

Murray held up his hand, cutting off Amos's next example. I get the point, Doc. That's riveting stuff, really it is, but snails and fucking roaches are a hell of a ways away from human intelligence.

Behavior is merely a chemical reaction, Mister Longworth, Amos said. Human behavior involves more complicated reactions, but they are reactions nonetheless, and if a snail or as you so eloquently put it, an effing roach can be manipulated, then so, too, can a human.

Murray rubbed the bridge of his nose, as if some monster headache pounded the inside of his skull. You know, I came here hoping for some good news, but this just gets worse every second. Okay, so someone out there has created a parasite that can manipulate human behavior. When the hell are you two going to give me something I can use?

Mister Longworth, this is something incredibly advanced, Margaret said. Her voice grew cold and angry. This man wanted simple answers, yet there were none to give. Were talking a high degree of technological superiority. If this is an engineered organism, someone out there is so far ahead of us it's difficult to conceive. To put it another way, if this parasite is engineered, we're in a lot of trouble.

Murray scowled. It was clear that additional complications were not welcome. What do you mean if?

I suspect, and I should note that Amos disagrees with me, that this psychopathic behavior may not be intended, but is actually a side effect. The possibility remains that this is some kind of natural parasite, or if not natural, then it was not specifically designed to make people crazy.

Murray shook his head, then stared at the plaques on the wall. It's a weapon, Doctor Montoya, and a damn good one at that. Don't make this so complicated you can't see what's blatantly obvious. You handle the chemicals and such, and leave the strategic analysis to me. Now, I need ideas from you on how to fight this thing. Do you have any suggestions?

Actually, Margaret had several suggestions, most of which involved a sledgehammer and Murray Longworth's ass, but those she kept to herself.

There are a couple of things we need to do. First, we need to expand the staff. We need some psychiatrists on board. Why?

All the hosts have shown severe behavioral disorders. If we're going to learn how this thing works, we need a living host. We need a bigger staff and we need it quick, particularly a neurobiologist and neuropharmacologist. A psychologist might help us figure out how to handle deranged victims. And in the long run, we need to learn how to combat the parasite's effects, possibly with drugs that modify behavior by countering the neurotransmitter overdose.

I don't think adding staff is a good idea, Margaret.

We need these people, and we need them now. We could lose control of this any second. Information control is one thing. Letting a plague break out on our watch is another.

Murray's fingers drummed the desktop. Fine. I'll start looking for people. I don't need to tell you again just how secret this whole operation is, so I'm not going to have someone for you tomorrow or the next day. What have you got that I can use now?

Brewbaker had a small growth with colored fibers growing out of it, Margaret said. This symptom is consistent with a condition called Morgellons disease. We think that the fibers are a parasite that died, but parts of it keep working. The fibers are made of cellulose, a material common in plants but not produced in any way in humans.

Are the fibers conclusively connected with the triangles?

They are, Amos said. The structure of the triangles is the same material as the fibers' cellulose. There is no way it's a coincidence.

And if you have the fibers, Murray asked, then you have the triangles? You're going to go psycho?

Margaret leaned forward. No, that's not the case. It seems people can have the fibers and not develop the full-fledged parasite.

And we haven't seen the triangle growths before, not before the last few days? The CDC doesn't have anything on it? Not that we know of, Margaret said. That doesn't mean there haven't been, or aren't currently, more cases. They may have existed. We just didn't find them.

So the fiber thingies have been around for a few years, but the triangles are new, Murray said. Sounds like whoever is making the weapon is getting better at it.

Margaret swallowed. If she was going to get her way, now was the time. The CDC may have information on Morgellons, including potential time lines of the condition and maps of people claiming to have this disease. We need to talk to Doctor Frank Cheng, who's leading the investigation.

Murray leaned back in the director's chair and looked up at the ceiling.

We can't get the CDC involved, Margaret. That's why I lifted you out of that organization.

We have to talk to this man, Margaret said. It's possible they have a database on this. If we're lucky, they are tracking symptoms, dates of infection and other data that could potentially lead us to other parasite victims.

I can't allow it.

You will allow it, Murray! Margaret said. Murray's gaze lowered until his cold eyes locked with hers. She couldn't stop now, she had to see it through. I've played this how you want it so far, but I will talk to this man, with or without your permission.

She expected a huge fight, a battle of wills, but Murray just sighed. Okay, you can talk to him. But you cannot, and I repeat it just to be perfectly clear, cannot tell him about the triangles. Deal?
Deal.

Find out what they've got. And I'm giving you executive-order clearance on this. Otto, make a call to the CDC director. Doctor Cheng will cooperate with Doctor Montoya, and he doesn't need to know why.

Yes, sir, Otto said. He smiled at Margaret. It was a small smile, but she couldn't miss it.

Okay, Montoya, you get your little chat, Murray said. But if that doesn't turn up anything, we need alternatives. Give me something to work with.

The excess neurotransmitters create a biochemical disorder, Margaret said. Based on what we've seen of living hosts, they suffer symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, possibly complete with intense hallucinations. Based on reported behavior, the hosts' paranoia is quite acute, with elaborate threats and conspiracies, but I'm sure that doesn't just happen

overnight. There's probably a buildup process, an amplification of paranoia. These hosts may be looking for help in the early stages, but according to what we've seen in the five known cases, they are very suspicious and tend to stay away from institutions like hospitals and doctors. We have to make ourselves available to these calls for help.

How do we do that? Murray asked.

We could run ads in the paper. Vague ads, things that might appeal to the hosts' paranoid nature, but wouldn't attract attention from anyone else. Perhaps businesses with the name Triangle or something like that, something the hosts would see and instantly associate with. Paranoics construct elaborate fantasies about the world around them. If we play into likely fantasies, we might draw them in.

