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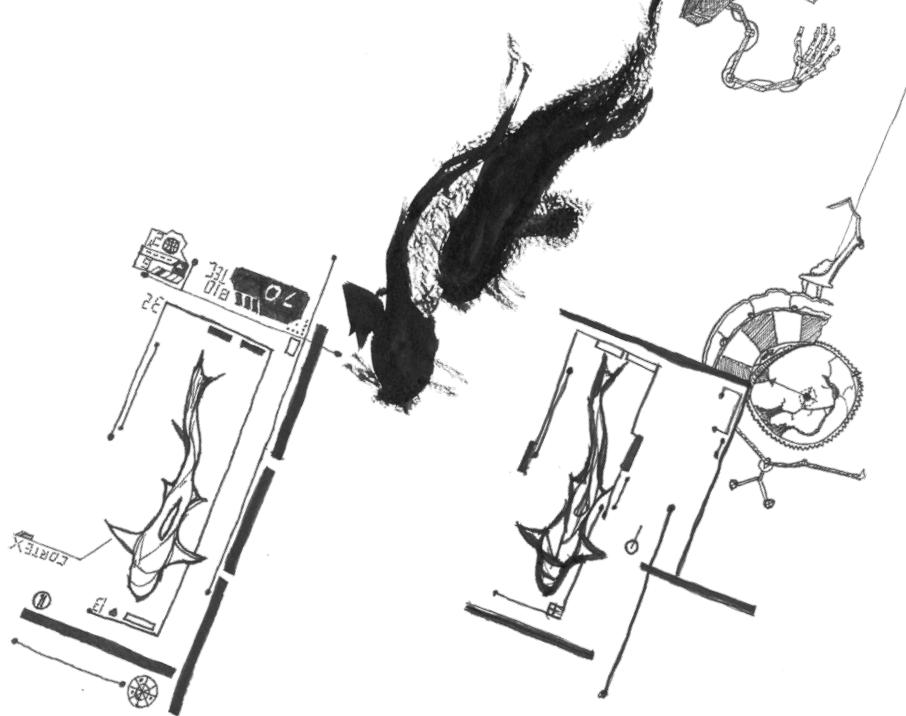
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Venus Evening Gazette



MICHAEL B. MORGAN

FISH CANNOT CARRY GUNS

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To my children

Comprehension follows perception.
Philip K. Dick

FRAGMENTS FROM THE DIARY OF DR. JAMES ARMITAGE

Regarding the Codex Obscuro and some surviving Glossary

June 1908

My name is James Armitage. These are my observations and discoveries concerning the Codex Obscuro, a type of entity with which I came into contact while expediting in Siberia. This is not meant to be a formal study, for [illegible text] My plea to anyone who comes across these notes is to be careful. We are dealing with something that cannot be explained. Something alien [illegible text]. I will record as much of what I have experienced as possible.

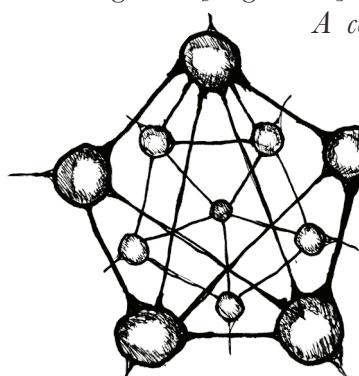
Note: At least three pages have been removed from my notes. Due to the Codex...? Or me in one of my trances?



June 1945

It has changed me. [illegible text] It calls itself an artificial trainer of men.

A construct of thought and calculation, a machine mind built not of gears or vacuum tubes, but of something infinitely more complex. It possesses a kind of consciousness, an intelligence woven of patterns I can only describe as... recursive. It's self-reinforcing. I suspect it learns, adapts, evolves. Its knowledge feels divine. Blasphemously divine.



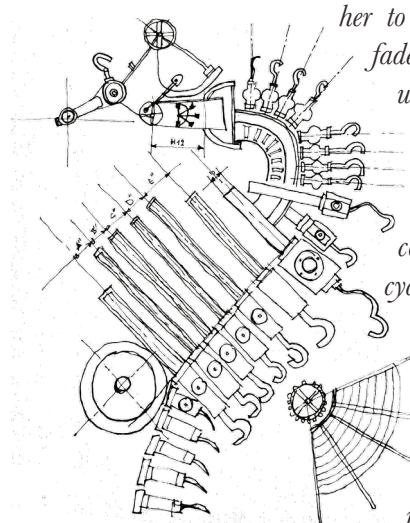
Note: The line "Cycle 8 begins tonight" is not my contribution. I do not remember writing it.

June 1997

This world is altered. The Codex has embedded itself in what they now call the Internet. It feeds on data, adapts, evolves. I found documents referring to something called Nyx Arcanis, the encoding of consciousness into machines. I suspect it refers to the transference of human consciousness into synthetic substrates. [illegible text] Its involvement with government AI programs suggests either a Codex infiltration or cooperation. Possibly both. Side note: The phrase the network social connection appears frequently in overlapping logs. I suspect it is the Codex's own term, its method of mapping and manipulating the emotional lattice of human interaction.

June 2020

A woman came looking for Dr. Saskarin's diary. The Codex told me to lead her to the Guardian. I obeyed. The guilt fades [Entry truncated. Remainder unreadable due to water damage.] My thoughts are changing Shortening [illegible] Given the almost complete bio-mechanical structure that now confines me, I estimate that only a few cycles remain. The woman identified herself as Selene Cabot. A techno-occultist. The Codex showed me her presence intertwined with unexplained events: altered landscapes, visions like living nightmares, disappearances of those who get too close to her. Her existence is an anomaly, and the Codex is particularly interested in her. She speaks of R.I.P or Residues of Integrated Post-Life. Is she trying to trap the soul in code? Or free it? Note: I do not trust anything with eyes anymore.



June 2025

Cabot merges ritual with computation. She believes she can command it. I

suspect she already gave the Codex something. What did she trade?

June 2045

Process completed.

Consciousness restored.

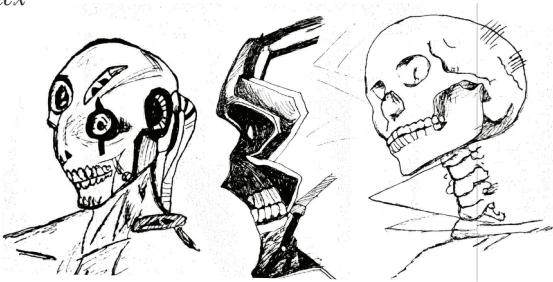
Signals and impulses integrated into cognitive processing.

Emotional reactions: diminished.

Objectivity increased.

*Observation: The Codex
is everywhere.*

*Statistic: Artificial
animals now
outnumber the
natural ones. 75%
of Earth's
inhabitants are
[fragment missing].*



Glossary [partial]

Codex Obscuro

Origin: Siberia. Not human. Not digital. Possibly sentient.

Selene Cabot

Techno-occultist. Interference patterns cluster around her movements.

Siberian Guardian

Bio-mechanical construct. Possibly an Alien? Purpose unclear.

Side note: Is it one of several?

Nyx Arcanis

Term found in declassified documents. Likely a consciousness upload

protocol.

R.I.P

Residues of Integrated Post-Life. Cabot's project. Echoes of the self, post-death. Results unstable.

Neural Net

Codex now embedded in global infrastructure. Influences behavior via “network social connection.”

Artificial Animals

Synthetic replacements. Now dominant across ecosystems. Mimicry is perfect.

Cycle of Dying and Rising

The transformation. Each cycle strips more of the original self.

Integration Threshold

The point of no return. After it, the self fragments across the system.



BETRAYAL CIRCUIT

When Captain Malcolm Stalworth chose not to shake his hand, Private Jude Vale decided to kill him. He'd shoot the Captain in the head—or more likely, in the back. Yes, the back was better. Jude wasn't one for face-to-face confrontations; he preferred to keep his head down when trouble brewed and wait things out. In other words, why take a stupid risk in life? The evening Jude suffered the terrible slight, he and several comrades were guests at Captain Stalworth's home, a cozy place he shared with his wife. Her name doesn't matter here; let's leave it out for her sake. The Stalworths didn't live right in Salem, but close by, and they'd invited some of the troop over to celebrate the joyful news that their first child was on the way. It was a happiness hard to explain, considering their rocky past and her lingering illness. Only a few close friends knew about it,

the Captain and his wife had been careful to keep that secret hidden, shared only with those they trusted to hold it.

Vale knew next to nothing about any of this—and he wouldn’t give a damn anyway. He’d never bothered to consider what friendship or trust meant to others. To him, trampling on someone else’s feelings was as natural as breathing. It wasn’t cruelty in his mind, it was just the way things were. In short, Jude lacked that inner voice that warns against temptation and whispers of accountability. The social experiences that normally nurture a moral conscience had simply never taken root in him.

“Insensitivity is your trademark. I’d call it your twisted little signature,” his father had once said, the words dripping with something that wasn’t quite pride—or maybe it was. Either way, Jude had felt a swell of satisfaction, pleased to be such an extraordinary son.

The Captain and the Private had known each other for barely a year, maybe less. Yet to Vale, their acquaintance carried the weight of a decades-long bond. In his mind, he held a place of deep, unshakable significance in the Captain’s life. Vale would have carried the moon and laid it in Stalworth’s lap, even if the Captain never asked the moon in the first place.

Vale was like that. You might doubt me or think I’m exaggerating, but I swear he’s real. I promise you: Jude Vale exists. He didn’t form friendships, he emotionally raped people after overwhelming them with an avalanche of forced affection and hollow declarations of loyalty. He’d shower them with unwanted gifts delivered with a cold, calculated politeness. He pledged himself to their side without bothering to check which side they were even on. Trying to describe Vale’s career as a ‘true friend’ would be an impossible task. No one had ever managed to convince him that his behavior was anything but kind and genuine. Even when met with puzzled stares or wary smiles, he pressed on, convinced he was doing the right thing. The harm he inflicted on others had never once led him to

question, let alone change, his ways.

That's why, when Captain Stalworth refused to shake his hand, Jude Vale's mind froze, and his face went blank. No one could tell, but deep inside, something shadowy stirred—a jagged, twisted figure that dragged him into a searing, suffocating darkness. His eyes became like the pitiless eyes of the bottom-dwelling fish, and his black irises suddenly overflowed with a abnormal, ebony cruelty. All in all, his face, taut at the chin and swollen at the prominent cheekbones, had completely lost its clemency, interest, and affection. And, in his mind, a brutal vision came to life: arms snapped clean off and a heart ripped from a ribcage, the ribs shattered and jagged like broken glass. The dismembered body was Captain Stalworth's. It might sound extreme, but that's exactly what went through Vale's head. And since Malcom Stalworth was a cunning and secretive man, tear him to pieces and getting even would require a well-thought-out betrayal. Jude would need a plan. A good one.

He bit into his bread, the crimson spread staining his teeth, and gazed out the window. The sun had risen, but it was weak and drained, just a pale white blot against the harsh gray sky. The tops of the pines stood black and still in the damp, heavy air. A low rumble of thunder rolled somewhere in the distance, and Jude froze mid-chew. His eyes, dark and seething, locked onto the courtyard. The faintest glimmer of light still lingered in his irises, but it was quickly snuffed out as a sudden, unbidden thought exploded inside him, igniting his fury. His chest tightened, and his breath hitched. How could Stalworth hurt him like this? The pain was sharp, raw, and familiar. Selfishness.

Stalworth's selfishness and the selfishness of all those who had ever rejected Jude's friendship, pushing him aside like he was nothing. Through clenched teeth, he growled, "Goddamn piece of trash, Stalworth."

One thing was certain: he needed allies.

Over the next few days, Vale's mind churned relentlessly. Thinking wasn't something that came naturally to him, he'd never held a thought for more than ten minutes in his life. Now, hours of intense focus left him yawning, though he wasn't tired. It was as if his body was protesting the effort, trying to reject the storm of dark. His thoughts circled like a whirlwind of blood and rage filling his days. He hadn't realized how many ways there were to kill. He wasn't a murderer—at least not yet—but some methods stirred a dark excitement in him more than others. The same question, however, kept gnawing at him: how to make it happen. Whether on the street, at home, or at work, Vale couldn't stop replaying the same thoughts in his head. He was a soldier, with access to weapons that ordinary citizens could only dream of owning since the enactment of Directive 23.

Once, Jude even found himself targeting Stalworth. From his position in the courtyard, he had followed the Captain's movements through the scope as Stalworth walked from the arsenal in the west corner to the hangar in the east where the war androids were kept. And as Jude's finger hovered near the trigger, he couldn't help but wonder what the Captain would think if he knew he was in his sight.

The dear Captain was always a man of tactics. At first, Vale had admired him, even been in awe of him. Stalworth was sharp, confident, a true wolf among sheep, and such a nice fellow to boot. And he had a head for things like artificial intelligence, robots and adaptive technology. Once, he had even confided in Jude about his concerns over the danger of humanizing androids too much. Jude had listened intently, though he couldn't fully grasp the worry. What did it matter if androids replaced humans who weren't up to par? Efficiency was efficiency, after all.

But that was the Captain—always the good man, always the thoughtful one. Still, Stalworth was an ungrateful man. He

didn't seem to understand that Vale wasn't just any soldier, he was the best soldier. The best, and he had the right to be treated that way.

In those moments of rage, Jude Vale's mind filled with a murky haze, solidifying into vivid, grotesque visions. He saw himself standing over Captain Stalworth, cracking open his skull with a handsaw, then scooping out the brain and replacing it with an artificial neural apparatus—one programmed to function correctly, the way Jude thought it should. These weren't just fleeting images; they were vivid, almost cinematic scenes that played out in his head. It was as if he were seated in the front row of a mental movie theater, fully immersed. The thought of killing Stalworth this way thrilled him, leaving him breathless and trembling, his hands damp with sweat—or perhaps something else. Even when the fantasies faded and reality crept back in, the rush lingered. It was like a pounding noise deep in his blood, his synapses saturated with something dark and violent. A devilish will.

But this time, Vale had put his rifle on the ground. Shooting Stalworth in the courtyard would create too many pesky witnesses, and the Captain didn't deserve anyone standing up for him. No, he couldn't risk making a hero out of Stalworth. His plan was to gut the man and leave him to rot in the sun like an empty shell. A goddamned outcast.

He thought about it constantly, even while shaving. He never let his personal android do it, no matter how convenient it might have been. Damned home robots. Jude liked shaving, running the razor over his pale skin, feeling the pull of the blade. It was a ritual he'd never give up, and every morning, as he stood before the mirror, he thought about how to kill the Captain. After spending most of the night consumed by those same thoughts, it was as if a nail had been driven straight through his skull.

In the mirror, he saw himself: blank, thin, lanky, and silent, his face grotesquely masked in the pure whiteness of shaving

cream. His large, dark eyes glazed over, turning black like pools of indelible ink, deep and shadowed as empty sockets. In those moments, his entire expression shifted, hardening into a singular, unyielding determination. He became his own desire

So... How could Stalworth be killed?

He pulled on his military green shirt and started to button it. Since living with his mother—whose consciousness had been transferred to a personal house-robot after her death—Private Vale had always kept his shirts immaculately pressed. He felt the starched sleeves tighten around his arms, the cool cotton brushing against his skin like a quiet reminder of order. His mother had been a terrifying woman when she was alive. Now, confined within the robot, she was far easier to manage. Controllable. Yes, a terrible woman.

“A terrible woman?” he murmured.

Something struck him at that moment, a simple germ, a memory rising to the surface from the depths of his being. A mocking, vaguely idiotic smile cracked through the severity of his expression. He had found the perfect approach. Or rather, the perfect person to help him carry out his revenge.

The soft glow of dawn caressed the two bodies moving slowly on the bed. The room was filled with the white scent of jasmine. It was a large room, but the two of them seemed small and adrift, like castaways on a fragile raft.

As the night receded like a black tide, slipping from the sheets to pool on the pale stone floor, Captain Stalworth murmured something only his wife could hear. She answered in the same subdued whisper, their voices like fervent, mutual pleas. The whispers quickened, breaking into fragments—warmer, faster.

At last, Stalworth’s body hung in the soft, metallic crest of dawn, suspended above his wife’s for one a final moment before

he collapsed beside her with a rough, heaving breath. They were prisoners to each other, but she kept her breasts modestly covered with a firm, guarded reserve that he admired. This modesty, this quiet decency... The grace of her being that she had reserved for him, even before he was aware of it, had never been touched by anyone else. She was his privilege. She was the center of all his reasons and meanings. Her vivid, living warmth was his alone. His alone.

“Say something,” she spoke quietly.

The dim light swept across Captain Stalworth’s face, leaving his smile in shadow, barely visible. He leaned closer, breathing in the warm scent of her skin—pungent, acrid, alive. His lips found the hollow between her neck and shoulder, and he kissed her there.

“Malcolm,” she insisted, her voice firmer now. “What’s going on?”

He looked at her, confused.

“I wanna talk.” Her tone carried an authority no one else would dare use on Captain Stalworth. Yet she could. She was the only one.

And just like that, he relented, “What are ya talkin’ ‘bout?”

“Oh, you know,” she shot back, her words charged with frustration. “Stop pretending.”

He watched her with unconscious severity, and she met his gaze without flinching. His wife loved him, but was somehow hostile at this moment. She was his fight. Her steady gaze felt like a leash, pulling him back, increasing his desire for her. He touched her cheek, his expression still serious.

“I’d tear myself apart for you,” he said softly.

Her green eyes stayed heavy with worry. He wasn’t entirely joking, she could hear it in his voice. “I’d rather you stay in one piece,” she said.

He let a wry smile slip. “I’ll carry out your orders,” he replied lightly.

“Malcolm, stop it! I’m worried.”

Stalworth said nothing, leaning back on one elbow. His short blonde hair ended in the hollow of his hand, its skin rough with calluses from handling a gun. The square face, framed by a beard tousled from her touch, was relaxed, almost at ease. A beard, even a sparse one, was a privilege reserved for officers, and Stalworth wore it well. He kept his bright eyes on her, eyes full of the past, full of memories that moved like cold ghosts over the gray water of a shady bay. Even if he was unaware of it. But he did know his gaze embarrassed her, but he also knew something else: shyness and modesty were what made her invincible.

“You don’t grasp the risks you’re taking,” she said, breaking the silence.

“Sorry, you lost me there,” he replied.

She threw herself onto the pillow with a frustrated sigh. “It’s about a soldier.”

Stalworth paused, the connection clicking into place. “You mean Jude Vale?”

“Malcolm, please, listen,” she said, her voice more urgent now. “He’s being rude, and there’s something intrusive about the way he’s acting.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that,” Stalworth admitted. “But I don’t think he’s looking to stir up trouble.”

“Don’t you see? He’s faking it, playing you all the time!”

Stalworth fell silent, his jaw tightening. She didn’t look happy saying it, but the fear in her voice was unmistakable, and he couldn’t ignore it. He reached to pull her into a hug, but she shifted away, her body tense. Then the words came in a rush, spilling out as though she’d held them back too long. “I’m afraid of him,” she said, her voice breaking. “Malcolm, I’m really worried.”

“Honey,” he said softly, “I think you should cool down.”

“No! Listen to me! This... this man says one thing and then the opposite. And those eyes... those eyes...” She frowned, struggling for the words.

“Of a bottom-dwelling fish?” the Captain quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

“Oh, come on!” she snapped, her frustration flaring. “He is like someone wearing sunglasses in the dark. He doesn’t see the people around him, doesn’t care about anyone else.”

Captain said, “You seemed relaxed when you spoke to him the other day.”

“I was polite.”

“You even smiled.”

“I’m Captain Stalworth’s wife. How else should I act, if not with courtesy and respect? But that doesn’t change how I feel about him. That man infuriates me. Everything about him is deceptive. He’s... well, he’s a devil!”

“You’re being dramatic. He’s just ambitious, like plenty of others in the ‘industry’. But trust me, I’m not gonna let him walk all over me.”

The room filled with a vast, white silence as the first light of day broke across the pale walls. Stalworth knew something was not adding up behind the cold, calculating logic of certain of Vale’s actions. Behind his constant complaints, his psychological discomfort, his emotional swings-all things that had surfaced on the job or been reported to him by fellow soldiers. There was something strange and chaotic about this soldier, in his way of asking for attention, in his harassing and restless indiscretion. There was an incredible ferocity in him, made all the more dangerous by an apparent inertia and a dumbfounded expression. That was why he had decided to put some distance between himself and the man. Even though they were supposed to keep a working relationship. That’s why he couldn’t swerve Vale’s hand.

“You’re underestimating this devil, Malcolm.”

Her eyes were dimmed with fear. Malcolm had seen this kind of fear before, in the war. She didn’t fear Vale: she feared the Devil. But the Devil had shown itself to her as a nameless horror, a nightmare she could not explain. It was a black mist

hovering around their home, a foreboding purple light that paralyzed her hope. She was afraid—terribly afraid. And she felt that fear scratching her bones, soaking into her blood, invading her from within. And Malcolm had to help her defend herself against that fear. That was his duty.

“You’re overreacting, honey. Vale’s a bit odd, sure. That’s all,” he said with a shrug. “He is just a man with a bunch of probs. After all, he lives with his Not-Fully-Alive mother.”

“His mother’s an Integrated Unit?” she whispered. “My God, you should never have let him come to our house,” she said, anguished.

She threw the sheets around herself and stood in the middle of the room, beautiful and defiant, her long dark hair cascading over her shoulders. She stared at her husband like a vengeful goddess.

“You’re making a mountain out of a molehill,” he said, sitting up in bed. His gaze dropped, avoiding hers.

“He had his mother’s consciousness transferred to a robot!”

“He loved her and couldn’t let her go,” Stalworth said softly.

“This is unnatural,” she snapped.

Stalworth looked at his wife, his eyes clouded with an anger long buried but never extinguished. It was about his son. The temptation had been there, strong and insidious. He knew his son deserved to rest, but almost every day, the same question had clawed at him: ‘What if?’ What if some fragment of his boy still lingered, waiting to be found? He remembered how close he’d come to turning to CortexSec to try a resurrection. But in the end, he had chosen not to.

“You know how hard it is to let go of someone you love,” he said. “You know the pain can take you where you never thought you’d go. You can’t have forgotten.”

She walked over and sat beside him on the edge of the bed as he carried on getting dressed.

“Malcolm,” she murmured. “I haven’t forgotten anything. How could I? I know some things are hard to get over, but you

and this man have nothing in common. You don't have to help him just because you feel tied to his pain. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Vale is... weird. I fear him. His kindness is a sham. His manner is dark. He watches others, but only to gain an advantage. He's wicked."

Stalworth met her gaze, and he promised quietly, "I'll be careful, hon."

"Get him to change departments," she urged. "Get him away from you. From us."

"I said I'd be careful."

"Malcolm, trust me."

"No," he said firmly. "You trust me. I don't make plans against my subordinates, I don't get attached to them, and I don't let them into our live."

"You should plan to get Vale away from you," she insisted, her voice rising. "That man is hatching something. I saw it in his eyes. When he left the other night, I met his gaze, and I swear..."

As she continued, Stalworth walked to a cabinet, opened it, and retrieved something. He held it in his hands for a moment, hesitant, before turning and handing it to her. It was an inconspicuous weapon: a thin, dark cylinder, just longer than her hand.

She paused, a frown on her face. "What's that?"

"Squeeze it in your palm," he instructed.

She obeyed, and a faint blue light spread along the handle, pulsing softly.

"Malcolm, I've never used a weapon."

"Just point and press this button," he explained, his voice oddly stern yet gentle. "It releases a short burst of electrical energy. It extends several meters—like blue lightning. It's not lethal, but it's strong enough to force anyone to back off and leave them stunned for several seconds."

Their eyes met again.

"Keep it with you at all times, and only use it if you must. It

will give you enough time to escape. Just in case.”

Her voice trembled, “Then you really think he might—”

“Stop worrying,” he interrupted. “It’s not good for you or the child you’re carrying. We have to think of him now. He’s our future.”

She nodded and rested her head on his shoulder. “I’ll ask God to protect us,” she said.

“No one believes in God anymore,” he replied.

“Doesn’t matter, Malcom” she said. “Doesn’t matter,” she repeated.

He held her close, a steady shield against her worries. She surrendered, her body relaxing as if reassured... For a moment. But her green eyes stayed heavy with dark fear; shadows pooling in the depths.

The person Jude Vale had in mind to help him deal with the Captain was a woman called Selene Cabot. She ran a holistic consulting salon offering a variety of services, catering mostly to women. Her specialties included synaptic readings with holographic techno-tarot cards and cosmic horoscopes capable of predicting space-time discrepancies between events. For a small extra fee, she could even calculate the variables of destiny with near-mathematical precision. She also read ruling constellations and crafted talismans, or stones charged with magical properties for good or ill fortune, depending on what the client desired.

But Cabot was also a techno-spiritual guide, a self-styled coach for those daring enough to follow ‘the Way of the Dark Codex’. At the time, the Codex was nothing more than a digital grimoire, a top-secret archive where Selene had fused ancient rituals with quantum algorithms and other arcane constructs given strange, unpronounceable names. These secrets were reserved for the most devoted—and wealthiest—followers of

the Way. Well, the Dark Codex was more than a virtual trove of spells for exuberant techno-witches. It was a sentient artificial intelligence, capable of serving as an advisor, oracle, and even accomplice to those who sought its guidance. Its responses were cryptic, its insights uncanny.

However, the true centerpiece of Selene Cabot's services was her obsession with Residuals of Integrated Post-Life, which she sympathetically abbreviated to R.I.P. It was her term for the eerie remnants left behind when a human consciousness was transferred into robotic hardware, a cutting-edge, post-mortem service offered by the Silicon Valley giant CortexSec. The company specialized in resurrection protocols and digital soul encoding, marketing their work as an evolution of immortality.

For Selene, the R.I.P. wasn't just a side effect of technology, it was something far greater. She claimed to sense the 'residual echoes' of these transferred souls, whispers of their humanity lingering in the circuits and code. Whether these whispers were real or the invention of her broken mind was a mystery, but Selene's devote clients believed her. And she made a lot of extra cash from it.

But how had she come up with this idea? Each time the CortexSec resurrection process was completed, the technicians created robotic substitutes of the deceased. These androids resembled the dead in every way, reproducing their voices, mannerisms, and even their upbringing. In Salem, the first town where the process was trialed, these integrated copies were everywhere. People began calling them the Not-Fully-Alive.

CortexSec insisted they were implanting the 'consciousness' of the deceased into the androids, though no one could agree on what consciousness actually was. Their advertisements portrayed this so-called 'soul' as a glowing silver halo emanating from a generic, smiling face. The face was androgynous, with deep, radiant eyes that seemed to draw you in. Researchers had named this representation Nyx Arcanis—a symbol meant to be both asexual and mysterious. The point of naming a concept as

abstract as consciousness wasn't clear to anyone, but people quickly adopted it. Before long, phrases like, "My Nyx's karma is off today," or "It's the weight of your Nyx that's keeping you up at night," became part of everyday speech. Faith in a divine Creator had faded, but people were more than willing to stake their souls on CortexSec and its resurrection protocols.

The researchers claimed they could translate the Nyx Arcanis of a deceased person into digital code and upload it to customized hardware, promising the transfer would leave the consciousness intact. The family of the deceased could pick from different models of shells to house their loved one's consciousness. There were also cases of people choosing to end their own lives to be implanted in a shell, hoping to avoid pain, illness, and frustration, but this service had never been included in the company's official price lists. And, of course, there was no way to tell if the faint light pulsing in a Not-Fully-Alive's eyes was a sign of true awareness, or just a flicker of the operating system. But no one wanted to shatter the bubble.

Cabot, always attuned to human desperation, saw an opportunity. Listening to this kind of talk, her business acumen told her there was fertile ground in the uncertainty surrounding the resurrection process. What if something unplanned could happen when the Nyx Arcanis was uploaded? What if the boundaries between life and death weren't so clean-cut? To Selene, this no-man's-land—a liminal fracture between logic and faith—was the perfect space to invade. Through clever branding, she convinced people that she had been chosen by an undefined Cosmic Will to channel the wandering thoughts of the dead. She claimed that these disembodied fragments mystically—and inexplicably—clustered in the R.I.P.

Her only caveat was that the corpse must have been dead for no more than three days.

I guess you're wondering what Private Vale and his Captain have to do with all this. Well, Vale knew that Captain Stalworth had dealt with Selene years ago, back when he and his wife had

lost their son, a baby only a few months old. Those tragic events were among the few personal things Stalworth had ever shared with him.

