



Swallowed

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Do not seek happiness outside yourself but establish it within your own mind.

-The Buddha

The young man awoke in an unfamiliar setting. He was lying in a soft, comfortable bed. The sheets were clean and smelled nicely. He could see the rest of the room, though dimly lit through the heavy curtains on the window, was rather a mess and a scent of staleness hung in the air. He stretched and rubbed his eyes, wondering at the jagged randomness of his thoughts. He noticed, somewhat uncomfortably, the portrait which hung on the wall before him of a woman with bare breasts smiling down mawkishly at him and he shuddered. The young man sat up in the bed as he pushed the sheets away. He looked down to see he was still clothed in his slightly dirty jeans with the studded black belt and his black button up shirt, although, he could feel that his feet were bare beneath the sheets. Slipping his feet from the sheets, he turned in bed and stepped lightly onto the cold, wood paneled floor. From the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a dark shape upon the floor, near where his feet rested. A casual glance revealed his neatly folded socks and black shoes with the purple laces. He stooped down and reached for the footwear. "This is bizarre," he thought to himself in tense bewilderment. "Am I dreaming?" He tried to remember where he was and how he had come to be there. He had a headache which grew exponentially more intense the more he strained to remember something, anything. After pulling on his shoes he stood and surveyed the room. The vague shapes in the dimly lit room revealed little. He could make out various pieces of furniture and piles of books, all half hidden by dusty bed sheets or heaps of clothing. His surroundings told him nothing he could decipher. He quickly spun around and snatched at the heavy curtains on the window, pulling them aside. His heart sank a little deeper. He could see nothing though the milky, wire veined glass. He crept to the closed bedroom door, trying to make out more of the room along the way. When he reached the door, he turned the knob and pulled slowly. Peering through the cracked opening he could see the flicker of firelight against a wall. He dared to open the door a little wider and the hinges of the door groaned a loud and prolonged creak. He stopped suddenly and listened. There was no movement or sound, just the lilting flicker of light upon the wall opposite him. There was something else upon that wall as well, he noticed. Large black marks; it looked like writing but his vision faltered at this distance. He ventured to open the door a bit further, but ever so gingerly. The hinges whined harshly, though much softer than before. At last the doorway was about a third of the way open, more than enough space for his lithe figure to slip through. The young man swallowed hard and stepped into the unknown. A cursory glance around the area revealed it to be some sort of antechamber. The only opening aside from the doorway through which he had just passed was a massive and ornate double door to his left. To his right was a grand fireplace where exquisite flames happily lapped at a heap of enough wood to build a cottage. There were no furnishings anywhere in the antechamber. The young man kept a suspicious eye on the open double doors as he turned to examine the wall to his left. It, too, was covered with thick black writing from

ceiling to floor. As he gently ran his fingers along the writing in examination, he found it had a soft and chalky residue that stained his fingertips black. He thoughtfully rubbed the residue between his thumb and fingers as he raised his hand to his nose and involuntarily looked to the fireplace. "What kind of mad place is this?" he whispered to himself, brushing his fingers on his pant leg. He realized that the letters seemed to flow in a continuous stream, flowing across all four walls from ceiling to floor so one had to spin in circles to read it. Random bits of sentences caught his eye as he searched for the beginning and he started to realize what he was reading. He found the beginning where he knew it ought to be. "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked," he read softly. It seemed the entirety of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* had been scrawled over every space afforded by the four walls. "What the fuck?" he whispered rhetorically. He fixed his attention again on the open double doors and approached with caution. The space beyond the doors appeared to be a cross between a derelict asylum and a filthy old Victorian style house. The fixtures, the staircase, and the furniture were, although rather unkempt, very ornately carved wood. However, the walls were a stark white but stained and dirty, the windows were opaque with grime and lined with wire, and various doors were closed and bolted with heavy locks. The young man stood in shock as he attempted to take this in and utterly unable to fathom where he had found himself. He was so stupefied that he hadn't noticed he was being approached. "Well, well, well," chirped a voice with an English accent. It had a decidedly Norwich dialect to it. "What have we here?" The young man spun, startled and terrified, as the owner of the voice clapped him on the back. He was staring straight into the face another young man, about his age, who wore a toothy smile. "Good to see you up and about, mate. Name's Atticus. Some folks'll call me Atty which I think makes me sound a bit like a nancy boy if ask you ask me, which you very well should since it's me own bleeding name!" Atticus furiously scratched his tousled black hair and scrunched up his face. "Well come on then. I suppose we've got a bit to do now, yeah?" He began to turn away. "Wait! Atticus, right? Um, what exactly is going on? Where are we?" Atticus turned back toward the young man clicking his tongue. "Oh, we are a bit knobbed up now aren't we?" he said, adjusting the young man's collar and brushing away some unseen speck. He smiled again broadly "Well worry not mate! You're in good hands. Ol' Atticus'll take right good care of you." Atticus patted him on the chest then he spun around and began to stride away. "Well come on then you geezer!" he called. The young man followed after. "Well, I take it you probably don't even know your own name then you sorry sod, yeah?" Atticus joked merrily. The young man stopped walking and stared hard at the floor. After a moment he looked up into the amused face of Atticus. "I thought not." He patted the young man on the shoulder heartily and turned away once more. "But we won't get much done out here, will we?" As the two began to walk, they passed a couple seated on the floor with their backs to the wall. One was an old man with a bushy white beard and a mane of frizzy white curls. He was wearing red trousers and a white button up shirt. His hands lay motionless in his lap and his legs were

