TO AIRY THINNESS

By Brian Wolak

A man's chief business in life is to succeed! — Napoleon Hill

The individual possesses powers which he habitually fails to use. He energizes below his maximum, and he behaves below his optimum. — William James

> Our two souls therefore, which are one, Though I must go, endure not yet A breach, but an expansion, Like gold to airy thinness beat. — John Donne

| Walther Wallach |

The clouds are coming undone. The white sky is domed and hollow. In the glass ceiling, everything that flows is trapped. Beyond the black eyes, the atmosphere hangs like a skull casing. Over the subject's shaved head bolted into the three-pin skull clamp, Walther Wallach runs a smooth dry finger. "Your brain isn't what you think it is," he says. "There is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference ... He can only be reformed by showing him a new idea ..." The brain contains consciousness the way a diagram represents an atom. He smiles. Today's materialism has come full circle to yesterday's immaterialism. Planck's mechanics bore out Bishop Berkeley's idealism. "Esse est percipi." Above all, he, Walther Wallach, is an evolutionist. Bergson's showdown with Einstein showcased the asymmetrical growth of the mind in relation to a greater force. When geniuses fail to recognize the compatibility of their ideas, something's gone awry. "Success as most conceive it is fool's gold." Gesturing to the icon on the wall, the old Ouroboros, he says that not only are we symbols and serpents. We're symbols of serpents, quantum bellies pressed to the Newtonian dirt even as we — he uses the term loosely — slither apart from any independent objects in any sense of absolution. "The brain is the world's grand distortionist." But it's also, at the moment, evolution's circuitboard to the only accessible abstract of reality. From his pocket he fishes out a block of bundled sheets. Across its glossy cover he slenders his fingers. "In ancient times, a Rumpelstiltskin of the Skies would spin rainbows from light and water." It's a peace offering, he says, flapping the pages. "The good doctor subscribes to the notion of a collective of symbols, but this symbol's personal. To you." The next time he sees it, "somewhere deep in that construct you identify as a brain, you'll recognize it. Vaguely and likely not for what it is, but symbols and brains play out their own evolving modes of semiosis."

But above all Walther Wallach means him well. "I wish you success, even in your misunderstood sense of the word." He tugs at the lips of his scarlet turtle neck. "You made the right choice," he says. "Yes, you. I'm aware that's a paradox. But something always remains. If that's not the point, I don't know what is." He tells him that when he reawakens he'll be a new man. "Somewhere between rebirth and reset." It'll take time to regain his bearings. Some memories will return. Some won't. Some will stay buried "for your protection while others remain sacrificed." He sees his eyeballs slant to the fire as technicians blowtorch the tools. Marigold spades envelop hooks and knives in gaseous cleanliness. The instruments cool in hisses as they're plunked into alcohol. "See you soon," he says. And then to the attendant in charge: "I await my delivery. Give the doctor my regards." And then, to the subject on the gurney as a globe of ultramarine is

lowered to his head, he says, "Aside from brilliant engineers, they're amazing cosmeticians. No know will ever know." As he's almost out the door, Walther Wallach turns: "Try not to mistake perfection for success."

The Vile Vial

I Donald Marcus I

The mind has a mind of its own, Leaning together, Headpiece stuffed with straw. Alas, we live in an age of alchemy, When atoms are centrifuged, And straw spins into gold.

He wakes up, opens his eyes. The room — certainly it's a room — means nothing. He is too immersed in the idea that his sleep (his blackout?) has disgorged. As though he was nonexistent until seconds ago when something, some part of who he was or might become was issued like a bubble from the ocean floor, and only when it approached the surface had it acquired enough light to materialize — because it wasn't thrown together; its components were arrayed so that he could build himself, piece by piece, to emerge from one state into another with a more than a burst, to spread with an idea as big as the sky.

In agony he lies absolutely still — his head doesn't just ache; it feels like a block of ice in which its inner particles are exploding — and then sinks back into an agitated momentary sleep.

He opens his eyes again. First come the sounds — air conditioning, shift of sheets, howl of traffic. Then the odors — sweat, liquor and something different, floral, alpine, like snow melting over a rose bed. And then he sees the ceiling fan chopping through the dark air. It's almost dawn.

He would sit up and look around, but the balance is too precarious, like an unstable isotope — the idea holding the pain holding the idea. He sighs deeply and falls within himself deeper into the bed. Yes, it's a bed. Now he's awake, but where and who he is are less clear. Memories bubble back slowly.

His first attempt was when he launched a whiskey distillery ("Wry Rye: The Less Corny Alternative"). He poured so much money into it, and it ended up flooding, literally, at the banks of the One River — the one and only time the river's ever flooded — just as his first batch was ready to bottle. He managed to fill one lonely, custom-created bottle, which he kept for himself. A token for another time. Undaunted, he pivoted, trying his hand at motivational speaking. He'd recuperated some money from the universal-basic-

income-insurance-fund and borrowed the rest to rent space on a premier floor of what was then the Rose City's chicest scraper. But on the day of his first seminar, there was a breach of Waltherium. The entire building was evacuated. Hazmat crews came in. Later, he heard, no more than a drop had spilled — not even in the building but beneath it — but the tower was condemned. He pivoted again, this time into a lifestyle entrepreneur, starting "Don't Wait For Now," which had two things going against it — a disastrous promotional campaign, and a warehouse fire that burned all of his merchandise. The harder he tried, it seemed, the more he failed.

He risks turning his head. Every centimeter cracks the ice. On a nightstand, a bottle sits with a familiar logo — the silhouette of rye grains over a blurred ear of corn. It's empty. Its cap lies next to a smaller bottle of colorless liquid. At the foot of his bed, on the desk in the other room, more bottles stand (some on their sides) like a jury.

He yawns, and brings his fist to his mouth. Even in the dark, his ring stands out: fireroasted vermillion specks pressurized inside of a white jellied vacuum of alloy, welded around the circumference, and into, the third proximal phalanx of his right hand. Every body cremates into a unique Pantone, most in the 170-180 range, from cinder to moon mist, but a hue of red? The baker said it was unheard of. Saturn has its rings and he has son's ashes.

Suddenly there's no air in the room. He can only lie as he is, breathing slowly, trying to recall something else, something just as important to balance the sacrifice, paralyzed in the airless room, not waiting for the light but staying as he is until it comes.

Because he discovered it. The miracle. Not simply the companion to, but the literal manual on how to become successful. When the ability to read was extinct, and yet he'd found *a book* — that served up exactly what he'd been looking for — and what's more, his colleague — a brainless man — was one of the zero percent who'd retained his literacy? How was it anything less than a miracle?

The air conditioning powers on. The first ray of light crosses his hand, slicing his ring in half. He turns to the window, and finds on the pillow beside him a pair of eyes peering back — grey-blue and brilliant, like sunlight on a broken column.

He remembers. One must "direct to a definite end the forces of his or her mind," Alan read, "thus harnessing the stupendous power which most people waste in spasmodic, purposeless thought." "Stop there, Alan." He had to think, had to unpack the extraordinary lessons in this relic of scientific language. The human mind has "forces" that can direct the "power" that most people "waste" on frivolous ends. Could it really be that simple?

He realizes not only that she's been tucked alongside him all this time, whoever she is, but possesses more than a body. She is, or has: a sheath of electrified material, sleek and undulant, reinforced by a strange, inner durability; the way the unit folds him into her contours, it strips away something, laying bare the failure or illusion of barriers.

"Do you remember anything yet?" she says, her voice like liquid over dry grass. "They said it would take time."

His impressions return imprecisely at first, like blunt scissors cutting out a portrait against the blur of the window. There's something familiar about her because she resembles, somehow, every woman. Except that there's more. In her cheeks he can almost see the thumb marks of her sculptor — smoothed and refined, faded into the pinpoints of her lips and her paisley-shaped eyes.

"Who?"

"Turn on the video," she says.

He has Relative Reality. Of course. He uses it to turn on the video screen. The pixels light up the wall and someone, a gaunt man in a suit and tie, with a fading patch of hair and eyes that bulge in their lids, like marbles in a goldfish's mouth, is talking in an affected voice — deeper than natural.

"Lost in RESET, excavated from the Underground, translated from the Written Word into our Vid Age, The Law of Success, Complete and Unabridged in Sixteen Lessons, Authored by *the* Napoleon Hill, comes to you in modular installments by Donald Marcus and Alan Whitmore Productions, presented by your host and guide, me, Donald Marcus. Let me show you how to think and grow successful."

Two things flash in his mind at that moment. The first is the sinking feeling that comes from recognition — a self loathing that he'd somehow managed to detach, isolating its raw fuel to convert into energy.

The second thing ... He flies off the bed and runs, naked, he realizes, to the desk, to the bottles and their sticky residue where he missed the mark completely, the glasses and their melted ice and the shafts of light piercing their rims as though illuminating an encoded message. Had he and — "What's your name?" "I'm Olivia" — drunk all this whiskey? How many days has he been out? The answers are crowding around the frozen wall in his mind. With a violent sweep of his arm, the bottles go flying. The crash is terrific. He rips out the drawer of the desk, stomps around the cramped living room, explores every corner, and stalks back into the bedroom where Olivia has shifted to his side of the bed. She is unperturbed by his manic display, surveying him with curiosity. She is, he notices, naked too. In short order, he rips out the drawers of his bureau, dumping everything, which isn't much — a few Engage tablets, energy powder, hydration capsules. Launches into his bathroom. Then looks under the bed. And then? There's nowhere else it could be.

For a moment he loses himself searching this exquisite Olivia — collar bones joined in smooth humps, arcing out like curtain rods from which the skin has been hung — the whole thing inordinately functional, almost overly wrought, as though the womb had overthought its work — skin less a composition of cells and more a kind of fabric woven from a picture of skin. Her neck muscles flare up either side of the slender pipework of her throat to that angular jawline, and those examining spectral orbs, like a scanner, starting at his crotch and making its way up.

"Olivia," he says to this scanning, assessing woman — "where did you put my book?"

She watches him with blank eyes except for something else — animal-like but more distant. Recognition of various things — the nightstand, the clothes in the corner, the video screen are starting to return in a clumped but lucid regurgitation, as though pumped back from a drain into sink water, except for how he met her. Except for the smaller bottle on the nightstand.

"What is this?" he says, scooping up the vial. Her eyes shift. She's watching the twirl of the ceiling fan as though she can see its soft vortex traverse the distance to her body. She is immaculate, a class of woman so far beyond his budget that he wonders how he could have afforded her. She folds her hands across her stomach. Everything about her is balanced along an unexpected edge, as though soft is creased into hard.

"I could deceive you so easily," she says. Their position, nudity, the cadence of the interaction— it all bears an eery familiarity. "It's an indenturing medicinal," she says. "You snore, you know. I could have squeezed some in your mouth."

"Did you?"

Her eyebrows spider. "Do you even know who you are yet?"

"Concierge," he commands. "What day is it?"

"Today is the 42nd day of 18th year, Mr. Marcus," the conapt concierge responds.

"Do I have any messages?"

"You have holograms from Carson. And an appointment tonight with Alan and Claire Whitmore at Eden's Exit."

His eyes shut. The error of this blackout — even if it was with someone like her — is so indicative. How he blocks out the consequences until it's too late, forced to endure the parade of guilt as a prelude to the manifestation of a life-long march of mediocrity as a permanent castigation. It's a simple question. Why can't he make himself do what's in his best long-term interest?

"I've seen your videos," she says, "with my sister."

"You're one of the few. Would you do me a favor, Olivia? Would you show me what's under your pillow?"

She studies him for a moment, and then angles her arm under her head. He watches closely. Her hand reemerges with that paper brick of pages, the white cover trimmed in mustard-gold and those thunderous black words, stamped boot-black across the top.

"Your definite chief aim in life should be selected with deliberate care," Alan read, "and after it has been selected it should be written out and placed where you will see it at least once a day ...' Written out?" "We'll do an audio recording, or even a Relative Reality reminder. Go on." "...the psychological effect of which is to impress this purpose upon your subconscious mind so strongly that it accepts that purpose as a pattern or blueprint that will eventually dominate your activities in life and lead you, step by step, toward the attainment of the object back of that purpose."

His Relative Reality reminder kicks in, his self loathing suppressed, like a cobra charmed back into its basket.

Marcus goes to grab the book, but she clutches it, and with a slight smile closes her eyes. Her nipples puddle in the light, and she does a strange thing. Olivia starts to hum — languid rises and falls as her arms dip at her sides, the book falling hear her waist, fingers stiff along the sheets, her thighs arched over an excess of covers. Three feet from his hand, it stands on its side. He could seize it. Throw her out. And try to remember what happened. But he says, "What do you want?"

Olivia's eyes shoot open, half moons of ice-blue pigment pulling something out of him: a bead of mercury along the dip of her pelvis. She rises, and their bodies butt like a pair of refrigerators.

I Olivia I

He has it and doesn't know it. They all have it, but from this one it stinks. Like a rotting apple in a paper bag. How his head fumed, mouth drooled, ears probed — emissions of the mind's metabolism at the center of which it's sown. And this one wants more. It spews from him like radon. His sweaty head looks so rubbery. The poor creature. They told her to take care of him and she has. "He doesn't have the rebound system yours does. Keep him warm, keep his chamber chilled. Your inner heat will offset the outer conditions." She watched the breath go in and out. "A brain is powered by more than electrochemistry," they said. "You couldn't imagine his trauma." She tried, but empathy is imaginary. The question isn't why he was born with one, but how she acquired a taste for it. In her sister it's manifold. The prodigal one, from whom she's learned so much, including an appetite. She would would marvel. In all her vastness, she would find no spite and rather: the longing to seize opportunity along one's personal footpath. If anyone would understand that, she would. Not their other sisters, certainly not their father. But is the whole more than the sum of its parts? She'll give it a few more minutes, but the early results aren't promising.

She begged the doctors to drop one in her head.

"Olivia, you're not a piggy bank," they said. "You're our control. You must understand that."

An upload could be sweetened with a kiss. "Could it not?"

"A kiss of the Self?" Ms. Ottersblood laughed. "It would be dead on arrival."

"But you could try."

"To what end?" she said. "To cart around a stillborn thing?"

"What do you think I'm doing now?"

They were obstinate. "One implant of this magnitude is volatile enough. As it is, anomalies are likely. Two implants would be courting disaster."

"You're giving him what he wants," she said.

"That's different."

"If it can happen to my sister, there's hope for me."

There was no arguing with that. In the end, they did it.

And here she is, no different yet. She suspected failure when the Pastoral symphony, a luscious sound, coming from her own lips no less, stirred nothing. And now, after a fornication? She plants her cheek on the pillow. The side of his head is a hemisphere. There. At the temporal lobe she plots her perfect finger and begins a circumnavigation. So oily. She allows her cuticle to perform the slightest dig. The upturned atom. How sublime. How tortuous to wield this invisible crumb. Right here at this spot ... if she poked her finger through, she'd take out his audio comprehension. Dr. Cythroat would be amused in his unamused way. "Biology's inverted sense of humor," he'd say. Sometimes she thinks about him. Couldn't he have sown one in her? The "great" Dr. Cythroat? Seeded her uterus with its possibility and given her the chance to grow it on her own? But no, he sent her on her way. She would cry if she could. So she traces his head with her perfectly designed finger, and then with the whole of her palm, she cups his occipital bun. She palms her human lantern tenderly. "Repression is a survival technique," they said. "We added a little something to help bury his mind's version of radioactive waste." Where is his Self? she wonders, as she curls her perfect abdomen against his side. During the night he gasped: "Am I awake?" She petted his sweaty forehead. If you wake up more than once, when are you truly awake?

One hand strokes her thigh (nothing? nothing) as the other fondles his treasure. But why? She didn't even know what it was. She had to check her database. "Pre-RESET compendium of human input. Early attempt at telepathy. See: hieroglyphics." If she had what he has, she'd fornicate all day. Like the others. What's a Self for if not to relish its full saturation? But this one's oblivious. Is ignorance an excuse or a condition? She ought to bore through his skull and squeeze the wormy matter until it releases its bloody essence. Oh, Olivia. She can see it now. Running down her cheeks as she licks her palms clean. "Volunteer officer, it was delicious!" "Miss?" "Volunteer officer, would you like to fornicate?" She'd slide her fingers down her perfect curves, revealing every fraction of her sensuous physique. But no. It didn't work. "The sun's rising," she says. "I'd love to feel the breeze." When he obliges, she unwinds from the sheets and goes to the window. Into a ponytail she wraps her hair and then squeezes her hips. Her fingers squish the skin into dark rivulets. Dawn, which oozes the greasiest light of the day, slathers her face from head to toe, leaving, in a mirror, her backside shadowed except

for minute blasts of vid-powered blue. The sun is so bright that it erases her face except for her unblinking eyes. She can picture the shafts flying through her sockets, bouncing around the optic nerve until they're lost, or swallowed whole.

"Thanks," she says. Her hand sneaks around her waist and lingers for a moment on her stomach. His, too, slides over his abdomen. "But this isn't working out. And you — you're so blessed."

"I don't understand."

The sun bulbs over the mountain like an egg yolk.

"It means that you can change," she says.

I Carson I

The tiki straw stands upended in a goblet-for-two in which a blonde strand of hair sticks. It curls over the last lick of rum like a pinch of saffron. Where have the good times gone? A snore. A snort. Awake again? At this hour? Or maybe he never slept. Some shut eye would do him good. He paws the shades to black and curls into a daze. Oh, closed eye and cloven hoof, huffs and puffs, cat calls and whistling pigs, the perimeter blurs as the room collapses, and the legs of dawn go dancing away. "Baste it in coconut rum," he mutters, sprawling his four-foot (eight if you count the stretch of his fore and hind legs) across the contour-hugging bed, thinking: if the eyelid is a canvas, paint it in strawberry latex, with a pineapple bodice, serving platters of snow hare: tartine over tandoori toast, tartare on a tartar smear etc. etc.

But he rolls. He fidgets. He lies still. Even the get-up and circle-back-down trick fails. What is sleep no deeper than a kiddle pool? If he was the blaming type, he would blame Donald. But fault is a human invention for — stop this — for anytime that reality — he promised himself — that reality has the gall not to meet an expectation. As though reality can't do its own thing once in a while. As though expectation has nothing to do but wait. No. He licks his neck. Fast dabbing licks. Expectation can get along just fine on its own. May the drunken and slumbering eye be one! Still — Donald should have given him a heads up. A hint. "Stop this," he says, and he's serious. He has the fortitude to wrestle with himself all morning if need be. Whatever worm managed to outswim the tides of rum, be warned. There's more where that came from. Best to get its rest like the rest of him. There. The head of sleep crowns at last. The forceps grab, and guide him into ... static? "How dare you?" Carson roars as the hologram crackles through. An open eye is the bloodletting of a hangover and he'll have none of it. "Megan Jean?" he says. "I told you not to contact me until you've burned every article of that animal's clothing." Why are blondes such libertines? Best to stay wrapped in darkness. Light is the leech of intoxication's vestige. "Give me liberty or give me rum!" Because silence is a liar's promise. So "Speak!" But no. This intruder is forcing his hand, or paw, as it were. So be it. It will taste his pain. His eyes part. The tube of light swirls in the middle of the room. "Your transmission sucks," Carson barks. But his eyes adjust: "Donald?" he says. (His voice did *not* crack.)

With great, mountainous heaps of skin mounted upon a mountain of a man, even through the smoke and mirrors of a hologram, it's him. On its own, Carson's tongue flicks across his paw. A deep, long lick. His ears triangulate. His shoulders shiver. Something tells him to bound through the light, but pleasure starts with restraint. Upon his bed Carson rises, head dignified, tufts flared. Indignation defeats stupor. "Very well," he says. "You will hear me out. No — I will go first." All the sleep deprivation in the world couldn't snuff out the consolation gift of the righteous. "Do I have a right to know where you've been? A right to know *in advance* when you're leaving for *three days*? Four, if you count this morning. Your state of mind was no mystery, sir, but that's no excuse. I'll have you know that the limoncello rum slushies at Myer Leman's were refreshing and copious. That Megan Jean performs acrobatics that would make an acrobat blush." He appears dazed. If it be by the sting of Carson's independence, sting again. "That a lynx is perfectly capable of getting along without you." But true friendship is unbreakable, supported by the pillars of intimacy, built on a foundation of vulnerability. "Was I taken aback by your disregard?" Carson says. "I'm not ashamed to say that I was. Was I aware that humans have the emotional refinement of a mosquito? It goes without saying. But friends are respectful. You look terrible, by the way, and very naked. Where are your clothes?" Whether it's the delay of the hologram or the natural torpor of his voice, his plea is cracked, croaked and quiet, but critical. "Come over, Carson."

No blame. No way. He won't do it. He will not blame himself. Donald's a grown man. He's already into the hall. It's only two doors up. No impediments. Except — who's this? "Alexandra!" Carson says. "You shame the other joggers. No one fills out a jog-kini like you. Not even that enchantress who sells the jewelry on the vids. I would offer to join you, but you filed that restraining order." "Pig." And she's off. So principled. What's the point? Megan Jean flung principles out the window. It's her fault, by the way. What was he supposed to do when she offered him belly shots? That stomach! Like tan velvet over six flat rocks. Lime, salt, tequila? Lick! The bewitched is innocent! Should he have stayed at Empty's Parlor? Were there warning signs? One minute, Donald was "shots all around!" The next he was "the human nutcracker! I'll take your empty glass, and yours, and yours, and yours." In a single hand he crowded their shot glasses. He showed everyone. Perfectly balanced. His fingers curled. His thumb clamped. It sounded like shattering teeth. His forearm became a throbbing thing — the horrid bulge lined with a lightening strike of purple veins, thick and rumpled under that livid yellow skin. Then came the woman - of a class that don't go to Empty's, and she made a beeline for Donald. Carson checked on him. They were outback: Donald humped, head angled, ear out; she, legs crossed, hands over knee, whispering. The moon plump and bright as a mushroom. "Everything okay?" Donald didn't turn, but she did. Whatever the opposite of drunk is — she was. Black pebbles for eyes in a face of granite. "Donald?" "I'm fine," he said. "Go home." Carson paused. Honestly he did. But then Megan Jean demanded to know: "How long is a lynx's tongue?"

The body sensor lets him through. Immediately a breeze fluffs his fur. It blows through the AC, warm, carrying a strange scent, faint but synthetic, like asbestos, masked by a puff of rose, and mixed with the familiar odors of Donald — the cortisol, pheromones and his base smell (a fungal-like fragrance). The traffic at a hundred stories high is always audible, but in here it's unmuffled. It's dark except for the pale blue that strobes the carpet near the bedroom. He turns the corner - and finds his friend hunched on the bed's edge. Before him, the blackout curtains blow like broken masts. Donald's arms hang like skinned pigs. A meat carcass would have more life except for how the book steadies his hand, cane-like. All the power of the flesh festooned upon his mammoth frame, and in this light, it looks like it's melting off. "You don't have to tell me where —" Carson says. Melting off like ice cream, like double mocha espresso. Like salted caramel drizzle over rocky road. With eyes like red hot candies in a butter pecan puddle. "She jumped." "Jumped your bones? The chick from Empty's? You devil. I knew it." "Empty's?" The doorbell buzzes. "Did you drink all of those?" Carson says, "Donald, for the love of — Did you get a liver transplant? Is that where you've been?" The doorbell cries again. "What happened here?" His head slumps like a scoop of coffee molasses. "What do you mean 'jumped?" Now a fist raps against the door. "Coming." Carson calls. "Make yourself decent," he tells Donald.

A jump to conclusions is so unmindful. When in doubt, let loyalty lead the way. But if this beating doesn't stop, "I'm going rip out your throat," Carson snarls and springs open the door. "Hey! I could never forget those oolong eyes," he says. Volunteer officer Brody arrested him last year for disorderly conduct. Or it might have been disturbing the peace. Not that 'arrest' means anything, and Carson happily obliged. He deserved it, and to be cuffed (he didn't even know they had non-human cuffs) by her wasn't the worst experience.

"Where is he?" she says.

"I'm too expensive to cuff now. No hanky panky," he says. "I haven't seen a 'he' in three days. Four if you count today."

All these volunteer officers and their suspicions. She's looking at him with utmost suspicion. With that navy-blue uniform and that shield-shaped idol on her breast, she, or any of the volunteer officers, would be predisposed toward suspicion — something about clothes has a strange effect on humans — but as Carson recalls, this one was

rather cavalier. Not friendly at all. One who took her volunteer duties a little too seriously, who thought she had more authority than she has.

"Tell him I found the body," she says.

His tail bristles. The back of his tongue dries. He coughs — to no avail. "Whatever you think you might have found," he says dryly, "a volunteer doesn't need to get mixed up in it. In my conapt — right down the hall — I have coconut rum. I don't do this with everyone, but you look parched — you look stressed, actually — and I don't want to brag, but I have this technique that'll make the tensest buttock tingle. Or," he says, finding her demeanor unchanged, "I also have Malbec. You look like maybe you're a wine person." She would have gone for it. A few more seductions. He knows it. But Donald foils the ruse when he emerges from his crypt. "Come in," he says.

At least he's dressed now. With efficiency, he takes them into the bedroom — that ridiculous video still playing on the vid wall. That absurd book on the nightstand. He takes volunteer officer Brody to the window. He points down. Then at the bed. In short order, he discloses the truth. He doesn't remember coming home. He woke up with a strange woman in bed. She coerced him into having relations with her. Then she jumped out the window. Perfectly straight forward. The ensuing conversation is equally, or less, so.

Brody: "You had sex with her?"

Carson: "Don't answer that."

Donald: "I did."

Brody: "How did that go?"

Carson: "That's circumstantial."

Donald: "Not well."

Brody: "You couldn't satisfy here?"

Carson: "Objection!"

Brian Wolak

Donald: "Apparently not."

Brody: "Don't take it too hard."

Carson: "How dare you?"

Donald: "Are you arresting me?"

"For what?" volunteer officer Brody says — quite sanely. Then she laughs — quite insanely. "It never occurred to you that she was a little too perfect?"

I Delvin Cythroat I

Delvin Cythroat is fusing a titanium clavicle to a new alloy sternum when the alarm sounds. He rips off his goggles and flings the torch to the table. Again? How is he supposed to create? Why did he make that alarm scream like that? And now another of his Olivias is missing.

Cythroat hurls a wrench across the lab. As the whirling device adds another dent to the wall, he groans from the follow through. His damn rotator cuff. "Curse this cursed vessel." No longer can his body perform even the most quotidian tasks without incurring collateral damage. How is he supposed to ventilate rage if not through kinetic motions? He stalks to the electra-map to see which Olivia went kaput. There, in Bot Hill. Olivia18. He liked her too. The third one this year to go down.

He glares at the map, resisting the urge to drive an oscillating saw through its Waltherium-powered screen, and returns to the skeleton. If bone to bone welding won't bring him solace, nothing will. He was poised for an all-day symphony of flow too. The way he'd joined the wave-shaped curve of the collarbone to the scapula, how easily the humerus had articulated into the glenoid cavity, it was destined.

He closes his eyes and runs his hand across the sub-scapular fossa. The smooth hardness of synthetic plating is like a newborn planet. His stubby fingers, nearly numb from all the embalming fluids, succumb to the creamy ridges along the vastness of its concavity, like skating across a lake of hybrid bone. He thinks of nebulas and supernovas and their accidental inceptions causing aftershocks of beauty to intersperse through the universe. Art: equal parts serendipity, engineering and imagination, no matter the canvas. This one of titanium and alloy has only just begun. When he completes the carpentry he can proceed to her facade where he truly excels. He has only to look over at #3, who lies inert on the gurney awaiting basic repairs. Her beauty is insurmountable, and yet his new Olivia (#37) will best all of her sisters, just as her predecessor had surpassed hers. It will make the disappearance of Olivia 18 less distasteful, and truth be told, a shrewd creator knows that all of his creations are destined for the dump no matter how skillfully rendered. And there is always Project Hawksbill to console him. That job alone will give him a financial power he'd only dreamed about since the debacle of Relative Reality. Then the true thrust of his plan can kick in. That alone would drive him from bed each morning. And yet in Delvin Cythroat's cold, blistered heart, the only thing that truly overpowers the morningintensified arthritis in his toes is the urge to forge.

He's about to weld the skeleton, but the disappearance of Olivia 18 weighs on his mind. She was too young. Too inexperienced. Too unequipped to engage a world she'd never asked to enter. And then there's the heartbreak of heartbreaks. Olivia 1. Cythroat goes to the window and peers at the dark underworld. He decides to take a break. He unsuctions the door and steps into the drippy cavern. All around him, mineral deposits glimmer in the feeble glow of his lab. He heads to the riverbed. Dead, dry, empty. Running parallel above is the pipeline of Waltherium. Its long thick mileage barely glows through the reinforced cement. Cythroat spits. Olivia 18 never got to enjoy the riverbed. As soon as she went live, he sent her up the ramp into the world above. He was a cruel creator. He wheels around to consider his home of a decade. A metal box with a window, equal parts studio, laboratory and metal tent sitting on the eastern edge of an old nuclear mine. A couple thousand feet west and he'd hit a corridor of toxic canisters. His little box has served him well. Isolation and privacy in which to create. That's all an artist wants. And he has Walther Wallach to thank. Cythroat spits again.

He starts to make his way back to the lab when a light materializes. At first he wonders if it's a product of the lichen ingestion, but that would have worn off by now. It's a tube of light, taller than Cythroat. In a moment, a hologram emerges of an ogre of a man, bald and sweaty and, Cythroat sees, standing before a window hundreds of stories high.

"Are you Cythroat?" he says. "She said to contact you."

Who? is squelched before he barks it. He knows who. He can feel it. Cythroat's heart is palpitating. Cold sweat runs from his oyster-grey curls.

"I need to talk," the man says.

Cythroat is about to cut off the power and scramble the recipient code when he feels his spleen rub against his abdomen. His gallbladder purrs. Could this be the hour? The windless cavern is damp, dank, drippy, each drip like a second being ticked off a stopwatch.

"The Walther Wallach Commemoration Bridge," he tells the hologram. "One hour." It shuts off and he stands in the cool cave. "So be it," Cythroat declares, rubbing his sweaty hands. "Olivias 33 and 34," he commands – but first he must clear his throat – "follow me."

From the clouds, the crepuscular rays descend. Cythroat shields his face with upturned hands. Oh, gamma-ray geyser, why must you spew your relentless carcinoma? He peels down a pair of Ultraviolet 400 sunglasses, pops on a hat, and entrenches himself within his old nylon topcoat – and white surgeon's gloves.

It's a quick trip – he'd forgotten how close – before Delvin Cythroat joins a herd of wastrels waiting for the tram. In a way, he longs to see how physical symmetry has devolved over the past decade, but the sun sticks to the sky like a pat of butter, melting its brightness through the nooks and crannies on down to his darkness-craving eyes. This visually impaired state only heightens his sensitivity to the heat signatures nearby – wandering purses of hot urine – and the pandemonium of heart beats, coughs and other cacophonies.

Objects come into clarity eventually, including the broken cricket legs of the pantograph threading down the center cable of the street - a core line among a skein of braided cables all energized by Waltherium. Then there's the tram itself, the automated aluminum bubble coasting forever along a designated circuit and its silent encroachment except at stops, like now, when its doors release their mechanical compression and part, and Cythroat and his Olivias climb aboard to find in the manufactured light that humans have indeed grown more asymmetrical, sucking on inhalers beneath uncut bangs and bobbing their oblivious heads to the thump of intracranial hiphop. In every pock-marked face he finds validation of his craft. What is the point of creation if perfection isn't sought? Imbalance is the ally of imperfection, and asymmetry is the casualty of a balance out of whack. The protruding ears, the fatty deposits, incessant (static and dynamic) wrinkles, pigmentation blight, vascular lesions and rampant cellulite have unloosed an epidemic of Euclidean disproportion. On this one, the cervical vertebrae are collapsing under the weight of an ox. On that one, moles (sarcoma) were flung across the nasal bridge with disdain for the Fibonacci number. All one sees is the Golden Ratio voided from one ugly duckling to the next. Cythroat looks at Olivia 33. His heart lifts. And to Olivia 34 – to the common eye a replica of 33 – but in reality an advancement toward perfection.

Behind the protection of his sunglasses, he closes his eyes as the tram glides along and the controlled wildfire of released life pumps overhead. Everything out here is amok. It's a miracle that he was able to hatch Relative Reality with all these noises (puberphonia, chorditis) and odors (endogenous gases, praline and cardamom) at every juncture. Judging by the state of affairs, it's as though the idea of perfection in whatever humble

guise was sodomized into nonexistence.

Somewhere inside his cavity, Cythroat's center of gravity jiggles like a precipitous yolk, as though a single zig would crack the shell and spill his runny insides all over the zero VOC industrial carpet. The rising gastric acid, quivering vagus nerve and exploding serotonin receptors are already unbearable.

"How long?" he says.

One of his Olivias – it feels like 34 – drapes her 98.6-degree palm over his inflamed hands.

"Next stop," the automated voice announces overhead, "the WW Commemoration Bridge."

Cythroat's eyes open. Behind the scratched windows, the twin steel towers rise like tusks, and the chaos of girders creates a hypnotic vector that traverses more than the One River.

Cythroat spits. The foamy secretion barely has time to lodge onto the carpet before it disappears under a brown boot.

"No animals allowed," the boots' owner says.

Down three seats, a shrew rolls on its side. Up five rows, a goat steadies over a bump in the road.

"Mind your business," Cythroat says, and spits again, this time on the boot.

The fist sails through space, acquiring size as it nears his nose, but changes direction when Olivias 33 and 34 lift the goon off the floor. A nominal inspection indicates: specimen plagued by hyper pigmentation and spider angiomas – a victim of impulse. "Get these things off me," the victim cries. The doctor defies his creaky knees and stands. His lungs quicken for a moment and saliva fills his cheeks. With his middle finger, he erases a bead of sweat from his forehead. All around him, attention swirls like a cloud of gnats around a bug zapper. Deep into the goon's eyes he looks.

"You're being held together by an equilibrium beyond your grasp," Cythroat says.

"You're a puff of air inside of a wetsuit." The tram doors open and Cythroat starts to leave. "Oh," he says, doffing his hat. "You're welcome for Relative Reality." A wave of his hand prompts his Olivias to drop their baggage. The tram scoots along.

The sky has taken on iodine glow, and his intestines grow more irritable with every step. "I smell rain," he growls. A lawn emerges in which a rose bush is surrounded by mushrooms. He halts, searching the landscape. On the other side of steel, dirigibles glide over cumulus and chop chops flutter between towers. Behind him, the tram disappears as silhouetted obesities roam the sidewalks. But here, the double decker vertical lift bridge is devoid of life. Cythroat plows over the grass when his hand catches something. "Ow!" And discovers a scratch on his palm at the end of which a thorn hangs. He plucks it out and sucks the blood.

Reentry was always going to be perilous, which is why he pounced on the opportunity his system 2 brain provided when it did – when it made up his mind for him. But everything feels wrong. Was he happy in his lair? Cythroat's eyes slice together and stay closed for an extra beat as the wind lashes micro-beads of precipitation against his whiskers. When at last he opens his eyes again, he's standing before a vid screen on the lower lift deck. "Welcome to the Walther Wallach Commemoration Bridge," it announces, "which was permanently closed in Year 10 to honor the world's greatest innovator. No visitors permitted."

The tendons in his fingers pull. His heart thickens. And his amygdala releases an inner howl. A catecholamine dump, he knows, has just happened. The sun thunders. Clouds compress. The wind, he sees as he wheels around, shakes the petals from the roses. But the mushrooms lay low and still. Cythroat's loafer connects with a fan of gills, sending a fleshy dome into a loop as the stem quivers. He sniffs in the solar-contaminated air and collects himself. Is there really no one?

"No one?" he barks.

It was to be here – on what was the most trafficked pedestrian bridge in the Rose City – where he would announce his return. He can even picture them: fat, fatter and fattest, loafing over the water from one falsity to another, oblivious to their suspension above a fast-moving hazard in which everything, despite an appearance of constancy, constantly changes. Cythroat wanders onto the desolate bridge. The machinery house floats on the upper lift deck. The main tower sheaves of cast steel rise like temples. Cythroat spies the enormous cement counter weights suspended on either side. All around him

the v-shaped girders fly like prison bars and within them, the ghosts of would-be consumers linger in strands of cloud.

As the One River flows beneath him, Cythroat turns to the phantom mob:

"Into exile, I cast myself — a scientist," he whispers. "Out of exile I return – an artist." The wind whistles down his raspy trachea. "Relative Reality was my creation, and it was stolen. And it enriched a thief whose namesake decorates this bridge," – (he can hear the jeers and hisses) - "But while Relative Reality augments the perception of life, it has limitations. I can admit that. And so I spent the last nine trimesters in labor. Writhing. Obscure. But incubating. To bear an incomparable inventory. And I return with a realized vision – forged in the fires of wrath and imagination – for the future of the human apparatus." (With a wave of his hand, he would hush the crowd's exuberance.) "How often have you suffered the revulsion of your own elephantine flesh?" (Always!) "Have you ever dared to imagine the glory of inhabiting the perfect body?" (How could they?) "Well ..." (They would simmer.) "To that deformity, bid farewell," – (dramatic pause) – "and dress your inner self in outer perfection." (At which point his creations would join him on either side.) "Perfect yourself by stepping into an Olivia model – available soon for a competitive price." (An interlude of hysteria would follow, after which Cythroat would bring it home.) "My Olivias represent the convergence of art and existence, and just as an assault on art is a criminal offense, an attack on existence makes the perpetrator a murderer." Cythroat's eyes blaze open. "Which makes you - yes I'm pointing to you, sir – a criminal and a murderer."

Delvin Cythroat finds himself pointing at the very slayer he was assailing. Here before him, as quiet as a rat: the vermin from the hologram: a dumbfounded, brutish beast. Next to him, a bobcat-looking creature with a rear end humped higher than the rest of its body, its back legs elongated like a jackrabbit's, its chubby, furry face symbolic of Curean indulgence. "I'm trying to understand," the oaf says.

While systems one and two are the perpetually warring factions that comprise the semicontained chaos of every sentient brain, in Delvin Cythroat they form a sort of unity in which, when one side triumphs, the other rallies behind it. Which is why Cythroat fills with glee when he smacks the pillbox from the troll's hand and kicks in the direction of the non human. And it's only when he realizes that he's failed on both accounts – i.e., his own palm aches from where it encountered the brute's knuckles, and his foot, instead of connecting with fur, flew in a futile pendulum – that Cythroat's systems one and two act on their own.

How long has it been since he's run? Has he ever run, he wonders, as he runs? The clouds over Bot Hill are rocky compressions stretched behind the scrapers. Fatigue sets in after 10 paces. His lungs, devilish grapes, shrivel on the vine. His beastly body betrays him. And at the other end of the bridge: his Olivias: he'd failed to beckon them. Cythroat stops. Raises his hands. And backs up, step by step, turning awkwardly in a direction he didn't intend.

Man and creature stand in the east. Olivias in the west. All around him, prison bars rise as monuments to his greatest adversary. And just as his equilibrium leaves, something splashes on his nose – something light and wonderful. As he says, "It's raining," Cythroat spills over the railing and his entire apparatus goes weightless.

I Marcus I

For 75 flights she fell. Then, just as someone had finished charging the battery of his aerial — Elon edition — she flopped across its nose. Tore it right off. Then she spilled onto a bridge where someone was air-carting their baby. She missed them by a foot, according to volunteer officer Brody. Olivia caromed off, apparently still functioning, until a fire hydrant impaled her. Inches from the ground she lay, face-up, torso perforated by the red bonnet of the hydrant. She had time to see it coming, the charged battery that took off her head just as something gave, a nut, a bolt, something, and black water went shooting out of the nozzle.

He was taken to the volunteer police precinct ("I thought I wasn't being arrested." "Standard protocol," said volunteer officer Brody, "in case its owner shows up destruction of property and so on"). The vid statement took five minutes, but its processing longer. By the time he was released, it was afternoon. Carson, who'd made his rounds with the the volunteer officers who'd arrested him over the years, was adamant. "You fell for an artificial human. It happens. She fell for you. It's even."

It's not that Olivia wasn't alive. He can accept that. Or that he didn't recognize her artifice. She was a masterpiece. And now he knows the cost of remembering. ("Ladies and gentlemen, let me describe what I call 'intercourse with perfection.' It has surfaces, you see, levels of shallows or depths, depending on your point of view.") It's that she was designed for the pursuit instead of the attainment; that perfection comes with imperfections, and stability, or something like it, is insatiable.

"Whatever you do," Carson said once they were outside, "cancel tonight immediately."

What he didn't put in his official statement were Olivia's last words. "Right before she jumped," he told Carson, "she said to contact someone named Cythroat."

Carson said it was a mistake, and it was. Now, from the edge of the Walther Wallach Commemoration Bridge, they watch her creator break the surface as the river roils on. In the sideways rain, in the blackness of the water, Cythroat is a squalid persistence, a cherry blossom, a floating stone, a beheading. His other creations, both of which look like Olivia, surface too. The wind shoots over the water. The Olivias start to guide Cythroat to the banks — it's amazing how they slice through the water — but the current quickens. It pulls them down. They fight it, but something happens. They stop, all three of them, as though surrendering simultaneously, and relent to the will of the river until they disappear.

The One River bisects the city. It runs north before curving west through the district where it ceases, or rather transitions into an ocean. Whatever Cythroat and his creations have tendered to the flow, they're part of it now: a strand of hair, a smell, a thought. It all empties into the Pacific and leaves Marcus destitute.

They hologram in an anon emergency and head out of Bot Hill. "As your trusted advisor, I advise you to get drunk," Carson says. How is he going to focus on Alan and Claire? On Alan? After these ordeals? When he can't even remember where he was?

He didn't even remember to bring the book — to heighten the drama of his proposal to Alan — but it's already after four o'clock. He could rent a jetpack but then he'd have to trust Carson to meet him. He looks at the lynx sniffing the fumes of early dinners on a street of brew pubs. The damn book. And the way she held it against her stomach. "Let's make the world spin," Carson says. Of all the questions, why she leaped is the one that lingers. "It's the only way to make sense of anything." He keeps calling it a she. "I know you don't like to do it," Carson says, wagging off the rain, "but today's a good day to use your Relative Reality." She wanted something she wasn't designed to acquire. "There's a place down the street — Extracted Distraction." The question is how she came to want something in the first place. "I know the owner. She'll connect you for hours." While Cythroat — who spent all that time building someone who didn't want to live — was done in by a drop. "Let's keep going," Marcus says.

When they pass Derelict's Pass, they're hit up by the customary barrage.

"Spare a credit?"

"My crowd fund's empty."

"Wastoids," Carson says. "Try saving a credit for once."

From a stoop, someone calls out. "I need to score, man."

"Yeah?"

Brian Wolak

"Come on, man. Help me Engage."

"Sorry."

"Asshole, man."

As they turn a corner, someone emerges. Down the back of his hand he presents a gold necklace — links like fish scales. "Give me an offer," he says. The rain lashes them. It washes off a flake of gold. It swims down his wrist into the hollow of his hoodie. The pewter truth lies exposed, and he doesn't know it. When they walk on, he cries: "Goldbricks."

"I hate that filthy alley," Carson says. "It's called a monthly basic income, not a daily allowance."

Something's in the air, a spore, a germ, a virus that, once it's ingested, turns every object, animate and inanimate, into chomping mouths of its ubiquity. Even the river. Even ...

Olivia said she couldn't change, but she must have changed at some point ...

"We could go to Barrett's Esophagus," Carson says. "He has this moonshine — you don't even have to drink it. One sniff — Are you listening to me?" He plops his butt into a puddle. His ears cup sideways and rotate toward Donald, their tufts drooping. "You need to take your mind off it all," he says. Sauntering, maundering, delirious, the Rose City is wonderfully oblivious. "I don't mind doing this. No paybacks accepted. I'll hologram Megan Jean. We'll get together, and she'll take care of you." His nose is as dark as tobacco, shaped like an upside down anchor. Around it, the fur is a ring of velvety rust pushed down from the grey and silver and brown and black furs, a mask around those dragon-like eyes. "That's what friends are for." The rest of Carson is a pair of long and twisty legs that connect a bellied cylinder and that stub of a tail, like a burnt end of a squat tube, and those stumps for paws. Does he even know it's raining. "It's late. We'll never make it in time anyway and they flew in," he says. "Call the Whitmores and say you're sorry to cancel. Then we'll head to Empty's."

... Otherwise, she wouldn't have wanted to change in the first place.

"You're a good friend, Carson."

Brian Wolak

"I hate good friend speeches."

"I need to make a quick stop."

A stop that should have been made days or weeks ago, but here he is, outside. Carson is too busy to notice. "Absolutely not," the lynx is insisting. "You always make a business of exasperating me, but today takes the cake. Do you even know how many blindspots you have? I'm like the mirror your brain doesn't have. I reflect what — oh my. I've never seen a hookah that size. I wonder where she got it?"

"I need you to do me a favor. A big one. I need you to stay focused. Practice your meditation. Listen to the rain. Watch the women pass. Smell the ale. Just. Stay. Here. I'll be five minutes. Max."

Carson's eyes squeeze a quarter way shut. His ears perk. His shaggy head tilts ten degrees — enough to catch sight of the bronze lion statue slumbering on a marble pedestal before the persimmon-colored poles of the old Chinese gate. He looks from mane to Marcus to mane. His fur defies the rain. It spikes. "This is where I draw the line." Across the sidewalk he swipes his paw. "Blackouts. Leaps. Falls. Fine." Judging by the commotion beyond the gate, Balthazar's Bazaar is already in full swing. "But I will not tolerate that *animal.*"

"I need a fallback plan," Marcus explains.

"I'm hologramming Megan Jean this instant."

Marcus stoops, and starts to run a hand along Carson's neck, but the lynx shifts up, like a thick bendy wire, into Marcus' armpit, apparently to catch sight of whoever's walking by on heels. It jars something in his inner jacket pocket. Marcus withdraws the vial he'd stashed away before showing volunteer officer Brody his bedroom. It sits in the crease of his palm, the clear tube with an inner dropper, the crystalline liquid cutting across something, too faint to see, etched into the glass. "Huh. She said -"

"Who?"

"Olivia."

"Who?"

"The - who I woke up with. She said it was an indenturing medicinal."

"Oh!" Carson says, suddenly, almost blissfully cheerful. "I've had that used on me — Mistress Kiss — long time ago. Very hard to come by. Did you use it on her? Or — you dog — you wanted her to use it on you?"

Quieter, Marcus says, "Mistress Kiss gave this to you? This medicinal?"

Carson sniffs the the length of the tube, pausing to pucker at the stopper. "It smells the same," he decides. "I smell your dead girlfriend's scent on it." "Too soon." "But the core odor is the same."

"And it worked?"

"Worked? It was weeks before I could say no. Spent a lot of universal basic income on that woman."

His fingers tangle around the tube. He twists the head and slides out the dropper. It smells like nothing. It looks like water. These are the times he wished he had the non human ability for subtleties. He holds it to Carson, who rolls his eyes. "I told you," he says. "It smells the same. It smells like — What's that sound? You're getting a hol? It's them, isn't it?"

"No." He twists the cap back on and slides it into his pocket. Marcus rises as a patch of clouds clears. At the end of the street, the rain douses a line of pedestrians, but here, as he walks away from the bronze lion, a blade of sunlight falls from the sky. "Come on. We're late."

| Alan Whitmore |

"Marcus is a loser," she says, taking a sip of her "corn-distilled whiskey — I despise rye," wincing at its potency. "Hol him again. He can't be bothered to show up to his own meeting? Have I told you how much I loathe the Rose City?"

Eden's Exit is increasing in human and non human patronage alike, all of which is inebriated. As the blubber of a 300-hundred pound woman known as "Hefty Hagar" thumps to the beat of the music with a goat whose drunken eyes swivel around its sockets, a row of crows spits peanut shells from a wire traversing the entrance. At least a hundred hookah tubes hang from the HVAC into the sucking pie holes of vapor-spewing clientele around the Engage bar. All around, the crimson blobs of Waltherium pulse through the pipework.

Alan Whitmore is stroking his Van Dyke, hoping the beer will take hold. A city of a 10,000 diners, and Marcus chooses a rumpus room to meet in? Maybe the dining area will be different different.

Claire is watching him with eyes like martini olives — orbs of pity pricked with disappointment and a poison-red pimento of despair. Right now she's thinking: I chose the wrong mate. He knows. Even now, lifting the pint glass sends tremors down his arms not because of the alcohol, but because he's failed to grow into the confidence which is the natural extension of achieving something he's set out to accomplish. He knows her expression, in which deliberation, verdict and punishment are compartmentalized into spousal obligation and the perfunctory attempt to sustain love for the sake of the commitment of years, if nothing else, all crunched into that sour amusement within a ring of fire-red hair.

Their table is rocked by the butt of a jitterbugging elk. Their drinks crash, but no one seems to care, least of all the staff. Claire glares at the last bursts of pink rays out the window. The door swings open. In walks a robed woman with a spiked mohawk. Alan raises his hand to the waiter. Another round.

"He'll be here."

"Then what? Your last ounce of dignity burns up?"

Here we go. The self respect card that she's so eager to play is drawn from a stacked

deck, card after card, flicked in marital jabs not to destroy him in a single blow, but to erode him until nothing remains.

The waitress sets a whiskey and beer on the table, the suds foaming down the sides of Alan's glass.

"Let's cut him some slack," he says.