Murray nodded. Newspaper ads are good. It will take a little time to create a fake business and we have to avoid anything unusual that might draw the press, but we'll get it going. What other ideas do you have?

Otto cleared his throat. Excuse me for interrupting, sir, but most people don't get their news from papers anymore, they get it from the Internet. You can set up a web page and have it indexed so the major search engines will find it. The Net is anonymous, so a host might surf it for information on the growths. They can contact you right from the web page.

Murray's nod picked up speed. Yes, yes I see your point. I'll get people on it right now. We'll come up with some different ways to attract the hosts. What else have you got, Doctor?

That's about it, Margaret said. The triangles decompose so fast we haven't been able to get a good, clean look at one. We either need a live host or one that's only been dead for an hour at the most and I stress, Murray, the need to see a live host above all other possibilities. That's the only way we're going to learn more.

31.

WASH THAT THING RIGHT OUT OF YOUR HAIR

Perry stepped out of the shower into the steam-filled bathroom, toweling off lightly and feeling oddly peaceful now that all his senses -and his wayward memory- had returned. It might well have been the longest shower of his life, and it was worth every second. His head pain had faded to a mere whisper of its former screaming strength. He was hungry. Really hungry. Cleaning up the bathroom would have to wait until he'd hit the fridge. Some Pop-Tarts would hit the spot, for starters.

The strange thing was how he didn't itch anymore. In fact, now that he thought about it, he hadn't itched a bit since waking up on the floor, except for a scratchy growth of bright red beard that itched plenty.

Trying to keep his newly clean feet from stepping in the gunk on the floor, he moved over to the steam-covered mirror. He used his hand to clear a patch. The water-beaded reflection showed beard growth, looked like two days worth.

Jesus . . . just how long had he been out?

Wrapping a towel around his waist, he walked into the living room and turned on the TV. Channel 23, the Preview Channel, always listed the time and date in the bottom left-hand corner of the screen.

It was 12:40 P.M. But it wasn't Thursday, December 13. It was December 14.

Friday.

He'd been unconscious since returning home from work on Wednesday. Somewhere in the vicinity of forty-eight hours. Almost two full days.

That wasn't passing out, that was a fucking coma. Two days? He'd lain in a pool of his own vomit for two days? No wonder he was so hungry.

Perry grabbed his cell phone. Sixteen messages waited for him. Most of them probably from Sandy, wondering if he planned on showing up for work.

Work. Counting when he'd been sent home, he'd missed two full days of work. He was probably fired by now. There was no way he could stroll in at 1:00 P.M. on a Friday. What a great story this would be: Sorry, boss, but I tripped in my own bathroom, clunked my head on the toilet seat and slipped into a coma while lying in a puddle of my own sick. Perry sat down on the couch and sorted through the messages. Sure enough, two were from Sandy, seven were from Bill, the rest hang-ups from telemarketers. Four of the work messages were from Thursday. Bill sounded concerned. On the final message from Friday, Bill said he was coming over to see if Perry was all right.

Perry erased the messages. He turned off the phone's ringer; the last thing he wanted to do was talk to anyone, even Bill. Perry moved to the front door. Sure enough, tacked to the outside was a note.

Two days. Hed missed two days of work. What the hell would Dear Ol Dad have said about that? Nothing good, Perry knew that for certain. Hed make it up to Sandy. If he had to work double shifts and weekends for the next three months with no overtime, hed make it up. Concussion or no concussion, there was no excuse for missing that much work. He couldnt just call her. That would be cowardly. Hed drive in right away and take his medicine face-to-face. After, of course, he got his ass to the hospital.

His stomach growled. He had to get some food first.

In minutes his last two eggs were frying up in a butter-coated pan. The smell drew loud grumbles from his stomach and made his mouth water. He dropped two pieces of bread into the toaster, then crammed a third piece in his mouth and chewed ravenously.

Before the eggs finished cooking, he reached into the cupboard, pulled out the last of the Pop-Tarts and wolfed them down. The toast popped up as he slid the eggs onto a plate. He jammed a piece of toast into the first yolk, and took a big, satisfying bite. His stomach rumbled again happily, this time as he finished off the first egg and raised his toast to puncture the second yolk.

Then he froze, half-chewed food hanging in his mouth.

The round, yellow-orange yolk glistened, surrounded by a bed of white. Orange. Orange that at one time had been a baby chicken, growing in a shell.

Growing. Growing. Growing.

Grown.

The toast dropped to the floor. It landed butter side down.

What the hell had he been thinking, eating a pile of eggs and worrying about work when he still had these fucking things inside him? He pulled back the towels edge to examine his thigh, exposing the wound that had helped knock him out cold for two straight days. The shower had cleared away the dried blood, leaving fresh pink scar tissue with only a small, dark red scab-pebble in the middle. The wound looked healthy. Normal. The whitish growth that had caused his itching was long gone.

It was gone . . . but the others werent.

He sat at the kitchen table and pulled his right knee to his chest, getting a good, close look at his shin.

The orange-peel skin was gone. What had taken its place didnt make him feel any better.

Where a circle of thick, pebbly, orange skin had once been, a peculiar triangle now lay. A triangle that was under his skin. Each of the triangles sides was about an inch long.

The skin covering the strange triangle had a pale bluish tinge to it, the same color as the blue veins in the underside of ones wrist. But it wasnt really his skin. There was no break in the skin that wrapped around his leg, that covered his whole body for that matter, but somehow what covered the blue triangle just didnt seem to be his. It felt tougher than his own.

Near each of the triangles three points was a quarter-inch slit pointing to the triangles center. They reminded Perry of the slits in a homemade apple pie if, of course, apple pie were triangular, made of human skin, and held a bluish tinge.

What the fuck was it?

Perrys breath came in rapid, short, shallow gasps. He had to get to a hospital.