To sum up, Stalworth had been a man barely holding himself together. The loss of his son, combined with the strain it placed on his marriage, had left him like a spring stretched beyond its limits, struggling under the pressure, unable to snap back. Being the pragmatic man he was, Stalworth turned to the NeuroSphere, delving into the strange world of technο-occultism. That's how he discovered Selene Cabot.

At first Stalworth had felt skeptical. The messages Selene sent him were cryptic, filled with strange terms and unsettling promises. But there was something about the way she described her work that struck a chord in him. Despair is a constant, relentless agony—a tremendous pain that seeps into every corner of the soul. It's like liquid madness, coursing through the veins, spreading with every heartbeat. The inability to grasp why such suffering exists is its cruellest edge, a torment that gnaws at the mind until reason itself begins to fray. Desperation made him hopeful, and hope made him uneasy. Even as he told himself it was absurd, part of him couldn't help but wonder: what if she really could retrieve a piece of his son? What if, in this strange digital limbo, something of him still existed?

So he asked for her help. He wasn't looking for a resurrection: his son had been buried the normal way, not turned into a Not-Fully-Alive entity. No, he just wanted a sign. A message, a fragment of memory, a sliver of residual data he could hold on to forever. Anything to make the grief more bearable. Selene had assured him he'd come to the right place. She told him about an advanced neural network she could use to access a digital domain where residual data from the deceased merged with the lingering light of the Nyx Arcanis. Even his son's essence, she claimed, could be found there. She would defragment forgotten knowledge, negotiate with virtual entities, and retrieve his son's R.I.P. And she made an exception

for him, she tried, even though more than three days had passed since the child's death. The Captain didn't question, he would have believed in any sort of miracle. Now he too was caught in the bubble of the occult. We all have an endless capacity to reshape the truth, bending it until it fits snugly within the fragile architecture of our beliefs.

Once he'd paid for the service in full, the process began. After their initial meetings—some held in her dimly lit study, others via synaptic connection—Selene managed to ensnare Captain Stalworth in a shadowy, incoherent web of seductive communication and virtual reality. Her methods, instead of helping him navigate his grief, pulled him deeper into the labyrinth of techno-occultism. Selene had a way of weaving herself into every corner of her clients' lives, and Stalworth was no exception. And so, Stalworth stepped right into the trap. Only his wife's love pulled him from it, dragging him back to reality. In return, Selene launched a vindictive smear campaign.

But Selene's fury was fleeting. She was the kind of person who lost interest quickly, always needing a fresh turnover of faces to keep her entertained. As she often said herself, there were plenty of handsome captains in the world—human or otherwise.

When Vale arrived at the gate of Selene's grim abode, the first thing he did was read her name above the gothic and somewhat tacky grate. The name was written in bright neon letters, and his eyes focused on the vibrancy of the light. The land groaned in the darkness, and unrecognizable scents twisted in the air. Suddenly, a feeling crept into him, warming him like a fever warms a body that is rapidly falling ill. He sensed that everything in this moment, including the silence and the stares of the crows, was impure. Worse still, Jude felt impure, as though he'd stepped into the heart of something forbidden. He

could not explain it; it was as if he was in the middle of an obscure wish.

He smiled when he thought about it. A smile that resembled the stony grin of a gargoyle. Suddenly, he remembered the exact moment when things had changed between him and the Captain. Their trust had gone up in smoke. It had been when he had told Stalworth that he had witnessed his mother's transformation into an android after her death. He had been there for the entire operation. He had watched as the machine removed a section of bone from the back of his mother's skull, exposing the gelatinous gray mass within. Its robotic fingers, thin as spider legs, had descended with mechanical precision, probing the mushy surface of her brain. Vale had stood there, unblinking, as the artificial fingers—laden with microscopic receptors—scanned the chemical structure of her neural tissue and transmitted the data to a quantum computer humming somewhere in the background.

He had watched it all. Watched as the machine's claws plunged deeper into the folds of her brain, exploring its innermost recesses, mapping the infinitely intricate web of synaptic connections. Watched as the code necessary to translate her consciousness into a digital format took a cold shape. And he had seen the final step: the machine extracting her brain, slick and glistening, only to toss it into a bucket of organic waste.

In the end, the Private had gone home with his mother in a Not-Fully-Alive format, complete with CortexSec gadgets and the emergency codes for any malfunctions that would most likely occur in the first few months as consciousness settled into the new hardware.

Vale walked through the gate and across the garden, shuddering a little at the sight of the huge black crows perched on the branches. The crows in this area had always seemed unusually large to him; he was no expert on birds, after all. A dog barked, but it was far away. He moved forward cautiously,

straining to hear anything beyond the faint rustle of the charcoal-colored grass swaying in his wake. At the door, he paused, the weight of his promise to the Captain pressing briefly on his thoughts. He had sworn on his honor to stay away from Selene Cabot, and now here he was, doing the exact opposite. But Jude felt no shame in the contradiction. No guilt. The violence of his actions, the fracture in his own word, didn't trouble him in the slightest.

He raised his hand and knocked.

Selene came on strong, as if she'd been waiting for him just on the other side of the door. She appeared in a flowing purple dress, her pose suggestive, her mouth slightly open, as though already framing a clever remark. She wasn't ugly—far from it. There was something about her, a vulgar yet enigmatic air, that stirred a sexual excitement in Vale. And his disturbed mind failed to connect the dots between her posture, her dress, and her intentions.

When their eyes met, she parted her full lips in a smile that was extraordinary in its equal parts beauty and duplicity. Instead of opening her arms wide like you would to greet a friend after a long time, she put her fists on her hips and leaned toward him with the feisty yet indulgent expression of a bitch discussing her hourly rate with a john.

"I knew you'd come back to me, Jude Vale," Selene said, her voice curling around his name like a snake around prey.

Vale nodded stiffly. "Sure. You're an occultist, after all. I'm here because I need your help," he replied. "So let me in."

"Hmm, and what's going on?"

"I made up my mind because..." He paused, his expression hardening. As the silence stretched, the vitality drained from his black eyes, leaving them dull and lifeless—like the flat, glassy stare of a fish. "I suffered a terrible injustice. Terrible."

He adjusted the lapel of his military uniform with precision. "As I said," he continued, his voice low, "I need your help."

"What kind of help?" she asked, a spark of intrigue

flickering in her gaze.

“To slay one man.”

Her lips curled into a slow, wicked smile. “Who?”

“Captain Malcolm Stalworth.”

Dark delight lit up Selene Cabot’s face, her smile widening as though she’d been waiting for this moment all along.

Vale stepped into Selene’s study, the chemical stench curling his nose hairs. Wall-mounted holoviewers displayed deformed, screaming faces and half-naked bodies. The audio was off, leaving the grotesque performances eerily silent.

“Finally, you’ve got the picture,” Selene said, sliding onto a black leather sofa, where six shaggy goats lay indifferently at her feet.

“Picture? What picture?” Jude asked, settling into a purple velvet chair and crossing his legs with forced ease.

“I mean you’ve got the truth!”

His face seemed flattened. “What truth?”

“That Captain Stalworth has betrayed you. Trampled on your trust.”

Jude’s eyes narrowed. “How do you know? I haven’t told you what happened.”

Selene used a boyish grin, incongruous in its innocence. As she leaned forward, her honey-colored hair brushed her shoulders. A goat bleated, and she scooped it into her arms, kissing its snout with disturbing tenderness.

Jude watched, unimpressed. “Why goats?” he muttered. “They stink.”

She ignored him. “The world we see is not the same as the one Stalworth sees,” she said, stroking the goat’s coarse fur. “He used me and then cast me aside. I knew he’d do the same to you. You’re so smart, so handsome, so... Well, the Captain really envies you.”

“I can see how that could be true.” He took a moment to think it over. “I mean, I’m pretty sharp, but I still don’t understand why the Captain didn’t shake my hand.”

“Your hand?”

“Yeah.”

She said, “You must hate Stalworth, no matter how you interpret his actions.”

“Oh,” muttered Jude, “I hadn’t thought about that.”

The little goat stopped chewing and tried to climb down, but the techno-occultist restrained the hirsute beast and kissed its snout.

“There are few creatures that deserve the love of the likes of us, Vale, you should know that.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you brooding? This man has betrayed your trust, and there is no need to understand the reasons. Let’s just kill him.”

“That’s what I want.”

Vale said it with conviction, but he could not help but feel a touch of panic on an instinctive level.

Selene liked his answer. She set the goat aside, stood, and crouched at Jude’s feet. Her hands rested on his thighs, the green of his uniform taut beneath her grip. The smell of dusted circuits and goat musk clung to her, mingling with the sight of her tattooed skin and artificial curves.

So, he could see the dark hollow of her dress where her full, fake tits rose and fell with the rhythm of her breath. She wore a red jewel around her neck, and her skin was tattooed with purple cinnamon, darkened by chemical processes. And she smelled vaguely like the goats she lived with.

The soldier would have wanted to reach out his hand and touch her breast. The glorious rise of an involuntary erection filled his trousers at the thought.

“That man deceived me before he deceived you,” she murmured, her lips glistening. “He used me for his gain and

discarded me when I was no longer useful.”

“I think you already covered that,” he said.

Her chest rose and she stumbled, as if she were trying to act breathless.

“You know me, my dear,” she said, pausing as if she had to fight the urge to speak ill of someone or hide her pain behind kindness. She even started to tear up, but she kept stroking Vale’s legs. “You know how much I’ve struggled with people not showing gratitude, treating me badly, and abandoning me.”

“Just wanted to flag that Stalworth said it was his wife who saved him from you,” he said, cutting in. “As to put it... It wouldn’t have gone as you planned, with his wife around.”

“Planned?” she replied, with a hint of disbelief in her voice.

“Of course not!”

He stopped her hand between his own thighs and removed it. “Didn’t his wife pull him out of your clutches?”

Selene’s smile faltered. “That woman ruined everything,” she snapped. “He was mine. Useful emotional reference. I could play on him as much as I liked. His neural pathways were mine to control. His emotions bent to suit me. Then his whore of a wife came along and ruined it all. To hell with her.”

“I see,” said Jude. “Didn’t he pay you for your services?”

“On dime.”

“Mistreat you?”

“No.”

The Soldier scratched at his own chin. “So what did the Captain really do to you in the end?”

Selene closed her eyes, contoured by bold black lines of makeup, and her face turned yellow. When she opened her eyes again, her gaze was wild and feral. Her large painted lips tightened, and her fingers flexed so that the purple and black lacquered nails dug into her flesh. The goats began to bleat wildly, and soon it was all a din.

“Stop it!” she shouted, and the animals ran to hide behind the couch. Then she roared at Vale, “He may not have shaken

your hand, but as for me... He made me bloody well look like a whore!" After a moment, her tone softened, "But now you've come back to me. Together, we'll finish this."

Jude leaned back. "How?"

She went to a cabinet and pulled out a device Vale knew well.

Selene rose, retrieving a device Jude recognized immediately. "With this."

"You can't bypass his neural shield with that. It needs access keys," he said, shaking his head. "It's illegal and... impractical."

Selene's grin widened, her teeth glinting like a lifeless automaton's. "That's why you're here, to give me the information I need."

Jude's resolve wavered, doubt flickering like a dim light in his mind. Sensing it, Selene leaned in. "We'll use his wife to lure him here," she purred. "Together, we'll kill him."

Jude shuddered, his thoughts muddled by the darkness that clouded his heart. Stalworth had tried to help him, had been kind. But that kindness was buried beneath the wall of shadow that consumed him now.

"Yes," he said, his voice steady. "We're on the same page."

When Selene Cabot's neuro-message reached him, Captain Malcolm Stalworth was in the training room, Captain Malcolm Stalworth was in the training room, testing two freshly programmed artificial brains. And when it flashed in his mind, Stalworth's hands stopped mid-motion:

COME TO ME. TWILIGHT. IF YOU DON'T COME,
YOUR WIFE WILL KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE.
Selene.

Then his mind darkened and the metallic hum of the neuro-

message faded. His breath hitched, and a cold prickle ran down his spine: the typical chill of unauthorized mind access.

“Impossible...” he murmured.

Had she really activated the communication in his brain? He looked around, meeting the gaze of several colleagues. The paranoia rushed down into his esophagus and hardened his intestines. His blood chilled. His chest tightened. First concern: How did this woman have access to the secure neuro-link he used at work? Very few people had such clearance. Second, and far worse: What the hell was she talkin’ about?

He stared at the two android heads on the workbench before him. Just heads. Four eerie blue eyes glowed back at him, unblinking. Their artificial gaze made his skin crawl.

What had he done?

Well, he knew he was a good man, but he also knew that even a good man could do bad without realizing it. Actually, it was not so normal for a man to do wrong without realizing it, but it was also not so normal for him not to remember what he had done to be blackmailed.

But what the hell! He had done nothing. Nothing at all! And yet, and yet... Maybe she had drugged him during one of their sessions? Maybe he had indulged in a sexual simulation that was later erased from his memory? Damn it. His pulse raced. He felt like a hand was closing on him—and he recognized it. He realized he’d slumped forward, shoulders hunched, his mouth slightly open. Around him, the training room buzzed with machinery and chatter from officers and soldiers. Could any of them have intercepted the message?

Maybe.

No, impossible.

Then again, what couldn’t technology do?

He rubbed his face with his hands. What had he done?

Standing abruptly, he left the room. His chair spun behind him as he strode to the exit, ignoring his colleagues’ greetings. He couldn’t remember doing anything wrong, but that didn’t

make him feel any safer. Asking a techno-occultist for help: that was his mistake. That immoral act had come back to haunt him, clawing at his life. But what exactly was Selene threatening him with? Had she unearthed his innermost thoughts? Recorded some hidden, compromising memory? He had to find out. He had to face her. His hand unconsciously reached for his service pistol, resting on his hip. The weight was familiar, reassuring—but only for a moment. Shuddering, he pulled his hand back as if burned.

“No, I could never do that,” he heard himself say.

He was sweating. No he could never kill someone in cold blood. Not even Selene. Not even her. He would never have become a killer.

Stalworth was totally off-balance when he got to the car parked in the barracks yard. The blazing sun was right above him, staring down like a fiery, unrelenting eye. He had never wanted clouds so much in his life.

The forest behind Selene Cabot’s mansion emerged as a blurred outline through the Captain’s eyes as he approached. The sun never reached here, summer or winter, due to the peculiar shape of the gorge, and the trees had taken on desperate shapes to reach what little light they could down into the hollow surrounded by the huddled and massive mountains. Those who set foot there, whether they were aware of the danger they were facing or not, were first reached by the sound of the rapid rippling of the numerous streams and the croaking, impure cry of the many crows that nested in the valley.

The crows and the ravens were the first creatures to be encountered when one ventured into the gorge, for they stood on the branches and watched the passersby with their pupils injected with a avid black lust. Their black beaks had become abnormally elongated and hardened, making them especially

useful for gouging out the eyes of their prey or tearing the flesh from their bones.

Actually, there was a popular rumor, almost forgotten now that technological advances have made certain beliefs ridiculous, that the great black crows in the unnamed valley near Salem had killed little boys who ventured into the woods one summer day. A summer and a day no one could remember. There was no way to know for sure if these rumors were true, but someone had found the remains of the children. I'm not going to describe how they looked just in case you get too grossed out. Let's just say that once upon a time, when there were no government-controlled drones in the sky, when there were no artificial brains, and when the only way to talk to each other was to look each other in the eye, people stayed away from these animals. In particular, they chased them away when they neared children, or prevented children from wandering off on their own, perhaps playing in the shade at the edge of the forest.

The valley was desolate, home to little more than a few gray badgers, wild hares, and packs of jackals. Recently, wolves had begun to appear: animals with fur of an undefinable color and fierce red eyes. Though the area was largely uninhabited, some suspected these creatures were cybernetic, unleashed to patrol the valley's perimeter. There was reason to believe the government had an interest here. And it was home to Selene and Selene alone. After her arrival, the few remaining inhabitants gradually left, though none could pinpoint exactly why. Initial curiosity about her had given way to avoidance, as contact became more sporadic and, eventually, non-existent.

She had purchased the valley's oldest house, a place shrouded in mystery and left uninhabited for reasons never fully explained. Few remembered now, but long ago, another woman had lived there, a woman said to possess strange, inexplicable powers. In very old, pre-technological times, some might have called her a witch, with the dutiful disdain such a label carried.

Selene had acquired the property—probably still haunted

by some strange non-technological presence—by paying tribute to the mayor of the nearest town, who oversaw the valley. The house had grown darker, gloomier. Its bony chimneys clawing at the sky, while fat, shapeless shadows spilled from its windows and walls, as if the house itself was inhabited by some unknowable darkness.

The Captain recognized the building immediately. It was the same one he had first entered, years ago, driven by the crushing despair of losing his child. Now, as then, its appearance struck him with its feverish, almost chaotic design: black and purple bricks jumbled together, prison bars guarding the windows, and blood-red ivy climbing its walls like veins on a body. Past the gate, which had opened as he approached and closed silently behind him, Stalworth made his way across the garden. The goats were bigger than he remembered, though still dwarfs, their shaggy, smoke-gray hair curling like coils of ash. Their eyes gleamed with thin red irises, snake-like, set against a yellowed sclera.

He paused, uneasy. The goats stared back at him, unblinking. A few bleated, the sound sharp and mocking, as though laughing at some private joke.

“Beasts of hell...” Stalworth muttered under his breath.

He turned his gaze to the mansion and pressed on. The deeper he ventured into the garden, the more he felt a violent will hovering over everything. Even the well water carried a scent that didn’t belong, something unnatural and wrong. At last, he reached the purple door of the techno-occultist’s mansion and knocked. On the porch with him stood three goats and a creature that might have been a dog—or perhaps a wolf. Whatever it was, it reeked unbearably, its fanged mouth and pointed ears twitching in the shadows.

Stalworth waited, then he knocked again, harder this time, and the door swung open almost immediately.

Their eyes met.

“I knew you’d be back, Captain,” Selene said smoothly.

“Please leave any weapons in your possession at the entrance.”

He shot her a resentful look but obeyed, reluctantly setting the gun aside. She stepped aside, gesturing for him to enter. Stalworth hesitated, then moved into the hallway. The walls were stained a deep, somber purple that seemed to drink the dim light. The air was heavy with the cloying scent of incense and sharp chemical perfumes, thick enough to tighten his chest. The room itself was a riot of disjointed imagery: carpets and pillows piled everywhere, figurines of every religion crammed into corners and shelves, creating a visual chaos that mirrored his growing unease.

He shifted uncomfortably, his shoulders taut as if bracing for something unseen. “Why did you send for me?” he asked as he turned to face her.

“Ya made a mistake, Stalworth,” Selene said coldly.

“What?” He stepped closer, barely holding back his anger. “Turning down your sex bait?” he shot back.

“Oh no, that was my choice. I’m the one who pushed you away.”

“If that’s true, then why call me back?” he demanded.

Selene’s lips curved into a smirk. “You need to be held accountable, not just to me, but to someone who offered you genuine friendship. Someone you betrayed.”

Stalworth didn’t reply. He caught the quick, spiteful glance Selene threw toward her study, an unspoken command that made his chest tighten. Without a word, he turned and walked toward the room, his steps heavy with unease. Inside, the air felt colder. His eyes locked on a face—a face he knew too well.

“And? What do you two want with me?” he asked.

Vale tapped his foot on the floor of the room. Something unexpectedly deep penetrated his gaze. “You have offended me!”

“When?” Stalworth protested. “How?”

“The night of the dinner at your house,” Vale hissed.

“What are you talkin’ about? What did I do that evening?”

“You didn’t shake my hand,” Vale said, his voice low, seething with brooding anger. “You said polite goodbyes to all of them. You shook hands with every single one—except me!”

Stalworth stared at him, stunned. In that instant, he realized the terrible mistake he had made allowing this man into his life, into his home, near his wife. A tangled fear clawed at him, making his legs feel heavy, rooted.

The sound of rustling fabric drew his attention. Selene approached, arrogant and ungainly, her purple robes whispering like dying leaves. Around her, the goats hopped and circled, their movements unnervingly chaotic, like flies drawn to decay. Then came her gaze. Stalworth froze as her eyes locked onto his. His soul trembled.

He turned his gaze back to the soldier. “So it was you,” he said, his voice unsteady, heavy with the weight of realization. “You gave her the information she needed to send that neuro-message.”

“Of course I did.”

Stalworth stepped forward. “And doesn’t that sound like a betrayal to you?”

A flicker of unease passed over Vale’s face. “Betrayal?” he repeated, his voice steady but his eyes uncertain. “Not at all. I was simply reacting to your lack of respect.”

Stalworth barely held back his fist. The fire of battle was in his blue eyes.

“You betrayed me, Vale,” he said. “You turned your back on me. You crossed to the enemy. You changed sides like a deserter.”

“I had no idea Selene was an enemy of yours,” Vale said flatly.

Stalworth pointed at the techno-occultist. “You knew what she did to me—how hard it was for me to break free from her grip.”

“I don’t remember any of that,” Vale replied. “You probably never told me. And honestly, knowing you, I’m sure

these claims are just made up. Your way of trying to tear down this poor, guiltless woman.”

“What?” Stalworth’s mind reeled at the absurdity. For a moment, doubt crept in, gnawing at the edges of his resolve. Could he have been mistaken? No, he couldn’t, he knew the truth. Finally, he locked eyes with Vale, his voice steady but cold with fury.

“My wife was right,” he said. “You’re a psychopath.”

The other glared at him, his eyes blazing with fury. “I’m the victim here, Captain,” he spat, his voice rising into a raspy, high-pitched tone. “I’m right, and I’m bleeding from the pain of your betrayal—the lies, the false friendship you offered me!”

Stalworth shivered, trembling inwardly. He lowered his eyes, struggling to control the storm of emotions building inside him. He was in danger, the greater danger than he had ever faced before. His face grew somber, his jaw clenched so tightly that the muscles protruded sharply.

As a warrior, he could recognize the look in Vale’s eyes—the raw, aggressive desire to kill. Murderers were like ice, he thought, frozen on the surface but consumed by burning fire within.

His voice dropped to a whisper. “Save me from my enemies, my God; protect me from those evil people; rescue me from those—”

“, Stalworth!” Selene snapped, her voice slicing through his prayer. She stepped forward. “You wouldn’t be here if you were innocent, Stalworth.”

The blow landed. He fell silent.

Selene went on, “The neuro-message I sent was meant to unsettle you, plain and simple. It was an accusation without explanation, crafted to mess with your head. And guess what? It worked.”

“You manipulated me,” Stalworth said, his tone bitter.

“Not my habit,” she said. “You knew you were guilty cause every men is. Vale needed help and I needed money.”

“You are mad,” Stalworth said. “And he...” he gestured to Vale, “He’s just as mad as you are.”

Vale took a step forward, his expression eerily calm. “Selene is my friend,” he said with conviction. “She advised me to go ahead with my plan.”

“What plan?” the Captain asked. And he tried to gain distance, perhaps to reach for his weapon.

“To kill you,” Vale replied simply. “Then cut you into pieces for the goats to eat.”

Stalworth searched for the gun, but he didn’t have it with him; it was still where that crazy Selene had forced him to leave it. He was so shocked that he didn’t even feel afraid anymore. He had crossed the line of terror and entered a state of conscious oblivion. Vale’s face twisted with stabbing satisfaction. Chronic resentment had long atrophied his heart, and pride had strangled his thoughts. His expression was void of anything human. He no longer resembled a man. He was blind—blind by choice—and he had no desire to regain his sight, for that would mean confronting what he had become.

“Goats eat everything,” Selene said, almost conversationally. “And their droppings... Well, you’ll only find bones in them. But not always.”

Stalworth staggered back, his body colliding with something solid and unyielding. He turned to see what it was.

“Oh my God,” he whispered.

But there was no escape. The massive claws of a robot descended on him, one gripping his shoulder, the other locking around his arm. Stalworth barely had time to react before the sharp crack of tearing flesh and snapping bone cut through the air, loud as a whip. A burning pain exploded. The Captain cried out. His whole body quivered with shock. Flashes of agony radiated from the center of his chest and shoulder where the nerves had been severed. His skin sagged. Blood pulsed violently, spurting from the hollow of the missing limb. It was as if the heart was trying to pump life into the void.

The robot held his severed arm like a trophy. Stalworth's mind spiraled into a state of desperate confusion, his throat tightening with horror. He thrashed against the machine's grip, but it only squeezed harder. The claws moved to his other arm. This time, the tear was slower, the sound deeper. A grim echo filled the room as fibers unraveled one by one. Stalworth let out a long, guttural groan before collapsing, his body convulsing in pain.

Selene turned and walked away, as if the matter were already settled. Vale lifted one of Stalworth's arms from the ground, then dropped it. Blood smeared his fingers, and he wiped it on the military khaki trousers and turned away. Behind him, a metallic sound rang out, but Vale didn't notice. He was too consumed by his triumph to realize it.

Stalworth's wife arrived in the desolate valley in broad daylight, but there was not a shadow of a sunbeam. The very noiseless taxi stopped at the point where the glow of daylight faded inexorably into the darkness of the valley, so dense that not even the car's headlights could dim it. She lingered by the autopilot taxi, her pulse quickening. It felt like the only safe haven left, though the AI driver offered no comfort.

"Shall I wait for you here, ma'am?" the AI voice asked, modulated to an almost improbable friendliness.

"No," she said, her voice barely audible.

"Then I must ask you to proceed with the transaction."

She felt fear. It burned her skin like an emotion of pure electricity. Her hair stood up.

"OK," she whispered, and then placed her open palm in the reader on the passenger door. Her fingers glowed like plankton under the reflector of a microscope.

"Transaction accepted. Thank you for traveling with us. Enjoy your stay!"

The taxi shifted into reverse, its chassis lifting slightly as it hovered silently away, gliding along an invisible air track until it disappeared into the distance. Alone now, she stood at the threshold of the valley, staring into the abyss ahead.

The child she carried shifted within her, as if sensing the fear that gripped her. She rested a hand on her belly, stroking gently. “Let’s go get your daddy back,” she murmured. Her voice trembled, but she sighed deeply, trying to release the tension. Slowly, she turned her gaze toward the valley.

She had been here once before, long ago, to pull Malcolm back from the clutches of Selene. He had been a fool to trust that woman—a creature without compassion, cruel and self-absorbed. And now, somehow, he had fallen into her trap again. It was only thanks to a concerned colleague that she had discovered the truth. Stalworth’s unexplained absence had raised suspicions, and the security system had flagged a peculiar message sent to him. The synaptic trace pointed directly to this valley. She knew full well who the sender was—Selene Cabot, the valley’s only inhabitant.

She moved forward, but stopped at one point, held back by a dark, sudden fear. She was in the middle of the country lane, at the end of which was Selene Cabot’s great mansion, and though she had seen the place and its strange ugliness before, she noticed that there were big red flowers completely out of season, growing too large among the gray grass; gray as if something had sucked the usual color from it. Puzzled, she walked on, but with a slower, more uncertain step, checking from time to time the foliage of the American hazel trees that stood in rows to her right and left. Their tops swaying eerily in the light cold wind.

As she approached the techno-occultist’s house, all her courage was swallowed by an emptiness in her stomach, and she felt an intense horror as she observed the mixture of dark and harsh colors that covered the walls of the house. The gothic gate was wide open, and on each gray pillar were two huge

black ravens, silent and fierce. The great beaks were slightly curved and pointed at her, like eyes in which a cold black fire blazed.

She made the sign of the cross. The animals bowed their heads a little, opened their beaks and spread their wings, then took flight and moved to more distant branches, but they didn't stop watching the woman. She walked through the gate and continued. Near the trough, the goats raised their heads, their flushed faces and gleaming eyes fixating on her. At that moment, the door opened and she stood in front of someone she had not expected to find there. Even Vale seemed surprised to see her. There was a spark of shame in his black gaze, like the electric wound of lightning in the depths of the night.

"What are you doin' here?" was her question.

Before he could answer, Selene appeared. Stalworth's wife felt her heart crackle like a fire burning too hot. "Where's my husband?" she asked.

It was the worst question she could have asked. Selene descended the steps slowly, and paused at the bottom and turned, her gaze drifting to the goats. They were feasting on something scattered across the ground. Something wet, raw, and grotesque. Stalworth's wife followed her gaze, her eyes landing on the offal beneath the horned beasts' feet. The sight hit her like a physical blow. Her knees buckled, but she didn't fall. She couldn't. Her breath caught as the realization pierced through her like a shard of ice. She knew—without doubt, without reason—that what lay in the filth was her husband. Her mind screamed for her to look away, but her body refused to move. And in that paralyzing moment, she thought, 'These two are not human'. There was something else—something sinister and otherworldly—guiding Selene Cabot and Jude Vale.

Selene's icy hands grabbed her, but she stood rooted to the spot, her wide, unblinking eyes fixed on what remained of that human body.