"Screw him." She takes another sip. "He wasn't driving. Okay, I get that. He wasn't even in the aerial. Fine. But let me ask you this." Her makeup is cracking around the cheeks. "Why were they in the aerial in the first place? Sandy never flew. She didn't even know how."

"Claire," he says.

"And now he wears that — whatever it's called ... tribute ring. It's a facade. Just like everything about him."

"I don't think bone grafting qualifies as facade. Do you know what you go through to get that done?"

"Let me tell you something about your buddy Marcus."

"He's not my friend."

"He's illusion. All performance around a big nothing."

Outside, aerials soar in ordered trajectories. Commuters in jetpacks launch and land from arc pads. And the sunset smolders over the One River.

"It was your idea to come," he says, playing the only card left. But she's too skilled a slipper of mediocre plays, displacing blame, or responsibility, or ownership of their predicament back across the table.

"To give you closure," she asserts.

"Then let me get my closure."

"This as shole needs to show up. I was wrong anyway. You're going to get conned in like you always do and then -"

"Enough," Alan says, slamming his beer so hard that it leaves half in the air, which splatters down in a liquid rope. "You have no idea what it feels like, having this ... thing ... inside." Her eyes tighten. "I can picture it. Do you want to know what it looks like? It looks like a bone. No flesh. No muscle. No nothing. Just a mound of bones shaped like a brain. Let me finish," he says when she tries to cut him off. "I have something that needs, on its own, to be used. Marcus found the only -"

"That book is junk."

"What if —"

Before he can finish, the door swings open again. A mammoth silhouette, with the neck of a rhinoceros, fills the space.

"Speak of the devil," Claire says.

Instantly, Alan realizes that his former colleague is changed. As he carves his way through the dancers, Marcus is twice the size he was. He used to have a runner's build: thin, tall, loping, almost gaunt. It suited him. Now he's giant. The few hairs he had are gone. A hollowness haunts the way he troops ahead. As he emerges from the crowd, lines slant down his cheeks like the hypotenuse of a triangle.

Before he can say anything, Alan is swallowed in a bear hug and then held at a distance for Marcus to take in. His face is like a hunk of clay hardened by a desert sun. Marcus turns to Claire, offering a hug. She accepts with the impotence of a slug.

"What took you so long?" Alan says.

Marcus tries to smile but his teeth glint like a row of axe blades. This trip was a mistake. Alan's never going to hear the end of it. He takes a seat, trying to process his fate, when Claire flings her first dagger.

In her most sympathetic voice, she says: "I never got a chance to say how sorry I was for your loss." She clarifies: "Losses."

Around Marcus, the dancing humans and non humans are blurring, as though pulled into him. He looks like he might snap the leg off the chair and skewer Claire with it. But he says, "I'm sorry too." And gives a strange smile. A weary grimace. "Let's get something to eat," he says.

"Where's your cat?" Claire says.

"He's a lynx, a fully autonomous non human. Suggesting ownership is like saying you own Alan." His eyes dance. "And we know that's not the case." He nods to the side door. "Carson's getting us a table." And starts to lead them out. "A word to the wise: if he wants to listen to the xylophones, let him be."

"Why don't you take off your jacket and stay a while?" Alan says.

"It's cold in here."

From the center of the table, the waiter emerges in the form of a tube on which a hooped screen appears, and proceeds to show the "chef's offerings, and, as you know, Eden's Exit is licensed to prepare and sell animal products. It applies only to our non human diners, of course, but tonight we have snowshoe hare tartar. For our human diners -"

"Give us the tasting menu," Marcus says, "and Carson the hare. And rye whiskeys all around."

"Right away," the waiter says, and descends like a periscope into the table, leaving the white circumference like a wasteland between the four diners.

"I guess I'll have rye whiskey," Claire says. Alan watches her eyes search for something to pounce on. It doesn't take long. "Pretty ring," she says.

Against the white linen, Marcus' meaty hands are cracked around the knuckles; pale and chipped. Around the index finger of his left hand, the strangest ring Alan's ever seen radiates: millions of fiery specks circle around a white, pressurized jelly-like fluid, embedded within a titanium ban that's clearly cleaved into the bone.

"Claire," Alan says, "let's opt for civility."

"It's alright," Marcus says as the whiskeys arrive. He takes a long drink, using the hand with the ring for Claire to get a good look. "We should forgo civility for candor."

Carson is blissfully ignorant as he laps up the rye from a shallow bowl.

"This ring is everything," Marcus says.

"I thought your book was everything," she says.

Marcus does something Alan's never seen him do. He considers. "The Law of Success," he starts, and then rethinks it. "Say that my life is a straight line."

"Which it's not," Claire says.

"Let's pretend," he says. "On one end, there's the book. On the other is my ring. They're different points on the same path, if that makes sense ..."

"It doesn't," Claire says.

"When it's crystallized, a body's ashes harden into a unique color." Marcus pushes the glass away. "Most people don't know that, with the Sarcophagus and all, but for the few who don't make it in ... Everyone's different, depending on the nutrient composition and other," he says, "less quantifiable elements. Red ashes aren't just unusual. They're aberrations. The lab said they've never seen anything like it. Rare exceptions are emerald. But vermillion — no. Lucas was special."

"Donald's finger is worth a fortune," Carson says in between tongue laps. The patch of fur ringing his nose is moist, and his white chin drips with whiskey. "He could buy an estate if he cut it off and sold it on the underground."

"I'm surprised he hasn't," Claire says.

"And Sandy?" Alan says. "You've communed with her since the accident?"

"I have," Marcus says, the pitch of his voice rising. "Not in some time, but yes."

The first course arrives, quickly followed by two more plates and an equal number of

Brian Wolak
whiskeys. Carson devours the hare and wanders into the dining room to "see what the problem is with the music."

Alan's feet keep slipping and his eyes, despite his brain, which has somehow retained its vigilance, are bobbing around at the blobs of Waltherium.

"So," he says, "are you going to tell us why we're here? I assume it's to employ my 'unique' skill set? Again."

Which is when a hoarse howl, delivered in pouty bursts, silences the dining room. A cadre of waiters converges on its source, which is now where the empty xylophones sit. Every eye in Eden's Lounge is on Carson: "Where is the live xylophone?" he says, "and do not try to placate us with inferior glockenspiel — which you are known to do. Put down that butter knife, young lady."

Claire spins to Marcus. "Are you going to do anything?"

Marcus shrugs. "They advertised live xylophones tonight."

Claire tosses her napkin and stomps away.

Quickly Marcus turns to Alan. Taking his queue, Alan leans across the table.

"People are ready," Marcus says. "They just don't know it." He makes an arc of his fork, gesturing to every table: the girl with the pigtails gripping either side of the bowl, tipping the last drops of vichyssoise into her oval mouth; the man with the soup spoon shoveling heaps of cayenne-scented chard into his horse-like face; the woman with the fork pecking every last pomegranate seed from her plate. "We have the literal manual on how to be successful — and we gave up after a few setbacks." He tries cutting a Brussels sprout but the blade slips off. "Do you remember the day we found it?" He stabs a carrot and gulps it down. "I propose a do-over — with a few tweaks. We make the vids shorter, sexier, and up the production quality. All you have to do is translate. I'll do the rest." He's being sincere, or at least he thinks he is, or Alan believes he thinks he is. "We both need this."

Of course he remembers the day. That night, he dreamt of swinging an axe at Marcus' head. There was no setup. No reason. He was in mid-swing, aiming for the temple.

When it struck, the axe popped. Marcus grinned and screwed off the top of his head like a lid from a jar, while Alan held the exploded balloon. As soon as he woke up, he knew what it meant. He thought for a long time about his condition. He thought of a heart and brain, both butterflied in their own blood as he fluttered overhead, repelled from bridging the inch of separation. He got out of bed and took a hit of Engage. His teeth buzzed. In his forearms, it felt like rabbits were digging through the skin. Yearning is a strange pain. It embodies something wonderful, something wondrous, that hints at a possibility that hasn't, or can't, be pictured. The morning smelled like pastries. He was on his way to Marcus' to commence the translation and he knew that the dream would stay with him. Marcus had spotted the book. All they were doing was killing time, and it made Alan laugh afterwards. He'd broken the glass casing of a pocket watch. Balthazar was there. He saw it slip from Alan's hand and made him buy it. Which is when Marcus found it on the heap. He blew off the dust, and showed it to Alan. All the time he'd spent anticipating this moment — when the fingers of his brain would reach out from his eyes. and sift the letters, a kind of hand-panning in a stream of air, until the gold nuggets were revealed — it was here at last. He tried to conceal his trembling. It took him a minute to sound out the words, but he read the cover aloud. Instead of whatever he was expecting — ecstasy, bliss, satisfaction — it gave him a headache. Marcus paid for it on the spot, wearing the same grin as in Alan's dream.

The ridges of the glass are like fingers holding the final swallow. Whiskey is such a dirty liquid. "I should throw this in your face," Alan says. "You made me into a tool. Stop," he says, when Marcus is about to protest. Alan tenses his eyes. He even launches the hate from from his pupils. If anything has felt good, it's the look on Marcus' face as the fifth or sixth round of ridiculous food is served. Marcus is rubbing the bottom of his nose trying to find his next play. The problem with the vids wasn't the production quality. It wasn't their length, which was already stupidly brief. He looks around. At every table except their own, a vid is playing. The problem was that theirs were specks in a universe.

"You're making a mistake," Marcus says.

"I don't doubt that," Claire says, taking her seat. "Your pet, by the way, is banned from Eden's Lounge."

"He's not my pet," Marcus says.

"Well, your non-pet is being escorted off the premises. But more to the point," she says,

"How is my husband making a mistake? If it means avoiding you, Alan's made the best decision of his life."

"I can handle this myself," Alan says.

The knife clanks on the porcelain as she cuts through a mushroom with a single slice. Marcus eats his beets while Claire watches, every now and then flashing delighted eyes at Alan. At last, when Marcus scrapes the final vegetable through the blue cheese, he crosses fork over knife, pushes the plate away and folds his arms on the table.

"I've made mistakes," he says. "But - It's kind of like a pregnancy."

"Like a what?" Claire says.

Marcus runs a hand across his neck. "What I mean is: Alan thinks he's wasted himself. I think I've found a way to monetize his value."

"It's not about making money," Alan says in mid hiccup.

"You're right," Marcus says. "It's about becoming who you've always wanted to become." And for a long moment, he stares at Alan with what he must think is an intense gaze, as though he's trying to insert his will into his, Alan's, mind. Alan can almost feel it, like a termite, burrowing through there, when, not even for a second — that's how quick it is — something gives out. There's a feeling of having his legs knocked out from under him. An inaudible groan or crack comes from somewhere deep. Then it's gone.

"Enough," Claire, says. "He's not partnering with you. That's why we flew down here. So Alan could tell you to your face."

"For closure," Alan says, the room starting to spin.

"We could make a fortune using our skills," Marcus says. "Don't you see that?"

"What's your skill?" Claire says.

"Persistence," he says, without missing a beat.

The way Marcus is talking is funny. The idea of closure is funny. The lava-flow of Waltherium is funny. "Sandy might be right there, right now," Alan says, "in that Waltherium bubble."

"I think you've had enough," Claire says.

"More than enough," Alan says. But it does nothing to diminish the humor. In fact, it amplifies it. Absurdity is a comedy performance for all to watch free of charge, every moment of the day. Something crashes. Alan turns, the room turning in kind. There's Carson again, going on about false advertising and "glockenspiel-loving philistines."

"That's some cat you have," Alan says, spinning back around. Too fast, perhaps. The number of Marcuses have multiplied, as have the number of Claires. But there's only one glass waiting to be finished. Alan claws it, its warmth emanating from the ridges, as though passed from another person's warm hands, and Marcus and Claire watch, their mute, incorrigible expressions like a pair of clowns, while Alan gives them each the finger and takes the last drink. "I can handle my liquor," he says. And gently — to prove his dexterity — lands it back on the table with the grace of a dove. "Did you see that?" And finds his finger going to his nose to wipe it. "Never again!" He proclaims. A running rose, from both nostrils. "Never." He dabs his fingers in the slippery prey. Grey. And something trickling from his ears. Ears? He wipes his hands beneath his lobes. Is there a leak in here? And the look on their faces is the last thing he sees before Alan's forehead meets the table.

I Marcus I

The day collapses into night. The mist is a quagmire. Air is fallout. But someone had the wherewithal to join a pair of empty rose heads by a beveled crease and sprout wings from either side. On every door in the neurological wing of the Walther Wallach Medical Center, the image is dead-centered. To Marcus, it seems a confused mashup, but he has other things on his mind ... the path to his Definite Chief Aim, the buildup of guilt, the reflux of accountability, the snaggletoothed spouse of a translator bitting her nails and then spitting their crescents on the self-cleaning floor, EEGs and their mountain ranges, Sarcophagus chutes into which daily donations are made, except for aberrations who burn to orbit the gravity of a bone, and betrayal, intentional or otherwise, as a tributary of a larger river as her puffy outrage cracks the makeup, exacerbated by her pallor and red vipers of hair, stunned success, venomized by a vial while she plays, played, a doctor in a video, Higgins, training her very own Doolittle, while the one who does (who did) little, has more to do. Literacy might have been the first thing to go in RESET, but something always remains. Someone said that once.

When the door opens and the doctor emerges, Alan is supine, arms at sides, on a hoverbed, his head engulfed in an oversized water drop ("sustainability serum," Marcus learns, "perfectly suspended and magnetized by the brain's natural north") as the handle of the Sarcophagus chute, spic-and-span, protrudes from the back wall. As the doctor delivers her explanation, Marcus finds his mind wandering backward, flicking through an image bank of Relative Reality to what Alan called the book's "table of contents." He should be listening to the doctor. Showing concern for Alan's condition. But those are automatic responses, background programs of consciousness while the true work, the focus, is on the goal. "In all," said Alan, "there are 15 lessons." He ahemmed before launching into what felt like an odyssey of translation. "A Definite Chief Aim, Self-Confidence, Habit of Saving, Initiative and Leadership, Imagination, Enthusiasm, Self-Control." It took him 10 minutes to get through the names of seven laws. "The Habit of Doing More than Paid For, Pleasing Personality, Accurate Thinking, Concentration." The doctor continues. Something about hemispheric something and vapors. "Cooperation, Profiting by Failure, Tolerance." He owes Alan nothing, most of all because he felt no kinship to him, but also because it was an accident. Would he owe a battery if he charged it improperly? The repair would be its recompense. "And Practicing the Golden Rule," Alan said, "whatever that means." Or maybe his tank of guilt is too full. Alan once asked him if he knew what his problem was. Of course he knew. A lens that wouldn't focus, lights that didn't shine and a translator that couldn't translate for shit. "Tell me." "You can't sell a product if you don't respect it." As if the product had anything

to do with the sale. Water is worthless until it's "drinkable diamonds ... gemstones that through the fingers of mother earth are made potable, in a liquified ..." "...liquif*ied*." The end of the word, the duh sound, lingers between them, like flotsam, until it's trumped by the unseemliest of noises. A toilet whooshes. Hands lather. A bathroom door opens and someone departs beneath the slapping rain.

"Just turn it back," Claire is saying. Her face is a powdered donut. She is a horse whose flanks are spurred, a mule whose tether is pulled, a human whose eyes are enlarged, whose color has been replaced with the backwater of an emotional septic tank, whose vituperative hair belies a common trait - but what? a cheek line? hair line? eye shape - not the socket but the literal eyeball and its big, thick roundness - of Olivia. The Olivia. Whose creator is where? Delvin Cythroat, who was, or is, driven by a command from who knows where to spawn things not in, but antithetical to, his likeness. It seems the doctor has taken it all in stride. "This is difficult, I know." She repeats herself, this time in a more teacherly tone, as if the combination of words were accurate but the frequency required modulation for the transmission to succeed. The entirety of Mr. Whitmore's brain sustained damage, she indicates, her voice rising on "damage" almost as though having asked a guestion, but his "parietal lobe took the brunt of it. Somehow - we're trying to simulate the exact chain of events - a portion of Mr. Whitmore's brain is, well, it's gone." She removes her glasses and cleans them on her smock. Claire is a sunbaked brownie, cracked and porous and inanimate. "It appears to be trauma from a sublimation virus. Strictly from a medical standpoint, it's fascinating that other areas of the cortex turned to gas while -"

"Excuse me," Marcus says. He wipes his suddenly running nose. "The what lobe?"

So this is Alan's revenge, or the retribution of something through the disappearing act of his mind. Creation is a blink and everything else, the stare, is a form of maintenance in the face of disrepair. "Forgive me," the doctor says. The parietal, she explains, touching the top of her head, is one of four lobes in the brain. There are natural crossover functions among all of them, but complex behaviors like computation, visual perception and reading and writing skills, "in the rare event he had them," since they resided primarily in the parietal lobe, are "no longer." Claire, for her part, conveys her disregard for the number of lobes. "We have a flight to catch." The doctor waits for it to sink in. She says that a virus "transformed whole swaths of neural mass. Did anything unusual happen at dinner?" "You said his reading?" Marcus says. "What are you saying?" Claire says. As if the outcome wasn't a knife to the gut as soon as Alan's head crashes to the plate — nasal and ear discharge mingling with the sweet and sour sauce over braised

cabbage in which the sixth whiskey was spilled, his fish-eyed face encased in that exaggerated triumphant expression of defiance, one eyebrow cockeyed, forehead plowed into a pile of whipped turnips, as Claire called for medics and Carson ran wild, chased by the busboys, and the jingle of glockenspiel jangled over the scrapes of oblivious forks under the blood-orange glow of Waltherium. Oh, Claire. "Our data indicates a subsistence period of three weeks," the doctor says. "During that time, your husband will be effectively inert. After that, I'm afraid that Mr. Whitmore will pass away." He can almost see the lungs cut her breath in half. Breathlessly, Claire says: "The Sarcophagus?" "In his state, it would defeat the purpose. Aside from that, the criteria is clear for donations: intact consciousness etcetera." All day it's rained, and now it's found a crack in the ceiling. "If you don't have any further questions, I'll send a counselor to discuss disposition arrangements." An inch from his nose, the water boings in poignant drops. "Mrs. Whitmore?" the doctor says. Any closer and vertigo would be his. "Do you have any other questions?" Claire pokes her tongue in her cheek - "Unacceptable." The doctor betrays a faint frown and leaves them in a void of dripping white as the rosebrain clings to Alan's door. "I have a question," Marcus shouts. The doctor pauses. Claire turns. What, they must wonder, has inspired this man to halt such an unceremonious exit. A proposal? An idea? A remedy? "Does it fly or bloom?" he says. "When a brain's heathy, I mean." The doctor considers, and then, before she turns the corner, just as Claire's palm stings his cheek, she says: "It swims."

A Definite Chief Aim

Dr. Young is telling him about nuclear physicists. "Mindlessly creating derivatives to add to their atomic table," he says. "Picking through decay, prodding the effigies until -'Aha! Now we have Anythingium. Whateveron. Whocaresadamine.' For what?" The bristle of his mustache pinches. "For what we are, children of the RESET. That's hyperbole, you understand. What you've become isn't exclusive to Walther Wallach's doing." He rises from behind his desk. "It's rampant. Now lie back. I said lie back." Over Marcus he looms, a rotund man, his forehead cliff-like, ridged with seagull-shaped creases that summit a pyramid of jowls and a fault-line of a mouth that appears on the verge of quivering into laughter. "Have you ever dreamt of being an architect?" he says. "A sculptor? A gardener? Have you fancied yourself stealing fire from a mountain?" He plays games of free association. "Money. Fame. Extravagance." And: "Unity. Self. Nothing." He asks about Marcus' dreams. "A statue that burns overnight and clogs the atmosphere with its ashes? Interesting." He asks about symbols. "Does a circle of squares mean anything to you?" And he declares that the "state has overthrown the individual but not the individual's psychic architecture." He pulls a pipe from his jacket and bites its stem. "Original Desire was sublimated, but you said something about carrying?"

The couch is deep and pliant, its oversized cushions like an ocean of rubber. The base of his head feels encircled, almost swallowed into another dimension. The ceiling is tiled with starbursts, and a chandelier casts out veins of Waltherium-powered light. "Mind if I smoke?" Dr. Young says. His teeth click the plastic. Tobacco crackles as his breath trills through the chamber. The smoke rises plumply, like the folds of a leq. Through a stray limb Marcus waves his hand. Outside, a solitary cloud hangs. The only things separating the cloud from the smoke is a strip of melted sand and a blind of diaphanous chartreuse. "Would you open the window?" Marcus says. "It's not for everyone," Dr. Young says, and lowers the window with the press of a button. "We live in an age of wonders, but I wonder if you understand the limits of your biology?" The blind wilts in the breeze. "That burials of - let's not call them living - animated things will produce a few ghouls." Now, Marcus suspects, smoke and cloud will pull together. "Reaction?" What's the appropriate reaction? Marcus replies that whatever happened, it wasn't intentional, prompting a smile from the good doctor. In point of fact, Marcus hadn't said anything about carrying. "You'll need something to talk about," Terese had said. "It should be something truthful or he'll know." Of all the things he could have said, he chose something he'd never disclosed before. "Something's alive inside of me." "Have a seat first." He hadn't even chosen it. "I can't get it out." "Have a seat, please. Now tell me, when did you first feel its presence? Approximately?" A week. Maybe two. Maybe longer. "Can you describe what it feels like?" He'd just gotten comfortable when a bird

landed on the ledge outside the window. It pecked at the glass. Three guick bursts — its black eyes camouflaged in the black splotch on its forehead, like warpaint on a gold orb. "I know that bird," Marcus said, but he didn't know how. "Have you named it?" "The bird?" "The thing inside you." "Does it matter?" "Is it a boy or a girl?" "His name is Clay." Dr. Young had produced a silver watch on a chain and swung it back and forth. The next thing he knew Marcus was listening to Dr. Young talk about nuclear reactions, the release of energy and the "new alchemy of the age." Now he's saying, "Let's entertain a thought experiment. Let's say that Clay isn't where you imagine." The smoke bounds into the starbursts, tumbling into invisible components. It's not difficult to imagine. Marcus has always known that his womb was less fixed than others'. Sometimes he feels it at the back of his head or the tip of his spine. Other times, it's more liquid, always unloosed from any lifeline. It edges to his fingertips or swims through the whole distribution of flesh. Sometimes, like now, it floats in his eyeballs, transparent, nothing, omniscient. "Rather, we shall picture your unborn infant out there." "Out where?" "There," Dr. Young says, jabbing his pipe toward the window. In pushes the breeze, warmish-cool, rippling the blinds like a surface of absinthe. He seems to resolve something. "I'm going to prescribe you an antipsychotic. Take it religiously. I mean regularly." When he turns around, he makes an old-man sound of twisting, a full-body sigh, a grunting effort to contort his thick frame. Still no knock on the door. Marcus slides his hand into his pocket; his fingers grope for a bag that he realizes is on the other side of his pants. The wrinkles of Dr. Young's jacket stretch in falling arcs. Bottles clink. Capsules rattle. A drawer rolls closed. When he turns around, Marcus should be ready, cloth in hand. One stiff-arm to the face and a wide-eyed doctor would crumble to the floor. Marcus and Terese had practiced for hours. They covered variations of how it might happen — standing, sitting, lying. "This stuff would knock out an alligator," she said. She would come to the door. In his surprise, the doctor would be vulnerable. Marcus would pounce — unless he had a clear and perfect opportunity before that. "By the way," Dr. Young says, handing him a bottle of pills. His silvery eyes are like fish sucking at an algae on Marcus' body. "How are you paying for my services? I accept credit and Relative Reality Exchange." His eyes flutter as he starts to tabulate. "Hypnosis was \$500. Double that with the medicine. And the analysis —" He lands a hand around Marcus' wrist. "Why did you come here?" He leans closer, his lips guivering, the smoke on his breath seething from his nostrils. He gives Marcus a squeeze. "You want something only I can deliver." A knock comes on the door. "Am I not correct?" A hollow buzz grows around Marcus' hand. The knock comes again, followed by the sound of a pneumatic lock. Marcus' hand is turning white, smothered, like static electricity around a sleeve of flesh. "You never said how you lost your finger," Dr. Young says. He releases. The pins and needles jolt back. The knocking grows wilder. Terese's

voice comes through, but Dr. Young gives him a wink, and returns to his desk. When he sits, the chair moans. When he sits up, it screeches. Marcus, too, sits up from the couch, facing the doctor who's now explaining that everyone acquires a fetish for what they lack, and having spent a lifetime "twisting invisible arms, what I covet is something more tactile." Aimed at his patient, he forms a chevron of his hands. "Does the term 'in the flesh' resonate with you?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "I'm something of a curator of hard-to-acquire items. When opportunities arise, I vowed to seize them with unapologetic manliness." Terese is shouting for Marcus now. But a door falls over the door, and the only sound is the rustling of the blinds. It stays like that until Dr. Young says, "Did it ever occur to you that you're searching for a more permanent domicile?" He flicks his chin. "Than — that?" Marcus is silent. Next to him, the pipe lies in an ashtray, ejecting its dying scent. "I think we can help each other," Dr. Young says. "All these burdens of the flesh. You see, natives of this land, long before RESET, would seize their enemies' crowns with a guick swipe. You have an ungainly head, Mr. Marcus, and I'm uninterested in your scalp. What I'm interested in is something more engrossing," he says. "I'm proposing a swap. Tit or tat. Once it's complete, I'll let your friend in, and you can confiscate whatever it is you think I'm harboring," he says. Marcus turns to the window. The goldfinch is gone. "Do we have an agreement?" the doctor says. The drapes flap. A wasp bops along the wall. The city murmurs. "Where is it?" Marcus says. It was never silent. "Come again?" Dr. Young says. All this time, something mechanical has thrummed in the background, a percussive chopping, light and rhythmic, as though a drumstick rattles the tin of a snare drum with maniacal scruple. How could he not have noticed? This mechanized heartbeat. "You seem vexed, Mr. Marcus. Have you lost something?" He turns back. He turns back. To a toothed wheel, pinioned against a network of cogs, clicking in sync. "Where is it?" Marcus says. He is standing. He is screwed to the center of the room as the walls smooth, as the corners round out, as the chevron of Dr. Young's hands shift into to a semicircle of interlaced fingers. His glasses pinch a thinner nose than Marcus remembers. His silver mustache is burnished with umber threads. His forehead is high and undulant, as though smoothed over before gulls have made their pleats. In his bright black pupils a bright spot, a hole, reveals an inner glow. A pointed slug slithers across the crevice of his lips and disappears. "The brain isn't foolproof," Dr. Young states. His fingers unlock and a hand disappears behind the desk. Soft cloth is rustled as the room chips away, or crystalizes, into proliferating shrapnel. Along the desktop, beside the smoked out pipe. the silver watch is placed, face up, its silver chain tethered to a ring around the crown, strewn like a sleeping snake."Do you even know why you're here?" Dr. Young says. His hair line is lower, rimmed in a shallow sea of black swarf, his complexion iron-brown, stern, sheer. His one eyebrow angles over his glasses: "well?" "I came here for -"

baked goods, molecular analysis, scrambled recipient codes? for — "something. I — that's funny. I can't remember." Dr. Young observes the expressions trundle over the seconds. Marcus can feel the minute alterations surface from the recognition that a river has dried up, or the sky has changed color, or the linchpin has been removed. "Loss of desire can be a defining moment in a man's life," Dr. Young says, "revealing unexpected liberties — indeed — freeing him from the chase to dabble, even delight in what he might have overlooked. Or," he growls, "it can hook a collar around his neck and charge him forward or backward on a hunt for something that's ceased to exist. Desires don't define the man, but panic — well," he says. "Panic can." The earth is displaced by a gravitational nick. A worm rolls over. The thorns of a rose are snipped off and flung into a compost. And all the balloons that were anchored to a single clip are untied. "It can be frightful when you weren't gripped as tightly as you'd imagined," Dr. Young says. "I've seen that look before," he says, a clinician at heart. "Or another way of looking at it is you've found what you were looking for and didn't realize it. An accidental epiphany of the unconscious is a blessing."

"Blessing?"

"It means -"

"I know what it means," Marcus says. In one motion the watch is in his hand. Its ticks sail into the abyss. Its chain dribbles into his lap. "Time is no pickpocket," Dr. Young says. Marcus clenches. The face snaps. The gears crunch. And the ticking ceases. Clay lies elusive but Marcus grows larger than he's ever imagined. He fills the room and Dr. Young is what he's always been. From his back pocket he extracts a silver hoop. A flick of the wrist expands its diameter. He proceeds to the doctor who scoops up the remains of his watch. "Something always remains," he mutters.



I Delvin Cythroat I

The water whips him around so fast that he can hardly see the underside of the Broken Bridge before his body surrenders. It's a strange descent. Even stasis succumbs to gravity and his skin is revealed for what it is, a barrier to a vaster intelligence. His shoes hit and then slide off a curve and his knees plummet to the rocky bottom. A few puckers of sensation are sucking in their last as Delvin Cythroat lands on his back. The icy sludge cradles his moribund person. To see the end in a blackwater drowning. He opens his eyes. The Waltherium pipe glows with Walther Wallach's radioactive abomination. Everything else is nothingness into which the material of consciousness is trying to enter. Cythroat sends commands to his body. Cup hand. Flip foot. Above all, rise. But his brain fails to register as it clings to a diminishing cloud of oxygen. He can picture the alveoli relinguishing molecules to the voracious capillaries to continue to circulate oxygenated blood through his system. In seconds, the whole schabang will go kaput, all because something automatic ceased being so. His beautiful Olivia emerges from the blackness like a sculpture coming undone. Regardless of how perfectly rendered, the body is a casualty of antiquated design. He would laugh if he wouldn't choke. How much time has he spent perfecting something with an innate imperfection? It's typical. To have delved into the particulars at the expense of the obvious. The cursed body should have evolved by now to bypass unconscious defeats and obey the imperial commands of consciousness. The body should regulate itself, but when something goes kerfluey, system one should take over as the rightful monarch. A democracy a corpus should not be. As Cythroat lies at the bottom of the river, he watches his lovely Olivia approach – brilliant replica though she is, a nearsighted clawing at an outmoded invention. The remains of oxygen are giving out while unconsciousness overtakes him. In seconds, systems one and two will disperse through billions of metric tons of pressurized nothingness. If only he could press through the membrane and enter a vaster vessel. Perhaps it would make the oversight worth the price of admission. Alas, the last barricades give and the truculent water breaches the inner sanctum. So be it. He entered this world as nothing, and he leaves it as nothing less. His wrist is cuffed by loveliness. He succumbs to the yank and the rest of him is forced into a hasty ascent. From the depths to the shallows, from darkness to the light, he is drawn up. Bubbles feather over his haggard face just as his brain is giving way to whatever its conqueror is. Somewhere in the recesses of system two, an idea takes hold like a giant squid.

Her words come drifting in like sea anemone, so light and fluid but rooted. "Hold on." He'd paid such heed to the vocal tract too, sculpting the nasal cavity until it achieved the perfect pitch and tone in which to articulate the harmonic content of her AI. Like an underwater rhapsody. Is this what subsisting in the Sarcophagus is like? Despite its resplendence, its creator will pay in flesh. Cythroat will see to it. Even in half death, he will exact revenge, and the infringement will be balanced on his private judicial scales. But then something happens that issues a sudden bolt of spasmodic doubt. Not just pain, but a full-body paroxysm transfixing his being from a single point of entrance. It shuts down his body. He's out.

Cythroat awakens to her halcyon face. Her eyes are his finest creation, like sapphires stashed inside of pistachio shells. No one can cut shapes like he can and still have the technical skill to fit orb within orb within double-jointed crescent. And beneath those circles, her jaw is the union of oval, rhombus and hexagon: smoothed, refined, purified.

"My 33," he says. "Where am I?"

"In your laboratory."

As he gazes at Olivia 33 (the hair around her temples still dewy from her dive), an idea jumps like a carp from the surface of his mind. If it's to be done, it must be done hastily, and judging by her expression, it must.

"In the third drawer down, in the red emergency cart, there's a tool that looks like a funnel attached to a wrench," he says. "Bring that."

Her economical footsteps are quick and pointed, followed by the ball-bearing tray unrolling, and then she's back, obedient to the last.

"Put it in my hand, dear."

"You're too weak," she says.

"In my hand."

She puts it in his palm. With a click of his finger, it connects to Olivia 33. He clicks again. It nearly knocks him out, but Cythroat endures the blast and knows that the coupling is successful. He's now looking up at her through his own eyes as well as down at himself through the eyes of 33. Already he notices the difference in quality. Thirty three's vision

is sterling, vivacious, dimensional, whereas his optics are grab bags of objects. How he's managed to create beauty with such a vague grasp of the world's geometries is miraculous. Through the superior eyes of 33 he's able to see, for the first time, the creatureliness of his body. It is, he realizes, a dumping ground of cellular matter inside of which organs are floundering. He can almost see them through the skin, like stillborn birds to be tossed from their nest.

On the next table lies his new creation, Olivia 37. How magnificent it would be to inhabit her model, but she's no more than skeletal material at this phase. On his other side, stationary, awaiting basic repairs but suitable otherwise, Olivia 3 waits.

Via 33, he sterilizes the room. He shaves the hair from 3 – which he'd painstakingly located, follicle by follicle, and on which he spent days mixing hues to achieve the perfect gradation. When there's only scalp, he pushes a scalpel through. When he's done, he moves to his own body. He shears his grey hair, sanitizes the skin while seeing, for the first time, the moles and growths pocking his scalp. And then, after a judicious application of numbing agent, with nary a thought, Cythroat proceeds. A circular saw descends and tears through the skull. After hours of precision cutting, Cythroat begins the extraction. The glide-ladle scoops out the 3.2576 pounds of bound neural tissue. The ventral view indicates a fully intact removal. Cisterns are plugged to preserve the cerebrospinal fluid. The cerebellum hangs like a jiggly mold of jelly from the hemispheres as Cythroat moves his brain over the cranial vault within Olivia 3. As it hangs in mid-air, he allows himself to muse where, precisely, he is at that moment, before reverting to the task at hand. It takes all day before the last stitch is tied. Through 33, he takes the tool from his former body's hand and clicks the trigger. His new eyes open to white light. A bulb. A claw. Rotary saw. To his right, Olivia 33 searches his new countenance. He wriggles his pinky. Then his toe. Something like sensation courses through every crevice of his corpuscles as though a full-body tourniquet vanishes and the blood floods through.

Delvin Cythroat glides to the corner of the cavern and grabs a book (as light as a spider must feel in a spider's clutches) from the pile and returns to the makeshift pyre. He rips a page out and shoves it into the tinder. "I used to associate myself with that," he grumbles, as his former skin hisses and melts, and his bones pop, and his organs crisp and shrivel. Inside, he finds a mirror. Flawless, especially after reinserting the hair. He made sure of it. But "perfection is inhuman," he says, fingering his elevated cheek (on which he spent a good day identifying the perfect placement for the malar fat pad to

optimize eye fullness). But he's not in the business of creating human, is he? And even perfection can be perfected. The instrument he now inhabits is the greatest work of art humanity's ever produced. Of that he has no doubt. Exquisite in every respect. Olivia 37 would have been a miracle, but now that he dashes and cuts and flows he feels like the optimized craft for optimal performance, a sports and all-terrain vehicle for exacting revenge. Cythroat scratches an itch and then stops. Why is there an itch? On the back of his hand he spies a patch of inflamed red bumps. The back and forth intensity of his fingernail digs up a fleck of blood. And then he's scratching his ribs. Cythroat yanks up his shirt and discovers another patch of irritants. "Can it be?" he says, heading to his pharmacy. As he dabs on the lotion, Cythroat releases a womanly laugh, which makes him laugh all the more. "I'm allergic to my new body," he says. He would laugh all the more at this charming little darling of destiny, how fate delights in prodding its best and brightest — he could endure it all in the dwelling of 3 - but even those the histamines will subside, their presence indicates a defect. Suddenly, his shirt's off and he's stepping out of his pants, and his skin, as he exits his lab, seems to cling too tightly to his bones. Tarsus, talus, cuboid bone: condensers or oppressors? Pharynx, larynx, trachea: too hard to breathe. Cythroat plunges into the dark chasm of the dead river and bathes himself in the emptiness. The dying flames of the pyre shoot insectile sparks across the barky limestone walls, and the molten presence of Waltherium is like an exploding universe trapped on the other side of something. Cythroat fondles the lymph nodes of his armpit. He pets the union of the ilium, ischium and pubis. Just as he'd pushed something to the brink, a crumble of rock tumbles down and echoes in the cavern, revealing a bright new pinprick of light. He knows what he must do. He knew it at the bottom of the river.

He races back into his lab and heads to his Imagi-Sphere, but stops. Something alluring sits there. It's in his palm. His fingers tighten. And it descends into the thorax of Olivia 37. Again and again, crunch after crunch. And then he stops. He thinks he did it, just a second ago, overtaken by an urge. His body did it. Or his brain, or a portion of his brain, commanded his body to perform an operation that he never issued. In seconds, Cythroat is shredding the skin of 37's abdomen. He punctures the dermis to the fatty tissue to the muscle fibers, and then drives a series of staple-shaped holes into the muscle. When he leaves the scalpel quivering upright in the transverse abdominis, Cythroat runs out to the bonfire. He extracts the charred remains of his former body and picks through the smoldering skull. The fire's burned through, disintegrating the evidence he was hoping (or not) to discover. He looks again at the shell, at the congealed remains, still smoking. A putrid essence. The only explanation is that he left something behind, which now resides as burned goo on the casing of his old skull. But

what? The pituitary gland? He's too skilled. The pineal gland? The hippocampus? The chances of Cythroat committing a blunder like that are one in a million. The reasonable explanation is that an adjustment's taking place, and Cythroat will need to forge a way to make further adjustments. In the meantime, as he stares at the smoking wreckage that was his body, a powerful lust wells up.

He's back in his lab, opening the hatch to where he keeps his special orders, and then climbs into the black cavity. It's so silent down here that Cythroat can hear the soft, regulated thumps of his new aorta. All around him, his self-created treasures lurk, a museum of contemporary invention buried deep inside the earth. He switches on his worm light. The thin ray (generated by his mind's electrical activity and boosted by the air's natural beta decay) slices through the cavernous room. Across the immaculate faces and dormant torsos it slashes ... their black eyes sparkle like crystallized lava ... their limbs hang in mute readiness. A new crop. To remain mannequins until Robin lves and those cutthroats at Hawksbill pay him his due. Cythroat proceeds to his cove of directed-energy weaponry – a modest arsenal of projectile-based armaments that lies in a stack of cases, remains from random underground marketing orders. Cythroat goes for the biggest case and hauls it back up to his lab, amazed at how light it feels in his new grip. He springs open the lid. The directed-energy hand cannon was a special request from Balthazar, who never followed through on payment, so Cythroat tucked it away for a special occasion.

I Balthazar I

"Purpler," he says. Palatial saturation is "almost bloody. Go deeper, damn it. Stop. Now step back. I need to see without your odor in the way." Around the trellis they pop in their bloodier shade. "Go pomegranate now." His workmen modify their palettes. One kiss per bud does it, adding a lacquer that they lacked. But "they look too real now. I've changed my mind. I preferred white all along." The workmen obey. They paint the roses white and turn the Waltherium back on. It sends a jolt through the buds. The portal to the botanical section is illuminated by the white heads of roses that emanate a fragrance of gardenias. "If this doesn't seduce buyers, I'll cut their throats." He orders his hookah and into his sedan chair he climbs. In every direction: the luminosity of bric a brac! the sprawl of vision! An ecstatic cannibalistic ecosystem embodied in the physical marketplace, and one that caters to every biological appetite or need. And he, lofted into the air, workmen front and back, is transported through the arteries of his creation. Gadget Haven. Trinket Junction. Artifact Armory. Relic Repository.

"No honest offer is refused," he calls. "You there! Yes, you, eyeing that tin of plutonium. That's too rich for your blood, but two aisles down you'll find my more economical actinides. I offer several exotic isotopes at competitive prices, and I'm getting more every day. Always remember, I pick everything myself." To a couple wrist-deep in a pile of Relative Reality uploads: "We have the Rose City's most eclectic collection. Tightrope walkers, scenic reminisces, tropical utopias. Or are you in search of a more couplesfriendly experience?" To his assistant: "Take them to my Debauchery Den, and two no, three — for the price of one!" Then to the universe he wonders: "Where are my teeth? Where is my eye?" To his vanity he's taken where he finds, and screws in, his mechanical eye (left socket, arctic periwinkle, color corrected triple magnifier with a oneway reflector) along with his white-gold top-and-bottom grillz with fang extensions. He smiles a 14 karat smile, running his tongue along the tip of each cuspid before approving of the whole ensemble. He is ready to interface except — one must be exalted at all moments — he pulls in a prolonged puff of Hassium-269. Now. "Exalted," he exhales, as something falls from his non-mechanical eye. It makes a wicked descent, guttering through his mascara. As the tip of the slither touches the point of his lip, Balthazar licks away the very fluid his body has just tried to eject. In that salty orb he tastes the bitter stew of a bubbling cauldron, of his own making, no less. He plunges into his favorite chaise longue, and shields his vision with the crook of his arm. The mechanical eye detects: fraying fibers of polyester instead of strands of desert-berry satin, and a business model predicated on the hard-to-find rather than the come-to-get. How could he have underestimated their appetite for vids? A sizable Relative Reality

section he boasts, but not extensive enough. "Kingston!" His servant arrives and Balthazar commands him to turn on the surveillance unit. The walls ignite in live-circuit footage. There they are, the mass of his clientele congregated around a diminishing pile of Relative Reality uploads, others knocking into wrap-around projectors, fivedimensional hologram drop ins, dazed by the sights of their own Relative Realities. "These damn boobs," he says. "They can't turn off their own vids for five blessed seconds to buy new uploads." Is his business model sustainable or must he invest in what they want?

The truth is that his revenue streams were never diverse. It always depended on the big sale, and no one wants uranium anymore. His more entrepreneurial investments haven't delivered and every buyer on the underground wants something sexier. Something unexpected. He needs to broaden his vision. Curate something electrifying.

"I'll send your visitors away," Kingston says.

Wait. Who? To the far corner of the surveillance circuit his eye roves. Exactly what he needs. Distraction is the French tickler of Inspiration. Kingston's disclosure pries out the bright light of 14 karat grillz. It brings the tube of Hassium-269 back to Balthazar's heart-shaped mouth. With his mechanical eye he can perceive his lungs embrace the cloud. "Take me to Donald Marcus," Balthazar says. "Tout suite."

"Love the new look. Scalped. Bare. Nude. What do you call it? The unembellished thinker? The meat of the coconut? I can't look, yet I must. I get it. Barrenness puts the onus on the message. You've always taken the long view. How are the vids coming, by the way? Is every Curean transformed? But that was never the plan, was it? Success is a tricky business. Eye of the beholder. Incidentally, nothing clarifies like a 720-degree lighting system. Illumination from top to bottom, side to side. Longitude and latitude. No setup required. It sets itself up — perfect for the amateur and professional alike. Deep discount for an exceptional customer. Offer closes at midnight." To Donald Marcus he glides, arm out, hand dipped, ruby-encrusted rings poised for their rightful kiss. "All this muscle. Good for you. An optimized body empowers the optimal mind. You won't kiss the hand? Suit yourself. You look tense. Are you tense? I have the best masseuses. Buy a three-point lighting system and I'll throw in a free massage. Carson! They didn't tell me you were here."

"Can we speak in private?"

"What's wrong with Carson? Don't tell me the cat has his tongue?"

"In private?"

"Privacy! Privation. States of mind. These," — he gestures to his workmen — "are my nerve endings. How can I please the masses if I don't know what they want? Are you — You're serious. III humored, even. Sobriety is a disease, you know. I have medicinals for that! Oh, have it your way." He claps his hands. "To my office!"

So far, distraction hasn't birthed inspiration, but patience is a midwife. But Marcus complained about the wait. He bemoaned the walk. And he sulks with a sullen energy while his companion slinks along like a salamander. How is Balthazar's unconscious supposed to repair a nervous system when his conscious mind is so — conscious? This wishy-washiness must cease. "Tout suite." "Your grace?" If this mollycoddle — this papoose of success — fails to deliver him from his doldrums, there's always another plan. Send the bald thug underground and watch from above as he tries to navigate a network of tunnels stuffed to the gills, at the moment, with exotic reptiles. They haven't been fed in a week and Balthazar could fetch a killing for broadcasting a live bloodsport. Throw in the non human and it opens another round of bets. "That's inspiration!"

His office is a tent beneath the Broken Bridge near the underground entrance. When it's not harboring undomesticated cargo (a special order from the Southeastern District), the underground tunnels transport goods in relative seclusion while unearthing the occasional artifact, like the tin of plutonium (the poor smuggler was forced to self-donate to the Sarcophagus while in quarantine, never even getting a sniff of payment), or the sporadic strategic reconnaissance aircraft (purchased by Walther Wallach himself years ago), or, perchance, something more inglorious, something so humble and irrelevant that it's a miracle it's endured.

How it arrived, he can't remember, but how it left he'll always recall. It was an April day. The roses had just bloomed. Sloth and lust were in the air, and fortune favored Balthazar — because he was diligent. Not only was it a slow morning, but he was depleted. The previous night, instead of the restorative bacchanal he'd planned, the festivities had turned into something else. There was singing. There was screaming. There was blood. Some of it had gotten on him. But he'd awoken at his usual hour and prowled, proudly, his grounds. After selling a few paltry pounds of golden-seal coffee, a roaster and an industrial filtration and pour-over suite, he spotted Donald Marcus and the tall man, and decided to escort them himself. He'd nearly lost heart from the get go. They were penny pinchers. It was obvious. But Balthazar persisted and brought them to The Heap: to the customer a "vintage of creatively curated melange" - in reality, the unsold detritus piled for next-day incineration. There were wigs, boots, polyester and vinyl jackets (perfect for the aspiring vixen), not much for the male miser, but just as Balthazar had zeroed in on an atomic-powered silverware set (lead-plated, for absolute safety), Donald Marcus had alighted on something altogether remarkable. It confirmed a principle of Balthazar's. That year, half a million customers had entered the bazaar and passed over this particular item without a shred of curiosity. Indeed, it had become an object of ridicule. The vertically challenged, when dining, would use it as a booster seat. But value is inscribed in facial expression, and the face of Donald Marcus, though he tried to conceal it (to crisp his eves like that!), had assigned an exorbitant price tag. Ultimately, Balthazar negotiated two prices for the cost of one. "This artifact is special. To pretend otherwise is a fool's errand. For months I've resisted selling it." The tall man, against his friend's better judgment, performed the unthinkable. He took the book, studied its cover, and then bloomed the sounds from his hairy lips, turning the incomprehensible into meaning. "The Law of Success." A thousand possibilities occurred then, not least of which was: how many credits could he fetch for auctioning a translator? It would have been so easy. A raise of the hand, and his guards would have circled them. The translator would have been bagged and assessed — was it only English he could read? or more? — and then primed for next-day sale. A translator? That was a precious commodity indeed. He'd never encountered one who selfidentified, and this one was oblivious of his value. It was a miracle that ALL hadn't scooped him up. Balthazar had his gold-gold grillz in. He showed them. "Some have vision of the world's flow," he said, "and others, the ones who clench up, can't see a revolution right before their eyes. And whether it's the rose in the air, or the shade of the morning light, or because I see something in you, the tandem team, I'm going to confound my accountant, and deprive myself. I'm going to sell this relic to you for 2,000 upfront. My bean counters will hang me, but hang them! In return for my faith, you agree to a cost of 10 percent residuals — call it a finder's fee — once you're up and running."

His office tent is humid, his energy waning. The reptiles are swarming — he can feel their subterranean thrashings. And Balthazar has lost all good will. "Where is my 10 percent? It doesn't exist? Then my nine percent? What about my eight percent — certainly you have that?" Balthazar's mechanical eye homes in on his combatant's eyes.

Instead of crisping, they're wide open, as he sits, palms flat on the ponderosa pine, as stoic as an icon. "Tell you what. Let's put a plug in the residuals. I'll take you to dinner. Couple blocks north. Beautiful view of the city at night. All the glistening lights below as we dine on center-cut filets, amply marbleized by the looks of them, practically melting in their own fat." It elicits the slightest of crisping. "Always features The Rose City's most progressive dishes — the chef is a wizard — including, and especially, a you-bring-it, we-cook-it special. Who said the non humans are a pointless species?" The beauty of the mechanical eye is its real-time, infrared measure of pupil dilation. Marcus' has grown to a giant nine millimeters. "Carson," Balthazar says, "I almost forgot you were there." His guards are on them before the lynx can wobble off the bench. "Instead of distraction, you've given me disruption. Cuisine or combat? That's the question. Kingston, bring the waiver for Mr. Marcus and his companion. It's a formality, you understand, for anyone who enters the underground in the event that accidents occur. Don't worry," he assures his guests, "you'll have opportunity to bet on yourselves - or, if you care to leave your dependents a few cents. Do you have a dependent, Mr. Marcus? Oh, I didn't see your ring. Shall we off that first before tossing you in the sewer? No final words? I wasn't speaking to you, Carson. That blond imp you're so fond of? What's her name? She's here, or she was. She likes my room of cuffs. Kingston! Bag that beast this instant!" Balthazar eyes his still-stoic guest. "Where's that translator of yours?"

"It's funny you should ask."

