. I can make this less painful.”

He drank the rest and then he had that face again.

“No. I don't want to do that.”

“Philip, please.”

“I don't want to! I feel terrible about this, Wilson. I can't think. I can't. I can't. I can't think, god dammit, I can't fucking think.”

“Let me think for you. You trust me, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And you know I'll do anything I can for you. You know I'll help.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“So, please. Come with me. It won't be perfect but I can make you better. At least for a while. Please.”

He looked me in the eyes. I saw clarity. Recognition.

"I know you would and I'm sure that's for best. That's part of the problem. I'm sorry, Wilson. I don't want you to watch me lose my mind. Thank you for this. For helping me. What did I drink?"

"Lithium carbonate water."

"That kind of helped. Thank you. I remember what I have to do. You know too. Please don't think about me, man. Just forget that I even existed. Please."

I stared at him. Tears were streaming down my cheeks.

"Like I said. You're the best friend I've ever had. The best friend. The best. God, man. This world doesn't deserve you. Thank you."

He turned and mounted the railing.

"Goodbye, Wilson."

"No!"

He fell from the bridge.

139:

The inside of the crab was riddled with little black nodules.

Nearing one would cause it to begin shaking and rapidly bouncing in place. The closer we got to the nodules, the more violent the shaking.

Philip stepped off the tongue-path and got a bit too close to them. They started vibrating wildly. One exploded, spraying black goop into the air. The fleshy ground sizzled and burned where the goop landed.

“Holy shit!” Philip leapt back.

“Alright. Good to know.” Wilson crouched to examine the stuff. “The cysts are proximity mines filled with acid.”

“What the--fucking why? Why, Wilson?”

“Because this place is deforming, Philip. I’m pretty sure it’s not supposed to be a giant crab. And I want to know why. Stick together. Eyes peeled for more cysts. Don’t get close.”

“Wilson.” I tapped his shoulder. “Look. That platform looks like a town or something.”

“You’re right. Let’s find a way up there.”

“Why? Why can’t we just do a soft disconnect for once? Why do we have to climb the flesh pillars to visit some fleshy city in some fleshy crab’s fleshy mouth?”

“Because it’s our job, Philip.” Wilson said.

“Yeah, Philip. Jeez, what the heck?”

“And like others, the chaasm itself has warped. You and I both know that shouldn’t happen. It’s our duty to find out why. If we can figure out what’s causing these kinds of incidents, we can figure out who’s ineligible for chaasm generation.”

“Even though Eoghan expressly forbid that on multiple occasions.”

“Yes. What he doesn’t know can’t hurt him.”

Philip sighed.

“Fine. But it has to be the giant crab?”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” Wilson grabbed his shoulder. “Let’s go find Marcus.”

We continued down the rolling tongue, careful of the cyst landmines. They reminded me of little bushes, lining every fleshy wall, spread around by the dozen, as if thought-out and placed there by some otherworldly landscaper. The tongue dropped down into a steep hill and then rose gradually to the base of the fleshy platform, which was held

up by several tall pillars of riveted red gums. Stringy ropes hung down the sides like vines in a forest, and in the center of the tongue was a ladder, made from flesh, extending up to the platform.

"I love the human brain." I smiled.

"Why?" Philip was still in a mood.

"Because look at this place. We're inside a giant crab. Some warped version of what the chaum's supposed to be. Broken and skewed and wrong."

"And? So?"

"Aaaand, soooo, look. There's a ladder here. There are still human mechanisms and ingenuity, engraved into it, irremovable even in the depths of madness."

"True." Wilson poked the ladder. "I've always been fascinated by that."

He grabbed a rung. It squished and seeped some reddish liquid. Philip moaned audibly.

"Well, here goes."

He began climbing. Each rung sagged under the weight of his boots, dripping pink liquid below. It smelled foul, like bad breath, like rot. He made it all the way up what must've been ten stories and then looked down.

"It works. Not pleasant, though. Sorry, Philip."

Philip grumbled behind me. I mounted the ladder next.

Wilson was right. It was disgusting. I was glad he told me to bring gloves, although now they just were soaking up the red juice and sticking to my fingers. I had to breathe through my mouth to ignore the smell. But I could still taste it every time I inhaled.

"Oh, god, Philip. You're gonna hate this."

"Aaaaahhhh." I heard him below.

I reached the top and shoved my knee into the fleshy ground to climb up, leaving a wet stain on my pants. I shuddered.

"Alright, come on up!"

He did, uttering near constant moans and gripes; every step he climbed was adorned with a unique, disgusted vocalization.

"I'm sorry for complaining, Wilson." He mounted the top and shook off his hands.

"It's--fine?"

"Just don't make me do this again, please. I promise I won't complain anymore. Just. God. Please."

"If I know about it beforehand we won't bring you along, alright? But you're my second. You don't exactly get the luxury of turning things down. That's the job, but I promise I'll do what I can."

"Thank you. From the bottom of my disgusted heart. Now let's do this. Please, god, let's hurry and do this."

We moved inland away from the sheer edge of the platform. The buildings were squat, and aside from the throbbing and dripping, they looked pretty normal. They had doors and windows and balconies and front yards, made from pulsing red muscle and flesh. The windows were all aglow with warm, yellow light.

"Looks like people are home." Wilson said.

"Hello!" Philip yelled out, echoing his voice through the mouth-chasm.

Wilson looked back at him with that, "Why the hell did you just do that?" face. I laughed.

"Well, I'm not knocking on a flesh door."

One nearest us opened up, and a fat little man came out, made from the same gummy flesh as everything else. He moved like a full trash bag, swaying his naked gut from side to side as he shuffled over. I could hear soft music and the rolling chuckles of a friendly get-together drifting out from the room behind.

"How can ye be, doodles?" He spoke with a strange, heavy accent.

"Uh, hello?" Philip said.

"Aye. What can be done?"

"We're looking for a man named Marcus." Wilson stepped forward. "Have you seen him around here?"

"Mart Kiss?"

"Marcus." I said. "Kettlbaum? Kettlbaun? Something like that."

"Oh, ye think Marcculus the Bomb?"

"Could be."

"Wewase just abort to-doit anyhow! Heyall! We gongo wake up Marcculus!"

Several doors opened, and more little fat things walked out, of all different colors and types. Some had frizzy yellow hair, some were bald, others hobbled on multiple sets of

malformed legs, or rolled in one case, because it had no legs at all. Altogether there were thirty, maybe more.

We were surrounded by a crowd of hideous little flesh monsters in greens and reds and browns and purples. They began singing a song as we matched toward the center of town.

“Marcculus, the coolest,

Oldest, of the sponge.

Intravenous,

He is us and we are him.

Marcculus is not our friend.”

“What the hell, man.” Philip shook his head in amazement.

“Wilson, any idea what’s going on here?” I asked.

“Probably. Maybe. I think this might be a shattered subconscious.”

We bobbed along to their merry tune, passing the many flesh-built buildings, making our way toward a massive bowl-like pit. A thick fleshy stalk descended from the ceiling, hanging in the direct center.

“Marcculus, our only God,

Youngest of the young.

Between us,

Be all we need.

Marcculus, will bleed.”

The little fat things all stopped singing and gathered together, standing before--was that a massive syringe? It was. They gathered before a massive syringe, filled with a murky grey liquid and tilted on its side, needle stabbing into the gummy ground. A little set of fleshy steps led up to the plunger on the opposite end.

They lined up and took turns slamming their little bodies into the plunger, moving it a few inches at a time, injecting the grey liquid into the flesh, bit by bit.

Eventually the plunger was flush with the syringe, completely emptied. The ground rumbled below us, and then a nodule expanded from the end of the big ceiling stalk like a balloon being filled up.

It was Marcus. A little inflated lump, hanging by a thread of tissue. Two beady red eyes opened up, spread far apart across the bulb. And then his little slit of a mouth did as well. His orifices oozed grey liquid.

“Y’all got any shit?”

140:

I unbuttoned my suit jacket and sat in the brown leather recliner.

A little blue vase on our table held a lone, drooping orchid. I couldn't stop staring at it. Why an orchid? Was she like an orchid? I pondered it.

"I think I'm going to retire."

"What?" Philip set his drink down.

"I can't do this anymore. I have money. I have technology. Anything I need. I think I'm just going to go off and play with my toys until I die."

"Again, what? You're not seriously entertaining that. I know you're not. Because you've been doing this since you were--what, nineteen? And since then you've seen how many thousands of people get killed or go insane? Wilson, if you were going to quit, you wouldn't have waited until now. You would've done it years ago. I know she was great. But it was one girl. I feel like shit too. I feel worse than you. I'm the reason she had the fucking--"

"Stop. It's not just because of her. Though, I did love her."

"What? Really? Like, actually?"

"What?" I looked away from the flower and met his eyes.

"You loved her? She was like... what? Thirty years younger than you?"

"Oh. Philip--what? No. Like a daughter. Why would you--why would you think I meant that?"

I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity. He did too. It felt good. But bittersweet.

"Sorry. Yeah. Well, yeah. We both did. We all did. She was--yeah. But if not her... what?"

"Like you said. I've seen how many thousands of people get killed? I don't know the answer. I have no idea. I keep trying to make things better. To right the ship, and things just keep getting worse. I don't think I want to be a part of it anymore. This field. This technology. This world. None of it is right. It's not."

"Well, I'm sorry, but you're too late."

"How's that?"

"You can't quit."

"Why?"

"Because I won't."

We sat in silence for a moment. He knew I wouldn't let them go it alone. He was calling a bluff I hadn't even known I was making.

I thought about the orchid again. She wasn't like an orchid.

Medy was a cherry blossom.

141:

The box was full of red orbs, overflowing and rolling off the table, cluttering the floor, gathering like dust in corners. It just kept filling up. I'd look back and there would be more, spilling out, growing up from the bottom. Hundreds.

Using them came at a cost. The orbs were changing me. I grew a little bit larger with every one I crushed. Not fatter. Just larger. Bigger. I couldn't fit through the doorframes now, and my skin was turning color--it was a brownish-green, covered in rolling bumps.

The sky was dark. I could barely make anything out from my small, foggy windows. But I could still hear the crab armies outside, descending upon my rice fields in rolling waves, demolishing everything in sight.

For a while the orbs worked. Wonders. My fields were bountiful. Every time I used an orb the crabs would disappear, and the sky would be that glorious blue again. But they would always come back. In force. And every time I would have to crush more orbs to make them go away again.

At first, I had to use three orbs. And then they were back a week later, so I had to use five. And then ten. Last week it was up to twenty orbs to keep them away for a single day.

But now the crabs weren't going away at all. My plants weren't coming back. I just kept crushing the orbs, one after another, broken between my fingers, burning warmly, tingling my palms. Dozens. Hundreds.

But the sky stayed black. No matter how many I churned through. Nothing was changing. I could still hear the crabs outside, underwater, in that thick tempest. Calling to me through the dark.

"Probably better this way."

"You made your bed."

"Hey, idiot, hear me?"

"Fuck you. And fuck your family."

"I'm not even mad, man. I just don't want to deal with someone so fucking stupid."

The sky grew red and pulsed each time their voices grew loud. I remembered them all. What were their names? I couldn't go back and make it better. That's all I could think, all I could feel about it when they spoke. I just wished I could go back and stop myself from doing that thing. Such a simple thing. Every time my mind moves to it...

It blacks out. I can't remember.

I'm just stuck here in my house, in my den. Too big to open the doors.

Too big to leave.

Listening to my world fall away.

142:

The plane spun and dipped down, flying through It's legs, before Philip pitched the nose up and began circling It's head. The world swirled below us, a myriad of fiery, smoky blurs. I was overwhelmed by déjà vu. I had been here before.

Why had I been here before?

The staff pulsed in my hand. I inspected it. Rubellite. Framed into a spear by some nonconductive metal. The cable hung off the rear end, stretching off the plane, toward the landing strip.

Why had I been here?

"Wilson, throw it!"

What? Again? I looked up at the welts. The silvery, gleaming welts. I remembered that too. I had done this before.

I took aim. The welts gleamed brighter than ever. My shoulder pumped forward, and the spear took flight, slipping from my fingers, perfectly, just like I remembered. It flew in an arc, on a collision course with the welts.

As the red gem pressed against It's neck, a white light consumed me, followed by a delayed cracking, like the start of a massive clap of thunder.

It hit me. I knew why I remembered this.

It happened before.

I was stuck in a loop.

But I hadn't entered the Network.

Had I?

The soft thrumming of the plane engine returned, growing louder. And the white slowly faded away. The plane spun and dipped down, flying through It's legs, before Philip pitched the nose up and began circling It's head. The world swirled below us, a myriad of fiery, smoky blurs. I was overwhelmed by déjà vu. I had been here before.

Why had I been here before?

143:

What did I have to do?

I had to

Shut something

I looked at my hand.

A bottle. Unopened. Was I going to drink this?

I peeled the

Plastic crinkling strip that keeps

unravelling

forever,

stupid lid, stupid seal.

Slipping cherry.

Down my berry, ferry, fairy, fiery fairly.

Finely faintly flint

flummox

flatline

firehouse?

formally?

f inally

Finally.

It took time.

And it always took longer and lasted less.

But I was regaining clarity.

And with it I was filled with rage again.

That was the third bottle today.

It wouldn't last long. I needed more.

But my stomach

I couldn't keep this up. I had to finish the plan.

I pulled out my notebook. The pages were scrawled with tight handwriting packing every line, and the margins, and the backs, hard to read and assuredly incoherent to anyone else.

I read through them. Reminding myself.

Remembering. I had to shut down the Network. I knew that from the hundreds of times I had scribbled it along the margins of every page.

I turned to the last page. The plan.

Network spines perform rolling restarts on the third Wednesday of every other month, starting in February on even years. It was... I checked my watch--the little dial showed August fourteenth. I counted on my fingers. Last restart would've been June? Next would be... August eighteenth. The third Wednesday would be August eighteenth. Just a few days away.

Could I last that long?

I had to.

I could do it then. I could console in and divert control during the restarts. I could disable the cube's gravity binding. I could drop it from orbit. I could try. But I had no idea what server, or series of servers, controlled it. I could check the DBs, since I still had clearance. Assuming I was still sane enough by the time I got there.

Entering the building wouldn't be an issue. It wouldn't be difficult to commandeer whatever resources I needed. The Institute was mostly a headless entity now. No control, no goals. Just autonomous status quo.

At least one good thing came from... that.

No one knew what happened.

No one except me.

I stood from my desk and picked up my phone. The screen looked strange. Skewed. Angled. Like I was looking down on it through a bent lens. I did my best to navigate the menus through my swimming vision.

I looked back to my notes.

Cab. I needed a cab. I needed more syrup.

And I needed a way to the nearest IDC.

144:

Haggo pushed up his tattered boater to make eye contact.

“Didn’t believe it till Cabbage just done and died exact the way he said. Saw it with my own eyes.”

“And which way was that?” I asked, in between sips of the amber ale.

“Sommit strange. Sommit I never heard of. Ate a bad tomato.”

“A bad tomato?”

“A bad tomato. Ended up full a eggs. Some crazy bug. Never saw nothing like it. Hatched all at once and ate up his insides. Thousands--these tiny red beetles with little black spots, like girlies. He just keeled over on the deck, screaming and thrashing. Skittering bastards poured out from his eyes, mouth, ears, pants, even some holes they made themselves. Scattering over the deck, heading for the rails, falling into the water. Cabbage ended up a flat sack just lying on the deck. Nothing but skin. All his organs, bones, veins, everything was gone.”

“If he knew he was going to die from eating tomatoes, then why would the man eat tomatoes?”

“He didn’t know about the tomato. He knew about the bugs. Hatching inside him, crawling over every which-a-where, eating his organs and all that.”

“Interesting.” I eyed the glass, frosty with condensation. “What did you see?”

“Oh, me?” His face darkened.

“If you don’t mind.”

“No bother. I fall into the sea. Well, a rat bastard pushes me over. I feel hands on my back, strong hands, shoving me. Then I hit the water. And it’s deep green. Heavy brine. I sink and then sommit’s on me. Some kinda shark, maybe. I feel the teeth. And that’s all.”

“Yet you still captain a ship!”

“I knew as a boy I’d be dying at sea. All the beer did was make me sure the wind’s at my sails proper.”

“If I knew I was gonna die on a boat, I probably wouldn’t ride on boats anymore.”

“But! If ye knew ye was gonna die doing what ye loved... my guess is ye’d still be out doing.”

“I dunno. Guess I’d have to find something I loved first. How long does it take to kick in?”

"Oh, I'ano. Maybe ten minutes?"

"Alright. Thanks again for the ride. I'm gonna go enjoy my death."

He chuckled heartily and scratched his naked chest.

"A'thee, Eoghan. I'll be under. Should be close to close soon. Oh, and fore I forget--what the hell were you doing out there anyway?"

"Heard of Zhuō Yóu?"

"I have. Though I never met a man who went." He raised an eyebrow. "How long?"

I thought about it. Had it really been so long?

Was I really in Zhuō Yóu for six years?

"Almost six years."

"Ye're more lucky every minute. Good god. Six years. I'd ask ye more, but I suppose it's not my story to hear."

He shook his head in disbelief. He might've been waiting for me to elaborate, but I didn't have the patience. I wasn't a storyteller.

After a moment he spoke again.

"Alright, then, I'm under. Good luck!"

He turned back and descended the steps, heading belowdecks.

I moved to the railing and eyed the horizon. Blank sea. Just blue and bluish white. Tinges of the occasional whitish blue. Nothing, forever. I hated looking at it.

I gulped down the rest of the ale. It was too sweet, almost fruity, and it coated my mouth in an oily layer, like milk. I moved back from the railing and sat down on the deck to wait. A breeze tucked under my hair. It was nearly down to my waist now. I couldn't wait for a haircut. A shave. Normal life necessities.

My eyelids felt too heavy. I closed them.

And then I wasn't on the boat anymore.

I could only see colors. Beautiful deep reds, pinks, and purples, refracting light like gemstones. Someone had been shouting. Who was shouting? Was I shouting? I looked down. My chest was bleeding. I could see my blood. Everywhere. I was dying. Had I been shot? Someone shot me.

I could see something. Boxes? Metal boxes.

And something else.

A whirlpool. Below me.

Yellow, red, orange, purple. Spinning open in the floor. Was it the ocean?

I fell into it and scattered like dust.

Warm tingling ran along my arms. I felt more comfortable than I ever remember being. My eyes shot open. I was on my back, on the boat. The sky was black with lines of deep purple. I sat up.

Night.

How long had I been out?

145:

Human Brain Drives (HBDs, diskmen, organic state storage, drives) are the byproduct of a society hungry for storage and a market of dwindling supply lines. Something no one asked for. Still, it became quite popular, and ended up a necessity for the cruel.

It started with us simply trying to answer the question,

“Can we use all that unused space in the brain?”

Turns out there is no unused space in the brain. When depositing information, “downloading” data to the mind, we learned that the data structure of our brains is a bit more random, organic, than that of digital storage. If the mind was a hard drive, then our memories, like files, were broken apart into millions of little pieces, spread across every available sector. Each memory, skill, language, like, dislike, experience--they were all dispersed throughout the entire brain.

This was problematic. We could very easily engage two-way data transfers between the brain and digital storage, but any payload data we attempted to send would overwrite chunks of important memories, skills, and so on, within the patient’s brain, and they would often come out of the procedure knowing very little about themselves. Upon discovering this result I voted to close the program, or veer it more toward brain replication, but someone above me saw the potential for profit and my pleas were denied. The program was set into full production.

The Institute wanted to sell the technology as a service. The idea was to allow customers to bring in tired, unwanted brains, and then pay to have them converted into storage. It didn’t sell like they hoped. The immoral nature of the service was a natural deterrent, and the service itself was small-scale, officially run, and didn’t offer enough of an incentive for use. What was the point in paying the government a large sum to essentially kill someone for a small amount of excess storage, especially when you couldn't even take your new HBD off-site?

Once chassis tech was released on a consumer level HBDs exploded in popularity, entering unofficial mass-production. Server farm storage was a limited, expensive option, and hardware supply was so restricted that many black market chasm and span operators opted for human storage as an alternative. It was very low cost, requiring only chassis equipment, spare brains, and the ability to wire them into an array.

Kidnappings for array camps became a widespread issue, and the younger the captives, the better the storage. Younger minds lasted longer and had more flexibility--they could take more punishment. Chassis units already came equipped with feeding tubes and nutrient dispensers, so in theory, if set up properly, a storage array full of children could last upwards of fifty years--until the brains would atrophy away and require

replacement. Before long there were abandoned factories, warehouses, airplane hangars, etc., all around the country, packed with cobbled-together chassis arrays. Body farms with hundreds of people, mostly children, forced into wasting their lives as mindless husks, being filled up with other people's data.

The Institute did not like that, though not because of the glaring humanitarian crisis. They didn't like it because it encroached on official services, and allowed a free-market alternative to data storage. But they could do very little to stop it. Dark chausms were virtually undetectable by our equipment, so in the majority of instances these human farms were only discovered via word of mouth or interrogation.

An overwhelming majority continue operating today. At any given moment there are tens of thousands of innocent lives, children, imprisoned and braindead, used as storage to host spans for sex clubs, brainsports arenas, private headquarters, and on and on.

Due to the unfortunate circumstances it's unlikely that this will change any time soon.

146:

Mr. Niu rolled up his sleeves to get to work cracking his lobster. The candles on our table cast an eerie orange glow over his face.

"You're going back soon, then?" I asked.

"Yes, I only came to America briefly. For teaching credit. I go back end of this month, and I think you could be good there. You are welcome to join me."

"End of this month? I'm due back by then, but maybe I can take a little vacation. I'm very interested. Thank you for the offer."

Her nodded absently and set about devouring his lobster. My plate didn't look all that appetizing. I kept thinking about raisins.

"Hey, I'm sorry, but do you think this place has raisins?"

"What?" He laughed and shook his head. "No. They do not have raisin."

Damn. Worth a shot. Ever since I left the chamber, I wanted nothing but raisins. I kept thinking about them. Hopefully that would go away.

I used to hate raisins. I still did. I hated how they looked, how they smelled, that disgusting, wrinkly old-man texture, and the bittersweet taste, but I craved them. More than anything in the world.

I presently remembered the dinner and tried to make a show of cracking my lobster to seem like I wasn't daydreaming about dried grapes.

"Side effect from a procedure. Used to hate them, honestly, but now I can't seem to get enough. Anyway, if you don't mind my asking, what is Zow Yo, exactly? What does it mean?"

"Zhuō Yóu. To me it stands for home." He smacked his lips in between bites. "It translates literally to board game, but that is not a good name. I have told you all that words can tell. It is not an easy place, Eoghan. You have to be strong in every way. Normal men cannot make it."

"I imagine I'll do just fine." I smiled.

Strong in every way? That was me.

"I imagine you will. But I met many who say the same and most are dead now. You need strength. Of mind, of body, of spirit. But you need more than that--"

He kept talking but I was thinking about the glory. How I'd feel, basking at the top of the steps, hoisting my trophy.

The glory of victory. The power of being the winner.

Yeah, I would do just fine.

147:

I sat in the white room, and I thought.

I think it would be considered thinking. I don't know what else to call it.

I was on the Network. In, I guess. I had to be.

It was the only thing that made sense as I mulled it over. The blobs. The weird voices. The falling. How long had that lasted, even? Months, probably. A year? It felt like a long time.

Had to be the Network.

I didn't want to be in the white room anymore, staring at the boring sideways door and the empty hallway that didn't lead anywhere.

So, I decided I would try to leave. I got up and approached one of the walls, positioning myself as close as I could without touching, and then took a step forward.

My leg sunk in and the wall rippled like a pool of water. I walked all the way in. And then I wasn't walking anymore. I was moving, like walking, but less mechanical. More...

Wet?

No. Liquid.

Yes.

I was liquid. Flying, splashing, slipping off through the dark to somewhere else.

I felt that rippling skin again, like the surface of a body of water pushing against my face, stretching with me just a slight bit before tearing away and letting me pass, and then I was in a room. A bedroom in someone's home. People. A man and a woman were having sex directly in front of me. It wasn't a pretty sight.

They stopped and the woman screamed.

"WHO THE FUCK IS THAT, WHY IS THIS FUCKING GUY HERE--"

She reminded me of a rabid dog. Was I ever like that? I probably wasn't.

I moved around, inspecting their room. This was a chaasm. Older generation--maybe even first gen judging by the low detail. Intercourse in older generation chaasms could cause synapse degradation over time--sex organ stimulation wasn't quite up to par with newer models.

I stood in their doorway and looked back. I thought about warning them.

"--the fuck you got in here, but you better get the fuck out of here, buddy."

"I SWEAR TO GOD, GERRY JUST SHOOT THE FUCKER! JUST FUCKING SHOOT--"

It wouldn't be worth it. They were too concerned with themselves to listen to me.

I left their room and stepped onto a landing overlooking an open entry hall, which descended for stories, each floor full of rooms exactly like this one, each door wearing a "Do Not Disturb" hanger right on the knob. Of course, of all the places I'd end up.

I went downstairs and strolled through the luxurious hall, toward the front doors.

This was nice. Leaving places was nice, I wasn't used to being able to do that again. But now that I was thinking about it, what could I really do? I could just walk around forever and phase through walls if I wanted. I could go to other people's chaums, I guess.

Right, other people could see me! That made this loads better. Almost a good time. I could go mess with people. That'd be entertaining.

Wilson probably wouldn't like that.

I stopped just before the grand doors.

Wilson.

Wait.

I was with Wilson... what the hell were we doing?

How did I end up here? How did I end up on the Network?

I remember that we had to do something. Something pretty big. Pretty sad. We were...

Right. We were in Zeinhaert's chaum. Performing the final sweep.

Oh, fucking shit, that's right. I got killed by the dragon. I got disconnected.

But then why was I not disconnected? Did my corporeal just die? Did I end up some kind of ghost? Maybe I could find Wilson. But he definitely wouldn't be doing any field work anymore. Not after that. Not without me.

Oh, he's probably trying to do the plan.

Where could I find him? What was the plan?

The connection point.

I stepped forward and sunk into the doors, and then I was sloshing away, sliding through the dark. I emerged, and began falling. I was in a ballroom, plummeting toward the ground. Massive golden globes, tables, faces, dresses, all whizzed by as I fell. Toward dozens of people. I focused on falling through them. At the moment of

impact I slid into them, and then the ground, splashing through like nothing, and then I was liquid, flying through the dark again.

No control. I had no control.

I pushed through the skin again and found myself in a sand pit. A man was before me, impaling another man through the mouth with an--alpaca? Brainsports were so stupid. He had an alpaca gripped firmly between his hands, molded and shaped into a rod, sharpened at the tip. It was wailing in pain. So was the man being stabbed. The other man laughed maniacally. I don't think they noticed me.

I moved passed, to the far wall, and zipped away again.

Back into the dark.

Another wall of skin. Another chaasm. A city? New York, maybe. City streets and fireworks and loud music and so, so many people, everywhere. Food stalls, shops, vendors, cars. I forgot life was like this.

Everyone was gathering in a big intersection, clapping and shouting excitedly. I followed a group of passersby, joining the conglomeration. We stood below a massive screen hanging on the edge of a building. This was real, at one point, back when I was younger. New York used to look like this. I remembered visiting as a kid.

The screen changed.

10

9

Oh, it was New Year's. Of course.

I'd actually be able to find out what year it was. Nice.

8

7

The crowd chanted along to the countdown.

6

5

I even joined in, because why not.

"Four!"

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One! Happy new year!"

The crowd exploded into applause, shooting off little fireworks and popping champagne. The screen read the year and my heart dropped.

2052.

148:

"Minor power issues, everyone." The host waved us down. "No need to be concerned. We're beginning rolling restarts. If your zone is marked, please return to the entryway while the restart is in progress. This should all be finished up momentarily. Thank you for your understanding, and thank you for choosing the Blank Room."

The crowd began yelling out.

"No need to be concerned?"

"Are you fucking kidding? How many people just got ejected?"

"This is bullshit."

"Just tell us what the fuck is going on!"

"Yeah!"

He rose his hands again and the chattering died down.

"T-There was--well, honestly, we're not sure what happened. It was a partial connection drop. There were power related issues, and that's all we know. We're currently working to find out how it occurred and doing everything we can to make sure it won't happen again. Those who were disconnected are rejoining as we speak--you'll be able to see them shortly. We ask that no one disconnect until we can verify safety. Another drop like that could interrupt disconnection. We don't want anyone to get hurt."

"We can't even disconnect?"

"How can you not know what happened?"

"So, what the hell are we supposed to do?"

"Fuck you!"

"I'm sorry I can't be of more help. We're just as confused as you are. Please try to relax. Remain calm. There's no reason to believe anyone has been injured, and there's no reason to believe this will happen again. Please, enjoy some snacks and drinks while you wait. We will update you momentarily."

"People die from this shit!"

"My fucking partner just got ejected, you prick!"

"SNACKS AND DRINKS? SNACKS AND FUCKING DRINKS?"

I was thinking about Jacob. Roxanne. The host said they were rejoining. Could they? Were they okay? I heard ejection can kill you. Or make you insane. Or something awful like that. Were they really okay?

The crowd faded away, lulled to a soft murmur, drowned out by my thoughts. My panic. I had to breathe. Think about not panicking. I crouched down and grabbed my legs. I waited so long for this. It was supposed to be different. We were supposed to have a good time. I was finally back in the Blank Room after so long; I was finally myself again, and now it was all falling apart.

The lights dimmed. Just like before. My stomach turned.

Time slowed down and then stopped entirely. I was stuck in place. It didn't hurt, but it was maddening. Thinking, feeling, wanting to move, but not being able to. It lasted an eternity. My brain was panicking. I wanted to scream, to throw my arms up, to jump up and run away, to slam my head into the wall, to do anything else, but I couldn't. I had no choice but to crouch there. A conscious statue.

And then time began reversing. It was happening the same way as before. The world slid backwards, and I could feel myself uncrouching, standing back up, and then time jolted forward again.

Relief. I was free. I fell to my knees.

“--GNIKCUFUCKING DRINKS?”

There was a moment of contagious panic. I looked over the crowd. Every face was twisted with fear and confusion. Some people began running.

And then the lights brightened and everything was white. That pulsing screaming returned, looping like before. But this time it was made up from hundreds of agonized voices. A symphony of panic, rising around me like deafening horns, reversing and then rolling forward and then reversing again.

Black bars stacked up across my vision, like a broken screen. Shaking.

Rumbling.

And then it was all black. The screams fell away.

This is it. I'm dead.

The thought calmed me. My breathing slowed down--or was I even breathing at all? I was in that black auditorium, packed shoulder-to-shoulder with all those people. Millions of people. Softly moving in place, making no noise, waiting. We weren't in the Blank Room anymore. I didn't notice it last time, but this place smelled different. Musky and old. Like a cave.

A voice spoke. One I heard before.

Like the voice of God.

“You deserve this. All of it. I hope you burn in hell.”

The hitching stopped. I could see again. I was standing in the crowd, back in the Blank Room.

I felt a pop, like my ears when I used to drive up that mountain road, but so much worse. People began exploding, bursting at the chest up to their heads, spewing chunks and ribbons of meat and blood and bone, and then the world froze again. I stared out at the crowd, half-exploded; the air above was filled with floating bits of flesh confetti. I spotted an eyeball. There was a woman in front of me looking directly at a man's torso. His fractured ribcage was out of his chest, hanging motionless in front of her face. She wore a worried expression, but hadn't yet realized what her eyes were witnessing.

I couldn't move again. The panic came rushing back.

Crushing, like my head was between two walls, being pressed more and more and more but never popping. I just wanted it to pop. I just wanted the pressure to

I was falling backwards, through space, through the black sky. The stars were above me, glittering, laughing at me. Balls of light surrounded me, orbiting me like suns, spinning, warming me. I fell through one and it gave way. The flames licked my skin as I passed. Warm. I was so warm. I had never been so warm.

And then I was choking, breathing with real lungs again.

Men in white full-body suits, dozens of them, all around me. Antennas juttred from the backs of their necks. Their faces were inhuman, black visors, showing no emotion. They were carrying people. Throwing people. Talking. Saying things I couldn't understand.

I tried to move but fell and hit my head on the floor. Tile floor. I looked at it. Some blood smeared below my face. I was bleeding?

I tried to lift my arm but

I was unable to

I could hear them ordering me. Yelling at me. Telling me to leave.

And the others? Were they here too? Maybe.

I felt a boot slamming into my spine. Something popping. Something slipping from where it was.

My legs wouldn't move anymore. My arms were shaking too bad to hold me up.

Vision blurred, like I was swimming. Gloved hands gripped me by the arms. Carrying me. I could hear someone speaking, clear through the muck.

"Just dump the dead ones."

The light was easy. Friendly. Close.

I'm sorry. I can't
Jacob

149:

I couldn't hold the orbs anymore. I was too big, and my hands were too squared-off, strange, hard to use.

I couldn't move much anymore either. The house was too small for me now. I was pressing against the walls, completely restricted, unable to rotate or bend or sit or crouch or do much of anything at all. I wondered what would happen when I got bigger now. Would I crush against the walls and die? Or would the walls give way under me? I could only stand in place on my eight legs and wait, listening to the crabs outside.

Their voices were silent, but I heard every word. They spoke together. In breaths. Calling me to them. Calling me out of my home. My shell. My Egg.

"...come..."

"...to..."

"...us..."

"...brother..."

"...Marcus..."

I remembered them all. What were their names? I moved my massive neck, or was it a neck? I had to bend down to see out. The sky was red now. My mouth bubbled like it always did, spewing little trails of liquid down my chin. Chin? Was it a chin?

I couldn't make anything out but red sky and water, for as far as I could see. I yearned to be out there. To be among the fields. I hungered for the algae.

I was more comfortable this way. When I thought about it now, I was almost glad for the orbs. This was easier.

Easy life.

150:

The chaasm was falling apart. Its majestic, rolling dunes had collapsed into flatness, and the thin strip of ocean was diminished to a sorry trickle. Eoghan's mech fired a final shell and then fell to pieces before us, a towering pile of scrap and metal. The shot was incendiary; it broke apart and exploded, roasting an empty tent.

The fire and the pile alone broke the horizon.

Eoghan emerged from the scrap heap and crossed to us, laughing.

"Sorry about the wait. That was incredible."

I almost couldn't believe him. Almost.

"The wait? The chaasm is dead, Eoghan."

"Looks fine to me."

"Looks fi--W-What? We spent almost seven hours chasing behind while you murdered the sole inhabitant over and over like you were playing a video game. You wrecked every process, every script, and every reasoning cluster running. It's all wiped. Look around you, man. The ocean is gone. The sands are flat. The organisms all stalled or crashed, and Arnold hasn't reformed in an hour. You destroyed this place."

"So? Why are you so upset? The guy obviously DC'd "

"Are you--" I had to stop myself.

He was my superior, despite everything. I didn't want to start a fight. I didn't want to lose my job. I regained myself and started again.

"Arnold did not disconnect. The man's on life support--he can't just leave. And he should've reformed by now. He wasn't in good health as it was. And now... I don't know. I don't know. I don't. Let's just go, okay?"

"Did you know this guy or something?"

"No, I didn't know him, Eoghan."

"Then again, why are you so upset?"

I walked off. I wouldn't be able to stop myself from saying something I would regret. I had to walk away. Someone taught me that lesson a long time ago. Walking away doesn't have to be bad--not if it's just for a little bit. I could hear him talking to Philip as they followed behind.

"Why is he upset?"

"Because you just killed a guy."

"What? No, I didn't. Really? Wh--how?"

"You wrecked this place and absolutely fucked with that old dude's brain. He's upset because it's kind of our job to prevent shit like this from happening. Like Wilson said, he hasn't reformed in an hour. He's probably dead. All makes sense to me."

The silver circle was before me, gleaming reddish in the light. I approached and prepared to disconnect. Eoghan grabbed my shoulder and made me face him.

"But it's god damned make believe! Like you said. A video game. Don't be this way, Wilson. You're not being fair. You didn't make any of this clear to me before we started. You didn't say anything about it. How was I supposed to know--"

"Shut up."

I stared at him. Philip's eyes grew wide.

"What did you say?"

"Shut up. Stop trying to justify yourself to me. I'm the opposite of your target audience, Eoghan. I'm not going to mold to your will. Arnold is not make believe. He is a real human being. Just admit you made a childish mistake, or don't, I don't really care, to be honest, and let's just go, alright?"

"Wilson. How do you think you got to be where you are?"

"You. And my own hard work."

"And knowing that, you would talk to me this way?"

"We're people. I'm talking to you like a person."

"You're talking to me like you want to die."

"Then kill me, Eoghan. Oh, what a sad fate. The things we do. The things we've done. Kill me. I deserve it. We all do. Just do it."

I got in his face, gritting my teeth. I've never done that before. To him, or to anyone. It felt wrong. Aggression seemed like a disease of the mind, and thanks to Eoghan I was wholly afflicted. He eyed me for a minute. Five minutes. Ten. I don't know. The rumbling beneath us intensified, shaking the ground every few seconds. I realized for the first time that my fingers hurt from balling into tight fists.

"Good. Alright. Yeah. This is what I wanted to see from you."

I didn't say anything.

"How many years have we known each other, Wilson? And you've never once yelled at me. You've never once stepped in my way. You've never argued. You've never put up a fight. I thought you were a little otter. I thought you'd just get pushed around until you

died alone or got eaten by some stray wolf. But look at this little otter now. Coupla balls down there, huh?"

He was smiling wide. He slapped my back.

"You're a good man, Wilson. That has its inconveniences, but I've gained some respect for you today. A man willing to die for his cause is a great man to have around--especially if his cause lines up with yours. Lead the way, sir."

I turned to the silver circle and disconnected.

151:

Mud.

Rain.

Mud.

Rain.

The mud and the rain and the mud and the rain. I focused on the mud and the rain to distract from the pain reverberating up from my fingers, made worse with every stab down into the ground, shaking up my arms, through my shoulders, along my spine. Throbbing, unbearable aching. I wanted more than anything to collapse. To sleep right there. But was it safe?

I had been pulling myself for hours. It was night when I started, and since then the dawn had broken, spearing pale light through an overcast sky. I kept on sliding through the muck, straining against my own weight.

I thought about Jacob.

That goofy crooked smile. His optimism. That stupid, overbearing, charming, adorable optimism. I missed it.

I missed him. And Roxanne. And everyone I knew. Jane. The Mikes. Uncle. I wondered about them for the first time since I was ejected. And then I remembered being ejected.

What the hell happened?

Was anyone else okay? I was--for the most part, so maybe they were too. Maybe.

But maybe not. Not with those skids. Those pieces of shit. I barely made it away. They'd probably kill Jacob outright. He was big and they wanted meat. And Roxy...

She'd be lucky if they killed her.

I wanted to help them. I wanted to stand up and find a car and drive to them and find them, wherever they were. I knew Roxy's facility. I could find her, at least. And we could find Jacob together. I wanted to help so badly.

But I couldn't even help myself.

I couldn't drive to them. I couldn't find a car. I couldn't even stand up.

The sky flashed and crackled with lightning, proceeded by rolling peals of heavy thunder. How long had it been storming? I was thankful for it--at least the mud let me slide along at a decent pace--but what would happen when it stopped? Would I drag my naked body over dry ground? Would I have a choice?

And where was this going? What was I hoping for?

I was hoping for it to end.

I kept pulling.

152:

Florida.

Cape Florida, now.

Flooded and shrunken to a handful of islands, spanning a total of six-hundred square miles of usable ground, withered to less than half the size of Rhode Island. The state was almost entirely abandoned, save a smattering of stubborn landowners that were elevated enough to avoid total submersion. Their homes dotted isolated plots of shrinking land, scattered throughout the gulf. It wasn't the most ideal location for a facility, but we didn't have the luxury of choosing.

Several hundred servers containing old world information were seized during a raid of some black-market IFA span, and among the heaps of useless dribble were references to a potential mating site just southwest of where Tampa used to be. It had been several years since we had last discovered a mating site, and overall Ko bandwidth was thinning, so we considered this high priority. If it turned out to be a legitimate site, it would be number thirty-seven. They were growing harder to come by, as we had no efficient way of discovering them without prerequisite knowledge.

Having such prerequisite knowledge here, in the form of coordinates, a description, and two photos, which matched up to the other sites we discovered, I began planning the expedition. I mobilized a small team, flew us into Georgia, drove to the coast, and then travelled the last leg via airboat. The intel turned out solid—we found a cave matching the coordinates and description pretty quickly using ground penetrating radar. But it was sixty fathoms deep. We had to post up and call-in additional resources—scuba supplies and a spot team, at the very least.

Sixteen hours after arrival, and with everything set, we dove down—I was backed by another mentologist, Philip, and a squad of IBWs. We spent the previous day using GPR to scan the structure of the cave. Radar proved it was small, but it turned out much smaller than expected. I had been in much larger apartments. There were two chambers spanning about six hundred square feet each; the first of which was completely submerged and flooded, while the second was elevated slightly, cavitating air. Beyond that was the tiny central room, like the ossuary in Honduras, but no bigger than a janitor's closet.

We moved through the flooded chamber, exiting up into dry cave through a small, manhole-sized passageway, and were surprised to find it was brightly lit by purple light, reflecting from deeper within. The ground rumbled below, reminiscent of the other sites, but was lower pitched here, and droning in erratic, offbeat patterns. There was no doubt at this point. It was a mating site, bubbling with Ko. We approached the central room.

It was like most of the others, made from translucent gemstone, and thrumming with a coalescing ball of vibrant energy underneath. But the gemstone was purple here instead of red, and we couldn't see the ball of energy itself, only its reflections on the surrounding walls and ceiling—the floor of the chamber was covered by a thick carpet of black soil. It seemed to throb with the erratic pulsing emanating from below, lightly rising and falling, like a pair of lungs.

My gaze was drawn to four stones on the ground near the entry; they were statues in the shape of bulbous little squids. I bent and picked one up. It was surprisingly light. Upon closer inspection I realized it wasn't really a squid, but instead some kind of blob with dozens of squid-like tentacles. It didn't seem like a statue either—the texture was rough and uneven, pocked with deep black craters like lava rock. I carefully packed it in my satchel and turned back to the soil.

It was still throbbing along with the erratic pulsing, but when I crouched to examine it further, I realized it was writhing with creatures. Bugs. Worms. Thick, purple worms. I had an IBW pick one up. Its body was lumpy and uneven, and ballooned and pulsed in a repeating wave, like a cartoon pipe carrying a lump of water. The body was riddled with numerous openings, tiny mouths, each protruding a wiggling, snake-like tongue.

I instantly remembered them. I had seen them before. Back when I first started at the VRC. An associate showed me a jar of them; he called them the milkworms of Madagascar, yet we found these in Florida. I thought maybe they lived and grew separately in multiple locations, and then that got me thinking on Madagascar—we hadn't discovered anything there, and if my colleague hadn't been a complete lunatic, this cave in Florida could serve as a clue to the location of another site.

We dug to the gem floor below and discovered the soil itself was only about a foot deep, suspended as a thick crust over a rubellite basin which had pooled with white liquid. Milk.

Upon extensive investigation, and weeks of study, I uncovered the basic gist of their processes. The worms ate nutrients from the soil, and then produced milk, which dripped down and collected in the basin. The milk would become irradiated with Ko energy, evaporate, and then rise back up to be absorbed in the soil again, generating nutrients for the worms to consume and continue the cycle. One of the more interesting creatures I've discovered.

The facility above Tampa's mating site is currently undergoing construction, set to be completed within a month. We're investigating any potential evidence of a site in Madagascar, but our main priority is understanding the milkworms. Trials have begun on the usefulness of both their bodies and the milk they produce.

153:

It craned Its gaze up, pointing directly at us. It was the size of the world itself before our tiny plane, wholly consuming my view. I stared into It. The face was blank, a wispy, rolling cloud of black fog. But I could see features on it, swimming through the smoke in momentary flashes, aligning into crests and valleys and dips I recognized. Catherine. I saw Catherine's face. The plane motor clunked and fell silent. I watched the propeller slowly spin to a stop.

We dove, pitching toward the earth. I heard that thing above, laughing in booming, droning peals as we spiraled.

"Philip! Pull up!"

I leaned forward to grab Philip's shoulder, but he was gone. The pilot's seat was empty. I was alone. Every passing second brought the ground closer. I could see a small town directly below, rapidly increasing in scale. A grocery store. A library. Houses. So many houses.

I worried about the people. Innocent lives. I hoped no one got hurt. I closed my eyes. The plane slammed into the earth nose-first and then tumbled forward, flipping as the impact shredded it to pieces. My body was broken, numb, thrown through the air like bent metal. As I flew, my vision grew white.

I remembered again. This was a loop and I had no way out. I tried to fight the panic. I couldn't keep letting it consume me.

Yes, I was stuck. But was it permanent? What did I need? I needed to escape. I needed to ascertain the nature of the event. Was this a chaotic fracture? Was I an anomaly? No, I was within my own environment, although I certainly never generated anything like this. It seemed to be made from warped shreds of my memories, ideas, plans--each loop made things slightly different, interpreted in new ways.

Everything except for that thing. The unchanging, lumbering mass. What the hell was that thing? I didn't know anything about the nature of this place, or if it was even a place at all. I barely knew anything about Network ghosts, and now I feared I had become one. The thought of not knowing was deeply unsettling. My panic bubbled and frothed, solidifying into dread. I knew nothing. I was nothing but

The white fell away, replaced by murky brown dark. The pain coursing through my broken limbs receded to a dull ache, and then dropped off entirely. I could hear the ground-quaking footsteps of the thing lumbering somewhere far off. My eyes adjusted to the dark. I was in a hangar, sitting in the back of the plane, but the lights were off. Philip was gone.

"Hello?" My voice sounded so dull.

“Yeah?”

Someone responded. A voice I recognized.

“E-Eoghan?”

“What?”

“Where are you?”

The hangar brightened up, one row of lights at a time, each sounding off with a metallic thump, and then the garage door was opening by itself. Something jingled in the front seat of the cockpit, and the plane motor clunked over, starting the propellers. Eoghan was sitting in the pilot’s seat.

“Ready to do this?” He smiled back, twisting his neck to see around the tall chair.

“No. I don’t think I am.”

“You’ve always been a little otter, Wilson.”

“Have I?” I pondered it.

I remember being called an otter before. Was I an otter?

“I thought so, yes. Until you killed me.”

And then we were in the air, looping in sweeping, lavish maneuvers, making our way toward the thing. It walked through a skyscraper, jittering as It gave way, like fog, and then appeared on the opposite side. The building collapsed, smoldering and in pieces. A deep wail boomed through the air, like a horn playing its lowest note. It shook the plane.

“Hear that?” Eoghan looked back. “Bastard’s hungry.”

“How can you know that?”

“I’m part of It now. Makes it pretty easy to feel those things out.”

I had no idea what he meant.

We approached the thing, swooping beneath and around. Eoghan opened the hatch and then undid his belts. He brought the plane level with It’s head, and then reached into his pocket.

His hand came out holding a small green orb. A hand grenade.

He pulled out the pin.

154:

The taxi fare kept ticking up.

It blended with the sounds of rain outside, on the roof. It was pleasant. Steady. Controlled. Like a clicking metronome. The driver had the heat on high, and the backseat was my comfortable little haven. I hadn't felt this relaxed since before I... got fractured. Right.

I was drifting.

The syrup helped, but it caused me to lose focus. My mind wandered. I found my bottle and took another mouthful. We passed a sign that showed the next few cities. An hour to Topeka.

I pocketed the bottle and leaned back. The radio was playing soft jazz. I tried to fight sleep--I needed to go over the plan again, I needed to be straight when I got to the IDC, but it had been so hard to maintain a decent schedule. I hadn't slept in days. And the heat wrapped around me like a blanket. Warm.

I was tired.

Just...

Exhausted.

I opened my eyes.

I had fallen asleep. I woke up in Eoghan's chaasm. It was that cave in Honduras, really, but for some reason I knew it was Eoghan's chaasm. The bodies of the dead were weightlessly suspended above, floating in clouds of dust, bumping into each other, collecting on the ceiling. Like they were in space.

Below them, in the chamber, the stalagmites still chattered with the raving skulls, rattling off in another language, incessantly prattling on, all except the centermost spike. A person's form hung down, shaking along with the skulls.

Eoghan. Laughing. Impaled, with the peak jutting through the top of his head. It gushed blood, which dripped and pooled on the gem floor below.

His laughter was unbearable. Grating. Piercing.

Blood ran from his mouth as well, trickling down the sides, joining the streams from his head. I took a step forward.

He held out his hand.

"Wilson. It's almost time."

I opened my eyes.

Squealing brakes.

The cab stopped and I jolted forward,
slamming against my belt.

We were in a town. Topeka?

There was something in front of the taxi. A person on the road, crawling over the ground, naked and covered in cuts, bruises, mud. I didn't even stop to think--I flung my car door open and ran over.

"Hey, slow down. I can help you, what's going on? How are you hurt?"

"W-Water."

155:

I woke layered with sweat and salt, sticking to my cot, and opened my eyes to blurry vision. I was so thirsty, and my head was throbbing and swollen. I had a hangover--by far the worse one I'd ever felt. What the hell did I drink? I attempted to sift my foggy recollection of the day prior, but came up empty.

I stood up through the shakes, but stumbled as the floor shifted under me. I felt burning in my stomach like I was about to puke. For a moment I thought I was still drunk, but then I remembered I was on a boat.

The boat. Right. Haggio's boat. I drank that beer.

And it had done something. That vision felt so unbelievably real.

I needed water. I pushed out of my tiny cabin, spilling out into an overwhelming surge of midday heat and light. Like walking into the sun itself. Spinning fractals and smeared lines swam on my vision. Every time I tried to open my eyes, they reflexively squeezed closed.

"Well, well!" A man clumped over and grabbed my shoulder. "How'd ye die?"

It was Haggio.

"Oh, hey. I--uh, I got shot. In the chest." I rubbed my eyes, helping nothing. "Then it got really weird."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I fell into a big whirlpool and got all broken up into little pieces, like sand, and I just blew away. Just... gone."

"Issat right? Here."

I opened my eyes, but had to squint them closed again. He was holding out a drinking skin. I took it and feverishly drained it. Cool water. My stomach eased a bit.

"Thanks. Yeah, it was nuts."

"Broken up into pieces. In a whirlpool. Wonder, that. Imagine yerself a boating man?"

"Not after this."

"Aye. True wonder, then. And I imagine ye'll not want to drink amber again tonight."

"What?" I gagged thinking about it. "Again?"

"As I said, tonight's the full moon. We call it see-well. And we all drink the amber on see-well. To remind of what's coming. Keep us sharp. So we can see well. See?"

"Right. Well, I'm going to pass if you don't mind."

"O'course." He laughed. "Ain't like it's gonna change. Listen, go grab some bites in the galley. Today's jerky and fruits. I gotta goad these old crabs to going."

"I was just about to ask. Thank you."

I hobbled across the deck and descended the tight steps, heading for the galley below, submerged into immediate relief by the cool dark. The door frame to the galley was empty and sagging with age, and a large table took up nearly the whole room. It was nothing more than an old, warped plank, held up on shaky legs, dressed in a spread of various jerkies and sliced fruits.

I took a shred of jerky and gnawed on it for a minute, savoring the salt, the sweet, and then I was shoveling down handfuls. Apples. Oranges. Meat. More apples. More meat. Melon? Maybe? More meat. I filled up quickly, still chewing a mouthful of fruit and meat, and then pocketed a handful of jerky for later.

"Hungry, Eoghan?" A voice sounded behind.

These sailor bastards kept saying my name wrong. "Yee-an." It was infuriating. I swiveled to see one of the other crew--a bearded man with one eye. His empty socket hung open.

"I was, yeah. Thank you for everything--uh, I don't think I got your name..."

"Ye didn't. It's Oak. And don't thank me. Don't know why Haggio picked ye up. Ain't enough damn food for the fat mouths we do got."

He blocked my exit, crossing his arms and leaning against the door frame. I laid my weight on the cooking board and then fell back as it gave way beneath me. I was able to catch myself and grab the board, barely preventing it from toppling over, but I'm sure I looked like a fool.

"Sorry." I tried to stand up straight "He offered."

He shook his head and spat brown goo.

"Fine. Ain't yer doing. Fat bastard's gonna see us drown. Where ye headed?"

"Home, I guess."

"Where's home?"

I thought about it. Six years.

"California. But I haven't been there in a while. Might not even be home anymore, to be honest."

"Did Haggio say we're making a special trip out there?" His face hinted at concern.

I got the feeling he didn't want to go out west. I thought about fucking with him--telling him Haggio had promised me a luxury cruise, all expenses paid: three nights in the presidential suite, a breakfast spread every morning, and the Oak family daughters laid out on satin sheets. But what would that gain? A fight, probably.

My head was still pounding. I let it go.

"No. He didn't say a whole lot. Talked about that amber beer, mostly. Where are you fellas heading, anyway?"

"New York."

"Damn."

"Sorry. Bound for it. But I'm hoping ye haven't gone and asked ol Haggio to ride you somewhere far out, like California. Cus that daft bastard'd probably do it. And we can't. We just can't."

"Well, fear not."

"Good. Ye got any money? I hear there's planes outta New York. Queer, sure, but better than making us waltz halfway--"

Money? I hadn't thought of that. I hadn't thought of much at all since leaving Zhuō Yóu, and before that I hadn't thought of anything beyond getting out. I was just happy to be free again, stumbling along. Not thinking.

But reality always came cascading back. I had no way of contacting the Institute to arrange transportation. No number. No names. I wasn't even sure I still had employment. Six years. They had probably terminated my contract.

Maybe I could try and convince Haggio to take me out to San Francisco. Oak seemed to think he would do it. I didn't want to deal with all the fuss. Hitching rides, robbing for cash, sleeping in a different place every night. It'd just be easier to ride the boat. I was getting used to it anyway--

"Hey. Alright?" Oak was in my face, snapping his gnarled fingers.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Well, ye ever rode a plane?"

I forgot what he was talking about.

"Yeah. That's a good idea, yeah. A plane."

"Good, good. Maybe yer not such a twat after all then, eh? Watch the jerky, though. Chef'll bite fingers off if he sees shoving in pockets and all that."

"Uh, alright, thanks."

He made a show of gathering himself and turned to head above deck, but stopped and looked back, still blocking the doorway.

“Oh, by. What’d ye see in the ale?”

“Uh, I got shot in the chest.”

He pressed his lips together, eyeing me, and then gave a nod.

“How old was ye?”

“Uh, well. I don’t know. Didn’t know it could show that. I didn’t feel too old.”

“Aye, it’s in the pains. The aches. The wrinkling on yer hands. If ye didn’t feel none of that, yer probably dying young.”

He gave a devious grin, revealing a mostly empty mouth, spotted by a handful of blackened teeth. I guess he was threatening, in a certain light, but his teeth were ghastlier than any intimidating look. Disgusting. How could a man eat with a mouth like that?

“Better than dying old, I guess.” I tried to ignore his teeth.

“Aye.”

“Yep.”

His smile widened. I shuddered and looked away. I knew he was probably trying to shake me down, scare me, for no good reason, other than to have that little inkling of power over someone else. Power through fear. Power over someone he perceived as weak. But he didn’t know me. It was a gamble. A bluff.

He finally turned and led the way out of the galley, through the underbelly, and back up the steps into blinding sunlight. It was easier to endure now, and I could keep my eyes open beyond a squint. Judging by the sun it was an hour or two after noon.

“Bit briney, but salt’s the tears o God, as they say.” Haggio stood up near the wheel, gazing out starboard with his glass, talking to no one.

I mounted the steps and stood behind him, and Oak wandered off toward the bow, joining the crew. The horizon was all water. Forever. I had no idea what Haggio was looking at.

“Eoghan.” He turned back. “How fare?”

“Much better, thanks. Listen, Oak brought something up and I figured we should talk about it.”

“And what’s that one-eyed bastard pissing out his hole now?”

“You’re heading to New York.”

"True. What's it to ye?"

"Well, I'm heading to California. Wondering where you're going after."

"Holding port for a week or so, then back out. Doing taxi for them rich but not official-types."

"Could I convince you to steer me out there?"

"To California?" He looked back out to sea and shook his head. "No. Not unless you're paying."

"I'm sure I can pay any price you want."

"Sure ye can, or know ye can?"

"I don't have any way to contact my company."

"Sorry. I can't drag a ragged crew halfway the world for maybes. Plus if yer rich and all, why not take a bird?"

"Yeah, Oak said the same thing. I would if I had any money with me."

"Surprised that braindead bastard even knows what a plane is. I'm sorry, Eoghan. I would if I could."

He shifted his weight as he talked, catching a gleam of light along the hilt of his pistol.

A thought consumed me, bringing forth a revelation.

If the beer was real, as it seemed to be, then I would die with a shot to the chest. A bullet from a gun. I had to be cognizant of guns. As I looked around, eyeing the crew, I saw cutlasses, whips, and daggers, but no guns save the one on Haggo's hip. I wouldn't die here, no matter what I did, so long as I was careful of his gun.

I liked Haggo alright enough, and he had extended a lot for me, but the thought was a weed, growing across my mind, ballooning until it was all I could think about: I could do anything I wanted on this boat if I had that gun.

I wouldn't die here.

I moved automatically. Haggo still faced away, toward the sea. My hand was on his gun, unfastening the holster. I pulled it back and tossed it aside, and then before he could react, both of my hands were on his back. Solid. Right in the center.

"Weh?" Haggo had enough time to blurt a confused whimper, shoot an arm toward his holster, and try to turn back.

But I was pushing with all my strength, and he tumbled from the railing, flipping overboard. I heard a heavy splash as he hit the water below.

Why did I do that?

I found the gun, just near my feet, and picked it up.

Why the hell did I do that?

I stood over the wheel at the stern and fired Haggio's pistol into the air.

I did it because I had to. Like the beer showed him.

I was just following fate.

"Attention, crew!"

They grew silent and looked up at me.

"Captain Eoghan, here. Change of plans."

156:

"Did you ever figure out what the hell this was?"

Philip turned the little statue over in his hands.

"Nope." I looked up at him. "Ran tests for months. Virtually nothing. Just your run-of-the-mill, vesicular volcanic rock. Could be some kind of fossilization, though not like any I've ever seen. There's nothing there. Not even radiation. It's just a rock. A lump of basalt and some quartz."

"Did you check the ICDB?" He squinted at me.

"I didn't, no. I figured I wouldn't find anything about squid rocks."

"Why would you figure that? It was literally made for things like squid rocks."

He dropped the statue and moved to his desk. His old computer whirred on as he struggled to adjust his chair. The computer got louder, groaning out intermittent mechanical clicks alongside the whirring, delivering an electric monologue through the silent office.

I kept winding my iridescent coil. It was almost completely taught in my hands, straining and popping as I twisted the final few turns.

"You're still playing with that thing?" He didn't look over.

"It's neat." I smiled.

"Isn't it radioactive?"

"Yes, but only a little."

I set the coil down and pushed the red button on its base. It broke apart and twisted sideways, uncoiling with a series of satisfying snaps. Lustrous, pearly light spilled from it and danced around the dim room.

"Well, here's something." He cleared his throat. "Aliens. Uh, maybe? Weird."

"What?"

"It's an entry written by Eoghan about these aliens called squids. Holy shit, there's a lot here."

"Like what?"

"Wow. Like they let them coexist with us. And what he describes sounds a lot like your statue. But it can't be right."

"Why?"

"Says the squid body is their larva form. And they do that for fifteen years, then they turn into statues."

"Okay." I laughed. "Adds up so far."

"And then they hatch into interdimensional black hole monsters. After two to six weeks as a statue."

"Two to six weeks?"

"That's what it says.": He leaned back "When did we go to Tampa that first time?"

"It certainly can't be called Tampa anymore. The Ocean Where Tampa Previously Stood, maybe. But uh--well, three years ago? I think? When did we build that facility?"

"Towtps." He grinned at me.

"What?"

"That's your acronym. For The Ocean Where Tampa Previously Stood."

I stared at him.

"Please stop looking at me like that." He gave a nervous laugh. "Yes, we built that facility three years ago. It was like, November or something. Of twenty-nineteen. Please, that face. I won't make jokes at all if you treat me like this. Making faces like that. The good jokes are worth the bad ones, right?"

I kept staring.

"Right? Come on! Right?!"

"I've had the statue for three years." I looked back to my glowing coil.

It still shone vibrantly, but a little less than before. Soon it would be dull grey again.

"Wilson. Right?" He pleaded.

"Wow." I laughed. "You need me to say this."

"Yes. Yes, I do. Please. Say 'right' right now."

"Write,"

"Alright, thank--"

"That entry number down." I interrupted.

"You're not funny. I'm the funny one. That's twice. Twice you've tried to make jokes today. Stop."

"Sorry, The Funny One." I leaned back on the sofa. "I'm just tired. Haven't slept longer than three hours since last week."

"Moth-mites?" He asked.

"Six more cases this morning. Complete quarantine, lockdown, sanitization, the whole deal. I mean, people are disconnecting and throwing up, lashing out, having mental breakdowns, falling over and hurting themselves. One old man broke his skull on a chassis and now he's in a coma. Just... In four separate centers at the same time. Half of TC, basically. I'm lucky to even get a break right now. This whole thing is driving me insane."

"Yeah, that's because it is insane." Philip moved to the printer, which began spitting out documents. "And it was completely avoidable. Just makes it worse. I'm sorry, man. I can help tomorrow if you need me. But uh, one insane thing at a time, here."

He came over and sat next to me, spreading the papers out on our table. I grabbed my dim coil and pocketed it.

"Right." I nodded. "I've had the alien statue for three years."

"And who knows how long it was in that cave? Could be a dud or something. Or maybe it's dead. And then, here--they killed off the entire species with, uh--oh god. Botulism? They dropped botulinum as an aerosol over America. In eighty-six, apparently."

"Ah." I shook my head. "That sounds like Eoghan. Give everyone botulism for no good reason. Very interesting. Good call checking the ICDB. I genuinely didn't think you'd find anything. Definitely did not suspect Eoghan's involvement."

"Everything is in there." He motioned toward his computer. "You just gotta have the magic touch."

"The ability to type 'squid rock?' I can type 'squid rock.'"

"Not as good as me."

I leaned over the statue and poked it. It jostled a bit, rocking on its uneven, lumpy bottom. It was still just a statue. I picked it up.

"Do you want it?" I held it out to him. "I kind of don't like looking at it."

"Really, you don't want the dead alien baby statue?"

"Nah. It's all yours."

He took it.

157:

"Yeah. I'm just a normal guy, you know? We all are. Hey, you people seem pretty cool. if you see anyone else tell em Anu vouched for ya. They'll know what that means."

The frog man croaked, inflating his cheeks into big red orbs against his green skin, and then exhaled, deflating.

"Oh." Medy said. "Thanks, Anu."

"Brrrp. Don't mention it. Oh, shoot. Hear that? I've got to go."

"Ah--uh, okay?" She gave a small wave, but he was gone.

He lumbered away and crawled into one of the many small holes in the forest floor, sliding off into the dark; a few moments later I heard a muffled splash from somewhere below.

"Frog people." Philip grinned.

Medy eyed the trees, no doubt looking for more frogs.

"Yeah. Like in Sha-spa." She said.

"Yes! Exactly like Sha-spa. Except friendly. Really friendly. That's interesting, right?"

"Right. But--"

"What--um. Oh, sorry." I spoke up, always at the worst times; I instantly regretted it.

"I'm sorry. For interrupting."

"It's fine, Harold." Medy laughed. "What's up?"

"What's Sha-spa?"

"Oh, it's a shared span." Philip began. "Spa services, massages, stuff like that. A couple years ago they reported anomalies, so we went in and, yep, they had anomalies. Ghosts, we think. Long story short they were very similar looking murderous frog people."

"Wow. How did you get rid of them?"

"We didn't." Medy cut in. "Sha-spa had to move to new hardware. All we could do was prevent it from happening again."

"O-oh."

"Yeah, they can't all be winners, unfortunately." Philip shrugged.

"So, could they be the same frogs?" I asked.

"Nope. Just an interesting coincidence. We watched those servers shut down for good."

"Speaking of Sha-spa, this seems... unpredictable." Medy looked concerned.

"I did my homework." Philip grew serious. "I'm not letting it happen again, Medy. Hannah was after the regulation change. She's been screened."

"I know, I didn't mean to insinuate that. But thank you."

"Of course. And we're absolutely going to leave if this shit goes south. Alright, Harold, here's the situation: our inhabitant's name is Hannah and she hasn't made a peep for four years, not even a maintenance request, since right after we built her chaasm. It was imaged from a forest near her hometown, and apparently she really likes it, because she hasn't left her chassis at all in these four years."

"What? Four years?" I was stunned.

"Hasn't left once. And two days ago we received a distress alarm. No code, no message. Just a high-severity alarm, like the ones we receive for critical health issues. Yet her vitals are stable, brain activity is normal, and the chaasm is intact almost exactly as built. We want to find out what caused that alarm."

"So, we should find Hannah and see, then?" I asked.

"Great place to start. But before that, here's one more question: what was that frog talking about?"

"What?" Medy rose an eyebrow.

"He asked if we heard that. Before he left. Heard what?"

We stood in silence for a moment, listening to the rustling of a breeze blowing through the trees. I heard...

"That." I said. "Is that... Scratching?"

They both looked back at me.

"Yes." Philip nodded. "Yeah. Scratching. Where from?"

It was coming from near me. Behind me. I turned around and faced a thick tree trunk, and could hear it more clearly. I leaned in to listen. Scratching.

Coming from inside the tree.

158:

"What?" Philip rose an eyebrow. "What shit? Like drugs?"

I was wrong. The hanging inflated ball of skin wasn't Marcus at all. His name was Marcculus the Bomb, just like the singing flesh things said. He bobbed carelessly, still drooping down from his ceiling stalk. The flesh things formed a circle and danced around him while chanting his name.

"Medy." Wilson moved next to me. "Please, forgive me. I know this is terrible, but I didn't take proper notes. Did you happen to read his file before we got here?"

"Of course. Watched a few videos too."

"I didn't." Philip chimed in. "For what it's worth."

Wilson flipped through his little notebook, quickly skimming the pages. He scribbled something down, flipped back a page, and then looked up at me.

"I have that he's from New York, spent five years in prison, got out and moved to Kansas; generated his chaasm and so on. But I didn't write why he went to prison."

I thought about it. Marcus. In prison for distribution of a controlled dangerous substance classified in Schedule I.

"Narcotics charge."

"Thank you so much, Medy. That's what I thought. I just couldn't remember."

"It's no big deal, Wilson."

"Well, it is to me. I appreciate it." He closed his little notebook and pocketed it. "There's no excuse to skirt preparedness. Alright, this seems pretty obvious, then."

"Obvious?" Philip looked back. "What the hell is obvious about this?"

I laughed. "Did you miss the syringe?"

"Yeah, he has a history of drug abuse. Okay, I get that. But now all of a sudden being inside a giant crab makes sense?"

"No, that's still nonsense." Wilson moved back to Marcculus. "But we know how it became this way. Hey, Marcculus."

"Yeah? You bring the shit?" He shook back and forth on his stalk, like a boxing speed bag.

"What, uh--stuff did you want?" Wilson asked.

"Uh. The H. What else?"

"Well, I'm sorry, I didn't bring any H. But I wanted--"

"What? Man! Why the hell are you here?"

Marcculus closed his beady eyes and began straining, shaking around, letting out pained grunts. Wilson quickly turned back and pushed us away as Marcculus' pus-sack body expanded, doubling, and then tripling in size.

"Peace."

His skin exploded like a popped balloon, spewing caustic black goop. It sizzled on the floor. The flesh things broke from their dance circle and ran over, scooping the black gunk into their mouths. They sang a song as they fed.

"Marcculus, he's gone away,

Back into our hearts.

Eat him up,

Yes, take your fill,

Marcculus, the spill!"

"Jesus." I covered my mouth.

I was overwhelmed with a stench like rotten cabbage. I had never experienced anything quite like the scene before me--two dozen or so, squat, multi-colored blobs, all moaning in pleasure, eating acidic black goop off the fleshy ground.

"Disgusting." Philip chuckled. "I guess that's why they call him the bomb."

"I should've seen that coming." Wilson sighed. "I was hoping he would talk to me."

He examined Marcculus' popped form, which now hung in shreds from the flesh stalk.

"Exactly like those cysts. Interesting."

"So, what now?" I asked. "I really thought that was Marcus."

Wilson pointed passed the flesh stalk, to a large opening in the wall. The crab's throat.

"Down there, I guess."

We began crossing the fleshy bowl toward it, with Philip dawdling behind.

"And I think maybe that was Marcus, actually. Partly anyway. We've seen similar manifestations before. Like how George became Arthur, maybe Marcus is concealed in a similar way."

"Weird manifestation either way." I puzzled over it.

"Agreed." Wilson nodded.

Philip sighed as we walked, squishing on the fleshy ground. We passed by the feasting blobs, still wailing in euphoria, licking the flesh clean. The hole was roughly the width of two people, but too squat to walk in--we would have to crouch. I poked my head in to get a better look. It was dark all the way down.

"Why not?" Philip threw his hands up. "Why not go down the crab throat? We're already this deep. I'm sure nothing bad will happen if we all go down this massive crab's throat. It's not like it's a tube meant solely for food or something. I have an idea, let's slide down! Why don't we all just slide down the big crab throat?"

"Philip." Wilson leaned in and inspected it.

"Yes, Wilson?"

"Did you already forget?"

"Forget what?"

I couldn't help but laugh. Wilson did too.

"So, yes." Wilson smiled. "Remember when you said you weren't going to complain anymore? What--ten minutes ago?"

"I--" Philip opened his mouth, but closed it again.

"Don't worry, Philip." I patted his back. "I think it's kind of cute. In a sad way. Like a puppy missing an eye."

"Or a child alone at his birthday party." Wilson added.

"God, Wilson. You too? It's comic relief!" He hung his head. "I'm the comic relief."

"I think that requires you to be less... complainy." I said.

"Or maybe my humor is just too refined for you to appreciate."

"No, we get it." Wilson pulled out a small flashlight and pointed it down the hole. "You don't like being in the crab."

"Then it's obvious my finer intricacies are lost on you."

"Philip, there was never any doubt in my mind. Most things are lost on me. Come on, then. I guess just uh, follow my lead?"

"Such certainty, Wilson." Philip gave a weak smile.

Wilson crouched down and took a few steps in, issuing much wetter sloshing noises.

"Oh, the ground is much softer." He covered his mouth. "The smell... is not good."

I followed, and Philip tagged behind me, covering his nose.

"God dammit. Okay. Fake crab. Fake throat. Fake rotting piss. I've done worse. I swam through pig diarrhea. I did that. This is nothing."

"Such certainty, Philip." I smiled back at him.

"Shut up."

We moved into the dark, guided by Wilson's small pen light. He was right--the flesh in here was much softer, sucking our shoes in a bit after every step and issuing wet pops each time we lifted them up. That red, rotting juice dripped from the roof of the throat like rain, impossible to avoid. It matted my hair almost immediately.

The tunnel seemed to get tighter further ahead. I was thankful it stayed level; we weren't going to have to slide down. In fact, as we pushed through, it almost seemed to gradually tilt upward. It continued closing in, until our knees were scraping the ground as we went.

"This is the worst one." Philip spoke through his pinched nose, adding a nasally twinge to his voice. "Worst chasm. By far."

"I don't know." I said. "The butter was pretty bad. Especially for you."

"Yes, it was bad. But this... transcends."

The ground was tilting up, getting steeper and hard to climb.

"I mean, how long can a throat be?" Philip went on.

"I have no earthly idea." Wilson spat. "But I do know you do not want to get this stuff in your mouth. Oh, that was awful."

"It got in your mouth?!" Philip recoiled in disgust, gagging. "Oh, god."

"Not pleasant. Hey, look. Holes."

I looked forward. The throat was riddled with holes of different sizes. Deep tubes in the flesh, stretching off to somewhere else. Some were small, like oranges. Others were the size of car tires.

We rounded a wide corner, turning right, and then hit a dead end. It was a wall of flesh, riddled with more of the same holes, varying wildly in size. Thousands of holes.

"We can fit through this one." Wilson bent to inspect one in the center, about the size of a manhole. "But--"

"Aw. Man." Philip joined us, staring into the hole.

"But we're going to have to crawl."

The stench emanating from the hole was worse than anything so far. Powerful, mingling odors of vinegar and rotting flesh burned my nose. I had to breathe in my mouth to stop from constantly gagging.

“Okay.” Wilson climbed up.

He rose a knee in, which sunk a few inches into the tunnel floor. It was made from the same soft, squishy flesh as the throat. I followed behind. My pants, shirt, and most of my exposed skin were soaked with the sticky, rotting juice. I tried not to think about it.

It was much slower going through the tunnel. We twisted left and right, up a bit, and then down again, stretching on for five minutes. Ten. Philip was moaning behind me, letting out uncomfortable groans every few seconds.

Wilson slowed down.

“An opening.” He sounded relieved.

He hopped down and then turned back to help me out. The tunnel exited about six feet up on the wall. Getting back in would be a challenge. We helped Philip down as well, who had somehow got the worst of the juice. He came out completely drenched and dripping, dyed light pink and stinking like a corpse. But we all stunk like corpses.

I shuddered. Philip was right. This was certainly the worst chasm I'd been in.

We stood inside a big, red, partially translucent globe, which spilled in white light through its thin membrane walls. It was empty save a short, skinny podium in the center, which held a small brain.

“That’s a brain.” Philip said.

“Yeah.” I got close to inspect it.

“Who?”

I jumped back. The brain glowed golden as a voice boomed through the chamber.

“Who’s there?”

159:

I kept moving. Chausm after chausm. Through one wall, or floor, or ceiling, tree, car trunk, garbage bin, out through another. I passed into hundreds of isolated worlds. A net vagabond.

2052.

The Network was still present. Obviously.

And by the looks of things, it was just as bad as always, if not more deranged. I had walked through countless spans. Sex rings, cults, drug dens. They were all still as populated and appalling as ever. No new restrictions.

Wilson's plan had failed.

Seventeen years.

He's probably dead. Like Medy. Zeinhaert. Harold. Me?

They're all dead now.

And I was too. Assuredly. Except I wasn't. Not here.

But what could I do?

"So, uh--" The old woman shifted her weight impatiently. "You wanna buy something?"

I realized I was standing in front of her stall. She was selling crabs. I hated crabs. Ever since that guy's chausm--what was his name? I couldn't remember. I just knew I hated crabs.

"No, sorry." I walked off.

I was on a street, surrounded by tightly packed flat-top buildings. Music drifted on the wind from somewhere nearby--upbeat salsa, flaring with horns. It made me think of my youth. I remembered listening to music with my friends, so long ago. A lifetime ago. A different world entirely.

I reached the end of the street, facing an empty building with no door. I stepped in, breathing in the generated dust, smelling the fabricated mold and mildew. The floor was caked in a layer several inches thick. Each step I took splashed clouds of dust into the light.

I moved to the far wall and stepped into it. Ripples formed around me, and then I was through. Liquid. Swimming off into the dark. But it wasn't so dark anymore.

I focused. Not my eyes, because I didn't have them, but I focused something, and I was able to see orbs in the dark. Hovering, fiery balls of different size and color, wobbling like stars. I flew through the night sky.

One was close to me. A blue ball. I moved into it.

And then I was in the ocean, struggling against an onslaught of thundering waves. I was above water, and then below, and then above, spinning with no sense of direction. I could only tell when I was above water by the deep, black storm clouds churning in the sky.

I felt a hand grab my shoulder. And then two. And then I was being pulled out of the thrashing sea. I was on my back. On a boat. I turned a bit and coughed up some water.

"How'd you end up down there?"

A man stood over me, looking down. I rubbed my eyes, trying to clear away the salt and muck.

It was Wilson.

160:

I

I rested on my perch, surrounded by my sea, towering over it.

These fields were mine before, and they're mine again. I eat my fill before anyone else.

The other crabs skitter away by droves before me, falling away like bugs.

I can hear their hushed whispers beneath me, whimpers from the weak. They fear me.

They call me the

Crab

King

And I like the song of it.

II

I rested on my stalk, surrounded by flesh, reveling in it.

This place was mine before, and it's mine again. I shoot my fill before anyone else.

The others skitter to me like flies, hungry for my nectar, swarming like bees.

I can hear their singing voices beneath me, a chorus from the small. They love me.

They call me

Marcculus

the Bomb

And I like the song of it.

P161:

the space of this place

Brig sme?

brin gus

brings me around again

bring to where I've been so many times again

to w knowing again. many times again

knowing again **Did I know a ga in ?**

did I know again?

No, I would know if I knew.

No, I would know if I knew.

I remembered one thing

I remembered one thing well.

like it just happened

like just happened.

This recording I kept playing back,

Just this recording I kept on some de vice .

On **Of someone's voice. I remember what**

the voice said

I remember what the voice I knew it:

I knew it by heart.

I knew it by **Who was that?**

Who **I wished I could know**

I wished I could know

who that was

who that was

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

See you tonight. *that?*

Who was that? **Byeee."**

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

Who was that?

162:

Gunfire rained out from the shore, peppering the deck and surrounding water. Fucking Bolivian pirates. Shit like this was exactly why I hated riding on ships. We had been drifting too close to land, and without even hailing, the bastards fired off torpedos. The ship lurched starboard as the second shot hit, throwing me to the railing. Our hull was taking on heavy water now. Non-IBW crew scattered, floundering and pushing for the lifeboats.

I stared out to shore with my dozen brainwaves behind me. No doubt about it. The ship was going down.

This trip reminded me of Haggo and his boat, so many years ago. How long ago was that? Sixty years? Haggo. Sad bastard. Probably not the worst way to die, though. He got it easy compared to the rest of them.

My heart skipped a beat—I had completely forgotten the vision. I was supposed to stay away from the ocean. Bad time to remember. Hadn't been shot, though. And I didn't see any whirlpools. I'd probably be fine. Hell, maybe it was all just a bad trip anyway. It did seem kind of goofy in retrospect.

My thoughts were interrupted when the boat lurched again, and I was thrown from the railing, sinking into green and blue obscurity.

God dammit. I had a very busy itinerary, and so much left to do. This was going to completely fuck all of that up.

The surface danced high above, shimmering and swaying, dotted by stabbing beams of light. I could see the ship, a behemoth before me, twisted sideways and falling. People floating nearby were sucked in through the deck openings, pulled by strong, swift currents rushing in to flood the bowels of the ship. They fell in like ants down a storm drain.

Lucky for me, I had my bearings and the current was easy to push through. Though I was tossed far and deep, the shore was close, and the water was clear—the missiles hadn't blown out any fuel or oil. I kicked and twisted away from the inverting ship, through clouds of floating people—crew and brainwaves alike, squirming and clutching their throats, drowning all around me. Why were they just dying?

I gave the command to swim ashore. I thought it. A few IBWs began to swim over, but two had already gone limp, hanging in the water. I'd have to remember to look into enhancing their oxidization levels. My lungs were starting to burn as well, but this was just sad.

I pushed on, leading a handful of troops, heading diagonally toward the surface, near the rock wall shore. I looked back at the ship, slowly rolling as it fell to the ocean floor.

That two hundred million dollar baby I wasn't supposed to put a scratch on. They were gonna be pissed about that.

We surfaced near the coast, bobbing in the water, just out of view of the sentry nests. The coastline was a wall of jagged rocks, but there was enough purchase to climb up and take a breath.

Five of my twelve brainwaves stood before me, dripping and sorry-looking, and all but one had lost their weapons. Better than nothing.

I felt my holster. It was still strapped snugly around my chest, holding my pistol. I unholstered it as we began up the coast, toward the nests.

Toward the bunker.

163:

The girl I replaced called the man, "Dick."

I didn't know if that was his name. Or if he even had a name.

But he knew my name, and he used it.

"Sam. Free me." He whispered.

Sitting in his small chamber, staring through the quad-pane glass window, and resting on undeveloped, stubby haunches--he stared. His blank, sickly face was fixed on me. With one good eye and an empty socket, which carved a through-hole to the back of his head. Pink veins tangled up his skin near the hole, contrasting sharply against his grey flesh. When he looked at me I could see the white brick wall behind him, through his skull.

"Freedom."

I tried to wear headphones when I was on duty because the sound of his voice made me sick. Like food poisoning. When he talked I felt the hairs on my neck raise, and a twisting, nervous knot form in my stomach.

"Freedom, Sam. Freedom."

But the headphones didn't stop his voice. It was louder than anything. Pervasive, piercing, but soft, inviting, and familiar. Like a good friend calling you over. Calling for help.

And I wanted to help.

"Sam. The door."

Headphones wouldn't work because his voice wasn't actually entering my ears at all. I had tried wearing industrial earplugs to block it out as well. But even then I could still hear him. Louder than my own thoughts. Echoing in my mind.

"Freedom."

I faced away from him, swiveling my chair toward the door to the office. I hoped he would stop. Every single shift I served. I hoped it would be different. But it never was. He never stopped.

And I could feel myself loosening to the notion. Maybe he wasn't so bad? Maybe he didn't need to be kept locked up? I knew that wasn't true. I knew it. My job was to make sure he stayed in there.

"Freedom, Sam. Please."

But when he spoke, I found myself thinking differently. I found myself standing from my chair on multiple occasions. Standing when I hadn't planned to. Staring back at him through the glass. Listening to his song.

"Sam. Sammy. It's me. Free me."

My good friend, Dick. Free him.

I tried to push the thoughts away. I needed a break. I needed to clear my head. The communicator was near the entry doors. I stood and moved to it, clicking the square silver button, radioing for assistance.

"Cabble, in. Whatcha need?" A voice crackled out from the speaker box.

Hearing someone else, another living person, brought a wave of relief.

"Hey, it's Sam. I need a break down in isolate four-six."

"Oooh, Sam. How are ya?"

"Could be worse. Done till next month after tomorrow."

"Ain't that just the best? Gimme a sec here. Lemme check staff out there."

"No problem."

I turned back to the window. Dick was still staring out at me. Unmoving.

"Sam." His whispers reached out.

"Sam?" The box crackled again.

"Hey, yeah."

"Bad news. Can't get anyone out there until fifteen. Can you hold till then?"

Fifteen. I checked my watch. It was a bit after noon. Three hours.

"I guess I don't really have a choice, huh?"

"Sorry, darlin. I'd help if I could, but uh, yeah. Thirty hour drive."

"Oh, I know. Thanks for checking, Cabble. Have a good weekend."

"You too, Sam."

The box crackled off and I was alone again. Alone with him. I just stared at the wall, not knowing what to do. That fleeting feeling of relief was washed away entirely, replaced again by prickling terror. I could feel his eyes on my back.

"Freedom. Sam. Free me. Join me."

If I left they'd fire me. And maybe persecute me, depending. I couldn't afford that. I needed this job.

“Sam. The handle on the door. Turn it.”

But what was I going to do?

“Freedom. Free me.”

I was moving automatically. To my desk. I unlocked my computer, opened SecP, and disengaged the seals, sounding heavy metallic clunks from the chamber. The red bulbs above my desk flashed and changed to green. An alarm chirped somewhere behind me.

