





# The Distended Eye

A collection of stories by  
Fredrik L. Knudsen

The Distended Eye. Copyright © 2016 Fredrik L. Knudsen

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover art and design by Elise McCall

Punctuation, spelling, and grammar editing by Alexis Casteel

ISBN-10: 0692647317

ISBN-13: 978-0692647318

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission.



# Table of Contents

We Await You

—

1

Bloated

—

67

Gideon's Song

—

103

Machina Urbis

—

115

The Distended Eye

—

167

*for Jean*



# We Await You

Demarreio's phone wailed an alarm through its tinny speaker and flashed the hour: 3:30 a.m. He hovered a finger over the screen, but refrained, letting it continue resonating through the room. Out of the corner of his eye, the unfamiliar, dark sky of Tromsø and the arctic beyond loomed over him. Eleven months were tangled in that sunless horizon, eleven months spent fighting for grants and arguing with department superiors and convincing a small team to come with him; he wasn't sure which had been the most difficult.

At length, he stood in spite of his grinding joints. The plush carpet pushed up between his toes as he stepped toward his window looking out at the sea. Waves rolled off to his right, pushing in from the arctic north. He swept his eyes left over the Atlantic, then finally grunted and turned back to his bed to shut off

his alarm. His covers lay in remarkable order—usually he would wake to find his sheets tossed about and curled around his limbs and tucked between his legs, but tonight the only fold was the square corner where he had thrown them back to rise. He spun and dropped himself on the bed, staring up at the textured ceiling rendered black in the Norwegian night. It was unnatural, he felt, the way that nights up here dragged on for so long, leaving no room for the day.

He shut off his alarm and closed his eyes in an attempt to enjoy his last few dozen minutes without the incessant hum of the boat's engine, but it was marred. It was always this way—the last time he had tried to escape was three years ago to celebrate his thirty-seventh birthday. He had gone into the hills, far from any city in order to escape the sound of machinery that pervades human-inhabited places, in favor of the forest's solemnity. But on the first day of his trip, during a hike over the hills, a plane had whined overhead with its repugnant, pattering motor, splitting the sky with a bright white contrail. That night, however, it was the hum of a heater, distant through the metal grate in the floor and rattling its way up through the ventilation tunnels. Most people, he knew, could eventually set aside the deep thrumming from the boat's engine, but for Demarreio it persisted always, rattling in his ears and his lungs, a reminder that he was never quite alone.

After only a few minutes on his back a knock

## *We Await You*

came at the door. “Hey, Demarreio, you awake in there?” It was Harriet's voice, quick and sure.

Demarreio only afforded her a tired groan.

“Well, come on. We're just waiting on you and Marx. Slow old people, the both of ya!”

Demarreio groaned again. The floorboards creaked as Harriet walked back to the lobby, the sound of her footsteps echoing in his head and dizzying him. He shifted upright and sat in the bed a while, staring out the window. The shapes of everything around him, the buildings outside, the lamp, the table, the door behind him—all were only suggested in the darkness. Off in the distance, the lights of fishing boats mingled with the cascade of bright stars overhead. He imagined the stars as teams of fishermen from great alien civilizations, each with a stake in the sea, waiting to dive down and scoop up their quarry.

He ran his palm over the scruff on his jaw and sighed. “No time,” he murmured as he shambled into the bathroom. He stripped off his pajamas and leaned into the mirror, touching the grey splotches in his facial hair. A few of them were likely acquired from the stress of obtaining the grant for this arctic trip. He stepped back and looked over his body, gripping onto his muscle and watching the skin pull taut. He had sacrificed much of his health to acquire his doctorate and perform his research. “Tribute to the blue and the white,” he murmured, recalling an old poem he had

published some years back, though he didn't like his old writing anymore.

It was only twenty minutes before he met up with the other three members of his team in the hotel lobby. Harriet was absentmindedly rubbing her thumb on the rim of a crumb-covered paper plate while Roberts and Marx were sipping on coffee. "Bout time you showed up," said Harriet, looking up at Demarreio and kicking her feet onto the table. Her frizzy blonde hair slid into her face, the black roots at her scalp betraying her efforts at youth. (Demarreio, however, suspected the aesthetic was intentional)

"Trust me," Demarreio said, "you don't want to get there early. We'll just end up standing on the pier for an extra hour." But Harriet appeared to lose interest and began fumbling with something in her bag.

"You want some coffee?" asked Marx. "There's some over there." She pointed a pale finger back at the far wall.

"Yeah," said Demarreio. He wandered over and pumped some into a paper cup, but hastily set it down again with a yelp and blew on his fingertips, cursing under his breath. Black coffee sloshed over the side and splattered onto the countertop.

"Hard to imagine being out there for two months," murmured Roberts. She flipped a page in her fashion magazine, something she had brought from

## *We Await You*

America.

"It's not that long," said Harriet. "Usually they're longer."

"Yeah," agreed Marx, "this is just a jaunt. There in a week, sail around for another six, back in another week. It's like a vacation." She set down her coffee and pulled her frayed, brown hair back into a ponytail.

"Hearing that makes me feel like a kid," said Roberts.

"Well, you practically are," Marx quipped back.

"I'm twenty-eight!" Roberts shut her magazine and dropped it onto the table.

"Don't worry," said Demarreio, "the ocean will make you old." He smiled and slid a cardboard jacket over his cup, then walked over to join the rest of his team sitting in their cushy chairs.

"Oh good, I feel so much better now," Roberts grumbled.

"Ahh, you'll be fine," said Harriet, patting Roberts's forearm. "You'll love it."

Roberts scrunched her lips at Harriet, then sipped her bitter coffee.

Demarreio blew on his drink and guzzled it down as fast as he could. Once he had finished, the three of them wordlessly donned their thick down coats and tossed their duffel bags over their shoulders.

It was only a fifteen minutes shuffle through the snow to the pier. They made their path through pools

of yellow light cast by high streetlamps on the powder-buried sidewalks. They spoke as little as possible, trying to minimize the amount of freezing air they had to breathe. Tromsø itself was silent; only the sound of labored breathing and snow crunching underfoot could be heard next to the ocean speaking from without, but much of that sound was swallowed up by the night and the snow. Finally, the team came upon a long, dark road leading out to the sea. There were no lamps on the path itself, and the four of them had to walk slowly to make sure they didn't trip or fall into a ditch. If they squinted, they could make out the road with wan light from nearby buildings and parking lots, but it still felt as though they were walking down the gullet of some huge beast.

It was a relief when, at last, they came upon their ship. The road crested gently down to meet the ocean, which was lapping hard in the winter cold. The pier jutted out from the shoreline, which was short with the tide, and ran parallel with it. The crew had assembled several hours earlier to make last-minute preparations for the trip, hauling large crates of research equipment, food, and a myriad other supplies onto the ship with a crane before opening them and hauling their contents into the hull. Smaller boxes were being loaded by hand on a thin ramp that ran up to the deck. A few of the crew glanced at the new arrivals, but only afforded them a moment of their attention. Adorning the side of

## *We Await You*

the ship in thin, white letters was the name: *RV HÅVARD*.

“It’s... bigger than I was expecting,” said Roberts, running her eyes along the clean, grey hull. The stern of the ship was weighed down deep, and the A-frame on the back hovered just above the water.

“It’ll shrink on you,” said Marx, heaving her bag over her shoulder and leading them down the snow-covered slope.

It wasn’t difficult to find the helm; there were only a few decks in the open air, and each was a bit smaller than the one below it. The door was swung wide open to accommodate the frequent traffic. Demarreio led them through the doorway. “Captain Moy?”

The captain swung around quickly; it was remarkable that his hat stayed on after such a flourish. “Ahh, you must be the bowhead researchers!” he announced with a large smile. His voice was laced thick with a Norwegian accent, but his English was clear. His wrinkles shifted as he spoke, and his well-kempt blonde beard bobbed with his jaw.

“Yes,” said Demarreio, “we’ve just arrived, and we were hoping to put down our bags.”

“Of course. Sæbø can see you to your quarters.”

Upon hearing his name, Sæbø turned and stood by his captain’s side. He was a short, stocky man with thick creases on his forehead and a natural resting frown that didn’t seem directed toward anyone in par-

ticular. They mumbled a few unintelligible words between one another before Moy addressed the team again. "It's good to have you all aboard," he said. "This is Sæbø, my first mate. I apologize, his English isn't the best, but he knows where to go."

"It's fine, we can follow him either way."

Captain Moy chuckled. "Ahh, it's good to have someone with a sense of humor." He scratched at his beard. "We haven't had many Americans on this ship. Having a whole team of them is... unorthodox?"

"Yes, well, it was a struggle to get aboard."

"Ahh, I see. Well, I must get back to preparations. Goodbye, mister... Brown, correct?"

Demarreio nodded. "Goodbye, Captain."

Sæbø led them out the door and through the mazelike corridors of the ship, and the team did their best to keep pace. "That was kind of awkward," said Roberts.

"Not really," Demarreio replied. "People in other countries have different ideas of awkward."

"Yeah," interrupted Marx. "Besides, you haven't seen awkward until you've done research in Japan."

"Ooh, I gotta hear this story," said Harriet.

"No. No you don't."

The oily smell of the ship waxed and waned as they crawled lower and lower into its belly. They negotiated their bulging bags through cramped hatches and rounded doorways until they came upon a long row of

## *We Await You*

compartments bustling with crewmen. A few of them stepped aside into open doors to make way for the team until they were brought to their compartment. The walls were lined with four bunks stacked two high, and a strong, white light hung from the ceiling. Sæbø nodded to them and left for the helm, leaving them alone with one another.

“It’s a little bit worrying that we’re so low,” mused Roberts, chucking her bag onto one of the high bunks. “What if the ship sinks?”

“Be thankful,” said Harriet, flopping down onto the lower mattress, “we won’t roll as much down here. Easier to sleep.”

“The captain seemed friendly enough,” said Marx. “Nicer than any I’ve dealt with.”

“Mmhmm,” hummed Demarreio. “It’s refreshing.”

“Do you think anyone else on board speaks English as well as him?” asked Roberts.

“I dunno,” said Harriet. “Sounds like they mostly work with other Norwegians.”

“Gonna make it kind of lonely.”

“Nawwhh, it’ll be fine!” Harriet threw an arm over Roberts’s shoulder. “You’ve got us!” Roberts recoiled.

“You mind if I take the lower bunk?” Demarreio asked Marx. “My joints haven’t been doing so well recently.”

*Fredrik L. Knudsen*

“Yeah, that's alright,” she replied. “You gonna be okay to dive?”

“Mhm. If anything, they're better in the water—takes the weight off of them.”

Roberts clapped her hands together. “Alright, what now?”

The rest of them stared at her. “Well,” said Marx, “we wait.”

“What do you mean wait?”

“I mean we wait until the boat launches, probably a couple of hours.”

Demarreio nodded. “The sailors are offloading our stuff for us, it'll be in our workroom. Then, we'll be recording every time one of the other teams is taking samples of water.”

Harriet raised an eyebrow. “I thought we were just taking recordings at our sites up north.”

“Yeah, well, it was one of the ways I convinced the college to let us on the ship. The team stopping the boat won't make their first recordings until a few days into the voyage, so we've got time to set up.”

“Says you. You're not the one doing it. When were you planning on telling us, exactly?”

“As soon as I got you three in person. And yes, I *will* be doing it with you. Head researcher and all that.”

“How many extra stops are we making?” asked Roberts.

“About eighteen, unevenly spaced. I'll get you a

## *We Await You*

timetable.”

Harriet made a gagging noise in the back of her throat.

“Oh, be mature.”

An announcement came in over the intercoms laced through the ship, and the four went silent to listen to the message—in Norwegian. After a few dumb seconds, Roberts asked, “Does anyone here actually speak Norwegian?”

Marx shook her head, Harriet shrugged, and Demarreio pursed his lips.

“Great. Just great.”

The message, as it turned out, was to inform the crew that they would be departing in about two hours, on schedule. The three more seasoned researchers split out across the ship to familiarize themselves while Roberts laid down in her bunk, taking in the strange new patterns unique to ships. Marx was right—it was shrinking in on her, and already she could feel her joints aching for an open area, though she knew there wouldn't be one. Resolving not to let the feeling overwhelm her, she shut her eyes and relaxed her muscles, focusing on her breathing.

She was jolted awake after what seemed like no time at all by the movement of the boat, and her eyes shot open. Again, that Norwegian voice blared through the speakers and rang through the hull. At first, she was

afraid the ship was capsizing, but she heard no panic from outside the compartment. Collecting herself, she ducked out of her bunk leapt down onto the floor, skipping the ladder altogether. She shuffled her boots on and took long strides down the hallway, maneuvering her way around busy-looking sailors and through open hatches to the main deck. She strode aft, hoping to watch Tromsø disappear behind them, but on the low, flat platform, the deckhands were stomping about, moving equipment and tools, leaving no room for a silent observer. With a wry face, she turned to walk up toward the bow and was met by a strong gust of arctic wind that bit at her nose and her cheeks. She used one gloved hand to pull her coat over them, inadvertently releasing a lock of black hair from under her hood which fell over her eyes and obscured her vision. Already she could feel her lips beginning to dry and split. With her other hand, she gripped onto the railing to resist the boat's incessant rocking, but her feet still shifted with each passing wave. She squinted her eyes and cursed under her breath before trudging back inside. The sound of the deckhands thumping and shouting disappeared behind her, replaced with clanging metal. She slammed the door shut.

“Looks like we were some of the first to get loaded up,” said Harriet before taking a big swig of milk. “Not that it matters. I thought Roberts was going to puke all of

## *We Await You*

yesterday.”

“This is the longest I've ever been aboard a ship,” Roberts groaned, rubbing the dark circles under her eyes. “You tell me your first trip was any better.”

“Actually I was fine,” said Harriet.

“I was okay,” said Demarreio.

Marx shrugged.

“Oh come on,” she whined. “None of you?”

“You'll probably be fine after a few days,” said Demarreio through a mouthful of potatoes.

“Yeah, I'm doing better today, definitely not as sick. I'm figuring out how to move with the boat. Still tired as hell.”

“You've got an appetite, at least,” chuckled Harriet, pointing at Roberts's massive plate of food.

“I didn't eat anything yesterday, I'm starving.”

“Well, eat up and get your strength back. You're gonna be setting up the hydrophone equipment with me today, plus everything else.”

“Can't we do it tomorrow?”

“Nope.”

Roberts cursed and nibbled at her toast.

“You doing okay?” Marx asked, turning to Demarreio. “You're looking tired.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he replied. “I'm just thinking is all.”

“Worried about the bowheads?” asked Roberts.

There was a long pause as Demarreio chewed on some egg. “Just didn't sleep well last night.”

*Fredrik L. Knudsen*

“Ahh, it'll be fine,” said Harriet, pushing back her hair with wind-cracked fingers. “If they're there, we'll find 'em.”

Demarreio afforded himself a smile. “With your ear to the water, yeah.”

“It's going to be tricky,” said Roberts. “Bowheads are pretty shy.”

“Don't believe it,” said Harriet. “Whales are chatty, doesn't matter what kind. If we get close enough to hear them, we will. Besides, you've got me listening in. I could pick 'em out in the middle of an underwater metal show.”

“Too bad you can't hear anything else,” said Roberts.

“I'm sorry, what was that?” Harriet glowered down at her junior.

“See what I mean? Can't hear a thing.” Roberts smirked.

“What do you think's eating Dr. Brown?” asked Roberts, pulling apart the packaging on the speaker.

“What do you mean?” Harriet was busying herself tying her hair into a fuzzy ponytail.

“You know what I mean. Something was eating away at him. Even Marx could see it.”

“Don't be fooled. Marx is probably the most sensitive person here.” Harriet gripped the speaker's handle.

## *We Await You*

“Well, what do you think it is? About Demarreio, I mean.”

“I dunno.” Harriet heaved the speaker out of the box. “Probably just worried about the whales.”

“Really?” Roberts balanced the speaker in Harriet's hands and guided it to its new home on the floor. “I'd think he's used to this by now.”

“You get those kinds of researchers sometimes,” said Harriet as she stretched her back. “They join up because they really care about their research, more than most people, and they never quite lose the passion. It's the only reason anyone really sticks with their PhD work.” She leaned against the desk.

“Yeah, but I feel like he knows something that we don't. It's eerie.”

“I think he does know something, but I wouldn't call it eerie. Science takes a special kind of intuition, at least at his level.”

“Why does he need me, then?”

“Awwh, don't sell yourself short.” She nudged Roberts's shoulder. “He picked you up for a reason.”

“Yeah, because he couldn't find anyone else stupid enough to do it. We're heading into the arctic ocean in the dead of winter—it's going to be perpetual night in a few days. Hell, it's 5 in the evening and it's pure black outside.”

Their conversation was interrupted as Demarreio knocked on the open door of the listening room. “You

guys, you've got to see this. Get your coats on and come outside.”

The two of them looked at one another, then bundled up and followed Demarreio and Marx. The door to the outside groaned with the effort of moving before opening to the freezing air on the aft of the ship. They stepped down the metal stairs to the A-frame, each footstep clanking quietly as they approached the low deck, illuminated in an odd green. Before they made it off the steps, they could already see why they were summoned: above them, in clear, precise ribbons, danced the aurora borealis, waving in incomprehensibly massive strokes, curling around itself and tapering away, with lacy blues twining along its edges. All of its colors were reflected off of the little rippling waves beneath them, surrounding the boat in lucent glory.

Marx glanced at Demarreio. “You know this isn't that uncommon up here, right?”

But Roberts, under the fluff trim on her puffy down jacket, was grinning.

“Alright, we're ready!” Harriet exclaimed over the radio.

“You don't have to talk so loud,” groaned Demarreio, who hung over Harriet's shoulder and stared down at the audio recording suite on the screen. “It's a radio, the signal caps out.”

“Exactly, so they don't have to worry if I talk loud.”

## *We Await You*

Demarreio sighed and spoke into his own radio. “We've got confirmation that the other team is done with the water sampling, we're good to start recording.”

“Took them long enough,” complained Marx. “Lowering the mic.”

“Be ginger with it. That thing is crazy sensitive.”

“I know, I know.”

Harriet's setup was remarkable. Even though the college had offered to loan her any necessary equipment (and indeed, all of the miscellaneous devices stacked up and secured above the table was the college's), a large portion of it was her own. There were three wide, flat monitors lined up with one another, each attached to an arm built into the desk. On the center screen was an audio editing suite with various buttons, marked by obscure labels littered throughout the user interface. On the right was a series of thin bars that jumped up and down along the bottom of the screen, measuring the wide range of sounds that their hydrophone could detect. On the left monitor, in bright colors, was an animated show, adorned by subtitles along the bottom in thick yellow lettering. The show was paused on a shot of a character lugging a sword several times larger than himself. Her desktop tower was bright blue to match the headphones hanging around her neck.

Harriet slammed the spacebar on her computer, and jagged waveforms began tracing themselves across the main screen. “We've got a signal,” said Harriet.

“Everything looks good.”

The room was uncomfortably quiet. The whole team had already grown used to the hum of the engine (except for Demarreio), and it was strange now to have nothing at all except for the distant clanking of crewmen moving about the close hallways. Underneath the A-frame, where Marx and Roberts stood, only the sloshing of the ocean against the hull was audible next to the sliding of the hydrophone cable through the gloves on Roberts's orange survival suit.

“Flick the speaker on,” said Harriet. “Looks like the mic's underwater.”

Demarreio nodded and reached around the casing, fumbling for the switch. A massive noise suddenly blared and he recoiled, covering his ears to block out the roaring. Harriet shouted something at Demarreio.

“What?” he yelled.

Harriet rolled her eyes and ran over and turned a knob on the back of the speaker. The sound subsided. “I said turn it down, dummy.” She sighed and returned to her seat, then brought the radio up to her lips. “Alright,” she said over the din of the speaker, “we're hearing it loud and clear in here.”

“Well, loud, at least,” Demarreio mumbled.

“How long did you want us to hold this?” asked Roberts, her voice distorted through the radio.

“I'd like a ten minute sample,” said Harriet, “not too long.”

## *We Await You*

“Christ, fine. I'll find a more comfortable position.”

The first few minutes were laborious, and soon Demarreio could feel himself growing dizzy and tired from all of the white noise. Harriet, on the other hand, seemed invariably attentive, listening carefully and scribbling timestamps next to indecipherable print on post-it notes then slapping them down loudly on the edge of the table.

As Demarreio began to reach his limit, he looked over Harriet's shoulder to see how much longer they had, and he restrained from grumbling when he saw they had only been recording for five minutes.

Then, Harriet frowned and squinted at her screen. She pressed a few buttons, and the recording began to roll by faster. “What's that?” she murmured, leaning in closer to the speaker and watching the measurements on her right monitor.

“What? What is it?”

“Sh-sh-sh,” Harriet demanded, raising her index finger to silence him. Demarreio's head cleared as he strained to hear whatever it was that Harriet was finding, but all that was audible was the roar of the gently rolling waves and the smooth current. Harriet continued listening closely for the last few minutes, mystified. She didn't write any more notes.

Harriet was frantically playing with the audio file as Roberts and Marx clambered back into the ship, lug-

ging their fat, orange ocean survival suits. Roberts was dutifully pulling the cable back into the room while Marx had set to washing and drying the hydrophone. “What did you find?” asked Marx once she had packed the hydrophone away.

“Shh!” snapped Harriet. Over the speaker, an indistinct section of the recording began looping.

“She’s been like this since about halfway through the recording,” whispered Demarreio. “She’s convinced she’s found something.”

“You don’t seem so convinced.” Marx matched Demarreio’s hushed tone.

“I couldn’t hear anything, just sounded like ocean noise.”

“Oi, shush!” yelled Harriet.

Marx leaned up against the wall, her suit crinkling, while Roberts held the halfway-coiled cable in her grip and stood ramrod-stiff to spare herself another ear-piercing shout.

As the recording looped back again and again, the three slowly became aware of a particular low moan growing more and more distinct. “Is that... whalesong?” asked Demarreio.

“It might be,” said Harriet. “Hold on.”

Over and over the recording looped as Harriet tweaked the settings, and each time the sound grew over the ocean roar until it was just distinct enough to differentiate.

## *We Await You*

“What *is* that?” asked Roberts. “I don't recognize it.”

“Me either,” said Marx.

“Demarreio, sound like a bowhead to you?” Harriet craned her neck to look at the doctor from her seat.

“I mean, it *technically* could make that sound, but it's like nothing I've ever heard.” He kept his eyes on the screen. The recording continued looping.

“We're still in the Barents Sea,” said Marx. “If it's injured, it could be close and quiet.”

“More likely an iceberg,” said Demarreio, “or maybe a wreck. We should check to see if there are any known or suspected wrecks around here.”

“I kind of wish you'd have pushed a bit harder for an array,” said Harriet. “Then maybe we could tell where this noise is coming from.”

“Would a wreck really make such a deep noise?” asked Marx.

“I don't know, it could,” said Harriet.

“We should probably let the captain know if it might be an iceberg,” said Roberts, pushing herself off of the wall.

“I'll talk to him once we adjourn,” said Marx.

“Sounds good.” Demarreio nodded at her.

They were silent for a moment, listening carefully to the sound as it repeated in its unearthly rhythm. Suddenly, Roberts's eyes went wide. “Wait, Harriet, can you make it more high-pitched?”

Harriet raised an eyebrow. "It's already pitched up, but I could pitch it up more, yeah." A few key-strokes and clicks, and the roar of the ocean rose to a wail. The signal behind it rose as well.

"Oh, now *that* is creepy," said Marx.

"Can you apply that effect to the few seconds after that?" asked Roberts.

Harriet didn't even respond before selecting the next thirty seconds and pitching them up. As she hit play, the whole team shuddered and listened, trying to discern from it the pattern they thought they could hear.

The clip ran through once before Roberts spoke up again. "It sounds like speech, right? I'm not the only one who thinks this?"

"Nah," said Demarreio, absentmindedly waving his hand as he stared at the waveform. "You mess with natural sounds like this enough and you start to hear voices in anything, especially with so much background noise."

"Still," said Harriet, "this is pretty uncanny." She slapped the spacebar, halting the playback, and rose. "Welp, I'm hungry. Let's go get dinner."

Harriet was already well into a story by the time Marx had returned. The rumble of the engine had begun again, and Harriet was overcompensating for it in her excitement. "So as the two sides of the wall ran right at

## *We Await You*

one another, some dumbass thought it would be funny to do something a little different, right? This gorilla-looking guy picked his target—me—then, as both sides were coming at one another, he tucked himself down, grabbed me at about waist level, and chucked me up into the air! For a second I was so high that I could see the whole crowd beneath me. At first I was worried that I was going to break my neck, but the crowd caught me, and I started surfing on them! It was so sick.”

“What's this, now?” asked Marx, dropping her tray onto the table with a clatter. The four of them had made a corner of the mess hall their home for meal-times, and other sailors seemed to give them a decently wide berth—whether it was due to their unfamiliarity with English or Harriet's loud voice was hard to say.

Roberts chuckled. “The great rocker Harriet Chung is regaling us with the story of how she got to meet a band.”

“Not just any band!” she exclaimed. “I mean Gojira, one of the kings of death metal!”

“You speak these words,” said Roberts, “and I don't know what half of them mean.”

Demarreio decisively changed the subject. “So what do you think that sound was?”

“Oh come on,” said Harriet. “I don't want to work while I'm eating. Besides, I still need to run that sound against other recordings. Anything we say right

now is just speculation.”

“Then speculate. Do you think it could have been an injured whale?”

Harriet took a sip of water. “I dunno, maybe. But when you hear whalesong, even from an injured whale, it's way more distinct than that. I'm gonna say no. Probably just ice breaking up.”

Demarreio looked unconvinced, but nodded despite himself and took a bite of his fish.

“So when exactly are we making our next stop?” asked Roberts.

“In a little over a day,” said Demarreio. “We're slated to start recording at about three a.m. day after next.”

The other three groaned.

“I swear,” complained Roberts, “I'm going to get home and none of the bars are going to be open long enough for me.”

“Boats tend to run on their own clock,” said Marx.

“BS. If they did, then they wouldn't have regular mealtimes like this. Why not just have an open bar or something?”

“I don't mind it,” said Demarreio. “Now that it's dark all day, it's nice to have some semblance of time-keeping besides the clocks.”

“God knows our sleep cycles won't keep track of it.”

