



the bird room

blake pitcher

The Bird Room
By Blake Pitcher

To Mom

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Part One: Dirt | Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Part Two: Becoming the Corporation | Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Part Three: Friends | Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Part Four: Underworld | Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Part Five: Migration | Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

Prologue

Raine rests his finger on the trigger. He's leveled a rifle before; taken aim and squeezed, a target shattering. But not a life. Not this amalgam of flesh and soul soaring through the air and kicking up sand. Plastic bulls-eyes and discs of clay, that's all. No blood there. No sacrifice.

He lies chest down in fresh leaves covering the moldering corpses of the ones before. Before him, the sand dunes provide the stage where two teenage boys ride their bikes, oblivious to his presence.

Today, for the first time, his job is to kill.

To take a life, one of countless—how could it compare to an imperative that would preserve the world from annihilation? One cog eliminating another. That's all.

Another leaf flutters to the earth as the sky's weight presses down, gray and grim, demanding resolution.

Protect or destroy, the choice is living in your scope. Ian Swift, just another nobody that matters a little too much.

Part One: Dirt



Chapter 1

The road twists up and around the old lumberyard, dips down through the valley where the branches reach over it. One brushes Ian's shirt as he draws close to the crumbling edge where pavement breaks into sand. The trail bike's exhaust mixes with the scent of the pines, leaves a malingering trail of fumes and resin.

One false move, man.

There are no false moves, and no right moves, Ian thinks.

The road draws closer to Trout Creek as it winds its way down. Ian's bike echoes between the walls of the deepening ravine.

The gravel mouth of the Haneke's driveway opens up and slopes down to a small clearing where a manufactured home rests beside a sagging pole barn.

A matte black sedan idles in the driveway.

Jim Haneke's worn boot extends out from behind the open driver's door.

The trail bike skitters down the driveway and Ian pulls up by a round-faced teen wearing a Hurley t-shirt standing with his hands jammed in his pockets. Chuck smiles—even now, you couldn't keep him down...

"Cut it a little closer, maybe?" Chuck laughs nervously.

"Who's in the car with your brother?"

"Taunton."

"Why is he wearing a hoodie in August?" Ian straddles the bike, digging his heels into the ground.

"It's Taunton, dude."

Smoke eases its way out of the sedan with the thumping bass of dirt rock as Jim's long, black-jeaned clad legs swing out. Jim stretches into a stand, crumples a cola can, and tosses it aside in the driveway. "What took you?"

Ian keeps it straight. He wants to laugh, wants to tease, but there were times when you let Jim Haneke be, and this is one of them. The times you owed him money or someone slandered his mother, God rest her soul.

"I'm right on time." Ian says.

"What's that, Swift?" Taunton calls out from the car.

“Nothing to do with you.”

“Why don’t you turn your trash bike off? Worried it won’t start again?”

“Where’s your car at? Oh, right, you don’t have one.” Ian won’t mess with Jim now, but Taunton... that dude was a robot and had it coming every time.

“Just turn it off.” Jim glances at Ian’s backpack. “Let’s see it.”

Ian pulls out a roll of cash and tosses it to Jim. Jim counts through the money and allows himself a terse smile. “Seems a little light.”

“Smallens didn’t pay yet.”

“Oh yeah?” Jim’s voice ticks up.

“Owes me a hundred bucks.”

Jim pockets the money. “Guess what—that’s your cut.”

“He says he doesn’t have any money.”

“Everyone’s got something they can sell. You’ve just got to apply the right pressure.” Jim stoops into the car and pulls something out of the glove compartment. “Take this,” he says, handing Ian a small, black knife.

Ian opens the blade. Three inches, maybe. “You want me to cut Smallens?”

“If you use it right, you won’t need to. Just show him you mean business.”

Jim pops the trunk of the sedan “I got more for you.”

“There’s one more thing.” Ian’s stomach tightens. Jim wouldn’t want to hear what he had to say.

“There ya go.” Jim tosses over a small package tightly wrapped in black plastic.

“About school,” Ian says.

Chuck’s expression tightens as Jim slams the trunk.

“I’ll finish out the summer, but when school starts, I’m out.”

Jim smiles dismissively. “You’re just getting started.”

“I need to graduate.”

“You’ll be fine.” Jim leans beside the open car door and breaks out in a raspy laugh. “They even let this dumbass graduate,” he says, jerking a thumb toward Taunton. “You’re way smarter than him.”

Ian is silent.

“You’ll do it.” Jim swings his lanky leg into the car and sets himself down, taking a cigarette from Taunton. “It’s barely August. Take time to make a careful decision.”

Ian is still silent. Jim shuts the door and peels out of the driveway kicking up bits of gravel.

“That could have gone worse.” Chuck shakes his head. “You’re asking for it though. Jim doesn’t like to hear ‘no.’”

Mosquitoes foray from the creeping shadows of the early evening. Ian smacks a big one on his forearm, wiping away a smear of blood. “The principal already hates me,” Ian says. “Plus, you know...”

“Jenn.”

“We’ve got plans and I don’t want to mess it up.”

“You worry too much,” Chuck says. “Come inside and shoot stuff up on the Xbox.”

“Your dad in there?” Ian can see the silhouette of the truck through the partially open pole barn doors.

Chuck looks down. “Yeah.”

“Maybe later.”

“We’re still on for camping this weekend?”

“Black Hole? Always.” Ian kick-starts the trail bike. The 1970s Honda revs smoothly.

“Listen to that throaty, orange beauty,” Chuck grins. “She give you any more trouble since I cleaned out her carburetor?”

“Running smooth. You’ve got a talent, man.”

Ian twists the handle and the bike lurches forward, around and back up the driveway. It feels good to ride. Screw Jim. Screw Smallens. Screw the little black knife heavy in his pocket.

Chapter 2

There's the trailer where Pauly Jones carried him by the belt to the bathroom to retch up Genny Light. Pauly was too old to be hanging out with fifteen-year-olds, but he wasn't a perve, despite his vampiric face and eighties hair-metal mane. Two years later and now he's another stop on Ian's route.

Pauly's sitting on the steps, blonde locks hanging over the shoulders of his Molly Hatchet t-shirt. The sun beams on his pale skin but he's not bursting into flames and ash. He smiles that big smile of his when Ian pulls in.

"Everyone knows when you're coming on that bike, man," Pauly says cheerfully. "I start drooling like Pavlov's dog for that good bud you carry."

Ian makes the transaction, and Pauly doesn't wait to light up. "Want a hit?"

"No thanks. I gotta check on my mom."

"You're a good kid, Swifty. Always were." Pauly scratches at his shoulder. "How is your mom?"

"She's doin'."

"Yeah." Pauly is somber and introspective as he inhales a large drag. "Your mom's a good lady, living here as long as I can remember. Hell, your family practically owned this place." Pauly looks across the park road where a trailer gently sags, with green mildew tinting the vinyl siding. "You remember when your aunt lived there? What was her name, again?" Pauly knows the answer, but asks anyway.

"Kim."

"Whatever happened to her?"

"She's in New Mexico, making turquoise jewelry and finding herself in the desert," Ian says. She used to babysit him when he was seven, giving him rose gardens and Tang. Ian promises himself he will visit her there someday. Maybe with Jenn, when they drive to California after graduation...

Ian says goodbye to Pauly and heads farther into the park where his mother's trailer is set far back, shaded by the trees.

Ian is relieved to not see Aunt Bonnie's car in the driveway. The oldest of the three sisters had moved in after his mother's illness.

"Hey Sweetie."

Ian's mom rests in a recliner, propped up with pillows on either side of her. "Can you open the blinds, Sweetie? I want to see if Peanut got his treat."

Ian opens the blinds, letting in the last rays of the day, which add a pink cast to his mother's powder-white face. She always smiled, even now.

"Thanks Sweetie."

"How are you feeling? You need anything?"

"I feel pretty good. Plenty of time to work on my crosswords." The slight waver in her voice belies her honesty. "You didn't come home again last night."

"Yeah."

"You got a girl you like?"

"Stayed over at Chuck's."

"You can bring her around here. I'd like to see her."

"I was at Chuck's, Mom."

"You think I don't know my boy? Let me have a look at her. I bet she's cute."

Ian looks out the window. "Peanut's here." A small rat climbs the pole of a bird feeder and reaches up over its lip. Seed in possession, he scampers back down and disappears out of sight.

"He's reliable, that one," says Ian's mom. Her face tenses up as she stares out the window. Her body tightens as a wave rolls through her body. Slowly the wave recedes and she exhales.

"You okay?"

"Just a tingle, Sweetie." Ian's mom glances toward the kitchen counter. "Would you make me a tea?"

"What kind?"

"Something herbal." She watches Ian fill her mug with tap water from the sink. "I got to try to sleep. Although I'm not sure when I'm actually awake these days. The pills they give you are something else."

Ian microwaves the mug of water. Two minutes. An eternity of listening to the microwave drone. He loves his mother, but he can't breathe in here. Can't think. Can't come to terms...

"Chamomile alright?" he asks.

His mother takes the mug gingerly in her hands and touches her pale lips to the rim. It barely looks like she drinks any of the hot fluid, a comforting pantomime. "Mmm. Thanks Sweetie."

“You eat anything today, mom?”

“Mmm hmm.”

Ian imagines her scrawny body wasting away underneath the patchwork quilt draped over her, an enduring memorial to memories, places and people. A square of corduroy from her old jacket. A square of floral print from grandma’s old blouse.

A square of denim from dad’s jeans, whoever he was, or had been.

“I picked you some blackberries earlier.” Ian rummages through his backpack and pulls out a plastic container.

“From the old Getman farm?”

“Yeah.”

“Those stone fences date all the way back to the Revolutionary War. Before it, maybe.”

“I know, Mom.” Ian shifts the container in his hands. “You want some now? With milk and sugar?”

“Thanks Sweetie, you can put them in the fridge. I’ll have them with my breakfast.”

“You sure you’re eating enough?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

As Ian puts the container in the fridge, the storm door squeaks open and bangs shut. His Aunt Bonnie enters, taking off her shoes on the linoleum entry patch and setting aside her purse without looking at Ian. “Lousy mail didn’t come again.”

“No, it’s here.” Ian’s mother glances at the counter. “Higgins dropped it off.”

“Higgins should mind his own.”

“He’s a nice man.”

“Probably scouting the property for when...” Aunt Bonnie pauses. “What are you doing here?” She says to Ian, still without making eye contact.

“I live here.”

“Huh.” Aunt Bonnie snorts. “Right.” She looks to Ian’s mother. “He better not be tiring you out.”

“No, Bonnie. He brought me blackberries.”

“How about rent?” Aunt Bonnie cracks a smile. “He bring that?”

“I was just leaving.” Ian pulls on his sneakers.

“Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

“Oh, stop it, Bonnie.”

“It’s alright Mom.” Ian thinks about giving her a hug and a kiss but that would mean passing by Aunt Bonnie. There’s always tomorrow. And the day after that—until the days stop coming.

Peanut is back up the bird pole...

“You know what Aunt Bonnie,” Ian says, regretting his words almost as soon as he speaks them, “Maybe you’re the one tiring mom out.”

Aunt Bonnie turns and stares at him directly, her narrow shark eyes piercing. “Where are you when I help her with her bath? Make her breakfast? Change her bedpan? Your mother and I made an agreement to take care of each other when we had no one else. And that’s what I’m doing. What do you do? Get suspended from school? Up to who knows what? I thought you were leaving—why don’t you get on with it? And thanks for the blackberries.”

Ian's face burns as he rips out of the trailer park, his mother's weak "love you" still in his ears, and a last ditch, "don't forget to bring that girl by." Nothing could bring down his mom. Not his aunt. Not even cancer. She was strong, always had been. Working two shit jobs and raising him after his dad had disappeared. Life never broke her, never would.

Night takes over and Sandy Knoll's small collection of streetlamps struggle to light the two intersecting rural routes that comprise the faded hamlet. A barbershop, an inn, a church. A few grand old houses with peeling paint and questionable roofs, most cut up into multi-family homes. There were a few kept-up places, but most of the people who could afford to had moved up atop the hills for the views, smattered between the dilapidated past. New log cabin, sagging shack with a load of trash in the yard. Grand home with a view, overgrown farm with a collapsing barn.

Trout Creek froths along the length of Sandy Knoll, wending its way back and forth under the roads, bridges of yesterday replaced with oversized culverts that strained to contain it in the spring, though it could look like a trickle in the hottest of summers.

Ian takes a right at the intersection and avoids the pothole. Thing had its own life, and it was getting bigger every week. On the outskirts of the village he coasts into the driveway of a grand old victorian and parks on the grass alongside the cars of three other tenants.

He could have texted, sent a message up to space and back down through her roof that he is coming, is here. Is in the driveway. Or the rattle of the Honda is enough, still idling. The relationship is still new, she is new. She had just come in at the end of the school year. She was a way out of Sandy Knoll without even leaving it. She had a thing about her, a maturity layered behind the typical trappings of a teenage girl.

Maturity and mystery.

A light in the second floor window. Her window. Ian stares up at it, a golden square amongst all the dimmed. His phone vibrates gently in his pocket.

Hey Boop

Ian texts back. *Coming out?*

Jenn's face appears in the window, filling the bottom left pane. She smiles, a little, and points down to the back door.

"Inside?" Ian mouths, although it is probably too dark for her to see the movement of his lips.

She shrugs, then points again before disappearing from the window.

Ian feels eager and anxious. The light in the adjoining room turns on, a moment passes, the outside light flicks on over the entrance.

He is off his bike and waiting.

The door is painted green and peeling.

Should I just go in?

But then it creaks open, and there is her face in the opening, Jennifer O'Sullivan, nice Irish girl.

Her dark eyes look him up and down and smirk, just a little. "My parents aren't home."

"Oh," Ian says. "I didn't see their car." *Obviously.*

She glances behind her, up the narrow stairway. "Want to come up?"

Each step complains as Ian presses down on the worn wood, following her up. Jenn pauses at the top, looks back, then says nothing. She swings open the door and Ian follows her into the foyer of a small apartment. A small pot of water is simmering on a range-top. The light has a greenish hue from reflecting off the pea-colored walls, but the air is clean.

Jenn walks to the stove and pours the hot water into an oversized mug with a chip on it. She takes a small packet and pours in the powdery contents, stirring it with a spoon. "Dinner," she says. "Hope you aren't hungry. I only made the one."

Ian stands in the middle of the kitchen space with his hands in his pockets.

"Thirsty?" Jenn opens the fridge and surveils the thin contents. "Dad's got some cheap beers in here. Or maybe OJ is more to your taste?"

"Water's fine."

Jenn fills a glass from the faucet. "Hope you like tap."

"I'll survive."

Ian follows her into the adjoining room where a loveseat faces a small television and a coffee table scattered with art magazines. Behind the loveseat are three doors, two open, one closed.

They sit on either side of the loveseat and Jenn turns on the tv. "What do you want to watch?"

"Netflix?"

"We don't actually have that, believe it or not."

"Whatever's good." Ian sips his water. "Where are your parents?"

"Don't worry, they won't show up."

“I’m not worried. Just curious.”

“I don’t even really know.”

“That thing I said, last night...”

“It’s cool.”

“I didn’t mean to go too far, you know...”

“It’s cool, Ian.”

“I just...”

Jenn’s face twists up into a smile and she reaches over and shoves him playfully. “Shut up, Boop.”

“Okay.”

“I want to.”

“You shut up.”

“No, really.” Jenn slides in closer. Ian feels her sweater brush his forearm. “Let’s do it, let’s get the hell out of here. At the end of the school year. We’ll just go, like you said. Make it work.”

“Yeah?”

Jenn glances back at the three doors, her eyes resting on the closed one. “Yes, I want to get away, too. Wherever. Somewhere cool. Somewhere with jobs. Somewhere a million miles away from here. You know, west coast.”

“I don’t know what I’ll do there.”

“Anything you can do here, times 100.”

“A hundred times zero is still zero.”

“I can waitress. And maybe take some classes.”

Old sitcoms with laugh tracks fill the interim. Ian sits, wonders what he should be doing, saying.

Jenn glances back at the doors again.

“What’s up?”

She smiles tentatively. Her lower lip quivers. “I want to show you something.”

Ian is up off of the couch, following her back.

Ian takes her hand. “You’re shaking.”

“In here,” Jenn says, with some effort, as if breaking from a spell. She leads him through the middle door.

The room is a little sad, but Ian doesn’t see that. He is seeing the pocked walls and looking for patterns. Looking at the Dega print and looking for meaning. Looking at the chipped blue dresser and the

notebook, wondering what she writes in it. Looking at the white comforter neatly pulled across the twin bed.

Jenn takes a photo album from a shelf filled with paperbacks and figurines. She sits on the bed, rumpling the comforter and pats the space next to her. "Sit down." She flips through the pages, lands on one. "My parents."

"The ones I haven't met."

"This is the best way to meet them, trust me." Jenn laughs, cynically. "They're much more controlling in person."

Jenn flips forward a few pages. "My old doggie."

"Aww..."

"I miss him."

"Yeah."

Ian feels strange sitting on the bed. He could sink right through it, into the bedding. He could do a lot of things. He could touch her...

Jenn sets the book down, touches him first, on the arm.

"Take me for a ride on your bike."

"Right now?"

"No, next week."

Ian laughs. "Alright then." He looks at the photo album. "What if your parents come home while we're gone?"

"This is about as close as they ever come home," Jenn says cryptically. "I'm not worried."

The Hollow; that's where she told him to go. An opening in the woods where the pines loom tall and bow their heads. The Hollow, she whispered in his ear. The opening in the woods.

An opening in the woods where the stars form a celestial crown above, a lovers' locale. Lovers in the opening in the woods.

Cool night air rushes past, courses off the jacket. No helmets, no protection except the fabric between them and the road.

Jenn's hands clasp Ian's waist, her only restraint. He feels them intently, he considers the placement of each finger. He is sensitive to each squeeze and change in pressure. In his rear-view her hair blows wildly across her shadowed face.

The night is starry now with an ultra-bright moon, but it darkens as the road turns up and into the state forest. The Hollow is there, a popular place for young people, but not tonight. Tonight it would just be them.

Jenn's hand leaves his waist. The glow of a phone screen illuminates her face and then it is shadowed again and her hand returns.

The Hollow is approaching. An unmarked road, a logging trail really—nothing his bike couldn't handle. Jenn shouts something in his ear, puts her hand on his shoulder. Urgently now.

"Pull over," she is saying, Ian can hear now, with the bike idling at the side of the road.

It is so dark Ian can barely see her face. He turns back to her. "What's wrong?"

Jenn cries, wiping her eyes with her hand.

"Are you hurt?"

Jenn speaks between small, stifled sobs. "I'm fine. I'm fine..."

Ian puts down the kickstand and steps to her side. His hands find her shoulders.

A minute passes and Jenn lifts her head. She looks ahead, past him. "Let's go somewhere else."

"Not The Hollow?"

"Somewhere else."

"Home?"

"Not home."

Ian knows better than to ask anything else. He pauses, where the glint of the moon catches her forehead. He leans over and kisses it, then his leg swings back over the bike and the throttle is revving with the back wheel kicking out the bits of sand and stone.

Not home, not The Hollow.

He would take them somewhere.

Or he would just keep driving.

Through the night.

Chapter 3

He jitters, he jolts; he is Chuck and he is high on his idea, and maybe something else.

Eyes alight he enters in the usual Chuck way. He has energy, in bursts, his almond eyes shining out from over his soft cheeks and gentle expression. He couldn't hurt a fly, wouldn't hurt a fly, even if that fly had it coming. Chuck shoves at Ian on the couch, who protests groggily.

"And I thought I slept too much," Chuck says.

"I haven't slept much at all," Ian grumbles. "I got in less than an hour ago."

"Something you need to tell me?" Chuck is wearing the same jeans he always wears, zipping up his hoodie and grabbing an energy drink from the fridge on the way out the door.

Ian rolls to the other side of the couch. "No."

"You sure about that? Maybe something about Jenn?"

Ian shoves his face deeper into the cushions of the couch.

"Whatever." Chuck pauses in the doorway. "You better get it together before Friday."

"Friday?"

Chuck lets go of the door handle. "Don't mess with me. You know. Camping. Black Hole."

Ian sits up, giving up on sleep while Chuck is engaged. Nothing stops Chuck when he is talking about camping. The only thing to do is let him air it all out.

"I've already started collecting our rations, you know? The essentials. Beer, smoke, more beer. Beer."

"How about food?"

"Well, yeah man. We'll be cooking with fire. Living off the land—you know."

"Living off of the land?" Ian rolls his eyes.

"Catching fish, you know, all that."

"Never seen you actually catch a fish."

"Yeah, well we'll have chips, too."

"Who's carrying this all in?"

"Us." Chuck grins. "It's gonna be a party."

"A party? I thought it was just going to be a few of us."

“Think big, friend. Think people. Think drinks. Think fun. Think girls.”

“Think realistic. Besides, I already got something going.”

“Jenn? You call that ‘going’?”

“Shut up man.”

Chuck screws off the cap to the energy drink and takes a swig. “I’m just kidding around. You should invite her to come.”

Ian shrugs. “Be kind of weird to drag her over there just to hang out with a handful of bored dudes who don’t have enough to eat.”

“I told you, this is legitimate. A bunch of people from school are coming. Won’t be strange at all. I’m going to be carrying in supplies earlier that day, couple of trips. We’re talking tents, folding chairs, hammocks.”

“It’s almost a mile hike.”

“Nah,” Chuck says.

Chuck finishes his energy drink and coughs heavily into his hand. “Besides, did I mention swimming? That means bathing suits. Girls and bathing suits.”

“We’ll show up and it’ll just be your brother and his asshole friend.”

“I mean, I’m not saying they won’t show up. But it’s not going to be like that.” Chuck glances at his phone. “Alright man, I’m outta here.”

The door shuts with a bang and Chuck is gone. Ian lies back on the couch and stares at a water stain on the ceiling. Maybe he would ask her, maybe he would. The water stain starts to look like a face after he stares at it for a while. *I really need to get some sleep*, he thinks.

Ian wakes to a beam of sunlight on his face and sweat coating his body. The air conditioner has kicked off, and the trailer is sweltering in the midday sun. In the bathroom he tosses out a couple of beer cans that are littering the tub basin. The cool water of the shower is a relief. He already has a change of clothes in his bag, just another t-shirt and jeans. But at least they are clean. He looks in the mirror, musses his hair with some of Chuck’s gel.

Not much to eat at the Haneke house, not with the brothers and a dad who was on the road half the time doing the grocery shopping. He steals one of Chuck’s energy drinks and grimaces as he consumes the saccharine fluid. Maybe he would swing by the house, his aunt should be gone. Get

out of here before Jim shows up. It was rare these days, but it happened. Didn't need another conversation about quitting after the summer, especially without Chuck around to soften his brother's edges.

His finger hovers over his phone's screen, but he sticks it back in his pocket without texting Jenn. He'd just swing over quickly, talk to her in person. Why not? He thinks about camping at Black Hole. It plays out in different ways in his head. There's the picture of him swimming with Jenn and getting a little loose and maybe they snuggle up under the stars and that's the start of the rest of their life. And then there's the picture of bugs biting and awkward interactions.

Still, he loved Black Hole. The swimming hole's a local secret, a good mile from the road and surrounded by state forest. Trout Creek cuts through the shale creating a place where the water is deep enough to cover your head. Jenn hadn't been there, that he knew of.

It could be fun.

Yeah, he'd just swing over.

His mom's asleep at the trailer park. No Aunt Bonnie. Ian makes a peanut butter and jelly sandwich which he eats over the sink. An apple for his pocket and then he's quietly out again, and heading toward Jenn's.

The entry door is unlocked, so Ian goes up the steep stairs. The apartment door is slightly ajar, so he gives a gentle push, calling out.

"Hello? It's Ian..."

No answer. Ian's intuition prickles, and he calls out again.

Still no answer. He pushes the door all the way open, looking into the kitchen. "Hello?" He calls out again. Again, no answer. He steps inside the kitchen, trying to see back to the living room and the bedrooms beyond. The dishes racked by the sink are still wet. He checks the drawer with her keys, they're there, on her little pink pig keychain.

"Anyone home?" Ian calls out, walking to the living room area. The three bedrooms lie behind. He peeks into her room, nothing seems out of place. What must be her parent's room is also empty, along with the bathroom.

"Huh." Ian notices the third room, the room that had been closed. He tries the handle and starts to open it...

"Hey there!"

Ian lets go of the handle and turns to see Jenn coming in the doorway of the kitchen, outfitted in jogging clothes and sneakers.

“Oh, sorry,” Ian says awkwardly. He stumbles to find his words momentarily, as Jenn walks up, her face flushed and breathing heavily.

“You ripping the place off?” she says cheerfully, taking her hair out of her ponytail.

“The door was unlocked, I...”

“Thought I needed rescuing?”

“Something like that.”

Jenn takes his hand and leads him back toward the kitchen where she gets a pitcher of water out of the refrigerator and pours herself a glass. “No one’s murdered me, yet.”

“I’m impressed,” Ian says. “We were riding around practically all night. You go out jogging while I feel like I’m barely awake still.”

“What did you want?”

Jenn seems flighty or maybe just pumped from her jog, but Ian doesn’t think about that. He’s too consumed with the question at hand. He’s asking her to go, talking about Black Hole, playing it down, playing it up. She’s smiling, she’s nodding and agreeing and saying yes, and sure.

So there it is and he’s out the door getting on his bike.

So, okay. She’s going. Ian wants to feel excited, exuberantly squeeze the accelerator, but something’s holding him back.

The things he hates to do but knows he must.

He starts with the easy deliveries, all the familiar faces and places. Collect and give. He makes the usual run, but saves Smallens for last. He doesn’t want to go there, he can see Smallens’ sad-sack look and hear his excuse coming out of his pallid face.

Smallens isn’t at home. Ian feels strange and guilty as he senses the shape of the knife in his pocket as he talks to Smallens’ mother. She says he went somewhere on his bicycle. So Ian cruises the familiar spots until he sees it leaning against the wall of the Dollar General, and there is Smallens, out back, leaning against the crumbling concrete wall by the loading dock, smoking with that guy whose name Ian can never remember.

Okay, Smallens. Don’t be dumb.

Make this easy for both of us.

“Want a hit?” Smallens smiles his yellow-tooth smile and holds out a joint as Ian walks over from his bike.

“You owe me a hundred bucks. How did you afford that?”

“Nah man, it’s alright. It’s Joey’s.”

Joey. That's the kid's name. Ian motions away the joint. "It's time to pay up."

Smallens exhales a cloud of smoke and shrugs. "I don't got it."

Ian tries to stand tall, lifts his shoulders. Friggin' Smallens. Why couldn't he just pay up? The knife rests heavily in his pocket. His hand reaches in and touches the handle, as he thinks about Jim's directive.

"Is that all, Swifty?" Smallens *is* small, but also one feisty kid. He stands almost a head shorter than the long-haired Joey next to him. Joey takes the joint and smokes disinterestedly.

"Jim told me if you didn't pay he was gonna mess you up. Or that I have to."

"You think you can take us both?" Smallens laughs.

"This ain't my deal," Joey says, killing the joint and opening the back door to the Dollar General. "You should probably pay up, Smallens. Jim Haneke is seriously crazy." The door groans to a close behind him.

The bravado eases from Smallens, who kicks at a crack in the blacktop. "I'm gonna pay, I just need more time."

"Sell your Xbox. Sell your games. Just get me the money." Ian looks down. "Jim isn't joking around this time. You know what he can do when he goes off."

"Okay, okay." Smallens says. "I'll figure it out. I can have it by Monday. That's fine, right?"

"I'll try to keep Jim off of you, but I can't make any promises." Ian sighs. "And if you don't pay..."

"No, I'll pay." Smallens hops on his bike. "Monday."

Ian watches as Smallens cuts across the rutted parking lot and disappears across the street.

Monday. Right.

Screw this job.

Screw Smallens.

Screw Jim.

Chapter 4

“We need a burro.” Chuck plods along the narrow path that winds past the fecund swamp on the way to Black Hole. One hand grasps a cooler handle, and the other keeps adjusting the weight of the overstuffed pack on his shoulders. Ian takes up the other cooler handle and is similarly weighted down, with a makeshift pack consisting of a tent, bedroll and other items rolled up in a tarp and tied together with a piece of rope that dangles a sleeping bag kicking against the back of his legs.

“We also need bug spray.” Ian’s eyes water in reaction to the hovering pests.

“They’ll thin out once we reach higher ground. And I have bug spray at the camp.”

“I can’t believe this is your third trip in.”

Chuck looks back at Ian. “I told you this was going to be epic. But it takes gear, and there’s no easy way to get it in.”

“Airdrop it.”

“Gee, why have I been wasting my time?”

The trail dips down through a low spot where Ian and Chuck balance their way across a couple of logs bridging the muck. The path begins to lead uphill. Thorn bushes infringe the path, scratching at Ian’s bare legs.

Most of the bugs have given up their trail, save one determined fly that buzz bombs them in giant, swooping circles. Chuck swats at it, and curses. But the air is fresh and invigorating, and Ian knows the end of the trail is here. The ridge of trees that runs along the steep bank above Black Hole rises up before them. The old-growth spruce tower over their heads, with smaller trees struggling up between.

“Valhalla,” Chuck says.

Ian gazes down the steep descent to where Trout Creek cuts through the shale. A narrow footpath zigzags down the slope, marked by dark, upturned earth and disturbed pine needles, branches worn smooth from hands gripping for support. On their side of the creek, large, flat rocks spread out below where the ravine widens at a bend. On the opposite side a shale face rises steeply from the water.

Chuck starts down the footpath, fully loaded.

“Hold up—shouldn’t we make a couple trips?”

“No time for that.” Chuck scrambles farther down, pulling Ian along by virtue of the cooler between them.

Ian’s feet struggle to grip the path as he counters the downward weight of the cooler. Without the pack, without the cooler, he’d be skipping down the path from the memory of a hundred passages.

About halfway from the bottom, Chuck’s feet slip out from under him. The weight of the cooler jerks the handle from Ian and it goes sliding down with him. Chuck rolls onto one of the large rocks jutting out into the water. The cooler lands next to him, but stays right side up.

Ian lets his pack go as he speeds down the path. Chuck’s eyes are closed.

“You alright, man?”

Chuck rolls onto his back and groans woefully. “My back.”

“Dude...”

“I think you’re going to have to carry me out of here.”

“You ass.”

Chuck grins. “Nice soft moss growing on this rock. You worry too much.”

“Ass.”

“You need to get a drink in you and lighten up some.”

“It’s early.”

Chuck sits up and pops the top of the cooler. “Not for me.” He cracks open a can and takes a large swig. “Pre-gaming.”

Ian steps out to the edge of the large rock, where the water swirls past. After a few feet, the bottom of the creek disappears into darkness. The creek ran deep there. You could even swim a few strokes.

Not much to hang on to at the other side. Just the fractured visage of the shale face rising up. But on their side of the creek, large flat rocks cluster like oversized lily pads. A wide sandy area spreads out downstream, with a circle of rocks making a firepit. Chuck’s supplies are tucked against the slope from his previous trips.

“First ones here, I take it?” Ian says.

“They’ll come.” Chuck finishes the beer and crumples the can, but doesn’t toss it. Black Hole is too sacred a spot to litter. He goes to a black trash bag he has rigged to a small tree protruding from the slope and deposits it.

“FYI, I packed you some of your favorite whiskey.”

“Eh, I don’t think so.”

“Whatever—we’ve got work to do. Help me set up the tent.”

Ian checks his phone. “I don’t have a signal.”

“We never do, down here.”

“I need to get up top and see if I have a message from Jenn.”

“Cool. I’ll just set up the tent all by myself.”

Ian climbs up the path, grabbing roots and branches to leverage himself up on his way to the top.

Still no signal. Ian curses under his breath. Usually got one up here, that reliable if solitary bar of connection. He holds the phone over his head and squints up at it. Nothing. Ian sighs and sticks the phone back in the pocket of his shorts.

A tree? Maybe. Ian sizes up a nearby pine with large, low branches. He hoists himself up, trying to avoid spots of sap and scratches from the dead, needleless branches poking out in clusters. Halfway up the tree he gets his bar. He waits. Nothing. Was it enough of a signal? Ian taps out a text, erases it, then taps it in again. Casual enough? *Whatever*. He hesitates then presses the send button. The circle spins and spins... then... sent.

He leans back on the branch and waits. And waits.

His feet are starting to ache from standing on the branch when he hears his name shouted from below.

“You up there?” Chuck’s voice echoes through the ravine.

“I’m waiting for a text.”

“Dude, are you in a TREE?”

“Shut up.”

“You’ve got it bad.”

Chuck labors up the steep path to the ridge and plants himself under Ian’s tree. “Aren’t you supposed to meet her like four hours from now at the trailhead? Don’t be a stalker, man—it’s not attractive.

“I’ve got two more trips to make. But if you come, it’ll make one. Besides, you’ll get a better signal by the road than up in that stupid tree.” Chuck selects a large pinecone from the ground and whips it up at Ian. It deflects off a branch and bounces awkwardly back down to Chuck’s feet.

“Nice throw,” Ian calls down.

“You coming, or not?”

Ian shoves the phone in his pocket. He was running the battery too hard anyway. Might as well do something to make the time go faster.

The final trip to and from the road where Chuck's car is parked is uneventful. The phone is extra heavy in Ian's pocket. He feels it at every step. His hand creeps down to it, feels the outline of the device in his pocket. A good signal at the car; no messages. And then the monotonous hike back. He thinks about going back up the tree, but then decides against it. He'd just wait until the time they agreed to meet.

People trickle in. Friends of Chuck that Ian knows, sort of. Couple guys and girls. Then some more. It's a small school at Sandy Knoll. You kind of knew everyone anyway. It was good and bad. Just hard to stay away from the assholes. Like Chuck's brother.

Ian checks the time mechanically. A half hour before he should head back down the trail, yet again. This time he would be alone. Almost a dozen people have shown up, Chuck wasn't bullshitting. A dozen people is almost a quarter of his class. The afternoon sun warms the flat rocks of Black Hole, and some of the girls lie out on them. A few swam, and most drank. Chuck has started a fire, and is laughing with some guys. Ian drifts nearby, but doesn't engage.

Everything is casual, everything is friendly.

Everything is needles and edges.

Ian fights the impulse to start the hike early, when his phone vibrates in his pocket.

A text from Jenn. Somehow, down at Black Hole, an elusive signal.

Everything drains away as he reads the text.

Can't make it. Don't come for me.

Ian stares at the text, wonders how to respond.

You OK? He taps into the phone. No signal, no sending. The circle spins.

Ian leaves the fringes of Chuck's conversation and climbs up the path, easing past two more newcomers making their way down. He climbs back up the tree, going, going, going, until he gets that solitary bar that allows the message to find its way to the nearest cell tower and off to space and back again.

The minutes crawl by, but no response comes.

Why didn't she say anything else? Is she really OK?

Screw it. He was going to call.

Ian breathes deeply, then makes the call. He stares out through the tangle of branches as he listens to the ring. Just as he's expecting

voicemail, there she is.

“Hey.” She sounds hesitant, she sounds small. All in one spoken word.

“Hey... Is everything OK?” Ian feels dumb, saying what he had just messaged, but this is what he is saying. These are the words coming out of his mouth.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” she says. “I just can’t make it.”

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.”

“You don’t sound right.” Ian fumbles for the words. “I... I don’t care about this party. I can come meet you, wherever.”

“Just stay at the party, it’s alright. I’m alright.”

Ian’s voice is husky. He hates how he must sound, the cracks, the quaver. “Nah, I’m coming over. Even if we don’t hang out. I just want to see you quick.”

There’s a long pause before Jenn responds. “Listen, it’s not going to work out, you and me. I didn’t want to say it, I mean, I didn’t know how to tell you.”

Ian holds the phone numbly against his ear.

“I want to break up.”

“I don’t understand...”

“There isn’t anything to understand. We’re just not working.”

“I’m coming over, we need to talk,” Ian says.

“I’m not at home. I’m... with someone else. Just, don’t bother.”

“Someone else?” Ian asks, but the call has ended. He redials, but it just rings and rings before going to voicemail. He hears the beep, and finds himself recording white noise and the rustle of the pines before numbly pressing the big red button that ends it all.

Chapter 5

Ian is in a tree. The prickly-dead branches scratch him here and there, as if they are trying to comfort him but all they can do is draw red lines on his legs and arms. His face stares out through the small spaces in the branches. He can hear voices down in Black Hole. He can hear voices on the trail, faint echoes becoming distinct conversations. The tops of heads pass under the tree, unaware of the would-be avian perched above them. Talk of people, talk of parties, beautiful meaningless verbal ephemera spoken and soon forgotten.

Sitting in the tree is a stress position. The ache in his thighs becomes one with the one in his heart and brain. The top of another head passes under, alone, and unrecognized. Ian waits for it to make its way down the slope and out of sight. He listens, and hearing no one approaching, clambers his way down the tree.

Sap on the shirt and scratches on his skin—one on his leg deep enough to let the blood trickle down to his sock.

There's the footpath down, there's the trail back to the road.

Jenn, not at home, with someone, anyone, who knows.

Leave and have nowhere to go.

Or down to Black Hole.

Down it is.

Black Hole is crowded with teenagers. Chuck pulled off his party, Ian thinks. The cooler beckons, and Ian grabs a beer, drinking it down quickly and then acquiring the next. He hovers near Chuck's general sphere, avoids standing out by being completely alone. Chuck can talk for two, and he does.

Ian stays conversation adjacent, hopes to blend in. A girl glances at his bleeding leg, but doesn't comment. It wasn't so bad. He sips the beer, sips some more. Thinks about the bottle in Chuck's bag. Not yet.

Girls on the rocks, laughter in the air, bodies in the water. Cigarette smoke and weed. He doesn't care about any of it, drinks and stands around, drinks and stares emptily...

"I am a golden god!"

Jim Haneke shouts from high atop the shale cliff on the opposite side of the creek, with Taunton at his side. Heads turn.

Shirtless, Jim howls and waves with his free arm to clear the water below. His occupied hand brings a can to his mouth which gulps down piss-yellow liquid. He crushes the can and flings it forward, following it over the edge with a deliberate leap.

Gasps precede a moment of silence as he plunges feet-first into the water and disappears beneath the surface.

Murmurs and grisly anticipation; did he hit that small space just right, where the water was dark and deep?

Jim emerges, his long, black hair twisting like a dog, shaking off water. He sucks in air and howls again to which the crowd cheers.

Crazy Jim, you're crazy.

Even Ian smiles at crazy Jim.

Taunton isn't jumping, he isn't even smiling. He just stands like he always does before backtracking and taking the long way down and around.

People love Jim. They also fear his wildness. You couldn't predict Jim Haneke, not like his brother. People like Chuck, but they love Jim. They'd hang out with Chuck, though. Jim just sort of showed up and made things happen.

Jim is out of the water. His wet jeans cling to his lanky legs, and he whips his hair some more as he talks to people about the jump. They recoil, but with smiles.

Jim makes eye contact with Ian, gives him the old nod, *it's okay my man, no worries about Smallens tonight. Tonight is a night to have fun, to get off your head. Summer is old but we aren't.*

Except Ian doesn't care about anything. But the alcohol warmth is taking over, and the gloss is spreading through his mind. He detaches, straggling farther from any group. His eyes can't settle, his lips part open. His hand is robotic in bringing the can to his mouth.

Chuck's hand comes from the outside, intrudes on his shoulder. "No Jenn?"

What was there to say?

"She's not coming?" That's all Chuck needs, he knew, he knew enough. "Screw it man. Screw her."

Ian doesn't say anything.

"I bet you could hook up with Annie Jablonski tonight."

"Don't." Ian forces out even that simple word.

"Right, right. You need a stronger drink, man?"

“I’m good.”

“Okay man.” Chuck cares, but he also knows the limitations of time. He sees the crest of his long-planned event arriving, and he wants to be there, wants to be in the midst of it all. Ian understands, he doesn’t need anything, anything at all. Just his drink and somewhere to stand without anyone noticing him too much.

Most everyone is talking to someone, except one guy he doesn’t recognize, sitting off on a rock near the hill. Older, maybe, by the standards of a teenager. The guy doesn’t really look at anything, just sits and seems to drink, seeing no one and everyone, not Ian, not a glance. Ian knew everyone in Sandy Knoll, but not him. Just some guy in jeans and a plain tee. Just some guy old enough to be his dad, whoever the hell he was.

Ian catches himself staring, guilty of the action he so desperately wants to avoid being on the receiving end of. So he looks away, but that guy is there, on the periphery, and there is just something to it, and it would bother him more, but he can’t blot out Jenn, she’s taking over everything...

He drinks some more, and the sun dips below the trees in glorious orange and pink, sailor’s delight...

There is the moon in the sky, there is the moon on the water, a reflection of a reflection’s light dancing in ripples, twisting with the flow of the Trout Creek, heading on its merry way to the next waterway, downward and out, flowing on to the big water at the end. So many paths but they all head in one direction, they all go one way, when you look back it seems as if you made so many decisions, but did you really? Water has to go where the earth runs low.

The beer swells in Ian’s belly, muddles his brain, but it doesn’t dull the edge enough. There’s her face again...

The young partiers recede to the warm glow of the fires, while Ian stands alone on a wide, flat rock looking at the darkness of the water.

Doesn’t hear Chuck’s laugh, so he goes looking. Heads over where Chuck pitched his tent, there’s a small fire in a circle of creek stones. Chuck, Jim, Taunton and some girl who looks so thin her arms are like willow branches.

Taunton leans over the fire, with what passes for a smile, a crinkled and bottom-blackened square of aluminum foil in his hands, grasped by the

edges. He takes a straw and inhales the smoke vapors curling up, handing it over to Chuck who accepts it without smiling. Jim stares intently into the flames, and as Ian steps closer, he can see them dance in his enlarged pupils.

“Chuck,” Ian says.

Chuck leans over the foil and inhales through the straw, coughing slightly. “Hey man.”

Taunton still has that half-smile, half sneer. “Wanna chase the dragon, Swifty?”

Ian doesn’t even look at Taunton. “Chuck, why are you doing that, man?”

“Why are you doing that?” Taunton parrots.

Chuck smiles. “It’s a party, lighten up.”

Ian just turns, pretends he doesn’t hear, doesn’t see, doesn’t care. About much of anything. He finds Chuck’s bag and there’s the bottle of whiskey, he screws off the cap and drinks. It burns, but the beer has smoothed the way.

Ian drinks again, more this time. He wanders by the small fires and talks to people, guys and girls, bottle in hand, bottle in hand.

He sits down next to a girl next to the fire, Annie what’s-her-name.

“Wanna drink?” He offers her the bottle, sloppily. He’s slurring now.

“No thanks.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’ve got my own drink.” She holds up her red plastic cup.

“Cool.” Ian listens to the fire talk, no one pays too much attention. He laughs when they laugh. He drinks when they drink. The bottle is low.

Ian finishes the last of the brown liquid and stares at the empty bottle. He thinks about throwing it into the big rock beyond the fire, shattering it. But he can’t, even now, even inebriated, Black Hole is too sacred. The bottle droops in his hand as he stands up and wanders away from the fire circle. No one seems to care or notice.

He stumbles over to the water’s edge and stares at his form in the moonlight, in the water. He bends over and sets the bottle down, but it rolls, clinking and then splashing quietly into the water. It turns, for a moment, before the current takes it along like a little ship.

Maybe he’ll take a little swim. The brown liquid presses at his pores. Screw you, Chuck. Screw you, Jim. Screw you, Taunton.

Screw you, Jenn...

Ian shallow dives. Skins his nose on something, but comes up. The creek water is summer-warm. His feet just touch the bottom. He keeps his chin above the surface, hearing the voices carry over, hearing the water, feeling the water. The fires flicker along the shore. Ian tilts his head back, looks up the shale face, to the moon, passing under a cloud. He lets himself drift out deeper, maybe a yard's difference. Treads water. His arms don't have much in them, save alcohol. His head dips under, and he takes a lungful, sputters above a moment, then, under under under....

Holds his breath until his brain wants to explode.

There's the moon, up through the water; colorful strands reach out and down, twisting and pulsing. Burning gold and electric blue, one strand throbs violently, grows larger than the rest. Its end is a small tube, growing in circumference. It wants to take him in, devour him,

I've been waiting for you, it seems to say.

