

EIDOLTRY DIGITAL #5



TERRORS FROM DOWN UNDER

FROM THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT

WELCOME BACK PSYCHOS TO ANOTHER TRIP TO THE DARK SIDE. THIS MONTH WE ARE PROUD TO FEATURE AUTHORS FROM THE MYSTERIOUS LAND DOWN UNDER. FROM OUR HUMBLE HEADQUARTERS IN CONNECTICUT, AUSTRALIA IS THE OPPOSITE END OF THE EARTH. WITH IT'S UNIQUE CULTURES AND GEOGRAPHY, THE TERRORS THAT LURK IN THE BUSH ARE UNKNOWN AND TERRIFYING. I HOPE YOU ENJOY THE TALES.

TEETH.....	JOSEPH TOWNSEND
LILITU.....	HELEN MIHAJLOVIC
THE SINKHOLE.....	MARK TOWSE
ORACULUM TENEBRAE.....	MATTHEW R. DAVIS
INKUBUS.....	MIKE ADAMSON

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TEETH

JOSEPH TOWNSEND

I was sitting in an AA meeting when I found the tooth in my pocket.

This was two and a half weeks ago. I always hit the Saturday night meeting in the city—it's fifteen minutes from the apartment I share with my girlfriend, but mostly I like the ambience. It's on the third floor of a place junkies and drunks call the "Hilton of rehabs", a fat five story hospital on the outskirts of the inner city, on a row populated mostly by mid-range hotels, cut apart from the main CBD by a big sprawling park. It's run by long time sober folks but because of the location you get a lot of newbies, and I like that, because sometimes you forget things. Like what made you trade the bottle in for a little bronze medallion and some lukewarm coffee.

An older lady was near tears, halfway through her share, when it occurred to me to check on how many cigarettes I had left. I reached into my pocket to look at my pack of Parliaments and I felt it.

A little lump, smooth and hard yet with an odd, almost rubbery texture to it. I took it out of my jacket pocket and looked at it. and couldn't believe it. It was a fucking tooth. How does this happen?

I must've been making a face—and rightly so, how goddamn revolting—because Richard, a guy I usually sit beside at this meeting leaned over and asked if I was alright.

I put my hand back in my pocket with the tooth and smiled and whispered, "Yep, all good," and he nodded and turned back to the lady at the front. She was wrapping up, talking about how things were so different now—her kids were back in her life, her job hadn't let her go after all. She was smiling while she spoke. I'd heard her story before—right down to the bottom, she'd been a bag lady and in bughouses. Now she was in a nice sweater and skinny jeans, nice shoes. But her teeth betrayed her.

They were yellow and black and gapped. They were the teeth of a drunk..

Half an hour later, I begged off from getting a cup of coffee with Richard and booked it to my car. Relic from my drinking days—a beat up Ford truck with a taped on rear-view mirror and a broken right-side window lever, bumps and gouges and scratches all over it from driving drunk. I just couldn't get rid of it. I don't know

why.

I lit a cigarette in the cab and took the tooth out again, wondering why I hadn't said anything to Richard, why I was already thinking about keeping it from my girlfriend. It was conversation worthy. Hey, Jim, what's that in your hand? Oh, this, Richard? A fucking tooth I found in my pocket. What's up with that? Maybe he could've helped me figure it out.

It wasn't a particularly interesting tooth. It was white with a slight yellow hue to it. I couldn't tell which tooth it was, like where it came from in the mouth, I'm no dentist. Nor did I know any, offhand—but my girlfriend was a nursing student, and maybe she did.

I always liked mysteries, odd things that can't be explained. When I was drinking—and this routine rarely wavered in all those years—I would start the night off reading some novel or other but by the time I was in my cups it always ended in the same place: true crime, unresolved paranormal stuff.

I figured I'd ask my girlfriend when I got home if she knew somebody from school that could help. Once I got with the friend, if there was a friend, I could figure something out from there.

So I drove home. Into a buzz-saw I didn't expect that made me forget about the tooth entirely, for a while, anyway.

She was gone. The apartment was empty – save the cat, Apollo, who walked around yelling as soon as I came in the door, his tail twitching, bright green eyes level and dispassionate as always.

I called Kelly's name a few times and walked from room to room. Our apartment was small—two bedrooms and a living room with a kitchenette, ratty as hell—and she was nowhere.

No note on the fridge, on the kitchen table, on the bed, nothing.

This wasn't like her. We were mostly attached at the hip—it'd been like that the two years we'd been together and we both liked it, despite what people say about co-dependency. Anything I had to do without her—my meetings, for instance—I always messaged her when I got there, when I got home, and usually I heard back.

I checked my phone, and she'd texted me back ten minutes after I'd messaged her saying I'd left the meeting. "See you soon, love you" is all it said. Nothing on her Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat. I called her once and her voicemail picked up

immediately.

Her car was outside, where she usually parked.

All of her clothes were in the closet, her Switch and her phone were charging by the bed.

Her phone was off. When I turned it on, it came to a lock screen that I didn't know the password too.

Nothing was missing.

I went outside for a cigarette, to try and calm down. Our balcony looked out at the little curve of the road we lived by—residential street with a train line running alongside it. The train didn't shake our apartment, but it made noise. The track was quiet that night. I couldn't hear anything except the trees rustling in a light wind.

There was a guy on the street. Or a woman. A figure. They were wearing a hoodie with the hood up, obscuring their face. They were standing on the sidewalk. They were looking at me.

My hair stood up on end and I thought about another night a long time ago when I was drinking, a time I was in a bar and there was this guy, quiet, standing in front of me while I was waiting to get a drink and he was taking his time counting out change to pay for his beer and I said something dumb to him, to hurry up, and he turned and looked at me and he didn't say a word but his face was so, so cold. This lone figure in the street gave me the same feeling that guy in the bar had—that I was in somebody's crosshairs.

Stupid, I know. Irrational. Left over paranoia from a lifetime of substance abuse. I blinked and held a hand to my face, smoke curling around my eyes, and when I took my hand away and looked again, the figure was still there. Slowly they turned and walked up the street somewhere past where I could see.

It wasn't much later I called the police.

The cops didn't do much. Do they ever? I felt stupid for calling them to begin with—she wasn't even gone twenty-four hours.

They got me to ring up Kelly's parents and a few friends. Kelly's mom freaked out—wanted to come over. I begged off. Nobody knew anything.

When I called the cops again the next morning with no sign of her, they took it seriously.

They checked with her work. They checked flight lists. They checked her credit card. They searched our apartment top to bottom. They went through her phone. Nothing unusual save the fact that apparently she'd been looking up wedding rings—information I would've been happy to know.

I really loved her. Love her. I really did, I really do.

A week passed in a blur. I kept going to work and tried to keep it out of my mind. The apartment felt dark and empty. I went to a meeting every day.

I didn't tell the police about the guy I saw on the street. I never told them about the tooth—I'd forgotten about both in the panic.

What do you do when you wait for someone who may never come back?

I chain-smoked and stared at the walls, the laptop screen. I stayed away from bars and liquor stores—if she came back I didn't want to be drunk, no matter how fragile I was emotionally, how much I could feel my sanity draining.

The first day of the second week of her disappearance I got an envelope full of teeth in the mail.

I checked the mail every single day since she disappeared in case she sent me a note.

The envelope was plain, white, like you'd get at a post office. It had no stamps or writing on it. I could feel the little lumps in it as soon as I picked it up. I took it upstairs to the kitchen table—cluttered as it was with missing person posters I'd been putting up—and opened it, watched them tumble out.

Six teeth. I stared at them then went to the bathroom and kneeled and threw up—thinking of mornings hungover doing the same thing.

Better than the drinking days—no blood. I flushed it away and went to make a phone call.

I don't know why I didn't go to the police. I really don't. Maybe I distrusted them after the way they'd handled things. Maybe I was afraid they'd blame me or think I was crazy.

The teeth had to be connected to Kelly. The same night I find one in my pocket, she disappears. A week later, I get an envelope with half of somebody's enamel in it.

Instead of calling the cops I rang up one of Kelly's friends who rang up another and another until I got put into contact with a dentistry student she was acquainted with. He was a nice guy, I'd actually met him at some party she'd taken me to once, for the brief time we were together when I was still off the wagon. He hadn't seen me drunk, thank God.

I met with him at the university, some lab with big long tables and microscopes and equipment that looked like something a torturer in medieval times would use and he spread the teeth out on a white sheet to inspect them.

"You say you found these in your backyard?"

"Yeah," I said, and realized I was sweating. I wiped my brow, wishing we could be doing this at Charlie's or the Thorned Bush or the Nightcall or any of the bars I used to call my second home. Or that I could at least smoke in this fucking building. "I was just curious as to what they were, if they were, like, human or whatever. You know?"

"Right, right." I wondered if he knew about Kelly. The cops had been keeping it quiet, it wasn't plastered all over the news or anything, and he would've asked me about it in connection to this weird request if he'd known. Then again, why did I care? Why did I feel so conspicuous?

"Well," he went on, "These are definitely human teeth."

"Jesus Christ."

"Don't worry—it's odd, but they don't look damaged or anything, I wouldn't say they came out of someone's mouth as a result of trauma." He picked one up with a pair of very thin tongs. "No abrasions. No pulp or anything, either. It's like they were grown in a lab or something, they're pretty pristine, if a little yellowed, but that's only natural if they were outside. I'd say they came out of a mouth naturally. Might be somebody's kids' teeth, you know how some parents hold on to them after they do business with the tooth fairy."

“What?”

“What did I say?”

I stared at him. Something was rising in me and I swallowed against it.

“You say these are kids’ teeth?”

He nodded. “Oh, yes,” he said. “Definitely. Baby teeth.”

There wasn’t much more he could tell me. I thanked him and took my teeth with me and in the parking lot I threw up as discreetly as I could beside my car.

When I looked up—over the hood, at the edge of the parking lot beside the busy freeway the university stood beside—I could see that figure again. Dark loose pants, a hoodie, the hood up. They stood against the falling sun, in shadow. They were still. They were staring at me.

Noise filled my head. Like a million animals screaming at once—cats, dogs, birds, a menagerie—I clasped my hands to the side of my head and screamed myself, trying to blot it out. I heard running footsteps and my eyes clenched shut tighter and I kept thinking—as long as I don’t see it coming, maybe it won’t hurt as much. The footsteps got louder and louder in tune with the screams and then—

It all stopped. I opened my eyes. There was nothing, no one, except a few students staring at me. I got into my truck and drove out of there. My knuckles were bone white, tight against the steering wheel.

I went to a meeting that night. All familiar faces—no strangers, no hooded figures making noise in my head. I tried to make sense of what happened to me, but how could I? It did occur to me that I might be in the middle of some sort of nervous breakdown. I’d certainly exhibited behaviour like this when I was drinking—delusional, paranoid, upset. But never hallucinations.

When I got home that night, I resolved to call a psychiatrist in the morning. I texted my boss, told him I wasn’t coming in the next day. He had a vague idea something was happening with me but didn’t press it.

Then I took a bath and smoked a cigarette and made myself listen to reason—stay sober, stay alert, don’t pay attention to this nonsense. Your brain is trying to

hurt you. See a doctor, see what they say, go from there.

Easy.

Then I saw her in the bathroom doorway.

Kelly.

She looked different. Like a cardboard cut-out. She was inert and smiling and unnaturally still. Her hands were clasped in front of her and she was otherworldly in the dim light.

She was grinning but her eyes were flat, unreadable, like marbles. She was wearing clothes, but they hung on her like on a mannequin. Her skin was olive, dark—in reality she'd been so pale.

I dropped my cigarette in the tub and it sizzled and floated away. I stared, openmouthed. From somewhere in my throat I heard a soft strangled cry, and I splashed, drawing away from this thing wearing my woman's skin.

It opened its mouth. Like an animatronic, slow, as though operated by hinges.

Teeth spilled out and clattered on the tiled bathroom floor.

Baby teeth.

I closed my eyes. It was like being shocked from low voltage, sustained over an eternity. Everything in me seized up and then froze and all I could do was scream.

When my eyes opened again, she was gone.

So were the teeth.

I splashed out of the tub and ran to my room—our room—and put something on and went out to go sit on the stairs.

I sat out there for a long time, breathing, trying not to throw up, waiting for my hands to stop shaking and my mind to clear. When I finally got the nerve to go back inside, to go back to that bathroom, the water was drained from the tub and there was a carving on the door, near where that thing that looked like Kelly had been.

It was black, like it was scorched into the wood, smooth to the touch. A depiction of a rudimentary set of scales, like a symbol, and under it one word, or a string

of letters:

TECHMICTIXNEQUI

They were both immaculate, like the door had always been that way, and I'd never seen either before in my life. A smell hung in the air, too—something I couldn't put my finger on, some sort of car smell or outdoor smell, pungent but not entirely unpleasant.

I ran my fingers along the symbol and the letters on my bathroom door again, then took a photo of them with my phone—partly as a record, partly to check another source to see if they were indeed real. Because it was at this point that I had come to realize that I must really be losing my mind, right? My brain must've finally pickled from ten years of hardcore drinking and drugs and this was the end of it all.

But this felt real. The scorched carving on my door felt real.

Which in a way was even more terrifying.

A shrink couldn't save me from whatever this was.

This has gone on a little long, maybe. But I want you to understand. There has to be some kind of record of this because if I kill myself or I die or God knows, someone has to know I didn't do anything, that this happened to me. You can understand why I haven't gone to the police—they'd put me in a bughouse, write me off as some crazy drunk. Or worse, blame me for her disappearing. A partner with a few drunk and disorderly arrests, a few DUIs, a history of alcoholism—perfect suspect in a disappearance, right?

I've cancelled the shrink appointment. Today, this afternoon, I'm going to go see a friend of mine, a teacher. I'll write an update once I do. He teaches history and may know what that symbol is all about.

Or what the fuck 'Nahuatl' is. See, I googled those letters. That word.

TECHMICTIZNEQUI.

Techmictiznequi.

It's some language, Nahuatl. Ancient Mexican, Aztec, something like that. I can't make sense of it.

According to google it means, "HE WILL DESTROY US".

There are things I don't talk about at meetings. A guy told me once that you have to be as honest as possible, especially when it comes to the Hard Steps—4 through 9. I never got through them. Honestly, I never even really tried.

When I drank, I used to time. once I lost a whole day—scary to wake up with zero memory of the night before or come to standing with one foot over the ledge, feeling the wind ripple your shirt, your entire core straining to stay upright as you piss off the top of a building and you just laugh because you don't know what else to say to that deep and unrelenting void before you.

When I quit, I felt like I lost years. A decade. A lifetime. There was a boy I used to see in the mirror—not a man—and sometime in that span he disappeared. I'm not sure when. Before the last drink, the day of, the day after. But he went, and all those memories went with him. Dates, places, names—I forget, I forget.

Mark, my friend, the teacher, would never forget, because he never quit. We used to drink together—long nights out at the train tracks, end of the line, tossing beer cans and whiskey bottles at the graveyard of tin tubes with their windows like viewing glasses into a tomb. I quit drinking, joined the program, but he never stopped—and nothing happened except his life got better and better while mine stayed stagnant. He got a job, new friends, a wife, a kid. I got Kelly—who I loved, truly—but everything else was just the same. Just the same.

When I went to see him, oh...a week ago now? Two? I lose track of time.

When I went to go see him, I was thinking about the train tracks, those dark nights. You know the funniest thing? We were best friends; I think—we spent two or three nights a week doing that, getting piss drunk in the middle of a train yard at two in the morning, and I LOVED it, I'd look forward to it every day. But goddamn if I can't remember a fucking thing we talked about.

He was happy to see me, it'd been a few months. I felt like an interloper walking around in that school after hours. The classrooms were dark, lights off everywhere except the teachers' lounges where the overworked instructors were grading or lesson planning or whatever it is they do. He was in his office, by himself with the lights dimmed and the blinds drawn, his face illuminated blue by the computer screen while he clacked away at something. We hugged, it felt wooden. I sat down and asked him what I needed to ask him.