## *We Await You*

“You'll get used to it,” said Harriet.

“Maybe by the time this trip is over,” Roberts moaned and scraped her fork along her tray.

“Yeah, then at that point you just gotta keep sailing. Join us,” hissed Marx, miming claws.

Roberts leaned away and raised an eyebrow. “Did the boats make all of you so weird?”

“You know,” said Demarreio, “I wouldn't be surprised.”

Demarreio leaned over the bow of the ship, watching the horizon rise and fall under the starlit sky. Sunlight had come and gone hours ago, and the northern lights were out again, though not quite as spectacular as before. The days were beginning to melt together in the darkness; sometimes, it took concentrated thought to discern which meal was the one he had just eaten. By his estimation, they had seen the last of the sun for the trip. The waves were beginning to grow as the days wore on, promising strong wind sometime in the future, but for now, the open sky still afforded him a clear view of the stars and the northern lights. He was humming some made-up song to himself in the key of whatever note the engine was making as Marx approached him quietly.

“Hey, you alright?” Marx's voice was muffled by her hood.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” replied Demarreio, barely loud

enough to be heard over the spray of the water. “Just can't help thinking of what's ahead of us.” His breath could be seen leaking out from his hood.

“What *is* ahead of us, do you think?” She joined him against the railing. “More bowheads? Fewer? None?”

“I've prepared myself for every contingency. I'm ready for when there aren't any whales left, but I'm also ready to see a strong, stable population. I'll take anything before the former, though.” He coughed in the dry air, spraying a cloud of condensation. “Sometimes I imagine the bowheads forgetting how much we've hunted them and coming up next to the hull, like other whales do.”

“You feel guilty?”

“Not guilty. I mean, I didn't do anything to them personally. I've done the opposite, even if the engine is churning out CO<sub>2</sub>.”

Marx chuckled.

“You can't help but feel bad for them, though. They're ancient creatures, some of them over two hundred years old. It hurts to be likened to people who slaughtered them nearly to extinction. It takes bloodlust to do that.”

“Well hey, maybe we get to be the ones to show them we're different.”

Demarreio turned to Marx, who was silhouetted in the light of the boat, and smiled a smile hidden un-

## *We Await You*

derneath his hood. Then, he looked out off the bow again, towards the sea, and squinted against the wind. They stood next to one another for some time, watching the world bob around them, the sea cast in a bright green.

At length, Demarreio spoke again. "Why did you decide to come up here?"

"You mean on the bow of the ship?"

"No, I mean up here." He gestured out to the water. "The black, the cold."

Marx thought for a moment. "I like the dark," she said. "It's calming. Lets you sort of retreat back into your mind."

"Yeah, I guess so." Demarreio scratched at his nose. "I dunno, though. I can't help but wonder what's out there, just out of sight."

"You ready in there?" Roberts chimed in over the radio.

"Yeah, you're good to go," said Harriet. "Drop 'er in."

"Oh, you mean Marx?"

"Hey, you can try."

There was a few second of silence before Roberts replied. "Lowering the mic."

A few seconds more, and Harriet spoke. "We're getting a signal." She nodded toward Demarreio, who stepped toward the speaker.

"You know, you'd think a ship like this would

have a better hydrophone suite built in,” he said, reaching behind the speaker.

“The ship's pretty big, but it's still specialized,” said Harriet. “Besides, I'm not complaining; I get to bring my rig. Anytime I get bored, I can play games or watch shows in here.”

Demarrio flicked the switch, and the roar of the ocean filled the room again.

“Sounds good,” said Harriet over the radio, “hold 'er steady.”

“I'll try,” said Marx, “but she's antsy. Not my fault if she falls in.”

Roberts's voice could be heard distantly over Marx's radio. “Not funny.”

Marx giggled.

Demarrio leaned up against the wall as the roaring filled the room, and dizziness assailed him once more. He began to lose track of time, but resolved not to bother Harriet by looking over her shoulder as she scribbled on her post-it notes.

Suddenly, Harriet stopped writing. Demarrio stepped behind Harriet and watched the bars on the screen jump in sustained, constrained arcs. “Harriet, is that a problem with the speaker?”

“I don't think so. Hold on, let me listen.”

Minutes slipped by with intense concentration before the radio crackled again. “We good?” asked Roberts. “It's been about ten minutes, right? My arm's

getting sore.”

Harriet hesitated before picking up her radio. “Roberts, pass the cord to Marx. We need a longer recording.”

“What? What are you guys getting?”

“Not sure. Just keep the mic in the water.”

“Will do.”

But just then, the sound stopped. They went silent for a moment, then Demarreio spoke. “Leave it in the water, in case it returns.”

Their muscles tensed, waiting for some horrifying sound to come through the speaker, but nothing came. Harriet turned her eyes back to the waveform and began scanning it carefully as Demarreio listened. Finally, as fifteen minutes ticked by on the recording, Demarreio called the two hydrophone operators back into the listening room.

Roberts and Marx shuffled down the hallway, the hydrophone in tow. “What were we recording out there?” asked Roberts.

“You tell me,” said Harriet. She queued up the recording at five minutes. At first they strained to hear anything, but then, clearly, cutting through the din of the ocean, was the rumble. “This is pitched up, but the sound was originally coming in at twelve hertz.”

“That sounds like what we were hearing before, just louder,” said Marx.

“A little bit.”

“Can you pitch it up again?”

“Way ahead of you.” With a few swift keystrokes, an altered version began playing.

As they listened, the room began to feel colder, and the blood drained from their faces. This time, none of them could mistake what they heard. Mingled with the high-pitched whine, in clear, deliberate English, were the words: “*We... await... you.*” Though it was a human language, somehow, it didn't sound like a human was speaking it—the vowels melted into one another, and the “T” in “await” was closer to a click.

“Shut the door,” murmured Demarreio, but nobody responded. He repeated, louder this time, “Shut the damn door.”

Roberts ran over and swung it closed, cringing as it slammed into its socket.

“It has to be a prank,” said Marx. “One of the sailors probably has a speaker they're putting underwater.”

“Bullshit,” quipped Harriet, slapping the spacebar to stop the recording. “An underwater speaker that could make this clarity and frequency would cost hundreds, if not thousands of dollars. I doubt any of the crew are willing to spend that much on a prank.”

“We can't rule it out, though,” said Marx, sliding off her orange jumpsuit. “I mean, what else could it be?”

“Could be military,” said Roberts as she helped

## *We Await You*

Marx out of her suit. “Maybe they're testing something. You know their horrible track record with ocean noise.”

Demarreio cut in. “They could have said anything. They could have quoted Shakespeare or a Led Zeppelin song or spoken in code, but instead they said, ‘We await you.’”

“Here, hold on,” said Harriet, “I have the recording from the other day queued up. Listen.” She hit play, and again the strange rumbling pulsed from the speaker. “Those low drones we were hearing? They're the same pitch as this message, just quieter. All I had to do this time was copy-paste the same effects we applied for the old recording. Listen, they're speaking the same words in the exact same way, just quieter. That's why it didn't sound like words.” She stared at the waveform. “What I wouldn't give for an array right now.” She pouted up at Demarreio, who shrugged.

“Could be a message for someone else,” said Roberts, “and we're just intercepting it.”

“I don't think so,” replied Harriet. “Each time, the messages started almost exactly five minutes after we started recording.” She looked up at Demarreio. “I think this message was meant for us.”

They were all silent for a time as Marx helped Roberts with her jumpsuit. Finally, Marx spoke up: “Think we should tell the captain?”

“No!” spat Demarreio. The rest of them were taken aback by his sudden adamance, which suddenly

dissipated. “I mean, we don't have anything concrete, right?” He paused and licked his dry lips. “We'll take one more recording. Our next scheduled stop is in about eighteen hours. All three recordings will have been at erratically different times, at different intervals. If the same thing happens again, then we'll talk. Until then, I'd recommend putting it out of your minds. We're done for now.”

The other three nodded, and Demarreio opened the door again. “We speak of this to no-one.”

“Who are we going to tell?” asked Roberts as she walked past. “Nobody on this boat speaks English.”

Demarreio sighed and shut the door, leaving the rest of them to clean up.

Though there were still eighteen hours until their next recording session, Demarreio knew he could spend a few of those hours checking certain things. First, he connected his laptop to the shipboard internet and checked on live feeds of boat positions, even shelling out a couple of dollars for subscriptions to new ones in case they had information the others did not. It was just as he expected: the only ships anywhere nearby were far behind them—mostly fishing vessels. But the locations of military ships were oftentimes kept secret, so the possibility remained. It would still have been peculiar; usually when the military made a ruckus in the ocean it was to test sonar, but this didn't seem to be anything of the sort.

## *We Await You*

It had taken him two hours of slouching over his laptop in his bunk to deduce this information, and his eyes were beginning to itch. He shut the screen and slid under his covers. His eyes burnt as he closed them, but it was a relieving burn. Very slowly, he felt himself drift off into a fitful sleep.

“Doctor Brown, I have something for you.” Harriet's face hung over his, her hair draped down in a messy curtain.

“If it's a kiss, I don't want it. Your breath stinks.”

“Ha ha, very funny. Seriously, Demarreio, this is important.”

Demarreio gripped onto the bars of the bunk above him and tugged himself upright, then swung his stocking feet over the side and hunched over. “What is it?” he asked, his voice deep and resonant from his nap.

“I ran the numbers on a hunch I had,” she said. “Our last audio recording was taken at the edge of the Barents Sea, and we're cutting a straight line through it to our first dive site.”

“Right.”

“Okay, so I got to thinking, we couldn't be certain of where the sound was coming from, but we knew that the audio signal was coming at almost exactly the same time in the recording after we dipped our hydrophone.”

“We already established that. There's no evidence

other than coincidence.”

“But what if it isn't? What if they know more about us? So, I approximated the decibel level of that voice we heard against the noise, then used those to project the decibel level if—well—if the sound is along the line we're traveling.”

“What makes you think it's stationary?”

“I'm not sure,” she said. “It's impossible to tell with a sample size of two. But working on my hunch, I tested the projected loudness of the sound if it was coming from our first dive spot.”

“What did you get?”

“About one-hundred eighty-five decibels, give or take.” She massaged one of her temples with her fingertips, then moved them to massage her shoulder.

“You can say it, Harriet.”

She paused and looked at him before sitting down on her bunk, across from Demarreio. “Doctor, what if this thing's waiting for us, whatever it is?”

“Then we have to meet it.” Demarreio spoke without hesitation.

“You—you really mean that, don't you?” Her eyes widened despite the dry air.

“We're scientists. It's our job to explore the unknown.”

“I guess, but this feels wrong. I can't be the only one of us that thinks this.”

Demarreio's brow softened. “It's not a matter of

## *We Await You*

feeling right or wrong. Besides, this may all just be a prank. We'll know more soon."

Harriet nodded, then stood. "Food's just about ready. Roberts and Marx are probably waiting for us."

"Harriet, wait."

"Hm?"

"Those sounds—what frequency were they again?"

"Twelve hertz. Why—?" She froze in place. "Oh my god..."

Demarreio slowly lifted himself to his feet, feeling his joints creak. "Don't jump to any conclusions yet. We need that third sample before we can say anything for certain. Keep this between us for now. Okay?"

"But why? Roberts and Marx have a right to know."

"Know what? We don't *know* anything for certain. We just have theories and speculation."

"Yeah, but—"

"Harriet, if that third sample falls in line with your hypothesis, then you can share it. But please, just for now, don't say anything."

She swallowed in a dry throat, then nodded. "Alright."

"Come on," he said, "let's go eat. And Harriet?"

"Yeah?"

"You did good."

She relaxed a bit and smiled. "Well, I mean, it's

not like it was hard. It's just algebra—simple algebra at that—“

“Harriet.”

“Yeah?”

“You did good.”

“Thanks, Demarreio.”

Each of them was somber as they sat down at the table. The food that they had enjoyed during their trip now seemed unpalatable, and even the smell was off-putting.

After a few minutes, Roberts looked up at Harriet. “Could you say that again?” she asked. “I couldn't hear that.”

“I didn't say anything,” she replied.

“You sure? Silence from you is unlikely.”

Marx chuckled. “I think she's like a motor,” she said, “she mutters when she's not talking, but the ship's engine covers it up.”

A smile cracked through Harriet's face.

“Hey Harriet,” said Demarreio, “tell them about the time you got kicked out of a concert for talking over the band.”

“Hey hey, that's not nice,” said Harriet, but her growing grin betrayed her.

“I heard once,” said Marx, “that Harriet got into a shouting match with a whale—and won.”

All four of them broke out into laughter.

“Hey,” said Harriet, “it saves me money. When

## *We Await You*

the horn in my car broke I didn't have to replace it. Now I just roll the window down.”

Demarreio squinted his eyes and started wheezing through a huge white-toothed smile, iridescent against his skin, and the rest guffawed, filling the mess hall with mirth. A few irate sailors shot them looks, but a different few couldn't help but smile at their infectious laughter.

The joking and laughter died down but never quite dissipated, rising back up as they thought of new ways to roast Harriet, and, of course, Harriet would be the one to laugh the loudest.

However, as they were nearing the end of their meal, Captain Moy stepped into the mess hall. The other sailors watched as he made his way through, stepping around tables until ultimately approaching Demarreio and his team. “Doctor Brown?”

The mirth faded. “Yessir, Captain Moy.”

“Would you meet me on the bow of the ship? I'd like to have a word with you.”

The other three looked perplexed, but Demarreio didn't seem fazed. “Of course,” he said. He stood and followed the captain, leaving the remainder of his mashed potatoes to grow cold on his tray. The faces of the remaining members turned sour, and they each grabbed their trays and stood, with Marx dutifully taking Demarreio's.

Moy led them out to the dark bow of the ship.

The still night air was frigid, and Demarreio was shivering even underneath his thick jacket. Moy, however, showed no sign of noticing the chill in the air. Clouds obscured the night sky in dark patches, and the horizon was covered wholly, promising rain. Their footsteps clopped loudly in the quiet of the ship's open front deck.

"You have good people with you," said the captain at length.

"I like to think I have a good eye for them."

"You cover your feelings with platitudes, Doctor Brown. I can see your pensiveness."

"I appreciate your concern, but we're just buried in our work."

"It's unbecoming to lie to your captain." He brought a gloved hand to his face to scratch his nose, and condensation plumed from his nostrils.

Demarreio shifted his weight. "What did you want to know?"

"There's nothing I was hoping to ask you," he said. "And even if there were something, I'm not sure I'd want to know." He gazed up at the clouds. "I don't know what to make of you, but I do not envy you. Something great is approaching you."

"How do you know? That something's coming for me, I mean."

Silence. Then, "There are many ways to approach the same conclusion." He turned to Demarreio and

## *We Await You*

placed a hand on his shoulder—it was heavy, far heavier than he was expecting. “I want you to know that, as long as you're aboard this vessel, your burdens are shared.”

“I'll try not to pass my burdens to you,” said Demarreio.

“No, that's not what I mean,” replied Moy with a more familiar, gentle smile. “I'm telling you to share them.”

Marx crackled through the radio. “Ready to go out here,” she said.

Harriet looked up at Demarreio, dark circles underlining her frown, and Demarreio nodded. “Drop it in,” ordered Harriet. Outside, Roberts was again holding the hydrophone, despite Marx offering to do so. Each of them wore a furrowed brow, and their muscles were taut underneath their thick, orange jumpsuits. Marx released her tight grip on the cord and Roberts guided it as it slid down into the tar-black water. Back on the computer's right screen, the bars jumped wildly with the sloshing of the sea, and the recording began. “We've got a good signal,” Harriet said.

She and Demarreio watched the screen together, the waveform tracing across the screen. Seconds ticked into minutes, and Demarreio began to pace back and forth, his shoes clinking against the metal floor. Occasionally, he would peer over Harriet's shoulder to see

that ten, fifteen, twenty seconds had passed since his last inspection.

“You guys getting anything yet?” asked Marx.

“One minute 'til,” said Harriet.

“Alright, well, don't leave us in the dark.”

“Was that a pun?”

“Screw you.”

Outside, clouds scuttled overhead, and as Marx and Roberts looked up at them, they felt they could reach their hands up and run their fingers through them, the droplets like nanoseconds sifting by.

The timer ticked past five minutes. “Clench your buttcheeks,” said Harriet. A few seconds later, low bursts of droning came through the speaker, a deep bass that rattled Harriet and Demarreio's bodies and shook their organs. Demarreio felt sweat pooling on his back and under his arms.

“We're getting it,” said Harriet through the radio. There was no response, but still, the hydrophone transmitted its signal.

They left the hydrophone in for fifteen minutes again, and again the message lasted five minutes before ceasing entirely. Harriet ordered the hydrophone coiled and halted the recording. Roberts and Marx rushed back into the room, peeling off their suits. As they helped each other, Harriet prepared the recording.

“Shut the door,” said Demarreio, and Roberts quickly obeyed.

## *We Await You*

“Ready?” asked Harriet. They all stood in anticipation. Harriet brought her finger down on the spacebar.

There again was the mantra, far louder than the noise of the ocean this time: “*We... await... you... We... await... you... We...*” On and on it droned, repeating that dull litany, rattling every loose piece of metal in the room.

“It sounds clearer this time,” said Marx, “like it’s learned how to speak better.”

“I hear it, too,” said Roberts. “Sounds more human.”

Demarreio licked his lips. “Well, Harriet? Does it fall in line?”

“Let me check a few things.”

Roberts raised an eyebrow. “Fall in line? With what?”

“Harriet had a hypothesis,” explained Demarreio, “that whatever’s making this noise is speaking specifically from our first planned dive site.”

“And she’s using the decibel level to see if we’re moving directly towards it,” conjectured Roberts.

“Right.”

The room went silent for a few seconds while Harriet clacked away on her computer and cursed under her breath, murmuring something about passwords and obtaining ship positions.

“So wait,” said Marx, “if we do assume we know

the location of this thing, then we can guess the decibel level. What's it come out to?"

"One eighty-five or so."

"And the frequency?"

"Twelve hertz."

Roberts stared down at the ground for a moment, her eyes flitting back and forth. "Wait, that would mean it could be..."

Demarreio nodded.

"Got it," shouted Harriet. She looked at a notepad next to her desk with simple equations lined up and certain numbers circled, checking her approximations, then turned toward Demarreio and gave a nod. "It lines up."

"This is insane," said Roberts. "It's got to be something else."

"Well," replied Demarreio, "we'll find out when we arrive in a few hours."

Roberts looked at Demarreio incredulously, then at Harriet. "You can't be serious. You're not diving down there with that thing."

"I'm in." Marx stepped forward, eyes leveled at Demarreio, and extended her hand.

He gripped it hard and nodded. "You know, I would have gone in without you."

"Honestly, I'm with Roberts—I think you're nuts. But if you're right, I wouldn't miss this for anything."

## *We Await You*

Roberts sighed. “Well at least I don't have to be near the water.”

“Excuse me?” said Harriet. “You'll be holding the hydrophone in. We're recording all of this.”

Roberts's jaw dropped. “But you'll already have the dive cameras!”

“Redundancy.” Harriet's voice was serious, but she couldn't hide the grin on her face.

Roberts tripped over her words a few times, half-formed words slipping out of her mouth, until finally she took a deep breath in and sighed. “Fine. But this is the last time I do anything for any of you.”

“Uh, what are you all doing?” Demarreio peeked his head into their sleeping compartment and saw Marx, Roberts, and Harriet all huddled up on one of the bunks, shouting and cursing and laughing as they stared across to the other bunk. Plastic controllers rested in their hands, connected to an outdated gaming console that was wired to one of the flat monitors from the recording room, propped up against Demarreio's duffel bag.

“Hey! Demarreio! You wanna join?” Harriet was reluctant to tear her eyes from the screen. “We're just about to finish a race—Roberts, don't you dare throw that shell.”

“Oh, I'm going to,” she said through a malicious smile.

“Marx, I thought at least *you* would be above this,” said Demarreio

“Yeah, well, clearly I'm not,” she said before spitting a curse at Harriet, who had worked herself into a tizzy.

“We're about to encounter what could be one of the most terrific scientific discoveries of the century, and you're—what is this? Kart racing?”

The three of them set their controllers down in their laps. Roberts raised her fists into the air while Harriet slumped and sighed. Marx, however, looked up at the doctor and smiled. “Room for one more.”

Demarreio looked at them, then at the screen, then at the controller that lay on the ground—it was already plugged in. A few moments passed before he shook his head and smiled in spite of himself. “Alright then, but I warn you, I'm terrible.”

“Don't worry, we all are.”

“Hey!” shouted Harriet, “Speak for yourself!”

“Alright, you're all set,” said Roberts as she cinched down Demarreio's nitrox canister. In his lap sat his full-face mask, glinting in the white lamps lighting the deck. Perched atop the glass of the mask was a small camera with a wide lens like a curious child's eye. Just behind them, the ocean sloshed against the ship, beckoning them. Any light from above was obscured by the heavy clouds that had set in, but, mercifully, no rain made a

## *We Await You*

showing.

Harriet's voice crackled loud through the radio. "Test your mics, boys and girls."

Marx and Demarreio fit their masks over their faces. The sound of the regulators sucking in air was loud in their ears. "Test, test," mumbled Demarreio, his voice muffled.

"I'm not getting anything," said Marx, who had done the same.

"Did you turn it on?" asked Roberts.

Demarreio paused, then took his mask off and inspected the inside. He gave Roberts and Marx a sheepish look before flicking the switch and affixing it to his head again. "Test," he mumbled.

"Loud and clear," chuckled Marx.

"I'm reading both of you fine," said Harriet, whose voice now came through the headset mounted in their masks and through Roberts's earpiece.

They both stood and hobbled to the edge of the boat, where, only a few feet below, the black water roiled. Roberts handed them their fins. "Be careful down there," she said gravely. "Both of you."

"We will," replied Demarreio. He smiled, an expression that was difficult to make out from behind the regulator. "Welp, we don't want to keep our guests waiting."

"We'll be right here." Roberts put a hand on Demarreio's shoulder.

Demarreio gave her a nod, then turned. After taking a deep breath and cringing in anticipation, he dropped himself into the sparkling water and filled his suit and BCD vest with air. Even under his suit, the water was biting cold, but he couldn't feel any leaks. He kicked himself out of the way and Marx followed without hesitation. Once they had affixed their fins to their boots, Roberts handed them each their fat, yellow floodlamps, then retreated to prepare the hydrophone.

As the dive team was dropping into the water, Harriet was busying herself with preparations. A second recording suite was open next to the first on the left-hand screen with their old recordings plastered on it and the effects window open. She was rapidly peering up at that particular window and back down to a notepad, copying down the numbers with a ball-point pen.

Then, from behind her, boots clopped along the metal walkway outside the door. She turned, and in stepped Captain Moy, ducking to accommodate his cap through the entryway. His brow was furrowed, and he held something tightly in his fist. "Are they in the water yet?" he asked flatly.

Harriet nodded and flicked her microphone off. "They just went in. What do you need?"

Moy nodded back, then peeked over Harriet's shoulder at the screens. "I was wondering if I could listen."

Harriet clenched her jaw, but nodded again.

## *We Await You*

“Something wrong, captain?” Harriet spun partway in her chair to look at Moy and threw her arm over the backrest.

Moy shook his head and pursed his lips. At length, he spoke: “How do I say this... I've seen signs.” He unfurled his fist, and in his palm lay a black stone speckled with impurities; against the roughness of his hand it was like a gem. On its front was carved some Nordic rune, its meaning lost on Harriet. “Nature is saying things, and even someone like me knows to heed the gods when they speak.”

Harriet raised an eyebrow. “Wait, what are they saying?” She gently plucked the stone from Moy's huge hand. Somehow his presence had grown so that it seemed he stood taller than any room could accommodate.

“I'm not sure. But it's a warning, and not for me.”

“For who, then?”

Moy sighed. “I think it's for Doctor Brown.” He sat down in an extra chair by the wall in the cramped space. “You've been making yourselves scarce, and I won't pry. But I would be remiss if I weren't here to help. I believe I need to be.”

Harriet peered into Moy's eyes; they were like smooth ponds hemmed in and sheltered by high, rough cliffs. She sighed and nodded, then flicked the switch on her headset again.

*Fredrik L. Knudsen*

“Harriet!” shouted Demarreio into his mask.  
“Harriet, you there?”

“Yeah! Yeah, sorry, I'm here. Everything looks good on my end. Roberts, go ahead and drop the hydrophone.”

“Will do.” The hydrophone plopped into the water.

“Hydrophone readings look—wait, what the hell?”

“What is it?” asked Marx.

“It's... it's whalesong. Loud. I mean really loud.”

“How many?” asked Demarreio.

“Just the one, as far as I can tell.”

“Alright, let's dive,” he said. Marx nodded, and they both raised their BCD valves and pressed in. The sound of hissing air signaled their descent, and it slowly petered out as they sank into the featureless water beneath them. As their heads breached the barrier of the ocean, they could hear what Harriet was referencing: from what sounded like every direction was a beautiful whine, soaring high and then dipping low beyond audibility in a bass that shook their bodies.

“How deep are we going?” asked Marx, who practically had to shout over the song.

“Thirty feet.”

“And then what?”

He pressed the rubbery button on the top of his floodlamp, sending light cascading through the water.

## *We Await You*

“Then we wait.” He pulled his backlit dive computer into view and watched the depth drop steadily, and Marx followed in silence. After only a few seconds he slowed his drop with his BCD. “Thirty-three feet and holding.”

“The song's getting louder,” said Harriet.

“We can hear it. Marx, get your light on and start searching.”

Marx activated her floodlamp, sending out pillars of light which disappeared into the distance, swallowed by the darkness. Plankton and other random bits floated through their field of view, and shadows of nothing morphed in and out of sight. At each sign of a specter they would snap their lights over to inspect it, only to see those white columns pass through into the endless abyss. Constantly, the high-pitched, whining whalesong burbled louder and louder, an omnipresent wail rattling their bodies and battering their ears.

And then, all at once, the song stopped.

Harriet spoke through the communicator. “I'm not hearing anything, you guys okay?”

“We're fine,” said Demarreio. “But we don't see anything.”

And then he felt something heavy nudge his back. He shot around as fast as the water would allow and swung his light forward. Before him, encompassing his entire field of view, was a massive, jutting jaw. In panic, Demarreio cried out and kicked backwards,

pulling more of the fleshy mouth into view, which waited, motionless.