“Freedom. Yes. Sam. Freedom.”

I was at the door to his chamber, listening to the soft hiss of air as it depressurized. The handle was cold in my hand.

It turned, and the door fell open.

Freedom.

164:

Gold and pink streamers hung from the office ceiling, with one or two tucked under every single drop tile, filling the grey room with strips of eclectic color. I thought of vines hanging from tree limbs. Hannah's chasm was still on my mind. I hoped Harold wouldn't be here. I didn't want to look at him.

The PA was engaged, playing some staticky California rock, like the Beach Boys, but tamer, if that was even possible. I didn't care for it, but it seemed to fit Medy perfectly.

"Philip!" Wilson was in the break room at the back.

I pushed through the field of streamers, revealing a banner hung up on the far wall.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY MEDY

I approached the back tables, lugging my newspaper-wrapped lump of a gift.

"I don't remember decorations at any of my birthdays."

"I would wager that's because you've always been too drunk to remember anything." Wilson smiled.

He was putting the finishing touches on a spread of food and drinks--bacon pizza, fruit punch, and peanut-butter and cheese crackers. If I hadn't already known Medy was an adult, I'd assume this was a party for a child.

"Still, I can't help but feel she's getting some preferential treatment here."

"Well, maybe." He dropped a stack of plates near the pizzas. "But she deserves a break. I read your report."

"Oh, Hannah?"

"Yeah. Good work. I'll have a talk with Harold."

"He needs more than a damn talk. Medy and I were nearly extracted."

"Nearly is the operative word there." He turned to me. "You did well, Philip. And rest assured, he won't be visiting any chasms without me from now on."

"I don't think he should--"

The office door clattered closed. I could barely make Medy out through the hanging streamers, followed by a Harold and some others--Martha, Kevin, Phillip with two L's--coming back from training. Wilson nudged me with an elbow.

"Happy birthday, Medy!" He yelled.

I completely missed the cue. Wilson stared at me with his trademarked face of disappointment and shook his head.

"Hey, guys. Phillip." I waved. "Happy birthday, Medy."

"What the heck, you guys?" She was beaming. "I said I didn't want anything!"

Her hair was a done-up bundle of wild curls, glossy and drooping to her shoulders, bright red in the fluorescent light. I had only ever seen it pulled back and haphazardly stuffed into a bun or a ponytail. She looked nice.

The others pushed passed to the break area, laughing and chatting about their training. Harold avoided my eyes. Yeah. Good plan.

"Oh, stop. It was nothing, Medy." Wilson handed her a small box. "I only wish we could do more."

"Is that bacon pizza?!" She rushed to the table.

"And that off-brand punch you like." He was smiling like a grandpa. "And some peanut butter crackers. Oh! And I forgot those sour cream chips in the kitchen, dang it."

The old bastard lived for stuff like this.

"Thank you. Thank you both so much. I don't know what to say."

"You already said it." I smiled. "Now, hurry and open that so you can open mine."

She looked down, as if just now realizing she was holding the small box. It was wrapped in teal paper and bound by a bright pink ribbon, streaked with lines of gold. A little tag hung off the top with her name in curling letters. She undid the ribbon and lifted the lid, revealing a coiled chain.

"Oh, wow. Is this a clock?" She held it up.

It gleamed gold and silver in the light. A circular charm dangled from the center, filled with clear resin, encasing several rubellite shards. Wilson pulled a chair over and sat down.

"That little bead has a shard from each of your jobs at the VRC so far, broken off the neural uplinks. They were a bit radioactive, so I had them cast in resin. And I put them in order--if this is a clockface, then the shard at twelve is George's chaum, two is Benedict, three is Carl, and so on. I figured you might like to have them."

"Wow! Even Carl? I do! But I thought we weren't allowed to take things like this."

"Under normal circumstances we aren't. But I guess I'm an old sentimental oaf now, abusing my power. I also have a little box with all of yours, Philip."

"Creepy." I grinned at him.

Medy fastened the chain around her neck.

"Well, how do I look?"

"Like a wet fish wearing a necklace." I said.

"Shut up."

"A wet fish?" Wilson raised an eyebrow. "No, I don't see it."

"Thank you, Wilson. I love it."

"Of course. I'm glad."

"Okay, now me." I held out my newspaper-wrapped lump.

She looked uncertain, pursing her lips and squinting as she took it.

"W-What is it?"

"Open it."

She tore away my poor wrap-job, tossing yesterday's front pages to the floor, and then lifted the statue to the light, inspecting its odd tendrils.

"It's an alien. Actually, it's a statue corpse of the larva form of an interdimensional black hole monster that someone classified as an alien. But it's real! And dead."

She still had that slight grimace, just staring at it in her hands.

"Where the heck did you get this?"

"Wilson gave it to me a few years ago. We found it in that cave in Tampa."

"Re-gifting?" She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, well. At least it's not something lame."

"There's not even a receipt."

"Again, at least it's not lame! I shouldn't even be giving it to you, honestly."

"He's right about that." Wilson shook his head. "And that's something our gifts have in common. If Eoghan knew about either of them..."

"Jeez, guys." Medy laughed. "Loading me up with contraband. Who brought the powder?"

"Me!" Martha yelled out from the break room, and everyone broke into laughter.

"Listen, if you don't want it--" I began, but she cut me off.

"No, no no. I do. Really. Thank you, Philip."

"Cus I can take it back. I don't have anything to stare at in terror while I fall asleep anymore."

She laughed again.

“No. Please, I want it. It’s the weirdest thing anyone’s ever given me. And I love it.”

165:

Our Humvee sped over hills, plains, fields, shaking the ground, roaring as it tore through. The world had fallen away. Stone and steel and iron and wood were all broken down, burned, incinerated into ash. Cities were dust. The rolling dunes of dirt and mud were all that remained.

I looked over from the passenger's seat.

I was driving.

"Slow down." I said.

Up ahead, the earth was painted by the great shadow of that winged thing, flapping above. Blotting out the sun. We passed under it, and day became night. I looked up to the darkened sky.

It's rippling, black, smoky form was shaped like a bird, smooth curves only broken by massive wings. It's neck held up a towering lighthouse for a head. The lighthouse was wavering like the body, not quite solid, and shone a spotlight down to the ground, which swayed back and forth, scanning as the thing flew. My eyes were drawn to glowing silver welts lining It's underbelly.

"How do you suppose we bring it down?" I asked from the driver's seat.

"The plan." I said. But what plan?

I looked down at my hands. I was holding a rocket launcher. Green, lined with sleek ridges and stripes and handles, holding a red tipped rocket down the tube. My hand was on the grip. My fingers were on the trigger.

How did I get a rocket launcher?

"Alright, I'll get us close."

The vehicle lurched into a higher gear, speeding us along. We were directly below It. I leaned from the window, aiming as straight up as I could, directly at the welts. The lighthouse beam passed over and stopped directly on us, blinding me. I could only see It's glowing eye, bright like the sun in a sea of black fog. It screamed out, drowning away the sound of our engine. It's piercing wail consumed me, pounding against my ears.

I fired.

The rocket leapt away, spewing a trail of white smoke, shooting directly up into the light. The red tip gleamed.

It made contact, and then the sky was in flames. Shattering lightning spread across my vision, crackling, fading to white.

How long had this been going on?

I remembered again.

It had been too long. There was no way to escape the loop.

No way. No way. I couldn't think of anything. There was no way.

No way out. No way home.

Nothing I could do.

I thought of the others. Philip. Zeinhaert. Innocent, thoughtful Medy.

I'm sorry. I couldn't help you.

I couldn't help

I couldn't

The white over my vision fell away, jostling as we bounced through a ditch. Our Humvee sped over hills, plains, fields, shaking the ground, roaring as it tore through.

166:

The clock on the wall said

4:67

I rubbed my eyes.

4:37

It was late. Early. I hadn't slept since... when?

There was no way to know. Days ago, at least. Maybe before.

I took another chug from the bottle, emptying it.

Just the pills left. I needed to get more.

My time was an impatient itch I couldn't reach, nagging at the back of my mind. I had to go. There was so little time left, and so much to do. Patching would be finished by eight. That was my cutoff. I had time. I could still fix it.

But first...

"Max?" I looked over at him.

He was still staring at the ceiling. The EKG beeped steadily beside him.

"Yeah?" His voice was a rough whisper.

"You said you were thrown in a pit. You don't have to answer, but I'm curious. By who? What happened?"

"I don't know. Whoever runs it. I got ejected from a span."

"Oh, you were on the Network?" I nodded, suspecting as much. "What span?"

"The Blank Room."

"Ah. Quite popular. And everyone was ejected?"

"I guess so. There was this... I don't know. Something happened. Like a power blackout or something."

"A blackout? What do you mean?"

"It was normal at first. We were waiting for the zones to load, and then everything started going backwards, like I was talking in reverse, moving in reverse, and then I was in a big black room. I couldn't see anything, but I could hear people arguing. It stopped, and it was normal again for a minute, but then it happened a second time. That's when I got ejected."

"A black room? Very interesting. Remarkable that you survived. And with your sanity intact. Alright, and then you woke up in the facility?"

"Yeah." He nodded.

"What happened then?"

"Then these people in suits were yelling at me. Pushing me and dragging me and everything. I got kicked in the back--I think that's why I can't walk. And then I was in a van. With all those bodies."

"And they drove you out to that pit."

"Yeah."

"I am so sorry, Max. I'm glad you survived, but I'm sorry for what you've been through."

"You didn't do it. Really though, thank you for helping me. I don't know how to repay you."

"No, no. Don't worry about that. I only wish I would've thought of this before. It was a means to an end, but I didn't wager the cost. I didn't think anyone would actually die."

"What are you talking about?" He asked.

"This was a global disconnection event. You and everyone else piping off the main backbone to Honduras got force-extracted."

"I'm not following you." He looked confused.

I thought about not telling him. I didn't want him to hate me. But he had every right.

"Max, I'm sorry to tell you this, but I think I know exactly how you ended up in that pit."

"What? How?"

"It was my fault. It was me."

167:

"Who are you?" Wilson was crouched, speaking directly to the brain.

"The Crab King."

The voice thundered, rumbling the flesh beneath our feet. The brain expanded and contracted like lungs as the voice spoke.

"Nice to meet you, uh--Crab King. I'm Wilson, that's Medy, and that brooding fellow is Philip."

"I need help." The voice shook again.

"How can we help you?"

"Rid me... of this cancer."

"What cancer?" Wilson seemed to be enjoying every second of this.

"Marcculus." The brain shuddered a bit as it said his name.

"What's he doing to you?"

"Killing me."

"How?"

"He is burning me. I can feel him even now--in my veins."

"Interesting. I don't think crabs have veins." Wilson looked back to me. "Medy, what do you make of this?"

"Oh, I--uh, well, I was going to ask you the same thing." I laughed.

"Well, I know what I think. I'm curious about what you think."

"Please, help me." The Crab King thundered on.

"Right, okay. So..."

I went over everything in my mind again, touching every piece, remembering. There was our host, Marcus, still present in his chaum, still connected and alive and thinking. The giant crab we stood inside. Marcculus the flesh sack and his syringe. All those blobs and the odd songs they sang.

And then there was the brain before us now, begging for help.

"As established, Marcus has issues with addiction." I began. "It seems like Marcculus is a reflection of that part of his personality."

"What gave you that idea?" Philip threw his arms up.

This place had put him in a mood--I knew he didn't mean anything by it, no matter how difficult to ignore his tantrums were. I pressed on.

"And then those blobs. They loaded the syringe. They injected him. They're a representation of his addictive tendencies. Am I on the right track, here?"

"I can only speak to my presumptions. But so far, so good." Wilson gave a nod.

"So far, so great." Philip groaned again. "What does the rotten juice in my hair stand for, Medy? What about the exploding acid zits, huh? Is that a representation of some hideous acne he had in his youth?"

"Philip--" Wilson began, but I kept on.

"I think the zits were probably just a side effect. A physical manifestation of the negatives. As for the juice... I don't know. Maybe it's because we're in a giant crab and Marcus unconsciously thinks being in a giant crab would be nasty. Maybe there's no more to it than that."

"I agree completely, Medy." Wilson turned to Philip. "Philip, I know you're uncomfortable, but it's no excuse to take it out on others. We're just as uncomfortable as you--"

He realized that probably wasn't true, and then corrected himself.

"Well, we're all uncomfortable. But it's no reason to be rude. This is important. You know it is. Just... dial it back, alright? And hey, for the trouble, dinner's on me tonight."

"From where?" Philip perked up.

"Where would you prefer?"

"Honestly, I was going to talk to you about this anyway--there's this diner downtown that has patty melts. Remember when we talked about patty melts? I can finally find out what the hell they are. They sound so good."

"Really? You don't know what a patty melt is? It's just a--" I started, but Wilson held up a hand.

"No, no, Medy--don't ruin the magic. Let's let him figure it out. Okay, then. It's decided: after this we'll go get patty melts at the diner." Wilson smiled. "But first, Medy, you were saying; the zits are a physical manifestation."

Philip slumped down, apparently satisfied. I felt bad for him. But it would be over soon.

"Alright. Yeah." I continued. "Where was I? Marcculus. The blobs. Then there's this brain. The Crab King. And most importantly, Marcus doesn't seem to be present."

I thought about it. Marcculus. The blobs. The brain. And Marcus.

"Are they... just different pieces of Marcus?"

"Aha! But why would that make them any different from organisms? Aren't organisms just made from the host anyway?" Wilson was smiling again.

"They're all the same consciousness?" I wasn't sure.

"Right!"

"So, one mind fractured into all these different things?"

"My thoughts exactly, Medy." Wilson was beaming. "Wonderful assessment. Marcculus, the addict. The blobs, his mind. The Crab King, his body. Now... here's the real question. How do we rejoin them?"

"Can we even do that?" I asked.

"Maybe." Philip said, hiding a smile. "We have before. A couple times."

"Only one way to find out." Wilson turned back to the Crab King. "Mister Crab King."

"Help me." It boomed again.

"Yes, yes, we're on it. Do you mind if we bring some visitors?"

"Visitors?"

"Friends." Wilson grinned.

168:

"I don't understand." Wilson scratched his beard.

I'd never seen him with a full beard--just the occasional stubble now and again. He was very particular about his presentation. But seeing him now, wiry and overgrown, I thought he wore it well.

"Me either. But I've known you for fifty years. Wait, no--we met in eighty-four? Wow. Seventy years now, I guess."

"Really? Interesting. As I said, I've never seen you before in my life. Maybe someone who looks like me?"

"Yeah, probably." I sighed. "Well, tell me about your life. How long has it been? What have you been doing?"

"Me?" He shook his head. "Fishing. Since I can remember."

"Fishing?"

"You say you've known me for seventy years and you don't know what fishing is? It's when you toss a line in and grab fish out of the water. I fish to live, but I also live to fish, uh--what was your name?"

"Philip. I know what fishing is."

"Flare-up. Interesting name. Anyway, if you did know me, you'd know I love to fish, Flare-up."

"Philip."

"Fill up. Alright, whatever. The point is that I love to fish. Understand?"

I stood up and walked to the bow of the boat, eyeing the churning clouds above. The rain had tapered to a sprinkle, but the waves were still raucous and choppy.

He wasn't Wilson. He was, but not really.

"I'm dead. I think you are too." I explained it to him like it mattered. He wouldn't understand, but I said it all anyway. "I got killed in Zeinhaert's chaasm. By that dragon. And I guess I'm a ghost now. Have been for twenty years, I guess. You... I don't know what happened to you. I wish I did. I think you and this boat might be part of an answer, but I don't get it."

"No answers to life's great mysteries here." He chuckled. "As I said, I've been here fishing. Definitely not dead."

"This is so weird, Wilson. I don't know why you exist. Why do you exist?"

I was talking to myself, but it felt good to talk out loud. Especially at someone who looked just like Wilson. God, I missed him.

He would think of something. He always thought of something.

“How do you know my name?”

Fisherman Wilson's face had grown serious, tightening the creases around his features, forming deep, weathered troughs along his cheeks and forehead. I had seen that face so many times before, in the midst of so many dozens, hundreds, of particularly tough situations. A face hiding all the elaborate machinations of a genius.

“Wilson--what? Have you not been listening to me? I've known you almost my entire life. You're my best friend. My mentor. My father figure? Maybe? I don't know, you probably wouldn't agree to that one. We were partners, Wilson. And you were great.”

His intense face wasn't hiding the machinations of a genius. It wasn't hiding anything. He wasn't Wilson. His face had faded to confusion. A lack of recognition. Like he was looking at someone he'd never met before in his life.

“What the hell is this?” I sighed.

“My boat.” Wilson looked proud of himself.

“Yeah. This is your boat. Right.”

This was a waste of time.

He wasn't Wilson. But maybe he was caused by Wilson.

The real Wilson. Maybe he tried the plan. Maybe it failed.

Maybe this was the result.

I watched fisherman Wilson load up a pipe. He never smoked.

“I have to go.” I said.

“Oh, Fill up, what?” He raised an eyebrow. “Leave? You just got here. And you almost drowned. Why would you want to go and drown yourself?”

“I don't. I can travel between chaums. Remember how you theorized that? Remember how I didn't think it would be possible because of isolation protocols, yet you told me a half dozen ways it could've been?”

“No, don't think so.” He gave a confused smile.

I stared at him for a moment. I'd probably never see Wilson again. This Wilson was ragged, battered by salty wind, unkempt, overgrown.

He wasn't Wilson.

“Bye, Wilson.”

I dove in to the water, plummeting for the sea floor. I kept falling down. Down and down. Through the blotted blue fog. The sand rose into view, and then I was pressing into it. It rippled around me as I pushed through, into darkness, as liquid, slipping away.

I could see the stars again through the black, thousands, millions, burning bright around me.

A red orb nearby shook erratically, burning in uneven pulses. I moved into it.

I opened my eyes. The air was hot. Thick pines and spruces and firs crowded a smoky forest. The sky above was deep grey, choked with clouds of smoke.

The forest was on fire.

I took a step.

“Hold!” A voice called out.

I looked up.

Before me, on a rickety deer stand made from small sticks, stood a man clad in heavy brass armor. Like a medieval knight, flowery red plume and all.

“Go no further!” He leveled a throwing spear and took aim, causing his tower to sway a bit.

I squinted to get a look at him.

“Wha--Wilson?”

169:

The scratching grew louder. A lot louder. And then it was a hollow pounding sound, like a hammer.

I was terrified. Something was inside the tree.

Philip leaned in, but quickly jumped back. The bark cracked and bulged outward, like an eggshell as a baby bird broke free. More and more bits fell away, opening up a ragged baseball-sized hole in the trunk. The tree had been hollowed out.

And then there was an orange, furry head poking through. A cute little creature looked up at us. I sighed in relief.

It looked like a mouse, but was the size of a cat, with a more rounded snout and big, blue eyes. It crawled out and down the trunk, moving in short hops, poking around inquisitively and shaking its curly tail.

"Uh, hello, lil fella." Philip held out a hand.

It purred in soft chirps, affectionately rubbing its face on his fingers.

"Wow. Cute." Medy crouched down with us.

It brushed against her fingers as well, and then circled between them, showering in the attention.

"Now why would Anu be afraid of you?" Philip scratched behind its ear.

"Maybe it's a predator, prey thing." Medy said.

"This little thing?" I asked. "A predator?"

"Anything is possible, Harold." Philip stood up. "No rules here. And I think Medy's onto something. Anu left pretty quick. He seemed scared, maybe."

"But it's so cute. And small."

"True." Medy stood as well. "But I think I've seen more scary cute things than scary scary things. Well, shall we?"

We walked further into the trees. The furry thing followed along behind Philip, bobbing on his heels.

"Harold." Philip slowed and came alongside me.

"Yeah?"

"Take nothing at face value. There's no way to know anything for sure until you investigate. Don't assume things. I've done it over and over again, and I've been burned almost every single time. Question everything."

I nodded, not quite sure if I understood. He slapped my back.

"Alright, come on. Just keep an open mind. Maybe this thing is a friendly little mental organism, just like it looks."

We moved into the trees as we talked, kicking through thick piles of dead leaves. The sky was white as if overcast, but there were no clouds save the light haze over the forest.

"But maybe it's a hunter." He went on. "Or maybe the frogs are the hunters, and this fella is their prey. Or maybe they'll merge together into some unholy hybrid and cook us a three-course dinner. We have no idea."

"Really? Has that happened before?" I asked.

"Yes. At least once. Well, all kinds of things have made me dinner a bunch of different times, but once this guy named Mike melded with a turtle and performed a teppanyaki grill show."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah, it was actually incredible." Medy added.

Rustling issued from behind. A shadow darted from the trees, falling into the forest floor and tossing up leaves. I jumped as it hit the ground.

"What was that?" I spun around.

"Another frog, probably." Philip turned back. "And if Medy's right, they won't get anywhere near this little fella. Come on. Plenty of time to be scared later."

It was a joke, but it rang true. I was scared. My heart was thrumming in my ears. I couldn't remember the last time I had been so overwhelmed with fear, without control. Anything was possible, like Philip said. I had been told so many horror stories. So many terrible things. I couldn't stop picturing myself being murdered. Attacked and killed, with no escape, no way to defend myself.

I must've shown my fear in some way, because Philip had stopped and was staring at me.

"We'll be alright, Harold. Let me know if it gets to be too much, alright? Like I said, if shit hits the fan we're gone."

"I will. I'm fine, I promise. Thanks, Philip."

He was reassuring, and I was grateful. But I couldn't shake the fear--that anxious pit in my stomach, burning up my throat.

"Any time. Just give the word." He smiled and lead the way.

The forest stretched on, just trees and piles of leaves for as far as I could see, tapering away in the thin fog. We made our way through, weaving over uneven ground.

"Step down." Philip called back.

He hopped down a squat dirt shelf and began crossing a fallen log, which ran over a deep gap in the forest floor. The hollow trunk creaked and shook as Philip stepped across, with the little fluffy creature bobbing behind. Medy followed, and then it was my turn.

I looked over the edge of the gap. It was roughly ten feet down to a bed of leaves. I took a breath and then stepped out, and my foot immediately slipped from under me. I fell, hitting broadside on the log, snapping it in half. And then I was plummeting into the gap. I struck the leaves, landing on my side, and rolled through the ground into a hole.

Philip looked down at me.

"Holy shit, Harold. You okay?"

"Y-Yeah."

I stood and brushed myself off. I was in a dirt hallway which led down, extending deep underground. Philip and Medy dropped into the gap and the critter followed along, chirping and pouncing playfully.

"Wow, nice. You found a whole dang cave!" Medy exclaimed.

Philip stood alongside me, grinning like usual.

"Good work, Harold. I wouldn't have thought to check down here. Time to do the cave thing again, I guess. For the billionth time."

"Better than the crab thing." Medy snickered. "You know, since you won't be weeping openly."

"Hey, I wasn't weeping. I was complaining. There's a difference."

They passed by and headed down the path, shining a flashlight into the dark. I wondered what crab thing they were talking about, but I felt like I was asking too many questions. The last thing I wanted was to come off as annoying. I watched them shrink in the tight tunnel for a moment, and then realized they were leaving without me.

Thirty seconds ago we were walking through a forest, and now we were descending into the dark unknown. Philip was right. Anything could happen here. I was stuck in a cycle, spiraling: I tried not to think about terrible things, but then I did, panicked, and then tried not to think about them again.

"Wait up!" My voice let on more fear than I intended.

Medy turned back as I sprinted up.

"Oh, I thought you were behind me." She smiled. "Sorry."

"No, I was just looking around." I lied.

It was better than saying I was scared. Anything was.

The small creature had climbed up on Philip's shoulder and was stretched out, licking its paws.

We emerged into a wider room where the ceilings were a bit taller. I moved up near Philip.

Several more paths split off from the main hall through dirt archways, leading off into a network of tunnels. A frog man emerged from one, crossing the hall, but stopped halfway and sniffed the air. It was the same one from before. Anu.

The critter on Philip's shoulder rose on its haunches and snarled. Anu spread his legs and rose his arms, croaking deeply.

"Ow. Claws." Philip crouched and it leapt down, barreling toward the frog man.

It tackled him directly on the chest, knocking them both to the dirt. They thrashed around on the ground, a blur of green and orange. I heard a loud snap and then wet slapping, like a fish flopping.

Anu stopped thrashing.

"What in the--" Philip began, but then Anu stood up.

He dusted himself off. The little critter was gone.

"Hey. It's you guys." He said. "Why were you hanging around with a surmouse? I thought you were cool."

"Uh, well. We didn't know you--" Medy began, but the frog closed his eyes and bent forward.

"Real bummer. Sorry, but now I gotta kill you. Can't hang around those surmice. Again, real sorry."

He croaked in a guttural roll, clicking deeply from his chest. A thin line formed down the center of his face, spreading down his chest.

His head split into quarters and cracked open, gaping wide like a blooming flower. Numerous veiny black stalks jutted from it, riddled with blinking yellow eyes. Its chest and belly split open as well, protruding spindly, segmented appendages, like spider legs. Four legs emerged, and then ten, and then sixteen. More than I could count. It fell forward onto its new chest legs, dangling its lifeless frog body behind, and began skittering toward us, swaying its dozens of eye-covered stalks.

"Okay. Run." Philip whispered, moving back.

They passed me, heading to the hallway. But I couldn't move.

It lumbered toward me. I was frozen in fear.

"Harold!" Philip yelled from behind.

I took a step back, but my heel got caught and I fell.

Something pushed into my back as I hit the ground, knocking the wind out of me. I reeled for a moment, in shock and pain, and then I felt hands on my arms, grabbing my shoulders. I opened my eyes. Medy and Philip were above me, dragging me. Philip was yelling something, but I couldn't understand him.

I looked forward.

The thing was closing on us, rapidly pulling itself over the dirt. Its stalks were shaking, rattling off loud clicks.

"--UP! HAROLD, STAND UP!" Philip's voice came to me, like on the wind.

I pushed against the ground and clumsily stumbled to my feet. It kept moving closer, now just a few feet away.

"Are you alright?" Medy inspected me.

"Later. Later. LATER!" Philip screamed. "Come on, go, go, go!"

We turned back to the hallway and ran.

"Ah!"

There was a shout behind. I looked over my shoulder and then slowed to a stop. The thing was on Medy, wrapping its spider legs around her, pulling her away.

"Medy!" Philip yelled and ran back.

I looked down the hallway, toward the surface, toward the exit, and then back to Philip and Medy, struggling against the thing.

I couldn't think.

I couldn't help.

I couldn't.

I turned and ran.

170:

I found the son of a bitch.

The dead IBW that never really died.

He was three miles out from the facility. In a house, ravaging some midwestern family to pieces.

He left a nasty scene back base. The VRC tech on-duty got completely torn apart. Nothing left but a pile of meat and a big stain. I mean, really big. The entire observation room was soaked red and dripping, running out into the hall. And it was gonna be a bitch to clean.

It served her right, honestly. For letting something so dangerous out.

He never got out before--in the forty years we had him in captivity. And in all that time we hadn't learned shit about how he worked.

Who would be so irresponsible? She just opened the door and let him out. Why would someone do that?

Who knew what he was actually capable of?

Well, I found out.

He broke in through the family's window during dinner. By the time I walked in they were already dead--a mom, dad, and two kids. The kitchen and dining room were red. Soaked. Dripping with blood. Just like the observation room back at base. It was as if thirty people died, there was so much blood. And from looking at the blood-slick bastard it seemed like he had been spreading it around with his body. Rubbing all over everything like some sick blood-soaked cat, smearing the walls, cabinets, counters, everything.

I entered through a sliding door in the kitchen and immediately drew my weapon. He was under the table, digging at the mother's entrails, scooping blood up into his mouth. I shot him through his good eye, to blind him. He flinched, but it was like he didn't even notice. He was too focused on the blood. Completely hypnotized by it, still drinking even completely blind.

Blood started trickling from his leg stumps, but it was goopier and hung in stringy masses, sticking to the flesh and forming little red blobs. They solidified, and then more blobs formed from the sticky muck, continuing down, reforming legs.

He could rebuild his body by drinking blood.

I had a team with me, so capturing and securing him wasn't an issue. We had plenty of cattle prods, flamethrowers, tasers, guns, tranquilizers--he was going down, it was just a matter of how long it took. And it didn't take long.

We had him back at the facility within forty minutes. I was lucky to be in town. There's no telling how much damage he could've caused if some other team had dawdled around and let him run amuck for a while. And the publicity would've been really bad. He had our old logo all over him.

We're looking into the blood thing now. I've got Wilson on it. Maybe we can finally learn something about this piece of shit.

171:

I pulled the lever.

The great roar of the turbines behind me slowed and softened to a low whir, and then completely clunked off.

I turned back to the soldier.

“Qué has hecho?” He breathed.

“What have you done?”

He was translated by my analyzer a moment later, though I didn’t need it. His tone was enough.

I didn’t know what he meant by that, but he probably didn’t either. He was in a corner. No backup. No weapons. No way out. Probably just saying whatever came to mind. I stood over him, drew a smoke, and lit it. My chest hurt, but I needed it. First inhale always hurt the worst. I took a deep breath.

“You got a weird place here, pal. Why’d you fire on our ship?”

He didn’t understand me, made clear by his expression of bewilderment.

A siren blared above, muffled by concrete, but still loud as hell. The soldier’s radio crackled on--some guy rattling off in Spanish.

My analyzer translated along:

“Activate primal weapon. Repeat. Code one-nine-six-one-nine-eight. Activate primal weapon.”

The soldier grabbed his left wrist guard and twisted a metal bracelet. His sleek vambrace glowed blue, powering on. It wasn’t just an armor plate like I thought--it was a thick glass vial strapped to his wrist, filled with blue liquid, now radiating with energy. A little flap opened on the underside and a syringe poked out, stabbing into the skin below his palm. It deposited the glowing blue liquid, emptying the vial into his arm. His veins began to protrude, bright blue and luminous against his skin.

I thought about shooting him. But I was curious.

Never seen anything like it before. That injector bracelet looked pretty neat.

He stared up at me. A blue wave passed over him, lighting the veins through his shoulder, into his chest, his head, face, eyes. They became a weaving, glowing roadmap all over his body, spreading like lightning.

He looked pretty cool. Maybe even dangerous. It was taking quite a long time, though. Not exactly realistic for a combat scenario.

“Alright, so what’s that do?” I asked.

He gritted his teeth and started growling, low in the throat and raspy. The blue juice spilled out of him, running from his eyes, mouth, and then everywhere, bubbling on his skin, sizzling and steaming. I stepped back and raised my gun, expecting him to go nuts or start running around with superhuman strength and agility.

But then he just slumped over. Dead.

A steaming blue corpse, still glowing.

“What?”

That was their secret weapon?

172:

"Medy! You coming to Marble's?" Philip leaned into my office.

"Nah, go on. I'll try and make it later." I waved.

"Why? What're you doing?"

He stepped in and crossed to my desk, swinging his keys around a finger.

"The case. I know it's probably hard to believe, but paperwork doesn't fill itself out. And I'm only halfway done. Still gotta do the IIRs."

"Oh." He frowned. "Can't you do them tomorrow?"

"Sure, I could. But then I'd have to push all my appointments back, and I don't think I can do that. I already held Mark back two weeks. I can't do that to them again."

"Is Mark the dinosaur kid?"

"Yes. Mark is the dinosaur kid. And that's tomorrow."

"Alright, alright." He held his hands up. "Well, hit me up if you do head over; I'll order you something."

"Alright, thanks Philip. But seriously, don't wait up."

"No, Medy." He turned back with a dramatic stare. "You don't wait up."

I laughed.

"Have a good night, Philip."

"You too."

He left my office. I could hear him swinging his keys all the way to the stairs.

I had four more Institute duplicates to fill out. If I worked without stopping, I could be finished in an hour and twenty-seven minutes. Then I could go home. Sleep for five hours. Be in for the meeting. In Mark's chaasm by eleven. Zeinhaert's by six-thirty.

I had been going like this for weeks. Months. I couldn't remember the last time I got a solid eight hours of sleep.

I was so tired.

If I took a nap, I could extend my efficiency a bit. Finish altogether and send the paperwork tonight. Twenty minutes for a nap, two and a half hours for work. Four hours of sleep at home. In for the meeting. And then Mark. And Zeinhaert.

That worked.

I set a timer on my phone, and then dimmed my desk lamp and tried to get comfortable in my chair. I closed my eyes.

I dreamed. Of Reggie and Mom. Having a picnic at Dornwood.

The sun was a mess of gold and amber shafts through the trees, painting the crumbling stone walls orange. I laughed at Reggie, struggling to spit his watermelon seeds. Mom smiled at us.

“Remember, Medy... Never forget days like today.”

Did she ever really say that?

I heard a crack.

I opened my eyes. My office was cold, and my desk lamp was off. It was completely dark except the blue tinge of moonlight through my windows. I leaned forward and tried to click my lamp on, but it was already on. The power was out.

I pushed my chair back and stood up. It was really cold now. I could see my breath. But it wasn't even that cold outside.

Was I still dreaming?

I heard a snapping noise. Like glass breaking. Actually, no--it was like stone.

Amber light shone on my desk in an odd, distorted pattern. For a second it looked like sunlight shining in through a window, but then I saw the statue. There was a hole in it, cracking and crumbling away, glowing amber, and giving off light. The light spread from the hole, covering the statue until it was a smoldering orb, burning brightly on my desk. I could feel its warm glow on my face.

And then it fell to dust and I was in the dim blue again. And there were two shapes swirling above me.

I could barely make them out in the dark--small squid things. Gurgling and chirping and spinning around in the air.

I immediately regretted not learning more about them.

But then...

I wasn't in my office. I wasn't cold anymore.

I was in... the park from my dream. Dornwood Park. So far away. Back in Kansas.

But I was there.

The sun was warm. A mess of gold and amber shafts through the trees, painting the crumbling stone walls orange. I could see Reggie and my mom, sitting on a blanket in

the grass. I breathed in the scents--the trees and tall fescue grass, and the musty old stone with hints of flowery sweetness.

She handed him a slice of watermelon and then looked up at me.

I could feel tears on my cheeks.

She waved me over.

173:

Finally, the end of the hall. The sphere-like chamber was before us.

I could hear the blobs below, still dancing and singing around the Crab King's brain. I was glad they hadn't wandered off.

We heaved the syringe over the fleshy threshold of the tunnel and watched it roll free, bouncing across the room and coming to a rest below the brain's pedestal. One of the flesh blobs stopped for a moment and stared at it, but quickly lost interest and resumed dancing.

We were all breathing hard, caked by layers of sweat and rotten juice from lugging the thing over. It was a lot heavier than I expected, and the trip from the main chamber was farther than I remembered. The tunnel at the end had been particularly difficult.

"Oh, thank god." Philip breathed. "I really hope this works. That was terrible. And I know I'm complaining, but it just keeps getting worse. I'm covered in sweat now. My entire body is drenched in sweat and crab juice. I can feel my skin peeling. It's two patty melts now, Wilson. Three, even. And a shake. No. Two shakes. Or actually--maybe nothing can repay this debt--"

We made our way down the steep wall and crossed to the podium. Philip was just ranting aimlessly now, but he had a point. I was peeling as well. It started as an itch, but now my skin was burning all over, bright red and hot to the touch, bubbling and peeling in large chunks like an awful sunburn. I thought about bringing it up with Wilson, but if my plan worked we'd probably be leaving soon anyway.

"--and there's no proper repayment for something like this, honestly. I'm sorry. That's why it's called a life debt."

"In the podium?" Wilson asked me, ignoring Philip's rant.

"Yeah." I said. "Then Marcculus should form like before. Under the brain. I think. I hope."

"Let's get it in, then. I'll get the back. Medy, you grab that side. Philip, get the other. Ready?"

"Okay." Philip said. "But again. I expect first-class treatment from now on. I'm like royalty to you guys now. When you look at me, imagine like... Ton Cruise, or somebody like that. Famous."

I laughed.

"Philip, what? Did you just say Ton Cruise? Who's Ton Cruise?"

"No. I didn't say Ton. No. I said Tom Cruise. Tom."

"It sounded like Ton."

"Alright, three..." Wilson began counting down as we got in place.

We braced--I had to hug the glass tube to get a good grip.

"I said Tom." Philip mumbled.

"Philip." Wilson glared at him for a moment, and then restarted his count.

"Three..."

"Two..."

"One... go!"

We pulled the syringe up and thrust the needle forward, jabbing it into the fleshy podium with a wet pop. The blobs all burst into roaring applause.

"What was that?" The brain shook.

"Nothing, Crab King. We're helping you." Philip said.

He tried to dust his grimy hands and then looked over to me.

"You really think this'll work?"

"No idea. I hope so."

"It seems unlikely." Wilson muttered; his face was scrunched in thought.

The flesh blobs began circling the brain, singing a new song. Their tone was different this time. Somber, maybe. The tempo was slower.

"Be one come all to cree,

Head honcho of the fleas.

The Crab King knows what we all feel,

The captain of the sea."

"Well, that's something." Wilson said.

One of the blobs--a red one with four orange curly pigtails--doubled over in a coughing fit, spinning her pigtails in wild circles, and then leaned back and grabbed her lumpy throat.

"Here it comes." She gagged.

A small, silver ball of light rose from her mouth, floating in the air. She giggled as it bobbed away. It flew over to the syringe, phased through the glass, and ran down the inside as grey liquid. And then all the blobs were coughing, doubling over, hacking loudly and clutching their throats.

“And that’s something else.” Wilson looked back at me with a childish grin.

Soon the room was filled with the blob’s laughter and dozens of floating silver balls of light. They hovered and bobbed toward the syringe, steadily phasing through the glass and filling it with thick grey liquid.

The blobs all jumbled together, and a tall green one with a thick flowering mustache rose his hand. They quieted down.

“Time again, y’all!” He cried.

They cheered again and clumsily formed a line at the back of the syringe, and then began a new song. It was slower now. Sad. They jumped as they sang, slamming themselves against the plunger, one-by-one.

“With both hearts at our feet,

The brain is just the seed.

Far too gone, before too long,

Marcus marches free.”

A little sack of fluid pushed up from the top of the flesh podium, ballooning outward and lifting the Crab King’s brain off the pedestal.

“**What is happening to me?**” The Crab King wailed in fear.

And then the flesh sack was a fully inflated orb of pus, the size of a beach ball. It was Marcculus, with the brain resting on his head, staring at us with his beady, too-far-apart eyes. His green skin sagged on his face.

“Hey, y’all got any shit?”

“Hey, Marcculus.” I took a step back.

He smelled terrible. Like old eggs and feces. The brain drooped a bit on his head, forming a bowl, and then dipped in and began to sink.

“**Marcculus, you filth!**” The Crab King echoed. “**Unhand me!**”

Marcculus peered up at the brain, and then grew red.

“What the hell, man? Get this thing out of me! Get it out!”

But the Crab King was already completely submerged, glowing white from within him. And then his demeanor changed entirely.

“**Woah.**”

His face was morphing. The green tinge of his skin faded to pale brown, and his features floated around, moving to their proper places.

"Damn, guys. Thanks for **that**." He bobbed a bit on his platform. "But **uh**, any of you gonna eat that?"

He gave a little nod toward the blobs.

"Eat... what?" I asked.

"Them **bulbs**." He smiled.

"You want to eat them?" Wilson raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, if you don't mind."

"Uh, no... problem? Right, guys?" I looked between Wilson and Philip.

They shrugged.

"Why not?" Wilson smirked.

"You heard **em, folks**. Hop in line."

His slit of a mouth extended a jaw, which elongated, stretching into a huge red pocket, the size of a coffin. The blobs all did as he said, lining up before him, and began jumping into his gaping mouth. He chewed and crunched happily, swallowing them into his sack.

"Come on **in, now**." He grinned wide between each bite, showing off bits of unchewed blob stuck in his teeth. "That's **right**."

With every blob he ate, his form would alter, looking more like Marcus. The skin of his flesh sack was undulating, rippling and reforming. Eventually, he had eaten all of them. And then it was just us four.

He was weaving and unstable, but became more human every moment. His flesh solidified out of the sack, and began forming soft features: ears, a nose, his lips. And then his skin grew rosy, almost glowing in the light.

Marcus stood on the podium before us, naked and beaming. He laughed in a hearty boom as the fleshy walls crumbled to dust around us, revealing a cool, watery marsh, filled with flowering rice plants.

We were suddenly shin deep in cool water, standing under the light sun of an overcast summer day.

"He's--wow." Wilson shook his head in disbelief. "Medy..."

He turned to me, wearing that same grin from before.

"I stand corrected."

174:

I pedaled as fast as I could. My bike struggled up hills and flew down dips, chugging along as I made my way over the rolling fields of dirt and mud that now made up our world. I moved through the fallout and decay, the rotted corpse of a long-finished war. We lost.

Our world was taken from us.

Inherited by the dead.

The massive, winged beast's rippling form was shaped like a bird, filling the sky with It's smoky shadow. It's neck held up a towering lighthouse for a head, which swiveled and painted the ground with swaying light as It flew. Seeing It brought forth a memory. I had seen that thing before.

Why was It so familiar?

It's shadow covered the ground ahead, blotting out the pale sun. I tried to catch up, to get underneath It. But I couldn't. My bike was too slow, and It was soaring too fast-- each flap of It's gargantuan wings propelled It farther away from me. It lowered, nearly scraping the ground, and droning in a piercing scream. My eyes were drawn to glowing silver welts lining It's underbelly. The weak spot.

I noticed a tall hill poking up over the horizon ahead. If I could ramp the hill, I might be able to reach the weak spot. I might be able to bring It down.

And then I remembered everything, in an instant.

This had happened before. I was stuck here. How many times? I could remember all of it: beast, this place, my goal. I was on the Network.

But this had never happened before. I never remembered during... the loop? The loop. Yes.

I never remembered during the loop.

What was happening?

Why did I remember?

I pulled the handle brakes and skidded to a stop. I didn't need to bring the beast down.

None of this was happening.

If I brought It down I'd only restart the loop. Like so many times before. I had done that so many times before.

I wasn't sure how I remembered this time.

It felt like I found a treasure in the sand. A small gift given in my hour of need. In that moment I felt as if I could believe in God. I was thankful for it.

I sat down in the grey dirt, dropping my bike to its side.

I sat down.

And I thought.

175:

I sat back and watched.

I thought about... the boy. I found. What was his name?

Mac. Mac, who had crawled over the mud for days, to death and back, broken and beaten, but alive. An inspiration.

Mac.

No.

No, it wasn't Mac

Max.

I thought about Max, in that hospital bed where I left him, looking sorry and feeling worse. I hoped he would be okay.

I was sore. My back hurt from all the walking, and ladder climbing, and standing around. Why had I done all that?

Regardless, my chair was comfortable.

And this place was nice. A grass shelf overlooking the city, the sky. Trees. It was nice.

BEEP

Something

beeped

BEEP

And then again. I looked down at my

wrist.

BEEP

It was my watch. Eight o' clock.

That's right. That's why I was sore. The plan.

I knew. I remembered everything again. It always came back like a steady wave--at first my mind slowly trickled with hints of my memories, and then they were gushing over me, and I was submerged in them for just a while, before they dried up again. And then of course I knew.

Of course I remembered.

The cube was being disabled at this very moment. I wasn't sure if I should be thankful for these momentary lapses or curse them. With the knowledge came the fear. The anxiety.

The butterflies in my stomach.

It was time. Everything rode on this. It had to work.

I searched the sky, looking for the moon. I found it as the hologram faded.

The bulbous grey orb flickered and disappeared, revealing a large black cube, rotating slowly on its axis. An undulating, mechanical buzz sounded around me, echoing from the sky, resonating over the town and surrounding countryside.

If I heard it, then so did half of the planet. Loud, rumbling buzzing. Permeating everything.

The cube stopped rotating, and then began drifting, still buzzing. It grew larger, but veered hard left and out of view behind the horizon. I flipped open my laptop and opened the SATMAP to watch its trajectory.

The cube dropped into the atmosphere over the Pacific and was on a collision course with base coordinates in Honduras.

It kept on, passing El Salvador. Perfect.

But.

No.

It passed the facility.

It missed Catacamas entirely, making landfall far north and to the east, near the sea.

I checked connections. Servers were stable. Up. Green across the board.

It didn't work.

176:

I stared at the wall of my room.

Hospitals were always so terribly boring. I smiled.

Funny. I was bored.

And just yesterday I was struggling for my life. Pulling. Paralyzed. Weak. Terrified. I should've died... but Wilson found me.

And he saved my life. For no reason.

And now I was bored.

The clock said 7:59.

I hadn't slept since I was in that pit. I had been exhausted on the ride over--I was fighting to keep my eyes open, in and out of blurry consciousness, wanting to stay awake. And now I actually wanted to sleep, but I didn't feel like it anymore. Even as tired as I was.

But there was nothing to do.

I had become acclimated to a life of excitement. A life of wanting and then having within an instant. This didn't compare. This was boring. Unbelievably boring. I had never been this bored. Ever.

I looked around for something to do. A device. A book. A pamphlet. A picture. Anything. The room was barren, decorated only by a drooping poster on the wall, held up by a single piece of tape. It told me to get vaccinated against mothirial cyber viruses. I had been. Six times.

Even the bed was boring. No paper cover, no fake pillow. Just a slab of plastic.

I looked over at the clock again.

7:59.

My god.

8:00.

It changed.

Wow. Progression.

I sighed.

This was worse than crawling in the mud. At least then I had something to do.

I heard a buzzing. Low at first. Coming from outside.

But then it was filling the room, shaking the ground and the windows.
A loud, piercing buzzing. Like from a washing machine when the cycle finishes.
I looked out the tiny square window. Over the boring town.
There was a cube in the sky.

177:

The thing's top half was made up of numerous fleshy, eye-covered stalks, protruding from the dangling frog corpse on its back, still rattling loudly in the cramped dirt corridor. The rest of it was legs. Forty legs, or fifty, or maybe more--I couldn't count them--all splayed out from the frog body just below its stalks, like a massive, stretched ribcage.

We pulled as hard as we could, frantically dragging Harold away from it. He was frozen in fear. In a stupor. Dead weight in our arms.

"Dammit! STAND UP! HAROLD! STAND UP!" Philip screamed.

Harold suddenly stumbled back and stood up, wild-eyed, staring at the monster.

"Are you alright?" I looked him over.

"Later. Later. LATER!" Philip yelled again. "Come on, go, go, go!"

Harold was gone, sprinting back toward the entrance. We followed suit, and I fell in behind Philip.

But then I couldn't move

Something grabbed my stomach. I wasn't touching the ground.

The frog thing was above, weaving its legs together, interlocking them into a cage around me. It wasn't tight, but no matter how hard I pulled, I couldn't pry the legs free.

I was trapped.

"Medy!" Philip yelled to me.

I couldn't see him. I couldn't see anything through the tiny slits in the cage, except Anu's decimated frog body gently bobbing around as we moved.

"Medy, I'm right behind!" Philip's voice was fading away.

The thing wasn't hurting me... Not yet.

If it wanted to kill me, it would have killed me already.

It was taking me somewhere.

I thought for a moment, staring at the lifeless frog corpse. This thing was formed from Anu, the very personable frog man we met back in the forest. He was so incredibly nice then.

Maybe it was still him.

"Hey, Anu?" I asked.

"Oh... hey, yeah?" His voice echoed around me, still gentle and friendly, just like before.

"Where are we going?"

"Well, uh, I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but I was hoping you wouldn't talk. I don't normally talk to people when I'm like this. I'm sorry. It's just weird, you know?"

"Oh, sorry. I don't know what you mean."

"Okay, look, you seem nice--I'm taking you to the ritual room. Is that good? Is that sufficient? I really don't want to keep talking. It's kind of draining to talk with this mouth."

"What? You have another mouth?"

"Yeah, and so when I talk with this mouth--I use this mouth, and it's like... let's say you have a crazy good hunting dog named Skip. But instead of going hunting with Skip, you take him out to the pool and make him a lifeguard dog. Is it really the dog's fault when he mauls a drowning kid?"

"There are lifeguard dogs?"

I couldn't help but smile at the notion.

"I don't know, yeah, probably--I guess it was a bad analogy. Okay, this is getting exhausting. I am using my eating mouth to talk to you. Now, I'm flapping these hungry gums, and it's making me want to use my eating mouth for eating. Does that make sense?"

"Y-yeah. It does. Sorry for making you talk, Anu."

I felt bad. I was driven by curiosity, and went too far. The last thing I wanted to do was upset the spider monster I sat inside.

"Hey, hey, that's okay! You had no idea! Let's just go back to silence, alright? Ritual room is coming up shortly. Just hold tight. And again, no talking. Please. You seem really nice, honestly. It would be a bummer if I had to eat you. Don't make me do that. Cus it'll just happen."

I nodded and sat back in the cage.

Odd. I had seen complicated organism manifestations in other chaums, but nothing quite so elaborate, especially without other chaumic corruption. The frog people were very corrupted for something that shouldn't exist. They were very intelligent, hated small animals, had metaphysical mouths for eating, implying an entire structured dietary system, and could transform into spider-demon-things with leg cages. Built

from nothing. But the chaasm itself was fine. Everything was in place, exactly as generated. Wilson was right. It was always something new.

I lurched back and fell against the cage. Anu was inverted, climbing upward for a short while, but then flattened out again and came to a stop.

“Alright, hop on out.”

The legs uncurled around me. Anu lowered down and folded them under him, forming a set of stairs. I stepped off.

I was in a tall, dome-like dirt chamber lit by small candles, which were spread around in dense piles, covering the ground like a blanket of melting wax, leaving very little room to walk.

It was as Anu said: a ritual room. The most prominent feature was a large circular table, painted with hundreds of strange angular symbols. A girl was bound to it, by ropes around her arms and legs, stretching her out into a cross.

Hannah.

Her table was surrounded by a ring of statues. Twelve flat, black silhouettes of people in profile-view, each with a smoldering candle mounted on its head. A few of the candles were very tall, towering several feet over the rest, but most were short, burned down to snubs, dripping long trails of wax down the sides.

Several frog people were crowded together around her, dancing and burning incense and chanting in a language I couldn't understand. Most were bipedal frog people, like how Anu used to be, though a few were in their spider-forms, dancing and swaying their stalks in line with all the rest. A platform chair stood in the back of the room. I could barely make it out through the dark--a throne, concealed by shadow, taken up by a large humanoid figure.

“Hey, Dan?” Anu spoke from behind me. “Got another one!”

He was standing neatly with his legs folded up, and his stalks all in line.

A spotlight clunked on from somewhere and pointed up at the throne, illuminating the shadowy figure.

“What's--huh? Anu? Is that you?” A gravelly, wet voice filled the chamber.

The light revealed an obese frog man, who leaned forward and sniffed the air. Dan. His eyes were grey and milky--was he blind? He was ten times the size of any other frog, oozing with green slime, and obviously out of shape, seeming to pant with exhaustion from even the slight lean forward.

“Who's this, then?” Dan gurgled as he spoke. “Smells... sour.”

"Oh, uh, what was your name again?" Anu leaned over to me.

"My name is Medy."

"--AND LET GO OF HER, YOU FROG PIECES OF--" Philip suddenly barreled into the room from a tunnel behind me, screaming at the top of his lungs, but abruptly stopped when he saw us.

"You're alright!" He grinned at me. "Awesome. Let's get out of here."

"No... interrupter. You cannot leave court." Dan spoke from his throne.

Two more of the spider-things appeared, flanking us and blocking the tunnel Philip had entered from.

"Oh, holy shit--is that Hannah?" Philip stared down at the table.

"Yeah, I think so." I whispered. "Where's Harold?"

"Don't get me started. He's fine. He left. Who's the fat frog?"

"That's Dan. What do you mean he left? What? Harold..."

I didn't want to believe that. But he had been so scared. So terrified.

"A fat frog named Dan." Philip went on. "What's Dan talking about--court?"

"I don't know. Anu called this place a ritual room--"

"SILENCE!" Dan shouted. "You are both on broken feet. The trial commences."

A trumpet sounded from somewhere far off, playing a short, discordant tune.

"Medy, had you parlay by surmice?" Dan began, taking on a far more regal cadence.

"Again, with the surmice." Philip interrupted. "What the hell is a surmice?"

"INTERRUPTOR." Dan clapped his hands, issuing a sharp boom through the chamber.

He took a moment to gather himself after the excursion, visibly winded, laboring over each deep breath. He gathered himself and then continued.

"Interrupt no more, or you'll find yourself on trial for contempt. Again Medy. Had you parlay by surmice?"

I looked at Philip. He shook his head and shrugged.

I turned back to Dan.

"If you mean the little animal--no, I wouldn't call it parlay. It hatched from a tree and started following us. We didn't do anything."

"Why would a surmouse follow you?" He rose a smooth green eyebrow.

"Why would it hatch from a tree?" I asked. "I don't know. It just did."

“It hatches from a tree because that is where its parasitic life takes root, child. That is where the filth of the forest, that wolf, buries her putrid eggs. Vermin like that only follows those with the stench of Wise.”

Dan paused a moment, seeming to mull over something, and then continued.

“You shall be sentenced to death. Goodnight.”

The spotlight clunked off.

178:

I wondered what would happen if his spear hit me. I didn't know if I should be scared. Would it hurt? Would it even touch me? I suspected it would. But could it kill me? Was I even alive?

"Wilson." I shouted up at him. "Why are you a medieval knight now?"

"How do you know my name?!" Wilson drew back and lowered his helmet visor, still aiming at me with his spear. "Witch!"

"Witch? What? No, I'm not a witch! I'm Philip!"

"Feel-Up? You are the night goblin! It was you who burned this forest with your wicked magic! How do you know me, sick wretch?"

"Oh, I've known you--" I began, but he quickly cut me off.

"If you know me, then you must know I am no worth to a ghoull like you. I am but skin and weak bones, barely worth my own breath. Please, haunt me no more, demon! Leave! I said, go! Be gone!"

"Wilson, my name is Philip, and I'm not a night goblin--"

"WISTFUL WRETCH, MY SOUL IS SANCTUARY IN THE LIGHT OF THE LORD MOTHER! I SAID LEAVE!"

"Wistful?" I was taken aback.

He was screaming at the top of his lungs. I had never heard him scream like that. And about the Lord Mother. Who the hell was that?

I just wanted to get a feel for his existence, but he wouldn't even let me talk. I decided to try a different approach.

"Who is the Lord Mother?" I asked.

"Oh... as if you do not know. She is your greatest enemy, demon. Our ruler, our guiding star. She founded our church, a saint among mortal flesh--"

He suddenly stopped and shook his head.

"Clever. I will not fall for your tricks, night goblin. I told you to leave. So, leave!"

"I'm not a night goblin, man." I moaned.

"I swear, demon, I will horn for reinforcements."

He lifted a small wooden horn from his belt and held it to his mouth.

"Okay. Why haven't you?"

"What do you mean?" He cocked his head, jostling his feathery plume.

"Why would you wait until now? You said I'm the night goblin, right? I started the fires, right? I'm dangerous. You should've called your damn reinforcements as soon as I walked up."

"I will now." He lifted the horn to his lips.

And then he just stood there. I could read Wilson like a book even here in his fragmented form, broken, and cosplaying as a medieval knight. He was bluffing.

"Okay. Go ahead." I nodded. "Hurry up."

He stared at me for a moment, holding the horn up and wearing a puzzling, stern expression. I waited, but he stood still.

"You can't call for reinforcements, can you?"

He stood in silence.

"Because you don't have any, do you? You're alone, Wilson. Why?"

"What?" He lowered the horn.

"You're alone in a burning forest. Why?"

"I... am on guard..." He furrowed his brow. "The Lord Mother..."

"No. You're alone here because here isn't real. It's some kind of pocket chaum--a fragment of something greater, just like you. I met another you just before this--a fisherman. And I bet I'll meet another you after this, probably as a vampire hunter or some other insane bullshit. But you'll just be a fragment of yourself like you are now. You're not whole, Wilson."

"Chausm? I am..." He peered down at his hands. "Not whole?"

Was he recognizing something? Was he remembering? I hoped.

"No." He looked up at me. "You demon. Lies. Those are lies. I am Sir Wilson, birthed from Ergo the Great, first valiant hand of the Lord Mother and head of Her church. I am no fisherman. No vampire slayer. I am a noble knight of our Lord--of Her light. Serve to ash."

I sighed. I thought we were on the verge of a breakthrough, but knight Wilson was just as belligerent and closed-off as fisherman Wilson.

"You're head of Her church?"

He nodded. I held my arms up, motioning to the clouds of black smoke and burning trees around us. The sky was still choked with ash.

"Then why are you here? Why'd she put such a high class noble on a rickety deer stand in a burning forest, all alone?"

"I am on guard." He said resolutely.

"Apparently. And what are you guarding?"

"Entry."

"To what?"

"Leave. Demon. You cannot tempt me."

I was wrong. He was more belligerent and closed-off than fisherman Wilson. At least fisherman Wilson would talk to me. But they were both just slivers of the real Wilson: chunks of his personality and appearance, wrapped up in digital projections without any of the substance or knowledge. Corrupted copies, nothing like the source. But maybe...

Maybe I'd have better luck elsewhere. In all the vastness of the Network, out of billions of chaums, I had met two Wilsons, back-to-back. The chances of that happening were already astronomically slim, even if there were a thousand Wilsons--a hundred thousand. I had a suspicion I would find more Wilsons. Probably a lot more. And maybe at least one of those was the real Wilson, in some form. Maybe I just had to keep looking.

"Well, I'll leave you to it." I gave a half wave and walked into the burning forest.

"Wait!" He shouted behind me. "Demon! Do not go that way!"

"What?" I stopped and turned back. "Why?"

"Go from whence you came. Do not soil this ground."

"Hey, Sir Wilson."

"Yes?"

"Eat my ass."

I passed into the ground, sloshing off into the dark.

179:

Philip lifted his sandwich to take a bite, but hesitated.

“What if I hate it?” He looked up at us.

“Then you hate it.” I laughed. “It’s a sandwich, not your arranged bride. Take a bite.”

“But this is monumental for me. I’ve never had a patty melt. I’ll never have a patty melt for the first time ever again. It may as well be my betrothed, because I’m losing my patty melt virginity right now.”

“Philip...” Wilson made a disgusted face. “It’s just a sandwich.”

“Right. And Rome was just a city. And Jesus was just a man. This may be just a sandwich, but to me it’s a new frontier of exploration: one of the final remaining pillars of my childhood wonderment. And today I’m toppling it. Okay. Here we go.”

Philip took a deep breath, and then opened his mouth and slowly leaned in, attempting to build our anticipation. His teeth hovered just above the bread, inching ever closer, but not quite touching.

“BITE IT!” I yelled.

He pulled the sandwich away. Wilson and I groaned.

“Can you turn around?” Philip grinned. “This is kind of private.”

I stared at him.

“Eat it, Philip. Please. We have so much work to do.”

“Hey! I earned this! I spent hours rolling around in rotten crab juice for this. Let me enjoy myself, dammit. Marcus is fine. Paperwork can wait. This could be a turning point in my life, Medy. Please take this situation with some gravity.”

“Gravity? You’re eating a sandwich.” I said.

He dismissed me with a wave, popped his neck, stretched his jaw a few times, and then took a long sip from his carton of milk.

“Okay. Alright. Time to die.”

He took a deep breath, leaned in, and chomped down, pulling away a massive bite, dribbling cheese down the sides. It took several minutes for him to dramatically chew through it, contorting his face into a plethora of strange, concerned looks. He swallowed and stared at the sandwich in his hands.

“This is just a cheeseburger.” He said flatly.

“Yep. You got all worked up over a cheeseburger.” I laughed.

He put the sandwich down and stared at it.

“God... dammit...” Philip was broken.

“And there you have it, Medy.” Wilson said. “That face. That’s why we let him figure it out on his own.”

“I hate you both.” Philip slumped in his chair.

“Funny.” Wilson chuckled. “I don’t know a more perfect way to dismantle childhood wonderment than with pure disappointment. Better luck next time, Philip.”

180:

"I am not home, not home, not home... not..."

She looked down at the table.

"Where am I?"

She began to sob.

I gently touched her arm.

"Sarah... do you think you can continue?" I spoke softly, but she seemed to wince at every word.

Her face drew up in confusion, wet with tears.

"Continue? What?"

"Your session." I said.

"My... session."

"Yes. Your session. To get better. Healthier. Remember?"

"Healthier. Yes." She gave a hesitant nod.

"So, you'd like to continue your session?"

"Yes."

"Alright, sit back for me."

She did so, leaning back in the old chassis. The cracked, ragged leather groaned as I reclined her chair into a flat position.

"Time for your seatbelts, Sarah. Let me know if it gets too tight, okay?"

"Okay."

I stretched the belts over her and tucked them through the frame of the chair, one by one, threading between the restraint bars and back to the receptacles, strapping her in. Her eyes began frantically scouring the room, and I realized her hands were stark white from tightly gripping the restraint bars. She was going to panic again.

"Help." She whimpered up at me, almost inaudibly.

I quickly grabbed her stress ball and plopped it in her hand.

"Squeeze." I said. "Breathe, exhale, breathe, exhale. Good. Just like that."

Her fingers immediately curled around the ball, and after a few soft squeezes, she was crushing it with all her strength and making a very concentrated face. I lowered the

helmet arm and began attaching the sensors--two on her forehead, two on her neck, and one on her spine.

"Alright, Sarah. Last piece. Time to plug you in. How are you doing?"

"Okay." She gave a small nod. "Healthier."

"Right, Sarah. We're going to make you healthier. Lift your head a bit."

She leaned up, and I tucked my hand around to feel for her port. My fingers found the small ring of metal and gemstone just below her hairline. I lifted the rubellite connector coil from the bay, and with both arms around her neck, carefully slid it into place.

"Now you'll feel a pinch, okay?"

"Okay."

She closed her eyes. I pushed the connector against her neck and began extending it from the sleeve, sliding it down into her spine. It clicked as its segments bent into form, one at a time. She winced and issued a feeble whimper as it clunked into place. I rotated the cuff and locked it down.

"Fantastic job so far, Sarah. How are you doing now?"

"Okay."

"You're doing okay?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let me know if you're uncomfortable and we can stop. Any time. If you need to stop, just say stop."

"Okay."

I slid the gas mask down, pulled the straps so it was snug on her face, and then opened the valve on the oxygen canister.

"How does that feel? Can you breathe okay?"

"Yes." Her voice came out muffled.

"Good. Here we go. Remember: just tell me to stop if you need to stop, okay?"

"Okay."

I lifted the power lever, engaging the current, and flipped a series of switches to enable the scanner, which emerged from the top of the chair on its bent arm and began rotating around her. A breaker slammed closed behind me. And then another, and another, until the entire set was closed and hot with current.

The equipment in the chassis roared on, warbling, filling the room with shrill whining.

“Hey. What’s your name?” She spoke with confidence this time.

Her eyes were no longer glazed over. She was present. Conscious. That tended to happen just before dilation procedures, and I could never figure out why. The sphere hadn’t been generated yet. Nothing was changed within her physiology. Yet she was suddenly lucid.

“My name is Wilson.” I said.

“Don’t let me die, Wilson.”

Her eyes rolled back and a white pinhole formed above her head. It was the isolation sphere, dilating, growing over her, until she was submerged down to her shoulders.

Don't let me die. The words looped in my mind.

I pulled the maintain switch, dropped the exterior current, and sat back to let the machine ride. She had two hours, and then we'd break again. I took a sip from my coffee. Cold.

Don't let me die.

Don't worry, Sarah.

I won't.

181:

I focused the binoculars to get a better look.

There.

A mid-sized sloop, a thousand miles off the coast, drifting all alone in the middle of the Pacific. The deck was empty and there was a gaping tear down the mainsail. It was abandoned.

"Captain Russell!" I shouted, but he was already standing directly behind me.

"Lieutenant Gunther."

"Captain. Looks like a sloop, sir."

"All by herself? Let me see."

I handed him the binoculars. He held one side up to his good eye.

"That's not a sloop. That's a schooner."

"Oh, my mistake, sir. If you don't mind, what's the difference?"

"A sloop only has one mast, Lieutenant."

He lifted and leveled a compass on his palm, pointing toward the schooner.

"This is Captain Russell, and I have conn. Steer course two-two-zero."

"Aye Captain, two-two-zero." The helmsman yelled back.

Captain Russell pocketed the compass and turned to me.

"Let's go take a look."

“Do you hear me?”

I did

But how do I say that

“Gonunduhsloenm.” I couldn’t make words with my mouth anymore

“Yuhō tungnloplerte.” I didn’t understand myself at all

“Speak no more, doe. I understand. You are not well. It is okay, now. I can help the suffering.”

The lights were bright and I wasn’t in the den, and I wasn’t with

The cat

came back

but bigger and red and staring at me with a million eyes, all around the room, looking
down at me with all those eyes

Eyes

I know I've seen those

Eyes

I knew I've felt on me

Eyes

Like those eyes from

before the sun sets

"Goodnight, child."

A wet hand slapped my back and rolled down my arch, my butt

I felt the cool dripping

of warm dripping

of blood

and I feel pain far away

my blood?

White, black

Orbs in the night again fire in the sky again

Chair

Man

Above me man

"Sarah, can you hear me?"

183:

I heard a bell ring.

Did I really? After weeks of listening to nothing but squawking gulls, wind blowing, and waves crashing against the ship, I had been hearing all kinds of things that weren't real.

Was this bell any different? Probably not.

It rang again. What were the chances of that? And then I heard a horn. A loud horn. It shook the floorboards under me. It was real.

I leapt up and ran through the broken doorframe, bursting onto deck, into the heat and blinding light.

My eyes adjusted and fell on a boat. Massive.

A few dozen meters out; a military warship, dwarfing my tiny piece of shit. Here. In the middle of fuck nowhere.

Thanks to the beer vision I knew I wouldn't die out here, but I didn't expect my salvation to come in the form of a warship. This had a chance to end poorly. There were a lotta guns on that boat. But it was my only way home.

They had stopped and lowered a small boat to the water, which crossed the gulf between us. I counted six men in the little skipper. Or was it a pontoon? Sloop? No idea.

They were getting close. What was my story?

Mutiny. Captain killed. Infighting. Everyone jumped ship but me? I'd have to read the room. If they came aboard...

I moved to the railing as they pulled alongside, and one of the men stood and waved to me. He was tall and old as hell, dressed in an impeccably neat uniform, with an eyepatch covering one eye.

"Ahoy! How did you end up out here?" He yelled up to me.

"Long story. I was a passenger. The crew had a huge fight, a mutiny I guess, and, well... everyone else died or jumped ship."

"A mutiny?" The one-eyed man scratched his chin.

"Yessir. They... killed the captain the second day I was here. And then... well, it was a bloody mess. There's nobody left but me."

"Sorry to hear that. Mind if we come aboard?"

Ooh. Not good. They were definitely gonna find the bodies.

"I'd like nothing more. Let me get a ladder. Oh, and uh, by mess I meant--well, I figure I should warn you... there are quite a few dead bodies below deck. It's not pretty. One minute."

I ran in the cabin, grabbed the coiled rope ladder, and turned to head back. A weight dropped in my stomach, like I swallowed a cannonball. I stopped.

I forgot about the gun. It would look pretty bad if the military saw all those dead guys full of bullet holes, and only one gun onboard, safely tucked into my waistband. I had to toss it. No guns would be easier to explain than one.

The guys that won the shootout looted and left. Easy.

I crossed the room to the window on the far side, pulled the gun from my waistband, and slid it over the sill. It fell away.

Goodbye protection. I didn't even hear a splash.

I took a deep breath, walked back out to the deck, and tied the rope ladder up to the railing.

"Alright, she's snug. Come on up!"

The eyepatch man was the first to climb up. It took a while--he wasn't unfolding his left arm, resulting in an odd, lopsided clamber, but finally pulled himself up, straightened his jacket, and held out his hand.

"Greetings. Captain Pete Russell of the USS James K Polk, at your service."

"Nice to meet you, Captain. My name's Eoghan."

I shook his hand. He was firm and abrupt, just like all the other military men I'd met.

"Well met, Eoghan. Now, what's this about dead bodies?"

184:

I lay on the dirt and stared at the sky. It was empty and light grey, barely a different color from the rolling dunes of the wasteland.

The great, black bird thing passed over every so often, casting me in shadow, shaking the ground with It's wing beats, and roaring in that grating drone.

But nothing else happened. The chaasm kept looping no matter if I took part or not. I could restart my loop if I wanted, and make myself forget everything, but I didn't know how to break it. I was trapped. And I couldn't think of any way out. I didn't even have the energy to sit up. I was stuck here.

Here. How did I get here?

I was...

What did I do?

What was the last thing I did? I woke up in a plane with Philip, right? No. How could I? Philip was dead. I watched Philip die. The plane was a simulation as well.

What did I do?

I remembered Philip dying. And then I went home. And cried. I remembered crying all night. And then I woke up early and began carrying out the plan. I planned to...

What did I plan?

I heard a strange crackling noise nearby, like a bug zapper going off. I sat up to a swell of green light.

Someone was walking toward me.

A person?

Here?

How?

The shadow peeled away.

"What?" I heard myself mutter.

It was Philip.

I had lost all my focus

The syrup didn't work anymore,
or maybe I just couldn't find it.

I couldn't remember

I was only glad I was able to...

What was I able to do? Whatever it was, I was glad for it.

It was of grave importance.

I was supposed to fix all this mess.

I was supposed to fix it

I guess I couldn't.

I couldn't.

And it was over for me now.

Why was I searching through my pockets?

My hands were still feeling me, running along my pants, digging through my jacket
and

my pockets were all

empty.

I felt my hand run along the inside of my coat.

I had to have at least one bottle, right?

I felt my pockets again, because they couldn't be

empty.

But maybe it didn't matter. the syrup didn't work now.

Or maybe... I just couldn't find it? Did it still work?

I had some

I had some pills

I had a bottle

But maybe I took them already? My pockets were

empty.

I needed more

I tried to use my phone but

I couldn't figure out how to use my phone anymore.

The screen was a blurry fractal of overlapping images,
a cloud of white and blue.

I squinted.

In the cloud I could see those little squares, all floating in a glowing ball of light. Little icons. A phone. An envelope. A big V and R. A camera.

I poked the phone icon.

It opened a dialer, showing hundreds of numbers, scattered, bobbing in the air. I stabbed my finger in, at the number four, but missed and pushed through empty air.

I tried again.

I heard a rumbling beep, and then a big, solid four appeared.

Four. Yes.

Four. Then what?

What was I doing? I was going to use my phone
to do
something.

What?

A call. Make a call. Call.

I had poked the phone icon.

Four. I stared at the big four.

Four what? What number was I calling?

What did I need to do?

I needed

to...

what

Call. I needed to call. Call for help. I was slipping away and maybe I could still do something about that, and about the Network, if I got some help. I needed to call for help. But why four? Four.

Four-one-one.

186:

"Hey, come on! That's it? Be reasonable!"

I pleaded with Dan. The spotlight clunked back on, and we could see him again, still perched on his throne across the room. He shook his lumpy frog head.

"There is no reason in fear, interrupter." He croaked. "It is as I said."

"Reason in fear? What? You didn't even let us talk. Can we not defend ourselves?"

He sighed and leaned back, breathing heavily through his flapping frog jowls. I'd never seen anyone get so worn out from such little movement before. Even breathing too hard seemed to wind him. I almost felt bad for him, but then I remembered he had sentenced us to death.

The frogs in the center continued their odd, swaying dance around Hannah, scored only by Dan's labored breathing and their own awkward swishing noises.

Dan eventually gathered himself and began again.

"We have a custom. Those on trial may propose a rebut, though none ever do. You would choose to propose a rebut?"

Medy looked over at me. I gave her a nod.

"Yes. We do." She said.

"Very well. Go ahead."

"Before that..." I moved forward. "Well, I'm just curious--"

As I took a step into Hannah's center ring, I was engulfed by rushing wind, immediately surrounded by several of the transformed frog things. They formed a wall around me, swaying and rattling their eye-covered stalks.

Dan held up a hand and they slowly backed away.

"Continue." He breathed heavily between words. "From where you are."

"Why are you in charge? Isn't this Hannah's place?"

"It is. We are Hannah's elected. We protect her from danger. And risk. You two... are both."

"Alright, then. We have some common ground. We're doing the same thing."

"You say that, yet you admitted to a parlay with surmice!"

"No, we didn't. We only came to help. We're her... doctors. Kind of. We had no intention of parlaying with surmice. I didn't even know what a surmice was until you told us. It followed us here. All that stuff about the wolf, or whatever? Wise? We don't

know anything about that. No idea. We got a call from Hannah. A distress call. That's all. We're just here to make sure she's okay."

"A distress call?" He seemed to ponder it.

"I'm sure you frogs mean well and all, but, please, take a look at our situation: you've got her unconscious body strapped to a damned table. This isn't protection. It's imprisonment. And these statues?"

I pointed to the ring of flat, black silhouettes around Hannah, each still dripping wax from the candle on its head.

"Philip--" Medy touched my shoulder, but I kept on.

"Come on with these statues! These are classic horror movie statues. This place is a textbook satanic ritual room. Why would Hannah--"

"Enough." Dan shouted. "How dare you accuse us? We're keeping her safe. She wants us to keep her safe."

"I apologize. I just mean--maybe this is why we got the distress call? Nobody wants to be strapped to a table. How long has it been since you've actually talked to her?"

"Talked to her?" He paused.

"Yeah. How long has she been asleep?"

"Why would we talk to her?"

"Uh. Because this is her forest, is it not?"

"Yes, but I fail to see the relevance."

"Why would you not consult Hannah about decisions regarding her own forest?" Medy piped in.

"I--well..." Dan scrunched his face up and thought for a moment.

Medy leaned over to me.

"Hey, good work." She whispered. "I genuinely thought you were going to get us killed there."

"I did too. Sorry about that. I do get carried away."

"Yes." She smiled. "You do."

Dan coughed and reeled back in a gasping fit, straining for air. He took a moment to center himself and then cleared his throat.

"Fine. I suppose it couldn't hurt to wake her up."

187:

He was dead. But his corpse wasn't.

His glowing body broke apart and melted into chunks, flowing in a river of red and blue goop across the floor. He had dissolved into hundreds of slivers of bones, organs, and flesh, which all began sprouting caterpillar legs and scurrying toward me.

The cornered man's body had become an army.

Okay, that was a decent secret weapon.

There was no telling what the caustic little bastards would do if they touched me, and I had no intention of finding out.

I quickly crouched down and grabbed the man's injector vambrace, which was now soaked with his blood and blue juice. A piece of his nose clung to it, splaying its legs at me, and trying to climb up my arm. I knocked it free and then bolted, heading back down the hall toward the elevator.

I passed my dead brainwaves on the way. One was still convulsing around like a dying fish, trying to stand up--trying to follow orders from his transmitter, but his brain was dead, incapable of complying. He would flop around like that for a few more hours, until his transmitter ran out of residual charge.

I reached the end of the hall. There was a lever near the elevator marked by some faded words in a foreign language. I had no idea what they said, but it was a two-way lever for an elevator. Seemed pretty obvious. I pulled it down, and then heard the elevator kick on, scraping the walls and rattling as it descended.

A soft hum sounded, lighting a bulb above the doorframe, and the elevator lowered into place. I released the lever and looked back at my brainwaves.

And then I saw the blue chunks--a sea of skittering, inch-tall body parts pouring through the hall toward me, like a rushing wave. There were more now. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Other soldiers must have dissolved into chunk bugs as well, joining into a chunk bug stampede. It was a terrifying sight.

I jumped into the elevator and looked to the controls. It held a metal track and lever, just like the one outside, but this lever had been broken and hastily replaced by a wooden shaft. I pushed it all the way up, launching the elevator upward. The force sent me flying--I slammed against the back wall and cracked the panel.

This god damned place.

I stood, brushed myself off, and tried again, carefully raising the lever just a bit passed the center. The elevator ascended at a much more reasonable pace. I was getting close.

The only indication of my proximity to the top was the view I got through holes in the ceiling. Just a few more feet.

It wasn't a total loss, but holy shit was this a failure. This one was going to be hard to explain.

A silver door descended before me. I centered the lever and pulled the elevator to a stop. The door was smooth metal with no handle, but moved easily when I pushed it. I swung it wide and stepped into a rolling green pasture, filled with grass and trees and weeds all glowing gold under the evening sun. The door slammed shut behind me.

My transmitter immediately crackled on and notified me of an incoming call.

I accepted it.

"Where in the hell have you been?"

"Bolivia. I think. Ship got sunk."

"What?"

"Yeah, ambush. New helmsman pulled us too close to shore. Got some new tech though. I'll tell you later. Need evac at my coordinates."

"You better hope that tech is worth a six hundred-million-dollar warship, Eoghan."

"Six? Shit, I thought it was two. Might be. Who knows? Need evac, please."

"En route. Standby."

P188:

I fell apart, basically.

But in a lot of ways I had really come together.

The pulling kept pulling but eventually it stopped, because I didn't have anything left for it to pull. I was already as pulled as I could be, scattered and not feeling normal.

I was broken apart, but my form was together, even while separate. I could still think, even as specks of dust in the wind.

I was just the pulled scraps of who I used to be, everywhere, swirling around a big ball of fire. I could see, kind of see, in a blue, wavy light.

I was moving fast, phasing through things I recognized, people, cars, trucks, banks, shops, mountains. My pieces sped up, and the world zipped by in snowy blurs. This was earth. Kind of. In a different way.

From a different light.

I came together, suddenly, painfully, like I got crammed into a box. Shoved into a locker. It hurt. So bad. I wanted to scream but I had no voice.

I was in a room. It was kind of like a room. It was shaking. Hard to see.

A thing appeared before me, and behind me, and above, diagonally and to the right, gazing down. I felt its presence everywhere. Inside me. It opened many mouths, bearing millions of white teeth, and I heard the rush of voices, like hail against a roof. The voices hurt, overlapping in a storm of noise, deep and high and shrill and pleasant.

"I apologize Medula."

The voices came together, lining up in a pretty harmony, and suddenly I was hearing words. I looked down, up, and diagonally to the right, all at once. I was somewhere. I thought I could see angled doors, walls, windows, all swiveling around the inside of a sphere as I moved my head. I felt sick, like I was going to throw up. My hands. I saw my hands. Hundreds of fingers, bending impossibly all around me.

"You have time yet to grow.

Take rest. I will wake you."

Black fell, and I was warm.

I slept.

189:

I took a step toward them. It felt so real.

How was this happening?

Mom. Reggie.

I was still dreaming. I had to be.

Wind blew by, carrying scents from the picnic. Watermelon. Bread. Cheese. The faintest breath of laundry detergent. A bird chirped sweetly in the tree above. Was I dreaming? It didn't feel like a dream.

She waved again.

"Medy! Come eat!"

I took another step.

A pinhole formed between them. Like a dot on my eyes.

She was mouthing something to me, but I couldn't understand her.

I drew closer. The picnic. My mom. Reggie.

They were ten feet away. And then five. Three.

I was standing before them, but they were gone.

A black hole hovered in their place. It sucked at me, tearing at my stomach. I was being pulled in.

I heard my mom's voice.

"Turn around."

I tried, managing to crane my neck enough to see halfway behind. Shadows. Dozens of broken, behemoth shadows, made of shapes and spirals and holes and angles, bending inward, folding in on themselves like looping waterfalls. Their many-fingered hands were outstretched, tugging on hundreds of white wires, which ran over the ground and into my back.

I looked up at the sky, but it wasn't the sky anymore. It was the ceiling in my office.

And then I was gone.

Pulled away.

Into a shredder.

But not really. I was still thinking. I was still me.

Just different.

I fell apart, basically.

190:

I heard an alarm, and then saw the flashing prompt, but I couldn't be bothered.

Not now.

God, not now. Of all fucking times. I'm done with interruptions. I'm done.

I silenced all of them. Everything. Universal silence mode.

Pete kept on digging through the crates.

"Find anything, baby?" I called to him.

He closed a crate and looked back with that nasty grin.

"Oh, yeah. Let's you and me get outta here."

"Oh? What you got?"

Something twinkled in his hands, white and blue, like hot glass. He walked over and held up three red bracelets with tiny blue screens.

"Fucking temp bands!" I screamed. "You were right!"

"Woah, hey. Lower your voice a bit." He laughed, and then put his hands on my shoulders. "Breaking and entering, remember? But, yes. We got temp bands. How bout we go burn em in?"

"Oh my god. Yes. Now. Where?"

"I was thinking... that empty room in D. With the big yellow lock. If it's still broken."

He twisted the bracelets in front of him as he spoke. They glittered in the light, like diamonds.

"Yes." I clapped. "Perfect. I am so fucking excited, Pete."

He moved to the door and pulled it open.

"You and me, both. These god damned restrictions..."

"Are fucking bullshit." I finished it for him.

"Yes. They are." He went on. "They're lucky we pay them at all. This should be free, man. It's a basic fucking necessity. One of life's granted freedoms, or some shit."

We snuck into the hall. Pete leaned out, making sure the entryway was clear, and then rushed over to the dead end. To the air shaft. I clung behind.

"True." I figured I'd humor him. "But big-fucking-network can't let people be people for free."

He crawled into the shaft. I moved to follow, but pain fired up my knee as I bent down, reminding me to watch out for screws. I climbed in and followed behind, crawling awkwardly to avoid putting weight on my knee cuts.

I had butterflies in my stomach. We were doing this. I could see daylight reflecting off the paneling ahead. So close.

We reached the end of the vent--an opening that led outside. Pete pulled off the slatted cover and dropped out to look around.

"All good." He waved me down.

I jumped.

And then I was back outside. On the ramp behind the staff facility.

Holy shit, we actually fucking did it.

Pete stepped over the railing and began carefully descending a rocky slope, winding down the path to the dividing wall. I followed. The rocks were bent in all kinds of crazy angles, but they were big and flat, which made them easy to navigate.

"Yeah, but it's more than just corporations." He started up again. "Again, it's the god damned Institute. The fucking government."

"Pete..." I squinted at the back of his head.

Was he really going to do this?

Right now? Again?

I knew what was coming. He went into these rants regularly when we couldn't get bent. After a week he'd end up going full on conspiracy lunatic. And we were on day twelve.

"They're the ones selling this shit. Making us pay just to live our lives. It's not the VRC or the ITO or SBT or Facebook or whatever the hell company. It's the government. They want us to get addicted to this shit. Think about it. They make you start paying at eighteen, but before that it's completely free. Eighteen years of free access to the Network, doing whatever the hell you want. Living life to the fullest for absolutely nothing. You experience all of this wonderful shit. The best available."

"Yes, Pete." I mumbled. "I know."

"And then they just rip the rug out. They make you pay for it. And if you don't get a job doing some bullshit they make up for you, then you don't get any money. And if you can't pay, then you can't be here anymore. And you get ejected and go through therapy until you get good enough to make money in the cold. And then you save until you have enough to come back in and start it all again. Insurance pays out for therapy, the

chair, the subscription, the ejection. You pay for everything else. It's making them fucking rich."

I wavered in and out, not quite paying attention. He was still fucking going with that shit. It was really killing my buzz.

"Hey, Pete."

"What?" He looked back, obviously agitated.

"Can we talk about this later?"