I Marcus I

So funny that Marcus pats his jacket breast ("May I?"), to which Balthazar flicks his fingers ("Proceed"). The guards pause their tussle with Carson, who stands, one paw in the bag, ear cockeyed, eyes furrowed, gaze remote and isolated, a mask of miserable far-awayness scrunching his compact, speckled face.

When they left the Walther Wallach Medical Center, the lynx was insistent. The first thing they should do is leave The Rose City. "The last thing we should do is go to that animal's bazaar." He was right, of course, but Marcus trudged ahead, too broke to rent a jetpack let alone an aerial, the streets engorged with the thick, insane lines of Waltherium, like phosphorescent umbilical cords connecting to a nursery of hover trolleys carting Curean hordes from smoking rooms to billiard halls to the almighty vid arcade, their windows lit by the glow of in-flight vid-tainment, while trams hissed along their quadratic tracks with the same moribund glow, the same postures within: head back, mouth agape, not dazed, but entertained. Carson, adamant that he could borrow money from Megan Jean, harping on the catastrophe Marcus should flee.

"Donald, are you — What happened was —."

"Fixable."

"See how I can't extend this claw? It gets stiff when something's wrong. My body senses it." They argued. Nothing was resolved. "Fine, but listen to this. Do you know what Jeter said? He said that the women in Saint Santiago don't wear any clothes. Why, you ask? Because they only wear bikinis! It's a law! I think that's what he said. And the women love to frolic in the ocean! Have I ever told you about recurring dreams about the ocean? But okay, if Saint Santiago's not your thing, we could always go to One Star. The other night Jeter was telling me that the women there have these legs — 'as strong as tree trunks, as nimble as ballerinas."

All the while Marcus was guarding an unfamiliar balance somewhere in the center of his body, as though a hinge ran from head to groin, separating but connecting bi-polar forces. Tranquility and energy. Awareness and relaxation. All the while sequestering hopelessness somewhere deep and far away. But Carson was testing the strength of the hinge. At one point they were outside a Vid-Mart, "where everyone should spend a

lifetime. We could be in there," Carson said, "but no. You need to go to the zoo instead. You need to pet the monkey. Let me tell you about the monkey. He bites." "Nobody's forcing you to come, Carson." On they walked, silent except for every ring, wail, cry and screech from streets that never sleep until Carson said, "You don't know anything about friendship, do you?"

"Commence," Balthazar orders, and Marcus withdraws the object. He holds it up. See. And stands the vial in the middle of the table, a miniature totem pole of colorless liquid. Elbows out, Balthazar cranes forward, chin just above the wood. His electrical eye zeroes in. "Light," he commands, and the tent goes dark except for that lone eye, lightning-blue, baby-blue, surrounding a mouth-like pupil, protruding, ringed in black, floating in nothingness. On the vial it lingers, compressing the interface of looker and object into suspended magnification, and then, when it seems to exhaust its inspection, aims at Marcus. The electrical eye spears out the memory of his last visit when, for weeks afterwards, Marcus feared that something, a part of him, had been captured in the surface of its electrical aperture. But this time Marcus doesn't look back. He looks in. Something is different. The light returns. "Out," Balthazar commands. Just like that, Carson is released, the goon brigade departs and Balthazar cracks his knuckles: "Explain."

It was a simple plan. Marcus would try in earnest at first, and he did. Failing that, he would apply chemical persuasion. When Carson caused the distraction, a drop went into Alan's drink. "It was supposed to be an indenturing medicinal." "I thought you two were friends?" "Colleagues." Balthazar smiles. "Go on." Marcus tells him what happened at Eden's Exit, and what the doctor said. He tells him everything except before for after — how vibrant it looked against the night sky, the Walther Wallach Medical Center, like a station on the moon. How Claire had hammered his chest. How he had to hold her to restrain her. How she kicked at Carson. Tore away and went for the jugular. "You can't be responsible for three deaths. You just can't." How seconds ago he'd lied to himself. There was never a balance. There was the willful ignorance of inner mutiny. The only way to shut down personal chaos is to ignore it. How, as soon as they left the medical center, the Bookworm Theater greeted them like a middle finger: with vids of every type: tragedies, comedies, create-your-own dramas, and a whole wing devoted to "The Vampire's Bride," seasons 1-500, including behind the scenes, director cuts, executive producer takes, actor profiles. And not a single one featuring the very thing they all, every slobbering customer, whether they knew it or not, yearned for. The

very thing Marcus could deliver, courtesy of Balthazar's scrap heap, if only he had someone to translate it.

Alan. Masquerading as a man, in white flannel trousers, always at a door, incapable of knocking, let alone knocking through.

Of all the brains in the country, how had his persisted through RESET with the ability to read? Didn't it require strength? Tenacity? Durability? Wasn't reading like a mining operation? Demanding stamina to construct the shaft, strength to wield the drill, tenacity to carve out the stones, power to haul the raw merchandise into the light? Reading had to be like that, and Alan was obsessed with a children's show. At every break he watched Mr. Egg. While Marcus repositioned lights, make the audio crisper, and perfected his pitch, Alan was engrossed in a mini-series about an egg in search of something "Unnamable!" while everyone was after his magic yolk. In every episode they tried to crack his shell. But sticks would snap and bricks would bounce. When a group of spatulas picked him up, the egg's weight got the best of them. They collapsed, and their rubber mesh broke his fall and he rolled away to safety. In the last episode, just as Mr. Egg's enemies had given up, and he sat on a hill to watch the sunset, a ribbon of butterflies danced by. Mr. Egg said nothing. Apparently, there was nothing to say. Tears rolled from his eyes and his shell cracked. Mr. Egg's magic yolk, suspended all that time by his own volition, collapsed. The entire mess, shells and all, oozed down the hill before the fade to black.

Alan. Daring nothing. Demanding nothing. Doling out his life in teaspoons. For what?

Of some 300 million people, less than zero percent had come through RESET with a memory or skill. It was part of the necessary expenditure of The Great Sacrifice, or "the voluntary disposal of the brain's nonessential energy to jumpstart the survival of everything outside of it." Nobody understood. Nobody cared. They got what they wanted, or what they think they wanted, and their former identities, relationships, routines — all the things that vanished — even their relevance evaporated. Inherent abilities — reasoning, instinct, communication, memory itself, devoid of content — matriculated while everything else was relinquished for the greater good. To tabula rosa they went. All except for miracles like Alan. He said that it was like an "inner hand with nothing to hold," as he searched for something he couldn't name. He spent years with his secret condition. As RESET wore on, artifacts arose in unlikely places. The first time Alan saw what he'd been looking for, it was in a vid. It was part of a set piece in the background. As soon as he spotted it, he kew. It took him hours to sound it out, but he

translated the title. "It haunts me to this day," he said, "wondering what 'Fifty Shades of Grey' is about."

A ragged claw in a silent sea. Drowning in an empty chamber.

At first no one cared that he could read, but then it became a mark of shame. Literacy was like a third eye, except that he could hide his mutation. And he did. And it drove him mad until Marcus rescued him from the scrap heap with a plan.

Etherized upon a table.

The question isn't why, but how had a mind as weak and uncertain, as fundamentally unstable as his, had made it this long? Was it poisoned, or did it implode on its own?

While Marcus waits, Balthazar's lackeys bring him goods to evaluate. Someone totes in a "four-dimensional knapsack, capable of compartmentalizing large and many objects within quantum confines — absolutely exact — perfect for the traveler who wants to tread lightly with a heavy hand." Balthazar keeps it for himself. Someone else shows him the schematics of an "aerial balloon — old counter-intelligence, shifty, with modern-day maneuverability and stealth technology. Stash and deploy it anywhere." "I have to have it."

Carson, for his part, put aside the issue of Megan Jean hours ago, and flopped on his side to "get the first hour of sleep in days." His eyes flutter behind half-closed lids, his belly puffs in automatic breaths while Balthazar continues his evaluations, every now and then winking at Marcus at various points ("Naughty man," "So cruel," "So desperate"), showing no signs of accelerating the process. Balthazar. Scalper in chief. Huckster extraordinaire. Cutthroat merchandiser. Voyeur in extreme. He knows everyone but touches no one. It's part of his vid series in which he espouses his "life's principles. Starting at One. Bliss is a bubble. Don't let anyone pop it. Two. To look is to feel. To touch is too much." It's said that he has a harem the size of a small city, of which, allegedly, Megan Jean, Carson's on again, off again lady friend, is a member. But he's on edge tonight. In Marcus he sees a solution. Marcus sees it. The trick is, or will be, to slip away with intelligence at the lowest price possible. Balthazar. Dressed in black with white makeup except for those blue flames painted over his eyes. "Three. Theatricality is daring, darlings. Four. Practice impermanence. Five. Identity isn't flypaper." Which is why he says he changes his look on an ongoing basis. The last time

Marcus was here, Balthazar was in his "Rock phase." Fewer cosmetics. "Rawer, with more adrenaline." His hair was gelled, flowing and red, like cinnamon in a trail of lava. His face had, and has (beneath that makeup), a melted quality, with skin peeling off his forehead, revealing the sunburns of forays to the south, possibly outside the Districts altogether, in which case he might have been harboring any number of contagions. Balthazar: a human drug, capable of transporting you into another world, willingly or not. The question isn't whether Marcus wants to make the journey. He's already locked in place, like a bullet in a gun, or a pathogen in a needle, and remains only to be shot to his destination as determined by a functioning schizophrenic.

At this moment, Balthazar's jettisoned his hookah for a clove cigarette. The rancid sweetness fattens the residual odors of men in the tent. Marcus, on the verge of sleeping, as the fragments of the past 24 hours reassemble in a kaleidoscope of confusion, is startled by the softest of sounds. Balthazar is twisting the burning cherry from the shell. Behind that makeup, his melty face is smeared in a close-mouthed grin, the shadow of what was months ago a drippy mustache festooned across the arcing lip, one eye bright, marble-green, piercing, expectant, his electrical eye prowling the brightening tent. He nods, his "deep-space" hair flopping against his ashen cheek. "Outside."

The rain has stopped. The clouds are de-chunking, revealing a nectarine sky. The air is crisp, cold, new. Balthazar marches beyond the Broken Bridge to a spot where the sun splinters between the Emerald Towers on the east side of the One River. Balthazar holds the vial to the light. "What do you see?" Marcus stoops. Presses his hands to his knees. A spectrum of color blazes through. His eyes adjust and he sees it, against the inner rim, tiny but distinct.



Suddenly Balthazar is taller, sober, dangerous, a wraith in the sun. "Cut the shit," he says. "Omit nothing."

So Marcus does. The air shocks his throat as he divulges the leap of the Olivia and the fall of her creator. When it's over, Balthazar is watching the morning traffic soar around the Emerald Towers.

"You're alleging," Balthazar says, "that you encountered *the* Delvin Cythroat, co-creator of Relative Reality, not seen or heard from for a decade."

But Relative Reality was ...

"That you watched him fall off a bridge."

"... But Walther Wallach created Relative Reality ..."

"And all you did was call in an anon emergency?"

Everybody knows that.

"How do you not know?" Balthazar says, his green and blue eye seizing up in apparent disbelief. Cythroat and his brother were the founders, he says. Walther Wallach contested, and won the rights in a court battle. "He rebranded it to Relative Reality. Cythroat Brothers, Inc. dissolved. One sibling went into exile. The other ... No one knows."

"But —"

"How did you meet this 'Olivia'?"

Somehow, the truth seems too intrusive. "At a bar," Marcus says. "She looked and acted like anyone else."

"Except that she had a death wish. And she came with the vile vial."

"I was very drunk." Marcus shrugs. The moment of truth. He means what follows to come out casually. Two guys talking. Marcus will take the information and promptly leave with Carson. No strings attached. Easy. "What do the symbols mean?"

Balthazar pops his thumb to the roof of his mouth, a thin arc of saliva connecting upper to bottom teeth, and proceeds to remove, and examine in the light, his white-gold grillz. In his other hand he bounces the vial. "These symbols," he says, biting the crisp air like an apple, "mean that I'm coming with you."

I Carson I

"It's been four, no, five days since my last live stream. Crazy weekend. Crazier start to the week. Don't ask. At this point, I've had two hours of shut eye, so I'm on my way home for some dedicated theta wave exposure. But I wanted to let everyone know I'm okay. And to get something off my chest. A certain person who shall go unnamed ... Hold on, I need to make a stop. Are you open? Hey, that's my motto too, except mine's: it's always five o'clock everywhere. Coconut rum on the rocks. Do you have those big artisan cubes? In a wide glass if you don't mind. Anyway, sorry. I don't even care that it's eight in the morning.

"So I'll put it out there to all of my followers. Do you have, and if so, how do you handle people in your life who ... aren't greedy, necessarily, but always want something extra, more what they have ... who aren't exactly selfish, but are definitely, probably clinically narcissistic ... who can't tolerate the thought that everything they have is everything they need, and that includes the people and persons already in their lives, and that includes non humans who would do anything for them, thank you very much. I'm referring to a person whose self esteem or self confidence has taken a couple too many hits and thinks he - did I say he? - or she - thinks he or she needs to overcompensate by being or becoming someone they aren't. This person I have in mind is always in search of something out there, never here, because if it was here the search would end. This person I have in mind can't see when they're in over their heads, when something dark, sinister and wrong is happening and — What's that? I didn't hear the question. Can you repeat the question, Chimeka? Thanks. No. I'll be fine. You know me. A lynx can take care of himself. I eat dark and sinister for dinner. So where was I? This person I have in mind would accuse me of being too Curean. As if that's an insult. As if that means anything. I'll tell you what it means. Where did the bartender go? Is she making the rum herself? Some of you have commented before that you noticed a change in me once I started meditating. Equal rights made a difference, but when I started to slow things down ...

"I was just in a tent — don't ask. There were lots of people, all human incidentally. And they're going on about this and that, liquefactions and sublimations and so on, and meanwhile what nobody's noticing is something amazing taking place. Let me paint a quick picture. Big canopy. Campfire red. Smoky. Stinky. Lots of men, all men incidentally, over there. Carson, over here. Okay? And don't even ask whose tent it was because I'm not going there. So anyway, there was a moth. Cute little guy. Seemed content. I watched him flutter around the folds and I thought: you know what: the same

energy that powers the bigger brutes in the tent, including this lynx, powers this little moth. Who would have thought? So I watched him. Light, gentle and delicate, but also: frantic, erratic and desperate. He went up. He went down. He went sideways. At every turn he encountered the same obstacle. He kept flapping his wings against the cloth. I watched him wear himself out and clip onto a fold. His wings heaved. Then he went again. From one diamond-shape to the next, he made more desperate attempts. And I kept thinking: it's as if someone had taken a drop of life and surrounded it with fur and feathers, and set it zig-zagging against an impossible wall. Made more awkward by his attempts. Until his energy started to drain. His wings flapped but without the same energy. He sank. And sunk. Until the moth hit the ground, and made a last attempt. And grew stiff. And relaxed, before it couldn't move at all.

"But I'm rambling now, and what I really wanted to say was ... This looks delicious. Is this small batch? You say they make it in the Rose City? I might have to pay them a visit. Take the payment from my Relative Reality credits. So what I was saying is — hold on. This looks so good. (Licks.) I mean, come on. Sugar cane and coconut, transformed into 80 proof. It creates this buttery biting bouquet ... I picture a buttercup with a Rottweiler's snout snapping down my throat. So what I was saying is ... We're alone. But some people make us not so alone. Or more alone. We're connected. And not so much. I feel raw this morning. Very emotional. Give me a minute. (Licks.) So good. What I'm saying is ... Carson out."

He'd restricted himself to one rum and upholds that restriction. It's going to be a long trot home and staggering would make it unendurable. On either side of the street, the scrapers are wet with shadow. A pair of pigeons hops off a ledge, one after the other, and makes a plunge before leveling off, and coasting, onto whatever mission birds embark on. The air is sweet, and it's not because of the nearby bun shop. It's always sweeter on a chilly morning. His ancestors and non-conscious or "animal" counterparts, would think (feel? sense? know?) the same thing. The redolence of an early spring morning, made stale because of the stench of cloves in his memory. It's impossible to feel anything but disgust, but the point is to accept feeling without label, to let it register and linger as it will, to dissolve on its own without his intrusion. But one more rum would accelerate the process. Abstinence is jail! Over there. Is that - Empty's? One must be mindful of signs. So be it. He will cross the street, but a tram honks. Carson sits on the edge of the damp sidewalk as it glides by, automatic, mostly empty, guided by a program to continue its loop. Donald took it. By now he's home, probably fondling that ridiculous book on his way to Gringott's Bank. As if someone wanted to steal it. Balthazar had given him an advance, enough for two passengers on a round trip.

Carson refused. "I need to clear my head." And he did, but he hasn't. And it's going to be a long walk.

By the time he reaches his conapt scraper, the sun is spraying its full-bladder blast on everything in sight, including Carson's bedraggled ass. To think: a day ago he was on the verge of entering the very state that's now become a full-blown personal crisis. Will he even make it to the elevator? Where's a bellhop when you need one? But a lynx has pride. Gumption. The elevator is one of those blast-pod deals that were in vogue years ago. It shoots him up 20 stories a second, which defeats the purpose of making it seethrough. The city disappears when the doors part and into the hallway he walks. So long, sun. Hello, theta waves and blackout curtains. He might even upload the Relative Reality Dreamer series, and he was saving that for a special occasion. Either way, one or two shots and then, when Donald wakes him for their rendezvous, so be it. Whatever he does, he will not let the idea of tonight — of the future — remove him from this moment, from this acceptance of his need, even if they're to meet back at Balthazar's this evening to go somewhere in the biomed district where Balthazar alleges he knows the maker of the vial. A vial which absolutely had the smell of an indenturing medicinal regardless of what *he* says. But Donald would have none of it. Failure isn't an option. Ah, but if you stop playing the game you remove arbitrary outcomes. Why are these hallways so long? But then he would complain he was too close to the elevator. Jeter's home. He smells the marijuana from his conapt. Betsy's home. She always hits the N-Guage at lunchtime. Thankfully no cloves. No Balthazar. No. No Megan Jean. Stop it. When he turns this corner, it's two doors down and he'll be in his room, and no more thoughts of — he can't even remember. That's how far gone she is from his mind. He turns the corner and she's gone. Banished. An empty hallway is an empty mind but who's this at Donald's door?

"Who are you?" Carson demands. "I asked you a question. Look at me. I said look at me."

She does. And she is. Which is to say that if a magic lamp had been rubbed, it would have produced someone like this. Not spectral because material. Not ethereal because comely. Like the perfect scoop of strawberry dolloped into a snug sugar cone fit. Not a drip in sight. Angular. Round. Geometrical but more. What coconut is to rum. When she smiles, it infuses more than an 80 proof rush into his blood stream. If lynxes could smile without baring their fangs, Carson would show them all. She speaks. "Hi, I'm —" And as he's thinking how a voice enriches the person the way a barrel ages a rum, her smile

turns. She yells. "Down!" Carson obeys. Down he falls. What more? What else? Then from behind, a strange sound. Not a bang but a burst. Something sizzles overhead. The hallway goes yellow. A yellow electrical ball punches out a hole through the far wall. The woman at Donald's is sideways, on the other side, arms on the walls. She's dodged the blast and she's looking at Donald, who's opened the door. Behind Carson, the same woman is reloading a hand canon. He charges. She sees him. And spikes the ground with something that explodes in smoke.

I Delvin Cythroat I

Walking (practically waltzing) along the river as the river breeze blows his (lustrous) hair, the cherry trees dotting his path in a pink-petaled carpet, Cythroat wonders why he didn't enter a superior body before. It would have saved him oodles of agony from that former jalopy, prone to: eczema, psoriasis, arthritis (of the rheumatoid variety), tennis and golf elbow in both arms, inflamed bowels, colon (and gluten) sensitivity, asthma and an extreme form of allergic rhinitis — not simply of the stuffy nose, post-nasal drip variety, but the kind of temple-compressing, brain-cramping, mental fog-spreading and thought-dismantling class that it added five years of delay to his toils — he's sure of it.

Whereas now, among the sky and river, the WW Commemoration Bridge in the distance, he feels the mystical flow of particles coursing through his nerves, waterfalled from his brain into its new repository of supplication. Cythroat should be sprinting from the scene of the crime, but this little moment, while not exactly revelatory (but close), is more important ... part indulgence, part comprehension of his newfound, newly created ability. A body that's supple, strong, reliable and indefatigable. Yes, this may be a chasing after the wind, but it's a breeze that arises from a mind wholly body, or a body wholly mind – or not quite (and that's the point of going on, aside from murdering Donald Marcus), but close enough for a revelry. Cythroat leans his arm cannon on the railing and picks up a rock. Hard. Rigid. Dense. And hurls it into the water. It plunks through, never to be seen again while overhead, sparrow-shaped aerials whizz by with quantum times the power and grace of their ornithological counterparts.

He picks up the hand cannon and moves on, progressing (logically) from the transition of unwanted to accepted (desired) biological machine to the experience of exchanging the male for female anatomy — and his surprise agnosticism to the switch. Aside from the procreation organs, whose weight he can feel suspended in his pubic region, and which he originally rendered obsolete anyhow, at least the internal ones, it's the same fundamental human experience. Joints bend. Muscles flex. Nose breathes. And so on. Does he feel womanly as opposed to … what? To that male junkyard of "organic" matter? "Organic" has always been a false taxonomy and everybody has their own levels of anima and animus anyway.

Sirens scream and emergency vehicles are blustering toward the wreckage. Cythroat hoists the arm cannon to his chest. It's a shame. One shot and done, and no carnage to show for it. He shot-puts it into the One River. Its elongated mass causes a double plunk before it disappears. He should be going, but he wants to look. Around the spindly

scraper he walks until the smoking ruin comes into view. A hundred stories high, the crater hangs like an oval-shaped mouth, like a scream in the wall.

He finds himself screaming. Out loud? Yes, aloud. The sound — barbaric, brutish but (objectively) dulcet — is catalyzed from a perfectly rendered voice box, hurled into the world by an harmonic act of exquisitely choreographed esophageal-sphincter tension. As the rain lashes his oval shaped-mouth and his hair whips around. Except that it's bright. Raining light. And the scream has an unexpected echo. As though his larynx had halted the sound before reaching its apex and diverted the primordial waves of being, likely the first sounds of homo erectus, into the caverns of his brain. His brain. Misfiring again. Damn it. The sequence of responses is wrong. And only now, after the fact, is he coming to terms with The Sighting. Donald Marcus? Yes, he was there. And didn't die. The non human. Which also didn't die. But also in the hallway:

She was there.

Sculpted from nothing. Made into everything. Who went, on her own. From something to anyone.

She didn't, doesn't and won't appear on his maps. But he knows it was her.

From the scream in the wall, as the emergency personnel stare mutely from the maw in the blast radius, he hears her throaty voice lodged in the wind, lingering like an aluminum butterfly, winging a pitiful path of its own before evaporating into the sounds of the river.

Cythroat will walk away but doesn't. He did it all wrong to begin with. The arm cannon was redundant. Devoid of physical contact, evisceration would slake nothing. When he kills Donald Marcus, he must do it with his hands.

Someone is coming toward him. She is dressed like a whore. Except she's not. She's a businesswoman. Clearly. In a professional suit, absorbed in the experience of Relative Reality, no doubt.

"Excuse me," Cythroat says, noticing his womanized voice (deep, powerful, feline).

The woman (whose hair is all wrong for her face) looks at Cythroat without suspicion.

The sexism is unbelievable. It's because he (Cythroat) is in a female body that this businesswoman suffers no weariness at his approach. Were he enrobed in his male biological machine, this woman (who's so bereft of cosmetic sense that she doesn't see that a gamine cut *only* works on a rounder, shorter face) would have quickened away at his approach. Should he explain that a long oval face demands, at minimum, an angular bob cut and preferably a shoulder-length blowout? It would be the humane thing to do.

"You're bleeding," the woman says.

For a minute, she turns into a pyramid of ash, but quickly recomposes into a bundle of flesh. Bleeding? Did that non human bite his thigh?

"Thank," he says, but before "you" can arrive, a blow to his rhomboid major knocks him to the ground. Broken by the bounce of his breasts! Then a crack to his temple blots out the light and he's out.
I Claire I

After the Walther Wallach Medical Center, Claire went to *Fate's Dominion, A Casino for Everyone*. The first things she noticed were the smells: the mineral of coinage, the pine of air freshener, and decay, for Fortune, Luck and Loss, respectively. Mingling with marinara, miso, and red-sauce chimichangas. This time commingling with leftovers from the medical center — antiseptic, Alan's sweat, the booze from his clothing. Because odors, like feelings, are physical, occupying "bodies, in a sense." They drifted across the the finger-pressing-buttons, hand-pulling levers, slack-jawed faces not quite hypnotized but vacated by occupants on forays to Fate's actual dominion.

Claire watched the play of slots, baccarat and roulette. At the latter she lingered. Shutting her eyes to listen to the metal glide, plastic spin, metallic dump and cease. She could tell by the sound in what color the ball landed. She always bet on black. "But isn't red your thing?" "But you taught me that a contrarian point of view enlarges." The tension from binding the contradictions is what prevents the wheel from flying off its axis. At the table she wondered. How many times had she bore witness to the body orbiting the counter-spinning mass, awaiting Gravity's crash? How many times had she watched Fate orbit Fate until Fate crashed into Fate. In the end, she didn't even play.

What Alan never knew is that she went to the Rose City on her "solo retreats. A weekend a month isn't a lot to ask, and I'm not asking for permission. Frankly, It's none of your business but I'm going for my sanity." Adding: "Sometimes you drive me so crazy."

Her nights were spent in *Fate's Dominion*; her days in the Emerald Towers where she was told many things.

Science: "Union is possible through the fusion of two or more unique atoms."

Instructions: "Look for Candy and then let it happen. Trust that you have the stronger core. You'll know when Soderberg arrives."

Comfort: "You've haven't heard the tale of Abraham and Isaac, I suppose? You wouldn't. It would have been sacrificed, but if old age has taught me anything, it's that something always remains. It might comfort you to know that martyrs come in different forms. Often, the most painful sacrifice isn't of ourselves." Lessons: "What if I told you that the stakes to play were your feelings for your husband? What, then, Claire? How would you go about the excavation? It's a personal issue, to be sure, but consider: everything has a body, and the body, by nature, is degradable."

Claire had imagined absurd ways. What if feelings were garments, and the game was strip poker? It had promise, but a feeling doesn't unstrap as easily as a bra.

She tried direct ways, through avoidance and non-recognition. But human nature is perverse: feelings grow in direct proportion to their neglect.

But then she discovered the utility of contradictory feelings. The tough ones could be trained to bully the tender-hearted dears. Claire trained hard. "You have no self control. No sense of something larger than yourself. Nothing to give yourself over to other than that idiotic book."

"But, Claire, what does the law of conservation of energy teach us?"

"That energy isn't created or destroyed. It's transformed." Longing into resentment. Regret into malice. Love into rage.

"Good, Claire. Because the time has come. Go to The Machinist."

What Marcus never knew is that she came armed with surveillance cream. "It reaches the subject's Relative Reality, and then — bingo." A little more and she could have tapped into his neural activity, but Marcus is a thug. He blocked her hits and held her wrists. But the dab she smeared across his neck outside the medical center was enough. Location and audio transmissions were all she needed.

He was too broke to rent an aerial, which made surveillance from one easy. After leaving the casino, Claire found him at the bazaar. She docked near the Broken Bridge and watched Balthazar's workers haul boxes, crates, tins, even a caged gorilla at one point. During which Claire stayed patient, vigilant, expectant, holding at bay an urge to explode.

When day broke, she watched Balthazar hold the vial to the light. She watched Marcus,

a burial ground of guilt, examine the glass. And a comedy routine ensue.

Balthazar: "It means I'm coming with you."

Marcus: "But ... that's too ... generous."

Balthazar: "Nothing generous about it."

Marcus: "But this - it's too trivial for someone like you."

Balthazar: "Nothing trivial about it."

Marcus: "But I'll pay you."

Balthazar: "Of course you will."

As if the ending wasn't apparent.

Marcus: "You win, Balthazar. What does it say?"

As if winning and losing weren't identical.

Balthazar: "How would I know? Only a translator could read it. Oh, right." It placed him in her bullseye. "Sorry. That was mean. My men deliver packages with these symbols every week."

Marcus: "And?"

Balthazar: "And ... I know where they go."

Alan. Emptied. Island. Instrument.

He must have thought her a monster. Must have wondered what he'd done wrong, how their marriage, as if it's a thing, had gone wrong, how and why he'd always disappointed her. The wheel spins one way. The pity. The ball spins another. Fate. If he'd been stronger, she would have told him the story of Abraham and Issac.

But Fate surprises. She didn't know what Marcus was up to until he slid the vial from his jacket and squirted it into Alan's drink. She knew that Carson was a ploy. Of course she did. With Marcus, there's always something. But that diabolical action, the coldness of it, the disregard for Alan, for her husband, was an affront on her. She thought about intervening. She has a heart and a heart, as a rule, has affection, has tenderness and sympathy. But the trick to living is quickly and seamlessly redirecting negative energies into positive outcomes, so she let it play out as it squeezed the universe into a ball.

The blast was a sign, but also unexpected. Not that it mattered. It took them five minutes, Marcus and Carson, to make a beeline for the tram. She watched them bicker. She watched Marcus pick up Carson and board the tram; Carson dart off; Marcus step off just as the tram was departing. She watched them take a seat on a bench and wait for the next one as Marcus pet him.

Now they're here. She docks the aerial and makes her way down. The sun is nosediving over the river. Their destination stands like pieces of a giant's broken toy: a collection of angular buildings grouped into a campus on a small, manmade island. Box-like buildings are topped with triangular glass structures. Fate, Fortune, Luck, Faith — have brought them here, to the former Rose City aquarium.

From Balthazar's limo, they emerge, Marcus, Carson and Balthazar with that ridiculous eye, the former two gawking like tourists at a bridge to the campus. "Hi, dummies," she says. They all turn, three speechless stooges. She dispenses the mystery in short order. She informs Marcus that she followed him, that she would never trust a dope like him with something "as important as my husband's consciousness. So here's what we're going to do. You," she says to Balthazar, "are getting me in there to talk to the right person. You," she says to Carson, "can jump in the river for all I care. And you," she says to Marcus, "you -."

But she is cut short by the "I'll be doggone" of a man speeding across the bridge. "Is that him?" he barks, dabbing his forehead with a handkerchief. The four visitors wait. When he reaches the street, the man bows, belly hanging like an elephant's from an untucking shirt. "I can't tell you how pleased I am to see you." With both hands, he shakes Marcus'.

"You know each other?" Balthazar says.

Marcus stands dumbly, pumping the plump man's hand like a jammed slot handle.

"Wait a second," the man says. "I recognize you. Balthazar's Bazaar! My kids love your vids."

"I'm charmed! We have a dedicated children's section, filled with everything from -."

"We're so thrilled you've come," the man says, glowing at Marcus. His head is lodged like a moon in the center of the plunging sun. It shades his expression of delight all the more grotesquely.

Enough. Let the Thunder speak.

"I'm Claire," she says. "I think someone named Candy might -."

"Pleased to meet you, Claire," the man says, transferring the sweat from his chubby palm to her lithe grip. "I'm Elbert Daft, senior vice president and chief operating officer of Unus Mundus." Balthazar shares a knowing look with Marcus. "I see we have a non human with us! Suffice to say that we're all Unus Mundus," Elbert says. "Come in. All of you."

Anticipation makes her light. Everything around her blurs as her focus narrows forward. The trip over the bridge filters through her conscious brain and only registers in the far back, where it rises like steam from a street. Over the bridge. Up the escalator. Into the mouth of Unus Mundus.

Marcus is the first one through. A voice from a speaker, computerized, announces each time someone walks by: "If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water." As pillars of water rise to a concrete ambulatory overhead. Over that, the glass ceiling, pyramid-shaped, lets the bloody light drench the upper levels of concrete slabs. How many rooms are concealed? How much resistance? Could this be a place of Faith?

All around them, in alcoves in the concrete walls, sit glassed-in boxes of water. Giant

aquariums, empty of anything except water. And bubbles. The gentle insistence of air searching for a surface in which to render its minute, inevitable explosion, an uninterrupted suicide mission.

"Where are the fish?" Carson says. In the cavernous reception area, there must be 50 of them, bubbling and glowing. "Well," Elbert replies, "the aquariums serve a different purpose." "Meaning?" Carson says. "Meaning," Elbert replies, "that water will always remain the point of origin." "Oh," Carson says.

When they reach the security checkpoint, a guard declares: "I am large. I contain multitudes." To which Elbert Daft responds: "I am large. I contain multitudes. Charlie, let's talk a second. I have some guests here that ..."

"Can I have a word with you?" Marcus says, and less gently than gentlemanly, yanks Claire aside.

"Don't - ever - touch me like that."

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I told you precisely what I'm doing."

"You need to leave."

Whether it's the lighting or the background, the bubbling placid water before which Marcus' head floats, it feels like the first time she's ever looked at him. So much muscle. So much skin. So thick, like a hippo's hide, and so tall, too, voluminous, holding it all in. How can he hold it in? Any minute and her hand is going to rise on its own. She can still feel it in her palm, in her fingers, the reverberating buzz to sting his ignorance.

What Marcus doesn't know is that Alan's wife is the one who dosed him. Three tablets in three beers before Marcus had arrived. It wants to come out of her. She can feel it in her throat, like a ball of phlegm to spit on his stupid face, but it already betrays him — before the body of water bubbling upwards, the emptiness before the emptiness — it has too much, or too little, and for a swift moment Claire feels something she never thought she'd feel for Marcus. She raises her hand to his face. And stops when she overhears Elbert Daft.

"Thanks, Charlie. I'll take Mr. Marcus. Send for Soderberg to host our other guests."

"Well?" Marcus says.

The moment crests. Too liquid for the solid sphere to hold.

"I'm sorry," she says.

As Soderberg comes in, Marcus is taken through the doorway as Carson's cry echoes across the chamber. He cries his master's name.

I Delvin Cythroat I

His brother always said that the brain is like a monkey trying to steer an elephant. It shakes the reigns while the greater beast lumbers where it will. Or was it not a monkey at all? There was an elephant. He knows that. And the point was that systems one and two of the brain share the ride. Or that peace between between species is remote. Or that the competing factions of the mind are made harmonious only if and when an impartial third party adjudicates their differences of opinion. Regardless, when he opens his eyes (Who or what just opened his eyes? Monkey or elephant? System one or two? Or the phantom third party?), when he opens his eyes, the Milky Way is stretched across his sightline like a bruise. Pain receptors indicate severe contusion and possible hematoma, but that's easily fixed. The more immediate problem is the chain and cuffs. He can't scratch an itch because his his wrists are pinned to the ground. Alas, so too are his ankles. So he's spreadeagled here between, what?, some buildings on either side and the Orion constellation overhead. At least the view is beatific, in its way, concealing the Monkey Head nebula within its distance. The celestial mechanics of the universe reign down. "It's right there," Cythroat mutters. But something is muttering in the background. Or not muttering but rumbling. Or no. What is that noise? It's coming from behind, so he cranes back to look over his face, as it were. Ah. It should have been obvious. Eyes like black beetles. Pinched ears. Long, black muzzle baring teeth. A doberman is snarling at him, flicking its rancid slobber in uncontrollable bursts. The dog lurches for Cythroat. He closes his eyes. (There he goes again. Who or what closed them?) A chain jingles. The hot breath of barking flies overhead, but no nearer. Oh. The dog is leashed. Good. But then a shoe crunches pebbles nearby. "Blasting holes in conapt walls wasn't in your job description," a voice says.

Cythroat has to laugh. If he hadn't been knocked unconscious, his inner elephant might never have wandered over to the river in which he was pushed. Or did he fall? Either way, the elephant confirmed what his simian brain discovered below the surface. Through the blackness, the elephant had taken control of Cythroat's biology, but who trained this trunked beast to manage something as intricate as a biological system? No. For all its foolishness, the monkey must always be in control. The universe says so. Having passed through the temporary void of unconsciousness, this short search of the cosmos has confirmed absolutely what he has to do.

"You're a proud employee of Hawksbill?" Cythroat says.

The doberman's teeth tear through its rippling cheeks while two brown boots emerge.

They stop beside the implacable dog as the night bombards them with a burst of Milky Way neutrinos. Cythroat gets an upside down look at his assailant.

"The wetsuit from the Tram," Cythroat says. "I might have known."

In seconds, one of those soot-encrusted boots is on his forehead. The galaxy disappears behind its outline and behind that, its owner's ashen face wreathed in jagged black hair.

"You've gone off the deep end, Delvin," the speaker says.

The Rose City and its back alleys. The bestial aspects of existence: grit in his lip, rock in his cheek, grooved polyvinyl chloride (his assailant's heel) on his frontal bone ... a vessel of apertures through which life sends its hordes and parasites to be experienced as sensations. In matters of perspective, squished between sole and street (and wall and wall, and left and right hemispheres), in which the infinitesimal and ephemeral appear larger and permanent in the moment against the coyer, yet omnipresent here, the tiny speck of "man" emerges without perspective, or even a reverse, perverted point of view within the nothingness.

"The job's done," Cythroat says.

The speaker, who whose face looks like a moon, releases a mirthless laugh. His boot lifts. The tension in the chains relents. The doctor sits up, his wrists and ankles still shackled, and reaches for the dog. When he nears the animal's grimacing snout, it nearly snaps its head off lunging at his hand.

"It doesn't like women," the man says.

It hurts — more than he can say. During the flight to his lab, Cythroat can't stop thinking that his attacker actually thinks that he, Delvin Cythroat, wanted to become a woman. Is he being overly sensitive? Sexist, even? Is he predisposed to unruliness after being bludgeoned into unconsciousness? Or is his brain malfunctioning again? Again? As Cythroat looks over at the lunar complexion of his captor, he wonders if it's abnormal to want to kill someone for thinking something that they shouldn't.

"What's your name?" Cythroat says. Then out of courtesy clarifies: "So I can identify you

in my thoughts."

The man tightens his (ill-proportioned) jaw. "Call me whatever you want."

It would definitely be imprudent to kill *Trent*, an operative for Hawksbill, the organization that commissioned him to undertake a lucrative job. Half was paid upfront, enabling Cythroat to do things he hadn't in years – buy rations other than tablets, ingest liquid besides H2O capsules – and reinvest the proceeds into Cythroat, Inc. Killing Trent could jeopardize the deal's consummation, and Hawksbill would hire a replacement for Trent anyway, so the conclusion is obvious: the murder of Trent would feed the elephant (so what if it's vegetarian?) but undermine the monkey's long-term plans — plans to revolutionize everything while delivering him, Dr. Delvin Cythroat, the satisfaction of having out-invented them all, including his brother, but especially Walther Wallach. But that doesn't change the fact that Trent thinks that he wanted to become a woman.

When they arrive, Cythroat waddles ahead in his chains. "This way, Trent. Don't step on that," he says, pointing to the charred remains of the bonfire. After a long day above, it's good to be back underground. The vision of his lab lifts his heart.

"So this is the great Cythroat, Inc.?" Trent says, taking in the forlorn box among the batinfested darkness. "Charming."

"Come now. Let me show you Hawksbill's great prize."

Ordered to enter first, Cythroat illuminates the studio – the gurneys and freezers of organs and tables of offal and, he sees Trent notice, the apparatus in the corner connected to three tubes that disappear into the ground.

"Do I even want to know what that is?"

"It's a loom," Cythroat says. "Epidermis, dermis and hypodermis. Hence the three injectors."

Trent's tawny eyes zero in on Cythroat beneath the bright light. "Speaking of skin," he says, "you don't look so good. You should see a doctor."

"I am a –." But Cythroat sees the red blotches on the backs of his hands. "I'm fine,

Trent." Past the limbs and tools, beyond the table where he performed his own transplant — his fertile crescent — Cythroat leads him to an air-locked door on the ground. He unlatches it, revealing a ladder.

"No games," Trent says.

It's sad, really, watching a brain incapable of assessing the variables go through the motions, so Cythroat throws him a bone. "You're an untrusting man, Trent, so how do you want to proceed? If I go first, there's a chance I'll be waiting at the bottom with a meat cleaver. If you go first, you risk a kick to the head and being suffocated in my warehouse."

Trent orders him to go first, adding: "I'll spill your brains if you try anything." Which makes Cythroat smile on the inside.

It's a precipitous climb. How he ever made his way down this ladder in his former body is a miracle. Of course he never had to – he took the elevator – and as he makes his way down (made more cumbersome by the cuffs and chains) Cythroat keeps wondering what he'll do when he reaches the bottom. He keeps it a mystery. Consciously so (monkey-inspired!). Spontaneous actions are best in these situations. Trust the wisdom of the elephant. But that's wrong. All wrong. But as so often happens, his indecision is made moot. His decision is made for him.

"Whatever happened to Cythroat Brothers, Inc.?" Trent says — said, innocently, mindlessly — elephant-generated, no doubt.

Cythroat halts, his hands dangling over the rungs like chained paws, and gazes up at his jailer's boots, the very ridges that were flattening his perfect face less than an hour ago.

For his part, Trent seems to detect a plunge in barometric pressure. He draws a gun. "Delvin, we're almost there."

It's dark. Extremely so. He should turn on the light, and he will, but he wonders if Trent knows what killed the cat. He could ask him. "But you don't know," Cythroat says. "I know it." And completes the descent, hopping onto the earth just inside the cone of light.

"Take five steps back," Trent says.

Each tread jangles the chains, sending Cythroat farther into the darkness. "From moonlight to blackness, just before dusk," Cythroat says.

When he reaches the bottom, Trent stands like a man caught in a UFO beam.

"Turn on the lights."

Cythroat recedes, backwards, followed by his captor. Suddenly they're wading through shoulders, and Cythroat ducks. Two blasts ring through the chamber followed by the sound of hard breaths. From his squat, the doctor watches Trent's legs scramble among the perfect thighs, heading, for whatever reason, toward the light, which Cythroat snuffs with a Relative Reality command. For a few blissful moments, the serenity of his work surrounds him as the sounds of strife are absorbed by the mass of synthetic flesh. Poor Trent: trapped between conflicting impulses: to bluster his way out of this ordeal, wait for Cythroat to make a mistake, or continue his retreat toward the ladder.

"That sound," Cythroat says, "is the disappearance of your escape," referring to the metal ladder grinding into its fixed position along the ceiling. It stops and all is silent again. Cythroat is twirling his hair, scrunched into a frog-like pose, when he realizes that he hasn't urinated in his new body yet. Alas, no more standing to pee. For the rest of his days, he'll be sitting, like this. "Let's clear the air," he announces. "I did not choose to become a woman. I'm a man who happens – out of necessity – to be in a woman's skin. I was drowning, Trent. My prior body was pulverized by the fall. I had no choice."

"Fine," Trent calls.

"But then you made it worse. You wouldn't have known I was so sensitive ... I know that, Trent. But you surfaced a painful memory." Because he was betrayed. It ruined his relationship with his brother and forced him into this life while the thief – "a pickpocket" – rode his invention to wealth. "Cythroat Brothers, Inc., should be the most capitalized organization on earth. Relative Reality is a joy to everyone."

"Sure."

"Tell me," Cythroat says, "what's your favorite sensory impression? You must have one, Trent. Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess. There's something something soft and mushy in that crusty heart of yours. I know it." As Cythroat spirals his hair he taps his lip. "Doves!" he says. "You love to listen to the cooing of doves in the morning, don't you?"

"Yes," Trent says, his voice now getting closer. "Birds in the morning."

"I wish that my brother and I could have profited from something that gives brings you so much delight," he says. "It vexes me to the core to know that the line separating success and disaster can be so trivial. Do you know what it was?" Cythroat waits. "A patent, Trent. Walther Wallach stole our invention and patented it before that legality had ever crossed our minds. I'm vexed, Trent. Very vexed. It's like I'm a prisoner in my own mind." He jangles the chain connecting his cuffs. And then a rush of air comes his way and a thousand eyes open. In seconds, a thud sounds, followed by the pummeling of flesh.

"Stop," Cythroat commands, and it goes quiet save for Trent's wheezing.

I Marcus I

The Choice.

The door shuts and they enter a cold corridor of flickering lights. On one side, recessed into the wall, aquariums hum with dark-lit water and nothing else; no sea-life; just volumes of bubbling water. On the other side, they pass rooms with brighter lights cut off by dangling strips of thick plastic, like walk-in refrigerator curtains. Every now and then, he passes a room where the shape of a person is standing or working behind the curtain. Always a distorted, blackened shape. Holding something. Stooping over something. And acerbic smells of singed things. And the corridor light flickering but the total space suffused with a dark glow, like luminescent mist trapped inside the cavities of air molecules.

"Mr. Daft, I think there's been a mistake."

"There hasn't. And call me Elbert."

The moment feels cut in half — each side teeming with momentousness, as though they exist as independent realities and somehow, through his being here, now, with Elbert in this corridor, they've been synthesized, superimposed or even reunited in a makeshift science by, or in, his mere presence - when that happens, then what? There's the force he has control over. He could peer through the strips of plastic tarp hanging from doorway after doorway, obvious laboratories of caustic smells and terrible sounds, screams even - primal, animal, muzzled - down the corridor with the halfbaked Waltherium, its tube work running crazily along the gutted ceiling, blinking, strobe-lighting the corpulent flab of his guide taking him who knows were. There's that force, yes. He could stop, turn, and leave if he wanted. Get Carson and go. To Saint Santiago. To Lone Star. To wherever. How else to rationalize, and react to the arrival of Claire? There are bad omens and then there are bad omens. The wife of the man who's brain he's now, completely and irrevocably responsible for fixing ... No ... This sequencing is too labyrinthine to escape from. Because there's the other force, a tidal power not divorced from, but actually influencing his will which brought him here, intentionally or powered by something else with intention. It's strange. And overwhelming. And invigorating.

After several minutes of walking, Marcus pauses at one of the aquariums. Unlike the others, this one is only half-filled, and something inhabits it. A slender black snake,

bangled in vibrant orange stripes, glides in silent motions across the surface of the dark water. "I see you've spotted Boris," Elbert says, heaving heavily. "The doctor indulged me ... He let me repurpose a little space back to its original intent. This building dates back a good century. It stayed an aquarium for a few years into RESET, and then things happened, and then the doctor took title to the property and then the rest is history." "Doctor?" "Don't mind me. I blab. But Boris? He's something of a mascot." "Can I ask what you do here? And what 'Unus Mundus' means? And how you know me? And -." "Valid questions, all of them, but don't you worry. I'm going to get you to the person whose job it is to answer them." "But aren't you the chief operations officer?" "I'm the custodian around here. Basic business operations are garbage that piles up, and I make it all go away. There are other minds here ... dedicated to 'clarifying the abstract,' shall we say. My task right now is to get you to them."

They're almost at the end of the hallway as the light continues to blink on and off, when they pass a doorway without plastic curtains. In fact, it's brightly lit, spacious, and filled with — artwork?

"Oh, there you go," Elbert says. "You've found our collection. We have pieces scattered throughout the campus, but this is kind of our museum within the museum. The doctor was — is, I should say — a real aficionado. Before all the museums were looted, he managed to assemble one the largest collections in the districts. Throughout our facility, you'll find everything from Baroque to Basquiat. These tall and skinny critters, for instance — suggestive, aren't they? Like you're gazing at the artist's rawest vision of the human experience. I think we have something like 50 Giacomettis standing around here. And don't you just love the contrast? See those big boys and girls hanging there? So much paint for so much flesh. The thing about the mature work of Lucian Freud wasn't so much his subjects, but how he captured the uncomfortable space between himself and his subjects. See?"

"Elbert, that snake back there?"

"Boris?"

"I've seen it before. I want to ask you about something I've brought."

"Hold that thought. Okay? We're almost there."

Elbert leads him out of the studio, back into the hallway and finally to its end where a

pair of silver doors stand.

"So here we are," Elbert says. "The big moment, at last." Something dings and the doors part. "Go on," Elbert says. "Climb in. Good. Now you'll see there are two buttons. Click the bottom one to keep going on. Or press the top button to opt out."

"Opt out?"

"Of the whole thing, Mr. Marcus. You have a choice. The top button will take you to a landing area. Once you climb off, the elevator will close and you'll have the option to go one of two directions. One passage leads north to Emerald Falls. The other takes you south, to Nevada. Or you can take the elevator down another level."

"But I can't go back?"

The doors are starting to close.

"That option's never existed. Not ever. See you around, okay? Or not."

The silver doors close and Elbert Daft is gone.

Can he trust trust that Carson is fine, that Carson can take care of himself? The latter is demonstrably provable, but the former? The sound he made in the reception area ... *What are the roots that clutch ...* But Carson chose. What branches grow out of this stony rubbish? He opted in. But Carson is loyal, and loyalty is manipulatable.

Marcus would close his eyes and press if his finger hadn't already pushed the bottom button.

Candy.

Her eyes are like Faberge eggs. Her lipstick (cherry chocolate) and nail polish (teal) are austere, precise. Her hair is short, parted and slicked to the side (with the comb marks to prove it). And her forehead is creased as her sullen mouth betrays a sensuousness, keeping her lips parted enough for her teeth to peek through.

From the elevator where he was greeted (by her), through the hallway, he followed the click of her heels around the corner into the conference room ("our war room") and bid him to sit facing a wall of paintings, one in particular — a dramatic piece, at least five feet across, mostly dark, a brimstone-black background, as though an oil spill had been sucked into the sky. In the foreground, a man kneels, wearing a white tunic from which flames are bursting. Muscular, he is trying to rip off the flaming garment as he looks to the blackness.