Marx wheeled around and brought her light upon the massive form, and was paralyzed.

“What? What's going on?” Harriet spoke frantically.

“We were right,” muttered Demarreio. “It's a bowhead whale.”

And then, once again, a sound filled them from every direction. But this time, in place of a song, there was a voice. Every sound was articulated with the utmost care and precision, neither male nor female but instead something perfect in between. And in this voice were spoken the words: “Hello, Demarreio Brown and Caroline Marx.”

There was silence for a time as the two divers marveled, their eyes wide. Marx's mouth was as agape as her mask would allow.

Finally, Demarreio collected himself. “Can—can you hear us?”

“Quite clearly.”

“So you—you are a whale?”

“Yes,” the bowhead replied.

“And it was you that spoke to us all those hundreds of miles away!” Somewhere in the distance, the two divers heard Harriet call Roberts into the recording room.

“Indeed.” Its voice was patient and ancient.

## *We Await You*

Demarreio tried to speak several more times but could not quite find the words he wished to say.

“Are you alright?” the whale asked with genuine concern.

“Yes,” said Demarreio, “I’m fine. I just have so many questions!”

“I will do my best to answer.”

Demarreio choked before finding his voice again. “How long have you been waiting here?”

“About ten days. We knew when you would be coming.”

“But how? How did you know?”

“You are a unique individual, Demarreio Brown. Your mind and your body are not so close as most others, and the thread connecting them is more exposed. It’s difficult to describe, but...” Its voice trailed off into a deep, thoughtful rumble. “We found we could place a hook on that twine.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We—how do I put this? I’m sorry, language is not something I’m used to. We could see certain of your thoughts and discovered your approach.”

“Wait,” interjected Marx, “if you’ve been here ten days, how have you avoided the orcas?”

“Oh, I haven’t avoided them. They were remarkably understanding.”

“Understanding? Can you speak to them, too?”

“Closer to a suggestion.” The bowhead rumbled

in thought. “There is much for you to know. Perhaps it would be best if I were to—as you say—fill in the gaps?”

Demarreio nodded. “Yes, of course.”

It burred once before speaking. “Humans are unique on the world in a certain way. For most animals, their minds and bodies are one, indistinguishable from one another. But humans, you have an... understanding that the others do not. Your minds and your bodies exist alongside one another, close and inseparable, and yet they do not consume one another. It is... miraculous.”

“You keep saying 'us,’” said Marx. “Who is 'us'?”

“You see, Caroline Marx, an animal's mind and body are one, and a human's mind and body are separate yet tethered. And then, different from both, there is our kind. We are adrift; the connection to our bodies is weak, like a strand of hair many miles long. Indirectly, our bodies carry our minds as they drift through the sea. But this weak bond does afford us a simple advantage: we may speak with one another despite distance, though we have no control of our bodies to act on any deliberation.”

Demarreio spoke up like an eager student. “So you're close to others of your kind, other bowheads, even now?”

“No,” said the whale, “for I have done something that most others cannot do: I have grown close to my body temporarily so I may perform the task of speaking

## *We Await You*

to you. I am only close to two now, humans with that longer strand between mind and body. You are one of them. Though I cannot seem to communicate with you without language.”

“Wait, who's the other?” Marx interjected.

“The other was far more receptive, closer to us. His mind seems to have a stronger connection. We couldn't quite speak with him, but we could give him a certain... you would call it a feeling.” It paused. “You know him as Captain Moy. I believe he's listening right now.”

Demarreio was quiet for a moment. “Is that true, Harriet?”

Harriet crackled through the comm system. “He just kind of... walked in.”

“So wait,” said Demarreio, returning his attention to the whale, “you manipulated him?”

“We could only give him the sensation that you were in danger. We could not force him to act.”

“I'm in danger?”

“You may be.” It was silent for a moment before it spoke again. “Our discussion may have attracted... unwanted attention. Moy's presence may yet hold it off.”

“Hold what off?” Marx asked.

“It's... difficult to describe. It gave itself a human name, though.”

“What is it?”

“Machina Urbis.”

“Latin?” Demarreio puzzled.

“Yeah,” said Roberts. “I think it means 'Machine of the City.'”

“There isn't much time,” the whale said. “I must ask something of you.”

“Of course.”

Again, silence persisted for a moment as the whale chose its words. “You have the capability not only to speak with others, but to act, and you have changed the world around you. Our bodies can only move and act through instinct. We were hoping you would share the secrets of your connection. Please, tell us how you have tethered your minds and bodies so closely. I beg you. Even my weak connection with this body is the most that any of our kind have mustered, and my time has been ecstasy. Let us feel the joy of touching the water around us and filling our lungs with air and exploring the oceans that we inhabit.”

For a long while, the three of them floated still in the water. No sound interrupted the silence as the whale waited patiently for an answer. Demarreio thought hard, trying to make sense of everything. Marx watched him as he floated still, his joints bent, his fins barely swaying to keep himself aloft. She marveled at the incredible ability he displayed even floating there, his skills honed by dive after dive, over a dozen years of it in his aging body. She thought that, in another life, he

## *We Await You*

may have been a whale himself. Up on the surface, Harriet watched a minute scratch by on the waveform.

Finally, Demarreio gently kicked his fins and brought himself closer to the whale. He pressed his palm against its lower jaw. "I'm afraid," he murmured, "that right now, we just don't understand the way that your minds work. I could barely recognize your description of it. We are still trying to recognize how our own minds work. Maybe one day, with enough research, we could help you, but right now I don't think we can."

The whale was silent again for some time as Demarreio held his hand against that great maw. Minutes passed while the whale rumbled deep in thought, shaking the sea with each sound, passing in and out of hearing range. Cold penetrated through the dive team's gear as they floated in the freezing water, surrounded by a mass of nothingness.

Finally, after what felt like an age, the whale spoke. "I see. Thank you, Demarreio Brown and Caroline Marx. I hope that, one day, we can meet under better circumstances. But now, I am tired, and my body is hungry. I must let go. I hope to meet you again, and it has been a pleasure speaking to you." And the whale tipped its massive form down, pushing Demarreio away. It began swinging its fluke in long strokes, pushing itself deep into the inky black below, nearly dragging the divers along with it in its wake, and a lonely song echoed through the water again.

At first Demarreio was stunned, but as the bowhead began retreating to the depths, he cried out: “Wait! You can't go yet!”

“It's okay,” crooned Harriet in his earpiece. “Let him go.”

“No! There's so much I have to ask!” He pressed in on his BCD control, and a massive plume of bubbles roiled up from him. He began sinking down into the abyss.

“Demarreio!” Marx shouted after him, but already he was well out of her reach. She drained her BCD as well and started kicking down after him.

“Don't stop me, Marx!” he screamed in the comms, his voice cracking. “I can't let him go!” But even as he spoke, the bowhead's body was sinking beyond sight.

Marx checked her dive computer: she was 70 feet deep, and that number was increasing quickly. She guessed that Demarreio might be another ten below her as she cast her floodlamp's light on him, but as they descended, he grew increasingly obscured. They continued sinking, down, down, and yet farther, their descent accelerating as the pressure around them increased. “Demarreio,” she cried again, “stop!”

And then, a familiar voice spoke through the comm system. “Doctor Brown, this is Captain Moy. I am ordering you to cease descending immediately. This is not negotiable.”

## *We Await You*

Demarreio froze his legs mid-motion, but his breath was still loud in his microphone.

“Inflate your BCD!” shouted Marx into her comm, “you're still sinking!”

Demarreio obeyed, and his descent slowed to a crawl, then ceased altogether. Marx caught up with him and inflated her suit as well, then grabbed his shoulders, weaving her arms around the tubes. “Demarreio,” she murmured, just loud enough to activate her microphone, “you alright?”

But he was silent. Marx could feel his body shaking, and his breath plumed from his regulator in erratic bursts. After what must have been half a minute, he spoke: “He's gone,” he murmured. “He's gone. He's gone.” Tears tickled at his cheeks as he struggled to even out his breathing, and all around him the darkness pressed in, collapsing the world into a small bubble just large enough for him and Marx. Their floodlamps still cast light, but all there was to illuminate was the gently shifting arctic water.

Marx checked her dive computer, then looked back to Demarreio and stroked his arm. “We're at one thirty-five feet. We need to get back up.”

“I can't,” murmured Demarreio. “I can't ever go back up. Not after this. I can't just leave them like this.”

“You can still help them. Think about everything we know now. There's so much work to be done, and they need us. They need *you*.”

Demarreio's breath bubbled in a deep sigh. He nodded.

Marx fished for Demarreio's BCD valve and fit it into his hand. "Let's just get to fifteen feet."

He nodded again, then released air into his vest. They began to rise ever-so-gently through the empty black. Marx turned off both of their lights and attached them awkwardly to her dive belt, then watched her computer to gauge their movement. She held onto Demarreio's free hand the whole way, occasionally murmuring to him and making sure he was still aware. He gave no answer, but still, his ascent was perfectly controlled.

As they rose, Marx signaled him to slow. "We're nearing fifteen feet," said Marx through the comms. "We're making our safety stop. Can you see our bubbles?"

"Hold on, let me look," said Roberts as she ran out to the back of the boat. "Yeah, I see you guys. You're about twenty feet behind us."

"Good."

The rest of their five minute stop was silent. Marx held Demarreio's hand in a tight grip as they floated in the darkness of the arctic ocean. Not even they were visible to one another, though occasionally a thin thread of light from the boat's lamps would penetrate through the short waves.

After what felt like hours, they popped up

## *We Await You*

through the surface, and Demarreio followed Marx all the way back to the boat where Roberts was, ready to take their fins and help them up the ladder. Also awaiting them were Harriet, who had wrapped her coat around herself tightly, and Captain Moy, who still wore only his captain's uniform. Demarreio and Marx sat down on the benches and peeled their masks off of their faces. Roberts helped Marx strip off her tank while Harriet helped Demarreio. As soon as she was free, Marx dashed over to Demarreio, got down on her knee, and took his hand in hers. The stinging cold had already frozen the tears on Demarreio's cheekbones. "It's okay," murmured Marx. "It's okay."

Demarreio was silent for a moment, but then he slumped down to his knees and collapsed into Marx's arms. He wept openly, his cries disappearing into the chill ocean and his tears freezing as they dripped down his cheeks. Roberts and Harriet stood for a moment, but soon, both of them had come to either side of Demarreio and embraced him, though it was made awkward by all of the thick suits and coats. They held each other like this for some time as Demarreio cried and cried, the image and the song of the sinking bowhead repeating in his mind. And all that time, Captain Moy watched over them like a lighthouse, silent and calm.

Once Demarreio could muster the strength to stand, they all worked their way back into the listening room. The three field workers stripped their suits off,

while Harriet ran to the mess to fetch them some hot chocolate. Moy busied himself assisting the divers with their drysuits, seemingly unconcerned about getting his uniform wet (or any of his other duties). It was almost twenty minutes by the time everyone was in warm clothes. They sat in the hydrophone room for almost an hour, slumped in their chairs, their shoulders heavy. The only time words were spoken was when Sæbø came down to have a short exchange in Norwegian with Captain Moy.

The silence was broken by Harriet. “Well,” she said, “what now?”

“What do you mean 'what now?'" snapped Roberts. “We just witnessed the birth of a whole new interdisciplinary field of study!”

“Maybe, but I mean, what do we do with this info? Do we just walk back up to the university and say, 'Hey, yeah, we totally got these recordings, we didn't make them up or anything, trust us.' They're going to think we're crazy, or that we're trying to trick them. Like we went to a special effects artist or something.”

“It's possible,” said Marx. “I wouldn't blame them for thinking so.”

“It doesn't matter what they think,” said Captain Moy. “You have to present the data you've acquired—you have a duty to present it. Whether they believe it or not is up to them.”

Demarreio inclined his head to look at Moy. “But

## *We Await You*

if they don't believe us, then none of us will ever be able to find work again. And then we'll never get a chance to do anything at all for them." He bowed his head again. The room fell into a privileged silence.

Harriet stood up and stepped over to Demarreio. "Well, no matter what anyone else thinks, I'm behind you," she said.

"I'm with you, too," said Marx. "If they want to discredit you, they'll have to do the same to me."

Roberts looked at Marx, then up at Harriet, then sighed. "Well, I guess I don't have much of a choice, do I?" she chuckled. Her grin disappeared quickly as the other two stared at her. "Hey, I meant that sarcastically."

Demarreio smiled, but his language failed him.

Captain Moy stood and stepped next to Harriet. "Doctor Brown," he said, "I think you worry far too much." He turned to Harriet. "Would you please take Demarreio's camera footage and put it on your computer screens?"

Harriet paused, then nodded. "I mean, yeah, I can. Why?"

"Just do it. I'll be right back."

"O—okay. Yes sir."

"What's he doing?" asked Roberts after he had walked out of the room. "Doesn't he at least want to look at it?"

"Guess not," said Harriet, grabbing Demarreio's

camera off of the desk and hooking it up to the computer, where she changed the display to duplicate the video on each screen. The rest of them sat in silence as she scanned through the video. Eventually, she came to the bowhead, its body engulfing the lens. "It's gorgeous," she murmured.

Captain Moy's voice blared over the intercom and echoed down the hallways in unfamiliar words.

"I'm learning Norwegian when I get back," proclaimed Roberts.

Once he was finished, they could hear commotion in the halls behind them. In groups, men and women were filing into the room, pushing the team closer together and crowding around the computer screens. After only a minute, the whole ship had managed to squeeze its way either into the room or into the hallways around it, making the air hot and moist. Finally, the captain spoke again over the intercom, this time in English: "Would you please play the video from the beginning?"

Harriet swallowed in a dry throat and did as he asked. The room and hallway were consumed with sound: Demarreio forgetting to turn on his comms, Roberts wishing them luck, and then the sound of them descending into the sea. As the bowhead came into view, the crowd murmured, but as it spoke, the audience went dead silent. The team looked at one another. Roberts smiled knowingly, but the other three were

## *We Await You*

perplexed. Harriet paused the video just short of Demarreio chasing the whale into the deep. Once she paused it, she looked over to Demarreio, who nodded knowingly and smiled his thanks.

There was a deep murmuring among all those present, but it was cut quiet by Moy's voice through the intercom again in Norwegian. Once he was finished speaking, the crowd bustled their way out of the room and hallway, again murmuring to one another. The team followed them into the mess hall, where Moy was awaiting them, his chest puffed up high. Once everyone had gathered, Moy's voice enveloped the whole room in a deep, piercing baritone, speaking in grave and grand tones and gesticulating widely so that the crowd had to follow him with their eyes. He went on for several minutes, occasionally gesturing back to Demarreio and his team, and when he did, the whole room would turn to look at them. The further the speech continued, the more often crewmembers would look back at them in awe. A number of them were leaning forward with their chins resting on their hands, and nobody spoke a word.

At last, Moy asked them a question, and the crew all raised their hands together. Captain Moy spoke a few more words, and the crew dispersed with purpose in their steps. A few of them walked up to the team and shook their hands, and a few attempted to congratulate them in broken English.

Once the crowd had thinned, Demarreio weaved

*Fredrik L. Knudsen*

through the tables to Moy. “Captain, what's going on? What did you tell them?”

“Everything,” he said with a patient smile. “We're heading back to Tromsø; this information can't wait.”





# Bloated

Welcome. Please, take a seat, and keep the lights off.

I know what you're here for. Well, I can guess. You want to try and move me, study me, see everything that Rick's done. I wouldn't recommend that—I believe I'm quite fragile now, and I've been so for some time. So tell me, how much do you know of Rick's work? By your frown, I'm guessing that you've discovered it. Oh, of course I can see you; I've grown quite used to the darkness in here. It's not like I can get up and open the drapes, after all. If you're looking for any other original test subjects, I'm sorry to tell you I just don't know, and I doubt you'll find them. He probably, well, "cleaned up after himself." He hated incomplete things.

An interview? Well yes, of course, though I'm willing to bet you don't want to know much about me—I'm remarkably boring. No wild adventures or parties

in the city or anything like that. I'm guessing you want to know about Rick. A lot of this you most likely know already, I'm guessing. But maybe I can bridge some gaps? Oh, you know more than me I'm willing to bet. Still, I'll try to make it worth your time.

Where is he? Well, my memory's not quite what it used to be, but I can try if you like.

I remember bits, such as meeting him. Back then, young love caked over all of his flaws; I guarantee you I'm remembering his muscles larger than they actually were. I first saw him swimming in the pools in college, the University of—uhm, I'm so sorry, I'm forgetting the name.

Hm? Yes! That's the one.

Anyways, in the big rec center, there were two pools lined up next to one another, with this big hot tub off to the side, and sometimes Rick would sit in the hot tub after his swim and watch me do my laps. Oh, I knew he was watching, but I would never let *him* know that. I'd just swim and swim, and he'd watch me, thinking he was being so sneaky, stealing glances and looking away when I noticed. This went on for a week or something, and I was hoping he'd eventually come over to me, but he never did. So you know what? I went right on over to him instead. Sat right down in the tub and asked him out. And, of course, he said yes. It took a few more weeks before we actually had time for a date, but we'd see each other all the time in the pools and

## *Bloated*

we'd sit in the hot tub and chat. Sometimes I'd tease him about his name making him sound like a porn star: "Ricardo Delgado." I gave him so much flak for it it. He took it in stride, of course, saying that I was the one who had asked him out and that I must have liked it. I'll admit, I kind of did.

The butterflies never really went away, but my appreciation for him grew as I learned more about him. Once I got a feeling for his personality, I just wanted to know everything about him. Our first date was at this cheap little restaurant that he seemed fond of. I wasn't so convinced about the food, but I didn't care. I just wanted to hear him talk. He had this way of understanding the world. He'd work from an idea, something that seemed impossible or illogical, and then trace his way back through discovery, like the old geniuses would. Something in the mind of a genius puts everything together before they truly understand it. That's what it was like with Rick: he had ideas, and he wanted to learn how to justify them, which was why he was in college.

He believed, and was fond of saying, "The Renaissance man is dead" and that a person must specialize, but ironically, he was always searching for a way to combine all of the new passions he was discovering. It was wonderful to watch in the beginning. He went after several different degrees at once: electrical engineering, then neurochemistry, then physics—I can't

really remember all of them, I know there was at least one or two more. When he arrived in college, he explained, he hadn't intended on getting so many. Money opens doors, however, and his family was willing to empty their massive coffers on his education, just not a whole lot else. It was remarkable, I thought, how much money his family made from owning cemeteries. When he got his degree in three years, he realized how much more there was to learn, and he set himself to the task of understanding everything that interested him.

We started dating during his second year, before he'd added on so many other degrees. Dates usually consisted of talking about the new things he was learning and getting my perspective on them, then listening as I introduced new ideas that I was learning through literature. He had talent in the hard sciences, but I was studying the humanities, which eluded him. That didn't stop him from trying to comprehend them, though. He chased new ideas like a child chases butterflies. Discussion only became more common when we moved in together.

But, as much as he loved the sciences and learning, you know what he loved most? Me. He was always so busy, but every day, he would find that bit of time set aside for me, and I could feel his passion for me whenever we made love. His touch was so gentle, and he would whisper these things in my ear that made me feel like a Greek sculpture, the way he praised me and

## *Bloated*

held me. Those years I realized, despite myself, that I'd love him forever.

I got my degree on time, of course. I'm only normal. Journalism. I was at the tail end of my junior year when we started dating, so after about seventeen months I had my degree and was out the door. When Rick learned I had a job offer from a publication a couple of hours away, he told me to go for it. He was excited for me, though he knew he'd miss seeing me even though we had weekends together. He joked about how he wouldn't be able to learn anymore, since I wouldn't be there to help him study. That was something we did, you know; we'd lie in his full-sized bed, still naked, and I'd quiz him on his material. We would be cold from our sweat, but he said that the cold focused him. He wasn't very good at reciprocating, but he really did try. Helping study, I mean. Language wasn't his strong suit. Sometimes I think it haunted him. But still, after I left, he studied just fine, in some ways even better, while I was off making a name for myself writing for a local publication and making just enough to get by.

During this time, however, I watched something begin to fester inside of him. He seemed burdened by something ineffable, something that only he could understand, though I don't think even he comprehended it back then. Realization grew on him over time as bits and pieces of that idea manifested independent from

the whole. Maybe, if he could have communicated his thoughts better, he could have understood it, and maybe I'd have been able to help him before any of this happened. As it was, I could only watch as this nameless burden grew.

Despite his good grades, his professors all tended to dislike him. It was that way before I graduated, but I think it got worse after I left. One night, during a phone call, he told me about how one of his professors described him as a skyscraper that had no rebar until halfway up. I told him that the only stuff worth the concentration was the stuff up top, and if you know the bottom stuff well enough you're fine, that they're self-explanatory. He agreed with me, saying that the foundations were just obvious, that concentrating on them too hard was a waste of time. I remember the fervor in his voice, something that hadn't been there when I left.

Once he was finally content with his wide breadth of knowledge, he started applying for jobs at other universities. His professors begrudgingly wrote letters of recommendation. With all of his talent, it wasn't difficult to find himself in a research position at a prestigious college studying the human brain; he was a prodigy, a genius. The only catch was that his job settled us a firm two days away, even farther apart than before. Still, the wonders of the modern age allowed us to stay in close contact, and I talked to him every night. During our video calls, he would pull the locket I gave

## *Bloated*

him out of his shirt. I would imagine him sitting down at lunch, stroking it gently. I brought the thought up to him once, and he said that he would sometimes detach it from his neck and hold it underneath the desk, running his thumb along the edge of it, feeling for a bit of my warmth inside. In turn, he'd given me his old pocketknife, a tiny thing made of wood and brass, an object I carried with me everywhere. Not much good for cutting or anything else, really, but I kept it sharp. It made him happy when I started absentmindedly flicking it open and closed. Sometimes, while watching television, I'd press the point into my fingertip and watch the skin flex inward, just before it became painful.

We would see each other occasionally. A two day drive brought it just within reason to meet at a hotel somewhere in between and keep each other up all night, particularly when one of us had a huge project coming up. The sex was passionate, but it was always so rushed. The whispers were gone, and he would grip me rougher. In our afterglow, he would run his fingers over me, starting in one particular spot and moving on to the next, observing me in pieces. I felt like I was being dissected, even when he would tell me what lovely hands I had or how soft the skin on my chest was. Compliments were paid to a particular part of me instead of all of me. His touch began to feel obscene. I understand now why it felt so, but at the time I felt like it was something I'd done. I figured it was just because of that

old cliché: only scandalous sex could be had in a hotel room. Eventually I convinced myself to enjoy that feeling, and it gave me a rush, like I was committing a taboo. Or maybe it's retrospect that gives me this feeling. I don't know; I forget sometimes. Can the memory of touch be erased if the nerves are destroyed? Of course I remember a hand on my skin, but not the sensation. I wonder if the rot has traveled along my nerves and into the parts of my brain that would remember such things.

Perhaps it was selfish, not being content. After all, I was in a relationship with a prodigy, possibly the brightest mind of the new century. But I felt colder, paralyzed. Neither of us wanted to leave our work, but leaving one another was out of the question. We were stuck, forced to talk with one another over video calls and be content with that.

In the meantime, my job was progressing nicely. I had a couple of pieces going at any given moment, and I wrote about everything, from entertainment to politics. I found a niche writing about the city's food, something I enjoyed thoroughly. I... can't remember the restaurants, but they were top-notch, definitely. I miss food, you know? Of all the things Rick did to me, taking away food was probably the most inhuman, though definitely not the worst. I don't feel like I'm starving, but you know how you sit down to a really good meal, and you eat it up, and you feel like all is well? I miss that feeling. Making food, too, especially when it was with

## *Bloated*

Rick. We'd make these amazing homemade lasagnas and eat half of them in one sitting. I attribute the five pounds I gained in college to making those huge dishes.

I'd built up a reputation as a journalist when he finally proposed, four years after I'd moved away. I tried to ask him what we would do, how we would live together, and he said that it was all worked out: he was making enough money to take care of both of us easily while I found a new job. The university really believed in what he was doing, he explained, and they had granted him a sizable salary as incentive to do his work there. I wasn't sure what to say at first; I was too insulted that he thought I'd be willing to drop my job without consulting me first. In the end, my old publication was able to set me up with something, but I still felt degraded for being the one who had to quit.

The wedding was a relatively small affair. Most of the people were Rick's family and coworkers, but I was just glad to see my parents again after four years. They told me that my grandparents were a little too frail to make the trip out, but they knew I was marrying someone good, and that they trusted my judgment, which had always been so strong. My parents agreed, they said, and they were smiling the whole time. Coworkers of mine who saw him looked him up and down and nodded with approval, marveling at what an amazing "catch" I'd found: brains, looks, and money don't always come together.

Rick's side of the family, however, was different. They seemed sickly and tired, and their eyes all had massive black circles beneath them which were accentuated by a pallid complexion. They moved in twos and threes with downcast gazes and pensive looks, and they all slouched as though their bones were too heavy for their bodies. Their jawlines were narrow, their shoulders were narrow, and their brows all came to worried, furrowed points. Whispers and mumbling were all they could manage, and none had any inclination to initiate conversation at all. They stood in stark contrast to Rick, who had full, firm skin, a shapely jaw, broad shoulders, and a fine posture. None of it seemed to come from any of them, but Rick insisted they were his blood relatives. He even had the DNA tests to prove it, since the issue was brought up so often.

His coworkers, on the other hand, were plenty lively—I think they ate almost all of the food. At the reception they were constantly slapping him on the shoulder and shoving hors d'oeuvres in his mouth, like it was some kind of inside joke. They were mocking him, saying “Eat now, while you can!” And Rick would shove them away and give a seeming-chuckle, the one he never used around me anymore because I could recognize it. It was the laugh he gave to keep other people comfortable.

No, I'm afraid I can't remember our wedding vows.

## *Bloated*

We started living in the same house again. Despite having to compromise so much, it was a relief for me. We both had work, yes, and we worked hard with irregular hours, but we were used to it, and whenever one of us got home at night, the other was waiting. He'd usually be home before me, since I would often be out late getting information for my reports—I was assigned to a string of kidnappings at the time that had gone unsolved for several years. Rick would come home, talking vaguely about something frustrating or exciting at work with enthusiasm. Usually it was about someone almost making a mistake, dropping a vial or something, and he'd be frustrated, or laughing, or somewhere in between. Those nights of lovemaking were my favorites, and I still remember them fondly. So much was in it: the anger; the frustration; the overwhelming joy of being with one another. I felt like I got to share in all of what he did on those nights.