He told me as much as he could. Nahuatl was some ancient Mexican language,

basically. Think Aztecs. The scales symbol—I'd brought a photo for him—he couldn't put a specific name to, but he said they were some kind of South American occult thing.

My questions exhausted, we parted on good terms, and I left with a memory lingering—those train tracks, the smell of cheap whiskey and cigarettes, half mumbled apologies over nothing and promises made on thin air and drunk breath.

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I went to the library next, walked the three miles to get there in the dark. It was closed, so I slept outside on a park bench until morning. I couldn't go back to the apartment. I could feel the cancer spreading in my brain—of the mind, the soul; madness. It felt like an old friend, and I knew it well in the form of a bottle, and I knew well enough to resist it.

Homeless folks use the library enough that nobody gave me and my shabby appearance a second glance, nor did anyone seem to care about my reading material. A skim of horrors, the occult. I was never much of a reader when it came to non-fiction—a good crime novel was more my cup of tea. This sort of stuff was beyond me, but I fell into the groove of the various writers' academic language easily enough, and before I knew it I'd read into nightfall.

My brain was swimming. Aztec blood rituals, Santeria, voodoo, hoodoo, voodoo. It was a mishmash of things that a month ago I would've dismissed or laughed off as prehistoric superstition, a thing our ancestors used to explain the unexplainable in a palatable way to their children.

I found the scales in a book by a fellow named James Nance, a local historian who'd put his work out through something I'd heard referred to as a 'vanity press' when I was in university. It was an old dog-eared thing, the book, in hardcover with that texture that books from my elementary school library had back in the early 90s. The scales were in a section on something called "Brujeria", in a subsection: "Local Practices Dating Back To the 17th Century". They were in a photograph, black and white—a big rock on the side of some kind of muddy hill, carved in stark lines. A little altar was in front of the rock, full of things I couldn't make out.

Words jumped out at me:

Justice, evening, balancing. Vengeance. Rituals dating back to unrecorded history. Practices passed down from mother to daughter—apparently Hispanic witchcraft was a mostly female affair.

The Nahuatl word didn't come up. Mention was made of Satanic worship

using the thing's name a hundred times in different ways, and of lesser demons I'd never heard of before. Names I could never pronounce, they looked like random letters: Chalchiutotolin, Tezcatlipoca, Itztlacolihqui-Ixquimilli.

A photo of the man himself: Nance. He was smiling. His cheeks were caved in. He had no teeth.

It was after that book that I realized I hadn't had a cigarette in a day or so. I closed it and yawned. The library was mostly empty. My phone was dead but a clock on the wall told me it was nearly 7pm, which also told me it must be Friday since the place was still open.

I thanked the librarian on my way to the door and they smiled at me strangely and I had time to see their teeth before I turned away. Rotted, black.

Outside I lit a Parliament, exhaled smoke into the night sky and tried to think of my next move. And of course she came into my mind, all of her. Kelly. Gone these two weeks, three, god knows. Losing track of time, of myself. I hadn't showered; I hadn't brushed my teeth. I sat heavily on a bench, the same I'd woken up on that morning, and let her do her death dance through my head, because it was in that moment that I was sure she'd died. Sure. My heart tightened at the cold certain knowledge and my gullet seized and I knew I'd either vomit or start crying when the child tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned, and I looked into the face of a THING. The THING smiled and its eyes were black and deep and endless. I saw colours there, some I've never seen before, mixing together and wavering in a rainbow hell. I was able to turn away before my mind broke and fell from the bench and when I turned a man was tugging his daughter's hand, wrenching her away from the gibbering lunatic on the bench and the little girl was staring at me with bright brown eyes full of concern. In the light from a streetlamp, I could see her olive skin and something stirred in me again, something old and terrifying beyond any of these spectres that kept assaulting me.

I gave her a little wave, and she smiled, and I saw her teeth, too. They were beautiful. They were perfect.

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I went to a bar.

I asked what cocktails they had.

He told me:

Whiskey Sour. Moscow Mule. Mint Julep. Espresso Martinis. Old Fashioned, Rob Roys, Boxcars, Car bombs, Irish car bombs. I asked what beer they had on tap and he offered me a selection as well as ciders and stouts and pilsners. Bottles behind him glittering in the dim light. Amber, clear, green, brown. The rainbow. My life. My heart thudding against my chest, sweat on my palms. I gave him twenty dollars, and he set up a whiskey and a jug of beer and I raised it to my face and looked into it for a long time just standing there with my feet ankle deep in peanut shells and sawdust and I could smell it and feel my mouth watering and the TV was playing a late night talk show and there were two Mexicans playing pool and a man throwing up outside and a rock bottom whore at the end of bar looking for tricks and I took it all in and I drank.

And I drank.

And I remembered.

*** **

It was before Kelly. It was before Mark, too. There was a guy I used to drink with, a man I'd forgotten. He worked at a meat works. He killed cows all day. He liked vodka; I liked bourbon, so we always had our own bottle. I'd met him at a bar and we'd gone back to his house together one night and it was just one of those odd friendships that spring up when you're a barfly—nothing in common save liquor and a shared desire for self-immolation.

Our routine was to start at a bar near a place I used to work, then go his house, already drunk, then drive from there through the city with a six pack between us and two bottles. I always drove because my house was past his—I'd drop him off on my way home to sleep on the patio or often in the car itself, woken the next morning by sun in my face and cracked bloody lips to go inside and die. We'd listen to music—we had no bands in common—and talk, and talk. I can't recall anything of significance was ever said.

He was rambling about something and we were driving through a part of town I'd never seen before when I saw her. I hit the brakes, but it was too late. The car slammed into her body and she spun of sight, and we spun and I felt the wheels and a crunch that went to my core. When we stopped spinning, the headlights were illuminating trees, a sliver of adobe wall through them. My partner was silent, heaving breath beside me. I felt blood running down my face but nothing else and I opened the door, not saying a word. I looked around—little squat houses with tiny years packed close together, a copse of trees across the way with our car facing it.

A lump of flesh in the road. Streaks of blood, viscera.

The radio playing behind me: “oh my my, oh hell yes, you got to put on that party dress.”

I walked towards the thing in the road. My legs were shaking. I felt suddenly sober but my vision was still drunk. I had to keep from reeling.

“It was too cold to cry when I woke up alone...”

I knelt by the thing, I reached out and felt its wet arm. My palm was slick with blood. I wiped it on my jeans absently.

“Last dance with Mary Jane—”

I turned it over. A child’s body with a monster’s face. But of course it wasn’t a monster. I’d made it into one. Her eyes were bulging. Her jaw was hanging loose.

Her teeth were mashed to pulp, and they tumbled out of her blooded gums like candy from a pinata.

Somehow I didn’t scream, not even when my friend’s hand found my shoulder and he dragged me back to the car. The front fender was damaged, streaked with blood, but that was it. The neighbourhood was dead silent—a second glance told me the houses were boarded up, abandoned. A derelict street in a barrio.

We drove away. We left her there.

*** **

I made it back to the apartment somehow. They say alcoholism is a degenerative disease—it gets worse, and if you pick up after a long period of sobriety, you’ll be as bad or worse than when you’d left off. It was true so far. In that night I drank a half a bottle of bourbon, two Moscow Mules, eight beers, shots of tequila, a glass or red wine. I threw up on the stairs on the way in midway through a cigarette and coughed until I had to spit up phlegm, then went inside.

I smelled it first—rot, like eggs. I flicked on the light and it was dim, stuttering, like someone somewhere was using a lot of electricity. When the thing came out of the bathroom, I think I was ready.

It was tall and thin. It had a beak, feathers. It walked like a man, like a bird, like something I’ve never seen, like everything. It spoke like chattering teeth and locked jaws, like screams and laughter. I closed my eyes, and I screamed to drown out that noise and I felt it reach into my mouth. After it wrenched the first one loose, I went somewhere else.

*** **

I'm typing this in an internet café in another town. I left on a bus, left everything behind. I imagine the police will be looking for me, and I relish the thought. If they find me, I think I'll pull a knife, and hopefully they'll gun me down. If the liquor doesn't get me first—I can't stop, not now. The pain is too much.

That thing took all my teeth, you see. But it left the roots. They dangle out of my gums like worms. Like spaghetti. I can't move without pain, or breathe, or smoke. But I can drink.

Whiskey helps about everything. It always did.



Lilitu
Helen Mihajlovic

When Reina Feldman grew weary of a troublesome world, she escaped it for a while. She liked to walk through the city late at night, when the crowds were gone, enjoying the silence of the empty streets. She spent hours gazing at architecture, a source of inspiration for her designs.

The urban high-rises appeared identical, oblong shapes that filled the skyline, but among the ordinary structures stood a majestic building. It had a Gothic facade with two grotesquely carved creatures perched on sandstone above the entrance, glaring down at her.

The moonlight streamed through lancet windows and when she put her face to the glass and peered through—as she had done many times before—she marveled at the vaulted ceilings and the grey Corinthian columns with gilded acanthus leaves.

The building had not been used for any commercial purpose for years and she had heard an unknown buyer had bought the property. It remained dark inside, but occasionally Reina would see a light in one of the windows on the top floor. But she had never seen a person enter or leave the building.

Reina craned her neck to the sound of a violent flutter. She could make out two large, crooked wings on the rooftop. It appeared that a large bird had landed on the tower and its feet were of a Corvidae. Sharp claws gripped the tower's iron lace trimming.

The bird soon disappeared, and a chill ran through her. As she turned to leave, a sign in the window caught her eye.

Room for Lease. Enquire Within.

“Good evening.”

Reina started; she had not heard anyone approach. She turned to a tall man in a navy-blue suit. He had long dark brown hair that extended down his shoulders, thin square glasses that framed pale blue eyes and a long, trimmed and pointed beard.

“Are you looking for a place to lease?”

“Yes,” she said.

“I am Bradley Elrod. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He stretched out his hand and shook hers.

“I am Reina Feldman. I am looking for a place to work from. My lease expires on my flat in a week.”

“What sort of work do you do?” he asked.

“I’m a freelance architect.”

He stroked his long beard. “The basement is for lease and the owner is providing an option to sleep at the property for a little extra.”

“Aren’t you the owner?” asked Reina.

“No, the owner isn’t in at the moment,”

“Shall I come back during the day?”

“You can come back at the same time tomorrow night. I will tell her you want to discuss the lease.”

Reina nodded. “I will come.”

“Good night,” he said.

Reina felt intrigued as he entered the building through the side door. She thought herself fortunate to have found a new place to live. She quickly ran back to the station to catch the last train home.

The following night, Reina stood before the front door admiring the black, iron foliage that curled on the wood. The lease sign had been taken away, and this was the first time she had seen the lights shining through the windows on the first level.

Reina grew puzzled, she noticed there was no doorbell or knocker. A security camera looked down at her from above the door. She felt watched.

A few moments later, Bradley opened the front door, wearing the same navy-blue suit.

“Welcome Reina,” he said. “Come inside.”

When she walked in, a musty smell filled the air. Her gaze rose to the imposing height of the hand-painted ceiling decorated with gold leaf. A mirror hung over a marble fireplace, with a velvet sofa by its side and her feet sunk into dark red carpet.

“Is that a Rococo mirror?” asked Reina.

“Yes, the owner bought it during her travels abroad.”

Reina admired its ornate frame with exquisite scrolls.

She followed him to a staircase descending to the basement and a dusty hallway with a few narrow doors. She held back a sneeze.

He opened one of the doors and they walked inside a dark room.

A moment of fear crossed her as she stood with Bradley in the darkness. As her eyes became accustomed, she saw another person at the other side of the room.

A thin woman stood near the window, moonlight beaming through the glass pane behind her, and she appeared as a silhouette. The woman switched on a tiny lamp on the table, only adding light to the immediate vicinity. Reina could finally see the woman’s face: dark brows arched over large eyes that held a deep solemn look, her long hair had a slight curl at the ends and a fringe brushed away from a narrow face. She wore a black dress, with long draped sleeves and a high neckline. She appeared fairly youthful in the dimness of the light, but Reina could not guess her age.

“I’m Lilian Laurier.” She was soft-spoken and languid in her speech. “I have been told you are interested in leasing the basement.”

“Yes, I’m looking for a place to live with a workspace.”

Lilian shot a glance at Bradley, who nodded in response and exited.

“Who else lives on the property?” asked Reina.

“I am the only one who lives here,” said Lilian.

Reina looked around the room. An ebony, oak table sat near the window with a finely carved chair, a pair of bookshelves, and drawers near the side walls.

“How much is it?”

“I am leasing it for six hundred dollars a month,” said Lilian.

Reina nodded with approval. Her eyes darted in search of a light switch; she

couldn't see one. "It's a bit dark in here."

"I can bring a desk lamp to give you enough light to work with."

Reina looked outside the small, barred window and saw a couple of people walking by on the street.

"The panes are tinted, they can't see you, only you can see them," Lilian said. "If you require more furniture, I will ask Bradley to bring something down from upstairs."

"This is ample," said Reina, looking pleased.

"Let me show you the bedroom."

Reina followed Lilian down a hallway, where she was shown a bathroom and small kitchenette. They then walked to a tiny room with quaint furniture at the far end of the basement. A cast iron single bed was in the center and on each side was a French provincial antique drawer. Two paintings hung on the walls; Reina recognized one painting as Gustave Moreau's Venice. The room had no windows and Reina felt slightly claustrophobic.

"I live on the top floor," said Lilian. "But I am a very private person and do not want anyone to enter that area."

"I understand."

"Bradley has told me you are an architect by trade."

"Yes, that's right," said Reina.

"He has seen some of your designs online and was impressed," she said. "I have been searching, for some time, for a skilled architect to design a Gothic home for me in the country."

Reina's eyes lit up. "Gothic architecture is my forte. I would be very pleased to help."

But Reina felt a sudden moment of doubt when Lilian's lips curled into a cold grin.

Reina moved into the building a week later. The haunting interiors of the stone basement, the dark chambers, arched doorways and narrow staircases, inspired

her as she began sketching Lilian's Gothic country home.

Whenever Reina designed a building, she always thought carefully of the owner's character and how it would influence the materials used to build it, the walls, the roofs, and foundations. Lilian clashed with the modern world she lived in. She had an old-world charm, her hair was long and flowing like Rossetti's Proserpine, her clothes were made of antique lace that draped the floors, and she surrounded herself in decor from a bygone era. Lilian had assigned her to not only create a home, but a world that was suited to her.

Reina's food was delivered to her weekly and Bradley was assigned to run errands for her, allowing her to focus on her work.

During the day, she did not hear even a footstep in the old building. At times, she wondered if she was on her own and Lilian spent the days out, or if she was a late sleeper. But there had always been faint groans at night. She put it down to the wind, howling through the rooms as it made its way through the fractures in the house.

Reina had been working steadily on Lilian's country home for a fortnight and was almost finished. She looked up at a crack of thunder as it temporarily distracted her from her sketching. When her gaze returned to her sketches, she flicked away a cockroach crawling on the sheet.

She continued working while fierce rain battered the windows.

Suddenly, she stopped when a shadow cast across the table. Reina turned to find

Lilian peering over her shoulder. In brighter light, Reina could see fine lines etched across Lilian's pale forehead and a curl of grey at her temple, a contrast to her otherwise ebony hair.

"Have you made much progress on the design of my country home?" Lilian asked, in her usual languorous manner.

"I've nearly finished the sketches." Reina shuffled through a pile of papers on the table. "I'm old fashioned, I like to sketch the designs by hand first before they're turned into a computer model."

Reina picked up a smaller sheet with sketches of the building's exterior.

"As per your specifications, the Gothic manor will be made of bluestone and

will have six towers, with gargoyles near the front two towers,” said Reina, pointing to them. She presented a large sheet with a floor plan.

“The manor will have fifty rooms: a master bedroom, a lounge room with a coffered ceiling and an elaborate dining room for dinner parties. There will be large bay windows and a fireplace in nearly every room, with spiral staircases through all three levels.”

Lilian’s dark eyes fixed on every detail as Reina discussed the sketches.

“I have included three studies and two libraries. At your request, I added a private library with a dome ceiling near your bedroom.”

“Your skills have exceeded my expectations,” said Lilian.