"It's called *The Death of Hercules*," she says, taking a seat with an imperial spine and then sweeping the nothingness off her lap. "It dates back centuries. Original oil, painstakingly preserved. Francisco de Zurbaran." Detecting no recognition, she continues. "Have you ever heard the tale of Hercules' Labors?" Her eyes sparkle. "He was a bit of a brute in his day, ages before RESET, but Hercules had something of the divine about him."

"Something of the what?"

"It means that his father wasn't of this world. You must understand: these were times when people believed in all sorts of phantasmagoria. But Hercules did something monstrous one day – something unforgivable."

"Oh?"

"He murdered his wife and children." At which point she searches Marcus, but unless she could see his toes curl, she saw nothing more than a man listening to a story. "He craved relief from the pain he brought upon himself. But how does one atone for a crime like that, that alters one's reality? For make no mistake, his outer world became a reflection of his inner depravity. One moment, he was walking the earth with divinity literally in his fingertips and the next ... radically altered. But you must be dying to know how he purged his guilt? Turns out the solution was rather basic. Hercules was commanded to perform a series of labors — physical feats that, if completed, would transform him into one of history's most mythologized figures. As an aside," she says, "isn't it interesting how a sickness is often remedied by going outside of one's self? When he completed his labors – and complete them he did – Hercules emerged not only triumphant, but redeemed of his guilt, and ascended his world to a better one."

"Better?"

"A world without death, Mr. Marcus."

"Why did he do it?"

"It's funny you should ask," she says, swirling her tongue inside her cheek. "He was commanded to perform the labors -."

"Why did he kill them?"

"Ah," she says. "It's very tragic, really. Hercules' conscious mind was overpowered by a temporary madness. Something, perhaps, everyone is familiar with from time to time? Anyway," she says, brightening. "You didn't come here for tales of mythology. Tell me, why did you come?"

Not that he knew what to expect coming here, wherever here is, but this isn't it. Somewhere above, Claire is stalking the corridors with Balthazar. Somewhere Carson is following along.

"I'm hoping you can help me," he says. "A colleague. Something happened to his brain."

"Go on."

He explains as best he can what the doctor said, omitting the more salacious background. Then he sets the vial on the table. "What's this?"

She interlaces her fingers and drapes them on the table. "It's a good sign," she says.

"Of what?"

"It's a good sign, period," she says, at last sitting back in the chair. Behind her the paintings hang like severed heads. "You were upfront about your needs, so I shall do the same." She doesn't crack her knuckles, but she may as well. "Here's what I surmise, and feel free to correct me where I err. You willfully and knowingly administered a controlled substance to your colleague without his consent, resulting in catastrophic damage to his parietal lobe, most likely. And this colleague whose cerebrum you sublimated has a special use for you? Have I missed anything so far? No? Good. And now you're in search of anything or anyone that can help you rectify what you fear is an irreversible blunder on your part — a blunder of terrible and staggering proportions

compared to the scintilla of thought you'd put into enacting a misguided and transparently desperate scheme? It's all so obvious — what transpired and who's to blame. Most people reveal their guilt over time, but your face has been overthrown. But lucky for you, you came to the right place. My organization is in a unique position to help."

"What exactly is your organization?"

"We're getting to that."

"Unus Mundus? What does that even mean?"

"If you just -."

"If you just tell me, miss, what's going on here — how your organization is in a 'unique position to help,' starting with that vial before you and what its symbols mean — then we can continue. I'm assuming they have something to do with your mascot?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"Elbert Daft's snake? Boris?"

She yelps than laughs — a honking and piercing cry of surprise. "Sometimes our chief operating officer forgets who he's working for. The symbols on the vial are certainly not representative of our organization. The symbols in the center — well, they don't matter. The whole thing belong to a sponsoring organization. An affiliate. Not quite a parent. Occasionally we perform subcontracting services for them and use their equipment. We are Unus Mundus. One World. That's what it means. Derived from the work of the renowned psychoanalyst, Dr. Carl Jung, of whom our own doctor considers himself something a disciple, if a radical one."

"How did Elbert Daft know who I am? How do you people know me?"

"But you're Donald Marcus — the world's authority on *The Law of Success* by Napoleon Hill, starting with the all-important Definite Chief Aim — the Donald Marcus who can make us all successful if we watch, and learn from, your vids. You're him, are you not? Of course you are. What's more, you're Donald Marcus, sublimator of your book-translator's brain, and you need to repair it so that you can complete your videos. Have I

missed anything? No? Good. Because we can do more than replace your colleague's brain."

"You're claiming —" Marcus starts, "you're saying that Unus Mundus — that you have artificial intelligence that can get Alan back to translating? How? A Relative Reality upload could never —."

"You misunderstand," the woman says. "AI? Please don't insult us. AI is so last-decade. We do something else here. Come. I'll show you."

The Cranium.

"And so we catwalk over The Cranium," she announces, entering a dark and cavernous room where the soft sloshing of water purs below. A faint violet light flickers from above and a strange flash of memory — a memory he doesn't remember — comes and goes. It leaves the smell of the ocean in his mind. Over the railing of the catwalk she looks down, as does Marcus, but it's too dark to see anything but bubbles breaking the surface of water.

"A few additives go in," she says, "but generally speaking we're talking about saltwater."

"Why is it called The Cranium?"

"I'm Candy, by the way," she says, thrusting out her slender hand, "Candy Ottersblood. This way."

She leads him down a winding ramp, down several flights, to a theater area where the Cranium can be observed from its base. At first glance, it looks like the largest fishtanks Marcus has ever seen. It's large enough to house a humpback whale but remains too dark to detect its contents. Steel girders link its giant panes of glass in a crosshatch of mullions.

"Shall we?" Candy says, gesturing to a row of seats behind them. She takes to her chair like a praying mantis to a leaf, cupping her hands over a knee (crossed over the other) while Marcus bounds in, sending a screeching pendulum of cacophony throughout the chamber.

And they wait. Not unlike in a theater before a movie starts, when the brain is given the miscellaneous time to pick over the debris of its user's life ... all the accidents and decisions that led him there, to this very spot, forced to wonder where it all went wrong. But Marcus muscles through his anxiety and resolves to discard, or at least quarantine, for the moment, the whole story about Hercules, Candy's disturbing clarity into his needs and history, Elbert Daft's freakishly timely walk over the bridge and the whole, general bad-shit-feel of this whole place. Outer reality a reflection of inner depravity indeed.

Before long, the modest light which continued to flicker, goes out altogether. They're left sitting in the pitch-black theater area before the mother of all aquariums, in a campus of empty aquariums save for a stray garter snake. The Cranium continues to hum. All perfectly normal, he's sure, except that Candy curses the "blessed Waltherium down here." Then louder: "Shall I have them turn on the auxiliary?" she calls. A guestion swallowed by the vastness. He can feel her on the edge of the seat, ready to spring up when something happens. The Cranium erupts in an azure burst. A nuclear blast would be less brilliant. If the noon sky on a cloudless day was dunked into the Caribbean Ocean, it might approximate the effect of the Cranium. It takes a moment to realize that light isn't being shot into the tank; and rather that the tank, or more specifically its water. is the source of light. In that radiant fluid (saltwater?) several dozen objects are floating. Not fish or coral. Or turtles or seahorses. They could be jellyfish, blobby blooms dangling translucent tendrils, but the water, very clearly, is teeming with brains, floating near the surface in the placid undulations. Scores of them, whose meatier portions are pinkish blue mounds, like globs of ground pork congealed into two distinct but united wads from which slender, effervescent streamers spiral into cursive nothings. In fact, they are rather disgusting to behold, suspended in their compressed flimsiness, slabs of gelatinous wormy piles, woven, lumped and interwoven in malformed, oblong globes trailing swollen nerves.

"Aren't they gorgeous?" Candy says

Marcus nods, with nothing of intelligence to add, except: "Saltwater? Shouldn't they be in a serum?"

"Serum," she scoffs. "They could incubate in the ocean. Indeed, their composites are 70 percent water, but more to the point: each and every human brain is an ocean in and of itself." She turns to Marcus, her peculiarly sharp teeth peeking through her cherry-chocolate lips. "There are tidal forces at our disposal if we learn to command them,

compressed into the compact weight of three pounds, give or take a few ounces, and eventually, if all goes according to plan, encased within six point five millimeters of rock-hard bone. That's a concision unlike anything else in nature except perhaps the atom. And though I may be biased, I dare say the brain is more mysterious — and more powerful. And yet," she says, "some background is required. I want you to meet the founder, chief science officer and chief executive officer of Unus Mundus." She clears her throat. "Dr. Cythroat?" The name bolts down his spine like lightning. "We have a very important visitor." Candy drapes a palm on his arm when a voice unlike any other – mellifluous, aquatic, and thunderous – arises like a tsunami of sound: "Donald Marcus."

"Delvin?" he dares.

His hand is promptly slapped. "I hope for your sake that was a Freudian slip." Candy's eyes are aflame. "To profane the name of Culbert Cythroat with that of his" – she can barely mouth the word – "sibling is slanderous. And frankly, I thought by now that you would have more perspective of our organization. To think that Unus Mundus would appoint a sociopath ..."

Her outrage is washed over by the voice of Culbert Cythroat: "We can be more generous, Candy. My brother suffers from a gross series of derangements, but let's not falsely accuse him."

Candy's description seems on-point to Marcus. "Forgive me," he says. "Delvin Cythroat and I had a bit of a run-in yesterday."

"We should have known," Candy mumbles.

"Let's turn away from unpleasantries," Culbert Cythroat says, "to the topic at hand. I'm pleased that you're here, Mr. Marcus. I'm sure that Candy has expressed how integral your work is to ours."

Candy has tucked herself deep in the recliner, both hands stretched along the handles, eyes sealed, as though ready to take in a symphony.

"First, a brief history lesson will help us gain a clearer picture of the present and your part in the future," Culbert says.

A Brief History Lesson.

"In the beginning, which is to say in the first years of RESET, virtually everyone was possessed by what we now agree was a residual urge. It's doubtful you'd remember, but in all likelihood you were bewitched by the same impulse. *To seek fame, or wanting to be adored.* We now know that the reason for the spread and durability of this urge was due to the ease with which fame was achieved in those days.

"If someone, say, had the aesthetic wherewithal to wear a tulip-yellow dress to a dance of pearl-whites, they were cherished by the masses. If someone uttered a quip or a witticism, they were admired by thousands. That adoration was amplified because it was broadcast across a burgeoning communication platform. This urge tells us something about life before RESET – not that it hasn't been speculated to death – but it also spotlights something ineradicable in our genetic makeup."

"I'm not following," Marcus says.

"You wouldn't – because those impulses have mutated, and the farther we've journeyed into RESET, the more our early memories have drifted away from accessibility. You see, underlying the itch for recognition was a deeper need. Or a capacity – the defining aspect of capacity being one's need to fill it. Incidentally, this is where the term fulfillment comes from, but I want to veer away from abstractions."

Marcus is lost in the abstraction, but Culbert Cythroat continues.

"So the crux of the matter is a universal desire to fill one's personal capacity, but how and if that's ever achieved is a complex process. If you haven't taken my meaning yet, Mr. Marcus, I'm referring to one's desire for *success* — something that takes many shapes and has evolved over the short span of RESET. The irony is that it was already outdated when we entered RESET. Very simply, people refused to work for something as laborious as success, so they sought out its counterfeits. Fame and popularity were more easily acquired, but therein lay their demise. If it's easy to accomplish and mass producible, it achieves none of the original effects. Are you following?"

He isn't, but he says otherwise. Cythroat continues.

"Eventually, only the most herculean feats commanded praise – and the effort outweighed the award for most. It should be noted that there's a widely accepted explanation for this change — that it's part of an intentional design – a telos – to hasten the evolution of consciousness as an aggregate. We here at Unus Mundus don't dispute the validity of that assertion. Indeed, you might say that we are beneficiaries. And it happens to be the worldview of Walther Wallach, so there's that," Cythroat says. "But what we're interested in is the underpinning mechanics of the brain at work, which brings us to the here and now."

Marcus is so lost in Culbert Cythroat's speech that he allows the words to wash over him.

"The rise of the Curean mindset ... cravings have overtaken goals ... to fill voids that will never, because of their very nature, be filled ... old hallmarks of success – ambition, aspiration, yearning – have given way to temporary and insatiable demands because the latter are easily slaked if never fulfilled ... But let's not overcomplicate it." Let's not. "Desire is misaligned with ability.

"Let me give you an example. A man wants to lose weight, but he still overeats. His ability to control his urge is misaligned with his desire to lose weight."

"Isn't he just undisciplined?" Marcus says.

"The absence of discipline is a symptom of a deeper deficiency. One can argue that desires should be decreased or abilities upped, but when they're encoded in someone's genetic makeup, whether it's by nature or nurture, you may as well instruct someone to sprout wings and fly away. And for the record, we want no part of altering someone's desires."

"So you increase the ability?"

"What we are talking about is delivering a superior vehicle of cerebral power. Let me give you another example. Let's say that you're driving an aerial, and to avoid the traffic, you want to glide up. You move the handles in such a way that the craft should obey your command. But what happens if the craft fails to respond, either due to malfunction, faulty design, improper care, or a combination? Is it not inevitable that the aerial will crash — perhaps maiming, or killing people in the process?"

On its own, his mouth expels a violent huff. Candy squeezes his arm. "He's only using an example," she says.

"Who is this he?" Marcus demands. "Where is he?"

"I can appreciate that this might seem unusual," Candy says, "but please understand: Dr. Cythroat is one of our planet's brilliant minds. We should have acclimated you to his disposition before now. Let's press the pause button, shall we?" Marcus is pressing it. "For the sake of his work, Dr. Cythroat forsook his 'human apparatus,' as he calls the body, and allowed his atomic disposition to be dispersed. For simplicity's sake, let's assume that atoms are abbreviations for the universe of particles. This 'physiology of dispersion,' as he calls it, enables him to work directly on his creations, unhindered and uninterrupted by what he calls the 'filters of the human organism."

"That includes every aspect of the human organism," Culbert says. "The skin, bones, organs, and the brain."

"Then what are you thinking through?" Marcus says.

"Through the Cranium, of course. What you are looking at, or through, is my brain. In a way."

"Salt water?"

"I did say there were a few additives," Candy says slyly.

There's nowhere else to go in this conversation than: "You said you could help me."

"Every native brain is defective," Culbert continues. "Even the most endowed are prone to misfires. But a revolution is upon us."

"Let me guess," Marcus says. "New brains for everyone?"

"Precisely."

"You want replace people's brains?"

"We're working on the word-smithing," Candy adds.

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Brian Wolak
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"You set me up," Marcus says. "Somehow you knew I would do something to Alan's brain."

"We've prepared a prototype for Mr. Whitmore," Candy says.

"What we have is an incomplete muscle," Culbert says. "It's a good brain, to be sure, but to finish it, we need to import certain components — what we've dubbed the '15 somatic properties' — or the brain's physical equivalents of certain abilities."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

The Assignment.

Now Candy lets out a sigh, but Cythroat continues placidly.

"We want you to track down the 15 laws of success as detailed in the book, *The Law of Success* by Napoleon Hill – with which you are well acquainted – so that we can hardwire them into in Mr. Whitmore's new brain." The water purs.

Candy takes her cue. "Your assignment is really quite simple. You're to find the human brains with the highest concentration of each of the 15 laws of success. When you locate your targets, simply lower *this* onto their heads – like a crown or a tiara, if you will – and the receiver will do the rest." She hands him a metal ring. "Don't worry," she says, "it's a quick and painless procedure. Twenty seconds tops. No harm, no foul. The hosts can go right back to their routines when it's over, like nothing ever happened."

"When you've acquired all 15, return the receiver here and we will export the laws of success into Mr. Whitmore's replacement brain," Culbert Cythroat says. "Not only will you help equip your colleague with the most advanced brain ever created, but in so doing you'll help inaugurate a new era of humanity."

Marcus finds himself rubbing his sweating forehead. Vagrant prickles of hair rake across his fingertips. "This is a joke, right?"

"Mr. Marcus," Candy demands. "We've been through this. Unus Mundus is on the cutting edge."

"Let me get this straight. Something like – I don't know – self confidence – has, what did you call it? – a physical equivalent – in someone's brain?"

"A somatic property, yes."

"That a 'definite chief aim' can be removed from someone's brain with a silver hoop?"

"Everything has a physical presence," Culbert Cythroat booms.

"Daydreams about women's asses? Do they have a presence?"

"Certainly, insofar as you experience cerebral activity regarding the image of the ass. The 'form' of the ass — the high ass, let's call it — is imprinted physically in the neural matter. That was one of the great lessons from doctors Thomas and Salte and their work in the Electrasphere, but you wouldn't know about that. It was pre-RESET."

"How do you know about pre-RESET?" Marcus fumes. "That was the whole damn point."

Candy Ottersblood is suddenly beside him, drawing her fingers down his back. "You must calm down."

"I'm calm, Candy."

"Please," she says, gripping his other arm. "You were chosen for a reason. *We chose you*."

"Why is that, exactly?"

"Because you're uniquely qualified," she says, releasing her grip. "You are the world's foremost expert on the *Law of Success*, are you not? Of course you are," she says. "Otherwise, what would be the point of your video project? Indeed, of your entire plan?"

"Why the Law of Success?" Marcus says. "Why not some other work?"

This raises her eyebrow. "Are you suggesting that the *Law of Success* is not *the* law of success?"

"Of course it is."

"Of course it is," Candy agrees.

"Let's say you're correct," Marcus says. "That these properties exist. How am I supposed to locate the people with the highest levels? Or convince them to give them up?"

Without flinching, Candy replies: "By any means necessary. That's the answer to both questions. We're entirely indifferent. We simply want the *somatic properties*."

Before he can utter a response, a flash of light emerges from the side. A door has opened. A short man with a ring of silver hair approaches Candy Ottersblood and whispers in her ear. Her reaction is vacant, cold.

"Dr. Cythroat," she says. "We have a matter to attend to. This way," she says to Marcus.

"Good luck, Mr. Marcus," Cythroat says. "You are large. You contain multitudes."

They're nearly out of the room when the Cranium goes dark. Its water murmurs and splashes.

"Soderberg," Claire orders, "turn on the auxiliary power."

Balloon, Bag and Bang.

With a flashlight Soderberg leads them down a hallway into a meekly-lit elevator. When all three are aboard, it descends. They are silent, staring at their reflections in the mirrored wall, Candy severe, Soderberg unperturbed, almost pleasant, Marcus bewildered. It's a quick descent. The door opens to a well-lit corridor, which Candy leads them down.

The click of her heel is authoritarian, its rapid succession percussed in the same ample space that delivers the swishes of Soderberg's beige sneakers with soft echoes. They pass storage room after storage room. Giant panes of glass. Medical devices, including what looks like the table or machine on which Alan had been set in the medical center.

"Where are we going?" Marcus says.

"This way," Candy says.

They must be a hundred feet below the surface, as deep as the tunnels where Balthazar runs his contraband. Nothing about anything feels right. Marcus' stomach churns. He will demand to leave immediately with Carson. Except that Candy stops. Soderberg opens a door.

Soderberg: "After you."

Marcus: "Not until -."

Claire: "Not until what?"

Marcus: "Claire?"

Carson: "Donald!"

The lights flicker.

Soderberg: "Is this your pet?"

Candy: "Your bobcat was caught snooping around."

Marcus: "He's not a pet."

Claire: "Are you Candy, by chance?"

Soderberg: "I think he's a lynx."

Carson: "Bobcats have shorter legs and smaller paws."

Soderberg: "But longer tails."

Marcus: "Were you sneaking around?"

Claire: "Is your name Candy?"

Carson: "I heard something that sounded like a cry. What kind of freaky shit do you do here?"

Soderberg: "This is a place of science."

Candy: "And you are?"

Carson: "What's that silver hoop?"

Marcus: "Where's Balthazar?"

The lights flicker again.

Claire: "I'm so pleased to meet you, Candy."

Carson: "What is that thing, Donald?"

Candy: "There was another one?"

Soderberg: "Shall I issue a search party, Ms. Ottersblood?"

Claire: "I need you to do something."

Candy: "How could you lose one of them, Soderberg?"

Claire: "I need you to hit me."

Candy and Carson: "What?"

Claire: "Hard, Marcus."

Marcus: "What are you talking about?"

Claire: "As hard as you can."

Marcus: "I'm not hitting you."

Candy: "I want them out of here. Soderberg -."

Claire: "I'm ready to explode."

Marcus: "Where did Balthazar go?"

Candy: "Soderberg?"

Claire: "Let me tell you something, Marcus. Your son wasn't special."

Carson: "Claire, please."

Candy: "I don't know who you are. Or why --"

Claire: "What am I saying? Lucas *was* 'special.' That's why they didn't let him into the Sarcophagus."

Carson: "Now you're embarrassing yourself."

Claire: "They don't take brain-damaged donations."

The lights go off. The door rattles open and closed. There's a thud followed by a crumple. Followed by another thud and crumple. A tussle and a collapse. Followed by a flashlight beam lancing over the bodies.

Balthazar: "Gentlemen. This way, please."

Marcus: "What -?"

Balthazar: "Carson, do you mind?"

Carson: "Donald, we have to go."

Marcus: "What did you do to them?"

Balthazar: "Now."

Carson: "Right now."

Marcus: "What's in the bag?"

Balthazar: "Carson?"

Carson: "Sorry, Donald."

When he awakens, the ground is soaring. There is skylight, air, and the pink inside of an enormous black balloon overhead. There are Balthazar's legs and cape, and Carson's paws near his head. "Hold fast," Balthazar calls, and something lofts them up so fast that Marcus feels his organs fall to one side of his torso, and then a sudden drop lifts them to his throat before it stabilizes. "A little turbulence is to be expected at this height," Balthazar continues. He peers down through his mechanical eye at Marcus clutching the back of his head. "Well, look who's awake from his little catnap, Carson. Shall I explain or do you want to have the honors?"

"Where are we?" Marcus says, seeing that the three of them are in a metal box of sorts. When he goes to stand, another roller sweeps the carriage up, sending Marcus into the far wall. Through Balthazar's legs, a bag slides from the other end and lands at Marcus' feet.

"Careful with that," Balthazar says.

"Carson?"

"Donald, take it easy," Carson says. "Come up and look. It's gorgeous." On two legs Carson is looking over the side of the wall. Gingerly, as though on a boat in a squall, Marcus steadies himself and rises. And looks over the carriage wall at the Rose City in the distance, a sprawl of golden Waltherium clusters, crisscrossed around the black squiggle of the One River and its bridges, like stitches over a cut, and the festering hive of aerials overhead, circling like radioactive flies.

"As soon as I saw the schematics for this stealth balloon," Balthazar says, "I knew I had to have it."

"Will someone explain what's going on?"

Balthazar and Carson share a smile.

"Well," Carson says, "let's just say that we're going to be rich."

"But more to the point," Balthazar says, "after we help our groggy friend accomplish his little task, we're going to be filthy — I'm talking Walther-Wallach — rich."

The two of them share a laugh and then Carson chimes in. "Have a seat, Donald. We'll explain."

Marcus sits back down, leaning against the wall as the bag slides over to the corner. In a panic he yells, "the receiver," but finds, almost by instinct, that the silver ring from Unus Mundus is looped around a clasp from his waist.

"It turns out that Balthazar is quite the burglar and spy. He overheard everything."

"Everything!" Balthazar roars.

"Fifteen laws in fifteen brains — to make one super brain? And guess what else? We're actually very lucky to have Balthazar here. He knows a mapmaker."

The bag slides into Marcus' leg. He kicks it across the carriage and Balthazar, at a small console, turns around.

"Will you please be careful with that? I haven't had a chance to adjust its compression settings. It's holding — very delicately — a brain."

"Brain?"

"He stole one," Carson says.

"Just one," Balthazar says.

"You stole one of Cythroat's brains?" Marcus says.

He rips himself up and tears Balthazar away. The ballon dips and they all stumble back.

"Can you be careful with the pilot?" Balthazar says. He grabs the controls and steadies the balloon as Carson explains what happened. That Balthazar's and Claire's plan happened to coincide ("rather beautifully and serendipitously" Balthazar adds). That their guide, Soderberg, was an old-model android easy to fool. Balthazar had schematics of Unus Mundus drawn up years ago and knew exactly where to go while Carson and Claire distracted Soderberg. "Claire wanted something else," Carson says. "She wanted to be left there. Said she had a job to do. So it's us, the three musketeers, off in a stealth balloon to go find the mapmaker to start your quest."

"Because once we get your 15 laws," Balthazar says, "I know some people who can upload them — and then, my hairy and — not so hairy — friends — we're in the money." He and Carson high-five each other.

"You look perturbed, Donald," Carson says. "We're headed to the mapmaker now. Don't worry. Your plan is still —. Oh — you're wondering … So Balthazar knocked them out, including you — for your own good — really — we needed to get out of there — back there on the lower level. It's more or less what Claire wanted anyway. And then we took a back-way out, through the tunnels where Balthazar transports his … merchandise."

"A brain?" Marcus roars.

"Stop pretending to be a boy scout," Balthazar says. "We all know -."

He is stopped. They all are. Including the balloon. As something rolls over them. Like a curtain or a wave, vertical, invisible but absolute, running from the ground up to through the atmosphere. Paralyzing, or immersing Marcus in its pulse. It feels like a tidal wave without the water has come out of nowhere, swamping him in its torpid, unavoidable force, for what seems, or could be, hours — submerged in a vacant, ubiquitous unconsciousness — until he's released.

He looks at Carson, rigid, crazed, flabbergasted; at Balthazar, bedeviled, awed, delighted. And at the Rose City, which looks precisely the same as before. As though no time has passed, the aerials flitting overhead, the crumpled land ebbing by below. And Balthazar continues to guide the balloon.

"Can someone explain what just happened?" Carson says.

Balthazar is shaking his head, muttering, a wicked grin evident even from the side.

"What did you do?" Carson says.

Balthazar looks onward, muttering, enrobed in his black raiment, black hair soaring on all sides, impish satisfaction plastered across his powdered face.

"Balthazar?" Marcus says.

The bazaar's ringleader turns, his mechanical eye protruding like an abscess.

"Don't look at me," he says. "Your pal, Claire ..."

Cartography
I Drake Black I

Arms akimbo, Drake Black, enveloped in a custom-made vicuna suit, gazes from the command center onto the molten black lake below. As president and chief executive officer of Sublunary – parent company of the skunkworks Thaumaturgy and utility subsidiary of Walther Wallach's unnamed conglomerate – he oversees the Sarcophagus and the ceaseless flow of Waltherium through the Vast Continental Pipeline. Under his leadership, ONE remains the sole and trusted provider of energy in the country and the envy of every business executive of consequence. He hires the best talent, procures the choicest materials, and stewards a system unrivaled in history. He is admired, rich, consulted, and sought after. Later, when he retires, he'll spin out a "little" business of his own, delivering seminars on the very qualities that make him who he is and thereby empower the lesser talents of the world to rise up to meet their own potentials. But today, Drake Black is clenching his waist harder than usual. He's expecting a visitor.

As the black lake stretches beyond the horizon, Drake Black is (inhaling) making a conscious effort to lock onto all the desired outcomes he envisions – amassing them in a psychic pool from which to steel himself as necessary – and (exhaling) purging the reptilian part of his mind of all its worrisome plaque while he combs over the technical intricacies that his boss, Walther Wallach, is wont to ask.

In his mind, he sees himself leading the meeting with maximum efficiency, a five-minute check-in during which Drake Black demonstrates such clear and obvious mastery over Mr. Wallach's creation that the old man is forced to conclude that his time is better served elsewhere. This future narrative is playing on the positive, inhalation circuit while his prior misadventure with Mr. Wallach repeats on the exhalation reel as he grows, as a man, more and more incensed at his psyche's inability to discharge the backwater from his system.

Disgrace (breath out), humiliation (push it out), inferiority (from deep in the lungs) and subservience (feel it exit) are precisely the kind of mental equivalents that must be power-flushed from the Vast Continental Pipeline on a regular basis. Why then, if he has the physical tools to purge the circuit that powers a country, can he not apply the same industry to scrub his own system? Has he acquired an arsenal of techniques to nullify them? Of course he has. At various times he: ignores the negative remains, acknowledges them without latching on, allows them to pass like debris down a river, vests them with no power and reasons, justifiably, that that they're simply byproducts of an isolated experience when he wasn't at his optimal. He had a head cold then. And a

head cold dulls one's faculties. It's a proven fact. "Fear no one," he tells his sons. "Everyone is human, with the same vulnerabilities. Even the strongest man on earth has a weakness." Yet less in his head and more in his chest, Drake Black harbors a quintessential, unbreakable nugget of knowledge: that his previous confrontation with Walther Wallach revealed an unexpected, profound and uncorrectable inner deficiency. In the deepest part of his heart, Drake Black knows that everyone has a master.

"Mr. Black?"

And so it begins. He must not – he will not – dishonor himself. No doubt, the young woman behind him is quivering with the same anxiety he conceals from Walther Wallach. In response to his inferior, Drake says nothing. He merely turns his chin a few degrees. *Yes, you have my attention. What?*

"The students are here."

Students?

"The field trip, sir. They've arrived."

From the view of the Sarcophagus, he spins around to find an assistant (Janet? Tabitha?) leading a phalanx of pre-teens gazing at the mighty Drake Black.

Yes, of course. The students. How could he forget? (He knows how, but he refuses to dwell on it.) In fact, this trifle is the perfect remedy for his situation. An excellent chance to sharpen his mental saw for the arrival of Mr. Wallach.

These students will someday become his engineers, the best and brightest from the country. Today is the highpoint of their year. Only 20 are selected annually for this field trip.

Still, a small part of Drake Black twitches and wonders how he could have forgotten. He should blame his assistants. How could they allow a scheduling snafu of this magnitude to happen? But a true leader doesn't blame his subordinates. He takes responsibility.

"Of course they're here," he says. He tugs down the fringes of his jacket (a shorter hem length for a younger look). A straight line. Up and down. A man of algebra, of impeccable order.

"Greetings to the most gifted young men and women on earth. And welcome to humanity's greatest achievement," he says, presenting the black lake behind him, "the Sarcophagus," he says almost in a reverent whisper.

The children look beyond him through the great command center window.

"Let us go outside and see for ourselves," he says.

Drake Black leads them down the tower until they arrive outside. Each and every step is an opportunity to express casual or natural, yet deliberate leadership (only the most effective leaders can balance these traits): the muscular fluidity with which the hip interacts with the instep, and the transverse waves (or is it longitudinal?) that his feet make as they glide along the earth while forging his personal footpath of destiny. He almost doesn't see or feel the sun when he steps outside due to his extraordinary level of concentration, but of course he's vaguely conscious of its position in the western hemisphere and the way it touches the molten blackness but somehow never quite reflects off, but skims the surface in a bead-of-water-dancing-across-a-hot-pan way, losing a bit of its luster, as though stripped, from below, on a sub-molecular level, of its brilliance, as it scatters about. Drake Black is all the way to the perimeter of the Sarcophagus before realizing that the children have stayed back.

"Come," he says, "it's quite safe as long as no rough housing takes place."

"But Mr. Black," dares one of the students. "Isn't it -?"

"Radioactive?" Seeing the children nod, he explains: "In there, it's more radioactive than anywhere else in the Milky Way," he says. "But out here, you're as safe as babes in the womb womb. Please. Don't be afraid."

The students trudge forward as a group until they're directly behind Drake. Good. Now the backdrop is set.

"What you're viewing," he says (he considered using 'partaking in,' but that seemed a little too grand), "is a monument to the ingenuity and intellectual audacity of humanity. It's no exaggeration to ascribe 'savior status' to the Sarcophagus. Without this creation, we would be extinct." He lets the profundity sink in. "The Sarcophagus is an 83,642 square-mile lake of energy. In point of fact, it is the sole source of energy for the entire

United Districts. It consists of two dominant elements. Can anyone tell me what those elements are?" All hands shoot up. Drake points to one of the few male students in the crowd. "What's your name, young man?"

"Thomas, sir."

"How fitting! Please, Mr. Thomas, enlighten us. What two elements are responsible for powering the country?"

"The elements of Thomasium and Humanium, sir."

"Very good! And do you know from whence these substances come?"

"Thomasium is actinide, the rarest ever found," Thomas says unsurely.

"Named after the great electrical engineer and discoverer of the Electrasphere, Edwin Thomas. Thomasium has a longevity of 100 billion years, students! It is, for all intents and purposes, an eternal substance. It's what gives Waltherium its eternal quality. Now, Thomas, you mentioned another element in the Sarcophagus. Do you know from where we derive Humanium?"

Thomas looks unsure. Is this a trick question, he seems to be wondering? "Humanium comes from dead people."

The students start to snigger, but Drake raises his hands. Shush.

"That's close, but not quite right. Humanium comes from the half dead. It is the essence of the person split, or decomposed, as you will, into quadrillions of particles. We are talking about the particle of the human spirit, boys and girls. Each one utterly unique, yet wholly universal. A paradox of science if there ever was one. More energy is compressed in the particle of the human spirit than in all other elements combined. I want you to ponder this. It's a very powerful lesson, the most powerful, perhaps, you will ever confront. We have discovered, isolated, and we now use the biological equivalent of the human spirit to serve the greater purpose. Humanium. From all these particles of humanity donated to the Sarcophagus, we need and take but a single one from each half dead."

Drake surveys the cohort of students. Is he getting through? He goes on.

"By fusing the particle of Humanium with that of Thomasium, the resulting atom – atom being a relative term – creates a powerhouse of energy unlike anything the world had ever seen, a form of energy that is in all respects endless and endlessly sustainable. Through Waltherium, students, we have eternalized the human spirit into the most utilitarian — and essential — resource for humanity. I want you to think on that for a moment."

A hand goes up in the back. A girl with rectangular glasses. "Mr. Black, when do we get to see the dead people?"

"Ah," Drake says, starting to lead them around the perimeter. "Unfortunately, you will not see the half dead on this side of the Sarcophagus."

"My dad visits the Reunion Zone," she says, "to commune with my mom."

"You mother is in the Sarcophagus?"

"She died."

"To clarify, your mother did not die. She half died. That's why your father can commune with her. And I should add that your father received a generous tax deduction. In any event, it's true that her particles will eventually grow so diffuse that it will become impossible to communicate with her, but that takes some time."

"My dad says it's like trying to talk to someone on another planet who's deaf and speaks another language."

"That could very well be the case. All instances are different, and all people are unique. That's the wonder of science. Now follow me and I will show you one of the pipes through which the new additions arrive."

As they're walking along the perimeter, the Sarcophagus stretches out as far as the eye can see. "A little piece of trivia," Drake says walking more dapperly now. "The Sarcophagus used to be called 'Idaho' — apparently a former plot of land in pre-RESET days."

"Who owns the Sarcophagus?" says one of the students. "Is it true that it's one man?"

Drake Black suppresses a retching sensation. "Technically, my company ONE presides over the Sarcophagus, but humanity is the great owner and beneficiary of Waltherium."

"But it was created by one man," the student persists: "Walther Wallach?" The silence is shattered by the screech of a hawk somewhere far away. "To incept the Sarcophagus, he half committed suicide. He surrendered his Humanium. Now he's half-human. Is that true?" All the children chime in now, wondering if it's true.

"Yes, it's true," Drake Black says, trying to push past these more macabre tidbits of history, "but it took more than a single particle of Humanium to commence something as majestic as The Sarcophagus. It took ... does anyone care to make a guess?"

"The Great Sacrifice," the students all say in unison.

"Very good!" He now stops at a small, impossibly long clear tube. "The Great Sacrifice. In the RESET age, 99.99 percent of the population has no knowledge of what the Great Sacrifice consisted. All we know, and I include myself, is that our predecessors, all of them, consented to and were part of the Great Sacrifice. Now," he says, folding his hand on the pipe, "this comes from The Big Apple, a small and insignificant city in the Northeast District. Anyone and everyone who was captured in half death – and that's roughly 80 percent of the population – their particles are transmitted through this tube. At this very moment, no fewer than 200 unique Humanium particles are donating into The Sarcophagus. The pipe –"

Drake is stopped by one of the students who points at the sky. "Mr. Black? Is that balloon supposed to be flying over the Sarcophagus?"

Everyone looks up at the black bulb blustering across the darkening blue sky.

At first Drake thinks that it must be Walther Wallach, but that's impossible. Not only would he never travel in — whatever that is — but Mr. Wallach would never fly over the Sarcophagus. No one would. It's forbidden. He's about to call his command center when an assistant comes racing down the perimeter after him.

"Mr. Black!"

"Bring that vehicle down immediately," he commands.

Brian Wolak

The assistant seems not to have noticed the airship. "The Rose City," he says. "There's a report. An alarm. Code red, sir."

"Speak clearly," Drake demands.

"A nuclear event in the Rose City!" he screams.

Squeals erupt from the students, but Drake Black seizes control. He's at his best in moments of crisis, times that demand calm and patience when lesser men and women would suffer meltdowns.

"There's nothing to fear," he tells the students (and assistant). "The Sarcophagus is equipped with barriers to prevent just such a catastrophe from reaching it — and fortunately for us, we are already erecting those barriers?" he says to the assistant (to which the assistant nods and races away). "Moreover, the governors of the Districts will no doubt implode the Rose City — if they haven't already given the order. It's an unfortunate measure, but it must be done. And the Sarcophagus is about to receive a heaping dump of Humanium."

Now about that balloon ...

I Terese I

"Hi, my name's Terese. I'm looking for Donald Marcus. Have you seen him?"

Terese repeats the same greeting to everyone she encounters, including the man with handlebar mustache (who eyes her suspiciously through his radish-red glasses and politely but distantly demurs: "no, sorry") as she kneels beside the slotted bench, stuffing her stubborn pant leg back inside her boot. Other than the not-exactlyserendipitous "yes" at the apartments on the river (during which that hectic scene arose where she was nearly attacked by the non human (who seemed quite inebriated) and one of her sisters appeared (there was something peculiar about that sister; something not quite right, but not wrong either (not that right or wrong even apply; they're just human figures of speech. Right?); something - what's the word? Maternal? (That's an odd word to come to mind (come to mind is an odd expression too; indicating that it originates outside her control).) Paternal, even? Or: off. Something was off about her sister who appeared with that dreadful weapon and caused so much mayhem that her one sighting, the singular time she actually encountered – she's quite sure it was him – Donald Marcus in the flesh – she had to flee the scene. And now she's back to the drawing board, as (we) humans say), no one has ever heard of him. The reaction bewilders her. How can no one know of Donald Marcus, proprietor of the Law of Success, undoubtedly – she knew it the first instant she saw his vids – the pathway to becoming individuated?

Walther Wallach called (calls?) it Immaculated, but he seemed to refer to something else. Then again, Walter Wallach would tell her the strangest things. "You aren't a woman, Terese. You never will be." Why would he say something that doesn't make any literal sense? Figuratively, she concedes that she has a lot of growing to do, not just as a woman but as a person. "You were never born," he said. "You were spawned by a man named Cythroat." What he means is that she wasn't born in the traditional sense, meaning that she wasn't birthed vaginally but rather through advanced new technologies. And this Cythroat person was either the medical technician who matched sperm with egg or else served as the midwife to help deliver her into the world.

The strangest thing Walter Wallach ever told her was, "Whatever anyone says, you are not an abomination." Why would anyone say – or even think – such a rotten thing of a fellow human being? Before she could ask him what he meant, he said something that's stayed with her to this day, indeed that's formed the bedrock of who she is. "You'll always be my first child." The joy to be alive! To be the daughter of a man of such universal magnanimity! Walter Wallach could – and always did – look past her shortcomings, however big or small, and embrace her as his very own, his first.

Yet she hasn't seen him in more than a year. To this day, Terese is unsure what she did to provoke his disappointment. His last words to her were: "You didn't work out. You're a technological miscarriage. It's not your fault. It's nobody's fault. You're the product of a process that inevitably generates failures. Now try to be well until the end of your days, Terese."

She spent weeks poring over Walter Wallach's last remarks, always zeroing in on the last portion – a commandment of sorts. What does it mean to "be well?" Was she not well up to that point? How does one be well? And then there's the second part: "Until the end of your days." The end of her days implies a future destination or an inevitable destruction, which in turn means that she has a limited number of days in which to discover how to be – and become – well. And then what? If and when she becomes well, will she elude destruction? Conquer it and avoid "the end of your days?" Or else prolong the number? And how long does she have until she reaches the end of her days?

Terese resolved that the second portion is an unknown and therefore should be excluded from the equation for the time being. Her mission, her newfound goal was and remains to become well. Surely Walter Wallach was teaching her a lesson. Be independent. Be your own person, Terese – she can almost hear him uttering those words in that plangent voice of his – journey forth into the world to invent your character, design the person you were meant to be. Forge yourself.

Terese has done these things to the best of her ability. She grows and expands her field of vision every day. She absorbs more of what this city has to offer. The days, the people, creatures, delicacies and dalliances, they impart fragrances to anyone with the will and sensory perception to inhale. She remembers something that he told her early in her inception. "The world is not as it should be, Terese. These are the early days of development. You were thrust into a time before your time. I can't help you other than to say this: fight against the impulse; focus on the goal." The goal, of course, to be well.

Which is why it was so opportune that she discovered the Law of Success. She remembers it like it was yesterday. There she was at the video library, pushed out of the nest, so to speak, on her own, impelled to be well, uncertain how something so nonspecific could be achieved, when the advertisement swept onto the screen, usurped

the pixels, and sprang to life. A Definite Chief aim. Of course! To provide the color and texture and vibrancy to her then-uncertain quest for delineations of the mind entering/ penetrating/engaging the world and assigning a name to what she wanted to – what she must – accomplish. She watched the video a hundred times at least. And sought the others. There should have been 14 more, at minimum, but no one could find them; they never played; the videos simply ceased, leaving Terese – and everyone out there embarking on a similar journey, including her sister Olivia, wherever she is – to founder when she should be forging.

So she did something that Walther Wallach might disapprove of, but she had no alternative. She went and found the book – the word still sounds strange, even in her mind – like the thing it represents – book – like a hardbound cover closing on a stack of sheets, encasing them in protective binding – book (she can see the pages flip and level at the micro-thunderous level) – on the underground market and then she went and did the next logical thing: she learned to read (which was quite easy with an upload). She read the book. And now it's all the more imperative to locate the man who introduced her to the material to expand her comprehension and help her apply her learning.

Such a long, short journey (life's like that for everyone, isn't it?) to this very moment. sitting on the old wooden bench (the pant leg stashed inside the boot) where she finds herself gazing at a pigeon – she watched it leave its flock, making "ambiguous undulations as it sank on extended wings" (from something Walther Wallach read aloud once, though she's not sure if she got it completely right) and perch on a birch branch, its ashen compartment protruding, rotund belly first (such a well-fed bird) against a berry-red sky. Finds herself. The phrase flaps its little wings in between her ears. How does one find oneself doing anything? Did she not have control over her own sitting? Is there some part of her that makes decisions (watching a pigeon) without requiring her conscious approval? It's part of the mystery to be alive, she tells herself, part of the complexity of the brain, the depth of human experience. We (humans) do things apart from our conscious will all the time. A sublimated or invisible command center that operates and occasionally competes against our consciousness. It explains the psychology of personal turmoil, she tells herself. The corpulent pigeon perched on the branch, every few seconds, cocks its head back and unleashes a series of cries. A specific and linear sequence of sounds. The bird calls them over and over. The little lady (certainly it's a she) surely isn't consciously uttering these cries; something deep inside the creature impels her to wail. A will beyond the conscious.

Until her last meeting with Walter Wallach, Terese was unaware of the existence of this

will beyond the conscious, but now she's certain that it's a connector to the harmony of being well which must (inevitably) form when the separate wills merge into one. That's the enduring gift that Walter Wallach bequeathed to her.

Terese spent plenty a day trying to uncover what parts of her were unwell. She discovered that her mode of cognitive functioning was erratic, unpredictable – inhumane, even, from time to time. A thorough and honest self assessment revealed a startling absence of certain physical attributes which in turn were creating psychical voids, which in turn were contributing to her travails – her lack of humanity and her not being well.

For example, she discovered that she was born without a reproductive system, which naturally (now it seems natural, but at the time she was none the wiser) caused an emotional rift from feeling truly womanly because it disconnected her a) from other women and b) from herself, or at least her then-conception of herself as it should have been. She set out to acquire the biological package and have it installed – no easy task, but she accomplished it (well, a "simulator" package (it wouldn't produce actual babies, but its other functions were similar to the organic thing) – only to realize later on that for her, after painstaking introspection, womanhood and motherhood were neither synonymous and/or irrevocably connected; that her mind (on its own, through or due to societal norms, no doubt) disharmoniously had conjoined and therefore distorted the two; and that rather than procreate little Tereses into the world, her newfangled ovaries et al functioned as little emissaries of the fornication urge – without doubt, a very human quality.

She looks back on those not-so-distant yet-oceans-away days with a dubious tugging of emotions. Growth isn't easy, nor is it always pretty, like when she discovered that she lacked any childhood memories – which, in the day and age of RESET, may not sound so strange at first, but their absence made it seem as though Terese had been hurled into existence one second after not having existed for the forever before that. There was nothing to look back on, or into, so she had a memory circuit implanted. It addressed the memory gap even if it didn't quite fill the void.

Which is why she's not surprised when she's visited from time to time, like right now, by someone – is he really a someone? – she'd rather not associate with. His entrances, and his existence, make sense because they stem from her imbalance of not (quite yet) being well, and his visitations give all the more impetus to finding Donald Marcus so that she can transform into a complete state of wellness.

With a fluttering squeal, the bird speeds off the branch as he approaches. No other visitor elicits the same response of muted electricity erupting across her nervous system. Her peripheral vision goes dark even as she stays locked onto the dying sky before her.

"I've missed you, Terese," he says, taking a seat beside her. "I come across an aberration like you once in a lifetime." He tries laughing but it sounds like lava gurgling in an iron volcano.

"Why do you follow me?" she says, daring (immediately wishing she didn't) to look at him directly for once. His (she thinks he's a he) head is little more than a skull from which a few wisps of hair float as though magnetized by something in the air. In place of skin, his head is enveloped in a sphere of scab-like tissue: wet, oily, oozing thick, black, tar-like drops. Against, or within this excremental coating are a pair of reptilian-yellow eyes in which the pupils, goat-like, are horizontal black dashes, elongated slivers of emptiness. He reveals a row of gumless teeth sheared into points. They extend over only as far as his nose where his mouth ends in that tar-like smear of a non-face.

"You're sensitive about what you are?" he says.

She looks at the sinking sun, at the disintegrating clouds, at the birds circling something in a tree – anywhere but at him. "Most people dislike being called nasty things," she says.

"You should rejoice in what you are."

And what is that? she wants to say, but refuses to give him the satisfaction.

"Good day, Styx," she states, "if that's even your real name." And starts to dart away from this serpent when his hand coils, as though flicked, around her wrist. (More lightning erupting.)

"I want to talk to you," he says. And then in a different voice. "Oh damn."

Footsteps (quick and methodic) harmonize with the pursed and measured breaths that precede the carnation-pink gloves and the form-fitting athletic wear of a woman jogging past Terese, leaving a wake of scented air – of jasmine and sweat. Styx vanishes, and

Terese watches the jogger round a bend into the sunset and then stop. Terese rises. The jogger hunches over – she must be catching her breath – but then clutches both sides of her head. A migraine must have struck. But then the woman collapses, and tremors race through her limbs. By the time Terese arrives, one side of her head lies in a puddle of vomit. The only things moving are the rise/fall of her chest and her roving eye. (The contrasts of that instantaneous impression – carob-hued flesh against lemony expulsion; left eye rolling to meet Terese's against, or within its frozen confines – will stay with Terese whether she wills it or not.) Her sounds push tiny eddies into the puddle: "Donate me." Which stops Terese from performing CPR. A laugh, ironic and sinister, arrives on the same breeze that flutters the dying woman's hair. "Same thing either way," Brian says, "but do what you think's best. She's had an aneurysm."

Not that Terese has to do anything. It's all set up. The micro-grooves in the pavement are already collecting her impartation – the human version of alpha decay, in which the Humanium particle(s) is simultaneously created and cast from its host – channeling it to the sewage system known as the "arterial feeder" of the Vast Continental Pipeline. Nonetheless, from the woman's breast pocket Terese detaches the tubular collector. She fits it between her fingers, thumb at the cap, and plants it on the woman's jugular. She presses. It sounds like a shot through a silencer. And when Terese removes it, the collector leaves a rose-like bruise on the woman's neck.

It's only when she's on her way to the sewer drain, in which she drops the "donation," that she sees the lights start to flash, and hears the alarm screeching.

I Marcus I

Carson is going ballistic ("shut it off!"), twisting in agony, planting one ear, then the other to the ground, pounding his paws over both ears, eyes rolling lambent with the red gloss of sundown.

Even now, this far away from the Rose City, the alarm is piercing.

"Can you make this thing go faster?" Marcus yells.

"The geiger counter — the needle is off the chart," Balthazar cries.

"What?" Carson barks.

"In the bag," Balthazar calls over the alarm. "Pocket 15. I'm about to make some adjustments. And be careful!"