But I loved talking with him, too, sometimes about contentious issues like politics or as simple as the smell of the flowers in springtime. Sometimes I'd even get stories of inside the lab. He said, in essence, that everyone in there was a bumbling little boy or girl. Not for any fault of their own, you see, but because they were hobbling across untrod territory. So, of course, they'd end up tripping and falling all the time, making mistakes and marking treacherous places so that others could eventually follow them. I suggested that they

were more like bold trailblazers, but he laughed and said, "If you could see the way we flail about, you'd say otherwise."

One night, however, I think about two years in, he came home with a particular story that stood out to me. If I could still shiver, I would. He was laughing the whole time he told it, I remember. They'd been experimenting on rats for some time, trying out this new biological compound. Well, he said that they had operated on this rat and left it overnight, but when they came back in the morning, the poor thing had swelled up so it looked like a little furry balloon. I asked if it was dead, and he said no, it was flailing and twirling its little legs, trying to move its bloated little body, but it couldn't do anything. Rick was laughing and laughing, but I just couldn't. I looked him in the eye, and he looked back into mine, and suddenly he stopped and grew somber. He walked away and wouldn't say anything else to me for the remainder of the night.

It was about half a year later when he stopped coming home in time to eat dinner together; the lab-work had grown too demanding, he said. He'd slide into bed, touched by the stench of chemicals and mold, and he'd toss and turn in his sleep. And then, when giving up evenings proved to not be enough, he gave up his Saturdays as well. During those months he would come home, exhausted instead of excited, and he would murmur malformed words to himself as he drifted off to

## *Bloated*

sleep. I tried to reach out to him, to make him feel better. He'd come home at night, and I'd rest my hand on his shoulder or I'd kiss his neck, but he'd only shift and grumble. And on Sundays, the days still left to us, he'd be tired and groggy, like his mind was off somewhere else. He seemed to move purely on instinct, and he didn't eat well. The lovemaking stopped.

It was one of those Sundays that I think I truly lost him. He was sitting in his favorite chair one day, looking out the window at the passing cars, when suddenly he gave a horrendous cry. I ran in from the other room to check on him. His eyes were wide and his mouth was agape, but he wasn't looking at anything at all. What was in front of me wasn't the Rick I knew, I'm sure of it now. After he recovered from the shock, he ran over to me, yet refrained from touching me. He began rambling on and on; I'm not sure he took a breath the whole time. He was talking about how he realized something now, that he could feel it—this other, untapped part of him. He said it was like another mind tethered to his body with a thin piece of twine, constantly there alongside him, a mutualistic parasite. All he had to do, he explained, was access it, use it, and lead others to find theirs. He had been using it all this time, he claimed, but not consciously, and only now could he feel it, a purer kind of consciousness. Once he was done rambling, his eyes glazed over and his shoulders relaxed like nothing had happened, and he

walked into the kitchen to get some water. I couldn't respond; I was shaking too hard.

After that incident, I felt paralyzed, unable to help him anymore. Whatever had been eating away at him for all those years had finally taken over. There wasn't anything more I could do, or so I told myself. I just dove into my work and hoped that he would get better. I remember being propositioned by more than one coworker during that time, and I admit I almost did. It's a special kind of loneliness, lying next to an empty person at night. But in the end I refused. I couldn't forget the Rick that I knew, and I still loved him. I know that people change, and I know they're not liable to change back, but something was happening to him, something beyond what even he could control, I think. I hoped that one day he would find his way out of his haze and come back to me, and I would be waiting with open arms, having never left.

I tried explaining how I told him one night as a final attempt. I reminded him of the time we had spent together and how the lab used to excite him so much and that he didn't have to work himself so hard. (I still believed that all of this may have been caused by too much work related stress) But all he could say was that this was the culmination of everything he had done, that he was so close. He had an endless supply of test subjects, especially rodents, and the support of the university to back him up. Sarcastically, he said, "Unlim-

## *Bloated*

ited rats, all the rats I could ever want.” I asked him if that was his purpose, to get more rats. He just laughed, a new kind of laugh I hadn't ever heard before. I hated it.

And then he was fired, or as close as he could get to being fired. I asked him why, and he said that they had lost the vision and the drive that they needed to do “the finest work that humanity had ever accomplished.” He ate even less, and he would stay up almost all night in his chair. He stopped bathing for a few days, and when I pointed it out, he mumbled some sort of assent before going and cleaning himself. I had to remind him every day from that point on. It was like that for what I think must have been a month. Fog consumed his eyes as he stared out the window for days on end, pacing and mumbling to himself, then sitting down in his chair and falling asleep. I think pedestrians began avoiding our street to avoid his unnerving gaze.

One day, though, I saw him frowning and writing at the kitchen table. I asked him what was going on, and he said that he couldn't give up, not now. Contacts, he explained. He had contacts all over the globe, and if one place wouldn't let him do his research, somewhere else would. He looked up at me then, and I'll never forget that look. Head low, shoulders tucked, eyes wide; he looked like a kicked puppy. It was then that I began to see the family resemblance. I had to leave.

A few days afterward, I was laid off from my job

and stonewalled. They let me know over the phone, and I was furious. I went in to the office, and they made me set up a meeting and told me to wait. I waited for four hours. This was the place I had worked for years, and now I was suddenly a stranger. However, they apparently had a much larger severance package for me than I had thought. At first I was convinced they were just messing with me, or that there was some kind of mistake, but I checked the paperwork, and they were right. That, or they had changed out the relevant pages. I feel like I would have remembered such a large sum, but then again, who would go back and fudge the numbers in order to pay more money? It was strange, all of it. After my little four hour sit-in, they wouldn't even answer my calls; I think my phone number was flagged. Rick seemed unconcerned, said that I could find a job elsewhere, and besides, with all the money we had saved up, we'd be fine for a while. His worry had changed to a certainty that belied his nonchalant demeanor—he was never a great liar.

And then, not a week later, I come home and he tells me that he's got a grant to do research in Moscow. Not just any research, though—*his* research. I look at him and tell him that we can't just move to Moscow. He says that it won't be forever, just for a few months, long enough to do what he had to do. And they were paying him an exorbitant sum. He said that once we were done with this, we wouldn't ever have to work again; we

## *Bloated*

could just live it up. I asked why I needed to be there, and he told me that he couldn't do any of this without me, that he needed me there to keep him going. And then he said something that scared me, but I couldn't understand why at the time: he told me that he was doing all of this for me.

I loved him, and I still love him, even after knowing what he did. Right then, though, I knew I was locked in. He knew that I couldn't say no, not after hearing that. I asked if he was sure it would only be a few months, and he said he was certain, and then we could do anything. We could even paint the house whatever color we wanted, and we could do it by hand, all ourselves, since we wouldn't have any obligations anymore. We could spend the rest of our thirties vacationing together in far-off corners of the globe and leave everything behind, really make our years count.

That's the strange thing about your thirties, isn't it? Old age is looming somewhere in front of you, a big mountain of creaky joints and sore muscles and lethargy. Every time your neck cracks and it hurts for a few days, you're reminded of what's coming, and you want to cram in everything active you've always dreamed of doing before your body won't allow it. Neither of us were in vocations that allowed a lot of time to get physically fit, so it was especially present for us. The dream was still alive then, that Rick could regain his glowing demeanor and we could go anywhere. Maybe, just

maybe, we'd have a child. It's not something I ever brought up to him, since he was so busy with his work, but somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered. We could expand the house, have rooms set aside just for the kids, and after they grew up, we'd take them to those old, dusty rooms and tell them stories of how troublesome they were. That was the dream. I knew, logically, that going to Moscow would help fulfill that dream, but somehow I couldn't see that future. All I could see from the plane on the way there was the land scrolling beneath me, farther and farther away from the place I wanted to be.

Someone was waiting for us when we arrived. Rick's name was even printed on a white board in the escort's hands. I joked that my name should have been there, too. That poor joke got a chuckle out of him, a real one. I relished it.

The man spoke in clear English with the slightest twinge of a Russian accent, and he drove us to where we'd be staying: a house rented and set aside just for us. It looked nothing like what we were used to living in—it was modern, very modern, with a long, slanted roof and a massive entryway. Flagstones traced the path to the heavy front door. Windows speckled the outside, and in the night it looked like a disco ball against the gorgeous, green yard that surrounded it. In the distance, downtown Moscow stood proudly, illuminating the horizon. It was all so regal, and I didn't want any of

it.

Our escort handed the house keys off to Rick before pulling out of the driveway and onto the little road. The whole street felt like a mockery of home, an attempt to improve something that couldn't be improved. The escort pulled my husband back over to the curb to murmur something through the window. When I asked Rick what it was about, he said that he was starting work the next day. He said that it made sense; the Russians wanted a quick return on their investment.

The inside of the house was uncomfortable. Houses have a certain order to them, places where things are supposed to be, but here the order was upset. The second story was carved out to leave a huge open space above us in the living room, with the second story overlooking it. The kitchen was up there, just behind a black metal railing. Underneath it, conjoined to the living room, was the master bedroom. It was like an alien's interpretation of a house, and I remember it more clearly than I'd like.

I checked the garage and found it conspicuously empty. I asked Rick where the car was, and he said that he was getting a ride to and from the facility. I asked how I would get around, and he said that I could just rent a car. But how was I going to rent a car if I didn't know any Russian? He said some of them probably speak English, but he seemed to think it wasn't his problem.

I threw my bags onto the couch. It was fairly early in the September evening, but jetlag has a way with people. I wasn't angry anymore, but I was so frustrated with how little I knew. Against the cacophony in my mind, I could only sleep.

And oh, did I sleep. It was refreshing in a way; usually when I went traveling during my childhood there was a demand to constantly move, to do as much as possible before having to leave. Here, though, there was no such demand. I had brought a pile of books with me, reading that I'd meant to get out of the way years before. There was a lot in there: a few Vonnegut novels, some romance, and a few middle-eastern authors that had caught my eye. Anton Shammas was among them, but my favorite was *The Blind Owl*. If you'd like to borrow it, you're welcome to. Just make sure you bring it back. Yeah, it's in that bag over there. What? Oh no, they've all started molding? I'm sorry, it's just gotten so damp in here. I think one of the pipes must have burst somewhere in the house. I did love that book. I felt like I wasn't alone when I was reading it, with my life shifting around me, but I also felt empowered; I hadn't gone crazy like everyone else in it. But it also made me wonder if that was my future, if these oddities would just keep piling on and repeating themselves. That's what had happened to Rick, wasn't it? I wasn't watching Rick sink deeper and deeper. Instead I was watching the waves of madness come in and out with the rising tide,

## *Bloated*

dampening more of the sand with each lap. For so long I'd watched it, and somewhere inside of me I realized it, but even at that point it was too late.

It was a week before I had any energy, but the trip hadn't slowed Rick. He came and went every night and morning, but I usually could only watch him from the bed. Haggard and pale, he would climb the stairs to the kitchen every night, grab an apple or something, then climb back down again and put his pajamas on before finding his way into bed next to me. Despite looking sicker and sicker, he was gaining energy; he moved precisely and with purpose. Fingers proceeded from the hand which proceeded from the arm, quickly, precisely, and certainly.

I'm afraid to say that I just don't know that much about what exactly he was doing while we were there. He said a little bit, but it didn't make any sense. I found everything he said innately disturbing, so I try not to remember it. Maybe it was his voice, or maybe the house was getting to me. All I knew was that everything he said had a distant air of truth, as though something far off was reaffirming everything he said.

One of those days I remember he came back, knelt down in front of the couch and started crying. I think it was in the third week. I went over to him and asked him what was wrong, and he said that nothing was wrong. I'll never forget those eyes of his, how massive the dark circles were. He looked burdened as he

tried to explain it to me, long, inadequate descriptions of altering people in ways that had no physical analogue. He described it as *stretching* that silken cord instead of adding onto it. Why would they have to weave more if they could just stretch what existed, he wondered to himself. I asked what he meant by a silken cord, but all he could give me were gross simplifications. I told him not to underestimate me, but he said that he barely understood it himself. Still, the ability to harness it was within his grasp. Cavemen used fire without understanding how it worked, he said, yet fire was the key to a new form of civilization. Humanity, he exclaimed, had the power to roam the stars, to fathom the unfathomable, to create and destroy beyond comprehension. But they needed more information, and the only way to gain that information was to keep learning, to keep testing.

What was I doing? Well, like I said, I read a lot, and I went grocery shopping. Pretty easy to find vegetables and figure out their price. But I also got into photography. After finagling with the online map of Moscow's transit system, I weaved my way downtown to a little photography store nestled in a shopping district. My futile attempt at second-language-computer-program Russian made the owner laugh, but he eased my nerves by speaking in fluent English. I remember the store: it was fairly large, and the owner made use of the copious wall space by putting up photographs, turning

## *Bloated*

it into a gallery as well as a shop. Some of the photos were placed over certain cameras to show which camera had taken which photograph. I thought it was an ingenious marketing ploy. And it worked. I saw a gorgeous picture of a run-down apartment complex and I decided that that camera was the one I wanted. I'd rather not admit how much I spent on it. Definitely more than I had any right owning as an amateur, but during the trip to the store, I had discovered my anger. Rick had brought me to Russia, and I was certain he had the best of intentions, but for two weeks, I had felt so alone and abandoned. So yes, I was resentful. But I don't blame myself for it.

You know the first thing I captured in that camera's lens? The other cameras. Now that I think about it, it was kind of funny. It was like I was shoving it in their faces, that I had picked this one instead of the others. What I was thinking at the time, though, was how strange it was to see antique cameras right next to the little modern ones. What I was holding in my hand was some strange amalgamation of the two: a digital camera with new technology modeled after the old tech. It even sounded like them when a photo was taken, whether by design or simply because the mechanics were the same, I wasn't sure. Like I said, I'm an amateur. Was an amateur.

I immediately set out for the city, and I realized that Moscow, at its core, was comprised entirely of this

strange duality. Going downtown, I saw brand-new, modern buildings planted next to old ones that were obviously ancient, despite their upkeep. Old, haggard men walked sprightly young dogs on ragged leashes in front of coffee shops built into weathered brick buildings. Apartment buildings with uncleaned, fogged windows overlooked matted black asphalt with brilliant white paint. I captured it all with my camera, which I had named Rufus. I was happy with the photos, though they never went beyond my computer or my memory card. When I uploaded them back at our loaner house, Rufus would sit on the table, and I'd look into its lens, jealous of it. It was a marriage of both the old and the new. It alone could see the city candidly, whereas I, caught up in that juxtaposition, could not understand it. I spent the next two months trying to understand what it saw, but I never quite managed.

I will admit, those two months with Rufus were wonderful. I began wandering around the parks in the Moscow area. Everything was lit up in gorgeous, brilliant yellows and oranges as the city transitioned into fall. Clouds would scuttle by one at a time, and sometimes they would block the sun for a little while, only to reveal it all again, lighting up the leaves littered on the ground and still hanging on the branches. My favorite shots were ones where you could actually see the lines that the clouds made on the ground.

For the first time in a long time, I felt free—free

## *Bloated*

from responsibility, free to do what I wanted, but also free from Rick. I stopped missing him, and I started feeling like my own person again.

But then one day, near the end of November, he called me and asked where I was. I told him that I was out. He asked where, and I just said out. He told me to come back as fast as I could, but I told him that would be two hours or so. That, apparently, was no problem.

When I arrived back at the house, I could barely recognize Rick. The skin on his cheeks was sagging, his face was wrinkled and haggard, and his body stank of mold. He grabbed my hand and said that it was done, that he was done, and that he wanted me to see it. I asked if his mysterious employers were happy enough with the work to let him go, and he said they approved. In fact, one of them was there to take us to the facility, the escort that had met us upon our first arrival.

I don't remember where it was—we drove down quite a bit of highway. Russia's a huge place, and it's even more pronounced when you watch so much of it go by, all looking the same. More than once I imagined throwing open the door and jumping out, rolling to a stop and just getting away. But I wouldn't with Rick there beside me. I couldn't do it. I still loved him so much. If I were the person I am now, I would have, despite knowing I would most likely die, but back then I was just so happy to have him next to me, lucid in a way he hadn't been in so long. He kept looking at me with

those puppy eyes, but I refused to say anything.

By the time we arrived, it was late in the evening. The compound was surprisingly small, and there was no activity from the outside. Miles of grass surrounded it with their vast promises of nothingness, still free of snow. It was so lonely that I was compelled to take a picture, but Rick slapped Rufus from my hands before I could. I yelled at him that he could have broken it, but he talked over me, saying the place was secret, and that he had to convince them to not blindfold me before taking me there.

I got chills even underneath my jacket when I stepped out of the car. Something seemed wrong, like the angles of the building were off, but I followed Rick anyways. I asked him what it was he was doing. I insisted that I had been quiet and respectful about it for so long and that now I wanted to know, but he told me to be patient, that I'd know very soon. As we walked to the door he rambled about how he'd worked so hard, but that now it would be worth it and we could just spend the rest of our lives together without having to worry about anything at all.

It was nothing but laboratories on every side as soon as I stepped through the doors. If this really was a top-secret facility, then they were doing their best to hide it in plain sight. There was a constant rumbling underneath the floor, but nobody seemed to notice or care while they walked from place to place, their lab coats

billowing behind them.

Then I felt someone touch me from behind, and—nothing. To say it went black wouldn't be right, because there wasn't any black or white or color at all. No sight, no sound, no touch. Just oblivion.

After an indeterminate amount of time, I came to consciousness, but that doesn't do justice to what I experienced upon awakening. I saw, no, I understood myself to be in a place, surrounded by other consciousnesses, all inactive, all seeking. At first I was terrified, uncertain of what had happened to me. Then Rick was there. To say I felt Rick's presence wouldn't be right, either, but I didn't see him or hear him. It was like a complete understanding of his presence without need of my senses. You know how when you try to say something, and you can't get it quite right? There was none of that. I had perfect clarity of thought and perfect clarity in communication. And so, to him, I expressed my fear and confusion perfectly. He responded with serene calm. I experienced that calmness alongside my fear, a glorious and strange combination. I asked him where we were, and he said near to our bodies, though not exactly on the same plane, and I understood, for the first time since the loss of his lucidity, exactly what he meant. I can't describe it to you now, since I'm using words, but we were close even though we couldn't physically touch. Physical touch wasn't necessary. Beyond this communication, I felt like I had

found a part of myself that was missing for so long, something that had been crying out to find me, to complete me, and now I was whole.

Then I woke up. I was on an operating table, blinded by lights. Rick was practically jumping up and down in excitement, telling me that it worked, that he had felt me, had talked to me. He'd stretched that cord on me, he explained, the cord between my body and that otherworldly mind. I said that it felt like so much more, but Rick just brushed me off, saying that it wasn't a mind in the way that we understand it, and telling me not to worry. I barely understood what either of us were saying.

I sat up and looked around. There were huge machines in big metal boxes behind the doctors, who were cleaning sharp surgery equipment. I faintly grew aware of an EKG machine hooked up to me. I was both coherent and groggy, like my mind was active though my body was sluggish. I asked Rick if we could just go home. He took my hand and said yes.

I did my best to show him happiness and satisfaction, but inside I felt, and I knew, that I had been betrayed. We flew back to America that night, and I talked to him as little as possible. He, however, couldn't stop talking to me about the things he'd gone through, the fears he'd fought, and the dreams he'd seen realized. Unconcerned about being caught now, the Russian company had flown him back on a personal jet, on loan

from a wealthy investor, so he could tell me about everything that had happened.

That experience I'd had was apparently something he'd theorized some time ago, before he had lost his job. I asked him why he'd lost his job, and he went on a long explanation. He explained that there was this other part of us that sought us, just beyond what he called the "membrane," a self of pure thought. I told him that I knew, and he simply nodded, as though that was the way it should be. He'd done work on animals, but none of the results were turning out the way he wanted and needed. It looked like quackery from the outside, but it had nothing to do with "pseudoscience," and the university could see that. It was something else entirely, and once he was able to prove it he was able to get a remarkable amount of funding. I asked how he proved it, and he said something vague about being able to affect information from some other distant place.

But then, he asked for something to finalize all of the data he'd collected: a human test subject, bypassing apes entirely. Humans are unique, he explained—only we among the animals of the earth have an expanded mind in that otherworldly place, but he couldn't explain how he knew. The university, however, said that tests on lower life forms were necessary before being granted permission to use humans. To the university he had delivered an ultimatum: that he get his human test subjects or he would leave. So he left. However, he didn't

own the rights to the data, so he couldn't get any of it back—the university had taken special precautions to keep it internal. He was cut off from his life's work.

Until a company had contacted him. A “connection,” he called them, some group in Russia who said that they had found his data and that Rick could finish his work with them, and they'd take care of the rest. This wasn't about publishing anymore, he said. This was about doing something great for humanity, progressing us to the next stage of evolution. They had given him people, death row inmates, people nobody would miss, and during the few weeks we were in Russia, he experimented on them, perfected the method. I asked what had happened to the early ones, the imperfect ones. He wouldn't say anything except that it was fine, that it wouldn't happen to me. What they did to me wasn't a test, apparently; it was the final stage of a long line of research, with hundreds of subjects before me. I was his magnum opus, the culmination of all of his work. Hundreds of people, cut up, experimented on, and he didn't seem to care, even when I pressed him on it.

You know what he did to me? *He made me immortal.* They had cut into me, fundamentally altered me, replaced my organs to allow particles from that place of my consciousness to enter me and sustain me. When I asked him what had been replaced, he said that most of my major organs were gone. I couldn't eat anymore, but I didn't need to, since they had developed

new synthetic organs that were tied with that mind beyond the membrane, that it would provide me with all the energy and nutrients that I now needed. Do you see what he was saying? That mind I tapped into, that beautiful consciousness, is now nothing more than a siphon. He explained that my new inner workings collected particles from that other veil, used those to give me energy, then sent them back off, all from the power of my mind breaching that membrane. That expanded consciousness, capable of such whole understanding, was turned into a fucking *clam*, useless except for sucking in food and spitting out waste. All of his genius, his potential, used to defile such perfection. I asked him, begged him to know why he couldn't have just given me access to it indefinitely, and he said that my inherent connection just wasn't strong enough. This was the best he could give me.

Then I asked if he had the procedure performed on himself. He spent three minutes giving me a convoluted "no." That, apparently, was the next phase. The company would have to find others like him, with that strong connection. For now, though, he could go home.

It was silent the rest of the way. I couldn't speak.

I remember the night of our return clearly. I stood at the foot of the bed, our bed, and watched him sleep naked, the covers draped over his lower half. He had been so tired for so long, and now he rested, so calm and contented. I could almost see the dark circles

sinking back down into him and disappearing. But I couldn't rest again, not ever. That night I loved him wholly, and I hated him bitterly for everything he'd done to me and for everything he'd made me do.

I turned to the dresser and picked up that little knife he'd given me so long ago, the one he'd valued so much and had entrusted to me. Still sharp, as I always made sure it was. I flicked it open, straddled him, and found the spot just beneath his sternum, which wasn't difficult due to how emaciated he'd become. I saw the skin flex inward against the sharp point. Taking a deep breath, I pressed in and up, sliding the pathetic little blade behind his ribcage. I felt his heart pulse against it, but I clenched my jaw and pushed it farther in, opening one of the lobes. He awoke gradually, but even as he saw me pull the knife from his chest, he couldn't find the energy to move. Instinctively, he brought his palm over the cut, but it couldn't stop the massive flow of blood. He looked up at me as he died, slowly, weeping without sound as consciousness failed him for the last time.

Once he was dead, I walked into the next room, sat down, and cried. I thought of running, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead, I waited. I had waited for years at my old job all that time ago, and I had waited those months on the outskirts of Moscow. Waiting was all I knew anymore, so I just kept waiting, waiting for Rick.

## *Bloated*

Nobody came around to check on either of us. I would answer the door whenever someone came around trying to sell internet or knives or cookies, and I'd politely turn them away. Dust would accumulate, and I'd clean it away, only for it to return. The television stayed off so that the only sounds were those of traffic, the shouting and screaming of kids, and the planes overhead.

Rick's body? I buried it in the basement after a few days. So much was tangled in the clouds that hazed his eyes. I looked into them and started crying again when I went to move him. I tried to tell myself that he had been gone for a long time, that what he had done to his fellow man was inhuman, abominable, but none of it helped. He was still my Rick, buried in there somewhere, now buried under the house.

It was four years before—this—started happening to me. First my sense of touch began to go, a precursor to my flesh softening. I felt bits of me clumping underneath my skin, and eventually I could even move it around with my hand. Then came the swelling. I saw my hand begin to grow distended, pudgy, and out of morbid curiosity I popped it with a kitchen knife. Mold spores spewed out from the built-up pressure.

I can't say that I was happy for it, but it was relieving to know what was coming. More of me began rotting away, kept inside by my skin, which in turn began bloating up. My muscles gave way next, and I

couldn't move, leaving me on this couch. Then my eyes started going, then my sense of smell. I expect my hearing will go next—I don't hear the planes anymore. And all of the mold has stayed trapped in my skin, leaving me swollen up like this.

Perhaps this is the first stage of my final death, his mistake that he'll never know. I'm not afraid of dying anymore, but I do have one fear: that I won't actually die, that instead my skin will rot, and all that will be left are those organs, keeping my brain alive forever. It will all settle down into the couch cushions, leaving me here alone and locked in myself until Earth dies. Or maybe I'll still be here even then, bloated on too much of Rick's wretched love.

Hello?

Where'd you go?





# Gideon's Song

Reginald had been made a promise in the sack he had learned to call a bed. It was not a dream, he'd made sure of it; the footprints were still upon the dirt. They had been left for him but were quickly trampled in the morning's rush. The apparition had called him "Reggie." Nobody had called him that since images of mustard gas-filled craters and fountains of soil had replaced boundless forests and ponds. One learned to embrace it like God.

The trenches were not filled with mud this morning, as they had been. It had caked over and cracked over the square corners that the men had made weeks before. There was one man who would carefully tend to those corners when they dried, saying that they reminded him of his home, where the walls met the floor. He explained that they had no floor trimming, so they

were straight corners.