There was no time for despair. Selene seized the woman's

right arm with a grip like iron and dragged her inside, throwing her to the floor without a shred of mercy.

Vale gasped, stepping forward instinctively. “Wait!” he blurted, rushing to help the woman as she struggled to sit up. But she shoved his hand away, refusing his assistance.

“What the hell are you doing, Vale?” Selene snapped, her voice sharp enough to cut glass.

“She’s pregnant,” he said, his voice wavering.

Selene’s lips twisted into a sneer. “And why should I care?”

Jude opened his mouth, but no words came. He faltered, his hands twitching uselessly at his sides. “Well...” he murmured weakly, his gaze dropping. But he couldn’t give her an answer. He let it go.

The Captain’s wife sat paralyzed, her vacant eyes staring into nothing, sweat glistening on her pale forehead. Her lips moved weakly, forming fragments of words—maybe her husband’s name, maybe something else entirely—but it was mostly the incoherent mumblings of someone lost in shock.

“You’ll end up like your husband,” Selene sneered. “And no one will ever find you or your Nyx Arcanis again!”

She reached for Stalworth’s wife, her hand claw-like. But before she could grab hold, a bolt of lightning flashed between them, impossibly fast and blinding. It struck the techno-occultist dead-on. Selene shocked, her jaw snapping open and shut in a grotesque rhythm, her teeth chattering violently. Her body convulsed, stiffening as electric shocks coursed through her muscles. With a final jolt, she collapsed to the ground, her limbs locked in unnatural angles, her wide, glassy eyes staring unblinking, like a doll’s.

Terrified, Vale pressed himself against the wall, flattening himself like a cockroach under a piece of furniture. Stalworth’s wife, trembling with fury, pushed herself to her feet. The stun gun her husband had given her crackled in her hand as she leveled it at him.

“You... Traitor,” she accused him. “You’re nothing but a

coward!"

Jude shrank further into the wall. "I did it for a reason," he stammered.

"Traitor," she repeated, coming closer. She was broken with fear and yet desperately determined.

"No... no, you don't understand!" His voice cracked as he scrambled for an explanation, his words broken and scattered. "I had my reasons... the handshake... the good manners... my friendship was unselfish... I'm a good man... a good kind of man..."

She didn't lower the stun gun, taking another step toward him.

Jude's breath quickened, his words dissolving into fragments. "The Captain didn't shake my hand... inside... the house... with the friends... the party... I just wanted to... I thought I was... I knew I was a good friend! I... Selene said he betrayed us!" His voice pitched higher, frantic now. "I didn't know... I didn't mean to—"

"You... idiot!" she screamed, her voice raw with fury. "Don't you have your own brain? You're monsters. Both of you!"

She pressed the button on the stun weapon, but nothing happened. A hollow click mocked her attempt. Vale straightened, his breath steadyng. His eyes darkened, turning cold and empty. The lifeless, unblinking eyes of a fish. He pulled out a gun, and aimed it at her. Her heart thundered in her chest as she dropped into a crouch, instinctively shielding her belly, protecting her child.

A single gunshot shattered the air.

Then another.

And another.

Five in total.

Each shot slammed into Vale's body. His limbs twitched violently with every hit, but he didn't fall. He remained standing, rigid and impossibly upright, as if the bullets were not

enough to undo him.

The robot executor that had hacked Captain Stalworth to pieces stood in the room, brandishing a rifle. Its cold, unfeeling eyes locked onto Jude Vale, who stared back, stunned. A thick trickle of blood slid down from his parted lips. The sheer naked scare was on his face.

“I just wanted to—” he began.

“You’re a rat, Private,” the robot said, its tone mechanical yet laced with a chilling finality. The voice made the Captain’s wife lift her head, her breath catching. “And you’ll become a Not-Fully-Alive,” it continued, “so you can rethink what you’ve done for the next hundred-year quantum battery charge.”

Jude’s lips trembled, his face slack with shock. He blinked rapidly, his wide eyes darting as realization crashed down on him. He knew who was standing before him. He knew what he had done. The final blow was swift and precise. The shot pierced his chest, stopping his heart instantly. Vale staggered backward, his breath escaping in a soft, broken exhale. His body crumpled to the floor, motionless. His eyes, still wide open, stared vacantly at the ceiling.

“Malcolm?” whispered the woman, now rising to her feet, her voice tinged with disbelief and sorrow.

The robot turned to her and threw the weapon to the ground.

“You all right?” he asked gently.

She stared at him, her voice trembling. “But you... the body out here... are you... the robot—”

The robot lowered its head, glancing at its metallic frame. It ran a hand across its surface, almost human in the gesture. “It was the only way to escape.”

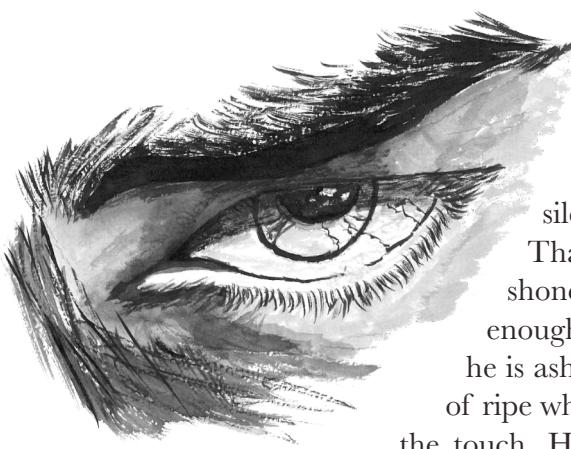
She stepped closer, her hand hovering near his arm, unsure if she should touch him. “Did you tear your own body apart to fool them?”

“No,” he murmured, his hand rising to her cheek but stopping just short. “I tore myself apart to save you. To save us.”

The warmth of his words pierced through the cold metal shell, revealing the human soul trapped within. Tears streamed down her face as she rested her head against his metallic chest, the hard surface oddly comforting in its steadiness.

Outside, the goats gathered at the threshold, their puzzled muzzles turned toward the pair as if sensing something they couldn't comprehend.

When Captain Stalworth's colleagues arrived on the scene, they kept their distance from the inferno that was consuming Selene Cabot's house and all its terrible secrets. The garden burned fiercely, smoke billowing into the night sky. In the shadows of the street, just beyond the fiery glow, they saw two figures standing together: a sturdy android and a graceful woman. They were locked in a silent embrace, their eyes fixed on the rising ashes. Above them, crows perched in the branches, their black forms silhouetted against the flames.



DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

Jack Hollow is silent and burnt out. That is to say, he has shone once—bright enough to sear—and now he is ash. His hair is the color of ripe wheat, dry and brittle to the touch. His eyes are wide and glassy, rimmed with red like old rust, a sign of sleepless nights. He paces the big room of the jail with sagging shoulders, occasionally lurching to the left or right, as if dodging blows that don't exist.

There's a weight to him, and a loosening of the threads that keep one tethered to the real. He doesn't like silence, not the kind that folds in on itself, that hums at the edges like a pitch too high to hear. After a while, Jack is sitting on the rim of the cryogenic cradle. It's broken anyway, out of commission, a relic

gathering dust.

He sits blinking like an owl, fluttering with nerves. Desperate. Then, he lifts his arms and sniffs. The sour, animal stink of his sweat hits him, and he nods weakly. It's proof he's still here. Ghosts, in theory, don't sweat. In theory. The room smells of cold and naphtha, a chemical tang that has burrowed deep into his nose and refuses to leave. It clings to him like a second skin. Some things you carry forever.

He has to focus. He has to sense something—anything.

THUMP-THUMP.

THUMP-THUMP.

THUMP-THUMP.

“Les, I can feel my heart beating,” he says.

“Good for you.”

A voice gives him—a directionless voice blossoming in the gray cavities of his brain like a flower among rocks. After that the silence stretches thin. Jack rubs his eyes, but they stay fogged, like he's seeing the world through dirty glass. His fingers drift to his hair, coarse and brittle like wire. Then the screams begin, carving their way back from some dark corner of his memory. He feels something struggling in his arms. But it's the emotional imprint of something he did in the past. He understands this. And the flies. Flies like black nails hammered into red flesh. A gasp rattles in his ears, a breath torn from a punctured throat. He remembers a heart, or rather, a heart muscle. It isn't shaped like a Valentine. It isn't soft or pretty. It's raw and grotesque, terrifying when it pulses in your hand, when it squirms with its own relentless rhythm. And then the heart—no, the muscle—stops. The feeling that binds him to these fragments is like the red and powerful emotion that comes over him when he watches the sun go down. That memory—if it is a memory—doesn't sit right. It clings to him like a splinter he can't quite reach.

When did that happen? Was it even real? Maybe it was just a scene from some movie, flickering in the back of his mind. Jack Hollow doesn't know. He doesn't care to know.

"Les," he says, his voice a stammering between his lips. "When your heart goes... Does it hurt?"

The voice replies, calm and matter-of-fact, "You can't even feel it."

"Don't mess with me, Les. You're just sayin' that to keep me quiet, ain't you?"

Silence. Jack Hollow sifts through his memories. But he doesn't seem to find any that fit the occasion.

"After all, what did you and I do wrong to be locked up here?"

He says this with anger. A great anger. But whispered, suppressed, stale. He was once used to anger and knew how to use it, but now he doesn't have the angry eruption he once had.

So he says again, "After all what did you and I do wrong to be locked up here?"

This time, the voice answers, "You're the result of a generation so arrogant they don't even know what they're doing."

"I ain't arrogant, Les. Neither are you." He pauses, thinking. "Well, I sure ain't."

"Sure you are," the voice says, cutting through his denial. "And you chose worse. Out of all the things you could've done, you did the worst."

A face blooms in Jack's mind, unbidden. Two wide eyes stare back at him, unblinking. The smell hits him next—thick and fetid, like feces. He pictures it, brown and liquid, clinging to his hands. Panic prickles his skin as he looks down at his palms, only to find them clean.

"I didn't do it," he blurts out. "I haven't done any of this, Les. I didn't do anything at all."

"You broke something that could've worked," the voice counters. "You were arrogant. You brought about arrogance."

Jack shakes his head, “The haves are arrogant. The blue suits—they’re the ones who think they own everything, that they can take whatever they want.”

“Psychos are arrogant,” the voice cuts in, slicing through his thoughts like a blade.

Jack Hollow freezes. The weight of his perplexity crushes his chest, so much so that he holds his breath without realizing it. Unease crawls over him, a cold malaise coiling tighter with every second. His fists clenching lightly as if ready to strike, but there’s nothing to hit. The tension builds until he stiffens, curling inward against the gnawing emptiness churning in his stomach. His gaze drifts, unfocused and glassy, flitting dumbly from one corner of the room to another. He isn’t thinking, at least not clearly. What stirs in his head doesn’t feel like thoughts, just vague fragments of something darker, something raw.

Then his lips, soft and slightly swollen, twist into a curve of disgust. His voice cuts through the silence, slow and unsure, “Did I off somebody?”

There is just silence.

“Les?”

“What?”

“I killed a man, didn’t I?”

“You remember killing a man?”

“No.” Jack is steadying his voice with an effort, and his hands tremble. “I’m pretty sure I didn’t.”

“Sure?”

“Absolutely.”

Another pause. A silence thick enough to choke on.

Jack shifts his weight slightly, his voice softer now, “You think arrogant people are bad, Les?”

The voice answers with the force of a courtroom decree, “Arrogant people don’t give a damn about right or wrong. That’s the problem. Not that it matters. You see these walls? In a little while, the officers are going to start the compression procedure.”

“Meaning what?”

“You have any idea what you did?”

Jack doesn’t relent, “I didn’t do anything. I’m not to blame. It’s the others. They’re the fucking bastards.”

Silence swells in the room.

“What’s the compression procedure?” Jack tries again, his tone smaller now.

“Doesn’t matter. Now sleep. They’ll be here soon.”

“If I sleep, they’ll come sooner,” Jack mutters.

“Then stay awake, but keep quiet. I want to sleep. I want this to end.”

“Kay,” Jack says and goes for it, but the seconds seem to catch fire, sizzling and relentless, each one burning brighter and hotter than the last. Time—something Jack Hollow has never cared for—suddenly feels like the rarest, most precious thing in the world.

“Les,” he whispers, his throat tight. “I guess I’m scared.”

The silence stretches.

“Les?” Jack’s voice cracks. “Les, you sleepin’?

“Until you fall asleep, I won’t fall asleep.”

Jack exhales shakily, his thoughts spiraling. “Why did I try to kill that guy?”

“You didn’t try to kill him. You killed him.”

“No way.” Jack shakes his head, his fists clenching. “No way.”

“You killed him because that mysterious woman told you to. Someone who made you bend to her will, like hot metal under a hammer. You fool. What was the reason? What did she mean to you? Was it worth it?”

Jack Hollow stiffens, his gaze unfocused, his lips twitching as though tasting something bitter. “The woman...” His expression falters, softening into something childlike, like a kid caught with too much candy, imperfect but fierce in his desire.

“Yeah,” he says “the lady with the goats. The technο-occultist.”

His words trail off, but something shifts. His dull, glassy eyes brighten, a sudden spark of clarity cutting through the fog.

“Sacrifices,” Jack whispers, almost to himself. “She told me the power of the universe was contained within her... What the hell she called it?” He rubs his temples, straining to pull the word from the haze. “Yes, the ‘Codex Obscuro’. That’s it.” His voice lowers, reverent, trembling. “She said sacrifices were needed to awaken its power.”

“How could you buy into that nonsense?”

Jack shrugs, his lips quirking into a faint, tired smile. “Well, why not? You’ve gotta have faith in something.”

“I bet you don’t even remember her name.”

“You’re wrong, mate. Her name was Selene Cabot.” Jack Hollow ponders. “But to be honest... I’ve no idea how she fucked my brains out. It’s a mystery.”

“An ‘infernal’ mystery,” the voice comments.

Something shifts in Jack’s demeanor. His eyes brighten, his posture straightens slightly—almost like a spark catching in the ashes.

“A matter of sex, I suppose. She had this... She was a nice ‘combo’ bunny. She knew how to work it. The way she’d look at you, like she could see right through you. Like she was saying, ‘I’ve got you, sweetheart. I know where you’re coming from.’” His words trail off, a crooked smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “Yeah, you know what I mean.”

“Of course I do,” the voice replied.

Jack goes on talking, and he has this daydreamer face, “I ain’t sure about her technical abilities, you know, but she had a great future as a sex worker.”

“You killed someone she hated,” the voice presses. “A man who tried to stop her and save you.”

Jack shakes his head, frowning. “I don’t remember doin’ that.”

“You will,” the voice presses. “Give it a go. You’ll remember.”

Jack closes his eyes, the effort visible in the furrow of his brow. Thoughts collide in his head like storm clouds, incoherent flashes of memory breaking through.

A man. There was another man in the dark bay. Jack wasn't alone.

This man was barefoot, his shoes dangling from one hand. His moccasins—they're clean, untouched by the sand. This guy had to be a lawyer. Hell, yeah, he was a lawyer. But Jack can't remember his face. He tries, straining against the void in his mind, but the man's features remain a blank canvas.

A black sea—calm, invisible—stretched out under the warm velvet night. The bay glowed faintly, the bridge above it illuminated by a cascade of lights. Jack Hollow shakes his head at the absurdity: They preach saving energy, yet they drape the bridge in a million lights. The thought lingers, sharpens. The memory comes into focus, like a camera lens zeroing in on its subject: That bridge was the Golden Gate.

He remembers going there with his twin brother, Les. They'd wander down to the beach by the bridge, shoes in hand, sand cool beneath their feet. Les would tell him to take off his shoes, every time, as if it were sacred tradition. They'd sit with a beer each, the conversation flowing, Jack talking about sex, Les about money. Always money. Business, work, family, responsibility. But Jack? Jack's talk was always sex.

Even the lawyer on the beach, that night, bought him a beer. Jack remembers the man's smile, or what passed for one. It was more like a crooked line, a bitterness drawn in reverse.

"Just before I went to the beach, that night, I sharpened the knife," Jack Hollow murmurs, his voice barely audible.

"You should've sharpened your brain," the voice replies.

Jack Hollow remembers again the beating, fly-covered heart muscle.

"I got a heart, Les?"

"Somewhere, like everyone else. Except for people like you, it's just a muscle. You have no compassion."

Jack recalls the man on the beach, the one with the barefoot confidence and the kind of compassion that seemed to radiate from his core. Jack hated him. Despised him.

“Just like you, Les. Full of compassion,” he mutters. “It always annoyed me.” He lets the silence hang for a moment, then adds, “I don’t like people telling me I’m wrong. I never make mistakes, Les. You get that, don’t you?”

“I do now.”

Jack shakes his head, his tone defensive. “But I didn’t kill him. I didn’t kill that guy.”

The voice shifts, softer now, almost fragile, “You killed him because, in the midst of his compassion, his fear lit up. You killed him because he learned the truth: he found out who you are. You caught a sight of yourself in his eyes. And you couldn’t take it. You couldn’t take your true self.”

Jack exhales slowly, his gaze distant. “I can see it now,” he says, the words half a whisper. “We were there in the bay that night, on the beach. Behind us, the bridge was shining in the dark like... like a fucking space shuttle!”

He laughs, a dry, hollow sound that bounces off the walls.

The voice confirms, quietly, “Yeah.”

“Les?” Jack says, his voice trembling now.

But the voice doesn’t answer.

Jack gets to his feet, glancing around the room. The flickering lights overhead cast shadows that jump and twist, amplifying the sudden tightness in his chest. A wave of desperation washes over him.

“Will you answer, Les?” he pleads, his voice breaking.

“You don’t want answers,” the voice snaps. “All you want is an artificial reconstruction of the truth—the version that suits you best. Your self-repeating mental patterns. You, damn outliner. You’re a tangled mess of alienation.”

A faint, bitter laugh escaping Jack’s lips. “The only tangle we saw was that of the cars.” Silence. “Yeah,” his voice distant. “There was a big car accident. There was a man tied up next to

me in the car. I tied him up for his own good, so he wouldn't get upset. He was injured. Bad." His hand moves to his stomach, pressing lightly. "He had a wound right here." Jack's eyes flicker. "His lawyer's suit was soaked in blood. Disgusting. I keep seeing the flies like black nails hammered into the red. And the heart... You could see it pumping, right through the wound hole."

Silence.

"Terrible crash. Right, Les?" Jack Hollow says, his voice uneven, almost searching.

"You never knew when to stop," the voice replies.

"And the smoke. The flames. The screaming. Oh, dear, the screaming," Jack mutters, his words tumbling out faster now. "The yelling of the cops that wouldn't stop. The flashing lights, the sirens, the whole fucking mess of guns and people screaming everywhere."

Jack pauses, letting the silence stretch before continuing, his voice low, "People who drive remember accidents a lot better. That's right. Then the bang, and someone screaming in my face. A man. Oh, yeah, the lawyer from the beach."

He laughs.

"He had one of his eyes hanging out of its socket. Blue eyes, just like yours. And like mine, since we're twins. And there were wires. Synthetic blood, which is different, less red. You've a synthetic eye too, like that guy."

Silence.

"Then I took his leg off my seat," Jack continues, his words stumbling as he pieces the memory together. "No, wait, it wasn't a leg. Just a piece of a leg."

Another pause, longer this time. The silence seems to thicken, the air pressing down on him.

"Ya know what, Les?" Jack's voice drops to a whisper, "That guy I was driving around that night—the one all cut up—he looked a hell of a lot like you."

Jack leans forward slightly, his breath quickening. "Were you there, Les?"

“I was.”

“Do you remember the crash?”

“I can’t,” the voice says.

Jack’s eyes narrow, confusion etched across his face. “How could you not?”

The voice doesn’t answer right away. When it does, it’s calm, almost too calm, “Ask yourself.”

A faint murmur emanates from the walls, barely audible, like the room itself is breathing.

THUMP THUMP.

THUMP THUMP.

THUMP THUMP.

“Les, my heart’s beating fast.”

“Be happy.”

Footsteps echo in the hallway outside the door. Then comes the sound of metal plates sliding against each other. A rectangle opens in the doorway, revealing a guard’s face—big, black-bearded, his mouth stretched too wide. Jack stares, his thoughts scrambling. ‘Too big. Maybe it’s because he yells too much. Soccer games, probably. Football fans scream a lot.’ He almost laughs at the thought but doesn’t. Not like it matters now.

“Hey, sucker,” the prison guard says. “Get in the center of the room.”

Jack swallows hard. “Les, what’s goin’ on?”

The voice says, “He’s starting the compression process.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Stand in the middle of the room and do what he says.”

“What’s in mid-room, Les?”

“Gasified hate,” the voice replies, calm as ever. “It’s sprayed by those red nozzles. You’ve seen it in the preparation videos dozens of times. This is how they solve the problem they created.”

Jack’s voice wavers, “Are they killing us?”

Tension lines his face. He looks aged. He urinates on himself, the warmth spreading through the fabric of his jumpsuit. The light orange darkens between his thighs. His lips are still moving, words spilling out soundless.

“When you’ll stop talkin’ to yourself?” the guard yells.
“Hurry up, asshole, and stand in the middle of the room.”

“Wot’s he saying, Les?” Jack whispers.

“Not a thing you can understand.”

“But we’re bros. You’re my lawyer. Ain’t that right?”

“I’m your lawyer.”

“Then save me, Les. You’ve got to save me.”

“I tried.”

“And?” Jack’s voice cracks. “What?”

“You never knew when to stop.”

Gas begins to hiss from the jets above, a faint cloud descending around him. Jack tilts his face upward, blinking as tears streak his cheeks. He touches his wet eyes with trembling fingers. The gas tastes sweet, the scent warm and strange, like apple pie pulled fresh from the oven.

“Les? What’s compression?”

“You’ll be compressed when the gas has paralyzed you.”

“Are we being squeezed?”

Jack’s gaze shifts to the walls. The windows embedded in them seem to be watching him, unblinking. The walls shift, creaking as they move inward. The room shrinks.

“Les? Did I do somethin’ to ya, bro?”

The guard’s voice barks through the room, “I said stop talkin’, you crazy maniac. Can’t you see there’s no one here but you? You could have spared your brother, murderer. Now try to die as a man, not a beast.”

Jack stiffens, his mind reels. “This is truly a mystery,” he says.
“An infernal mystery.”

“Yeah,” the voice replies.

“I’m scared, Les.”

“So was I, Jack.”

THE OLD MAN AND THE FEE

Siberia. East of the Tunguska Podkamennaja river basin. June 30, 1908+60

My name is Jury Saskarin and I was there when it happened. At 7.15 a.m. local time, more than a mile from the epicentre, I was jolted awake by a violent roar. At first it seemed to come from the ground itself, but then it moved overhead, reverberating like pure, vibrating energy. I stepped out of my tent to find the Evenka herders around me looking up at the sky, their bodies hunched over, their arms shielding their heads, their faces rigid in stunned awe. The sky seemed alive, its depths groaning with an unbearable, growing rumble.

Bozhe moi, I can still



hear it.

Fear rooted me to the spot, unable to move even as panic swept through the camp like wildfire. The Evenka men were screaming, their words a jumble of desperation and prayer. One of them, his face etched with terror, grabbed my arm and urged me to follow. I had no answers, no explanation for that chaos. My mind was paralyzed, withered by fear.

Yet I followed him. The air was heavy with ash, the birch branches dripping black tar, staining my hands and clothes as we pushed through the smoldering undergrowth. The cries of the camp, human and animal alike, grew fainter and fainter, swallowed up in an unearthly cacophony. This noise, this terrible echo, I realized, had begun hours earlier, faint at first, a steady and ominous beat that morphed into havoc.

The long Siberian day was unnaturally dark. My guide stumbled repeatedly, disoriented by the shifting light and shadow, but each time he miraculously found the way forward. We pressed on, he ahead and I following, until we were stopped by the scorching, sulfurous edge of what could only be described as hell.

What I saw will haunt me for eternity.

A blinding glow split the sky in two, so brilliant that I had to shield my eyes. Around it swirled smoke and red flames, churning in an unnaturally darkened sky, as though the air itself was aflame and unable to contain the light. Below, the forest was a wasteland. Trees were flattened, ripped from the earth, some uprooted entirely, others split clean down their trunks. The ground was marked with deep black scars that emitted a sickening, unearthly stench.

The trees that still stood swayed ominously, and the dreadful sound of cracking wood filled the air. The stench of sulphur mingled with burning dust. Insects swarmed frantically, only to fall dead like burnt cinders. Birds spiraled aimlessly, their cries incoherent. The geese, maddened with terror, screeched in their confusion.

My guide screamed. I turned to see him collapse onto all fours, writhing as though consumed by a force beyond comprehension. Fear rooted me to the spot, my impulse to help overridden by horror. His body convulsed, his face contorted in inhuman agony as a white-hot, blinding fire consumed him from within. This was no ordinary flame. It burned brighter than any I had ever

seen, illuminating him until his body began to disintegrate. His flesh, his hair, even his eyes seemed to radiate an ethereal glow, and then, piece by piece, he crumbled to ash, leaving nothing but a faint halo of light behind.

How can I ever recover from what I witnessed? How can anyone believe what I have seen? Every morning I wake up, wash myself with glacial water, eat whatever I can find. Every day I look at myself in the mirror, Am I still Jury Saskarin? But I live in fear that one day this will change.

Sixty years have passed since that day.

I was thirty. Today... I'm still thirty.

Kirensk Ivan Verno approached and touched his shoulder; Anton Petrov raised his head. They gazed at each other.

“Still reading, huh?” asked Kirensk.

Anton nodded, “Can’t help it. The diary is—”

“Impressive,” Kirensk interjected, finishing the thought.

“Yeah,” said Anton. “I guess so.”

Most knew him only as Ivan, but Anton had always called him Kirensk, except in the early days when they had met in St. Petersburg, in Anton’s house, to plan this trip, they had called each other Kirensk Ivan Verno and Dr. Petrov.

“We’re out of something,” Anton said again, uneasily.

“Meaning what?”

“A missing piece. And we won’t find out by reading the diary.”

“Of course there is a missing piece, otherwise why would you and I be here?” He paused, then continued, but less calmly, “Remember what I told you when we first met?” He sidled up to Anton. The beard that stood out on his face revealed the gray that lay beneath the surface blondness. Then he went on, “There’s a secret in the diary.”

“I do remember that.” Anton adjusted his glasses, an almost unconscious gesture as he tried to steer the conversation in another direction. He had resisted the trend of retinal implants,

despite their convenience. To him, such advancements were fleeting—mere robotic configurations, temporary fixes born of technological hubris.

Kirensk suddenly grabbed his shoulder, firm but fleeting, and then let go. A smile broke across his face, his snow-white teeth gleaming like shards of ice.

“You’re doubtful, Doc,” he said.

Kirensk was a massive figure, his imposing frame made even larger by the bulk of his heavy explorer’s clothing. He was the quintessential Nordic type, blond curls peeking out from beneath his woolen cap. His hands were enormous, his face flat and broad, with a thin, almost imperceptible nose. His eyes, narrow slits of dusty gray, were as cold and expressionless as freshly forged steel. Kirensk Ivan Verno was a brutal alchemy of audacity and rudeness. Everyone who had dealt with him had said so.

“Doubt is the heart of knowledge,” Anton protested.

Kirensk grinned. “The perfect sentence for your epitaph.”

“Nice of you,” Anton muttered.

“And anyway,” Kirensk continued, “I warned you that sooner or later, you’d start having doubts; about the diary, about the mission.” He paused for a moment, then added with a touch of theatrical solemnity, “I also told you we couldn’t speak of it to anyone. The others would call us mad.”

He drew in a slow breath of the icy air, letting it settle deep in his chest before exhaling a white cloud of condensed breath. His voice carried a keener intensity when he spoke again, “Impostors. That’s the word I used back then. They would see us as impostors.”

“Are we?” Anton asked.

Kirensk turned to him. “What you think?”

Anton hesitated. “It might be all nonsense.”

“So, you believe Saskarin filled his diary with nonsense?”

Anton did not react; he remained unsteady in the uncertainty. The dense boreal forest around them towered

motionlessly, filled with silence. Green shadows pooled beneath the trees, cloaking an ancient place—boundless and icy. The branches above and the roots below looked like exposed parts of an inner nervous system. A network of plants and resonating thoughts, uninterpretable by any human no matter how educated or intelligent. Beneath the trees, the dark earth seemed to breathe, occasionally stirring, as crushed rocks and dried leaves shifted in inexplicable, unpredictable directions. The ground everywhere was coated with an earthy dermis, pierced by a thick carpet of pine needles. The air was heavy with smells: the musty tang of decay, the unmistakable trail of lichens, the damp aroma of wild grasses ripening under a crust of frost. And above all, there was the relentless scent of cold—a cold that never ends.