Ian sees himself from above, a mess of hair, just under the surface... Then blackness.

Sweet air, coughing, sputtering.

The face of the stranger above him. The loner he had seen earlier.

Murmurs and excitement. The press of surrounding bodies.

Flat on his back along Trout Creek.

"What are you doing?" Chuck's face appears. "You're lucky this dude saw you fall in the water and pulled you out."

Ian coughs and sputters some more.

"You were gone, man. You were gone."

Ian closes his eyes, and leaves consciousness again, this time due to the alcohol, goodnight moon...

Part Two: Becoming the Corporation



Chapter 6

She still hasn't said a word to him.

Raine sits in a modern chair, in a modern room. White walls, high ceiling. An art installation of colorful, twisted glass hangs down in abstraction over a cold concrete floor.

The receptionist had hinted at a perfunctory smile when he walked up to the desk and stated his name and purpose (Raine Penton, here to be interviewed at 1:15 p.m., I'm a little early, is that okay?) but she didn't speak, simply looking to the row of wide-seated, short-backed chairs of metal and fabric.

He looks at his watch, purchased for this very interview. He needs an edge, needs to look the part. Whatever that part may be. The job listing had been vague, to say the least. "Entry Level Position" at a "competitive company with a start-up vibe" with "room to grow" in a "collaborative culture."

Almost a year since he earned his degree, and he's still floating. He hadn't gone to college right away, took a few years to live life, but then realized life was disinterested in what he had to offer, so on to school it was, the guy ten years older than the rest, a little more serious but still almost as confused as the baby-faced freshmen who were just excited to get away from the oversight of mom and dad.

He scans the job listing resting in his leather-bound padfolio, extra résumés tucked into the side sleeve. The last line reads "Other duties as assigned." But the primary duties are unclear, just like the purpose of Novillium itself. At first, he thought it sounded like a pharmaceutical company, but his search had only brought up a barebones website, and a satellite image of the building, located in an old industrial part of town, forgotten and overgrown; the parking lot had weeds reaching up through the cracks.

The building was large yet anonymous. Aging brick in a landscape of crumbling smokestacks and graffiti.

A small sign read "Novillium" by the door.

But the interior is not crumbling; it is machined and calculated; clean and maintained.

Crisp and cold.

Like the receptionist, whose hair is pulled back tightly and glasses reflect white squares of the monitor she stares into without waver or distraction. She hasn't looked at him since he sat down. No one else had come in or out; just Raine sitting in a modern chair facing her profile, waiting. No phone calls, no turning of the head. No texting, no checking of a cell phone. Just clicks, occasional clicks.

The clicks amplify in the space of the room.

No music either, or is there? Or is that in his head? The more Raine listens, the more he can almost swear he hears a faint underlayment of classical music floating in the air.

Raine's hands are cold, and it makes him nervous about shaking hands. He rubs them on his pants, subtly he hopes. The receptionist doesn't seem to notice anything about him. He wonders if wearing the suit is too much. It's grey and it fits well; an investment. Like the watch and his résumé printed on cotton-bond paper that states he has a college degree.

Raine resists the urge to test the part in his carefully combed dark hair, and instead looks at the watch, one-fourteen. The second hand works its way around to where it started.

"Mr. Penton?"

Raine turns his head to the door at the other side of the receptionist's desk, the only other door in the room beside the one he walked in through. An unremarkable looking man in blue jeans and a frumpled striped shirt looks out.

"Mr. Penton?" the man repeats.

"Yes?"

"This way."

Raine walks to the man at the doorway, saying "thank you" to the receptionist who just continues to stare into her screen. He reaches out his hand for the customary shake, but the man has already turned and is walking down the hallway. Raine sticks his hand into his pocket and follows him to an elevator.

Inside the elevator car the man looks toward him without making eye contact, his gaze shifting lazily to the side.

They exit at the second floor, and the man leads him to an unremarkable room with a pristine whiteboard, round conference table and not much else.

"Have a seat."

Raine takes the nearest chair, thinking about his posture (don't slouch, appear confident), while the man sits down across from him and crosses his leg over his knee. He leans back and stares toward Raine in an askance way.

After a long five seconds — felt like minutes — the man looks at the leather padfolio Raine has placed on the table. "Is that your résumé?"

"Yes, please, take one," Raine says, sliding out a double-sided sheet and handing it across the table. The table is just wide enough to prevent him from handing it all the way across, and yet the man does not lean forward to take it.

Raine's arm hangs in the air for an awkward moment, then he carefully places it on the table and gives it a careful nudge to propel it closer to the man. Raine leans back as the man takes up the résumé—he had read somewhere it was best to mimic the behavior of the interviewer.

The man slides his wire-framed glasses down the bridge of his nose and looks over his qualifications for a long minute.

"A state college?" the man asks, finally. "Graduated from?"

"Yes."

The man makes a clicking noise with his tongue, and another long minute passes. Raine's not sure if the man is reading the résumé or just staring through it.

"What," asks the man, over-enunciating each word, "is the difference between growth and success?"

"Great question." Raine desperately wants to answer it correctly, to impress this man. So many applications, fewer interviews. He would do anything at this point just to get his foot in the goddamned door of any semi-respectable company.

Based on the waiting room, this one qualified.

"I... I guess success is the destination, and growth is the journey."

Raine starts to say more, then stops.

Hopefully that was enough.

The man makes the clicking noise again.

"Performance," the man says, not looking up from the résumé. "How does one perform for the task at hand?"

"How do I perform at tasks?"

"How does *one* perform at tasks?"

Raine feels his cheeks burning, his face turning blotchy. He sees himself in his mental mirror, sweating. "One... performs the task..."

"Do you have any questions for me?" the man asks.

A long-running trickle of despair threatens to fill Raine to the brim. A disaster of an interview, this was turning out to be. Back to the fruitless job searches, filling out online forms for algorithms to assess and reject, starting from scratch, again and again, three references, three goddamn references....

He needs to think of something to say, a question that will make him look smart, or at least not incompetent.

"What, exactly, is this job about?" *There. That should do it.* Raine sees his chances light up in flames as soon as he spits out his statement of ignorance.

"This is an entry level position," says the man, placing Raine's résumé on the table, face-down. "With room to grow."

"But, what would I do?"

"What does one do at any job?"

Raine feels his left eye twitch. It's been a while since the last time that happened. He finally catches the man's gaze, locks in, and shrugs. "They do what they're supposed to do?"

The man clicks and focuses on Raine like a staring game of chicken. His left eye is cloudy, the other keen and unrelenting. He sets in like a pit bull with his gaze, doesn't release until he finally uncrosses his leg and rises to his feet. Raine stands up right after him, already dreading the walk of shame past the receptionist.

The man steps over to a small side table that Raine hadn't noticed before. The man opens the drawer and takes out a small packet.

"It's a small city, but the streets are confounding. I find having a paper map is useful. Everything's on phones these days." He hands the packet to Raine. "I suppose you have a phone?"

"The battery's dead." Raine stares at the manila envelope.

"There's restaurant menus inside, too."

"Thank you, sir."

"I trust you can find your way out."

Raine shifts the packet to free up his hand, reaching out for a handshake, but the man is already exiting the room.

"Have a good one," Raine calls out, lamely.

On the way out, the receptionist doesn't look up when he walks by the desk. His hand is pushing open the door when she says "you can stop in tomorrow afternoon to fill out your paperwork with Human Resources."

Raine looks back but she is still staring at her computer intently as he hangs suspended in action halfway through the door.

"Yes?" she says, finally, looking up.

"You mean I got the job?"

She smirks ever so slightly and looks back to her screen.

Chapter 7

The light in the elevator indicates B1, then B2.

Going down.

Raine's first day at the new job—he'd been thinking about it all week, but had received no further information, no direction, other than an ID badge and the time of his start. A rush to find an apartment, to set himself up in a new town. And now here he is, wearing the same suit he interviewed in, descending with the receptionist into the bowels of Novillium.

She had said nothing when he arrived, not a single word.

The doors open to a wide, uninspiring hallway with low ceilings. Beige block walls and ductwork run just above Raine's head. Uncirculated air leaves a stale taste in his mouth.

She leads him down the hallway. Raine senses contempt as her heels strike the concrete floor. She pauses before a large, metal door and hands him a white card with two words printed on it in a simple, serif typeface:

No Names.

She opens the door and ushers him in before her, not deigning to enter herself. Four other confused-looking individuals each hold a similar, white card.

"Someone will be with you," she says coldly, closing the door.

Raine surveys the others. Two men and two women, plus himself. The one woman could almost pass for a high-schooler, except for the Armani suit that offset her youthful face and slender frame.

"I'm Bill," says a freckle-faced man, wearing a golf shirt tucked into his pleated khakis. Raine reflexively glances down at his card. So do the others, uncomfortably. No one responds. *Did he even read his card?* Raine wonders. *Or does it say something different?*

They stand around awkwardly.

"Alrighty then," Bill says, shrugging.

The room is expansive and archaically institutional with filing cabinets lining the walls, and steel desks scattered between support beams. Drab overhead lighting. Lots of waiting.

Raine tries not to stare at anyone, tries to act casual. Tries to do the exact same thing everything else is doing. Tries to *not* do the exact same things everyone else is doing, too.

The other woman in the group looks to be in her late-forties, with a sad look to her eyes, accented by her gray attire. The other man seems a similar age to Raine, wearing a shirt and tie. And, of course, there is Bill.

The door opens and a severe-looking woman pushes in a large cart full of boxes.

“Hello,” says Bill.

The woman ignores him and straightens up behind the cart. “These are to be sorted,” she says scornfully. “And filed.” Her sleek, dark hair is pulled into a bun, with a wisp falling out over her forehead near a small, dark mole. A white suit is impeccably tailored to her angular frame.

“How do you want them sorted?” Bill squints at an ID clipped to her lanyard. “M. Bagot? What’s the ‘M’ stand for, Mandy?”

M. Bagot’s eyes are stabbing knives. Her lips quiver as if considering unleashing some eviscerating remark, but instead she exits without comment, in an air of general distaste as the steel door shuts behind her.

“Like an old Mandy Moore,” says Bill, with one of the worst similes Raine has ever heard used to describe someone.

“Alrighty.” Bill looks at everyone. “Well?”

The young woman in the Armani suit smiles, but doesn’t speak. The other two shrug, more or less.

“Worst on-boarding process ever,” says Bill, shaking his head. “This place.” He walks up to the cart full of boxes. “Folders. They’re full of folders,” he says, opening one up. “What the heck are we supposed to do with these?”

“What’s in them?” The girl inches her way closer. The other two hover, and Raine feels himself hover, too.

“Reports or some junk. Dot matrix hell.” Bill flips through one. “When the baker brings you bread, do not go to it, do not eat the bread,” he reads. “What kind of junk nonsense is this?”

The girl in the suit selects a folder and peers inside.

“No headings, no labels.” Bill slaps his folder back down into the box. “We’re being hazed. This is hazing.”

Raine is torn between moving in closer and just heading back to the elevators and leaving for good.

“How the heck are we supposed to alphabetize these?” says Bill.

“I’m not sure we’re supposed to do that at all,” says the girl in the suit. “She said to sort them, not necessarily alphabetize them.”

“How then?”

“Well,” says the girl in the suit, “I’m not sure. But, all of these folders are different colors... orange, pink, blue, manilla... they could be sorted that way.”

“It’s an idea,” Raine hears himself saying.

“What is this, first grade?” Bill snorts.

“It’s a start,” says the girl in the suit. “Something to get us moving. And then we could break them down further from there.”

“There are twelve boxes on the cart,” Raine sizes up the open box.

“There could be fifty of these folders in the box. That’s what, 600 folders?”

“But what does it mean?” asks Bill.

“Means we need to get going,” the girl in the suit says. “We can use the empty desks to sort them by color.”

“Oh joy,” says Bill. But the girl is already setting the folders out on the tables. “Reds here, blues here...” Soon each table has at least two colors per side.

The hoverers begin to pitch in, sorting out folders by color. With so many hands, the work goes fairly quickly. The colored stacks grow; dull colors, lifeless like the persistent fluorescent lighting that warms the ageless dust of the B2 basement complex. Time is amorphous amidst the flickering lights, but there’s a certain excitement to the work, and the folders move faster as the hands find their rhythm. So many folders. Sometimes they flutter open and Raine sees a snippet of text, meaningless to him. The contents don’t matter, he reminds himself. The job is to sort the folders, not analyze what is inside of them.

“And that’s that,” says Bill, placing the last colored folder into a stack.

“So... I guess we put them back in the boxes?”

“Or into these filing cabinets?”

“Or alphabetize them.”

The door to the room swings open with an aching creak; it’s M. Bagot with another cart full of boxes.

“Gawd,” Bill says, “You’re killing us, Mandy.”

The files are sorted, more arrive.

Rinse, repeat.

This time it’s the receptionist at the door with a spiritless announcement. “Lunch may be taken.”

“Are we doing this right?” Bill asks. But she is already click-clacking her way back to the elevator. “How long is lunch?” he calls out.

The group of five walks to the elevator. “Bet they didn’t think we’d get all them files sorted that fast,” Bill says. “Good job, everyone.” Raine can’t help but smile, and the others do, too. Raine steals a glance at the girl in the suit. She catches him and they both look down.

In the parking lot, Raine sits in his car and stares at the industrial wasteland surrounding him. *Not a lot of lunch options*, he thinks. By the time he got somewhere and back, it would probably be at least thirty minutes. He’s tentative about staying out longer than that.

Raine ends up sitting in his car with the window cracked. He has a box of Saltines in the glove compartment, and there are a few left. He tries to remember if there’s a water fountain in the lobby, or perhaps near the elevator. He could always get a drink from the restroom sink if he’s desperate, he reasons.

A few crackers in his stomach, and a thirst in his mouth, Raine returns to the lobby. The receptionist doesn’t even look up as he walks back to the door to the elevator and makes his way back down to B2.

The young woman in the suit is already there, with the other man and woman. Bill saunters in soon after. “You guys finished yet? No? Darn. I should have taken longer.”

The door creaks open again, this time it’s M. Bagot. She inspects the work, showing no emotion, her lips tightly set in a straight line. Raine thinks he sees a slight upturn of her lips, a hint of approval, but discounts it as a sneer when she walks to the door without saying anything.

She stands aside the open door, a full minute or longer.

“This is weird,” Bill says.

A worker in janitorial garb enters with another cart.

And another.

And one more.

“These also need to be sorted,” M. Bagot proclaims. *Yes, now that’s a smile*, Raine thinks as she leaves again.

“I’d quit, but I need a job,” states Bill before he starts sorting with the others.

Too tired to sleep, too tired to concentrate. Raine sits back in the well-worn recliner in his new apartment. Most of the boxes are unpacked, not that there's much to do. The place is drab, no time to paint, or anything like that, but it's clean. Clean, and not a basement apartment. The second-floor space had a couple of decent windows looking out on the lower-middle class street. Tightly spaced homes, cracked pavement and flaking paint. Weathered, much like Raine is feeling tonight. Best to sleep, best to start as fresh as possible.

Raine considers this as he stares at the screen-saver on his television in the dimly lit room. A wooden chair and a tv, some pots and pans. A bed and a dresser. Empty walls and some college posters still rolled up in a box, should he ever decide to hang them up again.

Not quite ready to entertain any guests...

Not that there were any to expect, anyway.

Raised by his grandparents from a young age, no aunts or uncles or cousins or anything like that. His grandparents had passed away after high school, and he didn't make any close friends in college. Not that he was standoffish, just kind of aloof in a subconscious way of protecting himself from loss, or so a therapist might tell him. He thinks of Grandpa Penton and what he might say if he were here. Probably not much, as he was a taciturn kind of guy. Liked to shoot, despised hunting, liked guns but didn't think many other folks should have them. Raine had picked up a pretty good eye with the rifle when Grandpa Penton had taken him shooting at the range all those weekends. More fun than AYSO, anyhow. Never could kick a ball for much.

Raine thinks about his day, laughs in his head at Bill. Then there's suit-girl, at least that's what he calls her in his mind, no names of course, no names, just faces. Her face is at once youthful and also worn, with high cheekbones and almond eyes that are gravely cheerful under her presumably dyed-blond hair.

He thinks about her until he finally falls asleep, in his chair.

Chapter 8

“The prior day’s sorting is adequate.” The woman with the lanyard that identifies her as “M. Bagot” addresses the new employees with her arms folded. She had never actually said her name out loud, at least that Raine can remember. Maybe her name was actually something entirely different. “However, more is to be done,” she continues. “Novillium values creativity in problem-solving. Creativity as a means to an end. A detailed end. An exemplary end.”

Raine stares at the mole on her forehead. *Focus.*

Unlike yesterday, M. Bagot is a fount of spoken words. But nothing seems to mean particularly much. A lot of blather about teamwork and productivity, but still no explanation of what exactly they were supposed to do, or why.

“...And pay special note to the formation of idiosyncrasies, disruptions, anti-productivity.” M. Bagot taps her heels together, the most animated Raine has seen her since he had first met her yesterday. *It only feels like forever*, he thinks.

“Speaking of idiosyncrasies, your group has been reduced from five to four. I doubt any negative impact will be noticed.”

Raine steals a look at the girl who had worn the suit. Today she had shed the suit in favor of slacks with a blouse. Raine is wearing the same outfit as yesterday.

Bill is noticeably absent. *Reduced.*

Raine concentrates harder on M. Bagot’s moving lips. He couldn’t be the next one let go, not this fast. Not after taking out an usurious payday loan so he could put a deposit down on an apartment to avoid another night in his car.

He would do what it takes.

He got that sense from the suit-girl, too. A determination. The other two, he didn’t get much of anything from. But they had made it to another day as well, standing stock-still like a couple of two-by-fours. As if he were any better.

“To conclude,” says M. Bagot, “You are to continue your work with the sorting, with an emphasis on content, creativity, and progress.”

She exits, heels clacking.

The four stare at each other without speaking.

After a long minute the sad-faced woman speaks up. “I’m not exactly certain what it is we’re supposed to be doing.”

“Sorting,” says the girl in the suit under her breath, “more goddamn sorting.” She pauses. “Do you think they’re listening to us?” She scans the ceiling and walls. “Just kidding, if you’re listening or watching.” In a lower, more confidential tone she adds “Hopefully I don’t regret saying that.”

“It worked for Bill,” says Raine.

The others stare at him in disbelief.

A name. *Shit.*

“We should get started,” says the sad-faced woman in gray, while the other man just stands around with his hands jammed in his pockets.

“You’re right,” the girl in the suit says. “Progress was stressed, after all.”

“Content, creativity and progress,” Raine says.

“Creativity as a means to an end,” she adds.

Raine opens a box and takes out an orange folder, thumbing through the contents. “How can we further sort these with an emphasis on content? That means we would have to actually know the content of each folder... and there’s a room full of them. Sorting by content... well... I don’t even know how long that could take.”

“Progress isn’t necessarily completion.”

“I guess that means we have to read them?” Raine squints at a page in the orange folder he has randomly flipped to. “This looks like it’s written in Latin.” He thumbs through more pages. “All of these.”

Suit-girl takes a folder, as does the other woman and man, following her lead. “This is a user manual, but for what I can’t tell.”

“I think these are legal documents,” says the sad-faced woman.

Suit-girl smiles at her. “It’s a start. Let’s look through more of these and see if we can find any patterns. Once we have something, we’ll start “sorting” them even more. We’ve already sorted them by color, so why don’t we split them up that way? We can each look through our colors and see if we notice anything.”

M. Bagot does not appear around lunchtime, so no one takes a break. Rather, they keep reading and sorting. Raine has red and orange folders to analyze; the work is dull, but at least there’s an air of mystery to the

process, he thinks. *The mystery of the mysterious folders: starring four fools who desperately need a job.*

Raine concludes that the red folders contain documents written in languages other than English, so he tries to sort them that way. A difficult task as he doesn't even recognize many of the languages, much less understand them. French and Spanish he could easily identify; there are also several documents in Asian languages; those are much more difficult for him to separate. Mandarin or Japanese? He doesn't know, and neither does anyone else in the group. So, he keeps them together.

No cell signal, no wifi. No updates from the outside.

The wall clock ticks audibly as it spins its way into the late afternoon.

The man checks out at five; the sad-faced woman at seven. Raine and suit-girl sort in silence. No one had checked in on them since the morning.

"Don't think you're going to outlast me," Raine says, without looking up from his current folder. "I'm in it for the long run."

Suit-girl smiles without looking up.

"Another page-turner," Raine says, placing another file in order. "If only I could read it."

"You're going to get us reduced, just like he who shall not be named," says suit-girl. But she still smiles.

"You think they're watching us somehow?"

"Or listening."

"I hope they're as bored as we are."

"Shush." She looks up at Raine. "I mean it. I need this job."

"So do I."

"Then more sorting and less chatting."

"How about after work?"

"I don't know."

"My treat... grab a drink at some dive?"

"Sounds charming."

"Well?"

"Only if you can sort files longer than me."

"I can try."

"Then maybe we'll both be here tomorrow morning wearing the same outfits." She laughs. "Although that wouldn't be a first for you."

Raine glances down at his second-day suit. "It's a deal, or a bet, or whatever it is."

The clock spins on. Eight, nine. Without it the basement room would be timeless. The yellow lights are the same. The shadows keep their mark. The only difference is that Raine is hungrier and more tired. He had hoped that suit-girl might say something, continue the conversation, but she hadn't. Neither did she show any signs of stopping her work.

It is ten when M. Bagot appears. "The building is closing," she smirks, before click-clacking away in her high heels.

Raine steps to the door and holds it open. "Ladies first."

"I'm not really into the whole gentlemanly thing," she says, folding her arms.

"Fair enough," says Raine. "So, how about that drink?"

“I was starting to think that suit was the only outfit you owned.”

Raine glances down at his untucked button-down shirt and blue jeans.

“It is. I’m just renting these.”

She laughs, and drinks her beer. “You look pretty good in it, at least.”

“Would you say it *suits me*?”

“Groan. Save the bad puns until we’ve had more beer. We just got here.”

What to wear had been a difficult decision in his apartment, tucking it in and out, rushing and trying to fit too many things in... eating a handful of chips chased with tap water (pretty much all the food he had right now) then brushing his teeth as quickly as he could. Jog out to his car, step on it to the bar — Ollie’s (a safe choice, or at least it seemed so from the online reviews, laid back but not gritty, located on a harmless side street off of the main drag).

Tuesday night at eleven and it’s subdued at Ollie’s. Two guys at the bar, one other table with a couple. No one at the pool table, no one cranking the juke-box.

“Is this where you take all your co-workers?” she asks.

“Actually, it’s my first time here,” Raine says. “I’ve only been in town a week.” He takes a measured sip of his beer, although his nerves want him to gulp. “I don’t really ever do anything like this. I don’t even know your name.”

“Maybe you should tell me your name first.”

“Nice try.”

“Here’s my philosophy,” she says. “When they’re paying me, it’s no names, no loitering, no shirt, no service— whatever they want to print on their little white cards— I’m happy to oblige. But I’m not on the clock now.”

“Raine. Raine Penton.” He extends his hand across the pub table which she accepts and shakes. Her nails are neatly kept, but unpainted.

“Tricked you.”

“Damn it.”

“Kidding. I’m Lejla.”

“Nice to meet you, Lejla.”

“And you, Raine.”

“So,” Raine says, “Novillium.”

“Novillium,” Lejla repeats.

Raine hesitates, looks off at the far end of the bar where the two men sit, looks at the couple several tables away.

“I know,” Lejla laughs. “But, I don’t think they’re watching us... here, at least.”

“They’re totally watching us back there.”

“Oh, definitely.” Lejla also surveys the establishment in mock suspicion. “And they’ve got hidden cameras.”

“And spies.”

“And spies. Wait... are you a spy? Is this a trick?”

“Careful what you say,” Raine says. “Or there might be only three people at B2 tomorrow.”

A shadow passes over Lejla’s expression.

Raine shifts on his pub stool. “Here’s a question— at the risk of sounding unintelligent. What is it exactly that we’re doing at Novillium?”

“Sorting, Raine. Lots and lots of sorting.”

“Well, right. But it doesn’t seem like there’s a point to it.”

“I don’t know about you, but for me, having a job is kind of the point.”

“Same here,” Raine reflects. “Still, I can’t help but wonder why they’re having us sort a bunch of random files without any direction.”

Lejla leans in. “I think it’s a test of some sort, you know, a way to winnow down the candidates.”

“Might be something to it.”

“We’re making our way to the meaningful work,” Lejla says. “But first we have to prove ourselves.”

“Last man standing.”

“Last *person* standing. At least that’s my theory.”

“Not bad. So, here’s another question. What exactly is Novillium?”

“A company? Hmmm. Well, obviously they... actually, I have no frigging idea.”

“It kind of sounds like a pharmaceutical company or some pill with terrible side effects.”

Lejla chokes on her sip of beer, spraying some back into her glass. “Oh my goodness, I thought the same thing!” She laughs out loud then notices one of the men at the bar looking at her. “Enough about Novillium—I’m starting to get paranoid.”

“Agreed. Who cares, as long as the first paycheck doesn’t bounce?”

“Cheers to that,” Lejla says, lifting her glass.

More people filter in, and someone starts up the jukebox. Raine looks at his watch, and his near empty glass. “Well, it’s getting a bit late, I don’t want to pressure you for a second drink when you’ve got to clock in early tomorrow. It’s getting a little noisier in here,” Raine says, raising his voice to counter the music.

“At least they played Billy Joel, I can live with that.” Lejla finishes her beer and looks to the bar. “Besides, I need two beers minimum after a day like today.”

Raine looks at Lejla’s glass. “Same thing?”

“Second round’s on me,” Lejla says, standing up and going to the bar.

The beers come, and they talk casually for a while, commenting on the patrons and what people are doing around the bar.

“Are you a local?” Lejla asks.

“I’m not really from anywhere,” Raine says. “At least not for a while.”

“So mysterious,” Lejla teases. “Where were you from exactly before now?”

“Okay, so I graduated from State last spring, and I was living there, or near there for a few years. But I was older than the typical college kids, so I didn’t really do much, you know? Just worked a crappy job and took classes.”

“A *couple* of years older?”

“Shut up,” Raine says wryly.

“What’s your major?”

“I don’t even know, really.” Raine shrugs. “I just took a bunch of classes and they gave me a degree.”

“I was a theater major,” Lejla says, “I’m embarrassed to say.”

“Why embarrassed? That’s cool.”

“Because look at me now. You know, Novillium? Sorting files? I’m not exactly taking Hollywood by storm.”

“You never know when acting might come in useful. Audition for anything recently?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, jinxing and stuff.”

“Makes sense. So where are you from?”

“I actually grew up not too far from here. My parents were Bosnian refugees.”

“They still around?”

“Yeah, but they weren’t too thrilled with my theater major. Business school sounded better to them. So I moved in with my older sister down in Norfolk after school.”

“Not exactly Hollywood.”

“Yeah. And now I’m back home because my dad’s ill, and my mom, she can’t do it on her own. I mean, she barely speaks English after all these years.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“So I’m back, and I need a job. Thus, Novillium.” Lejla shakes off the cloud of seriousness. “So enough of my sad shit. What about you? Got parents?”

“My parents passed away when I was young, actually.”

“Now I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay... I barely remember them. I was raised by my grandparents... who passed away my first year of college. Took me a while before I went back to it.”

“Shit. That’s heavy.”

“It is what it is,” Raine says. “Man, we’re almost as pathetic as that sad-faced woman at work.”

Lejla bursts out laughing, then catches herself, glancing about the bar. “She is so sad, isn’t she? You know, I’ve come up with a nickname for her.”

“Yeah?”

“The Grey Widow. I mean, I know nothing about her, but it just fits.”

“I like it.”

Lejla finishes the last of her beer. “Listen, Raine Penton. This was fun, I needed it.”

“But it’s getting late.”

“Definitely.” Lejla continues, taking on a more serious tone. “Listen, I think we should play under the radar at work. Like not get too friendly there. I... just get the feeling that’s not what they’re looking for. But, this was nice, and a good outlet. We should do it again.”

“Agreed.” Raine finishes his beer. “Tomorrow I won’t even know your name.”

“No hard feelings when I’m the last person standing?”

“Of course not.”

They stand up, and slip on their jackets awkwardly. They walk to the door. “After you,” Raine says, holding it open.

“You’re a slow learner, Raine.” Lejla touches his arm. “See you tomorrow.”

Chapter 9

They had finally left those damn folders on the floor below them.

Today, M. Bagot wears a shawl that makes Raine think of French suffragettes, why, it's hard to explain. Perhaps there's a faint easing of the sternness that could only come with the ascension from level B2 to level B1. *We're not going up, but we're going down less*, Raine thinks as they ride the elevator down to their new floor.

Three of the original five remain: Raine, Lejla, and the Grey Widow. *How long have we worked here?* Raine doesn't quite remember. The sorting and re-sorting and fine-tuning of the sorting had jumbled together into one bland wad, punctuated by trips to the bar with Lejla—late nights, deep talks, and even the beginnings of an emerging relationship. The relationship keeps them coming back, keeps them focused. Gives them an outlet to vent at the strangeness and monotonous brutality of it all. Bill had lasted a day before he got reduced. The other man disappeared somewhere in the bland, meaningless middle. But they were in it for keeps.

M. Bagot opens the door to their new room and sweeps her hand in a rather grand motion to reveal the very same boxes upon boxes of files that they had sorted so diligently in B2. Raine mentally vomits, and senses the same from Lejla. As for the Grey Widow, well, who ever knew what sad thoughts she was thinking?

"A person who satisfactorily completed the prior tasks should be proud, but not comfortable," states M. Bagot. "The prospect of understanding should ignite a deeper drive. Is not 'why' the question a person who completed this work should be asking his or herself?"

Raine finds himself nodding, gently. So is Lejla, and the Grey Widow looks like one of those dippy drinking birds.

"Yes," concludes M. Bagot. "They should. And they will."

Lejla focuses intently on M. Bagot, with a flat expression and the vestiges of a final nod.

"Today, you assess." M. Bagot paces before the file folders with her hands held behind her back. "You assess what you learned, why you did it, how you did it. Today, tomorrow, into the vague and variable future. These forms will assist you." She holds up a thick-looking packet densely covered in type. "One is to be completed for each file folder, by each

person.” She thumbs through the pages of the packet before setting it aside on a nearby box of files. “I trust the product will be exemplary.”

Raine sweats. He can see the future: today, tomorrow, the next week. The forms are thick and vague, always asking ‘why’. *Because I was told to. Because I am paid to be here.* But that would not satisfy the form, would not satisfy M. Bagot, would not satisfy Novillium. Raine keeps himself level, keeps himself from veering. Long nights, into the dimness, through the fluorescence, under the white acoustic tile, between the painted cement blocks. He could see them stretching out into the future, and now they are here and he is living them.

A day, a week, two weeks gone. The assessing is worse than the sorting. Raine feels like he is being ordered to justify the methods of torture used against him.

You couldn’t fight it. You couldn’t wrap your mind around the absolute density of the work.

You had to embrace it. Live it. Breathe it. Let it have meaning. Create a meaning for it.

The words on the forms are bullshit.

The words on the forms become poetry.

Monotony edges toward madness in the office, then veers back again. The sorting is a distant dream. Raine sits at a desk and watches the Grey Widow grinning at her work like she just discovered the cure to cancer, *is that what I look like? Will we all look like that?*

Raine adds up the numbers he had assigned and completes his likert scale. He sets the packet aside, neatly stacked on the others. It is a particularly fine achievement.

It is so quiet in the room that he can hear his own heart beat.

Ollie’s, eleven o’clock.

Lejla’s talking about the assessment, about what she’s learning.

Raine’s smile hangs heavy on his face.

He doesn’t talk much, typically. Makes him tired. He’s an introvert, an INFJ, whatever that is. Something an online quiz told him once, late at night. That and what character he was from *Lord of the Rings*.

With Lejla, he talks. Not that he needs to stimulate the conversation. She converses effortlessly. It feels good keeping up.

Not tonight. The words are slow to come, and his thoughts are mired deep within his skull. Like wading through stagnant, hip-deep water.

Why? The thought creeps in like an unwanted visitor. A party crasher. This is his time to enjoy a beer and forget about work... except work insidiously seeps into their conversation.

Why?

Why am I working here?

The economy is poor, and this is a job that pays.

Why am I here with her?

She's pretty and smart.

This is going nowhere.

Where is it supposed to go?

"The blue folders are all adding up to fourteen," Lejla says, "On the uniform equivalent scale."

"Huh." Raine watches the nitrogen bubbles stream up in his freshly poured beer.

"Isn't that strange?"

"Yeah."

"I keep thinking I'm finding patterns, all along. But they always get broken. But the blues, I really think something is happening with them. I'm finally on the brink of getting somewhere."

The bottom of his glass has a little etching, Raine notices. A nucleation point. To create the pretty bubbles.

"Don't you think that's odd?"

"Yeah."

"Have you run into any sustained numerical patterns in the uniform equivalent scale?"

"It's strange," says Raine.

"Well, have you?" Lejla prods.

"I don't know."

"You seem a little out of it tonight."

Raine observes her light blue eyes, the blonde hair touching her shoulders. The texture of her loose-fitting sweater. Her hand rests on the dark wood of the pub table. He covers it in his.

"Come back with me to my apartment."

Saturday morning sunlight filters through the wood-slatted blinds and onto their bodies. Morning hair, no care, what time, make a coffee soon...

Lejla traces her finger along the nape of his neck. "Our relationship is all branches and no roots," she says.

The Grey Widow looks pleased, stacks of completed packets piling higher around her on her table and desk. Her handwriting is careful and elegant, and she pays careful attention to both what she writes and how she writes it. She always fills each line available for "additional comments" to the fullest, for every single file she assesses. Sometimes, she will rewrite an entire packet simply because she is not happy with the quality of the handwriting.

The group of three gathers at a table for a required, periodic discussion about the completed packets (to compare their conclusions in depth and also complete a summary sheet for each set of three assessments). Typically deferential to Raine and Lejla, The Grey Widow allows herself another one of her increasingly common smiles toward the end of the discussion.

"That's that," she says.

"Hmm?" says Raine.

"The last file has been assessed, discussed and summarized."

"Really?" Raine looks around at the tables and desks stacked with papers.

"It's been so long," Lejla says.

"Months," says Raine.

The Grey Widow beams. Raine feels uncomfortable. He hopes she doesn't do something foolish like blurt out her name. But she just looks at Raine and Lejla happily without saying more.

"Should we tell someone?" Lejla asks.

"I guess," Raine muses. "Unless we're not actually finished."

The Grey Widow's expression flattens and she gently shakes her head.

"No, she's right, that's the last file," Lejla confirms.

"I don't know how I missed it," says Raine. "I guess we'll call the front desk. Shall I?"

Raine walks over to a green, corded phone affixed to the wall. He looks at Lejla and the Grey Widow, shrugs, and dials the receptionist's extension.

After a quick conversation, Raine hangs up and faces the others. “She says to wait.”

Several minutes pass.

The door to the room opens and M. Bagot strides in, followed by a maintenance worker wheeling a large object, cloaked in a white vinyl cover. The worker pushes the object to the center of the room, and plugs it into a floor outlet using a thick power cord that protrudes from under and behind the cloak. Without looking at anyone, or saying anything, he exits the room, shutting the door behind him.

M. Bagot stands beside the cloaked object. It is taller than her, a bit wider, and has a depth of several feet.

An obelisk, thinks Raine.

“Have you completed the task as described?”

The Grey Widow is almost grinning. “Yes,” she affirms. “We have.” A tear glistens in the corner of her eye.

M. Bagot surveys the room and the neatly arranged stacks of assessment packets, all studiously filled out over a period of several months. Without any hint of emotion or change of expression, she pulls the cloak from the machine in the center of the room (with some difficulty, as the machine is a few feet taller than her, even with her high heels).

The side of the machine reads, in neat lettering, “Kobra Cyclone Industrial Shredder.”

M. Bagot flicks a black switch on the side, and the machine hums ominously. She turns and faces the three. “And now you will complete the task.” She looks at the stacks and stacks of packets and back toward the now-humming machine.

“We filled them out exactly as you ordered,” says The Grey Widow, trembling.

“Yes.”

“You haven’t even looked at one of them.”

M. Bagot looks at the machine again, crossing her arms.

Pride and accomplishment drain from the Grey Widow’s visage as she numbly considers the implied directive. She takes a single packet and steps before the machine. It looms before her, almost as if it will devour her along with the packet in her shaking hands.

The Grey Widow looks at M. Bagot one last time, who does not return eye contact. She holds the packet above the hatch at the front of the

machine, awkwardly just above her chest level. Closing her eyes, she releases the it with an intake of breath.

Raine and Lejla watch as the turbine whirs and the blades chop the packet effortlessly.

“More,” M. Bagot instructs.

The Grey Widow selects another packet from the table.

“Much more.”

The Grey Widow fills her arms with packets and steps before the machine again. She hoists the reams of documents up and into the hatch. The machine whirs and chops, expulsing the compacted, shredded material from a tube near the rear of the machine in turgid white logs that break off and fall to the floor with no container to catch them.

The Grey Widow drops to her knees and sobs, putting her hands in front of her face. Although M. Bagot’s expression is changeless, Raine senses her satisfaction in witnessing the breaking of the Grey Widow. He wants to step over and comfort the poor woman, and he wonders if Lejla feels the same.

Lejla steps forward. *Good*, thinks Raine. *I’m glad she will.*

Lejla brushes past the Grey Widow and grabs an armful of packets. She dumps them in the machine, sending the load meter toward red. The whirring and chopping and compacting mixes with the sobs.

This is the job, Raine thinks. *This is the job*. He grits his teeth, grabs up a stack of papers and feeds them to the machine.

The Grey Widow remains sobbing on the floor.

Chapter 10

“Good morning.”

Raine is taken aback, momentarily. The receptionist had barely acknowledged him since beginning his employment months ago.

She holds out a lanyard with a new ID affixed to it. No photo; it reads “R. Penton” in bold lettering with a barcode underneath. “Touch it to the elevator pad to access L2. Proceed to the conference room across the hallway.”

“Thank you.”

She shows her teeth in what must be a smile. They protrude from her gums like the teeth of a shark, to complement her vacant eyes.

Raine recoils slightly, recovers himself, and says something mumbled as he makes his way past her desk.

Lejla is already seated in one of many chairs around a long conference table. The frumpy-looking man with the cloudy eye from Raine’s interview stands behind a chair at the distant head of the table, resting his hands on the backing.

“Have a seat.”

Raine sits across from Lejla, but keeping the same distance from the man at the head of the table.

“Today, your roles at Novillium take a new direction.” The man glances at Lejla. “Perhaps you will find this meaningful work.”

Raine’s face flushes at the phrase he recalls Lejla saying at the bar that one night. *Had they actually been listening to them, somehow?*

“Much lies ahead—it is important to be prepared mentally. I will leave you, both, to clear your thoughts.” The man walks to a small door at the other side of the room and looks back. “All I ask is that you do not speak to each other during this time.”

Raine looks over at Lejla, who avoids eye contact reflexively. *She won’t take any chances*, thinks Raine. *Not now. Not with her father’s illness.*

Raine shifts in his chair. He tries to lean back, but it pushes him forward, keeping him on edge. The room is spare. Aside from the conference table and chairs, there is a whiteboard behind him and a few framed pictures on the opposite wall. In one corner, a plant grows in a large pot.

Something's off about this room, Raine thinks.

The room is narrow and long, lacking space between him and the wall behind him. But it's more than that. The room narrows even more toward the back where the frumpy man had exited, like an optical illusion.

Raine looks down at the table. It's covered in fine specks that look raised from the surface, as if the room were painted and the table was not protected. Raine traces his fingers over them, but they are just part of the table top. The more he looks at them the more they bother him.

Across the table Lejla continues to sit without looking at him. Rather, she stares blankly to the right of him as if looking through the wall.

Raine can't focus on any one part of the room. He looks up to see the ceiling has spots on it, seemingly a pattern, but upon further inspection, asymmetrical and random. *Wait, no*, Raine thinks, *there is a pattern...* But then he abandons the idea.

Three pictures hang on the wall behind Lejla, the kind of bland corporate artwork one might find in an office supply store.

But these too are not quite right, including a typical still life of fruit resting on a table. The items in the scene are inappropriately scaled, but not by much. The cheese has a fine black mold creeping up from its bottom corner. The grapes are just beginning to shrivel.

The middle painting is an abstract piece with varying blocks of color, difficult to see behind Lejla's head.

And the third.... just to the right of her ear is some kind of Jackson Pollock knock-off, a mess of splattered paint, streaks and color. So much color that the color is lost in the density.

As time creeps on, Raine feels himself pulled into the painting. The surface feels like water, gently moving. Ripples shimmer and lap in and out, a secret pulsation, a secret pattern. The paint is wet like the sea and something is swimming in it. Scales and whales, secrets and patterns. He sees a dragon, sees its teeth, sees its heart wrapped in a fog of feathers. The fog condenses and explodes into a swirl of birds; Raine feels nauseous and wants to talk to Lejla, who continues to stare blankly. *He said we couldn't talk to each other, but he didn't say we had to keep sitting*, thinks Raine. He pushes back in his chair, which touches against the wall behind him. Raine slips sideways from the chair and edges his way along the wall toward the door where the man had exited. The room narrows, as he suspected, and even the ceiling lowers toward his head.

Oppressive.

He looks for the handle to the door, finds none.

The room bears down on him, he breathes short and shallow.

Raine retreats to his chair, feeling panicked, feeling silly. The painting is static and meaningless.

Lejla stares.

Blink, Lejla, thinks Raine. *Blink if your brain is in there*. He thinks about leaving, for good, fleeing this godforsaken room, running right out of the building and driving away from this dingy little city. But the time he has already invested in Novillium looms before him and he resigns himself to the fact he might have to wait in this odious room a long time.

I'll wait, he thinks. *For Lejla if nothing else. But I'm not looking at that painting again*.

The frumpy man is back, and Raine watches him warily. Over the past several hours, the man had subjected Lejla and him to a series of strange tests.

Stare at this picture;

Listen to this sound (over and over);

Stand in this room;

Touch this object;

But never talk to one another.

It feels pointless; it feels wrong. Tendrils of doubt creep into his thinking. He tries to quash them, but they snake deeper into his consciousness.

Heavy weigh the previous tasks and trials: the months of sorting and assessing, watching the others pruned away like struggling branches on a tree, discarded to strengthen the roots and growth of the other branches. He had survived the pruning thus far, though he had quavered at the shredding. But, he had followed Lejla's lead and made it to where he is. Invested.

Lejla must feel the same; he can sense her locking down, toughening up, laser-focusing on the tasks presented. Not allowed to speak to Raine? Hell, she won't even glance at him. Raine doesn't see even a hint of wavering in her. Her stalwart focus bolsters him as well.

Yet, another tendril creeps in.

Is any job worth this? The pay isn't exactly great.

Is it the pride in having a job that doesn't involve bending and scraping to every customer that walks through the automatic sliding doors?
Indentured retail servitude?

Besides, is this that different from the circus of flaming hoops he had been presented at every stage of his progression, college onward?

And a small part of him wonders, "Can I outlast Lejla?" For he has a competitive streak latent in his bones.

The final two.

Is that what this is?

A showdown?

Lejla doesn't show doubt.

Which puts her ahead.

And so Raine steps on the tendril of doubt as hard as he can, grinding it with his heel.

The frumpy man finally leads them to a new room, where they find themselves partially reclined in chairs with their feet up. The room is rounded and dimly lit, reminding Raine of a small theater with safety lighting.

"And now we will complete a series of evaluations to guide your placement within Novillium." The frumpy man stands before them, behind a small podium. He is lit from below, with shadows over the cleft of his chin and his nose. Raine and Lejla each face their own flatscreen monitor mounted to portable carts. The sleek rectangles are blank save a blinking green cursor.

"It is important that you focus your very best." The man presses a small button on his podium, which has a small screen embedded in it. Two lab technicians enter, each pushing a small cart, and stand beside Raine and Lejla, respectively. They outfit them from the carts as the frumpy man continues talking.

"These will monitor your body activity as you complete the tests," he says, as the technicians attach sensors to Raine's wrist, and then unbutton his shirt partially to add more to his chest. He sees Lejla in his periphery, receiving the same preparation.