“I’ve designed an elaborate home as you asked me to,” said Reina. “My sketches will be completed by this evening. Bradley has taken my old laptop and mobile phone today to trade them in for new ones. Once he returns, I will have these designs uploaded for your builders.”

“Perhaps you will consider designing another home for me in the future. I intend to have a home built for my overseas travels.”

Reina was pleased to know her work was so well appreciated, but as Lilian’s gaze remained on her flesh, Reina became slightly nervous. She felt a chill as Lilian left the basement.

Reina worked past midnight and headed to bed, satisfied with what she’d accomplished.

When sleep overtook her, a weird noise woke her not long after. The noises seemed different than she had heard on the other nights.

Her limbs trembled as the noise grew louder. Screams echoed through the hallways and seeped through the walls. As she lay in the cold bed, she felt a strange unease creep inside her. She wrung her hands and wondered what lay ahead of her.

The following day, Reina dismissed the screams as part of her wild imagination. It was nothing else but the whistle of the wind; she thought.

She shivered as cold air entered through the cracks in the walls. The heat of the lit fireplace upstairs usually found its way to the basement, but she had not felt it

for a while.

She grimaced and made her way to the floor above, knowing upstairs the chill in the air would be gone.

Her face brightened at the magnificence of the gothic revival room with its cavernous space and intricate carvings of foliage that she had seen when she first arrived. She had spent years studying dark interiors and often dreamt she would explore the inside of the Gothic building when she had quietly admired it from the walkway.

Her sense of wonder led her up the marble staircase to the second floor. The walls were a blood red, the stained-glass panes reflecting a myriad of colors, and a vintage chandelier hung from the ceiling.

She succumbed to the temptation of an open door nearby and, walking through it found a burnished wooden staircase. As she climbed the stairs, she was mesmerized by the mosaic patterned wall of a double-headed serpent. It continued up the stairs and through the hallway on the top floor. The further she entered the hallway, the dimmer it became, until the walls and rows of doors were barely visible.

She grew nervous when she suddenly remembered the instructions that Lilian had given her: she was not to enter the top level. Turning back towards the stairs, Reina heard a groan behind a door. She became worried that someone was hurt. The noise grew louder, and she anxiously peeked through the keyhole of the chamber.

A woman knelt on a bed. A toss of ebony hair revealed the side curve of a naked, slender back and the white skin of a long neck. Red lips kissed her male companion who lay naked underneath.

Reina withdrew slightly when she realized she had seen an intimate moment between Lilian and a lover.

But her heart beat faster, and even though she was thinking she must leave, being deprived of many desires lured her back. She would remain. She looked through the keyhole once again.

The male had a red flushed face, a slim frame and his lips parted as he let out a groan. Lilian's tongue tasted each part of his body and her motion on him was wild.

As Lilian explored his body with her hand, his eyes shut with a look of pleasure. Reina watched as Lilian's feet morphed into a shape akin to a Corvidae and a large claw appeared on her finger.

Lilian's claw tore at his flesh, and his screams penetrated the keyhole. Reina watched on in horror as Lilian ate his flesh with an uncontrollable hunger.

Reina covered her mouth to hold back a scream and ran for the stairs, the floor

creaking in her haste. She glanced over her shoulder, hoping Lilian had not heard.

Reina's blood pulsed as she rushed down the stairs. She headed to the front door of the building, but it was shut. She tried each door—they were all locked. Sobbing, she hurried to the basement. She reached for the bars on the windows and shook them in a frantic attempt to escape. A cold hand reached from behind and grasped her arm. Reina gasped. She turned her head and Lilian's dark eyes stared at her.

As Lilian touched Reina, a vision came unbidden. A naked woman—who looked like Lilian—lay on verdant grass, a serpent slithering beside her. Her dark tresses brushed against her white skin as she turned towards a tall man standing before her. She rose, walking past the tall man to the towering tree, where crimson fruit with an alluring aroma delivered a temptation, yet she resisted.

She craved for freedom above all else.

“Lilith!” called Adam after her as she left the garden.

Reina felt the sharpness of Lilian's claw as her vision continued. She heard the screams of men running on a cobblestone road on a stormy night as they were chased. In the dark skies, a winged creature with feet of a Corvidae and sharp talons soared above the village.

The men attempted to hide in vain.

“Lilitu!” They screamed, pleading for their lives as she broke down the doors of the medieval cottages.

She goes by many names: Lilith, Lilitu and Lilian, thought Reina.

Reina was overwhelmed by fear and collapsed.

Reina woke in a cold bed, shivering. She didn't know if the visions were reality or dreams. Her anxious mind could be playing tricks on her.

Did I really see Lilian kill a man? she thought.

Reina rose from her bed and began to pace up and down the basement, kicking a cockroach out of her way. She covered her ears when she heard more screams.

Reina desperately made her way to the front door and in vain she tried to open it, but it was locked again. She heard a thumping noise and she snuck up to the

next floor. Her lips trembled as she saw Lilian dragging a male's limp body up the staircase and a trail of blood was left on each step. Lilian shot her a deadly look, but then continued to drag the man up the stairs.

Reina assumed Lilian would feed on him. She grabbed her head, shook it, and descended back to the basement. She began to scream.

“Murder!”

But she knew that no one from the outside world would be able to hear her.

Reina spent the next two nights shaking in her bed, watching the door for the monster. But when her body could no longer resist sleep, she shut her eyes.

After a while, Reina woke to cold lips kissing her mouth, and she looked into Lilian's white face. Reina froze.

Lilian's arms weighed against Reina's shoulders and her naked body wrapped around Reina's torso. She was a prisoner within Lilian's limbs.

Lilian appeared like a spectral figure, who at times had the wrinkled face of a hag, and at other times had the silky skin of a maiden. Her wide eyes were hypnotic and had a look of evil, a Medusa like stare.

She felt Lilian's long yellow tongue taste her neck and find its way back to her breast.

Reina feared for her life, feared she would become Lilian's prey. But she also felt a strange desire at the touch of Lilian's hand. Petrified with fear, she could not move. With a final kiss, Lilian left Reina's petite frame and crawled out of the room. Reina's limbs were tired, and she drifted back to sleep.

Reina sat in the corner of the dark room on the cold floor for a period unknown to her. She ground her teeth and clenched her fists, beating them on the ground. The moonlight beamed on her greasy, unkempt hair as she sat there surrounded by cockroaches crawling on the cold ground.

She glanced to the table where she left her sketches, but it appeared emptier. She stood up, lifted her books from the table and shifted papers, searching for her design of Lilian's Gothic country home. But her sketches were gone.

She let out a scream of mental anguish and grasped her hair.

When she heard voices outside the building, her head jolted up. Two people were talking near her window and the man's voice was familiar. She saw the navy-blue trousers that hung loosely on long limbs. It was Bradley, with a young woman in red stilettos standing by him.

"I am Bradley Elrod. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The young woman let out a flirtatious giggle. "I'm looking for a room to lease."

"There's a basement for lease and the owner is providing an option to sleep at the property for a little extra," continued Bradley.

Reina's mouth fell open. Have they hung a sign on the building advertising the space? But what are they planning to do with me?

She watched as they parted. As Reina shook her head, she saw her reflection on the pane: the hair on her temples had grown white, her eyes encircled by dark shadows and her skin had become a pasty color.

The next day, the building was silent, and Reina had not seen Lilian. She lay in her bed, crippled by her mind, unable to move. When she heard a rustling sound outside her room, she hid her face behind trembling hands. The doorknob turned with a screech.

"Reina."

She slowly dropped her hands. Bradley towered over her.

"It's time for you to leave," he said. "I will help you get out of here."

"Yes, Bradley," she said, letting out a sigh. "I don't think I can manage living here anymore. I need to get away from Lilian."

He reached for her bony hand and led her to his car outside.

Reina opened and shut her eyes in a melancholy stupor, while Bradley drove for a long time on an unfamiliar winding country road.

When the car stopped, she looked up to a large, grey building with tiny, barred windows and a clock tower in the center. They walked down an empty corridor with the smell of disinfectant. and screams of madness could be heard behind the rows of doors.

She followed him, in a trance, to a tiny white room with a bed and a small chair in the corner. Through the barred windows, she glimpsed a large Gothic manor in the distance, resting on a hill.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“We let you stay with us till I found another place for you to live,” said Bradley.

An asylum! She thought.

“You’ve served a purpose,” he continued.

Reina looked puzzled.

“The lease is always given to people who serve Lilitu’s purpose.” This was the first time he had referred to Lilian by another name.

“What purpose did I serve?” Reina’s voice shook.

“It’s your skill as an architect that is of interest to us,” he said.

“But the designs I did, they were lost.”

“No,” he paused. “I took them while you slept.”

She raised her brows. “The manor I designed was never built!”

He pointed a long finger outside the window. “That grand manor on the hill is the Gothic manor you designed.”

Reina looked out the window in horror. Dusk was falling on a building with six towers and gargoyles near the front. She knew it was her creation.

“When you are better, Lilitu will need you to design another home.”

She heard the bang of the door, the key turn in the lock and Bradley’s footsteps grew faint down the corridor.

Reina’s lips quivered; her gaze remained fixed on the manor.

From that day forth, Reina's screams could be heard at nightfall as Lilitu flew over the dark sky to seek her prey.

Dedicated to my brother Bill

@Airborne_Skies

I'm
Lilian
Laurier



The Sinkhole

Mark Towse

Monday

“It’s getting so large, Denise. It’s driving me nuts.”

“Stop looking at it then,” she replies.

“It’s at least an inch bigger than yesterday.”

“Only because you keep staring at it, Tony. Enough with the hole already!”

Maintaining my gaze towards the gravel, I offer a teenager-like sigh, letting my shoulders drop. It’s definitely growing. “I reckon it must be all the military trucks. Streets weren’t meant for those kinds of loads. Probably causing some structural damage underneath.”

“Will you shut up, Tony? Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! For the love of God, will you please just shut the fuck up?”

Her words rise above the sound of the approaching helicopter, taking me by surprise. I turn to see worry lines embedded across her face. And she’s never sworn at me like that before. Her bottom lip begins to quiver; she’s going to go. I’ve seen it too many times this week.

“I’m sorry, love,” she croaks. “I think it’s getting to me, and the bloody hole is the icing on the cake.”

She doesn’t look well at all. Her face is puffy, likely from her asthma, and her eyes cloudy and sunken. Christ, I’m a fool sometimes, but in my defense, I can’t help myself, you see. I get fixated, things running through my head that must come out, regardless of the risk of upsetting or offending. Denise thinks I’m on the spectrum. She told me she wondered how I got through life without winding up in traction. On the other hand, I still don’t understand why she’s not as concerned as I am about the hole. It’s definitely bigger.

Ah shit, perhaps she’s right.

A single tear rolls down her cheek, but she wins the battle this time, staving off a full-blown meltdown. “There’s nothing we can do about it now anyway.” She sniffs, trying to gain back some decorum. “And there’s bigger fish to fry. Why don’t you do a Sudoku puzzle or something? Distract yourself from it.”

“I’ve done all of them already, even the mastermind ones at the back,” I lie. Fucking sudoku! What’s the point in writing numbers in boxes? That’s not going to save the world. I filled the last four puzzles with sixes anyway, my favourite number.

The helicopter hovers somewhere above our street. We can hear them throughout most of the day, undoubtedly operating in shifts, a relentless reminder: things are far from normal right now and likely to go from bad to worse.

“Cup of Tea?”

“That’s a joke, right?” Denise replies.

“For fuck’s sake!” It must be in double figures now, the number of times I’ve forgotten we’re without electricity or gas. The phone lines are down, and both mobiles are dead. We’re on our own. I can’t lie; I’m scared. And the blasted hole in the garden is just something else to worry about.

“I think we have some cordial left. That okay? They’re looking out for us, Denise. The truck—it’s for our safety. I’m sure they’ll drop more supplies soon.”

“What about my asthma, though? I’ve only got a little left in my inhaler.”

I used to think asthma was something doctors made up to allow weak people to be weak, but that was before I saw its impact on my wife. Me? Never had more than a sniffle, oh, and this damned arthritis in my fingers. “It will be okay, Denise; we’ll find a way.”

Denise places her head in her hands and, this time, begins to sob, shoulders rhythmically rising and falling. I bring her in close and gently pat her back, pressing my face against hers. Her skin is like ice. But my focus soon

turns to the hole again, a glimpse of which I catch through the dry grey hairs tickling my cheek. Jesus, has it got even bigger? In that short space of time. Surely not? But I think it has. I swear to God it has. This is all too much!

“It’s going to be okay.” I utter, my words feeling rather redundant. “Shall we open the tinned peaches?”

She pulls away and retreats upstairs.

Nice one, Tony. We’re alone, scared, military up and down the street every hour, and you’ve just offered her tinned peaches. There’s no manual for this, though. We’re all rookies.

I turn my attention to the window, noting the outline of a soldier’s protective suit in the driver’s cabin and one side of a sinister-looking mask which resembles something from a science fiction movie. The familiar shrill pierces the unnatural quiet as the loudspeaker on the roof kicks into action. “Stay in your homes; you will be safe there. Do not go outside. We will notify you when it is safe to do so.”

Each day, I hope for further information—something new, something to say we might be winning this war against the virus. We were told so little; lockdown came without warning. Before the power went down, a television reporter delivered news of a highly contagious virus, possibly airborne and deadly. The emergency bulletin informed us to stay indoors, close all windows, seal all vents, and not venture outside under any circumstances.

The loudspeaker kicks into action once more. “Stay in your homes; you will be safe there. Do not go outside. We will notify you when it is safe to do so.”

It’s the same fucking message repeated over and over. And that’s all we get, locked in our own homes behind a veil of ignorance.

Wait. Who’s that? I press my face against the window, catching Liz across the road doing the same. Someone’s coming down the road, waving their hands. They’re running towards the goddamn truck. Oh, shit. It’s—

A single gunshot rings out, sending Patrick slumping to the ground in a heap.

“Jesus fucking Christ!”

It’s all over so quickly. I feel dizzy, detached from my body. A warning shot? But the blood spilling across the front of his shirt ends my attachment to optimism. Across the road, Liz has a hand to her mouth, sinking back into drabness.

The truck emits a low humming noise and slowly grinds to a halt, leaving the street in eerie silence once again. I see more curtains twitching and nets pulled aside, residents no doubt keen to investigate what the kerfuffle is.

Come on, Patrick, get up!

My hands curl into a fist, fingernails pressing into my palm. This isn’t right. We were only at their house a couple of weeks ago for a barbecue. His wife—Sandy, was it? She seems lovely. Going through such a hard time already supporting her husband through chemo.

And now this.

Something emerges from a hole at the truck’s rear, spraying a ferocious burst of flames that engulfs our neighbour in what I can only describe as a great ball of fire. What the fuck? The song of the same name sinisterly plays out in my head as even from here, I feel the heat spewing out from the flamethrower that cooks Patrick’s flesh. There’s no screaming or movement as the blaze licks aggressively at his body. I assume he’s already dead, but it doesn’t make the scene less terrifying.

“What was that noise, love?” Denise shouts from upstairs.

“I think it must have been the truck backfiring!”

As the flames die down, I watch a robotic arm jerkily position over our neighbour and clasp around his smouldering body. It reminds me of one of those arcade machines when you try and win a stuffed piglet. Today’s prize, though, is a charred human. An automatic door slides open at the back of the truck, and the body is dumped inside as if it was last week’s garbage.

I’m shaking, my heart still pounding. It’s surreal; I’ve seen stuff like this

in movies, but that's just noise. This is stomach lurchingly real, and I'm not prepared.

"What is it, Tony?"

I turn to see my wife wearing her favourite blue dress, hair pinned up, and with a full face of makeup. The scent she's wearing makes me feel slightly more at ease, a slice of luxury and a reminder of life beyond tinned food and dominos.

"What's wrong? You've gone as white as a sheet."

I try to speak but can't find any words. I keep seeing Patrick going to the ground.

"Tony?" her voice floats across.

"You look amazing," I say, heart still thrumming, leaning back against the wall for some stability.