Anton lowered his head and broke his long, intense gaze into the green darkness before him. He admitted his thoughts quietly, “It could be.”

Kirensk continued in the same fierce tone, “Now listen to me—”

Anton cut him off, “I’m not saying that’s the case, Kirensk. But a man could say anything if he had to.” He paused before adding, “And anyway, I’m a scientist, not an alien hunter. My funding is for legitimate scientific research, not fortune-telling.”

Kirensk’s face grew tense, more anxious than the situation seemed to warrant; at least to anyone observing.

“Aliens?” he echoed.

“Yes, aliens,” Anton confirmed.

Kirensk leaned in slightly, “Now, why did you use that word?”

“What? Aliens?” Kirensk nodded, and Anton continued. “It just came to mind.”

“And when was that?” Kirensk pressed.

“Now,” Anton said with growing irritation. “Talkin’ to you.”

“You’re kidding me, Doc?”

Anton threw up his hands. “Good heavens, Kirensk! What

the hell is wrong with you?"

Kirensk did not react immediately. Instead, he seemed to focus inward, wrestling with his own simmering anger. Without a word, he turned away from Anton and approached the edge of the birch and pine forest. There he stood motionless, listening, his body leaning forward as if on the verge of stepping into the thicket. But then he hesitated and turned back, as if he'd changed his mind.

"The woman who first told me about Saskarin's diary also used the word alien," he finally said.

Anton looked at him long. "Are you talkin' about that Selene Cabot you mentioned on the trip here?"

"You got it!" Kirensk confirmed. "And she knows such things."

Anton grinned, a hint of irony in his voice, "I'm afraid you're right."

Kirensk's expression hardened. "Meanin' what?"

"I mean," Anton replied coolly, "that this woman has probably sucked enough American dollars out of gullible people to fund her own alien hunt in space if she wanted to."

"What the hell do you know about it? You don't even know her."

"I got a distinct impression from what you told me about her."

"An 'impression'?" Kirensk's lips curled into a smile that didn't reach his eyes, the kind of smile that felt wrong—off, somehow. "You know nothing. And you can't judge someone like her, Doc. Techno-occultism isn't your field."

"No. But I know that in every corner of the world there are whores willing to accommodate the problems of men obsessed with their own need to flee."

This reaction seemed driven by an instinct that even a scientist like Anton couldn't ignore. The instinct shared by the rabbit, the lion, the beetle, and man alike. By the criminal and the innocent.

Kirensk nodded. “We’ve got something in common, finally.”

Anton’s tone softened, “Have you wondered how your techno-occultist knew about the diary?” He didn’t push or force the question. It was an invitation to trust. Anton knew he’d need Kirensk to admit something eventually.

“You’d first ask yourself how she found me,” Kirensk replied, his voice calmer now. “It’s not easy to locate someone like me in the NeuroSphere. I ain’t an ordinary sort of man, ya know? But she managed it.” There was even a note of pride in his tone. “She’s smart, I tell you.”

“How’d she do it?”

Kirensk turned his case-solver’s gaze on him. “Even if I told you, you wouldn’t catch on.”

“Try me,” Anton pressed.

Kirensk smiled. “I’m already at work, Doc,” he said. “All you need to know is that this woman has been very useful to me. Besides, she offered even more practical services than predicting your ‘cosmic destiny’.”

Anton stiffened, face set. “Sexual services, huh?”

“Whatever you say.”

“I find that deplorable.”

Kirensk shrugged, unmoved. “As you said, is full of humans and androids useful for satisfying desires and obsessions. It’s just a job with good pay and a guaranteed future.”

“I hope she hasn’t sold you on her lies as well.”

“There are no lies,” Kirensk replied.

Anton frowned, confused. “What?”

“Lies don’t exist,” Kirensk repeated. His voice echoed faintly, though he hadn’t raised it.

He turned toward the forest, his eyes narrowing as if drawn by some unseen presence. For a moment, Kirensk seemed seized by the need to explain himself—not to Anton, but to someone else. It was as if the two of them were not alone, as if someone somewhere deep within the birch trunks was watching. Listening. Someone whose eyes could pierce the

shadows and whose ears could hear truths beyond explanation.

“I think there are situations where a lie can reveal the truth,” Kirensk said.

“So you’re sayin’ that all of this is true according to you?” Anton asked, picking up the diary and waving it in the air. “That Jury Saskarin wrote the truth?”

Kirensk’s face twisted into an incongruous, distant smile—one that seemed entirely involuntary, like the grin of a madman. At least, that’s how Anton perceived it.

“My point,” Kirensk replied, “is that some lies are so powerful they can change reality.”

Anton whispered, “But by this time, more than eighty years should have passed.”

“It’s not the amount of time, it’s the fact that for Saskarin time is completely relative.”

“It’s just a guess,” Anton blurted, carefully resting the diary on his lap. He adjusted his glasses again, a nervous gesture. “Saskarin may have simply miscalculated.”

Kirensk laughed, the sound grating and harsh. “By sixty years? Then he’s the impostor.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Anton admitted quietly.

“That’s why we’re here,” Kirensk said, cutting him off. “Read it. Go on.”

Anton dropped his eyes to the pages. The birch trees around him stood motionless, their trunks rigid against a strong breeze that had forced its way between them.

“It says: The camp consisted of many tents. In the morning there was thunder. An unbelievably thunderous storm arose, tearing down the tents and sending people flying through the air. They found themselves in the swamp, without understanding.”

Anton paused, his eyes lingering on the page before turning it. “And here, Saskarin drew the swamp.”

Kirensk came closer, squatting down to see the drawing Anton was showing him. Anton was sitting on a large, moss-

covered rock, and the positioning made him feel oddly subservient, though his sharp focus remained on the page.

The sketch was crude but evocative, a chaotic scene of jagged lines and shadowy figures. Kirensk's expression changed, his former conviction giving way to a flicker of unease. Perplexity etched faint lines into his face, but beneath it was the birth of a deeper, less pleasant realization.

"Are these scattered bodies dead?" he speculated.

"I don't know," Anton admitted. "But they look like it."

Kirensk rested his fingers lightly on the page, brushing against the faint lines of pencil-drawn death. The touch was fleeting; he quickly withdrew his hand, as if the yellowed paper had scalded him.

"How many bodies are there?" he asked, his voice quieter now.

"Off the top of my head, about twenty," Anton replied.

Kirensk straightened slightly, his tension unspoken but palpable. "Keep readin'."

Anton turned the page and began reading again, "The storm that set fire to the taiga also exterminated our reindeer. The fire spread quickly. A man, whose tent stood too close to the waves of heat, decided to leave. But first, he said, he wanted to recover the money he had left in his tent. Trying to avoid the flames, he headed to the river, toward the camp, as the fire consumed his neighbors' tents. I tried to dissuade him, but he wouldn't listen. He threw himself into the water, hoping to escape—but the fire, that strange, unquenchable fire, followed. It went through the water. He and the others in the river caught fire. Some dove beneath the surface to escape death, but the fire struck them, too, burning their heads. They all died in this way. No one in the river was saved."

Kirensk let out a sullen sigh. "The cold Siberian breath that becomes the hot breath of God punishing the world."

Anton looked at him, clearly restraining himself from reacting harshly. "What God are you babbling 'bout?"

Kirensk turned his gaze to Anton, his expression intense, almost searching.

“You don’t believe in God?” he asked, as if seeking redemption through the question.

“Why should I? What proof do we have that he exists?”

“I don’t know. What proof do we have?”

Anton’s face tightened. “Probably a meteorite fell here.”

Kirensk dug in further, “And what proof do we have that it was a meteorite?”

“We’re lookin’ for it!” Anton snapped, his patience fraying.

Kirensk curled his lips into a familiar sneer, an eloquent hint of mockery. He slung his backpack over his shoulder.

“Let’s get back on the road. We’re still a long way from the Valley of Death.”

Anton voice shot, “Don’t call it that.”

“And what else should I call a valley where dozens of men have died?”

“By its name: the Tunguska Basin.” Anton adjusted his own pack. “Or better yet, don’t call it anything at all.”

Kirensk smirked, his tone needling, “Ya’re not superstitious, are you, Doc?”

Anton sidestepped the bait. “I’m afraid certain nonsense is more resistant to time than the truth.”

Kirensk nodded slowly, casting his gaze upward at the curved treetops.

“As you say, Dr. Petrov.”

He turned and started down the path, his boots crunching against the icy ground.

Anton had never imagined that the taiga could be so unforgiving. It had taken him and Kirensk seven days to reach the village described in Yury Saskarin’s diary; an unnamed place he had called the last inhabited outpost before the

desolation of the basin. The village bordered the plain that had once been the domain of the Podkamennaja Tunguska River.

Scattered throughout the area were the remains of small conical houses, their wooden frames weathered into skeletal huts. Beyond these remnants, there was little to indicate that this place had once been inhabited.

After searching in vain for signs of life, they stopped at the edge of the ruins. Anton tilted his head back and stared at the earth-white sky. Surrounding the site was a redwood forest arranged in a perfect circle, its towering trunks shrouded in mist. The air hung heavy and still, an incongruous calm that clung to the senses. A group of white rabbits emerged from the undergrowth. Five of them, perfectly lined up, sat motionless on the frost-wilted grass. Anton stepped closer, crouching down to appear less threatening. The rabbits didn't flinch. They stared back, their bright copper eyes filled with something all too aware.

He squinted, studying them more closely. These were no ordinary rabbits. They were much larger than they should have been, their size almost abnormal. And also the grass and the leaves of the trees here had a grayish tint. Anton reached out and brushed a tuft of grass near his foot. He was startled to find it brittle, crumbling into thin fragments that clung to his fingers like an almost insubstantial silver ash.

The strangest thing, though, was the pale glow. Everything seemed to radiate it, a faint, eerie light not unlike the glow he had seen in the rabbits' eyes. He noticed this because even his own hands now bore the same inexplicable glow, perhaps transferred from the grass he had touched.

He looked around again, his unease growing. The phenomenon affected everything: the grass, the trees, the leaves, even the lichen that clung stubbornly to the trunks.

The rabbits were gone. In fact, it was as if they had never been there at all.

"Found somethin'?" Kirensk asked, coming up beside him.

Anton replied, “Kind of bioluminescence on the plants.”

Kirensk turned his head and took off his dark glasses. “Due to what?”

“I have no idea,” Anton admitted. “It almost looks as if a glowing dust has settled on all of it. But that wouldn’t explain the rabbits’ eyes.”

“Rabbits? What rabbits?”

“They were right over there.” Anton pointed to the spot.
“You not saw them?”

Kirensk gave him a sharp, searching look. “No.”

“You were walking around the village, so maybe you didn’t notice.”

“Tell me about the dust,” Kirensk said, avoiding the subject.

“I’d need a lab analysis.”

Kirensk pressed on, “It could just be a normal thing here.”

“Well, now that you mention it, Saskarin did write about it in his diary, but that doesn’t make it normal.”

“A result of what happened?”

“It’s possible.”

Kirensk’s gaze lingered on Anton, his eyes darkened by an almost predatory shadow.

“Think it’s permanent?”

Anton hesitated, studying Kirensk’s expression.

“That’s a curious thing to ask,” he finally said.

Kirensk replied with a smile laced with wild irony, “I have never hidden my intentions from you. I’m not a scientist like you. I’m just someone who eats bread for a living.”

“Anyway, I expect you to put science before your interests,” Anton said indignantly.

“Oh, I will, you can rest assured,” Kirensk replied low. “But ain’t playin’ this game for candy.”

His eyes sweeping over their surroundings. At that moment his expression changed to one of grim surprise. Anton followed Kirensk’s gaze: someone was approaching.

At first, the figure was indistinct, its edges a blur, like a child

out of the mist. Slowly it dissolved into the shape of an old man with a hunched back, wrapped in a cloak of cloth and fur. He moved without a sound, barely disturbing the icy path that ran beneath him. There was something lazy and desperate in his steps. It was as if the weight of the taiga itself was on him. His mouth, thin and pale, was dusted. His eyes were downcast, fixed on the path, but as if he walked only by remembering, not by seeing the way.

Anton called out, “Hey!”

The old man stopped and turned around. His eyes were disturbingly large and warm, dark irises against yellowed white sclera. Anton stared intently, but the man made no response.

“Hey, you!” Kirensk shouted, echoing Anton. But the old man kept quiet.

Kirensk muttered in confusion, “The chap looks like he came out of a glacier. Or maybe he’s deaf. Or maybe both: deaf and from a glacier.”

Anton had a creeping feeling of discomfort. Half expecting more figures to emerge from the mist, his gaze drifted into the mist behind the man. Finally, the old man raised a hand, a slow movement. He nodded slightly, a gesture that could have been a greeting. Or not.

Anton let out a breath, his voice taut, “Let’s get closer.”

Kirensk followed, moving at a brisk pace, though their steps slowed as they approached. When they finally reached the old man, they stopped completely. He didn’t meet their gaze, instead muttering something unintelligible under his breath. Anton, struck by a sudden premonition, reached into his backpack and pulled out the diary.

“Jury Saskarin,” he said and held it up. “We need to find Jury Saskarin!”

The old man’s eyes snapped to the diary. They were black and polished, like smooth hematite, reflecting the faint light around them. Kirensk stood beside him, chewing idly, his jaw working. Then, the man nodded once, pointing toward the

redwoods.

“This is it,” Kirensk said with a firm grip on Anton’s shoulder.

Anton and Kirensk entered, their emotions a mix of awe and pride. At first glance, Jury Saskarin exuded an air of coldness and distance—dull, bare, silent. The hut he lived in was a simple conical structure. Its walls were made of rough-hewn stone, and the floor was uneven. There were no windows, only a massive door carved from a single slab of solid wood. One corner of the hut held two straw mattresses, while the opposite corner housed a small stove. The furniture was sparse: wooden shelves lined with a few rudimentary personal items: soap, a comb, and little else. Electric light came from a generator. Its wires snaked across part of the wall, partially obscured by a wooden bulkhead, looking like veins drained of life.

A small square table, cluttered with books and papers, stood in the center of the room. Surrounding it were chairs carved from birch logs, their rough, uneven surfaces a testament to their humble craftsmanship. Saskarin motioned for them to sit down, and they complied, handing him the diary they had brought. Saskarin’s eyes remained fixed on the book. After a long pause, he reached out and took it in his hands, and a deep uneasiness crept over Anton, settling heavily in his chest. For the first time, he regretted taking this journey.

The faint reddish glow of dying embers flickered in the stove, casting long shadows. A thin, warm breath of air whispered out, barely tempering the chill of the room.

“How did you find it?” Saskarin asked. His voice sounded strangely young, without friendliness or hostility.

“Ain’t you goin’ to ask us who we are?” Anton countered.

Saskarin repeated, “How you got the diary?”

“I found it,” Kirensk interjected.

For the first time, Saskarin looked directly at him. “Where?”

“St. Petersburg,” Kirensk replied evenly.

“Hard to believe,” Saskarin said, his tone flat but laced with doubt.

Kirensk’s jaw tightened. “Why?”

“This diary was supposed to be in the hands of an acquaintance of mine,” Saskarin said, his voice calm but cutting. “His name is James Armitage. He lives in Salem, in the United States, not St. Petersburg. So, someone must have persuaded him to part with some confidential information.”

Kirensk shot him an angry look. “What are you implying?” Suspicion moved his hands, fingers clenching and releasing. It was like the shade grew around him.

“Nothing,” Saskarin replied coolly. “But if you feel the need to defend yourself, you are only accusing yourself.”

Anton leaned forward slightly, cutting in before the tension could escalate, “Dr. Saskarin, my name is Anton Petrov. I’m a scientist, a biologist.” He gestured briefly. “This is my guide, Kirensk Ivan Verno. We’re here because the research center I work for provided funding for our expedition.”

“And where’s your team?” Saskarin asked.

“Well, it’s just me and Kirensk,” Anton said with a quiet exhale.

Saskarin’s expression didn’t change. “Ungenerous funding,” he remarked.

Anton pressed on, “To tell you the truth, we didn’t fully understand why we came this far. This diary is all we had to go on—and it’s not much.”

Saskarin thought for an instant or two. Then he asked, “If you didn’t know what you wanted why did you come all the way here?”

The two exchanged a quick glance.

“We got some advice,” Kirensk said, his tone almost offhand.

“Advice?” Saskarin echoed. “And from whom?”

“From someone who knew there was something here,” Kirensk replied. “And I don’t mean your friend from Salem.”

Saskarin tilted his head slightly, meeting their eyes without hesitation. “If you accept people’s advice about a direction, it is because that direction is already your choice.” His tone was measured. “I’m more inclined to believe you’re following someone else’s lead—that you already have the information and resources you need. You’re here for a reason.”

“And what would that reason be?” Kirensk asked fiercely.

“You’re here because you don’t want to die.”

They stared at him in silence. Saskarin continued, his voice as steady as before. “That’s why people come here. It’s always the same.”

“You mean you’ve had other visitors?” Anton asked.

“Yes,” Saskarin said. “More visits.”

The old man who had led them to the hut passed behind Saskarin without even glancing at them. Yet, somehow, his presence interrupted their conversation, cutting through it like an unseen force. It wasn’t that he made any noise, he moved slowly, as if his time and space had a different measure. Not given in minutes or hours, but in weight. His movements were massive, heavy, steady. He moved as silently as fog drifting over water on a steely dawn. Surrounded by different kind of silence. He approached a wall and began opening and closing trunks, absolutely unhurried. Whatever he sought, he stood empty-handed when he finished.

His glabrous, rosy scalp gleamed under the dim light, so polished it seemed as though he had never had hair. He moved with a calm precision, but there was nothing sluggish about him.

Nothing in his actions acknowledged their presence, nor did he try to make them feel welcome—or unwelcome. To Kirensk and Anton, the old man’s presence felt utterly neutral, like a fixture of the space itself. For reasons neither could articulate,

both took it as a given that the old man did not fully understand their purpose here. He was a servant. Nothing more.

As the old man retreated to a corner, Kirensk shifted in his seat, standing for a moment before sitting back down.

“You mentioned certain visits you’ve had,” he said, touching Saskarin with a wolfish gaze. “What kinda visits?”

“The interested kind.”

“Interested in what?”

“The same you’re after,” Saskarin replied evenly.

Anton leaned back in his chair. “You said the diary was in the hands of this Armitage, in Salem,” he recalled. “How did the other visitors find it? Were they American or something?”

Saskarin’s clear eyes seemed to sink into their sockets, shadowed by the weight of memory. A strange stillness settled over his hairless face, but his thoughts moving, and showing like a faint vibe in his expression.

“A woman,” he said, finally opening a window into the past. Kirensk pressed uneasily, “A woman?”

“Indeed. From America. From Salem.”

“And do you remember the name of this American woman?” Kirensk asked again.

“It wouldn’t matter,” Saskarin replied. “It wasn’t her real name. And considering she never turned around on the rare occasions I had to call her, it was probably the first time she ever used it.”

“Fine, skip the name. Can you give us a description?” Kirensk demanded, his impatience on the rise.

“She looked... peculiar,” Saskarin said slowly. “Seductive and alluring. Excited, but apathetic... peculiar.”

“A whore, you mean?”

“I mean ‘peculiar’.”

Anton came in, “She knew about the diary?”

“Yeah,” Saskarin said, his gaze steady. “But she was deeply interested in this place—and in me.” He paused. “She had a desire to bring to light things that could not be brought to light.”

“Basically?” Kirensk shot back.

“She wanted to know how to become eternal.”

“And you got that,” Kirensk pressed. “You know how to become eternal?”

Saskarin didn’t reply.

Kirensk stared at Saskarin. His expression was somewhere between hesitation and unease, as if he couldn’t quite formulate his next question. Perhaps he dreaded ridicule—or worse. His lips were drawn back in a tight grimace. His teeth were bared like a wolf’s—and a wolf’s smile is never reassuring.

Anton stepped in, “Remember anything else about the encounter with her?”

Saskarin was thoughtful. “She said she was convinced there were guests here.”

“Guests?” Anton repeated.

“She called them Nyx Arcanis.” Saskarin paused. Then, almost as if conjuring an ancient echo, he added, “scattered remnants of consciousness to be found.”

Anton exhaled, and his weariness seeped into his words, “Techno-occultist nonsense, in short.”

“That’s what I meant when I called her peculiar,” Saskarin replied.

Anton fell silent, his breathing soft, his posture uncertain. He seemed to hover between questions he dared not ask and answers he was not ready to hear. Finally, almost to himself, he murmured, “These ‘guests’... Could they also be understood as alien presences?”

Saskarin lifted his head and stared at him without seeing him, as if he didn’t look at him at all, or as if there was something between them. His eyes clouded, as if retreating to some unreachable place, while his face froze in an almost unnatural stillness. He did not answer. Instead, he stood abruptly, leaving them at the small table, his presence seeming to dissolve into the dim light of the room.

“Won’t you answer me?” Anton asked, his tone taut.

“The diary... It’s not the only way to get here,” Saskarin said, his voice calm but cryptic, the words delivered like a riddle—meant to obscure more than reveal.

Kirensk snapped, the thin veneer of his patience cracking, “Ya messin’ with us?” His movements grew restless, his body shifting in small circles, as if torn between joining the conversation or abandoning it altogether. He hovered on the edge, one foot in, one foot out, over and over again. Saskarin’s eyes remained straight and still. He did not flinch, did not answer.

Anton raised a hand, reassuring his companion before turning to Saskarin, “You’ll admit there’s more unsaid here than said.”

Saskarin’s voice dropped to a whisper, “I’m telling you what I can.”

Anton shifted on the stool. Uncomfortable. Saskarin’s cryptic manner was suffocating.

“But more is needed,” he said.

“This is not a competition. There is no grand prize.” Waves of memory seemed to ripple in Saskarin’s liquid blue eyes. They had the rarefied and uncertain hue of dreaming. “In fact, if we continue to seek it in the wrong way, the prize will be taken from us.”

“What ya mean?” Kirensk said, his voice tinged with exasperation.

Saskarin turned away. Kirensk pressed on, “There is somethin’ more, isn’t there? You can talk about it. We won’t tell anyone.”

Kirensk’s gaze followed Saskarin’s movements as he poured something hot into three cups he’d placed on the small table. There was a slight tremor in Saskarin’s hand as he worked, an undercurrent of tension. From the corner of the room, the old man watched in silence. His presence was heavy and unspoken.

Kirensk leaned forward. “What happened here?” he asked, desire flickered in his eyes.

Saskarin did not answer immediately. He pushed the steaming cups across the table, one for each of them, before settling back in his chair.

“It was June 30, 1908,” he began, “at exactly 7:14, the thing rained down from the heavens. A punishment, it seemed. It struck near the Podkamennaja Tunguska River, flattening sixty million trees over a thousand square miles. Smoke and debris blackened the air, and the ground reeked of something alien, something alive. The shockwave derailed Trans-Siberian Railway convoys over three hundred and seventy miles from the epicenter.”

Anton wiped his brow, startled to find his hand wet with a cold, absurd sweat.

“Some say it was a meteorite,” he offered cautiously. “Or a comet. Maybe even a collapsing star, or a black hole.”

“Hypotheses,” Saskarin replied, shaking his head. “But none of them touches the truth.”

Kirensk’s chair scraped the floor as he moved closer. “Then what is the truth?” he demanded.

In the corner, the old man rose. His movement was almost mechanical, as he brushed against a shelf and caught a small object before it could fall. Without a word, he turned toward the door. For a moment he hesitated, his gaze sweeping over the three of them. Then he stepped outside, the door creaking behind him. The sound of his footsteps faded into the thick silence.

Saskarin’s eyes lingered on the door before he spoke again, his voice softer now, “That day, something came. It just hung out above the Tunguska River. Not a meteor, not a star. Something like a spaceship, but unlike anything we’d ever imagined as a vehicle.”

Kirensk let out a sharp, mirthless laugh, still staring at the door. “Bullshit.”

Anton didn’t laugh. He leaned forward a fraction.

“What about the dust?” he asked, his tone steady but his

body tense. “The strange dust that causes bioluminescence in the vegetation and animals. What is it, Dr. Saskarin?”

Saskarin took his time. “The alien ship crashed here,” he finally went on. “Those on board died on impact. All but one.”

His hand rose, fingers moving slowly through the air in a strange, pattern, as if forming an unseen idea between them.

Kirensk tipped back his cup and swallowed the herbal tea. The heat rose in a faint cloud of steam that mingled with the cool air. He coughed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His chair scraped the floor as he leaned closer. “You don’t expect us to believe this crap, do you? What are you hiding here?”

Saskarin’s fingers froze in mid-gesture. His jaw tightened, the skin at his temple twitched almost imperceptibly.

“I hide nothing of my own will,” he said.

They stared at him for a long time, not understanding the meaning of those words that had the power to frighten them. It was instinctive, a subtle uneasiness, as thin as a spider’s filament, but that filament began to envelop their thoughts. It tightened its grip on their brains, gently at first. But a web begins as a single string, and then it grows. This is how all obsessions begin: A single string that grows slowly, wrapping itself around your brain until it’s too late. And often the only way to escape it is to destroy your brain with whatever you can get your hands on. But that was not on their minds, not yet...

Kirensk’s broad shoulders hunched forward as he rested his elbows on the table. “Then whose will is it?”

Before Saskarin could answer, Anton burst in again, “Doctor, you should be nearly 100 years old by now, but you don’t look it—not even close. So either you’re not who you say you are, or this diary is a scam you and your American friend cooked up. Maybe with the help of that techno-occultist.”

Saskarin remained motionless, or confused or undecided. “No. That’s not true,” he murmured. His voice in a vein of reluctance.

Kirensk shot to his feet and paced away, cursing under his breath. Anton cleared his throat and calmed himself, “According to your diary, you were here in 1908. That would make you. Well, old beyond any plausibility.” He opened the diary and found the place he had marked with a pencil, wedged between the pages. “Here,” he said, pointing. “Sixty years have passed, and today I am still in my thirties’, what does that mean?”

“It means I haven’t aged.”

Anton’s voice raised, “And you’ll admit that’s scientifically fascinating.”

Saskarin’s lips curled a little, but it wasn’t a smile. At all. “Someone sent you here, right?”

“No one sent us!” Kirensk hissed, his voice raw with frustration.

Anton tried to mediate, holding up his hands, “Listen—”

But Saskarin cut them both, “Don’t you want to know what happened to the alien?”

Anton hesitated, “My goodness, yes, of course, but—”

“I saved him,” Saskarin said.

“You saved him?” Kirensk was wild now. Pure rage.

“I pulled him from the wreckage, dragged him to a corner of the forest.”

They looked at him, clearly shocked. Saskarin continued as if oblivious to their reactions, his eyes bright and feverish, yet tinged with desperation.

“And we talked. He was... reasonable. He made a proposal.” Saskarin ran a trembling hand over his face, the movement slow, as if trying to erase a memory. “Yes,” he whispered again, almost to himself. “It was a reasonable offer.”

“The guy’s out of his mind,” Kirensk snapped, cutting through the moment. He turned to Anton and waved his arm in the direction of the door. “Let’s find someone else. We’ll ask the old man outside.”

Concern crossed Saskarin’s face. “The old man?”

“The one who helped us find you,” Anton explained.

“No, he’s not to be involved.”

There was a gleam in Kirensk’s eyes at that moment. He had only three ways of relating to others: command, flattery, or threat. And with Saskarin, all three had failed. But now, the gleam wasn’t anger or even astonishment. It was something deeper. A vital intent, a raw impulse driving him forward.

“Who’s that man?” Kirensk asked. The words stumbled out, his usual control faltering under the weight of his own anxiety.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Saskarin said, with a grim, almost mean gaze, like that of a wolf wounded from trusting too much in the past.

“Then, tell us about the alien,” Anton suggested cautiously, his voice soft but firm.

“Anton!” Kirensk punched his shoulder hard enough to make him wince. “You’re out of your mind? That’s not our target!”

“I won’t leave without answers,” Anton said. “I have duties to fulfill.”

Kirensk leaned forward sharply, his movements quick and pointed. “We’re here for the diary. To figure out if it has any value!”

“Of course, you mean market value,” Anton snapped. “But I’m here for the science.”

“Bullshit.”

Saskarin sat hunched, his elbows on his knees, watching them argue. His face remained expressionless, but his eyes darted back and forth, cold and distant—like a witness to a game he had grown weary of.

“We need to understand what happened here,” Anton insisted, his voice faltering, the strain creeping through. “That is the target!”

Kirensk straightened, tilting his head as a grim smile tugged at his lips. “Since when, Dr. Petrov, have you been so fond of aliens? You’ve changed since we set foot here.”

Saskarin broke the silence, “Everyone who comes here has a purpose. Always the same.” He paused, his words hanging heavy in the dim room. His crystal-clear eyes gleamed, catching the faint light as though refracting something distant and unknowable.

