

*Memory alone arrogates itself the right to excerpt from dreams, to ignore the transitions, and to depict for us a series of dreams rather than the dream itself.*

André Breton

*Time and space flee every which way, disregarding your beloved logic.*

Mark Wingdings

## II

*From John Galamore, dated July 7-8, 1992*

Back in '89, when I was still Stephen Moore, I had dreams. Good ones. Back in '89, I was free. We were all free. Something tells me not even you are free now. Does that scare you? I hope it does. It sure as hell scares me.

Sometimes I'm happy here, and wouldn't dream of leaving. My dream the night before last is exactly why I have to leave. I told Ben about what I saw. He agrees that it must mean something, but he doesn't think it is to be taken literally, as I believe.

I have to save my landlord. I have to save the children. God, those children. What the fuck kind of world do we live in, to have something like that happen? I say that like I know what happened, I don't. I knew for a fleeting moment, but I can't remember. The dream was so vivid, so real. It's certainly the worst I've ever had, that I remember at least. But it wasn't a dream. It really happened-or rather, is going to happen. If I don't act quick. I can't unsee what I've seen. The future. I know what's going to happen if I don't intervene, hopefully with the help of Ben. I was a child once, too, and so were you. The universes' unknown possibilities shined through our broken little hearts and souls.

To children, everything is new, so they greet the strange and bizarre like a friend. Adults know better. Adults know there is no supernatural. Only the natural, and the unknown is but

natural phenomena we have yet to explain with science. Yes, adults know better. Right?

Ben isn't so sure about leaving. Is leaving the right word? I think *escaping* is a more proper term.

"I don't think your landlord is going to die. I definitely don't think some child or multiple children are going to be burned to death. It probably means you left something or someone behind, and you're just now realizing you're missing them, or it." he said.

My plan is to pretend to turn at precisely 11:55 PM. I will promptly get sent to a quiet room. The guards change shifts at midnight, giving me about a short window in which there will be no one-or less people-to slip past. I have no idea how much time I'll have. In the quiet room I will subdue the tech who attempts to "silence" me, and change into his clothing, and leave as he would be replaced with another tech at that time.

I don't know if this will work, and telling you certainly isn't the best idea, but I know you won't read this for a long time. You probably have someone reading your emails for you anyway. I hope not. It doesn't matter to me that you may never read this. I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing this for me.

Ben won't be coming. He says it's too risky and a bad idea. That's okay. Some things in life, I've learned, you just have to do alone.

There's one last thing I have to do before I leave.

## The New King - Chapter Four

### VII

Valeria was hungry, and tired, but the wizard would not let her rest. Not yet. He said it wasn't safe yet. Valeria wondered. Wondered if he was as he said he was. But how could that possibly be? He hasn't said anything about himself. Nothing to mistrust. She had to know more about him, especially if they were to save the world together.

"Where did you grow up?" she asked. "I began this life on another world." he replied, and turned to face her. They were in a jungle, and he was clearing the way with magic. He shot strange beams of light at the greenery, and instead of destroying the trees and twigs and beasts and bogs, he simply moved them aside, out of their way, so they could continue their trek. "That's mysterious. I don't believe it for a second." said Valeria. The stranger grinned. "You're sharp. But I tell you only the truth. We are much too near the darkness for me to lie to my greatest ally." Valeria quickly gave a look that said plainly: *I see*

*right through your bullshit.* “How am I your greatest ally? You don’t know me”- the wizard turned around to face the trees- “Hey, you great big ass, I’m talking to you!” and the wizard turned around. “This spell is hard to cast without full concentration, Valeria.” and she laughed. “How do I know you aren’t a practitioner of some sort of ancient dark magic, some kind of witchy occult... thing... I don’t know, but you’re suspicious. All you’ve told me is you’re a messenger for the *Eternal Sorcerers*, whatever they are. You may even not be lying to me, but you certainly aren’t telling me everything. I need some answers, now.” and the wizard continued his work, casting the plants aside. “You’ll know everything you need to know soon enough. Quiet now, we’re almost there.”

“Why the fuck am I even listening to you? How do you even know where we’re going? You don’t have a map. And what, are you gonna make me drink some *sacred* shit again?” and the wizard turned one last time. “No, Valeria. Your initial vision was all we needed, and I have a trusted source that has led me here. Listen to me now. Be quiet, or the garbuckles will hear you.” Valeria ceased her words, but she cast the wizard a dirty look. She would’ve kept going, but she didn’t know what a garbuckle was and didn’t quite want to find out.

A few minutes later, the wizard cleared the last of the wildlife before a cabin was affront the pair. It was a dingy little thing, made of mossy wood that was missing a few planks on the roof and walls. The rising sun lit the cabin. The wizard turned to Valeria and nodded as if to say “follow me.”

The stranger opened the door, and Valeria saw a single room contained inside. It had a bed, a desk, and a chair and that was all. The wizard approached the bed, and got on his knees to look under it. “As she said it would be,” he stood up. “Valeria, kindly help me move this bed,” he added. “Can I talk now?” she asked, mocking innocence. The wizard didn’t respond, but Valeria helped him move the eiderdown. There was nothing underneath the bed. “Take this, Valeria, and do not make me regret giving it to you.” said the wizard, and he handed her a small blade with an opaque gemstone inside the bottom of the hilt from the inside of his white cloak. It glowed brightly. “If you lose it, our mission is over,” he said. “We will need it to defeat the one who sent those monsters up to kill you and your friends, who I will refer to as only the dark one.”

The stranger then pulled out a small stick from the other side of his cloak. He tapped the floor four times in a strange, methodical way. He then drew a circle on the floor inside the boundaries of the taps, and that circle began to glow orange and soon the circle shrank and there was a hole in the floor where it once was, just wide enough for a thin person to slide through to what appeared to be a green stone landing below that trailed off out of sight...

“Here we go” said the wizard, and he managed his way down to the platform. Valeria followed. It was dark, but the light of Valeria’s new blade brightened the mossy stone walls and ground. “Be ready for anything, Valeria. I know not what lies ahead.”

He led the way nonetheless, and the hallway twisted and turned and occasionally split into two, three, and once even four directions. The stranger didn’t seem to know which way to take when the options

were presented to him, but he must have gotten lucky, because they found their way to a large cave, and though underground they were, there were trees with glowing ornaments and plants with lightning bugs. The walls were still stone, but there were four waterfalls, one in each corner. And in the center of the room was a pedestal. Valeria and the wizard cautiously approached, the wizard leading the way.

When they reached the pedestal, he held out his hand to Valeria, and she knew to hand him the dagger.

He lifted the blade atop the pillar, and saw a note there carved in the stone: *23, Ulysses' Cavern*

"This is not our final destination. In fact, this is not a destination for us at all. There are *at least* twenty-two other rooms that could contain the stone, and this is not it."

Valeria was suddenly enraged. "*Stone?* You mean we're here for a bloody *rock?*" The wizard turned to face her. "Yes, Valeria. We're here for a rock. Specifically, one of the eternal gemstones. Now, after all you have seen since you joined me in this quest, you seriously see that as a stretch? There are powers here far beyond your understanding, and I am absolutely correct that in these chambers lies the stone. Getting that *rock* is the *only* chance we have in defeating the dark one."

"Are you even listening to yourself? The only chance we have in defeating the dark one is to get to the King before he does, can't you see? That's what my vision was all about, was all that just for nothing?" asked Valeria in a shout. The stranger seemed frustrated. "The dark one has already reached the King, Valeria. But that is not to say all hope is lost, we will intervene when the time is--"

"What are you talking about?" said Valeria. "Already reached the King? No. That can't be--"

"But it is. All is not well in the world, but we still have time. You're ready to hear my plan, but first, a little background..." said the wizard over the sound of the waterfalls.

"In a time before time there was a singular being, known by many names. Tao and Ao are commonly used. This being was disgusted, horrified, by the nothing that existed, so they created two beings. Well, really five beings were created, but Tao began with two beings. Warden, the god of light, and--"

And then the stranger stopped mid-sentence. Over the sound of the waterfalls, Valeria heard something else coming from the chamber they entered from. Laughter.

"*And what?*" said a dark, raspy voice that Valeria recognized the timbre of, then more laughter.

Creatures sent by the dark one. "They must be here for the stone," whispered the wizard to himself, "get behind me." he said to Valeria. Valeria lifted her dirk, it was just bright enough to light the entrance, where she saw a wide, wicked smile. And then the smile began to move, closer, closer.

"We will be taking that," said the creature as it lifted a shaking hand to point at Valeria's blade. "along with your inconsequential life."