Tripods were already set up, legs without bodies yet. Scouts came back saying that they were attacking at dawn. Reggie couldn't remember exactly who it was they were fighting. The scout probably had rediscovered the enemy when he was over there. Men in the trenches weren't given these reminders; they only ever saw the enemy's feet and the legs of the tripod, then finally a mortar shell in the end. Had they ever seen bullets coming from the other side? Perhaps their foes' rifles shot mortar shells. Perhaps their faces were just mortar cannons. Why didn't they have everyone fire mortars? Take all of their guns, melt them down into mortar cannons, take their bullets, craft them into shells. That's the only thing that killed anyone there, anyways, unless the other guys were charging. Then they could just tilt them down directly at the enemy, like in the civil war! Ha!

Reginald remembered that five minutes prior, the sergeant had kicked the door down when nobody got up as quickly as he wanted. He had asked why the corners of the trenches weren't square yet. No, that was what Reginald had assumed he would say. It was just a long string of curses. He might have done push-ups. Push-the-earth-downs, if they all concentrated really hard. No, they hadn't, they needed their strength for the... enemies. The slur was lost.

Benny was the guy that loved straightening out

## *Gideon's Song*

the corners during dry spells. Reginald believed it was the Sergeant that put him to it, imagined the orders being barked through a string of obscenities to make the corners straight. Now, though, he was standing upright, kicking at the corner with his boot. Perhaps Reginald's belief was wrong. Or maybe he was just preparing the ground for a more careful trimming in the way he would mow a lawn, then use an edge trimmer. Why didn't more people have mud for lawns? Maybe he would open a business when he got home.

"It's bright out," Benny said in his nasally Boston accent. "Dries the mud out nicely. Good thing too, my toes couldn't take any more of the wetness. Looked like prunes. I think I lost some of the flesh, though. Not bad. You?"

"I lost my middle toe," Reginald replied. "At least, I think I have. Can't really feel it or move it."

Benny chuckled. "Well, it's better than losing your pinky toe! Important for balance, they say. And it's so little! Why, if I just took my rifle and hit your pinky toe, you probably wouldn't stand the same again!"

"Good thing it's small, then," Reginald said. "Harder for you to hit."

Benny laughed even louder. "Yeah, I guess so. The little stuff's important, huh? Bullets are small, too. Take one of *them* out real quick."

Reginald spoke the next line in a fit of mas-

ochism. “You remember who we’re shootin’ at?”

Benny shrugged. “It won’t matter soon. They’ll be made of lead! P-B on the periodic table, they’ll be that little square.”

The Sergeant walked up behind them and barked at them for jesting when an attack was imminent. Warned them that they could lose their lives again. Reginald had already lost his middle toe. Maybe it was “gang-green.” The tripods never lost their feet, even if they were in the mud for weeks on end.

The Sergeant told them to line up at the trenches. The attack was in five minutes. Long enough to go take a leak behind the barracks, but that would be too long for The Sergeant. That’s what the Americans had over them: punctuality. Even if the enemy was thirty minutes late, the Americans would be waiting there like a clerk ready to serve them. Serve them bullets. Reginald mentioned this to Benny, who stood next to him. Benny chuckled as he dug the toe of his boot into the corner of the trench. Reginald imagined that Benny was thinking about how long it would take to straighten out the corners this time.

The Sergeant loved his troops like his own children, and he was the father. An abusive father, yes, but only because he didn’t want to see them harmed, see them run off and join the military like some little idiot that really

## *Gideon's Song*

wasn't being asked that much, just to take out the garbage twice a week, was it really that hard? He used it all the time and could see when it was full and—

A father that loves his children will be stern if the child is in danger, and they were in danger all the time, weren't they? So he made them into little ornaments on his bootlaces.

The sergeant had a wristwatch. It trapped oil underneath it and made his skin itch. Or maybe it was the time that made him tease his pinky finger underneath the band. Little cogs digging into his skin and scratching him as the mainspring pushed them in their circles. He wished he had gotten one with the date. Days tended to jump around here. Wasn't it the eighteenth? Then the next day it would be the seventeenth. The-enemy-is-still-over-there-o'clock. Mortarday the fifteenth. Fourteenth.

But it was five past the hour. The men had been standing for ten bottles of beer and still no sign of the supposed charge. It had to be today. Only one sun was supposed to have risen, and it is impossible to lose count of one.

Time was its own in the trenches. Outside of the shoulder-high ditches, it must obey the laws of sense and reason; the time it takes a crow to fly from that spot on the horizon to that other spot is one minute, and so when that length has been traversed one minute has passed. But time would not be rushed nor impeded

here. A cloud scuttled over the mountain in an hour's time anywhere else, but here it would linger and be content to be there. Maybe they held hands to make sure they got all of the sun and none of it was wasted on the ground. If it always slipped, through, Benny would have nothing to do.

Benny stopped kicking at the corner of the trench, at least consciously. "Ahh, the ocean," he murmured just loud enough for Reginald to hear him. "Do you hear it too?" Benny was wont to ramble regularly. Oftentimes about his house back home with trim on the floors. The trim had saved his toes many times. He said that glass would get caught in the corners otherwise, glass with sharp edges that nibbled on his father's feet, trying to taste the last bits of what they had held. His mother said that if he got cut by a glass bottle it was okay because the alcohol inside the bottle from before had sterilized them. They ought to get some floor trim, she would say.

Dad was just sanitizing me. Got to keep the germs off. Shriveled them.

Benny then heard the words that he hoped he would never hear, because they would mean that he was finally losing it.

"I do," said Reginald. "I hear it too."

Benny's eyes fell half-open.

"Good," said Benny, "I can finally relax now."

## *Gideon's Song*

But oceans do not rise and fall in loudness like that, at least not to the degree that the soldiers in these trenches would be able to hear. Rather, the ocean was some hundreds of miles away, near the house he had picked out while he was walking around the town on leave. He hadn't looked at the numbers, but he figured that this sort of work he did paid pretty well. Enough money would loosen the hands of the homeowners so that he could take it for himself and, of course, his smokin' hot European wife who knew just enough English to ask what he wanted for dinner. (Everything was on the menu thanks to his almost-death money) He could eat it out on the nice porch that the homeowners had so nicely built for him, and it had only cost him a couple more mortars almost hitting his head. The only reason he thought of it now was because it was so tantalizingly close. If he were back in his home country, he would not have thought about it, just as one does not think of a Christmas feast in the middle of summer. December had come for him, though, and he figured, now that he was preemptively smelling that honey ham of a house, he could comfortably think of it and not desire for much longer. Or was it November? It would still work. Did the Europeans celebrate Thanksgiving?

Ocean waves roared for Reginald too, however. They were waves carried upon screams of agony. The sergeant peeked his head up over the side of the trench, and showed fear. A sergeant showing fear is the worst

thing that he can do. The men knew that a sergeant only showed fear when he was faced with something that he had never seen or heard of before. More soldiers tentatively peeked their heads up and over the trenches. Several of them helped the sergeant over the lip of the trench, where he stood, looking out toward their enemies. The cogs in his wristwatch ticked. "Men," he said in an uncharacteristically kind voice, "get up here."

It should be understood that this voice, described as "uncharacteristically kind," to anyone else would have sounded like any other sort of voice he used. To the soldiers, however, it lacked the sort of bite that usually accompanied it. If anything, to them it sounded inviting. It would have been akin to Joab thrusting a single spear into the abdomen of Absalom rather than three, because by taking three spears in hand at once it did not allow Joab to actually penetrate very far into Absalom's body, due to how difficult it is to grip three spears at once. A single spear, however, meant that he could send it through Absalom's body with enough force to pierce all the way through the heart and perhaps, mercifully, through his spine, paralyzing him from the pain lower in his body that certainly would be there soon.

The soldiers clambered over the trench wall and joined the sergeant on his slow walk to the enemy. They passed by craters filled with gas and trampled bits of shrapnel from the explosives fired towards them. To-

## *Gideon's Song*

wards them, as though they were something indeterminate, a goal not quite set in stone. A dreamed-up house rather than an actual one.

They walked unabated across no-man's land, still mostly clean of blood and corpses. American bravery had led to advancement on whatever front this was, and only a few enemy bodies were there. There were limbs scattered about. Reginald now understood the real purpose of the mortars: they were to help clean up. They would aim at the corpses and do their best to blast them into little bits that were easier for the crows to devour. How kind of them, he thought, the mortar crews are just looking out for us. Where *were* the crows, anyways?

As they grew closer, the wailing grew louder. The Sergeant seemed to drink it in, holding the side of his pistol's barrel against his temple and feeling for the heat that had been lost in every shot fired during its short lifetime. All with a perfectly straight face, of course.

And the roar of the ocean rose.

The Sergeant stood at the edge of the enemy's trench and looked down into it. Screaming was all that could be heard, and a chant carried alongside it, screams hovering around certain pitches together, and words sung in some foreign language not their own. Two words, indiscernible syllables, could be discovered if they listened, repeated over and over between blatherings: "Machina Urbis." If Reginald listened closely, he

could make out the sound of heaven. The Sergeant removed the pistol from his temple, pointed it at one of the men lying on his back, his hands over his ears, and fired. The bullet pierced through the man's skull and was thankfully cushioned by the brain of its target. Blood found its way out and discovered new channels in the soil. The Sergeant shrugged. "Shoot 'em, I guess."

Reginald raised his rifle to his shoulder and took aim. He imagined that finally putting a bullet into someone would create a fountain that would exude ripples through the mud. A shame that there was no mud today. Couldn't it have happened last week? What terrible timing. It was also a shame that they wouldn't fill them so full of lead that they would become metal men. They had to be "efficient."

The cracks of the rifles were like a rainstick, starting slow, building to a roar as they navigated the trenches, and slowly dying down in its inevitable piling together once again, prepared for another rotation. That would be on the list, Benny thought as he went around to each person. The home, the food, the porch, the money, and the rainstick rose in his mind, and he imagined each, first in succession, then all together, and the enemy screamed "Machina Urbis." He cried out between shots. Benny looked over at Reginald, who had come full-circle in the trenches to meet one another again. A few drops of blood speckled his cheek. Reginald couldn't say that they were mud this time. The last

## *Gideon's Song*

respite for them had disappeared with the rain. There was no coastal home for Benny any longer, no fields left for Reginald. They had settled at the bottom. How he wished it was dirt.

Pain throbbed in his foot with the missing toe. A cloud scuttled overhead.



# Machina Urbis

Rain obfuscated Dylan's surroundings as he stepped out of his cruiser. Hunks of concrete jutted up from the sidewalk, threatening to trip him in his dash for the front door of an old apartment complex. From the outside, the building seemed to be breaking under its own weight—windows were clouded and cracked, and some of the bricks in the walls were split in two. Above the entryway was a sign that read “wallowtail Leasing,” the missing S outlined in dirt. Inside, however, the carpeting seemed new (though the dark, mottled pattern may have concealed the grime) despite the paint having chipped and peeled in places. He called an elevator, which creaked its way down the shaft and laboriously carted him up to the fourth floor. A few nervous tenants eyed his police uniform as they shifted through the hallway, on break for lunch before going off to their

second jobs.

He pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket to double-check the number before finding his way to Finkle's apartment, halfway down the hall. Adhered to the door with blue painter's tape was a piece of printer paper displaying an image of the Virgin Mary, her arms spread. Underneath her, in Times New Roman font, were the words "Father, Forgive Us Our Sins." One of the pieces of tape had released its grip, swinging the paper to the side to reveal a fist-sized hole in the plywood.

Dylan knocked thrice.

A muffled voice came from within. "Who is it?"

"Police detective. May I come in?"

Finkle opened the door a crack and peeked out at him, her chubby cheek pressed against the wood. Her eyes were bloodshot and her lashes were clumped. "Right, right," she mumbled as she slid the deadbolt and opened the door.

Putrid air wafted out, a combination of sweet foods and mold, but Dylan maintained his composure and stepped inside. A flatscreen TV was situated in front of a coffee table and a wide couch with a deep indent in its cushions. Empty styrofoam boxes with sweet-and-sour sauce still stuck to their insides littered the table. The kitchen, just to the right, was littered with pots and spatulas dirtied by dried cheese, tomato paste, and bits of chopped-up vegetables. On the bar in

front of the kitchen were miscellaneous plastic doodads and toys, all colored a bright neon that glowed in the harsh LED lights overhead. The floor, however, was remarkably free of litter. To the left, a hallway split at the end into two doors—presumably the bedrooms.

“If you want, you can grab a chair,” said Finkle.

Dylan shook his head. “That’s fine.” Rainwater trickled off of his matted, black hair and ran the long distance down his nose.

“Well, I’m going to sit. Knees just aren’t what they used to be, you know what I mean?” She smiled up at him, her pudgy cheeks bunching up into pockets. She stared at him for a while, waiting for a response, but Dylan just smiled back and nodded. She turned and waddled over to her couch, dropping into the indent while Dylan fished his notebook out of his breast pocket and flipped it open. “Alright,” he said, “So to make sure everything is correct, your name is Elizabeth Finkle, yes?”

“Yes, yes it is, officer.” Her smile had faded.

“And how do you spell that last name?”

“F-I-N-K-L-E.”

“Alright. Now, you said your son went missing two days ago?”

“Yes.”

“What was his name?”

“Alex. Uh, Alexander.”

“Could you describe Alexander to me?”

“Well, kind of unshaven, a bit portly, like his mama.”

“As large as you?”

“Not quite. He walks around sometimes, helps him keep fit.”

“Alright. And what was he wearing when you last saw him?”

“Well, let me think. He had his jeans on, and he was wearing his trenchcoat, and he had... I think it was his gecko T-shirt.”

“Odd combination.”

“Well, he's a bit of an odd boy.”

“How old was he again?”

“Thirty.”

“Right. So you mentioned he lives here. Where does he work?”

“Well, he...” Her voice trailed off for a moment. “He doesn't, you see.”

“How long has he been unemployed?”

“Ah, about four years now.”

“And has he been searching for a job?”

“He—I don't see how this is relevant, officer.” Elizabeth shook her head and frowned.

“Please just answer the question.”

“Well, he's kind of looked. He applies to jobs every so often. I don't see how any of this will help him, officer.” Her face was growing red.

“It's important, ma'am. We can move on now.”

Dylan flipped a page in his notebook. “When did your son go missing?”

“Two days ago,” she said, shifting side to side in her indent. “He goes to this game store downtown sometimes, Games à la Mode. He plays his card games there, with his friends. I tried calling the police, but you told me he wasn't considered 'missing' until forty-eight hours had passed.”

“Does he drive there?”

“He takes the bus.” Her voice had gone flat, and she stared at the pile of styrofoam as she spoke. “I figured he just went to one of his friends' houses or something. I was so glad to hear he was meeting people. But then he didn't come home the next day, and I tried to call him but the phone just kept ringing and he never picked up—” She choked on her words. “I'm so afraid one of those people has hurt him.”

“Do you have his friends' phone numbers?”

Finkle shook her head.

“Does he usually come home the same night?”

She nodded and squinted her eyes as she pawed at the box of tissues on the armrest, holding back her tears. “Always.”

“And do you know which buses he usually takes?”

She inhaled sharply, pillars of saliva stretching between her lips, then stuttered through her sobs: “I—I—I don't know, but h—he's usually home by el—eleven,

and he l—left at three.”

Dylan nodded, scratching down the numbers on his notepad. Implications loomed over him as he attempted to stay focused. “Okay,” he said, looking up from his writing. “Is there anything else you think I should know? Any of his friends I should try to contact?”

She tried to speak, but instead settled for shaking her head. There was silence for some time, allowing the stench of the apartment to intrude further. Gusts of wind outside blew barrages of raindrops against the window, sending a rattle cascading through the apartment. Finkle's form jiggled with every sob.

Dylan stepped over to her, patted her shoulder, then flipped to a blank page in his notebook. He scribbled a number down, then tore the page out and placed it on her knee. “If you think of anything else, call me here, alright?” He prodded the number with his finger, wrinkling the paper.

Finkle nodded and blew her nose. The tissues did a poor job of containing the mess, and she had to grab a few more to clean her face. Once she had, she opened up one of the styrofoam boxes and stuffed the used tissues inside of it. The box creaked as it rubbed up against the rest of the pile.

“Miss Finkle? Elizabeth, please look at me. I need to ask you one last thing.”

“Mhm?” she asked, squinting her eyes further.

“Could I check your son's computer?”

“Sure. It should still be on. He never turns it off.” She looked up at Dylan. “Bring him home,” she pleaded. “I don't know what I'd do without him.”

Dylan nodded. “We'll do everything we can.”

The hallway to the bedrooms was lined with postcard-sized prints of Thomas Kinkadee landscapes in cheap wooden frames. On Alexander's ajar door, however, was a poster of a ninja with Japanese characters embellishing the top and bottom, all against a flaming background. Dylan pushed the door open and recoiled at the stench of stale body odor. Blue light from the computer monitor washed over the dark room, casting shadows over the array of scattered clothing and fast food wrappers. Clothes covered the bed in a patchwork of colors and hung from the computer chair in a small stack. A wastebasket lay next the computer, halfway filled with sticky soda cans which were also littered about the desk and next to the bed. Tentatively, Dylan stepped into the room, doing his best to breathe through his mouth and not his nose. On the computer screen was a list of cards for some trading card game with fantasy creatures printed on them.

Cringing, he placed his hand on the grime-covered mouse, doing his best to only use his fingertips, and explored the open tabs in the browser. A few image aggregate websites were open, as well as social media. He began looking through some of Alexander's mes-

sages, most of them heated discussion about video games, but it didn't take long to find the conversation he was looking for. He took note of this mysterious conversation partner's username (Righteousblade87) on his notepad, along with a few choice entries about Alexander's lifestyle.

Elizabeth's crying leaked out of the door as he stepped back into the fourth floor hallway, where the scent of cleaning supplies was mercifully weak. An occupant, overhearing the sound, shot a glare at Dylan before disappearing into his apartment. Dylan ground his teeth against one another as the elevator struggled its way back down to the first floor and his dutifully awaiting cruiser. The rain was blinding now, and he stumbled over one of the nearly invisible cracks in the sidewalk before diving into the cab. Even there, he couldn't escape, as the downpour pattered a cacophony on the roof. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and made a call.

“What's the word?” Turner asked.

“He could just be lost, but I don't think so. Right area, right type of person, right circumstances. Looks like the guy started messaging him a few days ago, too. All the signs are there.”

“Let's assume the worst, in case Carson really is behind this.” In the background a woman's voice shouted obscenities. “Are you bringing the mother in for questioning?”

“I’ll be honest, I don’t think she could fit through her front door.”

“Yeesh. Alright, I’ll be back at the station in fifteen.”

“I’ll be waiting for you.”

Dylan hung up and brought the cruiser to life, which pit the hum of the engine against the sound of the rain.

He was cut off no less than three times on his way to the police station. Voices chattered through the radio about a chase a few blocks over, but he paid no mind—it wasn’t his job. The fifteen minute drive was made more difficult by the rain obscuring his windshield at a rate his wipers couldn’t outpace, and even inside the cab, the moisture evaporating from his uniform made his breaths feel heavier. It was familiar, yet still uncomfortable. It made him long to strip off the clothes that clung to his skin and let himself dry off against the sheets of a bed. Maybe Edwin’s. If he could just get through the day to see Edwin, he’d be happy, he decided. Maybe Edwin would be off of work early, since he said he was finishing up that programming contract he had.

Christmas decorations were plastered on some of the storefront windows before December had even begun. Coffee shops advertised their seasonal drinks with snowmen and snowflakes and various other winter-themed plastic stickers and posters and decorations,

while a myriad of stores proclaimed their Christmas season deals. It was an aesthetic that Dylan reticently enjoyed. Soon, though, it would be pulled into the sprawl, and when the season ended, there would be red and green plastic cups rolling down side streets and paper ornaments trampled and wadded up in hallway corners to make room for the festivities of the doldrums. Earth turned like a cog, and this city was one of its teeth.

“Man, you were right, this guy *is* a perfect fit.” Turner sipped coffee from a styrofoam cup.

“Yeah. We'll need to get a warrant for all of his messages, maybe subpoena a few websites once we find this guy.”

“If we find this guy.”

“Oh, we'll find him.” Dylan turned in his swivel chair.

Turner thumbed the lip of his coffee cup, but he said nothing.

“I pulled up our old file on him.” He turned back to his computer. “Larry Carson. Kidnappings all within a twelve block radius in the downtown area. Kidnaps one, claims responsibility in a manifesto about how he's going to 'purge society of leeches,' then kidnaps six more. Seven total within a two month long period, all taken while on the street at night, claiming responsibility for each one.”

Turner scratched his neck. “Yeah, I remember, all of the victims had been on welfare for a number of years with no job. Messages victims beforehand to learn about 'em. Trust me, I remember. What's it been now, three months without sign of him?” He took another sip of coffee. “You know, winter's coming up. Maybe that's why he's started up again—it's starting to get darker longer.”

“Let's not make any assumptions. We've got where Alexander was last night, I say we go there now and make sure that's actually where he went.”

“Yeah. Could be a fluke. Let's get to the cruiser. And not that old one you like so much.”

“Oh come on, the engine's probably still warm.”

“That's an excuse, and you know it.”

Dylan led the way out to the parking lot, dashing through the rain. The cab was still uncomfortably damp from its first outing of the day. Turner spoke once the doors were closed. “Okay, so, elephant in the room: if this really is a kidnapping, and this really is the same kidnapper, why'd he disappear for three months after seven kidnappings? That manifesto he put out sounded pretty dedicated. 'Weed out the useless,' I think he put it. Even vague mentions to some sort of god. Going inactive for three months doesn't sound like zealous fanaticism to me.”

Dylan turned on the police radio, which immediately began babbling messages at them. He turned it

down before speaking. “Damned if I know. Maybe he took a term of college and didn't like it.”

“Yeah, yeah, you're so funny.”

“Really though, I'm not sure. The messages I found on Alexander's computer were written in his style. It could be coincidental, but it sounded like him.”

“You've got to stop getting at evidence before we get a warrant. You're going to ruin a case one day.” Turner coughed. “So where's this place we're going?”

Dylan wrestled with the gearshift and pedals to get them on the road. “Games à la Mode. It's downtown, kinda grubby-looking.”

“You've been there?”

“No, but one of the better bars in town is near it.”

Turner scratched at his unshaven face again. “Fair enough.”

Lunch rush traffic had already cleared. Taxis tickled their way along the curbs in an effort to spot anyone waiting for a ride through the downpour, while a few brave pedestrians placed their misguided faith in strained umbrellas to keep them at least somewhat dry. Cars filed past one another in the shadows of massive skyscrapers which stood high in the murk like massive, bare femurs. Turner fiddled with his seatbelt the whole way.

Most of the parallel parking spots were taken, but Dylan was able to fit his way in between two poorly-

parked cars just in front of the game store. The door to the place was sunk into the building, next to one wide, narrow window pushed farther out. A sign declaring the store's name was hung over a number of small, ornately-painted figurines that, together, took the shape of a battalion from some fantasy warband. The two of them ducked under the overhang as quickly as they could and shook some of the rain off before stepping inside.

There were only three other people in the store with them. Two were browsing board games together, muttering to one another and pointing, while one stood behind the counter in the corner opposite the window. All three looked toward the officers; the customers glanced away to continue browsing games, wordlessly this time, while the shopkeep stepped from his counter. His straight brown hair hung down to his chest, and a small piercing adorned his lower lip. His face was surmounted upon a red shirt with the image of an armored swordsman, blade raised over his head. "Hello," he said, extending a slight hand, "what seems to be the matter, officers?"

Neither took the offer of a handshake. "Is there somewhere more private we can talk?"

The shopkeep eyed them tentatively, but nodded nevertheless. "Yeah, why don't you come back into the inventory space?"

He led them through the cramped store, past rows of colorful boxes, posters, and cleared-off wooden

tables, then through a doorway just beyond the counter. In the backroom space were boxes of thin cards covered in sleeves of plastic, though they were difficult to make out in the poor lighting. "What's going on?" asked the shopkeeper, adjusting his shirt.

Dylan spoke up this time, his deep voice almost menacing. "What's your name?"

"Oh, uh, Harry."

"Last name?"

"Harrison."

"Harry Harrison." Dylan raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. I know, it's weird."

"Alright then." He scribbled quickly in his notebook. Turner peered over Dylan's shoulder, but squinted when he realized he couldn't read any of it. "So, we believe you may know someone who has gone missing. Does the name Alexander Finkle ring any bells?"

"Yeah, Alex. Heavy guy, always wears that brown trenchcoat. Has something happened to him?"

Dylan gave a long exhale. "He's missing, like I said. Has he been here recently?"

The shopkeep licked his lips, dry from nervousness. "Yeah, he was here a couple days ago, for a weekly game tournament."

"What day was that, exactly?" asked Turner.

"Saturday."

"And what time did he arrive?"

"Uh, man, I think about four-thirty? I don't re-

member that day very well, I was pretty hungover.”

“That’s fine. Do you remember who he talked to?”

“He—he doesn’t really talk to anyone, really. He just comes and plays.”

“Alright. And did you see anyone suspicious that evening? Anyone that looked a little bit off?”

“No, not really. Alex was probably the most ‘off’ person here. There were just the regulars that night for the tournament... I think. I could check the roster.”

“I’d like a copy,” said Dylan. Harry moved to go back to the counter, but was cut off by more questioning. “So he was there the whole tournament, then? How long do they usually go?”

“They can take a while. They usually go until ten or so.”

“And what about this one?”

“This one went a little longer than usual, like eleven or something.”

“I see. A lot of players?”

“Eighteen or so.”

“I see.” He scratched his pen on the page to get it working again. “So how long has Alexander been coming here?”

“About a year now. He mostly just comes for tournaments. He’s always here early to buy cards. I think he looks them up at home. Always has a list of what he wants.”

“And has anyone ever come in here to see him specifically?”

“Not that I've noticed.”

The silence grew as Dylan continued writing in his notebook, and Harry began picking at a scab on his scalp. After a long few seconds Dylan started his barrage again. “What time did he leave that night?”

“Uh, oh god.” mumbled Harry, bringing his hand back down and picking at his fingernails. “Well the tournament went to, like, eleven, and Alexander stayed to watch it after he lost. I closed the shop right when it was done and everyone got their prizes.”

“What kind of prizes?” Turner interjected, his higher voice a sharp contrast to the rumble of Dylan's.

“Nothing special,” said Harry. “Just a few packs of cards. The tournaments are mostly for fun.”

“Has anyone ever gotten worked up over a loss?”