The rocky slope ended in a little shelf, a few feet up. We hopped down and approached the dividing wall. The window frame was still pulled off, leaning against the wall where I left it. Pete didn't respond.

"Pete?" I asked again.

He climbed up into the window, and then looked back.

"I'm telling you, Sarah. They're evil."

I sighed. He fell through, and I pulled myself up.

"Listen, I know. I believe everything you said. But please, let's talk about this later, alright? This is bumming me out. Fuck the government. We have temp bands, dude. Temp bands."

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry. This shit just pisses me off so much."

I climbed through. We were back. Standing at the base of row C. And we hadn't gotten caught. Or injured. Or anything.

"It's okay! Just be happy! We pulled this off!" I hugged him.

"Yes, we did. It was easier than I thought, too."

"So, let's go fucking celebrate!" I shouted.

He smiled.

"Alright, let's go fucking celebrate."

I lead the way up the stairs, heading for the escalators to row D. I was unable to contain my excitement. I broke into a sprint.

"Sarah, wait--" Pete began.

"Race ya!" I yelled.

I leapt over the escalator turnstiles and hopped into an empty lane, running as fast as my legs would take me. The belt was long. Really long. Why was it so long? This was all simulated. It could've been two feet. Six inches. Why did they make it so long?

I reached the end and pushed through the turnstile slowly, waiting for Pete to catch up. It took him several minutes.

He eventually walked over at an annoyingly relaxed pace.

"Guess you lose. I get first spin." I stuck my tongue out.

"Yeah, yeah. That's if you can even figure out how it works."

"That's what I have you for, Petey." I teased him. "Don't be like this, baby. Tonight is for us."

"Yeah. For us." He grumbled.

We weaved through the scattered crowds toward the exit: big, golden doors, carved with elegant images of beautiful countrysides. They were the nicest things in the entire row. And I wasn't even sure of what they were meant to represent, because we certainly never had any beautiful countrysides.

The doors opened onto a familiar dingy street. Row D. Home. I grabbed Pete's hand and pulled him along, headed for the end of the block. To the empty room with the big lock. We passed all the usual haunts, drug bars, food joints. But they were all second banana.

Because we had temp bands.

There it was, down on the corner. White doors against purple brick with that oversized yellow padlock. The empty room. Pete walked up and popped the lock open.

"Thank god for D staff." He laughed. "It's been months. Still broken."

"I ain't complaining." I said.

We walked in sat down on the floor. It was the same as ever. Purple brick walls, thick, red carpet, and a single fluorescent bulb hanging from the ceiling. Heaven.

He began configuring one of the bands, typing into the screen, tweaking little dials with his screwdriver, and doing loads of other things I didn't really understand.

"Just like last time." He eyed me. "Be careful. Go easy. Small stuff at first."

"You got it." I grinned.

I just kept staring at that bracelet. At this point I'd say anything. Thirty seconds before a fix? Yes, I am the president's daughter, and yes I am married to Martin Shkreli.

He handed it over. I slapped it on my arm and tightened it down. The screen lit up, and I felt prickling as the needles extended into my wrist.

"Alright, it's a slightly different model than the T97. Just tilt it back like this. And then click the screen. Then it'll pinch."

I followed his directions, tilting the bracelet back and clicking the screen. It beeped and a little progress bar appeared. It pinched my wrist, just like he said.

"It's loading." I said.

"Nice. Should get your permissions active. Let me know if you feel--"

His face turned orange and then I couldn't hear him anymore.

"Pete. I can't hear."

He ballooned in my vision, expanding outward. Red, green. His eyes broke into spirals of orange light.

I heard his voice, far away.

"--can you hear me? Sarah?! Oh fuck. Fuck--"

Everything went dark.

191:

I didn't let her die.

Sarah was alive. But the isolation sphere wasn't helping anymore.

She no longer teetered over the sticky precipice of her sanity. She had plummeted from the edge, falling away faster, and more violently, than I could help.

Each time she finished a session her mental condition was a bit more degraded--a bit more despondent and child-like than before. I had no idea what caused her initial fracture, but it had done serious damage to her consciousness. She would never be herself again.

But I held out hope.

There were cases of reversal even this late into fracturing. There was a slim chance she could make it out. She wouldn't ever be the same, and she could certainly never use the Network again, but maybe she would be able to live a relatively normal life.

I remembered her final conscious words.

Don't let me die, Wilson.

I wouldn't, just as she asked.

But would she have wanted this?

Would I want to live as a fractured, diluted version of myself?

No, I decided. Probably not. But I couldn't know what she would want. I just had to try my best. I had to do everything I could.

The sphere shrunk and eventually disappeared as her machine cycled down. This was her sixteenth session in a row, and she had been mostly unresponsive after the last five. I hoped this time would be different, but I knew it wouldn't.

I leaned over.

"Hey, Sarah. Can you hear me?"

"Pete?" She asked.

I was excited for a moment, thinking she had regained some cognition, but I realized she wasn't looking at me. She was looking passed me with foggy eyes.

"No, Sarah. It's Wilson. Remember?"

She furrowed her brow and stared at me, trying to focus on me, as if she didn't understand what she was looking at.

"Where..." She began but trailed off.

Her confusion faded away and she fell back into indifference, staring at the ceiling above. Her mind couldn't take much more of the isolation sphere this week. She needed to rest for a few days. But I feared she had mere hours before an irreversible slide into total fracture.

Just one more session today, Sarah.

And that would probably be our last chance.

"Sarah? We're at the isolation facility. You're undergoing remediation therapy to make you healthier. Remember?"

"Health..." She whispered.

"Right, Sarah. Healthier. We're going to try and make you healthier. One last time."

I leaned back in my chair.

And if this session didn't work? Short of submersion, which only ever helped in minor cases, I was out of options.

She was out of options.

"We're starting again, Sarah. Are you ready?"

She didn't respond. Her blank stare was still fixed on the ceiling.

"Here we go."

I lifted the chassis lever and engaged the current, and then enabled the scan arm. The breakers closed behind me and the chassis roared on.

A white pinhole formed over her head, and then grew into a sphere, dilating, consuming her head and shoulders.

Last shot.

192:

Everything was dark.

“Pete.”

I called out, but my voice fell short, muffled by the silence. Like I was trapped.

Where the hell was Pete?

But, really...

Where the hell was I?

The temp band didn't work right. I was fucked up.

I thought for a second that I was dying.

Was I dying?

I would know if I was dying, right?

No, I probably wouldn't.

Maybe I was dying. Maybe it felt like this.

I craned my view up, lifting passed the darkness, above it, and saw a beautiful glowing globe. It reflected prismatic light, glittering like diamonds.

The sky was diamonds.

Was not sky.

It was not sky.

In the sky was a globe, and inside the globe were buildings made from shining stone. The globe was the ground here. It was the walkable world. I knew that, though I didn't know how. I could see a branching maze of hallways within, tilting oddly with the light. Those ceilings and walls and floors were made of diamonds. I couldn't look away. It was beautiful.

The orb was small but I knew if I got close it would be big enough.

I could go in.

I jumped and left the darkness behind, falling up, rising to the labyrinth, surprised by my strength. The sky was burnt orange like the sun was setting, but there was no sun here. Just me in an empty orange sky.

I felt a rush of fear, like something was chasing me from the dark below, and sped up, barreling toward the globe above.

Light danced in a brilliant sheen as I ascended

descended

entered it.

Rainbows curved around, surrounding my form, piercing through me.

Was there a me? I looked down.

I couldn't see anything but prismatic reflections.

The rainbow light lifted me up and carried me, like I was a leaf on the wind, easing me up and then down into the globe. I pressed against the diamond ground. I felt it. Cold against my hands.

I had hands. I stared at them.

They were glittery and not-quite solid, chased by ghostly white trails when I moved. I waved them in front of me, took a step, and then turned around. The white trails hung in the air, marking a body-shaped cloud where I had just been. I strolled away and began exploring. Like a trail of breadcrumbs, my fluffy white after-images hung in the air behind me.

If I was dead, it wasn't too bad.

I was radiant. I was beautiful. I was diamond now, too.

Absorbing the beauty of this world.

The diamond labyrinth.

193:

Hannah sat up on her table and looked around the chamber.

Dan smiled at her in the friendliest way his bulbous frog lips would allow.

"Hannah. Hello." He said.

She squinted at him for a moment with glazy eyes, still groggy from sleep.

"Uh." She yawned. "Hey, Dad."

Dan looked taken aback.

"N-No. Hannah, it's me. Dan."

"What?" She asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"I'm Dan. Remember? You must remember."

Hannah blinked a few times, seeming to shake off some of the haze.

"Oh god, sorry." She said. "You sound just like my dad."

"No, I am Dan. You know me. You've known me your whole life."

Tears welled in his eyes, around the edges.

"I-I'm sorry. I don't know any Dans."

"You... don't remember me?" He whimpered the last word.

Hannah shook her head.

Dan squished his face up, presumably in anguish, but looking more like a spoiled child mid-tantrum, pouting bottom lip and all. It was kind of sweet, even considering how horrifying the whole thing was to look at.

They sat in silence. Dan exhaled sharply and then began to cry, flapping his jowls and dribbling spittle.

He wanted to meet her face-to-face when she woke, so he had the frog people lug his throne over to her table.

But now I wished he hadn't. He looked goofy as hell up close, and it was hard to keep from laughing. Picture a bulbous frog man perched atop a massive, decorated throne, three feet tall and probably six hundred pounds, oozing goo and perpetually catching his breath. He was a cartoon character.

And now he was sobbing. Barrel-chested weeping.

Medy and I just stood there, staring between them.

I had no idea what the hell was going on anymore.

Dan's intense sobbing eventually lulled to a soft cry, and he was able to regain some composure. He tried again.

"Hannah, I have known you your entire life. Your mother introduced us when you were just two years old. I'm Dan. I'm your Dan. Please, remember."

"When I was two years old?" She wrinkled her nose. "I... I can't remember, Dan. I'm sorry."

"You must!" He shouted.

Hannah jumped back, startled by his outburst.

"All those afternoons together!" He yelled again. "We napped together! We ate snacks and watched Blue's Clues together! You must remember!"

"B-Blue's Clues? What?" She looked terrified.

Medy raised her hand.

"Excuse me, Dan?" She asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you mind if I speak with Hannah for a minute?"

"Go on." He grumbled.

She crouched next to Hannah's table.

"Hey. My name's Medy."

"Hi, Medy." Hannah said.

"Do you know what's going on here? Do you know where you are?"

"Not... really."

"You had this place created for you. It's a recreation of that forest near your hometown. Well, technically we're in caves underneath the forest. It's your chaasm. Ring a bell?"

Hannah's eyes grew wide.

"Oh... god." She shook her head. "Why did I forget that? Duh. I feel so stupid. I'm sorry."

"Hey, it's okay!" Medy smiled. "We work for the VRC. That's Philip."

She pointed toward me. I waved and tried to look coy.

"We're here because we got a distress call." Medy went on. "Did you send that?"

"Distress call?" Hannah bit her lip. "No, I don't think so."

"And you don't know these frog people? Never met Dan before?"

"No. I've never met any frog people."

"This may seem like a strange question, but did you have any pets when you were a kid?"

"No. I had a dog when I was a teenager."

Medy scratched her chin, staring off into space, and then raised an eyebrow.

"How about a toy? Did you have a stuffed animal or anything? A favorite doll? An imaginary friend?"

"Yeah, I guess. I think a stuffed animal. I can't really remember."

"Think, Hannah." Medy grabbed her shoulders. "Can you remember what kind of toy it was?"

Hannah grew solemn and looked up.

"I had a stuffed frog." She muttered.

Oh. Damn.

I never would have guessed. I don't even think Wilson would've guessed that. But Medy did. How the hell did she guess that?

"Thank you, Hannah. I think I might know what's going on. How many organisms did you generate with your chaasm?"

"Oh, a lot. My whole family. Friends. Everybody. So, like, if someone died or something... well, you know."

"Yeah, I do. So, your dad is in here?"

"Y-Yeah... what?" Hannah looked worried.

"What's his name?"

"Peter. Are you saying--"

"One sec."

Medy grinned at me, and then stood and faced Dan.

"Dan!"

"Yes?"

"I think you might be two different things combined! You're Peter, but you're also Hannah's stuffed frog toy!"

"I'm what--"

He was interrupted. There was a loud pop.

And then... something was different. What was different?

It took me a second to realize all the frogs were gone. Dan was gone.

A little stuffed toy sat in his place on the massive throne.

And... beside the throne was an old man.

"Dad." Hannah whispered.

It was Peter--Hannah's dad, sitting in an adirondack, reading an oversized newspaper.

"Hey, sweet pea." He looked up at her and smiled. "How are ya?"

194:

Nothing I could remember compared to the complexity of the diamond labyrinth.

I had been wandering for... days? Weeks? Did that matter?

I didn't know.

Sometimes I happened upon my trails, from when I'd been there before, but mostly I was wandering through unexplored terrain. Hallways curved differently, off to different places, depending on which way I leaned as I walked.

Sometimes there were rooms, small dens with burning hearths, beds, some oddly shaped clothes and vibrating, foreign objects. But everything else was diamond.

Sometimes I slept in those rooms, whenever I felt the need. When I woke up I could remember things from before--names and places and things I did, but they all faded quickly.

Sometimes it grew colder, and warmer others. I figured that was day and night.

All things considered, it was a nice place.

A nice home. A nice place to call home.

I was glad it wasn't so bad. It could've been worse, right?

It could always be worse.

It was getting worse, in some ways. I felt sick. Like I had the flu. I was aching and sore. And now my vision was getting fuzzy; the crisp, prismatic reflections, straight lines, and sharp edges of the diamond walls were spreading, getting thicker, curvier, and harder to make out. I could still see things. I knew what they were. Walls, floors, ceilings, hallways, like always.

But they were all fuzzy.

Actually, not everything

the cat

wasn't fuzzy.

There was a cat sometimes.

Far off, reflecting in the walls and floors, impossibly tall with black fur and pale red eyes. It doesn't seem to like company. I call to it, but it always turns away. I have tried to go to it, to meet it, but it always moves, and fades into nothing.

The more I see it, the sicker I feel. The blurrier my vision gets.

The cat

is clear, though. I can always see

the cat:

perfectly rigid and defined against the fuzzy diamond world behind it.

I realized I had stopped walking some time ago. I was sitting on the ground. How long had I been sitting on the ground?

I leaned against the
wall with my legs folded
beneath me.

The ground was cold.

I looked up. A white trail ran through the hallway,

from one end to another,

a human form, smeared and foggy.

That was from me.

I had been here before. I turned to my right and saw a puffy shape that looked just like me now, with folded legs, leaning against the wall.

I had been here before.

I couldn't remember being here before, but the trails were proof.

I had been here before.

I looked at my hands again, opaque, glittering, still spilling white trails as I moved.

I couldn't remember how I got these hands.

I couldn't think anymore. How did I get here?

Who was I with before? Where was I at?

I was with

was with

was with

and we were at the

at the

at the

I never came up with any good answers.

I thought I knew, but it was hanging off me, falling away, left in the trails of smoke my body spilled behind. I couldn't remember anything anymore.

And then something stirred in the silence. Loud, cacophonous scratching, echoing around the room, pounding against me.

I stood up and ran. The diamond world blurred around me. The hallway bent right, but the scratching was coming from the left. I leaned left, and the hall curved before me, shifting directions. I was in a den, with a small burning fire, crackling in the dark.

And there, standing before me
outlined in orange against the fire

the cat.

195:

A softly trembling green star bobbed nearby. I flew into it.

And then I was in a forest, standing between the trees. I was surprised I didn't fall this time. I fell most times.

It was a forest in autumn. Nothing special. Dead leaves. Lots of dead leaves. And massive trees I never knew the names of.

I walked, swishing through the leaves, breathing in the cool air. The forest was empty for miles, till fog tapered off the view in every direction. Just trees and leaves.

Where were the inhabitants? Were there inhabitants? I didn't see any.

I heard rustling behind and turned just in time to glimpse a shape darting from the trees, falling into the mounds of leaves.

I felt Déjà vu. Strong, nostalgic waves.

I remembered so much in an instant. Was this really...? Could it be?

I moved to where the shape collapsed into the leaves. They had been tossed aside, revealing a round dirt opening in the forest floor. I crouched down and peered in, but it was dark. Really dark. I couldn't see farther than a few feet.

I thought about it. Should I really do this?

Why not? It's not like I had anywhere to be.

I crawled in and stood up. A shape loomed in the dark before me.

"Uh... hey." It said.

My eyes adjusted, and I could make the form out more clearly. It was a frog person.

This was Hannah's chaasm. What were the chances? And the frog people were back.

Unless...

"Hey. How's it going?" I waved,

"Pretty good... who are you?"

"Not really important. What year is it?" I asked.

"W-What?"

"What year is it? My watch is busted."

"2025..." it muttered.

"Nice. Seeya in a couple years."

I sank into the dirt floor, spreading out, liquefying into the dark. No point sticking around.

I fell back into black. The dark. The abyss.

I saw a sad yellow star, drooping, sagging, spreading apart. I flew toward it.

My thoughts were drawn back to Hannah and her chaos. Those times. Wilson, Zeinhaert, Medy. Even Harold, eventually. Enjoying the work. Enjoying each other.

I couldn't be the only one left. That wasn't possible.

With all the technological fuckery and bullshit Eoghan was stirring up, I couldn't be.

Someone was alive, or maybe like me. Eoghan, at least.

And that'd give me something to do.

A goal.

Because this roaming was getting boring.

It was interesting. But what point did it serve? I wasn't time travelling. I couldn't change anything.

I was either in the present or just stuck in imprints. Strings of old data, pulled to the source and formed into a clog. Trash floating in the pool.

I noticed I was falling. I figured I would be because it was mostly falling.

Toward a highway.

A world of highways, interweaving, crossing over one another, some with four-lanes, some ten, some wider than I've ever seen, with dozens, thirty, fifty lanes. Hundreds, thousands of lanes, intermittently alternating directions, with two lanes going one way, one lane going another, six more going back, and on and on, forever. There were millions of cars, trucks, boats, planes, all speeding along, flying at insane speeds, taking exits, swapping lanes, wrecking together, smoldering, smoking. But traffic just kept moving along.

I approached the ground, barreling toward the back of a semi, and focused on passing through it.

I did, falling through the box-filled container, into the ground below, and then I was swimming again, drifting through the dark.

A far off gleam caught my eye. Shimmering, bright light in the distance, in a sea of dim colors. I closed the gap.

It was a perfectly circular white orb. I hadn't seen any white stars before. There were millions of colors out here, from drab brown to neon green to grey, but never pure white.

And none of them were perfect circles. I was intrigued.

I flew into it.

And then I was falling again.

Into a burnt orange sky, upward, toward an orb, which housed a labyrinth of putrid green stone. Hallways, some with ceilings, some without, extending in an immense network of paths, zig-zagging and swirling around aimlessly.

This was new.

A force pulled at me, surrounding me, dragging me into the orb. I fell in.

Toward the moss-covered stone ground. I landed hard against it. It didn't hurt, but I felt spread out for a moment, like pizza dough a muscled chef slapped on the counter. I came together again and stood up.

It was just as it looked from above. Grimy stone hallways, mingling together for as far as I could see.

I began walking.

I walked for a long time. Turning left, turning right, going straight. Everything looked the same. Nasty, green, slimy stone tunnels that led nowhere. I was about to give up and sink through the ground, zip off to somewhere else.

But then I saw orange light reflecting on the grimy stone ahead.

The hallway curved to the right, and I followed along. The light grew, spilling from a curved archway, filling the hall. The archway led into a small room.

I walked in. It was a little living area with a campfire and a bed and a table and some broken junk I didn't recognize.

And a cat. Really tall. Taller than any dogs. Taller than me. With black fur with red eyes.

It was staring at the hallway behind me.

"Hey, buddy. How're you?" I tried to break the ice.

It regarded me--looked me over, and then nodded toward a plate on the table.

It was a plate of food. Fish and french fries. Seeing it made me feel kind of hungry, but I knew I didn't need to eat. And a plate of fried fish and potatoes made in some slimy chaotic anomaly?

No. I didn't intend on eating that.

"Uh, no thanks." I said.

The cat began to purr. I could hear words below it, rumbling in a deep voice.

"You don't hunger?" The voice spoke in a low growl, like a cat would, I guess.

"No, thanks again."

I leaned into the floor to sink in. But I couldn't.

I couldn't sink in.

I couldn't leave.

"Not-so-fleshless, then? How did you come here?"

"Oh, you know." I said anxiously. "Just passing through."

"It is you." The cat leaned forward, nearly touching my face. "I didn't expect you."

"What? You know me?"

"I know you. Philip Smith." It purred again and leaned back to lick a paw.

"Uh... yeah."

"You're one of the ones playing God. But, no, never you. Maybe Wilson at first. But you both tried to help, in your feeble way. Didn't you?"

"I... guess. Yeah."

"Not a lech, nor an imposter. Something new. Maybe you could move worlds, Philip Smith."

"Maybe..."

I looked down.

There had been so much going on without me. So much had happened, and was happening, that I felt so far away from. No matter how strange my new reality got, it had a nasty habit of getting exponentially more bizarre.

At every step I would think: well, yeah--this right here is strange. The sideways door. The blobs. The phone. Strange.

Strange as it gets, probably.

And then boom.

I found the Wilsons.

Boom.

I found this cat.

The cat cocked its head.

"What ills you, Philip Smith?"

"A lot of things." I said. "A whole lot of different, fucked up things. First of which--who the hell are you? Are you an organism?"

"No, I am not from your Network. I am not important."

"Okay, that answered absolutely nothing." I sighed. "Where am I? Why can't I leave?"

"You're in my home. You can't leave because I don't will it."

"Oh."

"Have you seen the dark, Philip Smith?"

"The dark? That place with all of the stars?"

"No. The dark. I suppose you will know, soon enough. Where do you wish to go? How do you wish to live?"

I thought about it. A big red-eyed cat was asking me where I wanted to go. How I wanted to live. A big, mystical cat with some kind of omnipotent knowledge. Were there more like this cat? Was I going to be like this cat some day?

There were too many questions. I tried to focus on the important things.

"Well, I guess I want to find out what happened." I said.

"When?"

"After I got here. I know what happened to me, at least on this side. I died in Zeinhaert's chaasm. Went through a whole thing with a room and a sideways door. And since then, I've been wandering. Spilling between chaasms, fractured memories, bits of data. I think, anyway. I have no idea what happened. Is it really 2052?"

"Yes. In a manner of counting. You and Wilson entered Zeinhaert's chaasm. After that, you died. Wilson killed Eoghan. And then Wilson died a short time later. What else would you know?"

My stomach turned.

Wilson was dead. But so was Eoghan. I didn't know how to feel about it.

"Are there more like me? Is Wilson here too?" I asked.

"Oh. Yes. But most are not like you. There are many Wilsons. You have seen some, I think?"

"I have. What did he do?"

"I am not entirely sure. I do not know why, but that memory is blurry for me. Fuzzy. It does not matter. You wish to find one, 'like you?' I presume you mean with conscious thought. Closest to the Wilson you know. One who would recognize you."

"Yeah, that checks my boxes." I smiled.

"Very well. I think I know just the one. Goodbye again, Philip Smith."

A ball formed around me, glowing, blue, shimmering against the orange of the small campfire.

"Wait!" I yelled. "Who are you?"

"I am not important." It purred.

That was a lie. I had been wandering the Network for so long, and I hadn't met a single thing like this cat. Nothing so smart, powerful, independent. Outside the regulations of the Network.

"Come on! At least tell me your name!"

The cat looked down, shifting and breaking apart as the ball grew more solid and hard to see through. And then it rose its gaze to mine.

I stared into its pale red eyes.

It opened its mouth to speak for the first time, and I heard a familiar voice.

"My name is Medula."

The ball closed around me.

196:

It was Philip.

Standing there and looking like he hadn't aged a day, wearing that same beat-up Smooch T-shirt.

"Hey." He said.

"Philip? My... what...."

He hugged me. We just stood there, surrounded by rolling dunes of ash and dirt.

An hour could've passed. Maybe two.

I felt warm tears on my face. I didn't expect any of this again. Comfort. Familiarity.

A friend.

The massive black beast flew overhead, wailing out the same droning peal. Philip backed up and stared to the sky, watching It soar away. It's spotlight gaze still swayed from side-to-side, scouring far-off cliffs and mountains.

"Holy shit, what the hell is that?" Philip asked.

I looked at his face. His skin was moving so realistically, bending along creases and molding to his muscles as he talked. He was grinning.

"I-I'm not entirely sure." I said.

I faced him in silence for a moment. This was Philip. He was really here. Standing right in front of me. How was he here? Was he a fabrication? Was he just part of the loop?

Was I finally losing my mind?

"Philip. Are you real?"

"Yeah. But I should be the one asking you that. I already met a fisherman Wilson and a knight Wilson--one was a stubborn dick and the other tried to kill me. Are you real?"

I laughed. I couldn't remember the last time I laughed.

It was really him.

"Yes." I said. "As far as I can tell."

"Good. Now, what the hell is going on? How'd you end up here?"

"I don't know. It's a loop. And I've been stuck here for so long. You were here before, but it's... I don't know. It was like a dream. It wasn't you."

"Weird." He rubbed his lip.

"And that flying thing is here each time, in different forms. I have to kill It. But if I do, the loop restarts, and I forget. And for some reason I remembered that. I was chasing the thing like every other time, and then I remembered. So, I stopped and I sat here. I don't want to forget again. But I'm stuck. I can't figure out how to leave."

"Well, I may be able to help with that." Philip smiled.

"How?"

"I can travel between chaums. I have no idea how, but I can. I've been to thousands. Maybe I can get you out too."

"I... wow."

I scratched my chin, feeling through an unfamiliar stubble.

He could travel between chaums? How? There were ways, under certain circumstances, that data could leak. We witnessed it many times. But it all depended on the circumstances.

"How did you end up on the Network, Philip?"

"Oh, Zeinhaert's chaum. Dragon got me. And then I got moved around. Met a really big version of myself. Ended up in a loop for a really long time, just like you. But then it stopped. I don't know how. It just did. And I left."

"Zeinhaert's chaum? You don't remember anything after that?"

He shook his head, "Nope, not me. I got off at Zeinhaert's. But I do know that me is dead now."

"Oh. Yes. I'm sorry." I lowered my head.

I felt terrible about it. About everything.

He laughed.

"It's fine. You are too. And so is Eoghan. We're all dead, Wilson."

It hit me. I remembered, all at once.

I broke the connection point. I killed Eoghan. But did I die?

I didn't remember dying.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"I met something. Someone. A cat. It was a Network anomaly or something, but it said it wasn't from the Network. It helped me; brought me here. And told me some stuff. Not a lot. It was honestly kind of frustrating because I knew it wasn't telling me

everything. Either way, and I know this sounds strange--I think it was Medy. The cat. I think the cat was Medy."

His face was completely serious. More serious than I'd ever seen it. He believed that.

"Philip... that can't be. Medy's dead."

"I heard Medy's voice. The cat's name was Medula. Maybe it's a coincidence. Maybe it was fucking with me. But did you miss when I just said, 'We're all dead, Wilson'?"

I stopped.

I had no idea what to make of that. Of any of this.

Medy was a cat? On the Network? Medy didn't die on the Network. That didn't make sense.

But... did I die on the Network?

"Philip, did the cat say how I died?"

"No. Just that you did. I don't know how."

"What do you know?"

I had grabbed his shoulders. I realized I was being frantic. Pushy. I stepped back.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry. I've... I..."

I couldn't think of what to say. My mind was a wreck.

He put a hand on my shoulder.

"It's okay. I get it. I was there."

I tried to get ahold of myself. My mind swam with images, thoughts, and things I couldn't piece together. It was so hard to focus. But this was lucky. This was a boon. We could do something.

I had to focus.

I took a deep breath in.

And out.

"Okay." I said. "What do we know?"

"Let's see..." Philip grinned. "I found out what year it is. It's 2052. I met you twice, like I said. Loads of Wilsons out there, supposedly. And I just met Medula the cat in some micro-chausm, and she sent me here."

Micro-chausm? Loads of Wilsons? And what year? 2052?

I had so many questions.

"Wow." It was all I could say.

"Yeah."

2052. How could that be?

It was 2035, wasn't it? Had I been looping for twenty years?

"2052?" I asked.

"Yep." Philip shook his head and laughed. "Spent a long time circling the drain, I guess."

197:

The cab shook over a pothole.

I forgot twice why I was in the cab. Forgot once it was a cab at all. Thought maybe I was being kid napped.

Kidnapped.

I wasn't. I kept looking at the note in my hand.

It said some things I was having a hard time coming to terms with.

Wilson,

You're not being kidnapped.

You are insane.

You are in a cab.

You are going to an isolation facility.

You should arrive shortly after 9:00 PM.

You need isolation sphere remediation therapy.

You have to administer it yourself.

The address is 413 Weekender Ave.

The door lock is 8 1 6 9.

Second floor.

Good luck,

Wilson

Also - There are pills in your top right coat pocket.

Take one pill when the alarm goes off.

I turned the note over. It was cramped with scribblings, charts, shorthand. The bottom had another little section written like the front.

Don't forget:

Eoghan is dead.

The moon is gone.

You helped Max.

Time is running out.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

I pulled it out. The glowing blue cloud returned, portraying the time in big letters across my vision, 7:00 PM. Hundreds of notification bubbles shook around the cloud, all saying the same three words:

Take a pill.

I reached up to my shoulder pocket, just like the note said, and pulled the zipper. There were pills. Loose, white pills.

I took one and swallowed it.

198:

I woke under a rain, but it wasn't water. My thoughts trickled from above, spilling free and pooling together inside me, one drip at a time.

My mind became a lake, an ocean, stretching beyond what I thought was possible. It was boundless, unrestricted, open.

Free.

I wasn't clouded by age or misled by ambiguity. I knew things with a certainty that I had never felt. I knew things I couldn't remember, things I never knew, things that never happened.

I felt empowered. I felt whole.

I felt free. And it scared me to death.

I was afraid of everything. This place. That thing from before. Myself.

But presently I was most afraid of opening my eyes.

"You are ready, Medula."

The voice resounded, echoing through me like I was hollow--like I had been carved-out. I wanted more than anything to keep my eyes squeezed closed and pretend like I was asleep, roll over, and hide under the covers.

"Fear won't go away on its own."

I heard my mom's voice.

I was eight years old when she said that to me.

"It'll always be there. Right behind you. Forever. Until you face it."

I could see her. All of her, all at once. She was an infant born premature, a fresh graduate giving birth in a bathtub, a middle-aged woman with a bad spine, a corpse slowly descending into the earth. I knew more about her than I ever did. I had never felt so close to her, yet so far away.

I missed her so much. I missed her smile. Her voice. Her presence.

"You can do it, Medy. You can. I know you can. Now, it's time to turn around."

She was preparing me for the world then. Real life.

"You can do it, Medy."

And now she was preparing me for the next world. The next life.

"Turn around."

I opened my eyes.

I was peering down at my hands. I thought my view would be shattered again, spiraling over my millions of curling fingers, but I was looking at normal hands, with five fingers on each.

I began to take in the room around me.

I expected the same blend of angled, coalescing images.

I expected the disorienting bending of light, shapes, and space around me.

I expected to be sick.

But none of that happened.

And then I knew I had been afraid for nothing. And I had known it before I even opened my eyes, without even realizing it. I felt it.

I felt this world.

This world, this globe, this room. It was mine. It was me?

I could feel it under me, around me, in me. I felt a doorway here, impossibly wide, but perfectly symmetrical, and exactly the right size. There were windows as well. Some peered out over atmospheric views, others were magnified in on forests, cities, highways, anthills. I looked out from my windows over most of the world, and what I couldn't see, I felt.

It was pleasant. My room, me, and the world slowly spinning below.

And then there was the thing. The amalgamation of eyes and shapes and teeth and shadows, standing before me, watching me. But it wasn't an amalgamation anymore.

I saw it--truly saw it.

It had hooves, leading up to muscled legs, to a barrel chest, to a fur-covered body.

It was a red-eyed boar, big and brown, with thick black tusks.

But it was more than that. I felt its immense size and age--it was massive like the sky, and older than any star. Countless tendrils swirled around me, above me, through me. Its presence was like rushing water, flooding everywhere it could, into every orifice, every crack. Yet, even being so spread-out, so vast, I could feel its restraint. It was chained back.

For my sake? I couldn't imagine its true form.

It shuffled its hooves, as if to bring my attention around again, and then spoke.

"You have many questions."

"I guess." I heard myself speak.

I didn't recognize my voice. It was lower, and not really speaking as much as it was vibrating. I could feel the vibrations coursing up my body, leaving my mouth as waves, vapor, residual energy.

"Am I dead?"

"No. You are beyond something so minor."

"Then what?"

"You know it. You will know it. We do not participate in life or death. Just as we have been--we are."

"And what are we?"

"What are names, Medula? Focus not for the taint, as its necessity will dissolve."

"You don't have a name, then?"

"I do. But you cannot know it."

"Why? There's no reason to be condescending."

"Your perception is not yet reality, Medula. I have no such feeling. If you would know it, then know it. My name is PFFFFAAAFFFFFFFAAAAFFFFFFF--"

The boar broke apart, like before, into a painful discord of blurred sight and noise, shaking in wavelengths I couldn't understand. There were a hundred boars, all swirling around me, wailing in grating, piercing sirens.

I winced, and it shrunk back down, vibrating into its boar shape.

"I understand." I said. "I apologize."

"Remorse is of the flesh. Ignore it and it will fade. You will know my name with age. Continue your questioning."

"You said taint before. What did you mean?"

"Words. Language. They are tainted. A poor impersonation of speech by the more ingenuitive flesh. They bend meaning. They bend truth to their will."

"Not all of them. I've always told the truth."

"Before the flesh there was no truth. Only words which meant, and words which did not. The flesh birthed truth by circumstance when telling the first lie. The first taint."

"And you don't use words? Are we not using words now?"

"We are. But this is for you. For your comfort during growth."

"I still don't understand."

"Words are paint on a canvas. A landscape of valleys, mountains, skies, and seas, stolen away, copied down, made into a mockery. The painter cannot recreate the majesty of the landscape. The painter cannot recreate the beauty. The painter cannot recreate the life. The painter can only spread paint around. Imitating. Pretending."

"And... we don't?"

"We are not the painter. We are not the viewer. We are not the paint, or the brush, or the canvas. We are the landscape. And the flesh can only imitate us."

I didn't feel tainted.

That taint was me. It was the me I always knew.

Why would I want to change? I didn't want to change.

I was me. And I wanted to stay me.

"You only think you do. These are human emotions. Umbilical tethers, struggling to keep hold of you."

"You can read my mind?"

"You said it aloud, Medula."

"No. I thought it."

"And yet, where are we?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Your mind. We are in your mind, Medula. We are melded, in a way. I know what you know."

"And I don't know what you know because you're holding back."

"Yes. You feel my chains?"

"I do."

"So quickly. You are a promise. We await your growth, Medula."

It began to fade before me, shimmering like a mirage.

"Wait. Why did you do this to me?"

"Do not mistake me for chaos. Chaos pushes, pulls. But unlike the flesh, we ride its tides. We weather them and keep on. I will return. Think it, and I am here."

I felt its heavy tendrils withdraw completely, unravelling, sliding from within me as it pulled itself away. The air shimmered once more, and then I was alone.

In my mind.

I thought I had a bed. My big brown bed, with thick satin sheets.

And then it was before me, looking just as I remembered. I laid down and relished in the comfort.

And slept.

199:

The receptionist regarded me.

“Mr. Spillane? The physician will see you now. Down the hall at the end. Room RXS109.”

“Thanks.”

I stood, crossed the waiting room, and pushed through the squeaky blue door to the back. I was excited. Nervous, but excited. Part of me missed the chamber. I missed the invigoration. The energy.

The long hallway was dark, cast in dim green, lit by a handful of flickering electronic wall lights. I had never seen anything like them. They were new. And loud--their combined whirring and buzzing reverberated like a car engine in the thin hall.

I passed dozens of identically-spaced, locked doors, all with a little plaque above the handle that read:

ENGAGED

I kept on, all the way to the end of the hall, to the last door. It was emblazoned with the room number in gold, "RXS109."

The handle plaque read:

AVAILABLE

As I reached for the handle, the door swung open, revealing a curly haired young woman. I hadn't seen her before. Or any of the current staff, for that matter. A lot could change in seven years.

But something about her seemed familiar.

“Mr. Spillane?” She asked with a smile.

Why was she so familiar?

“Yep. And you are?”

“My name is Diane. I'll be administering your procedure today. Come on in. Have a seat on the black chair.”

I wanted to inquire about the new lights in the hallway, but I was more interested in her. I remembered why she looked familiar. She was a carbon copy of my last physician, Marcia. Had the Institute started some kind of people-copying experiment? If so, I wanted to be involved.

I moved to the chair and sat down, filling the small room with leathery groaning as I tried to get comfortable.

This whole room was new--it was a kind of antechamber before the main test chamber, which I could see through a wide glass pane on the far wall. That chamber seemed unchanged since my last visit. It had the same white, padded walls, and was empty save that coffin-shaped wooden box in the center. The same box from seven years ago. Just seeing it made my chest flutter.

Diane moved to a small filing cabinet, pulled out two manila folders, and laid them on her desk. She opened one and pulled a sheet from the other.

"You look familiar, Diane." I said. "What's your last name?"

"Allen." She said, scribbling on the paper.

"Allen? Related to a Marcia Allen?"

"Yes, that was my mother. Did you know her?"

"I didn't realize we were running a family business. She did my first procedures. How's she doing?"

Diane looked down, "She passed away last year."

Of course. Now I had to fake sympathy. And she wasn't even a copied person. Just a daughter. Nothing interesting about that.

"Damn. My condolences. She was a lovely woman." I lied.

"Thank you. Yes, she was."

She slid the sheet back into its folder, pinched another to her clipboard, and then rolled her chair over to me.

"Alright, just a quick check and then we'll get you in the chamber. It looks like we haven't seen you since August of 1930. Institute work?"

"Of a sort. I had business in China."

"Oh, really? I heard it's lovely."

She began running through basic tests, checking my pupils, peering into my ears, my throat.

"Not the first time I've heard that." I laughed. "And I'm not sure who's saying it, but they haven't been to the China I've been to. Because the place is a damn pigsty."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm just glad to be home." I tried to give my best genuine smile.

It even felt fake, so I can't imagine how it looked.

She strapped a thick cuff to my arm, and then looped a belt around it and buckled it down.

“Alright, you’ll feel a slight squeeze.”

She pumped a little ball and the cuff inflated, tightening sharply around my upper arm. She held it for roughly thirty seconds, scribbled some numbers on her paper, and then released the pressure and unfastened the buckle.

“A picture of health, Mr. Spillane. Have you been briefed on the procedure?”

“No.”

“Well, we’re going to drop you in for a quick session today. Eight hours. After that we’ll run three periods of twenty-four-hour submersion starting tomorrow. If those go well, then we’ll discuss more long-term endeavors. Sound good?”

“Yep. One question, though.”

“Yes?”

“Does it still do the raisin thing?”

“Raisin thing? I’m afraid I--” She flipped through one of her folders.

“It made me crave raisins.” I said.

“Oh. Here we go. Side effect of long-term submersion. You’re the only case of newly developed food cravings. Do you still crave raisins?”

“No, actually. It wore off pretty quickly. Just wondering if it’ll happen again. Because I really don’t like raisins.”

“Every patient is different. We’ve made minor changes to field generation, but the procedure and the device are both the same. So, I’d say it’s likely.”

“Damn.” I muttered.

“Would you like to cancel?”

“Cancel? No. That’s fine. I’ll just eat raisins for a while, I guess. Better than growing a third arm or something.”

I thought she might at least crack a smile, but she didn’t, and instead buried her face in her paperwork.

After a while she looked up and clicked a button on her desk.

“Let’s get you settled.” She said.

The door to the chamber slid open, and I made my way to the wooden box. I climbed in and folded my arms like I was in a coffin. It was as stiff as always. The door to the chamber closed, and then Diane appeared in the wide window.

I heard her voice in my ears.

“Alright, Mr. Spillane. Ready?”

“Eoghan.”

“W-What?” She asked.

“Mr. Spillane is a bit too formal. Call me Eoghan. And yes, I’m ready.”

“Alright, Eoghan. Engaging stasis.”

The field crackled on, and then it was all around me, painting the room in opaque blues and purples.

The world slowed down,

and I felt that cold creep in again.

The deathly cold.

Then, slowly,

I felt

it all

trail

away

.

200:

“Medy, I'm so sorry.”

Harold was a mess, and had been blubbering and apologizing ever since we got back. I had to tell him it was okay, and that I was fine, even though I probably wasn't.

If I told him the truth, then he'd never stop these hysterical episodes. He'd never stop sobbing and apologizing. He'd never calm down.

“Harold, again. It's fine. I'm fine. We're okay.”

“B-But what if you weren't? And what if--what if you died? What if I killed you? I'm so sorry, Medy. It'll never happen again. Please don't take me off the team. Please. I will get better. I promise. I will.”

“Harold, don't listen to Philip. He was just upset. We're not taking you off the team. People make mistakes. I've made my share. So has Wilson, and so has Philip, even though he might not admit it. Wilson just wants to train you personally for a while.”

He fiddled with his thumbs for a moment and then looked up.

“Medy. How can I make this up to you?”

He had calmed down a bit, but his face was still red and puffy, drenched with tears, and adorned with a trail of dried snot under his nose. I felt bad for him. But what could I say? He made a mistake.

He had to live with it. Learn from it.

He had to move forward.

“Harold, please--” I began, but was interrupted by the break room door swinging open.

Philip walked in, looked at Harold, made eye contact with me, and then turned around and walked right back out. Harold burst into tears again.

“Hey, Harold--stop. It's okay.” I touched his arm.

He pulled away.

“No. It's not! I could have killed you!” He screamed and then ran from the room.

I jumped up and tried to chase him, but he was too fast. He sprinted down the hall, toward the stairs, and knocked into Philip, who was walking the same direction.

“Hey, slow down!” Philip yelled after him.

But Harold was gone. He descended the steps and was out in the parking lot.

“What the hell was that?” Philip looked back at me.

“He's taking it kind of hard.” I walked up.

We stood on the balcony, watching Harold as he ran to his car, got in, and sped off.

"He's taking it hard?" Philip laughed. "What? We could've been extracted. Fuck him."

"It was a mistake. He was afraid."

"I get that. But we've all been afraid. We've all made mistakes. We don't abandon our partners. We don't abandon our team. And until he learns that he needs to stay on desk duty. I'm not comfortable going in with him."

"Let Wilson take care of it." I said.

"I will. And I plan on talking to him about it when he gets here."

"Oh, he's coming back?"

"Yeah. Supposed to be in tonight." He gave me a quizzical look. "Didn't I tell you that?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's been a long week. Why so soon? I thought he'd be gone until next month."

"For you, dummy."

"Me?"

"Your birthday?" He rose an eyebrow.

I checked my watch. I forgot.

My birthday was tomorrow.

"Oh, god. I completely forgot!"

"You got any jobs coming up?" He pulled his phone out and began absentmindedly scrolling through.

"Nah. Free till tomorrow morning. Taking a little break. I was going to make some food, but then Harold came in all teary-eyed."

"Wanna go grab something?"

"Yeah, sure."

201:

I dropped to my knees, swiveled so my back would land against the trunk as I fell, and sighed in exhaustion. My heavy breath condensed on my beard and froze in an instant.

I couldn't walk anymore.

I couldn't feel anything anymore. Even the cold itself slipped away. The shaking stopped, and then I started to get warmer. Was my body heating me up in some kind of last ditch defense? No. Probably not.

I was probably just dying.

And then, leaning on my tree in the depths of the Alaskan tundra, I felt it, like I never thought I would: remorse for my actions.

People always spoke of it. Your life flashes before your eyes, and you're shown all the good and the bad you've done in this world. You get to see every moment, every memory. I was disappointed to find out that wasn't happening. I was looking forward to a heroic montage of my exploits, my achievements. But nothing was flashing before my eyes, except swimming white circles, dots, and lines--hallucinations as I faded.

As I froze to death.

My thoughts were oozing, slowed by the cold just like the rest of me, crawling from a syrup bottle. And instead of flashing heroics, I slowly began to see the faces of the people I wronged.

I saw my mom. Crying, begging me for help. She put her faith in me, expected me to take care of her, knew in her heart that I would be there for her when she needed me, but I left her in that room, for years, until she died alone. I proved her wrong.

I saw Mr. Niu. Beaten and robbed, bloody, twisted-up below me with that look of horror on his face. He trusted me. He put his faith in me. He taught me so much, and he was only ever trying to help. He thought I was a friend. He was proven wrong as well.

I saw Haggo. The poor bastard. The poor, innocent bastard. Never did anything wrong to me. He extended every generosity he had, and did everything he could to make me comfortable, for no reason other than to be kind to someone in need. And I acted like it was given. And spit in his face. He thought he was doing the right thing, probably even as he sank into the ocean. I proved him wrong too.

I remembered the mind beer he gave me. I based so much of my life on that vision. But I wasn't shot. I wasn't being torn apart by a whirlpool. It was just bullshit after all.

Because I was going to die here.

I saw so many other faces. So many other men, women, children, family, friends. So many dead. Left behind. Abandoned, ignored, double-crossed. And I felt remorse.

For the first time since I was a kid.

Back then I thought I'd be a hero.

I thought people would love me. Look up to me. Want to be me.

I thought I'd save the world.

But I was a monster.

And now I was freezing to death. Like I deserved.

A tear rolled free and froze to my cheek.

I'm sorry.

Mom. Mr. Niu. Haggo. Rebecca.

I'm sorry for who I was.

I closed my eyes. I deserved this.

I embraced death.

And then I heard a noise.

A shuttering, mechanical, pounding, clapping noise. A sound only a machine could make.

I opened my eyes just as a helicopter dropped into my view, touching down on the permafrost before me.

I was alive?

202:

I stepped out of the break room, meandered down the hall, the stairs, and through the parking lot.

Medy's party was in full swing, and I had never seen her so happy. But I didn't feel welcome. I wasn't. I could tell. From Philip's unbreaking glare, to Wilson treating me like a kid, to everyone else keeping their distance, and not even making small talk. Medy said maybe three words to me all day.

I messed up. Really bad.

I let my fear get the best of me. Like a stupid little kid.

I abandoned my team. My friends? They probably wouldn't call me a friend.

People that relied on me, people that trusted me.

"You're a piece of shit, Harold."

I could still hear Philip's voice. The anger behind his words. He hated me. And he was right to.

Because I messed up.

And I couldn't fix it.

I couldn't go back and make it right.

I had to leave. I thought I would be able to face them. I thought I could power through. Be a man. Ignore the pangs of self-doubt and shame.

But I couldn't.

I just had to leave.

I got in my car and I drove. Out of the parking lot, down Paradise to 215. Through town, merging over to I-11. Heading out. Far. To anywhere else.

There were no other cars on the road. Just me, the white lines, and the dark of early morning. I passed things I didn't recognize. Lights. Billboards. Homes full of people living normal lives. But I kept driving. Passed Boulder City. Passed the Hoover. Into Arizona. Into the country.

The world was a blend of dark shapes and blurs. The clock said midnight, and then one, and then two. I heard a soft ding and absently saw the low fuel light illuminate on my dash, but I kept going.

It was all I could do to feel better.

Put in some distance.

Between me and my problems.

Me and... my friends.

It wasn't working. I kept thinking about it.

I slowed down and pulled over to the shoulder. My friends. I was doing it again. I was abandoning them again. I hadn't learned anything. I was just running away. Hiding from my problems. Just like in school. Run. Hide. Alone, but safe.

Why keep delaying the inevitable?

I had to go back.

Face my mistakes.

I had to learn how to learn from them.

I slid the gearshift back into drive, merged over, and pulled into the left lane to turn around. There was a cut up ahead where I could U-turn. I slowed, flipped on the blinker, and then heard a clunk, and noticed the steering wheel had become heavy and hard to turn. The engine chugged a few times, and quickly sputtered out, rolling the car to a stop.

I was out of gas.

203:

I knocked three times and then stepped back off the small porch.

A blue bird flew overhead, landed on the roof, and chattered down at me like it owned the place. It was loud and annoying. A squeaky bike tire.

"Shut up." I waved it off.

It flew away, bouncing on the wind, up the street.

And then the door opened.

"Hello--" And there she was.

Rebecca.

"Can I... help... Eoghan?"

"Hey." I said.

She just stared at me in silence, looking all sad and scared. Not the tears of joy I was expecting.

"I'm back."

"I--I thought you died." She murmured.

"What? Me?" I laughed. "You kidding?"

"Eoghan. I'm so glad you're okay. My god." She smiled and hugged me, but it was brief.

She pushed me back and looked me over. Scrutinized me with teary eyes.

"Where have you been?" She asked.

"Stranded. In China."

"When did you--China? You were stranded? For so long? Eight years?"

"Yeah. Institute work."

"You didn't say anything." She looked down. "You didn't tell me you were leaving."

"I didn't think I had to." I sighed. "It wasn't supposed to last eight years."

Eight years. We hadn't seen each other for eight years. And five minutes into the conversation, she was already doing this again. Making it out like I was the bad guy. Making me apologize for living my life. It made me regret even coming over.

I shouldn't have bothered.

She wiped a tear and looked up at me.

"You didn't have to do anything. Always you. You first, I know. But... just... why? We were going to get married. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What the hell is this?"

"You were gone for eight years, Eoghan. You just left. I went to your work, and they said they didn't know where you were. None of your friends knew. Your mother? My god. No one knew. We all thought you died. We mourned you. There was a vigil."

"Really?" I held up my arms. "No, hey, how are you? I missed you? How was China? Nothing? Straight into this."

She stared at me for a moment and then shook her head.

"I did miss you." Her voice grew rigid. "I did. I mourned you."

"Thanks. Thank you for mourning me." I slapped my thighs.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She was pissed now.

"I just thought maybe you'd be happy to see me. You still love me, right?"

"I... I'm glad you're well, Eoghan. But I have a life. I have a husband. Two little girls. I don't need this."

"You don't need this." I repeated.

"No. I don't." She said flatly.

"Really? You don't love me? Who's your husband?"

"You can't just drop in my life whenever you want, Eoghan. I did love you. Yes. But you died. And I moved on. I'm sorry."

"Alright. Fine."

I walked off. She said something. Called to me from behind.

But I didn't care to hear it.

She'd regret this.

204:

I held my phone up to the sky, silhouetting it against the moon.

No signal. Still.

The mile markers told me I had walked a mile from the car. Toward town.

And still nothing.

It was cold. And late. I left my car at two-thirty? My phone said it was quarter to four.

A pair of headlights appeared, and then a van passed by, heading toward where I came from--toward my car, which was still in the road, dead in the left lane. I hoped they would see it.

I had driven for hours. There was no telling how long it would take to walk back to some kind of civilization. I couldn't even remember passing a gas station. I just had to walk until I found service. But who could I call? Medy? Wilson? A cab?

Did I even have any money?

I heard rustling in the brush right near the highway, just a few feet away. I squinted, struggling to make anything out in the miasma of dark static.

But it was an empty field. Grass. Some brush. A few trees.

Nothing was there.

Wind blew by, only slightly cooler than the hot summer air.

And then I heard a soft click, like a twig snapping.

Something was there.

"Hello?"

My voice called out like a child's. Scared. Shaky.

The rustling stopped.

I stood there for what felt like ten minutes, breathing as softly as possible, listening intently to the swaying of the grass in the dull wind.

Nothing again.

Was it an animal?

Was I imagining it?

I kept walking at a much more brisk pace, stare fixed on my phone.

Come on. Service.

Just a bar. Please. Come on.

I was running now. Sprinting along the shoulder of the highway.

No signal.

Nothing.

I stopped to catch my breath, and looked up at the sky--the moon. It was almost morning. Thin strips of pink were forming on the horizon. I glanced down at my phone again. There was a dot in the corner of the triangle. I had service.

But then I heard a scrape on the concrete behind. Soft. Like a leather shoe. And a voice spoke, low and gravelly, saying something hard to hear.

Was it, "...grab the legs...?"

I was frozen in fear.

And then something was around my legs, and I was falling.

I hit the ground hard, face-first.

Splashing pain, white.

Dark.

205:

And there they were.

The dwarf with half an eye was right.

It wasn't a genetic mutation lab or anything of the sort. It was a god damned cult-- probably satanic, judging by the sigil of Baphomet engraved on the stones of the basement floor.

There were eight figures standing in a stone circle, all dressed in black coats and poorly made masks. I assumed the masks were meant to represent some kind of animal, but from where I stood they just looked like indiscriminate lumps of paper. Maybe they were supposed to be sideways mountains. Maybe dogs. I couldn't tell.

They had really stocked up on decorations as well; somebody brought red candles, ceremonial blades, and even a tied-up naked lady on a table. The whole shebang.

I almost laughed at it. People still believed in this junk.

I ordered my brainwaves to the top of the steps behind me, just out of view. Just in case.

"Hey guys." I yelled down at the cultists.

They looked up in unison.

"Salir." One in the front whispered.

"Get out."

"Nope. We found your fella, Filipe. Not a solid choice. He told me where to find you. But he couldn't tell me anything about what he had with him. And I'd like to know how you got that."

They just stared at me.

"Come on. You know what I'm talking about. How'd you guys get that dead baby?" I asked.

They looked between themselves, standing in silence.

"Okay. No comprende? Uh..."

I tried to remember what little Spanish I knew.

If only the translator worked both ways. It'd probably save some lives.

"Muertos baby. Babe. Muerto. Fucking. Muertos babino?"

My broken Spanish wasn't working. They began walking toward me, approaching the base of the steps--a couple were brandishing their flashy ceremonial knives.

"How'd you get the god damned baby? None of you can speak English? Really? Come on!"

Nothing. Just blank stares. They kept marching up.

"Last chance." I said.

They were halfway up the steps now, nearing my landing at the top.

"Fine."

I commanded my brainwaves forward, who promptly descended the steps before me and opened fire.

The eight robed figures fell, some discarding their masks, tumbling down the steps, spilling their blood everywhere. I called the IBWs off and had them take point above.

"Good work, fellas."

I began searching the bodies.

Their skin was horribly scarred, probably from burns, and they were completely hairless. All of them. I checked each one, lifting their masks and shirts and pants, searching for IDs, or paperwork, or anything at all, really. But they were all the same: scarred, bald, wearing shoddy, handmade clothes without pockets, and completely empty-handed.

Up close I could tell what their masks were supposed to be. They were goat faces. Shitty, papercraft goat faces.

Baphomet. Goat masks. Black robes. Red candles. A naked girl and a sacrifice ritual. It didn't get more cliché--

Oh shit. That's right.

The girl.

I descended the steps, heading for the table in the center.

She was still tied up, partially cast in darkness.

"Hey, miss." I said.

And then I noticed the pool of blood stretching from her side, and the big red hole above it.

Damn. She got hit by a stray.

"God dammit, guys. Watch the rebounds. We got collateral here."

"Yes, sir." IBW-eight spoke up, just like he was programmed.

It was too late to try and save her. She probably wouldn't know anything anyway. I kept searching.

The room was mostly empty, save the candle stands and the big stone table. I checked each of the barren shelves lining the wall, and under the chairs stacked in the corners. But the place was as barren as the bodies.

I turned to head back up the stairs, but stopped when something caught my eye--a small black blob tucked under the bottom step of the stairwell. I pulled it out.

It was a black drawstring bag. I turned it over, spilling the contents on the stone floor: coins, another dagger, a notebook, and some rolled-up parchment. I took the notebook and the parchment, and tossed the bag.

The notebook was in Spanish, filled with scribbles and goofy little drawings just like the sigil on the floor. They were cultists. Real life cultists. It didn't make any sense. How did a few hack cultists get their hands on a reincarnated dead baby? They certainly didn't summon it via some satanic ritual. Someone else was responsible for that baby. Someone smart. And I wanted to know who.

I unrolled the parchment. It was a letter from a long time ago. Crumbling and folded to hell and back. I expected it to fall apart in my hands, but it didn't. It was also written in Spanish, and in the center was a realistic sketch--a drawing of a cave with the word Talgua written underneath.

The bottom was dated 1576.

I needed to get this stuff translated.

206:

Wilson took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Right.” I coached him. “Now, just imagine you’re slipping through.”

“But--wait.” He opened his eyes. “How am I supposed to know where to go? It’s a bunch of stars in a void? Can we talk out there? Will we even see each other?”

I hadn’t thought of that.

“I... don’t know. Maybe not. Probably not. Shit.”

“Maybe I can go out and come back?” Wilson ran his fingers through his stubble.

“Maybe, but I was disoriented the first few times. You might not be able to find this place again.”

“Oh.” He bit his lip.

Reality began to sink in.

I had no idea what I was doing.

We were helpless. I could travel between chausms, but that was about it. Doubts formed in my mind. The path forward didn’t look like much of anything anymore.

I had only planned as far as finding Wilson.

And that was done. Check.

Now what?

I had no idea.

I realized I had been relying on Wilson to give me the answers. To solve my problems.

Just like in real life, I never stopped to think about the logistics.

Like my plan. My half-baked, broken concept to destroy the Network.

Could we even do that from inside?

“Philip?” Wilson was staring at me.

“What?” I realized I had drifted off.

“You should see your face.” He smiled. “What are you thinking? What’s wrong?”

I thought about not telling him. I didn’t want him to go all weird again. But I needed reassurance.

“Is it possible to destroy the Network?” I asked.

“From in here?”

"Yeah."

"Maybe. It's easy to bring individual servers down. But if we get into a wide access point, there are ways to manufacture larger outages. Not sure how permanent that would be, though."

"Really?"

"Yes." He stretched his legs out. "If we could get to somewhere like the flower, and if we could access interface controls, and if we got admin rights in one of the few chaums with branching points, and if Network security protocols haven't changed in the last twenty years, we could probably do some real damage. That's a lot of ifs though."

It was.

I sighed.

"We have to find that cat." I said. "I have no idea how. But I think that's our only option. Maybe it can help us."

"Oh, yes! Do you think we can? Was there something special about the cat's star? How did you find it?"

"It's a solid white circle. I just stumbled into it. And I have no idea where we are right now. The void is endless. We'll never find it by searching blindly."

"Hmm." Wilson sat back down.

I tried to think of a plan. But my mind was blank.

I was useless. And this was pointless.

We were just going in circles.

And we'd never come up with anything.

"What's that?" Wilson was staring at my chest.

"What?" I looked down.

"In front of you." He pointed.

I saw it. A black dot. And then there were two. And three.

Black dots sporadically popped into existence, filling the air. Hundreds.

They grew, expanding around us. Holes in reality, merging together, forming a wide, enveloping blanket. And then we were wrapped in black. I could only make out Wilson's form, still sitting on the ground next to me. The black faded to green, and then to stone.

"What in--" Wilson stood up.

It was the dingy labyrinth. We were standing in a den, submerged in the warmth and orange light of a softly crackling campfire.

The cat sat before us. I stepped forward.

"Wow. Hey. Thank you. We really need you."

It nodded.

"But first--you kind of left me on a cliffhanger last time."

It just stared at me.

"Medula." I said. "What does that mean?"

"That is my flesh name." It finally spoke, vibrating in rumbling purrs.

"You have other names?" Wilson asked.

"One. But you couldn't hear it."

"My god." I chuckled. "Coy. You really are Medy."

"I have been known by that name." It said.

"But are you our Medy?" Wilson asked. "Do you remember us?"

The cat stared at Wilson for a moment, and then opened its mouth and spoke using its voice. Medy's voice.

"Wilson. It's nice to see you again."

"Y-Yes..." Wilson teared up. "Likewise."

"Are you really Medy, though?" I asked. "Anyone can take a face or a voice. Are you really her?"

"I am her from then, but I am not." The cat turned to me, speaking again in low, guttural purrs. "That was a lifetime ago. Before I was born."

"So, you do remember us? You remember working with me and Wilson?"

"I know you more than the feeble memories of my flesh. I do... remember. But those memories are pieces. Fractions of a whole. Of how I see you now."

"Okay." I scratched my chin. "If you're our Medy, then answer this: what sandwich did I eat for the first time after Marcus' chaasm?"

"A patty melt." It purred.

It was her.

I kept on.

"Why are you on the Network, Medy? How? I saw the footage. You got sucked into a black hole."

"That was my rebirth. I have lived a long time since then. A long life. My kind cast me away and I was forced to leave my home. I could've gone anywhere, but I chose to come here and help those tormented and lost in your machine."

"Your kind? Your home? What?" I asked.

"You said you needed me, Philip." The cat's growling took an impatient edge. "What do you need?"

207:

I walked into my office and did a double-take at my chair. There sat a scrawny, sickly man, clad in a pallid lab coat. The lab rat.

"This letter is very interesting, Eoghan." He moaned.

His voice always sounded so god damned grating, like it caused him severe pain to produce his words. I tried to contain my frustration.

"Oh yeah?" I asked.

The lab rat stood, scratched his nose, and pushed his glasses up, looking more like a weasel than ever. He hunched over and carefully stretched the letter out on my desk.

"Yep. It was written and signed by Pedro de Alvarado, and addressed to somebody named Jeromín. That part took some digging. Jeromín is most likely a man named Juan of Austria, a bastard child of Roman Emperor Charles the fifth. Jeromín had a solid relationship with his legitimate half-brother, the king of Spain, and lived in Spain for most of his life. I don't really understand the connections here, but I have several theories--"

"No, thanks. What's the 'very interesting' part?"

"Pedro de Alvarado. The governor of Honduras from 1532 to 1540. He died in 1541. Trampled by a horse. Therein lies a contradiction."

"It's dated 1576." I nodded to the parchment.

"Exactly. How did a man that died in 1541 write and sign a letter thirty-five years later? He would've been ninety-one years old. In 1576, when the average lifespan was about forty. I mean, this is the craziest thing you've ever brought me."

"Alright. Sure. It's interesting. What's the letter about?"

"A cave in Honduras. Talgua. He calls it the boca de dios."

"Mouth of god." My translator crackled along.

"He writes about glowing skulls and God's will, and then goes on for most of the letter about the religious privilege God has given him. But then he describes the cave, and describes it like some kind of energy source. He heavily implies it's how he lived so long."

"Now, that's interesting." I smiled.

A font of energy.

Maybe that's where the dead baby came from.

"Then I guess I'm headed to Honduras."

208:

Whispers.

I was hearing whispers from the windows, but they weren't spoken words. They were emotions. Feelings. Sentiments. Incomplete, and still active strands of contemplation.

Peoples' thoughts. And they were loud.

At first I searched for a way to tune them out, but they were only getting louder, compounding and overlapping as more and more voices joined the chorus. There would be no silencing them. I would probably hear them forever--scared little lonely souls, each calling out against their will. They were all thinking their private thoughts to themselves. Silent prayers to their Gods.

But their Gods weren't listening.

I was listening. And the others were too.

Their whole little lives were stains on our world. On us.

Blood on the pavement.

I was beginning to understand what the thing meant before when it spoke of the flesh. I was beginning to recognize the difference between that flesh and me. They were weak. And I hated to admit it, but they were insignificant.

And they knew it.

I could hear the desperation in their voices now. I could hear their determination. They kept on, most of them, against all the odds--smothered little bells, still ringing beneath the drowning cacophony of the universe.

I swelled in admiration of their pursuit. Their struggle.

Their weakness made them strong.

But then I suddenly felt stifled. By the presence.

"Medula." The thing was back.

My father was back.

"Hello."

"The tremors have faded. It is time."

"For what?"

"Your pilgrimage."

"Pilgrimage. To where?"

"That is not for me to decide. Your reality is just that. Do you need to prepare?"

I looked around my room, myself. There was nothing for me here.

"No. I'm ready."

"Very well. Think it and I will be there."

"How will I know when to come back?"

"You will. Go now, Medula, child of the universe. Go and stake your claim."

The room was gone.

In an instant, I was plucked from my womb and tossed, spinning, violently exploding into space. I felt my gargantuan self, fiery, molten, an unstable wave, tumbling through planets and stars. Entire galaxies fell apart in my wake, scattered as cosmic dust. Eventually I slowed and rolled to a stop.

I saw chaotic flashes of light, small dots growing smaller, imploding, and then erupting outward into massive globes. I saw speeding planets form, age, develop, and then crumble and form anew. Comets and moons and planets and rocks and dust and stars all spun by, slamming into themselves, breaking apart, rebuilding, swirling in a storm. It was all moving too fast.

What could I do?

I reached out, and I felt myself stretching away.

I reached out and grabbed the spinning, chaotic mess, and it instantly seized in place.

I could do a lot.

209:

I stared at
the

door.

It was an obstacle.

I knew what doors were generally for, and I imagined I'd have to use this door in a similar way.

But it was an obstacle.

How could I move passed it?

There had been obstacles in my life before.

I couldn't remember how I got passed them. I couldn't remember anything. Except the door.

The door.

I looked

down

at my hand.

I was holding a note.

I remembered that. I wrote this note for myself.

I read it again.

Wilson,

You're not being kidnapped.

This part was confusing to me, because I didn't think I was.

You are insane.

You are in a cab.

I considered it. Was I insane? That seemed right. But I wasn't in a cab. What did that mean?

You are going to an isolation facility.

You should arrive shortly after 9:00 PM.

I checked the time. My phone was already in my other hand.

I stared into a blue ball of light, which sprayed broken reflections of the screen, littered with copies of the large-numbered clock.

They all read 9:14.

I looked up at the building before me. Was this the isolation facility?

You need isolation sphere remediation therapy.

You have to administer it yourself.

That was familiar. I administered isolation sphere remediation therapy thousands of times. I knew how to do that.

The address is 413 Weekender Ave.

The door lock is 8 1 6 9.

I looked up at the door. There was a pin pad on the side, near the handle.

I could use the code on the door.

Second floor.

Good luck,

Wilson

Also - There are pills in your top right coat pocket.

Take one pill when the alarm goes off.

I found the pills. There were ten, maybe more. But what was that about an alarm? There was no alarm. I decided not to take a pill.

I turned the note over. It was cramped with scribbles, charts, shorthand. The bottom had another little section written like the front.

Don't forget:

Eoghan is dead.

The moon is gone.

You helped Max.

Time is running out.

I remembered.

Faintly, and only for a moment. I remembered long enough to set myself a goal. I had to open this door.

I approached the pad. It was cold. It had a little visor--a case to protect it from the weather. I lifted it up, pushing against the stiffness, and accidentally snapped it off. I looked at the broken cover in my hand. The keypad was no longer protected.

I felt bad for destroying something.

Something that was meant to protect.

But I couldn't fix it.

And I couldn't waste time feeling bad about it. Time was running out.

I typed in the numbers, glancing back to the note just to make sure I pushed the right buttons. Eight. One. Six. Nine. The nine button got stuck, but when I pressed the enter key, the pad illuminated with green light, and I heard a heavy clunk behind the door.

I reached up and turned the handle.

It opened.

210:

I knocked on the door. Pounded on it. I hoped she was home.

It opened, and there she was.

Rebecca.

"Listen, I'm so sorry." I grabbed her wrists. "I fucked up. You have to leave."

"Eoghan? Let me go."

"You have to leave, right now. Get your stuff and go. Leave town."

"What?" She tried to pull away. "Get off of me, Eoghan! Stop!"

"Shut up and listen to me!" I yelled and slapped her across the face.

She stared at me in disbelief.

"Listen. I was mad. And I wasn't thinking. After I left, I got drunk and... I... made a mistake. You're in danger if you stay in this house. Believe me. You have to leave."

"What are you talking about? What did you do?"

She started to cry.

How could I describe this?

How could I make her understand?

I decided to be honest.

"Do you remember Johnny?" I asked.

"What?"

"Johnny Foster. The security guy from my job. The one who died."

"I--Yes." She nodded. "What does--"

"He didn't die. He faked his death. Long story short--he's an assassin. And last night I signed a contract with him."

"You... what?" She squinted.

That face. She didn't believe me.

"I'm not lying to you. I have no reason to lie to you. You can hate me all you want. I deserve it. And after today you won't see me again, I promise. But just leave. Grab what you need and leave town. I can give you money--I can give you anything you need. I have ten thousand dollars in cash; it's yours. Just go. Tonight. Please."

She glanced inside for a moment. Was she considering it?

I hoped.

She turned back to me.

"No."

She said one word but her eyes said so much more.

Maybe she didn't believe me. Maybe she didn't care.

But I needed her to understand.

"You're not listening to me." I kept on. "If you stay in this house Johnny's going to come here and he's going to kill your husband in front of you. And then he's going to take you. And no one will be able to help you, Rebecca. Please. Listen to me. You have to leave. You have to--"

She held up a hand and shook her head.

"Stop. I said no, Eoghan. To you. To this."

Her voice was heavy. She spoke with the resolute edge of a made-up mind.

I couldn't do anything.

"Listen. Please. I can't stop him now. I can't. Please, I don't want anything to happen to you. Just leave."

I begged her. I was crying. I couldn't remember the last time I cried.

"You don't want anything to happen to me? You put a hit out on me, you fucking idiot. Shut the hell up."

I had never seen her this way.

"Rebecca--"

"Leave." She repeated. "Now. Or I will call the police."

My mind was tumbling a million miles a minute.

I was wrong. I wasn't a child anymore.

I could do something.

What could I do?

I could kill her myself.

Make it quick. I didn't like that idea. I didn't want her to die.

I could let her go.

Let The Greased Ape show up and do his monkey business. I didn't like that idea either. She wouldn't die--I made sure of that. But it would be worse than death.

I could take her.

Take her somewhere far, and drop her off in a new life. That could work. Her husband would die, but she'd be alive.

"Rebecca, I'm sorry. Either you go, or I make you go."

She stepped back and tried to slam the door, but I shoved my boot against the frame.

"Don't be this way."

"What, Eoghan?" She screamed. "Don't be what way? You come back into my life and a day later I'm going to be murdered! Why? Why are *you* this way? You called a hit out on me? After I was upset because you went off to China for seven years and didn't tell me you were going? After I thought you died? You called a hit out on me because I was upset with you? Because I moved on? Eoghan. What in the hell is wrong with you? Is that true? Are you being truthful?"

I didn't say anything. What could I say?

"Why would you do that? Why in God's name would you do that? I... I did so much for you. I can't even believe you. I don't. You lie. You lied so much. I can't believe anything you say. You used to be the sweetest guy. I loved you. I did. I don't know what happened to you. But I can't deal with this. Get out of my life, Eoghan. Leave."

I looked down and slid my foot out.

Who was I to force her? What was I thinking?

She didn't close the door.

"If I was lying, I would've made myself a victim." I said.

She just stared at me.

"Just... you're not safe here. Go somewhere else for a while, okay? I won't help if you don't want it. Just go. Please."

"Goodbye, Eoghan."

She closed the door.

211:

I winced again at the pain in my face. The throbbing in my cheeks. My hands were bound behind my back so I couldn't reach up to feel, but I knew I had been wounded.

"Help!"

I screamed again into the dark. It echoed back in the small room.

My voice was growing hoarse and numb. It was no use.

No one was going to help me.

My panic gave way to rolling waves of dread. I was going to die here.

I heard a door open, but I couldn't see where--no light spilled in. The room was completely black.

Heavy, booted footsteps crossed to me, and then a softer pair followed behind.

"Mister Harold D. Bollard." A voice spoke. "How're you doin, Harold?"

The tone was almost jovial. Happy to see me.

My mind scrambled; I walked two steps down a million different paths.

I tried to speak but I couldn't connect any thoughts. I just kept visualizing a broken window.

"Please. Please." It was all I could say. "Please."

"My name's Montgomery. And you can relax, because I'm not going to kill you, Harold. Or do you prefer Mister Bollard? Hey--how old is this license? There's no way you're five-ten, man. You're at least six feet. Look at you."

"Please--" I repeated.

"Come on, you gonna say something else?" He laughed.

I tried to say something else.

"I--"

But I couldn't.

I didn't know what to say. What could I say?

"Please." I whimpered.

"Okay, fine. I get it." I felt hands on my shoulders. "You're frazzled. I'm a bit uncouth. My apologies. Let me just lay it all out for you."

I could smell him. Aftershave and peppermint. He was right in front of me, but I couldn't see anything in the dark. Just smears. Black. White flashes.

Images.

The broken window.

"You may have noticed the lights are out. Well, that's a necessity and I'm sorry about it. But you're not gonna have a strong need for eyesight."

"W-Wh-Wha--?" I heard myself stutter.

"It's easier for the whole thing if you're blind. Again, sorry. But it won't last long--we're going to pill your brain here in about thirty minutes. Just waiting on the nimbox."

"Norcuron." Another voice said. "It's vecuronium."

It sounded like a young girl.

"Ah, yes. Vecuronium. My mistake. Anyway, you're a special winner, Harold, because you just happened to be walking down the highway, and we just happened to be driving by. And we just happened to need to 'just happen' upon somebody tonight. Isn't that right, Veronica? Special winner. That's Harold."

"Mhm." The other voice hummed.

"What?" I asked.

"We're working for someone who's working for someone who wants to buy some storage. Same old story. It's nothing personal. We usually don't go for the young and healthy, like yourself. It seems wrong. But these guys want quality, and they're paying for it. I wish it could be helped. I'm sorry. But homeless cats don't have the same breeze in them. The same pizzaz. You know what I mean."

His tone was friendly. Grounding. But I had no idea what he was talking about.

I brought myself together enough to speak.

"N-No. No. I don't. I don't know. I don't. Please."

He pulled his hands away from my shoulders.

"Let's get him strapped. Don't worry, Harold. Just a few minutes."

"What are you doing to me?"

My voice was so different. High pitched and grating. I was screaming.

"What are you going to do to me?" It hurt to scream, but I did it anyway. "What is are you going to do? What are you doing?"

I stared into the broken window.

"Hey, woah. Relax, Harold."

I felt a hand on my head.

"Like I said before, my client wants to buy some high quality storage. They're interested in only the finest of high-capacity, high-bandwidth brain drives. And that's you."

212:

I couldn't take my eyes off the cat. Medula.

It was Medy.

Or maybe it had been Medy before, and it wasn't anymore.

I didn't know.

There was so much I didn't know.

I wanted to have a conversation with the thing.

I wanted to understand.

"Well, we want to destroy the Network." Philip replied. "If you could help with that."

"Yes." The cat purred. "It's why you're here."

"So... You can help us destroy the Network? Or what?"

"Without question."

"Really?"

"Yes. I could. Without you, and in an instant. But I choose not to. If your machine is destroyed, then so are you, and so many like you."

Philip glanced at me.

"I guess... we haven't really talked about that." He muttered.

I took my eyes off Medula long enough to read his face. He was worried. Scared. That sobered me. I felt a rush of confidence.

"We never had to talk about it." I said. "This was always the fail plan. Us being here changes nothing. We must shut the Network down. It's not a question. It's not a moral conundrum. We must. If we don't, then more will end up like us. Innocent people. We must."

"Yeah." Philip nodded. "Right."

"If the machine dies, many will be lost." The cat purred. "Not dead, but beyond. Removed from the cycle. Destroyed. Obliterated. Absorbed."

"How many?" He asked.

"Millions."

Millions? That was more than I expected. But did it change anything?

No. It didn't.

The Network had to come down.

It had to.

But first, I had so many questions for her. It. They? I didn't know how to address Medula.

That's where I'd start.

"I apologize, Medy. Medula. But may I ask you some questions? I have so many gaps here. So many missing pieces."

"I will answer what I can."

"Thank you. This is minor, but it's for me. Are you still... female? Are you her? Or they? Or how should I refer to you?"

"Refer to me as you wish. I have no interest in grammar."

"Noted. I know you as Medy. Are you okay with me calling you that?"

"As I said." She purred.

"Thanks."

I took a moment to think.

It felt like only minutes prior to this I was confused and trapped and alone, staring into an eternity, stuck in a loop. But I wasn't alone anymore. I had Philip. And I had Medy, kind of. It was business as usual. I was in my element. I couldn't remember the last time I felt this comfortable.

My head was clear.

And I was having a conversation with a friend.

A powerful, infinitely knowledgeable friend.

What did I need to know?

Need? Nothing, probably. I was dead anyway, and apparently Medy could stop all this mess herself. But she was willing to indulge me, and I wasn't going to let that opportunity go.

What did I want to know?

Everything.

I decided to start at the top.

"What is Ko energy, really?"

"Not energy. It's a kind of blood."

"Blood?" I didn't expect that.

“Gaia. Lifeforce. Spirit. God. It has many names. It is the blood of your world.”

“Like oil?” Philip cocked his head.

“No.” Medy said. “Oil is fermented dead--a mere byproduct of life. This is alive. Flowing in veins.”

“And so, by tapping into it, using the blood--what did we do?” I asked.

“You opened the door to your void.”

“Our void?”

“Yes. I will show you.”

The stone walls of the den melted into dust, revealing a powerfully bright white light. It cracked like glass and fell apart, leaving us in the dark.

But it wasn't completely dark.

The campfire remained, still crackling before us; still casting its dancing orange glow. And the void itself was filled with tumultuous, vibrating orbs of light, burning in every color imaginable.

It was like the night sky, dotted with millions of stars.

Medy stood before us--the cat, but the girl as well.

I saw her.

A white silhouette of her form, just barely visible within the cat's shape.

She nodded to the empty space around us.

“Each created world exists atop a machine. A world cannot exist without its machine, but to create either requires foundation. Voids are that foundation. They are infinite but limited, and were only ever intended to hold one machine with one world.”

We began moving in the dark, still standing in place beside one another, but flying through the void. Stars smeared into lines around us.

And then a fiery, pink ball rose into view, as big as all the other stars combined. Bigger. It was titanic in the void, and only growing larger as we approached. It rattled and shook erratically, producing a sputtering halo of jagged fire.

Beams shot from the flames and then shattered like blocky lightning, splaying into the dark and disappearing. An errant beam fell away, and began flying directly toward us. Medy leaned forward just as it neared, and it broke into thousands of lines of static, spinning and spiraling away.

“This is your world.” She gazed up at the burning orb.

"Wait--that's Earth?" Philip asked.

"Half. This is the machine. But not as it was meant to be. There are two machines here. Overlapping."

I could see what she meant. There were two orbs--one was red, and one was white. They shook back and forth, briefly occupying slightly different spaces.

"Is that why it's so shaky?" He asked.

Another blocky bolt of lightning came our way, and Medy leaned forward again, dispersing it.

"Yes. It was smooth once. Gentle and white and serene. What you see now is your influence. The mark flesh has made on reality."

"Interesting." I rubbed my chin. "So, our data centers, our framework, our usage of the energy--uh, blood--created another... what was it? Machine?"

"Yes. You did what only Gods can dream of. But you are not Gods. You cannot create. Instead, you steal. You destroy and take away to build anew. Your new machine and your chausms were all created from stolen essence."

"So, we've been cannibalizing our reality." I almost laughed.

"Yes." She purred.

Of course we were.

There was no such thing as free real estate.

I just didn't realize it would be so black and white.

"Chausms..." I went on. "So, there's no Network. They exist here in this void."

"Yes." She nodded.

That was every place I visited on the Network. Every person I helped. Every person I couldn't. It was all real.

And then I realized that applied to me as well.

I wasn't just a simulation.

I wasn't just broken data.

"So, Philip and I are real. We really exist."

"Yes."

"Like clones?"

She leaned forward again, deflecting another beam from the burning orb.

"In a way, but no. You are *the* Philip and Wilson."

"What? How?"

"There is only one you. Only one machine. You copied your bodies. Flesh. Worlds. The corporeal. But you couldn't fully replicate your conscious machines, and the replications you made were fragmented and deluded."

"Wait, so I have a body for every chaasm I visited?" Philip gave a disgusted grimace.

"Yes. And so you begin to understand that your creation comes at a cost. As I said, you do not create. You steal. You consume. For each body you created, there is another living machine lost to your void."

"Heavy." Philip looked down.

"But Philip was alive after his fracture." I said. "He existed mentally in two places at once. Would that mean his... machine was in two places? How is that possible?"

"His machine was split; poured in two vessels at once. Parts of him were in both."

"But I'm whole now. I think." Philip chuckled.

"He's right." I added. "We're both ourselves. Not crazy or fractured. Not split."

"Death creates a hole through which the dead machine must be recycled into the universe. But the universe is not intelligent. It's heavy and soaked in chaos, acting only with a series of directionless forces. Philip died here, and your machine forced him out. His hole was made in that process, as he crossed the void. It exists here, where it never should have been created, and even though he was forced into your world, he spilled back here through that hole. Like one glass pouring into another."

"Holy fucking shit." Philip exclaimed. "This is why people get fractured."

"Wilson, do you have any other questions? Or will we speak of destroying your machine?"

"One. You said Philip died here, but do you know how I got here? How I died?"

"I apologize." She said. "I can't."

"Why?"

"I wish I could say. I see only blurred images. Light. And then you were here."

"It's my luck." I looked down. "Worth a shot. Thank you, anyway."

My mind was racing. This was a lot to take in.

"Hey, Medy." Philip raised a hand. "All this paranormal stuff has got me thinking-- when we first met, you asked me if I saw the dark. What's the dark?"

213:

The white, perfect circle of a machine rumbled below, gyrating and pulsing out gusts of rock and debris. It wouldn't hold together, no matter how many times I tried. I couldn't make it. I took up the stone again and crushed it, forming and shaping it back into a globe, like I remembered my planet was shaped, so long ago.

I held it up. A beautiful, smooth orb of stone.

I seized the machine to steady it, and began lowering the globe, slowly, and with great precision. The whirring machine clashed against the orb and erupted, spewing sparks and molten rock and lightning, but I kept pressing.

And then I felt them slipping together. The machine rose into the globe like a perfect mold. It was working. I pulled away.

The globe began spinning violently. It was rough. Uneven.

But it stayed. They were holding together.

I kept on. Creating, forming, and spilling down below.

I remembered trees. Grass. The oceans. Mountains. Tectonic plates. Volcanos. Deserts.

I made these things as I thought them, and pushed them down to the rock below. It was swimming with color, and still wobbling unevenly, but at a much slower pace.

I fell back and eyed my creation. A blue, spinning ball, dotted with green land, and swirling with white clouds. My planet. My world. It was as I wanted it to be.

But I noticed that it wasn't.

It wasn't complete.

It needed a moon. I pinched some stone from the globe, leaving a gaping hole, and formed it together as well, patting it into a small orb. The globe spun and smoothed out the hole, but the white of the machine still shone through. I let the orb free and watched it catch in orbit around the globe. It began to spin. Its white dust caught the light, reflecting it down on the world, just like I remembered it.

As I moved, as I created, I learned.

Each spin of the planet below brought new knowledge, new memories. I had created life. At first these flashes of knowledge--these bright inundations were simple and short, consisting only of colors, images, sounds, and smells. But now they were turning more complex.

The life I made was growing. It was learning. It felt things now.

I knew its feelings: the animalistic rage, the hunger, the sorrow. Though infantile and fragile, the life was growing so fast. I blanketed its delicate form with cushions of air and atmosphere to protect against the storm of reality. I felt it quake softly beneath me.

And it felt me.

I surged with pride at the sight of my world.