Bent down with Carson, trying to cup his hands over the lynx's ears, Marcus mutters "Hold tight." He grabs the bag and opens the flap. The first thing he sees is the brain suspended in some kind of fluid. Marcus rams the pocket shut and opens another. And another. The bag is no bigger than a common backpack, but its capacity is voluminous. Carson is rolling crazily, bellowing, as Marcus tears through the pockets until he reaches 15. Along with toiletries and cosmetics, he discovers a pair of earplugs. He pushes them into Carson's tented ears — an imperfect fit — they look like slugs caught halfway down pyramidal envelopes — but they work. Carson's cries cease. Suddenly, the balloon shifts starboard. "Hold on," Balthazar calls. And before Marcus can stabilize himself, they're impelled in a blast forward, so fast and sudden that they're all rocked backwards, pinned against the far wall of the gondola. Carson's paw is plastered against his forehead while Balthazar's boot is driven into his throat. The sprint endures a good half minute until it subsides, and they're thrown forward by the shift of momentum, as the ballon rocks into a leisurely drift. The siren, Marcus notices, is gone.

Balthazar darts up and fidgets with the console. "Geiger counter's normal," he says. "This is very irregular. A false alarm of that magnitude? What could she have done?" he says to himself before declaring for more public consumption: "Men, prepare yourselves. We are heading for the cartographer — a peculiar, volatile creature — and we're forced to take a more — let's call it adventurous — route than originally conceived. Specifically," he says, more to the wind than Marcus, "we're sailing over the Sarcophagus."

Still with the earplugs in, Carson yells louder than necessary, "What did he say?"

It has to be a joke — no idiot would fly over the Sarcophagus — until he looks overboard. Right beneath them: like an oil spill as far as the eye can see, a glassy void repelling the twilit sky.

Balthazar casts a dismissive wave of the hand. "Spare me your frets. Send them to the winds instead. We are ensconced within the stealthiest airship ever created — far safer than any aerial or jet — and we'll simply glide over humanity's collective death pool and behold, in awe, the nuclear waste in which we would forever be engulfed in a state of disintegration, which is to say, trapped, for all intents in purposes, in an eternity of wilting, one particle at a time, hopeless, helpless, forever decomposing — if we happened to fall in. Which we won't. Sound good to everyone? Bravo. Onward!"

Marcus withdraws the earplugs from Carson, who gazes up at Marcus.

"This was a bad idea, wasn't it?"

Marcus runs a hand through the lynx's forehead fur.

"We have messages!" Balthazar says with delight and turns on the video.

"We need more of that thing, Balthazar. Are you going to make us beg?"

"Women," Balthazar says.

Followed by a man's voice: "That shipment of heirloom corn still hasn't arrived. How am I supposed to make bourbon without -."

"For the record," Balthazar says, "my bazaar guarantees 100 percent satisfaction with every order. This client happens to have a delinquent account. Carson, how are your ears? Marcus, I can judge by your breath that you want to strangle the pilot — this mechanical eye can see behind, incidentally. But I assure you that this stealth balloon is the perfect getaway vehicle, and over the Sarcophagus happens to be the safest path to our destination since no one, absolutely no one can see us." He cycles through another message: "You have entered restricted airspace. Turn around before —." Balthazar fast forwards. "Bring your bird down now to Quadrant Omega One." And again. "This is your last warning." He pauses. He pulls on his chin and then spins around, removing his mechanical eye with a great plunging noise, and tosses it over the side. As Marcus watches it plummet through the sky, eventually disappearing without a splash through the Sarcophagus, Balthazar is spouting leadership advice.

"In trying times, one must possess a sense of equilibrium," he proclaims. "One must remain dispassionate. Objective. And assess all the options. May I have the bag?"

Marcus considers throwing it, but walks the three paces and drops it at Balthazar's shoes, staring him in the (non-mechanical) eye. Balthazar, for his part, is unfazed. He opens the bag, dips his hand inside and fingers through its pocket sleeves until he pulls out something. It takes a minute to recognize, but Marcus steps back, guarding Carson. Balthazar reaches in again and pulls out something else. With one hand, he flicks out the cylinder of the gun, and with the other, thumbs in two bullets.

"Change of plans," Balthazar says.

"Balthazar," Marcus says, "let's talk this through."

"Three," Carson yells, "not one musketeer."

The video screen comes on again. "Land now or your balloon will be de-realized in midflight."

In the dying light, Balthazar smiles his white-gold smile. He raises the revolver. Marcus watches its muzzle arc up, align with his face, and move up and over as Balthazar points it behind his head. The video screen shatters in a deafening blast. Balthazar then directs the gun overhead, and shoots again. Marcus follows the trajectory of the bullet through the fabric of the balloon, to the empty blue beyond. They start to drop.

Balthazar calmly explains that they're to rendezvous at Quadrant 41, Omega Region, in the Peripheral Zone, at 1900 hours. "Lift that latch, please." On the ground, Marcus sees a handle wedged into the floor of the gondola. He lifts. "Kindly strap one on and lock in the coordinates."

Marcus lifts out three jetpacks.

"Make haste," Balthazar says, manning the console. "De-realizer engagement verified." Marcus is too stupefied to do anything. "Are you deaf?" Balthazar cries. "Get them on now."

Marcus links one jetpack around Carson's stomach.

"I don't think they had non humans in mind," Carson says as the pack spills over to one side. Marcus props it back up, but the flimsy bulk balances precariously.

"Would you be so kind?" Balthazar says, and takes a pack from Marcus. "Now, please — yours too. We're going vertical in 5, 4, 3 …"

Marcus rips on his pack and just gets it linked when his stomach flies into his mouth. And they're dropping. Human (and non human) asteroids plummeting through the twilight while the balloon follows above. Below, the gaping black hole.

For a brief moment, his weightlessness unbundles, like endorphins in a burst of liberation, every one of his concerns, all of his confusions and blanks, as though every heavy thing he's ever carried has been released, Pandora's Box-style, from his mind in a spangled exploding cone of invisible confetti. What can he do, what choice does he have, when the laws of nature have overtaken his controls? The fall is a relief. But its freedom transitory. Because in front of him, Carson is spiraling through the sky like a stuffed animal; his jetpack is inactive. And then the obvious practicality sucks his freedom back up – the entire spillage of consciousness down to the last care – and Marcus is left to reckon with the fact that even "liberation" doesn't exonerate him from responsibility. Carson has no way to turn on the jetpack.

Marcus fires on his rockets.

It speeds across the sky, misdirected at first, but he rights the path in a looping arc. When he reaches him, Carson is upside down, the jetpack flapping against his belly. "Press the -." But he sees the other problem. Carson is unconscious.

Mid-flight disaster reconciliation. No preparation. Nuclear lake below. This should be fun. Marcus circles the lynx to approximate the velocity of descent. Reaches out. And

gets hold of Carson's leg. As soon as he feels the paw he shuts off his own jetpack. The free-falling creates a hurricane of wind. In every crevice: pressure. Ripping air. Flapping straps. Crazed ruffling. And the knowledge that in seconds they'll cross the event horizon of the black hole. Which is when his back is pummeled. And he's smothered by arms and legs. And the base of his skull cracks as he realizes someone with a helmet is on him. An air-troop from the Sarcophagus command center. Carson pool-balls out of reach. A cord whips around Marcus' waist. Another whirls around his chest. Before it locks, something in him goes full-monster. His elbow shatters the helmet's visor. With both hands, he clutches the helmet. And, as though swinging a hammer overhead, yanks. The air troop's body goes upside down, above him now, Marcus clutching the ridges of his helmet. He sees the safety cord. Pulls. Lets go. The parachute rips open. Which is when Marcus realizes he's still attached to the restraining cord. In a split second, Carson is far below, sinking, and Marcus is jerked up and away. But the snap slackens the cord enough for Marcus to slip out. He reignites the jetpack and roars down. He's on Carson in seconds.

From the ground, a soundless beam of light scorches across the sky. Marcus follows it to the falling balloon which disintegrates without a blast.

In the distance, a pair of figures falls through the night sky. Clutching Carson to his chest, Marcus launches over. It takes no time to recognize the spindly arms of Balthazar. At first he's waving for Marcus in a manic SOS, but as soon as he sees his cargo, Balthazar seems to ingest the gravity of his predicament. Hair flowing like a volcano eruption. Laugh like a dungeon master. Balthazar shouts: "You got the only working jetpack." He holds up a knife in one hand and the bag. Marcus manages it to clench the bag. And lights the boost-back burners, stabilizing the jetpack as Balthazar gives him a final look, touches two fingers to his forehead and folds them out – a salute – before knifing through the surface. Followed, Marcus sees, by a lifeless air troop (with intestines spilling from his or her side) and another.

He throttles the rocket and readjusts, Carson under one arm, bag in the other hand, and then glides across the night toward the Peripheral Zone.

I Drake Black I

On the edge of the Sarcophagus, in the cool rush of air, Drake Black, as he watches the atmospheric mayhem produce three falling bodies, he thinks – or rather remembers – sheep.

Over the years, falcons, caribou, even the occasional grizzly bear, have all transgressed the Sarcophagus, never to be seen again. "A swimming quarry it isn't," he would jest to new hires. "No pool boy to dredge out the muck." The muck simply vanishes. Disassembles. Reassembles. (Whatever. Drake Black doesn't know. Doesn't care.) Plant and animal debris have been decomposing in the black lake before he ever took the helm of ONE. He gets a weekly report of what "the flora and fauna transgressions."

Just yesterday he listened to the report drone on: Vegetation: Mountain Hemlock, Ponderosa Pine, Salt Desert Shrub. Amphibians: Coeur d'Alene Salamander, Great Basin Spadefoot. Reptiles: Western Rattlesnake, Western Terrestrial Garter Snake, Western Whiptail. Birds: Black-Crowned Night-Heron, Common Loon, Ring-Necked Duck. Mammals: Canadian Lynx, Pygmy shrew, Uinta Ground squirrel, Wolverine.

He didn't think about it then, but he does now: It was a particularly cold and sleepless night. Doing anything to distract his (very private) morbid musings (why must his thoughts always pool around his vulnerabilities in the dead of night?), Drake Black found himself peering through the telelens of his "home away from home." Sometimes the nocturnal desert scenery imparts a strange solace, as though reflecting something interior and providing legitimacy for its dual (connected?) existence. But on this night, the usually reliable tranquility wasn't to be found.

Tearing across the moonlit scrub – semi-literally hauling ass – was the white buttocks of a Bighorn sheep. In the silver landscape, the sheep (not to be confused with ram) was not simply sprinting in obvious terror. It was twisting, rambling, zigzagging all over the terrain in its slanted, nearly gravity-defying gallop, tubular horns blazing forth. The puzzling part was that Drake Black, scan as he might, could find no predator on its tail. He'd seen lynxes chase down sheep before, but this one was running terrified from nothing. The sheep continued its haphazard sprint for some time, every now and then pausing, listening, searching for something, before resuming. Then it stopped. And lay on the ground. And Drake Black could swear that the thing looked up at the moon. Its white nose tilted up, sniffed, and it searched for something (for 1-Mississippi, 2-Mississippi, 3-Mississippi) when they both – Drake Black and sheep alike – spotted the serrated wingtips silhouette the moon. Then blaze down. The bighorn sheep was scurrying over the shrub before it even rose, a slithering-gallop ahead. Drake Black watched the animal beeline across the earth as the Bald Eagle swept down, claws out, about to strike. The scene unfolded so fast (and slow) that when the sheep leapt in the air, Drake Black didn't immediately realize what he was witnessing. The animal disappeared in the black water in a lumbering plunge and shattering cascade, as though yanked down by something monstrous. The eagle breezed over the surface and flew into the night.

And now, as he stands his distance from the edge of the black lake, watching the turmoil unfold across the skies – his skies – for which he alone is responsible – like a shepherd (Like a what? What on earth is a shepherd? Where did that image come from?) – Drake Black wonders, for just a moment, what happened to that sheep. And also: did it know what it was doing?

But practicality – and the opportunity for professional heroism – rend him from his stupor. Drake Black pushes the musings and memories back down their festering cerebral holes to focus on the task – or rather tasks – at hand.

First things first. Slow it all down, Black. That's what the great ones do. They slow fastmoving challenges into digestible scenes to get a full picture of what they're facing.

Black plants both fists into his hips – this time seizing a true power pose. The board of directors hand-picked him for a reason, primarily (no doubt about it) because of his proven track record of swiftly untangling "aberrational situations" with eyes wide open, parsing out isolated issues (and root causes) to mobilize his forces against them, with optimal (force and) strategy, one by one.

It sounds simple enough, but Drake Black has seen it happen time and again: the average person (for whatever reason) is overwhelmed when multiple and simultaneous situations strike, allowing the circumstances to collide and congeal until they form (in the average person's mind) an insurmountable mountain in place of what's really there: isolated skirmishes to be dealt with individually.

Drake Black cracks his knuckles. This is precisely the time to earn his bonus. It's a simple matter of triaging the situation and then appointing his best people to serve as his mind's operatives to strangle each threat.

Triage. Muster his strength and tackle the most difficult issue first, or go instead for an easy victory and immediately cross one issue off? The students. They're an easy victory for the taking. Simply have them ushered into the secured zone of the Command Center and that would be that. Except that it isn't that simple.

The students are the eyes and ears of society. After every annual field trip, all 20 future engineers are interviewed by the major media outlets and become de facto lenses through which the Sarcophagus, Waltherium and ONE are viewed. If the students return home to describe anarchy in the skies during which Walter Wallach – Walter (fucking) Wallach of all people – was visiting ... if just a single un-coached student goes home and describes his/her own sniveling fear instead of the resolved calm with which the charismatic and utterly competent Drake Black managed the crises, the Sarcophagus, NGR, ONE – and he – will suffer.

Black snaps his fingers. "Stacy," he commands. Stacy, an able senior vice president of some division steps up. "Take these students to the media prep room and make sure that Rex Slick himself coaches their think-speak. Do it in an orderly fashion. Cause no panic. This is just another day at ONE."

"Right away."

As the students are whisked off, Drake Black bids them a heartfelt parting. "The life and times of a president and CEO, I'm afraid ..." he says. "Sometimes educational yet entertaining presentations – even by the country's foremost mover and shaker – get cut short. Thank you for coming. I look forward to working with each and every one of you one day soon. Adieu."

Very well. A quick victory. Now it's on to the others. He starts to return to the command center when another assistant approaches. "An all-district emergency call, sir." This halts his python-leather loafers.

The assistant hands him the vid-message from the mayor of the Rose City. "An incendiary device was detonated in the underground compound of one of Rose City's stalwart establishments today. That device triggered a series of alarms which culminated in the nuclear siren. It is a false alarm. We repeat: a false alarm. We have found no evidence that a nuclear device was detonated. All the geiger counters throughout the greater Rose City metropolitan region register normal. Detectives are currently ascertaining the exact nature of the device that was detonated. Preliminary

findings suggest that a brief, no more than 60-second stasis might have occurred. As such, we are taking all the necessary precautions."

"Sixty seconds?" Black snaps. "How could their incompetence -"

But the mayor continues. "We believe that a highly valuable commodity was stolen from a Rose City-sponsored subsidiary. We ask that all surrounding districts be on the lookout for an airship, believed to be in the form of a balloon."

His eyes swish from tablet to sky: black balloon being de-realized at that very instant – a very quiet boom! – followed by someone in a jetpack puttering off into the twilight followed by splashes one, two and three.

For one long-pausing second his eyes turn to those of his assistant's, and then track back on to the ripples snaking in miniature black contours across the Sarcophagus.

"Motherfucker," Drake Black utters. And then: "BREACH." The word whirls from his throat in a terrible ejection. Birds and beasts, trolls and toads, no problem. But three fucking humans?

At this very moment, nothing in the country could be moving faster than Drake Black's heart. Nothing – absolutely no amount of training/vid-watching – has/could have prepared him for a moment like this. The disaster readiness handvids may as well be set on fire. A Jupiter-sized asteroid could smash into the earth for all he cares.

The Waltherium alarms start to sound. Deafening. Staccato. Chirps. Strobe. Lights. Blink.

What does one do when one has no idea what to do? It takes a second to fish up the answer. Aha. One consults one's chief engineer. Yes. Inside, in the command center, the chief engineer will be as clueless as he is, but Drake Black can blame him. That is the best and only course of action. Resolutely he spins around, and before he can say "come with me," he confronts the irisless black eyes of Walter Wallach gazing into his bottomless panic.

I Delvin Cythroat I

Delvin Cythroat is feathering the grooved skin between his nose and lips (the philtrum, also known as the infranasal depression) while sensing his eyes drift over the contours of his prisoner's face as he lets the thoughts – contemplative, meditative, therapeutic in their placid, meaningful arrivals – arise and undulate over and through his mind to be picked at, prodded and, if he chooses, dismantled and reconfigured. You see, Trent, the choices we make determine our actions, and our actions are the only things that matter – they're the only things that give definition to who we are to other people. (In his mind, he's patting his heart.) Does that make sense? Am I getting through?

"On one hand, I'm speaking theoretically, but on the other, I'm talking about something practical. And it's because I have a big decision to make, Trent." He waits for a response that doesn't come. In the brightness of his laboratory, Delvin Cythroat advances from the center of the room. "You have very good cheekbones," he says. "Did you know that? I could remove those first and store them for future use. Think how wonderful it would feel to know that post-human is enjoying the world with your zygomatic bones." He draws his fingers along his own jaw. "But your chin, Trent. It's like a tusk. I think you would agree — how could you not? — that we should — no, we must — fix nature's folly." To his assistants: "Strap him in."

Two Olivias fix straps across Trent's forehead and philtrum. Then they pull down a metal cage over his head and neck.

"Can you move your head? I'll take your inaction as a no. Let's get started with that chin then."

Cythroat turns a latch on the metal cage, springing open a rounded door to access Trent's anterior mandible.

"You'll have to pardon these prehistoric instruments. When Cythroat Brothers, Inc., went insolvent, we lost everything. Over these 10 long years I've had to make do with whatever's available on the underground market. This scalpel, for instance," he says, showing Trent the tempered steel instrument, "has a large downward edge more appropriate for thoracic surgery. In other words, if I want to open your chest, this indelicate blade would be perfect. It's less so for more delicate facial surgery, but as I've always done, I'll make do."

Cythroat makes a long incision along the underside of Trent's jaw while the paralyzed man unleashes a barbaric cry, so extended that Cythroat pauses in contemplation. And then gives the order.

"Ball him."

A ceramic ball is stuffed in Trent's mouth and bound in place with perma-tape. "Your barbarous outburst is now muffled, so it will be less distracting. Okay," he says, dropping the scalpel on a metal plate. "This is going to feel weird." Cythroat rolls the skin along the half moon perimeter, exposing the muscle and bone of Trent's jawline. "My goodness, just look at that hideous formation. I can't understand how you didn't hate yourself all these years. But before we begin, a word of caution. This is going to hurt." Cythroat lowers the high-grit orbital sander to accomplish the brute work, and then applies the cross-cut file until Trent's chin flows in a "beautiful parabola. I should be charging you for this service, but fortunately for you, I love my work and would do it for free. But this is a give and take relationship. And while I've given you a new jawline, it's time to take your cheekbones."

When it's over, Cythroat washes the zygomatic bones and then submerges them in the freezer. Trent is passed out on the operating table. Cythroat stands over him. It won't do. It can't do. Because they're so sunken, Trent's cheeks are now too hideous to bear. Despite his augmented jaw, Trent is an aesthetic abomination. Immediately Cythroat comes up with a solution: what if Trent was made to feel good about himself through the surgical reworking of his brain? Cythroat could adjust his serotonin and dopamine levels. That would be easy enough. But is he not recognizing the elephant in the room? Which is that he could search through and confiscate the part of Trent's brain that he (Cythroat) is missing? His own brain has been misfiring since the transplant. He has to admit it. His impulses have all become scrambled. A supplementary thalamus or hypothalamus could very well solve the problem. He could take it, sew Trent back up, return him and then what? How's he going to operate on his own brain? And who knows if and what he's even missing? Cythroat stares at Trent's razor-like black hair, pondering over the contents it's concealing.

Later, he finds himself outside his laboratory down by the old riverbed. The dried-up, forlorn crease of earth lies useless and ossified, its source and purpose diverted to alternate channels while above, the blobs of inhumanity, Waltherium – the "invention of the ages" – surges, or rather floats through the transparent pipework, propelled by the

softest, most unstoppable of forces. Cythroat spits. Waltherium. Endless, clean energy. The world powered by the half-dead. Corpses put to use. Cythroat tosses a rock down the river. It skips once, twice, then stops.

"So here we are," he says. "Time to define one's self."

There are so many options, so many choices to make that it's a wonder anyone makes a choice at all. It's so – simpler – Trent's way. Well, that's a thorny issue. And besides. This is Delvin time. So … The options.

Above all, he's an artist and must therefore create. But Cythroat's androids are not only contributions to the country's artistic canon of work, they're representations of who Cythroat, on an existential level, is.

But there's also the nagging lust to murder Donald Marcus. With his bare hands to strangle, literally, the life out of his body ... as though "life" is something which can be evicted from its shelter by the mere application of pressure. Which it can. Just thinking about the possibility makes Cythroat's heart race.

No, Delvin. Get up to speed. Absolute Consciousness.

But even there, is the forest getting lost from the trees? Is his brain misfiring? He needs capital. He'll get a boatload of capital infusion when he exchanges his production for payment via Hawksbill. When Trent awakes, he can take him there.

So many projects. So many opportunities. So much freedom.

Cythroat flicks another rock into the riverbed, its ricochet sounding throughout the dark cavern. He spits. And walks back inside. He knows what he's going to do.

To Cythroat's delight, Trent is waking up – tears dribbling down his concave, skingrafted cheeks, ice packs swaddling his jaw. The metal cage is gone. From this quasiomniscient point of view, Trent, even in his sorrow, looks more at peace, more resigned to his fate, his limbs splayed out like a dead lab frog's.

Without a word Cythroat wraps both hands around Trent's neck. It takes 24.6 seconds, according to the timer on the wall.

One of his Olivias starts to dispose of the body, but Cythroat stops her. "Leave him," he orders. "Get the order ready."

I Terese I

The alarm dies as life resumes. And Styx vanishes. This time Terese watches. He doesn't simply disappear, as she suspected. He dematerializes – as though trillions of microscopic dots of shadow suddenly decompose down to the last speck of black, unctuous air, leaving, slithering for a millisecond, a serpentine slice of icy breath that (also) vanishes as though snorted by an invisible giant nothingness. Where he goes, how he appears, and why he takes an interest in Terese, she has no idea.

What she does know is that things, at this very second, suddenly make less sense. Here one second and then: poof.

Everywhere, as evening blankets the Rose City, men, women, children (even the occasional non human) continue as though nothing's happened.

On a hill in the distance, an ash tree magnetizes circulations of swallows. Up and down a winding path in the same hill, pedestrians – smallish, motorized presences vs. heartpumping humans (but they are human, Terese!) mechanize the slope with their automated ascents/descents, as though humans in general are driven by conflicting forces (when in reality, of course, they have free will to do as they want and that's why some go up, and some go down). A woman walks by Terese, and all she can think is: "My, how her hair looks like curdled cream"; and then: why is she tenting her hands over a pipe and whooshing in (and then: why must/do so many (fellow) humans intoxicate themselves?). And farther away, aerials and jetpacks spray creamy, spindly streamers across the sky as the sun cuts its arc from one side to the other.

It's less that things make less sense now. They stop making sense at all.

Curse that foul creature! How she loathes that dreadful Styx.

She stops a group of teenage boys and asks them what they thought of "that poor woman? Here and then not. And then that alarm. Crazy, right?" They chortle like a pack of wildebeests. One of them agrees. "Crazy," he says. "Nuclear death and all," he says. "You down for a gang bang?" "What does that mean?" "It means," he says, cozying up to her, "you'll be a woman." "I am a woman." "More of one." "Come on, Julio," someone says, and they leave, pulled along their path (of life) by something.

Terese moves on. Onward! Into a rose garden. A rose garden in the evening is a

(wonderfully humanly) sensory experience to be sure ... surrounded by tender layers of nature's savagery, thorns like rhinoceros horns bejeweling the exploding tangle of ripe-flowing stems through which the force of not-Waltherium-but-something-like-it pumps (something like) blood into those engorged folds that in turn pump mechanized wafts of pleasant odor (perfume, Terese! So feminine!) that feel, somehow, as heavy as the very flesh of the blood-red rose she fingers and then pulls, like (like what? Like an artichoke?) a sheath of skin from the mechanical organism known as a rose/Rose. In the evening air, the fragrance is like a strip of womanly skin from which an article of invisible clothing has been removed (how scandalous, Terese!) and which, bared, touches one's own inside skin, coupled by the touch of that velvety/fleshy/not-quite-leather-but-thick-nonetheless softness of the artichoke petal which she drops, with the others, like an atom.

Coming her way is a couple, a man and woman, coursing through the garden path with roses flowing, popping, exploding on either side. She doesn't even have to see the woman's face to know that she reminds her of herself. There's something: inquisitive and unsure and open and desirous and aging and youthful in her evening face, and Terese can tell – smell – that she, like her, wants to experience more (more than what, Terese? More than life has given? But life doesn't give. It imparts. It's to be taken. seized, plucked! Like a rose petal! (She wants more, Terese knows, than her husband has been willing to share or participate in), and more than she's been able to steal on her own). With so much profusion, right here, down to the last flavor of quark, strange and charming, littered across (beneath?) the infinitude of graspability, it's heartbreaking how hard it is to uncover even the most primal particle, to pick up and press in her fingertips like a piece, infinitely less (and more) than a grain, of salt. Which doesn't make sense. With so much ampleness, how can it elude discovery? How can it confound the likes of explorers like Terese and this woman? To be surrounded by opportunity with no eyes to see and no hands to grasp. As she gets closer, this woman who craves experience, to rip it from the vine and smear her body with its oils (its essence, Terese!), to ingest its vitamins and minerals and crowd her existence with the details of Being, Terese wants to say: What? That not is she being, she is well?

"That you're not empty," Terese says.

To which the woman, so pretty-sorrowful-lively, responds with such melancholy gratitude that her eyes dip, lips lower, her entire being (not physical, but not not physical) falls. And across her complexion, a shadow-sorrow-pleasure awakens/wells up into something finally more palpable than concealment. With something inside of her, Terese tries pressing out. She tries blasting it from her thorax to the woman's chest, to irradiate her with this whatever-it-is. Her muscles tighten. Her ribs shudder. Her heart beats. She presses and presses. And watches the woman's eyes until she lightly, reflexively, but truly, draws a hand to her heart. Her lips open. She's about to articulate the hitherto-hiddenness within, when the man beats her to the punch.

"Are you alright?"

The funnel cloud dissolves. The heaviness of the roses vanishes. And her heart retreats.

"Hi, my name's Terese," she says. "I'm looking for Donald Marcus. Have you seen him?"

When they leave the garden into the evening, Terese is left with nothing but to pick up a rock. She tosses it once, twice, thrice in her hand. It feels ... like what a rock should feel like. Like an object. It has dimension and weight. And texture and temperature. "This is what a rock's supposed to feel like," she says aloud.

And the response comes not from her own feminine voice, but from his grave and glottal (infernal) tunnel of a throat.

"What do you think?"

She pictures a million pounds of heavy metal dumped into a volcano and immediately spewed back up in erupting magma. And then: a million metal sparrows kamikaze-ing against an iron tree of thorns.

"Are you real or what?"

"You might apply that question with equal opportunity," Styx says. "You and I come from the same pond. Tadpole to frog – and beyond."

"Please help. Or kindly go away. I have to find someone."

Without pause: "You and I might be searching for the same person."

"Who are you?" She risks a look. This time his face is shrouded in a black sheet folded up and tucked inside of a tall, black top hat. He's enveloped in a long black coat, a black shirt and black pants and boots. "Why are you always following me around?"

"I'm the closest thing you have to a relative, other than Walther Wallach and Delvin Cythroat – whom I strongly suggest you avoid." He clears his throat. "So here we are, Terese. You and I. Yin and Yang. Day and night. Man and woman. Are we to be estranged forever, or will you open yourself to what I am?"

"Which is what, exactly?"

If a black faceless mask could smile, she swears it smiles a treacherous smile.

"You must know," he says.

"Well, I don't. And I need to be going."

"I'll join you. To keep you safe." He tries a laugh, but more magma spews.

"No." And then: "I don't think so." And what she thinks (that around him she feels shuddered, that his oily presence is like a noxious nothingness surrounding her very existence) he seems to intuit.

"Without boundaries, anything's possible, but nothing would get done," he says. "But I can take a hint."

"It's not a hint."

"Okay, Terese. But I'll be around." And he disperses.

Leaving Terese to wander the night wondering about the shades of ... something ... of rocks and rose petals and men and women and whatever else is imbued with, if not life, something like it.

I Drake Black I

Those eyes, immense black blobby blobs around which star-white halos peek. They dredge every last particle of dread up his throat, forming a sopping mass, yanked, as if on a fishing hook, out and into a silent roar. "Mr. Wallach!" he says. "Welcome back. We've been expecting you. I'm afraid you've caught us in a moment of –." The words choke forth in acidic dread. "In a moment not of crisis. We don't have crises here, Mr. Wallach. We have opportunities. To prove our valor. Isn't that right, Tammy?" he says with a dreadful laugh as one of his senior staff members (he can't remember which at the moment (it doesn't matter anyway)) arrives next to him. Tammy is about to say something when he stops her. "Stop the excuses," he commands, finding a reservoir of strength from somewhere deep in his murk, "and get this corrected. We don't have protocols for nothing." She tries to say something, but he stops her again. "Stop wasting time. Go problem-solve." There. At last, he thinks, he's stanched the bleeding dread with a patch of fortitude. Yes it came at the expense of dressing down one of his subordinates in front of the chairman of the board, a no-no for any leader worth his salt, but here, now, it's a step in the right direction.

The truth is that he has no idea what to do. Nor does Tammy. Nor does any ONE employee. There are no precedents, let alone protocols for three human breaches, let alone three nearly simultaneous breaches.

He's struggling where to look. If he looks ahead, he has to meet those irisless eclipses; if he looks behind, he draws attention to the Sarcophagus, the very creation of the man standing in front of him and which he, Drake Black, was hired to protect — was paid more than any other chief executive in the business to preserve. As it is, he finds his own eyes darting around like birds. Every other second they alight on the bright black orbs of Walther Wallach's eyes, but the touch is so void, so cold and alien, as though sending a shiver of frostbite up an optic nerve, that he must constantly move. Why did this happen today? Of all days? A breach. The most calamitous of calamities on the very day that he needed peace, order, seamless function. He has only the strength to utter that very plea for help. What do I do, Mr. Wallach? Tell me. Help me preserve your baby. How do I unwrap this noose from its (and my) neck? He is about to provoke those very words on the singed feathers of acidity from his dread when Walter Wallach breaks the silence.

"Throw yourself in."

Drake's reply is spontaneous. "Come again?" He says it before processing the ancillaries - that Wallach's voice is merry, bemused almost. Its distorted tenor sounds as if it's been pressed through a digital voice box and given audibility with computerized, muffled static. Black forgot. Walther Wallach had his entire throat replaced a few years back. A malignancy was found. He rejected the alternative flesh that's been fashionable for half a decade now and opted for some other material, he can't remember, he just remembers thinking at the time how odd Walther Wallach was (chrome, chromium, corium?). His voice is one thing. His utterance something else. Did he really say "throw yourself in?" He's joking. Which must mean that the breach isn't serious at all. Or it could mean that Wallach saw through him, perceived that Black has no idea that it's a benign occurrence and has no business running a company where he's incapable of discerning disaster from benignancy. Or it could be the cataclysm that Black thinks it is and Walther Wallach may be darkly earnest, darkly comic, existentially humorous. The whole thing could be destroyed, which means that Waltherium is defunct, which means that humanity is destined to revert back to a post-RESET era which is as good as extinction. Or maybe three breaches make a right? Must Black sacrifice himself here and now by hurling himself into the endless molten lake and save life on earth?

"Mr. Wallach," he says, getting hold of an idea that's never arisen in the presence of Walter Wallach, "we have your office prepared. You must be fatigued from your travels. I'm sure you would enjoy some privacy for a few minutes while I attend to a pressing matter."

Walter Wallach betrays no reaction. Drake studies him for an instant. He rarely permits himself to take a hard look at Walter Wallach, but he does just that. He is of medium height and build, no taller than 6 feet, with broad shoulders that fan down to a thin waist. He might have had a thick chest at one time, but now there's a subtle rise in his snow-white turtleneck that comes down to a flat stomach. He must weigh 180 pounds, Drake thinks, and it's still all or mainly muscle. For an older man – Walther Wallach must be in his late 80's – he's in athletic shape. He's mostly bald, with a faint thin crop of whitish hair around the back and sides of his tan head. Around his jaw a brownish-white beard, trimmed close, reveals more of his age by the saturation of grey and white patches. The flesh on his face is tan, tight, unblemished, youthful. Indeed, in his face there would be a merry quality except that something remote or alien resides in those black pools that he views the world through. To see everything, the colors of earth, humanity itself, through those abysses is a shivering thought indeed.

At this very moment, Drake feels their oily black tentacles coiling around his very spirit,

starting to drag him in. He finds himself flicking his wrist. Stop. Pull yourself together. You're a man. He's a man. Equals. Or Equivalents. Both with the same biology and therefore the same weaknesses. You could just as easily push him in the lake as he could you.

The revelation is sudden and profound. He's known it all along but it congeals and hardens absolutely.

"Please," he says, stepping back from the lake to the other side of Walther Wallach. "Let me show you to your office." He gestures to the headquarters. Drake repositions himself. Behind Walther Wallach now, the black fluid and the purple pink hues of twilight fading to the aquamarine of space above and the faint, final bursts of yellow-white sun from the horizon. It must be no more than six feet to the lake. The length of a body. A focused, funneled charge, the muster of all his strength compounded exponentially by his willpower and a decade of hippocampus-powered inferiority and self doubt suddenly, violently transformed, inverted, alchemized into the might of a hippopotamus. Do it and it's done. Don't think. Do it now or it's too late. Everything around him fades into the past. A tunnel emerges. The only way out is forward. Everything in his body angles, stiffens ahead. His toes are taut, tense, inched. His calves hardened. The sweat of excitement springs across his forehead. He feels himself already running, charging, hands out, encountering the resistance, weight and reciprocal force as two wills collide: one to kill, one to survive and in turn to kill too. Once he springs, Drake knows it's to the death for one.

During the millimeter of his first step forward, Drake detects the sound of a human voice. At first it registers as distorted noise but his brain computes too fast for his body, and as he's moving forward he knows it's a voice, and then he hears the orotund cluster of sounds that are the unmistakable hallmark of a sentence. "Congratulations, Black, you've been promoted." The merry digitized voice of Walther Wallach intruding into the locked box that is his resolve and springing it open with such delicate ease that Drake is disarmed as absolutely as he was resolved. He hears more. "I came here to tell you in person. The board has voted you president of the parent company. You'll now oversee all arms of ONE, including ALL."

"But ..." Drake finds himself uttering, motioning to the lake. Against his will he starts to laugh. The crazed laugh of hysteria. Walther Wallach laughs too and clasps his hand on Drake's shoulder. The shivery cold penetrates to the bone despite his warm and jovial laugh. "You've always been a funny guy, Black." Drake Black has never been funny. It's never been one of his traits. He begins to wonder if Walter Wallach even knows who he is — if he has the right man. "We both know the fate of the fallen, don't we?" Wallach says, his black abysses throwing out even more tentacles.

"The fallen?" Drake finds himself uttering.

"In the lake."

"Oh, them? Of course we know the fate of those fallen. Ha. Ha." And: "You said that I was to oversee ALL?"

"We're going there now."

"ALL?"

"You seem surprised, Black."

"I'm a bit taken aback by this unexpected honor."

"You've earned it. Come on."

I Carson I

This is as good a place as any to piss. On this cold rock. In this cold terrain. Now wet, getting wetter, dripping with his scent. There. May all desert creatures beware. Carson claims this rock. In the middle of fucking nowhere, with no women, no drink, in this forsaken man-made desert after falling from a balloon of all things and being carried (so embarrassing, but what's a lynx to do when the damn jetpack wasn't designed with length and girth of a non human, to say nothing of paws, in mind?) from the sky to this cold desert rock. All around, nothing. No sign of civilization. And in the wilderness, no sighting of the inferior cottontail or jackrabbit, let alone the rarified snowshoe hare. Can memories alone sustain a lynx?

"You know," Donald says, doing his usual thing to distract himself from the situation at hand, "the Sarcophagus is how non humans came into existence. This, right here, around us, is like the Fertile Crescent for you."

"Ha ha." Whatever the Fertile fucking Crescent is, he pisses on it.

"That's the rumor."

He's over there adjusting Balthazar's backpack to fit onto his back, "to mobilize; there's gotta be a way." They'll be here all night while he works on that thing and then what?

Whatever he (Carson) was thinking, or drinking, going along with Balthazar — it's over; it's gone. Clarity returns here and now in the dessert. He blames his sleep deprivation — his extreme shortage of theta wave exposure. Of course he wasn't thinking rationally. How could he? No one could in his situation. There was Balthazar's plan — so persuasive! — and Claire's insistence — so absolute! — and Carson left to absorb their force while Donald went off and did his thing. While Donald did his thing after stranding his friend — his best and only friend — in the lobby of Unus Mundus with a huckster and a zealot and a robot. But that's resentment speaking, so stop. Loyalty. Compassion. Understanding. They're the farther-seeing guides, so follow them.

"Donald," Carson says. "Are you alright?"

Wind sweeps pebbles across the crusty earth. Something shakes a leaf in the distance, or drops a needle. And for a moment, when the wind dies, the sound of moonlight striking the ground can be heard.

"I'm fine," he says. "Why?"

Carson leaves his plot of claimed existence and, avoiding his growing puddle, walks over to Donald.

"Do you know what the amazing thing about me is?" Carson says. "It's that I don't give a shit. And when I do, it's for small things that make me happy. The scooped shape of the female human breast. Doe eyes in the dark. The juniper in gin. And the occasional snowshoe hare, especially when it's fresh and raw."

"Your point being?"

"That maybe you're trying too hard?"

He stops his toils for a minute. In the silver light, he looks ridiculous. Sweating. Torn shirt. Torn pants. Fiddling with (the late) Balthazar's bag. Jetpack on a boulder. Whatever he's going to say, he doesn't.

"I'm not suggesting to be like me. Although you would have more fun," Carson says. "But even a lynx who doesn't give a shit knows that maybe you don't need something else to carry around."

Marcus puts down the case with a thump. And stands before him.

"Do you know what separates you from the common human?"

"Of course I do," Carson says. "Devilish charm, and a debonair way with women."

"You give a shit."

"You're wrong," Carson says. "I give a piss."

This makes him laugh. "I should be more like you," Donald says. "But I'm stuck being me. And someone like me, because someone like you conspired with someone like Balthazar, has to find the cartographer."

And so he returns to the bag as Carson, milling around the (literal) wilderness, does a
quick inventory. Among the departed or deceased: Balthazar, who knew where to find the mapmaker; Claire, the wife of the man whose brain was destroyed; and stealth balloon, for easy traveling. Among the things they have: stolen brain; jetpack; and too much shit giving.

"If you're persisting," Carson says, "which apparently you are, you might want to contact your friends at Unus Mundus. Methinks they might want their merchandise back."

This stops Donald. "Damn it, Carson," he says. "Why did you let Balthazar -?"

"Why what?" Carson says. "Go on. Don't stop there. Why did I go along with Balthazar and Claire? I can tell you if you don't know."

"It won't happen again," he says, and starts the hologram. "Dr. Cythroat ... Where to begin? ..."

The whole spiel is torture to listen to, so Carson trots across the desolate rock. So much land. Too endless. And rocks and boulders and foothills and mountains and stupid shit that should be civilized. And so many pissant stars. The amazing thing about non humans is their privileged place between the animal kingdom and humanity. As a card-carrying non human, one enjoys the luxuries of humans while abiding by some of the instincts of animals. To hell with the stars. Wolves do not actually howl at the moon. Whoever wastes time staring at the sky is a fool. There's plenty of shit right in front of your face. Unless you live in a fucking desert.

Which is why they should get on the jetpack, fly to Tijuana, sell that brain and live the good life. It would be so easy. But Donald would never do that. He would say that he's sacrificed too much. Lost too much. And he has.

It's strange, Carson thinks, as he indulges something in his nature and lies on his side, then rolls on his back, legs sprawled, like an upturned chair made of fur and muscle and alcohol, and looks at the stars wondering how strange it is that in this life, by happenstance, that he was selected to host consciousness while thousands of other lynxes roam the wild, hunting and living like shit for a living until they fall off a cliff or lose their necks inside of a wolf's jaws or however it is they perish in the cold. How odd that he was chosen not just to bear consciousness, but that he would chose, or something inside him would chose, to take as his friend, his only friend, a bald human with so many problems. Carson sighs. And laughs. And laughs again that it's actually kind of nice: this lying on the fucking cold ground thing and staring at the endlessness above and thinking about abstract bullshit.

And the idea that help, and all it entails, is one of the things that separates the something from the something. To be given purpose. Meaning has a practical quality. That could easily go the other way. For whatever reason, Carson knows that above, or beneath, everything else, the notion of helping Donald gives him ...

Damn it ... He is such a ridiculous man. Estranged. Self inflicted. Who bemoans the separation he created but insists that his nature, whatever that is, is responsible. Which sounds like a load of shit except that when you're around someone so much, you bear witness to who they are. You understand what they go through, what they try, what they're attempting to accomplish. Carson remembers the day that Donald came home with that ring welded to his bone. His whole hand was white from when they drained the blood. Basically, the flesh and bone were scored away to make a trench for the ring. The nerves were snipped and reconnected through the metal. To hear Donald tell it, that was the worst part. But Carson knows the aftermath was worse. The accusations. Some of which were true. The ring ... it was, and is, as much for penance as for tribute or memory.

But the hilarious thing about humans is that they do shit all the time out of instinct, and then blame each other when their instincts don't jive with ... with each other's instincts or with bullshit notions that come from bullshit places. Donald didn't forfeit his family for something else. Something else reached inside him and pulled harder than everything else.

Which is when Carson sees it. Speeding across the desert.

"A miracle."

Not a snowshoe hare. But a jackrabbit. Sprinting like the mindless idiot it is. Carson is up and chasing it in seconds.

He speeds this way and that. Bouncing off rocks. The rabbit's torque is amazing. But Carson is on its ass. It squirts terror in the air, creating a trail as palpable as its quivering tail. Carson is close enough to pounce when he sees something else. A light. Unlike any light he's ever seen. And he knows what it is. What it must be. Blinking from something like a cave.

"Shit," he says. And slows down.

I Delvin Cythroat I

The march was a breeze. From cave to underpass they walked in quiet. Past the ogling eyes of Bot Hill, down the Relative Reality-imaging-snapping ruffians of Walther Wallach Boulevard they advanced with disregard for everything but their mission. And finally, into the financial district they came.

The frosted doors open to a winter of marble (or is that quartz? he can never tell the difference): white marble pillars, floor, ceiling and walls. All the opulent restraint or restrained opulence of a regard for cold simplicity. It could be the den of one thing only. They have entered the lobby of a financier.

Everywhere: white on white except: the coffee-colored faces of a pair of guard and, hanging over them, a black and grey silkscreen. His footsteps clop over the mineral until he stops to regard the life-size canvas. Poppy and catchy, disarming even, of double, overlapping images of a man with gun drawn (pointed at the viewer), legs akimbo, shirt unbuttoned: a strobed Adonis, dangerous and handsome. He could have been a model for Cythroat – blurred but beautiful.

"Who is that?" Cythroat says.

"May we help you?"

"I asked you a question."

"It's a Warhol. Now state who you are, why you're here and what they are."

Even the guards are dressed in white uniforms, tucked behind a white, marble station, and behind them: white turnstiles leading to a vestibule of ivory elevators.

Behind Cythroat, the doors compress, sending what sounds like an awkward closure to a transitory scene. They spring back open, and the synchronized sound of slapping flesh percusses the marble as 25 nude females (perfectly rendered), followed by 25 nude males (perfectly rendered) march in, creating a pair of five by five formations behind Cythroat. Or is that *General Cythroat*?

"I am none other than Dr. Delvin Cythroat" – a declaration that reverberates across the snowy dolomite in his feminine timbre – "And I am expected."

The guards – anonymous, chance-generated sheaths of consciousness – stand like playing cards with no suits. They whisper, hands cupped over mouths, until one (a she) seeks clarification:

"Delvin Cythroat? As in one half of Cythroat Brothers, Inc.?"

"In the flesh, the true inventor of Relative Reality."

The she-guard nods to her partner, who bends over a consul and clicks a button. "We need back up."

The she guard turns to Cythroat: "Stay where you are."

To which the he guard adds: "A little tip, miss: not only is Delvin Cythroat a hermit, he's a man."

This little chestnut's not going away, is it?

"I know how this must look," he explains, and holds up both hands. "Uninvited, what looks like a woman shows up in the lobby of Rose City's premiere financial intermediary with 50 of the finest androids ever rendered. Aren't they gorgeous? Just look at her," he says, petting the cheek of one of his creations. "Allow me a minute."

With a straight hand, Cythroat slashes the air vertically, then horizontally, creating an invisible crosshair of the android's face. "Along the y axis – I'm referring to the distance between the pupils and mouth in relation to the hairline and the chin – perfectly calculated and rendered quadrants. While across the x axis – going across here," he says, cutting horizontally across her face, "I'm referring to the space between the pupils in proportion to the width of her face ... The same immaculate quadrants. I hope you'll agree ... After 10 long years, I've perfected the art of symmetry in the human face."

The guards remain dunced, lanced by their duncery, lost in the dunced land of dunces. Not only would they be better served by an AI replacement in between their ears, but, how can they live with themselves looking like that? "Your forehead is impossibly sheer, and you, my dear, your poor cheeks should be deflated. Lay off the marshmallows, will you?" "Who are you, lady?"

He should blame himself. Expectations are a crusader's downfall, and ever since he cast his first – no – his second – Olivia into the world of "human beings," he should have been heeding the data of reactions. It would have prepared him … It's not apathy for beauty. It's deficiency of appreciation of perfection. It's not their fault. Even the deepest minds struggle to bring their full capacity forward. And yet Cythroat, if he's honest with himself, is hurt. If one of them had just –. He would have been satisfied had just a mote of appreciation arisen – a quiver at the edge (the canthus) of either guard's eye – and sunken back into the abyss. But no. They are, and will forever remain, philistines.

In fact, the she guard barks: "Apprehend them!"

Which is when Cythroat finds that he's been surrounded by peace brigadiers locking hands around his androids' arms.

He should have brought Trent. It might have delayed the bereavement.

It's a pity ... Death ... Loss ... Life's terrible gravity. Not to be slaked by the Sarcophagus. No. Cythroat can picture the she guard's disconsolate daughter, hair in pigtails, waiting for a mommy never to return – a mommy's whose innards were splattered across the ... "Is this quartz or marble?" Cythroat says. "I can never tell the difference. It doesn't matter, does it? This day was inevitable from the moment you were born," he announces. "I'd bid you to say goodbye, but there's nothing to say goodbye to."

Just as he's about to give the signal, an elevator dings. Striking. Resounding. Playful.

In seconds a stylishly-dressed executive – desert-colored blazer, slacks and shirt – disembarks. She glides over the marble, a pudding-like quality to her jiggly nonchalance. And then, in front of Cythroat, she tilts a hand on her out-thrust hip.

"It's lovely to put a face to the name," she says, and then turns to the androids. "They're perfect. Come with me and we'll complete our transaction." Then to the guards: "Take our order up."

I Marcus I

The quadrants match. The desert is barren save for this cave (or hovel, or wigwam, whatever it is), emitting a liquid glow. From a distance, it almost looks hospitable. A glimmer in the dark: life in the nothingness: a blip in the emptiness. It's as though he could, if he wanted, with the barest craning of toes, detach and go floating up. Absorbed or absolved? And yet the light has a warm-milk quality about it, as though spilled through the particles to lure the weary traveler in from the wasteland. Marcus, followed by Carson, approaches the door, which is made of – what is that? – wood? – strips of wood somehow aligned and joined, the cracks of which leak the milky light. He takes a breath, and when he's about to knock, the door opens.

"Come in, traveler." The voice is welcoming -a bit fatigued, but chipper, amused.

Marcus lingers on the threshold, feeling something move his foot forward despite another something, with less power, resisting. Behind him, Carson, curious, to his side, peers in. Cross this doorway and he's ... what? What's he doing? He's agreeing to a path that was set out before him. That he didn't create himself. But who creates their own path? All paths are contrived. And he, and we, simply choose. Right?

Marcus resolves to think, stepping inside, that he's choosing to step onto the path.

The light dwindles to a twilight in which the contours of the craggy walls and rocky ground appear alien, like varicose veins within old, pale skin. Yet the smell is not as musty or footy as he thinks it would be; it's rather sweet and airy. Marcus takes a few more steps before sensing, at first, then seeing, the outline, as though pressed from the shadows, of a figure. A good foot shorter than Marcus. Somehow emptier, as though made of shadow. But as Marcus approaches he sees that an old man is standing by the wall, hands clasped in front of him, a look of restrained expectation in his darkly radiant eyes.

"I'm Hege."

Around him the light rises, revealing deep, arcing crevices cemented in Hege's cheeks. Beneath his eyes, amphitheaters of lines — gradient, sinking rows of semicircles down to the sudden pop of the orbular white stages. Slender spikes of sweaty hair fold over his forehead and spill on either side, and his face is like putty smeared and smoothed over irregular hills with sudden and subsequent folds driven like deep ditches around his mouth, along his jowls. Over his eyes, partial cliffs hang where his long bulbous nose protrudes, giving Hege a look of wide-open eyes despite their smallness.