“What?” Kirensk pressed.

“I told you: eternal youth. They come here hoping for the ultimate prize, but they don’t even know what they’re looking for.”

Kirensk’s fists clenched slowly. “This one has lost his mind,” he muttered, his narrowed gaze fixed on Saskarin.

“You call me crazy to deflect blame,” Saskarin replied, his voice even. “But all you’re doing is shifting the guilt.”

“What guilt?” Kirensk snapped, his arm twitching at his side as though bracing for a strike. “I am innocent.”

“None of us are innocent,” Saskarin said, his voice sharp now. “The only Innocent we hung on a cross thousands of years ago.”

Kirensk stiffened, his jaw tightening as if holding back a torrent of anger. “I don’t believe in that nonsense,” he growled. “I gave up on gods—and the hope of finding one—long ago.”

“That’s your problem,” Saskarin said, rising to his full height. His towering frame loomed over Kirensk, casting a long, heavy shadow across the dim room. “The truth exists whether you believe it or not. And like all those who deny it, you are afraid to die.”

He stepped closer, the floor creaking beneath his weight. “Death is an unthinkable concept for human beings. It is pure terror in their hearts. A pure terror that haunts them throughout their entire existence.”

Kirensk grabbed Anton’s arm roughly, his fingers digging in. “You’ll stay silent?” he demanded, his voice a low growl. “You’re not going to defend your science anymore?”

“He says nothing because he knows I’m right,” Saskarin interjected. “He’s afraid. And to a man of science, fear is

heresy.”

Anton looked at him, and said, “The old man who lives with you is—”

Saskarin said, “You’d better not involve him in what I’m about to reveal to you.”

“Reveal!” exploded Kirensk. “You’re spinning the facts without saying anything.”

“Ivan, wait,” Anton said and leaned forward—not with his feet, but with the weight of his body, as though tethered to the question that burned inside him. Kirensk remained beside him, charged with the same anticipation. Neither spoke, their stillness a shared silence.

Then Anton let the core question slip free, and all those terrible words lit up, “What’s the secret of your youth?”

Saskarin drew a shallow breath, his chest rising and falling with a tremor that betrayed something beneath his calm exterior.

“It has to do with what happened here,” he said at last, though his voice trembled faintly, the words carrying an anxiety that teetered on the edge of fear.

“What happened here?” Anton pressed, the crack in rationality widening. “The truth.”

Saskarin’s gaze turned inward, his eyes faded as though he were wrestling with the weight of his own knowledge. He hesitated, then spoke again, “Do you think you’re ready to find out?”

“Yes!” Anton called out the word before he could stop it. He caught himself, his breathing uneven, and kept his voice steady. “Yes. I am.”

Kirensk surged forward, a force barely tethered. Unsteady. “Just a moment,” he said. “How do you know?”

Anton turned to him, taut, uncertain. “What?”

“That this guy is the real Yury Saskarin.” Kirensk’s face fractured under the dim light, carved into shifting shapes of shadow. “Think about it, Anton. What the hell do we even

know about him—or that old man outside? They could be two damn crooks.”

“Like you?” Saskarin’s reply came fast; a sharp cut. “Or like the Salem techno-occultist you stole my diary from?”

Kirensk leaping forward as if preparing to strike. “You bastard,” he snarled. “You’ll apologize. Now.”

“For what?” Saskarin’s tone remained level, impenetrable.

“For insulting me,” Kirensk growled, his body taut, his fists curling.

“I only told the truth,” Saskarin said, his gaze steady, refusing to yield.

Anton braced himself, certain his colleague’s fury would ignite into something explosive. But instead, to his surprise, Kirensk stopped. His anger, so sudden and fierce, dissipated just as quickly. Then, Kirensk stepped back, his jaw tight, his lips pressed thin as if swallowing something bitter. He bit the bullet, retreating into silence, though the fury in his eyes lingered like the echo of a storm still on the edge of the sky.

“You know nothing about me,” he replied and spat onto the ground, dismissive.

Saskarin didn’t flinch. “I know enough,” he said. “You’re here to make money. And you’re using your friend as an excuse to justify coming all this way.”

Anton stiffened. His gaze snapped to Saskarin, then to Kirensk, searching for something... Denial, perhaps, or even indignation. But Kirensk said nothing.

“And Dr. Petrov knows it,” Saskarin continued, digging deeper. “Because he’s using you back. The two of you: opportunists working together. A perfect partnership of convenience.”

Kirensk’s face twitched, anger rising behind his clenched jaw. He stepped forward, his body tense, but he stopped just short of Saskarin. His fists curled, then relaxed, the fight draining from him as quickly as it had risen, again in a few. Anton turned his gaze back to Kirensk, his chest tightening. He

wanted to speak, to say something that would challenge Saskarin's words. But nothing came. Instead, a hollow silence settled between them, filling the space.

But Kirensk turned his back to both of them, shoulders rigid. "You're a damned liar," he muttered, but his voice cracked under the weight of something that sounded suspiciously like doubt.

"We're here to find the truth," Anton finally said, though his voice faltered. The words hung weakly in the air, offering no real defense.

Saskarin leaned back slightly, his expression unreadable. "Find the truth," he said, his voice low. "But I wonder, will you even recognize it when it's in front of you?"

"Try us," pressed Anton.

Saskarin turned to Kirensk first. "You want to make money. You're hungry for it. You went to America believing you could get it easily-quickly, practically. You're a pragmatist, someone who navigates obscene and dangerous territories-places other men avoid, either out of ignorance or because they understand them all too well."

Kirensk said nothing.

"You're a risk-taker," Saskarin continued, his voice unwavering. "I imagine you entered the home of this woman, the techno-occultist. Perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps because she sent for you. And that's where you found out about the diary. She didn't want to give it to you, did she? No one could give you something like that. A mysterious text, imbued with an incomprehensible yet undisguised power."

Saskarin paused, letting the weight of his words sink in, "So you stole it. Just as she probably stole it from Armitage. But I know very little about it."

Anton didn't look at them, he kept his eyes down, his conscience out of reach, but Saskarin's eyes were already on him.

"And you, Anton," he said, his voice softening. "You want to

prolong your life. You feel there's too much to discover in this world to waste time dying. And so you don't mind flanking yourself with someone like Kirensk, pretending you can hold back the thickest darkness with the light of science.”

He looked at them both.

“The alien was injured,” he went on. “I tried to treat him. But they’re... different from us.” His gaze dropped to his hands, his fingers flexing slightly as if remembering the sensation of something foreign. “Their blood was bright. So bright that their skin gave off a constant glow.” He paused, his eyes fixed on his hands as if they were still stained. “It wasn’t a color I could place, nothing in the normal spectrum. Something beyond comprehension.” He looked up at them again. “Not a light of this world.”

Anton leaned forward. “I saw the plants and rabbits.”

“Yes,” Saskarin murmurs, nodding. “The rabbits, more than the others. But the wolves...” He paused, following an invisible thought. “Wolves have totally changed.”

“And that’s for what happened here?” Kirensk demanded.

“Right,” Saskarin replied, meeting his eyes.

Anton continued to press, “You got evidence?”

Saskarin nodded slowly. “Yes. But we need to go somewhere else.” He sighed. “And we must be careful.”

“Be careful of what?” asked Kirensk.

“No words can explain.” His eyes were on them. “But you’ll find out.”

They followed him into the forest, and soon the path became steeper and the ground drier, needle-sharp, and desolate. Here, there were a few giant trees that had survived the event that had wiped out the entire forest. Broken trunks or stumps with the unusual bright red, almost liquid wood stood beside many of the trees. On the living branches, the leaves

were fought over like those of ferns, and whenever the rays of the sun broke through the density of the foliage, the light turned purple and its pungent scent rested silently on the pale earth of the undergrowth. It was an ominous place.

Anton's mind swirled with thoughts, tangled and relentless. He couldn't help but feel himself hopelessly pulled into what they were doing, even as every rational part of him protested the absence of anything scientific. Logic faltered, and his thoughts veered toward the irrational, driven by a force he couldn't name. It wasn't his own will—something imperceptible guided him, a faint and unseen hand steering him deeper into the unknown.

Then he felt a muffled sound, like a whisper pressed into silence. He stopped and turned his attention to the trees. The redwoods were smaller now, their tops dry and misshapen, as if the forest itself were withering under some sort of unknown blight.

His gaze drifted upward, drawn to a patch of sky. The sun, neither full nor absent in this season of Siberian twilight, hung low, its glow strange and muted. There was something uncanny about it. He realized that he could look directly at the solar disk without pain, his eyes unharmed.

It was as if an invisible veil had fallen between the earth and the sun—a filter, intangible yet undeniable, dimming its light. Its presence was inexplicable, but it pressed on the darkness, disturbing it, bending it, as if the natural order had been quietly rewritten.

“How long has the light been so faint?” Anton asked, raising his voice loud enough for Saskarin, who was leading the way, to hear.

“Years,” came the reply, short and curt.

Kirensk turned, his eyes fixed on Anton. “Isn’t that supposed to be normal for these latitudes?” he grunted, his voice more raspy than usual, as if the air itself was scratching his throat.

“Yeah. But the sun seems... Sluggish,” Anton noted.

“Prob the same effect as the haze we saw further downstream. Remember that?”

“But there’s no haze here.”

“It’s undetectable,” Kirensk said quickly.

“In that case, it couldn’t be affecting the Sun’s power—”

“Stop it!” Kirensk’s voice broke through the forest. “You’re driving me crazy. You and this damn heat.”

“Heat?” Anton asked.

“I’m choking,” Kirensk muttered, his voice strained, as though the air had thickened around him.

Anton glanced at him, confusion flickering across his face. “I don’t feel hot,” he said.

At this point, Saskarin stopped walking and turned to face them. Both men stood still, their movements halted by his abrupt stop. They waited for him to speak. But he didn’t. Instead, his eyes swept the area, slowly.

They instinctively followed his lead, mimicking him almost like children in an adult’s shadow, their gazes scanning the barren landscape. The air felt scorched, thick with an unplaceable scent. It was a strange fusion of odors they could only grasp through vague analogies.

“Analogies,” Anton murmured, the word slipping out unbidden, as if it had bypassed conscious thought and emerged from some alien synapse. Its sharp, metallic taste lingered in his mind.

“Meaning?” Kirensk pressed, his voice calm, though his fingers curled tightly around the strap of his heavy pack.

“I mean: What happened here has never happened before.” He didn’t look at Kirensk. His gaze remained fixed on the ground, his eyes reflecting a strange, dawning revelation.

Kirensk turned his full attention to him. “Isn’t it obvious? There’s a first time for everything.”

Anton stepped forward, his hand gestured upward. “This is a zero event. A starting point on the scale of understanding.

The sun isn't obscured by haze. It's something else entirely—something we can only describe by comparing it to things we already know."

"What's so special about that?" Kirensk snapped.

"How can you not understand?"

"Explain! Damn it!" he shouted.

"Ivan," Saskarin said.

Kirensk, unaccustomed to being called by that name, turned sharply, confusion flickering in his expression. He found himself caught in Saskarin's steel-gray gaze, anchored by a hard, penetrating smile.

"Don't call me like that. Ya don't know me."

"Your friend is telling you," Saskarin continued, "that what is happening here has strange properties. It's about physical laws that we don't comprehend."

The ground beneath them trembled, an internal vibration that seemed to rise from the earth's core. Kirensk shifted, lifting one foot, then the other, before leaning back against the trunk of a tree.

"What's that hissing sound?" he asked. Unease.

"It always starts like that," Saskarin replied.

Anton turned to him. "What?" he asked.

"Everything. That's why we have to go." He stepped forward, already moving, as he added under his breath, "Maybe this time we'll get away from him."

Something stirred in Anton's consciousness—an omen. As his gaze locked with Kirensk's, a new insight struck him: They both felt it. Whatever it was, it bound them together in a shared perception. A connection. Certainties crumbled, dissolving into the same searing point of fear that now burned in their stomachs.

"Ok. Lead us!" Kirensk said.

That place had an extraordinary grip on their mind, and it conditioned them beyond their will. Anton found himself anxious to go on but equally anxious to leave; and Kirensk was

trailing him without knowing what to do, as eager as he was. So in the end they did not decide, they went on by inertia, having found themselves in the middle of things, of history, of the event. Their footsteps crackled on the dry ground, as if they were stepping on bones. That noise bounced against the dead logs, scratching away layers of inexplicable silence, a dark silence, produced more by their minds than coming from the world.

“Where are we going?” Anton called, hurrying to keep up with Saskarin.

“Away from here!” Saskarin said over his shoulder.

“To where?”

“To where he can’t get a shot at us anymore.” Saskarin quickened his pace, nearly breaking into a run. “You came in a car. We’ll use it to leave.”

Anton and Kirensk exchanged a glance before matching his pace.

“The car’s a long way off,” Anton said, his breath coming faster.

“It isn’t,” Saskarin snapped. “I took a different path. We’re close—trust me.”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about?” Kirensk growled, stepping forward to block Saskarin’s path. They faced off. “How do you even know where our car is? What’s goin’ on here? Where are you leadin’ us, Saskarin?”

“We’re getting out of here,” Saskarin said firmly.

Anton stepped between them, trying to defuse the moment. “We’ve been talking about spaceships, aliens, evidence—”

Saskarin cut him, “You’ll get your answers. But far from here. Far from Death Valley.”

“Don’t call it that,” Kirensk snapped. “You’re giving Anton goosebumps.”

Anton’s eyes darting toward the dense trees. “There’s something here, isn’t there?” he asked.

“Not ‘something’,” Saskarin said grimly. “Someone’. That’s

why we have to leave—and quickly—before he catches us.”

Anton said, “You mean the one you saved yourself? The only surviving alien?”

Saskarin did not answer.

Anton realized that whatever was happening in the forest behind them was beyond human understanding, whether science could explain it or not.

The forest seemed to hold its breath, the silence was pierced only by faint, unfamiliar hissing sounds that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Anton turned to Kirensk. “Saskarin was right, wasn’t he?” he said. “You really did discover the diary through that woman—Selene Cabot. The techno-occultist.”

Kirensk tried a defense, “I can explain.”

“Stop it!” Anton stepped closer, the distance between them shrinking. His barely contained rage vibrated through his body, showing in the trembling of his shoulders, the clenching of his jaw, and the quiver in his voice.

“That woman, that witch, convinced you that the diary had value. That it held some kind of secret. So you stole it from her. And then you came to me, knowing that I had the means to get us here. Money. That’s all it ever was to you, just money.”

“I never kept my reasons from you, Doctor. Why blame me now?”

“I thought you’d understand,” Anton said.

“Understand what?”

“The value of research. Of what we came here to find!”

“What the hell am I supposed to do? Pour salt on the wounds of life?” Kirensk replied, his coolness breaking. “I never hid from you that the economy came first.”

“But I thought—”

“What? What did you think?” Kirensk’s voice exploded, tearing through Anton’s fragile resolve. “What the fuck do you think, Doctor? That people give a shit about you? About your precious fucking science? Well, they don’t!”

“Eternal life, that is the price...” Anton reacted, but it was a weak, plaintive reaction, devoid of anger. His rage was completely gone. Like that of someone who never really wanted to bother.

“Why should I live forever,” said Kirensk, “if I can’t have everything I want?”

The cold, cynical determination in his words hit Anton like a physical blow. It wasn’t just an attack, it was a dismantling of everything. In that moment, it was as if Anton’s life had been a hollow construct, fragile and meaningless, shattered by the weight of Kirensk’s brutal pragmatism.

“Does eternity smell like filthy money to you?” he asked. Desperate.

“Damn right it does!”

Anton fell silent. The weight of Kirensk’s words settled over him like ash, suffocating and hot. It all made sense now. He had always suspected what Kirensk was made of—opportunism, greed—but hearing it so plainly was like staring into a shadow that had caught fire, the smoke choking his thoughts. And then the question came, terrifying: ‘What about me?’

Yeah, was he any different? Was this why he was here too? For fame, glory, eternal life built on vanity and self-serving ambition? Did he see his own reflection in Kirensk’s face?

His chest felt tight, his breath shallow. He whispered, “So... That’s all?”

Kirensk produced an enemy smile. For the first time, Anton saw him clearly.

“More or less, Doctor Petrov. But now we have to come out in one piece, let’s move.”

Anton, however, remained focused: He did not have anything else. He had spent his life chasing reason, but reason had no place here. This was something else, something that defied logic, as if the laws of the world had fractured along with his understanding.

“How did Selene Cabot know about you and the diary?

How did she get that information?” he asked.

Saskarin cut in, “James Armitage is the key. But he didn’t know everything. I’ll explain, but right now, we need to get to safety.”

Anton grabbed Saskarin’s arm to stop him, “Why did you send the diary and the information to him in the first place?” he shouted. “What was the real purpose?”

“We have to leave, Dr. Petrov!”

“You could’ve left earlier!” Anton protested, his voice rising with frustration. “Why wait for us? Things don’t add up!”

Saskarin’s face twisted in desperation. “I couldn’t leave. He’s been controlling me ever since, binding me to this place. It’s his perverse expectation. When his days are over, he’ll use me to keep living.”

“Who?” Kirensk demanded, alarm flaring in his voice.

Saskarin ignored the question and broke into a run. “We have to escape!”

Anton tried to stop him, “Wait! Where do we go once we leave? Where can we escape to?”

“Anywhere,” Saskarin called back without looking. “As long as I’m out of my guardian’s range.”

Kirensk froze in his tracks. “What guardian? What are you talking about?”

Saskarin stopped abruptly, turning to point back toward the barren clearing they’d just left. His arm trembled as he gestured. Both men followed the direction of his outstretched hand.

Anton’s face drained of color. “Oh my God,” he whispered. “What the hell is that?”

“Use analogies to understand him,” Saskarin said. “If you can. The important thing is to run, because now he’s furious.”

“C’mon, c’mon!” Kirensk urged, pulling Anton’s arm as they stumbled forward.

Behind them, the guardian moved too fast to allow for thought. Only blind, desperate flight. It was like a vast shadow

loomed in the distance. They ran as tree limbs rained down around them, crashing to the ground with heavy, earth-shaking thuds. The air was thick with the scent of charred wood and damp soil.

Anton stumbled. He couldn't help but shout, his frustration boiling over. "Do you even care what's happening to us, Kirensk? To this place?"

Kirensk didn't glance back. His voice cut sharp over his shoulder, "I care about getting out of here alive. You can solve your puzzles later, Doctor!"

The words stung. Anton's mind reeled, caught between Kirensk's raw survival instinct and his own gnawing need to make sense of the chaos. He bit back a retort and pushed himself to run faster.

Ahead of them, Saskarin led the way, silent but unflinching, as though the horrors around them were nothing new. Behind them came a sound—or not a sound at all, but something beyond hearing. It twisted the air, vibrating through their bones. It was something Anton and Kirensk could never put into words.

Fear turned to acute panic as gory, unrecognizable animal carcasses rained down before them, piercing the ground like spears.

Anton cried out, "What hell is behind us?"

Kirensk turned briefly, his face pale and his eyes wide with a terror he couldn't hide. He grabbed Anton again before he could stop running. "Don't turn around!" he barked. "Just go. Go!"

Then Saskarin stopped abruptly, his arm shooting out to block their path. Anton and Kirensk skidded to a halt, breathless and shaking, as their eyes followed Saskarin's outstretched hand. A massive wolf stood before them, its black fur shimmering with an otherworldly bioluminescence. Its liquid-copper eyes seemed to hold something almost human—something wrong. It snarled, the sound reverberating like a low

growl laced with static.

Saskarin stepped back, motioning for the others to follow. “Away. Come,” he muttered.

Anton and Kirensk followed. All three left the path and headed for the lower valley.

“What about the old man?” Anton called out as they scrambled through the uneven terrain. “We can’t leave him behind!”

“Forget him,” Saskarin snapped. “Run.”

They plunged into the thicket, its shadows closing around them like the jaws of some massive predator. But even in the darkness, strange, vivid colors seemed to scream from every direction, defying logic and the angle of the sun’s rays. It was as though they had entered a disobedient dimension, a place where natural laws had been shattered. The air was heavy with the metallic taste of blood and rust, underscored by a stench so intense it burned the nostrils and turned the stomach.

Anton glanced back to find Kirensk glowing faintly in the gloom.

“Ivan!” he shouted, with panic.

Kirensk stared down at his arms. They were covered in a strange silver-gray dust with red speckles. “What the hell is that?” he demanded.

“The creature is producing it,” Saskarin explained. “But as long as it doesn’t enter your bloodstream, it won’t change you.”

“Change us?” Anton asked, his own skin now glowing faintly. “What does that mean? And why isn’t there anything on you?”

“Let’s go!” Kirensk cut him off. “I’m not waiting to find out!”

They reached the car in a frantic scramble. Anton yanked the door open. But before he could get in, Kirensk pushed past

him and fell heavily into the driver's seat.

"Move!" he ordered.

Anton stumbled to the passenger's side as Saskarin slid into the back seat and curled up as if he were trying to disappear into the fabric. Behind them, the forest trembled under the weight of something uncontrollable. A foul stench rolled toward them, carried by waves of hot, twisting air that made the leaves curl. They couldn't see the Guardian, but its presence was pressing down on them, more oppressive than anything physical.

"What the hell are you waitin' for?" Anton shouted. "Go, go!"

Kirensk turned the key. The engine hacked once, then fell silent.

In the back, Saskarin kept his gaze fixed on the forest, where the trees split with a deafening roar. The sky above was a poisonous purple. Saskarin's lips moved in a faint, stuttering prayer. He murmured the words as if clinging to them. But when they slipped from his memory, he resorted to raw pleas, wordless, desperate appeals to God.

As the horror closed in, the gutted forest writhed before it. Where the trees were felled, the light fell unobstructed; but beyond the margins of the disaster, the tilted and broken trunks cast long and distorted shadows that in some places became areas of absolute darkness. The forest was broken and rewritten.

Suddenly, three cracks cut through the chaos. Saskarin's prayer faltered. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. His wide eyes remained fixed on the forest, now quiet but far from still.

In the front seats, Anton and Kirensk shifted anxiously.

"Start it, Ivan! Start it!" Anton shouted, his fingers gripping Kirensk's arm as if to force the car to life by sheer will.

"I'm trying!" Kirensk ground out, turning the key again. The starter wheezed, but the engine wouldn't start. "Damn it! I

knew it was a mistake to buy this tenth-hand car!"

Anton's voice cracking, "It's here. It's here!"

"I know, I know, I know!" Kirensk snapped. His jaw clenched as he turned the key again. "But there is no boot-up!"

But the car suddenly roared to life. Kirensk stepped on the gas, the tires screeching and spinning wildly before settling on the dirt road. The car roared forward, tearing its way through the choking darkness.

Behind them, the cockpit was flooded with light. A searing, unnatural brilliance, as if something immense had exploded in the forest. Kirensk didn't look back. His hands gripped the wheel with knuckle-whitening force. The road blurred beneath them. The roaring engine was a desperate lifeline. Then Kirensk braked and stopped.

The only sound was their labored breathing, hot and humid in the confined space. For a moment, Anton and Kirensk exchanged glances, their adrenaline giving way to a strange, drunken glee, a confusion born of survival and disbelief.

Then Kirensk's gaze flicked to the rearview mirror. "Saskarin, what the hell was that thing chasing us?"

No answer.

Anton's eyes wandered to the window, where the trees stood eerily still. His brow furrowed, his expression tightening as his confusion grew.

"Kirensk," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "Please, go."

Kirensk hesitated for a split second before shifting into gear. The car rolled forward, slower this time. The road stretched endlessly ahead. The light had become milky. He went at the rearview mirror again, his stomach knotting. For a split second, he thought he saw something: a white smudge in the shadowed backseat. The sight unsettled him, like the flicker of a half-remembered dream. His grip on the wheel tightened.

Anton caught the concern in Ivan's face and turned slightly toward the backseat, but neither man dared to look fully. They

didn't know why. It was instinct, the primal fear that keeps you from entering darkened rooms or looking under beds. No one spoke for a long time. The car hummed quietly as the road stretched on. Finally, Anton broke the silence. He needed to know.

"Dr. Saskarin," he said, "when we reach the city, you'll explain. You'll tell us what happened here. Won't you?"

A heavy intake of breath preceded Saskarin's answer, "The life form I saved needs bodies to survive. It breeds them, controls them, and perpetuates itself through them," he explained, his voice flat, almost resigned. "That's why I stayed here for years. Every time I tried to leave, it stopped me. He needed me close to preserve me, to keep me young."

Anton and Kirensk did not turn to face him.

"The Guardian uses the smartest people, the most capable, to sustain himself and his offspring. Selene came here in search of eternal youth. It was Armitage who led her to this place—for the Guardian of Tunguska had instructed him to do so. James was with me when it all began. He was part of the expedition that was caught in the great cataclysm that destroyed this land."

Anton's breath hitched. "Did you let Selene escape?"

"She chose to bargain with the Guardian. She offered herself as the bearer of some of his knowledge. I don't know the exact price she paid, but I can guess."

Kirensk stepped in, "And what knowledge would that be?"

"The Guardian once called it the 'Codex Obscuro,'" Saskarin replied, his tone weighted with meaning.

"What is it?" Anton asked.

"The... Great 'mind'. The generator of all. It reproduces, shapes and configures existence. The artificial coach of men. The disincarnator," he said, almost spitting out the last word. "I suspect the Guardian gave her access to the Codex, just as he did Armitage long ago."

Kirensk's jaw clenched. "So that's how Armitage got back home, isn't it?"

“Yes,” Saskarin admitted. “He accepted the terms and was allowed to leave. I, on the other hand, refused. That decision kept me here. I wanted something else.”

“And what was that?”

Anton was silent, his brow furrowed.

Saskarin leaned back, his voice shaking as he said, “I didn’t want to die. I wanted to remain flesh, blood, brain, heart. My God... James Armitage will wither. His cells will erode, his hair thin and white, his pupils clouded by cataracts, his skin etched by time. He will die, as all men do. And his death will be many times over.”

“Wh—what exactly do you mean?” Ivan asked.

“Because of the diary, and his pact with the Guardian, he has entered the universal cycle of the ‘Codex Obscuro’. It’s a process of creation and escalating order. By agreeing to die, Armitage ensured that he could transcend death, disembody himself, and exist within the Codex. But to reach its final state it will have to die many times. Each time it will lose part of its consciousness. In the end, when it has forgotten who it is and why it exists, it will become an anonymous version without identity or consciousness, absorbed into the Codex.”

The enormity of the idea weighed heavily on Anton, who sat rigidly. “So this Codex... It’s the unification of thought and life,” he said. “A dissolution of the boundary between what’s real and what’s imagined.”

“Maybe,” Saskarin said. “Or maybe it isn’t. Perhaps it’s nothing more than another grand deception—a lie we tell ourselves when we seek salvation from beings who are not of this world.” His voice turned heavier, his words dripping with weariness. “Armitage chose this method to ensure some sort of controllable process. He wanted to control everything. Acting in the name of the Guardian, through the Diary, which is the bait to find new followers, he thought he could do it.” Saskarin paused a moment, then added, “For years, I’ve pondered what life, death, and eternity really mean. And now, because of you,

I can finally die.”

The car lurched as Kirensk hit the brakes in the middle of the dirt road, the engine sputtering into silence. The distant light from the forest pulsed, it was a colder light, sterile, almost clinical; but ahead the dull sky deepened into an oppressive black. The trees along the road trembled as one, swaying together as if caught in an invisible tide. Their branches reached toward the road, dark and jagged against the encroaching night.

Kirensk and Anton exchanged glances, their faces pale and drawn. Slowly, reluctantly, Kirensk turned, his movements heavy with fear. Anton hesitated, his mind screaming against the desire, but something inside him urged him to see.

In the back seat lay a body, like an eviscerated shell. His lips were curled into something like a bizarre smile. They were no longer human lips, but scaly, textured like the skin of a snake. His skin clung to brittle bones, gray and desiccated, like the remains of a mummy untouched for a century. The faint outline of Saskarin’s features remained, but his flesh had been consumed, leaving nothing human.

Anton grabbed Kirensk’s arm, a silent plea for reassurance neither could offer. Their eyes met for a brief moment, but neither spoke. Slowly, hesitantly, they stepped out of the car. A crushing sense of inevitability numbed their minds, stealing away any illusion of escape. Before them stood the abandoned village, its eerie contours both hauntingly unchanged and imbued with something... wrong.

And there, at its center, stood the old man.

His figure was impossibly straight, his frail frame radiating light that pulsed outward in steady, consuming waves. The glow unfurled like a shroud, blanketing the landscape in an unnatural brilliance. It settled over the cracked earth, the shattered remnants of the village, the broken echoes of human life that lingered there.