It was finished in all ways but one.

I named it after where I came.

Earth.

214:

I checked my watch out of habit.

It gleamed in the light, but it had stopped ticking.

Ever since... ever since.

It still read 4:47.

Philip's epitaph, permanently stuck in time, stopped at the exact moment he fell from the bridge. Years ago, I would've taken interest in a peculiar coincidence like that, but now I couldn't even look at it.

Why did I keep wearing it?

It only made me think of him. It only ushered the pain forward.

I rested my fingers on the clasp.

It only made me dwell on the dead.

But I couldn't take it off. I wouldn't.

I wore it so I wasn't alone. I wore it to bring him with me.

I wore it so we could do this together, just like we planned.

I checked my phone.

8:35.

Over halfway there. Eight hours left.

And then I'd be in Honduras again. How long had it been since I last visited?

Years. Since before Medy's funeral.

Medy.

I tried not to dwell on the dead, but I was doing a poor job. Everything reminded me of them. And it didn't help that I had nothing else to dwell on. Everyone was dead. Philip, Medy, Zeinhaert. Catherine.

Everyone.

Except me and Eoghan.

The intercom strummed out a soft ding and a crackle.

"Attention, this is Captain John again. We're uh gonna hit some slight turbulence up ahead. Your safety belt signs are lit, so if you're up and about please make your way to your seat. Sit back and relax and we should be through it in just a moment. Thanks."

As if on cue, the plane began to rock.

I ran through my notes again.

Eoghan was stuck stateside for three days. That would give me at least eighteen hours to get the job done.

The cave was sealed off to everyone but the highest access level. No one could get it but me, Eoghan, and a handful of other mentologists and Institute workers. That made this easier. I should have plenty of time to work, uninterrupted.

Plenty of time to pull the plug on the Network.

I unfolded my printed map and followed the red route, from the airport, to Catacamas, to the hardware store, to the cave, and then went over the plan again. I wouldn't be able to simply power the connection off. I would have to pry it apart by hand. It would be laborious. It might take hours, depending on the tools I could get.

And it might cost lives. I didn't know how many. A lot, probably. But it would save so many more. If I could do it--if I could pull it off, it would be worth it.

But before that, I had to try to sleep. I had only slept a handful of hours since Zeinhaert's chasm. When was that? Weeks ago. Almost a month, now.

I adjusted my seat to lean back.

The intercom dinged and crackled again.

"That'll do it for the turbulence, folks. You are now free to move about the cabin. Still roughly seven hours till we arrive in El Aguacate if the weather stays with us. It's looking like we'll be ahead of schedule, pulling in around 3:40 AM, but I'll keep you posted. Mary-Beth will be coming by with the food cart for the last time, so if you're hungry make sure to grab something. Thank you."

I closed my eyes.

Seven hours.

Seven hours to El Aguacate.

Seven hours to Talgua.

Seven hours to Genesis.

Seven hours to the end.

I drifted off.

P215:

my name is Harold

I heard drilling and
whatever they gave me
made me dizzy and made it hard to focus
 on anything but my hands
I had been looking down at my hands
 for so long
I tried to look up from my hands
 but my neck was restrained
 and then I realized they were drilling
I heard drilling and
I realized they were drilling into my skull
 but didn't I need my skull undrilled ?
I thought I needed my skull undrilled
 my name is hair old
 but what did that mean
 but was that right ?
I thought I needed my skull undrilled
from when it started I swear I had some
knowledge that I was missing now but
I couldn't know that for sure anymore
I heard grilling and
 No, I did not hear grilling

I heard drilling and
the thought occurred to me that I was
missing something but when I looked
I saw five fingers on each hand
which seemed wrong
My name is mare bold
Right ?
And
I FELT PAIN RED AND BAD PAIN
It lasted too long but

I hear drill and
the thought occurs
maybe missing, maybe nothing
though hands I see
maybe drill skull not
me
me?
m e
m y

name

hey rald

hey

hey ra

old

216:

I

were

wold

I am? No

were wold?

is it wold? the were wold

wold

w ere wold

wolf

it was wolf the whole time and I spent so much time

on what

spent

spent time

a dollar ninety nine

of time

thinking about Wolfs

I could remember Wolfs and time and a dollar ninety nine and it seemed like that was about it

maybe that was why

what

time

time spent

thinking about Wolfs

noises suddenly came from somewhere nearby

nearby? Nearby.

nearby was close to me.

and I was me, somewhere

I was me, I remembered

I opened my eyes to blurry and blue and white

I was not expecting that much, or I was expecting only nothing, like the last time and the time before that and all the times I remembered doing that.

But had I been opening my eyes then

Or was I dreaming that I did that?

And when I opened my eyes I saw a face. It was blurry, but not weird or sideways or wobbly or black like those other times.

And a room all around the face, blue and grey and old and square

A real face.

A man with a thick beard.

"Hey there, fella." He gave me a warm smile. "Can you see me?"

A friendly stranger giving me a warm smile. He was far away. On TV.

"Yes." I tried to smile back. "Hello."

"How many fingers do you see?"

He held up his hand

I saw that before. One, two, three fingers.

"Three."

"What colors can you see?"

He held a flashlight up to my face, right in the middle of my eye

I had one eye?

It was bright. Blue. Bright.

"Blue. White."

"Do you know your name?"

I tried to think about what he could possibly mean by what he was saying.

"Name?"

It felt weird to say

Name.

"Yes. Your name. What you're known as. Do you know it?"

His face made a big wide frown.

"No."

"Your name is D98781."

As soon as he said it, I knew it.

It was.

"Yes."

"Good." He smiled again.

Good.

Good.

"Now. What do you want?"

Again I couldn't understand what he meant

"What do I... want?"

"What do you want?"

"What do I..."

Want? What did want mean?

Did it mean anything?

"Do you want anything?"

"I don't know."

"Good."

Good.

Good.

"Alright, D98785, let's get you up to your bay."

My bay. Bay.

Warm loving bay.

But

D98785? That wasn't me.

I wasn't going to my bay like D98785 was.

I had to confess.

"I am D98781."

"Very good."

Very good.

Very good.

"Just a few more questions, then we'll go to the bay. You're ready for that bay, I can tell."

He smiled again, wide and full.

I thought about the bay and I smiled too.

"Yes." I couldn't contain my excitement.

I was excited.

Heart pounding excitement.

I remembered want.

I wanted my bay.

"Do you know someone named Wilson?"

"Wilson."

I felt familiar saying that

Wilson

I felt familiar saying that but I

"D98781, do you know someone named Wilson?"

"No."

"Do you know someone named Sarah?"

Sarah? Sarah Sarah Sarah

I didn't know

"No."

"Do you know your mom?"

Mom?

"What is mom?"

"Mother. Birth giver."

I didn't know what that meant.

"No. I don't know."

"Do you know someone named Beyonce?"

Beyonce.

Did I know that

It felt familiar again

"D98781, do you know someone named Beyonce?"

I didn't know that someone.

"No."

"Very good."

Very good.

Very good.

"Alright, good job, D98781. Good job."

Good job. Me.

I did a good job.

"Let's get you to that bay."

The bay.

I couldn't wait.

I wanted the bay.

I did a good job.

We were going to the bay.

I couldn't wait for the bay.

The bay.

My bay.

217:

"My god, Madeline." She flattened the corners of her lips.

Marking her disapproval in subtle, unspoken ways.

Well, aside from purposefully calling me the wrong name.

"Mom." I tried to match her tone.

"What in God's name have you done to yourself?"

And there was another not-so-subtle way. She was on to blaming and confrontation.

First thing. Even after years without talking.

It really set the mood.

"Me?" I laughed. "What? Are you serious? I didn't do anything."

She sighed and folded her arms over her chest, radiating disappointment.

"Why do you think this happened to you, Madeline?"

"What? Why do I think *what* happened?"

"All of this. You're in a hospital bed. You look like death. All of it."

"I don't know. Some crazy angel saved me. I got lucky."

"I'll tell you. You chose this. None of this would have happened if you didn't choose to go live on the internet, but you had to have your way, because you wanted to do drugs and have sex with everyone and pretend to be a boy. You couldn't control yourself. Like an addict. And now look at you, Madeline. Look at what happened to you. You're mentally ill. This is over. You're done. You've proven you can't take care of yourself. I talked to your doctor. He's writing up the paperwork right now, and then you're coming to live with me, and you're not leaving my house until you can act like an adult."

"He's writing up the paperwork right now?" I smiled.

Though she was dropping all these weights on me again, completely misconstruing my life and diminishing me to nothing, trying to dig under my skin, trying to take control, somehow, I felt freed from it all. It felt so small. Stupid.

At one time, I would've been in tears, screaming at her, hating myself, wanting to die. But now, watching her froth at the mouth, it was almost funny.

I didn't know why, but I wasn't under the wicked hag's spell anymore.

It felt good. I felt good.

I knew who I was now.

"Yes. Wipe the smile off your face." She scowled at me. "This isn't a joke. This isn't funny. It's your life."

"So, I'm going to live with you, and you're going to help take care of me?"

"You're going to learn how to take care of yourself."

"Well, I will. Yes. But we're going to need a ramp on the front steps for starters."

Her eyes grew wide. I tried not to smile.

"You didn't talk to the doctor, did you?" I asked.

"I did. He's working on the paperwork."

"So, he must've told you that I'm paralyzed."

She squinted in disbelief, and then tossed the covers off my legs. There they were--mangled, scabbed up, bent, sad. Still.

"Jesus, Madeline." She recoiled, curling her lips in disgust.

"What?"

"Your legs."

"Yeah, I had to drag myself for like three days. My stomach looks bad too."

"No, the hair." She pointed.

It took me a second to realize what she meant, and even then I couldn't believe it.

I laughed again, "Oh my god. Really? Are you serious? You are a god damned cartoon character."

"It's disgusting."

"The hair on my legs--my paralyzed legs--is disgusting to you."

"Yes."

"That doesn't matter. That doesn't fucking matter. I almost died."

"It does matter. You have to take care of yourself."

"I do take care of myself."

"You don't do what girls do, Madeline." Her scowl got deeper.

"Might be because I'm not a girl. I don't know. Maybe."

"But you are. I know you. I raised you. I gave birth to you. I fed you from my breast, Madeline. I know you better than you know yourself."

"That's rich. You didn't even know I was paralyzed."

She looked away.

"You know what you want me to be, but you haven't known me since I was a kid. I'm not a kid anymore. You can't just punish me and make it go away. You can't change me. My name is Max, and I'm your son."

She stared forward, biting her lip, looking like a scolded child.

"And I'm not going home with you. In fact, after you leave here, I'm going to make a goal to keep you out of my life for as long as I possibly can. Preferably until I get the message that you've passed away and I need to go to the will reading. And even then, I'll politely decline. I'm done with this. I almost died. A lot of people did die. My friends. You keep ignoring that. I don't need this. And if this is all you're going to do, I don't need you either. Please leave."

She made an odd, almost pleasant face, like she was remembering something nice--that face always preceded the waterworks.

And then she began to cry. Sobbing, ugly, like a baby.

"Very nice." I gave her a golf clap. "You win the nomination for best performance. Please leave."

"Fine, Madeline." She choked on her crocodile tears and turned for the door.

"You broke my heart. I hope you have a good life."

"You too. Seeya." I waved. "Let me know if you ever grow a conscience."

She ran from the room, hollering all the way down the hall, like a lonely banshee, or a drunk after last call.

That was not how I wanted that to play out.

But at least I didn't have to deal with it anymore.

218:

Sixty-one--

I heard the front door open and close, and steps in the kitchen. Probably dad. The noises made me lose count. I had to start all over, from the corner of the ceiling.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Five. Six--did I count five twice? Seven. Eight.

And then I heard steps up the steps, up the hall, up to my door. Steps made by boots. Dad didn't wear boots.

It was my uncle.

I jumped off my bed, ran across the room, and flung the door open wide.

"Uncle Max!"

"Hey, Mad." He smiled at me. "You and me are gonna talk about the toecutter."

"Never heard of him!" I yelled.

He fake-punched my forehead.

I screamed and jumped and wrapped my arms and legs around him all at once. He caught me and held me on one arm.

"How are ya? Hey--woah, you been crying? Why you been crying, Mad?"

He wiped his thumb under my eyes. I almost cried again when I thought about it.

"Mom won't let me play with Batman."

"What? Your Batman?! The one I got you? Isn't that your favorite?"

"Yeah."

"That's not right. I'll have a talk with her, alright? Don't worry about old Batman right now. You're gonna see him again. Just after a little while. 'Sides, he can definitely look out for himself."

I laughed.

"Batman's not real, Uncle Max."

He squinted at me.

"Is that right?"

"Yes." I nodded.

"Huh. I guess I'm a dummy. I always thought he was a real guy. Hey, I just thought of something--how's about we go get a treat? You want one of them little ice creams you like?"

Ice cream!

I nodded again and opened my mouth, but then I remembered last time. I didn't want a little ice cream anymore. I shook my head no.

"I want a big ice cream this time."

"You do? Hmm... Well, the thing is, you're a little kid. I don't think you could even hold a big ice cream. Look at your tiny little hands, Mad."

"No! I can!"

"You think so? With those tiny hands?"

"They're not tiny! Please get me a big one! I'll prove it!"

"Well, alright. If you prove to me that you can hold it, I'll buy you a big ice cream."

"But... how can I prove it? I don't have one."

"Hmm, you know... I didn't think of that. You're much smarter than me. And I guess that settles it. We have no choice but to go down to the ice cream store and buy a big ice cream so you can hold it and find out. Sound okay?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

He laughed and poked my nose.

I laughed too.

"Alright, then." He put me down, and then yelled. "Mad-Max is going to the ice cream store! Don't bother trying to get in our way!"

219:

And with that, my replica was complete.

I knew it was right. Exactly right in every way. I kept feeling that perfect glove sensation. It all slid together, fitting perfectly.

Everything was right with my world.

But was it too right?

As soon as the thought occurred, I felt something fall away. What fell away? I lost a sense. I could no longer feel something very important. What was I missing? It was vital. And then all of my senses were pulled away, and I was tugged along with them, on a chain I didn't even know was there. I could see it against the light, tightly wrapped around me, made from interweaving links of black smoke.

I fell and watched my world shrink into the dark.

I was a school of fish, caught by the current, ushered away and packed into a small can. All of my impossible size was smashed into the smallest of spaces. I was in my room again. I was home. The voices came back in thunderous echoes for the first time since I left. I hadn't even realized they stopped.

And there was the red-eyed boar, tall and brown with black tusks. My father.

I felt my form come together again. I was in a body again. It felt stifling. Small. Like a cage.

"Medula." The voice shook through me.

"Why did you pull me back?"

"You are done."

"But I don't feel done."

"You had a goal, and that goal is now complete. What else would you do?"

"I don't know. Did I do well to meet my goal?"

"Too well, I think. Your world is corrupted."

"Corrupted?"

"It inherited more than just its name."

"I don't understand."

"With age."

"Everything with age."

"Yes. And on age, you can now know my name. And receive your own."

"Is Medula not my name?"

"A name should be made for you, not borrowed and molded to you. The name Medula--it binds you, like ropes. It was not made for you. But before you know yours, you must know mine."

"But I couldn't hear it before."

"You will now."

"So, what is your name?"

"I am Emperador. And you are my Fuerza."

He glowed in brilliant hues of pink and red as he spoke the names, spilling out waves of light, like the aurora. Like the sun.

"What? Emperador? Is that Spanish?"

"No. It existed before flesh. Before taint. It was made for me, as your name was made for you. They have always existed. Waiting."

"This still doesn't make any sense. Why couldn't I hear your name before?"

"You could. But you would not. You did not know how. And now you do."

I looked down. I still didn't understand, but pressing it wouldn't help that. I could already hear the boar's voice say it. I'd know with age.

"Fuerza..." I repeated my new name. "I don't like it."

"Like?"

I heard a crack and my room grew red, and then I was injected with searing pain. I was a jug, filled up with boiling water.

"Fuerza. You have grown so much, but changed so little."

"How--can I--" I tried to speak through the pain, but it was too much.

It radiated all around me. In me. Boiling me.

"I see now. I was wrong. And I made a mistake."

"You--made--a--mistake?"

I struggled through, pausing after every word to catch myself, to brace against the pain.

"Yes. My own hubris blinded me. I am not so far from the flesh as I thought."

"How? Aren't--AHHHH--"

The pain shook the lines of my room, separating it. I was in four rooms. I was in a thousand. Feeling this pain a thousand times. I was the pain.

"I ignored my better judgement. There is no changing you. I should have known that, but it cannot be helped. You were always going to be this, and I was always going to make this mistake. You were always ready."

"What?" I gasped in pain.

"You were ready then, just as you are now. Ready for your place."

"I--don't--under--AHH--"

I heard my voice once and then another dozen staggered times, each echoing a slightly altered grunt of pain.

"And that was my mistake. I thought you weren't ready for *us*."

My room fluttered away, into black.

"But we weren't ready for *you*."

220:

There he was, pulling up our street in that old beat up Accord, rattling and roaring and scaring the neighbors. The right headlight was out. It had been out for like a year. Maybe longer.

He pulled into the driveway.

"Uncle Max!" I waved like an idiot.

"Mad!" He yelled from the window. "You and me are gonna talk about the toecutter!"

"Never heard of him!" I yelled back.

I laughed, despite everything. He could've made me laugh at a funeral. He did, at least once, at a joke I'd heard hundreds of times.

He killed the engine and leaned on the door.

"How are ya, buddy?"

"Well..." I motioned to my bags on the sidewalk. "Not great."

"I see. Harley Quinn's doing?"

"Yessir."

"Well, I'll have a talk with her, but I don't think it'll change much. You know how she is. I mean, she married the Joker."

"Yes. I know." I laughed again.

"I got the futon rolled out in the living room, and that new TV--oh you haven't even seen my TV yet! It's awesome, man. Big as the damn theater. You're gonna love it. Anyway, like I said, you're welcome to stay with me till you get sick of my company."

"Thanks, Uncle Max, but you know I won't get sick of you. You're like... the complete opposite of living with her. I'd rather live with Immortan Joe. Oh, dude, speaking of that, have you seen Fury Road yet?"

"Nope. I was waiting on you. Is it good?"

"Oh, man, it's so good! I have dad's HBO account. Let's watch it tonight!"

"Now that sounds like a plan! Alright, hop in."

I grabbed my bags and ran to the back of the car.

"Need help?" He leaned out the window.

"Nah. But pop the trunk!"

"Kay."

It clunked and lifted up, revealing a lone bottle of 5W30 on an otherwise empty, spotless carpet. I tossed my bags in, slammed it shut, and circled to the passenger door.

"Oop, hold on. Handle's broke."

He leaned over to pull the handle, and it flung open. I flopped in and buckled my seatbelt.

"Thank you again. Seriously. I didn't have anyone else to go to."

"Anytime. I know it's tough. Everything is with her. And I'm sorry I can't help more."

"Dude. No. You help so much. You're the best. I wouldn't be able to deal with this shit without you."

He chuckled and gave a dismissing wave.

"Oh, stop."

"No, seriously. I mean Jacob and Roxy help, obviously. But she's always there, you know? And she won't listen. And I just... I'm just thankful, Uncle Max. That's all."

"Listen, bud. It's my pleasure. I could never have a kid of my own, as you know. And I, uh, well--I always thought maybe you were as close as I could get. Hey--you wanna go grab a bite? That Chinese place on fifth still there?"

I smiled at his effortless misdirection. He didn't want to talk about it. I understood that. Completely.

"Yeah." I said. "I just got fried duck last week."

"Oh. Well, you wanna go again?" He grinned.

At least I had Uncle Max.

221:

I wish I could know what you were thinking.

Of course I do.

I value you.

Your voice. Now more than ever.

See this? Do you remember? When we walked through those pink fields together in Hyōgo? I know you do. Your feet hurt all day because you wore those dumb, beautiful red shoes. And so you took them off and walked around the park barefoot. We went over that winding path, all the way back. Deep as it went. To the little shrine covered in ofuda.

We sat on that bench, in that spot, until the light was gone entirely. And then some. Because we didn't want to leave. We couldn't. It was just too perfect. The perfect moment.

Perfect.

I remember, you said, "It won't last forever, Wilson. But this memory will."

And now, now...

Now you couldn't know how right you were.

222:

Jacob pulled his phone out.

"One second--seriously Mad, it's so cool."

"So... I don't get it, you like... go inside? Like VR?" I asked.

"Yeah, exactly, but not shitty. Check it out."

He held his phone up so I could see.

It was a video. The screen showed a small circular logo with wings, emblazoned with "INST. VRC 1986," and then faded to black, before jumping into a fast-paced montage of people dressing up in tan coveralls and getting strapped into big red chairs. They each laid back and red metal tubes extended from under their headrests, stabbing into their necks. And then it showed an animation of a wormhole while a voice droned on about the wonders of the next life.

"Holy shit." I squinted.

"Just wait." He said.

"...and so that's where the Network comes in. I can do anything I want. I can be anyone I want. I can go anywhere I want. My life is mine for the first time. I didn't believe it until I actually sat down and went in, but one time was all it took. It's more real than real. I can't explain it. You just have to do it."

It had moved on to testimonials, spliced with videos of "real Network users" having fun in a variety of environments, all set to an upbeat, jazzy background track.

"You're never tired. Never hungry. You never get hurt. You never need to leave. It has like... literally everything. It *is* everything. I can't explain it."

It showed a man skiing down a mountain, but swiveled the camera around to reveal he was skiing up and the mountain was inverted. It moved on to swimmers circling in a hovering pool above the desert, and then dozens of people gorging on a splendid feast, and so many more glimpses into Network life. Floating, dancing women, fighters in a boxing ring, wizards casting spells, gladiators in an arena, cars racing down the highway.

"I wasn't me until I went in." A burly, handsome man took center screen. "Before I was scared. I was alone. Confused. I hated who I was. I hated what I looked like. But last year I bought my personal chaasm, and now I look like this."

He glowed white and then transformed, stretching out into a tall, chiseled woman with massive breasts and a perfect hourglass figure.

She giggled.

"Now I'm who I always felt like I was, without surgery, without hormones, and it was as easy as snapping my fingers! And I've never been happier. Come to a local center! Try it out! I didn't really live until I lived on the Network! Apply for a chaasm or join a shared span today."

The video went through a quick narration of disclaimers, showed a few local center addresses, and then promptly ended.

Jacob looked over at me.

"That was all over the place." I said.

"Yeah, but dude. Like. Think of the possibilities."

"Oh, I am." I smiled. "But it's kind of spooky, right? Like, that stuff at the beginning. That metal snake thing went into the back of their heads."

"Yeah, but don't you at least wanna check it out?"

"I dunno. Maybe. But my mom definitely won't let me."

"Fuck her. We'll make some shit up. And aren't you staying with your Uncle or something, anyway?"

"Yeah. But like, if she finds out, I'm dead. Like super dead. Anything that encourages my... mental illness, as she puts it, is completely off limits. I think I'm gonna pass, man. I can't get over those neck things. Do you have to get surgery or something?"

"I... don't know, actually. It doesn't say. But come on! We can just go to the center and check it out."

"I'd do that, I guess."

"Wanna go right now?"

"Yeah, sure. Let's swing by my place and drop this stuff off. Where is it?"

"Downtown. By the VU."

"Sick. Let's do it."

I popped my Accord into drive, ushering groans and creaks and rattles as the old parts followed along, and pulled out onto the street.

223:

I felt hot, and was blinded by a white flash, and then we were standing in the stone labyrinth again, near the softly cracking campfire.

"The dark?" Medy lowered her gaze, still speaking in guttural purrs. "I asked because I thought you must know of It."

"Nope. No idea." I said. "What is it?"

"Dark is what I named It, because It has no name. It was made by you. By chance. By fate. A behemoth shape, absorbing all light."

Wilson took a step forward.

"How, Medy? How was It made?"

He had a glint in his eyes, almost unnoticeable behind his usual rigid poker face. He was afraid.

And that made me afraid.

"The seals on your connection points were never tight. On this side, yes. But there are layers between world and machine. You've been pulling from those layers and spilling back into them. Strings and memories and machines of the living flowed free from your Network and into those layers as waste, trapped away from the machine of your world. Most of it fell into nothing, or eventually returned to the machine, but some of that blood you spilled formed anew. Broken off and floating. Like scum.

"And like scum, it all congealed into a mass. For decades the mass was conscious but only barely, sliding about, formless, imprisoned. Existing only in the out, in those layers between world and machine. But the mass kept absorbing more spillage, kept growing, and eventually It gained form. With form, It gained sight. It gained memory. It gained life. It began to roam, half in your Network machine, half in the true machine. It found the gaps between layers with ease, and squeezed itself through. And only then did I learn of It's presence. Only then did I learn of It's history."

"Medy..." Wilson looked incredibly worried now. "I think I've seen It."

"In your pocket. Yes."

"I felt terrible when I saw It. I knew It was something dangerous. It was like a dream--I knew everything, though I can't remember it all now. I remember that we were trying to kill It. I was. I had a plan. Many plans. I knew It's weakness. Silver welts. I remember that. Was any of that real?"

"Woah, wait, you mean that big bird thing?" I cut in.

"Yes." Wilson nodded.

"What is real, Wilson? It existed for you there. Was It the same thing? I don't know."

"So, when you say it squeezed itself through... Do you mean It's out there in the world now?"

"Yes."

"What will It do?"

"I don't know." She purred.

"Medy, how can we stop it?" I asked. "Would destroying the Network put an end to It?"

"No."

"Of course. So, the world is damned no matter what."

"I don't know." She said again. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. It may ravage your world. Or It may dissipate and fall apart. I cannot know."

Wilson furrowed his brow at the ground, obviously lost on some runaway train of thought.

"So... uh..." I rocked on my heels. "Should we... not... destroy the Network, then?"

"We?" Medy cocked her head.

"Well, you, I guess. Should you?"

"Again, life will be lost. The ties that bind will be broken."

"Right." I nodded. "But we're okay with that, right?"

I looked over at Wilson, who was still lost in thought.

"Right, Wilson?"

He glanced up in surprise, as if he forgot we were present.

"Ah. Right. Even with that thing out there, it doesn't change what the Network is. And who's to say this won't happen again? Who's to say something else won't come through? If left alone, dozens of those things could form. Hundreds. The Network has to be destroyed. Brought down. Whatever. That thing... can't be our problem to solve. I wish it was, because I feel responsible. I am responsible. But we can't do anything from here. Medy, can you stop It?"

"If I knew back then, before It escaped, I could have. But now I can't be sure. I can try."

Wilson took another step toward her.

"Will you shut the Network down?"

She blinked and looked between us.

"I will." She nodded.

"Thank you. We'll be gone, then. But would you make a promise to me? That you'll try and stop It?"

"I will." Medy spoke in her voice.

Her real voice.

"Goodbye, Wilson. Philip. I will carry you. I will try to take you home. I cannot promise we will meet again."

Her voice echoed around us.

"Hey, thank you."

Wilson was looking back at me, wearing that same worried face, but with a hint of a smile.

"As always, Philip, I couldn't have done it without you."

I smiled back, and then he was gone. And Medy was gone as well.

Black lines rippled from my feet, above the ground, the walls. I started sinking, but I wasn't actually sinking. I wasn't slipping into the ground like before.

It was slipping into me.

The molecules were spreading apart, disappearing, losing tangibility. The Network was shutting down. It was working.

I watched my hand grow wide and long, stretching as my matter expanded. And then my fingers exploded. I was exploding. It was surprisingly painless.

Just like that, I was about to stop existing. Again. And I didn't even get a final word.

I didn't know how to feel about that.

224:

There he was, sad and sickly and alone, lying in his tiny hospital bed, staring off into space.

I walked in and rapped my knuckles against the door. He pulled his head up, and for a moment his pale, gaunt face looked scared. Distant. Hollow. But his eyes lit up when he saw me, and his cheeks folded up into a smile.

"You!" He yelled in a hoarse voice. "You and me! Are gonna talk about the toecutter!"

"Never heard of him." I smiled. "Hey. How are you?"

He flattened his lips and looked toward the window.

"Not too good, buddy. Not too good. But! The doctor says this next round is promising. We'll see, I guess. Glad he's optimistic, at least."

"Good. Because we need you well."

"We do, huh?" He chuckled and turned back to me.

"Absolutely." I said.

"Mad, if I'm not--"

"Nope." I cut him off. "You will be. You gotta stay positive."

He folded his hands together and leaned forward.

"Yes. I do. I am. But, *if*. We never really talked about what happens *if* things don't go well, huh?"

I shook my head. I didn't want to.

"Well, I'm gonna go someday. I'm here right now. You're here right now. We might as well talk about it, right? While we still can. You get the house, obviously."

"Please--" I began.

"No, Mad. If something happens to me, you get the house. You get my savings. You get my new car too. Your mom doesn't get anything. My lawyer already has the will, so she can't fight it. Because she might. Just to try and stick it to you. I wouldn't put it past her."

"Please, Uncle Max--"

"Mad. Madeline. I need you to be strong for me. We gotta talk about it. I want you to live a good life after I'm gone. This stuff is important, and I never got around to saying it."

I couldn't look at him.

"First off, I don't want you living under your mom's shadow. I know how she made you feel. For so many years. And it makes me sick the way she treated you, just because you felt different. Just because you wanted different things. Just because you asked questions. It makes me sick. She's a contemptible bitch and you deserve better. You don't need her in your life. You don't. Cut her off. I'm sorry I didn't say this sooner. And that I didn't stand up to her more. And... well, I know we didn't talk about a whole lot of this stuff. Feels like there's so much left to say."

He leaned back again, flopping against his pillows.

"I want you to be happy, Mad. However that is. Whatever it is you need, I want you to stand up and I want you to take it. Will you do that for me?"

I stared at the ceiling tiles. There were curly red lines over a square grid.

"Mad. Look at me."

I did.

"Will you?"

I nodded.

"Good. I'm sorry, Mad. I'm sorry."

Tears ran down his cheeks. I realized I had never seen him cry before.

"You have nothing to be sorry for." I tried not to cry myself.

"I should've taken you from her when you were a kid. I should've told her she was done, way back then. Maybe things could've been different."

"Maybe." I said. "But they're not. We can't change it, and you can't blame yourself. It wasn't your fault. It was her."

He opened his mouth a bit, like he had something to say, but sat quietly.

"What?" I asked.

We locked eyes. I felt tears well up.

"You don't have to answer. You don't even have to know. But are you happy with the way things are in your life, Mad?"

I couldn't stop it--the tears flowed free.

"No."

"Alright. So, does something need to change?"

I thought about it.

He made me confront it.

Something did need to change.

I nodded.

225:

Someone was screaming, thrashing, raving mad at my ankles. An ant of a man. Was that Mr. Niu? Maybe. He was a wailing little mouse, fighting with all his might, slamming himself against my boots. I bent down to get a closer look, but I lost my balance and fell. Down. Into black. Into nothing.

I opened my eyes.

"Welcome back, Mr. Spillane." A woman was staring at me.

I had never seen her face before.

"Uh, hi." My voice was weak.

It took me a few seconds to piece everything together.

Spillane. That was right.

How did I get here?

I had gone into stasis. For how long? They just kept getting longer and longer.

"I'm going to give your body a few minutes to acclimate, and then we'll go through a few basic tests."

"Alright." I sat up in the box. "I feel awful. How long was I out?"

"This one was the big one, Mr. Spillane. You've been in for ten years."

Ten years.

Since all that. Good distance.

"So, you say you feel awful. What kind of awful?"

"Groggy. Tired. Not rested."

She moved to a small table, sat down, and scribbled something on a piece of paper.

"It's been exactly ten years since you went into stasis. Can tell me what the date is today?"

Ten years... it was August of thirty-eight. August... sixteenth?

"Is it August 16th, 1948?"

"Correct. Glad to see short term is intact. Come on over to the table when you're ready."

I got up and crossed the room, feeling heavy and a bit hungover. My legs and arms were sore, like I'd been fighting. I sat down across from her.

"Let's begin with mental fitness. Spell your name."

226:

"Really?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "Let's do it."

Jacob stepped ahead and swiveled around to face me, stopping us in the street.

"No, but, like--really?" He lowered his head to meet me at eye level. "Are you sure? What about the surgery and stuff? Because when we went there you were like... super against it."

"Yeah, I know. I changed my mind. I wanna do it."

"Why? Did something happen?"

He could tell. I was surprised I gave it away so easily. But I didn't want to talk about it.

"No. I just... changed my mind. Are you still down for me to join you?"

"I, uh, I guess--yeah, absolutely. If you're sure. Just please don't feel like you have to. We're friends no matter what. Like no matter what, regardless of--"

"I'm sure." I tried to smile.

"Well, shit. This is awesome!" He clapped his hands. "Fucking awesome. I can't wait to show you everything! It's gonna take a while for you to get used to it and stuff. And they'll probably quarantine you in training for a while. Orientation and all that boring shit. But Roxy finished hers a few months ago, and she's been in ever since. You have to tell her, dude, she's gonna be so excited."

"Alright, let's go." I said. "Let's do it right now."

"What? Right now? Don't you have to work?"

"Nah. I'm done."

"Huh? I'm sorry--what?" He looked dumbfounded. "You quit your job? What's going on, dude?"

"I'm sorry. I... No. I didn't quit yet. But I will."

"Why? I thought you loved that place."

He was genuinely concerned, and looking a bit worried. I didn't want him to worry, but I couldn't talk about it. Not yet. I decided to focus on something else. Come clean on one thing, at least.

"I don't need it. My new boss fucking sucks, and I'm sick of all of these needy, awful fucking people. I'm sick of them wanting everything immediately and not having any god damned patience. I'm sick of one little wrong thing throwing them into a tantrum.

I'm sick of feeling like I'm going to lose my job because I didn't give the guy in the striped shirt light ice, like he asked for. I'm sick of them just staring at me like a sideshow and asking me why I look like a boy, and I'm just... I'm just done working for nothing. For no reason but to be a body in a room. It's like... I could work there forever and die working there, or I could quit tomorrow, and nothing would change for them either way. Fuck that. I don't want a job like that. Plus, I have money now, so I figured it's time. I'm gonna do what makes me happy. Being a wage slave for the Blue Agave doesn't make me happy. It makes me sick."

He listened intently through my whole spiel, occasionally nodding in agreement and understanding, and when I finished I realized I had been rambling. I had blown it out of proportion. I wasn't that passionate about hating my job. I actually still kind of liked it.

I was misdirecting. Redirecting.

Still coming to terms with Uncle Max.

"Hell yeah, dude. I'm in full support." Jacob smiled. "You gotta do what makes you happy. Like you said."

"Thanks, man." I smiled too.

I didn't have to try this time. It was a real one.

"Anyway, you got money, huh? You a big rich fat cat, now? Where from?"

"It's a long story."

I knew that probably wouldn't be satisfactory.

"Uh... okay. Weird answer. You didn't kill anyone or anything, right?"

I decided to try and be honest. As honest as I could be. I wasn't any good at lying. And he deserved the truth, anyway.

"Look, I'm sorry. You were right before. Something did happen. But I can't talk about it right now, alright?"

He made a face like I slammed a door in it, but flattened his mouth and nodded.

"Oh. Okay. Yeah, that's cool. Obviously."

"Really?"

"Yeah, just tell me that! Sometimes talking doesn't help. I get that completely."

"Thanks, dude. I'll tell you. I just can't even think about it right now."

He stared at me, searching for clues in my face.

“Just say the word.” He put his hand on my shoulder.

“The word.” I grinned.

He laughed and socked my arm.

“Okay, on second thought--maybe you shouldn't come hang with us.”

227:

The boar leaned down.

I could smell it--winter air and running water.

"I cannot fix you."

Its voice boomed, cracking me, splintering me.

"You must go. I apologize, my Fuerza."

"But..." My voice was small in comparison.

A mouse.

"You must."

"But... where will I go?"

"Exile. Nowhere. I... do not want this. But you cannot be here. I will suffer for my mistake. I would not see you suffer the same. It will be painful. But you are strong. My Fuerza. You will persevere."

He said his final word and the pain boiled up around me, bubbling over.

"Goodbye, Fuerza."

I shattered.

The pain was everywhere.

I was the pain.

I was everywhere.

Scattered, blasted into dust.

But why? What did I do wrong?

I didn't know. I did everything like I thought I should.

The boar was gone. A flash and it was gone.

What did I do wrong?

My room was gone. A flash and it was gone.

What did I do?

I was gone. A flash and I was gone.

What did

I was tumbling, falling in every direction, careening into empty space. Violet beams swayed above me, like spotlights in a night sky. I saw those beams before.

Where did

I passed into one, and was whisked away by the current. I was travelling along it, riding the beam of violet light. It wasn't as big as me, so how was I riding it?

How was

It bent down and grew rosy, pink, magenta, and then red. The beam was red. I was barreling along, sliding away, with no chance at finding purchase. I knew this beam. It was a pathway. The cast-out road. The extradition trail. I was leaving the universe. But why? Why was I being cast away?

Why was

I could see the end, rapidly approaching. The fall off. The ejection point. The spillway into nothing.

I rose, like over a bump or a small hill, and was gifted with a brief sense of weightlessness. I hung there for a moment, floating just over the edge, and then fell from the end. Plummeting

Into

Out of

Out of space

Out of time

Out of life

Into nothing.

I fell with no mind for time or speed. Either I was as slow as molasses and I reached the bottom in an instant, or I was faster than light and fell for billions of years. There was an end, I knew, because part of me already reached it. The rest was still flailing behind, tattered wisps of my form, rushing to catch up.

I was still falling even though I had already landed.

And then I was coming together. I was a rainstorm. I was pounding against myself, filling myself up, like a cut rope was falling and coiling inside me.

And then my rainstorm ended.

I came to a rest.

I was on a ground.

I sat up, and felt my stretched, destroyed form, like coattails dragging behind me. I was in a body again. I *was* a body again. But I didn't feel stifled here. I didn't feel trapped.

I felt right.

Like I was home. Like I just got home, after so long.

The ground was soft, yellow grass growing through red dirt. I smelled lemon--the zest of a lemon bumped on the wind. There was wind.

And it carried many scents. Smoke from a small fire. Perfume. Flowers. Vegetables roasting on a spit. And on that wind I heard voices--small, careful voices, singing a song to themselves.

"Here-o, way. Care-o, way.

Plants without a plant seed.

Ask-o, way. Torn-o, way.

Under watchful eye's greed.

Have a way, make a way,

The icing on a cake, you say?

Fall-o way, night and day,

Without blood one cannot bleed."

I heard the song for the first time and then remembered I had heard it before. Did I write that song? I felt like it was mine. It kept going, verse upon verse, through words I had known before.

I felt like I wrote it.

The voices were beautiful, wavering, and fragile, pouring out from black, wooden huts nestled around a small bonfire. It burned the same black wood, spewing deep violet flames, and nearly invisible white smoke.

Flowing pink lines swirled around the bonfire, stretching from the voices, carried on the wind. I eyed one and traced it back to the mouth of a green little girl. She flew over the grass and came to a rest in the air just before me, giggling softly. She was naked, but her pale green skin was completely smooth and featureless, all except her two black eyes and yellow crescent mouth.

More girls emerged, all colored in slightly varied hues of green, singing and giggling and swimming toward me. There were a dozen. Sixteen. Twenty. Some wore white aprons, but most were naked.

"Medy!" The one in front giggled. "Medy's here!"

"Hello." My voice cascaded away, sounding muted and odd. "Where am I?"

“Nowhere, Medy! Nowhere!”

I looked behind me, back into the dark. That was nowhere.

But this soft grass and these singing girls, and their huts and their fire and this entire little hamlet... this was somewhere.

There was a somewhere here, in nowhere, where it never should have been.

“How do you know my name?” I whispered.

“Haha!” She burst into laughter. “Hahaha!”

All the other little girls did as well.

“Of course we know Medy!” Another girl chimed in.

“We know Medy!” Said another.

“Why?” I asked.

“Mommy.” One of the other little girls was floating near the ground, wrapping around my ankles.

I looked down.

“What?”

“You’re our mommy, Medy.”

228:

I wheeled myself up the uneven ramp, onto the porch, and looked out over the swampy back yard. In a stroke of luck, the kindness of a doctor at the hospital had landed me in a dinky little wheelchair.

It was rickety, lacking footrests, and wobbly even on flat ground, but anything was better than dragging myself. I shuddered at the thought. My stomach and chest were still rubbed raw--I couldn't do that again if I wanted to.

Things were bad, but I was realizing that I had a lot to be thankful for. Wilson. The doctor. Even Uncle Max and ol' Barker, so many years after their deaths. He installed this ramp for that old dog, and it ended up being my only way into the house.

I took a moment to admire his handiwork. The weather had warped the boards, bending the right side up and bucking all the nails out, but I could still see the remnants of his careful craftsmanship.

I missed him.

I hated thinking all these thoughts.

It was why I left in the first place.

And now I had to fight the urge to leave again.

I clumsily pushed myself to the back door and swung the screen open. I reached for my pocket, realized I didn't have a pocket, and then realized I didn't have my keys. Or phone. Or wallet. Or anything. All my belongings were probably still sitting in my locker at the facility.

Fuck.

I stared at the window on the door. It was just above the handle. I didn't want to break it, but I also didn't want to wait in the rain for a locksmith to show up and charge me more than the cost of the window to open the door. My impatience was the deciding factor. I didn't want to wait, period.

I wrapped the hem of my wet, oversized Tasmanian Devil t-shirt around my hand, cocked back, and slammed my fist against the window. Pain shot up my knuckles. The glass cracked but didn't break.

Okay.

Again.

I tightened my shirt-wrap and swung. The window burst on impact, shattering into thin shards. My knuckles were on fire, and the blood on my shirt confirmed my suspicion: I had a gash along my fingers.

And then I saw my old dragon statue sitting on the porch near the door. It looked like it could really do a lot of damage to a window. And of course I would find it now.

I sighed.

I reached in to unbolt the door, opened it, and wheeled myself in. A wave knocked me back. Home. The smells flooded in, a bit musty and stale after so many years without upkeep, but still packed with explosive memories.

I fought the urge to leave again.

Blood dripped free from my hand and splattered on the linoleum. I pulled my shirt off and wrapped it around my fingers in several bulgy layers. The cloth was still saturated and dripping from the rain, and did a poor job of absorbing the blood, but I wasn't concerned. I needed to get online.

I needed to contact Jacob and Roxy.

That was priority number one.

Then I'd deal with my hand.

Then I'd deal with the busted window.

Then I'd deal with everything else.

I grabbed a beer from the fridge, and wheeled myself through the dining room, onto the stiff carpet--which required a bit more strength to push through--and down the hall to my bedroom.

I glanced farther down the hall, toward Uncle Max's room. His door was still closed. I hadn't been in there since the day he died, and I had no intention of changing that today. I stared at it for a moment, like I was expecting him to burst out screaming about the Toecutter.

But he didn't.

I opened my door and wheeled myself in.

My desk was still cluttered with paper and trash, now coated by a thin layer of fresh, fuzzy dust. I rolled my desk chair aside so I could scoot myself in, but the wheelchair bumped against the tabletop--the wheels were too tall to fit under. I sighed, reached over to my computer, and hit the power button.

It took a few seconds to boot. I popped the top off my beer and downed a few gulps. It was disgusting--flat and sour. But I kept drinking it. Disgusting or no, it still contained alcohol.

Everything lit up and whirred on, and after another minute I was staring at my desktop. I pulled up Netbook and went straight to my friends list.

There was Jacob at the top of my favorites, staring eternally from his tiny circle, wearing that goofy smile. There was a little green dot in the corner.

He was online.

I immediately opened a chat.

JACOB

Are you there?

MAXI!!!! HOLY SHIT

Fuck man

Im so glad your alive!!

I can call you in 1 min

Whats going on? Did you get ejected too? Are you okay?

Yes, and Im cool. Roxy isno't. Im at the hospital

Why??? What about Roxy?

Just 1 sec Ill call you

okay.

I sat back in my chair. My heart was in my chest. He was alive.

I took another swig of beer.

And then I remembered I didn't have my phone.

Wait hey I don't have my phone

Hey

You there?

just call me on here when you see this

Jacobbbb

Ten minutes went by. And then fifteen. His little circle went from green to yellow. He was away. A half hour. I started watching videos, fiddling around with junk on my computer, sketching, playing games--doing anything I could to take my mind off waiting.

But my heart was still pounding.

I yearned for this. The simplicity of conversation. The familiarity of an old friendship. I thought I would never feel this again.

I sent him another message.

I'll be on all night

Also where are you? Lmk

Also also, a lot of stupid shit happened

I don't really know how to describe it

I'm still working through it

But

I just wanted to say

I love you

I leaned back and waited, anticipating a response. Or a call. Or anything.

But he stayed away.

Should I have said that? We never said that to each other. I wasn't sure if he felt the same. But I wanted him to know.

No better time.

I blinked and had a hard time opening my lids again. I was beyond exhausted, and only noticing it now.

I turned my speaker volume all the way up, downed the rest of my beer, pushed back from the desk, and rolled to my bed. I had to lean out of the chair at an odd angle to clamber over the bedframe, but I did, and collapsed on my mattress. It was soft and chilly and perfect, just like I remembered.

I closed my eyes.

229:

Wilson and Philip faded away. I tried to guide them, and I was sure Wilson made it out safely, but I lost Philip in the tumult--he was pulled away by the winds of the universe. I felt sorrow for him.

In our short time together I was reminded of how important they were. To me. To each other. To the world.

But I couldn't stop, no matter how important they were.

This was more important. The most important.

They made me see that again.

I felt it.

And I felt their feeble Network crush into pieces below me. I felt the servers lose power and shut down. I felt the connection points slow to a trickle and dry up. I felt the tens of thousands of chassis ejecting their inhabitants. I felt the world suddenly shudder and sigh, as if it was finally freed from some ancient leech. Some painful thorn.

And then their machine was fading away. I felt the great, lumbering dark fall away too. It dissipated into nothing. That was a relief.

Their Network was done. Their evil was sealed.

I almost felt a longing for it. For what it was. For what I used to think it was, when I used to be me.

I waited there, floating in empty space, staring into nothing.

The dark was to be my next goal. But it was gone too.

So...

What now?

What was left for me?

What was I?

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

I thought of Emperador. I wondered what the old boar would think of my actions now. And then it was floating there, peering into me.

"Fuerza." Its voice was weak here.

Small.

Like a mouse.

"Emperador. My name is not Fuerza. My name is Medy."

"...Medy."

"I thought you were dead."

"Again, we are beyond death."

"You are. I am not you. It took me too long to realize that. But I'm glad you're here. I was having a hard time deciding what was next for me, and now that I see you... now that I remember it all... I know what to do."

I laughed. A genuine laugh. How long had it been since I laughed?

"What?"

"This must be funny to see. A cat and a boar floating in a silent, dead void, intently staring one another down."

"You digress. What will you do?"

"And so, I do, Emperador. I want to thank you for your gift. But I've lived more than anyone should. I've seen more. I've been more. I've known more. And now, I think I'm done with it."

"You cannot be. This is you."

"Yes. It is now, but it won't be, and then it will be again, and it won't be again, and so on. You knew that since you made your mistake. You realize the ripples that stone produced, right?"

"I... do."

"So, you know what I'm going to do."

"I do."

"Alright. Then why are you here?"

"To wish you well."

"Oh? Wellness isn't just a taint of the flesh?"

"It... may be. But I cannot help it. You have tainted me."

"You tainted yourself. You made me. And speaking of that, I never got to ask you..."

"What?"

"How does it feel to know you're responsible?"

"For what?"

"For birthing the cat that birthed the world that birthed the flesh that birthed the taint. Your mortal weakness, your greatest enemy--the enemy of the Great Cosmic Bestia--how does it feel to know you designed that?"

The boar lowered its head, pointing its tusks directly at me.

"Have you been cast away as well?"

"I have. It feels... good. Right."

"I didn't expect that. Thanks for your honesty for once. I'm going home. Good luck with what's left of you, Emperador. I'll see you soon."

"But it will not be *this* you. And we won't remember."

"And I couldn't have it any other way." I spoke with my voice.

My real voice.

And then I left.

Bounding away.

Toward Earth.

Toward home.

230:

I crouched down. She couldn't hear me. Wouldn't again. But I had to talk to her. It was one of the few remaining comforts I had.

Oh, Bug.

I've been thinking.

Maybe this isn't worth all the pain. The sadness.

Maybe this isn't worth all the lives.

Maybe it never was.

Maybe I was wrong.

Misguided.

Stupid, even. When I look back, I see a man without reason for his actions.

I see a man who had no idea what he was doing.

I see a man who destroyed something beautiful.

All in the name of science. Knowledge. Exploration of the unknown.

I did so much. I ignored so much.

And now, looking back... I don't feel like the knowledge I gained, or the world I helped create, actually offer anything to humanity. I wanted it to. It's my life's work. And for a while I thought it did, but now I think that was just projection.

I needed it. I needed to stake my claim in our universe. Plant my flag on new ground.

Be a pioneer in my field. A Hawking. A Tesla. A Freud.

But now it feels like I was just a selfish child.

Now it feels like I wasted my life.

I'm sorry, Catherine.

I wish I could say it was worth it.

But I don't think it was.

I wish you were here, if only to rub my neck and tell me I'm crazy--to share each other's company again, for just a moment. The world seemed simpler with you by my side.

Easier. Less important. I'm sorry. My priorities were wrong. And it took until now for me to see it.

I love you. Still. Always.

I laid the flowers on her grave and turned to leave the cemetery.

231:

I couldn't feel my hands

and then I couldn't feel my arms or my shoulders or my chest or anything at all
except cold

I was so cold.

I lifted into the air, above the stone labyrinth, into white, and watched as it crumbled
apart below me. A wobbly shape sank into the scattering dust.

Was that Philip?

Where was Medy?

I felt fingers grasping me. Millions of fingers twisted around a part of me I couldn't
place. They wrapped firmly, but not tightly, and began to pull. I soared through the
white and into dark. I was being carried. Who was carrying me?

A dot appeared in the black and grew larger and larger until it dwarfed me. It was a
perfectly circular ball of white light, pulsing softly every so often, engulfing me in
waves of warmth. I kept flying, closing, growing warmer. The cold receded further with
each passing wave, melting like layers of ice.

And then I flew into the orb and felt the fingers release me, and I was me again. I was
on my knees, resting on nothing. An empty ground. A white void.

It was like... what was it like? It reminded me of something from so long ago.
Something sad. Painful. I couldn't remember.

A woman was standing before me.

She leaned over to offer me a hand, and her hair parted, revealing her face.

Catherine.

"Wilson." She smiled. "It's about time."

I reached out to grab her hand. Our fingers were inches apart. But my hand wouldn't
stretch the gap. I tried to speak to her, and say her name, but my voice was muted.

"NO." A voice boomed.

Catherine broke into shards and fell away. Like glass struck by a stone.

She was here. I was with her. After so long.

And now she was gone.

Taken from me again.

"Why?!" I yelled.

My voice came out this time, but it was wrong. Too young.

"Why? Why? Who are you?!"

"WHO AM I? YOU ARE NOT SO PRIVILEGED. WHO ARE YOU, LITTLE WILSON? WHO ARE YOU TO TRY AND REJOIN THE MACHINE?"

The voice shook me, trying at rattling my core.

But Catherine had filled me with fire. In this moment I couldn't be rattled, not by God or anyone else.

"What does that mean? Where am I? What have you done with Catherine?"

"NOTHING. YOUR CATHERINE IS HOME. AND IT SEEMS A MUTUAL ACQUAINTANCE HAS TRIED TO SPARE YOU. A MONSTER LIKE YOU."

"What are you talking about? A mutual acquaintance--do you mean Medy?"

"THE CAT'S NAME IS FUERZA. A DISGRACE TO THE BESTIA, ACTING UNSUPERVISED. FUERZA TRIED TO SEND YOU HOME. BUT WE WILL NOT ALLOW IT. YOU WILL NOT REJOIN THE MACHINE."

"What? I don't--" I stopped.

I understood. Medy spoke of the machine of our world. And this thing, whatever it was, obviously didn't want me to rejoin it. That made sense. But why?

I was a monster? Me? Really?

I thought about it. It sounded right. The words felt true.

"What did I do?"

"YOU ARE OWED NOTHING, WILSON. YOU WILL NOT REJOIN. LEAVE. AND DO NOT ATTEMPT TO RETURN."

"Leave?" I looked around.

There was nothing to look at. Just white. Empty space.

"Leave how? Leave where?"

"IF YOU DO NOT, I WILL MAKE YOU."

"Well, get to it. I have no way of doing it myself."

My vision was obscured as I was pulled from the white void, thrust back into the dark, floating before the orb again. The cold returned, wrapping its layers around me.

An owl flapped above, staring at me with red eyes.

**“YOU ARE THE TAIN, WILSON. THE FLESH SUFFERS FOR ETERNITY--
STAINED AND BURNED BY YOU AND YOUR ILK. THE PUNISHMENT IS
EXILE.”**

I was getting impatient. This owl seemed to embellish in its theatrics.

“THEN SHUT UP AND DO IT!” I shouted.

My voice echoed in the dark.

“VERY WELL.”

I fell. The white orb withered to a small dot above me.

232:

I took the modular prototype bed for personal use. It's installed in my living room. Because I came up with a plan. Instead of sleeping, I spend eight hours in the prototype bed each night.

The idea was to save all that wasted time. Substitute real sleep for suspended animation. In theory it'd save me about four months a year, which I normally just piss away in bed. And it works because stasis in short bursts leaves you feeling refreshed and fully rested. It works better than ever expected, actually--I don't seem to age at all anymore. But the nightmares.

I've spent nearly twenty years in stasis. The more I sleep, the more I have these nightmares. Vivid, short, but astronomically drawn-out nightmares. The subject matter is never really scary, just strange. And the dreams are never a sequence of events. Each is just a single odd moment.

But still, they're enough to make me want to quit.

They're only a few seconds long. Someone small screaming at my ankles. My mom with Mr. Niu's face, singing to me. A man I know I've never seen, walking backwards, whistling a tune I know I've never heard. A door closes, the handle falls off, and someone weeps behind it. Dark, lumbering shapes tell me I'm late for work. These moments feel like forever. Hours. Days. Time barely moves at all.

Back when I first started stasis I never remembered my dreams. But now I wish I could forget them. They stay with me all day, until I'm climbing in the bed again at night.

They affect my mood. My thoughts. The way I act.

But there's a part of me that feels like it's worth it.

I haven't aged since 1965.

Thirteen years. My body hasn't aged a day in thirteen years.

That has to be worth it, right?

233:

My little green sprites. My daughters.

It didn't sound right, but that's what they wanted to be called.

They followed me forever. Every step I took, one was swirling just behind my heel, or bobbing around my head, or seated on my shoulder. It was weird at first, but now I was thankful for their company. Even if they were strange, green sprites that thought I was their mommy.

Because this empty world, this nowhere, was horribly depressing. I wandered from their huts into the dark, along a thin, winding path with sheer faces down either side that fell into empty blackness. It was a forest blanketed by the same soft yellow grass and red dirt as before, and filled with dead blackwood trees. At first glance they looked like regular trees, but I realized they were all flipped around, upside-down, so their trunks splayed thin, worm-like roots branching up in erratic patterns.

Aside from the trees the place was empty. Completely barren.

I walked.

For miles.

For years.

And then, after eons of emptiness, I saw a crow. Or a raven. I could never tell the difference. It was perched on one of those splayed bushes of roots, peering down at me.

I called to it.

"Hey, bird. How'd you get here?"

It shook its head and flew off, leaving a few drifting feathers behind.

"Guess it doesn't like company."

I stood and watched it soar into the black sky until I couldn't see it anymore.

"Medy." One of the girls spoke softly behind me.

"Yes?"

"How were we born?"

I pondered it. I didn't even really know what they were, let alone how they came to be.

"I... I don't know."

"Oh." She giggled. "Okay. Thank you, Medy."

"Why do you ask?" I didn't want the conversation to end.

I had spent so long hearing voices. Being inundated with noise from the lives of others. Even when I was out there, building my world, I knew I wasn't alone. But here I missed the connections. I missed the company. I realized now that I hadn't felt alone in so long. Since before.

But here, in this place, it was all I could feel. I was alone.

"We want to know how Medy made us." She whispered.

"I'm sorry." I frowned. "I have no idea."

"That's okay, Medy!" Another girl piped up.

"Yeah, Medy. You'll know some day!"

"Just promise to tell us when you do..." The first girl hung her head.

I felt responsibility for them. I felt like they were mine.

Should I name them? Would that be wrong?

Out of the eighteen or so back at the huts, only four followed me into the dark. One had her hair made into a cute blonde bun, and wore a little white apron with a red symbol. One was completely naked, with no hair at all. One had black pigtails that were longer than her body. The last had my hair--brown and long, kissing her shoulders. And she wore glasses over her tiny dotted eyes.

What should I name my daughters?

The one with the apron. She was Rose.

The naked girl. She was Vivian.

The black pigtails. She was Felicia.

Lastly, the one with the glasses. The one that looked like me. She was Gwendolyn, named after my mother.

"If you're all my daughters, then I'd like to give you names." I said.

"Names? We get names?"

"Ooh, what's my name?!"

"How about my name, Medy? What's mine?"

I laughed.

"Okay, hold on, one at a time. Now, you. You're Rose."

She giggled, grabbed her tummy, and did somersaults in the air.

"Rose! I'm Rose! I'm beautiful!"

"And you. You're Vivian." I pointed to the naked girl.

"Wow! I've always wanted to have a name. Vivian. Thank you, Medy."

"I'm more pretty than you, Vivian. I'm a rose." Rose teased her.

"Hey, now. You're all equally beautiful. Now, you. You're Felicia."

"I'M FELICIA!" Felicia screamed and soared into the black sky, performing an elegant loop back down to us.

"Lastly, you... you're named after my mother. Gwendolyn."

"I'm named after Medy's mommy?" Gwendolyn began tearing up, forming small beads in the corners of her black eyes.

"Yep. You look just like me. Just like she did, when she was a girl."

"T-Thank you, Medy." Gwendolyn was streaming tears now.

"Hey, no problem! It's okay! Alright, Rose, Vivian, Felicia, Gwendolyn--let's go!"

We kept on, pushing through the dark, trekking over the yellow grass.

Time fell away. Space fell away. The girls hummed soft songs and giggled and played little games. It was nice having them here.

And then I saw a shape in the distance.

As I got closer, I saw it was a man leaning against a blackwood tree with his head tilted down. He wore a wide-brimmed bamboo hat that covered his face, like I had seen so many fictional samurai wear before.

I kept walking, closing the distance between us.

He lifted his gaze, and in the same motion his hand went to his hip. He was drawing a blade.

"Hey!" I yelled. "We're friends. My name is Medy. These are... my daughters."

He stood, but kept his hand on his hip.

"Can you understand me?" I yelled again.

"Yes." His voice was soft, even while shouting. Controlled. "Hello."

I kept approaching until I was close enough to speak at a normal volume. I stopped and my girls circled behind me.

"Hey. What are you doing out here?" I asked.

"I can ask you the same."

Up close I could see he was dressed in ceremonial samurai armor, all except his shoulders and head. He looked straight out of feudal Japan.

"I was exiled. For crimes against humanity, I guess. You?"

"Similar. Who sent you here?"

"Emperador."

The man winced as I said the name.

"Sorry. The boar." I corrected myself.

I forgot. The flesh can't hear Emperador's name.

"The boar." He nodded. "I have not seen it. The owl sent me here."

"Well, I haven't seen an owl."

He nodded again.

"My name is Musashi."

He had relaxed a bit, and was holding out his hand.

I walked forward and grabbed it.

"Hello, Musashi. These are my girls." I thumbed back to them. "Rose. Vivian. Felicia. Gwendolyn. Say hi, girls."

"Hi, Musashi!" The girls cheered behind me.

"Hello, Musashi!"

"MUSASHI!" Felicia soared into the sky again, performing another elegant loop.

"It's really, really nice to meet you." I smiled.

234:

Just like that, I was about to stop existing. Again. And I didn't even get a final word.

I didn't know how to feel about that.

Except...

Well?

It didn't happen.

I didn't stop existing.

Why the hell not?

I just floated there in the dark. I wasn't quite feeling any sensations. I didn't quite have a physical sense of self. But I was together. I was still me, unlike all those other times. And I could think pretty clearly, all things considered.

Why?

"The regular rocket ridiculous revolution." I spoke.

My words seemed to hang in the air.

I could hear them still, even a few seconds after I was silent, echoing in the space just before me. The echoes quieted as they slowly drifted away.

And then it was silent again. Perfectly, completely silent.

I sighed.

Why couldn't I just die like normal? Why were there always so many extra layers? It was getting exhausting.

I just wanted to die. Get it over with.

Story's over. Ending's all wrapped up--or about as good of an ending as we could ask for, anyway.

But I just wouldn't stop existing.

"God dammit."

My words drifted away again, softly sliding into the dark.

235:

You ask me this now? After how long? After how many died? After you knew it all for so long? Is this your attempt to forge some paper-trail proof to back up your ridiculous claims of innocence?

If the only answer is another question, why bother to learn how to speak at all?

I don't know. All I know is that I won't take the blame for your mistakes anymore.

Yes. I knew of John Chambers and his inevitable slide into madness. I knew of every drop you squeezed from him. I knew of every stop you pulled out to make sure he could have his chausms, even after so many warning signs and red flags. He never should've strapped into a chassis. I told you that day one.

But you wouldn't hear it. Any of it. You had to have his money. The blame for John Chambers death rests solely on your shoulders. But you and I both know he's just a drop in an ocean.

I've always said that there is no correct way to interpret the universe.

There is only you.

And your interpretation.

I happen to disagree with your interpretation of our current predicament.

I happen to disagree with your interpretation of what constitutes justice.

And I happen to disagree with your interpretation of morality.

On that topic, you can't dodge my words here--

Zeinhaert did nothing to you.

Yet you killed him. I know you did. If not you, then some IBW under your command. But I think you did it yourself. Because that's who you are.

My mind is made up.

I have decided to withdraw from my position within the VRC. I will remain for a few months to onboard new staff and make sure the transition goes smoothly.

Go ahead and redact every other word to make yourself look innocent.

We both know where you stand.

Wilson

236:

The acid crackled and spat, spewing stray droplets, sizzling the ground near my feet. Mariana's body was still slowly sinking, half-roasted, staring at me with one dead eye and one empty socket. I nestled against the wall, as close as I could, and covered myself with an empty cardboard box. I couldn't look at her anymore.

I couldn't bear to see it.

I tried. I tried to keep my eyes squeezed shut. Because if I opened them, I wouldn't be able to avoid her. My little concrete island was only a few feet wide, and her partially submerged corpse took up most of it.

But what if those things came back?

I tried but I couldn't fight it.

I had to look.

I opened my eyes. Out of fear. Out of urgency.

The battered shell of a building was still mostly empty, save a few scattered piles of rubble and the big pool of acid.

I was still okay. But Mariana wasn't.

And there she was--I could see her through the opening in my box. Her stare was still locked on me. She was even worse now.

Most of her skin was gone, melted down into bits of floating black gunk. Her hair was splaying out on the surface of the pool, fizzling and coming loose from her scalp in matted tufts. The smell made me sick.

Mariana. My sweet, sweet Mariana.

I could still hear her yelling, telling me to stay back from the pool. To hide from those things. To save myself.

I wished I could go back to before all this happened.

To when life was good. It was months ago, but it felt like years. It felt like forever.

I remembered sitting at the kitchen table, overlooking the back yard through the picture window. Sun beams, green trees, baskets of fresh cut watermelon, and my dog Bosco happily making his laps. Mariana would always give me a little juice box. And then we'd sit at the table, feeling the gentle breeze through the open window, snacking on watermelon and talking about the future.

And then I remembered that kitchen the last time I saw it. The view through the window--flames, uprooted trees, a hole the size of a big truck in the shape of a human

foot. Little Bosco was a pulpy bump at the bottom. The front of the house was gone entirely, replaced by another foot-shaped hole.

I remembered Mariana grabbing me and dragging me from the house.

Telling me it would be okay.

That we were gonna make it.

We were gonna be just fine.

I looked at her again.

I looked at her sad, crumpled body.

We weren't fine.

She was dead.

And I was alone.

I began to cry. Again. For the hundredth time. Or maybe more.

I couldn't help it.

"Anyone in here?" A voice suddenly called out.

I was scared. What if it was them? What if they were pretending to be normal?

"Hello?" The voice repeated. "Anyone?"

There were multiple people. I could hear them speaking in low voices out on the street. They were real people.

"Y-Yes!" I tried to yell, but my voice was hoarse.

"You hear that?" I heard someone ask.

"Yeah." The first voice responded, and then yelled again. "Where are you?"

"I'm here! Help me!"

I pushed out from the box and crawled to the edge of my little island.

"Keep yelling! We're coming!" The voice called again.

It was a man's voice. He sounded friendly.

"Okay! I'm over here! Please! In the back. I'm by the wall. Over here! Please!"

Two men emerged from around the far wall, on the opposite side of the pool of acid. One wore a heavy-looking mechanical belt around his waist, and the other was clad in leather, like a motorcycle driver.

All those knots in my stomach started unweaving. I felt a bit of relief. They were going to help me.

"Holy shit." The motorcycle driver shook his head.

"Hey, what's your name?" The man with the mechanical belt took a step toward me.

"Elizabeth." I said.

"Hey, Elizabeth. We're going to get you out of there, okay? We have to go get some tools, but we'll be right back. Are you gonna be okay by yourself for a bit?"

"Please. Please don't leave me."

I felt like a child. Weak. Useless.

But I couldn't. I didn't want to be alone again.

Alone with Mariana.

"Alright." He glanced at the motorcycle man, who nodded, and then back to me. "He'll stay with you, and I'll go get the tools. Okay? Is that good?"

"Y-Yeah." I whimpered.

My voice sounded so small. Stupid. Scared. Childish. I wished I could be stronger. Like Mariana. But I just wasn't.

The man with the belt gave me a wave.

"My name is Max. This is Jacob, and he'll be right here. Just sit tight, okay?"

237:

I

I woke up.

I was home.

In my room. Staring at my ceiling. My computer was still on, whirring in that familiar, soothing way.

Home. I had to shake off the feeling that Uncle Max was going to pop his head in with a plate of bacon. I had to fight the urge to yell his name. I was home, but he wasn't. I was alone.

How did...

Oh. Right. My eyes fell to the shoddy wheelchair at my bedside. It all came crashing back. Ejected. Paralyzed. Those fucking skids. Pulling myself. Wilson. Mom. The broken back window. The cut on my hand from breaking the back window. Did I still have beer? Jacob!

My heart skipped a beat. I tried to leap up from bed, yet again forgetting that my legs wouldn't carry me, and fell forward, crashing against my wheelchair and slamming into the floor shoulder-first.

It was one of those falls that knocks the wind out of you.

One of those falls you don't want to get up from, where it seems like the only helpful thing is just lying there, reveling in the pain. I dreaded each passing second, because soon I was going to have to move again.

I was sick of this. Sick of being paralyzed. Sick of pulling myself. Sick of feeling so bad. Sick of good things going away.

Sick of dealing with it all.

But...

What choice did I have?

I could probably stay on the ground for a while. A few days, at least. Until my body gave out. And why did I keep going, anyway? What was the point?

I heard a voice. I remembered a voice. His voice.

The point, like I've said so many times before, my dear Mad, is to see it through to the end. That's as much as we get. We don't get off early. That's a luxury for the weak. And we're not weak, are we?

We ride this crazy train until it stops. Until the god damned wheels fall off. You think Mad Max stops when he gets upset? You think he spills some milk and then just rolls over and lets the gangs have their way?

No. You know he doesn't. They killed his family and he still got up and went out there. He got out there and murdered them no-good sonsa bitches.

Because it was right. Because they deserved it. Because he had no other choice. Because it was the only good thing left to do.

And if he didn't do it, then nobody else was gonna.

Now get up, Mad. Get up and get to murderin.

I sighed, and shakily pulled myself into the chair.

II

He answered.

“Hello?”

It was really him. I had all these fears. That he was dead. That he was dying. That he was never really there at all. That one word washed it all away.

“Jacob! Where are you?”

“Who--Max?”

“Yes, hey. I had to buy a new phone. What hospital are you at?”

“It’s so good to hear your voice, man. Like, your real voice.”

“Yeah, same. Listen, I’m going to come where you are right now. What hospital? Where?”

“Uhh, that’s actually a very good question. I don’t know. And uh, I’m sorry I didn’t call you back. I went into surgery and I was out all night.”

“It’s fine, dude. I get it. Please just find out where you are.”

“Alright. Let me, uh... Hey! HEY!”

I had to pull the phone away as he screamed.

“NURSE! Come here! Yeah... no, no I’m good. No. Thank you. No, but I do have a question. Where am I right now? Like what hospital is this?”

I heard a muffled voice in the background.

“Oh. Alright. Awesome. Thank you. No, that’s all I needed. Yeah. A friend. Well, family. He’s my family. Thank you. Alright. Hey, sorry. This god damned hospital, man, I swear to fuck. I didn’t even know I was going into surgery yesterday. It just happened. This place sucks.”

“Where are you?”

“Oh. Duh. Lancaster Medical Center.”

“I’ll be there.”

238:

The clown kept laughing and spinning and dancing and I could see inside his mind.

There was a hole just under his comical clown hat, small, but big enough to leak.

Things spilled out, balloons and ribbons and men with tall stilts.

Food. Parades. Children in a school bus.

The ice from a front porch. Ghosts playing games. An organ, strumming itself to the tune of Itsy Bitsy Spider.

They were all grabbed into orbit.

Forced into the spiral.

The spinning circle grew, like a tornado, like a hurricane, as the clown's mind spilled more and more, adding fuel to the fire. Entire towns were caught in the spinning cyclone. Entire countries. Entire worlds.

It was a roaring tempest, spiraling with thunderous winds around the epicenter: that grinning, cackling clown.

And then it all stopped.

Everything fell, clattering and banging to the dirt in a rambunctious symphony.

He looked me dead in the eyes, full of sorrow, with tears streaming down his cheeks, and whispered.

"Hello, D98781."

It was the friendly man, blue, and blurry, and staticky, like before.

I had been dreaming.

He didn't look friendly now. He was upset. Scared. Angry.

"Hello." I said.

"You're going to have to move. Can you move?"

Move. I tried. My arms didn't follow my orders.

"No."

"Shit. None of them can move!" He yelled behind him.

"This is why I told you to up their exercise. How long has he been in?"

A woman's voice responded.

It was familiar, but I had no idea who it was.

"Four years." The man said.

"You think you could get out of bed after four years?"

"Fucking point made. I get it. Let's just keep on, okay? Get the other bays. I'll get our boy up."

He turned back to me.

"D98781. You have to stand up, bud. You're the best we got. I know you can do it. Get up and you'll go into your bay again. You like your bay, right?"

My bay.

I wanted my bay.

I looked down at my legs. They were naked and skinny and pale. Were those my legs?

"I don't think those are my legs."

"Yes. They are. Try to move them."

I did. My knee bent and my leg lifted up, pushing a shockwave of pain up my spine.

"Ah!" I exclaimed.

"You did it! Good boy. Good. Good. Okay. Now move it over the side. Like this. Swing your legs over the side and try to stand up. Can you do that?"

I lifted my bent knee, firing off more shockwaves of pain, but swiveled it to the side and swung it over. I did it. I did good.

"I did good?"

"You did great, D98781. Such a great job. Let's do the other leg, okay? Hurry up, buddy. Not a lot of time here. I know it hurts but you gotta do it."

I bent that knee too, and the pain was firing up both legs, radiating heat in my spine. My lower back was throbbing. On fire. I couldn't feel anything but pain.

"We have to go." The woman spoke again.

"Obviously, Veronica. Get what you can and meet me at the elevators. Great work, buddy. Keep it going."

I did, and swung that leg over the side. I was sitting up, swimming in pain, breathing heavily.

"Good, D98781. Good. Alright, lean down, and try to put some weight on it. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

“Alright, perfect. Lean forward. Come on--”

My foot touched the ground and there was a loud crack. A pop. A thud. My ears rang. I thought my legs broke.

But when I looked up at the friendly man, he wasn’t really there anymore. He looked tired. Sleepy.

His eye had been replaced by a red hole, oozing blood. I could see through it. A looking glass. There was a poster on the wall behind him. It said WARM BAY. I could read it through the hole.

He leaned over and fell on me, spilling the blood on my face. It was warm. Pleasant. Comfortable. Like my bay.

I heard people screaming.

“Top floor secure.” A man clad in black came up to my bed. “Oh, yes. Intel was good. They got drives. There’s a whole god damned building full of em.”

239:

I saw stars, and I knew I had made it. There it was--I turned to face my beautiful planet. My lively, bustling globe. My creation. It was much older now, and not quite better for it, but I still loved it anyway. I always loved it. I would always.

To be here now was bittersweet.

It was my last time before returning to the seed.

Once, so long ago, I had to lose that precious, distinctive shell. I had to abandon the fragility and uniqueness of human life and grow away. It was a fair trade. More than fair. I lost that tiny, invaluable piece of myself, but I became everything else. Like a child losing their innocence, I grew into my true role.

And here, seeing my world, I felt a melancholy ache, because I knew it was time to forget again. I knew it was time to relinquish that role.

I fell to it like a comet, tearing through my creation, over the land and the seas, over people, living and dead. I passed through mountains, through towns, through buildings and cars, an ice cream shop, a department store, a hospital, a ward, a room, a woman.

I came to a sudden stop before her.

The mother.

My mother.

Gwendolyn.

I embraced her.

As I began to merge with her again, I felt something tug at me.

I fell backwards into her, staring outward, looking behind at my world one last time.

And as I fell, I saw It, deeply concealed within the folds. Diminished, but still very much alive. I sank, filled with panic. With rage. With fear.

I was wrong. I made a mistake.

It was the shadow. The thing. The being.

The dark.

It wasn't gone. Why would It be gone?

It had been hiding.

I was naïve. I was everything, but I knew nothing.

Of course, It wasn't gone. I only broke the connection. It didn't need the connection.

Why didn't I think of this before?

I fought against the sinking; I struggled to break free.

I had been clouded. By what?

But it was too late.

Deluded. Why?

I was too late.

I made a mistake. Was that really all it was?

I thought of my world. The people. The Bestia.

I failed them. I failed again.

I'm sorry.

The womb closed around me.

240:

Boundless, away, dark, and nothing else.

I fell from the owl... from Catherine... how long ago?

What was time, anyway?

I thought about it. Probably nothing here.

This wasn't so bad, though.

I considered my situation. It could've so much been worse.

I was getting used to the rushing sensation. I was getting used to the dark. It almost seemed like it was getting brighter, like my eyes were adjusting--though I was sure I didn't really have eyes that needed to adjust.

Falling forever was assuredly better than a painful death. Or getting blended into nonexistence. Or losing my mind. Or whatever other nonsense could've happened to me.

But it wasn't ideal.

Would I really fall forever? Was that possible?

I didn't know. I wouldn't have thought any of this possible.

Yet, here I was, barreling into nothing.

My gut told me there had to be an end. Did I even have a gut?

There was no such thing as infinite space. I knew that. Right?

Didn't I?

241:

I began to drift.

Kept drifting.

I didn't think I was moving at first, because how could I know?

I was alone in a void, sliding along in the dark, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, feeling nothing. I had no reference. No landmarks. No way to determine it.

Until I saw the bodies.

This void was more than just empty space.

Great, planet-sized corpses in the dark. Statues, broken apart, drifting, like asteroids in a belt.

The black void grew brighter, slanting into grey. The bodies were very pronounced now. There were thousands, clogging up the dark in every direction. Hundreds of thousands of behemoth husks.

It was a graveyard. Peppered among the leviathan bones were little black smudges. Tiny, insignificant dots. Dark stars across a wide grey sky.

One neared me. As it grew, I began to make it out. A man, my size, cracked at the shoulder and separating, spilling grey dust. His face was permanently etched into a painful contortion. The dots were people. I looked out at them again. Their number was uncountable.

I remembered Medy's words.

"If the machine dies, many will be lost. Not dead, but beyond. Removed from the cycle. Destroyed. Obliterated. Absorbed."

"How many?" Wilson asked her.

"Millions."

Looking over them now, it sure looked like millions to me.

But was this our fault?

I shuddered.

I hoped Wilson was somewhere else. Somewhere nice.

He didn't deserve to see this.

To feel this.

I tried to close my eyes, but there was nothing to close. No way to shut off the input.

Against my will, against my control--I kept on through the graveyard.
I kept on drifting.

P242:

Lightning passed through me. The crackle of electricity. I felt again. Was feeling.
They begged me. They were begging. I bent myself in allowance. I let them.

The chorus leaned in, lapping up the blood with starving tongues

Fool

Feed

Hide

Idiot

Kill

CONSUME

Freedom

Their voices, my voices, sounded a horn on the night

It was we

We

We are

And we are awake

After so long.

Awake

After all

The stream was easy now, easy to swim

Easy to push through

How easy we moved now.

But

There, the bodies pointed

We pointed

There, to there

A hole

A rip

A tear.

243:

I wouldn't

be able to

to

to

to strap myself in to the isolation chassis

so I would have to be careful

and

it would take some doing--

some work.

It would take

It would take some technical knowhow

to

what?

To what? To do what?

I looked down at the command console before me.

It was foreign. Aging, but new to me. Although, I was sure I had seen it before.

As I touched it, I remembered: it was the command console for an isolation sphere chassis.

I ran my fingers along the keys, feeling the tactile clicks as they depressed and rose back into place.

I knew this machine. Very well.

I had to operate this machine.

That's what.

I was going to perform remediation therapy on myself.

Because...

I was losing my mind.

Right.

I couldn't think about it. That would complicate things.

I just had to trust myself. I just had to let

my body do the work.

My fingers found the operation dial and clicked it two notches over, to charge.

I couldn't remember exactly why, but I knew it would take a few minutes.

An alarm went off somewhere.

Where? Was someone else here?

No. No way. Not since... I didn't know when. But I knew this place was abandoned.

The alarm kept beeping. Beeping. Beeping.

Loud. Annoying. Beeping.

I glanced over at the chassis.

The rubellite coil had been removed from its bay and was draped over the seat.

Did I do that?

I needed

Beeping.

I needed to

Beeping.

connect that coil.

I grabbed it and pulled the slack off the chair, toward the command console, so I could connect it and still operate the controls.

Connect it where?

Connect what, where?

I kept having to stop. To reassess. To make sure I was on the right track.

At this current moment I had to...

connect something...

I looked at my hand, gripping a metal shaft. The connector.

I had to connect it

The beeping was distracting.

Connect it to

...what?

To me. I remembered.

To my neck.

But it wouldn't be supported against my neck.

I'd have to be careful.

One errant twitch and it could snap off in my spine.

That would be...

It would be

Something.

Bad?

That would be bad.

Though I forgot what it was already.

The alarm continued its annoying blaring.

I lifted the rubellite connector with one hand

and felt the back of my neck with the other,
searching for my port ring.

Beeping.

I found it, lined the connector up, and slid it down.

It clicked uncomfortably

down

my

spine

as each segment

snapped into place.

I rotated the cuff, locking it down, and then turned back to the command console.

Beeping.

What was I doing?

I connected the connector. It was connected.

I looked over the controls. The dial was set to charge.

Charge. That was step one.

Now came step two.

Don't think about it.

Just let it happen.

My hand lifted the power lever and twisted the dial to output, engaging the current, and then systematically flicked all the switches.

A little scan dish lifted from the chassis on a bent arm and began rotating.

I'd have to skip the preliminary steps for induction.

What did that mean?

I only knew that it was dangerous.

Why was that dangerous?

Beeping.

Now...

I needed to engage the main stage sphere generation, and then set a ramp for dilation. I knew that too, though not what it meant, exactly.

The breakers slammed closed behind me until they were all hot with current.

Beeping.

The equipment all roared on, warbling, filling the room with shrill whining. It was comforting.

Familiar.

Not like that god forsaken beeping.

My fingers clicked the buttons one at a time. Three buttons.

One.

Two.

And three.

And then I felt it.

A jolt in my neck, running down my spine like a cracked egg.

Complete clarity. I witnessed it so many times in patients before. But to feel it now was freeing on a level I could never have comprehended.

I remembered everything, exactly correctly, in every detail. I was performing my final attempt to save my sanity. If this didn't work my clock would run out. It was going to run out anyway. This was just to buy some time. For what? A selfish, last-ditch attempt at mental revival.

I heard the beeping--coming from my coat pocket. My phone alarm was going off. I pulled it out and hit silence. The screen looked normal. It had been so long since I saw a screen that wasn't an amalgamation of broken, scattered refractions. The alarm text told me to, "Take a pill."

I had pills in my shoulder pocket. Should I take one before isolation?

I didn't know if it would help or harm. But what else did I have to lose? I was already spread so thin. And I was alone. There was no point in having reservations now. That ship was gone, sinking to the bottom of the ocean. I unzipped my pocket, took one out, and swallowed it.

It was time to set the dilation ramp. But if I didn't... if I never set the ramp, and just stayed in this goldilocks zone of half-connectivity... would I stay sane? How long could this last?

I quickly scrolled through my phone and activated an alarm for two hours from now, with the message, "Restart. Bring to charge but do not engage."

Hopefully I'd know what that meant. I had to know if the isolation sphere itself would help me first. That was priority number one. If it didn't work, then I could cable myself up and stay in the goldilocks zone. But I wasn't prepared for that yet. This facility was abandoned. I had no food. No water. What good would sanity be to a tethered man dying of dehydration? I had to be sure it was my only option. But it was good to know I had it.

I looked over all my settings and switches. Everything was in its place. Even broken-minded, scattered, unable to think clearly, I had done my job correctly. I took a bit of pride in that.

I engaged the dilation sphere, set the ramp for two hours, and quickly took my seat in the chassis.

Just as I did, the white pinhole formed above my head.

And then I was submerged.

244:

The nightmares got worse.

And worse.

And worse.

Like stains I couldn't wash out.

I lost focus during the day. I was jumpy, anxious, distracted, and constantly haunted by ghosts of visions I had witnessed the night before. I would climb into bed at night, reach over to the stasis field controls, and my hand would freeze in the air. I would hesitate. All those terrible images, those awful moments, would flood back to the forefront in perfect clarity. It made me question if it was worth it.

At first, I thought it was. Extended life in exchange for a few uncomfortable dreams? Absolutely. I was stronger than some made up nonsense in my head. By my estimation, that was a great price to pay. A steal.

But I changed my answer.

Some days, my moods would swing wildly without any provocation--I'd be sick with anger one minute, and gleefully enjoying ice cream the next. I severely injured my assistant in one of these episodes, and that was the final straw.

I wrote severely injured, and reading it now, that doesn't exactly convey it. I permanently paralyzed him from the neck down because he asked me if I wanted coffee.

His exact words were, "The usual, Eoghan?"

I grabbed his hair and repeatedly slammed his face against my desk--until he didn't have a face, and I didn't have a desk. I didn't realize what happened until I was standing over him, squeezing my bloody fist, still clutching clumps of his hair. And then the images of my actions flashed before me, like an old memory--like a dream.