"Shall we to business?" he says, detaching from the shadows.

He turns to lead them down a dark tunnel. Marcus gives Carson a look: be on your guard. Then turns to follow Hege. And sees, on the back of the old man's head not hair or skin or skull, but layers or flaps. As they're stepping into the blackness, Marcus can only make out what looks like thousands of eye lenses cascaded over the back of a giant eye. Like looking into a black sun from the other side of space over which thousands of transparent shades are layered.

"Through here," he says, entering a pitch-black tunnel. Marcus follows. And comes into a lighter corridor where he finds Hege sitting on a stone ledge. Next to him, and all around, are hundreds of tiny, blinking lights.

Against the walls, the shadows of Marcus and Carson bounce in concert with the strange sticks of light scattered throughout the cave. Despite the closeness of the Sarcophagus, not a single drop of Waltherium seems to pulse through Hege's cave. Along the ledges, flickering amber tips taper into oblong bullets, held affixed to charred wicks within tiny cups of dripping wax. Or at least it looks like wax.

"Candles," Hege says. Like a shadow, he lifts a thin one from its sconce. "Sit."

"We'll stand," Marcus says.

"Maybe we should sit," Carson says.

Realizing his mistake, Marcus folds his knees and drops to the hard floor. "I've never seen – what did you call them – candles?"

"Made with fat," Hege says. "And bone." And then: "And so you come to the famous Hege. From the Sarcophagus? Do you bring an offering?"

"We brought," Marcus says, trying to conjure anything in his mind which could possibly apply, "a promissory note." And then: "How did you know we were at the Sarcophagus?"

Hege's eyes flutter. A tremor rolls over his forehead.

"I can only create when I'm inspired," he says, as though afloat in a sea of waves. "The nuclear water. Did you have some?" When Marcus doesn't answer (has no idea how to answer), Hege explodes. "Did you taste the fucking water or not?"

"No," Marcus says. "I didn't think you could drink from the Sarcophagus."

"You can't," he says, suddenly apologetic. "Forgive him. And forgive me. Let me try to do business with you on Hege's behalf. Quickly. Before he returns. I'm Gorg. Pleased to meet you, Mr. -?"

"Marcus," Marcus says, rising to shake Gorg's outstretched hand. "I'm Donald Marcus and this is Carson."

"Caron's going to be a problem," Gorg says. "And I say that with all due respect. If and when Hege returns, I suggest the non human is vacated by then."

"But he's been here since we walked in."

"I can only advise you, Mr. Marcus. It would be best for Mr. Carson to wait outside." Marcus nods at Carson: maybe it's for the best.

"I was just getting comfortable," Carson says, rising and craning his back. He starts to leave when Gorg's voice takes on a furious tone.

"Where's that fat fuck going? If you came here to conjure without nuclear water, you're mistaken. And secondly, you're letting the only thing you can barter with go once intoxication occurs? What kind of merchant are you?" He eyes Marcus. "Well? Do you see? Look around you. Do you see how many candles that thing's fat would create?"

"Who is he talking about?" Carson says.

"I have other valuables," Marcus offers dubiously.

"Nuclear water. And the animal."

"Where is the animal?" Carson says.

"In return for your map," Here says.

"How do you know I need a map?"

"How do I know? How does Hege know anything, I wonder? Is mapmaking is the art of articulating existence? Where ologies ..." and he squeezes his fingers together. "Of course it is. But inspiration requires sacrifice. Nuclear water. And a little materiality relinquished to perceive a lot of immateriality in all of its ... corporeality." A laugh, if a wheeze can be construed as a laugh. His voice changes again, this time regretful and tired. "And now everything in existence has shape." And then: "Here's where we are."

"Who am I talking to?" Marcus asks, detecting the change of tone. "Which one are you?"

"You must forgive me. Us. I do my best. Generally, I, Gorg – forgive me – handle the transactional side of our business while Hege conducts the science and art. I apologize in advance, but he's going to require a healthy nip of nuclear water. From the Sarcophagus, I'm afraid. Here." He takes a short tube from the ledge and hands it to Marcus. "To collect his inspiration." Once again his voice changes, this time truculent. "That's a nonstarter. I want its fat and bone." His voice changes back. He huffs. "He won't be satisfied unless he receives fat and bone. Perhaps you could relinquish your animal?"

"Where is this animal everyone is talking about?" Carson says.

"No," Marcus says. "We can make some other arrangement. I can bring you back -"

"Oh," Carson says. "I see. He's using a slur. Cute. You're a cute little troll."

"Get out!" A wild look takes over his eyes, and Hege (or Gorg) is rushing at him.

With the tube, Marcus, with Carson, dash from the tunnel, up through the blackness and into the corridor, and out into the desert night. The door swings shut and the light goes out. The scent of smoke trickles from somewhere, and Marcus and Carson are walking along the rock to where they left the jetpack and trunk.

Suddenly it feels like he hasn't slept in weeks. Or eaten in days. His memory is gnawed away. He's not thinking straight. Everything that's happened up to now? It paws at the

door of his mind. Along with his options. He looks at Carson looking at him. Both of his forelegs are tucked together and his hind legs are hunched, butt-to-earth, as his eyes start to slant closed, and the tufted radars of his ears remain up, forward, ever-curious, receiving the vibrations of Marcus' considerations.

In Carson he sees something heartbreaking. He sees an absolute trust in his, Marcus', decision making.

Marcus proceeds to sits on the earth and take out two small packs from his pocket. The first one he rips open and spreads the dehydrated nuggets before Carson, who inhales them before Marcus can even open his own pack. He spills them down his throat like the freeze-dried tasteless condensers that they are. They vanish into his bloodstream as soon as they touch his saliva. The fatigue remains, but Marcus' head is suddenly clearer.

"Well," he says, "that was interesting."

"You can always trade the brain," Carson says.

For some reason, the statement makes him smile. More than that, it's true. That brain has to be worth a fortune.

"I'll keep that in my back pocket. Get some rest."

"Where are you going?"

"Do I have a choice?"

He wonders, as the cool air draws tears from the sides of his eyes, if any of this is real. Which is what anyone wonders when things don't go their way. He doesn't even know if this guy – these guys – have maps anywhere in their cave, so why is he flying through the dead of night, across a desert, to the Sarcophagus for a "nip" of nuclear water? He thinks of his strange hologram with Culbert Cythroat. Marcus blamed Balthazar for the whole ordeal. "Thank for you checking in," Culbert said. "The alarm was a false alarm. Your friend, Claire, I'm afraid, has disappeared." "She's not my friend." "We will find her, whoever she is. As for you, I advise you to focus on your tasks. You have enough of them to require your full concentration. We'll be waiting for you. And then your colleague will get his brain, and you and he can return to the work you were meant to do." Work ... which already feels not exactly detached, but distant; not unreal, but tinged with artificiality. "And the brain that Balthazar took from our premises? Mr. Marcus? I trust you will return her to us?" Without missing a beat, Marcus found himself saying that the brain fell. "When we were over the Sarcophagus." Which wasn't a lie. Cythroat, silent for a moment, didn't press him to elaborate, a fact for which Marcus is even more thankful now that he has it as negotiating leverage. "It's unfortunate," Culbert Cythroat said at last. "Then the somatic compounds are your only priority. I mean this with the utmost respect for human life and achievement: Be ruthless, Mr. Marcus."

At last the black ooze is upon him, stretching for miles. Marcus lands, takes the tube and spins it around his hand as he nears the lake. What will it feel like when the elixir of half death is swishing around this clear container? He imagines it being enormously heavy, dense, like liquid lead. The edge of the Sarcophagus is silent. Not a breeze stirs the air. The surface is glassy, flat, blacker than any black he's ever seen. It smells like nothing. Sounds like nothing. And yet, as Marcus crouches, and starts the procession of the arm, down, the image of a billion people compressed into a speck of liquid appears. Should he or shouldn't he? When the lip of the tube strikes the surface, what then? Will it be like hitting concrete? Will alarms sound? Where, in the vastness, is Balthazar? And, for that matter ... others? And then the rush of what he's about to do is upon him. And Marcus, with a mental brush of his hand, pushes the thought away and plunks the tube, gingerly, into the surface. And finds that it's no different than trapping pond water. He swings it up, out and places it on the ground. And backs away. And takes in one, two, three deep breaths. There. In that tube, the half dead. Chained, on a sub-molecular bond, to the infinite. To provide Waltherium to the living. Bottoms up to Hege. Marcus pinches its top, ensuring that not a drop touches his skin, and gently, as gently as he's ever done anything in his life, lifts off the ground and flies at a slow, steady pace the entire way back.

Carson is on his back, both pairs of legs spread eagled, neck bent to the side, facing upwards when Marcus returns. He did say to get some sleep.

Marcus treads lightly to Balthazar's – now his – quantum bag. And decides to open it and look at the brain. Part of him expects it to be empty as it decompresses, releases what sounds (and feels) like a puff of steam, and reveals the various pocket sleeves within. Marcus closes it back up and takes a seat behind it, planting his hands on the rocks. He looks from the bag to the slumbering lynx, from the brain to Carson and then at the sky. At the moon, which is no more than a big rock in space trapped inside of a larger rock's gravitational pull, beaten, dented, dulled, illuminated by the blasts of a greater entity. It contains nothing inside it to expel its own glow. A reflector. An illusion. An impostor. *Be ruthless, Mr. Marcus.*

"That bone in the human ankle. The round thing," Carson says drowsily. "What is that bone called?"

Marcus finds his hand running over the outside of his boot, over his ankle.

"I thought you were asleep," he says, clearing his throat. "The talus bone, I think. Why?"

"The talus," Carson repeats dreamily. "That's a good word. That's what the moon looks like." Carson stretches his legs out, issuing little tremors of rigidity down through his paws, and then rolls to his side and sits up. "Debating, eh?"

"Debating?" Marcus says. "No. Weighing the worth."

"Which one's worth more?"

"The thing in the bag, clearly," he says. "If we're talking terms of objective commerce." Marcus looks again at the moon. "But value's relative. I never liked the moon until now. Carson?"

The lynx's ears cup in, then fold out, and curl in again, tented toward Marcus, funneling sounds of breath and other emissions into his mishmash of lynxian deliberations or machinations.

"You're not even drunk," Carson says, "so don't go getting sentimental."

"Alright."

Whatever's in the air, the molecular mist, almost lit by the white reflection of the moon (from the sun), flits in circular decompressions, layering down and in, and merges with the palpitations of memories, forming the current composite of Donald Marcus, the here and now, ever changing.

"Maybe there's something else in there," he says, going to the bag. And then notices, on the other side of Carson, an empty miniature of vodka and a shredded bag of something, of some kind of vittles. "Are those ...?"

"What?" Carson says. "I was hungry. And thirsty," he says. "And sober."

"But how? And where?"

Carson shakes his shaggy head. "Why are such a Luddite. This quantum bag is amazing. All the food and drink you need for an expedition. See?" Carson taps his paw on what Marcus now sees is a line of touch points.

"Is there anything else in there?" Marcus says. "Anything Hege or Gorg might want? Other than a brain?"

"Or a fat lynx?"

Marcus returns to the wooden door. The lights are out. The moon is waning. He taps his knuckles against the wood. It opens from his knock. He steps into the blackness. Passes into the temporary black hole, the portal to the world of cartography. And then, feeling his way along the wall, enters the tunnel. And endures the realization that every choice leads to an action that narrows a continually narrower path until converging to an end point. And more than that, that if and when he leaves this desert lair, something will be changed. Something gained. Something lost. Despite how little, how sunken the icy chords, like violin strings running somewhere microscopically deep in his bloodstream, that send vibrating shivers of ruthlessness in the form of suggestions, pushes, nudges, rather than dictates or commands, but with every twang from that misfit crevice in himself there's a sliding drop of serum or poison. Life may be communal, but we live solitary existences. Marcus slides through the tunnel and comes into Hege's chamber. Only three or four candles are dripping wax. And Hege is slouched in his stone chair, arms draped in his lap, chin to his chest, blackly radiant eyes lasered onto Marcus, as though in a trance. He can almost feel the vision pass through him, or rather look down at diamond-like aspects of him from assorted points of vision to render a more exact portrait of Marcus than he's aware of himself.

"You've brought my inspiration," Hege utters. "But not my payment."

"I brought," Marcus says, placing the tube on the table in the center of the chamber, and then, pulling things from his pocket, "Priceless nourishment." He scatters capsules of compressed water and concentrated nutrients on the table. He holds up one of the metallic packs. "This," he says "is not only delicious. It's enough sustenance to last a week. Now you have 10 of them."

"Sustenance," Hege says. "Fat." He raises a finger. And lets it fall. "And bone." He laughs. "No pig. No map."

"Can I speak to Gorg?" Marcus says. "I have something of immense value. To trade for the map. But I want to see the map first."

"I'm afraid," Hege says, rising, swaying, as though drunkenly, "that Hege – this is Gorg, by the way – thank you for bearing with us – doesn't have any samples to show you. That's not how he conducts business, you see. Hege is a custom designer. Everything is made on the spot, tailored to the unique needs of every customer. A painter of existence." And then the change of voice, scratchily: "Of what's there and what the customer wants to see … Press up against the limits. Reveal the boundaries. Isolate, and render, whatever it is … as long as it exists, no matter its materiality, I can find it." Change of voice. "I can vouch for him. No one paints a more exact replica than Hege. You can bet the bank on that one, Mr. Marcus. The Sarcophagus has taken as much as it's given."

"I need some kind of assurance," Marcus pleads. "Outside, I have something of great value to offer. But I need a guarantee ..."

"What's *that*?" Gorg says suddenly, eyes afire. "So shiny." The chamber erupts in brilliant, creamy light from thousands of candles on the walls. "Yes," he says, his voice higher pitched. "That might do." Before Marcus can ask what's what, Gorg, or Hege, is upon him, stooping.

"Are those — ashes?" Hege (or Gorg) says.

Marcus rips his hand behind his back and clasps his ring between his other fingers.

"Outside, I have something priceless. You could -."

"Something priceless is inside." Hege/Gorg smiles his old-man smile, and crosses his arms. "What if," he says ponderously, raising his finger to his pale lips, "instead of a one-for-one trade, we opt for mutual loans?" A wider smile of resolution. "What if Hege will create your map. And I will *loan* it to you. In return for either fat and bone."

"I said no."

"Or your ring."

"It doesn't come off," Marcus says. "It can't."

Smiling a hideous smile, Gorg says, "We've dealt with so-called permanence before." To the table he retreats, picks up the tube of black water, flings everything else off, and raises the table top. Rummages around. And then reveals a hatchet. He returns to Marcus, and slides it into his hand. "Ordinarily, I assess a surcharge on loans, on top of a 50 percent interest rate in fat and bone, but with one ..." — (he chops the air) — "... we can resolve an impasse with a mutually gratifying – or unsatisfying – agreement, as the case may be. Hege may not get his fat, but he'll get his bone. And you'll keep your fat and bone — the larger portion of it. And we both *borrow, on mutual liens,* something priceless from the other."

Marcus blinks, and in that single blink a thousand minutes seem to pass. What's the cost, or value, of a loan? His debt is already unpayable. "I have a brain outside," he pleads. "Worth more than 10 of these rings." To which Gorg smiles, and shakes his head. Marcus rubs the ring between his fingers, pressing, feeling the groove dig into his thumb. Is Alan's return worth it? Is there an obligation to uphold? All a nebulous spectrum of something and something else swallowing it all. And suddenly the image of a bird soaring past the moon (past the talus) soars by his thoughts. It dips its wings and cries. Not to be caught, but furnished a perch. Something permanent. Like a home. A ledge to justify the sacrifice. Sacrifices.

"Make the map first," Marcus says.

"Of course," Gorg says. "We understand completely." He picks up the tube. Unscrews the top. Raises it to Marcus — cheers. Drinks it in three gulps. Licks his lips. Wipes them with the back of his hand. And closes his eyes.

I Delvin Cythroat I

The office of Hawksbill's chief executive is no less immaculate than the lobby. A white chair. Another white chair. A slender white desk. "Is this marble or quartz?" Cythroat (tapping the surface) says. And on a plain white wall, two enormous panels hang. On the left panel: 25 bright, trippy, neon identical pictures of a woman against a marigold backdrop: banana-yellow hair, fuchsia skin, alabaster teeth and a turquoise dress strap. On the right: 25 black and white identical pictures of the same woman – but these are blurry, blurring, blurred – as though being smudged out of existence.

"I know someone else who's a curator," Delvin says.

"Your payment is ready, Mr. - or is it Ms. - Cythroat?"

"It's mister. And let me stop you there ... Ms.?" She nods. "Ives. I want to renegotiate."

She's a pretty piranha, floating behind her desk, seemingly distracted by something.

"Hawksbill's in no position to renegotiate a contract that's now two-years-old, particularly one that's complete," she says. "And I might add, Mr. Cythroat. Between you and me: 50 million is more than a fair price – and I'm not even deducting the cost of replacing Rubin."

Ah ... Rubin sure looked like a Trent. Alas.

"May I inquire what is to become of my creations?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. Now, thank you again for dropping off your product in person. It's a personal touch like that that's gained you such ... notoriety."

Cythroat takes a seat and leans back, eking out the barest of metallic groans. And looks out the window at the spires and scrapers, at the clouds and sky. He hadn't thought to ask until now what the bodies were for. It didn't matter. He was being paid to do what he loved. And now? And now his love has changed. He knows exactly when it happened. He'd been resisting, because love alters radically or not at all. And now, here in Robin lves' office in Hawksbill, his resistance has given way to acceptance. So be it. "I'm thinking of giving you the opportunity to invest in something bigger than bodies."

An array of vid screens appear on Robin's desk. Her eyes dart one to the other.

"Oh?"

You see, it's moments like this that can make or break someone's life — in which inspiration seems to come from nowhere and deluge the elephant part of the brain with more than sinister nonsense, knocking the tusked beast on its lumbering buttocks and washing it upon the beachhead of clarity. The irony is not lost on Cythroat. What he is about to propose is premised on the notion of exterminating the very part of the brain that manifested this uninvited, yet no-less-welcome, idea.

"Absolute Consciousness," he says — and he says it as in "*ta-da!*" — turning both hands into flashing lights — "by which I mean a consciousness that is 100 percent conscious — as in bye bye unconscious — a conscious consciousness that controls every facet of the human experience, zipped up in a perfect biological envelope." Cythroat sits back in his chair as the air conditioned air flows over his perfect hair. He studies Robin Ives' smug face trying to pay him no mind, pretending to be absorbed in other work.

"Why would Hawksbill be interested in that?" she says

Perhaps he wasn't clear.

"Because," Cythroat says, planting both hands on her desk, "I'm talking about a new stage of evolution. A completely self-regulating organism." He lets this sink in for a moment. "Lose a fingertip chopping onions? Oops. No problem. Grow it back with a thought command. Arteries clogging with cholesterol? Plunge them with a thought command. Aneurysm? Cancer? Ruptured spleen? Fix them all with a simple thought." She's interested. He can see it in her shifty eyes. "Want to see how you'd look blond? Not that you don't look stellar, but you understand my point, Robin. I'm offering Hawksbill an opportunity to invest in a series A round in a breakthrough company that takes the premise of Relative Reality, and turns it into Real Reality. And all I want in return is quadruple."

At last, a bodily response. Robin sits back in her chair, turns to the window to gaze outside at all those competitors, all with their own secret sauces, she seems to be thinking. Hawksbill already has something special in the incubator with Cythroat's delivery. He can see that. But is he offering her something once-in-a-lifetime?

Something revolutionary? Yes, Cythroat is transmitting through his cerebral energy, *I* can deliver you something revolutionary and all I want is an initial investment of 200 million. She's trying with every muscle to conceal her excitement, but Delvin Cythroat hasn't spent a decade perfecting exterior human reactions with no appreciation of the underlying tensions.

"We might be interested," she says. Of course. Play your game. "Under three conditions. One, our board of directors approves it."

"Whatever business gymnastics you have to go through ..."

"Two, we take a 49 percent stake in Cythroat, Inc."

"And three?"

"Culbert Cythroat is named co-chief science officer of your company and given a voting seat on your board."

"Unacceptable."

"No deal?" She says it with such smarmy innocence that Cythroat drags his fingers across her desk, leaving a trail of smudgy oil.

"Your insult," he declares, "has permanently barred Hawksbill from any future considerations of Cythroat, Inc."

He's leaving. Tearing open the door. And turns around to see her absorbed in her vid screens.

"When your board members discover what you've done," he says, "you'll be looking for a new job."

"Possibly," she says. "But probably not."

Cythroat has one foot out the door, literally, but can't bring his other to join. He slams it shut and stalks to her desk. "You're making an error on so many levels."

Now Robin rises, and proceeds to the double panel silkscreen. "It's a Warhol," she says,

and almost runs a palm down the bright side. "A gift from your brother. Did you ever consider that you might be the one making a mistake?" she says. "Unless I'm mistaken, Cythroat Brothers, Inc., was a formidable force in its day. Are you telling me that Culbert Cythroat has nothing to offer scientifically? Intellectually? Imaginatively? We both know the cold truth, Delvin. Culbert Cythroat is one of the most brilliant men of his time. Pairing you two would create a powerhouse. And with the backing of Hawksbill?" She ambles up beside him. "Unstoppable. The likes of which could take down certain prominent businessmen. Or inventors. You don't have to decide now."

"I told you my decision."

She gives him a warm smile and returns behind her desk. "No harm to sleep on it," she says. "Nothing said today that can't be unsaid."

But Cythroat is already storming out of her office.

I Marcus I

At its end, the night is grizzled, clutching blackness to the earth even as the first bursts of red and yellow glint over the distant mountains. With his hand tucked beneath his armpit, Marcus, stomping up the ledge to where Carson is planted, goes for the jetpack and quantum bag.

"Donald?" Carson says, but stops, seeing.

Marcus piles the packs on top of one another and loops one arm through, the easy arm, and then, untucking his hand, is forced to look at the bandage wound around his three fingers, his thumb absurdly wobbling forth like an out-of control earlobe.

"Are you coming?" Marcus says.

"The map?"

"Now we just need -." He stops. He looks back at the cave, then at the mountains and the spears of sun. "I need to talk to *her*, Carson. She's nearby."

Carson maneuvers around to be picked up as Marcus re-ties the bandage. His stampeding breath and the re-winding of the bandage are like uncomfortable murmurs of the earth.

"If it's any consolation," Carson says at last, "lynxes don't have middle fingers either."

It takes longer than he expects, a full half-day, but when he and Carson near it from above, it's unmistakable. When the black ooze comes to an abrupt end, on the other side of the windswept rocks, inside of a man-made crater just inside of Utah a brilliant circle of serene water lies.

"Oh my," Carson mutters.

The sapphire pool grows more brilliant in the late morning blaze as they approach it. The liquid has an otherworldly sheen, an amalgam of diamond-like transparency and an inner (as though immersed in the very molecules of water) turquoise glow that has a radiant glint and depth, as though having been transmitted from the icy heart of the universe.

Marcus' hand throbs from the amputation. He wipes away the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm. His other arm is numb from hauling Carson's weight. As he continues his descent, the bottom center of the pond grows clear: a reinforced cylinder, a portal of sorts, up which a constant, curling wave rises.

"The Inverted Waterfall," Marcus says. "That's where they rise."

In minutes, Sandy will ascend the waves and be channeled to his communing station. Rise from the whateverness, from her atomized vocation, from her eternal plight of perpetuating energy across the country until the earth disintegrates and her and Marcus' and everyone's laborious immateriality is released back into the bang. Everyone's, except not everyone's. Except those who didn't make it in. Who were obliterated before they could reach the Sarcophagus.

And they'll converse. Commune? He and Sandy. And it'll be awkward, not least because of the nature of the communion, but also because it was always awkward. And because she's encased in the Sarcophagus because of him. He's been here once before after the accident. She didn't understand at the time. It takes time, he was told, before "they know, before they truly comprehend. And even there, Mr. Marcus," the mortician explained, "you must understand, that words collide against a barrier they'll never be able to overcome. Comprehend is a strange word to use in these cases, but it's close. We're talking about the human particle, after all."

Marcus lands on a bounce pad outside of The Reunion Zone, unhanding Carson to the earth and feeling, once again, the liberty of having freedom with both hands. (That lynx would have made many a candle.) He strips off the packs and places them in a locker. His back is slicked with sweat. Every vertebrae feels collapsed. Marcus tilts forward, back and to either side, allowing his spine to decompress. He looks at the bandage, at the red puffs in the gauze. And then at Carson, who's already up by the ledge and peering into the "water." Marcus watches the lynx bow his head. His first thought is that Carson's doing it in reverence, paying his respects to the ascending dead. But then it dawns on him.

"Stop!" he yells.

From all around the perimeter of the Reunion Zone, the silent communion is broken. Hundreds of heads raise and peer at the strange sight.

Carson turns around to see what ignoramus is breaking the silence. When he sees that it's Marcus, rampaging toward him, he issues a truculent "What?"

Marcus motions with his hand. Keep your voice down. And then, when he's close enough. "Are you insane?" he whisper shouts. "Don't drink that."

Carson turns back to the lake. "What's the problem?" he says. "I'm thirsty. And it looks quenching."

He takes Carson to the lockers and takes out the bag. Grabs a miniature of vodka and a water packet. He breaks the packet over Carson's mouth. "There," he says. "Better? And vodka to wash down the water."

"I still don't see what the problem is."

"Not only is it disrespectful," Marcus says. "It's suicide. That's not water, Carson. It flows up from the Sarcophagus."

"Yes, yes," Carson says dismissively, "so I might have ingested a few nuclearized human particles. Big deal." After Marcus' lack of reaction: "Apparently this isn't the time or place for humor."

"This is exactly the wrong time and place."

"Fine," Carson says, wandering away. "Go do your thing." And then to himself: "I wonder if there's a gift shop," as he trots to a large overhanging canopy with shops and restaurants.

Marcus breathes in. Breathes out. Tightens his fist. Tries to relax his maimed hand. And proceeds to the Info Booth.

The attendant is heavy and sweaty, with rosy cheeks and affable eyes. He's wearing a hat with an emblem of two palms clasped together.

"Welcome to the Reunion Zone," he says. "Name please?"

"Donald Marcus."

The attendant slides his fingers across a screen. Checks. Rechecks. And wrinkles his brows and declares: "I'm sorry. Or perhaps I'm not. But there's no one down there" (he whispers the "down there" part) "by that name."

"Sorry," Marcus says. The full name must be pronounced aloud. It claws to something inside, unwilling to be hurled onto the plane of sound. But Marcus forces it: "Sandy Marcus."

"Date of atomization?"

"Day 135, 13."

"One minute, sir."

All around the Reunion Zone, the myriad responses display in plain sight, converging, forming a united anthood of communal wailing and laughing and explaining. The living and the half-dead (not half-living).

At last the attendant finds what he's looking for. "We have you at locus 45, station beta, on the north side of the pool," he says. "She has 14 minutes, 25 seconds of grade one lucidity remaining. After that, it debases to grade two at which point the communion will grow considerably less discernible." And then merrily: "We hope you enjoy your communion and thank you for coming."

During his first visit, he'd come out of compulsion, not desire, with no plan and nothing to discuss. He was hauling all the hollowness with no know-how of how to express it. Sandy was mostly incomprehensible at the time. That's what sticks in his memory. He should have waited. She ... He keeps calling her she, but is she really a she? Regardless, it was like speaking to a nonentity who lacked any cognitive functions, had no access to memory, and was utterly inebriated. He'd asked her what it was like in there. "*Space.*" It was the only thing she said that made any sense. He should have waited.

Marcus walks along the pebbled trail that circles the pond, the stones crunching under his boots. The hard, rough land rises up to a lip around the water and flattens where innumerable communers are seated, gazing into the fluid. The communion itself is a silent activity – "for absolute privacy" – by way of connecting neural frequencies based in part on Relative Reality.

Marcus continues his trek around the perimeter until he reaches locus 45. Up to the lip he walks, the pebbles giving way to umber rock. Now he can see them all, from all around the country, the communers perched on the carved stone seats, gazing into the sparkling blue. Unnaturally blue, he thinks. *Think*, he says in his mind. Stop wasting your time thinking about thinking and think what you're going to say. He finds his station and sits on the hot, hard stone. The Inverted Waterfall pushes up a gentle rush of undulations, like lava flowing from the mouth of a volcano, but quicker, more reasoned, tempered and constant. And above all, beautiful. From the reinforced core, which taps into the pipeline, which in turn taps into the Sarcophagus, the particle, the volunteer, donor – everything they're called except what they are – flows up when summoned and resides in the shallow fluid that enables the communion. Marcus takes a deep breath, forgetting whether he's supposed to say her name aloud, in his mind or how it happens. The Inverted Waterfall brings the constant flow and then he hears, or doesn't hear, but thinks he hears, a soft, airy voice. At first it comes like a blip of sound on the wind and he can't understand, then it grows clearer.

"Marcus?"

Her voice is computerized, garbled, distant. Not her voice. Her words. The voice has no femininity, no human quality.

"It's me," he says.

"I don't have much time."

"I know."

Think, he thinks. He must be fast. To the point. But the speech in his head is jammed, the words peeling off, floating into the ether. The words with weight sink below his grasp.

"Sandy," he says, not thinking now, "this is my confession. It does you no good now. It would have done you no good then. But I owe you this." Breathe. "You're in there because of me. Period. Lucas isn't in there because of me. Period." Breathe. "The

weight of those two worlds, yours and his, are burdens I carry every time I open my eyes until the moment I close them. I should have let you alone. My pursuit, if that's what it can be called, came from loneliness."

"From love, Marcus?"

Not thinking: "I should have left you, so you could find someone to make you happy. Someone who could make you happy. You tried so hard. But I never wanted happiness. That was the disconnect. Coming through RESET, my brain wasn't wired to want happiness like everyone else's. I wanted – I still want – something else. And the results of that divide are the reason for every dysfunctional interaction I ever had with you. And the consequences were catastrophic. Today I did something I vowed I would never do."

"You gave up his ring."

Marcus is silent a moment. "You knew?" He doesn't even remember telling Sandy about the ring the first time.

"You had to." He remains quiet, trying to understand. Letting her continue: "There are memories and then there's what you've been doing, Marcus. You've tortured yourself long enough. Despite what you think, it was an accident."

"That I set in motion."

"That was set in motion," she says. "I made my own decisions. You never controlled me. I wanted you to love me. *He* wanted you to love him. And I made the decision to stay because I wanted you to love us. Until I couldn't do it any more. And Lucas made the decision that he was going to try to make you love him because he was your son."

The depth of his hollowness is caving in on itself.

"I should have let you go."

"You don't understand," she says. "We didn't let you go."

"I came here to make a confession," he says. A flame of anger spokes through the hollowness. "To tell you that I'm sorry. For all of it. I made your life miserable. I made his ... I destroyed his life. And now I'm trying to follow through on this obsession. And I

know it won't bring me what I want, even if I achieve everything. It's already fucked. Alan, Claire, everything. And in the process I've traded his ashes." He laughs miserably, caustically. "I spent everything on that ring to have it welded to my bone. Now it's gone. On loan," he corrects himself. "But probably gone. Exchanged for a piece of the puzzle, not the puzzle itself." After a long silence, Marcus says, "Sandy?"

At last she says, "I don't know why you came."

"I came to say I'm sorry. For ever being in your life."

"I'm not," she says. "That's what you don't understand." A static comes in. "Good bye, Marcus." Followed by silence.

I Terese I

So here she is in the middle of the Rose City, in the financial district of all places, in the late morning, Styx long gone, no one to turn to, and now, she discovers, trying to buy a capsule of food, that she has no money. "But I haven't eaten in two weeks," she tells the man at the counter. He says that he wouldn't eat period if he gave his food capsules away for free. She goes back into the street. Up and down the sidewalks people walk. Their colors, shapes, styles, styles of walking, different but the same. Smells come and go. The smell of a pretzel. A croissant. A coffee. Come and go. Here and gone. Every now and then the scorching suction of a jetpack goes off down the street from a launch site. In between buildings, against the pale blue northern sky, the tram rushes by. Brimming with people that come and go; inside of each: things that come and go. But what about the things that stay? That recede but remain fixed to something permanent (as permanent humans can be) inside of each person, which is what? A neuron? A cluster of neurons, forming a memory? Or even something more physically stalwart like the spine. Some things succumb to failures or temporary defeats, but they remain lodged in the person like a thorn to which the person grows, more or less, accustomed, so that the prickliness or the pain, or the devilish luster, grows less pronounced. Less replete. And all these other smaller priorities swarm and camouflage the other things. She is surrounded by all of these people who can help or hurt her (whose brains are like scratch pads, in which desires and goals are scored in crosshatches), but mainly, she knows, they're unaware of and indifferent to her existence despite passing her in the street, their eyes lingering on her body, acknowledging that she exists because she can see their eyes fall on her person (sometimes linger (sometimes probe)) and bounce back to register, sonar like: this is a human being, their brains tell them (and implicit in that: a human being with shapeliness, like all humans, and therefore usable or unusable, provocative or not: but beyond, or behind that sheer geometry of the person: the same gooey contradictions, the same tensions between the here and the then and the other then (and sometimes never (which opens up a whole realm of despair and reconciliation). Do they think she's pretty? Ugly? Does she look like someone who hasn't eaten in a pair of weeks?

The strange thing is that she's never felt the sensation called hunger. She eats, has eaten, of course. It's what human beings do. But she's never experienced a sensation that would indicate: take in food now. She's eaten to stay human, just as she's had sex because it's what people do. Appetites are part of the experience of being alive, but for Terese they're more intellectual exercises without physical inception.

"Excuse me," she says to a long-haired, tank-top wearing man. She touches his arm as he goes by. "Would you like to have sex and or buy me breakfast?" The man is young, in his early to mid twenties, with a guitar slung over his shoulder. Up and down his arms tattoos run. "Please?" she says. His sunken eyes search her. His face is abnormally pale and when he smiles, his mustache rises to show deep yellow teeth. "Well of course I'll oblige," he says.

He takes her to an apartment two stories below the surface. As soon as they enter, the powerful scents of beer and piss collide as though the furniture has been drenched in both. In the kitchen, a group of people suck on tubes, laughing despite no one telling a joke. Terese and the man walk through the living room where two young men are playing with holograms, each armed with hologram guns, shooting holes through fantastical looking creatures. "This way," the man says, putting down his guitar in a corner. "Xanadu awaits." He pushes open a door, turns on a light. The tiny bed consumes half of his room. Drums, two more guitars, a flute and – "Is that a piccolo?" "It is indeed" – lie propped against the wall.

As she gets under the damp blanket, she wonders why everyone likes sex so much.

"What's your name?" she asks, as he curls his pelvis, dog-like, into her.

The question seems to throw off his concentration. He pauses. He has a young face. But something is erased from it. She doesn't know what. "Brooks," he says, and then goes back to his business.

"Brooks, do you like sex?"

"Most people do."

"I'm not sure I do."

He stops. His tangled brown hair cascades around his hopeless face. His eyes are strained. "Are you telling me to stop?"

"No."

He continues a slow, obsolete assault.

Brian Wolak

"What is it to be alive?" she says.

"This." His voice is rugged. Strained.

"Am I breaking your concentration?"

"You kind of are."

"Sorry."

When it's over and he's on his back, and they're both looking at the circular stains on the ceiling, she asks him if he enjoyed it.

"Apparently you didn't?"

"I don't understand it. That's all."

"There's not much to understand."

"It's so temporary. Like that," she says.

He lifts his head to see what she's gesturing at. "Like music?" There's a change in his tone. "It's exactly like that. It's here. It gives pleasure. It's gone. You want more. You want more variety," he says.

"Yes."

"Its temporariness is what makes you want it again."

Terese considers this. "But doesn't that make it hollow, just a bit?"

"Then all pleasure is hollow, and the Rose City may as well not exist," he says, "We all consume, and we all make our livings off of each other's consumptions. Only," he says, dragging his fingers through his hair, "not too many folks are consuming my offerings, humble though they be. A musician's life is a tough –."

In his soft, gravelly voice: something of a perennial sunset, an acceptance of the wearisomeness of life, that despite the hardships and travails that experience nails

forever to the bone, that above all life is to be enjoyed, immersed in and swam through like a body of water in which you find the aquamarine loveliness among the floating pieces. She renounces him completely.

"You never asked my name."

"What's your name?" he says, curling her hair in a finger.

"My name is Terese. I'm looking for Donald Marcus. Have you seen him?"

The question and her change in tenor catch him off guard. "I don't think so. I've never heard of the cat. Maybe one of my roommates has. We can ask them."

"Yes, let's. It's critical that I find him." She climbs out of bed, starts to piece her clothes back on. "Thanks, Brooks." And then:

"Just to put this out there: I want the whole thing. I want to know what it is to be alive, and that means seeking and completing long-term endeavors in which I've invested myself, heart and soul, and achieved something that I set out to do, that I've worked for, and which has nothing to do with the day-to-day impulses and pleasure barrage that the Rose City offers. I need Donald Marcus so that my brain can become complete, so that, in turn, I can embark on a long-term quest with a sufficient expectation that I'm equipped to reach my end. All worthy long-term endeavors demand your all, along with a unique yet specific skill set that hits on all of life's demands. I think that's what it means to be well. I've figured that out here, in your bed, after sex. So thank you, Brooks," she says. "Now, please introduce me to your roommates so that we can see if they know Donald Marcus."

I Delvin Cythroat I

The sun scalds his eyes. Sunbeams like nuclear butter dripping. Delvin Cythroat has always detested the slippery rays, the obscene ejaculations of a flaming idol that anchors a random center of a random quadrant in spacetime to fill a gravitational need and nothing more except to provoke the obeisance of the current manifestation of the blunt, worshipping tip of an increasingly infertile evolutionary mass. "Humans," he grunts, bumping shoulders with innumerable oncoming pedestrians on the sidewalk. Every time he collides with a body, he envisions himself as the solitary pylon in a sea of ceaseless waves. "Controlled by solar and lunar idols." He visors his eyes with a folded hand as he walks on. "You," he says in his pretty voice, talking to a large woman with dyed blond hair and a penciled-in mole on her cheek. "What you're seeing? This," he says, motioning to everything and nothing, "is all because of me. What color are you viewing?" He locks his hand around her arm. "Your Relative Reality? What color is that building?" He points to an obsidian multifamily project.

"Orange," she says.

"Of course it's orange," Cythroat fumes. "The world is painted pretty and bright for you because you live with an inner nothingness, and that nothingness needs to be colorized and made pretty or else you would forsake this gravitational pull and pray to something, anything, to be lifted off your forsaken feet and flung into the abyss above to escape the abyss below, here, right here," he says, stabbing his finger into her belly. The woman is now shouting for help, using every pound in her body to try to escape. "That orange, the exact thing that makes your miserable existence tolerable is due to me. You should be thanking me right now. Paying tribute to me. Not to that," he says, pointing at the sun, "not to Culbert Cythroat who did very little, truth be told, did very little indeed to advance Relative Reality, and certainly not to that picaroon, Walther Wallach. It is people like you, people exactly and specifically like you, users, blind, dumb worshipping users, who have empowered the false idols without recognizing your true master. It is people like you, so deficient in self control, who have absolutely no speck of self restraint and allow your urges and appetites to snarl at the trough and devour everything in sight with my invention to make the oats taste like honey. It is people like you who need to be obliterated and replaced with beings who can control themselves, who have been empowered to control themselves. You are not a conscious being. None of you," he shouts to the growing crowd, "are more than shipwrecks of the spirit, ruled by a power than you'll never understand, incapable of resisting the forces in your flabby bellies, your flaccid penises and dry cracks of vaginas, none of you will ever hope to control

yourselves. You are ruled by a mass of power that you're not even conscious of. If that is not the epitome of helplessness, I don't know what is. You need help. You need my help. I will give you consciousness that tames, controls, neutralizes and replaces the very need for the forces that rule your lives now. And those pitiful trash bags that you use as bodies now? Fatty bags of disappearing organs and runaway systems – the circulatory system? the respiratory system? the nervous system? – need I go on? They are all beyond your control, impelled, computerized and programmed to operate according to a bygone era and a woebegone scheme, an ancient, primitive, undeveloped, hopelessly inept logic hopelessly and forever out of your conscious grasp. But I can change that. I will change that. Mark my word," he says, at last releasing the arm of the lady. Cythroat, outraged at the ogling faces like random and myriad waves breaking futilely against the pylon that is his person, yet energized and empowered by his soliloquy, spits on the sidewalk and starts to cut a path through the mob. The buttery sun spills its golden beams onto his face. He shields his eyes once again.

"Hey lady," someone shouts, "you have a nice ass." He doesn't realize they're referring to him until someone slaps his right buttock cheek.

"You have big tits to go with that big mouth," someone else shouts.

A rat-faced man in a goatee and dumb eyes comes from Cythroat's side and grabs at his breasts. Arms wrap around his back. Something grinds against him. He is surrounded as he hears a ripping as his coat comes off and then his shirt is torn and the next thing Cythroat sees, after the sea of grizzly anonymous faces, and he realizes that Hawksbill is in the worst neighborhood of Rose City, are the grooves in the sidewalk, the ridges between the pale cement scraped over a contrived surface of a random location on a spinning, rotating rock in space.

When Cythroat comes to, he is on his back and the same fatty sun drips its slippery residue on his face. The butter-hued sky is suddenly blotted out by a face, his face, his own soft, pretty face staring back, looking at, looking in. She mouths the words: "Are you alright?" Cythroat hears nothing but the muffled roar of the ocean, but her words are clear, come lucidly to his consciousness through the magic of light. Light, he thinks, reflecting off of arbitrary dimensions wrapped around arbitrary dimensions, magic, pure and utter, created from nothing to return to nothing, this unceasing bouncing, reflecting, refracting process in spacetime. And then he realizes that he is not seeing himself in the sky, but he is seeing ... "Olivia?" He reaches a hand to pet her face but his arms refuse

or fail to obey his command and he thinks: Absolute Consciousness. That is what's necessary. "Is that you? My Olivia?"

Her eyes dilate, the unmistakable marker of mental activity suddenly, irrevocably at work, processing a mammoth and sudden undertaking. The recognition occurs in no more than a second.

"Delvin Cythroat?"

The words, his name, press through the grating roar of the ocean. A whisper through, against the wind. But it's wrong. Something is wrong. She is wrong.

"You're not mine." And then, with revolt: "What has become of you?"

The remarkable face that he designed twists. Cups grow in the hollow beneath her eyes. Crescent-shaped slashes form on either side of her mouth. An animation beyond what he gave her is alive beneath her skin.

"Who did this to you?" he roars. And rises. Finding the power from a reserve beyond his physicality. His white shirt flaps in the greasy breeze. The filth and slime and blood run down his battered thighs. "I demand to know who did this to you." Each word like a fist batters her back until the being he knows as Olivia staggers.

"You were a temple," he tells her. "Now, you are desecrated."

She was on his map and then she was off, vanished. He was sure that something terrible had happened, that she had met her end, but he never could have envisioned something this distorted, this vicious. "I made you," he shouts, now through tears, "not to be like that."

"I don't understand," she says through her own tears.

"My Olivia would never say something like that," he cries. "She would always understand."

"Please," she says, trying to touch him, but he backs away as though from a miasma. "Did you deliver me into the world?" "I made you," he roars. The confusion on her face is palpable, which only infuriates him more. "Don't you see? We have the same bodies, Olivia, we –"

"But my name is Terese."

Filicide, the act of killing one's own child, is an abomination. Cythroat knows this in all parts of his brain despite its misfiring and/or abnormalities. And yet if your child is a monster, has become a monster, do you even have a choice? Her throat is unprotected. A focused charge and she will be rendered unconscious and then the application of force around her throat will squeeze the monster from the body and she, it, the body, his creation, will be free of the burden it was never meant to endure.

"Terese," he says. He says it as a statement, a question, a commentary. He wants her to know that her name is not Terese, that she has no name, that to be named is a human convention which is the opposite of why she was created. But her reply arrives before he can explain through the only mode of communication that will convey the message.

"My father named me Terese."

"Your father?"

"Walter Wallach." Before he has time to process the information, she delivers another. "I'm looking for Donald Marcus. Have you seen him? He has something I need."

As he lunges at her throat, his hands are deflected. A shiver splinters through his body, hard, fast, sudden, ubiquitous, electrical and glacial. The tall, rancid figure is before him for an instant, a plume of frozen black vapor, a forearm of putrefied bone, the glint of a crescent-shaped blade, and then it's gone and his Olivia is running away. He is watching his creation flee into the cornflower blue of the sky between the rows of hovels until she turns a corner and vanishes.

Cythroat, in his ripped shirt, unleashes a primitive cry. It echoes through the empty streets. Somewhere a dog has been barking. It stops when Cythroat's sound rips through the air. Then the dog howls back. A sad, slow sound. It's joined by the howl from another dog, and then another, until the empty streets sing with the sorrows of animals.

Cythroat finds himself sitting cross-legged on the side of the street. The dust and pebbles and rocks and broken bits of glass bite into his flesh, and once again the

golden, creamy sunlight splashes upon his face. He does not know if he intends to rise again or if the action and subsequent ramifications are too objectionable to expend the effort. The scenario presents itself with more than appealing ardor. It arrives like a bouquet. Sit, Cythroat. Sit and desist. What does it matter? Either way? Delvin Cythroat is ready to accept the offer. He slumps his shoulders and turns his face to the ground, blotting it out with the visionary shields that are his eyelids. So beautiful, he thinks, the ability to blot out the universe with the simplest, most instinctive of reactions. The idea, the realization, the insight worms its way through the recesses of his mind, but he is ready to annihilate it. Functional beauty is irrelevant even as it's been conceived and harnessed through the monstrosity known as Waltherium. Surrender and it will all be over. Fight and it will all be over. Either way. Surrender, it strikes him behind closed eyes, on the hard earth, is the preferable option. And then a faint crackling, a static sound emerges before him, and Cythroat finds himself unblocking the world momentarily to take one last look, to indulge a final bout of curiosity, to find a man in a hologram standing before him.

"Delvin Cythroat," the man says. Cythroat eyes him with the weariness of a beggar who no longer cares to receive alms. "I come on behalf of Culbert Cythroat," the hologram continues. "He requests to meet with you. If you will come to Unus Mundus, we will have aerial to you in minutes."

The sun. Sinister, slippery, sycophantic. Against or despite or in unison with his will, he does not know which, Cythroat finds himself saying: "Send it."
I Drake Black I

From 30,000 feet above, the land is an endless layering of brown: hickory, coffee, sumac, rust, bronze, dried blood. Rich, vapid, crusted. Folds of earth's skins scored away, exposing the desolation. Drake Black has always managed to conceal his loathing of the land. An effective leader embraces the circumstance, including the terrain. Including this, the Dead District. Every now and then, they fly over a spot where the linear line of a road has been carved into the planet – the audacity to chisel such exactness into something so inexact, to instill mathematical precision into geographical wilderness. But mainly he sits in the aerial looking over the miles of wasteland, realizing that his promotion is banishment.

Avarice. The words bubbles up from somewhere. It's where it's all rooted. He once watched a vid of someone saying that success was easy: you decide what you want, and then determine what you to sacrifice for it. Sailing over the desert rock, Drake Black feels in his bones that he's relinquished something invaluable for something worth a mere fortune. The last time he saw his family in person was two years ago. They took a weeklong trip to Francisco's Coast. The thing he remembers most vividly is the sensation of touching another person's skin and bone, feeling his daughter wrap her tiny arms around his chest, the strange knob of her elbows flaring out like disjointed wings and the satiny, stringy hair adhering to the sweat on his cheeks. And the plumper, richer, deeper folds in his wife's shoulders, the density of her body and surreality of pressing against another person's body, the closing of space, the welcome invasion.

"Craters."

"Hmm?"

Walther Wallach is pointing across him to something below. Drake Black follows his finger to a cluster of dimples in the earth. Some are opaque while others contain the swirls of shallower formations. It looks like someone repeatedly dropped a bowling ball in the earth.

"Underground nuclear tests," Wallach explains. "They're called subsistence craters. The predecessors would bore tunnels deep in the earth – some not so deep, unfortunately for them – drop atomic munitions down the holes and then detonate them." Why is he telling him this? "The idea was that the fallout would be contained underground. The explosions vaporized the rock immediately around it, which caused the rock above to

crumble and cave in, forming a chimney."

Walther Wallach continues to talk expressively, incessantly, informatively, no doubt, about the aftermath of the predecessors' blunders and so-called progress, but Black doesn't hear. He sees the old man move his mouth, gumming syllables from his ancient lips, up that replacement throat into talk, into explanations. And all that he, Black, can think is: Why didn't I do it?

"ALL is just ahead," Walther Wallach says, breaking Drake's mournful reverie, pointing to a stark white factory with two gigantically round, white cylinders from which fat, sickly white smoke billows. The smoke rises like floating white lava, obscuring an entire swath of sky with its slow-moving, lurching upward girth.

"What is this place?" Black says, a pang of horror growing by the millisecond in his stomach. "It can't be what I think it is?"

The next thing he sees are the convex ridges of Walther Wallach's mustard colored teeth, the black chasms between the incisors and the strained, sickly tugging of the skin around his mouth into what the old man expresses as a smile. He claps a hand on Black's shoulder.

"This," he says motioning below, "is legacy unfolding into futurity."

Black's heart is thumping against his chest. "I can't be here." He looks at Walther Wallach's bemused smile. "This is medieval, Mr. Wallach."