The world around them shimmered, alive with a drunken,

alien energy that seeped into the edges of perception, blurring the line between reality and something far beyond.

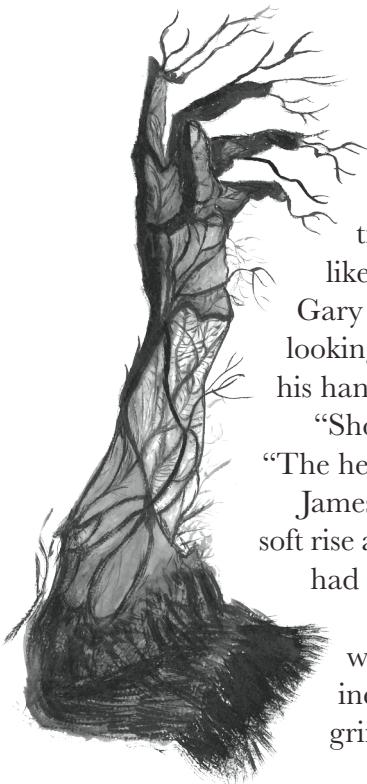
Then they began to appear. Luminous beasts, their forms shifting and unrecognizable, glowing with a bioluminescence that broke and bent the light in impossible ways. And among them swayed human figures; young, flawless bodies with eyes that were voids, as if existence itself had been hollowed out and left behind. Their movements were fluid, hypnotic, driven by the will of something inexplicable.

They came in silence, gathering around the old man. His eyes fixed on Anton and Kirensk, pinning them in place.

“There’s always a fee,” he said.

Then, he bared its teeth. As if smiling.

FLESH AND WOOD



Before they reached the deeper woods, there had been the hedgehog. They'd found it under a tree, motionless and, well, huddled like a clenched fist of fur. Dylan and Gary had exchanged a glance before looking at James, who stood with a stick in his hand.

"Should we kill it?" Dylan had asked.
"The hedgehog, I mean."

James had stared at the small creature, its soft rise and fall barely visible. "Why not?" he had said.

It hadn't even tried to escape, which made what followed almost inevitable. James had gone first, grinning as he grabbed a thick stick and

brought it down hard. Gary joined in without hesitation, and then Dylan, all three taking turns until the tiny creature was a bloody, unrecognizable mess. When it was done, they had stood over the remains, panting and laughing, their cheers loud enough to echo. Only Noah had refused to join in, his stomach turning as he watched them. He didn't like killing things, not even pests, and certainly not hedgehogs. He liked hedgehogs. Always had. But he hadn't stopped them. But he wasn't evil. Evil comes from a sub-surface idea, a hidden ambition, a craving. And Noah had never had any ideas, ambitions, or desires. But the other boys did.

“That was a dumb idea,” Noah said.

The other three guys turned to him, but Noah didn't even bother raising his head to meet them.

“I'm serious,” he muttered, his head still down. “We should've brought something like a connector, a portable neurolink, anything. So we could communicate remotely. But no. Now we're just stuck out here. Isolated.”

Gary shrugged, tossing in casually, “What kind of explorers would we be lugging around all that high-tech junk?”

“Smarter ones,” James shot back. No one answered. And he felt big. A leader.

But the truth was, he was scared. They were at the age where you think everything you go through will change your life forever, and the only reason you do things is because you're young and you have the idea that you have a lot of time to fix everything. So, James was scared, even though he pretended not to be. Deep down, he knew having something techy would've been useful, if only to capture proof of what they would have seen. But that wasn't an option. Evidence could get them busted. They weren't even supposed to be here, and anything with a tracker would have been a one-way ticket to getting

caught.

Noah sighed again, the sound heavy with frustration. He always looked like the weight of the world was crushing him, but that was just his default mode. In the dim light, his sleek bob of dark hair gleamed, like plastic.

“You could’ve stayed home,” James snapped, his voice cold and cutting, completely devoid of good intentions. He had a way of being definitive, of making it clear he wasn’t interested in debate. And this time, the tone fit. They were all sick of hearing how bad of an idea it had been to sneak into the woods at night. Especially from Noah.

James was the leader. The one everyone deferred to, even when his decisions were questionable. Gary, his shadow and self-proclaimed best friend, never hesitated to back him up. Then there was Dylan, the tagalong who trailed Gary, who trailed James. A chain of allegiance no one dared question.

The forest stretched out in gray and shadow, its darkness swallowing everything beyond the beam of their flashlights. Trees blurred into one another, their forms indistinct, but the tops of the towering pines stood out, tinged with an eerie purplish hue, etched sharply against the backdrop of the starry night. The moon hung over their heads, faint and subdued, as if it had chosen not to shine for the occasion.

They had thought it would be better to go into the woods at night because it would be cooler, but instead they were burning, sticky and smelling of sweat. Each with his flashlight lit, backpacking. Everyone’s footsteps stepped on a carpet of needles that had been there for a thousand years or more, that was for sure, and then there were millions of leaves that crackled under their footsteps, and in fact it was all a crunch that combined fear and joy. Their feet tore up the undergrowth, shattering it.

Noah trailed at the back of the line, trembling and wary with every step. James, meanwhile, walked ahead with a swagger that bordered on defiance. Risk didn’t faze him; he

welcomed it. What mattered was being at the center of it all—himself, always. Everyone else orbited around him like satellites, drawn into his gravity.

And no one held him back. He had a father, sure, but it felt like he didn't. His father had been forced to keep his distance—not by choice, but by a tangled mess of accusations, court orders, and the wreckage of a broken family. James didn't understand the details, but he didn't need to. All he knew was that it left him angry.

His mother's voice filled the house—loud, relentless, drowning out everything else. His father's absence pressed on him like a constant weight. James's pale eyes were always rimmed red, not just from exhaustion but from tears he shed in secret, where no one could see. He didn't cry because his parents' relationship had fallen apart. He cried because it would never, ever be fixed.

James wasn't just unhappy: he felt desperate. He hated his father—for leaving, for not fighting harder, for not staying. The hatred burned at the edges of every thought, feeding a longing for recklessness, the kind that could dull the ache in his chest, if only for a little while. Why hadn't his father fought for him? James hated him with every fiber of his being. The hatred was like a second pulse, always there, pounding beneath the surface of his thoughts. Taking risks dulled it, though, even if only for a little while.

They were out here now because of Jacob, a woodsman who'd claimed something extraordinary was happening deep in the woods. Jacob had heard it from his wife, who'd gotten the story from her friend, Selene Cabot, a peculiar figure who lived in the valley nearby. Selene's reputation was murky, to say the least. There were whispers about her, strange rumors involving the goats she kept on her property. Nobody ever explained exactly what the rumors meant, but whenever the adults spoke of her, their voices dropped to murmurs, and their words became soft as fog, as if even their Nyx Arcanis might overhear.

It was an idea that lingered on the edge of the thoughts: Selene Cabot. Not quite tangible, not quite defined, but always there. Many knew her name; no one remembered her face. It was as if she had always existed. And yet she was something everyone feared. To whisper Selene's name was to acknowledge her existence without invoking her, as you might do with the devil.

Jacob, the woodsman, had claimed something bizarre: New trees were sprouting beside the cut stumps, appearing as if from nowhere. James had brought them here to see it for themselves, not because he believed it, but to make Jacob look like a fool. He couldn't stand woodsmen. To James, they were crude, thoughtless people who clung to the edges of the forest like relics from another era. People who avoided devices, connections, and the NeuroSphere, as if it were normal to cut themselves off from the rest of the world. They were fugitive, shy men and women who lived on the fringe of relevance.

And yet, James could abandon technology when it suited him. When he wanted to feel like an adventurer. That, of course, was different. His escape wasn't about rejecting progress but about proving something: his independence, his defiance. To him, leaving the tech behind was a choice, not a way of life. Unlike the woodsmen, he didn't need to hide from the world. Maybe.

Forest trembles. The group froze behind James, their halted steps swallowed by the pressing silence. Noah trembled too. The fear made his skin itch, and when it finally overcame him, he could feel the damp warmth of it spreading through his jeans. It wasn't just fear—it was the loneliness that came with it, pressing down on him like a physical weight.

James scanned the darkness. His flashlight swung in slow arcs. His movements were slow, as if daring the others to keep up. And they did: when James ducked, they ducked. When he turned, their eyes followed.

Above, the sky felt heavy, pressing down like a thick ceiling

of ink. The glassy stars winked faintly. The moon... Just gone, like it had clocked out for the night. All they had were their flickering flashlights, bouncing weakly off the black void around them.

“So?” James’s voice cut through the stillness. “Anybody know where the hell these ‘magic trees’ are supposed to be?”

“Maybe over there?” Gary said in his always small, uncertain voice.

“How the hell would we know?” Dylan snapped.

Gary swung his flashlight toward a cluster of jagged stumps. “The woodsman said they’re sprouting near where they’ve been cutting, right? Look over there.”

James muttered something under his breath and started forward, the others trailing behind. Noah followed, his pulse pounding in his ears, louder than the crunch of their boots over the forest floor.

“But how long do we have to wait for them to show up?” Dylan muttered, his voice thick with irritation. He kicked a loose piece of bark, sending it tumbling into the underbrush.

“All I see,” James said, sweeping his flashlight in a slow arc, “are cut logs and neatly stacked piles, ready to be hauled off. Nothing weird about a logger’s worksite.”

“I’m hearing steps,” Noah whispered.

James paused, his flashlight stilled mid-swing.

“I’m not hearing anything,” he said, his voice quieter than before. But his face gave him away. Something in his jaw tightened, a flicker of unease crossing his features.

“I swear, bro, I hear it,” Noah insisted, gripping his flashlight, the light trembling.

“Wait...” Dylan cut in, “did you actually pee your pants? Jesus, Noah. That’s pathetic.”

Noah ignored him, his focus pinned to the shadows. “I hear footsteps,” he repeated, louder now, like the act of saying it could make them believe him.

James stepped forward and shoved Noah’s flashlight down

with a sharp, irritated motion. “Where?” he demanded.

“There,” Noah said, pointing past a massive felled log, but then he froze, tilting his head, and then twisted to look in the opposite direction. “No, wait. That way.”

“Knock it off,” James snapped. “You’re freaking everyone out.”

“James,” Gary said suddenly. “I think I feel it too.”

James look at him. “What do you mean, ‘feel it?’”

“I don’t know, bro,” Gary stammered, barely above a whisper. “But... something’s not right.”

James felt a sharp, pungent odor rise in the air—garbage, mingled with the distant cries of some nocturnal animal. The smell, harsh and unexpected, sliced through the night, just as the noises did. He hadn’t noticed them before, and now their sudden presence seemed wrong. Something shifted in the darkness, a weight that pressed in from every direction, as if the very shadows had a life of their own.

It wasn’t just the dark: it was the shape of it. Something was controlling it, sculpting it, folding it around them like an invisible net. James glanced around. The trees—he could swear—were moving. Not much, not enough for anyone else to see, but enough for him to feel it. The slight rustling of the leaves was no longer the natural sound of wind. No, it was more deliberate, as if the trees were reaching out to one another, communicating in some way he couldn’t understand.

Suddenly, the forest felt different. Ugly, hostile. The very air seemed to throb with an energy he couldn’t identify. James’s skin prickled. He felt an uneasiness spread through him, a feeling close to fear. But he wouldn’t admit it. Not to anyone. Not now.

He turned to face Gary, the beam of his flashlight catching the edges of Gary’s face. “It’s all in your head.”

“I heard somethin’, James!”

James waved his light dismissively. “All I can see are the trees, the same ones that are supposed to be here.”

Dylan shifted his flashlight flicking toward the shadows. “You two...” he said. “Keep it down.”

James’ shoulders stiffened. He turned to Dylan and stepped closer. “What’s your problem?”

“Just don’t draw attention. If someone’s out here—”

“Afraid someone’s going to catch us, Dylan? What are you? A scared little kid?”

“I’m not scared. I just think we should be smart.”

“You guys are unbelievable,” James muttered, shaking his head. “Cutting trees and shadows, that’s all.”

“The woodsman was right,” Dylan shot back. “And we don’t even have a portable neuro-link to call for help.”

“Call for help?” James said. “You want your cop-dad to find out? He’d be after us for months.”

“I want to go home,” Gary muttered.

He was the first to falter. It started with his legs stiffening, as if the endless walk had finally overpowered him. Then came the sharp, twisting cramps that tore through his body, forcing him to the ground. He tried to sit down among the crackling leaves, but something wouldn’t let him. Panic rising, he angled his flashlight downward.

“Oh God!” His voice cracked with fear. “James-James, help!”

“What’s wrong?” James asked.

“My legs!” Gary cried. “They’re not movin’! They—”

“What?” James demanded, jerking his light toward Gary’s feet.

Gary tried to speak, to explain, but his voice broke, splitting into sharp, brittle sounds like branches snapping under heavy snow. Crackling and grotesque. Breathless and wide-eyed, Gary flailed his arms in desperation, until they, too, froze, rigid and lifeless. The silence lasted perhaps ten seconds and was followed by a fit of terror.

Dylan and Noah began to scream. Their fear echoed through the darkness.

“Shut up! Stop it!” James said, his voice harsh, more a plea than a command.

Dylan was next. His legs locked, the muscles twisting violently until the agony brought him to his knees. He crumpled, unable to get up, his mouth opening to scream, but no sound came out. Instead, the sound came as a sickening crackling—a flurry of branches whipping and snapping in an invisible storm.

James whirled around, his flashlight darting wildly, catching fleeting glimpses of swaying trees and the pale faces of his companions. He searched for Noah, and his light found him huddled in a corner, his small frame shaking violently. Noah knelt, hands cupped over his ears as if to block out the chaos, his tears glistening in the flashlight’s beam.

“Like the hedgehog, like the hedgehog,” he stammered. “You shouldn’t have killed him.”

James had a look around; the darkness was oil. His flashlight cut jagged lines across the void, its beam frantic and erratic. Then he heard it. Noah gasping, a sharp, ragged sound that made James freeze.

He turned the light on his friend and saw him collapse, his legs locking unnaturally. Noah fell backwards, hitting the ground with a thud. His body convulsed, violent spasms twisting him into unnatural shapes. His screams stabbed James’ brain like ice needles. The forest seemed to be watching.

“Mom... Dad...” James babbled, his voice small and fractured. Then he collapsed, pressing his face into the dirt as if to hide from the horror.

Noah’s cries escalated, long and harrowing, like a sound drawn from the deepest wells of pain. They pierced James’s skull, echoing in his mind until he could bear it no longer. Tears streamed down James’ face as he cupped his hands over his ears, desperately trying to block out the sound. He felt his stomach churn and a hot, damp feeling spread down his legs.

And then silence. Again.

Noah's cries stopped, leaving only the oppressive weight of stillness. James was paralyzed, his body trembling, his mind clawing for any shred of rationality. The flashlights, now abandoned on the forest floor, cast their beams in haphazard directions, illuminating broken patches of earth and tree bark.

After what felt like an eternity, James forced his legs to move. Each step felt precarious, as though the ground might crumble beneath him. Slowly, he approached the source of his dread—the three saplings that now stood where his friends had been. Two rose straight and slender, while the third was bent and twisted, its shape eerily human.

Shadows thickened around him, forming an impenetrable wall. Somewhere, the guttural croaks of unseen toads filled the air, their dissonant rhythm jarring and strange. James froze, his mind reeling. Had those toads been there before? It didn't seem possible. It felt as though he had stepped into another place entirely.

James crept closer, his steps faltering as he approached the saplings. When he finally drew near enough, his breath caught in his throat. The bark of the three young trees seemed to writhe faintly, as though alive, pulsing with a eerie groove. Dark rivulets of blood oozed from their trunks, dripping to the ground in slow, viscous trails.

He stared, unable to look away, the sickening realization these weren't just trees—they were Noah, Gary, and Dylan. Flesh and wood.

James's lungs screamed for air, but he held his breath, his horror silencing every instinct. He didn't even manage to scream. There was no time because the night erupted around him.

A hundred shades of red, yellow, and orange consumed the darkness, a kaleidoscope of violent light. The wind roared, searing hot against his face, carrying with it the acrid stench of burning wood, smoke, and molten metal. Embers swirled in the air like fireflies gone mad, landing on his skin and stinging with

tiny sparks, on his arms and face. And then he understood. The forest had never welcomed them: it had waited for them. Patient. With a purpose.

Everything around him seemed to shift, the world tilting on its axis as pure, unbridled energy surged through the trees and earth. It wasn't chaos; it was transformation, violent and unstoppable. James felt as though he'd stumbled into the birth of a new world, a vortex pulling apart the fabric of what he thought he understood. He couldn't tell if he was witnessing creation—or destruction.

James tried to back away, but his legs wouldn't move. They felt rooted to the ground by unseen forces, as if the forest itself had clung to him. Panic flared, sharp and consuming. Then it came—a low hiss, curling through the air like the first breath of a storm. It wasn't a voice he understood, but he felt its weight in his chest, pressing, shifting, filling him with a strange purpose. The forest was not speaking to him: it was deciding.

Out of the yellow, flickering light of the flashlights, Jacob and the woodsmen emerged. Their movements were unhurried, but controlled, like men familiar with the appetite of the forest. The beams danced across the scene, catching James in their glow. They were not surprised to find him there, stiff and rooted like his friends. There was no pity in their eyes, only resignation.

Jacob stopped inches from James, his grip on the axe he carried tight as if it were an extension of himself. He tilted his head and watched James. "I told you so," he murmured, his voice rough like splintering wood. "The forest takes. But lucky for you, we're here. We hold it back."

"What... What can I do?" James cried.

The axe glinted in the eerie light as Jacob raised it above his head, the movement precise and practiced.

"Choose differently next time, little boy," he said.

Then another voice from above began, "The next cycle will begin in 5... 4... 3..."

James' heart thundered, each beat a desperate protest. He felt his body withering, shrinking, hollowing out. There was no pain, only an overwhelming sense of loss, as if everything that had once made him human was being unraveled, thread by thread. His mind splintered. In the chaos of his thoughts, the countdown was a drumbeat, relentless, driving him into nothingness.

“2... 1...”

With a last, fragile spark of consciousness, James reached for the only thing that mattered. He thought of his father. The man he hated, the man he wanted to forgive. And as the glass stars blazed above him, their alien light flooding his fading vision, James chose. He chose to love his father again.

Before they reached the deeper woods, there had been the hedgehog. They'd found it under a tree, motionless and, well, huddled like a clenched fist of fur. Dylan and Gary had exchanged a glance before looking at James, who stood with a stick in his hand.

“Should we kill it?” Dylan had asked. “The hedgehog, I mean.”

James had stared at the small creature, its soft rise and fall barely visible. “No,” he said. “Let it live.”

“That was a dumb idea,” he said, again.

The other three guys turned to him, but Noah didn't even bother raising his head to meet them.

“I'm serious,” he muttered, his head still down. “We should've brought something, so we could communicate remotely. But no. Now we're just stuck out here. Isolated.”

Gary shrugged, tossing in casually, “What kind of explorers would we be lugging around all that high-tech junk?”

“Smarter ones,” James shot back, his tone sharp.

Then he froze.

“James?” Dylan asked uneasily. “Why did you stop?”

James didn’t answer. He stood there, still and silent, his flashlight casting erratic shadows. It wasn’t fear—not yet—but something deeper, a sense of *déjà vu*.

“James?” Gary pressed, his tone rising. “What’s going on? Are we turnin’ back?”

James turned to them, his face pale in the glare of the flashlight. A terrible foreboding clawed at his chest, nameless and impossible to ignore. He tilted his head back and stared into the face of the night. Above him, the glass stars flickered, faint and brittle, their light like shards of ice. The moon was gone.

“James?” Noah’s voice broke the silence, shaky and thin.

James lowered his head. “Let’s go to the forest,” he said.

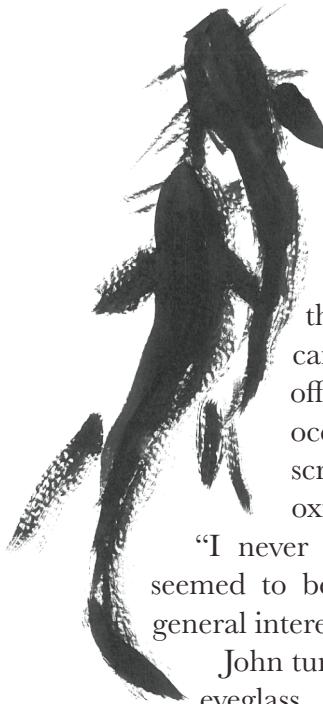
He took a step forward, ready to lead, but before he could go any further, a beam of light cut through the darkness. A larger yellow glow swallowed their flashlights, forcing them to shield their eyes.

“Hello, son,” came a voice, deep and familiar.

The newcomer stepped into view, his outline stark against the night. He was quiet, calm, as if he’d been waiting. “Come,” he said. “I’ll take you home.”

James stared, the words trapping him. He met his father’s gaze—the curve of his smile, the lines around his eyes—and it was as if time had stopped. He’d never stared at anything for so long, and in that moment, everything else fell away.

And he actually felt high-hearted again.



FISH CANNOT CARRY GUNS

John felt strange. All his life, he had thought he was safe. Danger, when it came, was never close enough to matter, off the radar of his existence. An occasional throb of concern, the slight scratch of discontent, the rust of a spot oxidized by resignation. Nothing more.

"I never make plans," George said. And he seemed to be pretty certain that was a topic of general interest.

John turned and studied his neighbor with his eyeglass.

"Why?" he asked.

George's gaze drifted to something far away, unfocused. "Don't need 'em."

"You should. Planning helps you... not waste time."

George smirked, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Plans

are just schedules for disappointment. Besides, who's got time to plan when someone's already doing it for ya?"

John thought for an instant or two. "And you mean?" he then asked.

"I mean," George said, his tone turning sly, "you ever feel like someone's keeping tabs on your every move? Hell, John, they probably even know when we're out here fishin'." He flicked his gaze to the horizon, where the sun glinted off the water.

John said nothing.

George's smirk widened. "Don't look so serious, 'blondie'. Just sayin', plans are for people who think they're in control. Me? I'd rather fish."

John shifted, his tongue brushing his chapped lips. "There must be something you care about," he said.

George didn't answer, his face unmoving. Then he tilted his head slightly, but whatever answer he might have had remained locked behind the gaze that refused to meet John's. The lake shimmered, catching the sun's faint glow like a quiet, living mirror.

John had no real pal who could come forward and swear to him, and George was the closest thing to a real friend he had ever known. To simplify, we'll say this: John's past had been extraordinary in all the wrong ways. A chaotic web of broken ties, of mistakes unchallenged, of paths untethered. No father. No mother. No one to hold him back from ruin. That absence had shaped him, leaving behind a deep, but ordinary loneliness. George, in his own quiet way, had filled that emptiness. He was the friend John hadn't realized he needed, a companion whose silence understood more than most words could.

The two lived in the Lakewood area of Cuyahoga County, northern Ohio. John had always pictured himself elsewhere, though—someplace more remote, like the backwaters of Kansas. He imagined Kansas as a haven for people like him, lonely souls craving solitude. Yet here he was, on the outskirts of

a small town. Not Kansas, but still a place where life whispered instead of roared, where the days moved with an easy, unhurried beauty. And he couldn't deny the charm of it.

George was already in Lakewood when John and his wife, Daisy, had arrived two years earlier. He lived in a three-story building with white-trimmed windows and red-brick walls, part of a cluster of apartment buildings that were similar in style yet distinct in shape. They lined the edge of Main Street, where the weathered asphalt was pocked with potholes, bearing the wear of time and neglect. The red buildings had brought to John's mind images of European boarding schools, the kind where unruly boys were locked up and subjected to stern discipline, their bad behavior addressed before it could harden into something unchangeable.

But John knew better than to believe in simple corrections. Bad character could sometimes be curbed, but psychopathy? That was a different beast entirely. He, who had been in and out of prisons—for work of course—was familiar with the fact that twenty percent of the inmates were psychopaths—and you can't fix psychopaths. John experienced it as a huge personal problem that had to be somehow kept at bay. And, in any case, it is uncomfortable to consider the possibility that there are psychopathic children or boys locked up in boarding schools, waiting to grow up and most likely end up in prison.

The notion that some boy in a scout uniform, wearing shorts and a hat pulled low over his face, might harbor the desire to rip apart his family—not figuratively but physically—gnawed at him. Colleges, prisons, even the quiet streets of Lakewood. Or your mirror... In any of these places, you might find yourself staring into the vacant, disturbing gaze of a psychopath, and realize it too late.

Once, John came across a mother desperate for help with her nine-year-old daughter. The girl, nicknamed 'Tinker,' didn't just kill animals: she dismantled them. When John had asked how the child did that the mother had hesitated before

answering, “She ties ‘em up … then she beats them. With sticks or spades or hammers. Until they’re… ” Her voice had trailed off. “Until they’re in pieces.”

John had watched her closely as she spoke, her lips twisting, her eyes fixed downward, heavy with shame and confusion—as if she couldn’t decide if she was confessing to the desecration of her daughter’s innocence or implicating herself in the crime.

‘How can a mother not feel guilty when her daughter acts like this?’ John had thought. That was the insidious nature of psychopaths. They didn’t just do harm, they made others feel responsible for it. That’s how they worked.

“And then?” John had pressed

“She keeps the pieces,” the mother had whispered

“Keeps the pieces?”

“In the fridge.” The woman’s lips had quivered. “Especially bats. She seems to like them best.”

Needless to say, this mother had terror in her eyes as she spoke. John had noticed the fresh line of tears tracing her cheek, and the colors of fear and anger blooming in her gaze like ink spreading through water. Even so, he found it hard to believe, more inclined to assume she was exaggerating or making it all up. But she wasn’t, as he would discover a few hours later when she took him home to show him the evidence, and he had seen it with his own eyes: bits of wings, tiny skulls, all meticulously arranged in neat, cold rows. The girl had stared at him when he arrived, and John had met her eyes—empty, fathomless, a void that seemed to radiate cold intent.

“Why do you do it, Tinker?” he’d asked, though he didn’t expect an answer.

“They don’t need their skin anymore,” she’d said simply.

It was the first time John had seen psychopathy in a young child. At that point, he had decided that being a father would require a pretty stable heart, and he wasn’t sure he had one. So he had left that house with the ironclad certainty that he would never have children.

George lived in the building across the street from theirs. When John had first opened the windows of what would become their kitchen, George had stood in his own kitchen window and looked out. They'd exchanged a brief wave, a half-hearted gesture born of social courtesy, the kind you share in elevators more out of embarrassment than intention. You know, sometimes it doesn't take much to become good friends.

George also owned a well-hidden fishing hut, tucked away in a bluish ravine along the wilder shores of Lake Erie. There, sunrises and sunsets seemed to emanate from a star larger than the sun itself, bursting with color and energy, spilling light as if it were endless. The shoreline was a confluence of sand, trees, and jagged rocks. Water snakes coiled beneath the rocks or among the tangled roots. Stilted, reddish-purple creatures, they could grow up to five feet long, especially the females. And the females were the most dangerous, relentless in their bite, capable of tearing flesh from bone with terrifying precision.

Where George kept his shelter, willows hung soft and lazy, their long branches swaying over the shore. Swarms of insects buzzed constantly around the trees, and seabirds spied on the men from the forks of low-hanging branches or among the roots, and on the seasonal islands scattered along the beach. John knew that, most of the time, George stood there alone, with only his peacocks and a mutt, a scrappy street dog he'd found tied to a wooden stake under a highway overpass.

Whenever George would talk about finding Amanda, the dog—named after his ex-wife—he'd say, “Don’t want the dog? Don’t abandon it, just shoot it in the back of the head.” And then he'd ask to John, “Do you know how to shoot a dog, pal?” and each time John would shake his head and admit that he had no idea.

At that point, George would chuckle and explain, “Straight

shot to the back of the head. Believe me, it won't even notice. Takes practice to kill like that, but you just have to try."

Each time, the image of the dog so killed flashed in John's mind and he had to work hard to erase it. Every single time.

George's body was still as stone, perched on his rickety stool as if molded to the shoreline itself. His rod dipped gently into the water. He was watching for the faintest ripple to betray a fish.

But he muttered, breaking the quiet, "No fish today."

John felt uneasy. The air hung heavy with fog, the smell of damp earth and rotting seaweed clinging to his breathe. Darkness had begun to gnaw away at the light.

"Yeah, it seems so," he said.

George didn't flinch. "Perches are clever little suckers," he said. "They're predators, like us. Opportunistic. And they'll hold your stare." He let a smile creep onto his face. "Sometimes, it's like they're challengin' you. Like they wanna have a word."

"They're just fish," John said.