Raine's technician removes a helmet-like device from the cart with wires protruding from it and places it over his head. The technician turns a dial on the back of the helmet that tightens its fit. "We will also be monitoring, and recording, other key biometric data points," says the

frumpy man, who comes over and hands both Raine and Lejla a three page legal document filled with dense text even as the technicians are adjusting the fit of the helmets to their craniums.

"I'm not sure about this helmet thing." Raine shifts in his seat.

"This consent form affirms that you comply with our collecting of data for research purposes, along with some other boilerplate disclosures." The man holds out a plain white BIC pen with a black cap on the end, expectantly. "Initial here, here and here. And then print and sign on the highlighted line on the third page."

Raine squints at the small lettering. Behind him, Lejla is already signing hers and handing back the document. Connectors click as the technicians wire the devices to the carts.

Raine scrawls his initials three times and then his signature at the bottom.

No one ever reads the fine print anyway.

The frumpy man places the consent forms behind the podium, and looks to the technicians, who finish adjusting the sensors. From his tablet, he dims the lights. "You will be administered a mild sedative, to help you relax and focus."

Raine starts at this, turning his head and moving the wires with it.

"It is important not to upset the wires with swift movements." The man frowns.

A technician rolls up Raine's sleeve and wipes his forearm with a disinfectant swab.

Raine breathes in through his teeth and stares at the monitor. He hates shots.

"You will feel a small pinch and some numbness in your arm," says the man.

The technicians exit the room.

"We will complete three batteries of tests," says the man. "First a personality test, with a series of questions, from which you will answer using various provided scales. Second, you will complete an inkblot test, where you identify different patterns. Third, you will be presented with a series of imagery and sensations while we continue to monitor your biometrics.

"Use the trackball embedded in your armrest to select the answer."

The first question appears on the screen.

"R. Penton knows how to put every minute of his time to valuable endeavor."

Seeing his name throws him off, a bit.

Underneath the question are a series of responses paired with radio buttons. "Strongly Agree," "Somewhat Agree," "Neutral," "Somewhat Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree." A small timer counts down from twenty-five in the corner of the screen.

Alright then, Raine thinks. What answer are they looking for here?

It seems obvious enough...

"The answers we are looking for are those that are the truth," the man intonates.

Are they reading my mind with this damn helmet? Raine dismisses the absurd idea. It's a likely thing for him to say at the beginning of the test. Pure coincidence.

Raine considers the question, hovers his fingers above the trackball as the little timer reaches the teens. He clicks "Somewhat Agree."

I probably just failed, he thinks. He pauses and waits for the man to say something creepy like "you cannot fail the test," but to his mild relief he does not.

The second question appears on the screen.

"R. Penton is often the first to react to a sudden occurrence."

This time the timer starts at ten seconds.

Raine stares at the question as the timer winds down.

Three seconds.

Raine clicks "Somewhat Agree" and hopes that giving the same answer twice isn't a demerit against him. *But what if I took too long to react to the question?* Raine worries. But then the next question is already on the screen and he must move on.

"R. Penton values justice over mercy."

The timer now starts at five seconds.

Raine clicks "Neutral."

The questions continue to appear, each one now with the five-second limit. Raine answers them as quickly as he can, although there are several that slow him down, such as **"Strict observance of the established rules is likely to prevent attaining a good outcome."** He finds himself defaulting to "Neutral" in many of those situations.

Occasionally he notices a humming whirl from the carts, a click from Lejla's mouse, or senses the frumpy man's presence at the podium, but he grows increasingly engrossed in the questions and answering them as accurately and quickly as possible.

After he has long lost track of the time and the number of questions he has answered, he is presented with **"R. Penton contemplates mankind and its destiny."**

He doesn't know what to think about that one. "Neutral."

Instead of serving another answer, the screen displays **"test completed."** The screen blips and then an inkblot image appears.

The frumpy man speaks softly from the podium. "Answers will appear below the image in single succession. When you see the answer that matches what you see, click the answer immediately. The answers will not repeat." Gentle tones chime in the room.

The first image looks like a black and white swirling mess to Raine. Underneath it the word "Lion" is displayed.

It looks nothing like a lion to Raine. It doesn't look like anything at all to him. *Swirling mess*, he thinks. *Well, actually*, he thinks, staring at the image harder, *that kind of looks like a mane...*

The word below changes to "Atrophy."

Crap, thinks Raine. *I'll have to answer more quickly. But what the hell do they mean by "Atrophy"?*

The word changes to "Sunrise."

Raine hesitates, then clicks. Just to be done with it and get a new image.

The images march onward, and Raine clicks away, as best he can. It is strange; he starts seeing something, but it's never the suggested word. At one point he lets a good twenty words cycle through before giving up and clicking. Over time, the words start getting closer to what he sees. He thinks "bee" and "hive" will appear a few suggestions later. His thoughts and the word prompts evolve closer and closer to each other until they match almost exactly on the first try.

Image. Prompt. Click.

Image. Prompt. Click.

Image. Prompt. Click.

It feels like cheating, but Raine feels little anxiety. Indeed, he feels extremely relaxed and accomplished. His anxiety about the room and Lejla

and the frumpy man dissolves away.

The screen blips and colorful, slightly moving images appear with no words. A picture of a distant castle in a sea of green, slowly zooming in. The ambient tones fade to the windswept rustling of grasses. The green grows greener, and the castle detail so bright it almost hurts, pleasurably, before blurring away. And now other images, slowly panning left or right, zooming in or away. A sailboat glides across sparkling, blue water as the waves lapped the shore, audibly. In the middle of it all there is a chestnut of memory with his grandfather, teaching him to shoot. His grandfather's face is clear then blurred, the barrel of the rifle cold, then warm; and then abstract color swirls, evolving into recognizable images: A mouse, a stone, a praying mantis.

Raine's head is heavy against the headrest, and he blinks less and less.

He is lost in the screen, presented with a door; and birds fly out in a panic from a dark swirl that evolves into a tangle of wires, the ends glowing like burning flares, until one flare grows brighter, and redder, until it engulfs the screen, and in it the burning redness is a form, writhing.

Raine feels the sensors on his head humming, or warming, or throbbing, no... burning. They burn through his skin and skull and attach themselves directly to his brain, sucking and seeking...

Words speak in his mind, not his words, not his thoughts; intruders...

I am the OmniFere, they say, again and again..

Raine opens his eyes with a jolt; he hadn't realized they were shut. The screen displays "test completed" in simple green lettering. He forcibly turns his head against the confinement of the helmet to see Lejla slumped back in her chair, head lolling... a nest of wires spiraling from her head, feeding the machine.

OmniFere, OmniFere, what doth you hear?

Raine would comfort her, but the span of the room is the gulf of a universe's consciousness.

"Two pints." The bartender places the drafts on the bartop.

Raine draws his glass closer to him, but doesn't drink. The second glass sits brimming before the empty stool next to him.

Lejla is always punctual. Automatic. The clock would strike twelve and she would be there, walking through the door.

Not tonight.

Twelve 'o five and there rests her beer, bubbles streaming upward as the foaming head recedes down the rim, leaving a web of lacing.

No Lejla, no text, no call.

Raine comes from the tradition of ritual and formality, and he figures she does as well, he expects the talk. At the very least, the talk. The formality of explaining what he already knows. *The job comes first, second and third. The risk is too great.*

Or the last day had been just too much... and she's out.

Done.

Gone.

His beer waits, untouched.

The clock progresses, and the bubbles wane.

He picks up his beer and drinks it to the bottom of the glass.

Leaves her beer beside him. Orders another for himself.

No reason to linger at Ollie's tonight.

But he does.

Chapter 11

The next morning the frumpy man is waiting for Raine in the lobby.

“Raine,” says the frumpy man. “Raine Penton.” The sudden use of his name is like an assault. “I want you to call me ‘Karl,’ would you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, *Karl*,” corrects the man.

“Yes, Karl,” Raine says.

“Today you begin your training as a junior-level generalist, someone who is capable of many tasks in the organization. A big-picture person, who understands how the moving parts interact.”

“A Jack of All Trades?”

“A base term, but yes.”

“A Swiss Army Knife?”

“I see something unique in you, although...” Frumpy Karl tilts his head and peers at Raine, “...gut feelings are sometimes misleading.”

Raine stands silently in the hallway.

“You can ask me anything. I may not always be permitted to answer, but I will never hold it against you for asking. Inquiry, after all, is the driving force behind all scientific knowledge.”

“I will ask one question,” says Raine.

“Go ahead.”

“Lejla. Did she... pass the test?”

“There is no test.”

“She would be better for this job than me... she should have it... if it’s coming down to the two of us.”

“Lejla was offered a different assignment within Novillium, which she accepted.” Karl looks over the top of his glasses at Raine. “Now, shall we begin?”

“It’s not such a large building, although it goes deep,” says Karl as Raine walks a step behind. “B1 and B2 are what they seem, the sorting and assessment areas. Of course, there are also places for mundanities such as boilers and HVAC—the guts of the building, if you will. Level 1, the ground floor, is reception and our interview suites, of course. Level 2 is

home to our psychological evaluation suites—which you’ve experienced. Research and Development is on level 3, and level 4 contains... our executive suites.”

“Those big windows at the top of the building?” asks Raine.

“Here we are—the annex. Our work has created the need to expand our operations. This is our fastest growing department—counter operations. And it is where you will be spending much of your time.”

Steel doors glide open to reveal soaring glass windows that flood an atrium with light. The space is abuzz with activity, computer desks gridded over the polished concrete floors between monolithic support beams. Rectangular panels of glass rise up to the modular gridded ceiling. The left and right walls are made of cold, gray blocks.

“You can’t even see this place from the parking lot,” Raine observes. “I had no idea.”

“The windows make it look bigger than it really is.”

“You mentioned counter operations — counter to what?”

Karl lowers his voice. “The Kurs.”

“Kurs?”

“Inanna’s Faithful. ‘Kurs’ is a bit of a slang term we use around here... more fitting. A radical cult of terrorists—violent and unpredictable. Secretive, manipulative. Ignorant, foolish...” Karl takes a deep breath, and exhales slowly.

“Ah, it’s Hansen.”

A blonde-haired man, not too much older than Raine himself, strides up with a gaping smile. The kind of guy who’s a couple of inches taller, oozes confidence and meticulously irons his shirt.

“Well, if it isn’t the honorable Karl Schmid with the new recruit. Welcome.” Hansen extends his hand and shakes firmly. “I must apologize, I was briefed on your name, but it totally slipped my mind in all the excitement since yesterday.”

Raine starts to say his name, but Karl interjects over him.

“The person of interest.”

“Yes,” says Hansen, “Person of interest, indeed. Someone the Kurs have a strong interest in. And therefore we do as well.”

“Careful, we must be careful. We cannot spook them.” Karl winces and presses two fingers against his right temple. “Hansen, you can take over from here. I must go.”

“Yes, of course Karl.” Hansen leans in close to Raine as frumpy Karl walks away. “An odd one, that Mr. Schmid. But that’s to be expected with the founder. These creative genius types fit a certain bill.”

“The founder,” says Raine, “the founder of this place? Of Novillium?”
“Yes.”

“I had no idea.”

“He doesn’t wear it on his sleeve. And he likes to be involved in the hiring process. He truly cares about each employee as an individual of the greater unit.”

“I feel honored he’s put such an interest in me.”

“He’s ubiquitous, until he’s not. You’ll see.” Hansen pauses and looks out across the annex. “So, you’ll be working in the annex... as a.. What was it now?”

“Karl said I was a junior-level generalist, I think. “So I’m going to work as a generalist to help fight terrorists? I’m not sure I understand.”

Hansen laughs. “It’s much less sexy than it sounds.”

“To tell you the truth, I’m a little intimidated.”

“You are a canvas, and your fabric has been proven during the initiation process. We’ll do the rest. Simply observe, learn and follow instruction. And when the time comes, you’re going to act, empowered by what you have learned.”

Hansen punches Raine playfully on the shoulder. “Come here and check this out.” Hansen motions for Raine to follow him over to a large table in the center of the room. “A bit of a tableau we’ve put together.”

Amongst the printouts, blurry photos and other seeming miscellanea scattered over the table lies a crude drawing of a bird, chalked in white over black paper. Hansen picks it up and shows it to Raine. “This is a symbol associated with the cult, and significant to them.”

“Where do they operate from?”

“We don’t know, exactly—they’re elusive and their numbers are small.” Hansen stares intently at Raine. “We’ve never had the opportunity to interrogate one of them. Indeed, what we know about them is based more on what’s not there, as opposed to what is. As if the emptiness between objects can take its own shape if one looks carefully. That’s where they operate.”

Hansen looks at his watch. “I have something coming up. Why don’t you familiarize yourself with the annex and I’ll meet back up with you in an

hour or so?”

“Okay,” Raine says dumbly. “Sounds like a plan.” He calls out as Hansen starts to walk away. “My name is Raine.”

Hansen turns and smiles. “I know.”

About a dozen casual professionals work in the annex. Raine feels awkward walking around the space, feels invasive looking over the shoulders of people at screens he cannot interpret. He shuffles over to the coffee bar along the exposed brick wall with a water cooler next to it. Raine fills a cup of water and wanders back to the table, something of a safe space, away from the working others, but still in the midst of everything. He was brought here, he has permission here. He looks at the contents of the table more carefully, mostly to give the appearance of purpose, but finds himself drawn in. The symbol of the bird keeps his attention. Makes him think of cave paintings and antiquity.

Raine picks up a photo of a sad-looking man wearing a flannel shirt. The photo is faded and worn, like the contents of the image itself. The man has raven-dark hair, hanging loosely over his brow, a strong chin, and piercing sad eyes that avoid the camera’s lens. Raine is about to set the snapshot down when he notices the background and takes a closer look. He had been so caught up in the piercing sadness of the face he didn’t notice it looked like the man was against a rough stone wall... a cave.

That’s odd, thinks Raine. Maybe he’s a spelunker.

Chapter 12

This number is no longer in service, the message had said. After the failed texts to Lejla's number, Raine had finally tried calling—he despised calling, despised any phone conversation, give him the old face-to-face any day... but the gnawing inside of him had its way.

No longer in service means no one to call.

Suspicion gives way to apathy, and apathy to acceptance.

Acceptance to moving forward.

Progressing.

Lejla is a fine, fading memory. A chapter in service of the greater story. She's a tough young woman who can handle herself. She is progressing, in all likelihood, much like he is. Raine feels the progress in his bones, in the certainty of his step. He rolls out of bed with a mental acuity he had lacked before. Carves the lines of new habits, eager to face the day and to work. The people at the annex treat him like their colleague. He is their colleague. He doesn't understand everything, but that's not the point.

The point, as Hansen reinforces, is to fulfill his role.

To be ready.

Today is no different.

"Raine, looking sharp." Hansen claps his hand on Raine's shoulder. "The shirt suits you."

"Thanks," Raine says. "What am I working on today? More report editing?"

"Karen says you've been a quick learner with the proofs. But actually I have something new for you today."

"Great," Raine says sincerely.

"That's just one thing I love about you Raine, you're always enthusiastic and ready to go."

"I try."

"How are you with patterns?"

"I think I can do well with patterns."

"We have these stacks of interview profiles, and well, we could use a fresh set of eyes on them, to be honest." Hansen strokes his chin. "It's not the most glamorous task..."

“I’m sure it beats the hell out of anything going on in B2,” Raine deadpans.

Hansen’s eyes gleam as he laughs. “With that can-do attitude you won’t be a *junior* generalist for long, my friend.”

Hansen leads Raine over to a desk at the far end of the room. “No more wandering for you, this bad boy’s all yours. Check out that sweet pen caddy.”

“Nice.” Raine sits in the chair, swivels back and forth nonchalantly. “Feels like home. So, get me on those patterns.”

Hansen brings over a stack of slim file folders, and opens one up. “Each one of these contains a profile on different individuals we’ve interviewed and performed psychological testing on. I want you to comb through them and see what you think.”

“What am I looking for?”

Hansen shrugs. “I don’t want to lead you in a direction that may be wrong.”

Raine takes a folder from the pile and flips through it. A profile sheet with a photo of a world-weary man paperclipped to the front. A second sheet with bio-data (height, weight, and more, although some lines are incomplete). Next, a glossy photo print of a speckled pattern of white dots over a black background. Raine holds it up. “What are these? Constellations?”

“No worries, Raine. Just see what you see.”

“You aren’t B2-ing me, right?”

Hansen laughs, and walks away.

Raine carefully handles the papers. He studies the first sheet, the basic profile, his left thumb finding the paper clip that attaches the photo. He slides the photo out, careful not to scratch the print. It’s a headshot of an older, rough-looking man. Raine sets the photo aside and looks at the first sheet with basic bio data. Nondescript name, no home address, no phone. Height and weight. Age. Nothing jumps out at him. He sets the first sheet aside and looks at the interview data. Questions about childhood, basic life and experience. Near the bottom a section catches Raine’s eye: hallucinations and out-of-body experiences. The section is left blank on the sheet, with a little pen line drawn through it.

The third sheet is the glossy photo paper with the abstract pattern. It’s gloss black, and the pattern looks like thick, glowing cobwebs with little

blobs stuck in and around them. Raine can't make sense of it, on its own.

Time passes and Raine makes his way through the stack. Almost all of the photos are of homeless-seeming older men, with similar, obscure details. Each has a cobweb photo, although each one is different. Some are fainter and more spread out, while others are thicker with more blobs.

Raine sighs and sits back in his chair, resting his eyes. *There's got to be something, right?* A voice in the back of his mind warns him of more meaningless tasks.

"How's it going?" Hansen's voice is a jolt.

"Um, good, I think."

"You crack the enigma?" Hansen kicks back in a nearby chair, all smiles and shark eyes.

Raine smiles wryly. "I can see that most of these guys are older, and well... how do I say..."

"Home-challenged?"

"Something like that. Who are they?"

Hansen leans forward. "Our downtown clients. We run a homeless outreach that provides free meals and personal counseling."

"I had no idea."

"Community is one of Novillium's core values. We're not all quantum security. We're here for people, too."

"What's this information used for?"

Hansen raps his knuckles on Raine's desk. "Say—instead of describing it, I'll just take you there." He looks at his smart watch. "Not today, though. I've got a thing. But tomorrow. I'll take you over and we'll do lunch. See it firsthand."

"Okay," Raine says. "Should I keep looking at these for now?"

"Hmmm?" Hansen looks up from his watch. "Oh, yes. Keep poring over those. Familiarity will be helpful."

"And one more thing," Hansen says, as he stands up and makes ready to leave, "Don't forget you've got a session with Schmid later this afternoon."

The Schmid sessions. Raine hadn't forgotten. It wasn't easy to forget. Schmid took a personal interest in the well-being of his employees, providing them with one-on-one counseling sessions, as he called them. They could be quite sporadic for most, but it seemed he had taken a special interest in Raine. This would be his third session since moving into the annex.

The facade of the homeless outreach is freshly painted a rich, bright red with white lettering. Large glass windows reflect back the street, and Raine looks at himself in them, walking up the concrete steps. His clothes have been newly purchased, unlike the days of his one solitary suit. A fitted shirt and pants, carefully maintained haircut. He is a professional now, not just another nobody.

Hansen locks and sets the alarm to his Lexus with a chirp. "Wait up."

The outreach appears to take up the first floor of the building, its fresh paint and shining glass contrasting with the aging brick above.

"You wouldn't want to come here at night," Hansen chuckles. "Hell, I get worried someone might want to take a looksee in my Lexus in the broad daylight."

"It doesn't look dangerous," Raine says, observing the worn but quiet city street.

"Oh, Raine. So much to learn." Hansen jogs up the steps and reaches ahead to open the door. "After you."

Inside is clean and spacious. Rectangular tables with bench seating fill the well-lit space. A line of rough-looking folks, mostly men, queue up at a lunch counter.

"Big Tony!" Hansen calls out, enthusiastically. "What's for lunch?"

A small dark-haired man wearing an apron behind the counter replies without pausing his service. "Hot turkey, baby. With all the fixins."

"My favorite," Hansen says. "This is my buddy Raine. He's an up-and-comer over at headquarters."

"Welcome to the family, Raine." Big Tony looks back to the kitchen. "Hit me with another tray of peas, already. Sheesh." Hansen and Raine fall into the quickly moving line. Hansen nudges Raine. "Good guy, Big Tony is. Salt of the earth."

Raine can see his rapport with the clients, a genuine smile on his face and a no-nonsense humor. Raine and Hansen fill their trays with hot turkey with gravy, mashed potatoes and peas on the side. Hansen leads Raine to the end of one of the long tables that is still unoccupied.

"One of these days I'll have to take you out for a real meal," Hansen says. "This won't get any Michelin stars, but it'll fill you up."

"It's not bad," says Raine.

Hansen spends more time talking than actually eating, commenting on the wide cast of clients, the employees behind the counter, and anything else that fires in his brain. Raine listens, and eats. He also observes. One man in particular catches his eye. The man sits alone at a table in the far corner, away from the windows. While the others chat in low tones, with a familiar, subdued comfort, the man seems out of place.

Raine interrupts Hansen as he talks about the features of his latest watch purchase. "Sorry, but that guy, that guy over there..."

"Yeah?"

"He's from the packet."

Hansen leans in. "From the packet?"

"Yeah. The packets you had me going through for patterns. He's one of the clients in the packets. The one labeled 'person of interest.'"

A sly smile spreads over Hansen's face. "Look at you. Nice observation, Raine, nice observation."

"As a matter of fact, I was hoping you'd notice him. You see, he's someone we need to know about. Problem is, we don't want to spook him. We need him to be comfortable."

"He just started coming into the shelter last week. We suspect he could have intel on the Kurs."

"Him?"

Hansen looks Raine squarely in the eye. "Raine, I think you're ready to know more."

Raine feels a tremor of a thrill run through his body. "Yes," he replies, trying to keep his voice level.

Hansen lowers his voice even more. "Agents of the Kurs... they have a tendency to appear in this area. They come and go, but they tend to have certain distinguishing characteristics. Many would pass for a typical homeless person... and some of them may very well be, in the end."

"You see, these agents, these Kurs, they get kind of used up. Their brains become addled. We don't exactly know why."

"You're saying this guy, he's one of the quantum terrorists you were talking about?"

Hansen sighs. "It's sad, really. Most of these people are unwitting accomplices, unaware of what they are actually doing. Used, and discarded when they can no longer function. I want you to get close to this guy, earn

his trust. Encourage him to take advantage of our counseling services. We might be able to help him get past this. Heal his mind.”

“What’s his name?”

Hansen laughs. “I have no idea.”

Chapter 13

Other duties as assigned... That's what the job description said, right?
That's what they all said. Raine adjusts the collar of his button-down shirt. It's early summer, but the cool dampness of spring lingers on.

The pretense is helping out at the shelter. Doing the odd jobs, wiping tables, making the clients feel comfortable. Making them feel at home. Wanted. Valuable.

Especially that guy, that guy in the corner.

Raine eases up to Big Tony.

"Just do whatever helps," says Big Tony, before Raine can ask anything, an apparent mind reader. "Except the cooking. I manage the cooking." Big Tony grins and fills another plate in line.

Raine psychs himself up to approach the person of interest. What was there to lose?

He could spook him. Spook the man and he never returns. Come on too heavy, too needy. Glance over at him one too many times. Then the bird flies the coop. What would Hansen say about that? Laugh it off with that wide grin of his? Chuckle and give him a friendly punch on the shoulder?

I wonder, Raine muses.

Raine forces himself to go slow. He casually places himself in the vicinity of the man, wiping tables. One day. Two days. Third day he smiles and says "hello." The man grunts, perhaps in a friendly way. It was difficult to tell.

It's the end of day three, and Raine is beginning to stress again. Almost a week at the shelter and his progress is negligible. Big Tony keeps on serving, the other volunteers keep doing their daily routine. And so does Raine, except his real task is secret. It's that guy in the corner. And what exactly is the timeline?

Back at his apartment, Raine sits in front of his laptop and cracks a beer. No more Ollie's these days; he thinks about Lejla again then pushes it back out of his mind. *Task at hand.* He brings up a web search and types in "how to build trust with strangers." He feels a little creepy hitting enter on the query.

Sales and networking articles, lots of them. Alright.

“Smile.” Great, okay, Raine thinks. I’m really on to something here.
He sips more beer and sighs.

“Be transparent.”

“Find things in common.”

“Dress in a trustworthy fashion.”

“Listen.”

“Show your weaknesses.”

Raine sighs again, sips again. A sip that empties the can. *How hard could it be?*

The next morning, Raine stares into his mirror and adjusts his tie. *Dress in a trustworthy fashion.* Was a tie trustworthy? Probably not to a homeless person. Raine pulls off the tie unceremoniously and tosses it aside before staring into the mirror some more and then untucking his shirt.

Not enough.

Raine changes into jeans and a t-shirt. *Enough?* His black dress shoes catch his eye and he swaps them out for his old pair of running shoes. Raine is just about to leave the mirror when he ruffles his neatly combed hair. *Too much.* He straightens it, just a little.

The new and improved trustworthy Raine takes a deep breath as he enters the shelter the next morning. He greets Big Tony and wipes down a few tables. The target hasn’t arrived yet, so Raine practices on some of the other clients, trying to engage in small-talk and acting natural in general.

A little after noon the target enters the shelter and takes his seat in the far back corner. Already, Raine feels increased confidence as he is chatting up another person and blending in better. He takes his time, but steadily works his way toward the far back corner, spritzing tables with a cleaner and wiping them down.

Show your weaknesses.

Raine loosens the cap of the spray bottle with his thumb. He lets the bottle slip from his hand and it hits the floor with a thud. Cleaning solution gushes from the overturned bottle.

“Damn it.” Raine bends down and sops up some of the liquid with his rag. “Such a klutz.” He laughs wryly. “I’ll be lucky to keep my job at this rate.”

The target watches Raine in a moment of keenness, looking up from his plate of chicken and potatoes. “What happened to your suit?”

“My suit?” Raine is taken off guard. “Um, I...”

“You were dressed like a professional yesterday. Now you look about as put together as the other ne’er do wells that frequent this place.”

Raine straightens up and notices the man is wearing a well-worn plaid suit and tie. Brown leather shoes peek out from underneath the bench table. So much for dressing for trust. How had he not noticed that before?

“It’s at the cleaners,” Raine says.

The man considers this and blinks his dark eyes. The keenness fades away as he looks down at his plate and pokes at his potatoes.

“What’s your name?”

The man mumbles at his plate and seems distracted.

Raine wants nothing more than to back away, but instead he smiles. It feels... forced. “I’m Raine.”

The man looks up and squints one eye. “Rain, rain... how does that rhyme go again?”

Raine keeps smiling. It’s not easy. “Good one. All right then.” He turns and starts to walk away when the target speaks up.

“Herman Manheim.”

Raine turns back.

“At least I think that’s my name. Not too damn sure.”

It’s the next afternoon and the target, Herman Manheim, is back in his usual spot. “Ever see the movie *Barbarella*?” he asks as Raine wipes down a nearby table shortly after another patron leaves.

“I’m not sure,” Raine says.

“Oh, you’d remember.” Herman licks his lips. “Here, come here and sit down for a minute.” He motions to the seat on the other side of the table. “Whats-her-name in the opening there, you know, whats-her-name doing the anti-gravity acrobatics...”

Raine sets his spray bottle and rag aside and carefully sits down. He pantomimes the act of thinking, pursing his brow and scratching at the stubble that he’s let grow in the last few days.

“The anti-gravity dance thing, you know. For the opening credits.” Herman licks his lips again, this time to ostensibly remove some errant gravy. “Julie or something.” He frowns. “Anyway you haven’t seen it.”

“It sounds familiar,” Raine says.

“Yes, well, *Barbarella*, goes to, what was it I wanted to say?”

“Can I ask you where you’re from, Herman?”

“I don’t know, may you?” Herman fixes his gaze on Raine before losing his focus again. “Sogo. Yes, yes, that’s it. Sogo.”

“You’re from Sogo? Not sure I know where that is.”

“You’re not sure about a lot of things, eh, Raine?” Herman fixes his shining black eyes on Raine again. “Barbarella goes to Sogo. In the movie.” A flash of life and mirth enters his eyes as he chuckles loudly. “Yes, I’m from Sogo, maybe I am after all. The labyrinths of Sogo. That must make me Pygar.” Herman reflects for a moment. “Let me guess, you’re *not sure* if you know who that is.” Herman’s chuckle erupts into a throaty laugh, prematurely ended when he coughs on a piece of turkey in his throat. “Let me explain, Raine. Pygar is a character in the movie, and I am Pygar, yes, maybe I am, although I’ve never thought of it that way before. One of many Pygars. Except, I wouldn’t be so lucky as Pygar in the movie, if you know what I mean.” Herman licks his lips again, this time no gravy.

Herman puts his head in his hands, and stares down at his plate. The mirth seeps out of him. He breathes heavily and speaks no more to Raine.

Raine cracks open a beer and settles back into his chair at the apartment. *Barbarella* hadn’t been freely available on the streaming service he subscribed to, so he had been compelled to purchase access. *This better be worth it*, Raine thinks.

The movie opens and Raine quickly understands Herman’s fixation with the opening as actress Jane Fonda removes her space suit in zero gravity. The movie progresses and Raine struggles to stay awake, exhausted from a long week. He perks up when the character Pygar appears, a half-man, half-bird creature. They go to the underground world of Sogo and more stuff happens. Raine has his finger ready on the fast-forward button of the remote, but never actually uses it, falling asleep at the end credits.

The next morning Raine decides to swing by Novillium before heading to the shelter, with the idea of catching Hansen up on his progress. Hansen is leaning over a worker’s shoulder in the annex, laughing at some meme on a computer screen when he notices Raine.

“Raine, long time no see,” Hansen says jovially. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you not wearing a suit.”

Raine rubs the stubble on his chin. "I've let this go wild, too."

"I'm impressed. You've really gotten into character for this assignment. Or is wearing the suit the character, and this is the real you?"

"I've been making progress with the target."

Hansen leans in eagerly. "Very good. Building trust?"

"His name is Herman Manheim. At least that's what he told me."

"Okay," Hansen says. "How soon can we make our move and entice him to visit us here?"

"Um, well I watched the movie *Barbarella* last night, and..."

"You watched a movie?"

"Herman, the target, he talked a lot about this movie..."

"These vagrant types often get stuck on tangents."

"I think I can make the move soon. Real soon."

"Remember," says Hansen, "The target may have been compromised in some way by the Kurs. Perhaps even suffering some form of PTSD. Tread carefully." Hansen slips his phone out of his pocket. "I'm sending you a number. When he's ready to give us a visit, just send the message 'pickup' to it. We always have transporters on call at the shelter who can deliver him to the psychological aid he deserves."

Raine's phone vibrates in his pocket as the message arrives. "Maybe as soon as this week."

Hansen smiles wide. "That's excellent news, Raine. Excellent news. Here, check out this meme."

"Odd." Herman Manheim's quizzical eyes locked into a gaze with Raine.

"You watched the movie last night, you say?"

Raine tries to act nonchalant. "Yeah, I watch movies most nights, and it was just on my mind after you told me about it."

"Hmmm."

"So anyway," continues Raine, who is sitting across from Herman at a table in the shelter, "heck of an opening."

Herman chuckles at that and breaks his gaze with Raine. He continues eating, and chuckling, and says "what are the movies, what is life," to no one in particular.

"So, why do you come here?" Raine asks casually.

Herman stabs a salt potato with his fork and brandishes it. “A little thing called meat and potatoes, son. Ever been hungry? Like a real hunger?” Herman asks in a way that insinuates he knows Raine has not. He sucks the glistening potato from the tines of his fork and chews it whole, a small trickle of butter leaking from the corner of his mouth.

“Alright, well, I guess that’s obvious. Sorry. I guess I meant why here, this shelter in particular? Aren’t there other places you could go?”

“I don’t know. I’m just sort of here, in the street. I get confused. Sometimes...”

“Where are you from?”

“I thought you watched the movie.”

“Sogo?”

“Sogo.” Herman chuckles at that, but quickly grows addled, muttering incoherently to himself.”

“What about family? Someone you could call?”

Herman’s face flushes and he chews at the inside of his cheek. “What is this, twenty questions!” he shouts. Across the cafeteria voices pause and eyes glance over. Even the metronomic clinking of Big Tony’s serving pauses for a moment.

“You’re right, it’s none of my business,” Raine says quietly, making moves to get up.

“I have many families,” Herman says. “Or at least two or three. They’re here with me.”

“At the shelter?” Raine settles back into his seat as the noises of the cafeteria resume.

“You should host *Jeopardy!* with all your goddamn questions, Alex.”

“Alex Trebek gave the answers, not the questions.”

Herman laughs, and seems to calm down a little. “Okay, brass tack Raine.” A sadness creeps over his face. “The truth is, I’m just very confused.”

Raine feels a tremor of excitement. He concentrates on regulating his breathing, his tone... Was this the opening? Or was it too soon?

“The shelter offers counseling services, and I’ve seen them help a lot of people, like you.” Raine’s hand creeps over his phone, wants to send the message, wants to win...

“I don’t know about that,” says Herman, finishing the last of his meal.

This number is no longer in service, the message says again. A moment of weakness, coupled with doubt. But the dead number allows a small sprout of misgiving to take root. *People don't often just up and change their number, do they?*

And then there's his task, the target. Herman Manheim. Something about the whole thing feels dirty. It helps that he doesn't particularly like the weird little man, but he also doesn't hate him. But he was beginning to know him, on some level, and that frayed at the directive.

A directive to get him the help he needs, Raine chides himself. *Not exactly nefarious.... And the guy could be a terrorist, a kur, as Hansen implied... not savory at all...*

Raine cracks his third beer of the evening (or was it the fourth?). Either way, the cold liquid isn't smoothing things over enough to his liking. His thoughts devolve into a whack-a-mole game of suppressing thoughts about Lejla with the occasional image of Herman Manheim sucking on a potato careening through. His recliner was turning into his own personal Ollie's, only without the distractions of conversation and fun. *Speaking of distractions...* Raine takes up the remote in his hand again, keeps flicking through all the little rectangles of entertainment, never choosing, always browsing. Somehow he finds his way back to *Barbarella*, and begins watching again, if only for the opening scene...

Not today, Raine thinks. *Not today.*

Raine wipes down the tables, doesn't look over at Herman.

Push too hard, suddenly it's over...

Instead he works at the shelter like it's his job.

Herman's just about finished with his meal, when Raine hears his name. Herman's waving him over from across the room, so Raine walks over.

"Don't be a stranger, now." Herman looks at him keenly.

Raine shrugs. "Just doing my job."

Herman blinks, then reaches into his pocket and brings out a tattered wallet. He flips it open and carefully draws out a pocket photo. "Look here," he says, carefully holding it up by the edges. "My daughter."

“Beautiful,” says Raine, squinting at the vintage photo of a teen headshot that looked like it could have been from the 1960s. “What’s her name?”

Herman stares at the photo. Redness creeps over his face. “I’m not sure,” Herman says, foggily. “I’m not sure, Alex.”

“She looks lovely.”

“Yes, she is lovely.” Herman carefully puts the photo away. “That was before I became a Pygar, a bird man.” He places his hand palm upward on the table and carefully pulls back the sleeve of his plaid jacket, revealing a familiar bird symbol tattooed on his wrist. “This is our sign, a sign of the faithful.” Herman stares at wistfully before pulling his sleeve back up. “I’ve been contemplating... do you think this counseling could help me remember better?”

Raine feels a small thrill. He allows for a poignant pause before speaking. “Perhaps. I can’t promise it will, but I’ve seen it help others.”

Herman seems to consider this.

“The shelter has a shuttle that takes you over, no cost,” says Raine. “Actually, it’s around the time it leaves right now.”

“I might be interested in seeing what it’s about,” says Herman.

Raine draws out his phone. “I can take you over,” he says, “if you want. I’ll just send a message to my supervisor to let him know I’m using my break.”

“I wouldn’t want you to spend your break on my account,” Herman says.

“It’s no trouble at all,” Raine says. “No trouble at all.” He taps out a message to Hansen, mentions the tattoo. His phone vibrates almost immediately, and a message says “ten minutes, then through the side door.”

At the ten minute mark, Raine skillfully wraps up some small-talk and escorts Herman through the side door of the cafeteria and into the alley beside the shelter. A black Mercedes van idles at the curb, with a friendly-looking woman with a clipboard standing beside an open passenger door.

“Here for the counseling services shuttle?” The woman says. Her red hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she jots down the information Raine gives her in her clipboard while looking over the top of her wireframe

glasses. “Perfect, Herman you can step right back in here,” she says motioning into the back of the van.

Herman looks into the interior, suddenly reluctant. “Why isn’t there anyone else in there?”

“Today’s typically a slower day,” the woman replies with a smile.

“Maybe tomorrow’s better.” Herman takes a step back and the woman quickly and firmly grasps him by the forearm. Raine notices she’s rather muscular under the loose sleeves of her lab coat.

“It’s okay, Herman, I’ll ride with you,” Raine says, gently nudging Herman forward. Almost magically, Herman shrugs and steps inside. Raine follows him and takes the seat by the open door, which soon glides shut.

Chapter 14

Herman grows increasingly anxious throughout the van ride which weaves its way to the industrial outskirts of the city. Raine recognizes the area, and soon they are pulling into Novillium. The van passes the main parking lot turn-in and goes into a side entrance that slopes down into what must have been a receiving area in the manufacturing days of old. Raine notices the tall windows of the annex rising above them as they drive down into the bowels of the building.

Hansen is waiting when the van arrives, standing before the gaping entrance to the receiving area.

“What is this place,” Herman says, peering out the window. “No, no, no. This is not satisfactory. I do believe I’ve changed my mind.”

The van door slides open and two men motion for Raine to step out. Goons dressed in lab coats.

“It’s okay,” Raine says. “I’m with him. I can calm him down.”

“Exit the van, sir.”

Raine complies, still trying to calm the situation, but the men ignore him and reach in and roughly grab Herman who makes a feeble attempt to bolt past them.

“Please,” says Herman, struggling.

The red-haired woman quickly injects him with a syringe. Herman slurs his protests as the two men prop him up and walk him through the receiving doors.

Hansen claps the back of a stunned Raine. “That’ll settle him down, alright,” he chuckles. He points his thumb back to the Mercedes van. “Enjoy the ride? Nothing but the best for our clients.” Hansen grins.

Raine shakes himself from his shocked state. “What the hell was that about? I thought we were supposed to build his trust. You didn’t need me to do that if you were just going to muscle him in like this.”

“You’re right, we didn’t.” Hansen looks at Raine earnestly. “You’re a sharpshooter, Raine. You did the job as directed—a Novillium man. The big picture will come into focus, but you’ve got to trust the chain of command. Now c’mon, there’s more to do.”

Raine feels a weird swirl of pride that mixes sickly with the sense of betrayal. It was a job to do, that’s all. And there was more work to be done.

The receiving area is a dim maze of corridors and open concrete spaces. Hansen siphons Raine off through a doorway and into a small room. A large glass window takes up one wall, reminding Raine of those cop shows on tv where they look in on an interrogation room.

Hansen kicks back in a chair facing the window, and motions for Raine to do the same. "They can't see us."

The room they view is white and medical. A conscious but sluggish Herman is brought in and strapped to a chair with padded cuffs. His jacket and shirt have been removed, revealing another larger bird tattoo on his chest. The red-haired woman takes his vitals, attaches sensors to his fingers and temple, and makes notes on a tablet before exiting. A long minute passes where Raine and Hansen sit in silence, Raine hesitant to speak up.

Karl Schmid enters Herman's room, looks at the one-way mirror, his face lifting into a rare smirk. He turns his attention to the head-lolling Herman and taps his cheek smartly to get his attention. An interview proceeds, apparently, for Raine can only see in, not hear. He wonders if it is possible to listen in, assumes it is, but hesitates to ask. *If Hansen wanted to hear, well, he would have sound, wouldn't he?*

The session seems reminiscent of the psychological sessions Raine has received. The man appears to display a series of questions to Herman, and he answers, with Karl tapping the drugged man's cheek whenever he begins to sag or drift away.

After about twenty minutes or so, the red-haired woman returns, this time with a syringe filled with a bright orange liquid. She injects Herman and reclines him in his chair, slipping a black hood over his head. She then helps Karl swing a large black screen over Herman's chest.

Karl and the woman exit the room.

Raine hears a faint humming noise.

It grows louder and he feels a vibration coming up through his chair.

Hansen leans over and hands him a pair of black sunglasses. "You'll want to wear these," he says, putting on his own pair.

Raine quickly fumbles the glasses on, as the noise and vibration grow to an uncomfortable level.

The lights dim momentarily, followed by a blinding flash that emanates from the black screen hovering over Herman. He is engulfed in light, and Raine feels as if he can look right through him, right through his chair, right through the wall behind him.

The humming and vibration fade away, as Herman lies still in the chair.

Hansen appears as comfortable as a movie-goer at a theater, just add a tub of popcorn and a sugary drink.

“World’s most powerful photograph,” Hansen says. He turns in this chair and gets up, walking over to a large-format printer in the corner. Quickly and smoothly the printer delivers a print— the celestial-like pattern Raine had seen in the files he had reviewed.

“You’re looking at a dark matter cluster.” Karl’s sharp voice says matter-of-factly from the doorway. He walks to the table and surveys the print. “Each one is unique to the individual.”

“I see,” Raine says, although he doesn’t really understand what Karl is talking about.

“It’s like a quantum fingerprint.”

“If you really want to know what that means you’ll have to ask one of the lab coats upstairs, right Schmiddy?” Hansen jibes.

“I’ve requested you not call me that,” Karl says coldly.

“I’m a connections guy, not a scientist.” Hansen stretches. “Right, Karl?”

Karl is enraptured by the print. “His main spiral cluster is fractured in several areas, and the individual cluster zones are quite dim. Yes, this man has been entransferring, yes, and traveling. Quite a bit, it would appear. Quite a bit, indeed.”

Through the mirror, Herman has begun talking and writhing in his chair. It seems that whatever sedative given to him has begun to wear off, and the woman in the room struggles to calm him.

Hansen flicks a switch on the wall near the window. “Everything okay in there?”

Sounds come through the two speakers mounted in the corners of the room. Incoherent babbling from Herman, static noise...

“He’s reviving too soon.” The nurse grunts as she fumbles with a syringe. “He’s going to feel the burn of that last shot.”

Raine can make out some of what he is saying through the unintelligible ranting and begging.

“No more, no more... Not to the dark... I won’t go there anymore, can’t go there anymore...”

Finally the syringe finds Herman’s arm, and he shudders and relaxes.

“Well, that concludes our session,” says Hansen. “Raine, why don’t you take an early leave? You’ve earned it.” He turns to Karl. “I told you he was a Novillium man.”

Chapter 15

The shine in the eyes, the desperate whine and feeble struggle. The damp sweat-stained collar, the look in the confused tramp's eyes and the moment of clarity when he locked onto Raine (impossible, yes, one-way mirror, but still) as if to say "I didn't trust you but I didn't not trust you enough you son of a bitch..." before the confusion and drugs wash over again.

It's a job to do. Raine's new mantra, oft repeated of late. *Lejla could be cold, why not me.* Number not in service. In the name of the job. Wherever she is or will be.

Friday morning and Raine swings by the shelter, does his routine of wiping tables and mopping spills, not quite sure what he was really doing anymore. Herman's table is there, in the corner, waiting for the old tramp's usual arrival time.

"Raine, my man," Big Tony calls out cheerfully from the serving line. "Hansen said you were all wrapped up here."

"Oh," says Raine.

"But I'm glad I get to see you one more day," continues Big Tony. "I'm gonna really pile the work on you, my man."

The day progresses, and Herman's table remains empty. It makes Raine feel eerie, and he's glad this is his last day, although he's not eager to return back to the annex either.

At least it's Friday.

Big Tony gives him a jovial send-off at the end of his shift. Raine wonders what he knows, if anything. *Probably more than I do*, he concludes.

That night Raine finds himself performing web searches about dark matter, stuff he barely understands, until he ends up watching *Barbarella* one more time, falling asleep in his chair during the credits. He awakes to Saturday, an untidy apartment and no sense of what to do, so he puts on the radio and washes the dishes, vacuums and straightens up. His mind keeps working on the entire Herman Manheim thing, dark matter, and then there's Lejla, too, like an OCD thought. Something couldn't be quite right with it, what the hell kind of job was she on, anyway? Or was she just Herman Manheimed away...