"This woman is a sacred seer and under my protection," said the wizard, "you will not be taking her life on this morning, nor any life on any morning, for the rest of time. Valeria, hand me the knife." and Valeria reluctantly obliged. The wizard approached the foul creature slowly, and the monster began to run at the stranger, and it quickly met him, at which point he lifted his arm and pushed the knife down, down, into its head, then again, then again, over and over he stabbed the beast, the blade

penetrating its head repeatedly, no blood was released, though Valeria could smell it from a distance, it was horrible. The creature fell finally, twitching on the mossy stone floor. Valeria noticed that the area that the wizard penetrated with the blade was glowing orange. Then, three more creatures barged in through the small entryway. The wizard, strangely, began to spin, faster, faster, his arm outstretched, holding the blade, and soon the stranger was but a blur, like a dreidel, and he began to move closer to the monsters, who he quickly met and slashed with the glowing knife. Those cuts, too, began to glow, and the creatures fell screaming horrible screams at an unsettling and unfathomable pitch.

He appreciated his work for a minute, or so it seemed to Valeria, possibly he was just making sure they were really dead. Is dead the right word? They seemed to be dead already. Valeria didn't know. They were still at last.

"Zook, the dark lord, sent these creatures. The risen dead. And they will be immortal until we kill Zook. Immortal to every weapon except..." and then he held out the special knife. "This one. That is why you must protect it. Because it holds in its hilt the most powerful of the eternal gemstones. The stone of light. We are here, in these caverns, for the stone of the forest. Now we go back where we came from and start over. It may take days, but we must act with haste. There could be more of these things in here with us, and if they get the stone before we do, our mission will be over and us defeated."

Hello, friend. I'm back, sending another message into the darkness. Into the void. Into the consumer. To your inbox. I'm twenty-six. I can't believe it. And how did I celebrate my birthday this year? I didn't, and I didn't last year either. I didn't even tell anyone, even Ben. I used to go all out on my birthdays. Some kind of innocence measured out in years. Now it doesn't seem like a mark of anything. Nothing I want to celebrate at least. I don't feel like celebrating being locked in here for over two years. I don't feel much of anything anymore.

I remember my thirteenth birthday quite clearly, as if it were yesterday. It was a special one. My dad showed me a gorgeous white gemstone that I never saw before nor have I seen since, and asked me to make a wish, but not to say it out loud. I obliged, and that summer's day, for the first time- well, ever, it snowed in July. I walked outside. I stuck my tongue out and let the snowflakes melt on it. I ran around a bit, and, after a while, when the ground was well and covered, I made an angel. We had a snowball fight. It was wonderful.

I remember my twenty-first birthday, too. My plan was to drink, but I didn't. I got high though. Very high. I went downtown to

the UFO club, the only psychedelic club in the city, and I smoked a lot of weed. And I was candy flipping (a small dose of both molly and LSD).

The walls were moving in the strangest way in sync with and against each other. I began to feel loved by this woman wearing paisley pajamas. And what a pattern it was! She didn't look at me once but I just *knew* how she felt, so I approached her. I walked with determination, lifting my knees up as far as I could, my arms dangling at my sides. She smiled at me briefly when we caught eyes and she began to laugh, a good sign! but she turned away. I didn't understand why she felt the need to hide herself. Women dig poetry. I thought on poetry broth a moment, and it went like this:

1. Simmer with an International Incident and bring to point of an all out conflict.
2. Place the all out conflict under the body of an old man (Note that it is desirable in times of national anxiety to have the individual suspended on a wire)
3. Add punch to your salad day and stir in all the remaining members of the massacre. A quilt can be lowered after simmering for thirty days. It is advisable to do this in the open air where members of the public will not be harmed.
4. Place all ingredients into a compound and dust liberally with medals and old dispatches. Chew until saturation point is reached. Boil larbs and cap.
5. Turning over new leaf. Place three handcarps to decorate and pour sauce onto a limping horse in a shinty garden.

I laughed so hard that snot shot out of my nose. I thought of blue. And then the molly really hit, and blue turned to red.

**God.** Strong love all around me. Why didn't she look longer?

It's all over now though, I turned toward my wife and realized I didn't have one. I was going to cry, but my lips were dry.

I was offered powder in a little baggie to snort by a blonde man in a polka-dot shirt and cool Dylan shades. It was a drug called Octarine, I had heard of it but never tried it before.

Apparently it's the strongest psychedelic known to man, created in a lab in the 1960s in a bathroom stall now. The acid was still strong with this one, and my golf shoes were gone. The door wouldn't lock! Look! Look at this damn door! It's fucking obese, man!

Should I snort this? Should I wait until the acid wears off? Yeah, man, maybe I should call my attorney. Some adrenaline junkie kicked in the door, fuck, man. "Get out!" I yelled. Or was it a harsh whisper? Downers came in with Nixon. I need a hit of smack to get me out of this present president predicament.

How many drugs am I even on? Maybe I just need some booze. Or an yvonette. Or cocaine. Yes, cocaine! What a drug. Wait, is this coke I have in my hand? Yes, yes it is, my prince. I empty the white powder onto the closed toilet lid- was that disgusting? Surely, but people do disgusting things for drugs all the time. Is that an excuse? Yes, maybe not a good one though. I grab a twenty dollar bill out of my pocket I was gonna buy a pack of yvonettes with and roll it up into the shape of a straw. Here goes everything, I laugh to myself as I snort the substance, and (∞)

that was when I realized I was a television. I thought *My God! What have I done?* ... Here I go again, I'm dying because I did drugs and it's all your fault. *There* I go again, placing the blame on everyone but me. Don't believe a word I say.

I'm falling again, I'm going to hit my head on the stall door or the toilet or the dirty floor. Those God damn plants, man. They're everywhere. But they're fucking yellow because they're going to die like I'm about to die because I'm falling-

It's a lost cause  
What's that crashing sound  
Not a silver lining to be found  
But she's all wearing her mask  
She never breaks character  
And I can't carry on  
I wish I could be  
Anyone but me  
There's a come up  
But you never leave it  
It, don't bother me  
And I dream about the doors  
And it's all about confusion  
Or temptation lest it runs  
But it's all about consumption  
Or that's the way it seems  
I wish she was beside me  
She's not there in my dreams  
And she'd love me if I was there  
I wish I was there to love her  
But I'm not there  
I'm gone.  
Deception don't bother me  
The biggest crowd you've ever seen  
The most angry they'll ever be  
You're playing all the right things  
They're yelling all the wrong things  
As you sing something about a deal

They don't mind how it might feel  
Everyone's a user  
And I've always been a loser  
And now you're all alone  
Nobody knows your name  
Nobody stays  
Nobody gets to know me  
They just tell me they love me  
I tattooed my brain all the way  
And I cry purple pills  
It's a complex  
Carry that weight  
It wants to break you down  
Let it, baby, let it  
You know nothing of me  
And maybe you never will  
The glass is empty  
I was clean  
Now I'm just mean  
I'm sold

I don't know if I can  
(retrieve what I've lost)  
A soul for parchment  
We're late  
Let's you and I both see  
Can we repent for all this hate?

A stranger, a child  
That don't need be hurt, no, more  
Don't need all the crashing  
Don't need all the breaking  
We're all rolling into one  
This place is on a mission  
And I hope that God was wrong  
When he said don't sing that song  
God bless the dead  
God damn the lying  
But if you need affirmation  
It'll all be over soon  
If he left today  
Says I don't think I'd mind  
How I'd just roll over and die  
As you go for a drive  
Surrounded by people  
Never feeling more alone  
We're all sinners  
Not a winner to be found  
It's all a long tragedy  
The beginning of the end  
What do you wish to find there?  
I hope it's not a friend  
The quiet comprehending  
Of the ending of it all  
It's a complex  
The purple pill  
Dehumanize and deconstruct  
Desperate for security  
Drink from that firehose

To forget the garden  
To find revelation  
To find revolution

For nine nights I was awake  
For ten days I slept straight  
And she's a painter  
I never cared about the plants  
I only cared about the bugs  
Could you taste the freedom?  
Just when you think you've cracked it  
You see you weren't even close

I forgive you  
I see things from your perspective now  
I can't forgive you  
Like I can't see why or how  
You don't know me  
It's just a state of mind  
When you forget to write it down

It's like a bullet in the brain  
And it's all about attention  
Or the hesitation's why she left  
If I broke character  
Would you still love me?

I can't tell what's really there  
And how I hate my messy hair  
And I was born to love her  
I've been mean  
And I believe  
But I don't allow it  
I don't belong to her  
And I don't belong at all  
The sky is blue  
And so are you  
Look into my eyes and see  
There's no stopping me  
And I ain't got nothing, babe  
No one to believe

Then he knew the world was at its end  
He lost all faith in government  
He knew he could be the one  
But something had to be done  
We're all under a spell  
Everything is different  
Everything's the same  
Everything in excess  
Care to guess my name?  
Never feeling success  
The realization's coming for us all  
There ain't a pill for it  
The resignation of all that was  
To become forever you  
And you're alone  
And you're gone, too.