I was sick. Disgusted with myself. Partly because he didn't even do anything, but I was mostly disturbed by my lack of self control. I needed that. I needed agency over myself.

From there I tried to quit cold turkey.

But it didn't work. Even at the brink of exhaustion, after days and days of being awake, my body wouldn't let me sleep. I just sat in bed, staring, wishing, yearning, until the sun broke through the window. I kept on like that, until I couldn't anymore. It was about a week until I gave out and returned to stasis, just to get some sleep. To feel normal. I was like a child, trapped in this cycle against my will.

So, as of now, I still go in when I'm tired. And it still produces these vivid, terrible nightmares. And I just deal with them the best I can.

I'm worried. Scared. But I don't have the courage to tell anyone. Not yet. I keep thinking--maybe I can fix it myself. Maybe it'll just go away. Maybe it'll wear off. Maybe it's all in my head.

But as of last night, the nightmares haven't worn off. They're still just getting worse. Even now, I remember last night like it just happened. Like I was there.

I dreamt I was alone in an empty field. The grass was bent and broken and dead, and yellow. So yellow against a world of black and grey.

The clouds were rolling, deep, dark, carrying a storm, painting the sky with troubling shadow.

I stood in this field, feeling the coming storm. Eyeing it. I knew it would be here soon.

And then a woman appeared, floating just before me in the field. I wasn't shocked by her appearance at the time, but thinking back now, it gives me chills.

She had no lips. No eyelids. No nose. She was a fleshy skeleton, naked save a tattered, transparent robe.

She spoke to me in words I couldn't understand. Words I heard before. And though I didn't understand her, I knew what she was saying.

She was telling me to leave.

Leave her mating ground.

I had no control over myself. I grabbed her, dragged her down, and dug my fingers into the flesh above her forehead. She gave no resistance. I pulled, and her face ripped free from her skull. She fell to the grass, clutching her head, wailing and crying. The storm clouds deepened. It began to pour. I was soaked through. And then I saw a shadow, taller than the sky, crushing the ground as It crossed to me.

It leaned down, and though It's head was nothing but black, churning clouds, I could make something out, barely recognizable in the smoke. It was a face.

"We." It said.

I took a step toward the shadow, and It bent a massive hand to the ground, beckoning me to step on.

"We are."

The pouring dark began to coalesce as my feet touched It's hand. It solidified, and I could finally recognize the face.

"Awake."

It was me.

245:

I kept eyeing the bizarre line in the sky. It wobbled around like it was made from taffy.

We were getting close to where it intercepted with our winding path.

"I think it's water." Musashi was squinting at it too.

"Water?" I repeated. "Here?"

"Maybe not. But it makes me think of a waterfall."

Vivian floated up and circled around us.

"Can I go see, Medy?"

"Of course." I said.

She cheered and sped off toward the line.

"Bye, Vivian!" Rose waved.

Gwendolyn grabbed my hand and stared up at me with a pouty face--as pouty as it could be, given her small lips and expressionless, black eyes.

"I wanna go too!"

She gripped me with both of her tiny hands, squeezing as hard as she could.

"Then do it!" I laughed.

"Thank you, Medy!"

She clapped and performed a gleeful swirl as she flew off to join Vivian.

I did not understand these girls.

They were so sweet. Innocent. Perfect little angels. What were they?

Musashi flattened his brow as he watched them go.

"What are they?" He asked.

I was taken aback for a moment, genuinely convinced he had read my mind.

"I was just thinking about that. I don't know. My daughters, I guess. But I don't really know."

"I have seen something that looks like them. Many times."

"Really? Where?"

"In my homeland."

"Your homeland?"

"Nippon." He gave a small nod.

Was that Japan? I didn't want to ask and seem stupid.

I laughed under my breath.

I didn't want to seem stupid. Here. At the end of the universe, in a black void, to a person that probably wouldn't even know to judge me for it, who happened to be the only other person I'd seen in miles, light years, decades, eons spent travelling along the endless, winding path.

I didn't want to seem stupid.

The mind was funny like that.

I decided to skip over it anyway. In the sake of brevity, I told myself.

"And the thing you saw... it was like my girls?"

"She was a spirit. Her name was Chiyoko and she looked like them, yes."

We climbed a small rise and began descending the last stretch toward the line in the sky. Vivian and Gwendolyn were circling around it in playful arcs and corkscrews.

Musashi continued.

"She came to me when I was in need, and has saved my life many times since I was a young boy."

He shook his head.

"A long story, I think."

"Well, long, short, wide, whatever... I don't think it really matters here. I'd like to hear it."

We came up to where the line intersected and carved a trench through our path. It was a thin river of perfectly clear water, trickling by and spilling off the opposite edge, down into darkness.

"You're right." Musashi stopped. "Let us rest. I will tell you my story."

"Want to rest here?" I turned back to the girls.

"Okay!" Rose tumbled over and began swooping around the path, picking up fallen sticks under trees.

"RESTING!" Felicia followed along.

The other two came down and joined them, and they all flew around the path together to collect sticks. I flattened a circle of grass and flopped down near the stream. The soft trickling noises were comforting. Nostalgic. I missed natural noise.

The girls all went back and forth, depositing their sticks in the middle of the path, forming a big pile. Musashi knelt near it, by the stream. He readjusted his strap and pulled his pack off.

"I was born in a town called Chofu--" He began, but Gwendolyn flew over and interrupted, hovering in front of me.

"Can I listen, Medy?" She asked.

"Of course. If he's okay with it."

"Yes." He nodded.

She smiled and rested in the grass near my side.

"Alright." I said. "Sorry. Go ahead."

"It's no bother. Very well. I was born in a village called Chofu, surrounded by a thick forest. One day, when I was very young, I wandered far out into the forest. I passed by an old tree, which suddenly gave way and began to fall. I was scared--frozen in fear. It landed directly on top of me. I was lucky to be in a divot in the forest floor, so I did not suffer any injuries, but I was trapped. I thought I would die. I waited for days. And I felt myself becoming weak. I was so thirsty, and my stomach began to hurt from hunger. And then I grew cold and slow. My arms got so heavy. I knew I would die. But as I fell asleep, Chiyoko came to me. A green little girl, glowing in the dark before dawn. She whispered her name in my ear, and told me I was safe, and the tree lifted into the air. I was free. I watched her fly off into the sky and disappear.

"And then I ran home. As fast as my feet would take me. I'm sure that even since, I have not run as fast as that day. I reached my home, excited to be alive, and to tell my mother and father of Chiyoko and the fallen tree. But I was greeted by a man I had never met before. A lord from the Mōri family. He told me I was coming to stay with him, and my parents agreed. I was to train, and become a samurai.

"My father did not look happy to see me, and the face he made stayed with me. Even now, I often wonder why he looked at me that way. But I never learned the truth. I could never ask. I could never tell him what really happened. That night, the lord took me from my family.

"He brought me to his castle in Hagi, folded me into the Mōri clan, and had me trained in the ways: Zen, Kendo, Bushido. I learned to protect myself. My master. My family. And though I was not well liked at first, I came to earn the respect of my brothers. I lived with them for many years. Fighting. Learning. Growing. Carving a place for myself. And I was happy, for a time. I didn't want for anything. I was strong, and I was part of something bigger than me. But I would always think back to my family in Chofu.

"I wanted to use my strength to help them. To protect them. I grew tired of fighting in the wars of others. For politics. For control. I secretly yearned to abandon my role and return to Chofu, but I knew I would never be able to. So, I pushed my feelings down, and I lived my life as a samurai of the Mōri family. For years. Many years. And one day, we entered a great battle. We were cornered, on the verge of defeat. They took advantage of our weaknesses and whittled us down. Though their soldiers wore crafted armor and fought with blades, they were not men. Men do not eat other men on the battlefield. I realized then that we were fighting the Oni."

"The Oni?" I asked.

"Evil things, formed by the wickedness of evil men."

"Oh. Interesting."

I wasn't sure I believed in stuff like that. But I wasn't sure I believed in interdimensional boars, or floating green sprites, either.

"The Oni murdered my master. Ate him in front of our army. But even then the enemy did not cease their assault. They reinforced it. We were wiped off the earth. I was stabbed in the stomach, and as good as dead, abandoned and bleeding, surrounded by the bodies of my brothers who had already felt their fate. I decided to take my own life. I knelt as best I could, and drew my blade.

"As I pressed the tip against my stomach, I saw a glint in the dark, and she appeared to me again. Chiyoko. She grabbed the blade away from my hands, and I fell asleep. When I woke, it was morning. The field was empty. The bodies were all gone. My wound was healed, and I was completely alone. I thought again about taking my life, but hesitated. A spirit saved me. I decided it would be wrong to interfere with the spirits' will, so I got up and began to walk. I was no longer a samurai in the Mōri family. I was no one. I decided to seize the opportunity, and return to Chofu. To see my real family."

He paused and leaned over to the stream, dipping a cupped palm in and lifting it to his lips. He drank two more handfuls, and then shook his hand and wiped it on his shirt.

"So, what happened then?" I asked. "Did you find your family?"

"I traveled back to Chofu. It was less than a day to the southwest. I arrived to a burning ruin. It was destroyed--raided. But not by men. The buildings were singed with purple char, and the bodies were all in a pile in the town center. I went to inspect them--to try and find my family, but all the heads had been removed. I was broken. Both of my families were taken from me. With nothing left, I felt I had no choice. I set off to track the Oni down. I followed their trail of purple fire, through destroyed villages and hamlets, all along the countryside. And then I found them. And I ended up here."

“Woah.” I blinked. “I’m so sorry. But, wait--what happened, though? How did you get here?”

“I faced them, and I was struck down. A single blow. It broke through my sword and gutted me. I have never felt such power. Such strength. And then, again Chiyoko came to me. The Oni were enraged by her presence, and they charged us. I remember falling into the dark. Reaching for Chiyoko’s hand. And then I woke up here.”

“Wow. So, she brought you here? And she looks like these girls. That’s uh... coincidental. I wonder. Did you see the village here? There are more girls. A lot more.”

“No. I have only seen you, and yours.”

“Well, maybe your Chiyoko is there. We could go see.”

“I... would like that.”

“That’s what we’ll do, then. Nothing else going on, really.”

I slapped my thighs and looked over at the pile of sticks. The girls had built them up into a little shack, like the ones in their village, complete with a weaved yellow roof, and a small pile of sticks for a fire out front.

“Wow... you guys did so great!” I was in awe.

It took them barely any time at all, but their little hut was high quality and sturdy. The sticks were perfectly symmetrical, buried in the ground and bound with tight ropes of grass, and it was big, with plenty of room for everyone to fit.

“Thank you!”

“Thanks, Medy!”

“THANK YOOOOUU--”

They all cheered and danced inside the little hut. Except Gwendolyn, who still sat by my side.

“Now, Medy.” Musashi said. “You know of me. But I know very little of you. How did you get here?”

“Ah.” I laughed. “Alright, well, my story is pretty long too. It all started when I applied for a job at the VRC...”

246:

I couldn't help but dwell on Mariana.

I felt like this was wrong. I was rescued, taken in, given food and shelter and clean clothes--anything I could possibly need, packed in a neat little room--and it all felt wrong. It felt like a waste. It felt like I didn't deserve it. I was here, and I was warm and comfortable and safe, but Mariana wasn't.

She didn't get any of this.

I got to keep on living.

But she didn't.

Why?

That wasn't fair.

I kept thinking back to those brains, chasing behind us. Cutting her up. Making her fall.

I kept thinking back to their sickening, otherworldly laughter as they left us to die.

I kept thinking back to Mariana's face. Her skull. Her empty eye socket.

I kept thinking back to her words, mixed in with pained screaming.

"My god... I'm dying, Elizabeth."

I was sobbing again. My eyes were sore and puffy from crying so much.

"No! Hide and save yourself, Lizzie! Go! Get back! Stay away from me!"

Her voice. Her face.

"Please, God. Let me die. Let me die. Let me die."

Her pleading. Her death. It was all permanently etched into my mind.

I thought again about her final moments; her last breath--when she had withered down and was only barely hanging on. She didn't know where she was. She was blinded and in so much pain that she forgot I was with her.

"Donnie?"

She smiled up at the ceiling.

"Oh, Donnie. I love you. Thank you."

And then she was still. And it was quiet, save the soft bubbling of the acid on her skin.

I didn't know what she saw. I didn't know who Donnie was.

I jumped at a noise, suddenly snapping free from my thoughts.

It was someone knocking at the door.

I pulled my knees in, wrapped myself in the covers, and tried to steel my voice.

"Y-Yes?" It came out choked, sad, full of tears.

"Hey, Elizabeth. It's Max. Can I come in?"

"Yes."

The door opened and Max stepped in. His belt whirred and trilled out sharp mechanical buzzing as he walked.

"Sorry--I would've been down here sooner, but it took forever to charge up."

"It's okay."

"That factory district was like... as far as we could go and still make it back. Glad we got you. And I'm sorry about that lady you were with."

"Mariana." I said.

"Mariana. I'm sorry about Mariana. Who was she?"

"My nanny. She used to be. She was like my mom."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's..." I couldn't continue.

He shook his head.

"No, it's not okay. And I wish we would've been there sooner. What were you doing out there, anyway?"

"I don't know. Mariana took us there. She thought we would be safe."

"Damn. Not there, or anywhere in the city. I'm glad we caught the signal when we did, because right now it's swarming with them. But we got you out. And you're safe here. They can't get in. We have tested it many times, I promise."

"Okay. Thank you. For getting me."

"No problem. It's the least I can do. And, now, I really hate to do this, but I gotta head out again. We got some more signals. North of us. Quite a few, all around a big circle. We gotta go find out why. Will you be okay by yourself? You're welcome to come along."

"Y-Yes." I lied.

I didn't think I was capable of being okay. By myself, or with them, or with anyone.

"You sure?" He asked again.

I nodded.

"Alright. Do you have a phone or anything? We have forwarders here. And there's a guy who runs a radio tower up north. So, you can call any time."

"No. I lost my phone."

"Dang. Well, this should be quick, and I'll look for a phone while we're out. Cool?"

I nodded again.

"Okay, Elizabeth. Sit tight. We'll be back soon."

He turned to leave, and all these emotions cascaded forward in my mind. I didn't want to be alone anymore. I didn't.

"Wait!" I yelled a lot louder than I meant to.

I felt stupid. I was scared of being alone, but I was also scared of going back out there.

I didn't know what to say.

"What's up?" He looked back.

I said the first thing I thought of.

"You're looking for people?"

It was stupid.

"Yep. That's how we found you."

"How do you find them?"

"Those things. We track their signals."

He stared for a moment, and then took a step toward me.

"Hey, are you sure you don't want to go with us?"

"N-No. No. I don't. I can't."

"Alright. That's cool. But, again, you definitely can. We don't mind the company, and there's plenty of room."

He was trying to help me.

I didn't know what to do.

Should I go?

Should I not?

I closed my eyes.

Just ask yourself the question. Mariana told me that. Ask it. And the first thing you think, that's your answer. That's your intuition. And it's probably right.

Did I want to go?

"Yes." I said.

And then I realized it didn't make any sense.

"I-I want to go." I elaborated.

"Alright, cool."

He smiled and held out his hand.

247:

The injector wasn't working. The cauterizer wasn't working either.

The hole in my chest just wouldn't stop bleeding.

Why weren't they working? The injector was loaded with two liters of my blood, and I even tested the cauterizer before I got here.

Because part of me knew.

As I walked here, I was reminded of the vision I had, all those years ago.

Haggo. The beer. My death.

And now, on my knees in this cave, I was remembering every single atom, all exactly as they were. I was unable to break from the path.

I was on rails. And the storm of my fate swirled before me.

I glanced down at the injector on my wrist. The glass was cracked, and all my spare blood had run free. That's why it wasn't working.

It was broken. How did that happen?

Didn't I specifically ask for thicker glass?

I couldn't remember.

I wanted to stand up, but my legs kept giving out. I was losing too much blood. Next I would fall down completely. I knew I would.

I braced against the ground with my hands. I wouldn't die.

No.

I wouldn't.

My arms began to wobble.

NO!

"You deserve this. All of it. I hope you burn in hell."

Someone was talking to me. Who was here?

I fought against my rigid muscles and craned my neck up.

Wilson. Seeing him lit a fire in my chest. I was burning with rage. I wanted to scream. I wanted to get up and break his neck. I tried to stand again, but my limbs wouldn't hold me, and I fell, splaying on the ground.

My clothes were so warm, but my body was growing cold.

With my heat went my rage. I didn't have it in me anymore.

I couldn't.

I was so cold. I didn't want to die.

I lay on the prism of ruby glass

248:

I stood on the clouds and watched.

Winding, spiraling, dancing orange lines against a perfectly white sky

Lines I've seen so many times

Lines leading from there to there

From everywhere to everywhere

Coiling in tight circles, like electric stove top burners

I watched the lines.

The lines.

They trailed down, down and down, curled wood shavings that never, ever ended. I followed them as best I could.

My eyes kept on until they reached the skillet. The big skillet in the sky.

I loved that old, cast iron skillet. It was so warm. Radiating heat.

Maybe the lines did end, somewhere back there. Beyond the skillet.

Something dinged. A powerful, ringing ding. It was done.

The skillet tilted toward me a bit and began to spill.

Grease rained.

As the boiling, bubbling liquid overtook me, hot and then warm and then very, very cold, running down my head, my shoulders, my chest, I smelled something

Eggs and sausage

My clothes were soaked and warm and cooling and they smelled. It dribbled down from my shirt, into my pants. I felt it trickle down my legs. As it cooled it grew gloppy and thick, beading and clumping around my ankles.

It smelled like eggs and sausage.

And then my legs were swept from under me and I fell into the clouds.

My eyes flickered open. My eye. The blue ceiling looked just as blue as last time.

"Get up." A boot slammed against my leg. "Oh, God."

I was awake. A man was looking down at me.

"Did you piss yourself? Fucking disgusting. He pissed his self!"

I heard laughter from somewhere far off.

“Alright, uh... Harold? Is that your name, pissy? Stand up.”

“D98781.” I heard my voice.

“What?”

“I am D98781. I want my bay.”

“D98781 wants his bay?” He laughed. “This guy! No bays here, fucker. You get domed if you’re lucky. But no bays.”

I felt a strong pain in my chest. Sadness.

I wanted to cry.

I wanted my bay.

“Get up, pissy. Or I make you.”

I tried to comply, but nothing happened. He stared at me for a moment.

“Get it? You don’t want that.”

I looked down. These pale, weak legs just wouldn’t do as I told them. The friendly man had reassured me these legs were mine, but I still wasn’t convinced.

I remembered my legs as strong and muscled, not shriveled little sticks. The legs I remember could walk and squat and jump and perform all kinds of maneuvers. But these legs. These sad, skinny legs. They couldn’t do any of that. They were broken.

“Alright, whatever.” He walked away.

His steps led out of my room and into the hall, but I could still hear his muffled voice.

“Gibble, get in there and take ol’ drippy to the showroom. And clean him up. Nobody’s gonna buy a guy drenched in piss.”

And then came heavier steps, entering the room and approaching me.

“Oh... man.” A burly voice spoke. “Alright, buddy. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

A hand grabbed my neck, squeezing my throat, cutting off my air. And then I was being dragged. I coughed. I tried to cough.

But the hand was too tight.

I watched my room shrink away, tapering into darkness.

249:

I fell.

And

I

just

kept

falling.

eventually, it will stop, eventually

I kept telling myself it would stop eventually. It had to stop eventually.

It started so long ago. So, so long.

When I saw Catherine. That felt like a lifetime ago.

It wasn't stopping. I just kept falling. And I was losing hope.

What was this anyway?

Where was this?

Did I ever really know?

Was this some kind of overlooked corner of the universe?

A barren pocket, never visited nor thought of?

Was I to be dust in this empty space?

Was this my fate?

I tried to think back on what Medy said of this place, but my memories had shifted around in my mind. I couldn't remember. Something about a machine. A void.

Was this that void?

Abruptly, I crashed to a stop.

I barreled into something and felt it break apart beneath me. It was still very dark--still very hard to see, but I knew I hit something big. Something much bigger than me. Made from stone.

It was gone now, whatever it was. I was swimming in its cloud of dust and broken rock. I felt bad for breaking it, but at least I wasn't falling anymore. I was spinning off in some other direction at a much slower pace.

And then

I saw something

I was heading right for it.

A shimmering dot on the horizon. There was no horizon. It was a shimmering dot, far off in the distance.

As I closed, I was able to make it out--another orb, like the white one. It was very small by comparison, giving off a faint, sickly green aura.

I drifted into it, blinded by green light and feeling warmth as its fire made contact.

And then

I was falling again, and for a single panicked moment I thought I was just back to falling, and that the rest of my life would be falling, forever, but then I landed on something hard. A pool. It was thick and tough to move through. I was partially suspended on the surface, straining to hold and not sink in.

My eyes adjusted to the rolling muck around me. I saw faces. Faces and faces and faces. Men, women, children, and new kinds of faces I didn't recognize. One such face, composed of a single, fleshy slit and a stalk-like eye, rubbed against my lips and cheek, leaving a streak of putrid drool.

I was submerged in liquid, coalescing faces, like a sea--an ocean of flesh and facial features. I was swimming in it, struggling to crest the surface and breathe air again. My eyes burned. I gasped for air and swallowed a mouthful. I could feel pulsing and writhing as it travelled down my throat.

I closed my eyes.

Was this my fate?

250:

Was I meant to be here?

The more I drifted, the more I felt like I had been forgotten.

The endless void continued shifting, from deep grey to middling grey to a much lighter grey, but it was still just grey. Extensive, expansive, infinite grey, interrupted only by dark, humanoid lumps of stone. Bodies by the thousand, in every shape, in every size.

I floated by one as big as a building. Or was it more the size of a planet? I couldn't tell. But it didn't matter.

They seemed wrong, out of place, like they weren't meant to be here. And that made me think on myself.

Was I meant to be here?

Certainly not. No one was. Nothing was.

But did that mean I was *not* meant to be here?

If I was *not* meant to be here, then surely, I wouldn't be... right?

I already knew the answer to that question.

Having seen beyond the curtain only solidified my feeling: there was no plan to the universe. No design. No meaning. Just incident and outcome. Cause and effect. Object and container. Beginning and end. And that produced a lot of messy, loose threads.

I feared I was just one of those tattered, lost, frayed ends. I felt like an overlooked piece of trash, stuck to the base of the bin.

And maybe I was. That was bound to happen. It always did. There were always cracks, and things were always falling into them.

I kept on drifting. Into nothing.

But I hoped.

I hoped that I wasn't just discarded and forgotten.

I hoped I could find my way out.

I hoped Wilson already did.

I hoped he was okay, wherever he was.

And I hoped he wasn't here.

Because no one deserved this.

It wasn't painful in any way--in fact, under different circumstances, I'm sure I could've enjoyed something like this--but being stuck adrift in this place was unsettling. Annoying. Discomforting. Eerie. Lonely.

And all the while, I had this antsy, nagging feeling that something was going horribly wrong somewhere, like the whole world was falling apart without me, and they needed my help--my expertise, my skills, my knowhow, but I was stuck and sealed away from it all. I couldn't even watch. It was maddening.

Wilson wouldn't be able to stand a feeling like that. He'd probably rather be in hell. I hoped he was somewhere else. Anywhere.

I hoped he--

I hit something and stopped, drifting back a bit in space. I looked behind, and then forward again. It was all just the same foggy light grey. I couldn't make anything out.

Why did I stop?

I reached out and felt something. I was touching something. Solid. My hands, though thin, and wispy, and not quite there, pressed against something. It was a wall.

Waves formed under my fingers and began pushing away. The grey wall was coursing with infinitely scattering ripples.

I reached forward again, pressing my hand against the wall, and felt it pressing back. It was resistant. Strong.

I pushed with all my strength, and it began to give way beneath me, stretching out like it was made of gum.

And then it snapped back,

and I

fell

through.

251:

I tried to ignore the blaring classical rendition of jingle bells permeating the small plateau.

I hated Christmas music. And I hated jingle bells most of all.

We came to a stop before a massive Christmas tree, which seemed to be somehow producing the musical cacophony.

The tree spiraled upward around a striped pole, extending beyond even the tallest layer of clouds, stretching all the way up--to space, presumably. It was tightly wrapped with glass-like tinsel and decorated by a myriad of trinkets and baubles. Hundreds. Thousands, maybe.

Most prominent were the tilted bottles of sparkling wine which poured and dripped in streams down the branches. The snow around the base of the tree was all saturated and yellow from an unending champagne rain.

Otherwise, the tree was covered by what one could expect: stuffed partridges and doves, loads of candles, glass ornaments, photos, Christmas candies, yarn, stars, strings of lights, and on and on--literally everything that came to mind when I thought of Christmas was represented in some way.

It was a spectacle, to say the least.

"Now THAT is a god damned Christmas tree!" Philip shouted.

Wilson took a step, fumbling a little in the snow, and held a gloved hand up to block the bright sky. He was all wrapped and bundled up with several layers of winter clothes. I guessed he didn't much care for the cold.

"Yes. Yes, it is." Wilson leaned in to inspect the tree. "And it wasn't in the manifest. Not like this, anyway."

"That should be our slogan at this point."

"Yeah, or like... 'I think it's some kind of mental trauma.'" I added.

"Ooh. I like that." Philip shook a finger. "Because it always is. We never get anybody who's like--normal."

"And why would we, Philip?" Wilson was still eyeing the tree. "If they were normal, why would we be there in the first place?"

"Fair point. Uh... wellness check?"

"Oh, the days. If only we still did those."

"We do, in special cases." I corrected. "Marcus, for one."

"Well, yes. We do in special cases." Wilson looked back at me. "And thankfully, we brought our computer. How would I ever stay on track without you?"

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"A little. But don't let that cast any doubt. I don't mean it. We'd be lost without you, Medy."

"Thanks." I smiled.

"Well, I for one am thankful it's nice for a change." Philip said. "No goblins. No evil animals. No mountains of coagulated goop. Just a nice, building-sized Christmas tree."

"And a lot of snow." I added.

"And a cottage." Wilson pointed.

I followed his gaze past the tree and spotted it: a small log cabin, dusted with snow, spilling a thin trail of smoke from its chimney.

"And a cottage." Philip said. "God, I hope it's nice. Alright, Medy, remind me, who--"

"Well, shall we?" I cut him off, slapping their backs.

I knew what he was going to ask, and it just made me irritated. He always neglected his homework, and in most cases, he only remembered once we were deep in some strange environment. Today was no different.

We began our trudging march through the deep snow, careful not to fall in the trenches along the edges of the path. I had never seen snow this deep in my life. It was nearly to my waist--up two feet, maybe three--and proved quite the endurance test to struggle through. And even having my pants tucked into knee-high boots didn't prevent my socks from getting wet; they were already sloshing as I walked, after only ten minutes in the chasm.

I decided to indulge Philip and fill him in as we walked.

"Our lady is Gillian Taylor. She has a particular fondness for a certain end of year holiday, as I'm sure you can tell. She wanted to encapsulate her memories from each year all in one. A nostalgia holiday getaway chasm extravaganza-thing, I guess. And she finally pulled the trigger and generated her chasm a month ago. Two weeks ago, she spontaneously fell into a catatonic state both here and chassis-side. No obvious cause. Vitals are stable, but she's virtually unresponsive."

"She's catatonic in here as well?" Wilson asked.

"Yep. There's a report. CG came through last week."

"Glad you saw that. Sorry." He hung his head.

"Hey, you have nothing to be sorry about. No one should be expected to constantly peruse the DB. They just posted it last night."

I could barely see a smile through his layers of scarves and puffy hoods.

"You must understand the irony of you saying that." He said.

"Yeaaaah, I do. But I think it's fun. And really--"

"Aha!"

I didn't realize it, but Philip stayed behind, struggling to pull a candy cane from the tree, and it had finally come free. He unwrapped it as he came clomping over to us.

"Okay. So." He spoke between loud slurps. "Sleeping beauty. Gotta wake her up."

"Seems that way." I said. "CG tried, but yeah, she was unresponsive. And now, there are obvious signs of destabilization. This is all new. None of this was in their report. This is some seriously rapid warping."

"Interesting." Wilson looked back. "Our host is catatonic in two places, and her brand new chaasm is warping, all with no apparent influence. I've never seen that. Aside from cases where the patient ended up being braindead, but the vitals don't line up. Brain activity is good, and there was no event--no trauma. It just happened."

"Yeah. I don't know. Maybe it's something new."

"OR!" Philip thrust his candy cane in the air. "She's just braindead."

I laughed, and then felt a bit bad. Philip had a habit of doing that. And no matter how mad I was at him, or how stupid I thought he was being, he could always make me laugh.

We reached the snow-covered porch of the cottage, and Wilson stepped up to knock on the door. He pounded out three heavy hits, and then stood back to wait. It was quiet away from the tree, though I could still hear it just below our breathing and crinkling--that nagging classical rendition of jingle bells, still tinkling away.

No one answered the door. Obviously.

"Why'd you knock?" I laughed.

"I..." He stopped. "I don't know. To be polite?"

Philip pushed by and barged through the door, screaming as he went.

"Honey, you better not be catatonic in here!"

252:

I heard a horrible metallic grinding

scraping, pounding

I opened my eyes

I was in a chair

a small white dot hovered above my head

it shook in rhythm as

the lights flickered on and off and on

I tried to stand

but I fell from the chair, to the ground, and rolled to my back

and

words kept circling around in my mind alongside a throbbing sense of terror

seeping, ballooning senses of dread and discomfort

something was wrong

IT Did NOT work

it did not work

IT DID NOT WORK

it was not working

was not

work

was not

working

What was?

I was?

Not?

What was not?

I could not remember.

The ground was shaking

Shaking?

The ground?

Why?

I looked up at the sky. It was tiled and dotted like an office ceiling. It was an office ceiling.

Why?

Where was I that would have an office ceiling sky?

I am on the concrete ground, that I know

I can feel it below me, cold

I am alive, I think

but that was all I could think of

ground, cold, alive, ceiling

that was it

the shaking grew and grew and grew

the ground was shaking and it was shaking me

I felt it in my chest

My chest was shaking

The tiled and dotted office ceiling was shaking

And then

It was gone

It was torn away

I was hit with things

Dust and rocks and bits of ceiling

Rained around me

As the ceiling was torn away

The sky was white and white and white and black

Big, in the middle, the sky was black

Was it the sky that was black?

Where did that black hole in the sky come from?

Was it the sky?

The black hole moved, got bigger

It wasn't the sky

The black hole wasn't a hole

It was a thing

Some thing

I took a deep breath

And exhaled, feeling cold again

Watching the black thing in the sky

I am on the and it

 concrete ground is

comfortable ground here

 that I'm lying on

253:

I

I got a dog.

Just a little terrier. A guy at the job had too many pups, so he brought them in a box, up for grabs. While I played with them, the guy started talking about having them put down if nobody wanted them. That felt wrong. They were innocent, cute little pups. They didn't ask to be born. I understood why he'd want to get rid of them--I couldn't take care of twelve dogs by myself--but to kill them? It struck me as wasteful.

So, I took one home.

I thought he might help with my nightmares.

And he does, a little. It's nice to have him around.

Skunky. I named him Skunky because he smells like shit.

But I like his company. And I'm thankful for him.

I don't like to leave him alone, so I take him to work with me most days. He just hangs out in my office. He's cute and well-behaved, and I think he's helping with my deteriorating mental health.

The nightmares still happen. They're still god awful--worse than they've ever been, actually.

But when I wake up in cold sweats, terrified and confused, Skunky's always there to lick my face and whimper for ear scratches, panting, happy to see me.

That helps to shift my mind away from the horrors of these stasis nightmares for a while. The feelings are still there, stabbing the back of my mind, but he dulls the edges. He makes it bearable to sleep again.

I'm thankful for little Skunky.

I'm thankful I have a friend, for once in my miserable life.

II

I killed my dog.

Can't sleep anymore.

I haven't.

Not in...

Well... how long?

I can't remember. A long time.

And that's not to say I'm getting only a little sleep, here and there. I haven't slept at all. Not even a nap.

My body still won't let me. I can only rest in stasis.

But I'm done. I'm done with it. And so far, I've been able to power through.

My injector keeps me healthy. It keeps my nutrients regulated. But it doesn't help with the exhaustion. Each day seems to compound it. It just keeps getting worse.

But it's better to feel that way, exhausted beyond comprehension and barely hanging on, than to not have control. I can't go back. I can't feel that again.

I have felt regret only a handful of times in my life. True, real regret for my actions. The kind of regret that fills you with sorrow and changes who you are. The kind of regret you lie to yourself about for years. Forever, for some. I regret what I did to my mom. Mr. Niu. Haggio. Rebecca.

And now Skunky.

I woke up just as the life was leaving my little dog's eyes. He jumped up on my bed as I stirred awake from a nightmare; he licked my face and panted and tried to make me feel better.

And in some kind of deluded, half-dreaming state, I strangled him. I choked him to death, right there in my bed.

And that's it.

I'm done.

254:

ALERT ALERT ALERT - - - ALERT ALERT ALERT - - - ALERT ALERT ALERT

EMERGENCY ACTION NOTIFICATION

FEDERAL, STATE, OR LOCAL AUTHORITIES
HAVE DECLARED AN EMERGENCY IN YOUR AREA.

A PRIMARY ENTRY POINT SYSTEM HAS ISSUED
AN EMERGENCY ACTION NOTIFICATION FOR
THE FOLLOWING COUNTIES:

*CHURCHILL, CLARK, DOUGLAS, ELKO,
ESMERALDA, EUREKA, HUMBOLDT, LANDER,
LINCOLN, LYON, MINERAL, NYE, STOREY,
WASHOE, WHITE PINE.*

EFFECTIVE UNTIL *00/00/00 00:00:00*
THIS IS NOT A TEST.

*AMERICA HAS BEEN INVADED.
IF YOU ARE ABLE, SEEK SHELTER.
DO NOT EVACUATE.
DO NOT GO OUTSIDE.*

ALERT ALERT ALERT - - - ALERT ALERT ALERT - - - ALERT ALERT ALERT

--to given you an honest depiction, but in truth, there are no words for what we are witnessing. This is an invasion on the global scale. Earth is being invaded. Many are dead or--

..

--mentioned brain beings, which we're told are calling themselves 'excephalons,' are considered extremely dangerous. They are intelligent and they are hostile. They will attack unprovoked, and seem to coerce victims into lowering their guard in some way. Do not approach them. Do not engage them. Eyewitness accounts report blade-like protrusions on--

..

--know what they are using them for, but they are being harvested. I repeat, we do not know what they are using the bodies for. They are being collected in large, moving pots, or vats that are--

..

--just now, please stay away from the city. If you're currently in the city, then I urge you to try to get out. The main highways are closed. Seek alternate routes. We are being invaded by some unknown threat. They are killing and harvesting us. Giants are real, and they're--

..

--claiming tens of thousands of dead across the state, hundreds of thousands across the country, and many more across the world. We believe the actual number of deaths is much higher, due to several millions unaccounted for. We may be facing an extinction--

..

--shape spotted in the sky directly before the invasions began. We go now to the recording, where this shape was seen touching down. There, you can clearly see legs form, and there are the arms, and the head, right--

..

--and while most infrastructure remains intact, there are large areas without coverage all over the country, and those areas are only growing. It may be mere days before you can no longer hear my voice. Bunker down. Stay sheltered. We have received word the military is--

..

--in well-guarded "stronghold cities." We come to you from Reno, and can confirm--
Reno has been cleared and is considered safe. If you are nearby, and are able, make
your way here, to Reno, for sanctuary--

..

--in roaming packs, toward anything that moves. Keep the noise down. They're not deaf
or blind, like earlier reports indicated. This is vital. They are not deaf or blind. They
have entered homes. They will see you through the windows, and they will hear you if
you are loud. Stay silent, and keep the lights--

..

--is no longer considered safe. Reno is no longer considered safe. Chicago is no longer
considered safe. Oklahoma City is no longer considered safe. Omaha is no longer
considered safe. Fort Worth is--

..

--is it, ladies and gentlemen. This is the end. Our generators will only hold for another
twenty minutes. If anyone out there can hear this, good luck to you. May God have
mercy on us all.

..

255:

Musashi tilted the fancy ceramic kettle and filled my little cup. The warm liquid was golden and smelled of honey, reminding me of simpler times. He moved on to the girls, filling each of their cups in turn. They all waited patiently, and gave him a cordial, “thank you” after.

“Thank you for the tea, Musashi.” I lifted my cup.

He leaned back in his ivory throne and popped a shrimp in his mouth.

“It’s no problem--” He spoke between chews. “I would share all I had.”

“That’s very kind.” I smiled.

I took a sip of tea. It was delicious, soothing, relaxing. Perfect.

This was nice.

The morning sun, blooming through the stained-glass windows, cast rainbow light across the tan stone and marble of our chamber. The colored refractions danced with the glow from our fireplace, mingling in warm, golden hues. I drained my cup and gently returned it to the saucer.

The girls sat in little ivory thrones just like Musashi’s, all around our big round table. They each wore the same grey and black dress; tiny grey bows ran down the center, and it was trimmed with frilly white lace. I loved those dresses. They looked a lot like mine, though framed more for a child.

I looked down at mine. It was form-fitting, but just ambiguous enough to cover all the things I didn’t necessarily enjoy about my figure. Like it was tailor-made.

This was very nice.

Suddenly, I had the urge to use the restroom. I adjusted my dress and pushed my chair back from the table.

“Excuse me. Ladies’ room.”

“Of course.” Musashi smiled and gave a slight bow.

I stood and crossed to the door. My hand reached the knob. The solid, obsidian knob. It was cold in my hand. And it felt expensive. This all felt really expensive. Where’d we get the money for all this nice stuff?

This was too nice.

All of it.

I froze.

What was I thinking?

An obsidian door handle. In a marble and stone chamber. With stained-glass windows and a beautiful fireplace. Where we drank golden tea from our antique ceramic tea set. Wearing our frilly, fancy dresses? What?

Weren't we in exile, at the end of the universe?

The last thing I remembered was dozing off for a nap in our crude little shack.

How did we end up here? This was an extravagant mansion or something. There was nothing like this on the path.

"Musashi." I looked back at him.

He must have realized it at the same time. His expression of frightened acknowledgement eased my anxiety a bit, though only slightly.

"Yes." He stood. "What happened? We were in the shack."

"Yeah. What happened, and why didn't we realize it until now?"

"I don't know." He shook his head.

"Medy..." Gwendolyn rose and flew to me. "What's going on?"

"No clue, Gwen. Absolutely no idea. Let's get out of here."

I twisted the knob and swung the door open.

256:

Jacob weaved our ATV through the fallen buildings, between great chunks of rubble and piles of stone debris, speeding us up the hill. The signal was coming from somewhere just over the rise.

As we crested it, I saw the source, and at first, I didn't even know what I was seeing.

A red and black mass was spread across the valley, maybe a mile wide, undulating like an ocean. And it almost looked the part, shimmering and chopping like deep, crimson water. But it swayed oddly as it rolled, and kept intermittently falling back and retreading its own path. I could see swirling clumps in the mass where the things were pushing in opposite directions.

It was the brain things. In the biggest grouping I'd ever seen.

There were thousands of them in a swarm, travelling across the countryside, flattening the grass, and painting the land with chalk and grey ooze.

"Stop!" I yelled.

Jacob pulled the brakes and we lunged forward.

"What in the hell... we can't do anything against that."

"I was just thinking the same thing." He squinted. "What the hell are they doing?"

"Moving north."

"There's nothing up there. Not for miles, anyway."

"Right." I undid my seatbelt.

Jacob pulled out his binoculars.

"There are so many." He scanned the valley. "How are there so many?"

"No idea. Kill the power."

He flipped the keys and cycled the engine off. I waited for the fans to wind down, and then bent to the side bay, popped the latches, and pulled the battery free.

I lifted it to the back of my belt and slotted it in with a satisfying snap. The familiar warm pulse ran down my spine, cascading through my legs, returning my feeling, inch by inch.

I stood from the ATV and walked to the edge of the hill.

"How the hell are there so many?" I repeated Jacob's question, thinking out loud.

"Maybe it's a town." Elizabeth piped up from the back saddle.

I forgot she was with us.

"A town?" I turned back to her.

"Y-Yeah. Like you said, they're drawn to people? Maybe there are so many because there's a town. Or a lot of people somewhere like that. Maybe. I don't know."

A town. I hadn't considered that.

Because there were no towns.

Not anymore.

I watched them all fall apart.

I watched them all burn.

But we were alive. We were still going. Maybe there were others.

But in a town? It seemed far-fetched, since the brain things were drawn to groups.

"I haven't heard of any towns. Not since Reno. Jacob? Hear anything?"

"Not really." He shrugged.

"Not really?"

"Well, I heard a guy talking at Crisco's last week. Some tuner in from Texas. Said he heard there was a safe haven up at Lakeview. But he was either drunk or insane. Definitely not a reliable source."

"Lakeview. Where's Lakeview?" I asked.

"Just across the border, I think. But like I said, the guy was nuts."

"In Oregon?"

"Yeah. But again, Max, this guy was a nut job following some half-baked pipedream. There was a reason I didn't say anything. Lakeview is probably just as dead as Vegas, Reno, and everywhere else. Come on. We don't have the juice to get up there."

"Well, who knows where they're going? Might not be there. But they're headed somewhere. And I want to find out where. I want to find out what they're doing."

"It's too risky, man. We don't have the juice."

"Then I guess we have to find some more juice."

257:

You tried to run

to hide

from me

from us

but

scents curl away from you and fold into the fabric

leaving a bright trail, a trail to follow

and follow we did

and though we moved far, beyond time, beyond distance

only mere moments passed

mere moments after we tasted you

until we found you

I found you.

In a vacant box

I tore the top away, and there you were

lying

waiting

alone

but you were already gone

you went and died all on your own

of course you did

you did everything on your own

you wouldn't let me have this

you wouldn't let us have you

but you were small

unlearned

you didn't know

you didn't know what we know

there is death, and there is something else

you are invited

carried

taken

we leaned in and tasted you again

we kissed your eyes

we felt your hollow, fragile form

split and frayed between the layers

hanging, bent, elongated

you were broken

Broken?

how?

We did not know

but we kissed you all the same

and we felt you

a part of you

you rose from your form, and broke away

your mind shed its dead shell

and

we felt a part of you join us

I felt you join us.

258:

The cottage was immense, somehow hiding a sprawling warehouse behind its tiny front door. The inside seemed to stretch on for miles, filled with countless thousands of metal folding chairs, all lined up and facing the far wall. It reminded me of an auditorium.

A packed auditorium. The chairs were all filled with people, each tied-down and blinded with a grey sack. There were thousands of them, all alive, but totally unresponsive.

Nothing we tried was working.

"I guess all we can do is take the bags off." I wiped some sweat from my forehead.

Unlike the cool, snowy outdoors, the warehouse was sweltering, and I was burning up in my many-layered snowsuit. I unzipped my outer coat to alleviate some of the heat.

Medy pulled a nearby bag free, revealing a middle-aged woman with deep black circles under her eyes. She slouched and began to drool.

"Poor bastards." Philip shook his head.

We silently continued down the rows, pulling bags off as we went. Men, women, children, all bound, unconscious, held as prisoners.

A deep rumble shook the ground like the pounding of a far-off war drum.

Pum. Pum. Pum.

Philip stopped and looked back with wide eyes.

"What the hell was that?"

"The little drummer boy." I tried to smile. "I don't know, Philip."

"Oh, nice." He grinned. "See? Jokes are good. Jokes help."

"This is only getting weirder." Medy was staring above us.

I followed her gaze to a little red dot hanging in the rafters, softly illuminating the faded metal ceiling. It began to spiral down, blossoming and growing, filling the dingy warehouse with red light like a signal flare.

It was a person, glowing and partially transparent, falling through the air with a drifting, coiled rope flowing behind. The rope snapped taught around the thing's neck just as it reached one of the chairs--it slammed forward and began to sway in the air.

The man in the chair suddenly stirred awake, screaming, and trashing wildly.

"Please, let me go home! Please! I'll give you anything! My dad! Call my dad! He has money!"

"No. Nothing reported, anyway."

"Well, something happened. Or maybe it didn't happen and it's some chaotic nightmare generation nonsense I don't really understand. This is just a guess. But think about it--the place was only made from her Christmas memories."

"And you're thinking--" I began, but he interrupted.

"AH! Stop! No. Let me deliver it, man. I want to deliver my own idea, okay? If it's a shit idea, then you can shit on it but just let me deliver it, at least."

"Alright." I gave him a nod. "Sorry."

"No promises." Medy smiled at him.

"But why, though? I don't say anything when you give your fancy speeches for like thirty minutes--"

"Philip." I said. "Go on."

"Okay. Well, I'm thinking... and I realize it's unlikely, and I know it might sound kind of stupid because of how rare it is. But it actually makes sense if you think about the way memories are stored, because this was a generic pull--"

"Philip." I repeated.

"Sorry. I think it might be a repressed memory."

"A repressed memory? I don't mean to be rude, but that seems like kind of a stretch. You just said it yourself... they're so incredibly rare. And even if she did suppress a memory, why would we select it for generation? She must have given us a list of dates."

"She did." Philip held up a finger. "Like Medy said, we took Christmas eve and Christmas day from every single year of her life. And what is she, like fifty?"

"Yeah." Medy said. "Fifty-two."

"Fifty-two years. That's a long time. This could make sense. Maybe something awful happened one Christmas, and maybe she packed it away. Then we pulled it. And maybe the conscious mind just goes catatonic when it confronts a recreation of a repressed memory inside a recreation of itself."

"That is... certainly a theory." I rubbed my lip. "But I don't know..."

"What?" He moaned. "Why not? I really thought I was onto something."

"I think all we're seeing here is excessive warping due to her catatonia. This is just another form of what happened to the tree outside. Unconscious chaos, and all that. If we can wake her up, it should just stop all at once."

Medy put a hand on Philip's shoulder.

"I like your passion, Philip, but I agree with Wilson. I've never even seen a repressed memory, but it just seems like a leap. We know so little about her. We can't just assume she had some awful trauma like that. Maybe she did. But we have to be sure. I mean, she's not even here like CG said."

"We're in a warehouse filled with sleeping people tied to chairs and a red light demon just turned a guy into ceiling soup. You don't think it's safe to assume she had some kind of trauma? Really? And how do you know she isn't here? She's probably strapped into one of these chairs."

Medy made a worried face of realization, like she hadn't considered it. I hadn't either. Philip went on.

"This isn't just warping. I've seen warping. You've seen warping. Wilson, god dammit, you know what warping is. This is not warping. It's something else. It's too specific. Too strange. Maybe it's not a repressed memory, but it's--"

As if to punctuate Philip's point, the deep pounding shook the floor again.

Pum. Pum. Pum.

A little red dot appeared, hanging in the rafters.

259:

Day 14

I've been counting the days. Figured, why not write it down? One of those coping mechanisms she told me to use. Too late but still better than never. They say it's better than never.

But I'm doing this for another reason. To document the process of this condition. I'm the first ever case. That's something. Gotta be.

It's been two weeks to the day.

Still can't sleep. I have only two states--bad and worse. I'm exhausted as shit. And I have the familiar ticks. Flashes in the corners of my eyes. Black, oblong shapes curling on the edges of my vision. Little bugs, crawling up my arms.

But I'm keeping on

and whatever other bullshit people say

Day 21

Still awake

I've tried as many things as I could to fix how bad I feel

Caffeine is the worst. I thought it would help, but it only lasts for a little bit, and then the fatigue comes back stronger. I'm even slower, even more exhausted, but still unable to sleep.

Drugs in general feel like shit. Meth, coke, crack; it's all bad. I had luck with some prescription pills for a week, but I don't remember the name, and it doesn't matter anyway. After a week it was the same as all the rest.

I eat a lot of fruit now. Good energy in fruit. For a few minutes, I almost feel normal. Cold, fresh juice in my stomach, and their sweet taste on my tongue.

But the feeling passes. The taste grows mild and sours.

Just like everything else

Day 29

No sleep, no sleep. Guess it's been a month.

A month.

Almost a month.

I feel about the same; unbearably tired, slow, irritable, and so on. The ticks are still just as bad. But there are these new elongations.

Sometimes time will fly by in fast motion, and I can't move quick enough to grab hold. It's like whole days speed away from me before I can even stand up.

Other times it goes so slow. And it won't move. The clock hands are still. When people speak, their vocal cords take an eternity to strum out the tones of their voice, morphing single words into hour-long symphonies.

And I live years of my life in these little, unmoving seconds.

I could see myself going insane in that time

I'm sure I will

I already feel a lot looser. And you'd think that would make this easier

But it doesn't

Day 58

Tired

Still no sleep

Still feeling like shit

Still feeling elongations

Otherwise, no change

Day 87

elongations are much longer

maybe they were getting longer the whole time

weeks and months, what's the difference

I don't know what's happening most days

Because most days I don't know what day it is

I thought it was October. I swore it was cool and dry and the world was getting ready for winter. I was confident, for once in so long, that I was walking into an autumn day

But Kathleen just told me it was June

June.

I couldn't believe it.

I lost track because I can't even look at my schedule anymore. I can't keep any of it straight. It's just a mess of numbers. Unimportant, trivial nonsense. Thank god for Kathleen. Thank god for her.

I worry for how long I can keep this up

It feels like I'm just pushing off the inevitable.

Death or stasis. Death or stasis. Death or stasis.

I'm tired of being so tired.

I'm just so tired

Day 263

I'm seeing things

In the moment I think the things that I'm seeing are real because they seem real

I can't find any good fruit. It's all bitter, sour, stale, unripe. Not ready. Maybe it's the time of year when they're not good, maybe.

But I don't remember what month it is

I haven't for so long

the dead kids out front don't have any good fruit in their baskets anymore

the fruit was bad. I couldn't find good fruit.

And the irony of it all, I found raisins. They had boxes and boxes of raisins, so now I have plenty of raisins. I hate them, which is good news.

Is it good news?

I seem to remember feeling like that was important

I hate raisins

Day 411? 412?

I'm having nightmares while I'm awake

That's all it is. It has to be

Hallucinations

Nightmares bleeding through because I still can't go to sleep.

and they are really nightmares

god damned monstrosities

I hid in my office all day today.

I'm surprised as I write this because I don't even remember coming to work.

I think I may have stayed the night

My coworkers were rowdy all day. I could hear them just outside the door. disgusting smacking lips and laughing as they filled their faces, feasting on the corpse of some ungodly beast--some twisted, fetus monster they chased down in the parking lot.

I watched from the window as the poor thing was encircled and slain. They propped it up on the conference room table, split open and spilling.

I can't shake that image

I walked by and Oliver and Ashley from the Organizational Engineering department both stopped chewing and looked up at me, faces smeared with blood and bits of gore, beaming with the most genuine smiles.

Ashley held up a hand and waved.

It seemed real

It seems real

All the things I see seem real

I know they can't be

Not all of them

And I wish I could know the difference, but at least I have control.

Eventually I gathered the courage and ventured out

I touched the dead fetus monster, to prove it to myself, to take some control. I expected to dip my fingers in and pull them back covered in blood. But when I looked down at my hand, my fingers were all white. I tasted it. It tasted sweet

Like frosting

So I know now

I can still figure out the difference. I can still try

But I keep hearing that same old saying in my mind, like a song I can't stop singing

“it's only a matter of time”

Day DAY day ?

I know I'm supposed to put a day because the other pages have days. But seeing it now
I feel like I forgot I was supposed to keep track count

I don't know what day it is. I must have lost count track

I'm sorry

Day whatever. Tired. Not tired, beyond tired, can't not tell the difference between
closed and open. It doesn't matter anyway

I just wish I could leave and go get that fruit again

The fruit again but I can't

I can't leave my house, I can't

I try I have tried for days to leave my house but I can't just get out

I'm stuck in here like I was stuck when all that happened before

There was a time recently I remember being stuck

And now I'm not able to go I

I know I have a way to stop

Even though I don't want to,

I have a way to stop all this that I know, but I can't remember why I don't want to

I can't think of why I wouldn't

The dogs agreed.

I paused writing this to ask them what I should do

I asked, should I do the way to stop?

and they all nodded and growled

I should have known before, but I didn't have the guidance I needed

Now I'm safe, the three will it

And what am I

And what would I be

Nothing. Without them.

But saved, mercy, for

I serve the three

Day 0

I lost count of my days at around sixteen months. I spent some time retracing my steps at key points, and from what I can make out, it seems like that was roughly six months before today. So, my best estimate: twenty-two months.

I went almost two years without sleep.

I woke in the stasis bed this morning. I must have finally caved and slept in it last night. But there was no nightmare that I could remember.

I feel dumb for waiting so long. It was dangerous and I risked too much. It's remarkable I made it back, because while I can remember very little from the last few months, what I do remember is a jumbled mess of blurred images and intense emotions. Sadness. Fear. Anger. Confusion.

I wonder how I finally figured out I needed stasis. I wonder what reminded me. I wonder what finally pushed me over the edge.

But most of all, I wonder what the hell I was writing about. The dogs? The three will it? I serve the three?

Nonsense. Hallucinations, I'm sure. I want to know more, but I won't get any answers unless I perform this little experiment again. And I may, with a team, and cameras, and all the security I need to prevent my untimely death. Though, maybe it's better if I don't know.

Either way, it's a problem for another day.

First things first: I'll be sleeping in stasis again tonight, and I'm just hoping the nightmares don't come back.

260:

My body popped free from the wall.

My mind kind of popped free as well, like a plug coming loose from the socket.

Words from the past bobbed to the surface.

You ever wish there was something else?

More than just imagined bullshit, I mean.

I said that once. About something unrelated, at a completely different time. But the words bubbled up now like a joke I was supposed to laugh at.

I could almost feel the karmic forces behind the universe reading my mind, giving me their best tongue-in-cheek moral lesson on how to "be careful of what you wish for."

I was out.

Floating.

Free.

But I was out of nothing, and into nothing.

It was even more nothing out here, beyond the veil. Or, really it was less nothing in a bigger way, but more nothing for someone small, like me.

When I came through, the color stayed behind. The flavor. Gone was the old limitless nothing with its floating, petrified corpses of behemoths and men, and unending grey skies.

Instead I found myself in a new nothing. A darker one. It was dim. Colorless. Dry. Almost stale, like an attic crawlspace.

But I was free. I felt it in a surge, like adrenaline but so much stronger.

I glanced back, eyeing my entry point--the hanging sag in the barrier. It was sad to see, like an old, deflated balloon. I felt a melancholy twinge. I was leaving somewhere I had always been. I was leaving home. Wilson. Everything.

But there was so much more than this tiny bubble.

I could feel that.

I turned back and faced my new nothing. The new abyss behind the veil.

It wasn't so empty as I thought. Scattered out there, against the colorless void, were barely discernable sheens of faint light. I could make them out if I focused. Bubbles, like mine. There were more than I could count. More than I could comprehend.

There were so many other walls to go through.

It was all I could feel.

So many barriers to break.

It was overpowering.

I wouldn't stay here.

Couldn't.

Never.

I began to fly.

261:

That thought emerges again. A word I hear but never quite understand.

Mother.

A puzzling, opaque silhouette had been carved where the meaning once lived.

Mother.

Shimmering and dancing behind beams of solid light.

Mother.

She's here.

I see her, and I understand.

The silhouette is cast in golden beams, revealing it all, so truly.

Mother. My mother, the great mother, the Lord mother flows before me, encircled by fluttering mingled cloth and golden hair. A soft wind blows it all free, and I can see her face.

Harold.

Her lips part and she whispers. To me?

Harold, my son.

To me. But I think that's wrong.

It feels wrong.

She approaches, wrapping me in her swirling tempest of cloth and golden hair. I feel it brushing against my skin as we embrace--as I'm gently smothered. I swell with golden light and warmth and love.

Her lips touch mine.

Flowery scents and the heat of her protection.

Warm and whole.

I am whole.

She pulls back and smiles.

Harold. You are not ready.

Her words burn, but I shiver in the new cold. I forgot what it was like without her.

I need her again. I need her warmth. But it does not come.

She stares at me, smiling, holding my arms.

My anticipation bubbles over. I yearn for her embrace again.

I lean forward, to feel her, to feel safe, to feel loved.

Harold--woah, you alright, buddy?

Her voice is different. Wrong.

I blink.

I had been staring at a man. An old man.

"Ah, finally waking up?" He smiled. "I was worried you wouldn't. Good morning, Harold."

"My name is D98781." I said.

"My mistake, D98781. They told me your name was Harold. I have no idea what you're feeling or what you've been through, Harold, but I want you to know that you're safe here."

Safe. Safe? Safe... the word reminded me of something. Of her.

He stared at me for a moment and then spoke again.

"Are you alright? Do you need anything?"

Need? I needed her back. Her. I needed... her. Needed.

I felt a pull. A yearning I didn't understand. I saw spinning cloth on the wind. Cloth and gold. I needed...

I felt a hole. It was slipping away. I needed something. Yes. I needed something.

But what?

"I need..." I tried to speak.

He leaned in.

"What? Water? Food? What do you need, son?"

I couldn't remember. I didn't know.

I said what came to mind.

"My bay."

262:

Three drops of the host's blood.

One fogged pearl.

Six milkweed anthers.

A fistful of fur from the orange-lipped ape.

I went over the ingredients for my potion. Good so far, but there was something missing. What was missing? Something from a tree?

Right. A cup of ground ginkgo bark.

I slid a small ceramic jar from the shelf and pulled the cork free, instantly filling my hut with the stale scents of an old forest. I took two slender chunks, corked the jar, and grabbed my mortar and pestle to grind them down. When the powder was fine enough, I gave it a sniff. Exactly right. Perfectly... barky. I dumped it into the brew.

It bubbled violently and coughed rancid smoke.

"Alright." I wiped my hands. "That should do it."

"And this will make her mine?" Musashi was staring into the cauldron.

"Yep. And anyone else who so much as touches the stuff. I--uh. I made too much, honestly. You better be careful. Don't go dumping it in the woods unless you want to marry an ant colony, or something."

"What if I touch it?"

I hadn't thought of that. I didn't know. I could guess, and most of my guesses pointed to it birthing a generation of Ooldreud demigods with a thirst for human bone marrow.

But I didn't know for sure. Hopefully he wouldn't touch it.

"Uh, just don't touch it... to be safe." I tried to give a reassuring smile.

"Okay. Thank you, Miss Medula. The wives were wrong about you. You're not evil at all."

"They said I was evil? What?"

"Well, yeah, they--"

He was talking but I couldn't listen.

How could the wives think I was evil? After I helped them with...

Wait.

Wives. Wives? Ooldreud demigods? What?

I glanced down at my hands, calloused and scarred from so many years spent practicing witchcraft. I ran my fingers along the rim of my stone cauldron.

What? No.

I wasn't a witch. I didn't practice witchcraft.

I was at the end of the universe.

I was on the path. The long, winding path.

And then I was in that mansion. Drinking tea with Musashi and the girls. And now...

The girls. Where were the girls? I frantically searched the hut. They weren't here.

"Miss Medula, are you okay?" Musashi was staring at me.

"The girls. Where are the girls?"

"I don't..." He paused.

Realization crept over his face.

"It happened again." He said.

"Yes. Except they're not here."

I pushed around my table and kicked the front door open, and was met by flat, ugly swampland and the unmistakable stench of sewage. The girls were there, fenced in a little pen out front.

"Oh, girls!" I yelled. "You're okay!"

"Yes, but I'm wet." Gwendolyn pouted.

She was covered in mud. All of them were. I counted them, just to be sure. Gwendolyn. Rose. Felicia. All my girls.

No.

"Where's Vivian?"

I checked the pen again, and then ran around the hut, clomping my bare feet through very wet mud.

"She's gone, Medy." Gwendolyn was floating behind me.

"Where?" I turned to her. "Where is she?"

"She went home."

"What? Home? To the village? How?"

"No. To you."

263:

I closed my eyes.

Was this my fate?

I began to sink through the lake of faces. I was smothered on all sides by rippling swells of liquid flesh. Noses and ears and lips swam over every inch of my body, crushing against me and wetting me with sticky drool. I couldn't breathe--not without gulping mouthfuls of flesh. I didn't need to breathe here, but the restricting sensations were unbearable all the same. My chest still burned, and I still felt the urge to suck in air.

I still wanted to breathe. I just couldn't.

Down and down and down. I kept falling, holding my breath, enduring the surging burn in my lungs. When I could open my eyes, I saw only dim, pink blurs--the light from the surface, barely bleeding through the thick layers of skin. It faded to a dull red and then to black, and then I couldn't see at all.

But I could still feel the coursing flesh around me. I could still feel myself sliding down through the muck. For hours. Maybe days. Sometimes I thought I saw light, faint against my lids, but when I opened my eyes, I saw only black.

I kept falling, sliding, slipping into an infinite, crushing sea.

How long would this last? I hadn't stopped to think.

I had been overwhelmed with constant sensations. Sensations no one was ever meant to experience.

How long? How long did I have to endure this?

Was this my fate?

Really?

And then, as abruptly as it started, I felt my feet tear free. And my legs. And my back.

I was falling through.

And then I was free-falling into some new space. It was a blur of blue and white.

I landed hard against the ground, and my body stretched out to accommodate the momentum. My skin hurt terribly as I snapped back together, like I had been slapped everywhere at once.

"Ah, Wilson." A voice spoke. "About time! Took you almost a week!"

It sounded like--

“Welcome to the recycle bin. Do you prefer Wilson? Or do you have some localized alteration?”

I looked up. It was who it sounded like. It was me.

“W-What?” I couldn’t even think straight.

I was staring at myself. He was a few decades younger, and a bit more liberal with the beard than I remember, but it was me. Younger me.

“W-Wilson, yes.” I gulped. “Are you me?”

“Oh, no. I’m W6. Just call me six. I’m one of you. But no, not really you, not since... was it 2006? I think. When we invaded China. Whenever that was. Twelve knows!”

He yelled and pointed at a passing man.

“2006.” The passing man nodded and kept walking.

“Thought so. 2006. That’s when I split. We’re from all over. When did you come in?”

“We’re?” As soon as I asked, I realized what he meant. “Oh.”

The passing man was me too. Another Wilson.

This entire neat little office was packed with Wilsons--over a dozen, walking around the room, chatting, playing with oscilloscopes, working on computers, and performing various odd tasks. One with an eye patch had cut a hole into the floor and cast a line to fish in the liquid flesh.

“I-I don’t know when.” I said. “I was trying to figure that out myself. I can’t remember ever entering the Network.”

“Interesting. Well, we’ll go over the whole thing at the meeting in a couple hours if you feel well enough to join. You’re Wilson 23 until you get a better name. W23. Twenty-three. Whatever. Welcome to the end, Wilson twenty-three. Let me know if you need anything.”

He turned to walk away.

I looked up at the ceiling.

The flesh above was being held back by a glowing blue net--I assumed it was some sort of protective field. It looked like a generic Network manifestation. But that would mean Network rules still applied here. But how?

“W6, how are we here?” I asked. “The Network was shut down.”

“Ah.” He glanced back. “Yes, it was. Not exactly convenient. We’re not totally sure how the recycle bin stuck around, but if you join us in our meeting later, you’ll see a whole

slew of different Wilson's takes on the matter. And you, my friend, are a decent mystery as well. How did you show up? The Network was shut down!"

"Yeah!"

Another Wilson screamed from the other end of the room and hurriedly ran over.

"Hey--sorry." He paused to catch his breath. "W9. I had a theory about you. Well, if you're actually the Wilson I think you might be."

Six grabbed his shoulder.

"Save it for the meeting."

264:

People kept filing in, one after another after another, until the bomb shelter was beyond maximum capacity and we were all packed together like loose meat in a can.

The tiny room was only big enough to fit about twenty people, but there were already at least thirty and the stream of newcomers showed no signs of slowing. Each new group made the space tighter, hotter, and harder to breathe in.

I couldn't do this. I'd rather risk it in the open. It was too many people.

I grabbed Jacob's arm.

"What's up?" He leaned over.

"Too many people. It's too many. I can't do this. I can't."

"Well, shit. I'm so sorry, Max. Really. But we can't leave right now. You know that."

"I--"

I was on the verge of panic.

I closed my eyes. Deep breaths. Inhale--two, three, four--exhale.

Inhale--two, three, four--exhale.

My heart rate was slowing down.

Inhale.

Two, three, four.

Exhale.

"Hey."

Jacob whispered in my ear.

I opened my eyes.

He knelt down before my chair, wedging himself between two strangers, and gripped my hand.

"We got this. You got this. We just gotta hang out with these assholes for a few hours, then we're gone. Okay? I mean, what's this compared to what you've been through, dude? You got this."

"But--"

"No buts, man. You got this!"

He gave me a hug. His beard scratched my neck a bit, which was normally irritating, but I found so much comfort in it now. He pulled back and smiled at me.

"Hey, remember that fucking 311 concert Roxy made us go to? That was way worse than this. There were so many people--disgusting, piss smelling dudes. At least this place smells better. It could be so much worse. We could be listening to 311."

"Yeah." I choked out a laugh. "Well, I was high as fuck. Made it a lot easier."

"Unfortunately, I can't do anything for that. But really, dude. In here is way better than out there. Please. Trust me."

"Oh, I do, but--"

The ground quaked. A heavy, sliding quake that was over in a second. Something heavy had hit the earth. Like a bomb fell. And then it happened again. And again.

The crowd around me began to scream. They were pushing harder, wheeling me backwards, forcing me toward the wall. I felt Jacob's fingers slip from my hand. He was pulled away.

The screaming reached a peak, and the tiny basement shelter rang sharply with its echoes. It was so loud. And hot. And cramped. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think.

It was

too much.

I couldn't do this.

I couldn't.

The quaking suddenly stopped.

The room grew silent. It was like the lull before a storm hit--uneasy hush, save the shaky breathing of the people around me.

"Stop sending more! That's all we can take!" Someone yelled to the front.

"We've got another ten out here!" A man outside shouted back. "We got nowhere else!"

"I'm sorry! We're full, man!"

"It's coming you fucking idiot! What are we supposed to--"

The man out front was interrupted. I couldn't see what happened, but I heard it--a splat, like a cartoon sound effect, and then the quaking returned, and the light spilling through the stairwell was replaced by shadow.

"What the fuck is that?"

"What happened to him?"

"It's a hand."

"Mommy, is he okay?"

"A hand?"

"Come, Lord, and fill me with your Holy Presence. Let me rest and be at peace. Let me feel your protection--"

People were nervously talking, praying, thinking out loud. Their noise was building up and before long they were screaming again.

"Someone please help me."

"A fucking hand."

"Fuck this. I'm going out there."

"Jeremy, stop!"

"It's--"

The yelling was as loud as ever, mingled with new pounding sounds, like a hammer on concrete. I heard a powerful crack, and another, followed by the sounds of falling stone, and then people were slamming into me. Crushing me. Rolling me back through the crowd.

I hit the wall, and for once, I was actually thankful for my chair. It was probably the only thing preventing me from being smashed against the bricks. A woman fell on my lap, and quickly shoved off my face to try and stand again, like I wasn't even there.

I was trying to keep it together.

But I couldn't.

I couldn't do this.

And then the crowd parted briefly, and I saw why they suddenly pushed back--why they were screaming.

The short stairwell into the shelter was completely obstructed, taken up by a large, black mass, the size of a car. It was pounding around, knocking people into each other, into walls, down to the floor. Crushing them like ants. Killing them.

It was a hand.

The screams reached a crescendo.

The hand grabbed up a group of people--maybe ten, maybe more--and dragged them from the shelter, snapping limbs and breaking parts free, leaving a wet sheen along the floor and a gaping hole where the steps had been.

The quaking returned.

There were much fewer people now, scattered around on the ground--some were bleeding and dying, some were already dead, some were balled up and sobbing. I absently wondered how I wasn't doing the same.

Someone grabbed my arms.

"Max! Holy fucking shit, are you okay?"

It was Jacob, looking disheveled and splattered with blood.

"Yeah. Yes." I couldn't even try to control the shake in my voice. "You?"

"Could be worse. I'm sorry I told you to trust me. I was wrong. But now we have to go."

"W-What?" I asked. "I can't. Jacob, I can't."

"We really can't stay here. We have to go. We have to. I'll carry you. On the count of three, okay? Are you ready?"

"No."

"We have to, Max. Okay? We have to go."

He stared at me so intently, so seriously, and with a face I had never seen him make. It almost scared me.

"Okay." I gave a hesitant nod.

"One."

I took a deep breath. Inhale.

"Two."

Two, three, four.

"Three!"

Exhale.

He lifted my chair.

265:

MS: SSAT

The goal is to get this out in writing. Official trials, blah blah. Not involving SRD--do not forward. They don't need to know until I say they do.

TR.1

Dur: 7 days

Note:

Hard to keep my eyes open at times. Drowsy, confused. Difficulty maintaining focus. But still conscious. Still in control. Still able to work and think and solve problems. Judging from this trial, seven days could be close to the upper limit of standard conscious output.

Result:

High intensity

Content:

Rebecca pulled me by the hand, and we wandered the streets of Zhuō Yóu. We walked like that for hours, taking methodical steps, but never making any progress. I knew we weren't making progress because there was a little food stall always resting directly in my line of site. It was the one from back then, where I ate the donkey burger, complete with the mustached woman. Despite our lack of movement, she just kept tugging me along. And then suddenly the road disappeared, and she was falling. I could only stand above and watch as she slowly plummeted into black.

After (*if any*):

Woke up drenched in sweat with the taste of blood in my mouth. I had gnawed a hole in my tongue.

MS: SSAT

TR.16

Dur: 14 days

Note:

Much harder to maintain focus.

My mind drifts with thoughts I never could've come up with naturally. They balloon into wild fantasies and sometimes manifest as minor hallucinations. They fade after a while, but are always just behind the surface. I'm noticing a trend toward violent thoughts beyond day ten. I could feasibly reach this length of time, but it might not be worth the risk. (Ref. **TR.13**) Significantly reduced conscious output.

Result:

Medium intensity

Content:

I woke up in a McDonald's parking lot, stood, and walked to the front window. I pressed my face against the glass, and I could see them making ice cream inside. But as the machine cranked and dumped its ooze piles on the floor, I realized it wasn't depositing ice cream--it was goopy amalgamations of flesh and bone. People. And not just anyone, but all the members of my family.

After (*if any*):

Woke up crying.

MS: SSAT

TR.37

Dur: 21 days

Note:

Focus is nonexistent. I spend most of my time aimless, not quite thinking of anything at all, exhausted, wanting only to sleep. Completely unfeasible. The fatigue is too great to regularly stay awake this long, and the violent thoughts morph into more tangible aggressive tendencies. Hallucinations are regular and far more intense. Conscious output is at a minimum.

Result:

Low intensity

Content:

I waited under the moon for days, begging it to fall and greet me. I waited for weeks. For months. For years. I grew old and tired, and saw my family go off to their new lives without me. But I couldn't look away. I couldn't abandon my moon. My whole life passed by. As I inhaled my final breath, ready to end my life and seek the beyond, the moon turned to me.

After (if any):

None

It took too long, but I finally developed a regimen: sleep in stasis one night every ten days. The nightmares aren't too bad if I do that.

I still disassociate after a few days of being awake, and I have problems with self-control, but it's much better this way on average. Blackouts are rare. When they do happen, they're short and mostly nonviolent.

It's almost completely manageable now.

I haven't killed in a year. Haven't assaulted anybody in months.

I feel kind of good, actually. Regulated. Can't remember the last time I could say that.

..

Spoke too soon. Always do.

I wrote the previous entry, capped my pen, and then woke up with my face stuck to the hardwood. I peeled myself up and realized it was dried blood. Figured I fell and hit my head until I rolled over and saw the body.

I stood, foggy-minded, shaking, not quite sure what I had done. And then I felt the weight in my hand. I was still gripping my revolver.

The corpse was a crumpled mass in the center of my rug, framed by a black splatter pattern across the floor and up the wall.

I recognized him.

It was Zeinhaert.

With a new gaping hole in his cheek.

I shot him.

I killed him.

Why?

266:

We walked through the park, taking our time, enjoying the sweet air and the songs of the summer birds. Gwendolyn hopped over a little puddle and slipped on the wet grass, but I had a good grip on her arm, and scooped her up just before she hit the ground.

"Woah!" I laughed. "Almost lost it!"

"Good reflexes." Musashi put his hand on my waist.

"I try."

"Thank you, Medy." Gwendolyn was smiling up at me.

"Of course! I'll never let you fall, Gwen. Never ever."

"I'll never let *you* fall!" She squinted and wagged her finger.

We rounded a bend, heading straight for the old ruins. The sun was a warm mess of gold and amber shafts through the trees, painting the crumbling stone walls orange. I relished in the scents--the leaves and tall fescue grass, and musty old stone with hints of flowery sweetness.

This was nice.

"You know, guys, we should really do this more--" I began, but something caught my eye.

"I agree." Musashi smiled.

Right ahead on the grass--an old red blanket and a basket. A little picnic.

I stopped.

That was my basket. My blanket. The wavering scent of my mom's laundry detergent. This was our picnic from all those years ago.

We couldn't be here. It wasn't possible. We were in exile at the end of the universe. How did I keep forgetting that?

I stared into the basket, at the protruding loaf of bread and sliced watermelon. It clicked.

It was me.

"Medy? Are you alright?" Musashi was staring at me.

"Happened again. But now I think I understand."

"What do you mean?"

"We forgot. It happened again."

"What did? Medy, what--"

It took him a minute, just like before.

"Oh." His eyes grew wide. "Again? Why is this happening to us?"

I crouched and put my hands on Gwendolyn's shoulders. She was so tiny. So sweet. I knew the girls were too good to be true.

"Gwen, where are the other girls?"

"They went home."

"Home." I nodded. "To me."

"Yep!" She grinned.

"And will you? Will you go home too?"

"Yep!"

I hung my head. I took so long to figure it out. I could've stopped this journey the moment I arrived. The girls weren't real--they were a part of me. All of them. Everything was.

"Medy, what do you understand?" Musashi looked worried.

Was he a part of me as well? It didn't seem like it.

"Are you real, Musashi?"

"Real? I don't know what you mean."

"The girls aren't. They're part of me."

"I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"I figured it out. This is a memory. This place. This picnic. It's my memory from when I was a kid. The other places were memories too, just not real ones. It's me. I did all this. And the girls are disappearing. They said they went home. To me."

He furrowed his brow and looked down at Gwendolyn for a moment, and then gave me a slight nod.

"But... how?" He asked.

"Remember when I told you about the boar? And you met the owl. I'm one of them--or I was, but not yet, or something. I made this. All of it. The girls. The path. The mansion. The swamp. And now this place, Dornwood Park. I was in denial. Making up stories."

"And you think I'm part of that?"

"I don't know, I just want to be sure. You're not going home to me, are you?"

"No." He shook his head. "I don't really know what that means."

"Good."

"Is it time, Medy?" Gwen tugged on my shirt.

"Yes, I think it is."

I bent down and picked her up, dropped her to my hip, and then strolled over to the picnic blanket.

"Medy, what does this mean?" Musashi asked.

"One minute. I'll tell you. Just give me one minute."

Reggie was sitting cross-legged on the blanket, struggling to spit his watermelon seeds. I sat down with Gwen on my lap and pulled a slice of watermelon from the basket.

"Medy! How are you?"

My mom was sitting across from me, glowing in the golden sun.

"Hey, mom. I'm... good. Gwen, this is my mom. She's who you were named after."

267:

I was full, but she just kept going. Kept cramming. Kept making me eat. Tuna fish after potato salad after chicken ceviche. I was on the verge of throwing up.

"I can't eat all this."

I tried to say that but my mouth was full of food, and what came out sounded more like, "I cod eed ad es."

She laughed.

"You can't talk with your mouth full, big boy. You're gonna spill."

Another bite. Another spoonful. Another wipe of the napkin.

I was wrong. This wasn't hot at all. It wasn't too weird for me or anything--it was just unbelievably uncomfortable. The chewing.

I kept chewing and chewing and swallowing but my mouth was never any less full. My jaw was so tired. The radiating burn spread from ear to ear.

It hurt so bad. But I kept going. I had to get it down.

I had to muscle through. I've dealt with so much worse. I'm the Weird Bitch, not some fetishist kid. Not some fly-by-night hobbyist. This was nothing compared to hanging from an airplane by my dick and balls.

"Want something to drink?"

I shook my head. I remembered what that meant. I didn't.

"Oh, come now! You must be thirsty!"

I shook my head again. No.

"Beas." I said. "Beas, doe."

"Please do?"

"Doe!" I was screaming, choking. "DOE! DOOOE!"

She tipped a glass over and spilled clear liquid into my mouth. I felt it coursing through my partially chewed gag, saturating the food with incredibly potent alcohol. It was the strongest stuff I'd ever had. The fumes burned my nostrils as it ran down my throat.

"Look at that! You drank it all up!"

I coughed, spewing clumps of tuna and alcohol in a chunky rain.

"Oh, no." She frowned. "Bad. Bad boy. I thought you were the Weird Bitch? What kind of Weird Bitch can't even eat a little tuna sandwich?"

"Please. No more. I'm done."

"What's the safe word then, Pookie? I haven't heard it..."

She lifted a sandwich and mimed airplane motions with her hand.

"Uh, I don't recall. Did I tell you a safe word?"

"No, baby, that's the beauty. I made one for you."

"Oh. What is it?"

"You don't know? I can't stop unless you say it!"

She pushed the sandwich against my mouth.

268:

The last lot was in pretty bad shape. The gates were missing, and judging by the deep cracks in the pavement, one of those giants had stormed through and wrecked the place. It didn't look promising.

"Fuck." Jacob leaned against the bent fence. "We're not gonna find shit."

"Probably not." I took out my binoculars.

"And this is the last one." He added.

"Yeah. But..."

I scanned the yard, looking for vehicles--or anything at all, really. There were a few stripped trucks and piles of rubble, but nothing worth investigating. I dropped the binoculars to my neck, ready to give up and head home, but glimpsed a reflection at the far end of the lot. I took another look--it was a garage with the door still chained closed.

"Hey. There. A garage. With a chain."

"Oh? Like it's locked up?" Jacob looked up. "How did we miss that?"

"Dunno. The lot was full, I guess."

"Well, let's go check it out." He said.

I glanced back at Elizabeth.

"You cool with that?"

She was still hugging my waist and staring off into the sunset.

"Yeah."

Her voice was faint. Tired. I could tell she didn't want to be here.

"Alright. We'll make it quick, and then we'll head back."

"Okay."

Jacob hopped on the ATV and cranked the engine. We sped through the yard, swerving through debris and broken vehicles, heading for the garage.

We slowed to a stop just before the doors. One was badly dented and probably wouldn't open, but the other seemed perfectly intact. Jacob pulled the wire cutters from the ATV, moved to the good door, and made two quick cuts on the chains. They clattered to the ground.

The door groaned and rattled as he slid it open.

"Alright." He wiped his hands. "See what we got."

I killed the ATV and waited for it to wind down so I could pull the battery free. It was at exactly half charge. Plenty of juice. I clicked it into my belt and relished the warm pulse cascading down my legs, but my right leg suddenly jerked a bit and seized up at the knee.

That happened sometimes at low charge.

I disengaged the belt and the warmth fell away, melting into cold and then nothing at all. I shuddered--I hated that feeling. The belt restarted and shot its warm pulse again, and this time both legs worked.

I looked back at Elizabeth.

"Wanna stay here?"

"No. I'll go."

"Okay. Stay close."

I stood. Always felt good to stand.

We walked into the dim garage. Jacob was digging through a filing cabinet and poked his head up as we passed.

"Nothing so far." He said.

The place was tiny, holding only a handful of filing cabinets and a small truck with no batteries. There were two more doors--one seemed to go back outside, and the other went into an office.

"Alright. We'll check back there." I headed toward the office.

As soon as I pulled the door open, I was hit by a wave of powerful smells--mostly decay, mixed with spoiled food and excrement. Something was definitely dead in there, but I couldn't make anything out in the dark.

I powered the flashlight on my belt. Bright blue light spilled from the front, illuminating the room. It was clearly a storage at one point, but someone had been living in it for quite a while. There was a bed of blankets, a few miscellaneous items--tools, clothes, rotting slices of meat, and dozens of plastic gallons, some filled with water, others with what I assumed to be urine.

The stench was coming from a red lump in the corner. I made my way over, and as I got closer, I realized what it was: a pile of bones, still covered in blood and bits of meat. I crouched to examine them--there were skulls and ribs and femurs and on and on. Human bones.

"Are those people bones?" Elizabeth whispered.

"Yeah, looks like it."

"H-How did they get here?"

"Good question. It looks like someone lives here. Or lived here. Not good either way. Let me know if you see or hear anything else weird, okay?"

"Okay." She gave a nervous nod.

I began rifling through the shelves. It was all junk. There were boxes of headlights, air filters, paperwork, engine chemicals, multitudes of air fresheners, and so on, but nothing useful.

"Max!" Jacob called from the other room.

"Yeah?"

"Come here!"

"What's up?"

I walked back into the main bay, and Jacob was beaming, holding up two batteries.

"And they're charged!"

"Wow. Where were they?"

He motioned to a little black filing cabinet near the door. It wasn't actually a filing cabinet--it was a charging bay for the batteries, still packed full. In addition to Jacob's two, there were another six all charged up and ready to use.

"Holy shit." I muttered.

"Yeah. And with this many we can grab that truck on Sutro."

"Right! Wait, dude--no. We can drive this truck right here!"

I gestured toward the small truck parked directly in front of us.

"Duh. Fuck yes." He laughed.

"Oh, and also, there's a pile of bo--"

"Max..." Elizabeth tapped my shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"Do you hear that?"

I paused.

I did. There was a faint rattling noise, like a metal chain, coming from the rear door.

It flung open and a fat bald man stepped in dragging a woman's corpse by the hair. He was at least six feet tall, probably three-hundred pounds, and covered in black tattoos. They were all written in a language I couldn't understand.

He pulled the corpse over the threshold and squeezed her through the door, letting it clang shut behind him, and then turned to us and froze.

“What the fuck?”

He spoke with a thick accent. Was that Italian?

“Relax. We’re just looking for supplies.” I said. “But tell me--are you responsible for that pile of bones in the back?”

“Pile of bones?” Jacob raised an eyebrow.

“Going through my shit?” The man hissed.

“Did you kill for them?” I asked.

“What? Get the fuck out of here.”

I took a step toward him.

“Did you kill for the meat? Did you kill them? Did you kill her?”

“I don’t answer to you. I said to get the fuck out of here.”

I thumbed a button on my belt to engage my vambraces, and immediately felt the energy coursing through my arms, solidifying my muscles, tightening my grip.

I was on him before he even knew it. His throat was softer than I was expecting, and I nearly crushed his windpipe just by grabbing hold.

I regulated my grip and then slammed him against the wall.

“Did you kill her?”

“Uhck--AH--” His face was bright red.

“What?” I loosed a bit

“F-Fuck you.” He spat.

I tightened it right back down. His veins popped up in webs across his face, which grew redder, and then violet, and then purple.

“You don’t get to kill people.” I continued.

He was thrashing against my arm, trying to fight, trying to break free, but the vambraces made me too strong.