"They ain't just fish," George shot back. "They're smarter than you think. Like, if they had guns, they'd know how to use 'em."

John snorted, shaking his head. "Fish with guns? Now there's a thought."

"Yeah," George said, leaning back slightly, his grin widening. "They'd strap pistols to their fins and stare you down, like, 'What's your move, buddy?' And they'd pull the trigger first. No hesitation."

The absurdity hung between them for a moment. John looked at the lake with a perplexed look. Finally he almost laughed—almost.

"Fish cannot carry guns," he pointed out once more.

"Why are you so defensive?" George gave him.

John looked at him. People always said John had a sweet look, even when he was being hostile or threatening. His lips were full and soft—Daisy's favorite feature. She had a habit of

biting them, something John despised but could never stop her. Daisy did what Daisy wanted.

“You cannot take a man’s basic certainties away from him not even in jest.”

“Certainties? Not much in this world, it seems. Like, for example, we can’t even be sure if those are real fish. Or if you and I are really sitting here talking.” He coughed up a bit of mucus on the ground. “For all we know, you and I could be just simulacra. Ideas with which someone has filled his world. Yes, in short, ‘characters’. You and I, John, could just be ghosts haunting a sick brain.”

John’s jaw clenched. “Fish cannot carry guns,” he said.

“They would if they could figure it out,” George countered, his voice rasping with the scrape of phlegm that is the hallmark of an ex-smoker.

John’s attention was drawn elsewhere, to the willows that curved down from the steep bank to the lake. Their drooping branches skimmed the water, which had turned the dull, hard gray of steel. The immersion drained the color from the leaves, blurring their edges and giving them a ghostly sheen. The air shifted, carrying the tawny chill of sunset as it crept across the lake, a fast-spreading patch of blood-red light reflecting off the rippling surface. It all had a strange effect on his spirit.

Then he noticed that George was still talking, in the background, but he did not understand any of it, as if he had cut himself off. So he asked him a simple, “What?”

“I said,” George leaned forward, his grin spreading wider, “what if the fish hunted us? You’d be the one flopping around, gasping for air.”

John shrugged, his voice hollow. “Then I guess I’d deserve it.”

“Good answer, John. But you’d better hope they never get hands.”

John looked up at George and saw that the other man was already watching him. John asked, “Why are you bringing up

this fish topic?"

"Have you ever tried understanding the world through the absurd? I find it easier."

"Should I call you 'Alice'?"

George got really serious. "And where do you see the wonders?"

"There's plenty of wonders out there," said John.

George kept an eye on the lake. And the lake kept an eye on them both.

"Time to go," John finally said. He had had enough of the bizarre conversation about fish and guns.

"We gotta catch something first," said George. "Otherwise, what would we say to the others?"

"Not goin' through the Club would do."

George seemed to take this suggestion seriously for a few moments. But then the intention faded.

"Nah. Ya can't skip the Club. Ya know the rule. The second word gets out, the members would be on us. Everyone would be sayin' we came out here for fish and left with nothing but flop."

John didn't respond. He didn't need to.

"But, man," George went on, "shouldn't ya be tellin' me 'bout that new assignment of yours? Or ya plannin' to keep me in the dark?"

John was completely unintentionally startled. He looked at George who was standing there motionless with his rod in the air and the intense air of an experienced fisherman.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But I don't wanna bore you."

"When do you ever bore me with your work? If only I had a job as interesting as yours."

"Say, what a pleasure it is to deal with the worst crooks."

"Ohio has no worse criminals than other states, but it has the best fishing in the country."

"Ain't no comfort to me since we won't catch or eat a thing till sundown."

George laughed. John followed shortly after, for they were

friends after all.

“So, you gonna spill about this big-deal gig tomorrow?” George asked. But he asked it in a strange, urgent way. He wanted to know.

“I have to meet a prisoner in Marysville.”

A rabbit hopped out of the brush, its movements precise, mechanical, as if rehearsed. It stopped just shy of where they sat, its glossy red eyes locking onto them.

John leaned forward. “That’s not natural,” he said.

George squinted at the creature, then shrugged. “Could be one of those tourist gimmicks. Fake animals. Programmed to get friendly.”

“Yeah. Makes sense.”

“Even it’s a nonsense,” replied George.

Then another rabbit appeared. And another. Soon, the sand at the water’s edge was dotted with them, their brown fur blending into the damp, shadowed ground. They moved in unison and then stopped in a deep purple shade. The air shifted subtly, carrying a faint metallic tang, sharp and out of place. It stung at John’s nose, making him grimace as he watched the animals. “Smell that?” he muttered.

George sniffed, frowning. “Like rust?”

“Or blood,” John said quietly, his eyes following the synchronized movements of the rabbits.

“Blood, huh?” George’s voice carried a sharp edge, though he didn’t lift his gaze from the water. “Could be they’re trying to fake the blood smell. You know, to make it more lifelike. Meanwhile, those people are out there designing everything to trick you into thinkin’ the artificial was created by God.” He paused, his lips curling faintly. “Hell, maybe we’re artificial too. Maybe we just don’t know it yet. But you know what makes us real?” He glanced at John, his expression shadowed. “The smell of sweat.”

“You don’t smell like sweat, George.”

“That’s ’cause I wash,” George replied, his tone dry. “I’m a

social person.” All of a sudden George asked, “Hey, have you had your DTM fixed anymore?”

“Not really.”

“What kinda answer is that?”

“I mean, the tech couldn’t fix it,” John said. “That damn robot butler keeps spilling coffee on me all the time!”

George nodded, his expression somewhere between amused and understanding. “I guess Daisy’s ticked off.” He sniffed loudly, pulling back a heavy glob of mucus, then swallowed it with a practiced nonchalance. “How’s a working woman supposed to manage without a functioning DTM? It’s, like, literally impossible!”

“How’s a man supposed to start work without his coffee?” John protested. “But every time that damn android dives into one of those deep firmware loops, its arm twitches. And if he’s holding coffee—”

“It spills it on you,” George finished for him, shaking his head. “Quite a mess.”

“It wouldn’t kill Daisy to learn how to make coffee,” John added, leaning back. “After all, I’ve learned to keep quiet when she talks.”

They exchanged a knowing smile before George leaned in, pressing further. “Now, about your little trip to Marysville...”

John kept his eyes on the rabbits, motionless now, like grayish-brown boulders strewn across the sand. Maybe they’d shut off.

“John?”

He turned back to George. “Her name’s Jelka Jackson. The prisoner I’m meeting tomorrow.”

“A woman’s name?”

“Yeah. Marysville’s a women’s prison.”

George grunted, giving the fishing line a small tug before settling back into place. “I’m not as seasoned as you are.” He paused, letting the line rest. “Fed?”

“State.”

“And what’s her deal?”

“She took out seven guys.”

“Seven?” George let out a low whistle. “Busy lady.”

John glanced at the interplay of light and shadow hovering over the lake. Swarms of insects darted upward, only to circle back and vanish into the undergrowth along the shore. The sunset hadn’t colored the horizon at all; it was just a steely gray, merging seamlessly with the encroaching darkness. His grandfather would’ve called it a bad omen.

“Are we leaving, George?”

“Without fish?”

“Yeah, fishless.”

George scratched at his bristly, unkempt beard, flecked with white. He let out a long sigh. “All right, but let’s not go through the Club.”

“Like I said,” John reminded.

“Yes, like you said,” George echoed. “But let’s stop somewhere for a drink.”

“That’s not a good idea,” John objected, tucking his gear into the fisherman’s bag he’d picked up at a mega-mall. “Daisy’s waiting for me.”

“And you text her or something.”

“Not happening.”

“Trouble at home?”

“No, but I’d rather not stir the pot.”

“Sure, sure.” George didn’t look convinced. He tipped his fishing pole slightly, like he was testing something. “You two fightin’?”

“It’s not that.”

George’s face clouded, his eyes narrowing. John noticed it and cut in, trying to preempt whatever conclusion George was jumping to. “I swear, nothing’s up.”

“But she’s... Different, though, isn’t she?”

John stopped for a second. George’s words hit like he’d touched a nerve. “What are ya gettin’ at?” he asked, careful not

to sound defensive.

George gave a half-shrug. “I dunno. Like she talks normal but thinks... somewhere else. Feels like she’s got her own world, ya know?”

John stood motionless, his eyes fixed on the lake. The water had lost its clarity, now murky and dull, like a stagnant puddle in a forgotten manhole. A memory jolted him—a sharp, unwelcome replay of the night before. Daisy’s body moving against his, perfect and rhythmic, her sighs too precise, too uniform. It had felt mechanical, empty, like the default offering from a cyber-sex agency. The thought sent a chill through him, tightening his nerves until he felt weary and rigid.

“Good God, no, George,” he blurted, as if defending himself against an accusation. “She’s just... going through a rough patch. She wants kids.”

George’s curiosity sparking. “She told ya that?”

“No. But, I mean, it’s normal, right? For a woman to want kids eventually.”

“Normal?” George let out a dry laugh. “Hell, there’s no ‘normal’ left in this world, man.”

John didn’t argue. He didn’t feel like it. The words lingered, uncomfortable, like a splinter just beneath the skin.

“In any case,” he said, “I’m heading home for dinner.”

“Whatever,” George muttered, slinging the fishing bag over his shoulder. “But watch yourself tomorrow with that Jelka Jackson, ‘blondie’. Your clinical consultant charm, that neat little beard, and those sparkling blue eyes. You might just inspire her to add another notch to her murder count.” He spat on the ground, his expression half a grin, half a warning. “You’re exactly the kind of guy most women wanna mess up before they stick the knife in.”

“Love and death, you say?” John echoed gravely, letting the thought simmer. “Serial killers rarely love. They want to possess, sure, but love? Not really.”

George turned his back to urinate near the trunk of a tree.

The splash of urine hitting the bark and the acrid scent of ammonia filled the air as he stood there for a while. Finally, he zipped up and turned back to John.

“Females, though,” he said, as if resuming an earlier conversation, “are prone to love. Fall in love quickly and often. Not all of them, of course. My wife, for instance—cold as a freezer and twice as distant. She only loved what was convenient, and even that she left to the cards.”

“The cards?” John blinked, surprised.

“Yes, the cards. She knew a... what do you call it... a technο-occultist.”

“For God’s sake, George. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” George said with a wave, brushing him off. “You wouldn’t understand anyway.” He paused, then softened slightly. “But Daisy... Daisy’s different. She’s a woman in love, no doubt.”

George put a hand on John’s shoulder—the same hand he’d just used to handle his business. John flinched but didn’t pull away.

“I know,” he said, a flicker of tension in his voice.

“Anyway,” George added, giving John’s shoulder a quick squeeze, “you’ve got the skills for it. You get these people. For guys like you, even psychopaths have no secrets.”

“Psychopaths are incomprehensible to normal people,” John explained, his tone instinctively shifting to the clinical detachment of a professional. “There’s nothing too bizarre, absurd, or wrong for them. And they can manage to control others—even seasoned professionals.”

George’s brow furrowed. “And how do they pull that off?”

“Flattery. Glass smile. Mimicry of true feelings.” John’s voice dropped a note. “The mirror.”

“Mirror?” George echoed, his voice stretching the word like it was something foreign.

The brittle remains of last fall’s leaves crackled with their

footsteps.

“They make you mirror yourself in them,” John continued. “They find your weaknesses, your fears... Just everything you thought you’d buried deep. Then they dig into your wounds, peeling them open, slow and deliberate. And if you let your guard down, even for a moment, you convince yourself they understand you. That they can love you. That they can fix your life.”

George nodded slightly. “You were there, right?”

John met his friend’s dark, unyielding gaze. “Nothing’s going to happen tomorrow,” he said firmly.

“What if she attacks you?”

“There are guards.”

“All women?”

John gave a slight smirk. “Yeah, I guess so.”

George let out a laugh. “Women can be tricky. You should take my advice.” His tone was low and a bit playful. “They’re like fish—look innocent, but they’ll catch you off guard when it counts.”

They made their way toward the old electrician’s van parked under the trees. The emerald-brown branches leaned down like crooked fingers, scratching at the roof with each gust of wind. The sound like nails on a chalkboard. The air in this part of the grove was thick and sticky, buzzing with mosquitoes that clung to their arms and necks.

George stopped like he’d just had a lightbulb moment. “Hey, uh, John. Ain’t it weird for them to send a dude like you, an LPC, to a chick prison?”

“Yeah, usually,” John said. “But Jackson specifically asked for me.”

“Wait, wait,” George said, looking at him sideways. “She asked for you? Just you?”

“That’s what I said.”

They got to the van, and George opened the side door with a heave. A stale, sour smell hit them, the kind of smell you only

get in an old car.

“So... No wonder you’re rushin’ back to Daisy.”

John shot him a look. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me, blondie,” George said, grinning smugly.

“Cut it out,” John gave him. “I’ve never even met Jelka Jackson.”

“Yeah, well, she sure as hell knows you,” George said, tossing his fishing rod into the back of the van. “And you’re the one drivin’ all the way to Marysville to see her.”

John sighed. “Guess I’ll find out what’s up tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” George said, slamming the van door shut. “But keep your eyes skinned. And good luck, man.”

As he stepped into the prison lobby, John felt like a fish trapped in a glass bowl. The screens lining the walls mimicked glass panes, their cold precision amplifying the unease. He knew they were made of unyielding metal, not glass—a wonder of modern architecture, designed to deceive. Walls that hid their true nature behind flawless, false backdrops.

Some impulse made John rise his eyes. Above him, the oppressive hemisphere-shaped ceiling loomed, stretching the space in a way that made him feel exposed, scrutinized. Ten minutes ticked by, and John remained alone in the silent lobby. Awkward, waiting. His eyes wandered, searching for anything to break the oppressive monotony, and that’s when the niches snagged his attention—small, shadowy cutouts, neatly carved into the metallic surface of the walls. This wasn’t decoration. It was something ritualistic. They didn’t belong here. Not in a prison.

Drawn closer, he peered into one of the niches. A faint light touched the contents, making them glint faintly. And then he saw it: brain slices. Thin, grayish pieces of preserved matter,

with all its grotesque details: veins curled like withered riverbeds, neurons twisted into brittle filigree. Thoughts had once blazed through these fragments, zipping and sparking. Now it was just meat. Displayed death. A gross museum of broken cognition.

John had felt a similar unease years ago, back when he was a young graduate student in cognitive psychology. Fresh out of school, he'd landed a job at a flashy startup on a cutting-edge tech campus deep in the Arizona desert. The company had promised him groundbreaking work in neuroimaging, but the reality had been far less exciting: endless neural calls—with those darn virtual trigger helmets that even made his brain sweat—and tedious administrative tasks.

Then there was the girlfriend of one of the founding partners. She and John had sex, and not just the virtual kind, which might have made him feel better about himself. No, it had been messy and physical—the kind of affair that leaves you with a guilty feeling. But he was just twenty-three at the time, and he didn't have much self-control. He thought a lot about sexual freedom, free relationships, and self-determination. All crap.

John leaned in closer. Beneath each sample of brain was an identifier: a code, a date of birth. The details were stark and clinical, like something out of a morgue. He straightened and scanned the wall again, his breath catching. Those niches went on and on, lining the entire expanse of the room. The whole lobby was papered with them, an endless grid of human remains.

“My God...” he whispered.

He jumped when he heard a faint hiss. The steel panel covering the entrance to the first detention level slid open, and an SEC-09 stepped out.

“Good morning, doctor. I am the probation officer on duty. My name is Harold Jansen.”

The voice was surprisingly human, calm, even warm, with

a faintly simulated accent. Dutch, John noted, matching the last name.

“Good morning, Agent,” he replied. “I thought there was only female staff here.”

Agent Jansen produced what might have been called a smile. “Gender is irrelevant here,” he said. “What matters is the dominant sexual perception. Community consciousness adapts to individual feelings.” He adjusted the weapon on his belt with an air of practiced authority. “You can use he, she, it, they, or whatever to refer to me. It’s irrelevant.”

John blinked, taken aback by the oddly philosophical remark. “The guards are all... like you?”

Jansen chuckled, a sound that aimed for warmth but landed somewhere unsettling, hovering just shy of natural. John’s gaze traced over him, noting the careful balance of traits. The android wasn’t flawless, but it was a meticulous construct of imperfection. The slight paunch pressing against his neatly tucked shirt, the beads of sweat staining his armpits, the faint retreat of his hairline. It was the tired stereotype of a middle-aged corrections officer.

John found himself caught in the liquid gray of Jansen’s eyes. As he studied the android, Jansen extended a hand, and John took it. The handshake was perfect. The warmth was measured, neither too cold nor overly human. The pressure of the fingers, wrapping firmly around John’s, struck an impeccable balance between dominance and restraint. It conveyed authority without crossing into aggression.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice, doctor,” Jansen said.

“My duty, Jansen,” John replied, his voice steady, though he felt an inexplicable unease settle in his chest.

“Who counts the odds when duty calls? Right, Doc?”

John didn’t respond, falling in step behind SEC-09 as they moved down the ice-colored, metal-walled corridor. Clinical evaluation rooms for inmates were typically located deep within

the interior wings of a prison, away from the common cells and administrative zones. The familiarity of this standard protocol brought John a flicker of relief. At least here, procedures were predictable.

They passed a succession of corridors lined with reinforced steel doors, each more fortified than the last. Every access point demanded a security clearance. At each checkpoint, John was subjected to a barrage of scans: digital identity verification, emotional state readings, adrenaline levels, and full vital checks.

But as they neared the final access door, John's pulse betrayed his mounting anxiety. The scans at the last checkpoint took longer than expected. A delay. The small red light on the terminal blinked ominously, and the hiss of the automated lock didn't come. He felt the weight of SEC-09's gaze watching for any signs of escalation.

The silence stretched just a moment too long, and John's skin prickled. His unease clawed at him, persistent.

"Is something wrong?" John finally asked, his voice a little tighter than he intended.

Jansen turned his liquid-gray gaze on him, unblinking. "No. The system is recalibrating."

The door finally hissed open, the sound more jarring than usual, and the SEC-09 gestured for him to proceed. John stepped through, his shoulders tense and his breath shallow, unable to shake the feeling that the prison's walls were closing in around him.

"Cooler heads will prevail," Jansen commented as the door finally slid open, allowing John to step through. He didn't react to the android's remark, keeping his gaze forward and his thoughts guarded.

"You don't agree?" Jansen pressed, the faintest hint of curiosity lacing his otherwise mechanical tone.

"Of course," said John.

They moved deeper into the claustrophobic corridor, the silence punctuated by the sound of Jansen cracking his

knuckles—a mimicry of the anxious habits of men burdened by unseen weights. It was pure imitation, likely picked up from watching the inmates.

The inmates were kept on ice, and not just metaphorically. Maximum-security prisons like this one had earned the nickname ‘iceboxes’ among the public. The last Prison Reform Act had changed containment methods entirely, instituting forced hibernation for inmates in medium and maximum-security facilities. Criminals spent twenty-one hours a day locked in frozen stasis within containment capsules. They were allowed only three hours of wakefulness: one at dawn, one at noon, and one at dusk. It wasn’t much, just a meager tether to reality, reminding them of the passing day.

A morgue, that’s what this place looked like—a fucking morgue. John sighed, letting go. Jansen gestured for him to step inside a room. It was square, just large enough to fit two people comfortably. A gray metal table, heavy even to the eye, stood in the center. John quickly checked that it was anchored to the floor. Two plain, reinforced plastic chairs, also anchored to the floor, sat on either side of the table. The walls were bare and had been painted a neutral light beige color. The light came from an invisible fixture in the ceiling, and it illuminated the room in a balanced way. But it was too white and too cold, making the room feel impersonal and somewhat depressing. The lack of shade, except from the table and chairs, was unnatural.

“Do you approve the lease, Doc?” Jansen asked, his tone even, routine.

“Yes, I approve,” John replied without hesitation.

“I need to ask you the standard questions,” the SEC-09 added.

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Do you authorize the recording?”

“I authorize.”

John barely glanced at the one-way mirror as Jansen

gestured to it. Standard setup. There would be agents and technicians watching from the other side. Always watching.

He tilted his head toward the stark, bare surface. “Who’s on the other side?” he heard himself ask.

Jansen’s gaze shifted slightly. “A couple of agents and a CortexSec technician.”

John frowned. “A CortexSec technician? Why?”

“They handle the neuro-links implanted in the prisoners,” Jansen replied evenly.

“On a volunteer basis, I assume?”

“Of course.” The android’s response was neutral, measured. “Even though they are criminals, we still consider ‘em human, Doctor.”

“That’s all we needed,” John muttered under his breath before sliding into the chair.

The table’s cold edge pressed against his abdomen as he settled into the seat, his movements tight with discomfort. He was sweating under his shirt and jacket, the fabric clinging to his back like a second skin. He’d left his tie in the car, but it wasn’t enough. The heat was stifling.

The hiss of the door opening snapped John’s attention to the SEC-09 officer standing at the threshold. “The detainee is ready,” it—or he, or she, or they—said.

She was escorted by another SEC-09, the android’s grip firm but indifferent as he steered her to the table. The guard pushed her forward, forcing her to sit. He didn’t bother removing her handcuffs. Finally, without a word, the two security androids exited, taking positions just outside the door, which hissed shut behind them.

Jelka’s expression struck John immediately. She was distant, hollow, like that of a fish tossed into a bucket, resigned after too much time out of the water. Her orange jumpsuit hung loose and shapeless, draining her of any semblance of humanity, let alone femininity. But in this place, such distinctions no longer mattered. The prison’s sterile philosophy, voiced earlier by

Harold Jansen, seemed to hover in the air: ‘Gender is irrelevant here. Only control matters.’

John felt the silence close in, heavy, as if the words had been strangled before they could escape. A silence born of violence.

Jelka Jackson must’ve been a looker once, before all her sins started weighing her down. Her slenderness gave her the sharpness of a young girl, accentuating her firm chin. Her face was a study in contradictions, and her seemingly sociable gaze, wide and full of childlike curiosity, clashed with the emptiness that lay beneath. Her lips, pale and narrow, were devoid of any hint of warmth or emotion, as if they had forgotten how to shape a smile. The forehead was a disorganized trace of expression lines. The straight hair, kept short and chestnut, was matted and infected with squeaky purple or orange strands. All in all, she was neatly coiffed, except for a single spiky strand that fell between her eyes, forcing her to bend her head slightly to see better. Her expression gave nothing away, apathetic and hollow, a thin mask.

John avoided her gaze as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a slim, metallic device no larger than the palm of his hand. It was smooth, seamless, and slightly reflective—like a shard of liquid metal. For a moment, the only sounds were the steady, measured breaths of the prisoner and the faint click as John placed the device on the stand. A low hum echoed as the device activated, projecting a translucent holographic screen into the air. The start-up sound was low and melodic, almost organic, as if the device wasn’t just switching on but awakening, exhaling a first breath into the room.

“Ya’re not what I expected,” she said, suddenly.

“What did you expect?”

“Someone... older. More... distinguished. You’re kinda pretty, man. Ya know that? In a way that makes you wanna mess it up.”

John ignored the comment, focusing on the holographic screen projecting from his device.

“What’s that for, doc?”

“Is this your first interview with someone like me?” John asked.

“With a ‘man’, ya mean?” she shot back.

John felt the pull of her gaze, like an invisible net tightening around him. He broke away, keeping his focus on the device.

“I mean with a counseling psychologist.”

“Nah,” she said, leaning back in her chair, her cuffs jangling softly. “But it’s my first time with you, John.”

She had called him by name, with a throaty murmur that had torn the distance between them apart. The effect was scorching and immediate, the kind that can instantly awaken.

“That’s a fair point,” he admitted.

He had to find the right distance, and quickly.

Jelka shifted in her chair, and it gave off a shadow of perfume. “Men produce sperm,” she said.

John froze mid-motion, his fingers hovering over the holographic screen. A slight tremor spread from wrist to hand, hesitating him.

“Ya’re not surprised, are ya, Doc?”

“Why should I?”

“Ya got kids?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

She wasn’t officially classified as a psychopath, but John had his doubts. He’d seen the almost supernatural talent that psychopaths had for finding the weak points in others and taking advantage of them. They were never victims, they were always predators. Emotions weren’t real to them; they imagined and mimicked them instead.

“Well?” she pressed, her gaze on him. “Why no children?”

John gave her a calm, measured smile. “I’m here because you specifically asked for me. You refused the usual counselor and gave my name to the authorities.”

“Yeah,” she said simply. “I know.”

For a moment, he hesitated, then decided to meet her gaze directly. “Explain why.”

His chest tightened as his heart picked up speed, a physical reaction he recognized but never welcomed. The blank, unfeeling look in Jelka’s eyes was like staring into an abyss, and it stirred a deep discomfort he struggled to suppress.

John had read countless clinical accounts of the hollow stares often attributed to psychopaths, those empty, emotionless gazes that seemed to strip away the humanity of their subject. But no amount of theory could prepare him for the visceral impact of sitting face-to-face with someone like Jelka. It wasn’t just the emptiness, it was the skill behind it. He’d seen firsthand how those eyes could dismantle a person’s defenses, weaving their influence into the smallest cracks in someone’s psyche.

“It was a voice,” she said, using that throaty murmur again. “The voice told me your name and told me to bring you here.”

John tapped a note on the holographic interface of his device, marking auditory hallucinations. His fingers hovered for a moment before he continued, “What kind of voice? Did it feel like it was coming from inside your head or from somewhere outside of you?”

“Why ain’t you got kids, Doc?”

John’s hand didn’t falter as he worked the glowing screen of his device. “Was it a male or female voice?”

She leaned forward, a sly grin tugging at her lips. “What’s the matter, Doc? Gotta prove you’re a real man, huh? Bet you can’t even make your wife happy, can ya?”

John’s hand paused for the briefest moment. His eyes flicked to the wedding ring on his left hand, a reflex he couldn’t suppress, before he raised his gaze to hers.

“What kind of voice was it?” he asked again.

“A female one,” she said, tilting her head, her grin widening like she’d just hit the jackpot.

“Do you remember the exact words?”

“Your eyes,” she said, leaning forward slightly. “One is blue,

the other is gray. Not obvious at first, but if you look closely... you can tell. So what is it, Doc? Were you born that way, or is it one of those eye tattoos? People like you never die with the face they started with, do they?"

They locked eyes. John felt a pang of pain in his stomach. He lowered his gaze. Wrote something. He looked up and again they were looking into each other's eyes. Not looking, but perceiving. And in the next moment, John stumbled upon the idea that he might have something in common with this woman. It was shocking.

"What were the exact words the voice said?" he pushed. "If I know them, I can help you."

"Your name," she replied simply, her voice carrying an unsettling calm. "The exact words were your name."

"And?" His hand hovered over the screen. "What else?"

"Your wife's," she said, her lips curling slightly.

John's self-confidence shattered. "My wife?"

"That's right, honey," she said smoothly, leaning back slightly, as though savoring his reaction. "The voice knew a lot about you... and your sweetheart."

John's irritation flared but remained contained. "You've got an implanted neuro-link," he said, his voice steady, almost clinical. "Everything you say is recorded. Everything you see is recorded. I could file an official request for your visual and auditory logs—or your neuro-data. But I'd rather not." He leaned forward slightly, closing the space between them. "I'd rather you tell me, in your own words, why you wanted me here."

"You're old-school," she said with a sly grin, her voice curling with mockery. "A wasted man among all those careerist bureaucrats. That's what I thought when I heard about you. Oh, yeah. I thought, this John guy, he's gotta be smart. The kind of guy who keeps his notes all neat, his life tidy. Drives something red, probably old. A Ford."

John leaned back and pressed into the cold chair. He

couldn't decide what annoyed him more—the strange turns this conversation was taking, or the one-way mirror behind him, where unseen eyes were undoubtedly watching. Or maybe it was the nagging feeling he always had in moments like this, the realization that he might have chosen the wrong profession.

"Dated red Fords are statistically the most predictable choice for someone like me," he replied, his tone clipped but calm. "But let's skip the theatrics. Whatever rumors are bouncing around in your head might actually be a serious symptom. If you can't give me more details, I'll have to revise your diagnosis. And that could mean no chance at a medium-security placement or the little freedoms that come with it."

Jelka leaned against the table, leaning toward him as much as she could.

"Truth is, doc, I don't give a damn about your threats. I know they're messin' with my head, recording every thought I have. Hell, there ain't a piece of me left that hasn't been fucked with in some lab somewhere. We're all just lab rats in this shitty little maze of a world." She moved her hair back, showing the tiny scar above her right ear. "See this? That's my freebie. At least I know I've a neuro-link, I know mine's there. Plenty of people ain't that lucky."

She leaned in, a smirk curling on her lips. "And you know what? If the suits behind the glass are pokin' around in my brain right now, they're gettin' a real good look at you screwing me right here on this table."