His father had gone into a hospital. His father had never come out. The doctors didnt do a fucking thing for his father. Jacob Dawsey spent the last two months of his life slowly shriveling up on a hospital bed, good-for-nothing doctors sticking him full of needles, poking and prodding and testing. All the while his barrel-chested, 265-pound father shrunk to a six-foot-five, 150-pound living mummy, a character out of some childhood nightmare.

Perry had gone into the hospital once himself, right after that Rose Bowl injury to his knee. Damn doctors were supposed to be able to fix anything. Turned out they couldnt. Months later a second set of specialists -and theres always plenty of specialists for an AllBig Ten linebacker, thank you very much- said the first doctors had screwed things up, that Perry might have continued his career if theyd done things right.

But this wasnt a blown knee. This wasnt even cancer. Cancer was a semi-living mass of flesh. The thing hed pulled out of his leg had been alive, it had moved on its own.

And there were six more. Six more that had grown unhindered for two days, while hed been unconscious. It had only taken three days for the things to go from a little rash to a squirming horror, and another forty-eight hours to transform into these bizarre triangular growths. What the hell might they become in the next twenty-four hours? The next forty-eight?

Perry rushed to throw on the first clothes he could find, grabbed his keys and coat and headed for his car.

Hospital time.

Definitely hospital time.

32.

CALLING DR. CHENG, CALLING DR. CHENG

Margaret waited for Dr. Cheng to come to the phone. She didnt like to be made to wait, but it was hard to be upset when Agent Clarence Ottos strong hands worked her bunched-up shoulder muscles. She was still in the directors office, except now she was sitting in the big-girls chair. Murray was on his way back to Washington. Amos was taking advantage of the downtime to get some sleep in one of the hospitals empty rooms.

Cheng was a bit of a bigwig at the CDC headquarters in Atlanta. She didnt know the man from Adam, but she had to admit it was fun to hear people at the main CDC office jump when she called. One phone call from Murray opened a lot of doors.

This is Doctor Cheng. Margaret shook her head slightly. Shed expected an Asian accent. This guy sounded like he was from Bakersfield.

Doctor Cheng, Margaret Montoya.

How can I help you today, Margaret? It seems you've got something important to discuss, important enough for the director to call me and tell me to make sure you get everything you need. He sounded annoyed, as if her call had pulled him away from something that he thought was very important.

Yes, Doctor Cheng. I'm actually CDC myself.

Really? I wonder why I've never heard of you. Do you work in Atlanta?

Margaret grimaced at the question. No, actually, CCID in Cincinnati.

Ah, Cheng said. There was a lot of contempt and derision loaded in to that single syllable.

Doctor Cheng, I need some information on your Morgellons task force, Margaret said.

You bothered me for that?

Afraid so. We're working on a related disease.

Must not be much of a relation, Cheng said. Because there is no disease. Just a lot of crazy people who have convinced themselves they have bugs crawling under their skin. He sounded about as compassionate as a guy opening up the gas valve at a Nazi death camp.

I'm more interested in the fibers.

Pause. Yes, well, there is something strange there, but it hardly merits all the attention. I'll tell you, I wasn't thrilled to be put in charge of this mass delusion. Fibers in your skin don't make you crazy, although I will say that the pain suffered by some victims seems very real. A few have genuine fibers that seem to be created by their own bodies, but for most of them these fibers turn out to be carpet fibers, clothing fibers, things like that. They convince themselves they have this infestation, they scratch themselves bloody, and these tiny fibers get stuck in the wounds. Hardly an epidemic.

But you've seen some of these genuine cellulose fibers growing out of the skin, yes?

We have found a few, yes, Cheng said.

I'm hoping you have a database on those claiming to be infected, particularly those who actually show the fibers.

The question seemed to anger Cheng. Of course we have a database, Doctor Montoya. We've sent out bulletins to all medical professionals, asking them to report anything that fits in to the myriad symptoms of these Morgellons victims. Tell me what you're working on. If it's a Morgellons case, it falls under the purview of this task force. You should be reporting it to me.

Margaret slunk into her chair and rubbed her eyes. This wasn't going the way she'd thought it would.

Margaret, Otto whispered. She opened her eyes. Now he was on the other side of the desk. He pointed to her, then held his left palm down at waist level. His right hand whipped back and forth in front of his groin, like he was spanking an imaginary person bent over in front of him. Then he pointed at the phone. Go on, girl, whip that ass.

Margaret nodded. That's right. I'm in charge now, I'm not this guy's bitch. If anything, he's mine.

I haven't got all day, Montoya, Cheng said. What are you working on?

Afraid I can't tell you, Cheng, Margaret said. You're not cleared to have that information. And in this instance you're reporting to me. You did hear about the executive order, didn't you?

A pause.

Didn't you?

Of course I did.

Good. I don't have time for this. Either stop being an insufferable prick or I'll just call the CDC director and let him know I can't get you to cooperate.

A longer pause. Otto had moved on from slapping the imaginary booty, and was now riding the pony. He looked ridiculous, a big grown man, CIA agent, in the black suit and the red tie, twirling in a circle with an expression of affected ecstasy on his face. Margaret couldn't help but smile.

Fine, Cheng finally said. What do you need?

What I need you to do, right now, is call up your most recent reports. And I'm looking for dates of first symptoms, as reported by the patient. So I'm not interested in people who said they've been suffering for ten years and just came in. I understand what date of first symptoms means, Cheng snapped.

She heard keys clacking as he worked his computer.

We had a case in Detroit two weeks ago, he said. A Gary Leeland. Visited his primary caregiver, reported the fibers growing out of his right arm. Multiple sores from scratching. Then . . . two cases in Ann Arbor, Michigan. These are less than a week old. Kiet Nguyen, art major at the University of Michigan. And Samantha Hester, who brought in her daughter, Missy, to the same physician, actually.

Margaret scribbled notes furiously, even though she'd have Cheng email her all the files. When? When did they call in?