"Thanks," she replies. "I feel terrible, but I'm going to try and be positive. We'll get through this, won't we, Tony?"

She's usually the strong one, the driving force. "Of course," I reply.

Our neighbour Patrick has just been shot in cold blood, barbecued, and dropped into a makeshift dump truck, but what is a man to say? "It'll be okay," is the best I can do. "There's running water, and if we stretch the food, we have at least another week. But I'm sure it will be all over by then, love. Now, seeing as though you are all dressed up, shall I open those bloody peaches?"

She nods, gives a half-hearted smile, and takes a shot from her inhaler.

"One quick question before I do, okay?"

"Sure, fire away," she replies.

"Does that hole look bigger?"

Tuesday

I didn't sleep much last night, eventually tiptoeing out of bed at four and leaving Denise snoring like a freight train. In my head, the song 'Great Balls of Fire' kept playing along with the associated imagery of Patrick's smoking torso.

How could they do that? How can they live with themselves?

From somewhere not too far away, the truck's engine thrums, possibly from the next street. The noise fills me with trepidation rather than hope, heightening feelings of being nothing but a prisoner in my home.

When will it end?

Autumn rain begins pattering against the patio door, and I consider how much I'd love to feel it on my face, just for a second or two, to kid myself that everything was okay.

The creak of floorboard snaps me into reality. Denise must be up and about. Her asthma's really bad at the moment, her wheezing worse than ever. I don't think all the stress helps. Christ, if she ever found out what happened to Patrick, it would be a game-changer.

I pour a teaspoon of malt chocolate into the two glasses and fill each half-full of milk. One carton of soy left; we'll have to stretch it out. We'll be out of food entirely by the end of the week, and then what? Perhaps that's why Patrick made a desperate run towards the truck.

The patio security light flickers on and catches me by surprise, revealing a feral-looking ginger cat drinking from the sinkhole. It turns its head and glares at me like I'm the trespasser. "Fuck off, you scraggy little shit!" I shout. But it doesn't move; it just stands there and hisses at me. I'm in a standoff with angry Garfield. Suddenly, it's running towards me. I recoil as it jumps, the impact thunderous as its face hits the glass with full force, causing the entire door to rattle in its frame. It falls back to the ground with a pained wail and retreats over next door's fence.

"What the fuck is this happy horseshit?"

Heart thundering in my chest, I grab the table edge for support. What the fuck next?

The sinkhole! It's at least a foot wider and full to the brim of dirty water. What a bloody mess! What an eyesore! Rain continues bringing all the soil down from the flowerbeds. I guess it to be about two feet deep now. Fuck's sake! My Dad used to tell me not to buy a property where the garden slopes toward the house, but Denise fell in love with the place. What's a man to do?

Spilling some precious milk over the side, I take my drink to the patio door to look closer. It certainly didn't extend beyond the conifers yesterday. God damn it!

"Denise!"

She enters the kitchen wearing her dressing gown, her puffy face shining with a glossy layer of thick makeup. I guess it's a positive sign that she's making an effort.

"What is it, Tony?"

"The hole," I say, gesturing her to come to the window. "Come and look at the hole."

"When this is over, I'm going to put you in that bloody hole!"

"There. Tell me it hasn't grown." I thrust my finger towards it.

Her neck gives a faint crack as she cranes it half-heartedly towards the window. I get a mouthful of her perfume. Christ, how much did she put on?

"I don't know," she says. "Maybe. I'm not sure. Is it really that important right now?"

It has got bigger, though; I know it has. She's just not taking it seriously enough.

She sniffs the air, "Can you smell that?"

“Just the rain, is that what you mean?”

“No, something really sweet.” She rubs the back of her neck. “Never mind.”

“Are you okay, darling?”

“I just hope Jeff and Ally are coping. I hate not being able to contact them.” Sadness fills her eyes, her face crumpling with resignation, suggesting any reassurance I offer will be useless. But unable to stop the words, I offer my half-assed effort anyway. “I’m sure they are, love. Ally will be kicking Jeff into gear; she’s unstoppable.”

I think of my kids, Sophie and Eric, and I feel her pain. I wish I had answers for both of us.

We take our drinks through to the lounge and flop next to each other on the couch. In silence, we stare at our reflections on the television screen. There’s a half-done jigsaw on the coffee table, but neither of us has the motivation to finish it. The hum of the truck gets louder, its ominous noise filling me with dread. How many people have been taken by it today, I wonder? I reach for my wife’s hand, noting how dry and brittle her skin is and how icy it feels.

“Aren’t you cold, love?”

“No, just scared,” she says, rattling her inhaler. “Nearly empty.”

And this makes me feel incredibly helpless.

“What do we do, Tony, when we run out of food? What then?”

I consider my response carefully. “I guess we eat each other,” I say, smiling. “Take little chunks at a time.”

She furrows her brow and gives me the evil eye, the bloodshot whites adding further menace to her scowl.

“You’re looking at me thinking medium or rare, aren’t you?”

She smiles, but I know she's struggling. I kiss the back of her hand. "I love you, Denise Rogers."

"It's my birthday on Thursday," she says glumly.

"I know, dear. Why do you think I'm saving that other tin of peaches?"

The truck slowly passes the rain-covered window as we sit watching the blank TV screen, the same message emanating from the loudspeaker. No gunfire today, though. Yet.

I rub my hands together in fake enthusiasm. "What do you want for lunch?"

"Honey garlic chicken, followed by Crème Brulee."

"Beans followed by crackers it is, then."

Time passes. Slowly. We fill moments with idle chatter, keeping our thoughts locked away. I can feel the blanket of fear and anxiety cloaking us; it's stifling and prevents anything but basic human survival functions.

*

Her dinner's been sat on the arm of the chair for half an hour now. Untouched. I watch a fly circling above her head as she stares at the same magazine page that she's been looking at for over half an hour. It finally comes to rest on her cheek. But she doesn't even blink an eye.

This worries me for two reasons: Denise usually goes nuts even when a fly gets into the house. secondly, how the hell did it get in away? Aware it's never going to be one hundred percent airtight, I know I need to do another round of inspections to ensure everything is sealed.

"Are you okay, dear?" I ask, mopping my plate with stale bread.

She snaps her head towards the fly. Shit, was that a growl?

"Denise?" I think my wife just tried to catch a fly in her mouth. As the buzzing continues above her head, a look of disappointment draws across her face.

She finally turns to me and smiles. “Think I’ll turn in.”

I watch in silence as she makes her way toward the stairs. “Night, dear,” is all I can manage. There’s no further response.

Wednesday

2.53 am

I wake up bolt upright, heart thumping wildly. Sweat drips from my brow as I swing my legs over the side of the bed and peel off the damp covers. I’m sixty-seven bloody years old; I shouldn’t be having nightmares. Christ, that was a nasty one, though. I was lying in the sinkhole, going down with it, dirt and gravel falling in, starting to crush me. The pressure on my legs and chest was unbearable, and I couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. It kept coming, covering my body. I woke up just as it reached my chin: gasping, sweating, flailing at nothing.

Nasty.

Beneath the covers, Denise whistles a tune through the gap in the facemask she’s wearing. She’s right; this sinkhole is becoming an obsession. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. I settle back into the mattress and stare at the small crack in the ceiling, concentrating on slowing my breathing down. Finally, my heart rate begins to approach normal, and I close my eyes once again. In the background, I hear the quiet rumbling of the truck.

6.53 am

Heavy rain pounds against the window, and all I can think is how much extra damage it’s doing to my backyard. Denise is still whistling through her nose. She never sleeps in—up at six usually, but I guess there’s nothing to rush for anymore.

I shuffle across to the hallway window and study the ever-expanding hole.

It’s bloody enormous now. Perhaps five feet wide. It’ll take the entire bloody house with it before long, and the rain won’t be helping. For Christ’s

sake, what am I supposed to do? I daren't step outside, not with the chopper patrolling above and what with yesterday's events.

I rush downstairs to take a better look, and even from the kitchen doorway, I see the network of cracks slowly working their way through the gravel, some stopping only a few feet from the house. Goddamn it! I march across to the patio door, coiling my fingers around the handle, feeling my hand twitching.

Don't be a bloody idiot, Tony! What the hell would I do with it anyway?

I'm cracking up, losing it. We're trapped, hiding from an unknown enemy that we've been told very little about, and it's really beginning to piss me off.

The malt is nearly gone. Perhaps another day's worth. This thought fills me with overwhelming sadness. I check the fridge and cupboards for supplies once again, letting myself hope I might have missed something but knowing I haven't. We can probably stretch the food out until Friday at the most.

Gunfire startles me, rippling through the neighbourhood. How close was that? I rush through to the lounge, pressing my nose against the bay window, but there's no sign of a truck, only more curtains twitching. Christ, this is unreal. I half expect Denise to shout down her concern, but nothing comes.

Even with all this going on, I find it impossible to ignore the hole. It's always there, nagging for my attention. I need to fill the cracks and stop the water from getting in. At least packing it in tightly would be a temporary fix. Perhaps if I partially open the doors, I could use something to scrape dirt into the openings. Christ, someone has likely just been shot, and all I can think about is that bloody sinkhole. I'll likely need to get professionals in—probably a big job—expensive. I've seen these things before on the news, taking whole chunks of cities down.

Why me?

The truck rumbles down our street, pumping out the familiar message. On cue, the house begins to shake, and—the crack—I just saw it get bigger! I swear it, in front of my very eyes. What if we aren't insured for it? They'll

probably try and squirm out of it. If we can't get it on insurance, I won't let it rest until the government sorts it out; mark my words.

This is all so bloody stressful!

As I sit down at the table with my drink, I spy a small sparrow drinking from the birdbath. It's a great distraction, and I sit there for countless minutes watching it wash, occasionally dipping its beak in the water. Eventually, it flies off, and my gaze once again turns to the sinkhole.

I wonder if any of the neighbours have got one?

I grab the table edge and drag it towards the patio doors. Steadying my right foot on the chair, I plant my hands down on the table and leverage myself up, craning my neck, careful not to hit the ceiling. I can only see a third of Bob's garden over the fence. No sign of any craters, though.

"What are you doing?" Denise croaks from behind.

"Take a look at it now, Denise. Tell me it hasn't got any bigger."

"I just came down for some headache tablets, Tony. I'm going back to bed."

"But look, Denise. You can see the cracks coming towards the house."

I turn to find her already gone. She could have looked; she was just there, for crying out loud. Christ, what am I saying?

I carefully get down from the table and follow her through to the lounge.

"Can I get you anything, love?" I shout after her as she begins climbing the stairs. She doesn't answer. "Well, if you need anything, holler, okay?"

Over the next few hours, I anxiously watch the hole extend to within three feet of the house. The temptation to go outside and quickly fill in some of the cracks is unbearable, but occasional distant gunfire continues to dissuade me. I really hope they're only warning shots. But people must be getting desperate by now.

How long can we go on like this, for fuck's sake?

Denise doesn't come down all day. I take her up some lunch and dinner, but it remains on the bedside table, untouched, next to her inhaler. I've never known her to stay in bed for so long. There's no fever, and her skin is ice cold. She's straddled across the bed wearing only her night mask, wheezing raucously. But that doesn't explain the series of black veins beginning to decorate her skin.

I watch her for a while, overwhelmed with a feeling of helplessness. My wife is getting ill, and there isn't a thing I can do about it. They'll shoot me if I step foot out there, just like Patrick.

This is inhumane! Unacceptable!

And the bloody the sinkhole. It's now about seven feet wide. Not a goddamn thing I can do about it. "Good night, Denise," I whisper, squeezing onto the slither of available mattress. I give up. This bloody virus has me beat.

Thursday

2.33 am

I wake up drenched in sweat. That was a gunshot; I'm sure it was. Shit, and another.

I rush to the bedroom window to inspect the street below. "Sweet Jesus of Nazareth." Three bodies are strewn across the pavement, soldiers covering them with blankets. Further down, I spot the truck approaching, no doubt on the way to clear the mess.

Why don't they fucking tell us something? People are losing it; they're scared. We're all bloody terrified.

Denise lets out a moan and turns over, breaking wind in the process. Its pungency hits me almost immediately, sending me retreating into the hallway. Too much canned food, I guess. The relief to be away from the window is cut short by more gunshots echoing in the distance. A busy night. What the

hell is going on out there?

Downstairs, the house provides the usual vibrations as the truck does its sinister business outside. Trying to distract myself from the sinkhole that looms in darkness, I set the table, stacking the last tins from the cupboard—sausages, beans, and peaches—in preparation for the birthday meal I hope Denise will be well enough to eat. It all seems futile, though, and resignedly, I fall back into the chair and close my eyes.

There was a beach in Puerto Rico; I can't remember what they called it or if it's still as pretty. Palm trees against deep blue skies and water that glistened an emerald green. I can almost feel the sunshine on my cheek and the warmth of the water as it gently laps around me. The most beautiful place I've ever seen.

*

“Denise, you're up.”

Something isn't right.

She's completely naked, her pale skin an atlas of black veins. She looks—dead—for want of a better word. And her eyes. What the fuck is with her eyes? Pale, but blood red where the whites should be. The words leave my lips automatically, a slight variant on the question I've been asking hour after hour, day after day. “How are you feeling, love?”

She snarls and rushes towards me, breasts swinging pendulously, stringy saliva swaying from her purple lips. The chair hurtles backwards as I stand, holding my arms out defensively. “Stop, Denise,” I scream. But I know well before impact that this thing is not my wife. My hip cracks against the kitchen bench as she forces me back, the pain immediately intense. I manage to grab her upper arms as we tussle, but she begins snapping her teeth towards mine, coming dangerously close each time to sinking her teeth into my nose.

“Denise! Stop this!”

I don't remember her being this strong. Her breath is foul, warm rancidness wrapping around me and making me instantly want to gag. She growls. It's the angriest I've ever seen her, even more than when I accidentally dug up her begonias.

“Denise, please!”

She flails her arm towards me, her hand finding my face, fingers slipping into the side of my mouth. A garbled noise leaves my lips as I plead for her to stop, but she bites at me again, her teeth snapping only an inch away. I manage a shove, but she snarls and comes back for more. “Please,” I cry, tears rolling down my cheeks. But she’s even more frenzied, spittle spraying across my face as she jerks and thrusts towards me. She lets out a blood-curdling roar, her teeth getting closer with each attack. I’m struggling to keep her at bay.

With the salty taste of tears in my mouth, I push her back as hard as possible and reach for the tin of birthday peaches. “So sorry, love,” I cry. As she lunges, I bring the corner of the can down against the side of her head. She recoils, taking a step backwards, giving me a look of pure savagery. She comes again, and I bring the peaches down harder this time, creating a slightly louder thud that dents the bottom of the tin and skims off some of her greenish skin in the process.

Relentlessly, she attacks again, snarling her anger, more stringy saliva spraying across my cheek and lips. Instinctively spit it back towards her—a direct hit in her right eye. “Sorry, love. Sorry”

As she growls and bares her teeth, I hear the hum of the truck and feel the vibration through the foundations. “Stay in your homes; you will be safe there.”

Nope.

Eyes wide with rage, she comes at me with even more ferocity. It feels like she’s getting stronger; I can’t keep her off for much longer. And Christ, that breath!

“Please forgive me,” I utter, bringing the tin of peaches down into her head with everything I have, the blow producing a squelch that immediately makes me want to gag. She stumbles backwards, clawing at her shredded skin, eyeing me in disbelief.

“I’m so sorry,” I croak, sidestepping towards the knife block near the sink. Peripheral vision shows the sinkhole only two feet from the house,

about three-quarters full of black water.

Not now, Tony!

I turn my attention back to Denise, her skull now oozing a liquid resembling black treacle. She wipes her hand against it, licking the palm with her swollen purple tongue. Almost immediately, she spits it out and scowls, turning her attention to me, eyes full of hate, lips twisted in disdain.

“Denise, please.”

I grab the largest black handle but immediately regret my choice, wielding the bread knife in front of me. Neck crackling like tinder, staring me down with pale eyes that bleed from the corners, Denise begins frantically biting at the air as she begins her approach. Waving the serrated blade in front of me like a sparkler, I nervously retreat until I hit the glass door.