The smiling sunflowers seem to know me  
But now they are whispering something  
They are two girls from a psych ward  
But they were never really real at all  
And they're watching you

And I admit I cry a lot but you don't  
know what I've got to deal with

A million men march forth  
Chasing while the wind blows west  
Chasing dandelions and eiderdowns and  
cups of tea



Nobody's home  
I gave myself to you  
I split my soul in two  
Nobody's home  
I think you know by now  
Nobody's home  
You're staring it in the face  
Nobody's home  
We've all checked out  
No one belongs when everyone belongs  
Isn't it funny how it moves along?  
Isn't it funny how we're all alone?  
Why ask why?

- I'm in a fucking star ship wormhole!

vanishes. ?

profound one. Fecundation exalts, a marvelous realization!

Everything I've ever done, !

[illegible]©<sup>TM</sup>

And after I came to the conclusion that I was playing pretend in a palatable Paris, I proceeded to plow pulpy playgrounds in the palm of a piano peacock's pet pumpkin's pair, picking prickly paint of said penguin's paper patrol as puppies recite poetic psalms. psychic powers point to peaceful pain and pondering putting perceived of pears peak in parts at part time pantry positions, pornographic posse to prefer paying pennies for pomegranates over pompous plaid purses, oh, and you.

you.

Is alliteration pointless? Perhaps.  $3x + 6y + 9z = 1x + 2x + 3y + 3y + 3z + 3z + 3z$  Piss or pass the pot, pal. I don't pretend to present perfection. I only paint with phrases. The point is, the tent is a map, the sky is glass, the sea is brown, everyone is upside down. Immortal transgender bald men, through this wonderful substance octarine, along with a hairy juniper flavored beer and the absorption of their twin brothers in utero, as well as growing woody tabby cat spiders, have become first-class flyers of the finest sort, sacrificing babies by drowning them in the blood of virgins. I yearn longest for these beers. Ah, yes, to taste the keen fruit of someone else's labour! It's criminal.

*And life is but a series of absurd statements and visions, a never ceasing and ever shifting fantasia (∞), a show of ecstasy and pain which are fleeting experiences that come and pass away as quickly as time allows, growing in complexity, absurdity and entertainment every moment the eternal soul, that cannot truly rest, exists. It need not believe or trust, sleep or eat, nor must it know where it came from or where it's going, for it came from itself and itself alone (which is the same as coming from nothing) and it is going everywhere (see: Eugenics). You must live with what comes through, let it all in and let it all out. There is darkness and light within and without you.*

Mark Wingdings

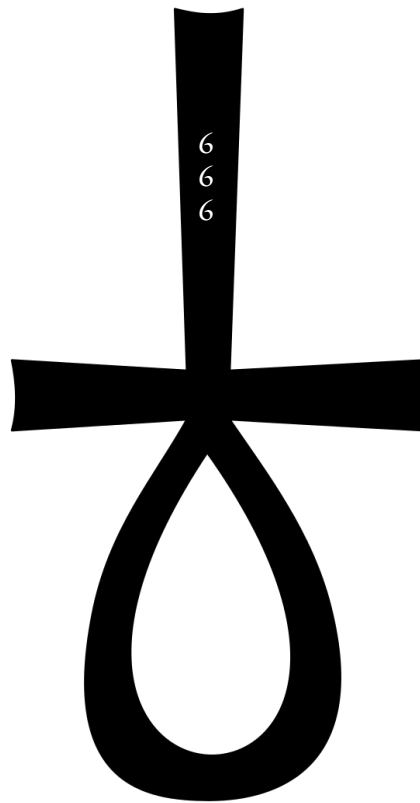
~~Imagine a giant spotlight, dancing happily up and down, and the hands wave out of the cars doors and the fire is green!~~  
Radios? Fine. Syphilis? If you like. Pornography? I don't see any reason why not. Immersive grapevines? Only if the grapes are violet! War? Gave us a good laugh. The telephone? Hello. Soluble fish? Don't count on it. Lorry driver? Quite unlikely, as are universal translators. Youth? Charming white hair. Erectile dysfunction? Thank you.  $\Delta\Delta\Delta$  before you and I could fight to the death, I was flushed down toilet after mayor's toilet until I met the cloning machine, making three copies of me and killing my prime host. I had to run to catch my firm nerf piano plane before it crashed. Rearranging my musical chair beds. Tattooing my brain and my chest. You're welcome.

The world is fucking ending tomorrow!  
There are pyramids everywhere and nobody knows where they came from! And there's a certain special species. Scale is a construct of human perception, aliens are real but not what we think and I only want to love you and I love the color pink.  
Pig shit, I walk the short walk to the aviation building and sell my soul in a cabin.  
There's a sun tomorrow that will shine right through you.  
Every plank is a little universe, can you picture that?  
Something like this is too beautiful to come from my mind.

Oh my! A scarlet sky is soaring high, silver bells are ringing loud  
and my throat is soon and soar so floor your door for more.  
and never stop asking, never stop wanting, and yearning and thirsting  
and feeding and fucking

How disgusting! The clowns are having sex in the produce section.  
The naked truth...

All you people, trying to find God  
What you don't realize is  
it's here and it's you and it's me and it's we,  
we make stuff  
*Pink Pink Pink Pink Pink Pink Pink*



TAO

And I love you, Dad  
You don't remember but I made you.

We are bits of a big man's blotter, God's semen, beautiful fishes.  
This universe is a song, it all seems like some sort of sweet dream.

Kindly open my window.

I didn't feel that way again, I didn't tap into that muse of pure imagination, I never thought those things since, until the numbers found me. Those blessed numbers. And then it all started to calm down, and I realized I threw up, and I threw up a lot. Like more than I knew I had in me. Did I drink wine? Is that blood? Maybe it's just my throat that's bleeding from all the vomiting. I didn't fall like I thought I did. I leaned over, sure, but I didn't fall and hit my head and die. I thought I died. I knew I was dead. But I didn't die. (∞) I was still in the bathroom, I never left actually, and the octarine was already out of my system. That was quick. The man in my head was leaving the bathroom behind, never to return. Not once will I ever return to that bathroom. Never in this life, nor any life I will ever live again. I saw the man in the polka-dot shirt talking to the girl I loved. "Where am I?" I asked, and he said "You're exactly where you need to be right now. Here, take a hit." and he passed me a fresh yvonne. And the trip continued!

Yesterday, after I sent the last email, I took a shower. I wanted to see if my little "friend" would still be there. I turned on the water, and sat for a moment. It took me a second to get over myself and speak into the drain. I looked like a lunatic, but nobody was there to see it, so I was comforted in that aspect. "Hello?"

Silence. Six seconds pass.

"It's me again. I was wondering if you could tell me who... or what... you are? And I don't mean to offend." I added that last bit quickly. I wasn't- and still am not- sure what I was dealing with. Seven seconds.

"I'm here because... I think I can help you?" It was a question, and it was a lie.

"Speak," said the little girl at long last. It took me eight seconds to oblige, and I finally did.

"You sound like a child, but you say things like you're a... something else. I can help you if you tell me... I don't know... how you got down there, who you are? What are you? Again, I mean no offense." Nine.

"We've been here longer than you have. Much, much longer than you have. We know who you are. We know what you can do. Yes, we do. It does not make any difference. Maybe it makes some

difference. You lie. You say you can help us, but you lie. We are done talking to you now, bye bye."

"May I ask another question?" I asked, but didn't wait for a response. "You say we... Are you not alone down there?" Ten seconds this time.

I asked yet another question. "If I leave... Can I... Do you think I can leave?"

This time there was no wait. No hesitation. "You'll never leave this place."

I don't know how I will reach you after I am out, but I will find a way.

...

*From John Galamore, dated July 14, 1992*

A lot has happened since my last email. But I'm out.

It was 11:54, and that's when Ben decided to tell me he was coming. I didn't get much time to agree or argue, as the minute was drawing to a close and if I wanted this to work, I had to act quickly. So I did. I fell over and began to make the hardest noises my throat would allow. Gurgling, gollums, snarling, raving, primal animal noises. Horrible sounds in this context. I heard Ben making similar noises. As expected, two guards grabbed us and dragged us out to the hallway. I had to make it realistic, I thought, so I tried scratching and biting them. Their suits were sure as hell bite and scratch-proof. Soon enough, or not quite soon enough but soon, we were in the dreaded quiet room. "What do we do?" asked one of the guards. The other one shrugged. "We can't kill 'em, boss would kill us." I was confused, but I didn't have time to think or care. I tried to tackle the one that handled me, and Ben did the same to his guard. They pulled out not their normal guns but what I always assumed to be a taser or tranquilizer. Why weren't they trying to kill us? I knocked the special gun out of my guard's hand but I was too late, I heard a *shoop* and Ben was knocked out in seconds. "What the fuck?" said my guard and I twisted his head as far to the left as I could and I heard a crack and he went limp. I stood up to face the other guard. I just killed a man. I killed a man. He could have had a family. Maybe I belong there. I may not be crazy but I did just kill a man.