Nguyen was seven days ago, Hester was six.

And have you had any contact with them?

As a matter of fact, yes. I personally examined Missy. Girl had a tiny fiber sticking out of her right wrist. I removed it, gave her a full examination, she had no other rashes, fibers or marks of any kind.

How long ago was that?

Four days ago. Delightful little girl. I'm actually flying back there later today to examine her again.

No need for that, Doctor Cheng. I'll be in Ann Arbor and I'll examine her.

Oh really? And do you know what youre looking for?

Yes, Doctor, Margaret said. I know exactly what Im looking for. How about Mister Nguyen?

He was another story. Quite rude.

What did he say?

Well, I called him to follow up, and as soon as I told him I was from

the CDC, he asked me . . . let me check my notes here...Yes, here it is. He said, If you show your fucking face around here, you fucking spy piece of shit, I will cut off your fucking balls and shove them in your fucking mouth. Ill kill anyone you send. Fuck you. Then he hung up. Needless to say, hes low on the list of people to interview.

Any others?

None in the past six months.

Send me those case files, and do it now. Do you have addresses for

Nguyen and Hester?

I told you, we have a database, Doctor Montoya.

Thank you, Doctor Cheng, youve been most helpful. She hung up, then immediately dialed Murray.

33.

DRIVIN & DRINKIN

Doom swirled before Perrys eyes like the tender flakes of snow gracefully kissing his windshield. He drove through town, down Washtenaw Avenue, heading for the hospital.

The University of Michigan Medical Center was supposed to be one of the best hospitals in the world. Lots of innovative research, new techniques, top-shelf doctors if there was any help to be had, that was the place. But that was a big if.

It was all over, really. What were the doctors going to tell him, anyway? Maybe they could tell him something. Better to go out knowing his killer than to just sit in the apartment and waste away to nothing. But more than likely, he knew, the doctors would look at him, examine him, poke him and prod him, then announce that this disease was a new development. And somehow, even though they would know as much about the disease as the Pope knew about making hard-core porn, the doctors would still try to sound intelligent. Doctors were like that, always trying to come across as wise men, never for a moment losing the charade of competence.

He slowed to turn right on Observatory, but had to wait for pedestrians to cross the slushy street. He was on campus now, and U of M students were renowned for their lackadaisical attitude toward cars. They lazily strolled through crosswalks, even on busy streets, immortal in their youth and confident that cars would slow for them. They were college students, and for most of them the concept that they might face a quick and unfair death had yet to hit home. Your day will come, Perry said quietly to the bundled and backpacked students as they passed in front of his car. Mine sure as hell has. He finished his turn onto Observatory. Now he was only a few blocks from the medical center. Perry realized he had yet to call work. What difference did it make if he called in, anyway? A lot of good his three years of devotion did at this point. Never late once, and would that help him survive?

Fuck em all, Perry said quietly. His coworkers would hear about it

soon enough on the news. He could hear the teaser now: Michigan man dies from new disease, which is named after his doctor, who is still very much alive and getting pretty frigging rich on the lecture circuit. Story at eleven.

He stopped for a red light at Geddes. East Medical Center Drive was just up on the right. Cottony clumps of snow swam in the fluctuating wind, hanging weightless and spinning one second, whipping about as if on an intangible roller coaster the next. Despair filled his skull more tightly than even his own brain. All around him were cars filled with normal people. Perfectly unaware of the disease turning Perrys body inside out. Fucking normal people.

Or...or were they normal? How did he know they werent suffering from the same condition? Maybe they sat in their cars, fighting the urge to itch, to scratch until their fingernails came back bloody. How was he to know if the people around him were normal or infected?

It hit him, suddenly and solidly, that it was highly unlikely he was the first person with this disease. And if he wasnt the first, a disturbing question reared up to confront him: Why hadnt he heard of this before?

A horn blast sounded behind him, jerking him back into awareness. The light was green. Heart racing, mind drowning in a sea of strange questions, he pulled through the intersection, then off to the side of the road. On his right was a snow-covered cemetery. How friggin perfect. Traffic rolled along behind him, the people who might or might not be normal going on about their business. He gripped the steering wheel to keep his hands from shaking.

Why hadnt he heard of this before?

He had fucking blue triangles growing under his skin, for the love of God. The disease seemed so unusual the media would have reported such a thing long ago, wouldnt they? Of course they would have. Unless . . . unless the people with this disease went into the hospital, but never came out.

Perry sat very still, staring out the windshield, the cold air filtering into the car and chasing away the artificial heat. What if the hospital was waiting for people like him? Maybe they wouldnt even try to help him. Maybe they would just study the triangle, lock him up like a prisoner so they could watch him die. And maybe theyd just kill him and dissect him like some lab animal.

It was the only thing that made sense, or hed have heard of this somewhere. There was more to this situation, much more. It wasnt just a simple disease, after all; he was marked for death sure as if he were in a Nazi concentration

camp and the triangles were Stars of David sewn onto his clothes.

But if he couldn't go to the hospital, what was he going to do? What the hell could he do?

Fear slowly sank its claws into his consciousness, squeezing out his breath, joining with the biting cold to make his big body shiver.

I need a drink, Perry whispered. And just a little time to figure this out.

He did a U-turn and kept driving. He didn't stop until he reached the Washtenaw Party Store. The pay phone was not in use, for once he didn't talk to anyone, he didn't look at anyone, he made his purchase and left.

34.

TURKEY SHOOT

Perry shambled back into his apartment carrying two bottles of Wild Turkey one full, the other already half empty. The promise of violence hung off his frame like the potential energy of a safe hanging fifteen stories over a crowded street.

Friday night, and it was party time.