Walther Wallach closes his lips, his black eyes twinkling in the setting sun. "I have much to show you."

When they land, Drake Black follows Walter Wallach with the surreal disbelief of a man following his executioner. All around him are the artifacts of a dead age enlivened with an unnatural aura. Those mammoth, volcanic cylinders continue to disgorge mountainous white chunks of endless, puttering cloud. Clay-white, domed silos stand like sentinels on the far end of the compound. What looks like barracks wraps around the central building, no doubt the central command, and a tall spire rises in the distance. The sounds are wrong (heinous vibrations; industrial gyrations; deafening mechanical whines that rumble the very ground they walk on). The smells are wrong (dust, rust, chemical laserings, ozone incinerations). And the sightline of the nothingness, the stone, a perimeter of rock, walls off one half of the complex. On the other half, flat, empty desert over which the immensity of the sky rains down cerulean hues of nothingness.

Before he knows it, Black is inside, the journey here already a vague memory. Every cell in his body tingles with numbing pierces. His blood pressure envelops him in a sleeve of incredulity. A door opens and he follows the old man through. Into the command center. Drake Black stands there for a second, his senses returning from the barrage of his surroundings. This, he thinks, surveying the equipment, design, setup – everything about this command center – is what ancient Man must have used when the wheel was invented. Barbaric contraptions of metal assemblages with innumerable dials, knobs, levers and micro-screens of black and emerald waves form a hexagon. In chairs with wheels on the bottoms, human beings sit, staring at consuls. Touching buttons. Pressing things. Muttering into microphones. When he tries picturing the very first hominid, Drake Black sees him sitting on one of these chairs, staring, in a windowless room, at an aluminum contraption of controls like this.

"It started with a desire to create," Walther Wallach declares. "That was the germ. I didn't know what. I didn't know how. I just knew that I wanted to create." He walks through the control room like a man walking on water, Black in tow. "Follow me."

They enter a paste-colored corridor, a tube from nowhere to nowhere, Walther Wallach far ahead.

Catching up, Drake Black says, "You talk as though you remember the days before RESET ..."

Walter Wallach pauses, as though considering something. "You do realize," he says, "that I orchestrated the whole thing?" His pupilless eyes look deader than ever beneath the faint white light and the paste-colored walls, while "the whole thing," croaked out, reverberates through the corridor.

"Of course," Drake says, taming (by ignoring) the insidious sense that everything is worse than wrong; that everything will stay wrong. "But you lost your memory in RESET too?" he says. "Like the rest of us?"

The eyes as black and far away as scoops of space encased in jellied spheres. "I lost

something," Walther Wallach says, opening a door (with a handle? That turns? (Drake Black had no idea such things ever existed)) to a vast room in which pipes of all shapes and colors flow in myriad grids.

Drake ingests the strange scenery quickly but persists. "The Great Sacrifice, Mr. Wallach? For the sake of the planet ... Everyone agreed to relinquish their memories to jumpstart your invention?"

"That was not the Great Sacrifice," Walther Wallach says dismissively, gliding through the room with the supernatural presence of a giant. At every juncture, workers, each and every one, stops, salutes, and continues. Like automatons.

Again, dashing along to catch up, Drake Black manages to throw an elliptical "But …" out there. At first he thinks it's grinded away by the drum of machinery, the whining whirr of something gigantic, when Walther Wallach, as though tossing a scrap to a lost animal, says, over his shoulder: "It was a rung on a ladder." The next pieces come out garbled, partially devoured by the mind-numbing sounds: "… collective cerebral output of the organism known as humanity was a catalyst" … partially distorted by Walther Wallach's mechanical larynx … "resulting voltage significant only to the extent" … partially swallowed by the room of pipes itself … "sufficient for the task it was called upon to ignite." When at last they come to the end of the room.

"But The Great Sacrifice?" Drake persists.

"Black," Walther says, eying, Drake sees, what looks like a strange glow coming from the center of the room, "there are many things you don't – and don't want – to understand. In a sense, that was The Great Sacrifice."

Drake is about to pursue the matter, but Walther Wallach waves him off. "Enough for now. Artemis will take you to your room."

Suddenly his arm is grabbed.

"I'll be seeing you," Walther Wallach smiles. "In the meantime, don't be too vexed."

Drake Black is then transported to the other side of the complex by a guard, and dumped into to a room, a miniature rectangle of space in which a metal cot, desk and chair sit on top of mud-colored tile, amid mud-colored walls, beneath a mud-colored ceiling and its singular, glassy protuberance that dangles like a teardrop, spitting out rainy white electromagnetic radiation.

I Marcus I

His thoughts are scrambled, uncontrollable, as though a confession is only valid when accepted entirely; as though a refutation, however delicate, invalidates its effectiveness; as though the physical act is the point and when deflected, reissues the components back to their origin. As it releases something from the mind's grip, confession rids the body of a weight. As though ... Not as though ... Thoughts, and the stuff of which they're made, are — must be — particulate; have composition and weight; they burden the shoulders, tighten the jaw, knot the stomach. If the stuff of the mind is physical, it means ...

Before Alan's collapse in Eden's Exit, something unexpected had happened. Marcus spiked his drink. There's no disputing that. And Alan drank it. Marcus watched him. And Candy Ottersblood all but confirmed that the substance was more than an indenturing medicinal. The only conclusion is that Unus Mundus had set him up — to hunt down the real or unreal compounds that they claim to need for their experiments. Had he stopped to contemplate the absurdity before now, he might have taken the elevator to the southern tunnel. The whole thing is an elaborate scheme. Obviously. The blackout. The Olivia in his bed. The vial. They knew everything about him — what he wanted, his desperation, his extremes.

But the problem — the problem is that Sandy had continued to accept, even in half death, her situation, her plight, her failure … But how? And why? Why had Delvin Cythroat been carried down the One River, around its bend, when he could have ordered his Olivias to fight the current and swim him to safety? How did Sandy not hate, or at least blame, him? Why did she not reject the whole thing? What Marcus did was unforgivable and yet forgiveness was something she hadn't even entertained — the problem is what had transpired before Alan drank the last whiskey.

Because Marcus saw it, not with his eyes, but he saw it — stretch beyond, or under the particles and enter, and dislodge something, in Alan's brain. Literally saw, and felt it. Enter. Overpower. And exit. It was as though Marcus' willpower had known the exact location, or that a locus was meaningless because it existed anywhere and everywhere in Alan's mind. And Marcus had managed to tunnel deep into the foundation and kick out what should have been cemented in place. Kick out as easily as a crutch from a shriveled hand. He felt the crumble. The crack. And he left Alan's mind before the

collapse. Or maybe there wasn't an implosion at all. Maybe there was the negative space from where and what Marcus had seized.

It happened so fast and it was such a weird sensation that he'd all but dismissed it, but all this time it's lingered, like a wasp on the back of a door, as though a push or the turn of a handle would rouse it. And now the door is open. Someone's walking out of the gift shop. Because the really weird thing is that he'd been practicing. He remembers the weeks before the blackout weekend, in bars, in smoke joints, in game arcades, randomly talking to random people, at first trying to change their Curean mindset ("But don't you want to more? Don't you want to *be* more?" "More than what? I'm happy, dude.") and then trying, literally, by focusing all his attention, to change their minds — envisioning the underlying thought, like a sloth draped across a branch, perfectly awake but absolutely at rest, unwilling to move — and Marcus' will crowding in like a fast-acting natural selection, bypassing the animal itself and forcing, or trying to coerce the species of thought to adapt to a new order, a modern threat, a postmodern direction. And then giving it up as fantasy, as ridiculous, and rededicating himself to finding an honest way of achieving his goal, only to find himself trying again the next night.

And then not in desperation and not even consciously, it flew out of Marcus' mind like lightning, struck its mark, and disappeared. And Alan had continued as though nothing had happened, like a tree standing after the blast until gravity brings it crashing to the ground.

Marcus grasps the receiver hooked to his belt. He unlatches, and looks at it. A silver ring large enough to fit a head. A metal headband. As light as a donut. It has no smell, no special quality except for a thin band that runs around its inner shank. Designed, they said, to extract the physical correspondents of non-physical things.

Behind him, the rip current of the Inverted Waterfall sends Sandy down its hole, back into the circuit from which she was summoned. He looks at the sun. His vision goes spotted. Every step crunches pebbles, fractions of some*thing* larger, lost, and still, somehow amassed. He needs new perspective. He needs to get out out of his head.

The gift shop is filled with communers and Carson, eying or buying mementos. Its pavilion is shaded and cool. Marcus watches Carson examine everything with equal curiosity. A statuette of clasping palms is circled, sniffed, and looked at from every direction. A crumb on the ground is licked. The voices around him are listened to by his shifting, pyramidal ears from which the black wicks swish, absorbing, detecting. Carson

moves to a row of t-shirts in which the same Reunion Zone emblem is printed. The slanted tube of his body waddles past a family of four to examine the sweat left on a sleeve. His long legs propel him rabbit-like from shirt to shirt, from scent to scent. Every noise provokes a turn, a tilt of the head, as he watches as though being spoken to. Children try to pet his silver fur while parents slap their hands for daring. Carson observes every transaction with equal fascination, the furry frills on either side of his face like a (gentle) warrior's helmet. At last he sees Marcus, watching.

"Too bad they don't take into account the fashion needs of non humans. These are lovely," Carson says of the shirts. "Dare I ask how it went?" He turns to a shot glass and sniffs. "I don't know what you were thinking, coming here. Come on."

He leads them to the Reunion Zone lounge for "a quick painkiller — bartender! two gin and tonics, hold the tonic" — during which they drink in silence, while another mismatched pair, a man and non human (a badger by the looks of it) – are in final throes of intoxication on the far side of the flamingo-colored bar. The man has a full head full of hair that betrays the first millimeters of recession around the temples. He is sharp-eyed despite his drunkenness, and holds the bar rail with both hands as though steadying the room from moving. He is probably 10 years younger than Marcus. A row of empty martini glasses ("my trophies," he keeps roaring) are formed before him like a firing squad. The badger is muttering, "What did you expect? At least you got to claim her tax deduction."

Within Marcus' own system, the gin is fast-acting. It seeps down all the right cracks, watering the seeds of euphoria that comes bursting forth in weed-like profusion. For the first time in days, it seems, he repeats in his mind the 15 laws of success which he memorized from Alan's translation, and wonders who in the country possesses the largest amounts.

- 1. A Definite Purpose
- 2. Self Confidence
- 3. Initiative and Leadership
- 4. Imagination
- 5. Action
- 6. Enthusiasm
- 7. Self Control
- 8. The Habit of Paying More than Asked For
- 9. Pleasing Personality

- 10. Accurate Thought
- 11. Concentration
- 12. Tolerance
- 13. Failure
- 14. Cooperation
- 15. The Golden Rule

Marcus grabs at his bandaged hand and motions for Carson to head out, but not before witnessing the man o' hair lose his battle. He slides off the stool like a scarecrow while the badger tilts its head on the bar for sleep's guillotine to fall.

The sun sprays its lemony luster. For no reason, Marcus looks at it. Again. Sudden, brief, ephemeral, permanent all the same. And then away. The pebbles change to rock and the rock turns to boulder at the edge of the Reunion Zone. He takes a seat and starts fumbling in the bag.

"Let's see what the price of a tribute ring, and its finger, fetches these says," Marcus says. And extracts a silver disc, about the size of a small hand, with a hole in the center, along with a thicker disc which seems as thought it could open somehow.

"Hege – or maybe it was Gorg – said to open the one and slide in the other," Marcus says. "I'm guessing the thin one goes into the bigger one, but how?"

On the thicker disc, an assortment of buttons runs around its top perimeter. Marcus is pressing every button but nothing's happening.

"Maybe on the side?" Carson offers.

Marcus runs his thumb along the circumference and sure enough finds a latch. The lid springs open.

"Put the thin one in the open tray," Carson says. "There's a center holder, isn't there?" Marcus slides in the disc and it fits. He presses down and the disc drops in snugly. He closes the lid and then ... waits. When nothing happens, he presses the big button in the middle. Through a window in the lid, the disc inside starts to spin, and along a grey strip, digitized symbols appear, scrolling from one end to the other. It takes a minute, but the internal disc picks up speed, creating a whirring sound and causing the entire

contraption to vibrate. When it seems on the verge of doing something momentous, it halts.

"Come on," Marcus growls, and starts to it.

"Will you stop that?" Carson says. "Press the other button in the middle. The big one is the power button. The small one is to play."

"What?" But Marcus' finger finds the smaller button in the center and smashes down.

A plume of yellowish, translucent plasma-like something spreads into a three dimensional block. The cube keeps spreading and spreading, like an oversized gum bubble, until it rounds into shape, and snaps. All the light vanishes.

"Where did it go?" Carson says.

"You can't see it?"

"You're drunk. You should have eaten something first."

"I'm seeing it, Carson. It's like written words in my mind, except that I can understand them. Their names and quadrants. I know who has the compounds."

"They could have given him absinthe," Carson mutters. "Liquid magic mushroom? Peyote juice? It could be anything."

"Hege and Gorg said the map was custom created ... "

It's a desolate and invigorating feeling, the realization that he's the only one in the world who can see this projection. A slice of the world reconfigured for his, Donald Marcus', exclusive consumption. His goals – his mission – his targets – identified in the psychic flesh.

"They're all here, Carson," he says. "It must have linked into my Relative Reality. Self Confidence in Philadelphia, Pleasing Personality in Saint Santiago."

"Saint Santiago!"

"Now you believe me?"

"I believe you if it takes us to Saint Santiago."

"I don't even know what Pleasing Personality means," Marcus says. "Alan never got around to translating that chapter."

"Don't overcomplicate. We have to start somewhere. It might as well be in the lovely – as I'm told – Saint Santiago. And here's the question, Donald. Here's the most important question. Does Pleasing Personality belong to woman, preferably to an attractive one? Because if it's a dude, we can go wherever else you want."

"It belongs," Marcus says, sounding out the name slowly, "to someone named Heidi Gemütlichkeit."

Heidi Gemütlichkeit

I Drake Blak I

Drake Black waits to be shown the controls of ALL. He waits to be shown the output. He waits. For days. With no word from Walther Wallach, nor, he realizes, drifting through the halls, from anyone else. When he enters a room, no heads turn.

"Does that lever launch the warhead?" he deadpans, lingering behind a young woman working a control board. He'd give her a reassuring smile if she acknowledged him, but his words, on this exchange, apparently have no value. "When my position's announced," he says, patting the back of her chair, "we'll talk."

In the cafeteria, he takes a seat at the end of a long table at which six engineers sit, their white smocks draped behind them like coat tails. Their conversation slaps against his ears with the familiar meaninglessness of waves: "leaching," "RA 226," "spectronomy," "transit times," Thorium X," "isodiaphers," "Bremsstrahlung."

"Don't forget to take a break twice a day," Drake Black offers. "Decompress your spine. Stretch out your legs." And then, to their inert expressions: "Blood flow."

Later on: "I'm Drake Black," he announces to a throng of scientists walking into a room. "President and CEO of ONE." A clear of the throat. Declarative enunciation. "Soon to be captain of this ship." He confronts the nearest scientist (a petite young woman) with an open, thrust-out hand. Radon gas might have been more responsive. She (and they) slide into their room, the door hissing shut.

Drake Black walks the halls to pass the days, waiting. Something effective leaders don't do. Walther Wallach could very well be waiting on Drake Black to show some initiative. Demand that he employ his talents. Take the helm. Seize. Control. Manage. Lead. But without a sign of the old man, what's he to do?

Mainly, he roams and returns to his room, watching "posterity" vids of scientists in little rooms, gabbing incoherencies ("u concentrations," "co-precipitation," "alpha counts"), while he compiles the speech he's going to unleash upon Walther Wallach. No more pseudo mystery. He's sacrificed his life to lead this company – "your company, Mr. Wallach" – and now he's being tasked to take on more responsibility. Dignity, respect, deference – these are the warranted, the justified, conclusions. "You will listen to me," he always begins. And in the mirror, he blurs his eyes to see past his own chestnuts (offering comfort in return) to peer into the miniature black Sarcophaguses. "You will

hear me out," he offers. Either way. They're both good, both strong assertions. Enough to incubate the warm nugget of stability (of self confidence) growing inside, the inevitability of which will spur their relationship to evolve in and onto more equal footing. "Listen." Damn you. Damn you, old man. Damn old man. He will forget, or he will gaze past, or gaze in and out of your dead, black eyes and see (not death but) opportunity.

Just as he's breaking mental ground, the vid changes. And Walther Wallach appears, pressing fingers to lips, gazing into the distance, speaking to nobody and yet speaking to Drake Black:

"When an organism is on the verge of death, its particles undergo rapid transformation. Decay is an inadequate term, but I'll use it as a placeholder. I discovered opportunity in accelerated decay. To bind the Humanium particle to an isotope of Thomasium, and create a homeo-atomic chain reaction."

"But I know this," Drake Black whispers.

"What will remain unknown is precisely how radical this process is – the process whereby the particulate matter of the human organism is delivered into the country's utility — particularly when it takes place in the RESET era. A donation to the Sarcophagus is a donation of one's life."

For the first time Drake Black may be seeing another side of Walther Wallach, a vulnerable blind spot of his own arrogance. There's nothing radical in the idea of donating your life for the greater good when you're on the verge of full death.

"Utilitarian practicality is the end game now," Walther Wallach continues, "but it belies the itch, erased from the collective memory bank for now, from the back of the universal mind: what would happen beyond?"

Beyond?

"God," Walther Wallach says. "As meaningless as a growl, now. As indecipherable as the shaking of leaves on a tree. Forsaking a believed in or hoped for acceptance beyond, in the eternal afterlife in the perpetual embrace of one's creator as opposed to ..." he says, drifting, "a reinvestment into the living. To banish the agony of hope, the Great Sacrifice was devised to ..." The vid skips again. Walther Wallach is still talking, but now he's in a room similar to the reactor room in ALL. He's speaking to someone. "I was the first donation." He pauses to watch the person's reaction. "If you follow your thought to the end, you'll arrive at the truth."

Drake Black follows it to nowhere. But Walther Wallach continues. "Waltherium solved one global crisis. But Sarcophagus was – and is – designed to solve a graver threat."

Which is?

Which is when a pretty woman enters the screen. She staggers, as though learning to walk.

"Good, Terese," Walther Wallach says. "In no time, you'll be more agile than all of us." And then to someone offscreen: "I want every iota of her movement documented, tested and retested."

And then another vid starts: "Waltherium, beyond the atomic framework, is no more and no less than an exploitation of the discovery and power of the human particle. Humanium, joined with Thomaisum in the Waltherium pipeline, is transforming the structure – that is, of the constantly splitting atoms of human essences within – on subatomic levels. It is combining every single human atom and bonding it to a substance that is, effectively, everlasting."

We know this. What of the ...

"You don't see it, do you? An amalgamation of every donor since inception, the resulting atom – or atoms – converged or collapsed into a particle of eternal half life."

Which is when it finally dawns on Drake Black. Outside, through the little port window, flecks of desert dust speckle the landscape like a swarm of gnats. "He's creating a new fucking particle." And eternalizing it. "And fucking eternalizing it."

"The next step of evolution will arise from that very brew."

But with the human particles constantly splitting, it's progressively depleting the individual particles of their individuality. Of their essence. Isn't it? The "person" who consisted of a singularly unique atomic structure is growing ever more diluted and

scattered.

I Claire Whitmore I

At the lower level of Unus Mundus, the body of Candy Ottersblood is being lifted onto a cart with a hatchet ("to chop 'em up for the doctor's experiments — if I ever told my darling wife that I sever heads for a living, she'd up and leave before I had a chance to explain what it is we do here").

"What is it we do here?" the other guard says. "And what happened down here? Did anyone ever say? Fallout. Radioactive gas. Contained quantum explosion, whatever that is. I heard all manner of cockeyed explanations. And the biggest mystery of all is how Soderberg managed to go unscathed. I wouldn't trust that spineless droid as far as I could throw him."

The other guard, now dragging the body of Claire Whitmore to the cart, notices a quiver in Candy's leg.

"Look at that, mate," he says. "Residual reactions of the nervous system, I expect. Mysteries of the body and so forth."

The other guard, a man with a belly that hangs over his belt, stops to regard her corpse. "I always found her to be hot piece of ass, truth be told. In a bitchy way, I mean. It's a shame." He returns to the cart and rearranges what was her collapsed heap into what is now simply a dead woman on her back.

The other guard, Terrence, a tall, lanky man with a long beard, twists Candy Ottersblood by her thighs onto her stomach. "Look at that," he says. "How she got that ass is the greatest mystery of all. All that walking, I reckon." He starts for Claire and then reconsiders: "I wonder if it feels as good as it looks?" He runs his thin hand along Candy's ass. "Ah, Candy," he muses, "what might have been, but never was, because of our respective positions. Me a lowly guard and you, whatever you were."

"What do you say we see if it looks as good by nature as it does under uniform? I wager 50 bucks that she's got implants."

"Keep your 50. I wager first dibs that it's all natural."

The fat guard looks delightedly at Terrence. "You're on, mate."

Terrence strips Candy's corpse of her pants, her right leg continuing to quiver. With each pull, Terrence grows more aroused by the exposure of pale flesh. Her round ass gives way to strong hamstrings and then to firm calves, "as white as the moon itself," the fat guard observes. With her navy pants down at her ankles, Candy's body, her buttocks in particular, are clearly unmolested by any cuts of the knife.

Terrence looks at the fat guard triumphantly. "Give me some privacy." It takes him seconds to unbuckle his belt and roll down his own pants to his knees. Because of his height, it's awkward to line up with Candy's body, but he's determined to make it work. He drags her by the hips so that her legs jut out from the ledge. Her arms are folded down either side like a penguin's and her head is turned to profile. A tiny stream of blood is trickling down the metal bed from the side of her mouth, and her leg continues to twitch, but Terrence, musing to himself that his penis would be unworthy of someone like Candy if she were alive ("I need it harder and faster for such a little pecker," he imagines her commanding), obliges his fantasy. Except that it's not so easy.

"How long?" the fat guard shouts over his shoulder.

"Not even started," Terrence calls. "Shut up so I can concentrate." He spits on his hand and rubs his cock wet. This is how she would like it, to savor every bit of these five inches (4 3/4?), to go slow and deliberate at first, and then to proceed to the rough stuff. A cunt like Candy Ottersblood was probably into freaky shit. She'd probably fucked a few corpses in her day, so there's no need for remorse, nothing that her still-adequate vagina (not to mention the sensation of her strong ass against his thighs) can't blanket. Terrence would heave himself into Candy except that her right thigh continues to twitch steadily, and then he feels, and sees, her left side start to twitch. He needs to go for it, to get it over with when he thinks, he's sure, but it's impossible, to see her arm move. The next thing he knows, Candy's arm is reaching up and her hand is clasping his shirt in a fist. He's imagining this. He knows it. But then a strange thing happens to Terence, as an icy sensation shocks the side of his head and he's thrown against the edge of the cart. In a daze, Terence dabs his cheek with his hand and sees blood as he feels a lightning bolt unfolding along his temple. He looks over to see the cart empty. Something seems to be in his peripheral vision, something jutting out of the side of his head. As soon as he realizes that it's a hatchet, he collapses.

The fat guard is too slow to turn around. A single whack sends him falling on his face like a statue.

"Sick fucks," Candy Ottersblood hisses, as she walks to the window to assess the damage in the reflection.

"This isn't going to work for shit," she says, parting her hair to survey her new digs. "At least this is the right place for that."

Over her prior body she kneels for a moment, momentarily mourning the loss of her home the way a crab might once it's outgrown its shell — if a crab had consciousness. From her former shell she extracts a transmitter and tosses it on the ground. "Why is it taking so long?" she says. At last a hologram of an old man appears.

"Mr. Wallach," she says.

"Claire?" the hologrammed man says.

"I'm in."

After a moment, the hologram of Walter Wallach, surveying her, says, "Good." And then ends the transmission.

"You're welcome," Claire mutters. "Splitting my atom in two wasn't on my bucket list. Neither was this body," she says returning to the window. "But – girl – you gotta work with what you got."

She proceeds to one of the intercoms on the wall. "Help," she shouts, pretending to be bewildered and out of breath, "this is Candy Ottersblood. I don't know what happened or how I got here, but I'm here with three dead bodies." She looks around. "And Donald Marcus is gone."

I Walther Wallach I

From the command room, Walther Wallach is watching Drake Black gaze into the light water graphite moderated reactor. A boy peering into a pond. A man pondering the radiation shield and containment structure.

On the console, Walther Wallach presses a button. It creates a static click followed by a burst of feedback, followed by the sound of Walther Wallach's nostril breaths into the thick webbing of the microphone.

"Don't waste all your time in here. Walk around. Get acquainted with the power at your grasp," Walther Wallach says. "You're going to help usher in a new era."

Drake Black looks up at the window. Walther Wallach takes his finger off the button. It goes quiet except for the clicking of keys behind him. He waves to Drake Black. He gives him a smile. Drake Black looks down, and then exits the reactor room.

"Don't let him stray, Athena," Walther Wallach calls into nowhere.

Walter Wallach makes his way through the plant. Jason across the Argo. Ahab across the Pequod. Perhaps. Perhaps. He stops on occasion, clasps his hand on someone's back, and moves on. He took pity on these people. He gave them meaning and purpose. That's what ALL is.

Eventually he makes his way to the spire and flows up into his sanctuary where, among the 360 degree scenery, Walther Wallach proceeds to administer four simultaneous dialogues.

To Claire Whitmore, he "begs forgiveness for my curtness. I was acclimating a new test subject to ALL. You're entrenched, then?"

"As Candy fucking Ottersblood."

"But that sounds enchanting."

"Do I get a raise for this?"

"You get everything that's coming to you, and more my dear. How are things with our

friends at Unus Mundus? Is my product ready?"

"They are, except for one, which Balthazar stole when he blew this joint with the non human and – surprise surprise – Donald Marcus."

"And what of that little foray?"

"I covet the strength of your faith, Mr. Wallach, if you'll pardon me saying so."

"My interest is piqued. I want daily updates."

At the same time he's conversing with Claire, he's holding a discussion with "Elbert Daft, senior vice president and chief operating officer of Unus Mundus. I'm pleased to finally to meet you, Mr. Wallach."

"The sentiment is mutual, Mr. Daft, but I've always communicated with Candy Ottersblood. Might I inquire why I have the honor of speaking with you and not Ms. Ottersblood? Everything is okay, I expect?"

"Everything is great. Situation normal. Ms. Ottersblood isn't feeling well at the moment, but we're working on that."

"It's no offense to you, but I've enjoyed my repartee with her. And you'll forgive me saying so, but she's a considerable upgrade in terms of the view."

"You'll find no disagreement there," he says, but Elbert Daft, corpulent and meaty, is sweating like a ham left out in the sun. "Now it was nice talking to you, Mr. Wallach and feel free to check in any time."

"My order."

"Sir?"

"I am due to receive 50 premier brains. Are they ready?"

Slivers of sweat trickle down Elbert Daft's blubbery cheeks. He wipes them away with the back of his wrist. "They'll be ready."

"I don't need to remind you of the consequences of a breach of contract."

"No, sir, you don't."

"Be sure to send my kind regards to Ms. Ottersblood."

"I will do that."

"And tell Dr. Cythroat that it's been a pleasure doing business with him."

"I will do that too."

"And for heaven's sake, tell them to turn on the air conditioning. It looks hot as the dickens there."

Elbert Daft mops his cheeks and forehead, chuckling his meaty, nervous laugh.

Simultaneously, Walther Wallach is conversing with Robin Ives at Hawksbill.

"A shipment from another vendor is coming in ahead of schedule, Ms. Ives. I wonder if I can expect the same service from Hawksbill?"

"Hawksbill honors its contracts," Robin Ives says. "Your order will be ready on the agreed upon date."

"It's a pity that I selected a vendor that can't deliver the same excellence as others."

"In my experience, there's no pity in honoring a contract."

"Fifty bodies by next Friday?"

"Now, if you like, I can put a rush on that order. We offer expedited services for the best of our best clients."

"I appreciate that. And may I inquire what the premium is for a so-called rush order?"

"Please don't offend us," she chirps. "We want our clients to be ecstatic that they chose Hawksbill over our competitors. But if you added 50 basis points, Hawksbill's policy is to bypass our parliamentary voting procedures."

Walther Wallach smiles his old, mustard-colored smile. "I knew that I made the right decision in selecting Hawksbill. You live up to your reputation."

"Your organization is first class, Mr. Wallach. Shall we ship them to the address you gave us?"

"That would be wonderful."

Simultaneously he is talking with Rex Slick at ONE's headquarters at the Sarcophagus.

"I don't think we've had the pleasure of meeting, Rex."

"I don't think we have, Mr. Wallach."

"I understand from Drake Black that you're his top guy."

"Mr. Black honors me."

"You've been with us for five years now? All in the Public Relations division?"

"It's been a rewarding experience both professionally and personally for me. Your creation is the wonder of the ages. That's why I've been planning a big public relations push with all of the major outlets across the country."

"I leave the marketing in your capable hands. But I have a favor to ask."

"Anything, Mr. Wallach."

"Drake Black is taking a leave of absence. His health is of the utmost concern to me. I've ordered him to focus on more important matters than ONE."

"But Drake Black is ONE."

Wallach laughs pleasantly. "He is indeed. But life, and business must go on. That's why I'm asking you to step in as interim CEO and president of ONE."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say that you accept and that you'll do a damn good job."

"I accept this honor, Mr. Wallach, and I will do a damn good job."

"Work on the message to staff and media and run with it."

"Before I let you go, Mr. Wallach, there's one slightly unpleasant matter I feel obligated to raise."

Walther Wallach betrays no reaction. "What is it, Slick?"

"The breach, sir. Right before he left, Drake Black was trying to determine the next steps in containing the breach of three bodies."

"Your first assignment as interim CEO is to codify emergency protocols."

"I will, sir. And I apologize for my - for ONE's - ignorance."

When Walther Wallach finishes explaining how the bodies are to be removed, he ascends the sanctuary to the summit, a small, circular room of windows. His knees meet the mat as he prostrates himself to give thanks and penitence for the day.

I Delvin Cythroat I

The backseat of the driverless aerial features a looped video of a blond man dressed in impeccable garb (a black and white gingham button-up under a blood-red cashmere sweater) standing before the command center window of the Sarcophagus:

"This is Rex Slick from ONE, your utility of choice. This aerial is powered by Waltherium, the product of ONE, thanks to your departed loved one's donations. On behalf of civilization, thank you. This message was paid for by ONE, with additional support by Walther Wallach, creator of Relative Reality."

Delvin Cythroat whispers, "Off." The interior goes silent and dark. The Rose City sunset casts its final radiance behind him as the car hovers into the night. At the crosshatch of lights around him he can't help but see or assign a face. Not of Walther Wallach. Not of Donald Marcus. Not even of the atrocity that now goes by the name of Terese. He sees a thousand faces compressed into one, each simultaneously and ubiquitously enjoying an augmented world tailored to their preference because of him, Delvin Cyhthroat, because of his vision for Relative Reality, what should have catapulted him into wealth and distinction but instead was ransacked, repackaged, and bastardized into something else entirely so that medicines, communications, self enhancements and the whole charade could be administered through microscopic bots in the body, soaring, gliding, endlessly festooning the bloodstream with their prowling existence, awaiting commands from their host or administer, be it doctor/judge/surgeon/whatever. Delvin Cythroat disdains Relative Reality – not simply because it had been stolen from him on a technicality, but because there remains something deeply compelling about accepting the world as it is, unvarnished by the tints and hues of an augmentation system. As the aerial descends to the river and speeds over the calm waters, Cythroat laughs at the notion. Accept the world yet improve its inhabitants.

When he arrives at Unus Mundus, he is shown to a room (on which a painting hangs of a man in a lion's pelt swinging a club at a snake) where he meets a man who introduces himself as "Elbert Daft, senior vice president and chief operating officer of this fine establishment. Pleased to meet you, Dr. Cythroat," along with a slender woman who, Cythroat can tell, has recently undergone some "work" on her face, and, extending a frigid hand, says, simply, "Candy Ottersblood." Instead of inserting his own hand into hers, which he assumes is the customary yet odious custom of quotidian introductions like these, he finds himself reaching out and pinching her index finger. "As charming as expected," she says.

"We're delighted to have you as our guest, Dr. Cythroat, Your work on Relative Reality was unrivaled."

"Thank you."

"How it was so viciously stolen from you and your brother was an unforgivable crime against justice."

"It was exactly that."

"But all journeys have their bumps, and your journey has led you here."

"To an aquarium."

"We're a little bit more than that."

"I'm sure."

"So we have a packed agenda, starting out with a tour of the facilities," Elbert says. "Let's show him around, shall we, Candy, assuming you're up to it?"

"I'm fine," she says, and the way she says it brings a purr to Cythroat's heart. "By all means, lead the way," Candy says, watching Cythroat with a pair of eyes that he suspects are not her own either.

Elbert Daft shows them around, a charade which Cythroat quickly surmises is an elaborate stall tactic to amplify whatever suspense they think is building over meeting — he's sure they're calling it a "reunion with" — his brother. But Cythroat is a good boy and plays along.

Daft points out every mundane detail of their laboratory ("we've got a little bit of everything here, from physiology and anatomy down on the south wing; behavioral, cognitive and developmental up north" etc.), even a tour of the restrooms.

After 45 minutes of such banality, Cythroat issues a demand. "I want to see the

experiments."

The hefty head of Elbert Daft releases a bead of sweat as he laughs meatily. "We do have a final surprise."

"I want to see them, or whatever deal you hope to fabricate will end now."

Elbert extracts a handkerchief from his pocket and dabs himself dry. "It's always so hot in here," he says. Cythroat can see his eyes straying to the cold-blooded creature behind him. Whatever her eyes reply, Elbert chuckles, claps a hand on Cythroat's shoulder, and says, "Let's go see the Skunkworks division, shall we?"

Cythroat follows them to an elevator that goes sideways. His pulse remains a placid 40 beats a second, but only because he designed the body to perform so. His brain, he knows, is sending signals to accelerate the heartbeat but the body is overriding its commands. An interesting dynamic — and a win for system one. For the uncontrollable part of his brain, the wandering elephant, is suddenly rampaging. He can feel its tusks poking at the straw walls of his consciousness, wanting to break through and trample everything in sight. The closer they get to the experiments, the more excited to grows.

At last the elevator opens to an elongated room of cold bright light. Cythroat has to squint his way in until his eyes get accustomed. In no time, he perceives row upon row of plastic cell block, each transparent, revealing every stage of surgical trauma, the very start to the inevitable end. There must be more than a hundred test subjects, some human, some non human, their screams, terrors and whimpers filling the space with caustic union.

"Why are you smiling?" Candy Ottersblood says, clearly trying to avert her eyes from the gruesome scene.

Cythroat finds his mind quieted, his thoughts utterly controllable.

"I'll tell you why, Candy," Cythroat says. "Candy and Ottersblood are such incongruous names, wouldn't you say? I could say them all day. Candy. Ottersblood. Is Ottersblood your married name?"

"Make your point."

"I'm smiling at my brother's – the 'great' and eminent Dr. Culbert Cythroat's – number one delight. He is very savvy at misdirecting his admirers with grandiose plans for progress and arts and the intersection of the science and arts and so on and so forth. But in his nucleus accumbens – I thought you would know the term – in the reward center of his brain – Dr. Culbert Cythroat, bastion of the sciences, champion of the advancement of human intelligence, has one insatiable tickle. Which is to maximize the infliction of misery."

Elbert Daft laughs nervously. "Sibling jokes," he says. "Perhaps we move quickly through this room? Right up here, starting with the young lady on the left, is the deep brain stimulation quadrant."

"The *exposed* deep brain stimulation," Cythroat clarifies. "I can see the poor girl's longitudinal fissure from here and those barbaric electrodes plunged into her cortex. How much skull did you have to shear away to reach that level of exposure, I wonder? And the way that she's babbling indicates ... No, Elbert, I've seen enough already. I am quite certain of that. Please take me to my brother now."

"Well, all right!" Elbert chuckles. "Let the reunion begin."

As they make their way into the elevator, Cythroat ribs Candy Ottersblood. "You look as white as an egg. Surely you must be accustomed to such cruelty?"

"It's science," she snaps, "The only thing I object to is your delight in another being's agony."

Cythroat smiles, clasping his hands behind his back.

"By the way," Elbert says, "if you want a change of clothes, Dr. Cythroat, just say the word. And I mean that with all due respect."

Which is when Cythroat pays attention to his reflection in the elevator's mirror. His t-shirt is missing a sleeve; its bottom is torn. For some reason he's wearing no pants. And as he walks closer to the mirror, his disarrayed hair conspires with the grime on his forehead and, he notices, a pebble stuck in the ridge between his lower lip and chin (the mentolabial sulcus), which he plucks out and lets fall to the floor. He lets out a deep sigh.

"No judgment whatsoever," Elbert says, looking perfectly ahead, absolutely not at Cythroat.

"I'm fine," Cythroat says. "Why wouldn't I be?"

When the elevator opens, Cythroat enters a dark and muggy room, filled with the odor of seawater and the putter of a high-powered motor.

"This must be the famous new abode of my brother," Cythroat declares. "Am I in his presence?"

Whatever drama was supposed to build is dispensed with immediately.

"Welcome, Delvin," a voice booms from the darkness.

Delvin Cythroat proceeds, hands clasped behind his back, with the confidence of a man who can see in the dark. He finds a spot and stops. "When may I see my brother's new manifestation?" he says.

"I might ask the same thing," the voice says.

The room is suddenly awash in indigo light, as the Cranium, in which the gelatinous, pinkish brains, with their tentacled nerve endings dangling like Portuguese Men of War, illuminates.

Delvin Cythroat approaches the glass casing. "One hundred percent diffusion. Not a trace remaining. In there with your babies? I must say, Culbert, your appearance, or should I say disappearance, must have broken a lot of hearts. You were quite the ladies man in your day."

"And you've become quite the lady yourself," the voice says.

Delvin pauses. He feels the tusk stab through the sides of his thoughts, but his body remains perfectly controlled.

"Your new form is more pleasant to regard than that former cadaver," Culbert says, with

something of a twinkle in his voice.

"It was a cadaver," Delvin says, examining the contents of the cranium. "It never cooperated, but it's led me here, inside this new suit, inside my own creation ..." and then his voice trails off to a mutter "... hastened by Donald Marcus ..."

"Donald Marcus?" Elbert Daft blurts. It elicits a strange silence. "Pardon my interruption."

"That will be enough, Elbert," Culbert Cythroat says.

"They stay," Delvin says.

"Brother - we have some catching up to do."

"Is Donald Marcus here?"

A strange pause. Very strange.

"Donald Marcus is not here," Culbert says at last.

"He was here though?"

If water could sigh ... "He has been here, yes. What of it?"

Delvin's voice turns high-pitched now, almost a screech: "Because he was an experiment?"

Elbert, his arm like a fence over Candy Ottersblood, backs away toward the door.

"He remains an experiment," Culbert Cythroat says.

As though a stick of dynamite, sizzling, is tossed onto the floor.

"Donald Marcus *ravaged my body*," Delvin Cythroat explodes.

"But you're gorgeous now," Culbert Cythroat says. "So self confident. Radiant. Majestic!"

"I lost myself," Delvin roars.

"I vacated myself."

"I was violated."

"I was vitiated," Culbert says, "for the sake of my science. It's no different with you."

"Yes," Delvin says, starting to lose control of his regulated body, "except that all I want to do is kill something."

"Then just be."

"Be?"

"Yes, be," Culbert Cythroat says. "You're now part of something greater. We are a sanctioned organization. An exempt entity. Which means that any full-time staff member has immunity for the rest of his – or her – days. Whatever you do will fall under the code of the advancement of the sciences. Which means that all of those urges you've been withholding can be released. All great men must flush out their demons. The wise ones train them to attack others."

The strangeness of it all circles Delvin Cythroat for a cyclonic moment. And the abuse. On the street. It suddenly collapses, crashes, and the might of the unconscious brain rips him along its punishing currents, dragging him back to that cold vacancy at the bottom of the river where, disassembling, he lay as inspiration clotted over chaos.

"I demand to experiment on a live test subject," Delvin announces. "On Donald Marcus. That is my prerequisite."

"He is one experiment that must be allowed to finish," Culbert says, "but assuming completion, if your bloodlust remains frothy, you may do as you wish. Is that acceptable?"

To delay gratification? When he's been envisioning, in no particular order: the smell of Donald Marcus' steamy blood; the weight of his slippery intestines rolling in his slippery, blood-soaked palms; the mouthfeel of his cheek flesh; and the disintegration of life from Donald Marcus' eyes as he snuffs off his air supply. To extend that carrot even farther

away is a cruel jest, but lust is best slaked when it's had opportunity to engorge. And the temporary displacement of the Donald Marcus quotient from the total opportunity index might help him focus, a skillset ingrained in his previous nature but has "been turning and turning in the widening gyre" since his transition, as he's felt his own "center cannot hold" and "mere anarchy is unloosed." Suddenly, the memory of those first days after the confiscation of Relative Reality hit, when Cythroat would sit by a fire while his lab was being built, reading — yes, reading — poetry, of all things. Ah, but those days are long gone and now it's best to redirect anarchy from one's self. Delvin Cythroat nods.

"Good," Culbert says. "Now, onto greater matters. Robin Ives informs me that you have the makings of a game changer in mind? A rival to our rival. She says you call it 'Absolute Consciousness?"

In which all the little ancient codings are charmed out of their primal pits and made to conform – unearthed and tamed absolutely. A being wholly mind. Unconsciousness flattened against consciousness on a singular plane. Of absolution. Making a monarch of the mind. And of the body.

Delvin Cythroat nods again.

"It's amusing," Culbert Cythroat booms, "that the body specialist would produce the brain idea. If we are to embark on this journey together, I propose that it should be under the auspices of Cythroat Brothers, Inc."

"Agreed."

"And it will mean taking on an old nemesis."

Which returns Delvin Cythroat to the surface, where, bobbing along, the indigo air and seawater spray reawakening his senses, he smiles delightedly.

I Terese I

She plants her hands on her thighs and gulps in air only to spew it back out. Around her eyes, her umber hair hangs in jagged blades, beyond the muffled cacophonies of the hundreds and thousands and millions ... the Rose City citizens and denizens, the transients, tourists and natives, the rapists, hacks, mountebanks and swillers, the strivers and seraphs that traverse the steel and concrete millimeters in disarrayed concert. Voices. Compressed. Distinct. Lucid and confused. Where have they come from? Why do they arise in times like now? In every utterance, something tiny emanates, like a tin cry crawling from the cracks to call attention to itself.

"I told you, Terese."

She straightens her spine, threads her fingers through her hair and squints at the voices, at the lingering vacancies haunting the streets.

"You can't help a man like Delvin Cythroat."

The collective howl rising not from outside, but from the internal infinite loop, seeping up in silence, in the washed out roar of nothingness.

"But that was one of my sisters," she says. "Wasn't it?" The foul plume of smoke darkens. And she knows — she knows from one of her voices, small but insistent, who it was she encountered. She can feel the groan of the voice throbbing through her limbs. "Stop laughing like that," she says. "Why does he hate me?"

The cloud of sulphur takes shape and Styx is beside her, snaking his smoky arm around her like a scythe.

"Let's take a little trip," he says. "It's not far, and I daresay you'll find it enlightening to see our birthplace."

The word *birthplace* stomps out like a hoof caving in a chest.

He's lying. She should resist. She should go back to trying to be well, trying to find Donald Marcus to learn how to become well, but she finds herself (there she goes again, finding herself) obeying.

Through the evening they walk along the streets Terese has walked all these months, past the Emerald Towers, beyond restaurant row, through the Curean arcades until they reach the industrial quadrant where warehouses, their doors gone, their siding rusted, stand like primitive huts. Styx leads them inside one onto a motorized lift. "Pull that lever, Terese." The black knob is cold. It looks like an overgrown eye. She pulls the gear, and the lift descends as steel chains jingle and grind.

When it stops, they disembark into a dark cavern where, at the foot of a ramp, a small square artifice sits sullenly among the dripping rock. Its cadaverous glow illuminates the dripping stalactites and, farther down, a rocky river bottom. Her feet crunch the pebbles as she descends the ramp while the shack spits out its dark glow like deformed energy escaping a black hole, or a dead womb.

"The quickening of your pulse?" Styx says. "It's recognition."

She finds her hand running along the cold cube's aluminum exterior. Along its length she drags her finger until it reaches the edge; the sharp joint creases her fingertip; she palms the other side. Cold aluminum. Nothing more. Rather than venture inside, she finds herself walking down to the riverbed. The cracks run long and shallow along the dried earth. A groove spans its length and disappears into either end of blackness.

"When Waltherium was first installed in the Rose City, its pipeline ran here, underground," Styx says. "But then Walther Wallach realized that he needed insulation for his plan to work. So he rerouted it to travel beneath millions of tons of water."

"The One River."

"Up there," he says, gliding into the bed, "the smallest of leaks sprang when they diverted the Waltherium into the new pipeline." Terese peers into the darkness above. "It's one of only two spills that have occurred over the entire project, and less than a milligram was leaked — no more than a speck, hardly visible to the naked eye."

Styx's smoky voice is amplified within the empty cavity. He continues.

"Delvin Cythroat, who retreated here for reasons that will become apparent over time, spent a decade trying to perfect the human body. He was furious when the men from ONE invaded his lair to reroute their precious Waltherium. On one day in particular, as he was completing the first of what were to become models of, in his mind, perfected human bodies, the engineers from ONE also happened to be reaching a critical point in their work. They cut off the Waltherium flow and were already rerouting it when Delvin Cythroat came out, down to this bed, ranting and raving about invasion. He had been testing his very first model, teaching it to walk, manipulate its fingers, to see, hear, react and respond to its changing environment, and the workers from ONE were interfering with his lessons. The droid followed him down to this spot. Delvin Cythroat and his mercurial ways quickly escalated the encounter into an altercation. Cythroat had to be restrained. And his droid inexplicably made its way between them, undoubtedly having no idea what it was doing, mindless as it was. Cythroat never specialized in brains. He obsessed over the human body and relied on computerized intelligence for cognition in his creations. When the droid entered the scuffle, a small cut opened on its abdomen. It was pushed into the basin, right here, where the microscopic drop of Waltherium has just fallen."

"And?"

"And?" he says with scorn. "That thing you consider life is the drop that got away. It got away inside of you."

Terese draws up her shirt. The crescent scar looks no more malignant than a fingernail shaving. She traces her finger over its sunken shape.

"What does that make me?"

"It makes you life itself."

"Human or robot?"

"Both."

"Everyone or no one?"

"You are who you are, Terese."

The riverbed suddenly looks like what it is, a gulley in which the sewage of life used to spew through a tube.

"The amazing thing is that Walther Wallach's recipe was incomplete," Styx says. "His concoction of particles wasn't fully fused. It was wrong, in fact. The properties he was looking for hadn't developed yet. That's why he rerouted and insulated the Waltherium. Life wasn't ready to spawn from his creation, and yet here you are. A miracle."

A miracle. Programmed – ordained – to become well. Via the 15 Laws of Success, via Donald Marcus.

Oh, Terese. The United Districts of Terese, under one body, indivisible, with amalgamated liberty and a voice for all. The knowledge hissed from a snake named Styx here in this cavity of rock, solidified, bolstered, unmovable.

"You said you were born here too?" she says. "You came from the same drop of Waltherium as I did?"

The blank black nothingness of Styx gulps and regurgitates from his inner chasms.

"I came from the same drop as you, but I had no vessel to infiltrate. And yet," he says, "I needed no organism to inhabit. At least not permanently."

Terese exits the riverbed to the far side of the cave, wondering if she should be confused or disconsolate or empowered or liberated, but she's none of those things. She is and remains who she's always been, with the same aspiration as always. Now that she's learned her origins, she's unequivocally unchanged. Perhaps it's the rock. Or the darkness. But the permanence is also stainless. Terese presses against the damp, rocky walls, their rigidity digging into her palms with the same sensation as she would have felt before the hissing. Specks cling to her hand. When she brushes them off, the particles fall away, leaving nothing (and everything) but their impressions, never to be erased until Terese is too.

She's about to turn back to the other side of the dead river when the glint of flattened heaps catches her eye in the pallid light. Terese walks along the wall to find scattered pits. Ashes. Flattened heaps of fallenness. The remains of cremations. She steps over the depressions wondering if her father was the fire-wielding mortician and what he would have burned. There are several of these funereal spots on the far side of the river, all of them no more than piles of blackened molecules except for one, in which she discovers, and fishes out, the charred remains of a piece of paper, the words burned away except for: "Spiritus Mundi." In her damp palm it lies while, with her other hand,
with her finger, she pushes. And crumbles the shard into pieces.

I Drake Black I

The roar of the turbines is truculent, ceaseless, ubiquitous. Among the labyrinthine piping in the cavernous white rooms of pumps, generators and computers (computers!?), among the herds of white-smocked scientists in paste-colored) hallways ("Hi," to which not even a head nods), along the steel catwalks, locked doors and spastic opening and closing portals to and through "containment" buildings, the droning thunder of turbines spins mountains of noise into existence.