Raine finishes his chores by noon, and finds himself staring at the vastness of an unplanned weekend by himself. With Lejla gone, and

himself tied up in work, there isn't anyone to reach out to.

Only-child orphan crap, Raine thinks. *Maybe I'll take up jogging.*

So he runs. Raine cuts through the blocks of lower-middle class housing to the cemetery on the hill, grand and also crumbling, peopled yet also with its less frequented corners. At the top of the hill, Raine leans and sweats against a pillar. The city spreads out below, or most of it, from the downtown blocks where the shelter is located to the fringe industrial corner of Novillium's headquarters. Was Lejla down there somewhere? Or Herman?

Did it really matter?

The physical exertion kicks Raine's newly white-collared ass, but it also opens up a clarity. He was progressing, primed to rise through the Novillium ranks. And he was proud of it.

Monday.

Raine has a lift in his step when he enters the annex. Hansen practically hugs him with enthusiasm before letting him know Karl has pushed his weekly session earlier.

Level three.

Karl is waiting for him just outside the elevator. They walk past large, rectangular windows that look into rooms full of people inputting data into computers, monitors flashing headlines, tickers, and non-stop cable news.

"How are you today?" Karl says.

Raine hesitates. Karl often encourages Raine to speak his mind, at least in the sessions. Still, he didn't want to push too far, or say the wrong thing.

"I'm doing well."

"I hear you are fitting in nicely in the annex. Making good progress."

"Yes," says Raine, seeing Herman's desperate face flash through his mind. He pushes it back. "And I found my work at the shelter to be beneficial—I'm excited to progress even further."

"Ambition is a valuable feature when properly harnessed." Karl pauses in front of a door near the end of the hallway after passing the large room. "The feedback from your weekly sessions is encouraging. I think you can look forward to growing in the corporation."

Inside the room Raine lies back in the familiar chaise lounge, sinking against the worn leather. Karl attaches a sensor to Raine's temple, and

presses a few buttons on a remote control before taking his position in the classic psychologist's chair at the head of the couch.

The sounds of gentle waves wash through the room.

"Today I'd like you to ask me any questions on your mind, anything at all. This room is a free place to ask questions."

Raine thinks about Lejla, pushes it back down. *Not that...*

"Can I ask questions about Novillium?"

"Anything at all."

"The rooms we pass, on the way here, what are they?"

"Everything is connected. The first is a room of inputs. A room of collection."

"And the other room is for the... output?"

"Yes. This session is an input, itself. It feeds our understanding of you and helps inform your role within the greater corporation. And not only does it serve us, but it serves you, by ensuring you are used to the best of your potential."

"The sessions have been getting longer," Raine says.

"Everyone at Novillium participates in the sessions, even myself."

"Yes."

"What else would you like to ask?"

"I don't know."

The feedback receptor on Raine's bicep pulses.

"Very well."

"I guess there's one other thing, something I've been wondering about."

"Yes?"

Raine swallows. "Lejla?"

"Very good, Raine."

"You said she still worked for Novillium?"

"I did."

"I don't see her around."

"What else would you like to know?"

"I guess that's all."

"Very well. Now I would like you to close your eyes, and think."

"About anything?"

"Yes, as usual."

Raine lies on the couch, listening to waves as Karl sits silently next to him. He thinks about Lejla, his role at Novillium. After several minutes

Karl speaks again. “The other day you witnessed the taking of a dark matter photograph. I’d like to take a picture of yours. What do you think about that?”

Raine sees a brief vision of Herman Manheim blasted by blinding light. He swallows quietly. “I’m willing, absolutely.”

What was progress, after all?

“The straps are for your safety,” Karl informs.

Raine finds himself sitting in the very chair Herman had been strapped to just a few days ago. He sees himself in the large mirror and wonders if Hansen is gleefully watching from the other side.

The woman with the ponytail comes in and draws two syringes. “The first is to relax you, and to numb the sensation of the second,” Karl says. “I will warn you, the second one burns—I would know, I’ve had it myself.”

Raine feels the pinch of the first and feels a warm flushing sensation, not unpleasant. He falls back into himself, as if watching himself and the others in the room as a third party. The woman takes the second syringe, the brilliant orange one, and administers it. It burns like fire up his arm, but distant somehow; the burning is burning him but like in a movie that he watches in the mirror. Karl and the woman swing the black rectangle before him. *I love you grandma*, Raine thinks, unprompted. The humming and vibration build to the brilliant flash, and Raine feels incinerated. Somehow he looks down at himself, and feels his ashes floating back to him and collecting like metallic dust to a magnet. He floats back inside himself and into darkness.

Karl’s face hovers above him when he comes to. “Hansen was right. You are a Novillium man.”

Several days later Karl appears at the annex, a rarity. “Come with me,” he says, speaking more quickly than usual.

“Another session?”

Karl grasps his arm and leans into his ear to whisper. “Level four.”

In the elevator, Karl breathes quickly, tapping his security card against the reader with an element of drama. Raine feels the elevator lift them up.

“You have been summoned,” Karl says. “By the OMNIFERE.”

The elevator doors open to the center of a large room filled with windows to the outside. In the center of the room is a pedestal on which is something Raine has never seen before. He struggles to understand what he is looking at; a moving cube within a cube, within a cube, but not; a translucent obsidian void about two feet in diameter, it absorbs the light from the windows, reflecting nothing.

“It sees,” Karl whispers, looking up and around. “It hears.”

Karl kneels before the pedestal and Raine follows suit, awkwardly.

“OMNIFERE is us all,” Karl intones. “We feed it all we know, and the sum is greater than the parts.”

The shifting shape waits, silently, wired to nothing that Raine can see.

Karl trembles. “It wants to know you.”

Raine says nothing.

“Place your head inside.”

Raine lingers on his knees before rising to his feet. He approaches it awkwardly, not just a little nervous after his painful dark matter picture. *Here goes nothing.* He bends down and inserts his head. He waits for the flash, waits for the blinding, but nothing happens. He stands there, feeling an ache in his muscles from holding the position. He feels nothing. And nothing. The quiet nothingness builds. Seconds stretch into time indeterminate. The nothingness is oppressive and all-encompassing. Raine becomes acutely aware of a greater, universal power by his separation from it. The separation is desperation, is desperation, is—

“It is finished with you,” says Karl.

Raine falls back from the object, and Karl nods to the exit. Raine staggers outside and slides down against the wall, acutely aware of his own existence.

A minute later Karl slides through the doorway, closing it carefully behind him. He smiles at Raine, the unfamiliar expression crinkling his leathery skin. “You have been assigned meaningful work.”

Chapter 16

Raine would recognize her face anywhere.

She peers out from behind the motel room door, secured with a slide chain.

“They send you?” Her words are bitter acid.

“I’m here to relieve you.” Through the narrow gap Raine sees her unwashed hair, dyed black and cut short. The dark circles under her eyes.

“Oh, I’m relieved.”

“Lejla, let me in. Let’s talk.”

“Lejla?” She laughs bitterly. “This is Sandy Knoll. In Sandy Knoll, I’m Jenn. Didn’t you know?”

“I know,” Raine says softly.

“You know nothing.”

“I just want to talk to you, if you let me. I can leave, if that’s what you want.”

“Is this a work trip?”

“They told me to come here, but... I would have come here anyway. I think about you.”

Lejla slides back the chain lock.

Mid-afternoon light glares through the small gap where the curtains wouldn't meet in the middle, and dust particles slow dance in the beam where it stretches over to the bed. Raine sees where it cuts a small jag over onto Lejla's calf. Following the leg up is the rest of her, surrendered to the rumpled bed. Boyshorts and shirt, clinging and floating away all at once. The dead look staring at the turning of the fan and sweat beading on the forehead. Raine feels his own sweat, the press of humidity, the pulsating relief of the turning fan. Hears the voices outside the motel, languid summer conversations...

It hadn't been a plan, hadn't been an intention. Raine had stepped inside, and every word, every practiced dialogue had been abandoned to her unexpected touch. The rest was automatic, two beings raveled, consenting and dark.

She hadn't spoken, and Raine didn't want to be the first.

How long could he lie here?

But she finally speaks.

"What will they do to me?" Her voice is distant.

"Do to you?" Raine sits up on the bed, still transfixed by the light on her calf.

"Or have you already done it?"

"I don't understand."

"Novillium sent you here, they had to have."

"Yes."

"So, what were your instructions?" The fan throbs above them. "To fuck me?"

Raine tastes salt on his lips, the room is oppressive. "They were worried about you."

"How sweet of them. And you."

"You know how it is, I don't really know that much. Everything is vague."

Lejla did not respond.

"They said they had lost contact with you. That they thought you were here. That maybe you would respond to me."

"That's all?"

"They mentioned a kid."

"I bet they did."

"Ian Swift."

“I’m familiar with the name.”

“You know more than I do,” Raine says. “They had me rush out here, told me the kid’s name, that you were monitoring him or something.”

“Monitoring, sure.” Lejla turns her head from the ceiling and looked at Raine. “You want to know what my ‘job’ is? My ‘job’ is to pretend I’m a high school student and ingratiate myself with this poor kid. ‘Just get close to him, we need to keep close tabs on him,’ is what they said.

“Finally got my acting job. Or that’s how I sold it to myself. Except what’s the difference between acting and lying? It’s a goddamn one-woman show. Get close to him, well I did that. Get close to him.” She laughs bitterly, then reaches over and puts her hand on Raine’s knee. “Are you an aspiring actor, too?”

“I can’t act.”

“Can you kidnap? How about kill?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Lejla sits up and leans in close to his face. She speaks softly, her hand still on his knee, creeping up to his thigh. “Ian... the ‘kid.’ They wanted me to set him up for a kidnapping.”

“Why?”

“Right Raine, they told me that. Novillium is big on full disclosure. But don’t worry, it’s important, it’s big, it’s the end of the world if we don’t succeed. Isn’t that what they told you, too, before you came here? That this kid in the middle of nowhere is a lit stick of dynamite and if we can’t have him no one else can?”

“They didn’t say anything about kidnapping or killing anyone,” Raine says. “They did say he was important, maybe dangerous.”

“You’re sure they didn’t they say anything about fucking me one last time?” Lejla slides off of the bed and grabs up a black duffel bag. She pulls on her jeans and quickly her shirt, then grabs a bunch of items and stuffs them in the bag.

“Am I allowed to go?”

“Of course.”

She shoulders the bag and steps to the door. “Do me a favor?”

“You know I will.”

“Pass on my resignation to Novillium.”

Raine hesitates as she steps out the door into the blaring sun, a shadowed silhouette. “Wait...”

Lejla smirks. “He’s at a party at a place called Black Hole. That’s what you need to know, right?” When Raine doesn’t answer she reaches into her pocket and pulls out a pair of keys on a keychain and tosses them to him. “Do me a favor and check me out when you’re done here.”

Raine sits on the bed under the droning fan as she opens the door to the outside, creating a brief gateway to the humid summer air and ceaseless cicadas. He hears her engine turn over and the wheels of her car reversing over the gravel in the parking lot before they thrust forward. She is gone.

The guy at the gas station knows where Black Hole is, alright. He asks Raine if he was going to the party, and if he needed anything else besides the beer. *I know a guy.* He ponders how many girls might be there and the ramifications of stepping out on his night shift. *I mean, my dad owns the place, anyway...*

Raine finds the unmarked trailhead easily enough. Plenty of cars are lined up along the road, most of them beaters. Raine follows the trail until it reaches the steep overlook. Laughter and shrieks echo up. He reaches into his pocket and takes out his phone, no signal, not that he expected one. He opens up his messages and clicks on the newest one, a photo of a teenage boy with dirty blond hair. He studies his features before scrambling down the path to the water’s edge. People look at him but don’t take real notice of him. He’s wearing a plain gray t-shirt and jeans, an old pair of Cons. What the hell, he doesn’t know what to wear, but he has tried not to attract too much attention to himself.

It seems to work. He’s just another slightly too old creeper like the gas station attendant crashing a high school party. He hangs out at the fringes, trying to casually watch the scene and spot the kid.

There he is: over by a group, drinking a beer, drinking it fast. Looks like a walking dirge song.

Dusk comes on and the kid gets drunker.

The kid takes a dive into the creek. Raine feels his heart beat faster. No one else has noticed. There’s his hand just above the swirling water, then it’s gone.

Raine thinks about his directive, thinks about fate.

Thinks briefly about Lejla.

He runs across the stones and jumps into the water.

Pulls out the kid.

Mouth to mouth, CPR, *how does it go again?*

Kid has eyes like a brother. Has eyes like a son, They open up before he coughs out water and convulses before him on the shale. Half the teenagers in the school district are standing over them, cross-armed and slack-jawed.

So much for blending in.

Part Three: Friends



Chapter 17

Raindrops blear the passenger window as Ian looks out. Chuck fiddles with the speed of the wipers. "Can't ever get this just right." He looks over at Ian. "We should stop at Packy's after this. I need a burger."

"Whatever, man."

"What's wrong with you, almost drown or something?" Chuck laughs. "You ain't dead are you?"

"I said 'whatever.'"

Chuck leans back in the worn seat of his car. "Let it out. Let it all out."

"You were using with your brother and Taunton last night."

"And I thought you were pouting over your girlfriend dumping you."

"You know better than to use that shit."

"Just one time."

"Sure."

"Couple times. What the hell does it matter?"

"Regulars don't go anywhere, man."

"Ain't no regular. And, by the way, no one in Sandy Knoll goes anywhere anyway."

"Shit will mess you up."

"This is from the guy who got plastered and took a dive into the crick." Chuck shakes his head. "What was that about?"

"I tripped."

"Yeah, well, I tripped too. Don't worry so much."

Ian turns back to the window. They were passing through the hamlet of Sandy Knoll, now. "It's the guy."

"Who?"

"The guy from Black Hole. The dude that rescued me."

"What's he doing out in the rain?"

"Stop the car."

"Jim's waiting."

"Just stop the car, Chuck."

Ian rolls down his window as Chuck slows down and keeps pace with the walking man. Rain wets the inside of the door. "Hey, you, wait up." Ian calls out.

Vague recognition passes over the man's face. His hair is wet and his shoulders are soaked.

"You're the guy that saved me."

"I guess so."

"You were gone before I had a chance to thank you... so, um, thank you."

The man stands in the rain.

"Need a ride anywhere?" Ian asks. "It's the least I could do."

The man considers this, looking up the street and back at the car.

"Well," he says slowly, "I don't really have any place to go."

"You homeless or something?" Chuck interjects.

"Shut up, man," Ian says.

"It's alright," says the man. "He's kind of right."

"Hop in the back and get out of the rain, at least," Ian says.

"Put a towel down for your wet ass," Chuck says. "Just kidding."

The man gets in and the three pass through the village's only intersection and head toward the Haneke brothers' home.

Ian looks at the man through the rear view window. "You hungry? Need a meal or anything? We're just making a quick pitstop first. Drop you off somewhere?"

"I'm not bad off," says the man, "but thanks. I have some money, I'm more just wandering, looking for work and such."

"In Sandy Knoll?" Chuck snorts with laughter.

"Yeah, maybe not such a good idea," says the man.

"What's your name?" Ian asks.

The man looks down at his hands, out the window. "Raine."

"You just make that up?" says Chuck, still laughing. "Rainbow."

"I'm Ian, and this asshole is Chuck." Ian shakes his head at his friend's behavior.

"Well, thanks for letting me out of the rain."

"So Rainbow, I've gotta ask, how the hell did you find your way to Black Hole?" Chuck squints at him through the rearview, remnants of laughter still bringing color to his face.

Raine shifts in his seat. "Guy at the gas station was talking it up. Thought maybe I could skim a few beers. Don't have much else to do."

"Paczkowski— ha!" Chuck breaks out in more laughter. "That creeper's thirty-years-old, and he's still got nothing better to do than to

show up at our parties. Was he talking about the girls?"

"He might have mentioned it."

"Friggin' Packy. His parents own the station, and the place we were going to get some burgers later. He's a funny creeper, that Packy, always sidling up to you, uninvited. No offense to you, Rainbow."

The rain breaks as they pull into Chuck's driveway. Sunshine steams the long, wet grass of the yard where it beams through an opening in the clouds. Jim's sedan is already there, with Jim leaning against it.

"Who's the deadwood?" Jim asks Chuck as the three get out of the car, Raine hanging behind.

"Rainbow," Chuck says. "He's the dude that made out with Ian after he took a swim in the creek."

"So what's he doing here?"

"I'm just helping him out," says Ian. "Don't worry about him."

Jim's eyes narrow. "Don't worry, huh?"

An annoyed groan comes from Taunton in the car. "For crap's sake, hurry up and leave the bloody kid alone."

"Don't tell me what to do," says Jim.

Taunton swings lazily out of the car. "Don't get your knickers in a twist. I'm bored and hungry. So let's hurry it up."

Jim isn't amused. "Knickers? Did the drugs finally fry your brain for good?"

Jim is tall, but Taunton has a few inches on him, and more heft. His bland presence hovers indecisively, his eyes dully set on Ian, staring.

"Hello? You been huffing again? Get back in the car and stick one up your nose, why don't you?"

Taunton just hovers, staring and starting to sweat.

Jim looks to Chuck. "You got the money or what?"

Chuck hands over a roll of bills. Jim counts it and then nods to Taunton, who breaks from his daze and opens up the trunk to retrieve a package.

"More to move." Jim stuffs the cash in his wallet.

"All that?" Ian stares dubiously at the large amount.

Taunton yawns wide and loud, then settles his gaze on Raine. "What are you staring at?"

"Sorry," Raine says, "couldn't help but notice your tattoo. Looks fresh."

Taunton rubs his forearm, where his shirt sleeve partially obscures the artwork—the same bird symbol Herman Manheim had tattooed on himself. “You some kind of tattoo aficionado?”

“Love tattoos,” says Raine. “Always wanted one myself.”

“Got it during the weirdest trip you’d ever have, a dream you couldn’t even begin to...” Taunton catches himself stumbling over his words and clams up.

Jim side-eyes Raine and then looks to his brother. “You babies sure know how to find the weird ones. You want to hang with us, Chuck?”

“We’re getting burgers at Packy’s,” Ian says.

Chuck has a strained look in his eyes. “Listen man, you can drive my car over there. I’m gonna hang with my brother for a while.”

Ian knows what that means, now. He looks over at Raine who is staring at Taunton’s tattoo, again. “Let’s go. Food’s on me.”

Chuck tosses his keys to Ian. “Why don’t you top off the tank while you’re at it? Hey, Rainbow—nice meeting you.” The comment elicits a snigger from Jim.

Ian watches Chuck, Jim and Taunton in the rearview as he pulls out of the driveway and shakes his head. Chuck was sliding in too deep this time, but there wasn’t much he could do about it.

Chapter 18

The couch is his place to sleep tonight. The brown couch with a view of the window, next to the recliner where his mother waits out the rest of her living days. No rat visitor tonight, from this angle he sees the moon slip in and out of clouds, waving branches, and patches of stars beyond. A quiet night in the park, the only noise coming from Aunt Bonnie sleeping down the hall, regular, droning snores, through the thin walls. Ian lets them drone in his mind like white noise. His aunt sleeps in his old room, but gone are the band posters and forgotten toys that littered his walls and shelves, now boxed and baking in the crawl space. He could take them with him when he goes. Or he could leave them to bake in the summer and freeze in the winter, hidden away, and lost. What would he do with them? If his aunt hadn't already sold them off in a lawn sale, or online auction...

Yes, leave them, and go...

He thinks of Raine, who had eaten with him at Packy's, downing burgers like a wolf. The money was precious, but Ian had spent it without reservation. The guy had saved his life, after all. He thinks of Chuck, and the growing tension between them, like two ships on different courses, unless one were to veer in a new direction.

And there is Jenn's void, a vacuum sucking in his mind again. It is these times that her memory drifts into his consciousness, when the grind of the day is done and he has not quite fallen asleep.

He had driven around the likely spots. Cruised by her parent's apartment, parents he had never met. Nothing. Had she really packed up and left, and gone?

Here was the time when reality became a dream. Here is the time when you could shape your dream to your wishes. Ian summons her face, and it floats before the moon, a ghostly juxtaposition. He asks her why, he asks her where, but he cannot make her answer for all his concentration. She fades into the moon and then his eyes are truly closed, and the darkness takes him into sleep.

Thus begins a dream he feels like he has had before. The strands reach out and take him down to the tunnel again, that terrible tunnel. Dim light and cold stone worn smooth, his feet feel the floor, moving along to the door. Seven doors, seven passages and the shadow of the beast that sleeps, whose will pushes him forward before pulling him in. There dances the

birdman, clad in feathers, bowing his human torso and arching his arms above his bird-like head, silently, save the drone of what slept behind the stone walls.

Seven doors, seven gates; the bird man leads him on and there is the door, the door with the symbol of the bird, he feels himself being pushed forward, as the door opens, and there is the face of Raine, staring back at him, through him...

Ian awakes with a start. He gathers himself, his clothes clinging damply to his skin. The snores continue to emanate from his old room, no one else has awakened.

Outside, the moon has followed its path to the far side of the window, ready to make its exit. A light rain from the baltering clouds wets the outside, but something catches Ian's eye. A figure standing in the drizzling rain, standing and staring through the window. Out, beyond the bird feeder.

Ian closes his eyes, almost, to feign continued sleep. Could the figure see him? The moonlight is not enough to reveal his features. Ian rolls slowly from the couch and down to the floor—the figure does not move. Ian crawls along the floor, and his skin crawls, too, unnerved by the dream, but this is still his home, his mother's home, regardless of where he sleeps. He reaches up and turns on the floodlight.

Ian draws himself up to the window and looks out. It is Taunton; his prematurely thinning hair clings wetly to his scalp and forehead, water dripping down his face from the constant rain. Taunton stares at him unflinchingly through the window with a flat expression turning slowly into a dead smile.

Ian taps the window, just loud enough as to avoid waking his mother or aunt, and then holds up his middle finger. Taunton stares a minute longer, then turns and walks away, making his way through the park, disappearing beyond the waving trees.

Chapter 19

Steam wisps from the concrete walkway where morning rays steal through the dissipating clouds. Ian steps out into the morning air, breathes it in deeply. Chickadees sing their morning notes, yet a slight unease lingers from the night before.

Pauly is sitting on his front steps, smoking his first cigarette of the day, and Ian pulls up on his Honda when he waves.

“You’re up bright and early, Swifty.” Pauly exhales a cloud of smoke that mixes in with the rising steam. He motions with his cigarette between his fingers. “Want one?”

“No thanks.” Ian hesitates.

“What’s on your mind, Swifty?” Pauly smiles in his laid-back way.

“Um, you see anything weird last night? Outside?”

“Weird?”

“I don’t know.”

Pauly shrugs. “Well, I was up pretty late last night playing Phantasy Star II.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Sega, Swifty.” Pauly leans in. “Sega!”

“I thought I saw Taunton outside in the middle of the night.”

“In the rain?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess that is pretty weird,” says Pauly. “But then again he was always one weird little kid even when I was back in school.”

“Well, thanks anyway.”

“I’ll keep my eye open for him. Where’re you heading?”

“Nowhere in particular,” says Ian, as he revs up the Honda. “Just gonna ride.”

“Nowhere in particular” turns out to be Jenn’s place, again.

It’s still not there. Her parents’ car isn’t in the driveway. Or at least he supposes it’d been her parents’ car; he never actually saw her parents, even in passing, much less in that particular vehicle.

Ian straddles his Honda on the opposite side of the street. *Someone's going to call the troopers if I hang here too long*, he thinks. He's been stopping by every day since the break-up call, twice already today. No sign of Jenn, her parents or her car. No lights in the apartment (he may have cruised by a few times at night, too).

It doesn't make a lot of sense.

The stinging pain of the break-up has dulled to a throbbing resentment. She is gone, that's for sure. But, it's just too... weird. Her serendipitous arrival in Sandy Knoll is only outdone by her baffling disappearance.

Maybe if he had seen her, he would have been able to let his anger foment and recede.

Maybe he could begin to accept.

Maybe.

But she has disappeared from the face of the earth, or at least the small, scrubby, tired part of it Sandy Knoll occupies on the map. What he wants right now are answers, answers that might be in that apartment. He doesn't have a key, he tried knocking a few times already. The landlord lives in an apartment downstairs, and Ian doesn't want him to take notice. Maybe he could climb up? The windows were shut, perhaps locked. Awfully visible during the day... a good way to get arrested. At night, a good way to get shot.

I have to get up there and check it out, he thinks. *Maybe if I had someone to distract the landlord... talk him up while I get inside...*

Chuck would be home. But so would Jim, wanting to know about those deliveries. And so would Taunton...

Ian shudders, recalling last night's incident.

I don't know anyone else that could help me...

Except maybe a guy without much to do, a guy who had already helped him out once and didn't have an angle in this game, free from the burden of history and locality and small town bullshit.

He could talk to Raine.

He had dropped him off at Sleepy Pines, he should still be staying there, hell, he had passed him on the bike walking around just the other day. Raine had returned his subtle wave.

Raine would be easy. He wouldn't ask questions, not about Jenn, not about his mother, not about shit. Hell, he didn't even know those people and situations existed; he didn't know much of anything about Ian's life if

he didn't tell him about it. At Packy's he had asked questions, sort of... but not the ones that were difficult to answer. Yet, he listened.

Yes, he would see Raine, and probably get rejected (wasn't it obvious?) then probably sleep on the couch again tonight and hope Taunton didn't show up again, the freak.

Ian revs the bike and motors down the street. The job would wait. The deliveries would wait. Jim would wait. Making money would wait...

To make money. To leave.

But you will never leave.

Not until you are done taking care of your mother.

Not until your mother... passes

You will never leave.

On your own? Who would leave on their own?

You know people here.

You know the system. You know how it WORKS.

People don't leave Sandy Knoll. You know, alive.

Ian talks to the clerk at the Sleepy Pines motel. Sure, there's a new guy staying. Sure, you can know which room, right down that-a-way. Ian knocks, and sure enough, Raine's at the door, in the middle of the day, looking a bit surprised but not put out, not at all...

Raine moves aside an ashtray full of cigarette butts and leans in over the picnic table. He speaks quietly as a woman walks her small dog along the treeline, within potential earshot. "So, you want me to distract this landlord guy while you try to break into your ex-girlfriend's parents' apartment. Is that it?"

Ian glances at the woman, who is fully focused on her dog who has decided to hunker down and let one drop. "I know it doesn't sound good."

"But you're worried about her, this Jenn girl."

"I just need to know what's going on."

Raine leans back. The woman and dog have ambled away, uninterested in two guys conversing at the motel's picnic table, set on a concrete pad amidst a swath of patchy, summer-dry grass. "I think this is where I ask what's in it for me."

"I can get you drugs, if that's your thing."

"Not so much."

“I have a little money,” Ian says hesitantly.

“Sandy Knoll, you’ve lived here your whole life?”

“Yeah.”

“You know your way around. You know people.”

“There’s not a lot of people to know. But sure.”

“I like it here, and I’ve been thinking of staying a while,” Raine says. “I could use someone who could show me the ropes. Small places like this aren’t usually as straightforward and obvious as they might appear to a passerby.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“A guy like me needs to know who to avoid, you know?” Raine shrugs. “People think you’re a bum, they don’t like that. Don’t want you around.”

“I see.”

“Plus you’ve got to know some good hikes and local spots around here. You know, like Black Hole.”

“I know a few.”

“So, have you ever broken into a place before?”

Ian shifts in his seat. “Not really.”

“It’s not as easy as it looks if you’re a newbie,” Raine says. “But lock-picking’s something guys like me pick up on the road. I would suggest you do the distracting of the landlord, while I do the getting in—trust me, it won’t be difficult. Then you’re not on the hook for anything.”

“I guess.”

“You tell me what to look for, and I’ll give you the full report.”

“We’re actually doing this?”

“Sure thing,” Raine says. “Sure thing.”

Ian dawdles at the gas pump, looking surreptitiously down the road. There goes Raine, a steady walker, making his way down the long sidewalk toward the old victorian that houses Jenn’s apartment. Intermittent passersby turn their heads to see the new guy, the walker, wonder if he’s a fixture or if he’ll float on through like some do.

About there. Ian starts the Honda and pulls out of the gas station, driving past Raine without looking at him. He turns into the driveway of the victorian Raine is approaching, the three-family apartment building. He feels short of breath, but this is the plan. *I have the easy part, right? Yeah, right. The ‘easy’ part.*

He approaches the door of the landlord's apartment and knocks. He would be there. He was always there.

A gray-haired old man opens the door. "Yes? Can I help you?"

Ian's mind goes blank. All the preparation. The perfectly crafted excuse to get him away from sight of the door—poof; gone. "Um," Ian says.

"I recognize you," says the man. "You were hanging around with the girl that lives here."

Lives here, Ian thinks. Still lives here?

"Haven't seen her in a while," says the man. "It's odd." He looks keenly at Ian. "You know anything about that?"

"I haven't seen her. Not recently."

"You looking for her or something?"

"No, I mean, kind of. Have you seen her parents?"

"I wouldn't know anything about that," says the man. "I know who you are, by the way."

Shit.

"You're the Swift boy—you've got your father's face. That's a Swift face if I ever saw one.

"Yeah," Ian says. "It is. I mean, I am."

"I was your mother's social studies teacher in high school. Good woman, your mother. How is she doing?"

"She's fine."

"Fine?" The man frowns. "I heard she was ill."

"Yes," Ian says. "Cancer. But, she's fine, I mean, she's doing as fine as could be."

"A damn shame." The man looks out his door to a small garden fenced in with chicken wire, behind the house, opposite the parking lot. "Well, alright then. I need to do some weeding." He steps out and closes the door, with Ian still standing indecisively wondering if Raine will walk up the drive at the exact wrong time and be seen.

"Is there something else?" the man asks, trudging toward the garden with the help of a cane. "Or did you want to pull some weeds?"

Ian sticks near his side. "Well, um, I noticed you had a downstairs apartment for rent. How much were you asking?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I do, I guess. I was thinking about getting my own place." Ian glances back down the driveway as the man fumbles with the garden gate. *Shit.* Raine is walking right down the driveway...

The man gets the gate to open, and stands beside the entrance. "You got a job?"

"Not really, some odd jobs and stuff."

"That'd be a problem." The man shakes his head. "If you get a job, a real job, we'll talk." He turns, facing down the driveway, and Ian looks with him, his heart in his mouth. No Raine in sight. *He must be inside the entry now, Ian thinks. Should I just go now like a normal person and hope this guy has enough weeding to do, or what?*

"Are we all set now?" asks the man.

"Actually, I was wondering if you could tell me what my mom was like, you know, in school and stuff."

The man sighs heavily. "If I'm going to regale you with stories, you're going to be pulling the weeds." He holds out a pair of brown jersey gloves. "Deal?"

Ian takes the gloves and walks inside the garden enclosure with the man, who points to a raised bed. "Start there, and don't accidentally pull one of my squash plants."

The garden faces away from the building, and the man stands with his back to the driveway as Ian kneels beside a garden bed. The weeds are thick and deeply rooted. *I guess that's a good thing, Ian thinks, at least it'll take long enough to distract him until Raine gets out.*

"Put your back into it." The man watches him closely, arms folded. "Let's see, your mom, Jo Swift... of course she would have been Jo Saltzman back then. What exactly did you want to hear about?"

"I don't know, just anything." Ian sets aside a fistful of dandelions.

"You've got to get them by the roots, grab them farther down." The man sighs heavily. "Jo Saltzman, Jo Saltzman. Well, she was always hanging around your dad of course, Marlon. He was kind of an odd duck, no offense. A little flaky. Not a bad kid, but I don't think anyone was terribly surprised when he left town."

"I don't care about him," Ian says. "I don't even remember him."

"Right, fine. Well anyway, they hung out a lot. Got married right after high school, then had you, of course."

"Was my mom a good student?"

“Yes, well, mostly. She had a lot of potential before she got caught up with your dad. She was very good-looking, really. Quite popular, too. She wore her hair quite long, so there’s that.

“Uh huh.”

“She was involved in a lot of activities, you know, softball, clubs, and such... can’t remember which ones. Oh, and she was a server at Packy’s Drive-In for a few summers. Even back then, Sandy Knoll wasn’t so downtrodden. There were still jobs—more people, things are always changing, and not always for the better. My parents lived through the Great Depression, of course, now that was a thin time. People think they have it bad now, but it doesn’t hold a candle to back then. I remember the stories my mom used to tell us, God rest her soul, you know even the kids had to pitch in and work, not like today—”

“So my mom...”

“Right, well, she kind of got in with your dad, and then it was just all about them.”

“He’s a deadbeat.”

“Well, he wasn’t a bad guy, really. Smart, smart as a whip. Not very motivated though. He’d rather lie on his back watching the clouds than get a job at the sawmill, you know. Dreamer-type.”

“Yeah.”

The man reminisces on Ian’s mother’s grades and her attendance, after fully recounting her physical features, but starts drifting off into the actual material of the class. Ian listens dutifully, digging out the weeds under the blazing sun.

But there’s Raine—who gives Ian an awkwardly furtive thumbs-up before ambling down the driveway and out of sight. Back to the motel, no doubt, to relax in the coolness of the air conditioning leaving Ian bent over a garden bed, with soil rubbed into his knees and sweat spots growing in the pits of his t-shirt.

“Two beds to go,” says the man. “And take care not to bump the tomatoes... they’re getting quite ripe.”

Raine is relaxing in the shade at one of the motel’s picnic tables when Ian pulls in on his bike, drenched in sweat.

“That old guy really put you to work, didn’t he?” Raine takes a swig from an ice-cold bottle of Coke glistening with condensation.

“Yeah, yeah.” Ian drops onto the bench across from him.

“You could probably use one of these,” Raine says, tilting the bottle at Ian. “They had the ones made with real cane sugar.” He retrieves one from his room and brings it out. “You’re probably anxious to hear about what I saw.”

Ian nods tiredly.

“Nothing. It was cleaned out. Not a trace of anything.”

“That’s weird. The landlord didn’t say she had moved out.”

Raine shrugs. “He said she was still there?”

“Not exactly...”

“I don’t know what to tell you, but the place is clean as a whistle. Did the landlord say he had seen her, recently?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“There you go.”

Ian stares down at the bottle in his hand. Something didn’t seem right, but she was gone, that was for sure.

“Drink up,” Raine says. “Isn’t gonna cool you off just looking at it.”

Chapter 20

“Pappy’s home.” The message from Chuck is a beacon. *Camping time.* Chuck makes a habit of keeping away from the house when his old man pulls in for a spell from long-haul trucking. Makes himself scarce.

Though, he seems fairly jovial when Ian pulls in on the Honda.

“We’ll bushwack it,” Chuck argues, “from here right along Trout Crick.”

Ian scans his friend’s eyes, they seem straight enough. “There’s no trail from here,” he counters.

“Hence bushwack,” Chuck says. “We’ll follow the deer paths. Dad took the car, and Jim’s not around. I’m not big on riding behind you on that little thing, like your girlfriend.”

“We’d have to leave soon, I don’t want to get lost in the dark.”

“Already packed, amigo. Tent, food, matches, and of course machete.” Chuck taps the blade sheathed at his side. “Into the wild we go.”

The pair trek into the woods and follow the creek, keeping it on their right. Near the Haneke’s home the terrain is low and quickly becomes swampy. Tufts and old stumps rise up from muck, as they struggle to weave a path along the firm spots. The creek runs wide and slow, as they keep moving farther away from it.

“Maybe we should go out around this more,” Ian suggests.

“Add too much time. The ground gets higher soon.” Chuck missteps and his foot sinks into the muck. “Damn.” He shifts his pack and his leg sinks down almost to his knee. “Give me a hand,” Chuck says, pulling out his foot with a suctioning squish. Black mud coats his leg. “My shoe came off.” Ian steadies him as he fishes it out. Chuck sniffs the black muck now coating his arm. “Man, that stinks.”

“Can’t wait to find that deer path,” Ian says.

The terrain eventually goes higher, moving up from the swamp. The creek moves more swiftly now, pressing against the banks.

“Swamp, and now prickles,” Ian says, delicately detaching a thorny branch that has attached to his shirt.

“Deer path,” Chuck shouts back. “And it follows the crick. “We’ve got to be half way there, already,” he estimates. “We’ll beat the dark.”

“And then Jim will show up.”

Chuck laughs. “Wouldn’t be the first time. But I think he’s out of town, or something.”

Ian rubs his hand over a bright, red line on his forearm left by a dangling pricker. “Have you noticed anything odd about Taunton lately?”

Chuck draws his machete from its canvas sheath and surveys the bushes ahead. “Dead end. Now the bushwack really begins.” He hacks at the thorn bushes with vigor, cursing with pleasure as they fall before him. Ian follows in his wake, but the pace soon slows as the initial burst fades with Chuck’s energy. The exertion required is high, and the knee-high stalks left behind poke at them as they trudge through. Chuck pauses, and points up to a rising slope ahead. “Ridge starts going up there. Then we should be in good shape until we get there.”

“Taunton was creeping outside my window the other night,” Ian says.

“Remember when he and Jim used to do that all the time?” Chuck took another sweeping hack. “Barely a night they weren’t tapping on my window or showing up if we were tenting.”

“Yeah,” Ian says. “This felt different. I don’t know. I mean, he was just standing in the rain staring.”

“For an average person, that’s weird,” Chuck says. “But, this is Taunton we’re talking about. He has his own scale.”

“And when I tapped on the window to get his attention, he just walked away.”

“You’re living a life of intrigue, man. Missing girlfriend, stalking weirdo — you name it.”

The thick bushes recede as they follow the slope upward, but the going doesn’t get much easier. Squatty pines struggling beneath their elders reach out with scratching brown branches. In some areas they are clumped so close together it is almost impossible to push through.

“This sucks, dude.” Chuck’s machete hangs at his side.

“Can’t go back, now.” Ian looks at the sun dropping below the treeline. “Let me take a hack at it.” Ian grasps the hardened, black plastic handle of the machete and looks down the long blade made of cheap steel. The cutting edge is nicked and stained green, with the serrated back showing spots of rust. Ian squeezes the handle tightly as he raises it up and makes a strong, sweeping blow against the struggling pine branches. He thinks of Jim and Smallens, he thinks of Sandy Knoll. He thinks of Jenn, he thinks of his dying mother. The blade rises and cleaves, the branches fall away,

but not without making their marks on his forearm. It doesn't feel like anything. He thinks of nothing except the hacking until they break out from the cluster of pines.

"Dude," Chuck says, "You're a machine."

The final leg is still a chore, but the terrain grows familiar as the ridge rises higher above the creek. The two clamber down the path to Black Hole and set up the small tent Chuck has stuffed in his pack.

"Tomorrow I'm taking the trail back to the road, man. I don't care how far I have to walk." Ian walks to the water's edge and kneels down to bathe his scratched up arms, the same spot he had taken a drunken plunge just a couple of weeks ago. The cool water soothes the burning red streaks on his forearms. He looks down, and there's his face again, in the ripples. Ian closes his eyes and remembers suffocating and the twisting strands that had reached down for him. A product of stress and panic and desperation to breathe... and alcohol, of course. Yet, they had been so vivid...

"Time for me to catch us some dinner," Chuck announces.

Ian breaks from his reverie. "Are you messing with me? You didn't bring food?"

"We'll live off the land. Like our ancestors did."

Ian finds Chuck's pack and rummages through it. "A bag of pretzels and half a bottle of Crown Royal?"

Chuck walks along the bank carefully stepping on stones until he reaches a tree overhanging the water. He skirts in close to the trunk, and reaches into the crotch of the tree, retrieving a small wad of fishing line with a hook. A brief forage results in the capture of a few large crickets, one of which he carefully hooks through the thorax. "Still kicking," he says, choosing a rock shelf that hangs over one of the deeper eddies.

Ian watches, munching pretzels, as Chuck dangles the line down into the water. "Dance, little bugger," he says under his breath, letting the cricket struggle just below the surface.

"Should I save you a pretzel?" Ian asks.

"Got one!" The line goes taut as Chuck sets the hook with a jerk. He pulls a flailing fish out of the water, and holds it carefully in his hands. "Rainbow trout. You can have the pretzels. But if you want fish, you're gonna have to start the fire."

A few minutes later Chuck pulls another trout from the creek. He tries for three, but the fish have stopped biting. He takes his rubber-handled

hunting knife from its sheath and cleans the fish, discarding the heads and guts downstream. Ian's fire is burning hotly now, in a stone ring near the creekside. Chuck lays the filets out on a flat rock and heats it in the fire, cooking them.

"Ain't fancy, but it'll do," Chuck says. "How about a beer?"

"You mean Crown Royal?"

Chuck grins. "You know I've got my ways." He returns to the creek, going upstream, carefully eying the stones. He kneels by an eddy that has been created by several carefully placed stones and reaches in with his arm. He pushes himself lower, down to his chest as he feels about. "I thought for sure it was this one," he says. "Unless friggin' Jim was watching and took them on me." He paces the creekside another minute before reaching into another eddy. "Eureka!" He pulls out two cans of beer and triumphantly returns to the fireside. "Ice cold and delicious."

"You're like a squirrel out here with all of your stashes," Ian observes. The beers are indeed cold and the gently charred fish is delicious after the difficult hike in.

"It's Crown Royal from here," says Chuck. "If you get hungry."

They talk like they haven't in a while, and it comes naturally enough. The moon takes its place and the sounds of the night creatures permeate the surroundings. The beers soon give way to slow sips of Crown Royal, of which they pass the bottle back and forth.

Chuck's face takes a serious turn as he looks out beyond the fire. "Look up there, but don't make it obvious," he says quietly.

"I don't see anything," Ian says. He searches the darkened treeline for a figure, a face, a movement.

"Over by that dead tree hanging low, you see it?"

"What?"

"Someone crouching."

"Is it...?"

"Shit, shit, shit." Chuck's voice is a tremulous whisper. "I think it's Taunton."

Ian's expression drains. There is something next to the tree, or someone. Someone kneeling. Anxiety wells up inside him. "What are we going to do?"

Chuck bursts out laughing. "Don't be a chump—it's a frigging rock. Ha ha, you need to relax man, you are seriously pent up. Take another

drink.”

“Asshole.”

The bottle goes back and forth, emptying to eking sips. No moonlight tonight, no stars, just a thick blanket of clouds that usher in the night as a wall of darkness and quiet, except for the firelight on their faces, and the babbling of the creek in their ears.

“I could live out here, I swear I could,” Chuck says.

“How long is your dad home for?”

“Don’t care.” Chuck savors the final sip of Crown Royal and stares at the label, turning it in the firelight.

“I guess that’s a wrap,” Ian says. “Unless you’ve got something else squirreled away.”

Chuck continues to stare at the bottle. “Might have something.”

“Yeah?”

“But I got it stashed out on the top of the hill.”

“Pretty dark now to be climbing up there.”

“We got our phones for light.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Ian clambers up the steep path following Chuck. Between having one free hand and the darkness, it’s a tricky ascent. Ian slides back, spitting, after Chuck kicks up wads of soft dirt and fir needles into his face, but they make it to the top without breaking their necks.

“I got it in a stump out here somewhere,” Chuck says cagily. “Might be tough to find.”

“Alright,” Ian says.

Chuck leaves the trail and blunders through the hanging branches. Ian keeps track of the creek to their right, keeps it in his hearing. The dark is complete under the dense tree cover, save the puny beams of their phones, feebly casting unnatural light into the void.

“I think this is it,” Chuck says, finally, standing beside a thick, waist-high tree stump. The center has rotted out, and Chuck shines his light in. “It’s gotta be.” He reaches his hand in, pushing through a deposit of dried leaves and flaking wood. He pulls out a ziplock bag as Ian illuminates him and the stump with his cell light.

“What the hell is that?” Ian asks.

Chuck holds the bag, not responding.

“It doesn’t look like alcohol, or pot either.”

“Loosen up, man.” Chuck shakes his head. “And stop shining that in my eyes.”

“What is it?”

“You know.”

“No man. I’m not doing that.”

“You don’t have to do shit.” Chuck moves to step away from the stump but Ian is blocking his path. “You can go to bed like a baby.”