This is not how I imagined we’d be spending my wife’s sixty-fifth birthday.

She tilts her head and widens her eyes as if there may be some element of recognition left.

“Denise, it’s me, Tony.”

But she offers a roar and begins her run.

The door explodes as she takes us both hurtling through it. Even as we plummet to the ground in a shower of glass, it’s all I can do to keep her snapping jaw away from my face. The impact and coldness force me to scream, filling my mouth with grainy water. Her hands fix around my neck, pinning me under the water. Pressure builds until my lungs feel like they’re on fire. Through the rippling surface, her face looks even more terrifying—mangled flesh in her hair and thick black goo dripping down the side of her cheek. I can’t get any leverage. She’s too strong.

Desperately, I claw at her hands, trying to rip them away, but she’s like a rabid dog that won’t let go. Her words ring out in my head, “I’m going to put you in that bloody hole, Tony.”

As her face draws closer, jaw open, ready to snap down, I see the helicopter come into view just to the right of her shoulder.

I genuinely thought we would get out of this alive, that it was just another so-called pandemic blown out of all proportion. And even as she sinks her teeth into my cheek, I just can't accept this is the end. I watch as she lifts her head from the water, chewing on a mouthful of my flesh.

Guess she got sick of peaches.

My mind flashes back to times shared before she started eating me, but melancholy fades as another explosion rings in my ears, half my wife's head now missing.

Over the ringing, I hear footsteps.

Dazed and confused, limbs leaden, I hold my wife like a shield, grimacing in preparation for a bullet. More of her face drops into the murky water, creating ripples and obscuring my vision further.

Where are they?

Shit! Shit! Shit!

And as the water settles, I can see boots at the hole's edge. Can they see me, too? The compulsion to breathe is beginning to fade, pressure relenting.

With the rifle's front sight, the soldier pokes my wife in the buttocks. I'm done for, surely. They give her another sharp jab in the back before finally turning and making their way towards the house.

I raise my head out of the water, easily pushing my wife to the side.

"Target down," the woman speaks into her radio, inspecting the door-frame and the shattered glass.

There's no pain in my back or cheek. I'm feeling good; charged. A network of black veins forms down both my arms, and it's as if I can feel each cell transforming. I'm starting to feel younger again; even my arthritis is beginning to abate.

This isn't so bad.

The sinkhole saved me. After all that, the bloody thing saved my life!

“Roger that... No, we can't wait for the vaccine, sir... They're all turning. We need to clean this place out... Roger... I'm going to check the house. Over.”

We were done for anyway.

That smell—so strong and sweet—what is it? I put my hand to the wound on my cheek, noting the familiar stringy black liquid seeping through my fingers. I feel the changes inside, iciness flowing through my veins. What the hell is happening to me? The soap, the sweat under her arms, the juicy meat under the suit. I smell it all so strongly.

I'm suddenly ravenous. And tinned sausages won't cut it this time.

It must have got to Denise slowly, through the air, taking advantage of her weakened immune system. I showed no symptoms, but she took a piece out of me like I was a quarter-pounder. No foreplay.

Christ, that soldier smells so damn good. Involuntarily, I snap at the air in front of me. What the fuck was that?

Her flesh. Her blood.

I'm starving.

I try to resist, but something animalistic supersedes my self-control. Can't think straight; foggy. Just hungry—need to eat. I'm running at her now. She turns, and I can see the fear in her face as I launch towards her, teeth bared.

What about the sinkhole?

Fuck the sinkhole!

The End



Oraculum Tenebrae
Matthew R. Davis

Once Oliver's life had been empty, echoing with a hollow ring whenever it brushed up against the solidity of other people's happiness. Then someone had offered to fill him up with everything he'd ever wanted, and his dreams had come true, and it was only when the shine had begun to wear off the endless glut that he came to realize this existence of excess was leaving him no less empty. It was simply that all the distractions, the pleasure and the plunder, made it harder to notice the void—easier to forget that it lurked at the heart of everything, ceaseless and inevitable.

Tonight, though, Oliver stared at himself in the bathroom mirror and saw the vacuum looking implacably back through his pinhole eyes. The person reflected there was just a shell, a mask. Oliver Spiteri had become a costume worn thin with time, and its details—dark hair styled in a younger man's fashion to offset its recession, dark-skinned body gently blooming into an indulgent middle-age spread, dark movie-star silk shirt and top-dollar Burberry suit—made not the man. He was just one of a billion faces plastered onto the abyss like stage make-up.

He lifted one hand and saw, trembling on a fingertip, a drop of blood. Not his own. It broke and streaked down the length of his index, and with it broke his will to remain bound.

No more of this. No more.

But what else was left?

And since when did a cog choose to leave the mighty machine of its own volition?

#

That night—it could've been any night, they all blurred into one and Oliver had long since lost track of the date—they'd been at the club. They hit Black Ice at least twice a week and Oliver was a favoured customer, his bar tab without limit and always picked up promptly. It didn't matter that he was two decades older than most of the clientele; his money talked fast and eloquent, and his generosity meant he habitually accrued a coterie of younger

libertines who would hang around until the party lulled, which often took days. Tonight, they'd left the club around 4am and brought the party back to the penthouse.

Oliver had once dreamed of living in a home like this; hell, he'd dreamed of being able to afford a hotel suite like this for even one night. A lavish suite in aggressively modern lines, almost brutalist in its right-angled composition, the penthouse came complete with top-of-the-line everything: a voice-activated virtual assistant called Taraxandra linking all its devices including a thumping stereo system, faultless soundproofing to keep the party din contained within the penthouse walls, an immaculate bathroom complete with a spacious slate-walled shower and hot tub, a pricey and well-stocked bar, a killer eighth-floor view overlooking the lights of the city. It looked like the kind of place where high-budget porn would be shot, where name actresses would sprawl and splay and spray all over the leather couches, and indeed, Oliver had captured many a candid moment on his phone as it played out before him; debauchery was encouraged within these walls. It was not unusual for Oliver to wake in his luxurious bed, roll out of it to take a piss, and find people he'd met at the club days ago passed out in his bath or doing lines in his lounge or fucking on the hallway floor. Fortunately, the penthouse came with discreet cleaners who returned it to its state of pristine shine a couple of times a week, else the place would have been knee-deep in empty bottles, pill dust, and used condoms by now.

Oliver saw he had half a dozen guests tonight—he was too high to keep track of who had been in his clique at the club and how many drinks he was paying for, but that was another detail that scarcely mattered. At least he knew these six by name, having shared rambling, clenched-jaw conversations with them earlier at Black Ice. Tig and Tyro were handsome bad boys who never mentioned how they maintained their high-flyer lifestyle, one Asian and the other Mediterranean and both GQ cover material, dressed in rich black and ostentatious bling like rising rappers on the make. Kesha and Kit were a couple of long-legged thots who made their money by dancing in R&B clips and modelling for cutting-edge lifestyle companies, not especially bright but hot as fuck and dripping with the kind of passive eroticism that promised an easy conquest, one black in a white dress and the other white in a black dress like matched negatives. Carlos and Dabney made for a less comfortable couple, the former a whip-thin silver fox older than Oliver but oozing a hot-daddy oleaginy that had even straight boys trying for his approval, the latter half his partner's age and obviously the bottom, a cherubic blonde who looked

like he'd been stripped out of farmer's overalls and plunked into clubbing clobber for a DNA modelling shoot.

And then, of course, there was Bethany.

Oliver's woman was everything he'd ever thought he wanted—nineteen years old and fairly simmering with a constant crimson carnality, open-minded to a fault and utterly devoted to his needs. Having her on his arm at the club made him at least as cool as the depth of his credit, made him look exciting and desirable in a way nothing else ever had; he knew the dirty half-dozen he'd brought home respected him largely because of her, would otherwise only be here in order to humour a sad old loser into sharing his wealth. A tall and slender model-body and a face whose beauty was seasoned with a touch of the everyday that only deepened its appeal—Bethany. A relentless lover who came through hard on her promises and kept him sated and damn near chafed raw—Bethany. His partner and his concubine and his little leather leash—Bethany.

The party followed Oliver into the penthouse and gazed about with wide, dilated eyes. The walls were a classy black and hung with art that encompassed a wide range of eroticism, from J.W. Waterhouse's nude nymphs to a soft-focus David Hamilton nubile photograph to dark, weird, explicit paintings by Cecily Brown and Ebon Eidolon. There was only one piece in the living area that wasn't sensual in nature, a painting that depicted the warped shadow of a hand cast against a wall covered in odd sigils and diagrams, and this was the one work Oliver hadn't chosen himself; his employers had insisted it hang above the forty-eight-inch flat-screen TV, keen to remind him always of his obligations. Tig and Tyro seemed to note its unique nature and stared at it until Oliver ushered them down into the lounge pit, where armless black leather couches formed a squared U and attended an onyx-glass table straight out of Rich Goth IKEA. Atop this awaited a selection of condiments: a pick-n-mix dish of pills, a black-tentacled hookah heaped with pungent bud, a mirror with white lines already racked up on its cold face.

“Oh, a party assortment,” Carlos declared, as if presented with an underwhelming charcuterie board. “Sit down, Dabney.”

The group settled down on the smooth leather as much as they could, no easy feat since everyone was high as giraffe balls. Jiggling legs and fiddling

hands lent the scene a constant movement, but no-one seemed ready to cool off. Dilated eyes stared at the table's offerings as if that was enough to partake of their effects.

"This place is fuckin' dope, man." Tig sank back into the couch and assumed a pose as hard as it was casual, always fronting in case of photographers, enemies, or bad bitches. "What you say you do again?"

"I don't discuss my business," said Oliver, who never talked about his job to anyone outside it, ever. Even high as a kite, with his gums flapping a mile a minute, he knew better than that. "And I don't care about yours. This is a work-free zone. Help yourself to whatever you like."

"Ooh, don't mind if I do," Kesha trilled, sitting forward with her eyes fixed on the mirror.

"My home is your home," Oliver replied, "at least until I kick you out," and he continued as everyone laughed. "We got beer, liqueurs, spirits, pills, weed, dust, anything else you may require. We like to keep it pretty informal around here."

"So I see," said Carlos, arch and dry, nodding at a David Armstrong portrait of a naked and erect man in gold body paint.

"Fuckin' A," Bethany said as she slid across the couch toward Oliver like butter across a sizzling pan, one hand slipping onto his crotch. "No limits here."

Do whatever you like."

"Oh, shit," Tyro cried. "Is this gon' be that kind of party?"

"It's every kind of party," Oliver declared, and threw his head back to address the ceiling. "Xandra, go to Club Mode."

"As you wish," his digital assistant replied—Oliver found that response a little passive-aggressive but had never gotten around to changing it—and then the recessed lights dimmed to a simmering XXX-red, lending the room a sleazy strip club vibe. Colours were washed away to a kind of crimson chiaroscuro, everything reduced to a hazy monochrome swimming in blood.

Kesha and Kit cooed at each other, impressed by the simple trick; Carlos twitched his nose as if too polite to point out how trite he found it all.

“Welcome to Hell, huh?” Tig said with a grin.

“Heaven for some,” Oliver said. “Xandra, play Party Mix 3.”

“As you wish.”

The penthouse’s hidden speakers boomed to life. The volume was set lower than at Black Ice to allow conversation, but not by much; the air was thick with bass and the beats were hard enough to chip ice. Turning to Bethany, Oliver saw her wet smile closing in to fix on his neck, her tongue dabbing at traces of sweat. He pushed aside a bang of her long red hair and rested one hand on her bare thigh, high enough to push up the hem of her skimpy silver club dress and display her black panties. Her fingers were still clutching at his cock, squeezing gently as it swelled to her touch.

“Soon,” she whispered, letting go and slinking over to the fridge to fetch cold drinks for their guests. Tig and Tyro shared Oliver’s taste for top-shelf beers, the thots liked Hennessy, and Carlos dictated spring water for he and his lover. Oliver did a line with Kesha and Kit, already so high their mouths ran like loose taps; Carlos had Dabney light his cigarette and rested one possessive hand on the young man’s knee as he made conversation with Bethany. Soon Tig headed over to the immaculate kitchen counter to pour some shots, and Tyro macked on Kit beneath a graphic print of a leering vagina, perhaps hoping the backdrop would act as a subliminal seduction aid.

When he finished his second Tutankhamun Ale, Oliver walked to the master bedroom and kicked off his dress shoes and socks, relishing the caress of the deep shag carpet, then threw on a dash of Creed Aventus to cover the scent of club sweat. Bethany followed him in and pressed herself against his back as he stood before the mirror, nibbling at his neck, pushing his hand against the damp gusset of her panties to show him her excitement.

“I want you to fuck me, Oli, and soon,” she whispered. He never tired of hearing her voice shape such words. “Anyone else you want in?”

“Kesha,” he said. “Kit too, if it comes up, but I want to see you eat that black puss.”

“I thought you might say that, so I got her talking at the club—turns out she’s bisexual. I’ll make it happen, baby.”

“That’s my girl.”

Her fingers slipped between the buttons of his silk shirt, popping a few of them open to expose his chest. Oliver closed his eyes as she caressed the ragged scars that criss-crossed his dark skin, uncomfortable with the reminder of their provenance. He shrugged her off, and she acquiesced with a wordless humility, pausing by the door to flash her wonderful tits at him before returning to the party. Oliver grinned, then re-buttoned his shirt to hide those ugly scars—the price he paid for this life of endless hedonism.

Enough of that. He had a debauch to oversee. Oliver swept back out to the red-lit lounge pit, a priapic Prospero in the making.

Dabney had his white tee off and was lying back on his elbows like a beefcake model as Carlos snorted a line off his lover’s firm belly, watching the act with the glassy eyes of someone only vaguely acquainted with reality. Tig and Tyro had roped the thots into doing shots of Patron at the kitchen counter; when Kesha spluttered at the booze’s bite, Bethany smoothly interceded and led her back to the couch. She brought her guest some water, sat close with one of her thighs aligned with Kesha’s, running pale fingers through the woman’s ebony locks. Oliver took Kesha’s place at the counter and nailed a couple shots with Tig and Tyro as they plied Kit with cool compliments, wondering if she would let them tag-team her and whether it was something he’d like to watch. By the time he returned to the lounge with another beer, Carlos was standing over Dabney with a controlled lust in his narrow eyes, one hand clutching the young man’s hair as he undid his fly. Bethany and Kesha watched this scene unfold with wide eyes, their hands linked, and when they turned away from the display to look at each other, they saw something reflected in each other’s eyes. As if this overt exhibition of queer sexuality had triggered their own, they kissed, sloppy but enthusiastic, and Kesha giggled as Bethany eased down one spaghetti strap of her white dress. The redhead sent Oliver a conspiratorial wink: mission underway, boss.

“Take your time,” he told her, “I need a piss,” and he stepped up out of the lounge pit and headed for the hallway. “I think Kit’s in there, man,” Tyro called, but Oliver didn’t see her anywhere and the bathroom door was open.

He let out the night's drinks to make room for more, thinking of the things he and Bethany would do to Kesha within the hour, and his dick felt heavy and ready in his hand. He washed up, nodding his head to the ever-present beat along with the grinning maniac in the mirror, dried his hands on a thick towel, walked back out into the hall—and saw something that made his hot blood turn to chilled sludge in a single heartbeat.

The spare room door was open.

No, no, no.

The spare room light was on.

No, no, NO!

Oliver dashed across the hall and in through a door that should have been locked—a door he'd been strictly ordered to keep secure at all times. The space within was small, the walls smooth if no longer blank, and his eyes shot straight to the object that dominated the room. After all this time, it still held him enthralled, overwhelmed, terrified. But that was usual, normal, even kind of comfortable.

What was not: for the first time in memory, he wasn't alone in the room.

“Oh my god,” said Kit, turning to him with a mask of sick fascination pinned to her pale, uncomprehending face. “What the fuck is that thing?”