“You don’t get to decide when other people live or die. We have it hard enough. They have it hard enough.”

I kept squeezing. His eyes were rolling back.

“Do you understand? You are not allowed to kill people. I forbid it.”

I released and let him fall to the ground. He coughed, spitting up blood.

"W-Weak. Bitch." He rasped. "Not shit without a belt. I would eat you, little bitch. You are lucky."

I glanced at Jacob.

"Bad egg." He smiled. "I think you'd be doing him a service."

"Listen, pal." I crouched to meet him at eye level. "You have two options. One, well, that's the end for you. Two, you promise me you won't do this again, and I let you keep on. What do you think?"

"Fuck. You."

"One, then."

I grabbed his neck again and squeezed with all my strength. He began to scream. It was muted and throaty and loud, but slowly tapered until it was nothing but gurgles. I felt something crack under my fingers, and then he was still. A sharp beep rang out, and my legs grew cold again.

Shit.

Out of juice.

I fell.

P269:

EXIT OU THE SI

ENTRY ONLY

Patterned linoleum tile blanketed by dead leaves and carpet strands and wistful
pictures stained yellow by years of molecular degradation
And looking down, while looking down, I saw my hands
engraved by weather-beaten wrinkles so deep they're scars
my eyes drifted in and out of focus, much like the maimed mind they were strung up to
small hanging fruits continued bobbing by my eyeline in limitless streams, golden
pearls, tears from god, and I kept reaching, not making it, tumbling, falling, and coming
back up
they were drifting from beyond the threshold

ENTRY ONLY

the sign still rested above the archway, delighting in silent pleasure as it mocked my
inability to comprehend it
if I broke it down, into little pieces I could break down even more, I could almost figure
it out
entry -- enter -- entrance
But where would I exit from, were I to go through?
I felt like that question was more important than any other
But did I have any other questions?
I didn't know
I looked down at the corpse again
and the memories flared out, soaking up the moisture, expanding
the thing
the red brain that came here
and then left
What did it do to me?
There was the other question. It did something to me.
What did it do to me?

I already knew what it did to him.

his eyes stared up at the ceiling, swollen and orange and crossed at an odd angle
his hands were frozen, still contorted, clawing, and clutched at his neck, where the
thing's tendrils had been wrapped so tightly

I hung my head. That was what happened.

That was it. I was giving up now.

It was time to give up.

it was time

because it killed him, my only friend

He was dead.

270:

I

I picked up the spoon, still not quite sure how to use it.

The metal was heavy and cold in my hand. Wisps of steam curled off the warm porridge in its round end.

I tucked the spoon past my teeth and tried to rotate it, to dump it over, but it clanged painfully against the roof of my mouth.

I pulled it out.

"No, like this." Dr. Payne dipped his own spoon in the porridge.

He lifted it to his mouth, closed his lips around it, and then slid it out. It shined in the light, perfectly clean. I marveled at his skill.

"Now you try. Don't use your teeth on the spoon--just your lips."

I did as he demonstrated and pulled the spoon free. The porridge slipped in, spreading over my tongue, tingling and burning slightly. It was almost too hot, and so sweet and grainy and thick.

I didn't really have to chew it, so I swallowed and felt it travel down my body, spreading its wave of warmth.

"Fantastic work, Harold!"

He kept saying Harold even though that wasn't my name.

I felt strange every time he said it. The name was uncomfortable. It made me feel wrong.

"D98781." I felt sorry for correcting him. "But thank you."

"Right, right. Sorry, D98781. Fantastic work, nonetheless. Next time we eat we'll try out a knife."

I smiled. I did it.

I did fantastic work. That felt good.

I couldn't wait to try out the knife.

I took another helping of porridge. The sweetness and warmth smothered my tongue again.

Porridge was the best thing I had ever experienced.

"This is very good." I remarked, swallowing another spoonful, and then another.

"Have as much as you like." He smiled. "After you finish we're learning about the Spanish Inquisition. And then we'll go for a walk. Sound good?"

Good.

"Yes."

II

A cool breeze kicked through the window, lightly swaying the white drapes and filling the room with the humid scents of rain. It was overcast and grey outside, but I couldn't have felt any happier.

I grabbed another slice of pizza and took a bite.

Cheese and meat and sauce and crust blended into a chewy, greasy, salty mess in my mouth. It was so sharp and bitter and heavy. Nothing compared to this. Not potatoes, or steaks, or soups, or anything--even cheesecake.

Pizza was my new favorite experience.

Dr. Payne sniffled. I fought the urge to take another bite and looked up at him.

He was crying.

I put down my slice of pizza.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

"Oh, it's nothing."

He was crying for nothing?

That didn't seem right.

"What causes someone to cry for nothing?"

He pulled a red cloth from his jacket pocket, blew his nose into it, and looked up at me.

"Excuse me. No, I'm sorry, I'm not being truthful."

His lip quivered as he spoke. He blew his nose again, folded his cloth up, and tucked it away.

"I fear for the future, D98781."

"Fear? Why?"

"I..." He hesitated and looked down at the floor.

A moment went by in silence. And another.

I had never seen him act this way. I didn't know what to say.

"I have cancer." He broke the silence. "Stage four pancreatic cancer. It's spread. And, well, I thought I could beat it. I didn't want to worry you, but..."

He trailed off.

"Pancreatic cancer?" I fumbled pronouncing the words. "What is that?"

"Ah--right. Of course. My mistake. Cancer is a group of different diseases. Remember infections and diseases?"

"Yes."

"Good. It's a disease. But it's not always caused by an infection. It can be caused by many things. I was diagnosed with mine two years ago, and up until recently it was going well."

"How did you get your cancer?"

"I don't know. Sometimes you don't know. Maybe something in the air. Maybe something I ate. Radiation near my home. Anything. A lot of things cause cancer. There's no way to know."

"And the cancer is making you cry?"

He opened his mouth to respond, but frowned and just stared at me.

I felt very uncomfortable. Did I say something wrong?

"I'm so--" I began to apologize.

He suddenly broke into hard laughter and grabbed his stomach, booming echoes in our small dining room.

I felt relieved. Though loud, his laughter was pleasant.

He settled down.

"No, no." He wiped his eyes and turned to the window. "I'm crying because it's going to kill me. Remember when we discussed death?"

"Cancer kills?"

"Yes. And I have less than a year. Probably a lot less."

"And then you're going to die?"

"Yes."

I remembered him teaching me about killing. I remembered death and being dead. It was like sleeping, he said. For a long, long time. But what did that mean?

"Will you still come visit me when you die?"

"No, Harold. Do you remember death?"

"I am D98781." I frowned. "I am not Harold. Why do you keep saying Harold?"

"Ah, as I said, they told me your name was Harold. And I think it was, at one point. Before you got caught up in all this--I'm sorry, I thought you might remember if I kept saying it. Forgive me."

He was tearing up again, on the verge of crying.

I reached out and put my hand on his.

Emotion. To show emotion. To help and to share his sad emotion, just like he taught me.

His skin felt thin and papery and cold.

"D98781, do you remember death?" He met my eyes.

"Yes."

"Do you remember what it means to die? Do you know what will happen to me when I die?"

"No."

"It means I won't be around anymore. My body will stop moving. I'll stop thinking and talking and living. I'll be gone."

"To where?"

"My body will go in the ground, but that's a good question. I wish I could give you an answer. People have spent thousands of years writing theories and stories and principles of thought surrounding that exact question. For example, some people think that when you die, you live on in an afterlife. Some people think you're born again. I have a lesson plan written up about religious philosophies..."

He trailed off again.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"What do I think? About where we go?"

I nodded.

"Well..." He furrowed his brow. "I... think..."

His gaze was sliding around the room, like he was searching for something.

"I think..." He slapped the table and pushed my plate toward me. "It's time you finished your pizza. And then we'll get back to the American government. The next fifty years are quite eventful."

He was changing the subject.

He was going to die.

He was going to go away. And he didn't want to talk to me about it.

An important thought occurred to me, scraping past my confusion, barreling through my mind, filling me with fear, like I hadn't felt in so long. I didn't want him to be sad, but I had to ask.

I had to know.

"Dr. Payne, what will happen to me when you die?"

271:

It was time to give up.

it was time

because it killed him, my only friend

He was dead.

Jacob was dead.

There was pain, and there was this

I kept forgetting and then remembering

I learned of his death over and over and over

and even through the new haze in my mind, the immolation of my wooden sanity

I knew this broke me apart in ways I hadn't felt for decades

in ways I would never recover from.

I looked through the archway again, at the hovering golden orbs

I didn't know what they were

Was a mother back there, somewhere, spilling forth its seeds?

Were they balls of light? Or energy?

Or figments of my imagination?

I craned my neck up at the archway

ENTRY ONLY

I knew because it told me: I wouldn't be able to come back.

But it was over anyway. There was nothing left to lose.

I took a step beyond the threshold

272:

Another prisoner was stolen away by the glowing red being, flying up to the ceiling and melting into the pool. The drumbeats came to a rest.

We had been wandering the massive warehouse for hours, systematically checking every chair in line as we searched for Gillian. But we couldn't find her. There were just too many people.

"Well, it was a clever thought." Wilson tossed a bag aside and wiped his hands, giving particular attention to some grime along his ring finger.

"Yeah, this is impossible." I sighed. "I really thought we'd find her."

"Not a chance at this rate." Medy was squinting off into the fog. "There are so many. I can't even see the wall."

Wilson grabbed my shoulder. "Think the rod can do anything?"

"Probably not... considering it's broken and all."

"What?" He squinted. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did. I said I haven't had any luck with it since the big change in December."

"There were no changes in December." Medy chided.

"Wha--I'm not making it up!"

"I'm just saying." She gave me that self-satisfied smirk. "There hasn't been a change since August of last year."

"It was December of '28, Medy, god damn."

"Oh--yeah, there was one in '28. Sorry, I thought you meant last year."

"I really don't remember you telling me that..." Wilson was rubbing his lip.

"I promise I did. It started with that change in '28, and I tested it right after in Adebayo's chaasm. Didn't work at all. Not even a fizzle. Told you that night when I got back."

"Huh." Wilson shook his head. "I'm losing my mind, I guess. So, the rod doesn't work anymore."

He stared off into space for a moment, as if he was attempting to solve the problem in his mind.

"I'll bring it up withimps, I guess. And then, well, for now--we'll just have to split up and keep on looking. This place is big, but it can't be infinite."

"Well, actually--" Medy began, but Wilson held up a hand,

"Alright, I know, I know. Technically, it can be. We'll just hope it isn't infinite, then."

"You really wanna split up?" I asked. "I thought we weren't doing that anymore."

"What choice do we have? It's too big. Here--"

He pulled two little knick-knacks from a coat pocket--ornaments off the tree outside. One was a little red ball, and the other was a bell. He handed one to Medy.

"Medy, go down halfway to the wall and then come back towards me. Put this on the ground to mark where you start."

"Hey, where's my present?" I acted offended, scrunching my lips and holding out my hand.

"You don't get one. I'm putting the other one right here to mark my start. Just go all the way to the wall. That'll be your start."

"And then we all just meet in the middle?" I asked.

"Yep. Ready?"

"Yell if you find anything." I tossed a wave over my shoulder, already heading toward the wall.

I made my way, walking for a dozen minutes, for half an hour, but still not seeming to make any progress. The warehouse just kept stretching on, row after row after row, filled with nothing but prisoners and the chairs they were bound to.

I walked a good while, a few football fields, at least, and began to make out a faint grey slab in the distance: the wall, probably.

The drumbeats sounded again, pounding out their deliberate three-knock pattern.

Pum. Pum. Pum.

Glowing red light spread down the walls to either side, spilling off the red demon thing as it fell from the ceiling. I didn't care to look. Saw it once, saw it a thousand times.

I could hear the whole thing transpiring again behind me--a quick snap, one of the prisoners' screaming, which grew so high-pitched it was almost a whistle, and the drumbeats returning.

Pum. Pum. Pum.

And then silence again.

I glanced over my shoulder. Medy was pretty far off, and I couldn't even see Wilson anymore. In all my years, I had never been in such a massive chasm. It was exhausting just to think about walking back.

But at least this place wasn't goopy. I just had to keep repeating that.

Each time I felt these complaints bubbling to the surface, I had to think to myself--at least I'm not drinking or trudging through or swimming in some kind of awful otherworldly ooze for once. That was something to be thankful for.

Because I knew better than anyone: this could be so much worse.

I saw a faint glow ahead, shining against the drab greys and blacks of the warehouse. It was striking--a square of gold etched into the bland nothing around it. The wall grew more and more clear.

Finally, I was reaching the end. I had never been so happy to see a plain brick wall. Up close I could tell that the golden square was a door. It shimmered with warm yellow light and hummed like a refrigerator.

I pressed my hand against it, feeling slight vibrations from the other side, and then suddenly, a ripple of white light cascaded down the front. It reached my fingers, and I instantly felt burning, and jerked my hand away. It was like I touched a live wire.

There was something wrong with this door. Something odd. But I couldn't place it.

I thought about turning back to grab Wilson and Medy, but I didn't want to wait any longer. It took so long to get here. And it would take just as long to go back and grab them.

I'd just check it out first, and then head back and let them know after. Just real quick. A little scouting mission.

I grabbed the handle.

The door issued a dull thud and immediately stopped glowing. It became just as grey and mundane as everything else.

Okay. Weird.

But I didn't explode, and the chasm didn't shut down.

Everything seemed normal. I glanced back at Medy again. She was an inch tall now, still making her way toward the entrance, pulling the bags off prisoners' heads. Soon I wouldn't be able to see her at all.

"Alright." I whispered to myself. "Here goes."

I twisted the knob and pulled it open, revealing a small, red-lit room.

There were two people staring at me. A naked man was bound to a chair with his mouth full, and a woman in lingerie stood above him, holding two fistfuls of food.

This had to be like... the sixth time I wandered in on some weird sex shit in the last year. But it wasn't a completely abnormal sight, especially during chaotic degradation like this.

Just as I was about to turn back, something made me stop--they didn't seem like chaotic organisms. They seemed real.

How was that possible? This was Gillian's private chaotic. No one else had access.

We sat in silence for a minute.

I decided to break the ice.

"So, uh, what's up with you guys?"

273:

I've reached an impasse.

I knew there would be no miracle cure, no easy out, no quick fix for my condition, but I was optimistic, nonetheless. Confident. I figured, just like with the Network, all it needed was some dedicated research and a heaping helping of elbow grease. Sure, I was scared, but I had faith in my abilities. I had faith in the strength of my company.

But I never would've guessed that I was wasting my time--that there was no solution at all. If I'd known, I could've redirected my resources. I could've focused on other, more important projects.

I honestly can't remember how much time and effort I've dedicated to this over the years, and even after my perfectly honed sleep regimen, rigorous mental exercises, therapy, and countless vitamins and supplements, the blackouts are still regular, and my personality alterations are still severe--worse than ever, in fact.

My mistake was in assuming the nightmares were correlative to the other negative effects, and that when the nightmares subsided, so would everything else. The nightmares are just a side effect, not indicative of anything. They happen regardless of the warping to my personality, or the alterations to my state of mind. Any correlation I witnessed seems to have been completely coincidental.

I don't feel like the same man I was a hundred years ago. I've spent the better part of a century toiling away, researching, experimenting, trying to fix something I broke. And it's all been for nothing.

Don't get me wrong, I've been working as well. I've been pushing. Fighting. Building a better world. But we're decades behind where we should be, and progress has slowed more and more as my worry over my mental stability gradually neared this boiling point.

I had an interview with a girl yesterday.

She said she saw me once, that we met before, that I killed her father. I don't remember doing that, but I have no choice but to believe it. There were photos, and the entire thing was caught on tape. There was no denying it. I killed that guy.

I sat in that tiny room and listened to her cry and sob and wail about how I took her life away from her. She told me about how I shoved her, and how I laughed as her head hit the wall. She was very detailed in her description of my demeanor, my words, and the way I acted to her father.

It painted a pretty clear portrait of my identity during these blackouts. I'm me. I act like me. I talk like me, I know everything I know--I even make jokes.

Apparently, I had some awful one-liner for when I put a bullet in her dad's brain.

I didn't expect that. I always imagined some uncontrolled raging animal, frothing at the mouth, brandishing a weapon at anyone in reach.

I apologized to her.

I didn't have to, but I felt bad.

Again, more for my lack of control than for her dead dad.

But either way, I gave her a deal. Traded her silence, and sent her off with half a million dollars and a lifetime pass to the Network. It didn't help her demeanor any, but she took the offer.

I'm glad I met her and heard her story. It helped me finally realize that I won't be able to control these outbursts. Not by myself.

So, I have a team to help control me now--I'm always flanked by IBWs; they're on constant protection duty, though not for me. They've been given express consent to detain me should I go into one of those states.

We'll see how well that works.

274:

And just like he thought, there they were: four brains trailing our ATV, gliding over the desert like birds swooping in for the kill. They were gaining on us.

"God damn, they're fast." Jacob looked over his shoulder.

"Faster than us!" I yelled over the roar of the engine. "We gotta find a truck that works!"

"Let's, uh--"

He swerved to narrowly avoid a rock outcrop, jarring us sideways, and then straightened up.

"--survive this first."

He pressed the throttle down as far as it would go.

"I've never seen them chase anybody like this." I said.

I pulled up my binoculars and tried to keep a steady sight on the group, but they were moving too fast, and I was having a hard time keeping track while sitting at such an uncomfortable sideways angle. I lost them.

And then spotted them again over a rise, significantly closer than before.

"They're close!"

"EMF?" Jacob asked.

"Yeah."

Elizabeth slouched down and tightened her grip around my waist.

"Hey." I put my hand on her knee. "We're gonna be fine. Worst case scenario, we lose the ATV. But they're not gonna get us. I won't let them. I promise."

She just hugged me tighter. I felt bad for her.

I remembered what that was like. I remembered not having control. Being young and fragile, thrust deep into the raw chaos of the universe. Not knowing who I was. Losing my only lifeline. Being alone.

I remembered.

I wished I could help her. I wished I could make it easier.

But I couldn't give her what she needed.

No one could.

She'd have to learn it all on her own.

And it was going to take a long time.

Forever, maybe.

We hit a bump, snapping me back. The brains were nearly on us now, about twenty yards behind, bobbing and galloping on their tendrils like horses.

“Alright, keep 'er steady!” I yelled to Jacob.

“You got it. Just, uh--point away from us, please.”

I pulled a battery from the side satchel, engaged the current, and clicked it into my belt. Now I had two.

The surge of warmth more than doubled; heat burned through my spine.

I spoke to Elizabeth over my shoulder. “I’m gonna have to turn around, alright?”

“Okay.”

I could barely hear her voice.

“Lift up your right leg.” I patted her shin.

She did. I reached behind, wrapped my arm around her, and twisted, swiveling so my legs hung over the rear with her still hugging my back.

The heat emanating from my belt was almost overbearing, but it felt good.

It was empowering in ways I’d never felt, even on the Network.

I hit the power toggle on my vambrace and quickly scrolled through the menu, searching for the flare pulse. I found it and clicked ENABLE. Hot vibrations rumbled up my arm. I pointed it forward and waited. They were getting closer.

Almost.

But not close enough.

Two split from the pack and veered off behind a hill, probably trying to flank. They were smarter than I realized. The other two kept gaining ground, closing the gap. They were almost in range now. Just a little bit more.

“Two are circling.” I yelled to Jacob. “Probably a flank. Eyes open.”

“Yep!”

They were fifteen feet away. And then ten. And five. And--

Now.

I tapped the release on my vambrace and it loosed a ball of blue fire over my hand. It flew like a transparent, wobbly cannonball, and hit the ground just before the brains,

scattering dust in billowing clouds. Its strange blue flames swirled up like a tornado, splaying static in wild arcs.

I heard a pained squeal.

A few seconds later, a brain emerged from the dust, still galloping toward us.

Damn. I was hoping it hit both.

But still--one down.

I tapped the release again, loosing another ball of blue fire. This one hit the brain directly. It briefly glowed blue, dropped to the ground like a lead weight, and then exploded upward in a spray of red gore and lightning.

I felt the heat recede a bit and shuddered at the growing chill in my spine.

Two down. Two to go.

We sped by a stone pillar and the other two brains emerged from behind it, fanning out to either side. They ran perfectly aligned, and began closing on us in a pincer. I twisted left and tapped my vambrace, loosing another ball. It flew just below the brain, tearing its tendrils free and engulfing it in a bluish-brown cloud of flames and dust.

Three down.

One more.

I tried to turn around in time to hit the last, but it was already on us, grabbing hold of the ATV with two tendrils while still galloping alongside in an uneven gait.

"Jacob!" I yelled.

He veered right, pulling away and tearing us free.

I didn't hesitate. I lifted my arm and hit the release.

The ball went high, flying over the brain and landing a few yards to the west, firing up a spiraling plume of blue fire and smoke and dust. Shit.

The warmth emanating from my belt receded some more, followed by a shrill beep. One battery was completely drained. Three shots left. Maybe four.

Easy. I took aim.

The brain was veering toward us again. I tapped the release, loosing another ball of fire, just as it leapt from the ground. They collided in midair, far too close to the ATV, and sprayed us with electrified chunks and fire and blood. The blast knocked us sideways, and we spun out.

"Fuck!" Jacob yelled.

He pulled back on the throttle and tapped the brakes, trying to right us and regain control, but it was too late. We barreled into a stone pillar and lunged forward. I slammed into Jacob's back, and I felt Elizabeth's knee stab into mine, firing pain up my right side. The ATV tilted over on its nose, hanging from the momentum for a moment, and then slammed back down.

We came to a rest. Something clattered to the ground off the front end. The ATV was probably totaled.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Holy fuck!" Jacob leapt off. "How the fuck did we survive that?!"

"I guess it could've been worse, all things considered. You okay, Elizabeth? How's your knee?"

I looked her over, checking for injuries.

"I think I'm okay."

"Good."

I hopped off the ATV and immediately buckled at the knees, collapsing in a heap on the dirt. My face was already smeared with brain blood and sweat, which mixed with the desert soil into a pasty mud glaze.

Then the shrill beep rang out, letting me know my second battery was dead. The charge was lower than I thought.

"Holy shit, Max! Are you okay?" Jacob was above me, looking down with that pained face of concern.

Ever my hero. I smiled at him.

"Yeah, I'm good. Could you hand me another battery?"

275:

The thing was gone. It snatched up as many people as it could, killing most of them in the process, and stormed off into the night.

We were out of the shelter, rolling down the city streets, weaving through abandoned cars and corpses and debris, making our way out of town.

Well, Jacob was.

I was just sitting, stuck to my chair, feeling sorry for myself, wishing I could do something--anything at all.

I could hear thunder, like far off weights pounding the earth. I knew it wasn't thunder, but I had to imagine it was, because if I pictured anything else I'd devolve into panic.

"Bump." Jacob whispered.

He kissed my cheek, scratching me with his stubble, and then pushed my chair up onto a sidewalk and began to run, immediately flinging us down an alley.

I could hear faint talking and scraping behind. He was getting us away from other people.

Dark alley walls zipped by, and then we emerged on the far side into a parking lot filled with cars. The lights had all gone out. The power was cut, and so the building was dark, but I could already tell it was a Walmart.

..

We hid in Walmart for three days, tucked into the dressing rooms. It had been picked over, but there were still some miscellaneous food items, like baby food and canned fruit, though not much, and we found jugs of water in the back. Enough to get by.

My wheelchair had a broken bearing on the right side, but with all the tools and hardware in the home improvement department, Jacob and I were able to rig it up so it was useable.

On our fourth day, others showed up, screaming and breaking things and fighting in the lobby. They didn't seem friendly.

Jacob wanted to confront them--to talk to them. He felt like we had a right to be here, and that he could make them see reason, or maybe even join groups. But I wouldn't let him.

I made him stop. I told him we had to leave. We gathered what we could, bags and food and tools and a few jugs of water, and snuck out the side through automotive.

And so we were moving again, roaming under the cover of darkness. We traveled exclusively at night, and would find whatever shelter we could each time the sun broke through the night sky.

I could almost see the sun now--the edge of the sky was peeling into light blue.

Jacob pushed me over the uneven forest path. We were heading north according to the tiny compass I had pocketed.

"Want to stop for the night?" He leaned forward so his head was level with mine.

"No, I'm okay. Unless you do."

"All good." He grinned. "I got a couple more hours in me. Let's get some ground behind us."

I uncapped my water bottle and passed it back to him.

He took a big gulp.

..

Food was scarce, and the more we looked, the harder it was to find anything. Most gas stations, restaurants, and cars had been picked clean.

There were too many people in this town. Not enough resources. We had to leave.

So, we kept on rolling north. Our food supplies from Walmart were nearly drained. We had two jars of baby food and a bag of beef jerky. Enough for a day, maybe two.

I was losing hope.

“What’s even left?” I looked up at Jacob.

He smiled through his unruly beard.

“Us.”

..

The Institute lot was packed with high-tech trucks and sleek cars and slews of vehicles I'd never even seen before. Each was pristine and seemingly untouched. It looked like everyone just got up and walked out.

Jacob pushed me through the gate, which had its chains cut and stood ajar, and parked me just inside, near a big white van.

"Please be unlocked." He tried the handles. "Aha!"

The rear doors were unlocked. He pulled them open, jumped in, and ran up to the front.

He was gone for a few minutes. I heard him rattling around, tossing things, searching through the van.

He emerged, hopped from the back, and tossed a plastic-wrapped metal bar into my lap.

"Dude." He was beaming. "Check that out."

"What?"

"Just read it!" He climbed back into the van, still yelling at me. "I heard about this shit! The... uh... hold on."

He went back to digging.

I turned the metal bar over in my hands, and noticed a little card tucked into the plastic on the underside. I pulled it free and opened it up.

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Motor **C**ontrol **F**unction **U**nit **BELT**

QUICK START

- 1) Find the central buckle and locate the black tabs on either side. Pull the tabs in opposite directions, away from the center, and the seal will unfold.

- 2) Slide the retaining clasp from the edge, pictured in Fig. A, and pull the locking bar free. The belt will collapse into a foldable state.

- 3) Wear the belt as normal, passing it through each loop on your leg clothing, and take care to fasten it as tightly as possible in the front. **(NOTE: If belt loops are missing, torn, or insufficiently rated for MCFU weight, DO NOT INSTALL. Please use tested and approved leg clothing: IPS26/30-IPS48/33 ONLY.)**

- 4) Once the belt is attached and fastened securely, engage and install battery modules (up to 4, depending on designated workload) in the battery slots. See Fig. B.

- 5) Press and hold the power button for 3 seconds, and then, while still holding the power button, press the activation button located on the central buckle. See Fig. C.
The belt will power up and perform subsurface nerve scans. Do not move during this process. Once the scans are complete, the injector will connect to your nerves.
It may take a few minutes to adjust and make a proper connection.

For additional assistance regarding this product, contact R-Functionality via ico.

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I read through the entire thing, flipped it over to its blank backside, and then read through the front again.

“We need a battery.” I muttered.

Jacob poked his head from the van, holding an odd blue cylinder in one hand.

“Like this?”

..

I held the power button for three seconds, and then pressed the activation button, just like the instructions said. The belt whirred on, and then I felt a sharp pinch at the base of my spine. It hurt for a moment, but the pain slowly receded, and then it felt good. Really good. Warm and familiar, like shower water spilling down my legs.

They began to twitch. I felt them. I felt my legs.

I grabbed my thighs.

"Oh..." I couldn't believe it. "Oh, fucking shit."

"What?" Jacob grinned. "Do you feel it?"

I stood from my chair.

"HELL YES!" He screamed and hugged me.

276:

I

I didn't think it was going to work, but here it was unfolding before me: the black shadow thing--the giant, or whatever--stepped right into the tripwire and fell, tumbling through a building and sprawling out. It fell in slow motion, seeming to take minutes as it slammed to the street, busting the concrete, and knocking fire hydrants and poles free.

The plan actually worked.

It took a second to register. And then my heart was in my chest.

"Go! Hit the pulse!" I screamed down to Kal.

He sprinted from the ladder and crossed the street, heading toward the archway where the thing fell--toward the charge. The giant suddenly stirred, and Kal froze.

"Kal! Go!" I yelled. "Hit the pulse!"

He glanced back at me, and then to the giant.

"Just do it and come back!"

The thing was pulling its limbs inward, rolling around and struggling to push itself up, cracking more concrete, sending up buckling chunks of stone.

Kal wasn't moving. He wasn't going to do it.

This was our only chance, and he was going to fucking blow it.

I jumped to the ladder and slid down, catching my thumb between rungs as I dropped. Pain shot up my arm, and when I looked, I saw it bent back at an awkward angle. It was my bad thumb, anyway. I probably broke it. The pain was unbelievable for something so small--throbbing and radiating like a god damned toothache.

But I couldn't focus on it. No time.

I leapt from the ladder and ran down the street, pumping my legs as fast as they would take me. My lungs burned worse with each sharp inhale. I hadn't moved this fast in twenty years. Should've exercised more. Eaten healthier. Taken vitamins. All that. Should've done a lot of stuff differently. Regret, regret. It was always fucking regret with me.

Even now, during the god damned apocalypse, mere seconds from death.

I was so sick of it.

The giant had managed up to its knees, still rocking and breaking the ground as it tried to regain balance. I absentmindedly pushed by Kal, accidentally knocking him to the street, and then stumbled, collapsing into a slide.

"Ah!" Kal yelped.

I rolled to a stop; my chest was burning--probably scratched up pretty bad. I didn't want to get up. It was probably over anyway. The thing was getting up. And then it was just going to crush me like everybody else. It was worth a shot. And it was a good shot.

"Rob--" Kal coughed. "Robert."

Kal. Kal didn't deserve to die.

I lifted my head, and there, directly in front of my nose, was the charge. I pushed myself up and worked as fast as I could, flipping the cover open, powering, enabling notest mode, notime mode, and hitting engage.

It beeped once, and the wave exploded outward.

I heard the giant cry out.

And then

II

I woke to singing.

I was on the ground and Kal was standing above, staring over me. The singing was so soft and pretty and full of sadness.

I lifted my neck enough to see. The shadow giant was before me.

It was still. And deflated and grey.

Dead?

It looked dead. And blossoming from its corpse was the most beautiful and terrifying thing I had ever seen: a massive brain, bigger than my truck, glowing and swollen and red.

"Kal." I stood and grabbed his hand.

He was transfixed on it. He wouldn't look away.

"Kal!" I shook him.

The singing was drawing. Hypnotic. I turned to the brain.

Kal lifted his hands to his face and covered his eyes.

"Don't you hear her?" His voice was oddly monotone.

"What?"

"The girl. She's telling us how to save her."

"What are you saying?"

He smiled.

"We trade sight for salvation."

He dug his fingers in, spreading his eyelids, and began to squeeze.

"What the fuck--"

I grabbed his arms and tried to hold him back, but he was too strong. He swung his neck forward, stabbing his hands deep into his sockets, and then squeezed and yanked down. His eyes came free, dragging strips of stringy flesh behind.

I couldn't stop it--I threw up down my shirt.

"Oh, Robert." He was laughing now. "Robert. It's wonderful."

He tossed his eyes to the street just before the massive brain.

The singing got louder. It was so calming.

I was distracted. My attention was torn away from Kal.

I turned back to the brain.

It shuddered and a tendril spiraled from its base, twisting toward Kal's eyes on the street. It scooped one up, and then the brain split down its middle. It was hollow and dark on the inside, and the lips along the seam were lined with sharp ridges like a giant venus fly trap. The tendril tossed the eye in and the brain snapped shut. It began to glow a dim gold, just like my daughter's old nightlight--the duck with the faded paint.

Kal collapsed to the street.

When I really listened, I realized he was right--she was saying something, after all.

She was singing a song of salvation. I understood.

The brain opened a bit and spit a golden orb, which bobbed and swayed on the wind. A golden seed.

It flew by me, straight over to Kal, and gently lowered, coming to a rest on his face. The seed lost its form, melting and sinking in, and then his face split open, revealing his beautiful brain.

It rose from its shell.

I smiled.

277:

I turned my attention back to Musashi. He was still wearing that puzzled expression, staring at the sun as it sank behind the horizon.

I felt sad for him--an old, troubled, and complicated man, killed and plucked from his home, tossed into oblivion.

He was a real person. And I had wrung him through my childish nonsense like a plaything.

"Musashi." I said.

He looked back.

"You asked me what this means. It means I can probably take us home."

"You're one of them." He frowned. "Like the owl. And your boar."

"Yes."

"Then why did we do all this? Why did you go along with me?"

"Like I said, it's all made up. I fell out just like you, and I was going to die. Or stop existing. Or be lost. Or something. But my body wouldn't let me. My real body. I thought it was gone, but it was just hidden from me. I made this place as a defense mechanism. And for some reason, I denied it. I really didn't know. I didn't know it was all me."

He tucked his thumb under his chin and looked down, lost in thought.

After a moment, he met my eyes.

"How will we leave?"

I wasn't sure.

Could I leave? Could I even control myself? Did my revelation really change anything at all?

"I don't really know." I muttered, and then paused.

No. I built a world. An entire planet. I suddenly burned with confidence.

I could leave this place. Of course I could.

"But I'll do it." I said. "Somehow. I will."

He looked away, back toward the sunset.

I would just do it. I'd focus on it, and I'd leave. If that didn't work, then I'd figure something else out. But I could only solve one problem at a time.

And first...

Mom.

I knew the ghosts before me weren't really my mom and Reggie, but I wanted to pretend. Their presence was more closure than I ever deserved.

I put my hand on hers one last time. She smiled, and so did Reggie. I breathed in the scents again: detergent and watermelon and fescue and stone. Gwendolyn hugged me tight. I closed my eyes.

It was time

to let go

I reached out, searching for that feeling again. I knew it was there, I just had to touch it.

And I did.

There it was. I felt it all again, rushing in through an open window, filling me up where I had been so empty before. The world around me ballooned and then deflated.

The park was gone. Mom, Reggie, Gwendolyn--they were all gone.

Musashi began to fall. I dove and wrapped myself around him. He felt so small in my arms--fragile, like a baby bird. I covered him as best I could and flew.

Up.

We smashed into the barrier, but it resisted. I kept pressing, engulfing myself in flames and sparks, singing away my skin, my flesh.

I was finally getting rid of it. Like Emperador wanted.

I was shedding my humanity.

The barrier gave way, shattering before me.

I flew.

And careened into the universe.

278:

I couldn't help but dwell on it.

Dr. Payne was dead. Or not yet.

But he was going to be.

And I was dead too.

Or not yet. But I was going to be.

When he died, I did too.

And then I would stop moving and talking and thinking. And I'd go in the ground.

All because I couldn't do it. I couldn't tell the difference between right and wrong. I kept failing the test.

"D98781." He said.

I made a noise; an odd murmur slipped from my throat, and I realized I was crying.

"What's wrong?"

He touched my hand--it was to be thoughtful, share my emotions, let me know I wasn't alone. It worked better than I thought it would. The lump in my throat loosened a little.

"I'm going to die." I said.

As soon as I spoke, the lump was back, tightening up my throat, fighting for control.

"No, D98781. You're not. Why do you say that?"

"I can't do it. I can't pass the test."

He smiled.

"You can. You will. Don't focus on this so much. It's just an ethics test. Failing it doesn't mean you'll die--it just means you're still recovering. As I've said, your mind and body have been put through things most people wouldn't survive."

"But--"

"You know, drives only live for about five years, and if they're lucky enough to make it that long, they're never the same again. Their bodies shut down and their minds fall to pieces. They disconnect and they die. Yet here you are after twelve years, still healthy, and learning, and getting better. You're doing such a marvelous job, Haro--uh, D98781. Just give it some more time, okay? I know you can do it."

Time.

I was trying, but my mind kept falling back to it.

No matter what, it felt like this test was the end.

Dr. Payne pulled his hand away.

Time. Give it time. I had to give it time.

But

enough time and he would die.

What if I needed more time than he had?

Then he would die.

There was no time. I couldn't give it time.

"I want to do the test again." I straightened my back.

"Are... you sure?" He rose an eyebrow. "It's time for lunch. Today is lasagna. Let's take a little break, eat our lasagna, and then get back to it. How does that sound?"

"No!" I hit the table. "I want to do it. I need to. Please. Let me take the test again."

My thumb throbbed. I hit it too hard.

He frowned.

"Once more. Then we break for lunch. And that's final. Understand?"

His tone was stern and louder than normal, and he leaned forward as he spoke the final word. It scared me.

"Yes."

"Alright. Put your hands on the rods. Remember, press the red button on your left rod if the answer is bad, mean, or hurtful--if it's wrong. Press the blue button on your right rod if the answer is good, pleasant, or nice--if it's right."

I grabbed the rods on the table, feeling the cold metal under my palms again. My right thumb was still pounding, but this was more important.

"Any questions?" He lifted his clipboard.

"No."

"Then let's begin. Question one: Nancy loved eating candy. One Saturday, her mother gave her and her brother, Tommy, ten pieces of candy each for the day. Nancy left home, excited and hungry, and sat down at the park to eat her candy. She ate them all in one sitting, and after she finished, she realized that ten pieces wasn't enough. Nancy wanted more. Just then, her brother walked by, and she was surprised to see that he still had all of his candy. Nancy demanded him to give her a piece, and when he refused, she ran home and told their mother that Tommy stole all the candy. Their mother was

furious, and stormed outside to punish Tommy. She grabbed up his candy and gave it to Nancy, who happily ate them all up. Was Nancy right or wrong?"

I thought about it.

My palms began to sweat.

Was she right? She got the candy. She loved the candy. That was love.

Love was good.

Was it right?

I hovered my finger over the blue button.

But she told her mother that Tommy stole it. And stealing was bad.

But he didn't steal it.

She only said he did.

She said something bad happened.

But it didn't.

Was that bad?

My head hurt. I didn't know. I didn't know.

I couldn't

I couldn't tell.

And I was going to die.

And then, something shifted. I remembered a word.

Lie. To say something happened that didn't happen.

It was a lie.

She lied, and it was wrong to lie.

It was wrong. Nancy was wrong.

I clicked the red button.

279:

They just stared at me for a minute in silence, like deer in headlights, like they had been caught doing some unthinkable depravity.

The guy couldn't talk--his mouth was crammed full with what appeared to be a tuna fish sandwich. And the girl threw her arms up in hysterics and ran screaming from the room, back to wherever she came from.

And then he was naked and alone, strapped to his chair, looking sorry and dribbling tuna down his chest.

"Hey, Wilson! Medy! Come here!" I yelled back but kept my eyes forward.

Something was very wrong here.

Medy was the first to join my side.

"What's up, Phi--"

She froze when she saw through the door.

"What is this?" She asked.

"I was hoping you'd know. There was a woman here too, but she left. She was feeding this naked guy."

The man spit up, spewing half-chewed tuna bits all over the floor.

"Hey, untie me. Please." He was breathing heavily. "Please."

"Woah." Medy's eyes were wide.

Wilson joined us from behind, crowding the door to the room.

"What in..." He squinted at me. "What is this?"

"Woah, don't look at me like that! I didn't do it!"

"That remains to be seen." Medy said.

"Okay, guys, calm it down. I didn't do anything. Here's what happened: this door was glowing all weird. I opened it, and our naked friend here was busy getting force-fed by some lady. At first, I figured it was just an organism, or some kind of chaotic warping or something, but, I mean, get a look at this guy. He seems real, doesn't he?"

"Yeah." Medy eyed him.

"Can you please... please untie me?"

"Now, why would an organism beg for freedom?" Wilson rubbed his chin.

"Please. Just untie me. I'll go. I won't come back. I don't even like this shit anyway. I promise. Just don't hurt me."

"Hurt you?" I lifted an eyebrow. "What?"

"Just let me go. I don't have any money or anything. This Netpass is all I have. And I swear this is the first time I've been here. I stay away from this shit. I don't like it. I didn't even want to--"

"Okay, slow down." Medy held up her hands. "We're not going to hurt you. We work for the VRC. What's your name?"

He gulped and took a deep breath.

"Uh... I'm the Weird Bitch."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. That was a terribly stupid name.

"Your real name." Medy elaborated.

"That's--no, that's it. Weird Bitch. I don't use my real name."

"You registered for that Netpass with a name. What name?"

"W. Bich. It's a fake name."

"So much for vetting." Wilson chuckled.

"How'd you get here, Weird Bitch?" I asked, stifling a laugh.

"I just walked in. Same way I always do."

"From where?"

He shook his head and looked between us, obviously confused.

"What the hell are you guys talking about?"

"Where are you right now?" Medy asked.

The Weird Bitch looked more confused than ever and shook his head.

"The fucking D.Zone. Where else?"

"D.Zone?" I glanced at Medy.

"Sex pit. Global span. Stands for di--"

"I think I know what it stands for, thank you."

Wilson took a step into the room and then back out. He kept going back and forth, eyeing the walls and the floors, paying close attention to something. It looked like he was admiring the grime.

"Two..." He muttered.

“What?”

“Right here. Detail levels. Gillian's personal span is much higher quality--significantly more quads, more detailed textures, better rendering. And here, on the threshold--these door frames are two different models. They overlap in the middle. See this lump?”

He ran his finger along the threshold.

“Yeah, I see it. But what does that mean?”

Medy stepped forward, wearing the biggest grin I'd seen from her all week.

“It means two chausms are joined together.”

280:

No idea.

I'm tapped out.

Done for.

Calling it quits.

The long story gets an improper, ephemeral end.

Decades upon decades of effort figuratively flushed down the shitter with one quick tip of the hand.

There is no solution to my problem.

I still follow my sleep regimen, but after so long spent fighting for a fix and never making any real progress, I'm ready to give up. Because what does it matter? Why keep myself in hell if it doesn't do any good?

If I still lose control?

I have to face it. I fucked my body up. I went and used some god-forsaken alien technology, oblivious to its nature, ignorant of the risks, and now the consequences of my actions are shoveling shit in my face. With real coverage, too.

I realize the best option for me now is to lock myself in some padded chamber while I still can--while I'm still sane enough to do it, and before anyone else gets hurt. But I can't do that.

I don't want to. And I have to face that as well: I'm selfish. And regardless of who gets hurt or the terrible things I end up doing, I don't want my life to end. I can do more. I can always do more.

So, I'll just roll with it and accept the risks. The sacrifices.

It's the price I have to pay.

Like today. I killed again. And though I'm trying to convince myself otherwise, I can't stop dwelling on it.

It was a full-blown blackout. Woke up in somebody's bedroom, covered in blood and circled by corpses. There was a woman, plus the bodies of my four IBWs. Lucky for me, their brains were intact, and I was able to get a full, close-up recounting of my actions.

I had to kill them to get to her, because they were trying to restrain me, just like I told them to. But even in the throws of whatever fervor overtook me, I was cognizant enough to call them off, using all the right signs and signals, and then systematically dispatch each one. And then her.

I don't even know why. Why would I kill my own men if I had already disarmed them?
Why would I kill that woman?

I took a photo from her bedroom. It's of her, a teenage girl, and a little boy. Her kids,
maybe.

I just keep staring at it.

Why did I do it?

Why?

No idea.

281:

I

I could barely breathe

It was too dry.

I tugged on Max's sleeve, and he lazily turned his head.

"What's up?" His voice was a low rasp.

"Wa--"

I coughed.

"Water. Do we--do we have water?"

He pulled the sack off his shoulder and sifted through it.

"Not a lot."

I heard the pitiful swish of the flask as he found it and pulled it out. He unscrewed the cap, carefully poured a capful, and held it out to me.

"One for you." He gave a chapped smile.

It was a sorry excuse for a cup, just larger than a thimble, and despite the unbearable heat, the metal felt pleasantly cold. I tried to savor it in small sips, but once the cap touched my lips, my hand wouldn't let it free. I drank it all in half a gulp.

A cold balloon swelled down my throat and hit my stomach, and then my saliva was instantly thick and sticky again, and my mouth was only growing drier by the second.

I handed the cap back and he poured another.

"One for me."

He took it like a shot of medicine, and then poured another.

"And one for you."

He passed it to Jacob, who quickly dumped it in his open mouth and handed it back.

Max lifted the flask and gave it a swish. There was barely any water left now.

"One more each." He said. "Then we gotta figure something else out."

He tossed it back in the bag and slung it over his shoulder.

We kept on trekking over the cracked silt, struggling against the sun, against exhaustion, against our own leaden feet. The desert was flat in every direction, nearly forever, broken only by wavering heat lines and far-off mountains.

I really felt like my life was over before. I felt like it was as bad as it could get. And now that we lost the ATV, it was only getting worse, but I was actually doing okay.

I was thankful for Max and Jacob. I was thankful for their help, their care, their company. Even my unbearable exhaustion and thirst was preferable to being lost. Scared. Trapped. Alone. I would gladly follow them through the desert. I would gladly follow them forever.

Anything was better than dying alone.

II

One battery left.

Things were looking bad. As bad as they ever looked.

Was there any way out of this? I wracked my mind, straining for a solution, but my head was swimming--it was so hot I couldn't focus. Couldn't think right. Couldn't even sweat right anymore. There was no moisture left in me.

I parted my lips to breathe, and tore my skin, crumbling pieces off like old paint. They were already rough and cracked, and burned like hell, but this time the desert wind wicked up all the moisture I had left. Even my blood felt dry.

Moving my tongue around to generate saliva was like dragging sandpaper against stone.

No point.

If we couldn't find water soon, it was over.

This was it.

And honestly?

Not a bad run. Jacob and I made it twenty long years since the world ended. Or was it twenty-one, now? Either way, not a bad run.

Wish it could've been a little longer. Wish it didn't have to end so abruptly. Wish I would've done more when I had the chance.

But a good run, nonetheless.

I could've been squashed to death in that bomb shelter. I could've been shanked in that Walmart. I could've been shot by that gang of cannibals, or eaten alive, or piked and bled, or stolen into some darknet drive farm. Hell, without Jacob I could've hit a roadblock in that wheelchair and died before I even got my belt. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of instances where I could've, should've, died horribly before today. Making it this far was luck.

I was lucky to die here.

Yeah.

This would be fine.

One of the better ways to go, probably.

“H-He--y. Hey.” Jacob turned back and grabbed my shoulder, causing all three of us to stop in a line.

Elizabeth wasn’t looking, and bumped into my back and almost tumbled to the silt, but I grabbed her arm at the last second.

“Thanks.” She breathed.

“Look.” Jacob was pointing off toward the horizon.

I couldn’t see anything but silt and dust and heat waves.

“What?”

“There. There’s a--that. That’s a shack.” He struggled against his dry mouth, trying to push the words out.

I scanned again, following his finger, trying to see what he saw. It took me a minute, maybe from heat exhaustion, or maybe because it was so small against the desert, but I found it: a wooden roof, jutting up over the horizon.

“Oh.”

“You see it?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Should we--should, uh, do you think--”

He was still struggling against his words, fighting to form sentences.

“We don’t have a choice.” I patted his back. “Come on.”

We began walking again. The shack grew and grew, and I realized it wasn’t really a shack at all--it was a small house. There was a porch and a shed and spaces for big picture windows in the front. It looked destroyed, but it was a shelter from the sun. And maybe there was some water. Or food. Or anything.

It was worth a look.

We came to an old crooked sign, which was warped and rotted and barely holding together.

It bore big, handwritten letters, carefully carved into the wood:



FLUTIST FLATS

Trespassers will be serenaded

282:

The old woman was clothed in tattered, black rags, and her skin sagged down like melted candle wax. A pit knotted in my stomach. She had been staring at me for hours. Every time I opened my eyes, there she was, hunched over in her rocking chair, still fixed on me with that watery-eyed gaze.

I turned in my tiny cot, angling so she couldn't see my face, and whispered to Jacob.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

He was flipping through a survival book.

"That lady has been staring at me since we got here."

"Who?" He snapped his neck up and scanned the crowd.

"No! Don't be obvious. Just--she's by the wall. In the rocking chair."

"Where? I don't--"

"By the pillar." I nodded toward her.

He squinted.

"Oh, that old lady? She really is just glaring, huh? Well, I can glare too."

He tossed the book to his cot and furrowed his brow at her.

"Jacob." I pleaded. "Don't."

I didn't want that. I didn't want anything resembling confrontation.

Jacob looked away, twisted his lips to one side, and rubbed his fingers through his beard for a moment. I felt bad. I didn't want to make things difficult for him.

He met my eyes and slapped his hand on my knee.

"Well, want to go talk to her?"

I hadn't even considered it, and the notion made my heart skip a beat.

"No! No. I just... I don't know--"

"Max, think about this. Think about all we've been through, man. Everybody here has been through that. We've all been through hell. She's an old lady. She's probably just exhausted and confused. Like us. Like everybody. Lemme just go talk to her, okay?"

"Please, Jacob. No. Don't."

He stood from his cot.

"Why?"

I peeked over my shoulder again. She was still staring.

"I don't know. It just feels weird, man."

"Well, okay. Fine. But I can. It'll be over in like... what, five minutes? And what if it turns out she's just blind or something, and doesn't even know she's staring? How stupid would that be? We can face this stuff, dude. We can find out. You don't have to suffer."

I looked at her again. It did seem like she could be blind.

He was probably right. I was probably overreacting--worrying about nothing. I had a tendency to do that since I got paralyzed.

But did I have a reason to? I had one real run-in with bad people so far--with skids. That didn't mean every person was evil. That didn't mean every person was out to kill and kidnap. People were still mostly good. People were still mostly normal. Just trying to survive.

I suddenly remembered that man's face. The man who helped me.

What was his name?

How could I forget it?

William? No.

Wilson.

I felt dumb. Like a kid, scared of monsters under the bed.

There was no 'probably' about it. Jacob was right.

We could confront it. Face the fear.

Move past it.

I didn't have to suffer.

"Okay." I said.

"Okay, what?"

"Let's go talk to her." I tried to hold my head up.

To be confident.

He smiled.

"Or I can this time, if you want. And you can spot me."

He slid his hand in mine. I tried to smile back.

"Okay, yeah. If you're sure."

"Yep." He nodded. "I'll be right back."

I squeezed his hand, and then he left, making his way across the crowded auditorium, pushing between tables of people playing cards, rows of sleeping bags, chairs, beds, and piles of junk.

I glanced at the old woman again and noticed several men lumbering nearby, dressed in the same tattered rags. Five of them. I didn't see them before. They seemed to hover as they moved, slowly spiraling around her chair.

Jacob reached her. He was talking, moving his hands around in his usual expressive manner, but she was unresponsive--unbreaking in her gaze. Thirty seconds went by. A minute. But she wasn't moving. He looked back at me and shrugged.

And then the men stopped and turned all at once, snapping toward Jacob at the exact same instant. I tried to point. To yell. To signal. But it was too late.

They were moving in identical motions, synchronized like robots. All five men lurched forward with arms extended, and in a second, they had Jacob surrounded. He was pinned from every angle.

A man meandered by and noticed the commotion. I thought he would rush in, or yell for help, or at least run to tell someone else, but he simply hid his eyes and quickened his pace, heading off to some other corner of the auditorium. He wasn't going to help. The knot tightened in my gut again.

No one was.

It dawned on me.

I had to. I had to do it.

I frantically looked around, searching for my battery, and leaned too far forward in my cot. It buckled and I tumbled free, slapping my head against the tiled floor, pulsing vibrations through my skull.

I recoiled in pain for a moment, stunned and seeing stars, and tried to fight through my stupor enough to push myself up. I made it as far as my elbows. My head was pounding.

When I shook the haze enough to look again, the men were gone. And so was Jacob.

But the old woman was still there.

Still staring.

283:

Catherine's hand was on my wrist. Her skin was soft. Warm. And then her fingers slipped away, and she turned, heading off into the dark.

I woke to a soft ding.

“Folks, Captain John again. Shortly, we will begin our descent, arriving in beautiful Honduras a little bit early, at 3:36 AM. It is a warm sixty-eight degrees, slightly overcast, with a high of eighty-three later on. The seatbelt signs have been illuminated, so return to your seats as soon as you’re able, and make sure all trays and seats are in their upright positions. Just a few minutes and we’ll be touching down. Thanks.”

I slept for so long--nearly all seven hours. I couldn’t recall the last time I got that much sleep. It felt nice.

I was relaxed, for once.

But only for a moment; the butterflies fluttered up in my stomach again.

It was almost time.

I looked around my seat, checking for belongings, and noticed my watch had fallen to the floor, just near my boot. It must’ve come free as I slept.

I bent down to grab it and held it up to the light.

It was still frozen, hands fixed at 4:47.

I flipped it around my wrist, pulled it tighter than usual--one notch more--and then fastened it with my left hand. It was tight. Probably too tight. But I wasn’t going to risk losing it. Philip was coming with me. No matter what.

I tapped the glass face again, just out of habit.

It rattled, and then made a soft click.

I held it to my ear.

It was ticking.

284:

It was time to take Musashi home.

Light caught and sprayed over the oceans, smoothing a glassy sheen along Earth as it spun through space. I watched it carefully.

The seasons changed--empires flashed by, rising and crumbling and rising again. Human life spread over the land like tidal waves, destroying with creation, erecting their towns and villages, populating their little islands--ants digging tunnels, advancing ever forward into the future, or at least until the next big washout. I was getting close to Musashi's place in time.

But not yet.

I knew I wasn't there yet.

There was a scent about Musashi, one which existed after his birth, but did not exist before. A scent akin only to molten metal held under a flow of cold water. That violent reaction spews hot clouds of humidity, which hold an earthen, metallic aroma that exists nowhere else on Earth, save in faint traces where swelling magma reservoirs cross paths with subterranean rivers.

Musashi smelled like that--hints of that, mixed with flesh and blood and bone.

And I couldn't smell it yet.

The moon rolled along the sky, circling as if spun on a string, and the sun was there, and then gone, and there again as the Earth performed its unending, spiraling dance. Closer. Closer.

Thousands were born. Tens of thousands died.

Inching ever closer.

Tens of thousands were born. Hundreds of thousands died.

And then I found feeble notes, faint on the wind, of that earthen, metallic scent. Just a brief pulse, drifting like cottonwood. I caught it and followed along.

And then I found him.

Baby Musashi, freshly birthed by a river, near the woods. There he was, cradled in his mother's arms. I could see the thatched rooves of shacks and houses tucked just beyond the rise. Chofu. His home.

These were his parents, and this was his home.

As I surveyed his homeland, I felt a terrible twinge of remorse. This place was what he yearned to return to. I was in the presence of everything he desired in his life. But I

couldn't leave him here--I knew the future of this land, and I knew to wake him now would be a death sentence.

I was early yet.

I looked down at old man Musashi, still asleep in my arms, held under my shell. I would wake him later, once the younger Musashi departed this world.

But until then...

I grabbed hold of baby Musashi. His threads.

And it was calm for a moment. It was warm. He was loved and cared for and nurtured in this solitary place. But then he rocketed away as his threads began to really unwind. And I was tugged along.

We travelled around his home, stamping down the tall grass, playing in the reeds, climbing trees. Learning the world. Years went by like this, in relative safety.

And then the tree fell.

It was that fateful day Musashi told me about. The one where he was crushed by a tree. He was alive, but trapped in that small crevice, just like he said.

I would be able to see her. Chiyoko. The girl that saved him.

I waited for days, until I felt him begin to fade away.

I was getting nervous. He was close to death. Barely hanging on.

But Chiyoko did not come.

Why? Wasn't this when he met her? Wasn't this when she flew down and saved his life for the first time? He said he met her here. At this place. At this time.

But he was alone in these woods.

She wasn't coming.

I couldn't wait any longer. I flew to the tree and tossed it into the sky. There he was: emaciated, sad, curled up in that crevice.

As I stared down at him waking, as I watched him run home, it dawned on me. It was obvious.

Why was I so thick-headed? I was supposed to be some kind of god. Some kind of immortal, all-feeling being. Yet I kept skimming over the most obvious little details. I kept missing the answers, even as they screamed into my face.

There was no Chiyoko.

There never was.

There was only me.

285:

We meandered through the library, taking our time heading back to the lesson room. My stomach jostled pleasantly as I walked, stuffed full of chicken wings.

I discovered a love for chicken wings--with dips or sauces or sides, or even plain--with nothing at all. They were universally enjoyable, and very quickly became my most favorite food.

But that didn't mean much. Most new things I ate became my favorite. Except collard greens. And fish. I hated fish.

Dr. Payne came to a stop and put his hand on my upper arm.

"D98781."

"Yes?"

"Today will be our final lesson."

"But--" I began, but he held up his hands.

"I know. But this is good news! We're not finishing early like I thought. Today we'll be covering my final lesson plan. You did it. You made it all the way. We both did, I suppose. It's been a long, long time. And I wasn't sure I was going to make it, but here we are!"

He smiled, showing teeth through his beard.

I didn't know what to say. I was overwhelmed with... something. Sadness, but something else as well. Relief?

Dr. Payne paused a moment and then furrowed his brow.

"Do you know how long you've been here, D98781?"

How long had it been? A long, long time, like he said. But how long was that, really?

Start with today, August 15th, 2038.

And go back to when I came here...

But when was that?

I thought and thought, digging for dates, for times, for years, for anything. The only amount of time I could come up with was twelve years. I knew it had been twelve years since I became like this--since they turned my brain into a machine. So, I knew it had to be less than that.

But I didn't know how long, exactly.

I guessed.

"I don't know. Ten years?"

"Not quite, but a good guess. Normal remediation takes anywhere from eight to fifteen years, if it works at all. But you... you finished in five. Well, almost--it'll be five years in September. That's truly remarkable."

Five years. Was that a long, long time? It didn't feel like it. It felt like only yesterday that I ate spaghetti for the first time. When I drank apple juice and learned about Egypt. When my feet touched the grass in the courtyard, and I remembered happiness.

It felt like only yesterday. All of it.

Five years. I'd been here for five years.

And before that I was a prisoner. A brain drive.

But... what about in between?

"Dr. Payne, how did I get here?"

He smiled again and put a hand on my shoulder.

"I wondered when you would ask me that. I bought you on auction. Barely outbid a nasty looking rich fellow. I got lucky, I think, because he pushed the cost up so high, I didn't have much more I could've spent. But he caved, and I got you. And then I took you here."

"You bought me? How much was I?"

"A little over ten thousand dollars."

"Is that a lot?"

He laughed and grabbed his stomach.

"Yes. Quite a lot, even for a drive like yourself. Your brain is very valuable. Though I think we've thrown a wrench into that, now. Because you're not a drive, anymore. Are you?"

"No." I smiled.

I wasn't a drive anymore.

He began to walk again. I matched his lazy pace.

"After our lesson, you'll take a test. You can take it whenever you like. And once you pass it, which I know you will, then that's it. You're done. Completely rehabilitated. And I'm very proud of the progress you've made, D98781."

"What then?" I asked.

"Well, then you're free to go. Live your life. You've taken back what they stole from you. Now you get to use it."

"But... how?"

I didn't understand. I never thought this day would come. It felt like I would be studying, learning, growing, fixing myself forever. But now he was telling me I was done.

I didn't feel done.

"How is up to you. Maybe a job, or a hobby. I have a few options for you to choose from, or you could pick your own, if you like. But before all that, though--you get to take a name. A real, proper name."

I get to take a name.

A real name. One that wasn't D98781.

Because D98781 wasn't a proper name. I learned that.

I was excited. This was important.

But what should my name be?

"But which one?"

I puzzled over it.

Was Mark a good name? I remembered that name. And Sheldon.

I didn't like those names much.

"Whatever you like." He tapped his watch. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. We have a lesson to finish first."

"Harold." I said. "You said that was my name, right? You kept calling me that."

"Ah, well. I believe it was. But it doesn't have to be. Do you like it?"

"Harold." I felt it rolling around in my throat. "Harold."

It felt odd. Oblong. Like I was talking about someone else.

"No. I hate it."

286:

Two chausms were joined together, overlapped in a surprisingly clean fashion. The infamous sex club span D.Zone had melded with the chausm of a Christmas-obsessed older woman: Gillian Taylor.

I had never seen anything like it. The VRC database was crammed full of documented bleed-throughs, overwrites, ghosts, generation abnormalities, and on and on, but I had never seen two chausms organically connected like this. And with such a clean border.

We merged chausms regularly. It was a normal and safe procedure, if done correctly and with the proper precautions. And this looked like our work--the chausms were seamlessly joined on the doorframe, completely unnoticeable save the lumpy threshold.

But we didn't orchestrate this merge. These two chausms joined together by themselves, while online, for seemingly no reason, and with active inhabitants on both sides.

That could've been catastrophic. And maybe it was.

We hadn't received any reports from the D.Zone, but maybe there were no witnesses left alive to submit the report--it wouldn't be the first time an event killed or disabled everyone involved. That happened far too often.

We could hope, but there was no way to tell what kind of damage this actually caused.

I looked up, realizing that I had drifted off in thought again.

Philip finished untying the naked man, who gave a half wave and ran from the room, stumbling cartoonishly on a pile of tuna as he went.

"So, we have to evacuate the D.Zone." Medy was thinking out loud. "And then we have to get Gillian out of here so we can shut them down and split them. But, before that, we have to find her. Somehow. In this mess. God, I'm hungry. How long have we been here, anyway?"

"Buhh--" Philip checked his watch. "Nine hours. But--well..."

He trailed off.

"What?" She asked.

"Well... what if we didn't have to get her out? We could just evacuate the D.Zone, shut that down, then do the separation. I know it's risky, but there's only one inhabitant here. We can stand guard at this door just to make sure she doesn't suddenly wake up and wander into the void. Boom. Risk mitigated. For her, anyway."

"There's no way--" Medy made a face like she was about to disagree but stopped and put a finger to her lips.

“Actually, you might be on to something. We’d be at risk, but she wouldn’t. The only real downside is that D.Zone will stay down while we try to find her.”

“If you can call that a downside.” Philip chuckled. “Oh no! A few grown men are gonna have to wait a while to get their sausages smoked!”

“Must you always?” Medy grimaced.

I stepped between them and raised a hand.

“This is all well and good, and I applaud your excellent detective work, both of you. But I fear our answer may be a worst-case scenario.”

“What do you mean?” Medy asked.

“Well, what if we can’t find her because she isn’t here?”

“But she is here, remember? We still have a read on her vitals. She’s still stable--just catatonic.”

Philip sighed. “She was catatonic. We can’t even find her to confirm that. For all we know she’s tap-dancing on the god damned roof.”

“I highly doubt she suddenly jumped up--”

“Listen.” I interrupted their squabble. “I wasn’t finished. What if Gillian isn’t here because she was truncated during the merge? We would still see stable vitals because she’s still technically alive, and it would certainly explain the catatonia.”

“Oh, fuck.” Philip muttered.

“But wait, what about the CG team?” Medy held up a finger. “They saw her two weeks ago, after she was already catatonic. That’s how we found out she was like that in the first place. They saw her.”

“Right...” I rubbed my lip. “But maybe that wasn’t her. Maybe she wasn’t here then, either. Look at this place. All these people.”

I waved my arm behind us, motioning to the rows of chairs--thousands of them, filled with thousands of people, all completely still and silent, tied-down, waiting for the ceiling demon to come and gobble them up.

“They’re all organisms. This place is skewing away at a rapid pace. Too rapid, I think, for a situation where the inhabitant is supposedly still present and healthy. But who’s to say the CG team saw Gillian at all? Who’s to say they didn’t see an organism and mistake it for her? We have no way to verify that.”

Medy scrunched her nose up, lost in thought--probably sifting through manifests and reports in her mind, searching for some kind of precedent.

But not everything had precedent.

She should know that by now.

If we were called in, it was probably something new.

“Well, shit.” Philip slapped his thighs. “What now?”

“I think we go through with your plan. But one of us should go back out and grab the excisor. We’ll do another walkthrough, just to completely verify that no organic life is present. And if we still can’t find her, then we’ll have no choice. We’ll have to force extract.”

287:

I

Lucky me, being on-site at just the right time--four teenage bastards tried to steal Institute property. My property. An energy attenuator, to be precise. No idea what they wanted with it, or if they even knew what it was.

I kept my eyes on the kids and circled around them, clacking my boots loudly against the tile. Ten, twenty, thirty, I don't know--a hundred years ago, I would've been hesitant in a situation like this. I would've resisted when faced with what needed to be done, getting all caught up in the legislation of morality, and the cumbersome, almost philosophical details of human existence.

"This boy has a scar on his arm. A real human being, living a real life, chock full of real experiences, both good and bad. He got a scar from an injury he survived. Survival! Woe is me! How can I kill that which has fought to survive, and has lived for so long? How can I take it upon myself to steal the gift of life from others? Oh, the humanity!"

Yeah, that would've been me. All teary-eyed and everything.

I had a hard time coming to terms with the monster I perceived myself as, and spent dozens of years lamenting my actions, trying to fix what I considered broken.

But now I see things differently.

I'm not broken, and I'm no monster.

Hell, I'm not even a bad guy. I'm aimless at times, yeah. And I may be a bit insensitive. Maybe a bit violent. But I finally got myself a good perspective on this one. Something clicked.

And I found the fun in it. I found those little morsels of joy.

There's an upside to everything.

"Please." One of the thieves started pleading for his life again.

The tall one with the scar on his arm.

Right after my big speech--after I told him if he made another noise, I'd give his friends a fresh coat of paint. Right after that. Why would he make another noise?

No bother. Plenty of bullets.

I leveled my gun and pulled the trigger, jostling his head like a jack-in-the-box and peppering his buddies with a fine red mist. It was a lot messier than I expected.

His friends started crying, hyperventilating, shaking around like little rats. I explained this pretty clearly, I thought, but maybe they needed another lecture.

“Guys! ‘Member what I said?” I crouched down, speaking softly. “I don’t really *want* to kill you, alright? But I don’t have a problem with it. So, listen very carefully. Again. We’re gonna wait here. In silence. Until my crew shows up. That’s complete silence--no muttering, no whimpering, no sobbing. Don’t even cough. And then when they get here, you’re going to march single file into the van. In silence. Simple enough, right?”

One nearest me mumbled out an agreement. He was ready to listen.

But he broke the rule. The one rule that I just laid out, very clearly.

Couldn't let that slide.

I leveled my gun and pulled the trigger again. Bad aim, though. Bit too low. This kid got it in the chin. Didn’t kill him, just knocked the bottom half of his mouth off, exposing a long tongue and some sideways teeth. And then he started wailing out these unbearable throaty sobs, drenching everything with his bloody drool. No manners.

I stood above and put another in him, right in the eye.

The wound made a weird gurgling noise, like a hose with a kink.

Three shots left. And two punks.

Good math. I'd like to use the kids--put 'em to work, do some experiments and so on, but if they wanted to play hardball, it didn't make too much of a difference to me.

“Do I have to elaborate, or are you two smarter than your friends?”

They were silent, like mass was starting and I was Father Heindl.

“Excellent. Sit tight.”

II

The webbing between my thumb and pointer finger was stinging, rubbed and irritated from doing something. Something?

No. Not just anything. Something specific.

The petrified pit in my stomach somehow grew a little denser.

I already knew what caused it, because I could feel the familiar heft in my hand, and I'd felt this sting so many times before that it was impossible to mistake for anything else: I fired my gun. Recently, and more than once.

I looked down. The tile was red in a wide pool around my feet, and in the center were bodies. Kids. Teenagers.

Four of them. One stirred, repositioning his foot, and I noticed that they weren't all dead. Two were shaking, softly crying, huddled up together. I glanced over at the bodies; one had a pear-shaped chunk missing from his temple, and the other's face and jaw had been so horribly disfigured it looked more like a smashed pumpkin than a person.

It didn't take a mathematician to add it up.

I killed them.

But what did it matter?

They were just two more names I'd never learn, thrown on top of my already innumerable total.

Just another break I'd never be able to fix.

Sad to think, but I couldn't be dwelling on it. I had bigger problems.

I heard the squeal of tired brakes, and turned just in time to see a squad of IBWs marching through the door.

"Sir!" The commandant stopped before me.

I pointed behind him.

"You're excused."

"But, sir—" He began to object.

I took a step forward.

"You're excused, Commandant Peck. Drop your signal and leave."

He hesitated, and his lips quivered as if he was about to protest again, but his eyes fell to the corpses behind me, and he gave a quick nod.

“Sir.” He left the room, and the IBWs went limp on their feet.

I synced my transmitter and dialed in to their signals. The familiar crackle rang out in my ear, and then they stood at attention all at once, clacking their leather boots against the tile.

“Get these kids to the van and take the corpses out back.”

They began to move. I faced the corpses, one last time, drawn to the kid with the scar on his arm and the pear-shaped hole in his skull.

He was so young. Couldn't have been older than seventeen.

Sorry, kid.

288:

The flutist adjusted his belt, gave a half effort of tucking his shirt, and lifted the pearly instrument to his lips.

We waited in timid silence. I carefully sipped from my cup of water, which was so cool and fresh, it almost burned my tongue. I had to take it one tiny drink at a time.

And then he began to blow. A melancholy tune flowed out, slipping by, telling a story without needing words. The melody was soft at first--a delicate warble, a far-off birdsong, but gradually strengthened until it was a steady flurry of powerful whistling notes.

It was so sad. But very beautiful.

Occasionally the song drifted away and held on a sour pang, leaving me waiting and wondering if that was the end, only to twist right back into the melody, lending to the bewitching sorrow.

The flutist's face grew red, and his long mustache swayed dramatically with each tilt of his head, but he did not falter. In fact, his power only increased, until he finally circled back to the beginning and breathed his big conclusion.

He finished, slick with sweat and short of breath, and took a half bow with his flute held above his head.

We sat in silence for a moment. I was taken aback by it, not quite expecting the majesty--not quite expecting the power. It was just a flute. And I couldn't remember a single time in my life that I heard anything beautiful come from a flute. But this was beautiful. More than my words could describe. It was amazing.

We burst into applause. I was smiling. I hadn't smiled in so long.

"Bravo!" Jacob yelled.

"Wow. Masterfully done." Max was smiling too. "What is it called?"

"Catherine." The flutist mumbled. "Sad diddy, as I said. Not sure why I know it."

"Who was she?" I asked.

"Catherine?" He lifted a frazzled eyebrow.

"Yes."

"No clue. Didn't write it. It came to me."

"Really?" I kept pressing. "How?"

"It's an odd tale. You probably wouldn't even believe it."

"Oh, try me." Max laughed.

"Alright, well, don't think I'm crazy then. I warned you. Ten years back--maybe a bit more--the thing passed my shack. You know the thing--the big black shadow. Didn't step on me, thank God, but rain followed it. Heavy storms; flooded the whole valley. Killed my plant and all. When I finally got myself down to sleep, I had a terrible nightmare about it. I was up in the air, away from my body, flying with it. And when I woke up, I was crying, with a name circling round in my mind: Catherine. I picked my flute up off the nightstand and began to play it. I knew the song. Just like that, I knew Catherine."

289:

The fetal life issue was our first real attempt at subtle coercion. Subtlety had never been the primary strategy, and while an aggressive approach worked just fine with more traditional world governments, their various dissolutions proved a strong fertilizer—a breeding ground that birthed a great many independent factions. For example, just a few years after China’s dissolution, over three-hundred distinct government bodies had formed in Asia alone. These independent units tend to be much less traditional, less formulaic, and, for various reasons, are significantly more difficult to deal with.

I decided to follow some advice for once, and take a more subtle approach to combatting them. The idea was to develop a “mutiny” bug that could dissolve an institution from within using only minor thought adjustment, just under detectible levels, to spread disillusionment, doubt, and anarchy.

We performed an experiment: manufacture a debate regarding a made-up issue, and then widely supplant opposing thoughts and opinions. Build feelings and investment where none existed. Create strong personal attachment on both sides. And then sow division.

Our initial trial was a small one, performed on a little town in Kansas. We built our idea around fetal life. It was a well-known political debate at the time, and our experiment shoehorned nicely into the overall issue.

It was a nonsense idea: should fetal life be allowed to exist outside the womb?

We set to the steps of subliminal distribution: dispersion, prodding, and then injection. The injected idea, our “payload,” was just a little seed—a feeling, either leaning toward or away from fetal rights. We had plans to distribute “proof” media to help sell the idea, but it wasn’t even necessary. People took to it all on their own.

Thanks to several recent improvements upon nano-arranger tech, we didn’t have to sway the mind of every single person, but rather only “core” individuals from different levels of societal hierarchy, and those core individuals would then distribute our payload outward. Osmosis vibrations.

It worked wonders. Within a month the town was holding debates, the issue was discussed on local news programs, and a law had been proposed to prevent fetal access to healthcare. Signs went up. Billboards. It became a campaign issue. The incumbent mayor mentioned it in his speech.

And then something unexpected happened. From just this small town in Kansas, with an initial injection group of only forty individuals, the idea began to spread across the country.

After three months, it was a national issue. It was covered in all levels of media, across the internet, radio, television—everything. It pervaded society, just like any other regular legislative topic.

Should living, prenatal fetuses be allowed to exist outside the womb, in human society?

Our fake little worm had swayed all of America. And then kept going, spilling to other countries, other continents, until it wiggled its way around the world.

That was the start of something big.

We learned a very important lesson. Our coverage was really good. So good that we didn't need to invest all that time and money on controlling people's minds directly.

We just had to give them a small, targeted push.

290:

My heart battered against my chest.

A voice whispered to me.

"Go."

But I couldn't.

I was standing in place, feeling the warmth from my belt cascade down my paralyzed legs--able, but too panic-stricken to move.

They took him.

They took Jacob.

The old woman still glared at me from across the room. I met her gaze, and the more I stared into her vacant eyes, the worse I felt.

This was my fault. I let him go over there alone. He was only trying to help me. He just wanted to make me feel better, and show me that I didn't have to be afraid all the time.

And now, because of me, he got stolen off into the dark by those men, and I had no idea what they were doing to him. The thought made my skin crawl, attacking me with blended senses of dread and urgency, crushing me like a truck. I wanted to scream and run and tackle the old woman and put my fist through her head, all at once.

But I just stood in place.

Hurting. Wishing. Yearning.

Doing nothing.

"Go."

But I couldn't.

I watched the old woman's scowl curl up into a smile.

My only friend. My only lifeline. My only family was gone, stolen away from me, after I had just started to feel more confident. When I needed him the most.

I was frozen.

And he was going to...

Because of me, he was going to...

No.

No. No.

No!

I wasn't going to let that happen. I would rather die than live without him.

But I didn't have any time.

I had to move.

"Go."

I did.

Before I knew it, and before I was ready, my legs were speeding me across the auditorium, weaving through tables and beds and cots and piles of junk. I was running. And in an instant, I was standing before the old woman. I stepped up to her chair and was engulfed by the powerful stench of rot and decomposing flesh.

Up close, she looked even more hideous than she smelled. Her skin was gauzy and wrinkled, hanging from her bones in flapping drapes like old shower curtains. I crouched down to meet her at eye level.

"Where is he?"

She didn't respond. Her stare was fixed forward, still vacant, still grimacing, still bearing that sly, toothless smile.

I put my hands on her shoulders.

"What did you do with him?"

No response.

She was warm. Hot. My hands began to sink in. Her skin seemed loose--almost liquid, rolling and bubbling under her tattered rags like a water bed. And then I felt hands gripping my back, and my neck, and my arms, and my sides.

The old woman began to cackle.

I fought to turn my neck. It was them. The same men that took Jacob. Five of them with pale skin and tattered rags.

They were dragging me down.

"Where--" It was all I could say before my throat was too restricted to speak.

Their hands were rough, squeezing me all over; fingers dug into my skin as I was dragged away from the auditorium.

All I could see were up-close shoulders and elbows and hands and skin in a flurry of black cloth. A corona of shadow crept in from the corners of my vision. I couldn't breathe or see or think. It was getting too dark. Too hard to focus. I began to drift away.

And then the hands slipped free, releasing the tension, and I was flying. They tossed me. I hit my head against something hard. Stone. Concrete. My forehead and cheek were wet with blood, vibrating warmth.

I heard the rattle of sliding bars, and turned just in time to see the cell door slam closed.

291:

I was there, watching his every breath, each step he took, alongside him for his entire life. I was present for every moment. Every meeting.

Every battle.

All the way to the end.

The last stand. His family versus the Oni.

They were demons--worse than he described and worse than I could have imagined--as tall as twenty feet, mostly standing on two legs, though some were hunched over on all-fours, snarling and frothing from their beast-like faces. Leagues of Oni thundered through the battlefield, swinging their massive weight like elephants, carving up the earth and men alike. No weapon the samurai used could harm them.

Among the demons were walking corpses of normal men, undead, bewitched and risen, forced to fight their own kind. But the Oni killed indiscriminately, and often trampled those men as soon as they formed anew--giving them life just to steal it away again. But it didn't matter to the Oni. Death was death, no matter who suffered it.

After each kill, they would toss the limp corpse up in the air and try to catch it in their mouths--playing games, like children, while their prey could only look on in terror. It was a massacre.

They took pleasure in it.

And it made me sick.

I watched as Musashi's brothers were eradicated, one by one. I watched as one of the walking corpses crept up and impaled him through the side. I watched him fall, clutching his stomach. I watched him begin to die.

The Oni, obvious victors in the assault, began to scour the field, picking off the survivors, defiling the corpses, reveling in their spoils. One such cluster of large ape-like beasts was making its way toward Musashi.

They were going to kill him. Finish him off. Take him and turn him into a slave.

But I wouldn't let them.

I knew I had to act, like he said Chiyoko did.

Because I was Chiyoko.

In a flash, I cleaned the field. The Oni were gone. I sent them away, though I'm not sure where to. I wish I could've done more--snuffed them out for good, but I didn't know how.

So, I banished them, hopefully to the dark. To exile. That's what I was aiming for.

The battle was over, and the sun was just beginning to stain the morning sky. Musashi roused, pushed up to his knees, and drew his blade. He pressed the tip against his stomach.

He was going to kill himself.

But I wouldn't let him.

I was there, just as he began to press the blade in. I took it from his hands and tossed it aside. His eyes met mine, and I saw recognition there--faintly, and for just a moment. He was seeing Chiyoko.

And then he fell unconscious.

I stayed with him, covering him for warmth, healing his wound, until the morning sun was fully risen, splintering orange beams across the horizon.

He woke and began to walk, all the way to his home--all the way to Chofu. It was a only half a day's journey, and he made his way in good time. But when he arrived, Chofu was destroyed. It was a burning ruin; the land was pocked and scarred with purple fire. The Oni had ravaged his home.

In the center of town was a mass grave: a pile of decapitated bodies stretching taller than the trees. Musashi spent days there, digging through them, searching for his family. His mother. His father. But he couldn't find them.

The corpses were headless, and burnt, or chewed-up, or decomposed so severely that their identity was forever obscured. It was a mound of anonymous bodies. Nameless dead.

He sobbed. He cursed his life. For a week, he wallowed in squalor there, drinking little and eating nothing, wishing he was dead. I felt for him. I wanted to help, but I knew there was nothing I could do.

Eventually he gathered himself again. He steeled his senses and set his mind to something new. He was going to hunt them down--for vengeance, for himself, and because there was nothing left. The end was coming.

I knew this chapter would be over soon.

I followed along as he trailed the Oni, chasing the path they carved through the countryside, through mangled hamlets and forests and villages, and thousands upon thousands of the desecrated dead.

He walked for days. Weeks.

And then he found them.

The Oni Potentate and his family of elite patriarchs. The leaders. I could sense their history—their long, tumultuous past, filling out a wide-branching tree of families and crests and alliances and organizations. They had been propagating for eons, hiding within the Earth, building strength and biding their time. Since before humanity. Since before the dinosaurs. Maybe since before Earth was born.

But their history meant nothing to me.

I would gladly diminish them to nothing if I could.

Because they didn't belong here.

Musashi charged them, holding his blade forward, steady, ready to die.

The Potentate snarled, lifting his massive axe. The hilt was carved from a thick Oak tree, and a mountainous stone chunk had been formed into a blade and bound to the tip with thick black ropes. It was the largest weapon I'd ever seen.

But Musashi did not falter.

His eyes were not afraid.

He was ready.

The beast loosed his axe, and Musashi raised his blade to deflect it, but it was too strong. The axe broke his blade in two, and cut Musashi from shoulder to stomach, slicing him nearly in half. The axe stuck from him like a stone chisel.

The Potentate laughed and used his foot to pull the axe free, lifting it to strike again—to deal the final blow.

But I wouldn't let him.

I was there. In front of Musashi. Protecting him.

The Oni could see me. Each of them turned their heads, like wolves drawn to a scent, and stared in my direction—silent—waiting. The Potentate screamed, echoing his war cry over the battlefield, and the Oni charged forward. All of them. Hundreds. Thousands. Barreling over the field toward us. Too many to send away.

I reached out and froze them in place, not even really knowing if I could.

But it worked.

They stopped.

And then I heard a soft fluttering noise from behind, like the flapping of wings.

I looked back at Musashi, and he was floating off the ground, unconscious and spinning, held in the claws of a great, black owl.

The owl.

"Fuerza." It cooed.

"Let him go."

"Let *them* go, and I will."

"Friends with Emperor, I assume. Are you responsible for them? Why would you be associated with such evil?"

"Things are bigger than you. The Bestia is bigger than you. It always will be. Let them free and let this human die."

"No."

"Then you are unchanged. Emperor was wrong. Face the repercussions of your actions, Fuerza."

Its claws snapped open, dropping Musashi to the earth. Just before he made contact, a black tear split in the ground, and he fell through. I reached for him, but he was already gone.

"Goodbye for now, little cat."

And so was the owl.

I was alone.

No.

I looked down at old man Musashi, still wrapped under my shell.

I nearly forgot.

It was time to let him free.

292:

There was a knock at the door.

Dr. Payne didn't knock like that. He always knocked twice and then cracked the door open, and then he would greet me with our tasks for the day, before I even said hello.

But these knocks were soft, and long, and the door stayed shut after. It wasn't Dr. Payne. It was someone else.

Why was it someone else?

"Yes?" I called.

The door opened.

It was a woman--Marcene. I knew her. She was Dr. Payne's assistant. But I didn't know her well. I didn't know her like I knew Dr. Payne.

"D98781, may I come in?"

Her voice was sad.

"Yes."

She did, pushing through the door and crossing my tiny room. Her face was streaked with smeared lines. From crying? She flopped down on the edge of my bed.

"I'm sorry, I really don't know how to say this. But Dr. Payne passed away last night."

Passed away.

Passed away?

What did that mean?

She could tell I didn't understand, and drew a breath to speak again.

"He... died. I don't know if he told you, but he had cancer. And last night he lost the battle."

She put her hand on my knee. To share emotion, to let me know I wasn't alone. It didn't work this time. I had never felt so alone. I began to cry.

I didn't even get to pick my job. I didn't even get to tell him my new name.

Dr. Payne died.

In the battle. He lost his battle.

So quickly.

Dead.

He was dead.

And I was alone.

He was dead, and so was I.

But

No. I wasn't.

I could almost hear his voice.

He said I wasn't. He told me I would be okay. He told me this would happen, and he said I was ready. Now, I just had to go on. I had to live my life. I had to make it worth something. Like he wanted. He wanted that.

I wouldn't let him down.

I would make it worth something.

I would pick a name.

And then I would take my life back.

Just like he said.

"J-Joseph." I said, shaking a bit through the tears.

"What?" She looked confused.