"How can anyone think in this place?" Drake Black mutters, doing as he was bid – "exploring" the open units of ALL, the operation that he's been onboarded to lead despite leading nothing and managing no one. Beyond the pale vid screen, he's seen Walther Wallach one time – from afar, when he (Drake) was "surveying" (in reality, staring at the colors, in particular at the sapphire pool in the core in which metal rods were dipped) the reactor room from the command center, and the old man conversed with one of the engineers – the engineer encased in an industrial white suit from head to foot while Walther Wallach, arms folded, laughed wearing nothing more than a red turtleneck and khakis.

And then there's the knowledge (not speculation) that he's being watched and followed everywhere he goes, even in the "privacy" of his room. Empirical evidence of this knowledge has been impossible to locate, but something buzzing and petrified points to the sightline of a surveillance presence. He can feel it, a disturbance in air that shouldn't move, when he's lying in the cot at night staring into the muddy void of darkness, when nothing else is moving except for the rise and fall of his chest, something, he can't describe what, is askew; the air itself parts, its stacking thinness issued into his most primitive senses, molecule by molecule, nothing greater. Last night, when the fog of unconsciousness started to drag him under, his eyes shot open, his heart raced, and he found himself spewing: "Who's there?" The lights blazed on. He checked every crevice of the dour room, but no one was there. The door was locked. He lay back down, pulled up the covers to his neck, clasped his hands over his chest and for the rest of the night lay awake listening to the hum of turbines as he wondered whose eyes were watching.

Today as he makes his rounds (again) through the complex, he finds his way into a room in front of the mountainous turbines themselves.

"Can I see these?" he shouts to a nearby technician. Tapping on a handheld screen, she appears not to notice. Drake Black shouts louder, but still the technician continues

her tapping. He nudges her shoulder. At last she looks up, smiles a look of recognition, holds up a finger (one minute, sir) and removes an earplug.

"Can you turn these things off for two minutes?" shouts Drake Black.

The technician, a short woman with a squished face, bulging eyes and unnaturally black hair, looks uncertain.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" she yells.

"Yes," Drake shouts, "turn the damn things off for two blessed minutes."

At a nearby control panel, the technician does as she's bid. The turbines start to wind down, the roar diminishing to a whir to a chop and then the cavernous slices of air to quiet at last.

He takes in a breath of that peace.

"What do these things do?" Drake Black asks.

"I'm not sure what you mean?"

"What is the purpose of a room of turbines within ALL ..." he says, stressing the ellipsis.

"Janet, sir. Well, they rotate."

"Brilliant," Drake says. "That's extremely helpful, Janet. They spin. May I see one? Take off the case of that big one over there."

"Sir?"

"Do it."

Janet gives him an are-you-serious? look and proceeds to send over a cadre of machines that unbolt and lift the case from the turbine, revealing an enormous metal spool fixed with gradient-sized circles of metal vanes. It looks like a metallic pine cone shorn in half. It's a treacherous looking piece of equipment, the angled vanes around a circle like a shredder.

"I bet this thing could inflict some damage?" he says. "Just some 'Black' humor for your amusement."

Janet bares her teeth in an appeasing, uncomfortable smile.

"Janet, what function does this turbine serve, besides spinning?"

"Ventilation, Mr. Black," she says nervously, as though being quizzed.

"Now we're getting somewhere. Ventilation of the heat generated by the reactor?"

"As far as I understand, yes."

"Why not capture the heat and use it for energy?"

"Sir?"

"Enough." It's time for some real fucking answers, Janet. He's about to lay into this toady with some Drake Black thunder when the answer curls over his shoulder. "Because we derive all the energy we need from non-thermal means." He doesn't even have to turn around. From the back of his skull, Drake finds his vision being sucked into the black vortexes that Walther Wallach has for eyes. "I might have expected the chief executive of the company that operates that non-thermal means to know the answer to his own question," Walther Wallach continues. "Or perhaps he found it necessary to quiz the random technician?"

He rips himself free from the gravitational abyss and wheels around to confront the absurd red turtleneck and silver band of hair around the baldness and those peasant khakis.

"These turbines should never stop," Walther Wallach says. "Never. Janet?" Who flees to the touchscreen and commands the robots to re-case the turbine and resume the ventilation.

"This way, Mr. Black," he says, and the droning thunder roars again.

"Before you say anything, I'm going to be candid," Drake Black says, as soon as they

enter the hallway. "I don't want to be here. I'm more valuable if I continue to operate the Sarcophagus. Check that. I want – I need – I've earned a vacation. An extended one." The final flash of lightning – "I want to see my family" – is blacked out.

"Of course," Walther Wallach says, gripping Drake's upper arm so hard that it feels like a blood pressure cuff. "I would never want something as momentous as ALL led by a man who didn't have his heart in his work."

"I wasn't brought here to lead ALL," he says, and chops free from Walther's grip.

"But you were," Walther Wallach says. "Perhaps not in the manner you might have assumed."

No, asshole. He gives Walther Wallach a final look of determination and smile to indicate: I can play too.

Drake Black troops down the corridor with vigor, confidence, purpose. Just like that, he's untied himself. Fear required a solitary act of defiance to be exterminated. As he gets farther away, the realization that he could start his own company takes hold. He'll take a long vacation to reconnect with his spouse and children, and during their stay in Catalina or wherever, he'll flesh out a plan of attack. *Drake Black: Leadership Essentials* has a nice ring.

His shoes are the only things making a sound. He shoots a look over his shoulder. No one's there. He even stops, turns around and surveys the long corridor only to confirm: it's empty.

The idea that he's spent 10+ years thinking he was growing something in himself to reach a higher summit – that made him think he sniffed the scent of success – is now a whiff of a fool's ass. He should have known better. Breathe. Live. Enjoy. ALL's revealed the truth. There's Walther Wallach, and then there's everybody else. If he can't get to the top of the pyramid, he can find a level higher than the mass at the bottom. Yet the rancor of having bound himself naively to the vision of another man (for the duration of his professional career when he could have been pursuing his own agenda) is an odious realization. That's the difference, he thinks, feeling (imagining?) hands trying to accost him. There's nobody else like Walther Wallach. We live in his world. The beauty is that a perfectly rewarding life can be seized from the lower plains – if and once they're accepted. Yet. So many fucking yets raining down on the wrong side of a

dividing line.

No more. A winner doesn't dwell. He's going to get his things and leave. Wait. Get what things? The grind of the turbines grows on his mind once again. Suddenly he needs to see them. Drake Black turns around toward the turbine room. Something tells him that a presence is right there, even now, looking at every pore of his face as he turns the corner. It will follow him as long as he remains, but he needs to see the turbines.

Inside, he directs Janet to uncover them. "All of them," he shouts over the roar, "low-, intermediate-, high-pressure turbines, whatever the fuck they are." Before she can utter any kind of protest, he says: "Do it, Janet."

She commands robotic arms to remove the casings of three turbines. Drake Black edges up so close to the speeding blades that his hair, even his eyelids, endure the whiplash of high-velocity pressure.

"This one is an impulse turbine," Janet shouts. "There are blades and nozzles. The reason for that –."

"I don't give a damn," he shouts definitively. "They go in circles."

Something hauls him backward. A voice orders him to stop.

Drake Black has always been a man of thought – who considers before he acts, something he's prided himself on – but he finds himself twisting, grabbing and heaving an arm attached to a body. Forward. The strange weight, a body that materializes in his arms, somersaults in midair before flying into the blades (or are they nozzles?) of the turbine.

He turns. The pallor in Janet's face, as she clutches the control panel, suffuses her skin.

"Mr. Wallach's personal guard," she says.

Drake Black waits to hear no more. He's out the door and then outside.

The sun in the liquid-blue is a canary diamond pouring its glittery opulence onto the twisting cactus and baked earth. The natural warmth feels so good on his skin that it surfeits him, as though his fuel tank (depleted all this time) needed nothing more than

sunlight to replenish.

As he squints the outside facility into clarity, he hears the squawk of a chicken. Wait. What? But, clearly, a chicken is being disturbed.

In this day and age, it's practically unheard of, but Drake Black is aware that there was a time when animals were killed en masse for their flesh and bones to produce food. The very idea churns his stomach. Has he been eating chicken flesh all this time? Did he really kill Walther Wallach's personal guard? Then the trumpet of an elephant peals through the air.

On the far side of ALL, peeking around the corner of the nuclear plant, Drake watches an enormous transport unload a parade of animals into a ... shed? The contraption is inadequate to house the size and number of animals being ushered in. In no time, he sees two kinds of primates, four crates of birds, an ox, a buffalo and a boar disappear into a shack hardly larger than an outhouse.

Why hasn't the alarm come on yet? Unless a silent alarm's been tripped? The facilities around the isolated campus look normal to his eye. He needs to leave now, but the line of animals has him baffled. He's never seen such a range of beasts. Just now a boa constrictor, an antelope, a toucan – he guesses it's a toucan, having never seen one – even a shark in a tank of water, have been pushed into the shack.

On the distant side of the complex, constant white wisps of vapor slither up from colossal pillars. They look like the barrels of two smoking guns shot up from the earth. He wants to see his family. It strikes down in a bolt of longing and regret. Out here there's no fence, no barricade holding him in. He could make a run for it. Something tells him to go. But something tells him he wouldn't last a day in this wasteland. He needs supplies at the very least, and transportation – an aerial – would be ideal.

Back inside, the turbines usher their high-pitched vibrations through the walls. Which makes it impossible to think, let alone remember where the fuck he's going. He's now walking down a hall he's never seen. Photographs of mushroom clouds line either wall. Something tells him to keep moving. Not to look back.

At last he stops at a door with a symbol he's never seen before. A square yellow background, a black dot in the middle and three, evenly-placed bars encircling the black

core, as though cut from a black ring. There's something mechanized but clover-like about the three patches. Trefoil? It comes to his mind, but he can't remember what it means, if it means anything. Drake opens a series of doors, each leading through a small room in which he's sprayed with something, a decontaminant of some kind (what the fuck, Drake? Turn around. But he can't. The doors bolt shut.) until he exits through a fourth door and enters a room larger than a closet but smaller than a bedroom. It's encased in thick (are they lead?) walls lined with shelves. Each shelf holding rocks of different sizes, but none larger than a soccer ball. There's nothing remarkable about any of them, certainly nothing to justify protecting them in a room like this. The only thing slightly unusual is their color. Suffused with brick-red undertones, a mustard-tinged yellow seems to cling to the rocks, yet the yellow, as Drake inspects closer, pressing his nose nearly into one, is part of the mineral composite itself. He runs a finger across its craggy asymmetry. Like an ordinary rock. Then something catches his eye. On another ledge, smaller, prettier and shinier rocks sit. Drake scoops up one. It's heavier than he expects, a dense little object, with iridescent green crystals embedded throughout. A deep, grassy green, as though the juice of life were crystallized within the rock. It's a little bit like holding the heaviness of life in his hand. Assessing its weight. How many pounds? The exchange rate? On the shelf beneath, discs and pucks of what look like silver lay in a neat row. Drake Black is marveling at the heaviness of one – he needs two hands to hold it – when the door opens.

"Congratulations, Mr. Black," Walther White says in that ridiculous red sweater and khakis. Can he please change into something else? "You've just contaminated yourself with so much radiation that you'll probably die within the day. You may live a full 24 hours, but it will be excruciating."

"You're joking," he says, backing to the exit door.

"You knew what this place was, and what it used to be. And your curiosity, or your hostility at me and your presumption over what you thought I had in mind has led you to this room – this room of rooms – where you've not only surrounded yourself, but indeed decided to handle some of the most radioactive minerals on earth."

"You're lying," Drake Black spits. "You lie about everything."

"I tend to mislead, that's true. But there's always a hefty half truth in everything I say," he says through his smile. "But here, Drake, among the plutonium, polonium and other nefarious little chunks of science, I'm afraid I'm telling you the whole percent of truth. I'll let you process that fact for a minute, given that you found your way in here on your own ... And, let's face it ... have effectively chosen now, within the hour, to donate yourself to the Sarcophagus."

The sinking feeling in his stomach, he realizes, is an irreparable – personal – explosion of reality. Drake Black knows he's being told the truth. Bodily, he feels no different – absolutely no different – (how does radioactivity work, anyway?) – and yet ... Notions of never seeing his children (Agnes, Jacques and Charlie) again, of them wondering how and when and where their father died, flit like bats around his spinning mind.

"If, by chance, you're not ready for the Sarcophagus ..."

"I'm not."

"There might be a way out."

"To stay alive, you mean?" he says, grabbing the red shirt and staring into the black abysses.

"Yes," Walther Wallach says, his face so close that Drake Black can smell the clover on his breath. "ALL is a place of hope."

"Please, Mr. Wallach, tell me what it is. I just want to see my kids again."

Walther Wallach wrinkles his nose. A thought passes by his eyes.

"What is it?" Drake says. "What did I say?"

"I'm afraid that you're being naive. I've already explained what we do here. I'm offering you a chance not only to prolong your life – potentially, if all goes according to plan, exponentially – but to advance civilization, humanity and evolution itself. I'm offering you the chance to be the vessel in which the eternal, nuclearized spirit of humanity is seeded." He smiles paternally, cups his shoulder, and searches Drake Black' spiraling eyes. "Do you accept this great honor?"

Against or with or despite his will, Drake Black finds his head nod one time.

"Good," Walther Wallach says. "Come this way, son."

"The animals?"

"What's that, Drake?" Walther Wallach says, as they proceed through the sanitizing stations.

"What are the animals for?"

"Ah," he says, as they enter a cavernous room in which the white light of sun spears through a glass ceiling. "You wouldn't know the reference, but this is something of a Noah's ark here at ALL. I realized that I didn't want to capture just human life. I wanted to fuse the spirit of all sentient beings. And now, Drake, you will be the host of that effort. When we walk in that room," he says, gesturing to a door ahead, "you will change the course of life itself. Are you ready?"

"Now?" he says, silent, inexplicable tears streaming down his cheeks, his heart racing so fast that it feels like it will jump from his chest.

"We can't risk a turn for the worse with your exposure. We must ask decisively," he says, pushing open the door to the reactor room.

As soon as Drake Black enters, it feels like hundreds of hands are on him, directing him to a gurney as an apparatus is tightened around his head.

"Alright, Drake," a Walther Wallach says, his tanned bald head emerging over the tunnel of vision. "In a moment, we're going to expunge you of your current, evolutionarily insignificant spirit and replace it, fingers crossed, with the first working specimen of the particle of life itself."

Walther Wallach nods to someone. As tears flow down the sides of Drake's eyes, something taps the side of his head, sending what feels like a thread – slight, almost gentle but palpable – from one ear to the other.

"That was a longitudinal test, Drake," Walther Wallach says. "In a moment we're going to go the other way. We're going to perform a latitudinal test. Wait. What's that Drake?"

"Mr. Black," he says, as the gurney gives way to or becomes, Drake Black can't tell, metal bars. "Those rocks ..."

"Yes, Drake? What about them?" His voice is filled with more gentle compassion than he's ever heard.

"Were they radioactive?"

Walther Wallach releases a soft laugh through his nostrils, expelling compassionate air from the deepest cavities of his lungs. "None of that matters now," he says.

Another jolt of electric thread fires through his skull, from his jaw to the tip of his head.

"Good," he hears Walther Wallach say. "He's ready."

Drake Black finds himself standing upright, encased in ribbons of metal. Three strips run down the front from his head to his feet. Five or six strips intersect, crosshatching, to create horizontal ribbons. He has space to move, but barely. While he can touch the metal bars with his hands, he couldn't raise his hand to his chest if he wanted. But Drake Black doesn't want to. He wants to see the remaining visions wash over his eyeballs. The last things he'll see ... The last things he's seeing, he corrects himself, are engineers, technicians, operators in bee herding costumes and disinterested, vacant eyes staring at him, Drake Black, imprisoned in a caged coffin, dangling over the reactor in which nuclearized liquid is about to swallow his body whole. The only barrier between them and him, he thinks, are his eyeballs. Something resides behind his eyes looking out, and something exists outside his eyes looking in. That thing – whatever it is – might very well (after all) be one and the same, and the only thing that gives the illusion of separation is a pair of eyes. How funny, he thinks: that the very apparatus we believe enables us to see the world clearly could be the very thing that distorts reality. The eyeballs are the only thing that separate a homogeneous entity.

"Drake," he hears Walther Wallach call up. He says nothing. He merely looks down at the crowd, spotting the scarlet turtleneck, his silver ring of hair around the tan top, and those pieces of coal lodged in his eye sockets staring, he guesses, up at him, entangling him in their unstoppable murk. "What we are all about to witness," Walther Wallach announces, "is the smelting of a human being. A refinement. A purification. Call it what you want, it is no less than the shedding of extraneous energies to arrive at that central, irreducible nugget of power. Your Humanium, Drake. That's what I'm after. That's what we're all after. This centrifuge will spin the excess right out of your soul." Walther Wallach raises his hand. Waggles his finger. "But that's not all!" he says. "When the reduction is complete – Dare I say it? – your essence will be coupled with something equally precious ... and universal." His voice trails off as he seems to lose himself in the ebb and flow of this musings.

"I want out," Drake says.

"It's too late for that."

"I want to see my family."

"When you emerge, you will be a million times more than Drake Black."

"Stop," he says, as the metal coffin descends into the nuclear reactor.

I Marcus I

In Saint Santiago, the sun vaults off the harbor in a spray of effervescence. There's the yellow glob of gas, hallowed and oblong as an egg yolk, dripping its eggy photons, and there's the smear of topaz from which it hangs. The occasional puff of cloud emerges high in the stratosphere only to dissolve in the charged and ceaseless particles.

To the east, the hills of mid city form grids of hotels and condos, and beyond that, the slanting, looming ridges of mountains run perpendicular as a rugged backdrop and reminder of the wilderness in an oasis. To the south, the downtown scrapers rise before the rounding arm of the harbor and its sloops and schooners and shimmering sun in shallow reflective ripples.

Carson's in his element, entranced by the volume of jogging sports bras and booty shorts, the perspiring, ambulating bodies sun-hued across the elemental spectrum of bronze, copper and gold. "Please," he insists, "rain sweat onto my fur. It will smell of gardenias and cherry blossoms, I know it. Forget your map, Donald. We've found paradise."

But Marcus' map, and his mind, apparently entwined, are proving uncooperative since landing. Pleasing Personality and its host — Heidi Gemütlichkeit — barely register; it (she) flits away as soon as he tries to focus. Heidi rattles around as Heide, Heidy and sometimes as Adelheid, whereas Gemütlichkeit is all gummed up as Wohnlichkeit or Vorsicht ihre Gemütlichkeit or Serpentin Schönheit. With the adjacencies equally muddled. The geocodes are all over the districts, and even Saint Santiago flickers as Antonio, Andreas and Juan.

Apart from the map, Marcus' mind is suddenly curdled with worry and mumbo jumbo. His limbs dangle dumbly as the cackles of men on porches echo with smokers' coughs. In the glass condo walls, his reflection, from house to house, wrinkles, shrinks and shrivels with each step, as though all the muscle he'd heaped onto his bones was necessary stockpiling to account for the inevitable depletion on a journey that hasn't even (really) incepted yet. For the first time, he wonders if he's equal to the challenge. If the challenge is worth the wonder. If the challenge is valid. If his brain — his constantly sputtering, misfiring machine of so-called intelligence — can manifest its inhabitant close enough to the glass to see clearly enough what, and how, and when, to do whatever it takes. He needs to sleep. But here he is. And there she is. And there they are. And so on. And yet with anything less than absolute attention, it all dims and scatters.

They're making their way to the Coronado, "the peninsula across the bay, a short ferry ride away from Saint Santiago proper."

The palm trees, leaning, looming, tall, slender, explode with daggered leaves. Lemon trees stand in front yards, little round suns dangling from feathery green. Farther down the hill, sublime hedonism in olive-skinned abundance: laughing jiggling giggling pinching and drinking.

"I need some coffee," Marcus says.

They make it to the Coronado ferry (from air to land to sea), which Carson says has a cafe, but when they board the ancient ship and head indoors, Carson orders triple rums.

Marcus takes a sip and he's gone. If blackness and nothingness are sleep, then he sleeps. But nothingness turns in the convergence of interior and exterior worlds, and his dreams become scribbles of deliverances ... intelligence that Marcus (finds, somehow, he) already knew. The most consequential news he's ever discovered (or possessed). And something in his mind — something prehistoric and gargantuan, but protective — swallows it whole and disappears into the abyss. Making the news disappear with it. Distantly, the thought bubbles up: *at some point it might regurgitate, but by then I'll be strong enough to absorb it.* The final, flaming vision before every inch of consciousness gets sucked down and rebooted: fire-dipped fur, fur-wreathed fire.

The rocking floor under the slapping waves is what wakes him. From the blackness: a pair of wisps flowing in the breeze, anchored to their shelled-out parabolas beneath which the serenest of slits lie slanted above the slope of a mushroom-shaped nose, the double-edged cherry stem of his curvy-closed mouth, and the fan of fur on either cheek laced in carbon-streaked copper and silver-crested snow. Carson's slumbering breaths overpower the motor and cabin-compressed conversations. So at peace when he rests. Out the window: the Saint Santiago-Coronado bridge splices the bay like a dinosaur skeleton. Marcus' face is slimed in drunken sweat and sea salt but something's recharged. The perks of a power nap. The battery that booted back up. As though a necessary download of updates powered down his mind and brought him back on after installation.

With his quantum bag in tow, Marcus exits the cabin and takes a seat on the old ledge where the paint is thick and chipped, its glossy black and white colliding in inexact edges. The chips are scored in deep in a hacked out divot, revealing eons of coats. Carson is suddenly by his side, and they both take in the serpentine bridge, its 200 foot girders like skeletal legs supporting a spine. Marcus must be at his best, he knows, which means being 100 percent present as they rumble over the waves of Saint Santiago Bay, the sun blobbing down blobs of blobby goldenness.

"Carson?" he says, as the ferry's docking. "You know you're my friend. Right?"

They could Rapi-Rail or even jetpack to the far side of Coronado, but Marcus wants to walk ("to walk back the feeling") and (actually) try to forge a strategy to approach Heidi Gemütlichkeit.

Right off the docks, they cut through a miniature village of ice cream parlors and souvenir shops and then through steamier "service providers" with names like Cukes and Ales, Sax and Spas, and the Hot and Sticky Sticky Trove. And then enter Coronado's residential corridor where the uber affluent apparently live. Where, instead of scrapers and towers obstructing the landscape, the sky falls farther down the vertical plane of this little peninsula, spilling its spritely ions across the sterling horizon of indigenous and manufactured abundance. Everywhere: relic Spanish Revival single-family houses (not a multifamily complex in sight), with their red-tiled, cross-gabled roofs, circular towers and doorway arches, gypsy dust- and rust-colored stucco in which arched arcades undulate with ornate beams and second-story roofed balconies stem from the double-sash doors of master suites and, in the (inevitable) courtyards, fountains bubble within black-water ponds among the cacti and turf.

Collectively, it spawns something like desire in Marcus. Not wantonness so much for the balconets and stained glass double-hung windows, and fountains, patios and gardens (and lemons and oranges and avocados), but appetite for the owners' success — for which their outer opulence is a token representation and/or extension.

This, thinks Marcus, is where one of the hosts of the 15 laws of success would live.

Which makes it surprising to see, among the aristocracy — "a peanut vendor?" Indeed, a little man, stationed at a little stand with a roaster, is peddling his wares on the street corner.

Which is when Marcus grows aware that Carson has been spieling, apparently nonstop, about the "Pacific ocean on the other side of the island. There's land, which we're on, and then there's water that goes on and on. How can anyone not be excited to see *that* is what I'm saying. Hey, peanuts!"

They veer over to the peanut vendor — an old man dressed in what looks like an oldtime outfit including a ship-shaped paper hat and order two bags. The man bows — "yes, of course" — and shovels freshly roasted peanuts into two brown bags. Marcus pays and takes them over to the other side of the street. He rips one open for Carson, who starts crunching the shells open and licking in each nut.

"What I don't understand is why you're not more excited to see the Pacific Ocean," he says.

But Marcus' mind tacks starboard to Carson's port. "That guy over there reminds me of something in the section about a Definite Chief Aim. Napoleon Hill says that you should think constantly about what you want. That what you *think about* determines what you get in life. I bet if you open that old guy's head and look inside, all you'll see is a mental picture of a peanut bag. By the way — what's with this obsession with the ocean?"

"There's nothing wrong with peanuts. This old man's making a living. And I've seen the bay, yes. I've seen rivers and streams. But never water as far as the eye can see."

"If all you think about is peanuts, you're setting your sights pretty low. The poor guy doesn't even know he can dream of anything bigger. And water's water."

"Who cares if he thinks about peanuts? I think about rum. And now the ocean. Which I want to see with my own eyes."

"Napoleon Hill makes a distinction between the two ways thoughts get into your mind. There's autosuggestion — which is the stronger and more authentic way, when you create the thoughts yourself. And then there's suggestion — which is when you let other people dictate what you think about. At some point in time, someone planted the suggestion in that man's head to sell peanuts, and that's all he's ever thought about since. He's never bothered to use the power of autosuggestion. Also: if you've seen a picture of the ocean, you get the idea." "He looks happy to me. But my point is this: Are you seriously telling me you're not curious to see a wave? We're talking about something that suddenly rises. And just as suddenly crashes. Back into itself."

"Come on," Marcus says, throwing away the empty peanut bag.

All this time he should have been thinking (via autosuggestion) about Heidi Gemütlichkeit and he's been grinding away on peanuts and waves.

Time for a plan of attack.

"Why don't you just ask her?" Carson says. "If she has a Pleasing Personality, she should be sympathetic."

It's a straight shot to the other side of the island where he thinks his "target" resides. On the map in his mind, her location is vague. Any one of these stuccoed mansions could very well be the home of Heidi Gemütlichkeit. She was so lucid he could almost touch the crook of her arm in his mind. Now that he's unfocused again, she's hazy, diaphanous, almost unlocatable.

What he knows about Heidi Gemütlichkeit is that she's 42 years old, triple divorced, childless, crazily wealthy from her modeling years; and she owns and operates a boutique jewelry shop called *The Nemean Lion*.

But what he sees on the map is a vague presence meandering up and down the coast. Then she fades away as Marcus' thoughts roam to images of the ocean, to peanut salesman, to autosuggestions versus suggestions, to mind control and its absence, which at this moment is fragmenting Heidi into disappearance.

Which is when someone calls out: "Yoo hoo!" Unfurling in diplomatic civic outrage. "Your pet can't do that here."

Marcus swivels around to find Carson crouched, an awkward curve along his spine, his hind legs angled so far forward that they're nearly touching the knees of his forelegs, as the unmistakable sounds of waste thud on the ground. The lynx appears to be so mesmerized by the end of the street that he's oblivious to Marcus or the woman watching him defecate on the lawn. "That's somebody's house," the woman declares.

"Not only is the Pacific the king of all oceans," Carson says triumphantly, "it covers nearly one third of the earth's surface."

"He's right," she says.

"Who's right?" Marcus says, swiveling around to find the mental image of Heidi Gemütlichkeit suddenly and irrevocably unify with the civic guardian jogging in place before him.

"Your pet," Heidi says, blowing out pursed exhalations as the leash (wrapped around her wrist) dances in step to her trots. Attached to the other end, a black and white Boston terrier, ears perked, watches Marcus through its glassy eyes. "The Pacific is also the deepest ocean in the world," she says with more sparkle than indignation.

"Holy shit you're beautiful," Carson declares, absently trying to cover his business. "Can you put me on one of your leashes?"

Gesturing to Carson's dirty work, she says "Do you charm all the ladies after doing that?"

"That?" Carson says. "But that's as natural as love-making."

"That's very nice," Marcus says, "that's just lovely. But let's allow Heidi to get back to her jogging."

"And you know my name how?" Heidi says.

"We've come for your Pleasing Personality," Carson says.

Outwardly Marcus laughs innocuously. Inwardly: *Dig deep, my man. Find something to extricate and correct. Turn this shit around.* "We happen to know that your jewelry is first rate, and that your clients come from all over the country because your curation is only rivaled by your salesmanship," he says. "You have an impeccable eye for beautiful things. People trust that when they travel to your shop, they'll find the best of the best."

"They're right," she says definitively. "I'm sorry, your name is?" When he tells her, he extends her hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Marcus." Her handshake is electric. It connects to her smile, which is genuine and concentrated on Marcus, making him feel both thin and complete, as though capable of absorbing and re-projecting the radiance of the sun which seems to infuse her very being with a beaming-forthness, which makes Marcus, he suddenly realizes, feel like the only person alive.

"You've caught me during my morning run," she says. She ceases her runner's breath and stops running in place. Which draws attention to her physique, clothed only by a sports bra and form-fitting running pants that extend just beneath her knees. Discreetly (though not so discreetly) he takes in her tall, slender body, her flat stomach from which the ab muscles are discernible. It's obvious that she exploits her physique to reel in the interested mindset, and Marcus, despite the awareness, blissfully swims in.

"I would love to show you around my little store," she says. "I could take you there now, but I don't have enough room in here for the key," she says, (slightly) cupping her sports bra. "If you'll agree to meet me in, say, 45 minutes, I'll make it worth your time. I serve the best coffee on the island. I have it flown in from the Rose City."

"Sold," Marcus says.

"I'm more of a tea person, myself." Carson says.

"I've been known to brew a mean cup of tea — Carson?" she says, approaching him. "May I?" She plows her fingers through his fur. "Beautiful," she says. "Shall we meet at *The Nemean Lion* at 10 o'clock?"

Heidi Gemütlichkeit bequeaths a final golden smile before jogging off, dog in tow. They listen to her quaint, powered breaths disappear.

"Well, I am smitten," Carson says.

As is Marcus. (Despite her not being quite as beautiful as he expected. Compared to his mind's projection, in reality she was more "normal," almost homely: her face bonier, plainer than he expected. Her hair was pushed back in an ordinary ponytail, and though she has an athletic build, it's (truth be told) on the older side of female bodies, clearly past her prime but maintained and supported by a dedication to exercise and fidelity to

healthy living. That little twist, her earned beauty in middle years versus her formerly more bombastic natural beauty of her early twenties, is what does Marcus in.)

To kill time, they journey the extra quarter mile to see the ocean, and along the way pass a Medic's Tent which Marcus knows he should enter. The pain in his hand is killing him, and the makeshift bandage is bled-through and unravelling. But then they turn the corner and there it is.

The beach — a wide, windswept swath, a white crescent wedge extending to a sheer wall of cliffs on the northern end while disappearing into a haze of hotels and condos on the south side, littered with rocks and boulders street side and then fanning out in a quarter mile of sand on beachgoers do their thing. And then there's the Pacific, the ironically named crasher of suddenly-rising water — the 10-foot swells that rise and fall, surge and spill, thundering a momentary spray of sudsy starburst violence before layering, dissolving, ebbing back into itself, sending — throwing — (if it were conscious) futile self-created manifestations of itself against an impervious barricade to squander away a few crystal grains of advancement toward an eternal overtaking effort.

"Whoa," says Carson, hopping onto the wall to take it all in.

As Carson takes in the Pacific, strangely opting to stay on the wall above the beach (let alone transgress the sand to reach the water), Marcus realizes many ridiculous things, including that he never asked what happens to the host when their "somatic compound" is extracted. Can he — should he — assume that it's a self-replenishing quality within the host's brain? That after he takes Heidi Gemütlichkeit's Pleasing Personality, she — or something in her — will resupply the emptied gas in the tank? Yes? No? If no, then what? Whose interests take precedence?

Stop it there, chief. You have a mission. Be ruthless. And try not to be a brute about it. Assume the best, in all respects. Assume that Heidi will be none the less for (the robbery) the transaction, and even offer to repay (the favor?) ... No. No repayment. Just get on with it.

"You need to get that looked at," Carson says. "You're leaking."

Drops of blood splatter the wall, trickling out from the unravelling bandage.

It's curious, as he enters the Medic's Tent ... She didn't assault him with the standard query: "Goodness, what happened to your hand?" Out of deference — certainly not ignorance (he saw her eyes whisk down then back up and in that instant transmit a speed-of-light resolution not to embarrass the poor man with a trite question). So that's how the deferential do it? Would he be able to make these kinds of split-second decisions that announce the presence of wisdom and grace? Social skills that signify active possession of Pleasing Personality?

"What happened here?" the Robo-Medic states.

Marcus has to laugh. Nobody said that AI was enlightened.

"Does it matter?" Marcus says. "I just need it cleaned and cauterized, or whatever the procedure is."

"I was just being polite," the Robo-Medic says. "At least it wasn't your ring finger."

When they walk into *The Nemean Lion*, the bell chimes as the old wooden door closes. On slender tables of driftwood, necklaces, pendants, earrings and arm bands are displayed. "Hello, my new friends," a cheery voice calls. This time Heidi Gemütlichkeit dispenses with the handshake and embraces Marcus as though he's her dearest acquaintance in the world. She kisses both cheeks as her slender body tucks into his. Marcus finds his hands just above the small of her back. The smoky smell of coffee follows her slender body. A strand of golden hair lashes silkily against his cheek. But Heidi releases and then wraps her arms around Carson, telling him that he's by far the handsomest "lynx?" — "yes, my minx, a lynx" — she's ever seen. "That wonderful scent," she says, "is The Witchdoctor's Coffee from a special Rose City barista. I have it brewing here in the back."

Exactly what he needs right now. (By the way, how did he go from wanting coffee to getting rum on the ferry?) The tantalizing aroma mixes with the woody and briny scents and Heidi's own sublime perfume.

She leads them through the small store, pausing at different tables to point out her favorite pieces. "I adore this abalone pendant. Look at the colors." And then: "This pretty little necklace is made by a local artist. I just love her work ..."

Yes, and what's your infatuation with dogs? On every wall, paintings, photographs and gifs of canines: an oil of a Labrador with a dead duck in its mouth; a watercolor of a cocker spaniel in Cubist pieces coming together (or breaking apart); an animation of a bulldog head on a man's body, walking. "You're really into pooches?" Marcus says.

She turns around, eyes bright, lively, when Carson interjects. "What's that glowy, human-looking thing?" Carson says. "Over there?"

Heidi nods approvingly. "I might have been suspicious if neither of you'd asked. This," she says, unfolding her arms to present the hologrammatic model, "is my very special section, open only to my finest clients, featuring the crème de la crème of my collectibles. Now a word of caution, you two. Don't get too attached because it's not to own — rental only." Marcus follows her through the ladies' blouses (of tiny beagles instead of polka dots) and arm bangles over to the hologram of the semi-nude model dangling, on a lithe, lazily outstretched finger, a ring. Not just a ring. A tribute ring. Marcus'. Unmistakably his. Vermillion flecks encased in perpetual orbit. Sclera-white pressurization. 8.5 mm titanium band.

"Breathtaking isn't it?" Heidi whispers. "Those luminous specks that look like the sands of a supernova? ... Ashes. I'm sure you've seen memorial rings before, but none like this. No," she says, mimicking petting its circularity, "this one's special. I have an amazing supplier." And then, twirling around: "Got you! You should see your expressions." Laughing. "A word to the wise, boys: the buyer should try to make *an attempt* to show disinterest." Still laughing. "I don't negotiate, so it makes no difference to me, but revealing such — desire — is an unusual strategy. I'll put it that way." Final golden laughter. "Let's enjoy some coffee."

(The difference between an explosion and implosion is what happens to the matter and energy involved in the annihilated object. The question is what happens when explosion and implosion occur simultaneously, in the same location, to the same object. In this case, to Marcus in *The Nemean Lion*. Curiously, the dual processes nullify and counterbalance, resulting in a paradox of destruction in which the structure is annihilated, but rather than fly apart or collapse in on itself, the matter and energy dynamic is yoked together in a bizarre state of stability. Stabilized destruction or suspended deterioration.) As Heidi Gemütlichkeit makes her way to the back of the boutique, Marcus and Carson share a moment of *what the fuck is going on* before the lynx makes a move.

"I have an idea," Carson says.

Marcus watches Carson saunter over to the hologram, and then in the most natural of moves, mouth the ring, close and gulp. And walks back to Marcus with something like a grin.

"Are you two coming?" Heidi calls.

Marcus can't believe what just transpired.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Carson calls, and then to Marcus whispers: "I'll shit it out later." And disappears beneath the slacks and dresses going toward the back of the store.

Heidi bids them to sit on a couch as she pours Marcus a cup of coffee and dispenses tea from an antique kettle into a "pearl bowl, imported from Catalina," for Carson. "It's not too hot," she tells Marcus, watching him loop his finger around the cup handle.

Get a handle on yourself.

"Even better than advertised," he says, taking a sip of her not-too-hot coffee as Carson slurps up the tea.

"The tea is good. Not as good as rum, but it will do."

Heidi takes a seat across from them. She tucks one slender leg over the other, and with an upright spine, crosses her hands over her knee. Her fingernails are painted in seafoam green (with iridescent, floating particles on her cuticles), and around the upper parts of her fingers, rings of miniature Dobermans and Rottweilers and Pit Bulls glisten. Her obsession notwithstanding, in her black, scoop-necked dress, in which her shapely bust is compressed and revealed, she is shimmering, her blond locks flowing on either side of high-cheeked, mischievous mirth — joy — jubilance — and symmetrical comeliness.

"Tell me about yourselves." she says. "I'm extremely interested."

Be earnest. Be open. Be forthright. (And whatever you do, stop staring at Carson.)

"To be candid, Heidi," Marcus begins, as he feels the confidence of his approach surge, "We're here for something more precious than jewelry."

"Oh?"

This is a good start, or it would be.

"For your Somali contraband," Carson says.

Marcus shoots him a malicious look. "We've travelled all the way to Coronado to this very shop to locate one extraordinary person who has something nobody else has," — trying to wash over Carson's attempt at *somatic compound*. Now that the prelude to his overture is complete, he turns to the thornier background. "A dear friend of mine is in the hospital." Her expression darkens. "Let me backtrack," Marcus says, "I'm here because I need something from you, and only you, because you're the only person who has the thing I need. My friend —"

"Alan," Carson chimes in absently, continuing to slurp up the remains of the tea. "More a colleague. His translator. Do you have any more tea, incidentally?"

"Of course. For you too?" she says to Marcus.

Marcus nods to be as gracious as possible. "Something happened to his brain," he says. *How to explain this one?* "To make a long story short, a large portion of his brain needs to be replaced."

"I had no idea that was even possible," Heidi says.

"A beta brain exists," he says, "but it needs a few final things to make it work — to make it extraordinary." Here goes nothing. "You have one of those things."

As soon as he says it, it sounds like a mistake, like something a kidnapper would say.

But Heidi laughs self mockingly. "I don't think anyone would accuse me of having an extraordinary brain. Surely you've come to the wrong place?"

"But I haven't," Marcus says. "You've been so generous already. You've invited into your store without so much as trying to sell a single item here."

"Go on," Heidi says. "You've made me interested." She places a hand on his knee.

Marcus proceeds to tell her about the 15 laws and how they factor into the new synthetic brain. (All the while compartmentalizing the image of Lucas' ashes lying somewhere in Carson's digestive tract.) "They tell me that each trait has what they call a somatic compound."

"Somatic ..." she repeats.

"Somali," Carson says.

"Each trait has a physical manifestation in the body. Which is why we've come here. You have one of the laws, and we're asking if you would relinquish a small amount into this." He holds up the silver circle. "It's a painless process. It only takes a few seconds."

"But what law, as you call it, could I possibly possess?"

Without knowing anything about Lesson 10 on Pleasing Personality in the *Law of Success*, Marcus is suddenly sure, as he loops his finger around the mug and draws it close enough that the steam whooshes his eyes, that if all 15 hosts were randomly dropped into this room and he was forced to pick, after a brief interview, who possessed the most pleasing personality, Heidi would be the obvious and only candidate.

"Your personality," he says. "I've been enchanted with you ever since - "

"Since what?" Carson says between dribbles of tea.

"Since Carson's indiscretion," Marcus says. "Everything about you has a presence. The way you listen. It's physical. I *feel* you taking an interest. You have this touchable aura, and I can say it's unlike anything I've ever felt before."

Heidi is leaning in to every word, as though chewing the very syllables. Then she sits back and lets out a laugh. "You're the one with the personality, Donald. I knew that you were a charmer from the moment I met you, and you don't disappoint. I could learn a thing or two from you." Then, "Of course I would be willing to help you in whatever way I can. But there's one condition I must insist upon." She pulls her chair so close that their legs touch. She coils her instep around his ankle and places both hands on the outside of his thighs. Her face comes so close that it looks like tiny platelets of gold reside under her cheeks while a little flame of rapture dances in her benevolent gaze.

"I'll do anything," Marcus says through this newly formed tunnel that exists exclusively for, and between, them. "You're so beautiful."

"Donald," Carson says, but Marcus waves him.

"I'll take you up on that," Heidi says, her mouth so close he can smell the spearmint on her breath.

"Just tell me."

She gives him a final rapturous look. "I want to add you to my collection of dogs," she says. "Because that's what you are." She's sitting back now, studying Marcus, her goldenness gone — replaced by eyes so narrowed they seem to squeeze Marcus into the width of a line. "Which one sent you? Hege or Gorg?"

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," Marcus blurts, and tries to rise but finds that his legs won't obey.

"You would make," she says, tapping her chin, "a perfect Irish Wolfhound. I don't have one of those yet."

"I hope I didn't offend you," Marcus says. "I came here with good intentions."

"Then where's my ring? Hmm?" she says. "Did you really think I could be blinded by your 'Pleasing Personality' baloney after this — animal — inhaled my product?"

"Lady," Carson says, "it's his ring. With his son's ashes. What do you think happened to his finger?"

Heidi shifts the tea kettle an inch to the left, and inches the coffee carafe to the right. "Felines," she proclaims, "are a vile species. Shekar? Lance? Come out here."

Which prompts two man-sized dogs, a Great Dane and a Mastiff, to emerge (their claws clicking and clacking on the wood-planked floor) from the back room. On either side of Heidi Gemütlichkeit, who still sits with her legs crossed, the massive dogs stand, tails wagging, gazing indifferently from Marcus to Carson.

"We have a thief on our hands," she says. And then in a dead command: "Take *it* to the table."

"Wait," Marcus says. His entire body, neck down, feels like a pillar of cement. Immovable. Uncontrollable. Abstract. Despite that, instead of retreating into a panic zone, Marcus finds himself picturing the man he wants to be, the man he's always envisioned himself becoming. At first it's a vague portrait, but his mind scripts this inner simulacrum with a control that Marcus has always coveted. He doesn't stop to consider where this new version's coming from. He accepts the visitation, and suddenly his mouth is open and the inner man is speaking.

"I would plead if I thought it would help, but in the end ... the weaker should submit to the stronger."

She eyes him sternly as she removes the mugs. "Flattery will get you nowhere, mister."

"You've carved a niche for yourself, and you're good at it because you've figured out what your strengths are, and connected them to a goal that makes sense for you. Most of us can't figure out what we're good at, let alone make up our minds what our goal is. My own scheme has amounted to nothing. I've lost. I only hope I can help alleviate your fear."

"Fear?"

"I don't mean to be presumptive," he says.

"Tell me about this fear you think I have."

"It's only that I thought someone who — does what you do — seeks something more than companionship."

Brian Wolak

"I'm still in the dark regarding this fear."

"You fear the loss of love," he says. "Don't you?" Heidi's eyes are like pieces of stone stretched across a chasm. "I mean no offense," he says. "I was probably projecting my own fear."

"Gentle Donald," she says, and comes over to stroke his neck. "Who's hurt you?" She says it softly, seductively, matronly. "A woman?"

It's working. To continue working, he needs only to continue.

"A boy."

She puts her hand to her mouth. Shock. "Your family left you?" she says.

"I left them."

"And you feel unworthy of love?" she says. "And now you associate with non humans because it's easier to earn their love. Mmm hmm. I see." Heidi seems to reach a conclusion. "I can use someone with such ... vulnerability. My clients will think they can prey on it ... Married women will drop their guards and indulge in so many pity purchases that I'll be moving product faster than it's available. You're a first," she says. "You might be more useful to me in your current form. Drink this quickly," she says, extracting a vial from a nearby desk.

She tries handing it to him, but then seems to remember he can't move.

"Open your mouth," she says and tilts the vial.

In that moment, Marcus imagines what it must be like for a parched ant, if an ant was granted consciousness, to look up at a blade of grass on which a bead of dew stubbornly clings. Bright. Pierced with spectral lucidity. Replete with enough sustenance to hydrate him for days. If only it would break from its spindle of watery saliva. Which it's about to do when Heidi Gemütlichkeit stuffs the vial between her cleavage.

"On second thought," she says, "you need to be taught a lesson first." And tightens one hand over the armrest and places the other on Marcus' thigh, stooping, ladylike, to search his face. "Nobody steals from *The Nemean Lion*."

It comes out in a scratched-out whisper: "It's my ring."

She whispers back: "It's mine." And stands upright, folding her arms across her chest. "I don't want there to be any hard feelings, so I won't make you watch. But lessons have to be learned and product has to be retrieved." Parenthetically, running fingers under Carson's chin. "It's not exactly a mink coat, but it might do. To be determined ..." Then to Marcus: "Prepare yourself. This is going to hurt." Then to the dogs: "I said take it to the table."

In a single, slow-motion convergence, Marcus' eyes meet Carson's, whose eyes fold shut, forming snug brackets over which his copper fur, like powdery pollen, crosses in rippled streaks. A moment of ... acceptance ... before the mastiff's jaw, extending like an inner protuberance from its Grizzly-like snout, snaps around Carson's neck — without sound — and drags him from the couch, across the floor, like a rabbit, followed by the Great Dane, and Heidi, who extends a conciliatory smile to Marcus before disappearing in the back room.

On the table next to him, a nautical themed clock, shaped like a clipper ship's steering wheel — a piece of history that endured, in all its mahogany and bronze glory, through RESET — ticks its second hand 74 times, circling the roman numerals one full orbit and then some, before her voice, and his yelps, stop. Something thuds on a steel tray. Its metallic rattle reverberates. Then plastic gloves are peeled off. Water runs. Her legs swish from behind the door and Heidi emerges, pinching an acorn-sized red and silver nugget in her hands, its hollow loop magnifying the nothingness behind and through.

"You really thought this was real?" she says, bouncing the ring in her palm. And then seeing the look on Marcus' face: "Oh, you poor man. You look — eviscerated." She laughs. "You should take comfort. He took it like a trooper. Now about this so-called receiver ..."

The bell dings. "Customer!" Heidi calls, and then to Marcus, with a touch of whimsy: "Don't move."

The smell of coffee hangs in the air. Like diesel. Like formaldehyde. Like ocean spray.

The Great Dane, when it taps along the planks from behind the wall, stands before Marcus like a quizzical monster, unthinking but imbibing, via osmosis or something like it, exacting its chocolate eyes on Marcus, its forehead threaded with wrinkles, ears as upright as batwings, black jowls hanging like an upside down horseshoe.

"Is he alive?" Marcus scratches out.

The dog tilts its monstrous head, reflexively, as if to say: I know you're talking to me, and I wish I understood, but I have no idea what you're communicating.

The inner man that seemed to form on its own is still strangely present in his mind's eye. Whether it's a spurt or a temporary gift from who knows where, or whether something deep and expansive has suddenly, finally, coalesced into a foundation from which he can engage the world permanently, with character, Marcus does something so unusual, so bizarre and nearly profane that for a moment, he reconsiders, but then moves forward: he thinks positive thoughts ... not just thinks them, but presses them into something like existence through the layers of his brain, through his skull, into the air, the world, and into the dog's brain. *Help me.*

The Great Dane cranes its head the other way. Concentrating on Marcus, its eyes not hypnotized but probing, boring in as though trying to ascertain a vision from far away. And then something happens. The gargantuan dog lifts its front legs onto the first ledge of the table, then to the second, and scoots his paws across until they hit the nautical lamp. And it continues to scoot them, pushing the clock sideways, until it crashes to the floor.

Marcus hears Heidi upfront. "Would you excuse me for one moment?"

When she stalks back, at first she sees the clock, then Marcus, then the Great Dane. "I have a client," she hisses. "How did this happen?" Shekar rises on his back legs, towering over Heidi, and collapses his front legs on her shoulders. In an embrace. "You were a bad boy," she says, trying to wrap her arms around him and maintain her balance against his hulking weight. "Mommy forgives you. Now let me go." But his weight is too much. She (and he) fall to the side, onto the couch next to Marcus. "Okay," she says, brushing herself off. "That's enough. And you," she says to Marcus, "keep being a good boy."

She disappears to the front. "Pets ..."

Shekar is staring at the cushion next to Marcus and then he sees it. The vial. A clear, stoppered tube. Before he can think *thank you*, the dog is pushing, nosing him over until Marcus falls softly onto the cushion, and the vial rolls to his nose. Marcus adjusts his neck until the vial elongates enough to roll, stopper first, into his mouth. His teeth grip the cork. And with his tongue, pulls it into his mouth far enough for his molars to clench the cork. Then with the tip of his tongue, presses the lip of the vial until the two part, and the cork falls into his cheek, the vial falls down his throat, but not before releasing burning liquid into his belly. Marcus rolls face down, letting the vial fall from his mouth onto the couch. And then lies quietly, as feeling starts to return.

When the madness wears off, and Marcus falls to his knees, receiver in hand, (bloody) pelt breaking his fall, he sees, in a burst: his destruction: the past, like a tail, retreating back into its shell ... the body of Heidi Gemütlichkeit under the table (next to the nautical clock), and the mastiff's mandible lies beside the dane's ribs and the curled fingers peek through a silk kimono of plum blossoms ... Just as darkness spins, and the inner howl dies, the front bell dings.