Perry calmly set the bottles on the kitchen table, then strolled into the bathroom. The floor there was crusted not only with dried vomit, but with dried blood as well. He noticed a good three inches of water remained in the tub, still and dead like stagnant pond water, disturbed only by the plunk of occasional drops from the shower head. Chunks of the thick orange skin clogged the drain. Smaller parts floated on the water's filthy soap-scum surface. He heard a faint trickle slipping down the drain, filtering past the disgusting clog.

He hadn't even thought about it when he'd showered. The orange skin apparently came off on its own. His free hand gently touched his collarbone, fingers tracing the slightly too-firm outline of a triangle. It felt more defined, the edges slightly more discernible to the touch. The blue looked a bit more pronounced, still faint, but now clearly visible with a color like that of a faded tattoo.

He walked back to the kitchen. He grabbed a fork and then a knife out of the butchers block, eyes once again lingering on the thickhandled, thick-bladed chicken scissors. He was dying. So many things yet to do, to experience. He'd never see Germany, never go deep-sea fishing, never visit the Alamo or all the historical sites of colonial America. He'd never get married. Never have children.

It wasn't all bad. He'd lived a full life. He'd been the first in his family to attend college. He'd played Division I football, been on ESPN, lived his childhood dream of being a Wolverine playing in front of 112,000 screaming fans at the Big House. But above all, he'd escaped his father's life of violence. He had surpassed his environment, surpassed his heritage, fought and clawed his way into respectability.

But for what? For nothing, that's what.

He sat down at the kitchen table, set the knife on the tabletop, then took a long pull from the half-empty fifth. It tasted awful and seared his throat, but those sensations barely registered on his brain. He knocked it back as if it were water. The Wild Turkey was already roaring through his head. By the time he finished the bottle he knew he'd be three sheets to the wind. Ripped. Drunk-ass wasted.

He'd be feeling no pain.

Tears of despair tugged at his eyes. It wasn't fair. He refused to cry. His father hadn't cried once during that whole cancer ordeal, and if Dad hadn't, Perry wouldn't, either.

Good old Dirty Bird carried a kick as severe as its taste. Perry felt light-headed and his toes tingled. His thoughts seemed thick, syrupy. He sat for a few minutes more, fighting back the tears, the Wild Turkey worming its way into his brain.

He picked up the knife.

The blade was almost ten inches long. The kitchen's fluorescent ceiling lights seemed to glint off of each and every tiny serration. When he cooked chicken or beef, he used the sharp butcher knife to cut through the no no no raw meat with little effort. Perry doubted that the knife would be any less effective on human flesh, particularly the thin skin atop his shin.

His eyes blurred a little and he shook his head. He realized he was about to cut into his own body with a butcher knife. A little Wild Turkey goes a long way. Yes, he was going to cut himself, but there was something in his body that no no no didn't belong.

He was going to die, sure, so be it, but he was taking these fucking triangle things with him. It was time for the Big Six to lose a member. Perry laughed out loud anytime you drop players from the lineup, you have to make a cut.

He polished off the last of the fifth, the liquid searing its way down his throat. He tossed the empty bottle aside, then used the knife to cut right through his jeans. The denim offered little resistance to the blade. In a few seconds, his pant leg hung in two long, ragged strips, exposing his tree trunk of a leg.

Perry lifted his foreleg and laid it on the kitchen table like a pot roast served at a family dinner. The wood felt cool against the back of his calf. The Wild Turkey buzz droned through his mind like a horde of lazy bumblebees. He knew if he didn't act soon, he wouldn't be able to do anything but babble, drool and pass out.

It was time to get down to no no nokillbusiness.

Perry steeled himself with a few deep breaths. He was acting crazy, he knew that, but what difference did it make to a dead man? He poked at the triangle with the fork. Nothing had changed since his earlier examination.

You're going to kill me? Perry said. No-no-no, my friend, I'm going to kill you.

He pushed the fork into his skin, just firmly enough to hold the triangle in place. The three metal tines made deep

indents in the bluish skin.

Small flecks of rust dotted the knife blade. Hed never noticed them before. He noticed them now. He was suddenly noticing a lot of things about the knife, things like the nicks in the wooden handle, things like the two silvery rivets that fastened the comfortable wooden handle to the blade, things like the grain of the wood, like a hundred little minnows forever trapped mid-swim in a soft, warm, brown stream.

Hed made the first cut before he really knew what he was doing. He found himself staring drunkenly at a two-inch gash. Hot, tickling blood spilled down the side of his calf, spreading across the tabletop, then falling in thick red splatters against the white linoleum floor. He heard the dripping of the blood before he felt the pain, which was severe but distant separated, as if it were pain seen on TV while Perry was curled up on the couch under a fuzzy blanket with a cold Coke in one hand and the remote control in the other.

no kill no please no kill

He felt as if he were on autopilot, gliding through this bizarre action like a spectator. Who knew there would be this much blood? It covered his leg, smeared against his pale skin, made it difficult to see the triangles edge, yet he pushed down hard on the fork, put the knife blade perpendicular to his skin and made another fast cut. More blood spilled across

the table and onto the floor. The pain didnt feel distant now, not at all. Perry ground his teeth in an effort to control himself, to finish the job.

The blood somehow found its way up the knife blade and onto his hands. He heard the steady stream-drip of his own blood pattering to the floor below.

Hows it feel, you little fucker? Perrys words were slow and slurred. Hows it feel? Do you like that? Kill me? No-no-no, Ill kill you. Youve got to have discipline.

Perry steeled himself, forcing his vision to clear once more and his mind to center on the next task. Despite his drunken state, his hands remained amazingly steady hed definitely missed his calling in life.

no kill please no kill no

His face furrowed in confusion. Something tickled at the edge of his mind, like a dream trying to crawl in and stir up nocturnal secrets. He violently shook his head, then stared with new focus at the bloody fork and knife. The second cut had left one side of the triangle in place, like a door hinge he slid the blade under the angular flap and flipped it back like a bloody piece of raw bacon.

cold no kill cold cold

What he saw stopped him instantly. A low hiss leaked from his mouth like air from a punctured tire.