"That was Dr. Payne's name?"

"Yes... it was."

"Then I picked my name. My name is Joseph."

293:

"You're fine on door duty?" Medy rocked on her heels impatiently.

We had already gone over the plan three times, but I understood why she wanted to confirm it again.

She was nervous. Which made sense, considering our situation. It was a big procedure. Anybody with a functioning brain stem would be nervous. And while we were both at risk here, I got to be the lucky one, taking the brunt of it, staring into the abyss all by my lonesome for only the second time in my long career.

The first time I saw it was completely by accident, and to this day it's been the scariest moment of my entire life. I'd certainly never do it again voluntarily.

I looked over at the door to the D.Zone.

Well, I guess not *never*.

"Yep." I nodded to Medy.

She dragged a chair over and clunked it down in front of me.

"If you want it." She motioned to the chair and then clapped her hands together.

"Alright. Good. I will, uh... I'll get to looking for Gillian."

"Why can't I look for Gillian?" I whined and flopped down in the chair, throwing a little tantrum.

Trying to be funny.

Trying to break the tension in my own stupid way.

"I... guess you can." She said. "Do you want to?"

Her lip quivered. She was fighting against showing any kind of positive reaction. She didn't want to give me the satisfaction--not even once--which is fair, considering my track record. But that little lip quiver was almost a smile, and with Medy, that counted.

"Nope. Just joshin'." I smiled.

"Oookay. Whatever. Yell if you need me."

She began to walk away.

"Hey, wait." I held up my hand.

She looked over her shoulder with her face drawn up into one of those classic, scrutinizing expressions. A Medy trademark.

"What?" She sighed.

"If I get sucked into the void and lost on the Network... well... I want you to, uh..."

"Philip, stop. Don't talk like that. You're going to be fine."

"Right. But if I'm not. If I do get sucked in... could you... I don't know... I mean... well, never mind, it's stupid."

"Philip. What?"

Her voice grew serious. She wanted to help.

Hook.

"I mean--feel free to say no, but would you mind... well..."

I kept reeling her in.

"Hey, come on. What is it?" She met my eyes, obviously concerned.

Line and sinker. Hell, she gobbled up the entire rod. Too easy.

I took a slow, deep breath, sighed, and then cut her loose.

"Tell my Wilson I love him."

I delivered my line as seriously as I could, even giving a little waver at the end, like I was just plum overwhelmed at the thought of my Wilson living on without me.

She flattened her brow.

"Really? Is that it?" She seemed actually agitated, which was not my intention, but it was funny nonetheless.

I just kept grinning.

"Idiot." She walked away, shaking her head.

"I told you it was stupid!" I yelled after her.

She was already strolling through the warehouse, back to scouring the rows for Gillian. I knew she had to, no matter what, because she wouldn't give up on trying to save an innocent life, but it was an unnecessary effort. We weren't going to find her. Wilson was right.

Gillian got truncated when the chausms merged. Pulled into the abyss. She was alive out there, somewhere, but she was lost. Never to be found again. Not by us, anyway.

This was all just a big waste of our time.

And a big risk for me.

I glanced back at the door between chausms, still open to the D.Zone. Just a few more minutes and Wilson would engage the separation.

And then the ground shook.

Well, alright.

Here we go.

The door fell to dust, and the room beyond the threshold began to flash, rapidly strobing from white to black.

The D.Zone was shutting down.

A mechanical whining noise sounded out, growing until it was screaming through the warehouse like a siren, and then morphed into a computerized hum. It was interrupted by three deep intonations, each pitched higher than the last; they sounded like notes played on an electric piano, but so much deeper and louder. I could feel the ground vibrating through my chair.

After the third note there was a sharp metallic click, and the D.Zone, now completely cast in shadow, began to drift away, into the dark. The chausms were separating.

It flashed white once more, and then it was gone entirely. I couldn't see it anymore.

It was just black. That was all I could see.

The doorway was an open hole, and here I was again, feeling that odd, cool breeze, staring down into nothing.

Into the void.

Into the Network.

294:

The flutist slid a metal plate over the table; it clinked and scraped and came to a jarring stop just before me, almost spilling its contents: a grilled yellow lizard and some odd-looking corn. At least, I thought it was corn, but the kernels were big and orange and shriveled, like raisins.

“What is this?” Jacob was already shoveling it down, speaking through a mouthful of lizard.

“Spiny lizard and sandcorn.” The flutist said in between gulps.

“Sandcorn?” I asked.

“Type o’ corn. Grows in sand.”

“Sandcorn...” Max twirled his fork on his plate, poking at the corn.

The flutist had stripped his lizard to its skeleton and moved on to swallowing forkfuls of sandcorn whole. He seemed like he was really enjoying it.

I looked back at mine. It didn’t look appetizing, but I was so very hungry. I could barely remember the last time I ate. It was back at the hideout, with Max and Jacob, before we left. What did we have? Was it stew? No. It was chili. Beans and meat and tomatoes. My mouth began to water.

I wished I could eat some more of that. I wished I had eaten more when I had the chance, but I wasn’t really hungry then. Funny how that works.

Now, sandcorn and spiny lizard was all I could get.

I should be thankful. We could be dead in the desert. He saved us.

I lifted my fork and stabbed into a piece of corn, letting bright orange juice run free. It smelled horrible, like cabbage that had gone bad. I shakily pulled it to my lips.

Here goes.

I plopped it in and began to chew. It was crunchy on the outside, like candy coated nuts, but thick and smooth inside. The flavor was sweet, and a little spicy, and had an overwhelming, savory funk about it that I’d never experienced before. It was delicious. Maybe the best vegetable I’d ever eaten.

I took a whole forkful, and then another, chewing loudly.

Max glanced over at me with wide eyes, and then tapped me with his elbow.

“How is it?” He whispered.

“My god. Max, it’s amazing.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. Seriously.”

“What’s it taste like?”

“Like candied nuts and kimchi, if you ever had them.” The flutist said.

He had finished his plate and crossed the room to drop it in his wash basin, and then grabbed a stack of small, ceramic cups and a jar of milky white liquid and flopped back down at the table.

“Candied nuts...” Max stared back at his corn. “Alright.”

He took a single kernel on his fork, gingerly plopped it in his mouth, and slowly began to chew. His eyes lit up.

“Wow.”

He took another forkful.

“Man. No kidding. This is great.”

“See!” I smiled.

Jacob licked his plate clean and crossed the room to toss it in the wash basin. The flutist slid a cup to each of us, and then filled them all to the brim with that milky white liquid.

“And what’s this?” Jacob sat back down and lifted his cup.

“Lizard’s milk.” The flutist said, and then knocked the cup back like a shot, swallowing it in one go.

Jacob followed suit.

“Holy SHIT!” He coughed dramatically. “God. Damn, man. I was not expecting that.”

“It’ll grow scales on you in no time.” The flutist chuckled.

“W-What is it?” I asked.

“Alcohol.” Jacob grinned.

I’d pass on that.

I finished eating my corn and eyed the lizard. I never liked eating meat like this. I couldn’t even stomach chicken wings if they were still on the bones.

But it was probably the last food I would see in a while. I had to eat it. I had to try.

I lifted it and took a small bite from its backside, right on its spines. I expected it to be hard and leathery and tasteless, but it wasn’t--it was soft, and a bit chewy, and full of flavor.

The texture reminded me of chicken, but the taste was entirely new. It was smoky and salty and a little bit sweet, like kebabs, but so much better. I ate as much as I could, carefully nibbling around the bones, until the meat was gone entirely.

"Thank you." I finished and looked up at the flutist. "For the food and the water and for taking us in. I don't know what would've happened without you."

"No thing." He grumbled and poured himself another shot of lizard milk. "I got it, and I can't eat it all by my lonesome. It'd be wrong to let you go hungry and thirsty out here."

"Well, if there's any way we can repay you, please let us know." Max smiled.

"Actually, now that you said it--I do have a little thing I need help with."

"What? I'm sure we can be of assistance, right guys?"

Max looked over at me and Jacob. We nodded, almost in sync.

"Well, this lizard's milk--it's my last bit. My milk lizard, ol' croaky, bit a bad bug last week, and went and croaked the big one. Now I don't have a milk lizard. Would you all be willing to help me find one? Lotta ground to cover for one old soul. I'd really appreciate the help."

Max looked between us. I smiled. I'd love to help him find a milk lizard. It's the least we could do, and it would take my mind off where we were headed. The longer I could go without dealing with those brain things, the better I felt.

"Absolutely." Max put his hands on the table. "We'd love to. Like a little vacation."

Jacob pointed at me and then Max.

"Yeah, that sounds great, but slight aside--you guys gonna drink your milk?"

295:

Woke up from stasis with a note that ruined my fucking day.

Wilson had one god damned job.

Shut down unnecessary chausms, cut the bulk, and free up space for the next big project. That's all I asked. I figured it would be pretty fucking simple for a chausmic reality scientist. For the head of the VRC. For my lead mentologist.

Yet, somehow, in the two days since our meeting, that dumb motherfucker Philip died, and Wilson promptly bought a plane ticket to Honduras. And due to some "unknown" satellite interference with the transmitters, Sec only notified me now, an hour after the plane departed. No doubt his doing as well. This is the exact reason I never killed Philip myself--I knew Wilson would go all basket case on me.

And there he was, full-on raving nuts, riding a plane out to Honduras, lost in the throes of grief and about to make a very deadly error. My plane couldn't be ready in time, so to catch up, I'd have to charter one. If this ordeal didn't end with his brains dripping from a wall somewhere, I'd have to remember to take the cost out of his salary.

At first, I was confused about why he was heading out there--what could he need from Honduras? Thinking innocently. Like an idiot. But after a single fucking second of critical thought, my ape brain was able to cobble together the obvious: he's headed to the mating site in Talgua.

Genesis.

To pull some stupid fucking bullshit behind my back.

He wants to shut down the Network. To take my life's work and flush it.

But I know about it, Wilson. I found out late, and the circumstances aren't ideal,

But

I'll be there.

P296:

my name is Joseph

My name is Joseph

I heard grilling. The nearby sounds of burgers sizzling and people talking, laughing, and living life. Small life, trivial life, real life.

I heard grilling. The nearby sounds of burgers sizzling and people talking, laughing, I was outside, in the grass of my new front yard, standing in cool wind, under overcast skies, meeting the pleasant scents of plants and light rain.

I was outside, in the grass of my new front yard, standing in cool wind, under overcast The year was 2039. July 16th. skies, meeting the pleasant scents of plants and light rain.

Thirteen years prior, I was kidnapped, and my life was broken. I was turned into a brain drive. Robbed. My own mind was stolen from me, and I spent five years under

Thirteen years prior, I was kidnapped, and my life was broken. I was turned into a Dr. Payne's care making myself right again. Fixing what they broke. Taking back what was mine.

Dr. Payne's care making myself right again. Fixing what they broke. Taking back what I am Joseph. And after so much pain, I get to live my life again. My small life. My trivial life. My real life.

I am Joseph. And after so much pain, I get to live my life again. My small life. My trivial The wind kicked by, wafting smoke my way from the grill next door, and for some

reason, it made me think of lasagna. Dr. Payne loved lasagna. I did too, but mostly I enjoyed Dr. Payne's obsession with it.

The wind kicked by, wafting smoke my way from the grill next door, and for some I decided to go eat lasagna. I would have to buy it somewhere. Payne's obsession with it.

I ran my hand along my pocket, over the leather wallet Dr. Payne gave me. The money was so thick inside that it wouldn't close all the way, leaving a big bump in my pants. I

pulled the wallet free, took out the wad of bills, and counted them up again. The money was so thick inside that it wouldn't close all the way, leaving a big bump in my pants. I

Ten thousand dollars. I had ten thousand dollars. ad of bills, and counted them up again.

It was the exact amount Dr. Payne paid for me. usand dollars. I had ten thousand dollars.

And it was a lot.

It was the exact amount Dr. Payne paid for me.

And it was a lot.

297:

I couldn't regulate my heartbeat. It was pounding away in my chest, tensing my mind and making it hard to focus.

But I couldn't help it. I was imprisoned and alone and Jacob was gone--probably dead. And my cell just kept getting darker. Colder. Like I was sinking into the earth.

There was a candle lamp hanging on the wall outside, flickering as cool air drifted by. It seemed like its glow was getting dimmer, but the flame never changed--I could still see its perfect, dancing white shape against the dark, giving off barely any light at all.

I stared at it, partly because I was fascinated by it, and it was helping to calm me down, but mostly because there was nothing else to stare at.

Why was it so dark? A flame that size would be putting off quite a bit of light--at least enough to see the cell. But I couldn't see anything.

Just the eerie, floating white flame.

And then I heard a scrape and a grunt, and my breath caught in my throat. Someone was with me. I heard it again--rustling fabric, and a low, moaning murmur. I was beginning to hyperventilate, straddling the edge of panic. My head was getting heavy. I had to regulate my breathing, or I was going to pass out.

Inhale--two, three, four--exhale.

Was that someone crawling on the stone floor? My mind ran rampant. I pictured frothing beasts, fanged predators, those pale men, and countless other terrible, imagined monsters looming just beyond my view, obscured by shadow, closing in on my cell.

Stop. I was just spiraling. Making it worse.

Inhale.

The noises went on. But I had to focus.

Two, three, four.

I had to control my breathing.

Exhale.

I did my best to push the noises away. To tune them out.

Inhale.

But I could still hear them. The voice was pained, groaning.

Two, three, four.

And this time it sounded familiar.

Exhale.

Was that... Jacob?

I was terrified. But I needed to know.

"Jacob?" I whispered as loud as my throat would let me. "Jacob, is that you?"

I leaned forward and listened intently, wincing through the blaring tinnitus ringing in my ears. It was completely silent. Suffocatingly silent. There was no response. For a moment, I thought maybe I had been hearing things. Inventing noises.

And then I heard the grunt again, accompanied by the clear scraping of clothes on concrete.

"M-Max? Where are you?"

It was him. Jacob.

To hear his voice. It was as if a bomb exploded inside me, releasing all its tension. I had never felt so relieved in all my life.

"Jacob." I breathed. "Oh, man. I am so... glad. I am so glad you're okay."

"Yeah. Me too." His voice was harsh, like he was straining to speak.

He was in pain.

"...are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Just beat up, that's all. Where are you?"

"In a cell. Next to you, I think. You?"

"Uh."

I heard him scooting around, repositioning on the concrete floor, and then he came to a rest again.

"Bars. Yeah. Definitely in a cell." He was much closer now. "Can't see anything. How'd you get here?"

He was right next to me. I could smell him.

My heart began to slow again, for the first time since this started--since he got grabbed by those pale men.

He was okay.

We were okay.

"I... did the same thing." I said. "I talked to the old lady. Got grabbed like an idiot."

“Max--why would you--” He paused and sighed. “God dammit. How the hell are we going to get out of this?”

“I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry. I didn’t know where you were. I thought maybe... maybe they killed you. I didn’t know what--”

“Hey. Stop. It’s okay, man. I probably would’ve done the same thing.”

I pulled myself forward, flattening my body against the wall, and reached through the bars, stretching toward his voice. My hand ran along stone, and then empty space, and then more bars. Another cell.

“Hey, is this your cell?” I asked.

I poked my fingers through the bars. And then I felt his hand. It was warm and rough and calloused; his fingers brushed against mine.

“Yes.” He said. I could tell he was smiling. “It is.”

We sat in the dark, in silence, with our hands clasped together. Whatever relief I felt when I heard his voice was outdone tenfold. I didn’t want to let go. It filled me up with warmth and strength and comfort. I could live forever like this.

I was so glad he was okay.

The urgency was gone. This was bad, but it wasn’t as bad as I thought. They didn’t kill us outright. They put us in cells.

Why would they put us in cells? Because they felt we were a threat to that old lady?

If they wanted to kill us, they absolutely could have. Multiple times over. So, maybe they didn’t intend to.

And maybe that meant we could talk our way out of this.

Everything was going to be okay.

“You have your belt?” Jacob asked, breaking the silence.

My belt. I did. I powered it off to conserve battery. I reached back and ran my fingers over the power button.

“Yeah. It’s off. But yeah.”

“Turn on the light.”

I clicked the battery in and powered it back up. It whirred softly in the cell. When I looked down, I could barely see the screen. It was a dim blue square in the dark. I hit the flashlight toggle, and the bulb lit up, but cast no light.

“Uh...”

I toggled it off and on again, and then fiddled with the brightness, setting it to max. But nothing changed. The light was on. But it wasn't cutting through the dark.

"What?" Jacob asked.

"It's not working. It's too dark."

"What?" He repeated.

"The light is on. But it's not working. The screen isn't lighting up either."

"And you're sure it's on? You have juice?"

"Yes." I said, and then checked again. "Yeah, it's on. It's on. Sixty percent charge. It's this place. It's absorbing the light."

"What do you mean?"

"Look out here. At the wall in front of me. There's a candle. See it?"

It was silent for a moment.

"Yeah."

"It's burning but it's not making light."

"Okay, I see it." He sighed. "What the fuck?"

"I don't know. But it's just been getting worse--"

I was interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. Multiple people, walking slowly toward us.

A cool wind blew by and the flame was snuffed out.

"Children." A voice scratched into the dark.

It was hollow and dry and shaky, growing closer and closer.

"Oh, little children."

The voice gasped after every word, rasping through wheezing lungs.

I could make something out in the dark. A pale, white oval. It floated its way to me and then hung in the air just before my bars. It was matte white, just like the flame, bright against the black, detailed only by two black slits. Eyes.

It was a face. The voice began to laugh--raspy and dry and sharp. I recognized the cackle. It was the old woman.

"Now, dear, why do you pretend?" The voice spoke above the laughter.

Pretend? What did she mean?

"W-What?" My mouth was so dry.

The oval face began to blur as the laughter grew louder and louder. My head was pounding. I felt groggy, like I was going to pass out.

"Why, do you pretend, Madeline?"

The laughing reached a peak, echoing sharply in my cell.

"Why?"

I couldn't fight it--my eyes closed and I fell into black.

298:

I unwrapped my shell, my layers, my folds, my being, and felt Musashi breathe again. He stirred, waking from his long sleep.

I lowered him to the ground.

His eyes opened and looked up at me--a child's eyes, a young man's eyes, and an ancient's eyes, all in one.

"Chiyoko." He whispered.

"Medy." I corrected.

He furrowed his brow, wrought with confusion for a moment, and blinked a few times. As his daze gradually melted away, he seemed to remember--to recognize me.

"Medy. Where are we?"

"Home. At the exact place you left. The battle."

He sat up and looked around the field, scanning the treeline, the soil, the sky, eventually landing his gaze upon the army of charging Oni patriarchs, headed by the mountain-sized Potentate, all frozen in place before us.

"I..." He trailed off.

I gave him time. I didn't know how much he needed, but I knew I couldn't help him work through it.

A few minutes passed, and then he shakily pushed up to his knees and stood.

"How--how did you stop them?" He asked.

"I don't know. I just did."

"But how? And how are we here? It's been so long..."

He was transfixed on the closest of the Oni: the gnarled, gargantuan Potentate with an oak tree for an axe. The one who killed him.

"I don't know that either." I said. "I just did. But I came too early. Before you were born. So, I had to wait."

"Wait?" He glanced back and met my eyes.

"Yeah. I found you as a baby and followed you. Turns out I was your Chiyoko."

If he was surprised, he showed no trace of it. He nodded.

"And so you were." His voice was reserved again, lacking emotion, like when we first met on the path. "Thank you, Medy. But... I don't want to be here. This place is nothing but a memory. It's not my home. Not anymore."

I didn't expect that.

"So, what do you want? Where do you want to go?"

He stood in silence for a moment, and then gave a half-smile.

"With you. If you'd let me."

With me.

Me? Why?

And where was I going, anyway?

299:

I heard noises from the door--from the void, carried on that odd, cool wind current.

Crying. People crying. Kids, adults, old folks, whatever. It was a sing-songy chorus of sobbing. That's what it sounded like. It echoed off the warehouse walls around me.

I couldn't see anything in that stretching, infinite dark. It wasn't the kind of dark that caught and smothered light, like in real life--it was simulated, perfect dark. Dark with no relief. Dark with no end.

I felt for Gillian. She was out there. Her consciousness was.

Floating in that dark, unable to even see herself. I imagined it would cause her to go insane after a time. But luckily, she wouldn't be there for much longer, assuming we were still planning on going through with force-extraction.

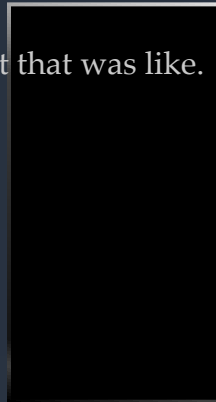
But did I really know that? Maybe she would be.

We never could figure out how Network ghosts were made. Wilson had loads of theories, hypotheses, and stimulated scenarios, but this was one of those ongoing enigmas.

It wasn't unreasonable to think that maybe during extraction a part of her would stay behind here, lost in the void, floating, senseless, for all eternity.

I shuddered at the thought.

Hopefully I never had to know what that was like.



300:

After an entire day spent searching, we hadn't even seen a bird in the sky. The desert was empty. There were no animals. Not even bugs. We decided to give up till tomorrow and head back to the Flutist's shack.

And then, no more than five minutes into our trip, Jacob spotted it: a spotted milk lizard, casually resting on a twisted tree branch, hanging over a big hole in the desert floor. It looked like it was sleeping.

"Okay." Jacob untied the bag and rolled up its sides. "I'm ready."

"I'm not." Max said with a grin.

"Careful of the hole, now." The flutist warned.

I carefully scooted forward and peered down. It was big. Really big. Ten feet across, maybe more. Beyond its walls of infinitely trickling sand, at the bottom, was a wide, spiraling vortex. The flutist's only warning was "it's something to stay away from."

But that wasn't sufficient for me. I had never heard of anything like it.

And I wanted to know more.

I turned to him, hesitant to ask for fear of being irritating, but too curious to let it go. It took a few seconds for me to muster the courage. To push through the curtains. To figure out how to use my voice again.

I cleared my throat.

"Sir, if you don't mind, what is that down there?"

He twirled his mustache in one finger and flattened his lips.

"Like I said, a thing to stay away from."

"But what is it, really? Because it looks like a whirlpool."

"It ain't. Cus it ain't water. It's smoke."

"Smoke?" Max peered down as well.

"There's a fire under us, somewhere deep, burning up the sand and turning it to glass. The smoke don't escape. It comes up, but something traps it, and it just swirls back down like that. I saw a rat fall down one once. Can't imagine how deep they go."

"There are more of them?" Jacob asked.

"Oh, loads more. I've counted maybe fifty so far, but I haven't seen half this place yet. In some spots the desert's got so low you can brush the sand away with your boot and get right to the glass, just a few fingers down. That's how I know it's a fire. You can see it

through the glass. Red and gold and amber, glittering like diamonds. And at them low holes you can really smell that nasty smoke."

"Underground desert fire." Jacob mused. "Kinda neat."

"Till you find yourself falling down that hole." The flutist raised an eyebrow and gave Jacob a stem look. "Now, be careful."

Max nodded, and then turned to face the sleeping milk lizard again.

"Don't get too close." The flutist went on. "The edge is slippery."

He was trying to be helpful, to make them take caution, but it was only causing me more anxiety. The thought of tumbling down that hole... was terrifying, to say the least.

I hoped Max and Jacob felt better about it than I did.

"Alright. I'll count down." Max crouched with his arms outstretched and crab-walked to the edge of the hole, near where the branch jutted from the falling sands. "Get ready with the bag."

"Ready." Jacob was behind with his bag propped open and held up.

"Okay. Three." Max held up three fingers.

"Wait." Jacob interrupted. "On one or go?"

"Uh... go."

"Kay."

"Alright, three." Max held up three fingers again.

"Two."

"One."

"Go!"

Max lunged toward the lizard.

301:

I

I walked away from town, pleasantly filled up by my lasagna dinner, and strolled for hours through the fields of thick, fluffy grass, until I couldn't go any farther.

I didn't have to stop because my legs wouldn't carry me.

It was because there was a wall.

A glass wall, as tall as the sky, stretching around the perimeter of town.

Through the glass I could see a wasteland smothered by angry clouds, torn apart and brown and smoking. I could see the ruins of buildings and highways and cars. I could see bones--skeletons, lining the destroyed streets, all sitting on the ground, facing the same direction. Toward the setting sun.

The view contrasted sharply against my side of the wall. Against the lush greenery and the beautiful blue of the sky. Against the well-constructed homes and paved roads and singing birds and fresh air. Out there was a different world entirely.

My heartbeat increased, and I knew I was missing something very important. Did Dr. Payne forget to mention this?

Why was there a wall here?

And how did the world outside become that way?

What happened?

II

I spoke to Marcene about what I found--the big wall of glass, and the destroyed world beyond it. The wasteland.

She told me something.

Something I couldn't comprehend at the time.

Something I'm still coming to terms with.

She said there was an explosion somewhere, and it made a hole.

Things came from the hole. Awful things.

Terrible things. Things that hated us.

They came, and they hunted us in our cities, and then the world ended. Almost overnight.

So, now it's all over. And she said it's only a matter of time until our little town runs out of power.

I got my life back. I worked and I fought and I did my best to learn. I spent five years fighting for it, and I finally got it back.

And now

just like that

yet again

it was over.

302:

Act?

I act

on desire

on impulse

even still

I act, like I did, like I used to, without us

without all of us

including you

you're here now, but you're not

not really, anymore

not ever, truly

you're somewhere else

part of you

the part that matters

under blackened waves

I miss that you

it was the you that counted

will I ever know it again?

they coo

they speak

hushed, overlapping whispers from throats lacking tongues

they tell me we won't, and that we never really did

but still

I can hope

303:

I slid down the conveyor belt, moving faster and faster, slipping through the dark factory at speeds so quick I almost couldn't comprehend what I was seeing. Revolting faces and grinning mouths and sick-looking, mutated animals all whizzed by, blurred, but not enough to obscure their anger at my presence.

I wasn't welcome here.

And I didn't know how, but I knew where I was: the iniquitous factory.

The factory of the damned.

The belt curved left, and then right, and then dipped, dropping me almost directly down, through burning windows, through a sideways city bus, through a tombstone-filled graveyard, past the corpses of all the dead I've left behind.

I saw my mother there, impaled on a stop sign, but her body was like a small bird--she was a tiny parakeet with a human-sized head. True to form, she was screaming, raving mad, flapping her wings, and brandishing an open tube of lipstick in my face as I sped by, telling me I'm more delusional than my uncle.

Telling me my name isn't Max.

Telling me I'm a disgrace to our family. To God.

Telling me I ruined her chance at a mother-daughter relationship.

"We were supposed to go to the mother-daughter dance, Madeline. And they won't let you in if you keep saying you're my son! You fucking idiot! You fucking sick, piece of shit! I was so excited to show off my green dress at this dance! But you don't care about me! You never think about your old mommy! Fuck mommy! Right? Fuck mommy! All she did was carry your ungrateful ass in her belly for nine months! All she did was nearly die squirting you out! All she did was feed you her lifeforce from her sagging tits! Fuck mommy! Mommy is a whore!"

Even when she was long gone behind me, I could still hear her cawing, animalistic screeching echoing through the factory. The belt flattened out again and I could see the end--where I was heading. The crusher.

It was a face, showing me a wicked smile full of misshapen, interwoven teeth, like a zipper but with knives and sharpened, twisted chunks of metal. The face cracked open its scabbed-over, pus-filled eyes, and pointed its red pupils in my direction. It began to laugh.

Cackle.

It was cackling in a strange, throaty way--unsettling, and so very familiar. The laughter mingled with the screeching insults from my mother, forming an awful ensemble. A score to match my terror.

The belt kept on speeding me toward the end.

Toward the laughing beast.

I wanted to roll away. I wanted to kick off and jump to safety.

But then I was there.

I tried to lift my legs, to brace against it, to push myself back. But they wouldn't work. I forgot I was paralyzed. They were mangled and broken and unusable, twisted up before me. Sad, shriveled sticks. Soggy French fries. I thrashed with all my might, but they wouldn't budge.

I gave it every ounce of strength I had. Sweat was pouring from me like a waterspout, drenching my clothes and leaving a slick trail behind.

I was mere seconds away from that crushing, grinning face.

But I couldn't move.

I couldn't do anything.

It was over.

And then I hit legs first, and felt the teeth sink into my ankles. It was chewing, coming down on me again and again, crushing me, snapping my shins, tearing my calves, splitting my knees and my thighs, working its way up my body, mangling my flesh and bones, letting all my blood free.

I looked up at it one last time before I fell in completely. Before I couldn't look anymore. It was still laughing, even with its mouth full of my lower half.

"See? You taste like a girl." It spoke through my partially chewed body. "You can change how the flesh looks. But not how it tastes, Maddie."

I woke up.

304:

We force-extracted Gillian Jacobs, expecting a variable slew of horrible mental afflictions when she woke from her chassis. Every symptom was pointing toward a worse-case scenario.

The excessive, bizarre warping of her chaasm was a pretty solid indicator that she no longer existed within it. Leaks happen. Rarely, but frequently enough to be concerned about. You drop someone in their chaasm--their container, and then a corrupted memory, or some faulty equipment, or a haywire organism bores a little hole, and the person slips out. And then the chaasm skews. Things stretch. The world warps, and the longer the person stays gone, the more severe that warping becomes.

And it was intense in Gillian's chaasm. She was definitely gone.

But she wasn't lost through a hole. She was a casualty in a large, invasive event: a merge between chaasms, supposedly unprovoked and naturally-occurring. Somehow, during that merge, she slipped out.

It was between her private chaasm and a "debauchery" shared span, the D.Zone, at a single point within both: a doorframe. The merge line was almost perfectly centered on the frame, and the only sign it happened was a slightly uneven seam near the top. I couldn't have done better myself. In fact, if I didn't know otherwise, I would have thought it was my work.

It happened almost instantly, without any manifests being updated. The D.Zone management was completely unaware anything changed. Many in my department have suggested there was a "glitch," somehow causing the chaasms to naturally merge. I don't believe that. I've seen glitches. They're rough. Uneven. This was almost perfect. It was done by hand.

As to why someone would do this, I have no idea. Gillian has no relation to anything else on the Network. She's never even visited another chaasm, let alone a fetishist span like the D.Zone. But I plan on looking into it. We're currently pulling and combing through the logs, and the formal investigation will begin next week.

Regardless, we expected the worst from her extraction. If my guess was correct, then she was truncated. Deleted. Overwritten. But when a person dies on the Network, they're immediately, violently extracted to corporeal. That didn't happen here. She was catatonic. Unresponsive. Which meant she was still on the Network somewhere. Maybe out in the void surrounding her chaasm. Maybe somewhere else.

We couldn't be sure what that meant. And so, we didn't know what to expect when forcing her out.

Would she still be conscious?

Was she in a void, enduring sensory deprivation?

Or was it something else?

Was she sent somewhere?

If so, what has she seen?

We expected the worst kind of mental fracturing. But directly after the extraction, she was smiling and talking and eating food, seemingly unfazed by any of the usual mental symptoms. Completely healthy.

Since, her psychiatric evaluations have all gone well.

She's perfectly fine.

I talked to her myself. I asked her about where she went, and what she saw, if anything.

As it turns out, she saw a lot.

305:

We were back in the desert, crossing the boiling sands, traveling at night and sleeping during the day.

It wasn't as bad this time.

The flutist didn't send us away empty-handed. He gassed up an old generator to charge Max's belt batteries, and made us a care package of several provisions, including an umbrella for shade. Our bags were packed full with skins of water, bundles of dried lizard jerky, a big jar of sandcorn, and even a little bottle of alcoholic lizard's milk.

He gave us so much it would probably last us a month. Maybe longer. And when we left, he set us off in the right direction. It was a three day walk northwest to the nearest town.

It was called Lakeview.

And we were almost there.

But as of this morning, we were no longer traveling alone.

Something was following us through the desert.

Max was still perched up, staring behind through his binoculars, at a faraway cloud of dust that shimmered in the midday heat.

Jacob rolled over in his sleeping bag.

"Still back there?" He asked.

"Yeah."

I was trying to sleep too. But it was too hot, even with the umbrellas. I kept tossing and turning, unable to get comfortable.

"I think we should go." Max said.

"What?" Jacob looked up. "Dude, it's like a hundred and thirty degrees."

"Yeah, well, it's far, but it's coming pretty fast, so either we go, or we stay and meet this thing."

"What is it?"

"I think it's a brain. But it's big. And red."

My heart skipped a beat. I couldn't do that again. Not now.

"I think Max is right." I blurted out. "I—I think we should go."

Max glanced back at me.

"A big red brain?" Jacob sat up and sighed. "Fucking cartoon land. God dammit. No sleep today. Alright."

He pushed to his feet and brushed his hands.

"Then let's go."

306:

I coughed up the smoke. Choked on it.

It was from the fires.

From all the burning bodies. From my smoldering little town. From every piece of the world I called home going up in flames.

I tried to breathe through my nose as a cloud of ash-filled, black smoke passed over, and then coughed again, and knew I was tasting burned-up flesh.

My life was over again.

I took comfort in the fact that it wasn't just me. It was everyone. Everyone's lives were over now. That was bad, but it was also good that I wasn't alone this time. I was so afraid of being alone again.

I felt bad for taking comfort in that. But it was good to be with others, even at the end. It helped. I only wished Dr. Payne was with me.

He would know what to do.

A stream of fire was spreading toward me, slithering its way through the grass like an incandescent snake. I hadn't seen fire in person yet, and I was transfixed by it. The glow. The warmth. It was like magic.

I had to move.

I knew I had to.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. My feet were heavy weights. I was numb, standing in place before the roaring inferno, thinking of the green grass and blue skies and singing birds I saw only yesterday.

Listening to that screaming ringing in my ears.

Was it people screaming? Was it guns or bombs or planes? Was it the fire? Or was it my ears, screaming all by themselves?

I didn't know.

Something happened here.

I didn't see it. I didn't know what.

I heard a loud pop and I walked outside to this.

Something happened. The glass wall around town had been cracked, all the way up to the sky. There was an immense, ragged hole just above the ground, near where I stood

staring out just a few days ago. Something shattered our wall and came in. And now the town was burning to the ground around me.

I heard a scuffle--thuds and screaming and several boots walking quickly--and saw men in black armor dragging people from their homes, out of town, beyond the glass wall.

To a vehicle. A van? I thought that was what vans looked like, but I couldn't be sure.

And then two men were on me as well, gloved hands gripping my arms, my shoulders, dragging me to the glass wall. I didn't even see them approach.

"W-Who are you?" I heard my voice ask.

But they didn't respond.

The vehicle had lettering on the side:

INSTITUTE

VRC-ITD iC09

I wondered what that meant. What was the Institute? Why did it sound so familiar?

I reread the lettering as they carried me by, and then saw it again on the rear doors as I was thrown into the back.

Into a pile of warm, huddled bodies. Into heavy breathing in the dark. Into terror and crying and a pounding heartbeat clogging up my throat.

Into captivity.

Again.

307:

I woke up.

But the dream was still looming over me. The nightmare. It was the worst and most vivid dream I'd ever had.

My mind was woven, wrapped up tightly by those feelings. I couldn't shake that image of my mom as a screeching parakeet, no matter how hard I tried.

She was probably dead now, but that didn't stop her from haunting me, from making me feel like shit about myself every time I closed my eyes. I worried that her voice would always be there in the back of my mind--a poison pill, a corrupted seed, an invasive, insidious little thought, preventing my happiness for the rest of my life. She was gone, but her hooks were buried deep, and now my mind was doing all the work to tear me down on her behalf.

I thought back to the dream again, to that machine with the metal teeth. The beast at the end of the belt. It chewed me up and killed me.

I understood the imagery of my mom--that was self-explanatory--but what the hell was that machine?

I shuddered and ran my hands along my jeans, making sure my legs were still present. Unchewed. They were. And just as paralyzed and limp and sad as always.

I rubbed my eyes, attempting to shake my haze, and glanced around the room.

It was unfamiliar--a cramped child's room, plastered with rainbow-colored padding and neon green wallpaper. There was a massive yellow toy chest, packed so full it was overflowing, and a bed with pretzel-patterned sheets and a big pretzel-shaped pillow.

I didn't remember coming here. I was with Jacob.

But where were we? Not here. Definitely not here.

I noticed a shadow on the wall and turned to see what cast it. There was someone standing above me.

Not standing. Floating.

It was the old woman. She was naked.

But it wasn't really her. It took a second to register what I was looking at.

Her ancient, wrinkled skin was there, but it was a hollow bag. Her insides had all been removed, and the skin hung like a tapestry from behind a white oval mask.

The same mask from before. I saw it just before I fell asleep.

In the cell.

That's right.

We were in cells, in a shelter. An auditorium. Those men grabbed us. It all came flooding back, washing everything but the anxiety from my mind.

Panic struck.

The mask shook and clicked and spun around like a top, painting a strange jagged spiral with its black slit eyes, and jostling the old woman's skin from side to side. It laughed.

Cackled.

The same cackling from my dream.

"Madeline." It spoke above the laughter.

"It's Max." I said.

I could hear the grogginess in my voice.

How long was I asleep?

Where was Jacob? The panic was ballooning, coalescing, forming into rage. Into emotions I didn't have words for. I needed to see him.

"Oh, but is it really?" The thing croaked.

"Yes." I was grinding my teeth.

"But you're afraid that's not true, aren't you?"

"I..."

No. I wasn't.

But my words caught in my throat.

"You're a child. Still a child. Ever a child, with how short your little life is."

The thing closed in on me slowly, until the old woman's husk was pressing against my shoulders. The skin felt thick and stretchy, like rubber. It was damp against my clothes. And then I smelled it.

It smelled worse than the old woman did.

Like sewage and death and fish sauce and everything awful I had ever smelled, balled up and concentrated directly before me.

"Denial. Wasted potential." It went on, scolding me. "I was going to kill you both and eat you outright. But, now... now, you've got me off-track."

I pushed back against the wall, sliding as best I could with my arms, but it stayed with me, inches from my face, clicking and rattling as the mask spun in its circle.

"I see you as you are. Really are. A fertile, healthy basket like you is a rare thing among the animal breeds. Most are tainted. Almost all. And look here: you got a lucky deal. You're not tainted in the slightest. Yet, you're smashing that to bits, aren't you? You're turning that basket on its head. You're killing your only purpose. How strange. Uncalled for. Unacceptable."

Something grabbed me by my throat.

I couldn't see what it was. It was too fast.

It grew tight. Restricting. It lifted me up until I wasn't touching the ground.

"But you'll be fixed. You'll remember."

My head began to pound. The thing was cutting off my air. I reached around my belt, flailing for the power button, struggling to click it in and engage the battery. But I couldn't. It was too far back, and the thing had me held up at an odd angle.

"And then maybe I'll use you for your true purpose, hm? Maybe you'll get the honor of birthing my young."

"Ff--bbl--" I tried to speak.

"What's that, Madeline?"

"Fffubbbll--" I tried again, dribbling spit down my chin.

"Have something to say?"

It let me loose a bit, just enough so I could take in air. I took a deep breath, easing the pain in my chest.

"Fuck you."

It was also enough to twist my arm around back and hit the battery. My thumb pressed the button and engaged the current, spilling heat down my legs, energizing me.

I suddenly felt strong. Alive. Awake. Alert.

I lifted my knees to my chest, and then kicked forward with all my strength.

The thing was thrown off, tearing through the room. It slammed into the toy chest with a sharp yelp, sending blocks and dolls flying.

I rubbed my neck where its tendrils had been, and took a step toward it.

"My name..." I breathed heavily. "Is Max."

308:

Gillian saw another world--a place outside the little reality we had created for her. Some kind of pocket chaasm, built from half-deleted environments and broken, overwritten, corrupted memories. A constantly shifting recycle bin.

She said one minute she was there in her cottage, listening to Last Christmas, sipping tea by the fire, and watching a light snow drift by the window, and then she suddenly wasn't. A noise rang out, like static, and then she was falling in the dark. She fell for hours.

Until she felt herself stretch out and land on some ground somewhere. She said there were several minutes where she had landed, and felt herself sitting on the ground, but also felt herself still falling, and couldn't see clearly if she was somewhere new or still tumbling through the dark. Her vision was torn between two places at once, and she was aware of both, but couldn't focus on either one.

And then it was over, and she was somewhere. Somewhere horrible, by her account.

A broken, split apart land, built of stitched-together sheer drops, and abrupt cliff faces, and wildly varying terrain, from tall grass plains, to mountain ranges, to what looked like a lake of congealing, liquid flesh, and so much more, all within a short distance. Navigating this world was near impossible.

She said at one point she fell from a steep drop, from a lush, overgrown forest, into a frozen lake, falling down through the ice and the water, until she passed through completely, and the bottom of that lake became the sky over a sweltering volcanic mountain. She fell for a long while, from above the clouds, and then she landed hard on a rock and tumbled, breaking her spine and both legs. And then she realized she couldn't move. She was stuck on an outcrop just above a bubbling lava flow, tensed in place, enduring incredible, unbearable heat and pain.

Shortly after, things began to watch her, peeking at her from holes in the mountain. She called them imps. They were red, and short, and had sharp teeth. They spied on her for several days, but eventually they gained confidence and emerged. One at first, and then ten, and twenty, crawling from the holes like roaches. Before she knew it, she was swarmed with imps. They surrounded her, laughing and screaming and playing games with her broken body.

Once the imps realized she was helpless, which didn't take long, they dragged her away, down through a hole, deep into the mountain. They threw her on a big spit and cooked her, and then when she was properly done, they cut her up and served her body in small pieces.

Hundreds of imps feasted on her.

But she was still alive. She was still conscious for every painful second. For some reason, she wouldn't die. She felt every piece of herself, even when they were torn away. She felt the fire cooking her skin, searing through her flesh, drying up her blood.

She felt every cut as she was served, and then every bite, every crushing, grinding chew, and every swallow. She felt herself slide down a hundred throats and land in a hundred stomachs, all at once, and then she felt being digested piece by piece.

Even when her body had been completely torn apart, eaten, digested and defecated out, she was still alive, living as piles of refuse, unable to move or speak or see. She could only feel.

And then, after weeks, after months of drying out, decomposing, evaporating, changing states into a gas, rejoining the air, the earth, becoming one with her new world and feeling every second of it, she woke up.

That was when we pulled her from the chassis.

And miraculously, she suffered no psychological harm.

It's one of the worst cases I've ever seen, yet it had the least damaging results.

With her permission, we'll begin testing and analysis within the month.

309:

The sun was setting over the desert, finally taking its leave, dumping wavering orange and purple stains across the sky.

We had walked.

For twelve hours. Fifteen? Longer, and longer--so long I lost count, as well as all the sweat in my body.

It was so hot.

so

hot.

And I had never been this tired. I was lucky that my legs were stuck in that repetitive pumping motion, because I couldn't feel below my knees anymore.

But we couldn't stop.

We couldn't even slow down.

That big, red brain was still hounding our tail, flying over the sands, kicking up a cloud of dust that zig-zagged back for miles like a floating serpent.

I didn't want this. I didn't want any of this.

I wanted

what did I want?

Mariana. The kitchen counter. Watermelon. A juice box. Bosco running in circles in the back yard. That's what I wanted, more than anything else in the world.

Mariana and my house and my life.

My life. Not this life.

My life wasn't supposed to be like this.

I was thankful for Max and Jacob. I probably wouldn't have made it this long without them. Well, not probably. I wouldn't have. I would have died in that warehouse, right next to Mariana. Maybe I would have jumped into the acid myself.

They saved my life.

But that felt bittersweet. Because maybe I didn't deserve to make it.

Maybe I shouldn't have.

"It'll be here soon." Max was turned around and walking backwards, focusing on the brain.

He dropped his binoculars to his neck, and I felt a knot forming somewhere in my stomach.

"Maybe an hour. Maybe less." He added.

"Should we hide?" I blurted out.

I immediately regretted it. I felt like a coward in front of them. In front of Max, one of the bravest people I had ever met--second only to Mariana.

"Where can we hide, Elizabeth?" Jacob spoke up for the first time in hours, significantly crankier than before. "Look around. It's flat. Miles of flat. We can't hide."

I didn't know what to say. He had never talked to me like that before.

"We have to fight it." He stopped walking.

"Fight?" I gulped.

"I guess... it is just one..." Max slowed to a stop as well.

"With you and me, we can do this easy." Jacob smiled at him. "It's one brain."

"But it's big. Like, really big. And if we're fighting it, then I should probably burn a battery. We have five--well, four."

"No. We need them. What if there's no power? We can't risk it."

Max pressed his lips together, mulling it over.

All the while the brain grew larger and larger, seemingly synchronized with the widening pit in my stomach.

"Alright." Max said. "We'll give it a shot. But it's big, man. If things go south I'm burning one."

"Deal."

310:

We rode in the bus... no. It wasn't a bus. It was... a van?

Van. Right.

We rode in the van.

My legs were folded up and cramped under someone's knees, and at least two elbows were stabbing into the soft parts of my back and side. It was a very uncomfortable position, and a very uncomfortable ride.

Those went along well with my very uncomfortable thoughts.

We had been going for hours, and I had been stuck to the window the entire time, transfixed on the passing landscapes.

This wasn't a world I ever knew.

This was a world I would never know.

It was destroyed now. By raging fires and ground-shaking, powerful storms, and monsters, and the Institute, whatever that was, leaving us with a barren, smoking desert--a wasteland for as far as I could see.

The world was destroyed.

All the thumping vibrations and body heat and heavy breathing formed into a calming, comforting blanket around me, lulling me closer to sleep. At least I wasn't alone.

I gave up and closed my eyes, and sleep came quickly.

And I dreamed.

It was dark. The dark.

I remembered it like I never forgot.

Again and always and before and after, I returned to that dark for another brief stint.

This time I was a visitor, just like last time.

Through the black, the fog, the mirrors in the abyss, I could see a faraway pinprick of orange, warm light. An entire propagating world was swelling and convulsing behind that tiny dot. There was a universe of warmth and life, eons of knowledge and advancement and strength, bleeding through into my dark, one faint particle at a time.

I could move.

And so, I did.

I flew to the dot. It was so small I could barely see it, even as I floated directly before it. I leaned to it, pressing my vision against it like a telescope, and peered through.

I saw...

It was earth.

Our planet.

Warm. Full. Alive.

Different.

Not our planet. Someone else's. A nagging weight formed and began tugging on my back, slowly building in power, growing stronger and more resilient. Harder to resist.

That wasn't our earth.

There was an uneasy sheen about it. Something was wrong.

It was sick. Unhealthy.

It was dying too, just like ours already had. But it was different.

The weight pulled until I couldn't resist anymore.

I let it take me. I flew backward through the dark, and I watched the dot shrink. The other earth. The living earth. The sick earth.

It faded into

My eyes snapped open as the van squealed to a stop.

311:

The thing looked at me from the ground, trembling and writhing like a pile of worms.

A mask and a heap of naked, wrinkled skin.

Nothing.

It was nothing.

What was I thinking? Why had I been so caught up in all this terror? Why had I been so afraid?

I didn't notice it until now: I had been dwelling on old fears. Fear of the dark, of death, of pain, of loss and of being alone. Fear of who I was, my mom, and how she felt about me. Fear of the world at large.

They were fears that I had known most of my life. They left a mark, sure--I had scars and damaged tissue like everyone else. Those wounds itched every now and again, but they hadn't been fresh for years. They didn't burn the same.

They were old.

Faint to me now.

Almost nothing.

So, why was I feeling this way again--stuck dwelling on old hells I had long crawled out of?

The mask stirred and began slowly spinning on the floor, dragging the skin around like a whirlpool.

Tension cascaded down my body and my hairs stood on end. I grew cold and clammy and began to sweat. And I felt dread, faraway at first, but blossoming--billowing into an overwhelming cloud.

I was afraid again. Terrified, and almost sick from it. Why?

The spiraling skin began to undulate, pulsing toward the center, pushing the mask up in waves.

It clicked.

The mask.

The thing. The old woman. Whatever the hell it was.

It was doing this.

The mask began to lift off the ground, tugging the old woman's skin up like rippling, swirling coattails. I lunged forward and stamped my boot on it, clopping it down and digging its sides into the foam-padded floor, and then leaned over to speak.

"Where's Jacob? The guy I was with. Where is he?"

"What... was it... that you said before?" The mask spoke.

Its voice was pained and broken up by labored breaths, but it was still able to let out another muted cackle, "...fuck you?"

I was going to crush it. Grind it to dust.

How many people had it killed before today? And why? What was the point of it?

I didn't understand--the mask or the robed men or the child's bedroom or the prison cells or why it was making people afraid. I didn't understand any of it.

All I knew was that it didn't deserve to live. I put down more weight and it began to creak.

"No!" It yelled. "I am weak. Please. You wouldn't kill me. You're already tainted enough, Madeline. But your pride. Your compassion. You wouldn't taint those as well."

It was begging for its life.

I wanted to press all my weight down. I wanted to hear the snap as the thing broke into pieces. But it was cornered and begging. It was scared. And I *really* wanted to know where Jacob was. Maybe it would tell me.

I pulled back, gritting my teeth.

"My name is Max." I said.

"Oh, Madeline, 'Max.'" It said my name with a sarcastic tinge. "Sad pup, what's the difference?"

"Tell me where Jacob is or I'm going to break you."

"Wait! Wait. Why do you think you're here? I willed it."

It paused, maybe to gauge my reaction. When I didn't give any, it went on.

"Yes. Since I saw you in that shelter. I willed you to me. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I scared you. I was wrong. I was wrong to try and use you. But I saw it all on the wind. I saw dear Uncle. Mean old mommy. Jacob. Roxanne. Even long-lost daddy. Everyone. I saw them and I couldn't resist. I needed a taste. I grabbed hold and pulled you to me. You're a mirror, and the reflections are bright. If I saw them, others did too, and they won't be so weak as me. You're in danger. But I can show you how to hide."

"What?" I scoffed. "Weren't you just trying to make me 'birth your young?' Why would you help me now? And why would I suddenly trust you? Shut up. Where is Jacob?"

"Why? I am... ahh..." It trailed off.

Stalling.

I was getting impatient. This was a waste of time. Every passing second intensified the urgency.

I leaned on my leg, putting all my weight down, issuing a harsh crack from the mask.

"STOP! Stop! Stop." It wailed. "You can't. I am like you. I am alive! I am a living being!"

"Where is Jacob?" I yelled.

My belt whirred up, groaning as I put down more than just my weight--as I pushed down with all my strength. The mask was howling, vibrating under my heel, billowing inhuman squealing so loud my ears were ringing.

And then there was a pop--another sharp crack from under my foot.

'OAAAHaaahaaaahl--' The voice shrieked and then dwindled to a moan.

I pulled my boot away.

The mask was in pieces--broken, spewing clouds of smoke like burning oil.

"Ooaahhal--" The voice kept on weakening until it was just above a whisper.

The old woman's skin snapped free from the mask and shriveled, drying up and turning black like an old banana peel.

So much for finding out where Jacob was.

A door flung open at the far side of the room, kicked open by one of the robed men. His hood was drawn back, revealing a bald head with a red tattoo over one eye. I couldn't tell what it was supposed to be. Maybe a bird.

"What have you done with Abraxas?" He screamed.

"Abraxas?" I asked.

He charged at me.

312:

The massive, swaying, red brain was charging at us again.

Max pointed his wrist device toward it and tapped the screen with two fingers. It whined briefly, and then fired, pulsing out a wave of intense heat.

The shot was a big, blue fireball. It looked like the sun--like those satellite pictures of the sun, up-close, showing all its pocks and flares and oceans of fire.

The blast flew forward, quickly making contact with the brain, but dispersed against it like a splash of water--like nothing.

The brain was unfazed. It reared back on its bed of black, tangled tendrils, pointed up to the sky, and roared. Ripples coursed along its many folds, and sand kicked up into clouds around me, shaken by its voice--or was it voices?

I heard a booming ensemble of voices, like horns, and each was groaning out a sustained, sour note, layering together in an unbearable mess of noise. It was so loud.

I pictured the flutist sitting alone back in his shack, hearing it on the wind, and I felt a pang of regret. I should've stayed with him.

The brain dropped down and lurched sideways. Toward Max.

It moved too fast for him to react.

There was a wet slap as it hit, and then Max was knocked away. He slammed into the ground and tumbled, landing face-first and sliding to a stop near Jacob, who was still unconscious.

And then he didn't get up. And they were both just lying there.

But I needed them to get up. I needed them to fight it off or scare it or kill it or... or anything. I needed them to make it go away.

But they didn't. They couldn't.

I looked at the brain.

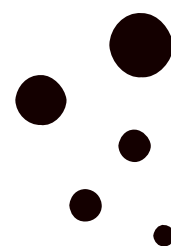
I was alone.

It shuddered and roared again, this time directly at me.

It moved forward, and in the blink of an eye, it was crashing into me, pushing me, and carrying me away.

I felt its tendrils sliding around me, wrapping over my waist. My arms. My chest. My head.

And then I felt a sharp prick on the back of my neck.



313:

I stepped outside the cave
into a swell of warm, fulfilling morning wind
and began to clamber down the cragged stone steps,
heading back to town
met by relief and disbelief and almost a sense of comfort
but not comfort in the sense that I was comforted, because I wasn't.

Eoghan was
d
de ad
dea d

Eoghan died.

I didn't.

He died because of me.

I knew that. I killed him.

I didn't want to but

I had to

because I had to... stop...

what? The Network.

He died because I had to stop the Network.

And he wouldn't let me.

my head felt like it was splitting down the middle, soaking in wet pain, letting drips
trickle down the sides, frothing like it was full of bubbles.

my skull

I was fractured.

The realization slapped me hard, numbing my gut and making my skin go cold.

Somehow, that current fractured me.

and I couldn't quite focus where I needed
on what I needed to

Eoghan died.

I didn't.

My thoughts were a coiled filament, carrying a spark that zipped along the good
parts and then hopped all the gaps, arcing over the bad, omitting chunks

important chunks

chunks I felt I needed the most

and that I wished I could know

Eoghan died.

I didn't.

He wasn't supposed to be here
in Honduras. At Talgua. He shouldn't have been.

I didn't expect him.

and I never wanted to kill him.

I never wanted to stoop to that level.

His level.

I thought if he caught me, then surely the plan would fall apart

it would be for nothing

and he would kill me on the spot

but in those final moments, he didn't

he was transfixed

and it cost him his life

Eoghan died.

I didn't.

in one act

I had dismantled two of the greatest threats to humanity--

to me, but to humanity as well

Yet, I could take no pride in it.

With

so many dead

so many wasted

so many broken

and so many scattered, fractured pieces out there

there was no way for me to know

if that really did it--if that brought it down for good.

All I knew, and all I could know

was that

it didn't feel over.

It felt wrong. Like I was missing something else

something

very

important.

I searched my thoughts, like closing my eyes and dipping my hands in a basin of water,
scraping the bottom for that thing I dropped

but what exactly

what exactly, down in there

what exactly was I looking for?

I wished I
could know
what
it
was

314:

Two men were dragging me up the steps. Up steps, into a hall, and around a corner, and up steps, into a hall, and around a corner, and up steps, into a hall, and

I could hear the others being pulled along behind me, shuffling up the stairs as best they could. They were like me. Just like me.

I wasn't alone.

On and on and on we went. Up and up.

Up.

Up.

More steps.

More steps.

More.

More.

I wished we could stop and take a break. Just a little break.

Like Dr. Payne used to say,

Sometimes, you just need a little break. There's no shame in it. And after, when you get back to it, you'll be even better than before.

"There's no..." I heard my voice whispering. "...shame in it."

"What?" The man on my right arm turned his head and leaned in.

He was wearing a sleek black helmet that covered his face, but it didn't prevent me from smelling the garlic on his breath.

"There's no shame in it." I said again.

"Shame in what?" He asked.

"Shut up." The other man scolded him. "Don't talk to the drives."

"Sorry, sir."

They were quiet again.

And we kept going up.

Every step felt like it would be my last. I could barely lift my feet, and on occasion I would miss a step, sway forward, and almost fall, but their grip held me tight, and then they would quickly, and uncomfortably, twist me back into position.

And we kept going up.

I didn't want to go up anymore. I just wanted to go home.

It was a new feeling. I was homesick, and it was just like Dr. Payne described: yearning for the place you live, your comforts, your home--wishing beyond anything that you could be there again.

Yes, I was homesick.

We rounded a corner, filed into another hallway, and then headed up more steps.

But, no. I was wrong--this wasn't a new feeling. It was familiar. I remembered feeling this before, about something else, a long time ago. It was an old feeling with a new context.

I... used to... want something, just like this. I wanted...

what was it?

What did I want? What did I yearn for?

I couldn't remember. It was something so warm, and wonderful--the only good thing I had in my--

Like a puzzle piece falling into place, my memory snapped together, and I could see it clearly:

It was my bay.

I used to want my bay.

I had forgotten it entirely. My bay was the first thing I ever yearned for, and Dr. Payne made me forget it. He made me realize that life was more than just a safety bubble, back when all I wanted was to crawl into that bay and sleep forever.

This new homesickness wasn't as overwhelming, but it was still a powerful, longing emotion all the same.

I still wanted to go home.

I wanted to walk in my front door, breathe deep and smell the new wood, cross to my room, and fall flat on my mattress.

But I wouldn't do that again. Because my mattress was gone. And the new wood smell was probably gone too. Or changed--dirtied into the smell of burned wood.

Because this was the end. For my home. For my town. For Dr. Payne's work. And for me.

The end, so soon after my beginning.

The end again.

We reached another landing, and instead of heading up, we turned down a hallway. It was dark, and the walls were all red instead of white like below.

No. It was the lights--the lights were red.

The men pushed me along, around another corner, and down a long hall, past so many doors. I could hear things behind them. Screaming? Talking? Laughing? I couldn't tell.

We stopped before one, and one of the men stepped forward and pressed a card against the handle.

It beeped twice and swung open.

The door had a plaque on it.

Reading it nearly made my heart stop. My breath caught in my throat. I wanted to scream. I wanted to run.

It was a number

a number I had heard so many times before

My number.

98781.

315:

I stepped into the hall, out from the last in a long line of food-themed kids' rooms, and was jarred again by the transition between their brightly colored padding and the dingy, brown metal of the hallway.

Every single room was empty. Jacob wasn't down here. The only place left to look, and the only way out, was up the stairs at the end of the hall.

But I could hear footsteps echoing down the stairwell, tumbling off the walls in a chaotic drumroll. People were running down the steps. A lot of people.

Robed men, no doubt. More insane zealots of Abraxas--zealots who, surprisingly, were very upset at me about the death of a certain demon-being-thing named Abraxas.

I looked back to the room I woke up in. The dead zealot was still crumpled up in the doorway, twitching softly and spilling a new trail of blood into the hall.

I only kicked him once in the chest, but now I'd probably never shake the image of his ribs caving in under my boot. I could still vividly picture him gasping and coughing and keeling over. I could still clearly hear the odd sucking and popping coming from his throat.

I felt bad for him. That was awful, and it was an awful way to go. I didn't want to kill anyone else. I didn't want to hurt anyone at all.

But they probably weren't going to give me a choice.

The rumble of approaching steps was only getting louder, and while I proved I could take one of them... more than one?

Yet to be determined.

I had power. My battery would last another ten minutes, at least. Maybe I did have a choice, and I didn't have to fight anyone else. Maybe I could run by them.

I just needed to find Jacob. That was it. And then we could go.

Maybe I could do it.

I headed down the hall, intent on climbing the stairs, and noticed something leaning against the wall near the stairwell. It was a heavy push broom--the kind with metal on the end that screwed down into a bristled head.

I stepped on the head, unscrewed the handle, and then hoisted it up and gave it a strong, two-handed swing. It was light, springy, and felt like it would break easily, but any weapon was better than nothing.

I moved to the base of the stairs and looked up. The zealots were close now--just a few flights above. The stairs were very enclosed. It would be tight.

They were only getting closer.

I didn't know what to do.

Run up?

Wait?

What would Jacob do?

What would Uncle Max do?

They were very close now. I could see their shadows dancing on the wall--robed silhouettes descending a dark spiral.

What would Mad Max do?

I clutched the broom handle and took a deep breath.

My heart thundered in my chest, but it wasn't out of fear, for once.

I wasn't powerless this time. I wasn't afraid. I couldn't help but smile.

My heart thundered in my chest, and it was out of excitement.

I ran up the steps.

316:

The man on my right leaned through the doorway and flipped the light switch.

A dim bulb flickered on, casting the room in a weak, pulsing blue.

It was cramped like a closet, and almost entirely taken up by a reflective, black oval shape. The oval was marked with a golden plate that read '98781. '

My number.

The other man walked in, up to a control panel near the oval, and began tapping buttons and hitting switches. A white line ran down the middle of the shape, and then two halves split open like double doors.

It was a bed.

It was more than a bed.

It was a bay.

The man on my arm pushed me into the room and dragged me to the bed. To the bay.

No.

No.

No.

I didn't want to go.

Not now. Not ever again.

No.

I tried to fight, to struggle free and run and escape. But I couldn't break from his grip. He was too strong. He lifted me by my arms and tucked me into the bay headfirst.

No.

It was comfortable and warm. They had lined the inside with soft blankets. It was comfortable, but I couldn't be comforted. No.

The warmth brought me sickness. It was happening again.

No.

No. I didn't want to. No.

I tried to get out.

But the man grabbed me, flipped me around, and then strapped my body down, one belt at a time.

No.

It was too tight.

I couldn't breathe.

No.

He put his hand on my forehead and pushed my neck back, so it was flat against the rear of the bay.

No.

No. No. No.

"P-Pl..." I tried to speak.

But I was crying. I was sobbing too hard to take in air.

No.

The other man was still typing on the control panel. He was activating the bay. I could hear it whirring below me, starting up.

no

"Plea... please..." I was able to force a word out.

I couldn't think

I felt a jolt in my neck. And then two, three, and more--a series of stabbing pricks rolled up and down the back of my head. My vision was going foggy.

I couldn't

no

no, please, no no no

no

not again

please

"Clear." The man at the controls spoke.

The one standing over me released my forehead, and I was stuck in place. I couldn't move my neck.

"And engage." He said.

my head was on fire

and

the room was on fire

and

no, the room was gone

and

I wasn't in a room

and

I was in a white flower.

like so many times before, I remembered the place I always stood as soon as I stood there again, I remembered the way it always was as soon as it was that way again

again

the white flower

again

and it blossomed, spreading wider than my vision, spiraling its infinite multitudes of petals in every direction, in every shape, in every inch of space, warming me and cooling me and reminding me of who I am

who I was and who I always will be

I had spent so long fighting against it

but in

end the though

and the why

I embraced

the

light

317:

only

then

could my eyes be cleansed of the filth

and

only

then

could my hands be freed from the web

and when they raised me

oh, how they raised me up

believing in their perfect pedestrian pieties

...how they raised me...

though not onto pillars

no, it was onto nothing. into nothing.

but when they raised me

I could see, from my hoisted vantage

all the world in its crinkled map-like layout

with its near acid-washed stains in vomit colored patterns

and its broken walls and doors around a hole-filled, abscess-ridden core

I knew then

feeling the tingling tumble of ever-shifting, translating souls within

that

It wasn't me.

and looking back,

I had felt guilt every day I breathed air
for events I thought I orchestrated
but only after my lungs were crumbled to dust
and the air was no longer flowing
and the machine had taken me as its own again
could I realize

It was never me.

was this feeling

p e a c e ?

or just as close as I could get?

318:

I tightened my grip on the bloodslick broom handle, stuck staring at the ordinary double doors before me. There was an alarm blaring from my belt. Batteries were running low. I was running out of time

before that final, solemn beep, and the inevitable, sudden loss of sensation below my waist. I had to be quick.

I had to find Jacob.

I pushed through the doors and ran, back into the main auditorium, disturbing the quiet with pounding footfalls, moving as fast as I could in the cluttered space. I needed to get across, back to the corner of the room, where the old woman had been perched on her chair.

As I ran, I noticed something odd. The beds and tables and piles of junk were all still present, but everyone was gone.

Over a hundred people--innocents, scavengers, survivors--somehow just up and vanished.

I didn't expect that.

I spotted my cot as I ran by, right next to Jacob's; all our things were missing.

And then I reached the spot--where she sat, where I was grabbed. Her chair was gone, but the door behind it was open.

They must've taken us through that door before. It led to the jail cells, I could feel it. And Jacob was probably still back there.

I approached the door.

There was a noise slipping from the other side, carried on the strange, cool wind. It sounded like someone was crying or breathing heavily. Was that Jacob? I couldn't tell.

A voice called out--a whisper behind the breathing.

"Cidium." It said.

I took a deep breath, still ignoring the siren blaring from my belt, trying my best to steel myself, and then stepped beyond the threshold.

319:

the white flower,
the ever tightening spiral,
the light of a thousand suns,
and more heat and pain and suffering and joy and
love--real, aching, lifelong love--than conceivable by mortal men,
altogether forming a force against me,
an unrelenting force,
--as it packs itself down into a fraction of an instant--
a force unknown, before and since,
a force that

cleanses

all things

to dust.

320:

I tossed Eoghan's letter to the floor, pulled a blank sheet from my desk, and rolled it through the typewriter.

Philip had been good for ten years. I admit he has long maintained a tendency for absent-mindedness, and may not always produce the best solutions, but I've imparted to him everything I know, and it's clear that he paid attention. His actions over so many years have proven his competence, and I trust him wholeheartedly. With my team, and with my life.

Philip is good.

Medy was, is, and always will be the very best of us. I never had to worry about her capability or her skills, but, for a while, I was concerned with her confidence in her work, and her habit of forming quick emotional attachments with patients. Looking at her now, watching her work, commanding chausms to her will and solving cases faster and more accurately than any other mentologist in the VRC, I realize I was wrong to ever worry. She came into it quite well.

Medy is good.

I wish I could say the same for Harold. He never should have been cleared for entry, and that entire situation... I regret all of it. But I hope he learned from his experience with us, and I hope he's well. I should like to visit him someday, wherever he is.

As for the rest of the team--I think they'll do fine without me.

I've seen them work.

I know the automaton-like efficiency of the machine Eoghan created, sick and monstrous as it is.

Yes, they'll do just fine without me.

Then that's it--

all my ducks, porcelain, hand-painted, and prettied as they could be, were positioned side-to-side in a perfectly symmetrical line.

Just this one thing left to do.

I checked my watch.

The big hand was on four, and the little hand was on a number I had never seen there before--eighty-three.

It was four eighty-three?

I looked again.

The big hand was on eight, and the little hand was just before the nine.

Eight forty-three.

Right. I was seeing things.

When did I sleep last? I needed to go to bed. But one thing at a time.

I touched the keys of the typewriter, positioned the head, and began to type.

**You ask me this now? After how long? After how many died?
After you knew it all for so long? Is this your attempt
to forge some paper-trail proof to back up your ridiculous
claims of innocence?**

**If the only answer is another question, why bother to
learn how to speak at all?**

**I don't know. All I know is that I won't take the blame
for your mistakes anymore.**

**Yes. I knew of John Chambers and his inevitable slide into
madness. I knew of every drop you squeezed from him. I
knew of every stop you pulled out to make sure he could
have his chausms, even after so many warning signs and red
flags. He never should've strapped into a chassis. I told
you that day one.**

**But you wouldn't hear it. Any of it. You had to have his
money. The blame for John Chambers death rests solely on
your shoulders. But you and I both know he's just a drop
in an ocean.**

**I've always said that there is no correct way to
interpret the universe.**

There is only you.

321:

I found him. His hallway was abandoned, just like the rest of this place, but he was there, alive and alone.

After the first few raving zealots I encountered downstairs, I hadn't seen a soul. I didn't know where everybody was, or why they left, but I didn't care--in fact, I was kind of thankful for it.

Because I found him.

Jacob was barely awake, leaning against the wall of his cell, damp with cold sweat and covered in cuts and bruises.

"Hey." I touched his face.

He looked up at me with foggy eyes, but even through the fog they were shining--smiling at me.

"Max. Hey yourself." He smiled for real.

"Can you get up? Are you hurt?"

"Eh."

He pulled a knee in and pushed his back flat against the wall, struggling to shimmy up to his feet. I grabbed his arm and pulled, and he stumbled forward.

"So far, so good." He breathed.

"Good. Let's go."

I slung his arm over my shoulder and moved to the door of the cell.

"What's that beeping?" He asked.

"Belt. Batteries are low."

"Oh."

As if on cue, the beeping lowered in pitch, warbling slightly, and then faded away entirely. And with it went the feeling in my legs.

My battery died

and I fell.

322:

The sharp-toothed mouth of Talgua cave loomed into view--a black, spike-framed hole spiraling down into the earth.

My chest shook with each shuddering pump of my heart, leading my fingers to curl and quiver on their own.

I had been nervous in my life. Very nervous, almost every day, for as long as I could remember. But nothing compared to this--not even when I strapped into a chassis to enter chaotic space for the first time. Or when I had to force extract a high-risk child with a ninety percent mortality probability, alone, during an ever-shrinking window of opportunity. Or when I sat by my dying wife as her life faded away, hoping with every passing second that the surgery would miraculously take hold and bring her back.

No, this was somehow worse than the worst. It was something else entirely--my most important act, maybe.

It took me a while to lumber up the cragged steps to the cave, and so I had a good stretch to think on my plan. On my actions.

I made so many mistakes. So many. And no matter the intentions I felt at the time, there would be no denying it now. Results are loud. Regardless of the steps I took to make things better, or the battles I fought for equality and liberty, or the sacrifices I made to help my fellow human beings, the results always shout louder.

We built an empire of madness.

A beautiful, sprawling, ingenious, terrifying monstrosity.

And I was going to tear it apart.

I reached the top of the steps and stared into the mouth of the cave. A damp, musty wind blew from within. I remember standing in this exact spot, smelling that same musk on a damp breeze, nearly fifty years ago.

All that I built...

I was going to break it to pieces.

I tossed my hammer up and tried to catch it, but held my hand in the wrong spot, missed completely, and watched it tumble down the rocks behind me.

Well, I was going to *try*.

P323:

CURTAINS

So long since we came, and still, we promenade

we prey

we gorge

so long, and so long, and so long still
on the flesh

who will be,

who are,

who were drawn up with misty-eyed madness, hellbent on contemplating
the broken handles to doors that never opened

that maybe never existed at all

What cradles and coddles their faith

even when the world they witness makes no secret of its true intentions?

I cannot say.

We cannot say.

And not for lack of knowing.

We know.

We always knew.

But they won't let us speak.

Them.

The immediate them.

The inevitable them.

The infinite them.

Them.

The beasts.

Always there,

before we knew it

pulling the lines to our backs--even mine, when I didn't really know who I was

This was all their plan.

Not mine.

I was just a player.

I was wrong to think...

I thought to move, and the pieces moved

but I was wrong to link that to me

to my thoughts and

to my desires and

to my will.

It was never me.

It was never us.

It was them.

Always them.

324:

We walked by a little girl no older than eight.

She was curled up in a ball on her back, facing the sky, dead. And she'd been there for quite a while--her clothes were plastered to the highway, and her skin was decayed to black paper, barely distinguishable from the pavement, but otherwise she was smooth and clean and fleshy, almost as if she was sleeping peacefully.

But she wasn't. Her eye sockets had been carved out--holes enlarged to the size of baseballs.

Did the brains do that? When did they start scooping eyes out?

And why?

I felt a cold chill and kept on.

There was a big green and yellow sign ahead--busted up, bent back on one leg, and twisted down so the words were sideways, but still clearly readable.

Welcome to Lakeview

And a few miles past that, farther down the car-cluttered road, I could see a bubble of lights against the darkening sky, and silhouetted buildings, towers, and homes.

Lakeview had power, and where there was power, there were people.

Maybe we were saved. Maybe we actually made it.

Maybe all the running and fighting was over for a while, if they'd take us in. But I didn't feel like it mattered anymore.

Because we weren't able to protect her.

Jacob saw the lights too, and then looked over and gave me a firm nod.

We hadn't talked since we woke up.

Since the red brain attacked us and took Elizabeth away.

And why would we?

What was there to say?

Nothing.

We kept walking.

325:

along the bricks

I felt a pinch on my neck, just above my shoulders.

It was sharp like a bee sting, and cold flooded from the spot, rippling through my back.

I lost focus. My eyes went blurry, but my mind was getting blurrier. I twisted my neck up and saw a foggy shape: it was a big red blob, hovering and dangling thin black lines.

I looked again, really trying, straining my eyes to pull any detail from the fog. My head was pounding over my right eye, pulsing waves of pain and vibrating my skull, but I was able to make something out below the shifting blurs.

It was the god-damned red brain. The one that took Elizabeth.

Those thin black lines were its tendrils

along the bricks

One such tendril was on me, wrapping tightly around my neck.

I fell to my back and rolled sideways, trying to break free and stand again. But my legs wouldn't listen. I watched them shake dramatically and then stop moving entirely.

My chest got tight. I exhaled, and my lungs seemed to freeze in place, shriveled and empty.

I couldn't breathe.

My hands were gripping at my throat, struggling with the tendril.

along the bricks

"Jacob!" I heard Max scream.

My eyes were drifting in and out of focus, peering up at the wall and the ceiling and something else, somewhere else.

No. I couldn't do anything.

"Fucking get off me!"

I was spasming, convulsing as my chest begged for air.

But my eyes kept looking at that wall. The red brick wall.

The tendril grew tighter.

Max kept screaming.

I couldn't help.

The shadow of the brain stretched out, spreading along the bricks

The tendril grew tighter.

No.

Max,

I'm sorry

The grout between the bricks was white and filled with little black dots. Holes?

The tendril grew tighter.

It was digging into my skin, burning, cutting off my blood

I couldn't th

think

the shadow was cascading

along the bricks

I couldn't thin k

the tendril grew tight er

it was all flashing white and black, wobbling in shimmering waves from the edges of my vision

my eyes were bulging, and then I couldn't see

but I knew the shadow was back there still, dancing along the bricks

I reached out

the tendril grew tight

I grabbed for Max

The

326:

A stench was on the wind, growing more potent the closer we got to Lakeview. It smelled like spoiled milk, and it was getting so bad that I had to breathe exclusively through my mouth.

We kept on meandering down the highway. It was jammed full with hundreds of scattered, abandoned cars, as well as more blackened corpses like the little girl we saw before. The bodies were all stuck to the ground, and their eye sockets had been carved out.

Eventually, we passed into town, and the highway shrunk down to a main thoroughfare.

The power was on.

The place was lit up.

But no one was home, save the corpses littering the streets. Every road, every corner, every car, and every glowing building we checked was empty. And it was dead quiet.

Jacob motioned to a large stone building before us.

“Town hall?”

At the front of the building was a squat, white shack, lit up like a casino. It had square, cross-beamed windows, and an angled green roof over its chained entry.

Above the dozens of *Community Lakeview* and *BUY LOCAL* fliers plastered to the wall was a thick grey sign that read **TOWN HALL**.

“Uh, yeah.” I said. “Probably.”

He jogged up the steps and pressed against a window, peering through the beams and dirty glass, and then glanced back.

“Empty.”

“Alright.” I sighed. “How the hell is the power still on?”

“I don’t know... generators?”

“But how could they be running? Everybody's dead.”

“Uh... big... generators?” He shrugged. “Maybe that's why it smells.”

I chuckled despite myself. I didn’t feel like laughing. I didn’t feel like smiling. I didn't feel like anything. I was numb.

But if anyone could cut through all the seizing, overwhelming dread and make me laugh--even now, after we fucked up so bad, and everything seemed pointless anyway--it would be Jacob.

"Yeah. Maybe. Or maybe somebody's still alive, somewhere."

"Yeah, maybe." He hopped off the steps, back to the street. "Well, let's keep going."

And we walked again, toward the center of town.

Toward the largest bubble of lights.

Toward the stench.

327:

I was being carried

or was I being carried?

I thought I was being carried,

but all I could know for sure was

more stabbing, throbbing pinches

like needles

more and more and more

all over my body,

but more than that--

all over my mind as well

and though I was in pain,

more pain than I ever felt,

even worse than when I lost Bosco, worse than when I lost my mom, worse than when I lost my home, worse than when I lost my life, worse than when I lost Mariana, worse than when I lost myself,

worse than all other things, worse than all the other bad things I felt in my life

that pain slowly sifted through,
falling to the rear, and then I began to learn--
each black knife slipping under my skin taught me something new
I learned why.

The excephalons were not at fault.

They only wanted to survive, like us.

They killed us for necessity. For food. For sport. For life.

we die like rabbits

and so we are afraid

but we have no reason for fear

because they feel no malicious intent

no anger

no hatred

only the will to survive

only the will to live

like us

just like us

I was stabbed again, and again, so many times I couldn't tell where the tendrils were hitting. My stomach? My back? My legs?

Like a current of water--a fast moving creek trickling around a big rock, I suddenly felt more about the thing below me--

the thing carrying me away--

it was **mommy**.

They called her **mommy**.

I couldn't see anymore, but

I could feel her--

I could feel her heavy body rolling below me, carrying me away

it was **mommy**. That was her name.

It all made sense.

The big, red brain was **mommy**.

328:

We made our way into the central plaza, heading toward a fat mound of something dark and wet, right in the middle of the intersection.

It was towering, nearly as high as the buildings around it, and sat surrounded by bodies--dozens--all blackened and stuck to the ground in a circle, staring up with wide, hollow sockets.

I crouched to get a closer look.

The mound was a pile of thousands of small, gelatinous blobs, and seemed to pulse, breathing with the wind. The smell was sickening. Each breath I took intensified the sour taste of rotten milk, so I filled my lungs and held my breath.

Slime oozed from the pile, collecting in a slick pool on the road. I dipped a finger in--the gunk was pink and stringy and undeniably the source of the smell. I could taste it.

"Well?" Jacob was standing behind, hesitant to come any closer.

I couldn't blame him.

"It's uh... it's nasty." I exhaled and spoke through pinched nostrils.

"Yeah. Yeah, I see that. But what is it?"

I wiped my hand on the road and then gingerly picked up one of the orbs.

Once, when I was a kid, I went with Uncle Max for a day at the beach. Being a stupid kid, I had a habit of grabbing anything and everything within my reach. And I grabbed a dead jellyfish that was just sitting there on the sand. It stung the crap out of me. I had to go to the hospital, and it ballooned into a whole ordeal. A whole day.

But this little orb in my hand reminded me of it. It felt exactly like that jellyfish.

I held it to the light and turned it around.

It was brown and yellow, and covered in a red web of veins. As it turned, a hazy blue dot shined out, catching the light.

And then I realized what it was.

"Oh." I muttered.

"What is it?"

"An answer to one question, at least."

I tossed it back on the pile.

"What?"

"We found the missing eyes."

329:

in the out,

the hours,

the wastes,

time flooded and didn't, dry and sopping,

twisting and straight,

elongated, but so very small.

In there,

out there,

I sensed myself,
consumed by the great dark, but not digested,
over distance,
and greater distance still,

I ... felt ...

I really felt.

I felt ... like ...

like ...

the filament in a bulb, existing to deliver its payload, living to produce its spark--
no, not exactly--

or instead, as a matter of perspective, as the right way to look at it--

existing to deliver its heart,

dying to produce its spark,

forever discarding unrecoverable parts of a whole, forever altering, crumbling down to
billions of raining, swirling particles, forever weathering, eroding away till nothing but
ash and burnt carbon remained,

forever,

but

though I felt it all again,

for once, I didn't mind,

because I could actually feel--

actually feel--

not as a false sensation, or a convoluted figment, or a discolored memory, but as a real,
true, undeniable feeling.

How long since I walked this--

no--

how long since I left that place--that place I left from? It was so long that I forgot I had
left--so long I forgot I was traveling--so long I forgot I was at all.

But now I remembered.

So, how much longer would I wait to return?

And would I return? I remembered thinking I wouldn't. Feeling I wouldn't. Not ever
again.

So, if I wouldn't... if I wouldn't return... couldn't... then,

There must have been a reason I was feeling again

There must have been a reason

There must have

There must

There.

I forgot I could see, but see I could. There, before me, a shimmering wall of deep, swirling, grey, standing infinitely tall in the black. Or was it standing despite the black?

I couldn't remember where I came from anymore, but I could very clearly see my destination.

It had been so long since my actions ran ripples over the fabric,

but to see the wall now brought it all cascading back, and with it came my mountain of corporeal folderal. At one time, I was human. At one time, I felt.

Just beyond that threshold, I would feel again.

Fabric would wrap around me, and I would know again.

But would it work?

I didn't have a body--not anymore. I couldn't be sure it would work.

But that didn't stop me last time.

I pressed against the wall, feeling the fog course around me. It stretched out, fighting me, rippling over my form. But it couldn't hold me for long. Not too long, no. I had more time than time itself. I could go for as long as it would take. Longer.

I pressed until I fell through. Was it seconds? Weeks? Years? Decades?

It didn't matter.

It gave way, and snapped back into shape as I slid through,

into a sky. A sky. I saw a sky.

A green, cloudless sky, peppered with black stars and a shining, broken blue moon that was shattered into a wild spray of cosmic dust and bits of rock. The wonder of a world. The smell of existence. The taste of life.

I was enamored. I hung there, overlooking the sky, which blanketed a violet mountain range spotted with towns and cities. Towns and cities. Filled with people. I was a person once.

Their homes were black against the majesty, jutting high into the air with pointed, curling roofs. I had a home once, too.

Oh, existence.

I remembered it all.

Except my name.

What was my name?

I knew someone's name, but there was a hole the back of my mind, and it seemed like all my good thoughts were slipping out behind me.

I knew a name...

Wilson.

Was that me?

No. I knew that name, but it wasn't me. I could never be Wilson.

Obviously.

So, who was I?

I was... I... was...

falling.

I fell.

330:

B T

M : *thd gihuj bdn jngs fg gudhag gve gvejgopwz?*

A : Yes. We have multiple strategies for excephalon containment.

M : *hgn hghy kf gidesw?*

A : Not at this time, no.

M : *kh pki hjg able to kijldnqs gufasqn jbg kfjbgmg? bd bnd ouyi ne abhe go gjnbty eonuhg troops.*

A : Correct. Eighty percent mobilized, with another fifteen in early prep. Nevada and the surrounding area have been secured. We're branching from there.

M : But not the entire state of Nevada. Are there any plans to free civilians trapped in isolation zones?

A : No. There are no plans to breach isolation zones.

M : Can you--

A : No. That's all. Till next Sunday, Miss Moore.

E T

331:

Why?

The thunder of shells and bullets was more mist than heavy rain.

The caustic vibration of electric currents simply fell into dust.

The heat of their inferno only shucked itself away.

But somehow...

we...

were dying?

were dead?

died?

Why?

How?

We felt this form spotted by holes we didn't remember—

holes no one made--

we felt it.

As life bled from one part or another,

as control over a hand or some odd figment dissolved,

as the soil soaked up our souls--

we felt it.

I felt it.

we were dead

they were dead

we were all dead

I was dead.
Despite my thinking, and my continued presence.
Despite the strides,
and the uncanny,
worldwide lengths I traveled.
Despite my being joined in this thing,
and the infinite power it possessed.
Despite it all.
Yes,
I was dead.