“It’s not happening, not with me here.”

Chuck rolls his eyes and places the bag back in the stump, carefully covering it over with the leaves inside. “Whatever man. Let’s go back to the fire.”

This time Ian leads the way down the hill, with Chuck scrambling behind, loath to leave his stash with it itching in his mind. “You’re not into it now, but you’ll see, man. It’s not bad, it’s not like they say. You’ve never felt a purer high. It’ll take you places.”

The fire has burned down to embers. The two lie down in the tent. Ian closes his eyes but Chuck is still staring at the ceiling, feeling the night waste away.

“It’s not what you think,” Chuck says. “It’s not like you think.”

“I’m not interested. Save it for Jim and Taunton—they’re your best buddies now, right?”

“Don’t be a tool.”

Ian turns away, facing the fabric of the tent, but he still senses Chuck’s desperate yearning.

“No wonder Jenn left you. She probably figured out what a baby you are, too. What did she want to do that you were too scared to try?” Chuck rests on his elbow, staring at Ian. “She probably found someone else who would. I wonder who the lucky asshole is.”

Ian rolls onto his back. “You want to use it? Fine. Climb back up there yourself and use it.”

“Come with me.”

“You called me a baby? I know you better than anyone. You’re afraid to climb back up there in the pitch black by yourself. Well, screw off, because I’m staying here.” Ian closes his eyes and breathes out heavily. He hears Chuck shift gently, and something hard taps his chest.

“Get that away from me.” Ian recoils from Chuck who has drawn his hunting knife and touched the flat of the blade to Ian’s chest. He draws his

thumb along the side of the blade.

“Come up with me or I’ll cut your throat.” Chuck’s voice is joking, but there is something less playful in his eyes.

“Not funny, man. Not cool.”

Chuck scoffs and sheathes the knife. He lies back and stares up, out at nothing.

Ian lies on his back, too. Saying nothing. Tensed, breathing. Believing the joke but unable to discard the worst. Later, Chuck is asleep, breathing softly, and Ian is still awake. He hears a distant owl screech, the patter of tiny feet around the campsite. Under all is the constant movement of water through Black Hole.

Chapter 21

The summer accelerates and Ian rides the wake. Running his route, saving his coin. Jenn is a void, he keeps his head in the job, in the selling. Chuck flies further afield, leaving another growing void. But then there is Raine, the man that saved his skin, there to fill the voids...

Doesn't push, doesn't seem to want *anything*, a shadow of a person, no attachments, no history, just a sprawling tapestry of experiences and anecdotes.

Doesn't want anything, but maybe he needs something, someone.

"How much farther?" Raine jerkily slaps at his forearm, then the back of his neck.

"Just getting started," Ian says. "About a mile left to Flat Top, but it'll go fast enough."

"I just killed three in one hit."

"Mosquito season comes right after black fly season around here. And after that it's about eight months of winter." Ian steps around a swath of stagnant muck. "They'll thin out as we start moving higher."

"If we have any blood left by then," Raine says.

"Not as comfortable as your sweet pad at the Sleepy Pines?"

"Got a bed and hot shower, most mornings anyway. Lukewarm at worst. Free wifi."

"You're a man of mystery," Ian says. "A freewheeling renaissance man. I'm still pissed you got a job here already. I can't find one for shit."

"Miracle of the gig economy. I get to sit in my motel room doing data entry for a few hours and they credit my PayPal. Keep my expenses low, no frills, no car. I like walking, anyway."

"For a guy who likes walking, you sure bitch about it enough," Ian wisecracks.

"Mosquitos are the devil. Or more like a thousand little devils all ready to prick you with their tiny pitchforks."

Ian and Raine carefully pick their way across a small, stony stream. "Trail starts going up now," Ian says. "So we'll be leaving the devils behind us."

“Thank God.”

“And then say ‘hello’ to the deer flies.”

“I can see why you want to leave this place.”

Ian goes quiet. The trail moves up and around, circling the large hill they are climbing. Sunlight filters through a kaleidoscope of foliage above, moving gently in the summer breeze. The mosquitos drop off, as promised. A deer fly circles and harasses, but it’s much better than before.

“I’m not sure what the point is, anymore,” Ian finally says.

“About leaving town?”

“Yeah.”

“What about your plan, west coast and all that?”

Ian shrugs. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Do stuff by yourself all the time. Travel alone and everything.”

“It’s not so bad,” Raine says. “It’s easier to do what you want, the way you want.”

“I could go out there and find out it’s just like here.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Raine says. “What about college?”

“I’m not even sure I’ll get through my senior year of high school. Summer’s already dead, and then I’ll be back. It’s gonna suck.”

“Is this about the girl?”

“We had a plan, now she’s gone and so’s the plan.” Ian breathes heavily as the two labor up the final steep part of the trail that ends at the top. “I don’t want to go on my own. I might as well rot it out in Sandy Knoll. I might not have a job, but at least I can make some money here.” *Besides, everyone leaves me in the end.*

The two crest the hill and the trail leaves the woods, ending in a large, flat clearing. In the center of a patchwork of sand and long tufts of grass is a concrete pad with an aging observation tower rising from it. Cans and bottles litter a fire ring nearby. Raine sits himself on the edge of the pad and wipes sweat from his brow. “Hell of a view up here,” he says sarcastically, looking at the circle of tall trees surrounding them. “Wouldn’t even know we were on a hill, except for the climb, but, it is flat as advertised up here.”

“That’s what the tower is for.”

“Great, more climbing. That thing’s safe?”

“Can’t make any promises,” says Ian. “C’m on. Let’s keep going.”

The top of the observation tower provides a sweeping view of the surrounding countryside. Ian points out the valley where Sandy Knoll lies among the rolling hills. Farther out, the hills rise into legitimate mountains. "Where the tourists actually go," says Ian. "Screw 'em."

"I think that's my motel," says Raine, pointing. "And what's that out there?"

"The sand dunes. The one thing Sandy Knoll's got plenty of is sand."

The two stare out at the view quietly for a couple of minutes before Ian shrugs and says "I guess that's that." About a third of the way down, Raine's foot breaks through a rotted plank, leaving him hugging at the metal frame of the structure.

"First step's a doozy," Ian says.

At the bottom Ian unzips his backpack and takes out a bottle of cheap wine. He unscrews the cap and takes a swig, then offers the bottle to Raine.

"Is it a dry red?" Raine asks.

The two sit on the pad in the shade of the tower and pass the bottle back and forth, taking small sips. Before long the bottle is down to a quarter remaining as the two bullshit back and forth.

"So what do you actually sell for that Jim guy, anyway?"

"You setting me up, asshole?" Ian squints at Raine. "You a cop? A fed? DEA?"

"No, no, and no." Raine takes his sip and hands the bottle over to Ian who tips it back and finishes the rest in one long drink.

"Got another bottle in there?" Raine asks.

"Alcohol? No. You want pills? Weed? Poison? Got little of everything, man, a little of everything. One-stop shop." Ian grimaces. "I sell it but I don't use it. Just the alcohol. Just until I get the hell out of here."

"Unless you don't."

"Everyone else leaves, not me." Ian stares off at the edge of the woods. "She left, Chuck might as well have. What about you, Rainbow? You leaving too? That's what hobos do, right?"

"Don't know, kid."

"Everyone leaves, or dies."

"You do a good job for your mom," Raine says carefully. "You're there for her."

"You haven't even met her."

"I know things, though. I can tell."

Ian stares at the empty bottle in his hand. “You know things? You know my father? Just another deadbeat like you. Another deadbeat who ain’t coming back.” Ian stands up slowly, tilts up the bottle searching for a few last drops of wine, then smashes it down on the concrete pad. “Sorry, Rainbow, I’m not thinking straight. Let’s get going. Ain’t nothing more here for us.”

Near the trailhead is a vacant mobile home, succumbed with vines and penetrated by a tree that’s decided to crash through the back half of the roof. No one’s lived there as long as Ian can remember, as permanent a part of the scenery as the black oaks and granite boulders surrounding it. Ian and Chuck had been through it, of course, like almost every kid in Sandy Knoll at one point or another. Staying there was another story, with the rotting dampness of the interior making it an unattractive place to squat.

“You get tired of living out of that motel, I hear this place is available,” Ian jokes. He picks up a stone and lofts it at an already cracked window, as is the tradition at the end of each hike to Flat Top. It misses, clunking against the sagging vinyl siding.

“I’ll stick with Sleepy Pines, thanks.”

“Did you see that?” Ian stares intently at the window he had just been aiming for.

“See what?”

“Something move in there.”

“Probably a racoon or something.”

“Looked like a face.”

“A face?” Raine looks around them. “Only thing parked here is your bike.”

Ian approaches the structure, stooping under a hanging branch. He steps up the sagging deck and peers through the entry; the screen door is hanging by one hinge, with the inside door partly ajar. “Who’s in there?”

“Careful, kid.” Raine follows Ian just up before the deck. “You think this deck’ll support both of us? Looks pretty rotty.”

Ian steps inside. He hears groaning. “I said, ‘who’s there?’”

Inside, under the window is Taunton, lying on his back on a decrepit mattress. His eyelids are squeezed tightly closed, and he groans again, more loudly.

“Get in here,” Ian calls back to Raine. “Taunton, what the hell is wrong with you?”

Taunton opens his bloodshot eyes and grins. The skin on his face is tightly pulled, as he makes a straining expression. He sits up on the mattress, wearing the usual Taunton attire... dark jeans, an unbuttoned flannel he always had on, regardless of the weather. But other than the outfit, something was different.

“You high or something?”

“All is well,” Taunton finally says, his slack jaw making his words sound sloppy. “Just going on a hike in the paths, in the paths.”

Raine is standing behind Ian now. “What the hell?”

“I see the remnants, the birdman.” Taunton shakes his head like a dog shedding water. “I mean, no. I am Taunton. I...” A seizure like spasm washes over him, sending him to his back on the mattress again, writhing and babbling.

“Do we need to call 911?” Raine asks.

“No,” Taunton says, writhing. “No.”

“We should do something,” Ian says. “Although I can’t believe I’m saying that.”

“No,” says Taunton. Drool pools in his mouth and drips down his cheeks.

“You want us to get help?” Ian asks Taunton.

“No.”

“Call Jim?”

“No.”

“Drag you outta here?”

Taunton groans loudly, before saying “no” once again.

“Can he say anything else?” Raine asks.

“You want us to just leave you here?” Ian asks.

“OK.”

“He said “OK.” What do I care?” Ian turns to Raine. “Let’s go.”

Outside, they can still hear Taunton’s groans.

“It’s gotta be drugs, right?” Raine looks back to the mobile home.

“I don’t know. He’s been... weird lately.”

“How so?”

“Well, a while ago he was just standing in the rain staring through my window, so there’s that.”

“Why?”

“Good question, Rainbow. Good question.”

Ian peels out the Honda onto the main road, with Raine bumping along on the back. Just down the road, parked on the side is Taunton's car.

Ian pulls up beside it, idling. "That wasn't there when we came in."

"Nope."

"Was he following me?"

Ian hops off the bike and tries the handle to the driver's door. It opens, and resting on the passenger seat is a beat-up notebook. Ian reaches in, picks it up and flips through it. "Bunch of doodles." Ian clasps the notebook at his side. "The drugs have fried his brain. It's the simplest explanation."

"Can I see?" Raine takes the notebook and leafs through the pages, filled with seeming gibberish and some crude pencil sketches. One catches his attention in particular, a bird...

"Can I keep this?"

"No," Ian says in a mockery of Taunton's burbling voice.

Raine laughs and tucks the notebook under his arm. "You sure we shouldn't call someone about him back there?"

"Hey, we asked," Ian replies. "Who are we to tell him what he needs? Besides, I don't think he'd be too thrilled with me if I called the troopers."

"His face looked pretty weird..."

"Stretched out like play-doh."

"Kind of like Gumby."

"Gumby?"

"Nevermind, kid," Raine says.

Chapter 22

The dream, the beast, the faces, the long path, the black hole, the white entrance, it twists and writhes like a handful of snakes, one opens its mouth and in goes Ian through the fangs. Here is the long hallway, here dances the birdman, here he bows and scrapes, here is the beast, before and behind, above and below... here is his heart, here is his belly. The beast hungers, for Ian, for his soul...

Down the long hallway where the birdman scrapes and bows, gestures onward to the door; to the room, the room with the heartbeat and the feathers, white fluttering feathers, it opens, it opens to the chirping of a thousand birds...

Ian awakes with a scream, Ian awakes in a sweat. The scream is trapped inside of him, as if weighed down with heavy wool blankets, but it finally pushes through and Ian opens his eyes to the familiar room of his mother's trailer. Aunt Bonnie hovers above him, genuine concern replacing sternness.

"It's just a dream, kiddo." She hasn't called him that in a long time. Her face could be his mother's in the light of dawn. Traces of the family shape, set in harder lines. They soften, now, as she pats his shoulder.

Ian blinks his eyes, transitions from the tension of the dream to the reality of his surroundings. His t-shirt clings to him with night sweat.

"I'll put on extra coffee." His aunt proceeds to her morning routine, starting with the pot of coffee, but this time cooks up eggs and bacon in lieu of her cold cereal. She sets a plate out for Ian at the counter before taking her efficient shower. Towel off, pull hair back, beige top, beige bottoms.

She's tucking in her blouse when she returns to the kitchen. "Your mother's been sleeping in later. Check on her before you go out."

Ian nods, revived by the coffee and breakfast, but still shaken by the vision of Taunton's face.

His aunt taps the head of her vintage, ceramic cat figurine sitting on the counter. A ritual. She takes her keys from their place hanging beside the door. Looks back.

"Thanks," Ian says, "For breakfast."

“Her medications are by the fridge.” The door shuts behind her.

Ian showers, washes off the night. Soapy water circles the drain but the dreams don’t rinse off with it.

Still nothing coming from his mother’s room. He gently opens her door; her eyes are open. She yawns and smiles.

“You want some breakfast, mom?”

“No sweetie. Thank you.”

“You sure? You should eat something.”

“I’m not hungry,” she says, a fading angel. “How about I make you something?” She stirs as if trying to get up, but remains with her head on the pillow.

“Aunt Bonnie made me breakfast. You sure you don’t want anything?”

“I just want to lie here a bit longer. Go out, enjoy the day. It’s supposed to be a nice one. Not many days like these left.” She smiles. “Although I always did love the change of seasons. We should go for a drive to look at the leaves, they’ll be changing color before we know it.”

Ian leans down and kisses her forehead. He wants to spill his guts to her, shaken by the nightmare, overwhelmed by everything, but he knows her frail state cannot handle that surge of emotion.

It’s barely six a.m. when he revs up the bike and heads for Raine’s, someone he could at least talk to about Taunton.

Raine doesn’t answer the door, which is odd, considering the early hour. Ian tries to peer through the window, which is open a crack, but the curtains are tightly drawn. *Where’d he walk off to?* Ian wonders.

He sends a text, and thinks about what to do now. Not much going on at this hour in Sandy Knoll, save the white hairs filing into the diner next door.

He hears the sound of a message notification, the familiar ping, faintly come through the window. *His phone’s in there?* Ian knocks again, this time louder.

Nothing.

Ian sends another message, and there’s another ping.

Ian glances behind him. No one’s around. He slides the window open more, there’s no screen.

“Hello?” He calls in.

Nothing.

He glances around one more time, then scrambles through the opening, pushing his way through the curtains, releasing a cloud of dust from them. Inside, he stifles a sneeze and looks around. He had never actually been inside Raine's room, all this summer.

There isn't much to see.

But something catches his eye on the beat-up dresser-top. Jenn's keychain, with the little pink pig. And her apartment key.

The lock accepts the key and the door to Jenn's apartment opens before him. Ian doesn't know what he'll find, has no idea. A sense of the ominous builds.

The kitchen is as he remembers. Washed dishes in the rack by the sink. Ian lifts a glass, traces off a fine line of dust. Dry goods in the cupboards, cereal, cans of soup. The refrigerator has been emptied and cleaned; cold, still running, cooling nothing. On a lark he opens the freezer— it's stuffed full of items from the fridge side: a container of blueberries, half a quart of skim milk, an avocado.

Ian steps carefully through the living room, hoping the landlord doesn't hear him from below. Her bedroom door is cracked open, a made bed, clothing in drawers. As if she had never left, save the fine layer of dust that seems to be over everything.

But Raine had said the apartment was empty...

Ian hovers in her room, processing everything: her absence, her belongings around him, Raine's apparent lie.

Only one room left to check, a room he has never been inside.

Ian stands before the door to her parent's room, turns the knob, gingerly pushes it open with a creak.

The hell?

The room is small and sparsely furnished, a desk and chair against the wall. A large corkboard against the opposite wall, empty, except for brass push pins. A few pins still hold torn corners of paper, as if the board's contents had been hastily pulled off.

No bed. No dresser. No evidence of parents at any point. Parents he had never met, oddly enough.

Ian exits the room in a stupor. His nightmares are spilling over into his waking hours. Confusion and inconsistencies stack one upon the next:

Jenn's disappearance. Taunton's erratic behavior. Raine with Jenn's key. No sign of her parents—ever.

Ian is back in the kitchen, staring at the refrigerator. *She left, but never came back here.*

But someone had. Someone who stuffed her perishables into the freezer to keep them from rotting.

Someone who had her key.

Raine.

Raine, who just happened to show up the day she disappeared.

But what had happened to Jenn?

Ian stumbles down the steep stairs. The landlord sees him and calls out, but he cuts through the yard to the back street where he's parked his bike. Full throttle and he's going to the only place left, the only person left. And even he's a question mark. But he'll have to suffice.

Chapter 23

The sun hovers above the treetops and casts its light over the expanse of sand. Ian is atop a dune, settled behind a scrubby bush, where he can see the end of the old logging road he rode his Honda in on, and most of the surroundings. Behind him is forest, a sprawling expanse of unpopulated thickets and bogs. Before him are the dunes, and a spacious clearing where two large sandy slopes form a large half-pipe.

His lone message to Chuck: "The eagle has landed."

Chuck would know what that meant. Know that it was urgent.

But would he come?

When the Haneke father would roll back into town in his shabby Eagle Premier, during their earlier years, it was a code to meet at the sand dunes, and ride a few hours until the old man got settled in. Fresh off the road, he would often be irritable, ready to lash out. Better to let him shake off the miles for a while, alone.

No cell signal out here, and Ian doesn't know where else to go. Doesn't want any awkward run-ins until he figures things out.

There's Chuck, gunning his car down the ratty logging road.

Looks like he's gonna shake the thing apart.

Ian steps into sight at the top of the dune and waves.

Chuck pulls up to a stop in a dust cloud and sticks his head out the window. "You gonna make me come up there?" His voice echoes through the dunes.

Ian puts his finger to his lips, motions with his hand to keep it down.

"What the hell, dude?" Chuck shouts up at him.

Ian shrugs, then run-slides down the steep incline to meet his friend.

"Did you have to yell?"

"No one comes here." Chuck looks up at the dune Ian just ran down.

"Why haven't we come here for so long?"

"Been at least two years."

Chuck walks to the back of his car and pops the trunk, pulling out two BMX bikes.

"You brought our bikes?"

"You said 'the eagle has landed,' that means it's time to ride bikes at the sand dunes, am I wrong?"

Ian takes his old bike by the handlebars. "It was at your house?"

“Does that surprise you? You practically live there.”

Ian looks down the logging path, and over his shoulder at the surrounding dunes. “Anyone see you leave?”

“Dude, what’s with the paranoia? No one cares where I’m going. What’s with all this ‘eagle has landed’ shit?”

Ian starts with the weird seizure Taunton was having at the bottom of Flat Top, and then tells him about Raine having the key to Jenn’s apartment, and how all her stuff was still there. It comes out in a breathy rush.

“It makes sense, when you think about it,” Chuck says. “Jenn disappeared the day Rainbow showed up. He’s sketchy. I bet he just cruises from town to town murdering girls, you know? Rainbow’s a serial killer, dude. It’s gotta be.”

“But he showed up at Black Hole that night.”

“After he killed her.”

“I don’t know.”

“Shit. Dude.” Chuck holds his hands out in front of his face. “Or he’s imprisoned her somewhere and she’s still alive, like a sex slave or something.”

Ian considers this horrifying new theory. “I don’t think so, I mean, where? And also, and how? And what about her parent’s room? I mean, what’s up with that? It’s like she doesn’t have parents at all.”

“Which means she was lying.”

“Why the hell would she do that? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“But she was.”

“What about the Taunton thing? I mean, that’s weird, right?”

“He’s a weird dude to begin with.”

“He was frothing at the mouth, like he was rabid.”

“Maybe he was smoking some shit.”

Ian chews at his lip. “Or Raine has nothing to do with Jenn’s disappearance.”

“But the key.”

“He could have picked up the key from inside the apartment the day he picked the lock, you know, make it easier to stop back in later. He lied about the apartment being empty, because he wanted to steal.”

“That doesn’t explain what happened to Jenn though,” Chuck says. “The theory that makes the most sense is that Raine is a serial killer who murdered Jenn. He learned about Black Hole and you somehow, maybe

while torturing her or something, so he went down there, to like, gloat or something. Then he's hanging out with you in some sort of sick game. He goes to her apartment, pretending to break in. That's what it is, a sick game."

"But her parents..."

"Maybe," says Chuck, "they like to sleep on the floor."

"I don't know what to do."

Chuck straddles his bike. "The eagle has landed. We do what we always do when we come to the sand dunes. We ride bikes. The rest will come to us.

Sand flies as the bikes tear through the dunes. The wind picks up and sand now bites at their faces, too. Ian grins, despite himself. It's been a long time since he's smiled, and the expression comes on as a kind of madness. Chuck's reverted to his middle-school self, and now he's found that old tuft they used to use as a ramp. He races down the dune, fishtailing ever so slightly before hitting the tuft straight on and getting into the air. The landing is less successful, as the bike slips sideways after the landing, but Chuck dusts himself off, uninjured and eager to ride again.

The old game was to shout a curse at peak air, and the old game it is, with both boys letting out creative curses. The sun winks behind the trees and the scrubs struggling in the sand cast long shadows. The boys stand atop the tallest dune, overlooking the half pipe.

"Last run?" Ian says.

"Gonna have to be," Chuck says reluctantly. He keeps his foot back on the coaster brake, as if the run would be more than the end of the evening.

"Do it again, soon?"

"Yeah, for sure." Ian says, but it sounds false.

Chuck pushes off and builds up speed quickly. He gets the highest air yet, curses viciously, and pulls a perfect landing. He moves out of the landing area and straddles his bike, waiting.

Ian is about to follow when Chuck begins waving his arms and pointing up at him. Ian turns, and suddenly there's Taunton, approaching quickly.

"Hold up, Swifty," Taunton croaks. His face is contorted and twitching, almost as if it's wrestling with itself.

Ian pushes forward to ride down the dune, but Taunton's ropery arms pull him from his bike. Ian struggles against the larger, stronger Taunton, but finds himself trapped under his weight. He throws a handful of sand into Taunton's face, and gets punched in return. Hands clasp around his neck and press. He hears Chuck screaming from down below.

Taunton releases his neck, straddling Ian who gasps for breath. Taunton draws something from his shirt pocket. Ian fears a knife, a gun... He puts his hands in front of his face...

Taunton takes out a small capsule and grins terribly. "May the palace of Kurnugi be glad to see you." He swallows the capsule and presses his body over Ian, wrapping him with his arms in a devouring bear hug.

Ian twists fruitlessly in his embrace, smells his sweat and feels its warm dampness.

The sky is glaring blue.

Then—release.

Taunton is knocked off of Ian in a sudden rush, tackled by someone coming in at full force and speed.

It's Raine. He grapples with Taunton, who starts breathing desperately. He rolls away from Raine and pulls himself over the ground toward Ian, who is on his feet and getting on his bike. Taunton collapses as his body seizes up in twitching jerks.

Ian looks back, and sees a small, black circle grow from a pinpoint in front of Taunton's face. It looks like a perfectly round inkblot on a flat page, increasing in size steadily. It swallows Taunton, then expands to consume Raine, who turns to Ian and tries to say something before he too disappears in the flat blackness. Ian pedals hard, ripping down the dune. He looks back again after hitting the tuft and getting air, to see the ballooning spot shrink back down to nothing and disappear.

Ian crashes the landing and lies tangled with the bike.

Chuck's confused face soon hovers over him. "They're gone," he says. "They disappeared."

Part Four: Underworld



Chapter 24

Raine walks along the roadside at a pace just fast enough to keep the bugs at bay. His legs have acclimated to the constant walking during his stay in Sandy Knoll; walking to the gas station for groceries, walking to the diner, walking to meet Ian, walking, walking, walking... Still, he'll be glad to finally arrive at his destination down a little-used country road, a pull-out encircled by tall trees. Walking leaves you with no escape from your thoughts, and he would be glad to forget his.

The pull-out approaches; a gleam from a car indicates his contact is already there. Raine has been using Lejla's phone, Novillium-issue. He had been told it was the only secure form of communication, except for face-to-face. His job has been to keep tabs on Ian, and send frequent updates.

Apparently, this meeting was too important to be left to a message.

Raine enters the pull-out. The gleam is from a familiar black Lexus. Hansen steps out and shakes his hand. "I see you're playing the transient drifter role quite well," he says, as he observes the growing sweat stains under Raine's arms. He looks about the pull-out area. "This is a secure place to meet? I'd have you sit in the car, but..." Hansen glances at Raine's perspiration again. "...it's such a nice day and the air is so fresh out here... in the country."

"It's secure, unless you care what the squirrels hear."

Hansen laughs, but quickly grows more serious. "Karl wanted me to come out here myself to talk to you. He doesn't trust to leave the communication to a lower intermediary, or to the misinterpretations of asynchronous messaging." Hansen brushes at his linen suit. "High pollen count today?" He sniffs tentatively.

"What's the message?" Raine asks.

"Where's the mark?"

"Ian, you mean?"

"Obviously."

"He's fine. He's doing his usual thing."

Hansen sighs. "Can you provide any more precision?"

"Last time I checked the tracker on his bike it was parked at his house."

Hansen waves away a fly that has discovered the talking men. “We have evidence that the Kurs are nearing a seizure of the asset.”

“Ian, you mean?”

“If they were to acquire him... it could be the end of everything as we know it.”

“He’s been alive seventeen years, why now?”

“Karl feels they are getting desperate.” Hansen waves at the fly again. “That they’ll take greater risks to bring him in, even risk their end game itself.”

“So we need to bring him in first.” Raine breathes deeply.

Hansen shakes his head. “Progress has been made, we’re nearing a breakthrough where we could shield him from their forces, but, quite frankly, it would be too late if they were to snatch him right out from under us.”

“Then what’s the plan?”

Hansen hesitates. “We’ve been prepared to remove the threat before.”

“He doesn’t even know he is a threat.”

“That’s beside the point. This isn’t about him, it’s about what he can unlock. Imagine the Nazi’s getting the atomic bomb first. That’s the importance of what we’re talking about here.”

“You want me to kill him.”

“You knew going in that could be a possibility. We briefed you. Lejla failed, and now she’s gone off our radar. We gave her the message that seizure was imminent, and that we needed to secure him first. She failed to act. So we brought you in. And, for the moment, the intel showed we might have more time, we might gamble to wait until our containment technology was ready... but... we’re concerned they have someone close and ready to act. Someone you’ve briefed us on who has been exhibiting strange behavior.”

“Taunton.”

“Technically it’s not Taunton at all. We believe he’s been hijacked by the Kurs — think mind-control. They’re desperate, aware of how close we are to unraveling their plot. And, desperate people may take desperate actions.”

“This threat,” Raine says, “is it really as dangerous as you described it? Like a nuclear weapon?”

“The amount of energy they could unlock would make nuclear weapons obsolete. It would be world-changing.” Hansen leans in, and Raine can smell his cologne. “Hundreds of thousands died in the atomic bombings that ended World War II, and few disagree that it was the right thing to do. Imagine averting a tragedy of that scale, or greater, with the sacrifice of just one person.”

Raine folds his arms and looks away. The narrow, towering pines surrounding them reach up to the summer-blue sky like gently wavering pencils. Impossibly tall and slender, the trunks bend without snapping.

“How will I do it?”

Hansen motions him over to the trunk of his car. He takes out a long, black soft case and unzips it. Inside is a black hunting rifle with a scope.

“I presume this will suffice?” Hansen says, offering the weapon to Raine.

“A Browning X-Bolt.” Raine inspects the rifle and looks down the scope. “What makes you think I know how to use this?”

Hansen smirks. “Well, you do, don’t you?”

“I may have done a little shooting with my grandfather.”

“More than a little. My briefing indicates you are quite the sharpshooter. The threat spends a lot of time alone outdoors. Take him out from a safe distance and ditch the gun — it’s untraceable. Then skedaddle. Bye, bye Sandy Knoll.”

“They’re going to figure it out.”

“I don’t think ‘they’ will. Someone no one cares about is shot by someone no one even really knows at all. Not exactly big news.”

“Isn’t there anyone better suited for this?”

“Novillium is a small family, Raine. And to be honest, our government sponsors don’t know the extent of the important work we do. Certainly, they wouldn’t recognize or even comprehend this threat. So we work with what we have.”

Hansen takes the rifle, and carefully zips it back up before handing it back to Raine. “And then you can leave this godforsaken place. Karl has been talking about a promotion, just between you and me.”

He curses loudly, swatting at the back of his head. “What the hell is that?”

“Horsefly.” Raine slings the case over his shoulder as Hansen scrambles into his car.

“I closed it for you.”

Raine pauses at the door of his motel room, now thoroughly soaked in sweat from his walk back. “What’s that?”

“Your window. It was open.” The motel’s maintenance man looks up from sweeping off the concrete walkway. “I closed it.”

“Thanks.”

“You should know, there was a kid in there. I saw him come out while you were gone. Thought it was weird.”

“A kid?”

“Yeah, a teenager. I don’t think he took anything. Unless you had cash out.”

“I don’t keep cash.”

“I figured as much.”

“What’d the kid look like?”

“Look like? Looked like the Swift kid. You gonna call the cops or something?”

“Not if there’s nothing missing.”

The maintenance man glances down at the black soft case Raine is holding and shrugs. “Whatever.”

Raine enters the room and closes the door behind him, bolting it. He scans the room looking for anything out of place. It seems... okay. The side table catches his eye; didn’t he have something there? Raine checks a few drawers, his pockets...

Yeah, he had something there. Jenn’s apartment keys.

You dumbass, he thinks. He feels the weight of the case in his hand. *Maybe Lejla’s not the only one who should leave town.*

Raine messages Ian, a casual text. *Message not received.*

Damnit.

If Ian took Lejla’s keys, the next place he would go is her apartment.

Raine lays the soft case on the motel bed and sits next to it. He breathes deeply in an attempt to think clearly. It was clear Ian knew something weird was happening. He might not know exactly what or why, but he would be spooked. There was even less time to act than Hansen had thought. He could disappear... and what then? Be caught up by the Kurs?

The kid was doomed either way. And one way could be the end of the world, if Hansen was to be believed.

Raine opens up the tracker application on Lejla's Novillium phone. Current position unavailable... tall trees maybe? The last location on the map is just off Hartley Road. Raine zooms out on the map and recognizes it as being near the sand dunes he saw from the Flat Rock observation tower.

Raine sighs and turns back out the door. What was a few more miles?

Raine lies on his chest, watching Ian and Chuck riding their bikes down the nearby dunes. His vantage point is from up on the side of the hill, farther back along its perimeter. As close as he dares get.

His legs ache from the day of walking, and now the sun lays low in the sky.

But he is not thinking about the trudging walk back.

The rifle is cradled before him, finger on the trigger.

You don't have to do this, Raine thinks.

But if you don't...

He squints through the scope, carefully controls his breathing.

Ian in the crosshairs, standing atop the hill, Chuck waiting below.

Squeeze the trigger and that would be the end of his story.

What if it is all bullshit, what if they're lying?

That doesn't make sense to Raine, but still....

His finger trembles...

A new figure appears in the periphery — from out of the woods behind Ian, not terribly far from Raine himself. It swiftly approaches Ian, tackles him — Raine's scope neatly frames the wrestling pair.

Raine looks up from the rifle's scope, sees the conflict in the flesh and hears it with his ears. He forgets his dead legs, and he is running along the rim of the hill where one misstep could send him tumbling down the sandy slope. He tackles Taunton, knocking him clear of Ian. Taunton foams at the mouth, his eyes do not see Raine, they glisten as they look up, and it seems Taunton is no longer himself, and rather a mindless vehicle of the Kurs. Above him a tiny black dot appears... A black dot that swallows up Taunton's body, and Raine, along with it.

Chapter 25

Darkness, darkness, color and light. The strands twist and pull, depositing Raine in his new destination...

A metallic taste lingers in Raine's mouth. Sounds worm in through his ears, like waves lapping against his oscillating consciousness. A domed ceiling swirls slowly, fading into darkness, and beneath him a stone slab cools his aching back.

An arm is draped across his chest. Raine tries to push it off, only to discover it is his own, attached but unresponding. With difficulty he uses his good arm to push it aside and pulls himself into an upright position. As his eyes adjust to the dim light he sees Taunton's still form beside him, his face forever locked in an expression of distress.

"He's up," a hoarse voice calls out. "Call for Stubbles."

A wave of nausea sends Raine back down to the floor. A blurred figure stoops over Taunton, touches his neck.

"Beardslee's gone," says the figure, looking back.

"May the gates of Kurnugi open before him," replies the hoarse voice.

"Where am I?" asks Raine. The blurred figure steps back without responding. Raine fights nausea, lifting his head. The figure takes his place next to another, at the far side of the circular, cave-like room, where the domed ceiling meets the walls at a very low point, just above their heads.

"I said, where am I?"

The figures ignore Raine's question. A clacking noise, like the sound of something being pulled, approaches. The cavern amplifies the noise as it enters.

"Where have you been?" The hoarse voice asks. "Beardslee... is down. It'll be standard procedure for a member of the faithful."

A grotesque moan erupts from the newcomer, echoing off of the cavern's walls.

"Now, now Stubbles. Yes, it's unfortunate. But do not doubt; and do not question. Beardslee would not have."

The clacking gently approaches, and Raine sees the newcomer called Stubbles take a knee beside Taunton's body. Stubbles is misshapen, even accounting for Raine's distorted vision. It blubs weepily as it carefully leverages the body onto a low, flat board with wheels and straps it into

place. The clacking resumes, louder with the weight of the body as Stubbles pulls it away and out of the cavern, until it can be heard no more.

Raine remains on his back. He struggles to recall the events that led him here; everything is scrambled, from his vision to his memory. He pictures the strands, and steels himself to follow them back... *yes, back to the sand dunes*, and he remembers the black spot that had swallowed Taunton.

Had swallowed himself.

Am I... dead?

The idea jars him. However, he feels very much alive, if not entirely lucid.

He forces himself to sit up again, and sees the two figures standing beside the wall, quietly observing. It makes him angry.

"Talk to me. What's going on?" he shouts.

The exertion brings on a stronger wave of nausea, and he turns his head and vomits. The purge is a relief, and his vision begins to improve. The blurred figures come into focus: an older man in a robe beside a man wearing gray workman's clothes.

"Answer me!"

The older man says something in the other man's ear as they ignore Raine's demands. The clacking sound returns, and the looming creature Stubbles with it, pulling the now empty board behind him.

"I'm afraid we've a bit of a situation here," says the older man, the source of the hoarse voice.

Stubbles grunts in acknowledgement.

"Standard procedure for unexpected guests." The older man pauses. "I hope you have a sedating injection with you?"

Another grunt of acknowledgement from Stubbles.

"Very good."

"Wait..." Raine protests the so-called "sedating injection" shot as Stubbles approaches, wheeled board in tow, but the creature expertly sticks him with a syringe, its hideous face hovering closely above, eyes filled with animosity.

Raine struggles weakly as the board is roughly wedged beneath him, with leather straps tightly cinched across his chest and arms. His ears are harshly grabbed as the powerful creature straightens him on the board before tightening the chest straps even more and then binding his feet. The

room spins into darkness as the clacking begins once more, this time with him moving along with it.

Chapter 26

In this darkness, Raine dreams.

In this darkness, Raine feels the presence of a sleeping entity.

In this darkness, Raine sees the strands, twisting and shining like unraveled coils of spun gold.

“Bway kup.”

Orbs shine behind that hideous face, that brute with the hideous strength. Raine blinks languidly, he does not have the wherewithal to be distressed by its presence. Now he sees; the orbs are a trio of lights in a chandelier above the creature—Stubbles, so called.

Raine giggles at the creature’s fleshy face. It is human, or is it? White, doughy skin hangs in flaps, from the cheeks and above the eyes; hair weakly sprouts from its large head. The creature hulks over him, clad in a loosely fitting gray tunic. Its sausage-like fingers reach out and tap his cheek, not gently.

“Bway kup.”

“I am awake, you thing,” Raine says, still feeling silly. *It must be a side effect of the shot they gave me*, he thinks, but that knowledge does not make him feel any less silly. “So why don’t you stop poking at me?” Raine giggles some more, growing more aware of his condition and his surroundings, lying on his back in a simple bed. The stone room seems carved out of solid bedrock. Beyond the creature, Stubbles, waits a small, iron door with a curved top. Raine’s unresponsive arm is dressed in a sling, and his clothes have been removed, with a thin white sheet draped over his waist.

“I’m feeling a bit vulnerable,” Raine laughs, in spite of himself.

“Read disss.” The creature proffers an envelope sealed with wax and imprinted with the mark of a double-headed lion.

“I guess I’ll sit up then. Give me a... paw? Flipper?” Raine chuckles.

The creature glares at him, but helps pull him up to a sitting position. Its hand grasps Raine’s powerfully, which helps stifle the silliness. *This monster could crush me like a walnut.*

Inside the envelope is a brief letter:

Dear Mr. Penton,

I regret our artless greeting upon your abrupt arrival. Surely your journey has been a disorienting one, and you have many questions.

Your presence is requested for a conference. I presume you will cooperate with my representative, Stubbles, as he prepares you.

Refreshments will be served.

Lord Nergleton

“I take it you’re ‘Stubbles?’” Raine eyes the creature, noticing it stands beside a stainless steel cart that contains several pots and bowls.

The creature grunts affirmatively.

“And you’re going to prepare me, whatever that entails?”

“Yess.”

“I guess I don’t have much choice.”

Stubbles ladles scented water from one of the pots onto a warm white cloth, sponging Raine’s body. He combs his hair, raking the tines against Raine’s scalp.

Raine cringes. “Easy there, buddy.”

After the cleansing and grooming, Stubbles provides Raine with a gray tunic similar to his own. The fabric is strong, yet soft against Raine’s skin.

“Am I supposed to tip you? I’m afraid I’ve misplaced my wallet.”

Raine laughs, but rings hollow.

“Tis sway.” Stubbles opens the small, iron door and beckons, before stooping down and stepping through.

The narrow passage arcs past a series of small, metal doors with curved tops similar to the one to Raine’s room. Symbols are carved into the stone above each. Stubbles stops before the final door in the passageway, marked with the symbol of the two-headed lion Raine had seen imprinted on the seal of the envelope.

Stubbles gently raps his swollen knuckles against the door.

Raine is feeling less silly and more distressed.

Claustrophobia and hopelessness.

The door swings open and relief washes over him at the sight of her face. It’s unexpected and unexplainable, like a reflex he has no power over.

It is a gentle face, adorned with fine lines of age and wisps of snow-white hair. Gentle, although her dark eyes are keen and calculating behind an enigmatic smile. Her soft features are framed by a textured shawl drawn about her face, that flows down to the layered robes that cover her body, just firmly enough to reveal the outline of her figure.

“Please, come in,” she says, in a soft, husky voice. Stubbles bows his head and leads Raine through the door into a warmly lit apartment with dark-grained furniture, thick, worn rugs and brass fixtures.

“Lord Nergleton awaits you.” She motions to an adjoining room before lilting off to what looks like a galley kitchen. Her feet softly knock against the floor, clad in wooden clogs.

Raine follows Stubbles into a sitting room where the hoarse-voiced figure sits, deep in an old leather chair, smoking a pipe and carefully exhaling the smoke from the side of his mouth. He is dressed in a black robe, a panted leg extruding at an angle. The mark of the two-headed lion is present again, this time embroidered on the left breast of the robe.

“That is all, Stubbles.” The man dismisses the creature, holding his pipe aside. The smoke smells of sandalwood and tobacco, hanging in thin clouds about him. “Mr. Penton. Your presence here, though a surprise, is a pleasant one, I assure you. Won’t you have a seat?”

Raine sits in a leather chair across from a coffee table between them, keeping himself upright on the edge of the chair, so as to not sink into the deep back. He watches as Stubbles leaves, the creature shooting a barbed look back at him.

The apartment door clicks shut and the two stare at each other, Lord Nergleton with amused consideration, and Raine with awkward expectation.

“I don’t think that thing likes me,” Raine says.

“Stubbles is a simple soul, in many ways.” Lord Nergleton puffs at his pipe. “He was quite fond of Beardslee, and rather blames you for his passing, I suspect.”

“I don’t know who this Beardslee is.”

“Well, you arrived here wrapped around him like a tightly knit scarf. I suspect you know something of him.”

“That body next to me was someone named Taunton, and I had nothing to do with his death. He just start sputtering foam out of his mouth before we got sucked into some kind of terrible void and ended up... wherever this is.”

“Beardslee was borrowing this Taunton’s body, if you will. In the name of service to a greater cause. He was one of us, had been from the very beginning.”

Raine shrugs. “I’d like some explanation on where I am and why I was brought here. And when and how I’ll be leaving.”

“Didn’t Novillium brief you on that? You were operating in their interests, were you not?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“About Novillium?”

“About anything.”

Lord Nergleton smiles. “Let’s be cooperative, shall we? I know what Novillium is, quite well, unfortunately. I also know who you are, Raine Penton.”

“What don’t you know, then?”

“I don’t know what you know, or what you think you know. Not too much, I suspect, that’s how Novillium likes to play it.” Lord Nergleton makes a spitting face as he draws out the pronunciation of “Novillium” in disdain. “Here, we are far more open.”

“Then tell me where I am.”

“A simple question with a complex answer,” replies Lord Nergleton. “You are... underground, away. Away, yes, away... that’s what I like to think of it. The gateway, or the crossroads perhaps. For some, not all... certainly for you, now.”

“How did I get here?”

“Shouldn’t you tell me that?” Lord Nergleton sets aside his pipe and claps his bony hands. “Is our tea almost ready?” he calls out.

The woman who had greeted Raine at the door waltzes into the room with a silver tray laden with a steaming teapot, two mugs, and two plates with white wafers on them. She places the tray on the table between Raine and Lord Nergleton, carefully pouring the tea while smiling the entire time at Raine, and avoiding eye contact with the other.

“Guests first,” she says, handing Raine a ceramic mug. The steam rises up and entices his nostrils. Lord Nergleton accepts his and sips carefully, cradling the mug in two hands.

Raine sips his. The tea is earthy and pleasant.

“Forgive my manners,” says Lord Nergleton, “this is Lady Eres, my companion.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Lady Eres curtsies before taking the empty tray and exiting the room, but not before giving Lord Nergleton a quick side-eye.

“Lady Eres grows this tea herself. It is fine, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, it’s very good,” Raine says. “Hopefully it’s not sedating me again, or whatever that was.”

“The tea has no mind-altering properties, other than simple relaxation. The shot you received was a standard procedure for unexpected guests... arriving here can be a... disquieting experience. I find it’s safer for everyone if we dull the panicked edge.” Lord Nergleton settles his gaze on Raine. “So, I believe you were just telling me about how you arrived, Mr. Penton.”

“That might be difficult, given I don’t really understand where I am.”

“Well,” Lord Nergleton replies, “We must start somewhere. Perhaps you can tell me the last thing you can remember before waking here. You truly have nothing to lose... I encourage you to be forthright.”

Raine looks down at his tea.

“Well?”

“Have you heard of Sandy Knoll?”

“I’m acquainted with it.”

“I was at the sand dunes. Taunton, the one you call ‘Beardslee,’ was attacking a boy. I... tried to stop him.”

“Yes?”

“He poisoned himself, I guess.”

“And then?”

“A black spot appeared... it grew until it just sort of swallowed us up.” Raine thinks of being pulled through the twisting void by the strands. “And now I’m here.”