Harry shrugged his shoulders and pulled at the hemlines on his shirt. “Only a little. Mostly over rules stuff. But it's been a long time since there was a big argument.”

“How long?” asked Dylan, his voice filling the room again.

“I dunno, a few months?”

“Has Alex ever been involved in any of these arguments?”

Harry scratched at his scalp again. “Not really. He's obnoxious and asks the judges for rulings a lot,

but he never got in anyone's face or creeped too hard.”

“Alright,” Dylan mumbled, scribbling in his notebook and shifting his weight to the other foot. “Is there anyone you think I might be able to talk to? Anyone that knows him?”

“Well..” Harry trailed off. “Well there's his mother. I dunno, other than her.”

Dylan sighed and flipped to a new page, scribbled on it, then ripped it out and passed it to Harry. “Alright, well if you think of anything else, here's my number.”

Harry reached out for the number, but hesitated before taking it between his thumb and forefinger. “So, what, if I see him or something?”

“Or there's anything you think will help in our investigation.”

“You mean this investigation?” Harry looked at one officer, than the other.

Dylan bit at his lip. “Turner, close the door.”

The click of the flimsy door shutting sounded abnormally loud. “Are you really gonna intimidate him? Not your style.”

Dylan looked over his shoulder to Turner. “You gotta pay closer attention.” He turned back. “This man is being threatened.”

“Well, not really threatened,” said Harry. “Just, in the city, you know when to keep quiet, right?”

“It's okay,” said Dylan, nodding to Harry. “Do

you want to sit down?”

“Nah, it's alright.” Harry shifted in his spot. “I, ah, look, I don't have any proof or anything.”

“Proof of what? Don't dance around it, son.”

Harry's breath became heavy. “Okay, look. The streets around here, right? A couple of months ago, there were homeless people everywhere.” His shoulders relaxed as he leaned over onto one foot, then he sniffed and wiped his nose with his thumb. “They always would panhandle in the area since they know the people got money, but not, like, super rich, to the point where they completely ignore beggars. Anyways, they were always around here. Not much of a problem, never really came in the stores—they knew better than to ruin a good thing, you know?”

“Yeah, I get what you mean.”

“So anyways, a little while ago, some of the regulars stopped showing up. The panhandlers, I mean. Not that uncommon, they just end up moving on to new areas and other people step in to take their place. But this time they were coming and going like crazy, there was a new face sometimes every week. At first I thought that people just weren't giving them money anymore so they were leaving.

“So about a month ago, this woman comes into the shop. Not well-to-do or anything, but definitely not on the street. She comes in and asks about one of the homeless guys, green jacket and this really notice-

able birthmark on his face. I told her I'd seen him, but he hadn't been around for a few weeks and wasn't here for long. Then she cringed, right? Said if I saw him to tell her. I told her to file a missing person report. She says she has, and that the cops never look at that shit if it's a homeless guy." He brought his hand up in a diplomatic gesture. "No offense."

"Just keep talking, Harry Harrison."

"Okay. So anyways, she says that she's heard rumors that people are being taken off the streets and into one of the buildings around here, and they never come out. Creepy rumors like that spread around all the time, right? I just told her that she should leave her number and I'd call her.

"About a week later I'm closing up shop late. As I'm about to walk to my car, I see one of the homeless guys on the street, passed out between a few flood-lamps. And this other guy, dressed up in a black robe or something, appears out of the alleyway, wraps his arm around the homeless guy, covers up his mouth, and drags him into the alley. Then, *shlorp*, they're just swallowed up by the darkness."

Dylan cringed at the sound effect. "And what did you do?"

"What did I do? *Tch*, I didn't do anything! You see something like that, you don't say a goddamn word, or you're next." He sniffed. "I guess Alex must have said something."

Dylan and Turner were silent for a moment before the latter broke it. “When, exactly, did these beggars start disappearing?”

“I dunno, two and a half, three months ago?”

Dylan stopped writing. “Tell me more about this man you saw, the one in the robe.”

“Can't tell you much.” Harry shrugged. “Like I said, black robe, but his face was hidden.”

“*His* face? They looked like a male, then?”

“Dunno. Didn't get a good look, and the robe obscured a lot. It's just a guess.”

“Tall? Short?”

“Not sure. He—they—were hunched over.”

The two detectives looked at one another, then back at Harry. “Thank you for your time,” they said. “Let us know if you find anything else. You have my number.”

“Wait. If they learn I said anything—”

But Dylan and Turner were already out the door. The rain was still obscuring the street as they dashed to their police cruiser. They sat together in silence on the side of the road for a few seconds, the rain dripping off of clumped locks of hair and the fabric of their uniforms. For some time, they sat quietly while the radio chattered at them. Finally, Dylan's face contorted and he slammed his fists on the steering wheel over and over, screaming a seamless stream of the word “Fuck!” at the windshield, drawn close by the downpour. Turner

was silent, his jaw slackened. "Three months," was all he could murmur.

"Alright," said Dylan, shutting the Police Chief's door behind him, "we've got a team heading out to the area to make a sweep."

"How many?"

"Three."

"What!" Turner threw his hands into the air, then dropped them to his thighs with a loud slap. Heads turned, but the perpetual chatter in the police office didn't slow. "We need a dozen people out there combing the streets, at least!"

"Well we aren't getting them. People are tied up, and the chief isn't convinced that the guy didn't just wander off or something." Dylan motioned for Turner to follow. "Alright, look: the only way we're going to get the chief to follow along is if we find something. Anything. He just said that we don't know the homeless people were really kidnapped, and one month-old eyewitness report isn't enough to commit resources. Once we have a more solid lead, we'll be golden."

"Yeah, but our only lead right now is a single muddled eyewitness account, which, may I remind you, is the first time anyone has actually seen this guy after he went psycho, and even then, all we've got is that he's a black blob."

Dylan flopped into the chair of his cubicle and

rubbed his palms against his damp, flushed cheeks. "Alright, let's look at everything we know. Larry Carson, white male, ideologically motivated, trying to get rid of 'useless' types, victims between the ages of thirty and fifty with no gender preference, likely preying on the homeless now, too. What are we missing?"

Turner crossed his arms. "Maybe we're looking at the wrong set of data. What about the victims?"

"What about them? We've looked at their destinations, and they all end up in the same area, but their routes still make up a twelve block radius. Not enough of a pattern to do anything."

They sat in silence for some time, Dylan with his head bowed and Turner standing with his arms crossed. They dared not look at one another. There was no crime scene, no direct connection with any of the victims, and no physical evidence of any kind.

At length, Dylan stood. "We were supposed to clock out half an hour ago. Come on, let's get a drink."

"I don't want a drink."

"I think we need one."

"Just not that place you were talking about."

"Come on, man. It's a neat little dive. Change your clothes and let's go."

Turner sighed. "Fuck, fine, whatever."

It was a joyless two hours spent at the bar, though the rain had diminished. There were a few pool

tables with ripped felt, obscured by the gentle haze of cigarette smoke. One beer was brought out to each of them soon after their arrival, but they didn't order anything else besides a basket of fries. They had no taste.

"Maybe we're jumping to conclusions," said Turner.

"Hm?"

"Maybe those homeless people really are just moving on. That game store guy could easily just be fucking with us, too. Gamers have wild imaginations."

Dylan bit off half of a fry. "Yeah. Maybe."

"S'fucking bullshit. How are we supposed to play our side of the game if we don't have anything to go off of?"

Dylan didn't respond. He looked out over the crowd that had gathered, most ignorant of the kidnappings. For one reason or another, the media had skipped over them, leaving even those nearby ignorant. And so, they yelled and laughed and drank and ate and drank and ate and howled and talked and talked, raising their hands to get the attention of the waitresses who weaved in and out between the tables and swayed their hips and swayed their drinks all trailed by swaying hair. They stepped so sure, so deliberately between these people who were just trying to feel something before the day was out, or maybe not feel anything. So sure despite the dim lighting, and foam dribbled down the sides of the glasses, tracing their way through the condensation.

They came and went so regularly, taking favored routes despite so many different possibilities. Each route taken was *her* route, like an ant leaving an invisible trail.

And there, in the corner, sitting alone, was Edwin, doing his best not to look at him, and Dylan was trying not to look back. The little leap in Dylan's heart that usually accompanied seeing Edwin recently remained absent.

"Hold on. My phone's buzzing." Dylan's face was illuminated by the harsh blue light of the display showing an unknown number. "Hello? Who is this?"

"Officer? Dylan, right?" The voice was in a hush.

"Yes?"

"It's Harry, from the game shop. Please, get over here."

Dylan nodded to Turner, and they both stood and walked briskly outside. "Harry, what's going on?"

"I see him, he's across the street, hiding in the alley. I think they know I told you! I think they're staring at me!"

"Are you sure it's him?"

"Definitely. Cars are showing them. Their headlights, when they pass."

"Alright, stay put, we're on our way."

"Please hurry."

Dylan hung up and stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

"Why didn't he call the police?" asked Turner. "I

say he's putting us on.”

“Not willing to take that chance.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

Guns holstered, flashlights and badges in hand, the two of them walked briskly along the sidewalk, zig-zagging their way down the blocks and between buildings in their civilian clothing. Sprinkling rain dampened their faces, but neither paid any mind. Neon “OPEN” signs flickered in storefronts, demanding their attention, while bright snowflakes lit by LEDs adorned their path, lining the way to their destination, cheering them on.

It was only a few minutes before they made it to the street, where they quickly crossed to the sidewalk opposite the game store. The owner couldn't be seen through the window, though a few incredulous customers were inside. Dylan pointed down the sidewalk, and Turner nodded. They walked as silent as their shoes could carry them, close to the building, guns drawn and flashlights at the ready. The street was mostly barren of people, with only a few a block away in either direction, leaving them a wide area to work. In the darkness, enveloped in dark clothing, they were nearly impossible to see.

As they approached the corner of the alley, they held still and pressed their backs into the wall, breathing slowly and steadily. Steam exuded from their mouths, thankfully pushed away from the alley by a

gentle breeze. Dylan turned to Turner and nodded with each number as he counted down. Three. Two. They both took a deep breath. One.

Dylan leapt out around the corner, far enough to make room for Turner, who followed him. They flicked their flashlights on. "Police, freeze!" shouted Dylan.

Before them, a mass of night-black cloth stood, almost as wide as the alleyway. From the top of the mound, the light from the flashlights flickered back at them momentarily, but before they could see any detail, the mass shuffled backwards and shot away.

The officers gave chase down the dirty alley, past dumpsters and random refuse, the pooled water splashing loudly with each step. "I said freeze!" Dylan called after the black mass, but his words went unheeded. The frantic, splashing footsteps reverberated off of the walls of the alleyway so that the sound of their breaths were drowned out. As the mass reached a four-way intersection in the alley, it split, with each half skittering away from one another.

"There's two of them!" Dylan shouted.

"I'll go right," said Turner.

They approached the intersection and split as well, but after a few steps they both realized that they were chasing after nothing. Only the sounds of distant cars could be heard echoing down the corridors.

"Where'd they go?" Turner cried out.

"They're hiding, somewhere, right here! Eyes

open!”

But there was nothing to hide behind. The walls were flush, the fire escapes were much farther down the alley, and there were no dumpsters, stairs, or doors anywhere close to the intersection.

“Dylan, where'd they fucking go?”

“I don't know!”

“What the *fuck* is going on?”

“I don't fucking know! Are there any manholes?”

“Nothing.”

“Anything above?”

“Nothing. It's bare.”

“Fuck!”

Dylan knocked thrice, and the door opened just wide enough to see through.

“Dylan!”

The deadbolt was undone and the door thrown open. “Dylan, you alright? I saw you in the bar. I... I didn't know if you wanted your buddy knowing, so I figured I'd wait until he left, but then you guys got up in a hurry. What happened?”

Dylan pushed past and took his shoes off, leaving Edwin to close the door.

“What's up?” Edwin stepped over to Dylan, whose face revealed nothing. He brought his hands up to Dylan's cheeks, then dropped them onto his shoulders.

“Edwin.”

“I’m right here.”

Dylan’s head was hunched over. “I need something from you.”

Edwin smirked. “What, you need me to take your mind off of everything for a bit?”

“No. Kind of.”

“You wanna fuck, just say so.”

“No, not that.”

“Then what?”

Dylan inclined his neck to look up at Edwin; his muscles felt like an old apartment building’s elevator straining to pull the cab. “I need you to make love to me.”

Edwin ran his hands down Dylan’s arms, finding his wrists and pulling him closer. Their breaths swirled in the space between their lips. “I can do that.”

Dylan grabbed his phone from the bedside table and checked the time: 3:30 a.m. He cursed under his breath and rolled over to see Edwin. He couldn’t help but grin.

“What’s with that look?” Edwin asked.

“Even after fucking twice you look like an Aztec.” He ran his fingers through Edwin’s short hair.

“Maybe I should become a stripper and use that as my name: ‘The Aztec.’”

“Shut up.”

“You shut up.”

Dylan threw his leg over Edwin, folding sheets between them, and leaned down over him, their faces hovering close. “Shut... the fuck... up.” And they pressed their lips together.

Edwin pushed Dylan back upright. “Stop smothering me.”

“Whiner.” Dylan started tracing lines over his lover's chest. He drew the walking patterns of the waitresses, over and around Edwin's imperfections, and then he thought of his route to work, weaving through the roads, and he found his way there over Edwin's chest, his home one nipple and the station the other, and he marveled at the lines he made, how they criss-crossed over the wide veins.

“So what does this mean?” asked Edwin. “For us?”

Dylan, leaned down and kissed Edwin's chest, avoiding his work route. “I don't know. I want...” And then his head was low over his imaginary layout of the city imprinted upon Edwin, his heart just beneath. The paths...

He flung his leg back over and stood up.

“What's wrong?” asked Edwin.

“I have to go. Now.”

“Now? Dylan, come on. Don't go tonight.” He sat up and rested his fingers on Dylan's stomach. “Just for tonight, let it go. Please. I need you. Here.”

“If I'm wrong, I'll be back before you wake up.

Okay?”

But Edwin could only murmur Dylan's name in response.

The receptionist had looked at him strangely for his disheveled appearance, but Dylan hadn't flinched. He hovered over his computer with a printout of Carson's active area flat on the table next to him, while on his screen, windows of reports displayed each victim's file. On his phone was a navigation application, where he tediously ticked in the victims' departure location and destination.

He caught glances of his old notes on each person and remembered the way he had thought about them, how he had formulated opinions on them that grew noticeably harsher as the case went on. The realization made him feel ill.

He began with the first: Sandy Harbor, a girl constantly re-imagining herself and writing herself into fictions crafted by others, especially ones involving mythological creatures. Kelpies had become her most recent obsession, and her room had been covered in homemade drawings of the mythical creatures. He traced Sandy's route.

Next was Yalen Hendrickson, a college graduate who saw his degree better suited to programming rudimentary hypertext novels in his mother's basement rather than obtaining gainful employment. Dylan had

read one—it was mercifully short. He traced Yalen's route.

And then Helen's, then Ella's, then Richard's. Each line traced through the buildings, weaving from outside and carving their way in, and roads like veins, carrying the blood, the plasma, the cells, and they push their way into the buildings, engorging them, filling them with blood and time, throbbing, and spreading itself. Their very existence encourages more, and more, and more, and they all must be maintained.

Dylan shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. Obtrusive thoughts. How to fix them?

Coffee.

His brow was furrowed and his hands were shaking, and yet his body demanded he find a place to lay his head. Twenty minutes later, the caffeine was wiring his system. Heavier beats only pushed his heart deeper into his gut, and he winced as he rubbed his tender scalp. Fingers in his hair, gripping, tugging, strands catching, twining at the base.

Edwin. Why did I leave you there in that bed, Edwin? If I wanted, I could have just let this go. I could have gone myself to the interview, not told Turner anything and let this case sink into the asphalt. I could have listened to that worthless shopkeeper, written everything down, and thrown the pages in the gutter, letting the rain pull it along with the dirt and the leaves and the shit and the blood of all those people. Then I

could go to the bar, meet up with you, go back to your place, throw you to the bed, whisper into your ear that I love you, that I could quit this job filled with those horrid, violent people on one end of the gun and these horrid, complacent people on the other. And when I quit, we could find work elsewhere, live quietly, happily, and you'd say yes, oh god yes. Somewhere inside, you knew I wasn't just using you. But then you'd realize that, by giving up on the police, I'm not the person you thought I was. You'd leave me. You'd resent me for the lie I built up myself to be, and the same way you came to love me, you'd come to hate me. But I never lied to you, Edwin.

He bit his lip as he caught himself mouthing the words.

The page loomed before him, its suggestion beckoning. His hand wouldn't stop shaking, shaking. The last three remained, and tracing them was little challenge.

Timothy's route, then Brenda's.

Then Alexander's.

There was no outlier. Though his known targets all had destinations within a thirteen block radius, there was a discrepancy: all of their walking routes had come within a much smaller area, and as they approached one another, there was one clear locus: a single block, overtaken by old buildings that couldn't quite find a renovator.

But they'd checked the routes once before by hand. Why hadn't it worked?

Dylan flicked open a browser window and checked the official mapping site for the public transportation. Dear god, it was underfunded. There, at the top, was a quote:

Announcement: 9/3

Thank you for choosing public transit! Your decision helps reduce dependency on fossil fuels and frees up congestion on the roads. As of July 24th, our updated route and stop structure is expected to further decrease congestion and get you to your destination even faster.

Dylan slammed his fists on the table. "We had outdated fucking maps?!"

He had the warrant for each of the buildings within an hour. He brought all of his evidence to the judge, who signed off immediately, though she did comment on his greasy hair and told him to bathe better if he was going to represent the police force. All he afforded her in reply were his echoing footsteps.

The siren remained silent as he weaved through the growing population of the early morning roads. The

clouds of yesterday had given way to brilliant reds and oranges which now were turning into the pale blues of the day. He passed by the game shop again, sheathed in a darkness accentuated by the coffee shop and convenience store that flanked it. Well within eyeshot in the clear air, yet to receive the smog of the day, was the small grouping of old buildings—his destination. As he approached, he realized that the cost to repair them would likely be far too high to do anything with them. Why had the city not demolished them yet? Who was holding on to them?

He parked just two blocks away, keeping his cruiser around the corner and out of sight. Blackness and cold embraced him as he stepped out, the stinging smell of his own body odor punctuating the fresh scent of rain on pavement. The folded warrant in his pocket crinkled as he stepped down the road past the steadily increasing stream of cars. Buildings stooped low over him on his short walk, peering judgmentally down at him, but he pressed forward, mind muddled by exhaustion and frustration. And there, above the rest of the surrounding blocks, were those old buildings that towered six stories high. Dylan swallowed in a dry throat as he looked up. Through the roof of the farthest one, a vent was pushing out a thin, steady stream of steam.

Dylan now wished he'd brought more people. There was still time to do so, he realized. But he was

here, and some of the people may still be alive, how much longer he couldn't say. Despite being outnumbered, the steady creep of limited time egged him on. These shadows, these spiders scuttling through the dark, would be crushed beneath his heel.

He slipped into an alleyway, past a rusted, neglected dumpster with paint flecks littered beneath it. Wet, flattened cardboard boxes were tiled on the ground in a brown patchwork, and battered, worn shoes were scattered about on top of them, each missing their partner. Hypodermic needles were nestled against the corners of the buildings, their plungers pushed in to the bottom. The only windows faced toward the roads, leaving bricks and thick metal doors to choke the cramped space. On his left, the wall drew itself all the way down to the other street, but on the right, another alley abruptly began like a split lip. Beyond that split was a way into the building that leaked the steam.

As he approached it, he realized, to his dismay, that the door's lock was intact. Still, he placed his hand on the metal knob, and when he did, he furrowed his brow—it was warm, like a mug of coffee left out for just a bit too long. He cringed as he twisted his hand, and the mechanism clicked as it released. His pistol drawn, Dylan pulled open the door.

“Dylan Sandoval!”

A hand reached out and gripped his forearm, yanking him in. Thrown off-balance, he ducked to land

on his shoulder and sought a target for his pistol, but before he could take aim, a black boot with a soft sole was pinning his forearm to the ground. Sudden weight pressed down on it, and a sickening crack ran along his skeleton and into his skull. He took in breath to scream, but the air choked him with the stench of oil, rot, and feces. Unable to speak, he rolled over in an attempt to cradle his broken arm, but the leg which broke it was still in the way. Vomit issued from his mouth, some of it cut off by his strained throat. Involuntarily, he coughed the remaining bile, spraying it across the smooth concrete. Only then did the boot remove itself.

“I was wondering when you would arrive!” The slow, methodical voice gurgled in a deep bass that rumbled through Dylan's body, just out of sight. He looked up through the tears glazing his eyes and saw a face looking down at him, obscured by a gas mask and shrouded in a black hood. No, he wasn't the origin of the voice. What little light there was glinted off of one of the eyepieces. It moved back, revealing the ceiling high above him which disappeared into the darkness. Just beyond his field of view, something made a sickening squelching sound, punctuated by satisfied rumbles from loose vocal cords. “Take your time,” it said, “I'm in no rush.” It sputtered a phlegmatic chuckle.

Dylan looked past his limp, useless arm for his pistol, but it was nowhere to be found. Saliva tainted with his bile dribbled from the corner of his mouth, and

he spat. Each inhale brought with it that putrid smell, but the demand for air was overriding. He rolled to the other side and pushed himself up to his knees, leaning heavily on his unbroken arm, then lifted his heavy head. Contractions pulsed in his stomach again as he saw what had been speaking.

Before him, a rounded mound of flesh shuddered proudly. It was a few feet taller than him, and it stretched out into a flattened dome that groped for more space. Its minor features were difficult to see in the morning light, which struggled to push past the many small windows behind it. Massive, sharp teeth jutted up from the crest of the heap, and bits of rebar in jagged form pushed through the membranous, uneven skin. Dug into its body were over a dozen spindly, mechanical arms that reached out and high into the building like spider legs through the putrid, moist air. Muscle and sinew were tied around these arms, and they twitched erratically, sending vibrations clattering up and down their length. The mass was flanked by four figures, two on each side, draped in familiar black robes, and each wore a gas mask beneath their hoods. The two closest seemed to be tending to it, touching it in various places with bare hands. Dylan attempted to speak or to cry out—he wasn't sure which—but his throat clamped down, still suffering from the acid of his bile.

“I've sensed you for some time.” The entire mass

undulated as its mouth moved, a maw that stretched nearly from one end of its body to the other.

“What—are you?” Dylan sputtered between heaving breaths.

It chuckled, and the robed figures chuckled along with it, their voices muffled by the masks. “What am I? I am your new idol, and you bow before me rightly. But you... most likely know me as a particular woodcutter, no?”

Dylan slowly stood, his arm hanging by his side. He flinched as his broken bone nudged his hip. “You're Larry Carson? That's not possible!” he spat.

“There is much you do not know, so much for you to learn! You've felt it, haven't you?”

“Carson, stop this! You—“ But his speech was cut off by the sharp sound of a pistol firing. He felt his leg give out beneath him, and he fell onto his good shoulder, the impact causing his broken arm to flare up in pain. Dylan's gun once again disappeared into the folds of an acolyte's robes.

“You will show the respect due to the idol of the New God,” the thing spoke.

Through grunts and choked screams, Dylan sputtered, “What have you done?”

Again it chuckled. “What have I done? I have done so much, but it is not of my design. Rather you should ask, 'who has shown me how?' The one who showed me is the New God, and it has a name.”

## *Machina Urbis*

Dylan squirmed on the ground, writhing in the pains in his arm and his thigh. The acolytes chanted un-animously: “Machina Urbis.”

“Machine of the City! Don't you see, Dylan? We summoned it! It was always there, waiting beyond that veil with the infinite other gods. We chose it, and it answered our call.”

“Fuck you!” Dylan managed through gritted teeth and a cracking voice. “What did you do!”

“I am lucky. *We* are lucky, Dylan. You and I are not like others. I can see it, that twine tied to your mind, it's longer, *stronger*. You can reach out, you just have to want to. I, I reached out. I saw all of those people, milling about, taking and taking, and giving nothing back! The city is a machine, Dylan, a machine of our own design, and those people were locking the gears! They were dust in the oil.

“Everyone has a place in the city if they choose to seek it. People go to them the world over, looking for a better life. What they find is a new *kind* of life. But the useless ones? They would not have any kind of life. I made my manifesto, a declaration that I would help move the city along our path, the path civilization has chosen. But after I had cleaned away the first person, I heard something—“

“You killed them!”

“I did not kill them, Dylan!” The building rumbled with the thing's rage, and Dylan's moans of

pain were dwarfed. “There is no killing anymore, not here among the concrete and brick! People come to the city, Dylan, and they see themselves as whole. But they soon learn that here, you cannot be one! One must become many, divided by time. They become cogs in the machine of the city, turning and turning.”

“You're just a cynic. A weak cynic!” Dylan's chest heaved and his voice cracked with the accusation.

“You still don't understand. They don't hate that life—they *choose* it. They split themselves, and do they resent it? No. They may leave whenever they wish, yet they stay. And this desire has called the New God. He has heard us.”

“You're insane.”

“I'm not insane. I am blessed—my twine is loose and long, and so I heard the God, the Mind Without a Body. I heard Him the moment I slit the throat of my first victim. It was right here that He spoke to me. He told me that I was to be his idol, and that I would have my own order who worship Him through me.” Its form heaved in revelry. “He showed me how to absorb them, those dirty people who clog the machine, and how to make them into a part of me, how to repurpose them into something useful.” It stretched its yellow teeth high. “We are the beginning of the modern church. We have cast off the old gods and their old druids, and in their place has been instated His new order.”

“You killed them! You killed all those people! All

of you!”

“We are stewards of the city, just as you are. We merely act on those whom you do not deem worthy of your time. We wish to help you, Dylan. Will you accept?”

Dylan turned onto his knees, inhaling through a clenched jaw, and pushed himself to his feet with his good arm. “Fuck you,” he muttered, wiping the tears from his cheeks. “You think I’m just one of your cogs? Go to hell.”

“Mmm,” it rumbled. “You are already a cog. You serve the city well.”

Dylan’s chest heaved, and drool stretched off of his lower lip. The pain was overbearing, and still his mind raced. In desperation, he turned and hobbled to the door behind him.