#

Oliver's old life had ended when he walked out of a second-hand bookshop one afternoon almost two years before. At that time he was forty-one years old, a smart but unchallenged systems analyst who had never quite found the life he really wanted, single as ever and making occasional booty calls to a plain but very obliging case manager called Cara. In his hand he was holding a gift-wrapped book, a signed copy of *The View from the Cheap Seats: Selected Nonfiction*. He was thinking about what he'd say when he presented it to the birthday girl, the way her eyes would light up when she saw it.

Two men approached him as he walked down a quiet side street toward

his car. They were tall and jacked, neatly conveyed in mauve dinner jackets and black slacks like the world's most intimidating valets. Oliver paused on the footpath, thinking of action movies where ex-military henchmen intimidated members of the public to get what they wanted, and knew this hunch was too close for comfort.

“Mr. Spiteri,” said the man on the left, his voice a businesslike burr. Everything about him, from his severe hair to his gun-barrel eyes to the alert way he held himself, screamed war. “Please come with us.”

“We’ll take you to your interview,” said the man on the right, his voice the rasp of blade on bone. He extended one hand like a helpful butler.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Oliver asked, surprise overcoming his unease, and the second man reached for his collarbone. Two thick fingers jabbed down behind it, expertly nailing a nerve cluster, and for a second Oliver was nothing but a thin paper wrapper around the universe’s primal gift of pain.

“Please come with us,” the first man repeated, helping Oliver to his feet, and this time he saw no reason to say a single word that wasn’t yes.

The dapper goons led him to a nearby car, brand new and black and anonymous, and drove him a short distance to an office in the city—he didn’t see which one, as they entered through a basement garage and none of the walls were conveniently branded with their name. When they got out of the car in the parking bay, Oliver briefly considered making a break for it; then he imagined the men gunning him down without so much as a twitch of the eyelid, and meekly accompanied them into a lift instead. The high-end office above was minimalist and brutally functional, the usual shades of work-harder white and business beige replaced by crypto-fascist charcoal and ostentatious orange, and the only decoration to be seen was the occasional arrangement of three interlocking triangles that resembled an occult symbol reworked as corporate branding. He was starting to get a Big-Brother-with-a-popped-collar vibe. He was also continuing to be absolutely terrified.

Oliver was ushered into a charcoal chamber that resembled police interrogation rooms he’d seen on TV, completely empty other than a table, two chairs, and a woman. The table was black glass and held nothing. The woman was a redhead in a black trench coat straight from the Coldly Beautiful

Russian Spy file at Central Casting, her hair pulled into a girlish updo at odds with her severe affect, sitting on one of the chairs with her hands folded before her. The men insisted Oliver into the second chair across from her and then stepped back, standing behind him with all the presence and promise of two rat traps poised to snap shut.

“Thank you for attending this interview, Mr. Spiteri,” said the woman, her voice scarcely more emotive than her impassive face. She might have been an android node for a digital assistant for all the animation she showed. “Let’s cut to the chase. You meet the Oraculum’s criterion, so we’re offering you a position with us.”

Oliver opened his mouth to say well, that was quick, but his throat was dry with fear and the woman carried on without a pause.

“You have two options. You can accept this position and take advantage of the extremely generous financial and personal benefits that come with it... or you can refuse it, and we will change your mind as forcibly as is required. I assume you accept?”

“Wait!” Oliver cried, cringing as he imagined a hand again landing on his collarbone to dig for fire. No such reprisal came, so he continued, “What position? Who are you?”

“The role is not dissimilar from the one you’re used to. You might call it systems analysis... I am no-one. You are no-one. We are Trion.”

“Trion?”

“No, you haven’t heard of us—no-one ever does, unless we decide so. All you need to know about Trion is that we have a nigh-unlimited budget and niche interests, and nothing—nothing—is beyond our reach. Think of us as a corporation or a crime syndicate, whichever you think is scarier—if there’s even a difference. You’ve been specifically selected for our purposes, hence we won’t take no for an answer. However, we will be extraordinarily generous should you say yes.”

“I don’t understand.” Everyone acted as though they were the main character in this movie called *Life*, but Oliver sometimes felt like an extra, even when alone, left stranded on empty sets to rehearse a single line that

would ultimately be cut. “Are you sure you’ve got the right person? Why me?”

“The Oraculum was quite specific. It must be you, Oliver Spiteri. The reason is as irrelevant as your life up to this point.”

Oliver tried to think through the blizzard of questions in his head. “The Oraculum? Who is that?”

“Not who. The Oraculum is your... supervisor. Also now your boss, and the only reason for your continued existence.”

He didn’t think he was going to get far with that line of questioning, so he switched tracks. “You mentioned financial and personal benefits for saying yes. The financial part I understand. What about the personal?”

“For a start, you get to avoid the things we’d do to you if you said no,” the woman said blandly. “On top of that, you can have pretty much anything you want. And rest assured, we know what you want.”

“Anything?”

“Yes, Mr. Spiteri. Quite literally... anything.”

The woman pushed her chair back and stood up. Her fingers popped the buttons of her trench coat. Oliver swallowed a splutter of surprise, thinking he knew where she was going with this and not quite able to believe it could be so. He failed to cover the sound he made, however, when she opened the coat and he saw what she was wearing beneath.

He’d expected something silky and seductive, very possibly nothing at all. But the woman was wearing a standard knee-length schoolgirl dress in green checks, the real deal and not some squalid sex-shop fantasy. On its own, that was surprising but not shocking. It was when Oliver saw the badge of an open book on her lapel that he realised why she wore her hair that way. He gasped as if clutched around the heart by two hands at once, one warm and impossibly inviting, the other cold and utterly merciless.

“What is this?” he asked, trying to hide his recognition behind the rapidly mounting wave of confusion and horror.

“We’ve scrutinised you very closely, Mr. Spiteri. There’s not a single thing about you we don’t know, even if you don’t know it yourself. And when we say you can have anything you want, we mean even this. And I don’t mean me playing dress-ups—I mean the real thing, any which way you want it. Just say yes, and think about everything you’ll have going forward: the money, the high life... the girl. Just say yes, because you’re going to anyway—and we have much less elegant methods of persuasion. You’ve already had a taste of the very least we can do. So make it easy on yourself. Say yes.”

Could it be true? After all this time, Oliver Spiteri, a made man? He’d done all right for himself in many ways, but this was an offer of greater things—things he’d always thought beyond him. Oh, he’d played the game as best he could, but he’d always known he was background detail, merely mediocre fodder for fate. His father’s abrupt abandonment when he was five had made that clear early on, and with that connection to a black life gone, he’d been raised by his white mother in a world to which he never quite felt attuned. No-one had ever taught him how to understand who he was, how to balance his cultural heritages, and so he’d never truly felt a part of the black experience. He wasn’t excluded because of his colour; racism had barely been an issue for him, to the point where he almost wished it had been, just to make him feel more alive. Oliver was so inoffensive and invisible that even obvious bigots didn’t bother to take issue with him, perhaps regarding him as one of the Good Ones. A white co-worker had once called him Oreos, but his tone had been approving, and Oliver couldn’t understand why he felt less offended than accepted.

That was him, then: wishy-washy, unexceptional, unformed. Hollow. A man without strong scruples, burning passions, even a solid fucking spine. Now he was being offered a life of luxury and largesse, and all he had to do was click ACCEPT. It was clear, however, that this EULA contained some thorny terms and conditions.

Oliver turned over the few pieces of the puzzle he’d been allowed, furiously trying to make sense of them. Whatever lay beyond his acceptance of this new position was bound to be terrible in some shape or form, and it was almost certainly going to compromise his principles and his humanity if Trion’s behaviour so far was any indication, and he was absolutely going to regret it if he agreed. On the other hand, refusal would bring nothing but blinding pain until he screamed and begged in capitulation—and even if he

managed to hold out by some superhuman feat of endurance, he would be deemed useless and executed with no further ado.

Best to do what he'd always done, and just go along. He'd have time enough to count the cost of this action later, time to understand his new position and plan his response accordingly. So Oliver said yes, and what followed was the best and the worst he could imagine, rolled together so tightly they were inextricable... and while he did regret accepting Trion's position, more bitterly than anything else he'd ever done, he took some little comfort in the fact that he was still alive to do so. And besides the money and the drugs and the sex and the unfettered indulgence, he now had something else he'd never dared dream possible.

It must be you, Oliver Spiteri.

For whatever reason, whatever perverted purpose, someone needed him.

#

Horrified to find Kit in the spare room—the dark and foetid heart of the penthouse, where he did the work Trion demanded of him—Oliver blurted out the only cover story he'd ever been able to conceive.

“It's art. It's a sculpture.”

That was what he'd thought the first time he'd laid eyes on the one thing in this room. Black as oil, yet seeming to shimmer with the rainbow sheen of petrol on water when seen from the corner of one's eye; formed of some coralesque substance that might be hard as polished psilomelane or soft as the sick, rotting brain it resembled; shaped roughly like a crooked-fingered hand that stood nine feet high... why, the Oraculum could easily be the warped creation of an artist expressing some inscrutable concept to the world. But proximity to the object soured the soul and rendered any benign notion impossible to believe on a visceral level—he'd known at once that it was something incomprehensibly terrible. Unfortunately, Kit was struck by this same understanding. It probably didn't help that the walls were smeared with disturbing sigils and unintelligible words, painted in the dark rust of his own blood.

“No,” she said, almost in tears. “It’s—I can’t—”

“You have to go!” Oliver insisted, terrified by the ramifications this transgression might hold for him. “You can’t be in here.”

The loud beats from the lounge were hiding her hysterics for the moment; maybe he could get her out of here and claim she was having a drug-induced meltdown. He grabbed for her arm, but Kit slipped from his grip, shaking her head in vain denial, transfixed by the inexplicable eidolon before her.

“This is wrong,” she whimpered, clawing at her face. “Oh, dear God! This is so wrong.”

“What’s going on?”

Oliver started at the new voice and spun about, heart in throat, to see Tig in the doorway.

Fucking hell, not another one! He had to fix this, and fast. If Trion learned of this breach, the repercussions would be swift and brutal.

“Nothing, nothing, she’s, uh, just admiring my etchings,” Oliver babbled, wondering where the hell that had come from. “But this is private, and you both have to leave. Now.”

Tig’s eyes were narrowed, focused on Kit’s growing hysteria. He didn’t look at the thing looming beyond her, so maybe he hadn’t noticed it yet. Maybe Oliver could get them both out of here before everything turned to shit.

“Look at this thing!” Kit cried, turning to Tig. Her voice was rising over the music, almost audible to the rooms beyond. “Tig, this is something horrible, I just know it! We have to—”

Tig’s arm flickered forward so fast that by the time Oliver flinched, the edge of his hand had struck Kit in the throat and she was already gagging, choking out one explosive cough that sent a spray of blood their way. Tig grabbed her by one arm, spun her around, slipped close to embrace her from behind. Oliver thought it looked like some oddly intimate dance move until Tig wrenched her head abruptly to one side. The snap of Kit’s neck was mer-

cifully drowned out by the thudding techno and she shuddered in his arms once, twice, as if he'd just delivered her to an overpowering ecstasy.

Oliver drew in a long, slow breath as Tig lowered the limp body to the floor. Nothing was making sense here.

“Why was the door unlocked?” Tig asked, low and dangerous, his voice falling dead on the beat like he was the rapper his demeanour tonight had evoked. “That’s sloppy. Don’t let it happen again.”

Oliver opened his mouth to reply, but nothing was forthcoming. As if a silent signal had been sent, Tyro appeared in the doorway, his sharp eyes taking in the scene at once.

“We have to get her out of here without the others noticing. Too much collateral is undesirable.” Tig’s syntax, his tone of voice, everything was different to the way he’d presented at the club, a disguise discarded. “We can stage this one. She had a bad fall on the walk home. I know a construction site we can use.”

“The others are preoccupied with the impromptu live sex show,” Tyro reported, his soldier’s voice now also at odds with his appearance; the real Tyro, whatever his name might be, would prefer his clubbing to be done with a blunt instrument and a side serve of plausible denial. “We can unfuck this. I’ll take out the trash. You tell them she’s gone home with me.”

“You’re with them,” Oliver blurted. Of course Trion was keeping a close eye on him, he’d known that, but in the haze of intoxication and routine, he’d forgotten how deeply they scrutinized everything.

Tyro pulled Kit’s corpse to its feet and posed it to look like he was supporting a drunken colleague. Tig turned to Oliver, his hard eyes noticeably avoiding the Oraculum.

“I’ll make sure the others stay distracted. You, lock this door behind us and make sure it stays that way unless you’re working.” A moue of distaste passed over his face. “Jesus, you’re a chip off the old block, aren’t you? Don’t do anything else to fuck this night up.”

There didn’t seem to be any point in defying a man who had just killed

someone with his bare hands in the time it took to draw a long breath, so Oliver did what he was paid to do these days.

He did what he was told.

#

No-one is truly invisible. In his years as a systems analyst, Oliver had made real friends at the firm, and for the first time since his father's abrupt and unexplained departure—disregarding some failed experiments in the ensuing years—he finally felt seen, accepted, wanted. It didn't matter to them that he was awkwardly dispossessed of half his birthright, emotionally adrift, and feared himself rather boring; in their company, he was liked. Martin Hemsworth invited a group of workmates around to his house for a Christmas in July party each year, and Oliver was absurdly pleased the first time he'd been asked. Maria Hemsworth laid on some wonderful food, and they enjoyed a quiet drink and a chat that tried to avoid work topics but never completely succeeded. Now and again, Martin's daughter Elizabeth popped in to enjoy the company of adults and take some amusement in their booze-loosened conversation.

Elizabeth was a canny kid, and watching her grow over the years, Oliver had known she would go places someday. She was bright, funny, and appreciative when an adult took the time to listen to her thoughts. At the age of fourteen, she turned a conversation with Oliver into an impassioned monologue on her love for the work of Neil Gaiman and the importance of art in general, and he'd been fascinated by her emotional investment. She imparted to him a sense of vicarious pride and protectiveness that made him feel like a trusted uncle, without the responsibilities that role would bring. He thought of her in random moments, and those thoughts made him smile. He wanted to be her friend, her confidante, her supporter.

At the last Hemsworth Christmas in July he had attended, Elizabeth was a notable absence. He'd been a little disappointed not to share in her infectious enthusiasm and vitality, but there were plenty of other distractions. Then, at around ten o'clock when the party was ticking along nicely, she arrived home and popped in to say hi. She'd gone straight to a friend's house after school to work on an assignment, so she was still wearing her uniform; an open-book badge was pinned to her lapel and her auburn hair was pulled into a casual updo. She hadn't stayed long, and Oliver didn't get to speak to

her. But she did meet his eyes for a long moment, sent him a warm smile that made him feel singled out and understood in a way no-one else in the room could match, and all the while Martin was telling a workmate how smart she was and what she was planning to do next year when she finished school, and then—

Next year she'll be eighteen, Oliver idly thought, and later he would remember this as the moment a switch flipped in his brain. Bright, funny, mature, lovely Elizabeth Hemsworth, eighteen years of age—no longer a child in the eyes of the world but a woman in every way, able to make her own decisions with no legal or parental authority overriding her. Able to be pursued and persuaded, wooed and won. Kissed, blissed, bedded, wedded.

Oliver was as much appalled as enthralled by this revelation, shocked to realise how long its seeds had lain unsuspected in ripe soil. He saw now that his admiration for her had been innocent only because she was—the new year would bring a new context for his feelings, and everything would change.

He'd never thought of Elizabeth inappropriately, but he knew now that those thoughts would crowd his head the moment they became legally appropriate, if nothing else. A little research revealed that the figure was somewhat arbitrary, since the age of consent was sixteen or seventeen across the country, but there it was regardless, a threshold waiting to be crossed—a trigger waiting to be pulled.

Oliver might have been revealed to himself as a lech, but he was no fool. He didn't believe Elizabeth would ever be interested in him that way, a fact he repeated to himself daily. But the relief that thought brought couldn't quite quell his unease, and his mind kept replaying that wonderful warm smile, along with any moment in their interactions that could support even the flimsiest double meaning. He knew it was wrong, felt like an utter shit of a man, but he also knew he'd never cross that line. Here was his midlife crisis, rendering him just another ageing fool desperate to cling to the excitement of youth, and he'd muddle through it like everything else in his unexceptional life.