“What was your job for Novillium?”

“I... don’t know what you mean.”

“Novillium really doesn’t do their employees any favors,” snarks Lord Nergleton, “keeping them in the dark as much as they can. Although, I’m sure they emphasized the ultimate importance of your task. They just didn’t trust you enough to explain why you were doing it.”

Raine stares into his tea. He can hear Lady Eres’ clogs knocking in the kitchen, cupboards opening and closing, the clink of glass and metal against stone.

“Ask me what you will,” prompts Lord Nergleton.

“Am I dead, or is this some kind of dream?”

“Do you feel as if you are in a dream?”

“If I am, it is the most real dream I’ve ever had.”

“And you are not dead, no more than any soul ever has been. Were you even alive up there?” Lord Nergleton looks to the stone ceiling. Then you are just as much alive down here.”

“Down here, where?”

“Welcome to the Underworld, Mr. Penton. I have a feeling you’ll be staying—for a while.” Lord Nergleton laughs hoarsely, cracker crumbs spraying out and embedding in his white, pointed beard.

Lady Eres arrives with another silver platter, beaming vacantly.

“Cookies, anyone?”

Chapter 27

The cookies melt on Raine's tongue, releasing delicate notes of ginger, lemon peel and honey. Teas have been refilled, and gladly accepted. Lady Eres had clucked as she tended Lord Nergleton, brushing away crumbs and straightening the lapels of his robe. And she had whisked away, back to another place, leaving them to their conversation.

"Everything about us is right here." Lord Nergleton places a deliberate finger against his temple. "Every single iota."

"In our brains," Raine says.

Lord Nergleton scowls. "The brain is only one component of what we are, and a subjugate one, at that. The soul, Mr. Penton, don't forget the soul."

Raine nibbles at the last of his cookie. *Here comes the crazy cult stuff.*

"Descartes theorized that the pineal gland was the home of the soul," Lord Nergleton says. "You have heard of Descartes, I assume?"

"Of course." It isn't an outright lie; Raine is reasonably confident he's heard the name before.

"Modern science—the likes of Novillium—has 'debunked' that notion. Except they are the ones who are mistaken. Some things cannot be uncovered with knife and scalpel, or revealed by the microscope. They could not see it, so they did not believe. But amongst the dark matter that streams through us at every moment, there is a particle, a particle entwined to the pineal gland. This particle contains every single thing about us: our DNA, our memories, a map of our current physical being."

Lord Nergleton leans forward earnestly. "Do you understand?"

Raine nods.

"It detaches from us at our time of death—taking everything with it, leaving the discarded husks of our earthly bodies."

"Where does this particle go?"

Lord Nergleton stands up and walks over to the opposite side of the room where a display of golden strands twists down from the ceiling. The fine, wire-like strands band together near the ceiling, splaying out in frayed branches as they seek the floor. An off-center strand in electric blue contrasts the gold, weaving from the band in its own arbitrary path down and into the stone floor. "The particle travels wherever it is destined; each one is unique, each one contains a pattern that unlocks its own door. See

these strands, bonded closely together as they reach out and accept the particle? Yet at the other end they fray apart, leading to different destinations. The particle may call for and enter the strand it is designated for.”

“Is that how I got here? But, I have my body.” Raine looks down at himself, at his deformed arm in the sling.

Lord Nergleton considers his question, pacing before the strands. “Perhaps you will learn our ways, the ways of the faithful. But, yes, you followed a strand, one that had its opening enlarged. The passages open all of the time, everywhere, but they are almost always fleeting and microscopic, smaller than microscopic, taking only the soul particle. A wormhole, in the common parlance.”

“I came here through a wormhole?”

“Yes.”

“That was enlarged, somehow?”

“Perhaps in time you will learn the ways of the faithful.” Lord Nergleton resumes his place in the leather chair. He claps his hands once more, summoning Lady Eres, and requests “a more serious drink” for their conversation. She returns with a bottle of green-hued liqueur, pouring it into small goblets. Rather than return to the kitchen, she pours herself a small gobletful and reclines on a chaise lounge beside them, humming softly.

“I have answered questions, now will you return the favor?” Lord Nergleton asks Raine.

Raine swirls the liqueur in his goblet, watching the legs form on the sides of the glass. He hesitates to bring it to his lips, thinking of poison and deception, before accepting the futility of resistance and sampling the concoction. It is sweet, and tastes of anise. “I will do my best,” he answers.

“Before you arrived here, you said you were at a place of sand and dunes. What was your errand there?”

Raine sips at his drink, thinking over the situation. *He already knows. What if this is just a test to see if I lie? Novillium didn't prepare me for this, not at all. Right now I'm having tea and cookies... that could change quickly.*

“Mr. Penton?”

Raine swallows a larger gulp of the liqueur. “I was following a boy. A teenager named Ian Swift.”

Lady Eres' humming ticks up a pitch, and Lord Nergleton leans in ever so slightly.

"That was the job, for Novillium, at least at that time. To keep tabs on the kid and keep Novillium informed of his whereabouts and actions."

"This boy," asks Lord Nergleton, "what was so special about him, that warranted a full-time monitor?"

"I was told that Novillium's interest in him was because he was believed by some parties to hold the power to some immense thing."

"Other parties, such as us, perhaps?"

"A cult. I suppose they could have been referring to you."

Lord Nergleton laughs angrily. "A cult—ha! Novillium's the *cult*. What is a 'cult' after all, but a group devoted to a false ideal? Fools. We are the faithful."

"The faithful," Lady Eres repeats, amidst her humming.

"That's all I knew. That he was important, and I needed to keep tabs on him. I really didn't know much."

"That, I can believe." Lord Nergleton composes himself, finishing his goblet and pouring himself more. "You may go on."

Here we go... Raine thinks. *Let's try to not set him off...* "The guy you've referred to as Beardslee, I knew him as Taunton, a local guy. He had been acting strangely recently, or just different. He attacked the kid at the sand dunes. I came out of hiding and tackled him. He... took some kind of pill... and that's when the black spot appeared."

"The wormhole," says Lord Nergleton. "The passage."

"And it got bigger and suddenly, I was... here."

Lord Nergleton considers Raine's account. Lady Eres' humming has waned, and she seems to have drifted off into a stupor on the lounge, eyes still open and staring upward.

"That's the whole truth, as they say?" Lord Nergleton sets aside his goblet and clasps his hands, leaning forward and drilling his eyes into Raine.

Raine thinks of the rifle in the woods, the moment of decision when he went from would-be assassin to intercessor. *I don't know what he knows. And he seems to know a lot.*

"It's the truth, but there is another aspect I'm reluctant to share."

"Yes?"

"I was directed by Novillium to kill the boy."

“Why?” Lord Nergleton asks harshly.

“That the threat was imminent... that the cult was going to make their move. That there was no other choice.”

“And yet the boy lives.”

“I couldn’t do it. It didn’t feel right.”

Lord Nergleton thinks about this, hands still clasped before his face in a prayer-like position. “Your reluctance to kill the boy is a redeeming merit, as is your willingness to tell the truth. Novillium is a cancer of the mind, but you seem to have resisted its ultimate effect: to turn its members into unquestioning followers.

“Here, we have questions. Here, we work together for a common good and purpose, a role complementary to the world and greater universe as opposed to perpetrating an unnatural combat with that we barely understand. We bring on what should and will be, summoning the inevitable rather than clawing blindly and futilely against it. Our work is not for our own edification, and perhaps you will learn that in time, should you so choose. You must accept that you may never leave Kurnugi. But you will be treated fairly, and your work will have true purpose—should you choose to embrace it. We are not here to hide the truth, but to reveal it as your mind is able to accept it.”

Lord Nergleton stands up, and Raine does the same. Lady Eres rises from the lounge and hovers in the periphery.

“You cannot leave, and there’s no free rent, as they say.” Lord Nergleton seems to grow in stature before Raine, as if his head would push up and touch the stone ceiling itself. “But should you choose to accept your situation, I believe you will find the work edifying. So, Mr. Penton, what abilities do you have to offer us?”

Lady Eres draws up closer. “I believe I may have use of him,” she croons. “Yes, yes, I believe I do.”

“As the lady wishes.” Lord Nergleton shrinks back down in stature, seeming more frail, more tired. “And she can be responsible for your orientation.” He retires to his leather chair, packing his pipe and lighting it, as Lady Eres takes Raine’s arm and leads him away.

Chapter 28

“Here we are.” Lady Eres stops before a curved, steel door. She points down the dimly lit passageway where there are many more. “Behind all these doors you see, are living quarters for the faithful. Though, most lie empty now.”

Raine counts twelve doors, before the passage curves out of sight. Lady Eres ushers him into his new room. Like the other rooms he has seen, the walls are carved from solid rock. Two steel-frame bunks are fastened into the stone on one side. A pair of chairs, and a coffee table. A rustic, half-empty shelf with some books. Opposite the bunks, an inset in the wall, with a curtain. Lady Eres pulls back the curtain to reveal a simple steel toilet and sink. “Stubbles will bring you a fresh towel and washcloth in the morning. What do you think of your lodging?”

Raine surveys the room. No windows, save the porthole-style one in the door. The space is warmly, if dimly, lit. He motions to the bunks. “Who’s my roommate?”

Lady Eres smiles. “A relic of more prosperous times. Once, we needed every bed, but that has long passed. The room is your own.” Melancholy creeps into her expression. “Indeed, many of the rooms you see lie empty now. Our numbers are few. Stan and Wenzel are two of our technicians; they choose to share a room, to combat the solitude, I suspect. Then there is Darko, who prefers his own company. Stubbles has his quarters, and the Lord and I our own. Now, with Beardslee gone...” Her voice upticks. “So it is, and so it was written. I imagine you must be feeling weary.” Her hand brushes Raine’s arm.

“I’m starting to feel tired, yes.”

“Eventually, you will acclimate. Though we do not have day or night down here, we do observe a routine period of rest. It begins soon (you will hear a chime). I suggest you try your new bed, and familiarize yourself with your new space. In the morning Stubbles will bring those things I mentioned. And you may take breakfast with us.”

Lady Eres croons to herself as she shuffles through the door and closes it behind her. Raine stands in the small space for several minutes, processing his situation. He peers through the porthole in the door, sees no one. He tries the latch, but it is firmly locked. He wanders to the sink, and runs the water. It runs and runs, as he watches, hand motionless on the

faucet lever. Finally, he breaks himself from his trance, and shuts off the water. He drifts across the small room and feels his body press down on the mattress on the lower bunk. A gentle chime emanates from above his door.

A period of rest, I suppose. He doesn't see much else to do, and exhaustion has arrived in full. The mattress is soft enough, and soon he sleeps, almost against his will.

Chime.

The gentle notification wakes Raine from a deep sleep.

The light in the room slowly brightens. Raine sits up and puts his head in his hands, his stomach growling loudly.

The door to the room opens, and Stubbles enters with a cart.

“Good morning, you weird thing.” Raine rises to his feet.

The creature shakes his head and sniffs. He sets a fresh towel and washcloth on the coffee table and drapes a new, gray tunic over the back of one of the chairs.

“Thanks.”

Stubbles trundles the cart from the room with another, more indignant, sniff.

“I guess I should get ready for breakfast,” Raine says to himself. He takes the washcloth to the sink and wipes his face and body. The cool water is refreshing, and he feels his senses sharpen after the all-consuming sleep. He slips on the new tunic, and folds up the old one, leaving it on the table. The fabric is coarsely woven and strong, yet gentle against the skin. Soon, the chime sounds again.

Lady Eres appears at the door, dressed in an apron made from the same material as Raine’s tunic. “Breakfast is served.”

Raine follows her down the passage past the doors to the workmen’s quarters. She enters a door that opens into one of the larger spaces Raine has been in, except for the cavern he arrived in. A long wooden table with rustic wooden chairs sits in the center, arrayed with a course of lidded pots and pans. Lord Nergleton sits at the head of the table, and two gray-clad workmen are taking their seats as well. Stubbles shuffles around the table like a grotesque butler, topping off small glasses with what appears to be juice. Many of the seats at the table remain empty.

Lady Eres shows Raine his seat, and takes her own at the other end of the table.

“Eat. You are hungry.” Lord Nergleton gestures to the dishes before them. Do not hesitate to serve yourself.”

The dishes are passed around, with the workmen taking modest portions. Raine accepts a dish, saying “thank you,” but the workman remains silent and fixated on his plate. Raine mimics the portions of the workman, putting what looks like casserole on his plate. A bowl of strawberries is also handed to him, which he accepts gratefully. The

casserole smells savory, and Raine needs no urging to eat his portion, with his stomach gladly accepting.

"This is Stan and Wenzel," says Lady Eres, introducing the two workmen. They grunt noncommittally and continue eating.

"Been here a long time?" Raine asks.

"From the beginning," says Lord Nergleton.

"From *your* beginning," Lady Eres corrects.

"I'm Raine," he says toward the eating workmen.

"May the halls of Kurnugi be glad to see you," replies the taller of the two.

"Thanks."

"How do you find your meal?" asks Lady Eres.

"Very good," says Raine, truthfully. "So, this is... everyone?"

The table is silent until Lord Nergleton speaks. "There is also Darko. He is not the conversational type."

Unlike these chatterboxes, Raine thinks, glancing at Stan and Wenzel who are eating mechanically.

"Darko is working," Lord Nergleton continues, "at a job for which we must always have someone on shift."

"The faithful are now few," says Lady Eres. "Our numbers have dwindled, and we are a mere skeleton of what we once were. Beardslee, now passed. And before that, Herman."

Raine's ears prick at the familiar name. *Herman Manheim from the shelter?* "Herman was a traveler, like Beardslee. But we sent him too often, although he was willing. It addled his brain. He was a victim of his keen loyalty... we could not dissuade him."

"He was a victim of Novillium, not his loyalty," says Lord Nergleton. "But the journeys are difficult, and our numbers few... As you can see. Many of the faithful were members of my original party. A few were pulled from the strands, like yourself."

"We have no more travelers, only our technicians, whom we cannot risk, and of course, Stubbles." Lady Eres strokes the creature's head, who waits crouched and hulking beside her chair. "But so it was written." She looks off into space, murmuring to herself.

A chime sounds.

"Thus concludes the meal of first waking," says Lord Nergleton. The workmen rise to their feet and walk wordlessly from the room. Stubbles

snivels beside Lady Eres who remains in her reverie.

“She will be with you... eventually.” Lord Nergleton stands and exits the room.

Chapter 29

“What are the flowers for?” Raine has just received a full accounting of the botanical spectacle that is the lady’s garden, a small hangar’s worth of vegetables, fruits and blossoms of superlative variety. Here, the ceilings arch high above their heads, outfitted with hanging baskets and an orderly network of drip hoses, wiring and grow lights.

“For my heart,” replies Lady Eres with a furtive smile. “And they smell lovely.”

Raine gazes at her ageless face; it defies a number. The ancient is in her eyes, the very way she carries herself, a counterbalance to a youthful body masked with the trappings of old age. A tension between old and young, in all things.

Lady Eres shows him the workings of the garden, naming with specificity a wide array of fruits, vegetables and flowers. Beds of squash, rows of corn, climbing pea plants, tomatoes and other vined vegetables; a select number of peach trees, apple and avocado, pruned closely; root vegetables, bursting marigolds, and a variety of herbs too. Honey bees work the blossoms, traversing to and from their hive in the far corner of the cavern. “The only creatures we cooperate with for food,” says Lady Eres. She explains the daily garden routine with both detail and whimsy. “Not only do I love it, but it feeds us,” she explains. “We are few here, and we rotate shifts as both a joy and a responsibility.”

Her smile wavers. “Although, our ultimate calling has stretched us thin in recent times. For now, Stubbles and I keep the garden growing. Your efforts will be of great value. The gardens are a good place to work for one who has not been fully acclimated to the underground way of life.”

Raine envisions working the garden more readily than the other, more claustrophobic areas of the cave complex. Here there are high ceilings and bright lights, warmth, and rich, oxygenated air, versus the cinching, stone tunnels and head-brushing clearances of wide, low rooms. Even his personal quarters, inherited from the late Beardslee, are somewhat tomb-like.

But even now his brain works to answer the question: *How do I escape?* A few solid meals and an uninterrupted night’s sleep have given him the mental energy to question talk of souls and wormholes.

Surely there was a way out of here, and he would find it.

“Follow me.” Lady Eres leads him through the raised beds to the center of the gardens where she kneels before a pile of dark, moist soil. An inoffensive, earthy odor wafts from it, reminiscent of manure spread on farmer’s fields in the spring, but with a mild sweetness to it.

“Our fertilizer.” She scoops some up in her gloved hands and presents it to Raine. “See how rich it is.”

“Where does it come from?”

“The refuse of the beast.”

“The beast?”

“He surrounds us. Feeds us. Provides for us in all manners. He is how we are here, if not why.”

Happy grunts and shuffling footsteps. Stubbles lumbers through the paths of the garden, wiping splashes of water from the drip hoses off his head as he bows before Lady Eres. His eyes brim with admiring joy, however he does not look at Raine at all.

“My dear Stubbles.” Lady Eres strokes his arm. “We have a new helper in the garden.”

Stubbles sniffs and raises his nose indignantly.

“Now, Stubbles. There is plenty of work to share. Another pair of hands should be most welcome.”

Stubbles sighs.

“I was just showing Mr. Penton our garden’s nourishment, come with us as I show him where to retrieve it. Where is the wheelbarrow?”

“Byda door,” Stubbles says reluctantly.

“Come then, let us go.”

Raine follows Lady Eres, and Stubbles trails closely behind them both. The creature takes up pushing the wheelbarrow as they exit the garden and follow a short corridor that leads back to a larger, curving passage. They follow it to the right, and it grows narrower and lower until they are walking in single file and Stubbles is ducking his large head. The floor grows increasingly dirtied by the soil until it leads to a small wooden door. Pungent manure smell floods out as Lady Eres opens it. They step inside a small room, carved from stone, with a cobblestone wall on the far side. Toward the top of the cobblestone wall is a small square opening, and below the opening, a pile of the soil.

Raine can hear rhythmic groaning and a few small burbles that he has also heard, more faintly, in the arrival room.

Here, the noise is much louder.

Another burble sounds and more soil ejects from the opening, dropping onto the pile.

“Not quite enough to fill your wheelbarrow,” Lady Eres says to Stubbles. “It has not eaten recently, however.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Raine says. “There’s some sort of creature behind that wall?”

“Just its ass-end,” says Lady Eres. She laughs, and Stubbles follows suit, emitting a braying sound.

“There is much more to see,” she continues. “I would not have you consumed by unfulfilled curiosity during your stay. She leads them from the room, carefully latching the door. They return down the corridor, passing the turn off for the gardens. The passage curves along until they reach an intersection Raine recognizes.

“To the right is where you arrived.”

They walk into the curved, low-ceilinged room, with the once-swirling ceiling he had awakened beneath. On the far sides of the circular room, opposite of each other, are two small openings.

“Did I come through one of those?” Raine points to the tunnels.

“No. The heart and body of the beast lies before us. Listen; you can hear it breathe. Those passages lead into his very being, carefully carved out by the faithful.”

“These caves, they were built around this beast?”

“Long before the ages of man Kurnugi has existed here, and the beast has slumbered nearly as long, dreaming. We reach out to him through our feeble holes. We provide for him as he provides for us, a fisher of souls.”

Raine notes the passages and wonders if they are dead-ends. Perhaps a way out could be found there. He focuses on mapping the network in his mind, as Lady Eres guides him back to the main intersection of two larger tunnels.

Raine pauses. “So, behind us is the arrival room, and before us are the gardens, and the... refuse room. To the right, I recognize the path to our living quarters...what is to our left?”

“The exit,” says Lady Eres, “should any be able to follow it.” She observes him carefully. “It interests you?”

Raine shrugs, and she leads him a short distance until they reach a large, steel door that looks like a vault.

“It is always unlocked,” says Lady Eres. “Should one turn the handle. Beyond are the seven gates. The last person to traverse the gates was Lord Nergleton; but it was a one-way journey, and he resides here to this very day. The gates... only go one direction.”

“Someone could just open the vault and walk through it now?”

“It would not do you any good.”

Stubbles chatters his teeth nervously. He tugs at the loose fabric of her robe.

“Stubbles understands the futility of the seven gates—and he is not alone.” Lady Eres comforts the creature, stroking his back. “Let us move on from here.”

They follow the arcing passage back, through the intersection, and to the side hallway, down which Raine is quartered. “Of course, you recognize this place. The seven of us reside in this area,” said Lady Eres. “No, that’s not right... six now, six. Beardslee has left us... you have his quarters, now.”

Stubbles bristles toward Raine at the mention of Beardslee. Raine remembers Taunton’s contorted face, with the remnants of foam stuck to his lips. *He was the beloved comrade?*

“Stubbles and myself, the lord, Wenzel, Stan and Darko...” Lady Eres mutters. “And... should we include him... the beast.”

“Does the beast have a name?”

“Indeed he does.” Lady Eres looks down the remainder of the hallway. “Down there you will find the control room, and another wing, a dead-end. That is everything. Do you feel constrained by our small quarters?”

“It seems large to me now,” Raine says, “although it is still quite new to me.”

Lady Eres scoffs. “Try living here as long as I have. Now, our tour must draw to an end. The dinner hour approaches quickly, and we would be pleased to have you as our guest. Despite our thoughts being so focused on the outside world, we truly know little of it, and delight in opportunities to hear of it. Stubbles, would you lead Mr. Penton back to his quarters, in preparation for our dinner?”

“But Tergleton snez...”

“Lord Nergleton is not lord of me.” Lady Eres smiles sweetly. “Now carry on. The dinner hour approaches.”

Stubbles presses his fleshy lips together, parting them to release a few more heavy sighs. “Okway.” He gives Raine the old side eye and lumbers in the direction of the living quarters. He looks back at Raine, who hesitates by Lady Ere’s side.

“Go on,” she says. “You will find Stubbles a capable guide.”

If he doesn’t strangle me first, Raine thinks.

Chapter 30

A day is a week, the week is a dream; dreams are escape, dreams are imprisonment. Raine lives the dreamlife, and still dreams at night, although the night could just as easily be day. There are no clocks, only routines. A sleeping routine and a waking routine. An eating routine and a working routine. The gaps are few.

The awakening chime sounds, from a small bell above the door from his room. It is *his* room now, no longer Beardslee's. The only trace of him is in Raine's dreams, where Taunton's face stretches into oblivion and is lost beneath the ever-growing strands. His lips move but his words are lost in the sound of breathing.

The breathing of the beast.

Raine hears it in his dreams, and sometimes while awake, through the stone, a sonorous rhythm that ebbs and grows.

The chime sounds again, and Stubbles is at his door, with a simple tray of breakfast; the chime sounds once more, and Raine walks to the garden.

Conduit leads from the bell into the tunnel and branches out in both directions, the same for the larger tunnel it connects to. The only trace of technology is a simple electrical line running from one room to another; no heat ducts; presumably the network of caves is kept the same, cool temperature by its placement below the earth.

Raine seldom sees the three workmen, save for silent passing in the halls. No words spoken, and often the workers look down at their feet as they pass. Even Lord Nergleton fades into the background, doing his own prescribed routine that rarely crosses Raine's.

Raine has never spent much time gardening, but he does not dislike it. Lady Eres is already planting her own knees into the soil, addressing with care each individual seedling. She hums to them, and they seem to respond, growing large and vibrant blossoms over time. Stubbles lumbers around with his own chores, and Raine settles before his first garden bed to work.

He can almost sense when the chime will sound again.

Raine stretches and sets aside his trowel. "Excuse me, Lady Eres, but I need to..."

"Defecate?"

"That's one way to put it."

"The garden is not your prison."

Raine stands up awkwardly. “If I hear the next chime?”

“Then proceed as you would.”

Raine follows the passage, heading toward his quarters. The main intersection of the tunnel system looms before him.

To his right, the arrival room, where he first awoke into this strange dream. He can see into it, like peering through a cardboard tube, where the periphery is lost to the edges of the tunnel

To his left... the vault and the seven gates.

He turns left, hoping he isn't seen. Were there cameras here? Not that he knew of. Sneaking eyes? The underworld felt something like a decaying village from which everyone had fled or decided to fade away with. Not many eyes to watch him. Spirits? Who knew? Raine proceeds down the passage until it reaches the circular vault door. Here, the conduit that follows the ceiling, providing energy to the small, dome lights, ends. He grasps the handle with both hands and turns. The door smoothly swings inward.

Heart in mouth, Raine waits momentarily. No alarm, no flashing lights. Barely a sound at all from the hinges.

The passage beyond is dark. No conduit, no lights. *I should prepare for this*, Raine thinks. *Come again tomorrow, with a light...*

No, this would be the time. He steels himself to the dark, steps through, and carefully closes the door behind him, hesitating briefly before pulling it completely shut with a click.

Total darkness.

Can I open it from this side? Raine wonders. *Best not to try. No turning back now.* He places his hand on the passage wall, and steps blindly forward.

What if there's a fork? What if I lose my way?

What if...

Raine counts his steps; ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred. He senses himself trodding slowly upward.

Two hundred steps.

Three hundred.

Nearing five-hundred, the darkness remains complete. Raine feels as if he is walking to nowhere, from nowhere.

I could step into a chasm and never see it. Would I fall forever?

Each step is carefully placed, with the other foot rooted behind it.

A light ahead? The blackness seems more gray...

A sweet aroma, followed by euphoria...

Raine leans against the unseen wall. Slumps down against it, lets his head fall back. His eyes blink slowly then remain closed.

Chime.

That sound.

The beginning of another routine.

Raine stirs and opens his eyes to the ceiling of his quarters. His excursion could have been a dream, except for the lingering scent in his nostrils.

The chime sounds again, but Raine remains in his bed, staring at the ceiling.

Stubbles enters with breakfast, and a subtle smirk. Lady Eres is with him.

She drifts to Raine's side. "Don't be dismayed; no need to be downhearted. You are not the first to try his hand at the seven gates." A smile plays across her lips. "Although many have made it farther."

Stubbles brays with laughter.

"Now, Stubbles. Let us not have too much fun at Raine's expense," says Lady Eres. "Although a small amount is certainly fine." She lingers at Raine's side and traces her finger along his arm.

"Some wish to enter, and others to leave. But the gates are fraught both ways. The last to enter through them was Lord Nergleton. And his journey was an ordeal. "And I know of no one who has left through the gates."

Raine turns his head from the ceiling and looks at Lady Eres. "So you brought me back. You could have left me to die in the darkness."

"Don't be dramatic." Lady Eres continues to trace his arm.

"What was the scent? A gas? Poison?"

"I am not the creator of the gates, nor queen of their sentries."

"I feel like I'm in a waking dream. I really think I might be dead, after all. Gardening in purgatory."

"At least you do not consider it hell."

"Maybe if I'm here long enough."

"You can fight existence, or you can harmonize with it."

"Gardening for eternity."

“The harvest approaches, for the faithful,” Lady Eres says softly.

“I don’t understand,” says Raine.

“No one has waited longer than I. The hour is ripe, yet we do not move. We risk rotting on the vine. We must remain faithful, yes. Though I sometimes wonder about Lord Nergleton. He speaks the words of the faithful, he speaks them. But yet I wonder.”

“Perhaps if I understood... the harvest.”

“The return.” Lady Eres closes her eyes, briefly, recanting words well practiced.

“Inanna we wait

For Inanna we wait

Your flowers are blooming

The flowers are fading

The bull has not mounted the cow

Nor the donkey the jenny

The bride has not taken her groom

The sun is hidden from us

And the moon winks coyly

Inanna shall return

When the mistress of the earth

Unlocks the door

And the world will be given vision

And we will choke on the dust no longer.”

Lady Eres hums softly, before opening her eyes.

The lights in the room flicker, and Stubbles whines nervously.

“Yes, the fruit rots on the vine,” Lady Eres hums.

Chapter 31

Chime.

The lights flicker.

Raine puts away his gardening tools and walks the passage back toward his quarters. He pauses in the intersection where his escape attempt had failed.

Try again, and fail again?

“Mr. Penton.” Lord Nergleton appears from the intersecting passage that leads to the arrival room. He wears a canvas jacket embroidered with the insignia of the lion over his white linen shirt. Black boots rise up over his pants, almost to the knee. “Come with me,” says Lord Nergleton. He follows the passage, passing by the side tunnel to the living quarters, as the tunnel grows narrower and rougher.

“I am not here to chastise you. Curiosity is not a sin. But it is risk. Curiosity led me here, and devotion has kept me. But I sought this place, and you did not. At least not consciously. The soul leads us where it wants, against our own will, perhaps.”

The tunnel ends with two doors splitting off in a “Y.” Raine’s hair brushes against the low ceiling. The shorter Lord Nergleton pauses before the door to their right. “Here we are.”

He opens the door to a large room. A long table is aligned with the back wall, set away from it by several feet. CRT monitors flicker on it, monitored by the two gray-clad workmen, Stan and Wenzel. Behind the table rise several stacks of computer towers, wires spilling out from them like gutted fish. The stone wall behind has several holes bored into it, and the tangled wires snake up into them, disappearing. The largest monitor, in the center, displays a graph of waveforms. In the farthest corner, Darko snoozes in a chair with his arms folded and his eyes slitted open. Raine hasn’t seen him this closely before; he was always away, separate from the group, head-down in the rare tunnel passage. Darko’s thinning black hair straggles down around his pale face. If he had noticed them coming in, he doesn’t show it, facing the array of screens unflinching.

“Behind this wall is the brain of the beast.” Lord Nergleton points to the wall behind the table of monitors. “Years ago I drilled in, and through. An act of bravery and foolishness. Of curiosity. Here we can crudely

visualize the thoughts of the beast. He sleeps, but his mind is ever active, scouring the transference of souls.

“He is an angler of the sea of souls, watching, waiting as they move from one place to another. That is when he casts his line into the strands. The lines you see on the horizontal axis of that screen are souls that his thoughts are bent on, past, present, and even shortly into the future. These times are denoted by the vertical dashed lines, here. We see the lines creep forward through the future, leaving their history behind them. Changes come like swelling waves, and when a person dies on earth we can see it building beforehand. The wave does not always crest, but it often does.

“We can influence his attention to a particular soul, to monitor it. And we can see, in our crude displays, his other attentions... often mass transferences. Think: natural disasters. Earthquakes, floods, and fires. The teeming rabble of the world passing in indiscriminate fashion. This is when he fishes, when he feeds, stealing from the strands like a bear artfully pawing fish from a flooded salmon stream.

“What does he do with them... with the souls?” Raine fixates on a monitor with a group of waveforms surging upward.

“He feeds on them. They power him, and in a sense... us, down here, as we cling to him like devout parasites. The electricity, the power, we siphon from him.”

Lord Nergleton pauses. “But he cannot thrive on souls alone. He hungers for flesh as well—indeed, though he fishes the strands for souls, he cannot physically eat, locked in stone and pressed beneath the earth. So we deliver nutrients to his belly directly, making us, the parasite, an important element in this symbiotic relationship. And as we feed him, his strength grows, back from what was a dim flicker when I first arrived so long ago.”

“You said the beast was here when you arrived... has it always been here?”

“He has been here long, but not always. He became trapped here when Inanna was banished to another dimension. He was like her pet, a faithful dog that would sometimes break its leash.”

Lord Nergleton stares pensively at the wall of monitors before peering into Raine’s eyes. “Does the garden tire you, Mr. Penton?”

“I enjoy my work in the garden,” says Raine cautiously.

“But perhaps your curiosity would interest you in other tasks?”

“Perhaps.”

A sonorous groan emanates from behind the wall.

The lights flicker, again.

“The beast hungers,” says Lord Nergleton. “Peace be with us until Inanna’s return.”

Raine stands still. He would put his hands in his pockets, if his tunic had any.

Lord Nergleton motions to Raine to take a seat behind the array. “Here, the old man has a story to bore you with.”

“I’m sure it’s not boring,” Raine says unconvincingly.

“I was once a much younger, more ambitious man. I was attending university when I began a friendship with one Karl Schmid—yes, that same Karl Schmid of Novillium.” Nergleton turns and pretends to spit in contempt.

“I was studying philosophy as a minor, as was Karl. We got along easily, of a sort. We talked well, and argued well. Although our worldviews were different, we each served as an apt sounding board for the other—a way to test our ideas.

“Over time, much of our discussion turned to the topic of the human soul. Karl was majoring in physics, and I in ancient history. It’s safe to say we reserved a certain disdain for each other’s preferences. But philosophy was our bond.”

“I found myself enraptured in certain ancient texts, I was reading between the lines often, they were incomplete and translated, sometimes poorly. But that’s when the dreams began. The dreams were opening me up to the missing pieces, the true meaning of the texts. The dreams were not the random firings of the brain at night. They were purposeful. I was being reached out to, somehow...”

“At last I had my eureka moment... about this very place; Kurnugi; that it was indeed a real and actual place, long forgotten by mankind. In the dream, Lady Eres herself had reached out to me. She was mesmerizing. The dream was too vivid to be the arbitrary machinations of REM sleep, or so I believed. The dreams came, and with them Lady Eres, every night. I was quite taken, and my other studies began to falter. Karl called me out on it, though perhaps I was becoming an opium addict (I had only dabbled, but the poor fool had no tolerance for experimentation, which is ironic for a self-described man of science). So I told him about the dreams, and I told

him that I had deduced the actual entrance to Kurnugi itself, and the more I told him, the more he backed away. I realize now I told him too much.”

“In fact, I was motivated to put together an expedition to reach the gates. I took a loan from the old family estate, under the pretense of further study (they would not miss the money, let me assure you) and over the course of a year recruited like-minded fellows to join me on my team. I had foolishly hoped Karl would sign on, but he did not. He was German, and practical.

“Honestly, I don’t know if I really believed I would find anything. But it was an adventure, and I was enthralled by the Lady. But there it was, yes, the gates, they were there.”

“Where were they? You mean you found a way down here from above? Physically?”

Lord Nergleton laughs quietly. “Indeed, although they have proven to be a one-way street. I passed through the gates, with my team. It was not a simple journey, but when I arrived, she was here.”

“Lady Eres.”

“Yes. She was here by herself, and a touch mad. Time passes slowly in Kurnugi, you will find. I didn’t age, or at least, I aged very slowly. Time itself is less meaningful.” Lord Nergleton gestures at the monitors. “These tether us to the overworld concept of time, and in fact, I can feel them draining me with their relentless graphing and progression.” He sighs. “So it is. Anyway, with my days, I began to make crude experiments as to the nature of the beast. Lady Eres had explained she used it to reach me in my dreams, but her approach was very mystical, and I needed a more functional understanding. It was quite weak when I arrived, but I dug in, and around. I carved out this very room we sit in now.

“Lady Eres called me here because she needed a guiding hand. This I felt. So I imprinted my guidance on the operation. The Lady is very whimsical, I’m sure you’ve seen. She aspires but needs a firm hand to mold her output. That’s what I provided. Still, my early experiments were quite crude as I gleaned what I could about the nature of the beast and wormhole travel from my observations and what Lady Eres told me. She taught me of the order of the faithful, of which she was the last remaining, and inducted me into its fellowship. I took up the cause zealously, if not handicapped by my crude understanding.”

“Still, the above world was like a weight around my ankles, I knew it was there, waiting and real, and I thirsted for it. I think you might understand. I even attempted to return through the gates, as you did, unsuccessfully. However, I began to realize the gates were not the only way to enter and exit Kurnugi. I knew the beast brought souls through the strands, and realized, that though constricted by stone, he could also deliver flesh. So we freed him—at least in part—and we nourished him. He grew in vitality, and I realized the strands could go both ways. So I took a great risk and traveled the strands, not knowing where, or even when it would take me...

“Lady Eres was apprehensive, but approving. She knew we must take forward strides, should we begin the journey to free Inanna once more. My heart was in my throat; I knew not where I would end up. The middle of an ocean? Atop a snowy peak? A thousand years into the future?

“As it turns out, I ended up in a place you are very familiar with.” Nergleton grins at Raine with his dust-yellow teeth.

“Sandy Knoll?”

“The beast was fixated on it. On someone there, it was reaching for them. I would discover who later. And although a thousand years had not passed, many had. I should have been much, much older. Everyone I knew had passed. Everyone except one person—and you must know who I mean.”

“Karl was still alive?”

“Yes, he was still alive. And I looked him up. He had not aged much, either, mysteriously enough to me. I told him of my journey, of my stay in Kurnugi. Foolishly I again told him too much. He acted as if I was mentally ill. Things went sour.

“But I had other agendas in my travels. Computing power had increased exponentially. I could leverage this new technology to create an even greater symbiosis with the beast, marrying the progress of man with that of myth. So with great effort, I brought new equipment through the gates—my second journey, and most likely my last. I am here now, to the end, bitter or otherwise.

“And as I reflect on my efforts, and what I have built here, I now see that end surging forward, and Lady Eres reaches out to it, pulls it to us. I will confess, I have comfort in the routines I have created, and in sitting

back and enjoying the fruits of my labor. However, Inanna's return... let's say I have no strong urge to unleash her."

The lord trails off. "I said I would bore you, and now I have." He looks over at the reclining Darko, before exiting the room. "Stay here with Darko and have him show you how the rudimentary aspects of the system work."

Raine waits until Nergleton's measured footsteps disappear down the passage. He looks to Darko, who stares up at the monitors, arms still crossed. Raine crosses his own arms and stares at the monitors, wondering what to say. His attention is drawn to a pair of smaller monitors, each showing a single, identical waveform pattern in red. All the other monitors display unique forms or groups of forms in green.

Raine glances at Darko again, who is still staring straight ahead with slitted eyes. "The old guy sure can talk."

Darko opens his eyes a tick more. "He's a garrulous old windbag."

"What are you looking for on the screens?"

Darko glances at Raine, with the gentle smirk of someone knowing an answer but doubting the questioner's ability to understand it. "Changes, patterns. Other things."

"Can the system itself look for these changes, these patterns, or must it be done by hand?"

"It might," says Darko. "It might." He straightens up in his chair and unfolds his arms. "But some tasks are too important to be trusted to machines alone."

"The two screens in red, the matching ones... what are they?"

"Those," says Darko, "show the thing most coveted."

"Ian Swift."

"Such is the name of the bearer."

"He carries the soul, or pattern, or key, or whatever, you mean?"

"One screen backs up the other. And I, it."

"This beast, how do you get it to see him?"

Darko sighs, and then nods. He stretches with a cracking of joints and rises from his chair. He motions over a table strewn with cardstock and what looks like inkblots. Holes are punched in at the key intersections, creating little constellation punchcards. To Raine they appear like cruder, hand-drawn versions of the soul patterns he had witnessed at Novillium.

"We feed these into this," says Darko, placing his hand on a stainless machine with a slotted front. It tells the system the pattern, and we send it

along the wires into the beast's brain, accompanied with a little jolt." Darko makes a raspy buzzing sound and laughs. "And, before you ask, because it seems you will, we get the patterns from Lady Eres, she channels them and draws them out on the cards."

"Does the beast have a name?" Raine asks.

"I like to call it Wurm."

Another loud groan pulses from behind the wall and the lights flicker.

"Wurm is growing hungry." Darko laughs. He looks up at the largest monitor of waveforms. "But he will eat soon."

Chapter 32

Flicker; again, now. The entire passage had gone dark the routine before, Stubbles squeals in surprise.

First waking, no chime.

First waking, no chime.

Raine's brain demands the chime, an empty hole wanting to be filled, he can almost hear its ghost as he stares at the bell above his door, but it will not chime.

His body craves it.

His fingers tremble for it.

First waking, no chime.

A knock at the door—Stubbles, with no breakfast tray.

“Come come,” says the creature.

Raine follows an agitated Stubbles to the control room where Lord Nergleton glowers before the wall of monitors. He is flanked by Stan and Wenzel, who stand silently. Darko, no longer snoozing, is fervently working at a keyboard, the light from the giant display illuminating his pallid face.

“I'm here,” Raine says.

Lord Nergleton shouts at the screen, slams the table with his fist. “It's coming, already. A wave. We have a wave.” He turns to Raine, more calmly, yet still agitated. “We have need of you sooner than expected. A mass transference is upon us. The beast refuses to be delayed.”

A surge of waveforms on the monitor moves from the future line toward the present. “We will need every hand available in the arrival room.” Lord Nergleton barks out more orders to the two workmen and then motions to Raine and Stubbles to follow him, walking with long, fast strides.

He leads them to the circular room where Raine first arrived into the underworld. Four wooden carts, with straps, are laid out in a row.

“Follow Stubbles' lead,” says Lord Nergleton. He walks to the center of the room, and looks up, clasping his hands.

A small swirl appears above him, the size of a quarter. Lord Nergleton could just reach up and touch it. A drip of water forms and drops down, splashing on his forehead. He brushes it from his brow.

“It comes.” He speaks to Raine, without looking away from the slowly growing swirl, now the size of a plate. “Do not forget—they are already

dead; every single one.”

And with those grim words, a hand appears through the swirling, followed by a wet, naked arm, shoulder and head. Lord Nergleton steps aside as a brown-skinned man with wet hair falls to the floor before him.

He is breathing, seemingly unconscious. A workman, Stan, is already dragging him away from the center by his feet, above, a hand and a foot, more water, a spray, the scent of salt, a pair of entwined bodies come through. A woman and man, heads fused together like conjoined twins, limbs wrapped together, holding and perhaps also fused, faces screaming, wet, terrified. Their entangled bodies writhe and flop on the floor.

Raine stares, aghast, but the Lord is sternly unmoved and the other workman expressionless. Stubbles grabs the feet, man’s or woman’s, pulls. Struggles to flop the bodies onto his cart.

“Wraine,” cries Stubbles, “Wraine.”

The swirling center grows to almost ten feet in diameter; a wave of water splashes through, wetting Raine and workmen. The splash breaks his fixation on Stubbles and the entwined couple. He looks up, sees a swirling of limbs and faces.

They begin to drop through. Young and old, male and female. Landing on top of the next, writhing and shouting, choking on seawater.

A hand touches Raine’s shoulder. “Assist Stubbles,” says Lord Nergleton. The other workmen are already dragging bodies from the center, hastily flopping them onto the carts and strapping them.

Another wave strikes them; water drips down Lord Nergleton’s face, droplets shining like gold under the lamps. Raine breaks from his paralysis and moves to help Stubbles, anything to stop watching the spectacle.

He grabs a wet ankle and thigh, brown, slippery, struggling. He presses as Stubbles ratchets down the straps.

The two tunnels at the back of the cavern wait like dim, soulless eyes.

“Fwollow me.” Stubbles pulls the cart over the smooth grooves to the tunnel at the right. He stoops his head as he enters, Raine behind him and the cart. Behind them a terrible cacophony of choking screams echoes.

Before them the beast breathes.

At the end of the passage is a small room. Stubbles opens a large hatch, like an oversized laundry chute. Bilious stench wafts out.

Raine mechanically aids Stubbles as the straps are removed and they struggle with the conjoined bodies, heaving them up before the chute.

From the blur of horror, the woman's face becomes real before Raine. Her dark eyes transfix him, her lips move and she speaks in a language Raine does not understand, a plea, a question—"tolong!"

Stubbles shouts and heaves, and Raine exerts his muscles mechanically. The woman and the man slide down the chute and disappear into the void with a thick splash.

Stan and Wenzel are already waiting behind them with a loaded cart, unable to enter the small room for lack of space. Stubbles maneuvers their cart to the side, pulling Raine in close to him, allowing them to enter. And then they are heading back to the pile, and the people.

The pile is heaped now, almost to the ceiling. The swirling has peaked, and now fades, constricting in size. Raine's feet splash through water as he and Stubbles approach.

A living mass of brown bodies, glistening in the lights. Some entwined, some deformed, some whole; all together in a terrible heap.

The swirl blinks away, and Lord Nergleton stands before it, arms crossed and stoic. Raine sees everything, sees the faces, hears the cries.

But then there is the job.

And the job is the only escape.

Disappearing into the work of the job.

They were already dead, after all.

Chapter 33

Tolong!

The soil is extra rich today, piled high with more still excreting from the hole in the wall.

Tolong! The woman's cry hangs with him, as does her face.

Raine shovels more soil into the cart, heaping high.