They were upon him within seconds. He screamed and squirmed, crying out for help, but the hands of the acolytes wrapped tightly around him. Pain shot up his nerves and down his spine and through his extremities, and his limbs spasmed as they dragged him back. The door, illuminated in the morning light, grew ever-more distant as the rumbling behind him grew louder. Squelching of intestines and damp flesh filled his ears and accompanied the sound of his body scraping against the ground. His consciousness faltered as he was lifted into the air. Light from the windows pushed in deeper, and his eyes glazed over as he silently begged

to see daylight one more time. But it disappeared behind a set of sharp, massive teeth as he was thrown into the idol. The flesh he landed upon was soft, but the pain in his forearm was too much. All thought faded as the sphincter beneath him opened.

“Dylan? Dylan, are you awake? Get up!”

He opened his eyes, but he saw only overwhelming blackness. “Who are you?” he slurred. Speaking took more energy than he thought he had.

“I’m Larry Carson. Look, I know you don’t like me. But please. I need your help.”

“Carson... I was just talking to you.”

“Yes. But not really. Look, just listen to me. Okay?”

Dylan tried moving his arms, and he realized that he was on his back. It was hot and humid still, and the ground beneath him was soft, as though he were resting on someone’s stomach. Mucus covered the floor in a thin film and clung to him as he sat upright. He ran his fingers over his broken arm, which was already swelling. “What’s going on? Where am I?”

“You’re inside me. Kind of. It’s... difficult to explain it.”

Flashlight. He had to find his flashlight. Searching all over his body, he eventually found it, heavy on his belt. He unclipped it and pulled it up with his good hand, flicking the light on.

The inside was fleshy and pink, with thick arteries snaking along the walls. The floor sloped slightly inward, but not enough to slide Dylan down to the bottom. In the center of the room was a man, naked and suspended just above the floor by taut tendons as thick as his forearm that were attached all over his body in seemingly random locations, locking him in a horrendous mockery of the Vitruvian Man. He was young, no older than thirty, though all semblance of hair had disappeared. His body was emaciated, with bones protruding from underneath his skin, and his eyes were wild. Dylan could not stand to look into them for more than a moment.

“Jesus, that's bright,” complained Carson.

“What happened?”

“You mean just now, or everything?”

“Everything. Nothing makes sense.”

“Well, it started when I kidnapped that first person.” Carson's cheeks stretched and strained with the movement of his jaw. “I was online, and I met this girl on a forum, she's in her thirties and complaining about her parents limiting her, and I get frustrated, right? I mean, I'm here working my ass off just to feed myself and this girl is getting everything handed to her. So I just... got rid of her. I know you don't agree with me, but you wanted to know everything.”

“Get to the point, Carson.” Dylan didn't have the energy to protest further.

Carson continued rambling, tripping over his words. “Okay, okay. So I bring this girl in here, right? And then this voice starts speaking. It's like nothing you've ever heard, it was a complete understanding, like a perfect exchange of thought, unsullied by language. It's like it was in between the folds of my brain. It told me its name, and it told me that I was an exemplar, and that I would become its idol. I heard my body telling you that, so you already know that.”

“Then just let me out already. It's your body.”

“Well, yes and no. It's my body, my flesh, but it speaks on its own now. For some reason, Machina Urbis wants his idol to have both mind and body. But my mind—I started protesting. I've learned things, Dylan, things that nobody has ever dreamed of, things people *can't* dream of. Humans, there's more to us than we think. We have a body, yes, but we have this other self that runs alongside us, incredibly close but distinct. Like a soul, but not really, way more complex than that. Like an expanded consciousness.”

“Carson.”

“I'm getting to it. So it's there, and it's tethered to us. And now I can *feel* mine. When Machina Urbis reached out to me, I suddenly became aware of it. It taught me how to fuse this woman's body into mine, so I did! I couldn't explain it, I felt so close to this god, and I wanted to serve him. But my new body was strange. This girl's flesh, it built up around me and dug

into the ground, rooting me. Then people showed up, those 'Druids' in those black cloaks, and they started bringing more people, and the god kept telling me to fuse with them. It started as a steady trickle, but then they came like a flood. I think they started taking homeless people. Eventually it was too much, I wanted out, and I tried to stop, but I couldn't. They'd just fuse into me, their flesh morphing around me. I told them to stop, but the Druids just kept going. And then, eventually, when it was piled up around me high enough, it began morphing again, and I got sunk down here and stuck here. It's my body, but I can't move it anymore. And it won't let me go! The most I could manage was forcing you down into this chamber.”

“So all those people, they're dead.”

“Pretty much.”

“And you want me to do what?”

“Get me out of here. See these tendons? If you can just cut them off, I think it'll free me. I won't try to run, I swear. Send me to prison, send me there for five lifetimes, I don't care. Just get me free!”

“And this thing will die?”

“Yes. It needs a mind to live—my mind. Hurry!”

Carson licked his lips.

Dylan rediscovered his consciousness and struggled to his feet, but the mucus was slick and he fell, landing on his hurt leg. He gave a sharp shout.

“Careful, now!”

He settled for crawling over to one of the tendons, hindered by the slight slope. The tendon was tough—tough enough for him to grip onto it and hold him up.

“Cut it! Don't you have anything?”

“I only have my pocketknife.”

“Do it!”

Dylan reached into his pocket and drew the pathetic little blade. Sawing at the tendon was no good. Even after three minutes, the only progress to show for it was a shallow groove. He grabbed the end of his flashlight and began smashing at it, but the tendon proved resilient. He yelled and bit into it, but the only thing he got out of it was the taste of gristle in his mouth. Finally, he sat back. “It's not working,” he said.

“Can your knife dig into the wall?”

Dylan squirmed over to the edge and prodded the flesh, but it flexed underneath the blade. “No good,” he wheezed. “I'm beginning to feel lightheaded. If I pass out again, I may not wake up.”

“Okay, um, um, hold on. Wait! I've got it. Oh god, this isn't going to be good though.”

“What is it?”

“Well, if you can't get into the wall, maybe you can get your knife... into me.”

Unwilling to waste time, Dylan slid his way down to Carson and scanned the flashlight over his body. “Where?”

“I don't care where you start. Just do it!”

Dylan chose the most readily available one, the one stuck to his ankle, and dug the knife into the skin, holding the flashlight between his shoulder and his head to illuminate his work. Carson groaned through clenched teeth, but couldn't move. Dylan ignored him and cut all the way around the tendon, freeing the flesh from the bone.

“Just get it off of me!”

“I can't.”

“Jesus Christ, why not?”

“I think it's stuck to the bone.”

“Then just cut away the bone!”

“I can't do that, you idiot!”

“Then try another place.”

Dylan reached up higher for one of the tendons on Carson's thigh. “I'm no surgeon. This is going to hurt.”

“Don't you think I know that?”

He dug the pocketknife into Carson's flesh, next to the tendon, and a horrible wail of pain pierced the dank air, though the flesh wouldn't allow an echo. He wedged the knife against the tendon and pulled back the flesh to reveal the muscle underneath.

“Doesn't work here, either.”

“Oh god, why not?”

“I think the tendon goes all the way down to the bone here, too. There's no muscle around it for a few

millimeters. Fuck!”

“What happened?”

“The pocketknife snapped; the blade's stuck in your leg.”

Carson spoke frantically. “Dylan, just please, do something. Don't leave me here!”

Dylan looked up at Carson's face, twisted in agony, and furrowed his brow. Wedging his flashlight in between one of the tendons and Carson's body, he gripped onto a tendon and pulled himself up with his good arm. Finding his balance with his legs, he reached up again and found another tendon with his hand. He threw his bad arm over one of the tendons to hold him upright and reached down to grab his flashlight.

“What are you doing? Dylan?” Carson's blood-shot eyes went wide. “No. No, you wouldn't. Please, no. Don't do this. Please, oh god, don't do this. You can't. Dylan. Stop. Stop!”

Dylan raised the flashlight over his head, then brought it down onto Carson's head. The blow was enfeebled by his tenuous grasp on consciousness, but it still struck with force. He struck again and again, each time compromising the skull a bit more, and each time Carson's begging grew more slurred. The cracks that accompanied the strikes grew louder as the bone splintered, then quieter as the skull gave way entirely to the heavy end of the flashlight. Carson's pleas ceased.

There was a great groan from without, and the

walls began squelching. The tendons stuck to Carson's body relaxed, dropping him to the floor, and the walls sagged. Dylan felt his last moments of consciousness slip away as the massive body fell in on him. Distantly, he heard the sound of crunching bones.

“Lock this place up,” said Turner. “Nobody gets in here until the FBI says it's okay.”

“On it.” The detective jogged out of the building as quick as she could and gasped for fresh air when she made it outside.

The Chief of Police wandered over next to Turner and rolled his shoulder. “What's your takeaway on this so far?” he asked.

Turner raised an eyebrow. “Well, this building has had illegal renovations performed on it, what with all six floors being knocked out and piled in the corners. Or were you talking about the stinking flesh pit over there? Or maybe the weird arms hanging from the walls? What do you think the takeaway is on this? I've got no goddamn clue.”

The Chief spat on the ground. “Where's your partner?”

“No idea. Last place he was seen was the courthouse early this morning, getting a warrant to search this place and the surrounding buildings.”

“Why'd he go alone?”

“No idea. I don't think he slept at all that night. He'd been up for at least 24 hours when he got the warrant. Probably a lapse in judgment.”

“Any sign of anyone else?”

“Nothing. Not yet, anyways. We're searching for witnesses right now.”

“Well give me something.”

“We're trying.”

The chief shook his head, sighed, and wandered off to his cruiser.

Turner walked over to the hole in the ground again and shined a flashlight down. Massive yellow teeth jutted up from the pink flesh far down below, but the stink somehow didn't bother him. One too many bad crime scenes, maybe. As he peered down, he thought he heard a voice deep beyond his eardrums, resonating between the folds of his brain...

He sighed and stood up, running his fingers through his hair. The moisture in the room was almost unbearable, and he needed to breathe.





# The Distended Eye

My name is Albert Sanchez, and I'm a professor of chemistry. If you are a member of the press, I beg you, read this letter and all of the attached evidence. Let the whole world know about what has happened. But if you're a member of that abhorrent company, one of you whom I see darting at the corners of my eyes, waiting for the right moment, then know this: you needn't read the letter, for I can tell you what it contains: the end for you and all who conspire with you. If one of you is reading this, then it's already too late. I have passed this letter to multiple allies, none of whom you know or can track. Each of these allies has taken the letter to a lawyer with whom they have never met before and have paid them to release it to every major news outlet in the event of death or disappearance for myself or Tabitha. I know I have only given us a short amount of time, but,

somehow, knowing that I fight you even in some small way is calming the shaking in my hands.

I didn't set out to discover any of this, at least not at first; I'm a professor, not a detective. A couple of months after teacher evaluations, the Board of Trustees decided to grant me a little bit of extra money so I could round up samples to show students. Seeing as it's my job to get students excited about chemistry, I thought I'd acquire a very small sample of iridium to show off. I figured it was a good choice, since all iridium comes from meteors that crashed into the earth when it was young, and new students all seem to have a fascination with space. On top of that, it's recently been used to produce minuscule amounts of antimatter, which is amazing to anyone, frankly. It's pricey, but mostly inert and stable in the right isotopes, and I would only be getting a minute amount. Most importantly, I had the contacts to get my hands on some for a decent price. Only about three metric tons of it is sold a year and supply is limited, but the refineries always keep a little bit aside for cases like me.

Which is why I was so surprised when I called my contact, Gerald, and he told me that there was absolutely none available. The refinery, he explained, was working around the clock to meet a frankly ridiculous contract that had, ridiculously, been accepted by the refinery. He told me that he could practically bury me in all the nickel they were getting from it, but iridium

## *The Distended Eye*

wasn't possible; every scrap of the stuff was being dedicated to the contract, and they wanted it pure, as pure as they could possibly get it. He said he hadn't seen such a high volume demand since the 2000s. I asked him who it was that made the order, and he made some vague reference to a private research company who might be doing something military, but he couldn't give a name. I remember the evasiveness in his voice, but at the time I didn't think much of it. Working night and day for the past week had taken its toll on him, I figured, and after working for years with him, I knew what it was like to process such a large order. He then asked me if I would be interested in seeing him again sometime soon. He offered to come over for dinner. When I turned him down (I had three tests to write) he began to sound more panicked. "Please," I remember him saying, "I insist. We really ought to, just like the good old times. I miss Lovely Lady Sanchez's cherry cider."

Though to anyone else this would have seemed a triviality, there were two things of which I was certain: Gerald was earnest, and that something was direly wrong. The first was confirmed by the inclusion of my wife's cherry cider, which she had frequently brought to the refinery to relieve not only myself, but the rest of the workers, earning her the title of "Lovely Lady Sanchez." The second was founded upon an oft-repeated promise we made to one another: we would never recall

those miserable years amid the noxious fumes as “The Good Ol’ Days.” I acquiesced, and we agreed to meet that weekend.

It was a twelve hour drive for him, but he made it, as he had promised. When he arrived, he looked ragged and worn-down, like a pocketknife sharpened far too often. I noticed that what used to be a full red beard was now marred by newly grey strands. His eyes drooped while the skin beneath them sagged, and his bones prodded out from under his skin where they had once been nicely padded. His first words were, “I could really use some of that cider.”

My wife, Tabitha, sat down next to me as we listened to him talk. He had brought a briefcase with him which he had filled with files copied from his office. These files, or copies of them, may be found among the evidence included with this letter. Despite the relative disorder of the papers, he picked each out and placed them on the table in a specific order. He asked me if I had a recording device. I reached for my phone, but he hissed at me that I needed something more secure. I realized that, in fact I did have something, so I went into the storage room and retrieved my old tape recorder, with a magnetic tape cassette still lodged in the spools, while Gerald got all of his papers in order. When I returned to the room and hit the record button, he began to talk frantically. Below is a transcript of the conversation:

## *The Distended Eye*

[Transcript begin]

Gerald: Alright Albie, I know this is gonna sound insane and paranoid, but you've gotta listen to me. Something is wrong. I have a ton of papers here, but none of it is proof, and frankly I'm afraid to get it, but... Okay, here, look, this is the order request form to refine about a third of a ton of iridium. That's not including dross or impurities.

Albert: Jesus christ, a third of a ton? Who needs that much?

Gerald: These guys, apparently. So here's the thing: we said, "Where are we supposed to get all of this iridium?" And they said, "No big deal, we have all of it, we just need you to refine it." And we said, "Where did *you* get all of this iridium?" And they said, "Here, have a metric shit ton of money, now buy more equipment, line your pockets, do the work, sit down, and shut up." So we did. I mean, what were we supposed to do, say no? But there was something wrong with these guys, man. They weren't just businessmen. There was something about them, something... aggressive. The way they carried themselves, their chests all puffed out and their hands folded in front of them and their flat voices. They identified themselves as "Holbert Nuclear Research Options." So I decided to look into it, right? Because who the hell do you know named Holbert? Whenever nobody was looking, I would start to look stuff up on these guys, through a proxy, just in case,

and guess what?

Albert: There's no such company.

Gerald: There's no such company as Holbert Nuclear Research Options, exactly. I made absolutely sure of it. Nothing. Not a damn thing. So I started thinking, "Has this kind of thing ever happened before?" You know, maybe they had done this under a different name. I couldn't remember anything like this happening with us, when we were working there together. But obviously we're not the only refinery owned by the company, so I started looking. There was...

[Twenty seconds of ruffling papers and incoherent mumbling]

Gerald: Here we go. I started digging into the archives of the company, looking for other orders like it. I didn't find any single large order like this, but I did find something weird. In the year 2000, a rapid series of smaller orders came in from a bunch of different companies, all of them research groups. Look at these names: all different, but all for similar samples of iridium, with an occasional outlier, and all demanding the same level of purity, the same purity that "Holbert" is demanding. Well, I decided to do some deep digging on each of the companies that made the orders, and same goddamn thing. None of them exist. None of them *ever* existed. A couple of them had webpages that were still up, probably forgotten about, but they were just facades, fakes. Every link on their front page just linked

*The Distended Eye*

back to the front page again. These orders kept coming in until the 9/11 attacks, then suddenly all of the orders ceased.

Albert: Wait a minute, are you saying these guys had something to do with 9/11?

Gerald: No no, I don't think so. But I do think that these guys went into hiding, since the government suddenly started getting paranoid. I know it seems like I'm jumping to conclusions, but look at this.

[Ten seconds of ruffling papers]

Gerald: This order that our refinery got? It's almost equal to the total amount of iridium that was requested back in 2000, just back then it was done piece-meal. I've looked elsewhere in the company, but we're the only ones who have gotten this order.

Albert: Wait, so why didn't they just make a bunch of little orders this time?

Gerald: I don't know, but I have a few theories. I started thinking, the Government's gotten more invasive, sure, but it's not nearly as paranoid. Maybe they just think they can get away with it. Maybe they spent all of that time making friends in the government so nobody snoops around. Even in these instances, though, that theory doesn't make sense, since it would be much faster to get a bunch of different refineries to do it. But I think I know why.

Albert: Why?

Gerald: Think about it. Why would you have it all

done in one place? Only one thing makes sense: location. And looking deeper into the order, they stated...

[Five seconds of ruffling papers]

Gerald: They stated that they would be providing their own transportation. I think they're trying to get the iridium somewhere with as short of a route as possible, so they're less exposed. Like, they're afraid that if one of the places gets caught, they're done, so they just keep the operation super localized.

Albert: So what does this all mean?

Gerald: I don't know. But whatever they're doing, they're keeping it secret, they're afraid of repercussion, they're doing it fast, and they have the money for it. And now, I think we're the only ones who know that aren't bought out and aren't with them.

Albert: What do you want me to do, though? What *can* I do?

Gerald: Look, winter break is coming up for college, right?

Albert: Yeah, but I still have tons of writing I need to do.

Gerald: Albert! [Slams fists on table] This is more important than your research! Something's going on here and... and I'm scared, Albert. They keep looking at me, watching me, like they know something, like they know I'm doing all of this... I think I'm going to die, Albert. They're gonna take me out, they know I know. But I was careful. They don't know I'm here, they

*The Distended Eye*

don't know *what* I know.

Albert: But Gerald, what do you want me to *do*?

Gerald: Alright, here, look: the first pickup has already happened, but the second pickup is happening behind the refinery, on December 18th at two o'clock p.m. If you can get there, follow them, secretly, maybe you can figure out what they're up to, what they're doing.

[Seventeen seconds of silence]

Albert: Do you want to stay here a while?

Gerald: No, I can't. The longer I stay here, the more likely that they'll find you. I have to go, as soon as possible.

Albert: At least have something to eat.

[Three seconds of silence]

Gerald: Thank you. I'd like that.

[Recording stops, then is resumed at a later time]

Albert: You're looking a little better now.

Gerald: Thank you. I think.

Albert: There are still a few things I don't understand. First, it seems kind of reckless that whatever group wants all of this iridium went through a single company to get it. How do we know they only used our company?

Gerald: I thought that was weird, too, but there are a couple of telling features. Yeah, it seems like they

only went through our company. I called a few other companies with iridium refining capabilities using a pre-paid cell phone, and none of them saw a volume like we did. I'd recommend getting one of those, a pre-paid phone I mean, in case you need to call me. No real way to track it if you get it in cash. I'll write down the number for mine.

Albert: But wouldn't taking all of those orders way back in 2000 make you guys really suspicious?

Gerald: Well, all of it got logged in our databases, but not until long after the jobs were completed. The records show that the requests were made in the year 2000, but they weren't actually logged until 2006, one year after the United States government did an audit of the company. There was plenty of other work coming in, so it would have been easy to fudge the numbers a little bit, funnel that money into an offshore bank account or something. The money they're offering this time is huge. If you looked at the numbers, you'd think they're commissioning us to make a small Hollywood film. They probably offered the guys up top a lot to keep it under the table.

Albert: I'm hearing a lot of uncertainty.

Gerald: Look, Albie, there's writing on the walls here. Isn't that obvious? Yeah, a lot of it isn't clear, but the concrete stuff is already dubious enough. These guys are up to something.

Albert: But what would they be using it for?

*The Distended Eye*

Gerald: I have no idea, but it's not like they're acquiring pure hunks of iridium just so they can whack them together. If we can just find out what else they're acquiring, we could lure them out.

Albert: Hold on, you're getting ahead of yourself. We're not even sure that all of those old orders are the same group.

Gerald: Listen to yourself! Even in the face of all this evidence you want to just curl in a ball and look the other way. You always do this! Back in the day, every time someone got up in your face you just cowered in the corner like a kicked puppy! "Oh, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean that about your mustache. The band patches on your jacket are super cool, by the way." And now you're doing it all over again. I'll bet you aren't getting paid nearly enough at the college because you're too afraid to ask for a raise, and they know it! How could they not?

[Ruffling papers]

Gerald: I'm not even sure why I came here anymore.

Albert: Wait—

Gerald: What? What is it, Albert?

Albert: Just—just leave the papers.

[Silence for four seconds]

Gerald: Fine. Not like I want to get caught with any of these anyhow.

[Sound of door opening]

Gerald: Albie. If I never see you again—

Albert: Don't talk like that. We'll see each other again.

Gerald: Yeah. Yeah, we will.

[Transcript end]

I ended up getting that pre-paid cell phone as he suggested. Even after he had visited me, he was convinced that they weren't aware of my involvement. To him, this gave me a freedom that he was no longer afforded. He had come to me on November 29th, giving me nineteen days to investigate whatever I could. After he had gone to so much trouble, it was the least I could do for him. In the meantime, he would work on discovering how they found out about his snooping.

There were a few things I needed answering. The first was simple: where did they get so much unprocessed iridium to throw into a refinery? Even if I had the time to contact every iridium mining site and get estimates on their total output, it would still be a wild guess; there are untold numbers of illegal digs that go unreported. Though it was possible for this company to get all of its iridium through illicit means, it's unlikely that so much could be collected without any notice. I made a couple of phone calls to the places I knew just in case, but (surprise, surprise) I was shoved into the bureaucracy and would have to wait months to hear back.

## *The Distended Eye*

There was one place I *could* look, however, that couldn't lie to me or hide from me: the money. I pulled up a few price charts on iridium. They only went back to about 2005, but one thing was very clear: something in late 2009 made the price increase from \$400 per ounce to almost \$1,100 per ounce. Demand during that period did increase with the heightened production of LED screens, but, as Gerald said with that tired old cliché, the writing was on the walls: someone was buying up a lot of iridium at once during that period, and not all of it could be explained by the production of backlights. A part of me wanted to say that I was just jumping to conclusions, that there were a thousand other explanations for these strange coincidences, and yet I couldn't ignore that suggestion that Gerald had buried in my ear. The more I researched, the more I began to feel like a Christian archaeologist discovering that the Pagans were right.

The second, most pressing question was more profound: *why*. Every practical application of iridium only calls for small amounts; even when it's being used as a shield against stellar radiation by NASA, only a very thin coat is needed. Gerald, in his wild imaginings, conjured some sinister purpose, but as a professor, I am keenly aware that seeming does not mean being. Attempting to discover this hypothetical company's purpose would be the most exhaustive task, seeing as the only method of doing so was to list the potential uses

and check them against the facts that were available to me.

But what could I measure? Despite iridium being a metal with a limited market, the only information I could find was a blip in its cost half a decade ago, albeit a large blip. I had no name, no information, and no contacts to guide me—just old order forms and ramblings from a terrified refinery manager. By Friday afternoon my mind was giving way, so I stopped by one of the many cafes on the college campus and sat in line, surrounded by bright new students exhausted from another week's worth of crippling classwork and illuminated by an already-setting sun. As I inched closer to the counter, my mind snagged on a thread that Gerald had mentioned: proximity. Before, they had gone to a number of refinery locations, but now they were just employing the one.

Or were they?

I quietly ordered myself a coffee before walking back to my office, not even bothering to turn on my light, which left my room in a singular deep shadow. It was still the afternoon, so I had time to make the calls I needed. I slipped my pre-paid phone out of one of my jacket's more secret pockets and dialed Gerald, but I received no answer. So, I went online to look for any other refineries within a hundred mile radius of that old plant to which Gerald was still tied. Search engines are remarkably ill-equipped for that particular functionality,

## *The Distended Eye*

so it took me a while, but I eventually realized that there was nothing that close. I expanded my search to two-hundred miles, then two-hundred-fifty. There was one other refinery, owned by a different company, with different capabilities. Biting my lip, I dialed their number. I remember the conversation even now; the peppy voice of the receptionist grated on my nerves, but her eagerness may have been what saved me from their eye. It went something like this:

“Hello! How may I help you?”

“Hello, my company was looking to employ your refinery. Could I speak to the person in charge?”

“Well if it's about refining services, I could assist. When were you looking to utilize our equipment?”

I chose my words carefully. “Sometime within the next month. As soon as possible.”

“Excellent, we can absolutely help you. We're currently swamped until the 20th, but we can get you in right after that.”

I had to work hard to mask the quavering in my voice. “Really? You couldn't do it any sooner?”

“Well, you could try to talk to the other company. They are listed as... Oh, let me check... Richards Metal Investments. If you'd like, I could schedule you to discuss details with Ms. Jenkins, our supervisor.”

“Thank you, you've been quite kind.”

“Of course sir, I mean, ah, thank you! Would you like to make an appointment with Ms. Jenkins?”

“No thank you, not yet. Goodbye.”

I hung up and gingerly set the phone on the table, suddenly afraid to make any noise, and brought my hands to the keyboard of my desktop. My senses were heightened in a way they hadn't been since I was a young man. I typed in a search for “Richards Metal Investments.” The link I wanted showed up at the very top.

I clicked. Adorning the screen was a finely designed veneer with smooth lines, complimentary colors, and even animated drop-down menus. It was covered with stock photographs of smiling businesspeople juxtaposed with trite, vague quotations about “vision” and “the will to succeed.” I clicked the “contact” link on the navigation bar. The page went white for a moment as it sent me to the link's destination:

The main page again.

I clicked another link, this one at random. Again, the main page. I clicked another five times, and nothing would take me anywhere except where I'd already been.

Before I had time to contemplate my discovery, my pre-paid phone began ringing. Tentatively, I answered. It was Gerald, yelling at me, asking if I was okay. Having someone else to calm helped calm me. I explained to him everything I had done and found. I still remember the shock in his voice as he told me that *accessing their websites was how they figured out who you were*. He explained that their method was crude, that

## *The Distended Eye*

they would use their website to obtain the IP address of the visitor. However, since I had used the college's internet, all they knew was that someone on the campus had looked at them, and I should be fine, at least for a while. Still, he recommended I run an antivirus and an antispyware program to be safe. (He had to step me through the process)

I could feel a choke chain lashed around my neck already. Only now had I even confirmed this mysterious company's existence, and they already knew where I was within two square miles.