Hows that for a prize in your Cracker Jacks?

He stared at the thing that had made him itch, made him tear into himself like a wild animal in a trap at what was undoubtedly killing him. Blood pooled and flowed around a dark blue triangular lump. Perry wiped away the pulsating blood to get a better look.

It was deep blue, shiny, although maybe that was from the wetness of the blood rather than its true color. The triangles surface wasnt smooth, but gnarled, twisted . . . malignant, like tree roots massed together and exposed to the soil surface, or like the texture of steel cable without the orderly lines.

Sobriety suddenly swam its way to the surface, spurred on by a horrorfueled fight-or-flight response. This was a whole nother ball game from the rashes, a completely different league than the thick orange blisters. His body hadnt made this thing, couldnt have where the hell had it come from?

Perry snarled. The growling voice of a rabid animal escaped his throat. He not-so-gently slid the fork under the bloody blue triangle. The metal tines scraped against his own raw flesh. Hed never felt pain so

no feel no kill no kill

pure, so dense, so all-encompassing, but he ignored it completely, focusing instead on the abomination buried in his shin.

Play through the pain.

He felt the tines of the fork meet the slightly giving resistance of the triangles stem. He gently fished around until the fork slid all the way through, its red-smeared prongs poking their little heads out from underneath the triangles other side.

The blood-covered table felt cold and sticky under his calf. Perry raised the fork. The triangle seemed to lift easily. The stem itself, however, was another affair, far more solid and firm than before. It would take strength to pull this one out.

Sweat poured from his face as pain sheared through his leg. It was slamminly intense, but he held it in check with the promise of purging this abomination from his body. Perry yanked up hard on the

no kill no kill

fork, but the stem held firm. Blood spilled anew from the leg, splashing into the puddle that blazed red against the white linoleum floor.

His head lolled to the right. Spots appeared before his eyes. He scrunched his eyes shut and shook his head, blinking fast as his equilibrium and vision returned. Hed almost passed out. Had he lost that much blood? His head started to spin he didnt know if it was from the Wild Turkey or blood loss. He felt control slipping away.

please no no no no no no no

He jammed the fork in deeper, allowing more of the tines to poke through the other side, enough for him to get a decent hold with his free hand. He held the fork as if it were a curling bar and he was ripping off a few quick reps.

His meaty biceps twitched in anticipation. He took a breath and

NO NO NO NO NO NO NO

NO NO NO NO

yanked.

He heard a ripping sound and felt a blast of searing nuclear fire rage through his leg. Something in the stem snapped. Perrys momentum carried him backward over his chair and spilled him onto the floor.

Blood had trickled before now it gushed, this time from the back of the leg. A wave of gray washed across his eyes.

Have to stop the bleeding. Im not gonna die on the kitchen floor . . .

He pulled off his T-shirt and leaned forward, ass and legs spreading blood all across the linoleum. Perry wrapped the shirt around his gushing calf, tied a granny knot, then yanked it tight with all his strength. His short scream filled the small apartment.

He rolled to his back, body tightly tense with agony, the gray washing over him yet again. He fell limp. His chest moved in regular breaths as he lay on the blood-smeared floor.

COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

The five remaining organisms conducted a poll of sorts. Following deeply ingrained instructions, they measured densities of thyroxine and triiodothyronine, hormones that stimulate the metabolic rate. Both hormones are produced by the thyroid gland, which is located in the neck region of all vertebrates. By measuring the densities of these chemicals in the bloodstream, the five organisms detected which of their number was closest to the neck.

Or, more accurately, which was closest to the brain.

The triangle on the hosts back, the one on the spine, just below the shoulder blades, came out the winner. This new discovery stimulated additional specialized cell development from that triangle like a stealthy snake approaching an unknowing victim, a new tendril slowly grew along the spinal column toward the brain.

Once there, the tendril split into hundreds of long strands, each microscopically thin. The tendrils sought out the brains convergence zones. These zones act like mental switching stations, providing access to information and linking that information to other relevant data. The tendrils sought out specific areas: the thalamus, the amygdala, the caudate nucleus, the hypothalamus, the hippocampus, the septum, and particular areas of the cerebral cortex. The tendrils growth was very specific, very directed.

Sentience was limited but progressing they had only just begun to think, to be aware of themselves. Words had floated about their environment, and they had picked up a few, but with the growth into the brain they would learn more and learn them quickly.

They had tried to stop the host, but their messages were weak. They simply didnt have enough information to communicate properly. That was changing; soon they would be strong enough to make him listen.

WAKE UP WE HUNGRY

wake up we hungry

Waking up on a linoleum floor was getting to be an annoying habit. His head hurt again. This time, however, he immediately identified the pain as a hangover.

The kitchen lights glared in his eyes. He saw flies behind the clear plastic that sat in front of the fluorescent lights. The bugs had flown up there, looking to do whatever it is that bugs want to do with lights, then they got cooked, burned to a crispy-crunchy finish.

His leg ached. His stomach grumbled. Loudly. First thing in his mind -besides the bugs- was the fact that he hadnt really eaten anything in three days. Depending, of course, on how long hed been out this time. No sunlight filtered in from the living room, so obviously it was sometime in the evening.

Perry looked down at his leg. The bleeding had stopped. The shirt had gone from athletic gray to a sickly dried brown, a tie-dyed T-shirt suitable for Marilyn Manson.

Dried blood smears coated the linoleum floor, blackish brown against the shiny white. It looked as if a three-year-old had come in from playing in the rain, covered in puddle mud, then rolled on the floor.

His leg hurt with the dull, throbbing, pulsating pain of a recent wound struggling to heal. There was no sign of the Big Six acting up; from those areas he felt no itching, no pain. That didnt make Perry feel any better; there was no telling what the little bastards were up to now.