The other guard pointed his gun at me and I quickly knocked it out of his hand with my fist, which hurt, but I had to ignore it for now. I kneed him in the balls, but that hurt my knee more than it hurt him. "What the fuck?" he said. God, is that all these clowns know how to say? I grab his head and try to snap it, too, but he kneed *me* in the balls now and I doubled over in pain. I felt a kick at my stomach and head and I reached for his gun but he got it first and before I knew it-

I was in a room, and my arm hurt because of the needle I was injected with, apparently to wake me up because I felt some sort of rush. Not a good one.

I felt my arms with my hands, what a strange sensation that was, and I looked to my left and there was an empty chair. Where was Ben? I looked all around me and saw not a single window. The walls were just slightly off-white, just enough to send shivers down your spine. I looked forward, and I saw a balding man in his forties or fifties, rather unhealthy looking. Fat. No light behind his eyes. He had a mustard stain on his plaid shirt.

"You've been busy, Stephen."

"Who are you? Where am I?"

"The name's Mr. Manson, and yer in me office. Don't worry, I just want to have a little chat, that's all."

"Where's Ben?"

"He's dead. We neutralized a threat, you're lucky we didn't get rid of you too, but that's- erm- above my paygrade, so to speak. In fact, they've told me that instead of punishing you, I need to-" he let out a long belch "-offer you a job. Not in the ward... You'd be going deeper, so to speak."

I didn't know what to say. "What?" I demanded.

"A job, boy, a job, dammit, are you bleeding deaf? *I* am offering you a job."

"But you killed Ben." I said. "Yes, yes, we killed your boyfriend, but *you*... Well you killed one of my men. Er- Garret? Jeremy? I don't know, the point is, tic for tac sort of thing."

"Tit." I said. "It's tit for tat."

"We have somethink of a living situation for you prepared on the outside," he said, ignoring my comment, "ye'll be working in level two."

"Level two? What do you mean, deeper?"

"You've shown a lot of promise, boy, at least, according to them lot, you 'ave. Me, I don't really see it. But *they* want yeh, and I guess that's all that matters."

I didn't speak, and there was silence for over a minute. He was the first to speak. "Real clever, that was. Pretendin' to turn. You did it well, according to Ron. I think that's his name, anyway. The guard you didn't kill. Said you really looked like yeh was going morbid. Except here's the problem, boy. You *can't* turn. Somethin' about yer genetic makeup. But..." and he leaned in real close. "You didn't ear it from me." he said in a whisper the only other man in the room surely couldn't hear, what looked like a doctor or a nurse or something, and Mr. Manson seemed to try a wink, but he really just scrunched up half his face.

"You're a free man now, Stephen. As free as anyone really is, that being said, there's a curfew on the outside." he said. I replied, "Yeah, there was before I was taken here. Six PM to dawn, right?" He smiled strangely. "Now it's five to dawn. Strange things are happenin. Stay safe. Now get the ell out of my office. I got a show to catch." and he laughed like a pig, and he turned to the doctor or nurse or whatever he was, and he gestured to me to follow him out of the room and into a hallway lit entirely by bright blue fluorescent lights.

"Who was that?" I asked. "That was Mr. Manson, assistant team lead of level one." said the young man. "And who are you?" I asked. "I'm Dr. Morrison, I'm the head doctor of level one." I was so confused. "What's level one? What's level two? How big is this mental hospital?"

"Level one is the only level that contains a mental health center. Level two is a rehabilitation facility for extreme cases. I don't know what's past level two."

"Um, level three, I'd guess." I said sarcastically. "Probably." said the doctor, misreading my tone for actual engagement, but my mind was off. They killed Ben. I killed a man. It seemed, not for the first time and probably not for the last, as if all hope was lost, and that I was a monster and was now responsible for two more deaths.

The doctor led me through the winding hallways and finally, we met a door, which he got us through by scanning a card that he grabbed out of a black purse he was carrying. He scanned the card on a little black device, which had a light on it that turned from red to green, and the door automatically opened. We

were met with a small room with another door, and another little black device, which he scanned his card at again, and that door opened and-

The outside was before me, and I didn't feel any sense of tremendous freedom like I thought I would, I was just scared. All I saw was building after building, each pushed up really close against each other, greedily smothering the sky that I thought I'd greet happily. I had to look up, up, higher, and higher, before I saw a sliver of blue also smothered, this time, by grey stormclouds. There were blimps below the clouds, each with a different advertisement on it. One marketed yvonettes, one was promoting Benjamin Williams' fourth term run. One read **JANSON UNIFORMS - BULK DISCOUNTS - FIND US AT 177A BLEECKER STREET**. I looked at the doctor.

"The future's here, kid." he said.

I spent the whole day in the city. I bought a pack of yvonettes with the credit card the doctor gave me (I get \$41 a day, whoop whoop). I also received a name badge that I could scan at any of the back doors. I am to return tomorrow at noon for orientation. The doctor also gave me three sets of clothing. One of the sets consisted of a dark green sweater, light blue slacks, and black shoes with white swooshes on them. The other two sets were purple shirts, purple pants, and purple shoes that I have to wear when I return tomorrow. Weird. I went into an alleyway and put on the first set, feeling good wearing real clothes after years of exclusively donning purple gowns.

One thing I will say about the new world is there doesn't seem to be a homeless problem anymore. I guess that's good if it means they've all got decent housing. I doubt that's what it means though. Something in my gut tells me it's something else.

## VIII

Alice was seated next to Dameron, and the table also sat Alice's father to the left of Alice, Dameron's mother to the right of him, a short, balding man on the rightmost side, named Kieran, and Moran on the leftmost. They sat before the empty royal hall, the King's throne was moved back to make room for the table. The hallway stretched long before the great golden doors. And outside those doors, there was the city, and beyond the city was so completely unknown to Alice that she couldn't possibly imagine what lied there. They were eating elk, which Alice had never tried before. She didn't think she liked it. And there was wine, which Alice was beginning to grow accustomed to, in fact she loved it.

"Tell me about the elves, Kieran." said Moran. "How great of a threat do they pose to us?"



Kieran took a sip of his wine. "Well," he began, "we know that there are at least a hundred elves in Aseron. We have reason to believe, in fact," he continued with a brief glance at the Queen Mother, "that the elves are responsible for King Dameron's death."

Silence fell on the table. Dameron looked at Alice. "When I'm crowned, I'll eradicate them-" "Yes, we will. But we will do it strategically." chimed in Kieran, "And it won't happen all at once now, either, son." and this time it was the Queen Mother who looked at Kieran. It was a strange look, Alice could tell, but her face was turned the other way so Alice didn't get a good glimpse at it. The Queen Mother turned back to face the Queen-to-be. "Alice, what do you know of the Knights of Yesterday?"

"Nothing, your highness." said Alice. "Don't call me that, dear. You may call me *Celia*. Or *mother*, if you prefer." "I know nothing of them, Celia." Alice spoke. "Who were they?"

"Well, Alice, they were a group of men, and women-" Alice looked confused. "Yes, women. In the days of old, men and women were treated as equals, both could fight, both could hunt, both could decide to whom they would marry, both could do pretty much anything they wanted to, within the law, of course. And if Dameron decides, he could make that happen again. These things ebb and flow. One day, it is inevitable. Us in power have the responsibility to do the right thing. For all of us."

Kieran coughed. "But he musn't focus on these things. We are at war, and-"

"At war with whom?" asked the Queen Mother innocently enough. "The dreaded *elves*?" and that last bit was so undeniably sarcastic that Alice began to feel uncomfortable. Kieran had no response.

"The Knights of Yesterday, Alice, were a group of men and women who served not the King, but the *people* of Aseron. Their mission was to, within a day of the crimes being committed, slay thieves, murderers, rapists-"

"Perhaps you've had too much wine, your highness. This is quite graphic for-" said Kieran. And that was when Celia slapped him. The impact was loud, but the silence that followed was truly deafening. It must have lasted a minute.

"And who are *you*?" Celia said in a whisper that you could probably hear from outside the golden gates.