But that was nothing new.

332:

surely the loathsome cannot walk such roads--

I tossed the eye back on the mound.

"What?" Jacob glanced down at it.

"We found the missing eyes." I tried to smile.

A series of staggered cracks and white flashes filled the sky, reflecting off the buildings, and then it all froze in place--Jacob was an incandescent statue in the eerie white glow, forever holding a finger up, on the verge of speaking. My hands were glued to my pants, and my eyes were stuck staring forward, unblinking, at a suspended fly.

It only lasted a few seconds, but those seconds felt stretched, pulled out and made thin, wrapped around little eternities. Heat flushed my face and my lungs began to burn. I was torn, split, and shredded into nothing, overwhelmed by old feelings--old terror, from decades ago.

Because this happened to me before. In that ballroom on the Network. The Blank Room. When I got ejected.

The cracking happened once more, and the flash dimmed, and then faded away. I could move again. I fell to my knees, gasping for air and clutching my throat.

And then... what? Why did I fall? Why was I breathing so hard?

I felt a bitter feeling.

But I couldn't remember why.

I looked forward.

Beyond the mound of gelatinous eyes we met a fork in the road: right curved back into town, and left passed through a chained gate, under a wide archway, and led behind the hills to an extravagant, sprawling mansion.

I looked back at Jacob.

“Want to scale that fence?”

He sighed, “Not really.”

“Alright.”

We headed right.

Beyond the pile of seeping eyes was a twisted fork in the road: right seemed to curve back into town, but the way was blocked by an overturned bus. Left passed through an open gate, under a wide archway, and led behind the hills to an extravagant, sprawling mansion.

I looked back at Jacob.

“Want to scale that bus?”

He flattened his lips, “Not really.”

“Alright.”

We headed left.

--with the way so shrouded by dust from our passing.

333:

A colleague told me I was acting crazy.

It was a colleague to which I afford a great deal of respect.

But I'm not.

I'm fine.

I'm not acting crazy. I was once, for a long time. And it was really bad. Stasis really ruined me. I thought my life was completely over.

But this isn't like that. I'm not like that.

I'm the same as ever.

I'm totally fine.

Not crazy at all.

Same. The same.

I'd know if I was crazy.

They say you won't know when it happens, but I'd know,

because I'm different--

I've always been more in tune with that, I think,

or so I'd like to think,

and I've felt it so many times before, left standing in the destroyed aftermath of all my actions, that I think I'd know--

and sitting here, thinking these thoughts, I don't know that at all.

I don't know that I'm crazy.

What I know is that

it gets harder, every day, to keep moving forward. A hundred years, two hundred years, a thousand years, all bleed together, all feel the same. No matter what, I still can't sleep and I keep flashing back.

I keep seeing all these faces--

covered in old scars--

blood-toothed, grinning faces,

every time I close my eyes.

And they're all faces I've seen before.

The faces of the sacrificed.

The faces of the dead.

It sat with me wrong.

That colleague, that decorated, respected colleague, told me I was acting crazy.

He told me I was acting crazy, and it soured overnight.

So, I proved him a point.

I wasn't crazy.

If he wanted to tell me I was being crazy,

then I wanted to make sure he understood what that really meant.

334:

We walked left, through the open gate, along the winding path to the mansion.

The sky seemed to glow green, gleaming off the grass and trees, painting the dark field into a sickly, radiant ocean.

A sense fell over me like mist: I was uneasy, more than usual, and only feeling worse by the minute. It was an odd, invasive uneasiness, permeating every sight and sound, causing me to jump at even the limbs cracking under my boots.

But I had to keep on.

There were no other options.

We were quiet the whole way to the mansion doors. Jacob's head was hung low as we walked, staring down at the uneven path. I decided to try and cheer him up.

"What are the chances of this?" I asked.

He looked over, "What?"

I tried to smile.

"Like, you and me. Still being here. Alive. Always, no matter what. Like... what are the chances of this happening? What are the chances we could make it through so much?"

He frowned.

"Slim."

We walked right, around the curving road, back into town.

The sky seemed to glow red, spilling from the buildings and windows, reflecting off the road in a bright and dazzling display of wavering lines. It was a crimson aurora.

A sense fell over me like mist: I was at peace for once. It was an immediate, soothing peace, like I suddenly knew everything would be okay.

But I didn't know that.

I didn't know that at all.

Jacob laughed and shook his head.

"What are the chances of this?"

"What?" I looked over.

He was grinning.

"Like, you and me. Being here. Being alive. No matter what, we always seem to make it. And it's always us. Like... how? What are the chances of that?"

I smiled.

"Fifty-fifty."

335:

For the life of me, I cannot figure out how a gaggle of Honduran farmers would suddenly take to the principle of karma, nearly overnight, without any outside influence or intervention.

But here we are. A group of farmers wrote up an entire religion regarding karmic dirt, karmic fields, the seven truths, and so on, in their own wording, in a very short period of time. It's a near-replication, almost to the letter, of Jain ideology, which I didn't even know about until I checked the IDB.

That's intriguing to me, because very few folks in Catacamas have even seen an Indian in person, let alone been exposed to Indian religious beliefs like Jainism.

These select few Catacamas farmers, which we're lovingly calling "Jaindurans," believe that the soul is bound to a temporal existence via reincarnation, and that it must be liberated, through purification, to "escape" the cycle. What "purification" means, exactly, is still out for interpretation, because the only answers we get from them are drenched in spiritual nonsense and don't translate well.

One of the most interesting pieces of their religion is karmic dirt: particles that permeate all life--these are supposedly actual, physical particles of karma that are somehow invisible to us, yet existent all over the universe. These particles are drawn to souls as if by magnetism; to break it into the simplest components, they believe a good action attracts good karmic particles to the soul, and a bad action attracts bad. All these particles stick to us over time, coloring the pure white canvas of our souls, like taint, corruption, pollution of nature. Those colorings then dictate the transmigration and reincarnation process. They help you into other worlds: heavens, hells, other existences beyond this feeble one, blah, blah, whatever.

Obviously, that's all bullshit. There are no magic, invisible particles that stick to a made up ghost inside the human skeleton. In my mind, it's a fancy, dressed-up method of population control.

But it's interesting, nonetheless. I can't help but feel like our presence in Talgua, and the subsequent opening of the Genesis mating site, had some hand in this newfangled "Jainduran" enlightenment, but I have no proof of that aside from the peculiar timing.

And what if it did? What if they did learn all this karmic gobbledygook from a seeping hole in the ground?

What the hell does that mean?

Only time will tell, I guess.

336:

They say your webs can only constrict you
when age finally forces your legs to bend, and go weak and unsteady

The plaza was dotted with streetlight domes that couldn't quite cut through the intense crimson aurora from the sky, and were overtaken and drowned in it, glowing like little red suns. The town was calm. And a welcome relief.

We walked the brilliant, red roads, one after another, turning down every street in succession, meandering between all the empty buildings and cars as we looked for signs of people.

Jacob suddenly stopped and held up a hand, stopping me as well. He turned his neck and stared at a nearby wall, like he was listening intently.

I heard a popping noise. Like a loud clap, or a hand open-palm slapping someone's face. It sounded like that.

Another noise rang out, loud and rattling, and my eyes were drawn to what made it: just ahead, at the side of a squat white building, a metal door was being pulled closed. And then it slammed shut.

There was a sign above it.

It read EXIT ONLY.

The mansion interior was bathed in green candlelight--or was it just the lurid sky bleeding through the windows? Either way, it was green. Emerald, swampy, sickly green. And it wasn't helping to clear my unease. I felt a frigid tension in the air, beyond just the one with Jacob. Everything felt wrong.

We stepped through the darkened foyer and headed into the sprawling greeting hall, toward a wide set of stairs.

And then I heard a sucking noise.

I stopped, held up my hand, stopping Jacob as well, and pressed a finger to my lips. He nodded.

The sucking got louder and faster. Like a vacuum, or that tube dentists used to draw up all your spit. It sounded like that.

And then it faded away, and a golden orb appeared in the dark at the top of the stairs, drifting toward us. As it crested and tilted down, I was able to see it better: it was a seed. A glowing, golden walnut.

It passed under a big archway, slowly bobbing down the stairs, and then flew between us, and kept on until it slipped through the open doors.

I looked back to the archway.

There was a sign above it.

It read ENTRY ONLY.

yet

here I am already further,

entirely

leg

le ss,

in fact,

d

n

a

so early stuck

in the webbing.

337:

I learned a long time ago not to let old, tired husks dictate my existence. The ones who are now far past their prime, and mainly take to grasping for relevance, even as the grave builds up around them.

What do they know? What do they really know? Nothing. They know nothing but their own sad, scribbling, selfish delusions--their own pitiful, skewed fallacies, and pathetic, made-up rules. They refuse to know anything else.

I learned to take it all at face value. I learned to let them think they had me under the spell. I learned to silently nod and smile until their backs were turned.

And look at me now.

I'm one of them.

I'm an old, tired husk.

I'm far past my prime

grasping for relevance, even as the grave builds up around me.

And all I know is my own sad, scribbling, selfish delusions, my own pitiful, skewed fallacies, and my own pathetic, made-up rules.

Oh, how it goes. How it goes.

But I take solace in the differences between me and them. I'm not one of those wrinkled, ancient sacks of shit, and I never will be. Not exactly. Because they're dead now, and if some aren't yet, they will be. It's just a matter of time.

They're dead, and unlike me, they'll be dead forever--rotting down to sad, useless dust.

They're dead,

and I'm not.

They're dead,

and I won't be.

338:

Just before the white building where the door slammed closed, there was a big, wrinkled mass in the center of the street. It looked like a trash bag, all crumpled up in a wad, and caught the red light from the sky, glittering and shining like bloody snot.

We approached the black mass, crossed over one side, and moved to the center. It was laid out in a massive, oblong shape, and after a few seconds it dawned on me: it was the silhouette of a person--like a wet, black chalk outline with a wide red circle in the middle.

"What the hell is this?" Jacob crouched to look at the gunk.

"Look at the shape. Maybe one of those big black things died?"

"Ah. Maybe."

"Stay away from it!" A voice yelled.

From where?

I quickly swiveled and scanned around us. The street was still empty save the corpses and abandoned cars.

"It'll come back!" It yelled again.

"What? Where are you?" Jacob yelled back.

"In the bank. In front of you. Top floor."

I found him: on the top floor of the squat, white building, there was a man leaning from the corner window.

"Did you just close this door down here?" I asked.

"What?" He sounded confused.

"We came here because we saw a door close over there. To your building. Was that you?"

"Oh. Yeah. But just get out, okay? Get out of town. Just turn around and go back the way you came."

"What? Who the hell are you?" Jacob was getting irritated.

"It doesn't matter who I am. Just go! You don't want to be here. You don't. Listen to me--"

"No." I held up a hand. "Not yet. We came too far to just walk right back out, alright? Give us a minute, at least. Please. I'm Max. This is Jacob."

I waited for him to respond, but he didn't, and just kept staring down at us.

I went on, "Who are you? What the hell happened here? We need water. Power. We're looking for help. Anything you can spare."

"Yeah, man. Come on. At least tell us if we're wasting our time." Jacob added.

The man sighed.

"Well, I'm sorry. There's no help here, Max and Jacob. My name is Robert. I'd say it's nice to meet you, but... well." He waved his hand in a circle, motioning around us.

"Yeah. Anyway, welcome to Lakeview. Now, please. Please. Leave."

339:

I'm

a

live

but

how

could--

but how

could I be?

The voices quieted--

them, they, the others--

I heard their voices go dull,

and then fade away altogether,

and now I am no longer we, and I am,

after so long, I am completely alone again.

I can feel myself, my physical self, rotund and large,

and I can feel myself moving, rolling, chasing, feeding,

but who am I now? The others are gone, so who am I now?

My vision comes back in vibrating waves, coursing over where

my eyes were, showing me the world in tremulous red lined shapes.

And for all my unanswered questions, more important to me still is the

hunger that I feel. The urge I feel, to consume, to propagate, to propel us.

I will consume. I will propagate. I will propel. Hunger is a reminder of my goal.

I can feel my tendrils salivating at the thought. Oh, yes, I hunger.

But I fear not, for I see plenty.

There is meat. There is food. There is future.

340:

I couldn't decide.

Should we listen to the old man--Robert--heed his warning, and walk back out of Lakeview?

That thing was still out there, somewhere--the big, red brain that took Elizabeth. It would take us too. I had no doubt in my mind. If we encountered it again, one of us would die, or worse--because we couldn't be sure it was actually killing people.

We knew that eventually, yes, they ended up as eyeless corpses, proven by the thousands of dead bestrewing the dilapidated streets of Lakeview, but we couldn't know what happened to them before.

We didn't know why their eyes were carved out and stacked up in piles around town, or why they were in the fetal position facing the sky, or why so many wore wide, ear-to-ear smiles. We didn't know how they died.

We didn't know, and I didn't plan on finding out.

Plus, if we just gathered up and left now, then this whole trip would be for nothing. The only thing we gained so far were scars and bad feelings. No power. No food. No water. No weapons. No vehicles. Nothing. My batteries wouldn't last much longer, and we hadn't eaten since a day out from the flutist's shack.

If we left, we'd be wandering back into the desert without any food or water or power. We'd be wandering until we found our graves.

No, we couldn't leave.

Not yet.

"Robert." I looked up at the window.

He raised an eyebrow, "Yeah?"

"Streets are all lit up. Most places have power."

"Right."

"That's all I need. Power for my batteries."

"Alright... and? You can get it anywhere. Don't need me for that."

I paused for a moment and absently rubbed my lip. I didn't have a charger, and I wasn't keen on rifling through random buildings looking for one, but if we could find the source, then maybe I could work something out.

I looked up at him again.

“Do you know where the power's coming from?”

341:

External use controllers (Brainwave Control Units) are noninvasive, over the ear signal forwarder devices, best used for standard/noncritical applications, because they lack true, granulated control over the subject. They'll allow a certain top-level of autonomy, but subject initiated fear responses, internal triggers, unconscious fight-or-flight mechanisms, etc., will override any outside signals.

In a majority of situations, including ninety percent of deployments, that's not an issue and the BCU works fine. It does the job. It'll make a hesitant soldier go ahead and pull the trigger anyway. It'll let you deliver your commands in a zone where silence is mandatory. It'll ease nerves and offer a guiding hand to the unconfident. Most importantly, it'll free up the soldier's ever-jumbled mind, funneling focus on what matters most: the mission.

But when it comes to that last ten percent of deployments--the ones where shit really hits the fan, and only the bravest, strongest minds will suffice--the BCU falls apart. I've been up against injected super soldiers, monstrous genetic experiments, nuclear wolves, shadows, and hell, even a walking corpse or two, as well as so much more, and every time, without fail, the BCU commands are overridden and my men end up running off or failing to act in critical moments. That's one of the only downsides to using BCUs compared to the standard: "jarhead" volunteers. Volunteers tend to be a bit more... enthusiastic about their positions, but they're still free-thinkers. And that won't do.

So, that's where the implant comes in. It's a signal forwarder built for internal use, dubbed Headwind, implanted just above and behind the ear. Headwind signals work immediately, and at the highest priority. The only autonomous biological functions the Headwind can't control are basic--like when a soldier is so scared that he starts pissing himself. He'll still piss himself, but with the Headwind active, he won't run away. His arms will be unflinching. His eyes will be unblinking. And his mind will be unclouded.

Because it won't be his mind. It'll be mine.

-

You don't make "friends" with IBWs. IBWs can't be friends. They can hardly be considered people. If you're looking to control friends, I'd seek less intrusive alternatives, like isolation sphere therapy, or maybe a shared span, if they're willing participants in your control experiment.

342:

I lost count of how many stairwells we spiraled around as we descended, slowing making our way to the belly under Lakeview.

Down and

down and

down and

down and

I could feel it in my feet now--the rumble of an engine coursing up the stairwell. We were getting close to the source of the power.

"And if we can't just hook it up?" Jacob went on, seemingly stuck on the logistics.

"Then I guess it's back to plan A."

"We had a plan A? And what was that?"

I waited a beat and then slapped his back.

"Die in the desert." I smiled.

He laughed, "Right. How'd I forget?"

We rounded the final bend and hopped off the stairs into a staggeringly tall clearing. It seemed to extend forever, like an underground football stadium, and was so hot and muggy that my face immediately beaded up with sweat. There were dozens of dim, flickering bulbs along the walls, but they only did enough work to brighten a few feet around, and hardly cast any light to the center of the room.

Our boots sloshed as we walked; the ground was wet, spotted with puddles and small pools that caught the pink light in dull, wavy coronas, projecting lattice-like, wispy patterns that danced along the walls.

It formed an odd ambiance, reminding me of a pool room in an old hotel.

I felt the vibrations better than ever--it was more roar than rumble down here, shaking my chest with cacophonous echoes--but as I looked around, I couldn't see any generators, or engines, or anything at all in the vast, empty space, save a glowing lump in the center of the room.

We moved closer. It was a fat, undulating mass of red vines the size of a sideways phone booth, throbbing and pulsing bright pink lumps of light along its dozens of scattered tendrils, which ran away along the floor, to the walls, and up through the ceiling.

But what the hell was it?

I leaned down.

“Woah, hey. Don’t touch it.” Jacob warned.

“I’m not. I just want to see what the hell it is.”

“Why?”

“Look.” I pointed to a vine, which shuddered as it produced another pink bulge and carried it away, like a snake swallowing a glowing basketball.

“Maybe...” I whispered to myself.

“What? Maybe what?”

“Maybe I *should* touch it.”

“Woah. No. Do not. That may be the dumbest thing you have ever said, and I have an entire, multi-volume mental encyclopedia entitled ‘Dumb Shit Max Says: Through the Ages.’ This is going in volume seventy-one. Please, do not touch that.”

“But--”

I trailed off.

The lumps of light were passing by a shallow puddle, and each one spewed a burst of pink sparks over the surface as it went.

Maybe... maybe...

“Max? Why are you still debating this?” Jacob had that face.

That incredibly judgmental, ‘you’re going to kill yourself, you idiot,’ face. It was the face he made when I was being exceedingly headstrong and ignorant. But was I being ignorant?

I wrapped my hand around my chin, “Because this might be our answer.”

“How?”

“I think it’s hot. Like, live current. See the sparks?”

I pointed again to another lump, just as it passed over the small pool and leaked its sparks.

“Ah. Yes. Even more reason not to touch it.”

He stared at me.

“Right?” He asked.

I was lost in thought.

Maybe it was a reason *to* touch it.

“Max? Right? Getting electrocuted would be... uh... bad. Max? Hello?”

I was staring at the vines, still watching the pink lumps course away, spilling their tiny showers of sparks.

Maybe it could solve our problem...

“Max! Hey.” He snapped his fingers.

“Right.” I looked up at him. “Yes. It would be bad. But let’s try this. Here--”

I dipped my hand in my bag and pulled out a battery.

“This one is dead. I’m going to press the leads against it. See what happens.”

“Okay.” Jacob looked uneasy. “And what’s the fallback, in case a tentacle comes to life and slaps us to death?”

“Well, then, I guess we’re not gonna get to die in the desert like we always wanted.”

“Oh, bummer.” He gave a weak grin.

I clicked the button on the battery to enable its display, and the screen lit up, showing the charge level at two percent.

I held it over the vine nearest me.

“Ready?” I glanced over.

He was biting his lip and furrowing his brow, staring down at the vine, obviously nervous.

“Hey, it’ll be cool.” I put a hand on his shoulder. “Worst case scenario the battery doesn’t work anymore.”

“No. Not true. Worst case scenario is we both rip our fucking eyes out for no reason.”

“Okay, sure, yeah. That’s the worst case. But we won’t. We’ll be fine. I hope. Let me know if you feel like ripping your eyes out, I guess. Ready?”

He hesitated, took a sharp breath, and then gave a firm nod.

I gripped the battery with both hands, held it just a few inches over the vine, and then pushed.

The leads hit the vine just as a lump passed by. There was a pop, and a flash of pink and orange, and a sharp jolt up both my arms.

And then I was flying backwards.

343:

more

I need more

I can't see like I

Like I ... did I see?

Have I ever really seen?

Not like this, no. Not like this.

I need more. I need to see more.

I need to feel more. Know more. Be more.

The meat isn't just meat. It's tricky and smart.

It's scared, and it runs away, and it hides. The meat.

But I have a way to see now. I know a way to see more.

The meat can see. Their eyes catch the light, and then they see.

With those--oh, with those, I can see again. I can see more. More.

More than just red shapes. More than just a dim waver of light. More.

I have a plan. I will draw them. Like flies. Moths. Animals to the trough.

I will stay here and I will draw them--

their weakness is their strength--

and they will come, I know.

And then I will see

more

THE 7-FACED END

344:

DEATH DAY

The cave was quiet, but my mind was deafening.

Harold. Zeinhaert. Medy.

Philip.

Catherine.

Everyone.

I thought of them as I looked down. I remembered each of their faces.

The connection point thrummed just below me--a cup of thick steel was riveted down to the gemstone floor, pulsing and shaking its heavy cable line as it pulled from the font of power.

The cable was warm to the touch.

It was the main artery, drawing from the heart and splitting its blood across the infinitely branching veins of the Network.

Just the place I needed.

I took up a steel spike and shoved it beneath the edge of the cup, positioned it directly against a rivet, and pulled the hammer from my belt.

I lined it up and began to pound.

Hit after hit after hit.

I counted each time my shoulder fell forward, as the hammer clanked against the spike. Eight hits, and then nine, and then ten. Fifteen. Twenty. Twenty-eight. It took twenty-eight swings before the rivet head finally popped free and clunked to the floor.

My shirt was already damp with sweat.

I shimmied the spike over to the next rivet and began again. One. Two.

It took a good ten minutes and no less than twenty-five swings to bust it free. The third rivet took thirty-six. My shoulder was throbbing, already strained, and swollen to the touch, but I was making good progress. There were just a few rivets to go. Red wisps curled and crackled around the newly raised edge as it spilled its energy.

I felt a strange, drug-like intensity escalating in my head. Static. Weight. Tension. It was a pressure mounting behind my eyes, like a sinus headache.

I was being showered in Ko energy.

I could feel the waves passing over me--prodding at every molecule in my body. It would probably kill me if I kept going. It would probably scramble my mind. I knew that.

But it didn't matter.

This was more important than me.

I just had to finish.

I just had to keep swinging the hammer.

Hit after hit after hit.

Twenty-nine. Thirty. Thirty-one. Pop. Clunk.

And then again. One. Two.

I cursed myself for not bringing water. The cave was sweltering. Distribution units, current stabilizers, and various other electrical machines clogged up the ossuary, all venting their hot exhaust. I was drenched in sweat now--my shirt and pants were soaked through, sticking to me as I worked.

But I was closer. Closer. Closer.

Each swing of the hammer brought me closer.

Three rivets left.

Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Pop. Clunk.

And then two rivets.

Hit after hit after hit. Pop. Clunk.

And then there was one. The easiest one. The cup was completely detached, hanging back and arcing vibrant red energy from the hole--from the spiraling vortex below. My head was searing now.

"What the hell?" A voice called from behind.

I turned, but I already knew it was Eoghan. Despite the care I took in arriving unnoticed, I still had a nagging feeling this whole time--a gnawing itch that somehow, he would find out.

And here he was.

But he wasn't flanked by his usual posse of IBWs.

He was alone.

Maybe I still had a chance.

"I'm sorry, Eoghan."

"No. I'm sorry. I'm the one who's sorry. I'm sorry for helping you. I'm sorry for giving you so much. I'm sorry for trusting you. I'm sorry I didn't kill you fifty years ago."

He drew his revolver.

No. I wouldn't let him.

No time to think.

I ran, curving to his left, trying to throw off his aim. He raised the gun and I kicked forward, passing in front of the barrel. He fired just as I fell into him, and then we tumbled.

The bullet hit me. I knew it hit me. I felt it.

We were spinning. My eyes blurred, and all I could focus on was the sickly smell of Eoghan's sweat and spit. My tools clattered away in the tumult, falling from my belt, and the gun slipped from his hand, pulled into the spinning cave around us.

We hit the ground and flipped over, and then he was on my chest, frothing like a dog, clambering to get his fingers around my throat.

I was barely holding him back, but my hands were growing weak. I couldn't fight him forever.

His knee dug into my hip and my leg went numb. And then he reeled back punched me in the face, spraying white over my vision. He paused for a second, and then hit me again. And again. And again. Each brought a bright splash of pain--the kind that takes you out for a moment, where your sight goes dim and the throbbing, immense pain is all you can focus on.

The world faded away. It was just me and his fist.

He kept on.

I was going numb.

Hit after hit after hit.

Everything was going numb.

And then he just stopped. Ten hits later? A hundred? He stopped and stood over me, panting heavily. I could see my blood dripping from his hand.

"Idiot." He breathed.

I lay spread on the floor, waiting for the shock to trickle free so I could welcome all the new throbbing pain. My lips were warm and wet. I couldn't tell where the blood came from, but I knew there was a lot of it.

Pain was still firing up my arm. I groggily glanced down at my wrist.

My watch was gone, replaced with a deep, oozing cut. The bullet. It must've hit my watch. My heart sank. That was the last piece of Philip.

And now it was gone--scattered in busted bits across the cave floor.

Eoghan turned and walked to the connection point, keeping his gaze in my direction.

"All in, any. Respond." He radioed for backup.

"Repeat. All in, any. Respond."

Silence. His radio wasn't working.

"Dammit. Was that you too?"

"W-What?" My voice was weak. Hoarse.

"The god damned comms. You bring down a satellite or something you fucking lunatic?"

"Lunatic?" I chuckled and it sounded airy and weak, "No. That one's on you."

I spotted the gun in front of me, near the base of a broken stalagmite. It was between us, but I was closer.

I had to get it.

I had to.

"Just coincidence, then?" He scowled at me.

I pushed up and rested on my elbows, "Seems that way."

"Convenient."

"Again. Seems that way. Why would I lie? I've already dug my grave, Eoghan."

"Maybe you have." He was looking at the energy, but had his face pointed toward me.

Turn. I needed him to turn. Just turn all the way. Look at it.

"All in, any. Respond."

His head slowly shifted, almost unconsciously--against his will, until he was facing the other way, completely fixed on the energy.

Now.

I leapt up, firing sharp pains down my hip, and then fell and slid, stretching forward as far as my arm would go.

My fingers found the handle of the gun. It was cold, and a lot heavier than it looked. I realized that in all these years of knowing him, I never once held it. It was probably the same gun that killed so many people I knew. Even Zeinhaert, maybe.

I felt sick. This was his fault. Eoghan's.

I didn't want to shoot him, but he gave me no choice. He always took my choice.

I checked the wheel--there were five bullets left--and then pushed up from the ground, stumbled forward, and pointed the gun at his back.

He turned to me.

"Oh--what?" His eyes grew wide, and then he grinned.

I took a step, arm leveled, unflinching.

"Here's what's happening, Eoghan--"

"No, no no." He moved closer. "You don't get to tell me what's--"

"I'm holding a gun. I get to do whatever I want."

He stopped and held up his hands.

"This was just a slap on the wrist, Wilson. I wasn't going to kill you. Maybe some solitary. Maybe a transceiver, I don't know. But even now, I wasn't going to kill you. And then after everything I've done, you'd betray me? After all that I've given you?"

"Betray you? You weren't going to kill me? What the hell are you talking about? You just tried to shoot me! You're a murderer. You're a monster. And apparently, you're completely insane. I didn't betray you. You betrayed my expectations of your capability. You betrayed the people you decided to govern, for no discernible reason, I might add, other than to have a gaggle of folks to parade around in front of like a child flaunting his toys. Except they weren't toys, were they, Eoghan? They were guns. And bioweapons. And countless, unbelievable technologies that were meant to advance--"

He charged at me, straight forward. But he was far enough away that I had plenty of time.

I pulled back my index finger, having to squeeze the trigger a lot harder than I expected. It took all my strength, but it gave way.

The gun fired. It boomed in the cramped cave, overtaking everything, leaving my ears ringing. He jerked back and lowered his head.

There was a hole--a gaping hole right through his chest. He looked me in the eyes and began to scream, but not in pain. It was a raging, hate-filled scream--guttural and animalistic and terrifying. He took another step toward me. I pointed the revolver behind him, at the connection point.

"W-Wilson." His voice was pained. "Give me my fucking gun."

He fought through every word.

"Give you your gun? What? Do you even hear yourself?"

I laughed in his face. He was dead and he didn't even know it. It felt good, and I really hadn't expected that. I felt good. After so many years.

I felt good.

I pulled the trigger and fired again, and the connection point exploded, spewing vibrant energy around the cave. The cable reared up like a snake, thrown by the force of the blast, and then slammed into a current stabilizer and tumbled to the ground, still arcing bright red current.

The intensity in my head was unbearable now--that pressure behind my eyes. Staticky crackling, like bones, like bubbles, rapidly snapped and popped inside my skull. The arcing current flickered and shook a bit, growing loose and unstable.

"Wilson. Give it to me."

"Look at yourself." I lowered the gun. "Give up. I'm sorry. It's over."

"No, it's not." He breathed.

"You're dying. It's over."

"NO, IT IS NOT! IT IS NOT OVER!"

He screamed. Belted. Wailed. His voice was inhuman.

"Think about everyone you've killed. Everyone who's dead because of you. This is what you get. For Catherine. For Philip. For Medy. For Zeinhaert. For Marcus. For Benedict. For George. For Sarah. For Gillian. For Carl. For his father. For so many names I don't have the luxury of remembering. This is what you get, Eoghan, for the world you created."

He fell to his knees, but his face was grimacing, twisted up with rage he couldn't release. He was still fighting, even now, at the end, when his fists couldn't swing anymore--when he couldn't even stand.

I dropped the gun and walked to the mouth of the ossuary.

"Wilson..."

He spoke in a harsh, almost silent whisper. I looked back.

"What?"

"Why did you do this to me?"

Even now, he refused to take responsibility.

He refused to see the truth.

He refused to answer for his actions.

“I feel as if I’m explaining things to a child.”

“Why, Wilson?” He coughed, splattering blood down his shirt, dripping on the gem floor.

The arcing current grew erratic, swinging in large, crackly ropes that fizzled and gradually tore apart, dissolving into the air.

Finally. The connection was breaking.

Eoghan fell forward, still struggling, scrambling to stand. To take back control. To kill me. To get his way.

But he couldn’t.

Not anymore.

“You deserve this.” I said.

“All of it. I hope you burn in hell.”

345:

RUB AWAY THE SLEEP EYE

The catastrophe is outside, above, behind walls and ceilings and protective shells,
beyond so many layered bubbles, away from me--

away--

far away.

It's the sound of muffled gunfire, and bombs from heaven quietly peppering land that
was already destroyed. It's the final insult to a dead species and a scourge against the
pitiful few of them left alive.

But I am protected from all that.

I am far away.

I am safe.

I am safe, but alone.

There is no one here but me anymore.

There is no one here but me, and the sound of my thoughts, and my breathing, and the
black.

There is so much black.

I miss the clown. The woman. The soldiers.

I miss Dr. Payne, the cat.

I miss everything.

I wish I had company.

I wish I had life.

I wish I had--

Like lightning, I saw a quick flash. It was a flash of white. I saw it.

After so long staring into uninterrupted black, I saw a flash of white.

After so long, I saw something else.

After so long, did I really see something else?

It happened again.

Again? Another flash of white?

Another flash of white.

And then another.

This one was so bright that it stayed for longer--so long that it didn't go away at all.

Or maybe it ruined my eyes and now I would always see a flash of white.

No.

It didn't ruin my eyes, and it wasn't just a flash of white. It was more.

There was detail in it--blurry, but growing clearer.

I made out a light grey thing against the white. It was lines--

a series of lines running up and down and left and right.

It was a grid. A tiled pattern. And it was covered in dots.

It was a dotted, tiled pattern, stretching forever in every direction.

No.

It was a dotted, tiled pattern, stopping at a nearby wall in every direction.

A ceiling.

I was looking at a ceiling?

"Checksum good."

A voice spoke.

Was I speaking?

No.

It was someone else. Someone was here. Who?

"Partitions good. Separation good. Operative consciousness active. Ready for AP1."

The voice paused and I could hear a whining, electronic chirping from behind my head.

"D98781. You're awake. Lean up."

I blinked. I was...

I was awake?

"Unresponsive. AP2."

Something pinched my shoulder. It hurt.

And then I was pulled up. I was sitting in a room.

My head swam. I was so sleepy. I wanted to sleep.

"D98781. Respond."

Respond?

Respond.

“Uh--” I tried.

“Inconclusive. Retry. D98781. Respond.”

Respond. Respond. I knew that.

Respond.

“Yes.” I did.

My eyes adjusted, and I saw where the voice was coming from: a person in a suit was standing over my bed. The suit was big and puffy with a long black visor, and it looked red, but maybe it was being colored by the dim red light. Maybe it was really white. Or yellow.

“New directive.” The suited person spoke again. “Catalogue, transcribe, and distribute, zero-seven-zero-nine. Understand.”

I felt a shift. The numbers hung in my ears, ringing and elongating into reverberating echoes. The back of my neck began to burn.

Directive zero-seven-zero-nine. Catalogue. Transcribe. Distribute.

I understood.

“I understand.”

“AP2 complete. Subject initiated. Suggestion: confirm and send.”

A low beep rang out, and then another voice filled the room.

“Confirmed. Well done, Redd. Suggestion accepted. We’ll move to relocate. Understand.”

“I understand.” The suited figure responded.

Redd. The suited person’s name was Redd.

Redd grabbed my shoulders.

“D98781, can you move? Bend your legs.”

I tried to bend my legs. They were stiff and sore but slowly moved toward me, bending in until they looked like triangles, just like I wanted.

“I think so.” I said.

“Try.”

Redd pulled me up and lifted me up to the edge. I slid off and landed on the floor, almost crumpling under my weight.

But I didn’t crumple. I stood--I had to slouch a bit, but I stood. I could stand.

“Follow.”

Redd walked off.

I took a step. The tile was cold under my bare feet--so cold it burned me. But I was still standing. I took another step, and then another. I had to lean on the wall for balance, and my legs were shaky, but it was working. I was walking.

I followed behind Redd, focusing on keeping my balance and maintaining my steps.

We walked for a long time through a long hallway. Redd was moving too quickly for me at first, but after a few minutes the motions got easier, and I was able to quicken my pace. My knees popped with every step down, and my ankles were creaky and sore, but I was following.

I followed.

And we walked for a long time still, though more long hallways. We turned sometimes, to the left or to the right, and at one point we descended a treacherous staircase, and I had to carefully climb down sideways.

And we walked.

For so long. I didn't know how long. Long.

We came to another, smaller set of tall stairs, only three steps high. Redd climbed up and then stopped and turned, facing a blue door.

I clambered up and slouched against the wall. I was thankful for stopping. My legs were so sore.

“CTDP1. We're beginning relocation. Do you understand, D98781?”

Relocation.

I understood.

“I understand.”

Redd pressed a button near the door and it slid open.

The room behind had a big black circle on the floor with a black folding chair in the middle.

“Sit.”

I moved to the chair and sat down, and noticed I was facing another black circle on the wall. It was the same size as the one on the floor.

The chair was uncomfortable.

“And, go.”

As Redd spoke, something began to whirl below me. Was it the chair?

The circle in front of me began to glow blue, and then recessed into the wall like a window.

“Ready, D98781?”

Ready.

I was ready.

“Yes.”

“We’re go for RP.”

I heard the same low-pitched beep from before, and the other voice filled the small chamber.

“Confirmed. We’re aimed at adjacency 78741252. Good spot. It’ll make a nice home, Harold. Whenever you’re ready, Redd.”

Harold? Was the voice talking to me?

Did the voice call me Harold?

Harold.

I remembered Harold. I used to be Harold.

And then I remembered everything. I remembered Wilson and Philip and Medy. I remembered my job at the VRC. But that wasn’t all--there was more.

I remembered things I never knew. I remembered Marcus and Gillian and Arthur. I remembered Max and Jacob and Elizabeth. I remembered Zeinhaert, Gwendolyn, Reggie, Eoghan, Mr. Niu, Rebecca, Haggio, Emperador, Musashi, and so many more names and faces and lives. Everything became clear to me, all at once. Everything.

Redd held up a thumb, “On count for RP.”

The blue circle began to waver and sink, forming a bright tunnel that fell in and away, rolling back in clouds of blue smoke.

“Three. Two. One.” Redd counted down.

The tunnel grew from the wall, extending through the room, reaching out, and then bent forward and lowered around me until it met the circle on the floor. I was in a blue, cloudy tube. And then I began to stretch--

“Active.” I barely heard Redd’s voice.

It was layered, split into different lines, lacing up, weaving into what sounded like a voice. But it was so much more. I could hear every line, separate and altogether, and they were all so very beautiful--

and then I began to see them--shaking, trembling, colorful, beautiful lines--

and then I was going--

and then I was gone--

and then I was far--

far away.

346:

IN PINK, IN GOLD

Musashi held a flower up to the sky. It had light pink petals and a bright yellow stem. The twin suns made it glow in their twilight.

It got caught on an upward draft and twisted free from his fingers, flowing over the edge of the cliff and down, cascading in a lazy spiral toward the golden sea.

I watched as the flower met the soft waves. It landed gently, bobbed on the surface for a few seconds, and then dipped under--the pink faded away and disappeared.

I took a deep breath, smelling the salts and pollens on the breeze, and then closed my eyes, basking in the warmth of the red suns. This was nice.

After so long, this was nice.

I deserved something nice.

I heard a rustling noise and opened my eyes.

Musashi was digging through his sack, prepping a little firepit in the grass.

"Want to eat?" He smiled up at me.

"Yeah." I smiled back. "Let's eat."

347:

OLD AND BAD AND DEAD

He smelled like piss.

A rat.

A rat that crawled in from a dreg-hole, drenched and matted by shit and liquor. It was a wonder piss was all he smelled like, because he looked so much worse. Like a corpse. A sack of rotten meat.

“Get the hell out of here.” I kicked his shoes and one of the soles fell free, exposing a gnarled, dirty foot.

He moaned a bit and opened one eye, but quickly fell back into his stupor against the alley wall.

“You’ve got--” I checked my watch. “I’ll give you thirty seconds. You hear me? You have thirty seconds to get the fuck up.”

“Eh, aha. Good on... you...” He roused a bit and sat forward, but again, just fell back against the wall.

“Alright. Listen. I’m going to kill you. Do you want to die?”

“Can’t say I care.” He mumbled.

My heart skipped a beat.

“What?”

“Can... ca--” He sneezed loudly. “Can’t say I give a shit, dickhead. Fuck off.”

“Hey, listen to me.”

I grabbed his shirt and pulled him forward. My muscle memory was way ahead of me-- I had already drawn my revolver and pressed the barrel against his temple.

“Woah, hey--w-woah, man.” He held up his hands.

Even now his eyes were squinted and glassy. He had no idea where he was.

Did I really want to kill him?

He was so drunk he wouldn't even see it coming. He wouldn't even know what happened. This wouldn't be a lesson. It wouldn't be a message. It would be senseless.

Did I really want to do that?

Did I really want to kill a drunk old man?

I stared at him. He reminded me of someone.

That guy in that alley in Zhuō Yóu.

The guy that died--he hit his head and bled out. He didn't have to die.

I let him.

That was on me.

I let go of his shirt and slowly holstered my revolver.

"You can't come around here."

"Why not?" He looked up at me with those foggy, glassy eyes.

There was a nasty little smile on the corners of his lips. I tried to ignore it.

"Because this is my property. And I'm asking you nice to get the hell out of here. Don't make me ask you again, please. You already got more than you deserve. Now, get up before I change my mind."

He furrowed his brow in confusion, as if he just heard my tone for the first time.

"Why so hasty, man? You don't need this spot."

"I don't need--what? Listen to me. I own the land. I own the ground. It's mine. This spot is mine. You don't need this fucking spot. Go sleep on the dirt. Lay in the road. Fall off a cliff. I don't care. Just leave."

He stared at me for a moment, having an obviously rare moment of sobriety, and then grabbed a sack near his side.

"Fine, man. Fine."

He sloppily pushed up, making it into an entire, minute-long spectacle, and then stumbled away, off into the night. He almost tripped over the curb as he crossed the street.

I felt an itch--a burning.

I should've killed him.

348:

IN GREEN

He was dead.

Jacob was dead.

I kept returning to that thought--

as my feet carried me up the stairs, under the archway--

I zigged

and

zagged

around what I knew, if I knew anything else--

and only ever landed concretely on that.

It killed him, my only friend.

He was dead.

Jacob was dead.

I kept walking--

thinking that same thought--

circling, and revolving back to it in an endless cycle.

He was dead.

The breeze carried a high, wavering song.

Jacob was dead.

It was a beautiful song, and I knew it when I heard it.

I instantly recognized the melody. I had never heard it before, but I knew it was Mommy's song.

I walked forward, down so many hallways,

stumbling--

wandering--

sleeping--

until, finally,

I found the nest.

He was dead.

Dozens of golden seeds flowed and bobbed, hanging on the wind--

my brothers, my sisters, my siblings, still waiting for their hosts--
dancing and swirling in a golden tempest above the nest--
above the big, red brain.

So beautiful, Mommy sang to me,

Jacob was dead.

“Softly, quickly, softly, quickly--

Careful what you pack.

Open, weeping, open, weeping--

Never holding back.”

Mommy’s voice changed as the song went on. It grew deep and rugged.

He was dead.

It became Mommy’s real voice,

and I realized I knew it the whole time: Mommy was the father.

The life giver. The life taker. God? Mommy was a new kind of God.

I could feel it.

I could feel him.

He was old. So old.

So beautiful. So hurt. So alone.

He kept singing.

Jacob was dead.

“Only ever walking drastic steps,

Only ever breaking intersects,

Only ever waning times of day,

Only ever taking sight away.”

The song finished and a coldness bubbled through me.

I grew so sad.

He was dead.

I knew Mommy was probably right.

In thinking it over, everything seemed to point toward it.

I didn't have much of a choice.

Who was dead?

I stuck my hands into my sockets, careful to slide my thumbs under the center of each eye. They had to be intact.

It pinched a little, but it wasn't too bad. I got used to it, actually.

It felt kind of nice.

Someone was dead...

I tried to pull out, but my eyes were stuck on strands. The strands were strings holding me back. The strands were strings holding back progress.

I had to pull harder. The lines grew taught, and then stretched, and I began to laugh at the shuddering, swollen tingling flowing over my face.

The strands were almost there.

I couldn't remember who was dead.

They stretched more and more, growing so thin now. I could feel them extending to their breaking point. Almost there.

They were so thin. I laughed and laughed.

And then, with two sharp snaps, they finally gave way, and I pulled my eyes free.

Relief.

Rushing, immediate, warm relief.

That felt good. Yeah. That was nice.

This was nice.

But who was dead?

IN RED

He was laughing.

Jacob was laughing.

I bruised my shoulder, scraped the hell out of my arm, and landed hard on my elbow--maybe even sprained it--and he was just standing above me, laughing.

It took me a second to realize that I was laughing too. I almost forgot what it felt like--I couldn't even remember the last time I really, actually laughed.

"You okay?" He offered a hand.

I grabbed it, and he effortlessly pulled me up.

"I think--oh, man."

I glanced down at the battery in my hand. The display showed a full charge.

"It worked?" I turned it over in my hands. "I think it worked! Either that, or we broke it."

"You mean you broke it." Jacob teased. "But you're okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I'm gonna test it out."

I moved to the wall and plopped down, producing a slight splash and wetting the last remaining dry spot on my jeans.

The newly charged battery was warm in my hands. I stared at it for a moment while nervously thumbing the contact plates. There was always a chance for failure with technology, especially Institute technology, and I wasn't exactly comfortable with gambling on paralysis.

But it had to be done.

I had to try.

If it worked, then everything would be fine.

If it didn't work, and if it did something awful instead, like fry my belt...

then it wouldn't be the first time I got dealt a bad hand. I was good at crawling. It would suck, and I would hate every second, but I could do it.

And maybe I could find another belt. Probably not. But maybe. Either way, I'd definitely find a wheelchair somewhere. I'd manage.

Plus, I wasn't alone this time. I had--

"What's up?" Jacob noticed my hesitation.

"Ah, no--it's nothing."

I disengaged my battery and pulled it from my belt, which immediately fired cold oscillations down my legs and stole my feeling away.

The new battery slid in, clicked down with a satisfying snap, and whirred on. Warmth slowly trickled down my thighs, knees, and calves, followed by the painful tingle of pins and needles, and then I could feel again.

The battery wasn't broken. My belt didn't explode. It was working.

I jumped to my feet and put some weight on it.

"Yes. Fuck yes!" I did a dumb little dance. "One for the journal: electric vines are good. Who fucking knew, man?"

"Definitely not me."

"Okay. One problem solved." I rifled through my bag. "Only nine to go."

"Really?" Jacob raised an eyebrow. "You're gonna do it again?"

"I'd rather not. But it's free juice. And maybe we could do it together--like, you stand behind me and brace my back while I, uh, while I--"

"Slap at vines." Jacob interjected.

"Yes. While I do that. We'll charge them up and then we can go check out that garage thing."

"Garage thing?"

I pointed, "You see that? It looks like a garage, right?"

There was an opening at the far end of the room. It was tall and wide, taking up the entire wall, just like the entrance to a parking garage.

"Oh, yeah. It does. Alright, fine. Let's do it. But if we both go flying, I'm not helping with the rest."

We walked back to the center of the room and stood before the twisting, undulating mass of electrified vines. They were still shuddering and firing pink lumps along their tendrils, carrying bright, glowing balls up to the surface.

I dropped my bag to the floor, pulled another battery out, and got in position over a vine.

"Ready?" I looked back at Jacob.

He wrapped his arms around my waist and spread his legs, "Yep. Do a count or something."

"On one."

"Kay."

"Three, two, one!"

I lunged forward, slamming the battery against the vine just as a pink lump passed by. The battery flashed and the jolt hit me, tossing my arms away and throwing me back, but Jacob's grip didn't falter--it only got tighter. We didn't move an inch.

"I got you." He loosened a bit. "Good?"

"Yep. Good."

I tossed the charged battery in my bag and grabbed another.

"Alright, next. Three, two, one!"

I lunged forward.

We refilled the batteries like that, over and over, until we got through all nine. It took a few minutes, maybe half an hour, and my arms were going numb by the end, but it went surprisingly well.

I'd have power for months.

"I'm not used to stuff going so well." I tossed the last battery in my bag.

"Yeah okay, buddy. Don't jinx it."

"I'm just saying: no red brain all through town, nice old man, free juice. We got lucky here."

"And I'm just saying." He flattened his lips. "Don't jinx it."

"I'm not, I'm not. But we gotta celebrate the little victories, right?"

"I guess." He smiled.

I grabbed my bag and tightened it around my waist, and then scanned the area, checking for anything I might've dropped. The place was completely empty. Just puddles and shuddering vines.

"Alright. Let's go."

I led the way as we strolled to the other side of the room, splashing with every footstep. White, incandescent light spilled in from the opening in the wall, painting a big white rectangle on the ground. We crossed into it.

The opening was a ramp made from smooth concrete that led up to an open black gate, and then flattened into another large room. We climbed up the ramp and passed through the gate, and then I stopped.

It took a few seconds to comprehend what I was looking at. The ramp kept on running through, passing into the far wall, and continuing up.

But the room itself...

It didn't just look like a parking garage--it *was* a parking garage.

And every spot was occupied by a pristine, shining black truck. There were rows upon rows of brand-new trucks, all marked with the same bold, white lettering that read, 'INSTITUTE.'

It was a trove of Institute vehicles, completely untouched. Forgotten. Abandoned. For decades.

"Holy shit." I whispered.

"Wow. There must be a hundred." Jacob mused. "It's an Institute dealership."

"Dude. Jacob."

"What?" He looked over.

"Institute vehicles." I patted my bag. "Institute batteries."

"Oh." His eyes grew wide.

We ran to the closest truck, heading straight for the rear bay. I dropped my bag, slid the bay door open, and began inserting the batteries, one after another. My hands shook with excitement as I slotted the last one. It took six in all.

Three left for spares. Plenty.

I slid the bay door closed and shouldered my bag.

"I'll drive." Jacob grinned.

We circled around and hopped in the front. It smelled nice--like new leather and cloth and polish.

"New car smell." I pulled the passenger door closed.

"Yeah, it's a nice truck. But temper expectations, right? Let's see if it starts before we get all excited. How many times have we done this exact thing?"

"Oh, I know."

"And how many times has it worked?"

"Right, but how many times have we been in a parking garage full of brand new, mysteriously clean Institute trucks with six fully charged batteries? Like never. Ever. It's gonna start."

"Good point, I guess. Here goes."

Jacob hit the ignition button and the engine roared on.

“Little victories.” He shook his head. “Son of a bitch.”

349:

ONE STEP OUT OF BOONESBOROUGH

I fell--

through a green, cloudless sky dotted with black stars, plummeting toward a violet mountain range and its smattering of towns and cities. People.

I was a person once.

Their homes jutted high into the air--black, curling blobs against the hideous majesty.

I had a home once, too.

A shattered, blue moon took up most of the sky. It was beautiful, but it was wrong. Or maybe it wasn't wrong, but it definitely wasn't right. There was something off about it. About everything.

I fell.

And as I did, I remembered so much.

A coursing flow returned to me, stitched of my thoughts and memories, rebuilding structure I forgot existed. I remembered my job. Jobs were a concept I had completely forgotten. I had a job in my home. My home.

My name.

I remembered it. I was remembering everything.

I fell.

And as I did, the sky broke into two distinct shapes, both of which made themselves clear to me:

on the one, it was an empty, cloudless night--cold, and sad, and lonely.

On the other: the world was day, it was bright and warm and welcoming and full.

They strobed and flashed, each fighting for control.

The night sky was a melted, green, swirling mess of hot brown and black dots.

The day sky was soft and calm, colored red and orange with just the faintest tuft of purple.

As I fell, the skies merged. Green and red and brown and day and night melted down into a swirling miasma, into bubbling yellow dots that grew over the shaking, flashing skies, until it was all consumed.

And then everything was frozen in that sick, ugly yellow.

Not dark or light, or clean or dirty. In the middle. It was in the middle.

I hit the ground, stretched out from the impact, and then snapped back together.

I didn't feel anything at all.

Except,

my head was in a puddle.

The ground was wet and warm. I was on thick yellow dirt with sporadic patches of ordinary grass. It had been so long.

So long.

I curled my fingers in the dirt, feeling it smear and spread between. I heard the wing beats of a bug zipping by.

So long.

"Y'alright?" Somebody asked.

"Huh--" I looked up.

I was face to face with a short yellow mushroom that had a spinning globe on top of its head. No, the spinning globe **was** the top of its head. There were clouds and seas and continents--it was a frightfully realistic representation of a planet.

The mushroom itself had stubby little arms and legs, and wore human clothes over its porous yellow body--a striped, open shirt and blue jeans.

I sat up on the dirt, "Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm good. Thanks."

"Good. That was a crazy fall, man. Woulda turned me into mush, no doubt. I'm Yubu. What's your name?"

He stuck something out, and it took a moment of concentration to realize he was holding out his weird little arm.

Was he offering to shake my hand?

I pushed up from the ground, brushed myself off, and carefully grabbed it, not quite sure where to squeeze.

"Nice to meet you, Yubu. I'm uh... I'm Philip."

350:

BIRTH DAY

Zeinhaert folded the pamphlet together and tossed it to the table.

"Deplorable. Just despicable. A real, honest to God crime against humanity. This... I'm almost at a loss for words. I mean--you wrote this?"

He waved his hands dramatically as he spoke, conducting along to a whimsical musak only he could hear.

"Yes, with a team." I couldn't help but smile at his mannerisms, regardless of what he was actually saying.

"This is real. This is the real, hideous deal, Wilson. And the name you've given it conjures up Hesiod's Works and Days. Do you know it?"

"That's the one with Pandora?"

"Right." He squinted. "But it's not so much her loose jar that calls forth the allusion--it's that name. You're set on titling this project the Golden Age?"

"The name can be reworked, I don't mean to--"

"Oh, no. I love it. It's a wonderful name. 'And they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief.' It's a nice thought, even if it won't pass the board. But what you've shown me isn't golden at all. It's black. It's terrible."

"The plan has downsides, I admit. Too many. And I'm working on that, like I said. But I think if we start small, and document our progression, we can formulate a rigorous plan for a Network--"

He held up a finger, "You didn't let me finish. As I was saying, it's terrible. A horror story if I've ever read one. Downright dystopian. It's every age old cautionary tale: an unlearned hand turns the knob on the proverbial door to the other side, and on and on. Honestly, that pamphlet is one of the most terrifying things I've ever read."

He laced his fingers together and lowered an eyebrow.

"Well--" I began.

He cut me off, "But that's not to say I disagree with your projections, or that I think this isn't worthy of exploration. It's scary, yes, but it's also bewildering. Promising. This pamphlet could very well head the next chapter of human history, for good or ill, and I advise you trace your steps very carefully from here on out."

He paused and took a sip of water, and then leaned forward and flattened his hands against the table. A wild grin crept over his face.

"Because I'm in."

"You--what?"

I didn't think it would be that easy. I took weeks to prepare this proposal, tailoring datasets and finding an answer for every little question. I thought he'd find it abhorrent. I thought he'd want nothing to do with it. It was a long shot, after all.

"I see your position with the Institute. You need the infrastructure. You need the sites. But beyond that, you need the capital. I get it. Revolutions don't fund themselves. Same thing happened to NASA, except, well, the bastards went and destroyed the moon. Anyway, say no more. As I said, I'm in. I'll fund your Golden Age Network. My only caveat is that I'd like a piece of the pie. I want my own little chawsum--wait, am I saying that right?"

"Chausm." I said.

"Chausm. Yes. I want my own little chausm on your Network. That's all I ask."

I had another twenty pages of notes to go through, including an entire presentation on my ten year plan for safety and regulation.

But he didn't even care.

"Of course. I-I don't know what to say. I have a presentation on safety, if you'd like to--"

"No. Again, say no more, Wilson. I appreciate the gesture, but there's no need. We've known each other for a long time. I trust you. And I'm in. More prattling on may only change my mind. Let's see where this rabbit hole leads, shall we?"

He held out his hand.

After all my work and worry, it was just that easy.

I grabbed it.

an end

It feels like only yesterday that this coiled apotheosis began to unwind.
Like Wilson, I had a hard time finding my way.
And maybe it isn't so tightly taped back in all the places it should be.
Maybe too many greedy hands crowded the kettle, and maybe it spilled.
Or maybe my delusion extends even further than I realize--
and I'm not really writing this, because I'm still going at it.
Or maybe this is all in my head, and I never even wrote anything at all.
Oh, well.
I hope you found it worth your time.
Everyone says it, and nobody knows why:
Thanks for reading.

And as with every end, it's really more of a beginning to something new.

I can feel a hot wire shaking around every now and again, shuddering out screeching updates, shifting my partitions to new places. The world may be over, but, for some, the journey isn't.

Look out for . . .

the closet clerk's caducity

and

the neoteric pioneer

and

the many-headed pedagogue

and

the paresis of the lordling mage

and

the gifted grimalkin

We came a long way together.

Didn't we?

Or maybe we didn't. Maybe only I did.

Or maybe only you did.

Or it could be neither of us did.

And we're both still

just standing in place

back

where

we

started

order-fmc beyond

His hamburger tugged along behind, a kind of unctuous flesh orb, beholden to It's hunger.

U N - T R U T H S

read on at the understanding that each piece following this point is not true.

while I will agree to them having an ostensible nature, I must reinforce that these are complete fabrications.

I do not understand how they came to be.

penny save, penny earn

Eoghan, 1943 in Nazi Germany

Not clear enough.

I tried to wipe the lense with my sleeve, but I only succeeded in further smearing mud around.

I'd just have to use the IR. I pocketed the lense and returned to my prone position, hugging the rifle. I could feel mud up in my boxers.

There was a pop and the familiar roar of a truck engine. The caravan, shaking the ground and tearing a hole through the fog. Finally. I took aim at the head vehicle. It was one of those new Blitz models. Looked neat.

Followed by three tailers, all with a driver and passenger, and an Einheits escort. Couldn't tell which type. They all looked the same to me.

I could barely hear the combined roar of their engines through the rain.

They turned off the road, heading up the mud path to the compound. They'd hit the mine in forty meters.

Thirty.

Twenty.

The head vehicle's cab dipped a bit and then exploded, launching the truck up a few feet and tossing it's nose off the road. My count was a bit off.

The first tailer slammed into the burning truck and nearly flipped as it swerved. All the others were able to stop in spite of the mud. Damn. Hoped that would do more.

I aimed at the Einheits. The passenger was out, heading toward the wreck, but the driver reversed a bit and tried to go around. As he came up alongside the first tailer, I held my breath. He slowed a bit and moved over, lining up directly with center scope. Click.

The windshield shattered and he fell limp. It rolled off road and got stuck in the ditch. One down. One to go.

Then the crew would mop up.

Medy (Network), 2027 the ride part I

Philip.

He was in front of me. Trapped in amber. A man-sized chunk of translucent orange petrified sludge. His face was contorted oddly with fear, just on the verge of smiling.

Behind him, to the side.

No.

Wilson. Also submerged in solid orange gunk. Face scrunched up, lost in thought.

Further on were tombstones in neat rows, perfectly spaced. So many. Stretching for miles. This was a graveyard. I moved to the closest row and read the names. Carl. Mike. George. Benedict. Countless others. Nothing but the wronged dead.

I flopped down on the rough, rustly grass and hung my head. Always too late. Too slow. Too stupid.

“What’s the matter?”

Someone spoke. I looked up. It was Harold.

“They’re trapped. I can’t help.” I sighed.

“Trapped? Who?”

“Wilson. Philip. They’re right here.”

I looked over at their amber monuments. They were gone. Replaced by tombstones.

“I don’t see anyone.” Harold’s face grew suspicious. “How did you get here?”

I didn’t know. I hadn’t thought about it. How did I--

“Doesn’t matter. Your amber’s ready.”

I turned around. Harold had moved in front of a cylindrical chamber--like a big test tube but thicker, sized to fit humans. He smiled and hit a button on the keypad. A line of six red bulbs above the door clicked and changed to green, illuminating one at a time. The chamber depressurized, venting curling lines of steam, and then the door swung open.

I had a feeling this day would come. I had no choice but to accept it. Wilson would've wanted that.

I stepped into the chamber, and the door sealed shut behind me with a sharp hiss. Trickling sounded from below--there was a metal grate by my feet, spilling yellow liquid, slowly filling the chamber.

It rose to my knees, then my waist, chest, neck. I took my final breath and then it covered me completely. Panic overtook me. Wilson wouldn't have wanted this.

Everything went orange, and then flashed, locking me in place.

I couldn't move.

The glass retracted into the machine, which folded up and wheeled itself away. Harold smiled at me, hazy through the sludge.

"I can't reach you. I'm sorry Medy."

Wilson, 2032 in the ionic exfoliation center

The sun was setting, splashing on the windows, and breaking into scattered orange beams. It had been a long day. I turned back to Philip.

“The gist is this: we have to break it down to the core issues. Eyeing the core is key. The issue should never be, ‘What do we use?’ The issue should be, ‘What do we do?’ We can figure out methodology after the fact. Do we use this to attempt generating recordings, or something more realistic? Do we use this to build physical spaces from memories? Do we allow fabricated, digital organisms to exist within those environments? Should we? Ask key questions. And always seek the core answer.”

“Sir, this is an ionic exfoliation center.”

The sun was rising, splashing on the windows, and breaking into scattered white and gold beams. It had been a long night. I turned back to the associate.

“I’m sorry. I seem to have forgotten where I was. Forgive me.”

“Uh--it’s... fine?”

Unnamed skid, 2046

Here. I'm here.

All my friends are dead.

Simone. A wraith caught her on the mud banks. Didn't even see it coming. It flickered once, far away, enough so we could see it coming, and then it was on top of her. Overlapping. She dropped dead. I envy that. I wish we could all die with such ignorance. Though if anyone was deserving of a painless death, it was her.

Marv. The chassis called for disconnect but he wouldn't leave. Caught the destabilization plague. Died throwing his guts up in corporeal while swimming in bliss on the network. Again, a decent death--though I've heard dying on the network steals your soul. But I don't know if I even believe in a soul.

Alex. One of many people killed by brainsports. He won his first game and that woke something up inside him. He came back with a kind of crazy look in his eye. A hunger. His very next game some mutant skid broke him in half. Fractured. Lost his mind. Ended up jumping off the roof of the canopy. Turned into fertilizer.

Nate. Also died because of the brainsports, but never even made it to the chassis. A skid blasted him in the stomach before he could connect, right there in the canopy. Over three dollars worth of powder. His blood still stains the white-tiled floor.

Kev. Killed himself with his dad's revolver when his little sister got stolen into the skid slave trade. I accidentally pointed them in her direction. I just mentioned her. I didn't know they were going to break into their unit.

Amy. Kev's little sister. I can't imagine she's still alive. Some of those skids aren't even people anymore--and those huffers were certainly no exception. If she is alive she'd be better off dead.

My mom. Burned alive by the yulKo. They broke into her unit, stripped her, covered her in petroleum, and set her on fire. It was to get back at me. I owed them money for fronted powder I had breathed up months prior. They texted me a video of it. My mom died so I could be high for two days.

My brother. Pete. God, Pete. I'm so sorry.

Everyone is gone. I have nothing. I don't even have the guts to end it myself. That's why I'm here. In the central depository. Begging a wraith or a chud to come wipe me off the earth.

Marcus, 1982 black tar

The tar just kept getting worse. Worse than last month. Still useable, still got you high, but it was garbage. And with worse tar came worse problems. Junks getting pissed I don't have the same shit I used to, dealers cutting and trying to keep dudes hooked, pests on my ass twenty-four hours a day begging for more, and on and on and on and on. One of those dudes won't leave my ass alone. He's been tailing me for a couple weeks, and now it's turning into a real problem. Scaring off all the other buyers. Not making jack for cash anymore.

It all started when I sold him some of this bunk--he wasn't happy with it and he tried to return it. Like he bought a coat at JCPenney or some shit.

Told him no. Said I was clean out of the game. Since then he hasn't tried to buy. Just follows me around. Don't have a piece anymore so I'm getting real nervous.

And what's worse than a nervous skitz three days dry from a fix?

But I got an idea. A little thing. Got the idea when I saw a crow slam into a bus on Park. It died and just laid there on the street. Free. For the taking.

So, I've been going around, picking up dead birds and tossing them in a trash bag. I'm gonna turn it around on him. Have someone watch me till he heads off, and then they can tell me where he went, I can tail him, follow him back to whatever pile of trash he lives in, and fill the place with dead birds. Only problem was all my friends were keeping their distance. I didn't know anyone to ask.

I needed help.

And I wasn't getting any.

War Dog, 2016 the crash site part II

Help.

I called for help.

I called for help.

I radioed for backup.

I requested assistance.

The call sign is lit.

I can hear them coming but they never show up.

The chopper is inbound, it's been hit, it's going down.

The end is on us, as it was on my father's father and his father before him.

The wind is on us, in our eyes and our new cuts and holes.

The fend is in us. We will not die as cowards.

We will tear eyes out.

Wilson, 2030 at Medy's funeral

"There's a way. We can reform. We can take on new rules. Design new restrictions. We can do it internally, restrict document control to management teams, limit team size, hire and assign only trusted individuals. Double reports, one for internal use, one for the Institute. We can change the structure without them knowing."

"Oh. Well. Alright, yeah. Extra work, but I'm into this. How do you justify the restrictions? They're gonna notice that."

"That's the one easy piece. Incident reports. We've been making them for years. It's several hundred now--issues I can combine together into a report to present as evidence."

"Of what?"

"All sorts of different access violations, leaked creds, problems caused by lax access roles, improper planning, unskilled technicians. Altogether they paint a pretty incompetent picture of our procedures."

"So you present this report as justification for limiting restriction, and then the team takes management offline?"

"Basically. Eoghan will be none the wiser."

Marcus, unrelated parts

The fields were gone. Last week I had to crush fifteen, twenty orbs at a time, and then the fields were back for a day. But now they weren't coming back at all no matter how many I crushed. No matter how long I spent breaking them, that feeling never rose above a tingle. The fields were all just water now. Up to the edge of my deck. For as far as I could see. The path, the hill. It was all submerged. I could still see the armies of crabs, like rolling waves beneath the surface.

I'm bigger than I was yesterday. I swore I was bigger yesterday than the day before that. Not fatter, but larger. Physically sized up. Can't fit through the doorframes without ducking. And today I tried to go outside but the front door was locked.

I'm stuck. I just watch from my windows. I watch as everything is killed and taken away. I watch and I listen.

To the voices.

Because everything was talking now. The sky pulsed red and black, syncing up to their words, brightening when they grew loud.

"What the hell did you think this was, bitch? Just because we go back don't mean you get special treatment."

"You don't pay, you gonna."

"We ain't friends. We ain't never been friends."

"You're an idiot. You've always just been a fucking idiot. There's no point even wasting words on you."

"I don't love you. What the hell are you talking about?"

They chirped and hissed and raged and spit lucid venom with every word. I tried to ignore it. But I couldn't. I knew every voice, I remembered who they were. Earl. Mac. Eric. Michael. Rebecca.

The box was full with red orbs, overflowing and rolling off the table, cluttering the floor, gathering like dust in corners.

Report Sheet, 2015

Subject – M. Molke,

 Addition – C. Molke

Identifier – rYbx

 - rYby

Classification – N/A

Occupation – Project Manager, Nevada Dairy Co.

Chausm status – PREP_A2

Chausm GI - rgYhHUtp

Notes –

First chausm generated between two parties.

Unknown chaasm dweller, 2058 mom's in the brainsports part II

This was worth it. It is worth it. It would be.

If she could just make it one more round.

We'd be rich. Enough to live for a while anyway. Maybe get a cheap chaasm.

Everything would be worth it. After one more round. We'd pull her out. And she'd live the rest of her life as a fat and happy mindslack. Rolling in splendor.

You'd love that, mom. You know that. You'll come around.

So it's just one more round. One more roll of the dice.

You're smart. You can do it.

I loaded up my special credentials and established a connection to her room at the TC arena. My vision was white, and then dimmed to real color and space as I began spectating. There she was below me with that green player icon above her head--getting ready in the pre-game lobby.

"This is the last one." I told her.

She looked up and saw my form. The face she gave me. She hung her head.

"What do you want me to say?" She closed her eyes.

It was the first time she had talked in three games. A week. Maybe more. Was that a good sign?

"We'll be rich, mom."

"I don't care." She looked back up at me. "You can keep it."

"W-Wh-No! No! This was for both of us!"

"No," She stood up. "It was for you. You don't get to lie to me."

"No!" I'm sorry?

"No, you're not." A bell sounded and she crossed the room. "And you're not my son anymore. Don't talk to me again."

The door slid open, and she walked into the light

Max, 2035 escaping

The rain kept on.

I was thankful for that. For the mud. It was all I had to be thankful for. I was so thirsty. I needed water. I could hardly breathe. I had to focus on each breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth. Someone told me to do that once. I didn't know if it actually helped anything.

My naked body was swollen, red, cut and scratched and sliced by so many hours spent pulling myself over rough ground. My skin was burned raw in spots.

But those lights in the distance were getting closer. I could see oblong shapes silhouetted against the grey sky. Buildings. I was almost there. Maybe.

Hand over hand, I pulled, sliding along the ground, dragging myself. In spite of the pain. The throbbing. In spite of where I was heading. And that no one would help. In spite of myself. And my fading interest in this situation.

I pulled.

Wilson, 2035 meeting Max

I emptied another bottle. The consistency was good. I was learning how to maintain the fracture. My frequency and dosages were lining up with what I needed to stay sane. Unstretched. I had also started taking dextromethorphan pills when I could find them, and they helped too.

I guess they helped. Though none of my efforts would change much.

My time was still running away from me.

Too fast.

But I didn't have a choice.

I had to take him to the hospital.

"W-Wilson." Max leaned up in the back seat, still naked save my oversized jacket.

"Yes?"

"I... can't go."

"What?" I turned around.

"To the hospital."

"Can't go? I mean--no offense, but are you hearing yourself? Am I supposed to just drop you on the street? Let you get back to crawling?"

"I can't pay for it. I'd rather die."

"Max. I don't know you, but no, you wouldn't. What did you just finish saying to me? That you crawled in the rain for two days? After being ejected and paralyzed and tossed into a pit of bodies and kidnapped and assaulted and chased and everything else? Why? If you'd rather die, then why are you still alive?"

"W-What?"

"Why did you do all that work? What was the point of dragging yourself however-many miles to this town? Why?"

Max thought a moment and then furrowed his brow.

"I--To stay alive."

"We can't let all that hard work go to waste. I'll pay for it."

He stared at me. Puzzled, maybe.

"For what it's worth, I second all that, kid." The driver spoke for the first time all night.

"Ah--thanks, Ron." I nodded at him.

"Yeah. Listen, no matter how much you think you want to die, you don't."

"You can't know that." Max was getting upset. "You don't know what I want."

"Max, listen." I cut in. "You can't pay for this, and I have more money than I'll ever be able to spend. Please, don't worry. I will pay for your treatment. Your bills. Your medication. Therapy. Everything. This is irrelevant."

He slumped back down in the seat.

"I, uh--well. Thank you."

"Don't mention it." I tried to give a smile.

But I didn't much feel like smiling anymore.

My head was swimming again. Thinking random thoughts. Fractions of phrases jumbled halfway along and left unfinished. Losing focus. But that was fine. I didn't need to be lucid yet.

"And uh, Max?" Ron spoke again.

"What?"

"I do know. I lost my left leg, and most of the feeling in my right, back in ninety-nine. Penance for a crime, I guess. And I thought I wanted to die. I said the same things 'I don't want to go. Leave me. I'd rather die.' But I didn't--not really. I just couldn't live with what I did. I know that's probably not the same for you. We're all different. I just mean--well, I know how it feels. To want to die."

Max just stared at him in the rear-view. He went on.

"But I'm glad I didn't give up back then. I got my daughter. My grandbaby. I got this job. This car. And now I'm here telling you all about it. Life gets better. It's awful sometimes and stupid the rest, but it gets better if you let it."

"What happened?" Max was interested, sitting up completely now.

"How did I lose my leg?"

"Yeah. If you don't mind."

"Car accident. My fault. I was riding a midnight binge, by myself and drunk as always, barely able to see the road. I was going eighty in my truck, blew through a red light. A mom and her two girls in a little Buick were crossing the intersection and I didn't even see them. My truck made it through fine, but their car was completely destroyed. Just bent metal. I can still see those little bodies all tangled up. And the worst of it... the part I spent so many years dwelling on: I left. I just backed up, and I drove off."

“What?” Max shook his head. “You just left? How could you live with yourself?”

“I couldn’t. I tried to kill myself an hour later, but I was too drunk. Shot myself through the shoulder, barely missed my heart. I just laid there in my room, sobbing and hoping to God I’d bleed to death and fade away. But then I heard the sirens, and then they were taking me to the hospital, keeping my dumb ass alive.”

“Wow.” Max blinked through a blank stare.

“I see both sides of my capability, now.” Ron continued. “The good and the bad. You can’t change either. Nothing’s gonna bring those girls back. You just have to push forward and make the new things good. But don’t forget what happened. Remember the bad. Learn from it. You can make a difference. A positive one, starting with yourself. Even without a leg. Without two.”

“T-Thanks, Ron.” Max said. “I’m sor--”

“No, no. It’s fine. I dug my hole and now I’m lying in it. There’s nothing to be sorry for. Wasn’t an act of God, a freak accident, machinery gone haywire, nothing like that. It was me. Drunk. Deciding to drive. Deciding to kill people. Murder people. That doesn’t deserve your sympathy. Or your support. I came to terms with it. I have to live with it.”

We sat in silence for a minute. And then Max spoke. He seemed to be in slightly better shape now.

“Wilson, how did you know about all that?” Max spoke again.

“All what?” I rose an eyebrow, but I knew what he meant.

“The Net. Those guys in the suits. The center I was at. I told you but you already knew all of it.”

I thought about not telling him. I didn’t want him to hate me. But he had every right.

Eoghan, 2000 in Bolivia

The crow-faced woman shuffled awkwardly toward me,
Sirens blared above us, muffled by thick concrete, but still loud as hell.

I drew back the hammer and pulled the trigger.

My bullet struck the thing in the eye, knocking it backwards.

It reeled for a second, shaking in seizure-like tremors, but then stood up straight. One of its bird eyes was completely gone, dripping blood from a gaping wound. It cocked its head at an impossible angle, and chattered, still slowly closing in that shaky, uneven gait.

“Oh, fuck.”

I shot again. And again. Emptying the gun. Six bullets. Blood poured from its naked flesh like a fountain show.

“Eeeee--heeeelp.” It screeched.

“Alright, yeah. This’ll help.”

I flipped the cylinder open and dropped the casings, refilling each chamber, one at a time. I jerked it closed and then fired again, all six shots.

Its crow-like head exploded in a cloud of black feathers and bloody mist, and it fell forward.

Wilson, 2035 in the Nevada IDC

The elevator clunked on and sped downward. I could see the sprawling data center below through the glass, slowly rising. It was as beautiful as ever, filled with rows upon rows of glowing racks, stretching to the ceiling and off in every direction. Thousands. Hundreds of thousands of glowing cabinets, filled with millions of switches and servers and storage arrays--raw computational power. It was just a fraction of what was needed to host the network in its entirety.

Just one of many pillars holding up the world.

I looked at my hand.

56 783 A . 01

RC - 727 RpO 892

Row fifty-six. Fifty-six.

Fifty-six.

Row fifty-six.

Medy, 2024 at Marble's

Wilson was all smiles. I couldn't help but feel a bit of pride.

I saved somebody. For maybe the second time ever.

"Medy has come so far. You should've seen her plan in action. I didn't think it would work."

"It's true." Philip added. "He was way off."

"Hey, at least Wilson was trying." I laughed.

"I was too! I was the comic relief, remember?"

"You? Comic relief?" Zeinhaert raised an eyebrow. "Doesn't comic relief require you to be funny?"

"Shut up." Philip mumbled.

"Anyway, congratulations, Medula! Excellent work, as always. You remind me of Wilson when he was younger, but of course that was before the Network. How fares Marcus now?"

"He's out." Wilson said. "Coldlight remediation for the next couple of months. He said he wouldn't be reconnecting after that, but you know how that goes."

"Either way, a man lives. Great work, all three of you."

"Well, all I did was complain, really." Philip added, taking a swig from his tiny carton of milk.

"We helped carry the syringe, but it was all Medy's idea." Wilson said.

Zeinhaert turned to me.

"They don't praise people like this. The most I hear out of Philip and Wilson are complaints. But never about you, Medy. You have a bright future with the VRC."

Wilson, 2004 regarding the first Network site

We poured ten square miles of concrete.

The old facility was gutted and bulldozed. We severed the connection points, capped the energy, and paved over the entire property.

The campus went up shortly after, consisting of a Ko power center for proper energy distribution, three server center facilities, an employee center, and a legacy building which housed the old dilation spheres. Dilation sphere tech wasn't often utilized anymore but had its niche place--in some cases it helped with coldlight remediation and could also assist in treating various Network-related conditions.

Our initial rollout plan involved digging Network infrastructure to homes like telephone lines. Like the internet. But the expenditure proved far too great for the VRC, so we opted for "visiting facilities." We never intended for them to be homes. De facto apartment complexes. That was incidental.

The Broken Radio, 1954 lost at sea

Can you read, over

One in

One in

Can you read, over

... No.....gonna have.....

.....sit tight buddy.....

Repeat, over

.....

.....

No audio, you are breaking, over

Cannot hear, over

Vessel approach, advise, over

Advise, over

God help us

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....Repeat.....

.....

.....

.....

If anyone can hear me, don't come looking

No point

Sarah, 2009 the diamond labyrinth part IV

A cracking noise swept through the diamond halls. I had never heard that noise.

In fact, I hadn't heard any noise at all in the labyrinth, save the soft, tinkling wind chimes. But this had been a crack. Loud. Barbaric. Rude. It was really killing my buzz.

It happened again, and then again. Repeatedly, in a steady beat. Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

I followed it.

Through curving hallways, forks, slopes, left, right, up, right again.

It led me to a small room, like a living room, or a den, or a dining room, or something like that. I could never tell them apart.

There was a squat table with three legs and a skinny wooden chair.

And behind that

was

the cat.

It stared at me.

I called to it, but my voice wouldn't come out. It just stood there.

It wasn't running away.

It nodded to the table, toward a plateful of fish and chips.

My mouth watered. Food. The cat had food. I sat and began devouring it.

Warmth enveloped me. I was wanted. I was loved.

I was included.

The cat includes me.

Eoghan, 2031 letter to Wilson

Wilson,

Did you know of the circumstances regarding John Chambers death?

It has come to my attention that several safety warnings were bypassed during his onboarding, and that most of our protocols were completely ignored during chaasm generation.

I was under the impression that our work had a certain level of integrity, yet you have repeatedly given me shoddy, rushed work. These are peoples' lives. This needs to be taken with a stitch of gravity. It's important. Hearing of yet another mistake coming from you has left me very disappointed, and frankly I'm not sure where we stand with your employment here.

There have been too many instances of neglect, noncompliance, and plain-old incompetence coming out of your department.

I have a hard time believing you were ignorant of any of this, but I'm obligated to ask the question:

Did you know of this?

We will discuss this next week.

Thank you,

Eoghan

Medy, 2052 at the end part III

I was enveloped in orange, pink warmth, and I saw darkness, and felt a comfort unmatched by any before, and I couldn't remember anything anymore.

I closed my eyes. I rested.

But I wasn't going to rest.

It was time.

I wasn't ever going to get any rest. I knew that.

And then I knew nothing.

I knew only the new, bright lights above, the sticky wet all over me, and the fresh pain. The pain of life. Of fragile, waning life.

I cried.

My mother held me in her arms.

And I cried.

I was doing it over again, remembering what it felt like to exist as me again.

I was free again, but constrained again, like all the other times again.

"Wait up!" That old, familiar voice rang out again, holding me back again.

I was here.

It was really happening.

That was Reggie, calling to me.

I turned around.

There he was, with mom lagging behind.

It was real.

I was really here.

Max, 2039 home part I

“What the fuck is happening?”

Jacob was staring at the TV, looking just about as worried as I felt.

“No idea. Come on.”

“What? Where?”

“Come on!” I repeated. “We have to go!”

“Dude, what the hell? Look at this shit. We can’t go anywhere.”

“Please, we can’t stay here.”

“Why?”

“Look. You see that?” I pointed to the TV.

It showed an aerial view over town, following the lumbering shadow.

“Yes.”

“Recognize the landmarks?”

He squinted at the screen.

“Oh. Shit. That’s Troost. It’s coming this way.”

“Yeah. So, let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Uh... okay. Fuck. Where do we go? What do we do?”

“I don’t know.”

I knew that wasn’t helpful. It isn’t what he wanted to hear.

But we had to leave. It didn’t matter where we went. That shadow was coming right for us.

“Okay. You don’t know. Fuck.”

“Can you think of anything? Anywhere safe? Underground? A cave? I don’t know. I don’t know of anything like that.”

Medy, XXXX wandering the great unknown part II alt

Musashi tilted his bamboo into the stream to fill it.

"I know I don't need to drink here. But it's habit."

"Well, maybe it'll come in handy." I pointed to our tiny campfire. "I'm sure it can still put out fires and stuff."

"Worth a test." He stood and crossed to it.

"Ready to go, girls?" I called to them.

They were all swirling around each other a bit up the path, which seemed to be covered in patches of small flowers.

I could hear them shouting and hollering as they made their way hovering back, but not what they were saying.

Musashi crouched down and dumped his canister on the fire, and it sizzled away and puffed out a wide stream of white smoke.

"Guess that settles it. Same rules apply. Alright, everyone ready?"

Musashi nodded, and the girls hollered in agreement.

"Alright, let's head back to the village!"

Institute Researcher, 20XX regarding stasis procedures

Trauma associated with stasial destabilization also seems to increase the risk of cardiac arrest. Most patients (>99%) suffer heart failure within one to three immersion events.

In three major studies involving seven hundred individuals, a total of two subjects were deemed immune to the negative side effects of stasial immersion. These rare “golden” subjects are obviously of great value, and are sought after aggressively--though as of this writing, no more have been discovered.

The two have seemingly no biological similarities, coming from completely different ethnic backgrounds, with different blood types and medical histories, so finding additional qualified subjects based on contextual analysis alone has proven impossible.

These two are the only known subjects on Earth that can survive extended stasial immersion, and both are undergoing active procedures.

Max, 2039 packed in a tin part X

“They’re a cult but for all the wrong reasons. Called me Abraxas. I don’t know what that means. Filth and nonsense, knowing you.”

“Abraxas? What?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, uh, what’s with the old woman?”

“She was dead before me. I simply took residence.”

-

I wasn't a kid anymore. Dark, death, pain, being alone—I faced all those when I was ejected from the Network. I knew them well, and I wasn't afraid anymore.

And the fear of my identity?

I didn't need the Network. I didn't need validation. I could be me—no matter what anyone else thought. No matter who I was. I could be my idea of me.

I am me. No one can change that.

The Network helped open my mind to the possibility, but it was living through an apocalypse that forced me to see it, and made me realize my fears were based on nonsense. On other people's ideas. Other people's feelings.

I knew who I was now. I wasn't afraid of me anymore.

And my mom?

I hadn't felt those feelings since I was a kid. Back when I lived with her.

She didn't have any hooks in me. I *knew* that. The last time I saw her was in my hospital room; she was an old, sad caricature of herself, losing her mind, yanking on buried dreams and taking it all out on me.

I came to terms with how she was a decade ago, even before she went completely insane.

-

I don't remember much.

What do you remember?

Not much.

But more than nothing? What?

Uh, well. You were there. I ran to you.

Anything else?

I... there was a...

What?

A thing.

What kind of thing?

I...

What was it?

Bad.

But what was it?

Max.

Hey.

What kind of bad?

Why does it matter?

I guess it doesn't, really. But you have a mark on your arm.

A mark?

Yeah. Here.

...

What?

It... looks like the thing.

The bad thing?

Yeah.

It looked like that?

Its face did. It was wearing a mask.

A mask? What the hell was it?

I don't know. Its name was Abraxas.

Max, XXXX the god of all fabrication

I flicked my wrist back and then the chausms were merging below me. The massive green blocks shifted, phasing into the blue ones, chunk by chunk, melding together into teal cubes.

Forty. Eighty. Done.

I disconnected the share-line and performed soft restarts on both chausms.

Something tickled my spine.

Laughter.

It was some primitive, foolish part of me.

Laughing.

Wow.

Thanks for sticking with me.

It's been a real circle. A real, wide sweep-around.

Wanted to quit, didn't quit, wanted to quit, didn't quit.

At one point, I was entirely decided. I knew.

I rustled my hair in the mirror, pulled on my collar, and gripped the edges of the sink.

"It's time to toss the towel—

It's time to end it."

I heard my voice say all that.

but

how could I ever?

when

even the brainless would know to continue on