stretched out before him as he stared expressionlessly at his black boots. On his left was a much younger man, clean shaven and with haphazardly hacked hair. He wore the same red pants which were also tucked into black boots with heavy buckles but he was fastened into a straight jacket and sitting cross legged. He sneered and made a feral sound as Atticus and the young man passed by. "Oi, bugger off you nonce!" Atticus yelled and kicked at the air. "See what I mean? It's bloody Bedlam around here with nobody running the show." They continued walking for a few moments in silence until Atticus abruptly turned and threw open another set of ornate double doors and stood in the doorway. "Welcome to me humble abode," he said cheerily while bowing and gesturing into the room with one arm. The young man entered. It was an antechamber identical to the last but well lit and furnished. That's not to say it was well furnished but it wasn't entirely dreadful either. Atticus removed the short black jacket he had been wearing and threw it across the room where it landed on a bookcase. The young man noticed for the first time that Atticus, too, was wearing red trousers which were tucked into large black buckled boots. With his jacket removed he wore a black waistcoat over a white button up shirt although the shirt wasn't tucked in and the cuffs of the sleeves were unbuttoned. Atticus glanced toward the young man while he continued walking toward the back of the room. "Not as cattled as your own lodgings, eh? But don't believe anyone who tells you I camp either!" he laughed while he plopped down into an oversized chair. He kicked his feet up onto a small table nearby, knocking a lamp onto the floor in the process. Atticus barely gave the lamp notice as it smashed with a clatter against the floor. "These lovely dames here go by Sheena," he said extending an arm toward two comely young blonde women seated nearby. The young man looked at the two women as he pulled a chair away from a desk and sat near the trio. The young women, who appeared to be mirror images of each other, were very attractive. They had delicate figures with delicate make up to match and perfectly styled hair, but there was something wrong. Their eyes were pallid and the contrast caused one to be unconsciously uneasy, almost fearful. The young man swallowed hard and tried to smile pleasantly, still rather dazed and beginning to feel queasy. "Both of you are named Sheena, then?" he asked, looking from one to the other and then to Atticus. One of the young women spoke "There are two sides to every coin. Mine happen to be disappointment and melancholy on the one side. The other? Well, the other is indignation verging on violence. I vacillate between the two constructed worlds, in neither of which I wish to dwell. So what, then, am I to do, Mr...." she paused for a moment on the young man's blank expression then looked to Atticus. Atticus shook his head and threw one hand up. The young woman continued "How can one exist this way while striving to be something better, to be someplace better? For a long time I hated the idea of being like everybody else. For as long as I can remember I have resisted the idea and fought fiercely against it. But what was I really fighting against and for? Now that same idea is all my tired body yearns for. Just erase this person that I am and let me be someone else; anyone, anywhere. Just let me be like them; act like them and

think like them and feel like them and dress as they dress and speak as they speak and have normal ideas and conversations about normal things. Just give me a normal family and normal memories. I don't want to be this proverbial bull anymore. I am trapped inside the tiniest of china shops and I find that I am unable to make the slightest movement in any direction without wreaking utter destruction and havoc. Take this away from me and let me be one of those docile dolls I can see passing by out of the corner of my eye through the tantalizing yet nearly invisible china shop window." The young man sat silently for a moment staring at her face. "Oh, well, um," he stuttered. The second young woman continued, "So I have nothing left but my anger- calloused, violent, and empty. I'm a product of my own absurd design. Who I am may have begun mundanely enough with abuse that metastasized over time into lonely hunger for something more than awkward socialization until finally coming to rest with a reckless and self destructive demeanor that bled into every relationship, every action, and every word without my notice. So maybe I'm some type of anti-Midas who lays waste to everything in sight with special attention given to what is most dear. I can apologize for what I've done but how do I change what I am. Thus, I have nothing left but cold hatred for everything about this life. But admit it, how often do you feel one moment away from going on a killing spree? Am I truly alone in this? What is one to do with a bastardized shadow of life when maintaining a husk of illusions is no longer worth the effort of upkeep? How do I continue in a world where there is no place I belong and knowing that it's not because the world is broken but I am? The endless days of seeing smiles and enjoyment and happiness and idealized normalcy occurring all around me while I'm left to wonder at how it works has grown from droll amusement to a more sinister and mocking question. As my facade finally begins to crumble I find myself aghast at how little lies beneath. Although the upkeep was grievous, it was my ticket to being somehow human; somehow able to enter the arena of those people without notice in order to ferret away a tiny sliver of their existence. The thought of forever writhing in these sticky shadows is terrifying and though, try as I might, I can do nothing to slow the mask from turning to dust in my very hands." Atticus clapped his hands together and brought them to his lips. "Brilliant aren't they?" he said closing his eyes for a moment. He dropped his hands and resumed his quick cadence. "I found them just languishing in a room up on uh, oh, one of the levels. Just all locked up they were." The young man noticed that both women were wearing red leggings under short white petticoats with corset-like tops buttoned down the front and he frowned. "What's with the dress code here, Atticus?" He said looking away from the dainty black buckled shoes of the women. "Er, not quite sure what you're playing at chap," Atticus replied while wrinkling his brow. "Never mind," the young man muttered. Atticus looked down and studied his own wardrobe with an air of insecurity and then studied Sheena's attire. "Well, um, this is just what we get, mate." He laughed off the insecurity. "Can't have everyone about starkers now can we? I happened to turn up this here waistcoat but we get what we get." "But where does it come from? Where the fuck are we?" the young man quizzed. "Ah, don't