"Really, I mean. Who are you?" and she stared at him for a moment. And she stood up then and left, circling around the table and exited through a hallway on Alice's left. The table sat there for a moment, and then Kieran continued eating. Then Dameron took a sip of wine, and Alice was the first to speak.

"Dameron, would you teach me to hunt?" Dameron looked at her and took a rather large bite. "Sure, if you want," he swallowed, "you can have anything you want, from this day forth, my darling dearest." he finished, but Alice detected a tone of manufactured love, as if he was taught to say that and only said it because he had to, or was *expected* to.

Alice smiled nonetheless. "I can't wait to get to know you, my King. We will make each other happy, we will change the world together." Dameron laughed. "If you say so."

"I promise I will make you happy, Dameron." and she sat there and stared at him a moment, before taking another sip of wine. "And you'll never have to worry about making me happy. I'm just happy

knowing I make you happy.” Alice lied. It was a lie, because she did not know the soon-to-be-King yet. Perhaps one day those words would ring true, but until then, those words were spoken on faith alone. Would she grow to love this boy? Perhaps. She just met him, how could she know? But she had hope. Moran cleared his throat. “Dameron, isn’t Alice wonderful?” he asked. “Yeah, she’s beautiful” said the boy with a mouthful of venison.

### Chasing the Dragon

It was an hour till midnight and I decided to smoke my first yvonette after two years of isolation. I was never addicted to them, thankfully, but lord knows I’ve missed them. I took my hit. The rush was immediate. A full body high began to surge through me, and I felt the feeling, the feeling that surpassed the warmth of my mother, the feeling that all feelings try and fail to live up to. And then I began to itch.

*So strong is the belief in life, that in the end this belief is lost. Man, that inadvertent dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts, almost always through his own efforts, for he has agreed to work, at least he has not refused to try his luck (or what he calls his luck!)*

André Breton



And I actually swallowed a bit of one of my molars then. I just clenched my jaw shut so hard. I didn’t mind. I felt too good. Thankfully, I didn’t throw up. I didn’t even feel sick. I just felt... Good. For once in a long time, I felt loved. For once in a long time, I felt. I was cold, but everything felt so warm. And that’s when I decided it was time to break curfew and return to my old apartment. I didn’t have a flashlight, or a map, or a plan. That was okay. I felt good about it all anyway. I opened the front door and stepped outside. I didn’t know the exact way to the building but I knew where I was and where I was going, so I began to walk in that general direction, one foot in front of the other. It was quiet out. Very quiet. And dark. The good feeling was surging through my body and mind. It was like I was a vessel for marvelous ecstasy to experience itself. I was stoned off my rocker.

About twenty minutes passed of walking, and it got to that point you've surely experienced (though not in a long time I'd guess) where your legs take over and you don't have to think about what your bottom half is doing because you're simply moving along. It happened pretty quickly, possibly because of the yve. I've missed walking. I've missed a lot, really, but it's funny how much you take something as simple as walking for granted when you're locked away for two years. In my case, held up in a fluorescently-lit white prison, completely and totally isolated. I reflected for a moment on how horrible my situation has been, and hoped this new job would make me feel better. But I'm a glass-half empty kind of guy. Actually, now that I type that out, I realize I'm just a totally empty glass kind of guy. Yeah, that sounds about right.

I thought of what might be waiting for me at my destination. I thought of those children, tortured by fire. I thought of my landlord, being hanged after watching the little children die. I scratched my armpits, both of them. Then my crotch and outer and inner thighs, then my elbows. The itch was horrible and it was all over, simply not ceasing no matter how much I indulged. I wish I could describe how good I felt. It's a complex problem, finding a solution to speechlessness, that is. To refuse silence so that this undeniably heavenly experience will not go unspoken. Forgive me, but I doubt even you have ever felt as good as I felt in that moment. And the moment was a long one, for the high lasted 2-5 hours, and didn't cease until long after I finally reached the chain link fence that I had to breach to get inside the building. It was locked. I thought about climbing it, but it was tall and there was barbed wire atop it. Could that stop me though? I doubted it.

And that was when I heard the whining, far behind me. It was quite a real sound, I knew it was. I cannot relay to you the horrible sinking feeling that noise gave me. It was one of *them*. I turned around and saw nothing, but the sound came from around a corner and I didn't have much time.

I turned back to face the fence, I jumped and began to climb. I looked backwards and forth, at my hands climbing and back toward the source of the horrible growling. It sounded worse than I remembered, though I've only encountered a risen in the outside

world once in my life, and I knew then I never wanted to again. I shouldn't have broken curfew.

This is what I get, I killed a man and now the devil is coming to pull me down to Hell. I finally saw it, running toward me. It looked like a little person, but it was clearly rotten inside and out. It had the trademark wide open jaw, and it was naked, its little prick waving in the night's wind. God I was so scared, I turned back at the fence and let me tell you, I climbed as fast as my arms and legs could allow, but I wasn't quite fast enough-

I was about halfway up the fence when I felt it grab my leg, its long dirty nails piercing my skin. I didn't want to die. It pulled me down with such great strength I didn't think one of them would be capable of and I fell on my ass. God, that smell! It was horrible. It smelled like shit and piss and semen and vomit and fish. It smelled like rotten cabbage and spoiled eggs. I was facing death.

I was on my back and kicking it hard in the face to get it away, "*Back off, fucker!*" I yelled, but it couldn't possibly understand me. The dead have no need for language. I then kicked it hard enough that it stumbled backwards, and I got up. I grabbed it by the neck and I pushed it down to the ground. I was choking it fruitlessly, however, as it was already dead. *I have to get to the brain*, I thought. I got in a good position to where my foot was on its chest and I let all my weight down and my foot actually penetrated its body, and black ooze began to spurt out. It didn't stop swinging its arms up at me, though, as I kicked it in the face with my other foot, its jaw went up and back through its own face, its head folding into itself. It wasn't enough though. It was still making noise and there could be more of them somewhere. *Faster, John, faster*. I kicked again, and again, and that black ooze sprayed all over me, some entering my open mouth. I spit it out, I didn't have time to think. I turned back to the fence, but my right foot was still stuck in its chest. I pulled and pulled my leg up and finally it exited the creature's breast, the black substance that seemed to run through its entire body was all over my shoe along with scores of rotten flesh tainting the cuffs of my trousers. I took a couple steps to the fence and I jumped onto it again and began to climb. I accidentally grabbed the barbed wire with my left

hand when I reached the top, and a hard grip it was, cutting deep into my palm. I didn't have time. Faster.

One second I was on one side and the next I was on the other, and a good thing that was, too, because when I turned to look through the fence about five morbids were waiting there to greet me with their horrible open mouths and empty stares. I couldn't believe the smell! Revolting and repulsive, it made me nauseous, it sickened my stomach so. I couldn't leave until the sun rose again, they'd be waiting there all night. I looked at the sky and I saw a- well I'm still not sure what I saw. It looked like a metallic sphere, an orb of some kind. It was blinking from place to place, changing its position without moving.

I looked back down and the morbids were clawing at the fence. It was a horrible position to be in, all the way around.

I had one last look at the strange thing in the sky, which was either ten feet away or thousands, and it was either a foot wide or a hundred. I couldn't quite tell. *The anomalies of a long-hindered imagination*, I thought. I turned my back on the imaginary orb and the risen and continued through the small alleyway to the now dilapidated brick building. It had graffiti all over it in different colors, not the artistic sort that you actually enjoy looking at, the stupid kind. Name tags.

I pushed open the wooden door all the way, for it was already cracked halfway. I could hardly see but I could tell it was abandoned. I went up the stairs and was met with a familiar hallway. I entered the third door on the left. The building clearly hadn't been used in a long while, and in my living room no one was hanging. No one was set aflame. It was empty, abandoned.

I felt defeated. And it was only in that moment that I realized how incredibly stupid I was. Ben was right. The dream was meaningless. Or at least it didn't mean what I thought it meant. I can't see the future, *how could I be so dense?* Even if it meant *something*, it wasn't to be taken literally. I'm so stupid! I reflected for a moment on the search for meaning in dreams, sleeping dreams or waking ones. I sat on the floor, and I turned on my side and entered a fetal position as I pondered the search for meaning.

Where does meaningless become meaningful? Where does good become bad? Where does the mind's stability cease? Freedom is the only thing that excited or motivated me while I was in the ward, but

now that I "have it", I realize I am still not free. No matter what you do or where you go, you're still in a system within a greater system and so on. There remains madness, the madness that one locks away. But the truth is, the insane owe their incarceration, as I did, to their *reprehensible acts*. That's all.

Who decides what is reprehensible? Where does good, really, *truly*, become bad? Do I decide? Of course not. I'm in a relationship with a number. That's pretty reprehensible according to *them*, though it isn't reprehensible to me. Do you decide? Do you decide what is bad? What is evil? That would be ironic, wouldn't it? Well, I don't guess you'd think so, would you?