Big Six? A rather unhealthy smile tickled the corners of Perrys mouth. Thats not quite right. I got another one. Youre not the Big Six anymore now youre the Starting Five.

He wanted to find the fork, the one hed used to pull the creature from his body. He wanted to see what the blue thing looked like when it wasnt latched on to his leg like a suckling kangaroo imbedded in the pouch of its mother.

His leg not only hurt like a bitch, but felt funny in a way he couldnt quite identify. What had the Triangle done on the way out?

Perry rolled to his stomach and struggled to rise without putting weight on his bad leg. He hopped up on his good leg and leaned on the counter, then scanned the floor for the fork. It had slid against the refrigerator.

He took one careful hop, leaned on the other counter, then stooped to pick up the fork.

I hope it hurt, you fucker, Perry said quietly as he examined his grisly trophy.

The Triangle looked like flaky, dried-up black seaweed wrapped around the fork in a permanent death embrace. He could barely make out the once-triangular shape, as it was now a lifeless hunk of crap without form or function.

But it wasnt the body that held his rapt attention or made his jaw hang open with astonishment and an additional serving of fear. It wasnt the body at all.

The creatures tail was just as dry, light and stiff as the body, but the very end was something totally unexpected. Hooked, bony protrusions stuck out of the end like little claws or teeth. Perry gingerly touched one sharp as a knife. As sharp as the butchers knife hed used to cut into his own leg like some narcissistic cannibal. Some of the claws hooked inward; these showed visible breaks and cracks. They must have helped hold the tail to the shinbones. Five of the claws, however, pointed outward or hooked wickedly upward, toward the now-dried head.

But how would that help hold on to anything? Perry murmured. What the hell is this?

His lip curled in revulsion as their purpose became suddenly clear. The outwardly curved hooks couldnt help hold the tail in place they could only cut and slash if the creature were pulled from its human burrow.

Thats why his leg had bled all over, because hed dragged five of the quarter-inch, razor-sharp claws through the meat

of his calf and out his shin.

They were a defense mechanism. Intended to hurt Perry if he tried to remove the Triangle. Now that he knew what was buried in his body, the claws served as a warning

a warning of what would happen if he tried to remove any more. Hed been lucky with the leg if one of these wicked claws had cut through an artery, it would have killed him.

no tr y it again

Perry wondered if he should try it again, try to get the rest of them out. But brute force obviously wasnt the way to...to...

Perry blinked a few times. His mind dry-fired, stayed blank as he tried to comprehend what had just happened. Hed clearly heard a voice. Was he going loopy? His mind filled with vague memories of his homespun surgery and that same voice echoing through his drunken head. Great. On top of dying, now he was developing a split personality. He was going loopy. Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs. Insane in the membrane.

Im crazy. Thats it. Im apeshit crazy. Thats the only answer.

you no crazy we no think so

That one stopped Perry cold. He managed a parched swallow and ignored an untimely rumble from his underpaid belly.

The voice had said, we no think so.

We.

As in more than one.

As in . . .

As in the Starting Five.

Perry was beyond speechless he was thoughtless.

Ill be a sonofabitch, Perry whispered.

sonofabitch

the voice echoed, a voice he heard as clear as day, although his ears didnt pick up a thing. He could hear the voice in his head no vocal characteristics or tone, just words.

sonofabitch feed us

It was them. The Starting Five. They were talking in his head. Perry leaned heavily against the counter, in danger of falling to the floor as if struck by a physical blow. His rashes had turned into triangles, and now they were talking to him. Should he answer them?

Hello, Perry thought no response. He tried concentrating, focusing. HELLO, he thought, as hard as he could. Still no response.

feed us we hungry

Feed you?

A response slammed through his head like the roar of a Rose Bowl crowd on New Years Day.

y es y es y es feed us

we hungry

Theyd answered him. Perry squinted his eyes and thought as loudly as he could. Whyd you answer me that time? He waited, but again heard no response. Answer me!

His stomach grumbled loudly, the sound bordering on an internal roar. Despite the shock of hearing voices in his head, he couldnt deny the gnawing feeling in his gut.

Im pretty hungry myself, Perry whispered.

so ar e w e feed us

we hungry

His head lifted with final understanding. Can you hear me?

y es w e hear you

You can talk into my head, but you cant hear my thoughts? w e send wor ds thr ough y our ner v es y our ner v es no send wor ds back ar e y ou hungr y now

What escaped Perrys mouth was somewhere between a laugh and a cry and a stutter. A sick, twisted bark of despair, a laugh that may have once echoed through Andersonville, Buchenwald or any of historys dark places where human beings give up all hope.

Perry fought back tears, tears that welled up in response to an emotion he couldnt define. His chest felt tight. His one good leg felt weak. He leaned heavily on the kitchen counter, head hanging down, eyes staring at the floor but seeing nothing.

feed us w e hungr y

The voice in his head grew louder, as did the grumbling in his stomach. Sudden stabbing pains in his belly snapped him out of his grim reverie. He hadnt eaten properly in days. Grinding hunger combined with a slight echo of sickly pink nausea.

sonofabitch feed us w e hungry

The voice in his head -it felt funny to use that term in all seriousness, for it was a term reserved for comedy or bad horror novels, but now it

was simply accurate- gave up all attempts at sentence structure and moved toward steady chanting.

feed us feedus feedusfeedusfeedus

Perry hobbled a bit to open the fridge and survey the contents. Some leftover tuna fish; a mostly empty tub of Country Crock; a mostly full jar of Hersheys chocolate syrup; an old, slightly gamey jar of Smuckers strawberry preserves; and stop the presses an unopened jar of Ragu spaghetti sauce.