The lights in the garden are at full luminescence. Stubbles works, unperturbed by the event, though perhaps lagging with some tiredness from exerted muscles. Raine empties the soil from his cart and kneels beside Lady Eres who works the garden.

"Those above blaspheme and blow; those below toil and sow," she mutters.

Raine gathers the will to speak. "Yesterday... What horror was that?"

Lady Eres sets aside her trowel. "I have been asking myself that for a long time. What are we doing, and why are we doing it?"

"I carted men, women and children and... I don't even understand what we did, or what was happening."

"We served as a brief intermediary between two states. They were to die, and we just borrowed them for a short while as they did."

"To feed the beast."

"To sustain us all." Lady Eres gestures to the cavern. "And it cost them nothing."

"They were scared."

"They were already scared. The beast pulled them from a tsunami, an instant before they were slated to drown. The gears of the universe turned, and their names were called."

"Aren't you upset?"

"You have been here for a whisper in time. The rest of us have labored much longer, and no one longer than I. The beast would fish the strands regardless of our efforts."

Is that true? Raine wonders. *Wasn't the beast unearthed and enabled by Lord Nergleton?* But he keeps that thought to himself.

"Yet, I too, would not have anyone suffer without necessity. And I must question the necessity. How much longer will we labor on? How much longer will we feed the beast? We have made the advancements, we have restored its vigor, enough to make our move. Inanna calls and yet we do

not answer. Why do we wait? We have found the pattern, and its time has come.

“When Inanna comes, the fishing will end. Suffering will end. Not just here, but for all. Lord Nergleton speaks of caution, speaks of the ‘right time.’ Yet he knows not the time, and it never comes. He would wait until the last hair withered and fell from his once noble head, until the last tooth rotted and fell from his vain and empty mouth, until his own bones turned to dust under the earth.

“Lord Nergleton,” continues Lady Eres, “likes being a lord a little too much and the benefits the title brings.”

Stubbles works in the far side of the garden as Lady Eres leans in. “I know your heart would have you return to the surface. You think of the seven gates even now, but it is a hopeless errand. But, a way may present itself... should you be willing to also do something in service of me.”

“I would do it.”

“Your heart tells you what it must be.”

“Ian.”

“Yes—Inanna’s key.”

“You want me to bring him here.”

“Where Beardslee failed, you may prevail.”

“And Lord Nergleton... he’ll approve of this?”

“Lord Nergleton is not the lord of me.”

The next day, the routine continues as usual. Raine settles himself into his daily chores, still unable to escape the horror of the mass transference. Perhaps the gardening work wasn’t so bad...

An alarm sounds in the cavern. Stubbles cocks his head like a dog hearing a whistle. His beady eyes sharpen, then dart to Lady Eres, first, then to Raine, who works in a nearby garden bed.

Lady Eres does not acknowledge the alarm, kneeling before a row of radishes, in her clogs. Raine watches Stubbles closely. The creature stares at Lady Eres for another moment, and then perhaps partially satisfied by her lack of response, glances to the entrance before returning to his toils. However, he is clearly unsettled, emitting laborious sighs and glancing at Lady Eres for assurance repeatedly.

The light flashes, and the sound continues. Time is nebulous for Raine underground; but perhaps thirty minutes pass when the alarm stops.

Soon afterward, Lord Nergleton appears at the entrance.

His proud head is bowed, slightly. And his usual, confident and deliberate stature seems diminished. He tarries by the entrance, looking in, but Lady Eres does not take notice.

Finally, he enters, paying no attention to Raine and Stubbles as they continue to work. Raine feels his heaviness as he passes by, like a dark cloud.

Lord Nergleton stands before Lady Eres and says nothing.

And Lady Eres continues her work, kneeling down.

“A signal,” says Lord Nergleton, “has been lost.”

“The signal of whom?” Lady Eres asks with a slight uptick. She turns from her work and rises to her feet, still holding her soiled trowel.

Lord Nergleton avoids her gaze.

“The key pattern?”

He nods, still avoiding her stare.

Lady Eres hums softly, the notes coming from deeper within her. The humming grows louder, until it is akin to a strangled, discordant shout. She clenches the trowel with whitening knuckles, then with second thought, hurls it at Lord Nergleton’s head. He ducks the object with admirable reflex and wipes away a clot of soil that had strafed across his face.

“It will be resolved,” he says calmly.

Lady Eres leans in closely. “Then why are we still here?” The sentence grows in intensity until the last words are screamed. She rises up, her stature impervious. “To the monitoring room!”

The large center screen shows no tracking line. All stare at it—Stan, Wenzel, Darko, Lord Nergleton, Lady Eres, Stubbles, and Raine.

“He has not passed,” says Lord Nergleton. “He has not passed,” he repeats, almost as if to reassure himself.

“And how do you know? I see nothing. Nothing.” Lady Eres hums in between her speaking.

“Review the logs again,” says Lord Nergleton to Darko. “There was no peak... not a hint of an evolution. It just... stopped. Is that not correct?”

Darko traces his finger over a dot matrix printout. “That is correct—it should have shown a building up to the event, but there is no change until the abrupt ending of the waveform.”

“No soul pattern we have traced has ended without the change,” says Lord Nergleton.

“What, my lord, do you think happened, then?” asks Lady Eres.

“It must be...” Lord Nergleton clenches his fist and slams it on the long table. “Novillium. Karl Schmid. They’ve obscured him from us.”

Lord Nergleton exits the monitoring room first, followed by Stan and Wenzel. Raine begins to follow when Lady Eres touches his arm. Her pleasant, unprovoking demeanor has returned, and she winks at Raine with a conspiratorial smile. “You know what to do,” she calls back over her shoulder to Darko.

“Yes, my lady,” he responds. “I certainly do.”

The fire is down to coals. Lord Nergleton draws in the smoke from his pipe and exhales it through his nostrils as he considers the proposition brought before him by Lady Eres, as she and Raine stand before him.

At last he speaks. “You have made a request of me that should not have been made. Mr. Penton has not been with us for that long, a mere blink of the eye.”

“He has proven himself with the mass transference,” Lady Eres says.

“He is not without fault. One of the faithful should be considered such an important task.” A slight tremor is present in Lord Nergleton’s air of authority.

“Perhaps I can find fault with the faithful,” says Lady Eres, “that led us to this unpleasant situation. And who would you suffer leave? Of those who remain, who can we spare?” Lady Eres asks. “You tell me that the boy, Ian, is held in the shadow of Novillium.”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell you what I know: that we had the sacred key and we bided our time until the opportunity was lost—we have failed Inanna. Yes, we have failed her.”

Lord Nergleton hangs his head. “If he reappears—”

“If.” Lady Eres smiles dangerously. “Is that what you bring me, after years of restraint? If?”

“You have been most patient.”

“*If* you had listened to me, we would have already opened the passage. *If* you had acted, instead of letting all of our accomplishments crumble before our very eyes.”

“Yes,” says Lord Nergleton, looking down.

“It is an imperfect method for such a sacred task.” Lady Eres lowers her voice. “And yet we must use what methods are available to us. Who would we spare, and not fall deficient here? Beardslee, whose remains now feed the cabbages in the garden?”

“And what would bind Mr. Penton to his task? An oath?”

“His body.”

Lord Nergleton looks to Raine, peering into his eyes, as if to pierce his very soul. “What do you say?”

“I accept it.”

“You do not even understand what you are volunteering for.”

“Such is the desire of the mistress of earth,” says Lady Eres.

Lord Nergleton looks to Raine. “You will do this?”

“Yes,” said Raine, solemnly.

Lord Nergleton stares intently into Raine’s eyes. “You have no idea. You have no idea of what you volunteer for.”

“He is firm of character,” says Lady Eres. “His soul will adapt.”

“I wonder.” Lord Nergleton chews at his pipe. “Long have we labored and now we put our trust in an interloper.”

“I put my trust in you long enough,” says Lady Eres.

“We plot our course with care, and let loose the wheel at the moment of reckoning.”

Lady Eres towers before him, with darkening lips and a face livid as tamarisk. Her words are a cutting sword. “You have failed your position, you have failed your sacred duty. I am the keeper of the gate. I will decide, and you no longer.”

“So it shall be,” says Lord Nergleton, blowing one last ring of smoke from his pipe. “We shall prepare Mr. Penton for the dark treatment.”

Chapter 34

“Descartes theorized that the pineal gland held the human soul.” Lord Nergleton’s footsteps echo sharply in the narrow corridor leading to the monitoring room. “Others have called it the ‘third eye.’ Ideas abandoned by modern science.”

Lord Nergleton pauses before two doors, one of which is the entrance to the monitoring room. He looks back at Raine. “Beyond this second door is a dark passage that travels around to the backbone of the beast. Follow me.”

The corridor slowly grows narrower and lower as they walk.

“Modern science is only as modern as its time. Much of what is preached as cutting-edge will prove hollow and ritualistic to the advance of time. And, some of what is less understood will come to light. So it is with the soul. It is not a mere conception; it is a physical presence in the body, entwined at a subatomic level. It exists as dark matter, and it clings to the physical space of the pineal gland, after all.

This is the particle that leaves your body when it dies. And this is the particle I have learned to transfer to another host.” Lord Nergleton pauses before an iron gate, running from ceiling to floor. He draws a set of keys from his jacket pocket, thumbing through for the correct one. “Do you understand?”

“I believe so,” Raine says.

“It is true regardless of your belief,” says Lord Nergleton. “For example, that overworld fool you knew as Taunton. I transferred Beardslee’s soul to his body, binding his particle to the pineal gland.

“And thus Beardslee’s identity as a human was transferred along with it. But it is not like moving into an empty house. It is a struggle for which one must be equipped. But whereas Beardslee was trained in the art, you are but an untested vessel.”

The gate opens with a creak. Beyond, red lights glow dimly from the ceiling, above the sounds of muttering and squealing. Raine follows his guide as the passage grows yet tighter, and the sounds grow louder. The passage then widens, and cells begin to line either side.

Some are dark and empty. Some have shadows that move in the back corners. Snorting and snuffling, the screech of a monkey pressing its face against iron bars.

“Getting these creatures here isn’t easy,” muses Lord Nergleton. “It takes all kinds of convoluted ways.”

“What are they for?”

“Not for eating,” Lord Nergleton replies. He continues on to a stretch of empty cells and pauses under the light of a dim, red bulb.

“Safelights,” says Lord Nergleton. “They filter out the blue and green light. But even these will be off for your treatment.”

He leads Raine into a small cell. It has a small cot to the back, and a simple toilet against the wall. “These will be your quarters; I am sorry they are so spare.”

“It’s my choice,” says Raine.

“Or perhaps the choice of Lady Eres.” The lines of Lord Nergleton’s face darken under the dim red light, his brow furrowed.

“The pineal gland is active when it is dark, and we must prepare to loosen up your soul from where it clings. Light obstructs the process, so you must live in the dark. And not simply from the absence of light, but absence from thought. Your thoughts must be cleansed from distraction. Unified, purified in complete darkness of environment and mind.”

“Your sanity will flee you, and then you must snatch it back. I cannot say how long it will take.”

Lord Nergleton steps outside the cell and closes the barred door. Raine stares back at him.

“When the dark treatment has run its course, your soul will be transferred to a new body. Then you will wait some more. And then you will travel the strands back to your world.”

“What will happen to my old body?” Raine asks.

Lord Nergleton shakes his head and walks away. The red lights shut off and Raine can hear the distant click of the outer gate as it is locked.

Madness, madness in the dark. It approaches, surefooted and inevitable. Raine could feel it from the first click of the latch to the latest sound of his breath, sound of his steps, sound of the hair shifting on his head in the dead air of the dark cell.

Purity of the mind, whatever that is.

Not fighting the dark, embracing it.

Not fighting the loneliness, but embracing it.

But, the longer the stay stretches, the louder his brain becomes.

The first day, it had slipped into darkness. It is still back there somewhere.

Was physical discomfort part of the dark treatment? Raine ponders this, lying and aching on his back, on the old cot. The mattress is imprinted with the form of another. He wonders who its former occupant had been.

Devoured by the dark.

Then devoured by the beast.

One day, two days, three days, four. Waking on the old schedule, until the routine starts splintering.

No more wakings now, the sleeping has stopped. Strange dreams are now strange thoughts.

The darkness is complete.

Raine lies on his back, aching. Think-dreaming.

The hunger grows until it is unbearable.

A gate creaks—Stubbles. Yes, Stubbles. He only comes when the hunger is intolerable.

The sound of disturbed animals—

The red light; on and burning... it is blinding now, searing and blinding.

The darkness switches to blindness.

“Offit, offit, you freak.” Raine covers his eyes with his palms, sitting up in his cot.

Stubbles does not reply; Raine knows it is Stubbles, can’t see him, no, but he can hear the rasp of his lungs, smell the acrid cloud of his folds...

The sound of pewter on stone.

Raine listens for Stubbles breathing. Imagines exhalation as words spoken.

“Why is it always you?” Raine crawls off of the cot and toward the plate, eyes squinched shut. He knows his cell, each small part.

Can smell the food. Hand to bowl, hand to mouth.

“Say something.” Raine devours the contents of the bowl, licks it clean.

Stubbles taps the bars. Raine snorts indignantly before pushing the plate back toward the door. He returns to his cot, and lies back down.

“How about old Nergleton? How about him for a change?” says Raine. “He’s a chatty bastard, he’d say something.”

Stubbles takes the plate and walks quietly back down the hallway.

“Fleshy freak,” Raine shouts, leaping up from his cot and pressing his face against the bars. His eyes are slits, adjusting to the red lights.

And then they are off again.

“Fleshy freak,” mumbles Raine. “I miss you.”

The thoughts fade again. For they must recede, and the light with it.

Chapter 35

The voice comes when all else has left. A padding of feet outside the cell, a whisper of a breath.

“Are you, me?”

Raine lies on his cot, questioning the voice, thinking it must be a hallucination.

“Psst. You. Do you hear me?”

“I... hear you,” Raine responds.

“Are you, me?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Are you in my head?”

“I was wondering the same thing.”

“You are here?”

Raine sits up in the darkness. “Yes.”

“Who are you, one of Nergleton’s faithful?”

“Who am I? Who are *you*?” Raine says, “I’m the one inside the cell.”

“A man, I suppose,” says the wavering voice. “Are you one of Nergleton’s?”

“I’m Raine,” says Raine, suspecting some kind of trick.

“The ones kept in the dark will travel soon.” The voice pauses.

“Something loathsome is planned for me as well.”

“I’m losing my mind,” Raine says, lying back down. “I can shut my eyes, but I can’t shut my ears.”

“If you’re real, then so am I. But I know how you feel... I’ve spent a long time in this place.”

“In Kurnugi?”

“Here, in these cells. Years, decades, maybe. I don’t know. I am from the last room down the hall. They don’t know I can wander when I please.” The voice turns paranoid. “You won’t tell them—Lord Nergleton, I mean?”

“I won’t.”

The voice relaxes. “Thank you. I’ll leave you alone, if that’s what you want.”

“Wait—” Raine stands up from the cot and walks to the barred door of his cell. “What’s your name?”

“Marlon.”

"I can't see you in this darkness."

"Nor I, you."

"Where are you from?"

"Down the hall, the last door."

"You were born here?"

"I don't like to think about *before*. It is just a dream."

"If before is a dream, then what is this now?"

"Why do you join the faithful?"

"I'm not one of the faithful," Raine replies. "I'm just doing what I have to do."

"They've turned the lights off on me again," says the voice sadly. "So I know that they have something planned for me. Hopefully the last thing."

"Why are you here, then?" Raine prods. "If you're not one of the faithful?"

"I'm just livestock to them. They hold me because they can, because a use might present itself, and they would like to have me available. Can you describe the outside air?" the voice asks hopefully. "And the sun, and the trees?"

Raine does his best, although he is not a poet.

"They brought me here years ago. I was barely an adult at the time... now, I don't even know. You asked where I was from... it's a small town most people have never heard of."

"Sandy Knoll."

"You know it?"

"Yes, I came from there before arriving here."

"You must be one of the faithful."

"I'm not."

"I have talked to many of the faithful, as they prepare... to travel. In this very cell. They all seem to know Sandy Knoll."

"That may be."

"I have a son there."

"Yes?"

"Ian Swift."

Raine is silent.

"You know him?"

"Yes."

“They want him, they want his soul. I know it. You say you are not one of the faithful, do you mean it?”

“I’m no zealot.”

“Should you get out of here... I have something to ask of you...”

“Yes?”

“Keep him from them.”

“I don’t know.”

“To the faithful, he is just a catalyst. To be burned up in the name of righteousness.” Marlon steps back from the bars. “I must return to my cell, before I am found out. Your dark treatment ends... soon.”

Chapter 36

Raine think-dreams, time indeterminate.

Dark, dark, dark.

The sound of the gate.

The sound of steps.

Raine rises from his cot and drifts to the bars between him and the hallway.

Too soon for food. Although, hunger has lost its primal urgency. Raine abstractly thinks about his hunger, hangs it on the cold cell wall and observes it like a picture.

No, not food.

Two sets of steps... this is new.

The red lights slowly come on with a dull buzzing. Raine braces himself, squinting, and wills himself to see through what to him is searing light.

Stubbles—the creature’s gait is unmistakable. As is the steady step of Lord Nergleton.

The time has come. Raine’s grip of the bar of his cell tightens with his good hand. He scowls as he forces his eyes to widen.

The shapes of Stubbles and Lord Nergleton pass by. And then... a distant click and rusty swing.

Someone else is being released... Marlon.

Raine slumps back in his cell, his dead arm aching with a prognostic pang. Yes, something would be happening.

His eyes finally adjust to the red lights. Stubbles and Lord Nergleton return, this time with a man between them, head bowed, feet stepping yet also dragging. Raine can not see his face, long hair curled down over it, almost to his chest.

Minutes, minutes. Eons and eternities.

Lord Nergleton appears before the door. “It is time.”

There is the unentered passage;

There is Lady Eres.

Lady Eres is clad in feathers. She raises her eyes and hands heavenward, she bows and scrapes and rises again. Her movements paint shadows on the wall. Her movements are dance, her movements are ritual.

Raine treads just behind Lord Nergleton, at heel. His thoughts are muddled, his eyes dart, then settle. Lord Nergleton bows before Lady Eres, and Raine mimics, not understanding, half his mind still in the dark of the cell, the other half spinning and bewildered by the lights and spaces.

Lord Nergleton kneels;

Raine kneels.

Lady Eres dabs his forehead with oil, and Lord Nergleton as well. Cedar and myrrh. The feathers cover her arms, with her underarms bare, fastened with leather straps. The feathers crown her head, and also drift low over her cheeks. Legs and thighs, shining eyes.

“Such are the rites of the mistress of earth,” Lady Eres sings.

“Such are the rites,” echo Raine and Lord Nergleton. The words sound strange coming out Raine’s mouth, sound far away to him, like little birds flying away from his face. He can almost see them as they pass Lady Eres, making their way down the passage. Now Raine is walking through the curving passage, and he begins to hear humming and a rasping, mechanical but not, electricity, electricity tingling his nerves, lacing his skin, teasing the tips of his hair...

They arrive at a small door; it opens without a sound.

“Here, we enter the beast,” Lady Eres murmurs as they step inside.

The interior is white, white with feathers, the same feathers that clad Lady Eres. The walls of the domed room are layered with them, and they pulse in rhythm, breathing, breathing inside the beast. The sense of electricity is stronger now, and it raises the hairs on Raine’s neck and arms.

At the center of the room is a simple wooden table and a computer, from which a tangle of wires spill, worming their way into small holes in the floor. Along the curved wall is a man strapped to a vertical stainless-steel table, the man with the long hair Raine had seen ushered down the hallway. His eyes groggily appraise Raine, and he seems to nod to confirm he is Marlon. His skin is pale white, his body thin.

Beside him is another vertical stainless-steel table, empty.

Lord Nergleton leads Raine to the empty table, and has him lean against it. He cuffs Raine’s wrists and ankles, forehead and chest.

“For your safety,” says Lord Nergleton, as the last strap is fastened.

A loud squeal erupts from the passage. Stubbles comes in leading a pig, which he tethers on the opposite side of the long-haired Marlon.

“What?” Raine asks.

“Nevermind it,” says Lord Nergleton.

The computer beeps and hums, and the room pulses and breathes. The feathers on the wall expand and contract.

Like a room of birds, thinks Raine. *I am literally inside the beast.*

He hears Lady Eres’s chanting.

“Focus on her words,” instructs Lord Nergleton. He takes the position at the podium, and clasps a small lever, pushing it forward. The humming intensifies and the feathers flutter. The beast groans, sending a vibration through the room and Raine himself. He sees a burning circle, he sees many colors, and then the beast shudders and is still. The room is silent, save for the beep of the computer.

Lord Nergleton is unclasping him.

It failed, thinks Raine.

He brushes his face with his hand, and realizes it is his damaged arm, but made new. He stares at it more closely; it is not his hand at all. The lines of the skin are different. His hair feels heavy and brushes his shoulders. He turns his head and sees himself, lying motionless on the table beside him.

The pig squeals.

Chapter 37

The feathers fade and Raine's mind acclimates to its new abode, fights with the fragments, wrestles with the withering vines of thought and presence, his mind mixed and returning to the darkness...

"It's the best way." Lord Nergleton eases Raine back down on his cot in the dark cell. "Until we are sure everything has... gelled."

"Gibble gabble dopp," Raine slurs incoherently. *I understand and consent*; the thought is there, the kernel of it, anyway. Floating in brackish stew of instinct and stimuli, echoing in the hollowness, now filled.

"Goop gopp," Raine says to Stubbles. *I understand and forgive you?* His mind is a shaken snow-globe, and all the snowflakes of thought flurry about, but ultimately fall back down to cover little plastic houses.

"One more thing." Lord Nergleton extracts a syringe from the pocket of his lab coat. Raine cringes, a little. The negative stimuli ricochets in his skull before glancing off into oblivion. The plunger pushes a nasty brown serum through the needle and into his vein.

It stings.

"There." Lord Nergleton straightens up, and motions to Stubbles. "You're probably wondering how much longer. I wish I could tell you, exactly. Be reassured that it is in everyone's interest to make this transition as expedient as possible. But we must ensure your mind can withstand the process... it is not a guarantee."

Read the fine print, that's the germ of the thought Raine wants to express. But, instead he says, "garp."

Lord Nergleton lingers at his side. "The shot you just received impedes the reshaping of your borrowed body. Your mind will be in a battle to terraform the borrowed body into the one it once inhabited—an uncomfortable process that can never truly be completed. The process, or battle, if you will, still occurs, despite the shot, only more slowly. You will need several more to inhibit this process for as long as possible—it is quite debilitating. However, if your mission is successful, you will be returned to your own body and transferred to the surface to live as you decide.

"Now, you will need a short respite to recover and refocus your mind. Then you will travel the strands."

"Garp," says Raine.

Emerging from the dark. Raine feels the punch on his arm from the shot, feels the burning. How does one slip out of madness when they have courted it so intimately? When they have invited it beyond the threshold of their sacred temple, the mind. Drawing back from the edge, the ledge, wiping off the ink, but the stain remains.

So close to the edge.

A snort and a grunt from the next cell over.

The pig from the room, they had left it in there.

Raine tries standing, feels dizzy, like he had just spun himself in circles. His limbs ache, blood-denied, and asleep. Things mix inside of him, his new shell.

That's what it was, a shell. A shell for his soul, and whatever scattered thoughts he could focus. A shell filled with his soul, and the remnants of its past occupant, and whatever Lord Nergleton injected into his arm.

Whose body had he been put into?

His arm; Raine marvels at the arm. It isn't his, not at all, but it moves when he thinks, and feels pain, and the pain is his. Raine wishes he had a mirror, and also is thankful for not having one. Would he recognize himself in another's face? But the arm, it works, oh it works, it doesn't hang limply at his side like his old one. It grasps and it touches. It swings by his side and reaches up high. He runs the hand across the smooth, cold stone.

Then there are the ghost thoughts. Raine can separate them from his own, but they ghost within his skull, faded stains that won't release. Often, they are more a thought of a thought, but sometimes they could speak.

I've rotted here, so long. ROT. Yes.

Not my thought, thinks Raine.

YES thought, yours, laughs the ghost. *Occupants. are the responsibility of the new LANDLORD. Tenants. TENANTS.*

But Raine can send that to the back. And he does...

Humming helps.

Raine stretches out on his cot in the slowly waxing light and hums.

The pig sighs next door as it settles down on its haunches.

Raine wakes up sweating and twitchy. If you can call it waking up; he doesn't really sleep, just loses himself for twenty minute intervals, drifting in and out of full consciousness.

A grunt, and another. It sounds like the pig is trying to cough up a bone. A hideous sound; it gurgles and struggles. Over again, and over. It starts sounding like a word, Raine thinks. Actually, it sounds a lot like his name...

“R...R..Raine...” the pig spits out. “Raine,” it repeats, and then again, like a proud baby that just had spoken its first word.

Raine leans against the dividing wall, looks out through the bars to the empty hallway.

“Raine, Raine,” says the pig.

“Yes?” Raine calls out tentatively. It’s a shock to hear his own words—his voice is different, it’s a voice created by a new set of vocal cords and a stranger’s tongue that he now claims.

“Yes,” says the pig, with some difficulty, drawing out the “s” at the end.

“I’ve lost it,” says Raine. “I’ve lost it.”

“Raine,” says the pig. “Yes, no. Hard. Talk.”

“Are you, me....” Raine asks.

“No. You... me.”

“Your body?”

Silence... Then: “yes.”

Raine hesitates. “Who are you?”

The pig sounds like it is choking again. It erupts into a coughing fit and then squeals unrelentingly, with Raine covering his ears with his hands until it abates.

“Marlon,” the pig speaks.

The name lingers in Raine’s ears, wants to stay, feels at home.

“I am in Marlon’s body, and you are in a pig,” says Raine.

“Get me out, Raine. Get me out.”

“I don’t have a key to my own cell.”

“Out of this pig!” Marlon squeals in distress. “Years of wakings, years of wakings, and here I am, placed in a pig. Feed. Feed me!”

“Calm down.”

“It twists, it twists and burns. It is a cruel joke Nergleton has played on me. No shot for Marlon, no shot. Just see what happens when I am in here, pushing at everything, madness. Feed me. Raine.”

Part Five: Migration



Chapter 38

February had been the longest month in Sandy Knoll, it always was. The dull, short days. The walks home in the bitter dark where the cold chafes your throat. March wasn't much better. It never was.

Ian walks along the sidewalk on the snowmobile track. The snow had melted and frozen, and melted and frozen again. It is slick and hard. The snowbanks are dying a slow death. Gone are the cleansing snows of December, that bathed a leafless deathscape in holy white. The snow is dirty and sullied, revealing its contents from months of accumulation.

Soggy-now-frozen scratch-off tickets stuck in ice, wavering in the cold; gas station styrofoam cups; dead leaves; road salt and sand stains it all. Ian's heart is as worn as the banks.

He follows a footpath through the snow into the mobile home park and kicks his shoes free of snow at the door. This time he knocks.

Aunt Bonnie's inside. Arms folded.

"She okay?"

"We need to have a talk," Aunt Bonnie says.

"Let me see her." Ian brushes by her in the entry.

"She's sleeping." Aunt Bonnie catches him by the sleeve of his coat.

"Don't be the one to wake her. She needs her rest right now."

"Why did you text me then?"

Aunt Bonnie relaxes her expression. "Why don't you take off your coat?"

"I'm fine," Ian says.

"Listen, I know you want what's best for your mom, we both do." Aunt Bonnie speaks softly. "And she's hurting right now. You know it."

"Don't tell me what I know."

"But you do. And she is. She needs better care than we can give her... to make her more comfortable."

Ice from Ian's boots starts to make little puddles on the kitchen linoleum. He sees them, hears the water melting, somehow.

"It's time for Hospice care."

"Nah."

"Ian..."

"That's where you go to die."

"I don't want her to suffer. I know you don't either."

"Shadyside is a dump."

"Don't wake her up."

"It's a dump where you go to die."

"I talked to your mom, and she agrees. It's the best thing to do."

"We can make her comfortable here."

"I can't do it all, Ian." Aunt Bonnie's voice wavers.

"I can do it."

"You need to finish school. They called here. Said you didn't show up last week." Aunt Bonnie's voice pivots to anger. "You think that's what she wants? To see you flunk out of your senior year?"

"You're gonna ship her off because you're tired of taking care of her."

"Get out of here," Aunt Bonnie says through her teeth. "Go sell your lousy drugs. Yeah, that's right—I know. Get out of here you little shit, before I call the cops and have them drag your ass to jail. You think that'd help your mom?"

Ian looks down the hallway toward his mother's door, looks at his aunt. Her treasured ceramic cat is on the counter. It's in his hand and hurtling to the floor. Smash. White and pink shards.

Slams the door.

He's gone. He's out.

The early March air takes the heat from his face. Bites at his cheeks. *I love you mom*, he concedes to himself, *but I can't do this*.

"Fragged you." Chuck leans in, hands gripping the controller. His eyes track the screen. "And again. This is getting pathetic, dude."

"Out of practice." Ian sets aside his controller and drinks from a can of piss-yellow beer.

"You're working too hard."

"Yeah, talk to your brother about that."

"Maybe I will." Chuck looks over at Ian, who is still drinking. "Easy there, pal. It's early."

"You're one to talk."

"Weed man. It's superior."

"Pass it, then." Ian squints into the bowl of the pipe. "Your bud looks pretty cooked, man."

“Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I ain’t no beggar.”

“Just kidding around.”

“I don’t need to stay here.”

“I know, man. I know.”

Ian stares down at his lap. “Mom’s moving to Shadyside.”

“Damn. Sorry dude.”

“It’s alright. Let’s go again.”

The game can kill all thought, if you focus. If you focus. The game can kill all thought, but you have to keep the seams tight. Those thoughts, they’ll seep in, yes, they will. They’ll seep in and next thing you know you’re thinking them and not the game and then you’re fragged... so just focus on the game and let it consume your consciousness.

But, that pesky thought pops up again...

Leave or stay.

Leave or stay.

Leaky seams.

It’s dark out already, happens early this time of year. Phones are pocketed, smoke is inhaled.

Jim walks in, takes the empty spot on the couch. More weed. He’s always got it on the ready.

Chuck is cool with his brother lately. Ian is too loose to care. Too loose to stiffen up. *Besides where else the hell I am going to go? Not the mobile park. Not anywhere else.*

“You want a turn?” Chuck asks Jim.

“Hell no.” Jim leans back, reaches out his arms along the sofa. “I’m too tired for that shit. Ever since that ass Taunton disappeared. Got twice the work to do. At least the cops stopped sniffing around. Like I know where the big dummy ran off to.”

Ian wants to look at Chuck bad. Can’t do it. No looks. *Yeah, about your buddy Taunton, he sort of just... disappeared. Yeah.*

“Maybe Ian’s bum friend Rainbow and him ran off together. Started a new life.” Jim laughs a raspy laugh, and Chuck joins in. Ian does, too. *Why not?*

The dark gets darker. The March winds are picking up. Wet snow slops against the windows, doesn’t know if it wants to freeze or melt. Jim laughs

and is loose, and so are Ian and Chuck. Jim's got his bag, got his kit. Got his tie, got his needle. Got it cookin'.

Off he goes, off he smiles.

Chuck too,

Ian is there, you know, you know this time was a coming...

You were never going anywhere;

You are going somewhere tonight boy.

Gonna travel the strands,

Gonna look inside your soul.

"Yeah okay." Ian says. He feels his nerves.

"Hold still," Jim says.

Ian feels his phone vibrate in his pocket, jerks his arm and the needle falls to the floor.

"Shit," says Jim.

"Sorry." Phone is in hand. "Might be mom."

It's not. Ian stares at the screen.

It's Jenn.

Chapter 39

The old trail bike is leaned against the railing leading up to the trailer. Frozen slop coats its orange body.

March.

Raine idles the rental car, squints toward the windows of the trailer.

This is so weird.

He looks at his hands resting on the wheel, stares at the strange, dark hairs and large pores of his borrowed skin. His hands tremble, slightly. Nerves? Or the constant struggle between the old and new inhabitant of this fleshy costume?

Things *smell* different. Like the new-car odor. Every thought has a slight reverb. Sometimes questions get answered by the ghost voice, suppressed and distant, but still alive and grasping.

The reverb gets louder when he needs a shot. So do the phantom thoughts.

Raine looks over at the satchel that contains his medication. Another twelve hours to go before the next dose. Every twenty-four, baby. Or your mind's gonna start taking this body over, and it ain't gonna be pretty.

Raine remembers Taunton having a seizure near the trail. *Yep, that could be you.*

Ole Aunt Bonnie doesn't seem to be home, Raine thinks. *No Buick in the driveway.* The mother was gone, too, by all appearances. It had been a long three days back on top. Raine had traveled the strands back with a new body, a credit card and an ID that said "Marlon Swift."

Marlon. That's who he needs to be, to pretend to be.

I need to pretend to be the person I look like, Raine muses.

Marlon the deadbeat dad.

Marlon the martyr.

Marlon the pig.

Three days to complete Lady Eres' directive. Her directive to kill Ian Swift—the word "kill" gives him pause—he needs to *almost* kill the kid—to open the strands and take them to Kurnugi. In two days, Darko would turn Ian's waveform on again, signaling Ian's fake rescue from Novillium. On day three, Raine would *almost* kill the kid so he could be snatched up by the strands and taken to Kurnugi. *Almost* kill; well, he had to really intend to kill him to open the strands, it just wouldn't be completed...

Three days... then act.

Bring him home.

Bring him down.

For the faithful.

Sorry that means killing you kid, full intent and all. But you aren't going to really die, right? Not right away... You get a free trip to the Underworld before they feed you to the beast, or whatever the hell it is they need to do.

It can't be a fast death. No guns, no bombs, no easy stuff like that. Raine has to make it slow, give plenty of heads-up for that wormhole to open and swallow them both up. They'd be watching the graphs in Kurnugi, waiting to snatch him.

Two days had already passed. He needed the time, anyway. A day just to look around in the light, the stabbing daylight. A day to get the car and scope out the haunts, find the kid with no home. A day to act—today.

Lady Eres asked for three days, to cover her tracks... can't cross the strands and "rescue" the kid from Novillium all at once, it's got to be believable, Lord Nergleton's got to buy it... She had shut off the signal with Darko, made it look like Ian had disappeared when in reality he was just loitering around the same old places...

Lord Nergleton didn't seem eager to do much at all. Maybe he knew the return of Inanna meant the end of his gig, so to speak...

I don't want to kill you, Raine thinks. They've got my body, kid. Hostage. Raine's still staring at those strange hands of his. Hands to strangle. Or...

Just keep Marlon's body and run?

What would happen when the medication ran out and the struggle between him and Marlon's ghost consciousness began?

Raine wonders if he would take over the new body, slowly, perhaps painfully terraforming to his old shape.

Or close enough.

If that were the case, maybe he could screw everyone and just run.

If that were the case.

You think leaving your ID for collateral is an incentive to return? Try your whole body.

Raine turns off the car, tramps through the freezing slush. Watches his hand knock on the door. Feels the bristle on his face. Feels the dark hair

brush his collar.

You're Marlon. I'm Marlon.

The door opens. Ian looks annoyed, like he expected his aunt, then off-guard. "Yeah?" he says.

Raine trembles heavily, feels his hands shake. He clenches them into fists at his side to try to hide them. Something about seeing the kid was throwing him off. Messing him up. Like his body was reacting to it. *Hey kid, you want to talk to your old pappy?* Phantom thoughts, phantom thoughts times ten.

"Hey kid." Raine taps the back of his teeth with his tongue after speaking. "I don't know... how to say this."

Ian just stares.

"I'm... your dad."

Sitting on the couch. Reading the kid. Ian.

Tap, tap, the tongue against the teeth...

Across the room from each other...

What the hell am I supposed to say again?

Ian speaks for him. "I don't know you. I don't think I want to know you."

Shit, this is complicated, Raine thinks. "I'm not asking for anything, not looking for anything," he says.

"Then why are you here?"

To strangle you, kid. That's the plan, isn't it? Spare myself the goddamn psy-ops and wrap these borrowed fingers around your neck.

"You know what? I don't care. So what if you look like my dad, look like a picture. You're not. You're just some asshole who showed up at the worst possible time."

You don't know how right you are, kid. Raine just sits, and tries not to twitch too much. Allows the kid to talk. Hell, he wasn't even sure what he was going to do. Strangle, or make a run for it, or just sit on this couch for a while. The kid was keeping it together, though. He had to give him that.

"Listen," says Ian, "maybe it's best if you just drive off and we both pretend I never saw you. I know sure as hell mom won't want to see you. That's the last thing that she needs."

Raine surveys the boxes packed on the floor. "For her?"

“Yeah. I’m taking them over to Shadyside.”

“On that bike outside? In this weather?”

“I don’t need help from Aunt Bonnie.”

“I got a car.”

“Hell no, you’re not going there.”

“I didn’t come here for her,” Raine says. “I came here for you. And I know you don’t want me to see her but the least I could do is help you get some stuff over there for her, you know, dry.”

“I don’t know.”

Raine stifles a twitch. “I’m not here to push. You want me to leave, I will. I... wouldn’t mind giving you a ride though. I’d wait in the car, drop you off and leave, whatever.”

“Nah man.” Ian walks to the door, doesn’t even look back.

It’d be so easy to strangle the kid. Lady Eres would keep her promise, right? Goddamn twitches, strange hands, goddamn headache no headache...

Ian’s out the door and it’s cold. Raine follows, walks through the slush to his rental car, hand on the handle. Ian tries to start the bike, it grinds and complains. Ian keeps trying, keeps pushing. Droops his head still clutching the handlebars, doesn’t look up. Beads of cold water glisten in his hair.

“Screw it.” Ian shoves the bike over. “I’ll take a ride.”

Chapter 40

The concrete blocks could use a fresh coat of paint. Maybe something other than antiseptic blue. Ian stands by the bedside, looks down, looks away. Looks through her, realizes he needs to *be* there, looks and sees.

"The nurse is a funny old girl," says Ian's mom, in a way that makes her sound British. Ian doesn't know why she's talking like that, and wishes she would stop.

Stop and just be normal.

She should be on the window-side of the curtain that split the room. Not here, not in this concrete cubby with yellow light and a curtain wall.

"She probably won't be back for a while," says Ian's mom. "Seems like." The morphine drips steadily.

"I brought the things you asked for," Ian says looking at the box he had set on the small bedside table.

"My buddy?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks, Sweetie."

Ian hands her the worn little stuffed bear with amber bead eyes and she clutches it against her chest. She breathes out, in and out. Ian listens, listens for the death rattle, the struggle. Looks at the morphine bag, looks at the curtain, there is no window, not even out to a parking lot dumpster.

"You feel okay?" Ian asks.

"I feel fine," says his mother. "Tired maybe."

"I should let you rest."

"You remember that time we went to Staltzman Falls?"

"Yeah."

"You loved hiking up that crick." She looks at the empty chair. "Why don't you sit down?"

Ian does, sits a while, his mom breathes, the morphine drips.

He doesn't want to ask.

He does.

"Why did dad leave?"

Ian's mom turns her head with some effort. Stares at the mirror of her eyes in her son's face. "Marlon."

"Yeah."

“I don’t know why. He was a good guy. For a while I thought he died. But it didn’t feel right, you know? It sounds silly, but I just could tell he was alive. Maybe it was drugs. Maybe he just bugged out. We were young.”

“You never heard from him?”

Ian’s mom shakes her head, like it hurts, like it is delicate.

“I’m sorry.”

It’s quiet for a while before she speaks again. “What about that Jenn girl, you still seeing her?”

“I never told you about her, or her name.”

“I’m a mom. We know things.”

“I haven’t seen her, not really.” The words stick in Ian’s throat.

“You should go to her. Girls like that.”

“I don’t know.”

“Like in the movies.”

“Yeah. She’s... not around here.”

“It’s okay.”

“I can’t go anywhere.”

“You can go.”

“I have things to take care of here.”

“I’m the one who’s not going anywhere. You can go.” Ian’s mom reaches out her skeletal hand and grasps his. “You have my permission to go. I want you to.”

Ian stands in the lobby of Shadyside, wrestling with indecision. Jenn had called last night, an angel swooping down to save him from himself. Had told him she needed him, wanted him. That she was with her cousin in Norfolk. That he should find her there. The future splits out before him: one fork a condemnation to live out his life as written in Sandy Knoll, the other clouded in the unknown, but lined with hope and promise.

Waiting outside in the parking lot is a man who calls himself his long-lost father.

A man he had told himself he never wanted to know.

A man who might as well be a stranger to him.

But that stranger had a car.

Chapter 41

How did we get here?

How did I get here, rather?

Raine grips the wheel with his strange hand, the other rests on the center console. Highway flies by, tires cut through slush. The stone-faced boy-man sits in the passenger seat.

"I need a ride," he had said.

That was about it.

The beat-up rural route feeds the highway, feeds the interstate. Gun stickers fade to out-of-state plates.

Need a ride? Sure. Southish? Sure, why not. Norfolk? Well, I guess I owe you pretty big after all. This will make up for a lifetime of absence and/or killing you, right?

"Mind if I turn on the radio?" Raine asks.

Ian shrugs.

Crackling NPR, country stations, something from Canada in French (must be the cloudy weather). A sermon, a mattress jingle, oldies. Oldies it is. Raine settles back in his seat. "What's in Norfolk?"

"Nothing," Ian says.

"Long way to drive for nothing."

"You can drop me off here if you want."

"Sorry, just curious. I said I wouldn't pry, and I won't."

Twenty minutes, twenty miles, or so. Gotta watch the roads, that tricky slush. "Turn, Turn, Turn" plays on the radio, laced with static.

"Girl?"

Ian shakes his head.

"It's going to be a long drive if you don't want to talk at all."

"Like I said, you can drop me off wherever."

"You don't owe me anything. Not even a conversation. But I won't lie, I wouldn't mind it. I've got one of those active imaginations. You're starting a new life, a new job, running away from something, who knows. Active, I tell you. My mind, it needs the resolution. Needs something. Plus the signal for this station is just about shot and I don't think there's another station I want to listen to between here and Pennsylvania.

Ian's quiet a while. "Your mind needs resolution?" He laughs bitterly. "That's rich."

“Fair enough.”

“If it’ll shut you up, it’s a girl.”

There’s only one girl Raine knows of, and she’s a former agent of Novillium— a corporation with a desperate interest in this kid here. Unless she isn’t a *former* agent at all, maybe she’s just acting again, like before. If not, she could be under duress, forced to lure in her target. *Shit, we’re driving right into some kind of trap.* From the bowels of the Underworld to this. Frying pans and fires and all that. *Or maybe she just really likes the kid...*

“What’s her name?”

Ian sighs heavily before responding. “Jenn. Her name is Jenn.”

Bingo.

“Nice name.” *God what a dumb thing to say.* “She lives in Norfolk, I take it?”

Ian rolls his eyes. “She’s staying with her cousin.”

Her cousin, right.

“There’s jobs down there. We can stay with her cousin for a while until we get our own place.”

“Sure, I see.” Raine plays with the radio dial some more. “It takes a lot of guts to make a move like that.”

Painted white stripes flash beside the car, signs and guardrails. Was “Jenn” with Novillium again? Had she ever really left? She had seemed pretty fed up with it all. If she had been acting, she should get an Oscar. Raine struggles to remember if she had mentioned a cousin, mentioned Norfolk. Echoes of another brain, grinding shadows, aching bones. God, they ache. Pushing against his muscles, tension grips his face, like his nose could push and twist its way out from underneath Marlon’s. His body was in this shell, and it wanted out. But Jenn, Jenn, Lelja. What had Lelja said? Anger, sex, fading. Faces and names. Fading. Suspicion. Maybe it wasn’t Jenn at all, maybe it was just Novillium, it was always Novillium. *You’re driving him straight into their hands. Somehow. You should just end it now, end it now, take these strange hands and end it your way. No, not your way, Lady Eres’ way. The way of the faithful. Ha ha ha ha ha yes, that would be something.*

“Hey man... you alright?”

“Yes?” Raine breaks from his reverie, feels his face flush.

“You’re just moving your mouth and not saying anything,” Ian says.
“For like ten minutes now.”

Raine suppresses a shudder. “I’m fine, kid. I could use a rest-stop though. Yes, that’s the ticket.”