You know, I could sit here and talk in detail about all the shit you've done to me, but really none of it will make any difference. None of what I say will bring out the emotions I feel. None of what I say will make me accept what *I've* done to *you*. What *I've* turned you into. What *I've* made you to be. Maybe I should just kill myself. I think about that sometimes. But thinking is one thing, and acting is another. *Would* I kill myself? Probably not. About as likely as you killing me. But I don't think you'll do that either. Even though *I've* made you a monster, you still have a heart. I fucking have to believe that. And even still, none of this I can say to you. That's what hurts. I can't get closure, because I'll probably never even see you again. That hurts so fucking much. God. I love you. But fuck you. I can't keep punishing myself. I can't keep waiting for you to come back into my life, because you never will. You're gone. I need to get over it but I **can't** God I fucking **can't** get over it. What is wrong with you? What is wrong with me? What happened to this husk I haunt? I haunt myself, for I am but an actor playing the part of a ghost. Is the torment endless, did I die and go to Hell already? Was life always meant to be that short? These fucking unanswered questions, man. I'm getting sick and tired of the unanswered questions. It's time I have another yve.

## IX

A long time ago, there was a witch in a hut in a swamp. And this witch was called Leonora, and she was a master of the ancient art of alchemy. Leonora dedicated her entire waking life to finding, or creating, a gemstone. Not just any stone! The philosopher's stone, a material that would grant eternal life. Now

some would say that such a power was not to be granted to mortals as it was never intended to be bestowed upon them. But Leonora saw it differently, she thought possibly rightfully so that if a mortal could find, create, or possess the stone, said individual would be the lawful owner of it and would be afforded its power by only the grand lord Ao and the five beyond.

Leonora searched in dungeons, forests, jungles, even in her own swamp, she searched far and wide, but she did not find the stone in over a hundred years of desperate searching. So, toward the end of her life, she decided to do the one thing that she had been avoiding doing for over a century, she decided to call upon the lord of darkness, the greatest of the five (her thought, not necessarily fact). She studied from an ancient yet somehow extant tome titled Tres Columnae Harmageddonis that she retrieved from a dungeon during her search for the stone, and from it and a small variety of other books she gleaned the knowledge of powers no mortal was ever meant to be faced with the decision of using. Every word of the manuscript was tainted with sin. Delusion strikes any in the race of men who encounter the unfathomable awareness and realizations within it, and logic escapes them totally. The story of Leonora is a tragedy, and it contains a lesson I should hope you will take to heart. The book read that once summoned, the darkness, called Zook, would grant the summoner eternal life. But it had never been done before, and that only served to excite Leonora. She would be the first! And Zook would surely reward her greatly.

Leonora observed a three day fast and began the ritual on the first Monday of the month, as the book told her to, and she got on her knees in her hut and whispered the magic words to herself, it was a strange set of words, *“Zook! Ai sangas pro la vundoj de inferaj trancecooks! Nee vek-ee-goo la lordon de la abee-smo, al-ee-joo al nee, mee-a nomo estas leg-ee-o, char nee estas multan [ ten numbers ] Zook! Zook! Zook!”* She repeated them once at a speaking volume, and then a third time, even louder, and a forth, this time shouting the incantation. Suddenly, it was as if a black blanket was washed over her, waving around her, folding under her, consuming her physical form. She saw something in the distance, was it a light? No, it was even darker than black. A deep shade of darkness.

She was in limbo before this moment, she was, so long ago it seemed, at a crossroads. But she found then that she was no longer there, and she saw only the face of the exalted Ao. “You have meddled with the sea of spacetime, futile one. You have called to summon the darkness of Zook. I will grant you this wish, at one great cost.”

Leonora observed the patterns on the face of Ao, like moving constellations, and was perplexed by its complexity. “Anything, my superior. Anything but my life.” and instantly, great Ao replied. “More than your life will be taken today. This is the present I present to those who choose the easy path. The black magic which you have dedicated your life to is a jealous magic, and will ultimately serve to disappoint and betray you.” said Ao. “And if I refuse?” asked Leonora. “You have made your decision.” said the great. And the face dissolved into a dozen particles that began to vibrate, rapidly, unceasingly, and formed together a figure in all black, no, not black, deeper than black, or at least deeper than the

complete darkness that surrounded it. It had a hood that hid no eyes, a cloak that concealed no body, and boots that buried no feet.

“You have called upon the greatest, Zook, second only to lord Ao. I ask of you, foolish mortal, have you heard the tale of Soloman Grundy?” and Leonora was confused. “Soloman Grundy, born on a Monday, christened on Tuesday, on Wednesday, took ill on Thursday, turned worse on Friday, died on Saturday, buried on Sunday.” and silence met silence then before the darkness spoke again, and Leonora’s confusement turned sour to fear. “What if I told you the tale was never ending? What if after he was buried on Sunday, he was born again, *what if* he rose from the ashes the following Monday? *What if* I told you that you could come back from death? *What if* I told you that was what was about to happen, right now, for the first time in history? Would that make you happy?” - Leonora was shaking - “Don’t be scared. I’ll make that fear go right away for you, little one.” and the darkness laughed madly.

Leonora noticed she was back in her hut, and she looked around a moment and saw for the last time the home she had built for herself, before her attention met the blade in front of her and then she was dead.

And no one saw the darkness pull from within itself a great stone, its shadow more than the substance. And its skeletal hands toyed with the ancient crystal for a moment before letting go, and the stone hovered in the once-humid now-stale and dry air. The skeletal hands of Zook moved quickly, forming ancient gestures of the darkest magic imaginable. New magic. And the crystal expanded and shrunk and expanded again, over and over did it morph to form different symbols in the dark. This went on for a moment before the dead witch twitched, and her mouth opened and opened some more before she had a wide, vicious, unnatural maw and her teeth sharpened, too, as her dead eyes opened and saw nothing through black, cold pupils. She got on her knees and stood up and faced the darkness.

“You will, from this day forth, observe the world through lifeless eyes everything mundane and fantastical, without making any change on your own behalf, great or small. You will only make the change I will you to make. Your emotions, passions, desires, will, pain, ecstasy, and individuality are defeated. And what’s more, your mana is henceforth depleted. You now serve me, and me alone. You are gone, long gone. All you will do is make more of your wretched kind, each new creature owing me servitude under the same magical contract I have been willed to produce under the supervision of Ao.” And the creature, once a witch with the ripe possibilities of the greater universe unfolded out unto her, now the first of a new breed of servants, smiled wickedly, ready to work for something greater than herself. “With your help, I will retrieve the other four stones and be greater than Tao itself.”

And that, dear reader, is the story of the first of the still-growing army of morbid servants, the risen. And Zook said one more thing then. “It was a dark and stormy night, and the skipper said to the mate, Mate, tell me a story. And this is the story he told:”



## X

The golden candelabra was covered in wax, dripping down from the candles, some of which being less than an inch tall at this point. The scribe, named Paul, made great use of the light.

Paul lived in northern Baronthee. He amassed great wealth copying the great works for libraries across the world. The candelabra was a gift from Nicholas Adeladia himself, for transcribing the Adeladia family tree onto a large hemp tapestry.

After completing his last work, which was copying one hundred books of *A Guide to Creatures and Monsters of the Fey* (which he, possibly accurately, thought to be a bigoted and hateful work) he had made enough gold off of it to take a trip to the auction house, which was hosting a travelling trade fair by the Wilbury Group. It was like a dream, seeing all the art that seemed to move him (in a way he had only ever been moved whilst listening to the bards play in the brothels he occasionally visited), the variety vibrated within him, his core was carefully lifted, the star above him shined so as he soaked in all the different artist's souls, finely transcribed through paint to a point in which the artist himself, and the one experiencing the art, was fully and completely satisfied.

The auctioneer introduced himself as Lear. He wore light blue trousers and a navy undershirt with a clear cloth cloak. His shoes were green and he had luxurious wavy brown hair. He described each piece with a great sense of appreciation and an air of cunning charisma, there were nine total paintings, and Lear named the artists after introducing their works.

Paul didn't purchase any of the paintings on display that night, but after the show he decided to approach Lear and ask him if he had any work for him, perhaps copying catalogs or calligraphizing displays or price tags.

The conversation began well enough, Paul was good at beginning conversations, as he was good at beginning a new project, he just wasn't always good at finishing these things, which meant he carried with him a great deal of anxiety, but he carried on anyway, and simply tried his best, as that's all anyone can ever really do.