He'd never understand how, but Trion knew all of this, and they used that knowledge to bend him into the key they needed to unlock things he couldn't remember and hopefully never would. When he agreed to assume their position—to carry out the insidious research and projections demanded of him—they gave him exactly what he wanted, and not just the money, free-

dom, and hedonistic life he'd always envied from afar. No, it was worse than that.

They gave him the girl.

She came to him a week after he'd moved into the penthouse, freshly eighteen and eager to take part in his every fantasy. It was brilliant, because he got to live in the blazing bliss of all her attentions with no social repercussions, and it was terrible, because Trion had somehow... edited her. Her mind was still keen, but she now focused almost entirely upon what he wanted and how she could make it happen. She never talked about books anymore, or even read them—when she wasn't active, she simply took on a posture of deep thought, though Oliver was convinced she was more like a computer going into sleep mode. No more monologues about Neil Gaiman and modern fantasy now—only lists of things she wanted him to do to her, things she wanted to do for him. She had the interests and drive of a porn star, her libido amplified and aimed at him alone, unless he demanded otherwise. And according to his handlers, he didn't need to worry about unfortunate complications. She'd been fixed.

Oliver swallowed the horror he felt at the implications of that word and let her rapacious mouth and adoring eyes smooth down the rug every time his conscience plucked at its edge to show him what had been swept beneath. She was his sleek, redheaded sex machine, calibrated for his whims and dedicated to his heart. She was everything he'd dreamed of, and he loved her, and he was happy to know she would be his partner until one of them died or until he got sick of her and asked Trion for a fitter, younger, other replacement.

But she was not at all the Elizabeth he'd once known and admired, so he called her Bethany instead.

#

No more of this. No more.

Oliver knew he'd done terrible things, even if he couldn't understand what they might be. Many nights he'd been put to work, just him in that spare room alone with the Oraculum, nights he couldn't recall when he returned to his senses and saw the bizarre words and patterns inked on the bare walls

in his own blood. These things were portents and orders and secrets, and he knew the knowledge he channeled had been put to dire ends. Trion was using him, and somewhere, someone was suffering for that use. Trion was obscene, and they'd made him a part of that obscenity.

Yes, they were evil. But what made him any better? Look what his lust had wrought—Elizabeth Hemsworth was gone, and in her place, a brain-washed succubus at his beck and call. That was the real horror here, even worse than the hand-shaped idolon in the spare room: for the sake of Oliver Spiteri's worst urges, a girl had been destroyed—her autonomy stolen, her soul suborned. She never mentioned her parents, and he'd never dared to ask what they thought of this drastic change, sickly sure that he'd learn they were no longer his or anyone's concern. Had they been written out of life to serve his whims? Martin had been a truly nice guy, Maria a talented cook and beloved social worker, their daughter a shining star on the rise—and now look. He'd sat with the Hemsworths in their house and accepted their hospitality, their friendship, none of them understanding that their undoing lay between his legs like a gluttonous snake. Fuck.

It was time to make his pitiful stand. The constant drugs and booze and sex had been very satisfying at first, but now they were ruining him as comprehensively as he'd ruined Elizabeth. Lives had been lost because of him, Kit's only the latest—every time he communed with the foul object in his spare room, fates were warped out of true. Trion tried to keep him sedated on everything he'd ever wanted, but his conscience refused to go all the way under, and now it was thrashing about inside him like a parasite demanding control of its host. And it had a right.

Oliver took a deep breath, watching the wretch in the mirror do the same as the drop of Kit's blood streaked down his finger. He couldn't beat Trion, but he couldn't carry on this way. He had to do something, even it meant Tig snapping his neck like a fresh biscuit. Hadn't he?

He tried to gather every scrap of self, of soul, that he could muster. Then he turned his back on his reflection, left the bathroom, and returned to the hazy red hell of his lounge.

Carlos and Dabney were done for now, the former sitting back on the couch and enjoying a self-satisfied cigarette, the latter staring blankly at his fingers as they absently traced shapes in the semen spattered on his bare

chest.

Bethany and Kesha were naked on the other seat, red hair spilling over ebony breasts as kisses were strewn across a gulping throat. Tig was watching the girls with dispassionate eyes and immediately turned away to approach Oliver, taking his elbow with a grace that belied the force it could wield and leading him over to the kitchen counter.

“This party kills, man. Where you been, bro? Here, have a line with me, motherfucker. Life is good. We should celebrate that while we’re all still alive, right?”

Tig pushed a silver steel straw into his hand as easily as he would push it into his eye. Oliver did the drugs by rote, coasting on muscle memory. It didn’t mean he was giving up.

Bethany glanced up from Kesha’s breasts, spotted her lover, and let out an urgent gasp. She sprang off the couch, dragging Kesha along by the hand, and hurried to Oliver’s side.

“Bedroom, baby. Now.”

Tig ignored the naked women and watched Oliver with flat eyes. Before Oliver could make any kind of choice, Bethany grabbed his arm and dragged both her lovers out of the lounge, through the open door of the master bedroom. She flung a giggling Kesha onto the cloud-soft queen-size bed, where the thot sprawled with her legs open and her shaved pudenda on offer. Bethany threw Oliver a hungry look as she mounted the mattress on all fours, rump in the air and everything raw on open display, and started lapping at the black girl’s clit. Oliver felt his body responding, his cock still restless from the adoration Bethany had lavished on it just minutes ago.

But he didn’t go to her. He stood, and he watched, yes—but behind his mask of lust, he was trying to fight his fate. He was an instrument, a blunt and unsophisticated one, and he was being used to inflict pain upon the world. He didn’t know how, and he didn’t know why, but he knew it well. He’d been compliant long enough. He’d rather be the harmless, useless son of a missing father than remain the bringer of death and misery to others, rather be—

Jesus, you're a chip off the old block, aren't you?

Tig's words. But wait, wait, that would mean –

Oh, no. Oh, fuck.

He turned to look out the bedroom door, and Tig was watching him. Knowing he was observed, the Trion agent crossed the lounge until he was standing behind Carlos and Dabney. His hands hung loose, ready. The message was clear.

Bethany cried out impatiently as she realized Oliver was still standing back from the bed, and now she flung herself at his feet, clawed down his pants. She gazed up at him with bestial desire, with unquestioning love, and he saw nothing of Elizabeth Hemsworth in her eyes. She took his swelling cock in hand and smiled, proving her devotion, worshipping him as she took his sacrament whole.

Oliver forgot about the woman on the bed who was watching and dabbing swiftly at her clit, forgot about all the women who'd given themselves to him in this place with his lover's enthusiastic consent, and he stared down at the once-bright girl he'd raped and ruined beyond recognition as her mouth massaged him into the all-too-familiar state of full and heedless arousal. His cock reached out to her, crooked and dark, and he thought of the way the Oraculum loomed in his mind when in that spare room, the irresistible power it held and the foul fortunes it foretold, the way he woke from its induced trances with his own flesh and skin beneath his fingernails and vile symbols he would never understand painted on the walls in his blood. He thought of Tig and Tyro and everyone else who was secretly a Trion agent watching him with cold eyes, of the jacked valets who had brought him to Trion and would watch his skin bubble beneath the hot kiss of a blowtorch with all the equanimity of a Zen Buddhist, and all at once, he just pushed – pushed away his complicity in his lover's reshaping, his gormless guilt, even the new and throbbing possibility that his absent father had in fact faced the same choiceless choice and obscene obligations before him. Oliver Spiteri closed his eyes and gave in to a force so much greater than himself, succumbed to the pull of the darkest gravity, and he could no longer tell if he was being swallowed by a void in the shape of a woman or by the emptiness that lurked at the heart of everything, ceaseless and inevitable.

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Mike Adamson

Daniel Masterson felt nothing as the experiment began.

A faint thread of fear had always been there, but he designed this project, and Phase I animal testing revealed no dangers. Unfortunately, it had revealed no data, either. This was an experiment in perception and the subject must be capable of reporting impressions. Animal behavior, eye motion and other cues could only suggest so much: if the experiment was to deliver meaningful data it must be carried out on a subject capable of objective observation.

The restraints around his cranium were cool and smooth, and all he heard was the muted thrum of the stereotaxic scanner rotating around him. Doctor Jenkins' voice came softly over the voice channel. "We're at 10% of rated exposure, Dan. All vitals are normal. Brain function normal. Are you detecting any effects?"

Masterson raised the first finger of his left hand to indicate no.

"Very well, going to 15%."

The dosage was stepped up in micro-pulses. All radiation exposure was accumulative, the very fact an obscure frequency of radiation was being beamed with the precision of a rifle shot into various centers of his brain was itself a serious matter, and had taken two years to gain ethics approval. The staff of the Westmont teaching hospital were highly qualified professionals and supreme caution was the order of the day.

"Going to 20%" was the quiet announcement when Daniel indicated no impressions. The radiation source was further exposed, and a pulse released into his brain centers. At the monitoring panel in the shielded control area of the radiology suite would be Deb Fraser, his co-conspirator on this ambitious project, and he trusted her to watch more closely over his wellbeing than anyone else. She had not liked the fact the project must have a human subject and doubly hated his assertion that it must be him, but she had also seen the logic of it. He could not ask anyone else to go where medicine had never gone before.

His optic processing center was being bombarded with frequencies of radiation intended to stimulate the regenerative properties of nerve tissue, and in so doing—theoretically — magnify the receptivity of the system so as to process layers of visual information normally excluded from the package the cortex received. If this effect could be generated, knowledge of the brain's information processing ability would be magnified greatly, and the human perceptive index would jump from five senses to some unknown figure. To be the subject of this experiment was akin

to being the first to step out upon an unknown world, for Daniel truly had no idea what he would see—if his theory held water at all.

He was disappointed as yet, and by 25% exposure, still far inside the safe limits, doubts were setting in as to the validity of his concept. Surely he should perceive something by now, something out of the ordinary, some visual information he could not account for by ordinary means. But he perceived not so much as flickers of light in his peripheral field, nor perturbation of corneal afterimages, as he opened his eyes to let them rest briefly on an illuminated chart of lines and dashes designed to stress the production of neuroreceptors at the back of the eye.

It did not seem to be working. An alternate possibility was that there was nothing out of the ordinary to see. He had postulated that vision was a selective sense and excluded much important information—if he was wrong, then even if visual perception was dialed up in novel ways, he may receive no additional information. He was beginning to come down on the side of this possibility by the time exposure had reached 50%.

“Professor,” Daniel said softly, not breaking his concentration. “I don’t think it’s going to work. How are my rads at this point?”

“Still entirely acceptable,” came the soft reply from the control booth. “Only a fraction the exposure of a cranial x-ray, so perfectly safe. Look, Daniel... I don’t think the committee will authorize a second run, in view of the lack of result. It’s too wild an idea, and I’m not sure I don’t agree with them. It was an interesting proposition but as yet there’s nothing backing it up... It’s your call, continue with the planned program or ... call it a day.”

Masterson blinked, sighed, and tried to make the decision. If this was perhaps his only attempt, then the investigation deserved his best effort. “Continue with the planned program,” he whispered. “Let’s see it through.”

“Going to 55%,” was the smooth response.

Nothing could have prepared Masterson for the shock. The spontaneous onset of x-ray vision could not have given his heart a greater jolt than the resounding thud through the whole building, accompanying a sudden blackout of all lights and the immediate arrest of the rotating scanner. Total silence—his heart hammered wildly, then the lights came up again as the hospital’s emergency backups came online to restore services. Telltales lit in the control booth and Masterson knew the whole nuclear diagnostic array would have scrambled to safe mode. The radioactive source was fully shielded as its default setting, mechanically sealed if power was down, and that meant the experiment was over.

“I’ll take that as an omen,” Daniel said softly, raising a hand to the booth, and a moment later Deb and the professor rolled the bed out of the scanner. He smiled up at them with a raised thumb and a shrug.

“Are you okay,” the girl asked quietly as she checked his pupil response and took his pulse.

“I’m fine. Bit of a shock, there, but I wish the experiment had given me as much of a surprise.”

“Nothing at all?” Jenkins asked with a shake of his head.

“Not the faintest suggestion of any sensory input outside the norm.” Foster peeled away the electrodes of the neurosensors, freed off the cranial restraints and helped him sit up. “Sorry guys, it seems I wasted everyone’s time with an idea as crazy as you all told me it was two years ago.”

“Hey, sometimes you have to believe in yourself,” the professor said with a hand at his shoulder. “Proper scientific passion doesn’t always listen to others, and many a great discovery was made by going out on a limb.”

He looked around the unit in its reduced emergency lighting and nodded to the booth. “I’d better check in with administration while they get their power outage sorted out.”

#

Disappointment was so tangible Masterson could taste it, a flat, acidic taint behind the pizza and cheap wine with which he celebrated the demise of his brain-child. It had all been a crazy idea on behalf of a starry-eyed student who thought he had glimpsed something important, and been indulged by the establishment—but only so far. Jenkins was right, the committee had called a halt to proceedings pending a review.

He was okay with that; he told himself. He had no desire to go against the rules, fire up the equipment out of hours, and try again. It took a team to perform the experiment, and they were all responsible researchers. Feeling glum was inevitable, and Deb stayed with him, to share the pizza and take his mind off things. Besides, as she had said, he was post-experimental and needed a specialist on hand to keep him under observation, at least for tonight.

That observation had been at intimate proximity and lasted until after midnight, and when they were at last tired enough to sleep Masterson found himself lying awake, listing to rain drumming steadily on the tiles above his second-floor

apartment, and thinking. Sometimes thought was the mind's worst enemy, an unceasing chatter, replaying data and rehashing problems. Deb lay curled against his side, breathing softly, and the night was as comfortable as he had ever known. If only his mind could be as restful.

What went wrong?

Perhaps the exposure time was insufficient... Perhaps the intensity needed to be a lot higher. Multiple, cumulative sessions might be needed to sensitize the tissue and provoke the increased neuronal density he was seeking. Maybe it took practice to use such an enhanced sense, or time for the cortex to adjust to the increased information load. Maybe he hadn't given it time to work.

The researcher smiled wryly... It could be a lot simpler than that. Maybe there was just nothing there to see.

Maybe—but experiments were designed to establish facts so that “maybes” would no longer apply. Masterson knew science had a long history of both serendipitous discoveries and promising ideas cast aside because they did not find favor with those in charge. Maybe his notion of enhanced senses was one of these, or, at the very least, ahead of its time.

A sigh, he turned over a little, heard a murmur from the woman by him, and closed his eyes, trying to will sleep.

Chattering mind... Chattering mind. It seemed he was destined not to sleep tonight, and instead simply rested, taking simple pleasure in the scent of Deb's hair by his nose. He let his mind run on, reviewing problems, trying not to listen, and at last he felt sleep beginning to enfold him.

How unfair, he thought, to be roused again by some thoughtless person using high beams in the neighborhood—will they never either go or turn them off? They're asking for a flat battery... Then a thought cannoned into him—he could hear no engine, had heard no voices, footsteps or car doors. So where was the light coming through his eyelids from, if not the street?

With the casual assurance of simple curiosity, he turned his head and opened his eyes a crack, and the breath caught in his throat.

The thing was floating, it seemed, in midair. He could not have named it, for it defied all logic, and reminded him most strongly of a bacterium in the film of moisture on a microscope slide, but that did not explain how this one was drifting in the dark of his bedroom.

Masterson swallowed hard and rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was dreaming. That was the most sensible answer, he was in fact at last in a troubled sleep, and was dreaming some nonsense reflecting his genuine disappointment over his project. With that thought, he relaxed a fraction and simply watched the thing. It was shaped like a fat sausage, and from each end sprouted a clump of gently waving, gesticulating tentacles, or perhaps cilia, flickering and waving; the whole thing seemed translucent, and a lambent, steady light glowed from within in pearlescent patternings of purple and gold, reminding him of a comb jelly.

What could it be? His subconscious idealizing a bacterial organism and projecting it for him? He relaxed in this notion, breathed easier and let his eyes drift heavily, almost mesmerized by the slow, silent motion of the creature. What a strange dream to have, he reflected, but he had a lot on his mind.