The concrete walkway leads through the fragmented arches to the modern-looking rest stop with triangular roof segments. “Welcome to Pennsylvania” proclaims a sign. Raine carries his satchel in his now-good arm, but he can feel it going numb. The fingers want to collapse. Let slip the handle. Pangs of pain alternate with drooping nothingness.

Raine awkwardly trails Ian to the men’s room, that’s the logical destination after all. The hallway leads down along glass, looking out to the still white-covered surroundings. Patchy, and there’s a hint of spring in the air.

“I’m... going to need a little extra time,” Raine announces as they walk in. He takes the farthest stall, waits until he hears Ian washing his hands and putting them under the high velocity dryer. He fumbles with the satchel, hands now shaking, drool spilling from his mouth onto his shirt.

The trinity; an antique-looking syringe with a glass barrel and a silver plunger adorned with three circles, two smaller to the left and right and a larger one above and center.

A set of glass vials accompanies the syringe, and Raine carefully uses one to fill its chamber. Raine draws back the larger silver circle on the syringe, winces, injects.

Once a day to suppress his body. He had pushed it too far this time.

He sees Taunton writhing on the forest floor.

He sees himself losing control while driving.

The amber liquid disappears into his arm.

The aching fades, the shaking stops. But not the thoughts... rather they are fortified, invigorated and talkative. But, at least he has control of his body... except perhaps his tongue and lips.

He flushes for good measure, wanders out into the lobby. Ian is staring into a display case.

“The good old ruffed grouse,” Raine comments, coming up behind him.

“Yeah.”

“You want to stretch your legs?”

“I just want to get this over with.”

Chapter 42

A gull lazily swings low over the familiar terrain, interstates and rest-stop parking lots, scanning for food. Makes the trip it has made before, and its father and mother before, and theirs before that... North to south, south to north, following the landmarks, following the signs, instinct, and habit. Ian and Raine's car passes below, and the bird thinks nothing of it or them.

Welcome to Maryland, goodbye Pennsylvania.

Ian stares at the sign, feels something stir within himself.

"Need to stop?" His father asks. No, not his "father." The guy who showed up. The interloper.

"I'm fine."

"Then we'll push on."

"I've never been in Maryland before." Ian doesn't know why he says it. Doesn't know why he engages with the interloper.

Yes the interloper, that's what he is. Another interloper that shows up at some convenient time. Always wanting something, something, but not you...

The radio drones, static and different stations mixing together. The volume's low, but now Ian's hearing it, coming out of an interstate travel trance.

"It's tough to get out of Sandy Knoll," says the interloper.

"Not for some people." Ian says, and regrets. *Don't engage the interloper.*

"Yeah, I guess that's fair."

"Nothing's fair," Ian says. "And everything's fair. Nobody owes me anything. Not you, not anybody. Not this ride, not nothing."

"Fair enough." The interloper's hands fidget with the radio dial. "One more state to go. Been seeing those Virginia plates. Although Norfolk, it's way down there." The radio breaks out of static. "Hey now, this is a song. You ever listen to Jerry Jeff Walker?"

"You want to talk? Fine. Here's a question. You say you're my dad. Fine. So where've you been, dad? Whatcha been doing?"

"It's hard to explain."

"It's still a long way to Norfolk."

"True."

"How do I know you're actually my dad?"

“Because I look like a picture? And I’m driving you hundreds of miles to Norfolk?”

Highway flies underneath. Vehicles pass and are passed.

“I didn’t want to leave,” says the interloper.

“Don’t even blame this on my mom. Don’t you even.”

“No, no, that’s not it. But you asked. So, I’m telling you. I was taken away. Kept away.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I don’t feel like myself.”

“Okay...”

“I was in a dark place, I mean. A very dark place. It took me and kept me there. I... thought about you a lot. This I know.”

Ian cringes. The words pierce, but don’t resonate. They don’t melt the ice. The cold in his chest. They are the words of an interloper.

“If you’re my dad, let me ask you this. Why don’t I *feel* anything? How about that for a question. Yeah, you look like a picture. Yeah, you’ve got some story. But shouldn’t I fucking feel something?”

The interloper’s hands are shaking now. The car drifts over the center line, back again. “Yeah, kid, you’re on to something. I think you are right. I’m not your dad. I’m a husk. A husk of a person that used to be him. But he’s long gone and ain’t coming back. A car-driving husk that can’t even drive.” The interloper’s hands shake. The bitten-short fingernails dig into the synthetic leather steering wheel wrap, leaving small arced indents.

Ian sits more erectly in his seat. Looks out the window, looks at the speedometer. A little slower, a little faster, but pretty damn fast. The interloper was a drug-head. Yes, that was about right. Yes, that explained it all.

“I’m gonna need you to drive, I think.” The interloper is breathing heavily. “Okay? I think I need a break. There’s a cell stop up there.” The interloper pulls off the side of the road, and the two switch sides, passing in the front of the car. The air is almost warm.

Ian adjusts the seat, checks the mirror.

On the road again. The interloper stops talking, just looks gray and shaky. Moves his fingers, moves his hands.

The beltway traffic around DC is thick. The car creeps to a stop in an ocean of idling cars. The interloper jitters and shakes.

Ian can’t help himself. “You alright over there?”

“Yeah, yeah. This pig is just fine.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

An hour later and they are on the other side of the city, waiting for the release. Waiting to break free from the waves of cars and traffic. Another dead stop, with exhaust and horn blasts, echoes of stereos.

“I’m having some trouble. I need my medicine. It’s in the satchel. I need it, yes.” The interloper unclasps his bag and draws out a leather case. His shaking hands draw out an antique-looking syringe.

“Hell no,” says Ian.

“I gotta do it, I gotta do it.”

The interloper injects himself, trembles, breathes more regularly. “Okay kid, okay. I’m okay.”

“You’re exactly the kind of dad I would have,” Ian says. “Why do you use that shit?”

“I just have to.”

“What is it?”

“Ain’t important. But I need it, or I become someone else.”

The traffic starts to break free, the car speeds up. Free at last.

“What, you’d die or something? Go into withdrawal?”

“I wouldn’t die, but it wouldn’t be pretty.

Ian rolls down his window. “Not too bad out there.”

“No, not at all.”

Ian seizes the leather case and tosses it out the window. It bounces behind them on the highway and disappears under an advancing army of vehicles.

“What the hell did you do that for, kid?”

“You said you won’t die.”

“I won’t. But it won’t be pretty, either.”

Five hundred more miles.

Chapter 43

The townhomes crowd the drive in a squat semicircle, white vinyl siding in need of a good powerwash and short driveways in need of a good patching and sealing. Raine idles the rental car in the extra spaces across the way, watching Ian go up to the door and ring the bell.

So this is it, Raine thinks. Good luck, kid. You won't be dying by my hands, today. For what it's worth.

Raine sees Lejla answer the door. Or Jenn, or whoever she's playing now. *Good luck explaining that to the kid.*

Jenn looks past Ian, left and right, brings him in, closes the door.

So that's it. Raine sits in the car as a light rain patters on the windshield, unable to shake a pervasive sense of suspicion. Lejla seemed sincere, he had felt it. She was sickened by her role. But, was Novillium done with her? Certainly they weren't done with Ian...

Raine's done with it all, with the kid, with the faithful, with Novillium. It comes to him sitting in the car. A decision he could make for himself. Just let it go. He's not killing anyone, not for Novillium, not for the faithful, not for any "save the world" bullshit.

But what to do now?

Food.

Raine's stomach growls. Yeah, he was hungry. And it was morning. Breakfast was a thing.

The cluster of townhouses forms a pocket in between sketch and gentrification. Raine turns out of the aging development toward sketch. Concrete block buildings, nondescript store signage. Teriyaki, mattresses, thrift.

A diner. It would work.

Raine takes a stool at the counter.

"Hey sailor," says the waitress, a young black woman.

"I'm not a sailor," Raine says.

"Whatever. Here's a menu."

Raine orders coffee, eggs, biscuits and bacon. Extra bacon.

The coffee is uninspiring but hot. It goes straight to his road-trip brain, prepares the digestive system for the onslaught of salt and fat to come.

Raine wonders how long his last shot will hold.

And then what?

In his memory, he pictures Taunton writhing in the abandoned trailer. Won't that be lovely to suffer through.

The analog clock above the diner's kitchen ticks steadily on. He would need to sleep, once the driving high and latest dose of caffeine fled him. But the sleep would eat precious hours of stability before his shot wears off, leaving him shaking and seizing. He'd need a motel room to hole up in, ride it out...

And then what? Would his body survive the seizures and settle into some semblance of normality?

Could he just walk free and forgotten? No Inanna's Faithful, no Novillium? They just cared about getting their hands on Ian, right?

Poor kid. But one could only do so much.

The food comes and goes down the hatch.

His body... Marlon's body... gratefully accepts it.

The waitress is back, refilling his coffee. "What's your name?"

Tip time. Raine starts to speak, catches himself. *Raine? Marlon? John Doe?*

"Let me know when you figure it out," says the waitress, pushing the check in front of him.

Raine exits and the door chimes behind him. It's warmed up a little, but it's still damp. He imagines he can taste the slightest hint of salt in the air.

Time to buy some groceries and hole up until he can ride out this change. Sorry Marlon. But there's a twinge, a premonition. Something that just doesn't sit. Novillium would have been watching Ian like a hawk. No way they just let him wander off. No way.

The kid's fine. Raine laughs sarcastically to himself. *Right.*

Who do you want to be?

Not the hero.

But not the villain, either.

I'll just swing by for one last check... then I'll go for good, Raine thinks. He drives the short way back to the townhomes, and parks in the nearest lot. Everything is quiet. Raine leans back in his seat and turns on morning talk radio. He would stay just a little longer.

Radio purrs like a beautiful wave of white noise. Raine blinks his eyes, once, twice. The dreams come. Lady Eres in a translucent, amorphous

wrap. Lord Nergleton clad in feathers. Radio static evolves into the breathing of the beast. Into the beast, the faceless beast. Consuming and ejecting. Ejecta.

Raine wakes in a sweat. Wipes his brow.

The door to Lejla's apartment is ajar.

It wavers slightly in the low, cool breeze.

Strange.

Raine waits a minute. Waits another.

How long was I sleeping?

Raine struggles with the decision of what to do next. *This is why you shouldn't have come back. But, now here you are.*

Raine leaves the car running and peers through the opening of the door. The dim lighting makes it difficult to see. He opens it a little more.

Carpeted stairs rise up to the right. Was that a foot or just a sock up hanging over the top of the stairs?

"Hello?"

No immediate answer.

Raine steps in farther. Calls out again.

He cautiously walks up the carpeted steps. The sock is attached to a foot which is attached to an outstretched female body, sprawled out face down.

Raine carefully rolls the body over.

Lejla. Jenn.

She's breathing. Raine gently shakes her.

A groan and a heavy blink.

"Are you alright?"

"Took him." Lejla's words come out like the most difficult task ever, pure exertion.

"Are you alright, though?"

Lejla looks like she's struggling under the heavy weight of gravity.

"Who are you?"

"It's Raine."

Lejla squints up at him. "They shot me."

"Where?" Raine scans her body for blood, a wound.

"With drugs." Lejla forces the words out through her uncooperating lips.

"Novillium."

“Yes,” she responds painfully. “Ian.”

Raine stands up. “They just left?”

“Bring me.”

Raine awkwardly lifts Lejla up under his arm and supports her like a limp rag doll. She drags her feet along and breathes heavily.

Raine surveys the parking lot, and doesn’t see anyone. *This can’t look good if someone does see me...*

He leverages Lejla into the passenger seat, buckles her in as her head lolls to the side.

Raine is in his seat and already on the move. “North?”

Lejla groans and closes her eyes.

He would take that as a “yes.”

The traffic is light along the Richmond beltway when Lejla comes around again. She shifts away from Raine, hand instinctively finding the latch on the door. Unruly hair, blonde with dark roots. Tired eyes. Sweatpants with a tank top, no shoes. Just socks.

“Who the hell are you?”

“It’s Raine.”

“The hell you are.” Lejla rubs at her eyes. “I’m not that far gone. What are you, some Novillium asshole here to clean me up?”

“I know I probably look strange to you, but I’m Raine. Really.”

“You don’t sound like Raine.”

“I know.”

“My head is pounding from whatever shit cocktail you injected into me, and I’m thinking about jerking the wheel so we fly off the road.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Because I’m supposed to believe you’re Raine?”

Ask me something only I would know.”

“This is dumb.”

“Seriously.”

Lejla shrugs.

“How about this: you have two small moles on the inside of your thigh,” Raine says.

“Oh my god, did you pull my pants down earlier?”

“No.”

“Creep.”

“I didn’t do that.”

“If you’re Raine, why don’t you look like yourself?”

“I don’t know how to explain it in a way that you’d believe.”

“Listen, whoever you are, you can let me out of the car.”

“On the side of a highway? Without shoes?”

“I want to get out of this car.”

“We need to drive to Novillium, to get Ian, remember? They have him. If I were with Novillium, I sure wouldn’t have let you wake up in the passenger seat of my rental car. Don’t believe I’m Raine—that’s fine. But tell me: do you know what they were driving when they took Ian?”

“They showed up in a white van.”

“That narrows it down. I’ve only seen about a dozen in the last hour.”

“New York plates.”

Raine muses on this. "Haven't seen them."

"They pulled up and I just knew, but there was nowhere to go." Lejla cringes. "I opened the door and next thing I know everything went blurry."

"Maybe he got away?"

"From Novillium?"

"Yeah. You're right." Raine checks his mirrors as he passes a tractor trailer. "You sure they took him up to headquarters?"

"Where else is there?"

"True."

"You know... you're drooling...?"

"About that. You think you can drive soon?" Raine wipes the drool from his chin with a shaking hand. "Things are about to get a little weird in here."

Raine observes her profile, wonders how much he cares. Cared. You get to know someone and then you become someone else, or they do. He watches Lejla drink from a half-empty plastic water bottle obtained during the trip to Norfolk, desperate to wet her tongue, a wedge of sandpaper in her mouth. Somewhere in the act she had become her character. She's Jenn now, she cares about the mark. She is captor and captive. And Raine doesn't hold it against her, doesn't judge. He reflects, as one can, fighting with the ghost thoughts, fighting the growing surge inside himself. Fighting the...

"We're pulling over!"

Cars blast by as Raine screeches into the narrow shoulder and throws the car in park. Lejla takes the driver's seat, with Raine crawling into the back. The entire car shakes as a tractor-trailer blows by.

"I still don't feel right," she protests, hands clutching the wheel as if to keep her from falling over.

Raine spits out one last frothy word before losing himself in a frothing seizure. "Drive."

And she does, leaning forward on the wheel, stepping on the gas with her socked foot and even squealing the tires a little as she merges back into the interstate traffic.

Raine lolls on his back, coughing and spitting, oblivious to Lejla's concerns. His eyes are open, but they don't see the cement-gray cloth ceiling of the rental car. They see bursts of light, and twisting strands. They see the personification of thoughts, they see faces in a carousel.

The agony is enough to consume him without blacking him out. His insides feel like twisting, like burning, like the groaning of rusty metal in the freezing cold morning. He sees the face he's stolen, Marlon's face, sees it screaming at him, sees a pig screaming, sees Marlon's face and the pig's face juxtaposed and screaming in harmony.

Gray-cloth ceiling again. It moves, it swirls, but it is real. It is there. It is really there.

DAMNIT

That was the—

DAMNIT

Lejla's voice cuts in, he sees her terrified eyes in the rear-view mirror.

"I should pull over."

"No," someone says, Marlon, Raine, who knew—

Yes, me, thinks Raine. *Yes.*

He feels himself overcoming the tenant of the past, murdering Marlon. The nasty brown serum had kept Marlon's remnants suppressed, had allowed his mind to squat in the body of another. *Not just the mind, the soul, my soul...*

Now it is taking over. Scorched earth.

"Seriously, I am pulling over. This is too much." Lejla sounds like she is going to cry, and she never sounds like that.

Raine pulls himself above the agony and twisting. "I'm alright... drugs wore off... it's okay... just..."

"Your face is twitching like crazy." But she drives, Lejla drives on...

Raine clamps down, rolls with the pulsating droning in his mind like a surfer on the big wave. He fixes his eyes straight up, because when he looks down he sees his skin rippling and it makes him want to lose it.

Interstates, potholes, ramps, roads and headlights in the night.

Somehow she keeps driving.

Somehow they are there.

Lejla pulls into an abandoned parking lot on the outskirts of the city where Novillium is headquartered. "You alive back there?"

Raine lies still, drenched in sweat. His arms are folded over his chest in vampiric fashion.

"I'm alive." Raine groans. "I could use a water, or a Snapple or something."

"You aren't kidding."

“And a bag of Combos.”

“Sure.”

“And a plan. We need a plan.”

“You mean we aren’t just driving here half dead and walking into Novillium and asking for Ian?” says Lejla.

“Haven’t really been thinking about it.”

“What’ve you been doing all this time back there? Having a seizure?”

“Yeah.”

“So, if you’re really Raine, where’ve you been?”

Raine laughs. It hurts.

“You’re a maniac.”

Raine sits up, feels his hands in the dim light. Is afraid to look at his face...

“Turn on the light?”

Lejla reaches up and punches on the dome light. Looks back at him.

“Shit, dude. I guess you do kind of look like Raine.”

Chapter 44

The light is morning glory pink and gold over the beaten brick facades in the old manufacturing district of the city. Plumes of smog rise against the fresh northern air, dissipating in nebulous columns. Raine and Lejla sit parked in an empty lot—no shortage of decaying asphalt to choose from in these parts. Raine shifts his position in the passenger seat as he feels his arm stiffen. Marlon's arm. Whoever's arm.

Lejla sees him wince. "Sure you're okay?"

"I think the worst is over," Raine says, based on nothing. "It's like my old body wants to take over this one, but it hasn't quite finished."

"Before we started working at Novillium, I would have thought you were crazy. I still might."

"Fair enough."

"So... you're really going through with this?"

The plan—there isn't much to it. Like stumbling across a bullet-riddled no-man's-land only to hand himself over at the enemy lines. No weapon... except maybe... himself. And Marlon's face. Raine reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. Shows Lejla Marlon Swift's ID. "What do you think? Look like me?"

Lejla observes the ID, reaches over. Touches the lines where his old face wants to emerge. "I can almost see you," she says.

"As long as they can't." Raine pockets the ID, rubs the scruff on his face. "Do I look shitty enough?"

"Yeah, you do."

"I feel shitty enough."

"What are you going to do when you get in there?"

"I'm not exactly sure. Just trying to get close."

"I want to come."

"Somebody needs to be on the outside... if we don't get out."

"That's not helping."

"Can you give me some acting lessons?" Raine asks. "In five minutes?"

"Weren't you getting plenty of practice in Sandy Knoll?"

"That wasn't really acting. Hell, I had to use my own name so I wouldn't mess up. I just basically played a different version of me."

Lejla shrugs. "Do you feel tense?"

“You might say that.”

“Before you go in, tense up all of your muscles, then relax. Control your breathing, in and out deliberately. Don’t try any funny voices.”

“Anything else?”

“Well,” Lejla says, “If they want this Marlon character as badly as you say they do, I don’t think they’re going to notice.”

“You know, you don’t have to be part of this. You don’t have to save Ian,” Raine says.

“Neither do you.”

“I’m really not sure I am.” Raine steps outside of the car, and stretches. His joints protest in a series of twisting pops and crunches. He shakes himself loose and stands aside the driver’s window. “If I get back out, I’ll meet you at our place, at the usual time. If not, don’t wait around.”

“Ollie’s.” Lejla’s confirmation has a note of wistfulness.

“Seriously, don’t wait around. If I don’t come back, it won’t matter to me. Or him.”

Novillium’s homeless center is quiet in the early morning. People straggle in, lining up for a hot meal and a cup of coffee. Raine falls in line, knows the routine. He’s seen it from the other side. The cameras were already watching, sending his face to the server to be analyzed by the facial recognition software, something Hansen had told him about, once.

Would it recognize Marlon’s face after decades of aging?

The keen look of interest on the man’s face behind the counter tells him “yes.”

Raine takes his eggs and bacon to a table across the room. Keeps his eyes focused on the food. Plays the part. Pretends he doesn’t want any attention...

But attention arrives, right on target.

A man appears from the back and stands beside Raine. His hand rests on Raine’s shoulder. Raine would punch him in his gut if he could—he hated being touched by strangers. But it’s time to play nice, he thinks.

Don’t upset the apple cart...

The man sports a big, false smile. “First time at the outreach?”

Raine chews at a wad of bacon, open-mouthed. “Don’t recall.”

“How’s the coffee?”

“Better than the bacon.” Raine swallows the wad of meat and chases it with the brown swill. “You waiting for a tip or something?”

The man politely smiles. “We’re randomly selecting clients today for an opportunity to earn some extra cash by completing a few surveys. Is that something that interests you?”

“Cash interests me.”

“Excellent. After your meal, we’ll put you on a shuttle that goes to the survey center.”

Raine peers up at the man suspiciously. “This some kind of trick?”

“No, not a trick. Just an opportunity to earn some cash.”

“Can I do it here? I’ve got to be somewhere later.”

“The surveys are only administered at the other location.”

“What kind of cash we talking about?”

“Each participant gets \$50.”

“Huh.”

“Shall I save you a seat on the shuttle?”

“This shuttle... can it drop me off downtown afterward?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Huh.”

The shuttle is conveniently waiting for Raine after he finishes his meal. It whisks him across town to the industrial district, and to Novillium. No one else on the shuttle, just him and that guy who’s a little too interested in him and trying to act otherwise.

Express trip.

Raine follows the man into Novillium, into the main lobby. The receptionist is there, doesn’t blink at the sight of him, no recognition at all. “Karl is waiting,” she says.

“Who’s Karl?” Raine asks throatily. “The dumbshit who’s giving me the survey?”

“So to speak,” says the man.

“He better have my fifty bucks,” Raine mutters.

Raine follows the man into the elevators.

Straight to the top level.

Well shit, Raine thinks. I guess they’re interested.

Karl Schmid attaches the sensors to Raine and trembles with excitement. He touches his screen gingerly, beginning the evaluation.

“You say you don’t remember your name?”

“Who wants to know?”

“As I explained, I am Mr. Schmid. I will walk you through the survey.”

“What the hell is a Mr. Shit?”

Karl Schmid grimaces lightly. “You may call me ‘Karl’ if you like.”

Raine shifts in his seat, touches at the sensors attached to his temple.

“Easy there... sir. Those mustn’t be disturbed.”

“Where’s this fifty bucks? In your pocket?”

Schmid’s face glows behind his screen. “The survey now begins. First, what is your name?”

“You deaf or something?”

“Excuse me?”

“You already asked me that.”

“Yes, but this is the first survey question.”

“Oh.”

“So...”

“I have trouble remembering which name.”

“Client is unsure.” Schmid taps the screen. “Next question.”

“How many of these questions are there? I’ve got to get downtown later.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Are you quite sure?”

“No.”

Schmid sighs. “Not to worry. Next question: where do you reside?”

“Like live you mean?”

“Yes, like that.”

“I’m not exactly the kind of guy that lives somewhere.”

“Where do you sleep?”

“In the pines.”

“In the forest?”

“I’ve been in a dark place.”

Schmid smiles, unable to suppress his eagerness. “Where is the dark place?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know.”

“Do you stay there often?”

“I’ve been there a long time.”

“Describe the dark place.”

Raine wants to smile, wants to laugh. Feels as insane as the character he’s playing, as the body he is living in. He shakes his head and mumbles incoherently.

Schmid watches the data from the sensors scroll across his screen and scowls. “Odd...” He returns to his questioning. “I am going to say some names. All you need to do is listen to them.”

“Marlon.” Raine lifts his eyebrows and laughs.

And laughs.

And laughs.

Schmid is a pasty porridge of a face. He sneers like he is thinking of a future revenge. He wipes his forehead with his handkerchief.

Raine laughs again, in a stutter, licks his lips.

“I am the founder of this institution and you will treat me with...”

Schmid trails off, feels his left pant pocket, slips out his slim phone, stares into the onyx of oblivion, puts it to his ear. “Yes, yes, I see... but is now really the best time?” Schmid carries on for a full minute babbling into the phone with a cascade of “buts” and hedging, until M. Bagot strides into the room with her gleaming white teeth extended over her lower lip in a biting expression, hand to phone, phone to ear. “No buts,” she exclaims, into the phone and into the room.

Schmid’s usual dispassionate expression gives way to simmering rage. “I founded Novillium, I make the decisions.”

M. Bagot leans in closely to Schmid’s face. “OMNIFERE has spoken. It wants him.”

“I will bring him—”

“It wants him *immediately*.”

Schmid glowers. He turns to Raine. “You’ve been summoned.”

Raine has been here before. Has Marlon? His body quivers as if he has. The underworld is dim; this place is a brightly lit hell. The windows that look out to the world have been blinded with horizontal slats, and the lights inside glare; in the center of it all is the OMNIFERE, that shifting shapeless

square within a square... the translucent void that was always never not there...

The reflectionless space, undefinable yet irrefutably shaped, has a guest, lying supine, head fully devoured by the godless space.

Ian Swift.

So you finally escaped from Sandy Knoll, kid...

Karl Schmid and M. Bagot stand in reverent silence, or perhaps indecision, as Raine remembers his brief interaction with the so-called OMNIFERE. Remembers the emptiness, the nothingness, knows what Ian is immersed in, helpless...

Raine is Marlon, is a father, is...

Raine tilts his head back and laugh-screams.

He licks his lips, languorous and lustful.

He wants to take Schmid by the neck and shake him, shake him, shake him lifeless and smash his skull into M. Bagot's gloating face...

"Silence!" Schmid erupts, his eyes bulging at the vagrant disrespect.

"Remove the boy," says M. Bagot, looking at Ian. "OMNIFERE wishes to inspect our guest."

"The boy, is he...?" Schmid asks in trepidatious hopefulness.

"He *is*," says M. Bagot.

Raine stares at the scene, stares at the travesty, stares at, stares... feels the surge of ghost thoughts, feels the body knowing its son, feels the fabric ripping...

The faithful are monitoring me.

I must die.

Before,

I let that thing... find me out.

Raine looks around, wonders how he can kill himself, sees M. Bagot's spiked earrings, has an idea... yes an idea, could rip those from her ears and...

Even as the idea forms in his mind a black spot appears before him, quivers, and grows... No doubt Lord Nergleton and Darko had been anxiously watching the graph lines in Kurnugi, including his... now they would be sucking in everyone around him in a last-ditch attempt to procure Ian...

"What is that?" Schmid asks, but M. Bagot is already turning to flee.

Ian is feeble on the floor. His eyes open and he looks up at Raine.
“Dad?”

The black spots quivers once more then expands and explodes into a brilliant flash of strands and space. Raine feels himself flying through, stretched and faded, juxtaposed in multi-dimensional space with the forms of Karl Schmid, M. Bagot, Ian and the rabble of the floors below.

Right onto the cold stone of the Underworld.

Chapter 45

There is that bitter metallic taste again, only this time Raine tastes it with borrowed lips. His borrowed skin and bones slump on the cold subterranean stone. Borrowed eyes find their focus.

It is a hideous unification; M. Bagot and K. Schmid joined at the head like conjoined twins, writhing on the floor. Pushing at each other, biting, and scratching. Novillium workers clad in white lab coats surround them in various states of composure and composition. Stubbles and the faithful workers, Stan and Wenzel, are already strapping them to carts and wheeling them away. Raine knows their destination—through dark tunnels to be cast into the belly of the beast. The surge had been large; the beast would hunger greatly.

And yet...

There is an electricity in the air...

Lord Nergleton gloats over the struggling duo of Bagot and Schmid, long-dark eyes sparkling with epicaricacy.

“Hello Karl,” he says. “My old friend.”

Schmid, unable to reply adequately as his mouth is twisted into his counterparts, merely hisses as he fends off a panicked strike from Bagot.

“You always wondered what happened to the souls that fed the beast. I presume you will discover that, if not too quickly. This is quite precious to me.” Lord Nergleton laughs raspily, catching himself up in a coughing fit.

“Enough!” Lady Eres strides into the fray. Her blue-steel eyes cut Lord Nergleton down. Even the tangled mess of Schmid and Bagot pause in the gravity of her presence.

“This is a holy moment,” she reprimands Lord Nergleton, without looking at him, for her gaze is fixed elsewhere. Amidst the twitching and groaning masses lies a still body, eyes gently closed, but breathing regularly. Untouched by the journey, Ian is surrounded by broken glass and cruelly wrought havoc. Lady Eres approaches like a ghostly goddess; taller, more beautiful, more terrible than her surroundings. She kneels before the young man and cries out in joyous song, notes not heard since antiquity.

“Untouched, yes, untouched,” she cries, “yes, I should have known it would be so. And here he gently rests, the key to Inanna’s Gate.

“Prostrate yourselves,” she cries out.

Stubbles drops his cart, having just returned from dumping two wailing scientists through the hatch and into the beast, and falls to his face in whimpering joy. Stan and Wenzel promptly follow suit, laying flat with their faces to the cold stone. Lord Nergleton drops to his knee with a withering creak of old bones, bows his head under the weight of holy expectation.

“May the gates of Kurnugi open before us!” shouts Lady Eres in overwrought emotion.

“May the gates of Kurnugi open before us!” squeals Stubbles in harmony with the faithful.

Lord Nergleton coughs out his response.

“Inanna’s key has been delivered to us! Joy, joy!” Lady Eres rends her clothing, tearing at her robes. She kneels over Ian Swift, takes in his being with a sweeping look. Gingerly reaches out and touches his forehead. Makes a sign over him.

“To your feet,” she declares, turning to the others. “Clear the refuse!”

Stubbles, Stan and Wenzel resume their task at double speed, with Lord Nergleton rising slowly up, a look of amusement spreading over his pensive face. He surveys the entangled pair of Karl and M. Bagot, and stoops over their writhing bodies.

“The truth you rejected will now embrace you.” Lord Nergleton motions to the Stubbles. “Let these two lead the way.”

Karl Schmid glares up at Lord Nergleton, pressing his lips together in resignation. His head shakes from the pulling of M. Bagot, who is lost in a frothing rage, spewing forth gibberish and saliva. Stubbles heaves the pair onto a cart with some difficulty and straps them in. Lord Nergleton reaches down and wipes a glob of spit from Karl Schmid’s face. “Goodbye.” The wheels of the cart clack along and away through the tunnel leading to the belly of the beast.

Raine, who is still figuring out how intact he made it through the journey along the stands, but finding it difficult to move, wonders if he counts among the ‘refuse’. *Certainly she’d honor a deal...* Of course that means seeing the possible return of Inanna, whatever that entails...

The clacking of the wheels grows louder as the empty cart returns from the tunnel passage. Stubbles pants and grunts, dropping down beside Raine. His fleshy hands seek out Raine’s limbs.

“It’s me, Stubbles, it’s Raine. Remember?” Raine looks up at the drooping face. “Your old friend Raine? In another body?”

Stubbles hesitates, then grins like an idiotic pug-dog. “Sorr-wee.” He flips Raine onto the cart with little effort.

“Wait, wait...” Raine struggles to move his arms, to resist, but feels like he is trapped under a heavy blanket... his arms don’t respond, but could, they could if he could just get through to them...

Leather straps cinch across his chest and tighten. Stubbles is still grinning, still muttering “sorr-wee” repeatedly, but not looking terribly apologetic. The wheels start turning, start clacking on the stone floor.

“Lady Eres, Lady Eres!” Raine calls out. He’s moving faster now, pulled by Stubbles toward the tunnel that leads to the belly of the beast... once entered it would only be a few moments before he was launched head-first into hell... and shat out in a pile of organic manure.

“Wait!” Lady Eres’s command stops Stubbles in his tracks, his grin quickly fading. “Not him, Stubbles, not him. We keep our promises, Stubbles, and we made a promise to Mr. Penton,” she chides. “We keep our promises—and he’s wearing a rented suit he owes us back.”

“Thank you,” Raine gasps, under the tightly drawn straps.

“Thank *you*,” says Lady Eres. “May Inanna’s grace be with you.”

Chapter 46

The room is birds;

The room is a hundred-thousand fluttering feathers.

The room is the heart;

The room is the vestibule to the other places.

Here lies Raine, again, on his back, on the stainless steel. Beside him is Ian, gently breathing. On a third table to his other side is his own vegetative body. It, not him. A shell. A primitive ventilator feeds it air. It looks vacant yet peaceful.

Now strapped to the table, Raine thinks about moving his feet, feels as if he should be able to... he can see his borrowed body intact before him, no visible deformation, although his insides could be another story...

If I could just move...

Lady Eres is light and airy and solemn and joyous, conflicting states of being, yet in perfect harmony. She wipes Ian's brow before anointing it with sweet-scented oil.

"May the gates of Kurnugi open before you," she whispers reverently.

Lord Nergeton adjusts the dials, checks the sensors, instructs the two faithful workmen in low tones. He is reticent in spirit, but direct in command.

"I will return," says Lady Eres, "to culminate the final rites." She floats from the room like an apparition.

The door clicks shut, and Lord Nergleton mutters under his breath. Sweat beads on his forehead, despite the coolness of the room. He checks the work of the faithful and stares pensively into his monitors.

Ian stirs, unbound on the table beside Raine. His eyes open and he turns his head weakly. "Is this death?"

"I don't think so," Raine responds quietly. "At least not yet."

"I've been in a dark place," Ian says. "A cold place."

"Yes," says Raine.

"I feel something is close to me. Something that has been following me." Ian turns his head back up to the domed ceiling of feathers.

"Electricity, a prickle... do you feel it?"

"Yes."

"I wish I could say goodbye to my mother."

"Don't say that."

Ian's eyes glisten. "Where is this place?"

"Underground... I guess. I don't really know."

"You aren't my dad."

"No."

"You're so familiar."

"I'm Raine. My body is over there."

"I feel like I was pulled out of myself and I'm not really back. I've been floating in the darkness." Ian turns his head back up. "I'm worried about someone."

"Jenn's okay."

"You know her?"

"She's waiting for you."

"I really like her."

"She likes you, too, kid."

"I don't feel like I'm going to leave this place."

Lord Nergleton curses at his monitor. He turns to the last remaining worker in the room and speaks to him in low tones. The worker leaves, head bowed. Lord Nergleton drifts between Raine and Ian on the tables.

"Discretion behooves us, does it not?" Lord Nergleton brings himself to Raine's ear. "Time is fleeting—have I your pledge of confidentiality?"

"Whatever you say, boss."

Lord Nergleton sighs. "When Lady Eres returns, the final rites shall begin. The pathway to Inanna's dimension shall be unveiled. And, if prophecies show themselves true..."

"You have concerns."

"Grave concerns. What is a joyous return for some, may be more fraught for others. Certainly for yourself."

"What about Ian?"

"The catalyst will likely be consumed in the event."

"I don't know if you've noticed, but I'm strapped to a table. I'm not sure how you think I can help you."

"Your original body lies naked beside you. Though it appears strapped, I have not fully connected the buckles underneath. Underneath the table I have placed a small dagger on the right side."

"My vegetative body?"

"Lady Eres will keep her promise to you—to return you to your body. To not do so would be the breaking of a covenant, and her belief system

will not allow it. She would fear it would jinx the final rites. No, she would not chance it.

“Shortly hereafter she will begin the final rites, which, incidentally, involve the sacrifice of young Ian to open the gate. She will be fully consumed in the moment... you will be an afterthought. Strike her down, before the act can be consummated.”

“If I fail?”

Lord Nergleton rises slowly and shrugs his shoulders. “Perhaps the prophecy is fulfilled, and Inanna returns. I am but a mortal man, like yourself. Long in the tooth, but ultimately stretched out. When the king returns, the role of the steward is over.

“Remember, the knife is below the table on the right side.”

Lady Eres returns, with a small entourage in tow. Glorious, she strides into the heart of the beast adorned in the ritual feathers collected from its sighing walls over centuries. Behind her trundles Stubbles with leash in hand, leading a familiar pig with human eyes.

Lady Eres floats to Ian’s side, caresses his cheek. “Today is the fulfillment of ten thousand lifetimes. An expanse of hopes and dreams, countless.”

“I can’t move,” Raine says, behind her on his steel table.

“Promises will be kept, will be kept. Yes, even now, promises will be kept.” Lady Eres kneels down to the pig. “Even my promise to you.”

The pig is tethered to the fore-post of Raine’s steel table, mouth muzzled to prevent any disruptive shouts. Raine pictures the scene from above: his comatose and unfilled body, next to himself in the shell of Marlon Swift, the pig who hosts the consciousness of Marlon Swift, and, finally, Ian Swift.

Stan and Wenzel wait beside Raine and Marlon’s bodies, holding syringes filled with dark contents, as Darko makes final adjustments.

The dials click,

Anodes are attached,

The dials click...

And the feathers rustle,

As the beast grumbles in disgruntled obedience—

Made to wait when the feast lies upon the table.

Compelled to perform the menial task before the sacred duty.

Raine feels the electricity, the strangeness, the radio static in his head. Feels like leaving, like exiting his body. Feels the earth tremble but nothing is moving.

Blurring,
And a blink.

He sees the same domed ceiling, but different, different. He blinks, and feels himself, at home... looks over and sees the abandoned husk of Marlon Swift.

The knife...

He can move his hand, yes, moves it slightly. Weak, but it responds.

A disturbance... the motions are made to transfer Marlon back to his body, but the particles won't flow. Lord Nergleton shakes his head from behind the console. Walks over to the body.

"It has passed," he says dismissively. "The soul cannot be transferred."

The pig hisses through its muzzle, fights the tether.

"Begin the final rites," Lady Eres instructs. "Remove the unnecessary."

Stubbles reaches down and untethers the pig. "This bway," he says.

But the pig slips its muzzle. It bolts, and Stubbles loses his grip on the rope. "Vengeance! Vengeance!" squeals the pig in fury. It beelines for Lord Nergleton and bites savagely into his lower leg. Cloth tears and soaks with blood in a terrible crunch of bone. The pig bites, and bites again, unable to lock his jaws on his victim. The weight of the pig and the surprise of the lunge sends Lord Nergleton reeling.

"Stop you foolish sow," Lord Nergleton cries out in agony. He falls onto his back, and the pig is quickly at his face, snapping and squealing. Lord Nergleton is wiry for his small frame and chokes the pig back, but the weight is severe, and pig's hooves beat at his chest. His resistance gives way, and the pig remains in his face, snapping savagely.

Lord Nergleton screams incoherently.

"Assist him," orders Lady Eres.

Stubbles and the faithful leap upon the pig pulling it back and jerking the rope attached to a choke collar.

"I am Marlon Pig" screams the pig, as it is pulled away by the workmen. "I am Pig Swift the Marlon!"

"Feed the pig to the beast," Lady Eres directs.

Lady Eres kneels at Lord Nergleton's side, and Raine berates himself for not acting. The moment had been so shocking he could not think to take

advantage of it. Now she is on the other side of the room, with the powerful Stubbles between them. In his weakened state an attempt would be futile.

Blood pulses from a nasty wound at Lord Nergleton's neck. Lady Eres caresses his face. "You have served well." Turning to Stubbles, she commands, "Feed him to the beast with the pig." She senses his hesitation. "It is his destiny. Even now, his life slips from him. Let his final moments serve the cause by nourishing the beast at the critical hour. Surely he will energize him like no other meal."

Stubbles takes Lord Nergleton by the hands. He protests, but cannot be understood through the gurgling, though the meaning is clear. His body leaves a trail of blood as one last gurgling whimper is heard before the door clicks shut after them.

Lady Eres steps before the monitor with no hesitance, makes a few minor adjustments with her bloodied hands. "The final rites now begin." She turns the dial and a humming grows in the room. The feathers vibrate as it grows louder. The beast churns in anticipation. Raine counts in his head, yes, about now, Lord Nergleton would be pitching into its belly, like so many before, along with poor Marlon Swift, the doomed pig.

Ian lies still, pale and silent. Raine calls over to him weakly. "You okay, kid?"

"I just felt her visit," says Ian. His voice is hollow.

"Who's that?"

"My mom. She's not suffering anymore. That's all."

Darko, who has been hovering in the periphery, appears above Raine and administers a shot. Raine stares dreamily upward.

Chapter 47

I could just lie here and let it happen.

Lady Eres keeps her promises...

She promised I could leave.

Raine tests the straps, flexing against them. The buckles are unclasped and the straps are loose as Nergleton had claimed.

Is the knife really there, too?

And, if it is, could I make myself use it?

Unless it's already too late.

Lady Eres chants at the foot of Ian's bed. The feathers are electric and alive, little shocks and bolts travel between them, covering the walls and ceiling in a sparkling display.

Stan and Wenzel have quickly returned from pitching the pig into the belly of the beast and are entranced by the scene with Darko, seemingly unneeded at this final stage. Stubbles has not returned, perhaps tarrying with guilt over disposing of his old master.

Raine reaches under the table. *Yes, there it is.* He slips the small, bone-handled knife beside him, stretching out his fingers to hide it behind his palm.

Lady Eres is silent now, as entranced by the room as the workers. The room almost sings, resonating with the beast that contains it. The light grows yellow then flashes bright white. An ethereal haze encompasses the space, along with the crisp, clean scent of ozone.

The other wormholes had appeared as black spots. This one is searing white. It appears before Lady Eres and Ian, the size of a dinner plate, hovering.

It's already too late, I waited too long.

And, what if...

What if killing Lady Eres destroys my only escape?

Raine hesitates. Would he drift along with the current, a spectator to the inevitable playing out before him?

Raine lifts his exhausted, drugged body with his atrophied muscles and one good arm, rolls off the table and onto his feet. Steps over Marlon's empty corpse. Lady Eres stands with her back to him, arms lifted in worship and reception. He raises the knife, brings it down.

She turns, catches the strike with her forearm, stumbles back. Again the knife plunges forward, and Raine with it. He finds himself on top of her, the small knife lodged under her ribs. Feels a sliver of regret as the betrayal registers in her eyes.

A frenzied shriek—Stubbles is at the door, has returned, has seen the attack on his sacred one and only. The creature's muscles are not atrophied like Raine's puny arm. He lifts Raine and slams him to the floor, lifts him again and hurls him, before collapsing in sobbing misery over Lady Eres.

Raine lies battered against the far wall. He knows he is broken, perhaps permanently. He stares into the white spot, wonders what will emerge from it.

Inanna?

The sparks run over his body, they stay with him, they charge him, he can stand, even. A last hurrah, a final push before the last collapse.

Lady Eres is whispering to Stubbles;

The white spot grows;

The beast, it strains;

Lady Eres has passed;

Stubbles rises in violent fury;

Screams at the white spot, screams at the room;

Smashes the computer, topples the table, rips the wires that spill from the wall.

The white spot persists, the size of a large window, hovering still.

Stubbles takes up Lady Eres in his arms, and steps through the white circle, into nowhere, vanishing.

Raine surveys the room, the damage, feels the damage inside of himself. Sparking energy streams over his body, and enables him to stand. The three workmen, the last of the faithful, look at the searing white circle, look at each other. Stan and Wenzel clasp hands and step through. Darko looks back briefly at the destroyed room, shrugs, and then steps in after them.

It is just Raine and Ian, and the body of Marlon in the sparking room of feathers.

Raine thinks about what Lord Nergleton had said, sees Ian's chest move as he weakly breathes.

"Ian? Kid?"

The wires are burning, filling the room with acrid smoke.

I'm not getting out of here.

No, you'll be leaving one way or another, responds the pain from his shattered body. *Might as well take one last trip along the strands.*

"We're getting out of here, son." Raine places his sparking hand on Ian's, clasping it.

Unprompted, his eyes close and he drifts into his subconscious.

Finds himself floating in the void.

There is Ian, floating beside him.

Raine opens his eyes to see the ceiling. He is lying on his back, somehow, with his former, crumpled body draped over him like a discarded wrapper.

The white circle hovers.

It stutters, threatens to disappear.

The machines are broken and burning; no trip back to the surface is waiting.

He looks at his hands, they are Ian's hands.

The echoes of Ian's mind dance with his own.

Pushes off his old body, crawls forward...

Only one way out, and it's through that portal...

Yes, he goes

Goes through the white circle

And into the blinding green

Sees a mother's face

That becomes

His mother's face