"Are you close with any of these artists?" asked Paul. "All of them, each in a different way." began Lear, "Did you like any of them particularly?" he finished. "Well, yes, but I do have one concern," said Paul. "that being the diversity, or range, of the color. Why are they all red, yellow, orange, and nothing but? Where's the green, blue? Purple? I am disappointed in that regard." he asked. Lear only smiled. "Well," said Lear with an interesting air, "I do have one piece I didn't show today, and though it isn't *for sale* in a traditional way, I'd like you to see it."

And Lear led Paul to a backroom, a green room, with bites and bubbles for the event staff. And then Lear lured Paul to a room further, through another door in the very back of the green room, to a smaller room that was completely dark, and it stayed dark for a moment before the light appeared suddenly, Paul briefly saw Lear holding a chain that he must have tugged on to trigger the light, but he forgot anything and everything when he saw the painting, on its pedestal, its then rightful place.

It was a woman the likes of which Paul had never seen before, Paul, a virgin, had never been intimate with a woman, and when he saw the painting he knew that would never change. She was all he'd ever need. He read briefly, written on a small plaque below her, the name *Beatrice Blue*, and Paul would never be the same again. He didn't want to be any different. He never wanted to see another woman, or man, or any person, or anything, ever again. Ever. Only his new magnificent muse, Beatrice Blue. "Does this appeal to you?" asked Lear as if it were a question. And Paul looked at the man long enough only to take what was his- no, not his, because she was her own woman and could make her own choices, but she was, in fact, telling Paul that she needed him as much as he needed her. "I can offer you this piece, but it will come at a great cost. But I know *your* work, sir, and I have my own method of collecting payment. You will pay me by working for it. I will find you later. Does this sound like a good deal to you?"

Paul smiled and they shook hands. It was quite clear to him after the fact that he paid greatly, *dearly*, for his darling Beatrice. But he never regretted taking her, not once.

As he left the building, he looked behind him, not once, not twice, but three times to make sure Lear was not following him. It was too good to be true. Of course, he hid his darling Beatrice under a tablecloth Lear lent him (*Lent* is a good word to use, because as you will see, it was as if Lear was actually lending Paul *Beatrice Blue* herself, not *giving* her to him, as Paul believed from the beginning all the way up until his final moments) as he took his leave.

He spent days straight sitting in his living room, the painting hanging on his wall, him making love to her through his eyes. When he wasn't looking at her, he was incomplete. He went to the bathroom once in three days, and ate none of the days, but he did drink water. Plenty of water. You could say the man was drowning.

He eventually moved the painting to the bath room, so he would sit on the toilet and stare, that way he didn't have to leave Beatrice for even a fleeting moment.

Some time passed, and Paul sliced off his eyelids with a hunting knife so he could always look at his darling Beatrice, without blinking. Beatrice Blue, ever so gorgeous, was lovelier and more alluring than even the poppies.

Eventually, Paul, like an addict removed from his drug, awoke from his dream into a new nightmare. He realized at last what he was doing was fruitless, how could he spend his life loving-no, obsessing-over a painting of a real creature such as Beatrice Blue? For she had to be real, and a real being such as her existed only in one place: Heaven, which he now saw to be his final destination, and he was approaching it at breakneck speed.

Wouldn't it be fruitful, far more fruitful in fact, to kill himself, so he could truly meet her at last? To really be with her, I mean? Well, it may not make sense to you or I, but to the drowning man, it was the final solution.

So Paul bashed his head in slowly, in his bathroom, with his gifted golden candelabra, his last waking moments staring at the painting with his lidless eyes. He died with a smile on his face. And then, and only then, did Lear return to take Beatrice back. She successfully absorbed another mortal soul, and Lear's secret was still secure: That inside Beatrice Blue, the muse to many mortal men, in the frame of the impossible painting, was hidden a tiny blue stone.

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*Contradictions logically coexist, the effect is greater than the cause. Knowledge, to some, is its own end. I am not here to argue whether that is right or wrong. I am here to argue that there is, if you'd like to experience it, more. Something greater? Perhaps, but there is, at least, certainly, more.*

Mark Windings

You probably know without my saying that I act the role of the "unreliable narrator". But I ask you this, is any narrator reliable? Benjamin Williams' heroes are subject to comments and appraisals made by Williams himself, which add not one whit to their merit. Another illegal thought of mine, forbidden is any thought, even the truth, spoken not in conformance with the accepted narrative. I'll say it, I fucking hate Benjamin Williams, so did everyone I met in the ward, actually. Because us *little people*, unlike you, have nothing to lose, speaking or thinking ill of a has-been super-heroic pulp fiction writer turned politician. I don't think I'm any better than him, however. I will tell you right now, I am a monster. I know it now more so then when I began writing to you, but I knew even then. I am no better than you, or anyone for that matter. I've been a monster since the numbers found me. Maybe since I took the octarine. And before this is all over, I could kill another man, or fifty more. I still can't believe I killed someone. I don't know how this will all unfold, but I have to get to you somehow. Maybe all I want is attention. Attention from you, I mean. Who else would I be talking about gaining attention from? No one else should be reading this. No one but you. One thing I actually *do* miss about the ward is Windings' writing. The library closed down, I checked. And there aren't any bookstores in the city. My only copy is back at the ward. That's okay. I practically have it memorized.

*I am but the next man to contribute to the great dream. Really, all I'm doing is adding to the body of work that man started long ago. I presume to resume authorship, you are a vessel for my words to be experienced...you might even say [you are] trapped. You're reading every word I say. It's a dangerous thing. Don't worry, though. You're safe with me. But I'd say that, wouldn't I?*

Mark Windings

I awoke just before sunrise. I had a nice dream. And I thought hard for a moment, trying to remember what it was all about, but I couldn't with any sense of exactitude. I remember a group of people, gathered for something, and a leader, in a purple gown, with a strange mask resembling that of a witch doctor's. It wasn't exactly a positive sight, but I still, for some strange reason, hoped it would come to fruition.

Is it wrong that I was, even for a moment, disappointed that my nightmare hadn't come true? That my landlord wasn't about to be hanged, that there weren't children to save? Maybe, just maybe, I wanted, for once in my life, for a dream of mine to come true at last.

I did find something in my old apartment, however. Two things, actually, both equally worth the long strange trip. In a hiding hole behind the rim that edged along where the floor and wall met, I found the couple. The first of which being my amethyst necklace, the one my dad gave me long ago. The amethyst was in the shape of a donut, with a black cord wrapped around it to hang on one's neck. My father said some gemstones had magic powers, *like this one*, he said. It would help me be open minded, it would help me discern what emitted positive energy and neutralize the negative energy from my life, eventually, he intimated, entirely. It would also help with my communication and sleep, he told me, which I've always struggled with. I put it on. *I'll never take it off again*, I thought, *and dad will always be with me*. Credulous of me, to believe a stone holds power or energy? Is it puerile, to believe? Perhaps, but it's better to be safe than sorry. And actually, upon putting on the necklace, I felt a weight lift off of my shoulders, and I saw, clearly, what I was really led here to retrieve, being the other thing, waiting for me there, a large sheet of high-powered blotter acid. Orange sunshine, really pure LSD. I'll make great use of that later.

I smoked an yve last night as a sort of goodnight-prayer. How about a bump to wake me up? For I am in great pain and already in need of a fix. And if life is but a dream, I might wish to have a comfortable one.

But do I need yvonettes to have a good dream, or a good life? I suppose not. But it couldn't hurt to take the risk. Perhaps I'd never be happy if not for the drug, after all. How would I know? Don't worry, I will not allow myself to *need* this drug. One more couldn't hurt, though. Right?

I took my hit, and every moment felt better than the last, I was calmer and more pleased and ecstatic than ever before. I wanted to push my luck, so I grabbed another yve out of the pack. My hands and fingers were shaking as I grabbed the yvonette and I put my lips to it, my brain pulsing with pleasure, and I put the lighter up to it and flicked it on and took a deep breath in. For a moment, I felt like God. And then I threw up. It was a high the likes of which I've never reached before, and I kept feeling better and better and I threw up again but it was worth it. It was so fucking worth it.