He could not tell how large the creature was, logic suggested it was minute and perhaps actually in the film of his eye moisture. If that was the case, he should not be able to resolve it due to focal depth issues, and that made him wonder again. If he was focusing on a microscopic object on the surface of his eye, might that not mean the experiment was actually a success? That his optic nerves had increased neuronal density ... and...? He snorted a laugh to himself. The eye was a biological camera, focal depth, aperture and exposure were all mechanically governed by muscles, and no amount of adjustment to the visual center of the brain would affect those things.

No, he was dreaming...

Deb stirred at his side with a soft murmur and he stroked her flank, feeling very relaxed as he stared at the apparition. The thing was unchanged, glimmering like some deep ocean invertebrate, strangely beautiful in its own way, and, as he watched, it settled gently, as if allowing the force of gravity to overcome whatever buoyancy mechanism it possessed. It settled to the curve of Deb's hip and his wide open pupils clearly saw the light it produced fall upon the blankets. From one waving group of members to the other, it seemed about a foot long.

At that moment, Daniel Masterson realized he was neither asleep nor dreaming, and his cry brought Deb awake in shock.

#

"What's happened?" Dr Jenkins' voice came clearly to Masterson from the mobile in Deb's hand at his side. He sat in bed, wrapped in a blanket and staring fixedly at the thing in the air before them, ghostly and transparent now a lamp was on, while Deb raked a hand through her sleep-hair and did her best to cope, because she could see nothing unusual at all.

“Professor, we might have a positive from the experiment after all,” she said breathlessly. “Dan is awake and distressed, he says he can see an object in the room, something he can’t identify.”

“What?” Dan heard clearly. “I’m on my way. Do you have your kit?”

“Yes, I can begin an examination.”

When the professor rang off, Daniel raised a hand to her shoulder. “It’s hard not to imagine hallucination, but I’m otherwise lucid and calm. Only one thing is out of the ordinary, and I’m looking at it.” He smiled fleetingly.

“Would you get me pen and paper? I can at least draw what I’m seeing.” She did as he asked and in moments he was sketching quickly, then writing up his observations as any researcher would. As he did so, Deb placed a stethoscope to his heart, checked his pupil response, took his temperature and blood pressure.

“Well, all seems normal at this level,” she murmured. “Is the thing still here?”

“Oh, yes. It’s over there, just drifting in mid-air, turning over slowly like a bacterium, tentacles waving as if it’s feeding on things I can’t make out.” He smiled with a crazy enthusiasm. “Do me a favour. Stand by the end of the bed.”

She frowned, but complied and spread her hands. “What?”

“Lean... Now extend your left hand...” He snorted a hmph through his nostrils.

“Most interesting. Your hand passed through it like it wasn’t there. And the thing did not react to your presence.”

Deb checked the time and grabbed a robe from over the back of a chair, to tie it on and toss another onto the bed. “The professor will be here in a few, better make yourself decent.”

“Yes, yes,” he mused softly, still scribbling notes. “Do you realize what this could mean?”

“Let’s be sure of whether there’s any damage done to you, before we start thinking about the Nobel Prize,” she murmured, and he glanced up, to take her hand with a smile of thanks. But the scientist in him was captured by the moment, and the notion he alone could see something no other human being could was not wasted on Foster. If he had expanded the human sensory range, it was to be expect-

ed new and strange observations would come flooding in.

#

Daniel saw another of the things on the way to the hospital. Jenkins drove, the head beams painting the night road, and at one point Masterson flinched with a gasp. “I saw one of them—just hanging in midair, we drove right through it...”

Deb and the professor shared a troubled glance, but said nothing. They were on unknown ground from a scientific standpoint, and when they reached Westmont, they took him in via the staff entry, directly to the experimental section. Security had opened the lab, and the lights were on. Masterson was shaky but otherwise seemed fine, and when Jenkins had examined him, he looked at the paperwork Daniel had brought.

“You say you saw...this?”

Masteron sighed and folded his hands. “Professor, there is no ‘say’ about it. I’m an experimental subject and I’m reporting my observation. Therefore, it is your observation of the progress of the experiment. Which, by definition, is not over.” He sighed, rubbed his eyes, and took Deb’s hand as she sat beside him. “This object was as clear as day. I observed it for half an hour, all told. It was easier to see in the dark, it seemed bioluminescent, and in light became indistinct, transparent. I drew it as well as I could, and my notes are as complete as possible. The fact no one else can see these things correlates with the experiment and wagers against me simply hallucinating.”

The professor sighed and rubbed his face, ran hands through his shock of wiry gray hair, then rose and pulled on his white coat. “Right. We have work to do. First, check the database for anything remotely resembling this situation; second, line up some tests.”

“Like what?” Masterson said with a grin. “Optic neuritis would cause blurred vision, problems with the eye or nerves can cause split vision, but seeing things that aren’t there is another matter. Hallucinations dwell in the realm of delusion and dream, they are associated with mental illness.”

“Let’s exhaust the possibilities,” Jenkins said with a wry expression. “Standard operating procedure. You know how it works, Daniel. The burden of proof lies with the claimant, and if you have succeeded in expanding human perception, we need to eliminate all other potential causes.”

For a moment Masterson nodded agreement, then put a hand to his temple with a grimace. “Ow... Headache, coming out of nowhere.”

Foster drew on her white coat and opened up a small surgery off the lab. She spread a couple of blankets on the examination couch and helped him through. “Rest a while, if it gets worse I’ll bring you something.” The tone in her words was uncertain, he knew as well as she that without knowing the facts, any drug may be inappropriate.

The light was off in the surgery and Masterson reclined, tried to rest, and listened to the conversation in the lab. He told himself, over and over, whatever was happening was very much his own fault. His enthusiasm for his work was faltering a little now, the thrill of discovery wearing off as the prospect of suffering what was normally considered hallucinatory phenomena—perhaps permanently—made itself felt at the back of his mind. His sense of reality would need to expand to accommodate it, and he spent a desperate quarter hour thinking in those terms, until he opened his eyes at a soft step to find Deb and the professor drawing up chairs, their faces long.

“What is it?” he asked, voice faint in his ears.

“Daniel,” the professor began, folding his hands. “The report came in from diagnostics on the systems down at Nuclear Medicine. The power outage in itself was not a difficulty, but...” He shook his head. “There’s no easy way to say this. The power spiked a split second before it went down, and the nuclear source was fully exposed, just for an instant, before it was mechanically isolated. You took a very high dosage in that moment. We can’t rule out the possibility your perceptions are a visual aberration due to this.”

Masterson frowned and stared at his hands, clenching them before him. “I don’t see that. Pardon the pun. If my visual cortex was damaged, my vision should be affected more or less constantly, surely?” He looked around.

“Where are the objects now? I see nothing?”

Deb put a hand on his knee and tried to keep her voice steady, though with obvious difficulty. “There’s more. The dosage was high enough to potentially cause cell damage. We could be looking at brain tumors down the road.”

Masterson shrugged with a helpless smile. “I understand. I brought this on myself, it was just plain bad luck.” His hands were shaking badly, despite the logic of his words, and a moment later he clutched his head and hunched forward with a gasp of pain. “Help me...”

Foster wrapped him in a hug, whispering words of comfort as Jenkins returned to the lab and lifted the desk phone. The next thing Masterson knew, order-

lies had arrived with a gurney and he was on his way to the ER.

#

When he regained consciousness, he was in a service bay in the ER, surrounded with diagnostic systems. A glucose IV was in his arm for shock and he recognized an anti-radiation drug among items on the bench alongside the bed. The ER was its usual night-time hubbub, not quiet by any means, nurses coming and going, and he took stock of his own feelings. His head was throbbing a little but otherwise okay, and he felt normal enough in body. He lay quietly and registered these things before he dared open his eyes, expecting perhaps disorientation, but what greeted him made him forget all else.

One of the foot-long bacteria was drifting in the air over the bed, tentacles writhing softly as if it sensed ethereal currents. The bay lighting was soft to encourage sleep, so he saw it well, the lambent bluish glow, fading through mauve and scintillating coldly, was as clear to his vision as the box of green Kimwipes and blue nitrile gloves on the bench. He did not fight the moment, felt he had little energy left to fight anything, and was aware of a churning in his stomach, the natural fear he had opened some Pandora's box and would suffer the consequences of all that escaped.

Instead, he simply watched the thing. Maybe he would have to get used to them—if they were a natural part of the world, omnipresent, then his ability to perceive them was the sole aberration. Perhaps they were not harmful... If they were too immaterial to touch, they may not be able to interact with physical matter at all.

This thought came from the scientist in him, and he took an interest again. Was the creature aware of him? Aware it was observed? He eased up a little against his pillows and looked hard...let his gaze wander farther, out of the bay, past the nurse's station at the center of the circular unit and on to bays opposite.

In the soft light, he saw the glimmers of the floating creatures, and was fascinated to see one pass right through a wall. He noted they were only near the patients; the staff seemed to be ignored. He sat up again, found the bed control and raised the back, realizing as he did so his own weakness—whatever the radiation had done to him, he had to take it seriously and understand that he was far from well. But his attention was on the creatures, not himself, and he stared hard, followed their tumbling, mesmeric motion, searching for some pattern. Not even a bacterium operated oblivious of its world, and any organism as sophisticated as single-cell life had moved a fair distance along the evolutionary chain. So, what was their purpose?

What did they eat?

Hunger was, after all, the single most important behavioral motivator, after metabolic respiration and before reproduction. As they were transparent to strong light, the odds of them being photosynthetic were long indeed, and if they were bacterial in more than appearance, then they would divide through binary fission to produce daughter cells...

He shook his head with a scowl. He was thinking like a biologist but reminded himself savagely, these were not bacteria as he understood them. They were billions of times larger, defied gravity and were utterly imperceptible to the normal senses. Their world was a very different one, and they went about their existence unfettered by the limitations affecting tangible matter. Perhaps they were life of a different order, composed of some coordinated energy rather than matter at all.

Too many maybes, not enough facts. All he could do at the moment was observe, and his curiosity got the better of him. He shifted the thin hospital blanket and swung his legs out of bed, to take hold of the IV stand and draw it with him one difficult step at a time toward the entrance of the bay, feeling as he did that it cost him great reserves of strength. But he had to see, had to know...

A moment later he wished he had not, for the sight was too much for him to take in. The softly glowing organisms were everywhere, he counted dozens in the ER. They came and went through the walls from moment to moment, hovering over beds, tumbling and twirling blindly, drifting one way or another, some glowing more brightly than others. More than their number, he observed pattern and sense to their actions now, for an old man, coughing with the congestion of pneumonia, was surrounded with their blue glow, and Masterson squinted, sought to understand what he was seeing, though the horror turned his stomach.

Where the old man's lungs were tormented, he saw two of the organisms, seemingly attached, one before, one behind, their tentacular members holding fast, while one major member seemed to be imbedded in the body at the site of the infection. Cold, blue-white light pulsed steadily along the members and the creatures shone more brightly as they...fed.

All around the ER, they were clustered around the sick; one was attached to an arthritic knee, another to the scoliotic spine of an elderly woman, and he choked back his reactions to see one attached to the torso of a sick child. A young man with a broken limb, however, was untouched; his was a fresh injury to an otherwise strong, healthy body, and Masterson was struck by this—the young man had natural resistance and vitality. Something about him seemed to hold the invisible parasites at bay, while the very old, the very young, and those long ill, had no such resistance, becoming the favored prey.

Slowly, Masterson looked up at the ceiling and imagined the several floors of

the hospital above him... Teeming with invisible parasites feeding on the sick. And every hospital in every country in the whole world. There may be more parasites than human beings; and why not? If the vitality of the living was their food, unless a natural predator existed in their ethereal world, what was ever to control their numbers?

Feeling faint, Masterson turned and tottered back to the bedside; he had done as much as he could in just those few steps. The nurses, busy as at any other hour, had not noticed him move, and no instruments had drawn attention; he settled back into bed and found himself panting shallowly.

Had he just discovered the ultimate cause of wasting illness? Not that the body was incapable of rallying, but that it must contend with a vampiric presence, draining it of the very energies it required to recover in the first place. The thought made his head spin, but the evidence was before him and he hit the call button, waited impatiently for a harried nurse to look in, and demanded pen and paper. She was inclined to scoff, but he barked the request again with a hint of authority in his tone and was rewarded with a notepad and biro, and when she was gone, he formulated his thoughts and set down all he had seen.

He was careful to note speculation and underlined it with hard strokes of the pen.

His experiment was a success and just as viewing the world in fresh parts of the electromagnetic spectrum revealed hitherto undreamed insights, the augmentation of human visual range made clear the intangible. His observations had the capacity to change the outlook of medicine.

He was still writing when he lost consciousness and fell into an unsettled, drifting dreamworld of uncertain footings and the chilling presence of blind hunger, embodied in the endlessly prowling, unseen hunters.

#

When he woke once more, Deb was at his bedside and her tears told him as much as his own dread, lethargy and the distress of his condition. He was very ill, more, so it seemed each time he woke, and a mortal fear took form in his heart. Maybe he had been very stupid to set aside her concerns, and he tried to find his voice to comfort her.

Professor Jenkins looked in for a while, and sat close to speak softly. "If it's anyone's fault, son, it's mine. I should have been more cautious... We had approval but..." His voice failed him. "All I can say is, I'm sorry."

Masterson did not need to ask his prognosis, it was clearly bad, and he was gripped with a sudden desperation.

He pressed his papers into Jenkins' hands and gestured at them with fingers that seemed to have lost coordination. "Read them," he managed to say. "The experiment worked... It worked! Don't let me take this to my grave, you must run with what we have!"

"We will," Jenkins said, too readily, and without looking at the notes. "Now, your family has been called, they'll be here soon..."

Deb was in silent tears, clutching his hand, and a sudden, stone-cold realization shot through him. They did not believe him. They were assuming his brain was damaged by the experiment, producing hallucinations in some as-yet unknown manner. Maybe it was true, he thought, but it matched no scientific principle he was aware of. That did not mean it was not so, but... Frustration welled up and he became agitated. "You're not listening! These are coherent observations, I'm seeing something very important! In the whole world, I'm the only one who can see these things. They're real! I don't know what they are but they're everywhere!" His outburst drained him and he realized the professor was holding him down. He panted shallowly, suddenly terribly aware of how short his time may be, and how helpless his position appeared from their perspective.

The burden of proof lies with the claimant... And he could prove nothing, because evidence was a channel of information divorced from unique perception. Something only he could see was as good as intangible. The word of one man was meaningless. One dying boy, even more so.

Dear God, I'm dying, he thought, his heart racing. No more tomorrows, no more grand dreams, no love, no career... Nothing at all. Just wasted chances; but he was scientist enough to find value in the only contribution he had made, even should no one else recognize it. He tried to formulate an argument, find something to force out through his uncooperative lips to convince them, and the more distressed he became the more urgently he needed help, and the more likely they were to sedate him. Before he could say another word, a nurse was at his bedside, syringe sliding home in the delivery port of the IV, and the drug flooded into his veins with a smooth, warm nothingness.

But not so quickly his fading eyes did not see the slowly writhing, glowing shape of a vampiric parasite at the top of the room over him, descending, falling like a leaf, and the scream welling up from his soul would not pass his lips as the creature settled on the crown of his head and a tentacle glided without opposition deep into his cranium, seeking nourishment in the damaged centers of his augmented brain.

Perhaps this was how all corporeal creatures died, and always had, he thought abstractly as the drug battered his mind away into the dark corners of unconsciousness. The last thing he sensed was Deb squeezing his hand; and the faint but shockingly real impression of the satisfaction of hunger, as his life essence pulsed away in glowing droplets of energy.

THE END

AND WE HAVE REACHED THE END OF ANOTHER TRIP THROUGH THE DARK. I LOVE THE FACT THAT HORROR IS UNIQUE FROM EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD. NEXT MONTH WE'RE COMING HOME TO THE STATES AS WE CELEBRATE THE UNITED STATES OF A. WE HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE.

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