Perry removed the jar from the fridge and explored the cupboard, looking for noodles. True to his current run of luck, he had none, only some Rice-A-Roni and a half-empty bag of Cost Cutter plain white rice. He also found one can of Campbells Pork & Beans, half a loaf of bread and a three-pound can of butter-flavor Crisco. What a time to realize that hed let his shopping duties slip.

It was enough to get started, anyway he felt so hungry he wouldnt have turned down chocolate-covered cockroaches. He crammed two slices of bread into the toaster and another into his salivating mouth. He opened the pork and beans and took a big sniff, y esy esy esy esy esy esy es

then dumped them into a bowl and tossed them in the microwave. He finished chewing the bread and stuffed another piece into his mouth before the toast came up. He immediately put in two more slices.

The microwave timer beeped insistently. Perry removed the scaldinghot bowl, grabbed his toast and hopped to the table. It was covered with blood. His blood. He decided to eat standing at the counter. He leaned over to the silverware drawer, grabbed a fork and dug in even though the beans were still hot enough to burn his tongue.

Aside from a piece of toast and some egg yolk, hed gone days without food. His body rejoiced in the meal. The pork and beans tasted better than anything hed ever eaten before better than shrimp, better than steak, better than fresh lake trout.

By the time he polished off the beans and all the bread, he felt much more himself. His hunger satiated for the moment, his thoughts centered on the rather unique problem at hand. He realized that the Starting Five hadn't made a peep since he'd started eating.

Hey, Perry said. He doubted anything could feel as surreal as talking to Triangles embedded in his body, which apparently talked back to him via his own nervous system.

Hey, are you there?

y e s w e h e r e

They sounded calmer, far more relaxed than when they'd complained of hunger.

Why aren't you talking? He wanted to hear them talk, both because he wanted to know more about these bizarre horrors and because they had been quiet for days, and when they'd been quiet, they had grown.

wait to eat food

c o m e s n o w

That phrase sent a shiver through his chest. He immediately understood the situation. The Triangles were like a tapeworm or something, absorbing the food he digested. Even though he had huge triangular organisms living in his body, he found the internal vampirism even more horrifying.

These critters were anchored into his muscles, tendons and skeleton, and tapped into his bloodstream like a baby cow nursing off a mother's teat. Anger swelled up inside him, hot and tumultuous and lava-red. But as the anger brewed, so did a realization.

They couldn't eat unless he did, which meant they weren't feeding on him. The good news? They're not eating you from within. The bad news? They're growing inside you even faster thanks to a highly nutritious porkn-beans buffet. He felt violated, like the victim of some horrible, biological rape.

He grew more aware of the pain in his body. His head hurt. His leg hurt. His stomach felt a little queasy. His eyes kept closing. He wanted to crawl into bed and give up, forget about the whole thing and let fate run its sadistic course. He made it as far as the couch, hopping carefully on his one leg before easing himself onto the welcome and waiting cushions. The couch seemed to caress his body, sucking away his stress, taking it, perhaps, under the cushions with the dirt and loose change. Maybe he'd die in his sleep, but he couldn't stop sleep from coming.

37.

GONNA NEED A STEAM CLEANER FOR THAT

Dew smelled it right off.

Unmistakable. Unforgettable.

The smell of death.

Faint, just a touch coming on the wind. It was still early, but he knew

from hard-won experience that in a few hours that smell would grow until the neighbors caught a whiff or two.

Control, this is Phillips. Clear odor of decomposing human body coming from Nguyens house. I need to move in right now.

Understood, Phillips. Move in. Support teams are in position.

Dew walked up the unshoveled sidewalk, feet crunching on a combination of snow and salt crystals. Ann Arbor, Michigan. Home to forty thousand college kids, many crowded into big, old, beat-up homes like this one. A single-family dwelling that in 1950 was a hallmark of middle-class success, housing Mom and Dad and a passel of kids, now held a half dozen students, usually more, packed in two to a stinky, beerstained room.

There wasn't a sound coming from the house. The university had just let out on break, the fall semester closing only two days earlier. Still, even with the break, he could hear a basketball game blasting from the house on his left and on his right. TV blaring, drunken kids singing fight songs and screaming at the television. But the one in the middle? Nothing.

He tried the handle. Locked. He peeked in a window, but it was boarded up from the inside with plywood. A quick check showed that all the windows were boarded up.

Dew was tired of fucking around. Just plain tired of it. He stood in front of the door, drew his .45, reared back and gave it a solid kick. It took two more, but the door finally swung open.

And the smell rolled out like Satan's breath.

Dew swallowed, then stepped inside.

Jesus, he said. He wasn't a religious man, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Phillips, Control here. Are you okay?

Im pretty fucking far from okay, Dew said quietly, his microphone picking up every sound. Send in all three teams, right now. Come in quiet and hot. Three civvies dead by small-arms fire, perp probably still inside. And call the body wagons, we got a big haul here.

In the living room alone, Dew counted three bloated bodies. Despite their greenish skin, swollen stomachs and the flies swirling around them, he recognized that each had a gunshot wound to the head. All of them had their hands and feet tied. They had been executed. Probably three or four days earlier, maybe a day or two before the end of the semester with classes over, and more than half the students heading home, the kids in this house wouldn't have been missed.

Where are you, you little fucking gook? Dew said. He knew it was a bad thing to think, a bad thing to say, but the

kid who did this was Vietnamese, and he was right about the age of the ones Dew used to kill back in the jungle. Well this one was getting his ticket punched, and right fucking now.

Four men in Racal suits and carrying P90s entered the house behind him, silent despite the bulky material. Dew used hand signals, telling them to spread out through the first floor. He sent a second four-man team into the basement, and took the final team with him upstairs. The house remained deathly quiet. He could hear the game, faintly, from both of the houses next door. The cheer-to-roar told him the Wolverines had just thrown down a serious dunk.

Dew led the walk up the creaky stairs. Up there, somewhere, was an infected jibbering madman. Like Brewbaker, but this one had a gun.