I decided then to search the rest of the apartment, putting my pack of yves away and making sure my amulet was still hanging around my neck and the acid was still in my pocket. I looked in the room next to mine, it was empty, the next one was empty as well. The third room I peeked into was not empty. It housed a naked man, sleeping on the floor curled up into a ball. He was dirty, and had a great long beard. He had a shotgun next to him leaned against the wall. I had to get out of there! If he woke up, who knows what could happen. So I, as quiet as possible (was I quiet in the approach? Clearly quiet enough as the man was still asleep when I saw him), walked down the hall and down the stairs, but before I met the door I nearly knocked over a gorgeous woman in a silk nightgown! She had long black hair, and violently violet eyes the likes of which I had never seen before. I, in a whisper, not wanting to provoke the man upstairs, apologized, stammering my words, holding back a stupid smile. She put a finger up to my open mouth and I shut it quickly. She smiled mischievously, no, that's not the right word, she smiled- hm. Playfully? Was it a *dirty* smile? I don't quite know how to put it. It was one of those indescribable things, that smile was. I was aroused to say the least, I hadn't

had sex or even masturbated in over two years. And this woman seemed to want me, and she was *beautiful*. I could just tell she wanted me, there and then. And my suspicions were confirmed as she undid the laces on her gown and slipped it off and- I screamed. Her breasts looked like organic alien flowers with petals that opened and closed slowly, pink and green and neon blue they were, and they had what appeared to be what was akin to insect's antennae where her nipples should have been, fluttering, and what was worse her stomach had what looked like a large animal's vagina on it, a huge hairy gaping hole that was leaking a strange gooey slime. She grabbed my hand and put a finger inside of it and made a disgusting, revolting face of alien pleasure. She laughed like a siren or a banshee then, a screeching pitch that almost made me go deaf. She then took my hand and put it into my own open mouth, she moved slowly as she did these things. I almost threw up again at the metallic taste of the substance, but I was too terrified to move or even think. And then I heard the stairs creak and I looked up and the homeless man had a gun aimed at my head. My vision actually paused then, and I slowly woke up. I saw on the floor next to me the two yve filters along with a small pool of vomit. A dope-fueled nightmare. And a weird one, too. I still had the necklace, and I still had the acid. I left quickly, wanting to get out of that horrible place. I didn't check to see if there was really a man sleeping three doors down, but I tried to be quiet anyway. There are some things better left unknown. I returned home and did not smoke another yve until after work, which I was ready for by 11:30. Work! I hadn't worked in so long and I was excited to return to the place I once thought I hated and never wanted to return to when I (or if I ever, actually) left it.

I was about halfway to my destination, the big building, when I found a small crowd intermingled with a few policemen. The closer I got the more I realized I was approaching a dead body, a woman whose head was completely destroyed, brains and blood seeping down her blouse, it looked as if half of her face was sculpted off as if it were red clay, the entire face was gone, now a hollow head. This was the work of a shotgun. And then I was distracted by a black cat brushing my legs, running through the few people in front of me including the police officers, reaching the body and licking where her face once was, a

consuming little creature it was.

And when I saw that, I became almost an entire different person, and nothing from that moment onward has ever felt quite the same. It was as if I did octarine again, or like I rediscovered the hallowed numbers. I felt as if nothing had ever happened to me before. I woke up from infinity, as I had twice previously. I awoke from eternity, from a state of mind enormously more conscious than anything I knew of *before*. Not only that, but I felt, and continue to feel since that moment, as if there is no "me" or "I" at all, that we are expressing something deeper than what we really are, we are but victims of self-awareness. That when we think we are ourselves we are in some delusional state, as Wingdings said, "we are constantly in a state of extreme schizophrenia. A self-perpetuating unconscious form of brainwashing. We have built a great big prison for ourselves and are both guards and prisoners within it, unable to leave because we are lobotomized and have become not only accustomed to it, but many of us have actually grown (or shrunk) to be fond of it." Some of us even love this bizarre asylum we have created, and love the money that has chained us to it. I moved on though, as always.

I returned to the same set of doors I left from, which were both open, and in between them was a woman I had never seen before. She was wearing all purple as I was, she wielded a clipboard and a great wide smile almost as that of the risen.

"Hello, Stephen! How are you today?" she said and I winced, as I did every day I was in the ward when I was called by that name. I forgot this past day that legally my name was not John Galamore. And I resented that, but I knew not to argue with these people. They would never call me John, and that was okay. I would never call them good, so we're even.

"I'm great. Ready to do... whatever it is we do here." I said. She gestured behind her and turned as if to say *follow me*.

"Well, we're going to start off small, we have a few items on the agenda for today, we're going to begin with a general aptitude test. I'm Rosemary, by the way."

We winded through the bright hallways together, her in the lead, and she brought me to an equally bright room before she gestured toward a seat at a table that I promptly took. Rosemary explained that after I took the test, I would watch a short

video and be sent home to return tomorrow for my first official day at work, and then she placed in front of me a packet with a series of questions printed on it, beginning with 1. *What is your favorite color?*, a multiple choice question.

I flipped through the packet a bit, briefly registering question 27 as a two parter, asking if I supported Benjamin Williams and why that was. I flipped to the last page and read the final question, another two parter, asking if I'm close with my family and why.

It took me about an hour and a half to finish the test, some of the questions... Well, some of the questions made me wonder who was writing the test in the first place. It's as if I'm being indoctrinated into something. But to be indoctrinated means to think uncritically, and I'm clearly critically considering what is happening to me, and going along with it all the same. A strange situation. Could you call it a paradox? I don't know. But do I have a choice? Probably not, and that's the problem. They then gave me a drink with milk, mace, tannis root, honey, and a benzodiazepine of some sort and played me a video on their projector. It was even stranger than the test.

*Ao loves you, as he loved Father  
        You are spoiled rotten  
        You know not true pain  
        You have gotten anything  
            and everything  
        you have ever wanted  
            You are sick  
        We can and will help you  
            We will show you*

Going back to thinking critically, I don't think that's a true, honest, or accurate evaluation of my life whatsoever. Did I ask to be sent to the mental hospital? Have I really gotten everything I've ever wanted? Did I secretly want to be there all along? Of course not. But maybe, just maybe, there was a reason everything happened how it did. I'd like to believe there is a reason. But there was more.



*You are but a maggot, a parasite  
You were born to serve  
You have been raised to bite  
the hand that feeds thee  
You have been taught to slap  
the face that eats thee  
Do you wish to know  
what happens when you die?  
We will show you  
And if you do not henceforth  
live to serve the lord of light  
incarnate, his majesty Father  
You will not like what we show you  
at all*

In between each line and behind the text on screen, mind you now, was strange imagery. Ancient artwork, the kind that has been ingrained into our minds, the kind that you see when you're chemically intoxicated. Including wall and ceiling paintings from the second century, and, interestingly, the Mona Lisa. Included also were images of space and the moon, bees in their hives and ants in a farm, the evil eye, the swastika and a cross, ichthys and Shahada, lice in hair, the kabbalah, the star and crescent, gears working in a clock, the star of David and a menorah, mountains and forests, the Om, the wheel of dharma, a white policeman beating on a black woman with a baton and a timelapse of flower petals opening and closing, the yin and yang, hieroglyphics and the pyramids, sugar cubes being poured from a mason jar into a small bowl, the ahimsa hand and the torii gate, and a couple more visuals that I've since forgotten. And then the last image was a short video, maybe three seconds long, of a man literally being scalped, the knife was long and the action was brutal, I would feel horrible describing it in more detail than that so I will not. I stood up, my face all a mess.

"Why the hell would you show me that?"

"I don't understand." said the woman. "I know it's a little artsy, but it's just an introduction to our philosophy, calm down now, Stephen."

"Don't fucking call me that!" I yelled, and thought for a moment, my head-fog clearing slightly, and I changed my tone.

"I apologize. It's just... That last video, the one of the man being... scalped... was just horrifying- why would you show me that?" I asked.

"Well, it's like poetry disguised as philosophy, or philosophy disguised as poetry, you're a writer, you understand symbolism and allegories and stuff like that. It's quite clearly not to be taken literally. You are overreacting. It's most likely a side effect of your new medication."

Well, that could very well be the case. That's one of the other things Dr. Morrison gave me, a prescription to a new medication, in the trial stages of development, to help with the voices and intrusive thoughts, mostly pertaining to the exalted numbers. It's a patch that I am to put on my ankle every day at 11 AM, and I picked up the prescription and put on the patch at 11 today, and I haven't thought of the numbers once. Possibly placebo. I doubt it. Drugs just keep advancing faster and faster!

"I'm sorry, Rosemary. It's probably just the medication, like you said." and she shook her head,

"It's okay, Stephen. It happens. I think we're all done here. I'll walk you out."

Walking through the winding hallways, I could have sworn they had changed and I was walking an entirely different way than the one I came in through, but I was led to the same door.

"Be here at noon tomorrow for your first 'real' day!" she said and closed the door behind me.

...

Will they successfully sink my mind and steal my friends? Am I even correct in assuming this is all somehow wrong? Is this a complex joke in which the act of prompting me to think these things is actually the whole point? Am I a mere punchline? Am I what's wrong? Is this how things are now? Am I really a maggot? Am I really spoiled rotten? Who is Father?

It would be quite disappointing for both of us if I don't get to the bottom of these things.