I went through the rest of the day as normally as I could so as not to draw suspicion, though my efforts were probably unnecessary. On the drive back home I had time to ponder. My call to the refinery, though seemingly quaint, had revealed a fantastic amount of information. First, this nameless corporation was feared by other refining contractors. One would think, with the time it takes to complete such a massive order, the queue to use the refinery's services would be long. In reality, I would be able to get my hypothetical goods into their facilities the moment that "Richards Metal Investments" was finished with them. It's likely that another company, at some point in the past, had attempted to hurry the order along, created an inferior product, and met with harsh reprisal. Whatever had happened, it was clear that nobody wanted to be anywhere close to Richards.

The other clarifying point was that they were almost certainly on a timetable. The iridium shipment would be picked up on the 18th, and whatever material was being refined at this second location was slated to be finished on the 20th.

I slammed my fist on the steering wheel; I had forgotten to ask what material they were refining. I had assumed it was lead, seeing as that was the refinery's specialty, but there was no way to be sure without investigating for myself.

When I arrived home and sat down next to the fireplace I realized that it was probably for the best—if I had asked about what material they were refining (something that wouldn't have been of interest to a man seeking a business venture), I would have outed myself as suspicious. As it stood, I had revealed nothing of the sort, and any information I gathered was due to the blabby nature of the receptionist, a fine excuse. Someone, somewhere in the heavens was watching out for me. Tabitha could visibly see that something was troubling me, and she sat down next to me on the couch and rubbed my knee to try and comfort me. In my foolishness, I confided in her what had happened and what I had discovered. After making us a pot of tea, she reassured me that there was a reasonable explanation for everything. Things probably just weren't lined up well for that particular refinery after the large order, and they had lost business, and how uncommon was it

## *The Distended Eye*

really for companies to screw up their websites? I only could give her a weak smile betrayed by troubled eyes. Unconvinced but realizing the futility of her effort, she stood up and told me to come to bed soon. I sat a bit longer, staring at the bottom of my hastily emptied cup.

The next day, both of us were in a bad way. It was clear that not even my wife had believed her own words. Given all of the information I had, she could only come to the same conclusion: that something was out of place, and that, as holders of privileged information, there was a responsibility on our shoulders.

We spent hours deliberating over multiple cups of tea as we watched traffic sift by—tea was all our stomachs could handle. It was a discussion that lasted all day, though much of that time was filled with silence. The more we spoke, the closer we came to the conclusion that our best course of action was simply to do... nothing. We decided that, even if they were performing something strange or sinister, they were simply attempting to effect a monopoly or something of the like. Once upon a time, we had been activists, attending rallies in an effort to change the course of the world (I had met Tabitha at one of those rallies), but we were old now, and we were content with the work we had done. Anything more would have to be performed by the younger generation, it was concluded. We would not act. I say “we” now because my wife had intimated to me that if I were to do anything rash, she would be

forced to come along as my partner in crime (literally. We had performed a number of illegal actions in our activist days).

The rest of the afternoon was calm. After making the decision, it felt as though we had sloughed off a great weight. We worked together in the kitchen and made a huge lasagna dinner to make up for the lunch we skipped, and we stood shoulder to shoulder as much as we could just to be close to one another. That afternoon, in the face of a crisis averted, we were happy.

That evening, however, as we were watching Casablanca together, my pre-paid phone rang. We were silent for a moment before I picked up and set it to speakerphone. Immediately, we were assailed with crashing and the sound of splintering wood. Gerald was screaming. "They're after me!" he cried in a garbled voice—all of the noise was blowing out the microphone. "They're in my house with guns! I've barricaded the door, but they're breaking in. I don't have much time. It's them, though! I was right, and now they're trying to shut me up! Please, don't let them win. Don't let them get away—"

We heard a crashing, then Gerald screaming, then a short, sharp bang.

I hung up the phone and sat in silence, with Tabitha at my side and the quiet murmuring of Casablanca in the background. My old friend was dead.

I wept for some time with my head in my hands.

## *The Distended Eye*

Gerald had been right—about the company and about me. I turned to my wife, who had been next to me for almost all of my life, and in her eyes I didn't see sadness and mourning. Instead, I saw a measured, righteous rage like the unseen energy of a drawn bow. It was something I hadn't seen for many years. I furrowed my brow and nodded despite my tears. There was no going back now; we were seeing this through.

The next eleven days were spent anxiously waiting, but we had our plan. There was only one road to the refinery, so we would hide just a little ways beyond the ingress to the main building, allow the truck to pick up its payload, then follow it all the way to its final location. Even after this long, we remembered how to tail another vehicle without being spotted; it had come in handy when trying to find new clear-cut lumber sites to protest. We would leave early on the 17th in our little commuter car, stay at a hotel, then lie in wait for two hours before the scheduled pickup time the next day.

The trip to the refinery was mostly quiet, and the two of us traded off driving to stay awake. We were terrified on our trip knowing that, once this was over, we would most likely die no matter how it all turned out. But we had a sense of purpose, and, most of all, we had each other. Between the two of us, we felt as though we could accomplish anything.

The semi arrived just when Gerald said it would. It was completely unmarked and looked brand-new,

with the trailer painted a fresh white and the cab a deep blue. It chugged down the dirt road a little before two and emerged an hour later, its sides pockmarked with fresh mud, and we sent our little car pattering after it, never quite losing sight. After about forty-five minutes of driving, we began to worry about fatigue, but our concerns were alleviated after we had only driven fifty miles. The semi slowed and turned onto a lonely, unmarked road that weaved between a pair of wheat fields and disappeared into a forest in the distance.

We'd found them.

We barreled past the road, then doubled back along the highway to wait in the last small town until nightfall, when we could infiltrate. We were relieved, but we both recognized that only half of our work was done. We ate out at a cheap restaurant before returning to our hotel, where we waited in relative silence, sitting in the chairs and checking the clock every few minutes. There was nothing left to say, but we were comfortable with it. We turned on the TV in our hotel room for a little while, but all of it seemed dull in the face of the stunt we would be performing later that night.

We began driving at 11:00 to the dirt road where we had seen the semi turn. There was no gate and no security; it was clearly made to be as inconspicuous as possible. We pulled onto the shoulder and covered all of the external lights with black electrical tape, a trick we had learned in our youth. We were in luck: despite being

## *The Distended Eye*

mid-December, the sky was completely clear, leaving just enough dim moonlight to guide our way as long as we drove slowly and methodically.

It was a full half-hour of careful navigation until we came upon our first and only roadblock: a simple metal gate at the edge of a forest. We left the engine running as we examined the gate with a small pocket flashlight. It took a few minutes of investigation to learn that the gate only had one simple alarm mechanism. We'd dealt with alarmed gates before—most worked by sending an electrical current through the metal bars, and if that current was broken by opening the gate, the current would stop, setting off an alarm. We were in luck: the one here only worked on a switch that pulled out if someone opened the gate, the same kind of mechanism used in refrigerator lights. I took a thin nail file from the car and used it to press the switch down while Tabitha opened the gate and wormed a piece of electrical tape underneath the file to secure the switch down. It was strange to both of us that such an operation would use such poor security measures. Still, we high-fived one another and continued down the road and into the forest beyond.

It was only a few more minutes before we came upon the complex. We mused that either we were sorely mistaken about the road the semi used, or the corporation saved a lot of money on security. What we found looked simply like a backwater church with a little wait-

ing room attached to the front, penned into a small clearing by the surrounding forest. We stepped out of our car and looked at one another in confusion. Nobody came up to the car to stop us, nobody shone lights in our eyes, and nobody shot us dead. We figured that being alive and uninjured was a good sign, so we decided to push our luck by pulling out our larger flashlights and seeing what we could find.

It didn't take long to find the black SUV crashed beneath the lone tree in the clearing. Its doors had been flung open and most of its windows were splintered or completely smashed. Tabitha reeled when she realized a bloody corpse was hanging out from the side. I held onto her as we moved closer to inspect the scene. Inside were five more mutilated bodies with five pistols scattered about, a few stuck in the rigor mortis grips of their old owners. On one of the seats was a blood-spattered yellow notepad with neat print scrawled across it. I picked up the notepad and examined it before taking it back to our car and resting it gently on one of the back seats. A few of the pages were glued together with droplets of coagulated blood, and I hoped that none of it had obscured any of the writing. I then returned to take photographs of the scene with my camera.

In the face of fresh corpses, I wanted to leave with our discovery, but Tabitha, despite her initial shock, demanded we press on. That writing and the

## *The Distended Eye*

photos weren't enough evidence, she said, and we needed something more, something tangible. Disinclined to examine the car further, at least for the moment, we set ourselves to searching around the premises, but we couldn't find anything of worth in the black of the night. We were left with one place to check: inside the building itself.

I tried the doorknob, but it was firmly locked. Not that this proved to be much of an obstacle; I doubled back to the SUV, trudging through the mud to retrieve one of the pistols, then made my way to one of the windows. With careful force, I swung the butt of the pistol through a high point in the glass, easily shattering it into large pieces. After cleaning the remaining points from the frame, I holstered the gun in the back of my pants, and we shimmied through. (We both were blessedly limber for our age) The room was quaint and small, with soft, plush carpet and reclining chairs lining the walls. Tabitha mused that the wide windows would have offered an inviting air had we come in the daytime. At night, though, with a knowledge of who worked this place, it gave the feeling of a grinning mask hung over the face of a monster. There were only two doors: the locked entrance, and another similarly-sized door which led into the pulpit of this false church. On the front of this second door was a small ceramic tile with an etching of the Virgin Mary and the words: "Father, Forgive Us Our Sins." Tabitha and I looked at each other for a

moment. I nodded to her, and she placed her hand upon the knob. For a moment she hesitated, afraid to discover what was behind that rotting frame, but she gathered her resolve and threw open the door. After a few seconds attempting to comprehend what we saw, we recoiled.

Through the door was simply blackness. To compare it to some other thing would not do justice to the absence that gaped wide before us; even ink gives a subtle glisten to identify itself. This was something more, something wholly incomprehensible, something that Tabitha would come to learn in a much deeper way that I ever could. We both peered closer in an attempt to identify it, to no avail, and the light from our flashlights was swallowed up, revealing nothing within. Finally, finding her courage faster than I did, Tabitha stepped through, consumed whole by that gaping nothingness. At first there was silence, but after a few seconds, barely yet distinctly, I could hear her screaming from beyond the membrane.

Terror gripped me, not for myself but for what unknown, awful fate that had befallen my wife. I remember hearing myself speak distantly, promising to go in after her as I mustered what little remained of my courage. Just as I spoke, however, the darkness gave way to dim moonlight, and I could see the worship room with its many benches affixed forward toward the pulpit in comic solemnity to my panic. I ran through the

## *The Distended Eye*

door, my eyes spinning wildly, searching for her. All I could hear were screams, intermittently growing louder and quieter with no apparent pattern, and each echoed off of the walls seemingly randomly to add to the cacophony. Her voice would come from one spot in the room at one point, then another, quieter and louder, as though her invisible form were being thrashed around by some imperceptible horror. The incoherent screeches combined with the maddening fear for my wife made me feel so ill that I nearly vomited where I stood. And all the while, a gory wooden statue of Jesus on his crucifix loomed over me, his face contorted in what then seemed less like sorrow and more like disapproval. Recalling the scene, I believe my panicked state only lasted about fifteen seconds, but my mind stretched it so thin that even now I remember every moment with agonizing clarity.

My panic relaxed when I realized that the echoes in the chamber had subsided, and now the screaming came from a singular spot: back outside. I dashed back into the meeting room and practically threw the door off its hinges after fumbling with the sticky lock. There before me, her shape barely discernible from the mud, was Tabitha, curled up on her side in a fetal position and weeping softly. Looming over her, cast pale in the moonlight, stood a man. What he was wearing I couldn't say in the dimness, nor can I define any particular features save for two. The first was that his body

was frail, appearing almost as though the stiff breeze that blew on us could have snapped his bones. The second feature was more appalling: his left eye was massive, bulging out of his head (it must have been as large as my fist) with a wide iris and a pupil stretched to its limit. He gazed straight at me, that eye focused and unblinking, its white mass glistening in the light of the moon. And then he began to walk toward me.

I reached for the gun tucked into the back of my pants, but I couldn't find it; it had probably fallen out when we crawled through the window or when I was running through the pews. I stood still, frozen in terror, ready to receive whatever fate this grotesque creature was about to dole out to me, but as he stepped closer, his eye lost interest in me. He stepped past me and up the short steps, through the open front door and to the entryway where the black membrane had once been. Transfixed, I watched him reach a bony hand through the frame and then, seemingly pleased, step all the way through—he had disappeared.

The strange figure gone, I grabbed hold of my senses and heard my wife anew, sobbing softly in the stinking, cold mud. I dashed over to her, nearly sliding in myself, and knelt down. I asked her if she was alright.

“He saved me,” was all she could manage. I asked her if she could move, and she nodded weakly, further grinding her temple into the grit.

I grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet,

## *The Distended Eye*

then lashed my arm behind her back and carried her to the passenger seat of our car. As I slid into the driver's seat, she turned to me and told me in a weak voice that we couldn't leave yet, that we didn't have enough; we needed something to keep them away from us.

Thinking quickly, I ran to the crashed SUV and began scouring it for anything I could find. She was right: if we didn't get some sort of evidence of their existence, they would just put bullets through us the same way they did Gerald. A pat-down of the corpses revealed a smartphone on each of them, which I confiscated after popping out the batteries to disable their GPSs. In my search for hidden compartments, I found a manila folder with a thin stack of papers in it as well as a laptop, the battery of which I also removed. I brought all of my findings back to our car and put them underneath the rear seat before making our way carefully back to the highway, where I removed all of the electrical tape we had applied to the car.

Recognizing that we would be suspicious if we stayed in a hotel due to all of the mud on us, I drove us both the whole twelve hours back to our home. At first, I was glad that we were on the road—it gave me something to do besides contemplate everything that had happened over the last few weeks. But soon, I found myself struck with a horrible paranoia which suggested that every car we passed was from that company, ready to slam us off the road and into a ditch. At some point

during the trip, when she had collected herself better, Tabitha related what exactly had happened to her.

She explained that, when she stepped through, she was assailed at once by what appeared to be random shapes, some jagged, some rounded, of all different swirling colors against a backdrop of sickening yellow. A few of the shapes almost seemed to be humanoid, but she could only see the suggestion of an arm or part of a torso; some of them seemed like faces directed toward her. Terrified, she had tried to come back through the membrane, but as she turned, she had discovered that it had disappeared. Then, suddenly, she felt the jolt of something pulling at her from outside and inside, as though every organ in her body were being rent, and as she felt this, all of the shapes around her changed form; some disappeared, and new ones came into being. The sensation only lasted a moment, but in fear of the pain and her shifting surroundings, she began running in any direction. Each time she ran, she would be hit by that same sickening, painful jolt that gripped every atom of her body, and the impossible scenery around her would shift nonsensically. Just as she felt her mind about to snap, she felt something grip her and drag her in what felt like every direction at once, but this time without pain, and then she was back on her feet, which could no longer hold her. I explained what I saw to her as well, how I chased her voice through the pews and the figure that stood above her when she reappeared. The only

## *The Distended Eye*

conclusion we had was that we were both sorely confused.

When we got home, we had time to go over our finds before deciding upon a new plan of action. In the manila folder were instructions to transport “Subject 7-F” to a particular geographic coordinate, as well as a number of other codes that probably had more meaning to those dead men than they do to us.

After much deliberation, we believed we had come upon a way to save ourselves, which I have written about at the beginning of the letter. We decided that copies of these documents would be provided to every lawyer, alongside the papers that Gerald gave to us. The phones and the laptop would be split up among the lawyers for security, in case one of them is found. If all of this isn't enough to save us, then I don't know what is. I'm not sure how they managed to track us without the GPSs on the phones, but I see them parked on the side of the road when I enter my home and following me on the college campus. I suspect that, if these letters are not sent soon, both Tabitha and I will lose our lives.

As for the writing on the notepad, Tabitha and I have read it over and over, trying to divine something from its dark implications. However, I get the sensation of someone who had been through so much that their mind has finally broken, and that writing remained their last recourse to try to find themselves again. The original has been sent to one of the many lawyers, but

copies have been provided to the others.

Perhaps it would be more righteous to go public with this information immediately, but nobody will believe us unless it is accompanied by our inevitable downfall. They will get it eventually, anyways—despite our good health, we are old, and we have ordered to have all of our findings made public even if we die of natural causes or go missing. It makes us ticking time bombs, in a sense. This has the added effect of making us immune to subtle poisons, as well. At this point, I'll take what I can get.

This is out of our hands now. To all of the people who survive us, out in the world, I wish you the best of luck bringing down this monstrous company; if what's written in the notepad is true, then they may have already been gutted from the inside by their own creation.

I'm not one of you any longer. I think I was for some time, though. The memories are gone, but certain things still remained. I remembered I was twelve. I had done some sort of sport, and I had the calluses on my feet to prove it. My hair color was a naturally bright blonde, and I had a birthmark on my waist: a series of small dots. My knowledge of writing, walking, talking, and everything else comes from that unknown place and time in my life. I also remembered that I had a brother, younger than I, but where he was I couldn't

## *The Distended Eye*

know.

That was all I had in my head while I was in that windowless van. It was dark, dark enough that I couldn't see anyone else's faces. The other children were tittering among themselves, talking about where they were going, what they wanted to eat, and video games. None of them spoke to me.

When we arrived at this church, the side of the van was slid open and we were ushered out. All of the kids were in plain T-shirts and jeans, all different races, hair colors, heights, and weights. A cornucopia. How did I know what a cornucopia was? But there was something about each of us that bothered me. As the kids looked around, I noticed that each of us had one eye that had been engorged; for some it was their right, others their left. I remember reaching my hand up to the right side of my face and finding only flesh and bone, but on the left side I found that I had been affected the same way: my sinuses had given way to make room for a distended eye. Yet it did not hurt to touch, and even the gentle breeze didn't desiccate it.

We stood there in the dirt for some time. Men in suits flanked us and occasionally spoke to one another, but they were drowned out by the excited chatter of the kids talking about all the time they would be spending in the surrounding woods.

The second emptied out much the same as the first, and among them was someone I recognized as my

brother with cropped, brown hair. His right eye was the distended one, a mirror to mine when we looked at one another. When he saw me, his face brightened and he walked over to hug me. He asked me if I was okay and said that I seemed downtrodden. I said I was fine, and that I was glad to see him. I couldn't bring myself to talk to him—what kind of brother forgets every memory of his counterpart?

After the second group had been unloaded, we were all ushered into the anteroom of the church. The plush carpeting was quickly ruined by our dirty shoes. I hated that. There must have been twenty-four of us in all. There we were met by what looked like an army sergeant in fatigues who also bore the eye. In a firm, clear voice, he ordered us to follow him as he opened the door that was supposed to lead into the main hall of the church. But instead, all that was behind the door was blackness. We were told to follow close and only walk in a straight path. A few adventurous children hopped in, followed gradually by the rest, and they were swallowed whole by the membrane. Sensations of wideness and openness, yet confinement washed over me. Lights shone the way amid a black emptiness. I counted my steps: it only took fifteen to reach the other side.

What we found through the hallway didn't resemble a church. Polished wood flooring surrounded a fire pit, yet no fire burned inside it. Unmarked lockers lined two of the walls, and in the corner was a door that

## *The Distended Eye*

the Sergeant explained was a bathroom. I don't remember using it. To the right was a single window, just high enough to peek out for the taller children like myself. But the outside was dismal, with only the oppressive emptiness of grass fields stretching on for miles. I began to feel ill at the sudden disappearance of the forest—it felt unnatural. Once the Sergeant had seen us to our correct lockers, he wordlessly left through the door and the blackness, which appeared to be the only way out. We stood around silently for a moment, then the children began to murmur again. My brother came over to me and told me that something seemed very wrong, and I agreed. He said to stay close and to watch out for each other.

Within the first ten minutes, the joy and excitement of even the most rambunctious children had faded beneath a brain fog that obscured thought and muddled the senses—words were spoken without faces, a scent had no source, and when I felt myself brushing up against someone, the obstruction had no identity. With nowhere to go and nothing to do, we began wandering in circles around the unlit fire pit. Time stopped acting the way it was meant to and only served to mark the order of a series of events. Walking across the room, which normally would have taken about ten seconds, took much longer, or shorter. Sometimes the room would seem emptier, then fuller, and my brother (whose name I still can't recall) would appear and disap-

pear along with the others to make way for open space. In the times he was with me, I was grateful to find him again, and in the times he was away, I would forget he existed. It was liberating.

Desks would come and go as well, and we were given lessons that departed quickly into the fog. I'm still uncertain of what they taught us, and how much of my knowledge and instinct is innate and how much was from those lessons. It's possible they simply taught us mathematics and writing. It would explain how I'm writing this.

Despite our dulled awareness, there must have been some sentiment that the current state of affairs wasn't right, because one day a miniature rebellion was staged. My best guess was that it had been a year or two, since we had all aged noticeably, but time didn't seem to matter. It could have happened six days after we arrived or it could have been another five years. When the Sergeant was passing through that dark hallway and through the locked door, about half of the kids, eight or so at the time, shuffled past him, pushing him out of the way, and the rest of us simply followed suit. We jogged through the black membrane and down that dark hallway, through the door, out onto the plush carpeting, and then through the front door and back into the sunlight. The weather was inconsequential, and I can't remember it anyways. But we were outside. We were free.

## *The Distended Eye*

Yet no sirens met us, nor scrambling security guards, nor panic, because none of those were necessary. We had gained our freedom, but desire was gone, as was any excitement, and so our liberation was hollow. It was nice to be outside, at least I thought that was how I should have felt. I remember stepping away from the building and turning. The children were milling about with unfocused eyes, stepping forward only because some impulse in them told them to, just as some impulse told me to look at them. None of them stooped to feel the grass or the dirt, and nobody look up into the rustling leaves of the lonely tree opposite the church. Breezes tickled my cheeks, but there was no relief in it. It was the same as any other sensation, just as dull and just as distant. No color stimulated me to any sort of effect, no thoughts were roused from the setting of the church nor from watching the Sergeant lead each child individually back through the hallway and into our stuffy room.

After this, the number of children fluctuated more wildly. My brother disappeared early. Only now do I remember his existence at all, and only now have I regained the capacity to call into question his legitimacy. But then, he was just one of a dwindling number. I took note of the years passing, noted with horror how my hands and arms would suddenly change as I noticed them again months later, but even that horror was a supposed emotion. Bristles grew on my chin eventually,

and I grew taller. I can only guess as to my exact age, since my body was almost sickeningly thin, from lack of activity or malnutrition or some other source I couldn't say. The remaining others looked similar, who had dwindled down to five, a number that would often fluctuate lower.

As these years passed, however, whispers of movement began urging me as the group shrank. At first, the direction was unclear, but then I felt it, tickling the inside of my spine, pulling me towards that locked door again. It powered through my resignation, through my fog, a demand that would be heard and obeyed.

Given will for the first time, I moved with purpose toward that door, gripped the knob, and ripped it from its flimsy foundation with inhuman force. There was the membrane, and I stepped through. At first I thought to move down the hallway, but there was no drive. I was where I was meant to be, yet something was still wrong. So, I turned to the wall and gripped onto what had seemed before to be a black cloth. I gripped it and ripped it free.

What I saw I cannot describe, not for any ineffable beauty or complexity (though its nearly holy form I do not deny), but because human language was not intended for something like this. What I saw was perfect clarity that no metaphor can fully encompass. My other mind, my network, latched onto me and came into me,

## *The Distended Eye*

and I went into it. It was healthy and strong, and I saw it was linked to me, filling me, nourishing me. I would have touched it, but I was already in contact. Innumerable others, smaller, weaker, moved and languished in uncertainty, wandering aimlessly, untapped by their hosts. Hundreds more of a different sort were nearby, attached to their partners yet horribly malformed. They sucked at the stuff of this aether, funneling it through that invisible wall between themselves and their hosts. Withered and wretched, their complexity had been reduced to the point of nullification—it would be like comparing a supercomputer to a water wheel. And in the distance, some were connected weakly to their partners, drifting listlessly and singing sorrowfully to be whole and curling around one another for comfort. There also was one set apart from the others, a mind far different from the others with no direct tether to this world. Instead, it reached out, touching others which, in turn, reached out to their hosts through the membrane. Oddly enough, it spoke, deliberately imitating human language, repeating to itself, “The city is a machine. The cogs must turn.” Ideas too complex even for me to understand were spooling themselves through its consciousness.

Then the veil returned, and I forgot again. The other children had already disappeared by that time I wandered back into the room.

It hadn't even been a year when they gave me my

first order, and as of yet the only order I remember obeying. A few men in lab coats stepped in from an entrance I couldn't detect and pointed at the door I had previously destroyed, telling me to go through, and I obeyed. They refused to follow me through, but there were people waiting for me on the other side, people in suits. Six of them stood in that cold little room with plush carpeting. Orange light from a sunset streamed through the windows. They were talking among themselves about how they had to move me as fast as they could before the "suppression" wore off and how it was already weak.

My greater mind had not remained stagnant after it found me, however. Through my distended eye I saw the creases where that other mind had folded the wall to the point of weakness, and now, it punctured through. I saw everything from that place beyond the membrane. I saw the company who had taken me and their self-important name, Erebus. I saw their abhorrent experiments warping the other-minds into those siphons, and so much more that I could spend five lifetimes describing it all. Among all those things, I saw the inner workings of the six men and women before me, their muscles tensing and relaxing, their guns holstered at their sides, and each synapse firing, showing their intentions before they could even be broadcast through their body. They sought to transport me. But my body, despite its apparent frailty, was strong from the stuff of

*The Distended Eye*

the aether. I was, and am, no longer human—I am Ascendant.

Corpses are scattered about me now, and they will not be the last. Erebus will be dismantled and destroyed, along with those who served that darkness. Men and women will die, their facilities will be smashed, and none will be able to find me again unless I will it. My sorrow I have channeled into these scant pages. My rage will be written in blood.