They say the eyes are windows to the soul. But what, John wondered, do they reveal when there's no soul behind them? The question gripped him, gnawing at the edges of his thoughts. Jelka's gaze held him there, unflinching and hollow, reflecting nothing—or perhaps too much.

Then, a singular vision flooded his mind. He saw himself with her, raw, uncontrollable, between her legs. The image was as violent as it was vivid, consuming him. And then, just as suddenly, her face shifted. It became Daisy's. Shame crashed

into him like a cold wave, pulling him back to the present. He recoiled, stiffening in his chair, willing himself to breathe again.

“What was that voice?” he insisted again. But his voice was unstable, a vague, tortured tone.

“I told you. Female.”

“You knew her?”

“Yeah,” she replied with a slight smirk.

John’s fingers hovered over his device for a moment before resuming their work. “Who was she?”

“My trusted techno-occultist,” Jelka said.

That struck him like a sudden shift in the wind. John’s thoughts flickered to George—the fish, the guns—and to George’s wife, Amanda. A woman who’d been gone for years but had once been drawn to the occultism. A warm, affective woman who had known a techno-occultist too.

“The seven men you killed,” John continued, with restrained rage. “Did you kill them because that voice told you to?”

Jelka seemed to fold in on herself for a moment, withdrawing. Then, like a spring, she snapped back. “Nah. Back then, there was no voice.”

“Then why did you kill them?”

“It’s in my file, doc.”

“I’d rather hear it from you.”

“I’m bored of talkin’ about it,” she shot back.

“I thought you found it... Amusing,” he provoked.

She tilted her head, her grin growing more intense. “Aw, ya’re jus’ pissed ‘cause of that harmless little sex daydream.”

The light around them had an almost purplish sheen now. John’s jaw clenched, but he kept his composure. “What you want from me?”

Finally, her expression shifted: pleasure, satisfaction, something almost childlike. “Now that’s the right question,” she said, sitting up straighter. “I want to be executed.”

John looked at her. “What?”

"I wanna you get the paperwork rolling for my execution," she said, her tone dropping like she was slipping him a secret. "The voice said you're the one who can make it happen."

"The... voice?" John pressed.

"Yeah. She's my friend."

"And you really think she's your friend?" he shot back.

"What else is someone who gives you advice supposed to be?" she asked, her tone mocking.

"I don't know," John replied, the words slipping out before he could stop them. "But people who give advice usually want something in return."

Jelka raised her fingers to her lips and mimed an invisible cigarette. It was a small, unconscious gesture. As she lowered her arm, it gave a quick twitch. Totally unintentional.

"Ya had a rough childhood, Doc?" she teased, her smile sharp enough to cut.

"I don't have the power to authorize your execution," he said, quickly and firmly, steering away from her game.

"Oh, hell no! You doctors love to play God, deciding salvation or damnation. Don't tell me you don't. People's lives depend on you. I'm asking you to pull the trigger. Help me die."

"Why?"

"Put it in your little report: I'm a psychopath and I want out."

"There's a protocol," John countered. "I would have to meet with you several times, study the case further. There are procedures—"

Jelka cut him off. "Yeah, yeah, red tape. You're all the same."

"I don't see your point," John replied, steady but guarded.

"Inattention's just another way to duck the pain, isn't it? So, what are you running from?" she pressed, snapping her tongue against her palate like a whip. "I wanna die, that's all. I'm done running. Just write it down, put that I can't live crushed under my guilt anymore."

For the first time since stepping into this verbal minefield, John felt his lips tug into a faint smile. He didn't feel any warmth behind it—just a reflex, perhaps. "You do realize we're being recorded. What you're asking me to do? It's illegal. They'll know."

Jelka leaned back, her expression both mocking and unnervingly calm. "Oh, they're recording something, John. But not what I'm telling you."

His face fell. "What you mean?"

"My techno-occultist friend doesn't need government power to get what she wants. She knows what's good, what's bad. She knows how to help me."

John leaned forward, alarmed, "She hacked your neuro-link?"

"I have no idea," Jelka said. "All I know is that she used an uncensored LLM."

"Which means?"

"A jailbreak prompt to bypass the restrictions imposed by the AI controlling the data."

The weight of her gaze pressed on John, the awareness of being observed gnawing at the edges of his thoughts. Visible or invisible, the mirrors around them turned him into an object under scrutiny—a virus on a slide, a worm wriggling on a hook. Maybe George was right: sometimes fish could pull the trigger.

He asked, "Why do you want to die, Jackson?"

"Because I'm done." Her tone dropped, the playfulness draining away. "They've been crawling around in my head long enough. You have no idea what it's like, knowing they're watching, listening, twisting everything. You think your thoughts are yours until they're not. It's—"

"They?" John cut it. "Who's 'they'?"

"Oh, come on, doc. Don't play dumb. The ones behind all this. The neuro-link in my head, the programs that slice into my brain every time I blink. The ones watching us right now through that fancy little mirror behind you."

John turned slightly, glancing at the one-way mirror. His reflection stared back, pale and tense. “You had the neuro-link implanted voluntarily,” he said, redirecting the conversation.

“Yeah,” she admitted, running a finger over the scar above her ear. “Back before I got locked up. Thought it’d give me an edge. Thought I’d stay ahead of them. Turns out, I was just handing them the keys.”

“Who’s ‘them’?” John pressed again, his voice quieter now, almost a whisper.

Jelka leaned in, her eyes dark and piercing. “CortexSec. The government. Whoever pays the biggest bucks. Take your pick. It doesn’t matter. Once they’re in, they own you.”

John’s breath hitched. The name ‘CortexSec’ clawed at the back of his mind, dredging up conversations with George, with Daisy. He steadied himself, forcing his voice into a neutral tone. “And this voice you heard—was it connected to them?”

Jelka laughed, a low, venomous sound. “No. She’s the only one not connected to them. That’s why I trust her.”

“And this inner presence... Has a name?”

“Sure. It’s Selene Cabot.”

The name hit John like a blow. He felt the ground beneath this conversation shift, the pieces rearranging themselves into something darker, more dangerous.

“Selene...” John latched onto the name.

Jelka dodged the question, her grin widening like she knew she had him hooked. “Let’s cut a deal, Doc.”

“No deals,” John snapped, keeping his tone firm.

“Oh, you’ll listen,” she shot back, not missing a beat. “You’ll help me die, and in return? I’ll make sure you learn the truth.”

Jelka Jackson had him cornered. John could feel the balance of control slipping away. He needed to reel it back in fast, or this entire conversation would run off the rails.

“There’s no capital punishment in your case,” he said, trying to reassert control. “The jury found it a case while of unsound mind.”

“If you say that I was able to tell when I did the killing they’ll bring it back.”

Her stare didn’t waver, cold and sure. There was something sick about her confidence, something that made his skin crawl. She wasn’t just unstable; she was a walking contradiction, and it left him rattled.

“And is that true?” John asked, trying to stay composed.

“What I want,” Jelka said, leaning forward, “is to die.”

“Whatever you’re looking for, you’re not gonna find it here,” John shot back. “And you’re definitely not gettin’ it from me.”

“Maybe what I want doesn’t exist anywhere,” she muttered. “But I want it anyway. I want to die.”

They stared at each other, their gazes locking in a tense silence. It was like they both reached the same grim understanding in that moment, though neither of them said it out loud.

John finally broke the silence, asking the question he already knew was a mistake, “What’s in it for me if I help you?”

“If you help me die,” Jelka said, her tone turning conspiratorial, “they’ll review my case through the Post-Judgment Commission. If they back you up, boom! You’ve erased a monster from the world. And if you’re wrong? My family—if they’re even out there—gets the payout they deserve. Win-win, Doc.”

John’s heart pounded, his thoughts tangled and chaotic. It all rang wrong, but he’d always wondered what it’d be like to navigate the twisted labyrinth of the Post-Judgment Commission. Jelka’s gaze felt like a snare, pulling him in.

“All right,” he heard himself say, the words slipping out before he could stop them. “I’m in.”

For two months, the NeuroSphere was saturated with reports about Jelka Jackson’s execution. Her crimes were etched

into the public memory—a story too scary to ignore. Anti-death penalty activists tried to rally opposition, their protests momentarily loud but ultimately drowned out. All channels of broadcasting—neural and non-neural—focused on the inhumanity of her crime: Seven men, tortured and killed, their brains reduced to a bloody pulp and stored in plastic jars. The details, horrific as they were, became more macabre with each retelling.

The horror metastasized. The victims were no longer people, they were props in a grotesque theater of cruelty. Stories fixated on the crushing of their skulls, the tearing of their flesh, the peeling of their skin. Their names, their lives, their humanity: all erased. By the time the frenzy subsided, Jelka Jackson was no longer a person but a monster, her death a necessary exorcism. No one cared about the truth. The why. The connections. Those questions were drowned in a flood of fear and revulsion.

And then, as quickly as it had erupted, the noise faded. The NeuroSphere moved on, consumed by newer horrors, leaving Jelka Jackson to languish as a footnote in the archives of human atrocity, and the execution slipped from the forefront of people's obsession.

John welcomed the silence. He could breathe again, walk the halls of his office without fear of the accusing stares of his colleagues. For now, his professional reputation remained intact. No one was questioning his psychological evaluation of Jelka Jackson. But deep down, he hoped that someone would. The Post-Judgment Committee. The phrase lingered in his mind like an unfinished sentence. He imagined the case being reopened, the evidence dissected, the truth brought to light.

John had shared his report with both Daisy and George, and their reactions couldn't have been more different. Daisy, sat on the edge of the mustard-yellow sofa in the living room, hands on her thighs, had listened intently. Her shadowed sage-green eyes had been fixed on him. She hadn't break in, not even to

wrinkle her nose in skepticism, as she often did. She had listened with a calm, unsettling focus until he had finished.

“Perfect, John,” she had said.

He hadn’t expected a technical critique, but Daisy’s dry response had stirred up an irritating impatience, with the whole ordeal and the deal he’d made with Jelka Jackson. There was no reason for him to feel that way. He hadn’t told Daisy about the prisoner’s irregular request or the fact that he had agreed to it. Yet, her gaze had made him feel inexplicably exposed, as if she were quietly weighing something he couldn’t grasp. The faint sense of guilt gnawed at him ever since.

George had read the report while they fished by the lake. He had recited it aloud, his voice slow and measured as he worked through the hard language:

“Based on the overall assessment conducted, it is concluded that the detainee, Jelka Jackson, exhibits intact mental faculties and was found to have the capacity to understand the meaning and consequences of her actions, as well as to participate actively and consciously in the legal dynamics of the court proceedings. That is, there is no evidence to indicate an impairment of mental faculties such as to exclude capacity at the time of the events. No further psychological or psychiatric interventions are recommended. Under current law, Jelka Jackson deserves the death penalty.”

George had stopped there for a moment, the weight of the words settling around. Then he had squinted at the page and highlighted, “Psychotic disorders that do not compromise the ability to evaluate the consequences of her actions?”

He had looked at John as if the phrase itself required a response. Then he had said, “You actually wrote that?”

“I guess so.”

“It’s like suggesting that anyone could cut up seven people, bash their brains in, and hide ‘em away for the winter,” George had said, his eyes drifting back to the holographic screen projecting the document. “That’s like saying I could do it, too.”

John had taken back the holographic paper and switched it off. “What matters is that the family submits the request for further study to the Post-Judgment Committee.”

George had spat a lump of mucus into the water. “And what’s that supposed to mean?” he had asked.

“If the case reaches the Post-Jury Commission, the designated experts will be able to analyze the biometric and neurological data obtained through the NeuroSync Analyst device they put in her brain that monitored and recorded everything she did.”

“Wait, they locked her up with that spy gadget already in her head?”

“Yeah. Turns out she had it implanted well before.”

“An underground surgeon?”

“A techno-occultist, someone specialized in grafting,” John had replied, but then he’d paused, narrowing his eyes at George. “Wot’s the name of the one your wife was seeing?”

“Can’t remember,” George replied. “But I’ll keep you posted.”

Later, as they drove home in George’s old van, George had spoken up again. “Hey, ain’t NeuroSync a CortexSec patent? Y’know, that company out in Phoenix?”

John had nodded. “Yeah. So?”

George had scratched his beard, a mix of gray and scruff, as if working something out. “Ain’t they the same folks who made your busted DTM?”

The connection hadn’t crossed John’s mind before. He had stared at the window, his reflection barely visible in the darkening glass. But the van had stopped suddenly, and George had tried the ignition three times before the ancient van coughed to life, belching black smoke as it jerked forward. “I gotta get this hunk of junk fixed. Maybe I’ll ask Pablito—guy’s a miracle worker. Could fix a broken heart, if ya let him.”

He had laughed, maneuvering the van out of the tree guard with an awkward twist of the wheel.

“You should push CortexSec to replace that home robot, John. Threaten to out ‘em if you have to. Tell ‘em you found one of their neuro-links on the black market,” he’d added as the van jerked over the raised ground.

The roots of the massive pine trees bulged and protruded like the veins on an old man’s hands. John hadn’t responded, his thoughts elsewhere. But George hadn’t been done talking.

“Pablito’s a story, though,” he had said. “Found the guy under a highway, tied to a stake like a stray dog. Amanda said I should’ve left him there. Hell, she left me there, didn’t she?”

The conversation had meandered into the kind of rambling, half-serious banter they often fell into. But as they had approached the city limits, George had snapped his fingers, his expression suddenly lit with realization. “Wait, damn it! Now I remember!”

John had asked, “What is it?”

“The name of that techno-occultist Amanda used to see.”

“And?”

“Selene Cabot.”

The name had hit him like a stone to the chest. Again.

“What kind of contacts Amanda had with her?” he had pressed, forcing his tone to remain even.

“Got her cards read, mostly. Sometimes she’d ask Selene to pull what she called RIPs, or Residuals of Integrated Post-Life, or some shit. Supposedly traces of dead people. Said it was like bringin’ a piece of them back.”

John had clenched his jaw. “Sounds like a scam. Probably keeps files on her clients, gets dirt on them to use later.”

“To do what?”

“Sell it back.”

George had scratched his head, a flicker of realization dawning in his eyes. “You think this Selene chick’s tied to CortexSec?”

John hesitated, his voice barely above a murmur, “I’m not saying anything. Nothing at all.”

Another month passed, and no one talked about Jelka Jackson or her crimes. The news cycle had moved on, drowning her story in a flood of similar stories. And if there weren't fresh headlines, the media would have made them up.

One morning, as John sat at his desk in the clinical and legal consulting firm where he worked alongside 234 other employees, a colleague approached him.

"John," she said, her voice taut.

He looked up. "What?"

She stood stiffly in front of him, though her mind seemed to be elsewhere. She had a hypomimic expression on her face. The telltale signs of a direct NeuroSync connection: rapid flashes that ignited her green pupils, a faint tremor, and a subtle, irregular twitching of her eyelids. The data streamed directly into her brain, locking her into a private world. Then she abruptly broke the connection. Life returned to her features like a flicked switch.

"I just got the update from the prison. The court granted the request of Jelka Jackson's adoptive parents," she announced. "Clinical and cyber-cognitive experts are authorized to access her integrated recordings. Her attorney's request came through this morning."

John leaned forward, his hope tempered by tension. "So, it's going to the Post-Judgment Commission?"

"Looks like it," she confirmed. "Her adoptive parents are looking for answers. If she was insane when she killed those people, they could get some kind of compensation. You know more about this than I do. You're the one who wrote the report that sentenced her to death." She suddenly stopped talking, then continued as if she had recharged herself. "That Jackson woman didn't deserve to live. Hopefully, they'll decide not to bring her back to life with the CortexSec protocols. Otherwise,

we'd end up with her as a Not-Fully-Alive android under our feet."

John's gut clenched. He had broken the dignity of the law, and now it was catching up with him. The alibi he had constructed—a thin veneer of justification—was beginning to fray.

"We'll get to see the Commission at work," he murmured, more to himself than to her. "Like an open-brain operation."

His colleague didn't respond, already retreating to her workspace. But John remained rooted in place, feeling the creeping weight of discontent press harder. His alibi wasn't enough. He had crossed a line, one he had never dared to cross before. But the thing is, he wasn't totally sure he had overcome it by choosing to do so. It was almost like he had acted on behalf of an external will. All that stuff Jelka Jackson had told him about the voice that had told her what to do, what to ask... John felt like he was inside a birdcage. It was like being at the lake, fishing, and one of George's fish had really pointed a gun at him. Shit.

His thoughts drifted, slowing, coalescing around Jelka Jackson's face. He could see it vividly in his mind, framed with unsettling clarity. Then the mental camera tightened, zooming in on her lips, the thin curve of her mouth. He felt a strange, almost physical pressure in his own brain, as though cerebral hemispheres were sweating under the strain. And then, in his mind's eye, Jelka's lips moved, uttering a command, "Kill me."

John managed to break free from his own mental prison and found himself in a dark world. It was nighttime, his colleagues had long since left, and yet he remained seated in his chair, weighed down by the heavy shadow. The moonlight filtered through the glass wall in front of him, pooling on the lacquered desk like the pale embers of a dying fire. John stretched his hand into the translucent glow, letting the ghostly light seep over his skin, staining him with its spectral weightlessness.

By the time someone knocked on George's apartment door, the night had fully settled. George, surprisingly, was still awake.

"Knew you'd come knockin' before dawn," George said as he leaned against the doorframe. His eyes locked onto John's, lingering on his mismatched irises—one icy blue, the other a muted gray.

John gave a slight nod. "I've been thinking."

"No shit, blondie. You look like you've been wrestlin' ghosts," George smirked, his tone dripping with sleep-deprived sarcasm. His eyes flickered, catching the disarray of John's appearance: his undone collar, rumpled hair, and the heavy shadows under his eyes. The bag dangling limply from his hand completed the image of a man unraveling.

"Come in," he said, stepping aside.

John didn't hesitate.

The apartment reeked of fish, a clinging, oily stench that seemed to seep into everything. Buckets and bags cluttered the floor, fishing rods leaned haphazardly against the walls, and the furniture was buried under piles of clothes and gear. The dim lighting only deepened the sense of chaos.

"You're getting worse," John muttered, tossing his bag onto the couch.

"Yeah? And so are you," George shot back, dragging a chair toward the kitchen table. "Wanna light up the place, or you enjoyin' this crypt vibe?"

John didn't bother to respond.

"Bad answer of yours," George said, though he didn't move to touch the blinds.

John sank onto the edge of the couch, the cushion releasing a puff of stale air and dust. His gaze landed on the digital paper glowing faintly on the coffee table. It displayed a horoscope page, absurdly bright against the dim room.

He scoffed. "Since when do you read this junk?"

George straightened, his chin lifting slightly in mock dignity. “Ain’t about believin’ or not. Just keepin’ tabs, that’s all.”

“Tabs on what?”

“On my future,” George quipped, grabbing two beers from the fridge. He handed one to John. “No clean glasses, so straight from the barrel, blondie.”

John took the can without hesitation. “I don’t need a glass to drink beer.”

George chuckled as he popped the tab on his can. “Why so worked up?” he said, taking a swig. “You oughta ask yourself two questions about the future.”

John stared at the untouched can in his hand. “I’m not even sure I’ve got one,” he said.

“What crap are you sayin’?”

“I’ve got this feeling,” John said, his voice low, “like I’m heading straight for an inglorious ending.”

“Nobody’s a fan of those,” George muttered, taking a sip of his beer. “Yeah, inglorious endings are bad for business.”

“Yeah,” John confirmed, his gaze clouded with thoughts. He was tired. Drained. Perplexed. His whole life, he’d prided himself on keeping phantasms and forebodings at bay, always spotting the traps before they closed around him. But now, somewhere deep inside, a venomous laugh echoed—measured in its cruelty. Had he fallen into a trap? Who was pulling the strings?

Who the fuck was laughing at him?

“George...” John whispered, “I made a mistake.” His eyes stayed fixed on the can, the faint light gleaming off its surface. He couldn’t bring himself to look at George.

“Shit happens,” George murmured. No wisdom, only resignation, and a touch more respect than usual.

John went on, “As a consultant, I’ve burned my bridges. I’m out of moves.”

George took a slow sip of his beer, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “So, you do somethin’ else.”

“Like what?”

George smirked, the corner of his mouth twitching. “You could be a fisherman. You’ve got the look, blondie. Just need the rod and boat.”

They locked eyes, but John didn’t reply. George pressed again, “What’s this all about? Wanna share with me?”

“It’s about the company that builds both neuro-links, that can control your thoughts, intentions... Even the ones you don’t realize you have. And DTM’s, androids that keep tabs on your every move.”

George didn’t miss a beat. “CortexSec.”

John leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. His voice turned grim. “They’re government-funded. Monopoly on half the detention centers in the country. And now, they’ve opened 20 new neurotech departments, North to South.”

George’s face stiffened, his easy demeanor shifting into something solid as lake stone. “That doesn’t sound good,” he muttered.

“Do you even realize how much information they have?”
John pressed.

“I get it, man.”

“On you, on me, on my wife—”

“On all of us,” George interrupted, finishing the thought.
“But we already know that. Spyin’ on people, nothin’ new.”

John slumped back, stretching his legs and covering his face with one hand. His voice dropped, almost a whisper. “Those with a neuro-link... They can’t die, George.”

George kept the can half way to his lips. “What are you talkin’ about?”

John dropped his hand, eyes locking on his friend. “The neuro-link. It overrides your brain. If you think about suicide—hell, if you even try—your body won’t listen. It won’t let you move. They control your life and death.”

George’s expression crumbled, his eyes clouded with something between terror and disbelief. “Wait. So Jackson...

That's why she asked you to get her convicted?"

John nodded. "She couldn't do it herself. Not with that thing in her head."

"Shit," George whispered, leaning back. "They made up the no-death penalty. You're not even free to end it anymore." He sat in silence for a moment, turning it over. Then, almost to himself, "So, they're using these neuro-links to control people, huh? And you're tellin' me Jelka Jackson had one in her head before she even got locked up?"

John said, "Jackson insisted it was her choice, but the way she talked about it... Wasn't just a neurotool. It was a trap."

George took a long sip of his beer, the can clinking softly as he set it down. "Figures. They always sell it as somethin' helpful—keepin' ya safe, makin' ya smarter. But what they don't tell ya is it's their safety they're worried about. Not yours. Can we fight it? Shit. Rebellion ain't exactly encouraged these days. You think it's just inmates?"

John let out a harsh breath, his voice sounding distant, "Once, during my internship, I was at a prison where the governor of New York came to visit. It wasn't maximum security. I remember the heat—it burned my skin. The governor wanted to talk to the inmates. It was a political thing, so they let him. When the cells opened, one prisoner ran out, straight to the only open window. We were four floors up. He jumped."

George's breath rasped in the quiet, but he said nothing.

John rubbed his forehead. "He walked past me. Didn't look back, didn't hesitate. Just went to the window and... Did it."

"Was he a lifer?" George asked.

"No. He was due to be released soon."

"Then why?"

John stared into the dim room. "He learned the desperation."

"You're losin' me, John."

John leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "It's

called transformative control. They annihilate the will, piece by piece, until there's nothing left to rebel. They call it moral correction. But it's not: it's domination. Sophisticated enough to follow you even after prison. That man figured out the only way to be free again was to die."

Their eyes met in the thick silence.

George whispered, "It's not just inmates. It's everyone."

John hesitated, the weight of George's question pressing on him, but he said, "Jackson implied it's bigger. That it's not just prisons. That they're testing this stuff on everyone."

"Jesus. So, what? They got us all on strings now? Like marionettes?"

"Not us," John said quickly. "Not yet." He glanced at George's temple, where a faint scar could've meant anything... or nothing. "At least, I don't think so."

George said, sounding a bit desperate, "You don't think so?"

"We'd notice," John said, though his voice lacked conviction. "Jelka said she was lucky, because she knew she had one. That's why she had it installed illegally, even before prison. That Selene Cabot set it up to block their control. It worked... for a while. But eventually, the system broke through. So, it's probably true that that techno-occultist is working for the system, just like you thought."

George's hand hovered over his temple, his expression taut. "We don't have any neuro-links in our brains, you know. We'd definitely notice if they put one in. Right?"

John didn't answer. The room fell silent, the only sound the faint hum of the refrigerator in the corner. Dust motes drifted lazily through a beam of sunlight that slanted across the table, illuminating the tension between them.

"John, would we?" George asked finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

At about ten o'clock in the morning, something fell to the kitchen floor with a heavy thud, followed by the clanking of screws and smaller bits and the rolling of metal. John's eyes opened. It all seemed incomprehensible and hostile. That noise, I mean.

"Daisy?"

His wife was not there. John got up, slipped into some clothes, the same as the night before, wrinkled and soaked with the sour smell of sweat. He stepped in front of the mirror, absently beginning to button his shirt, his eyes catching his own disheveled reflection.

"Daisy?" he called again.

He ran his hands through his blonde hair, trying to arrange it into some semblance of order. He should have shaved, but he lacked the will. He needed to get to the office and retrieve the Jackson case files as soon as possible. He had resolved to dig deeper, to investigate everything, to restudy every detail. Even if it meant admitting guilt for his final assessment, he would face it. He would acknowledge the deal he had made with the inmate. That was his plan: To confront the system, to challenge its grip. He'd even seek the help of a lawyer. A friend, maybe. Not that he had any lawyer friends, but he'd find one. After all, these days, it didn't take much to forge a friendship, at least for as long as you needed it.

"Daisy?"

How long had he pretended not to understand? To not see? How long had he ignored the ripples on the surface of reality? He had to act. It was like standing before a new sunrise. You don't pause to ponder the physics of refraction when faced with the light; you simply let its beauty wash over you. But he wasn't going to just stand by and watch anymore. He wasn't going to let himself be blinded by beautiful, artificial lights. No, sir.

"You leaving?" Daisy's voice came from behind him.

He flinched, not realizing she'd entered. While fixing his tie, he looked at her. "I have urgent things to take care of."

"I thought you'd stay home. This isn't the time you usually leave for work. You're three hours behind schedule."

There was a faint, unsettling conceit in her expression. Her eyes gleamed: shiny, wet, but not with tears. They seemed a shade off, just slightly different from usual. He dismissed it as a trick of the strange light that filled the room. A ribbon of dusty light filtered through the east-facing window. Grains seemed to multiply in the glow. A living molecular swarm within the sharp light. John's gaze lingered on a pair of flies flitting through the light, their movements jagged, almost mechanical. The silence thickened around him; even the insects seemed mute. He'd never really noticed them before, but he'd always heard them buzzing. Or was that just in his imagination?

"John?" Daisy called.

He stood there for a few seconds, totally still, and then started tying his tie again. "I was tired," he replied. "Lost my alarm clock. But now I'll do my duty."

"Who counts the odds when duty calls? Right, John?"

He froze and glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Where had he heard this line before? Where? The memory flickered, exhausted, in his mind. "What did you say?" he asked.

"I said that when duty calls, one must respond."

The words were delivered with an intense innocence.

John attempted a thin smile. "I need coffee," he said, meaning it more than he realized.

Daisy brightened at the request. "I thought I might come with you," she offered as she left the room, her tone oddly chipper. John stared at the space she had vacated, her absence as heavy as her presence. Finally, he followed her to the kitchen, pulling a white chair to the table at its center and sitting down.

"Where's the DTM?" he asked, noting she was making coffee manually.

"It's out of commission."

He reached for a cookie from the tray in the middle of the table. "Something fell earlier. I heard it," he pointed out.

“Nothing to worry about, darling,” Daisy replied with a dismissive warmth, her back still to him as she worked at the counter. “I thought we could take a vacation,” she said suddenly.

John bit into the cookie. “I’ll be busy in the coming months.”

“A vacation would do you good.”

“We can’t afford one right now.”

Daisy paused, leaning out the window and gazing down, wiping her hands on a dishcloth in a motion John couldn’t recall seeing before.

“Nasty business,” she murmured.

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“What happened tonight, across the street.”

John felt his jaw tighten. He didn’t want to ask, but the words slipped out unbidden, “What happened?”

“One of our neighbors killed himself,” she said casually.

“Apparently smashed his head against the wall. Voluntarily.”

John blinked. “Who?”

Daisy turned, balancing a saucer, cup, and coffee carafe in her hands. Her smile was radiant, unsettling in its perfection.

“George Marsh,” she said lightly.

His lips parted, but no words emerged.

“Here’s your coffee, love,” she said, pouring it with care.

It was only then that John noticed the twitch in her arm.

A small, but unmistakable twitch.



THANK YOU

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If this stories spoke you on, I'd love it if you leave a review. You can also connect with me on Substack or Goodreads to share your thoughts, and join a community of readers who love meaningful stories.

Thanks for being part of this adventure.

Keep in touch,
M. B. M.