get your knickers in a twist now mate! Of course, this heap of rubbish was built by none other than the Grand Matriarch. Wily ole cunt she was. Now some was here way back when the shite was being built. Sheena and some lad named Trent be the only ones left so far as I can tell. Yours truly is a relatively more recent addition. I can be a bit of a filch and I like to, shall we say, explore so I know me way around. Horses for courses I suppose yeah?" The young man had been listening intently to every word. "Who is this Grand Matriarch person?" he asked. "Well that one's a bit more of a mystery chap, even to a dodgy sod like meself. There was a right good painting of that cunting old twat in your lodgings. What I do know mate is that she was a right bloody storm and she was to be feared." Atticus pulled a gleaming silver box from the pocket of his waistcoat. With a flip of the wrist the box flew open on a hinge to reveal a neat row of cigarettes. He removed one and slipped the thin container back into his pocket. He placed the unlit cigarette between his lips and continued speaking while he jammed his hand into his pants pocket. "By the time I got here, there was already a bit of a mutiny in the works. I'm easy and thought it daft but it grew and it grew until the old bag just stopped coming around. Some bloke fancied himself in charge for a while and, well, things was a bit wonky but alright I suppose. No one really knows exactly who he was or what happened to the old boy though." From the small cardboard box he had fished from his pocket, Atticus retrieved a match and struck it on the side of the box and lit the cigarette in his mouth. He took a long drag and blew a stream of smoke to extinguish the match which he then threw to the floor. Atticus placed one hand behind his head and reclined lazily in his chair with his feet still inclined and puffed on the cigarette absently. His air of indifference irritated the young man who finally jumped to his feet. "If no one is in charge then why don't you all just leave?" he shouted. "Why are you all just milling around like stupid animals left to rot in their cage?" He stood frozen with his hands out interrogatively with wide eyes on Atticus. Atticus never looked away from his cigarette while he paused from blowing smoke rings. "Can't leave mate. There are dogs in the yard and bats in the belfry." "What does that mean?" the young man shouted again in return. Atticus looked over at the young man and laughed. "It means there are dogs in the yard and bats in the belfry." "This is crazy," said the young man as he turned away from Atticus. "I just want to go home, this is crazy!" He turned back to Atticus. "Where did you come here from?" he asked. "I don't rightly know to be exact. I was just here one day like you. I don't remember nothing from a time before this place." "What about you," he said looking to Sheena. His own frantic gaze was met by the four pallid eyes. Atticus could see that the young man was at his breaking point. "Tell you what," Atticus said, sliding his feet to the floor. "I know just the bloke you need to see." Atticus stood and snuffed the cigarette in the soil of a large potted plant on the desk from where the young man had taken a chair. After slipping back into his short black jacket, Atticus walked toward the double doors without a word and was trailed by the young man back to the main hall. Atticus looked around in both directions then suddenly shouted at the top of his lungs startling the young man. "Oi, Larry! Fancy a word mate! Where you got

off to?" A young black man with short dreadlocks leaned over a railing on the third floor. "The fuck you want now?" he shouted at Atticus. "It's not me britches in a bind you twat. This sorry sod here is right arse over tit. But then, I know you're the bloody dog's bullocks when it comes to unbinding britches, yeah? Now fly the fuck down here will you?" The man presumed to be Larry laughed playfully, flashing a big toothy grin in a way that reminded the young man very much of Atticus. Larry threw his leg over the railing and grabbed onto the ornate wood with both hands as the other leg followed. He dangled from the third floor limply. "Hey Atty!" he called out. "What do you think man? Too high?" he called out laughing and looking over his shoulder to Atticus. "Course not, mate. Never is," Atticus shouted in reply. Larry put both feet flat against the wall where he dangled and pushed himself outward as he released his grip on the railing. He executed a graceful twist in midair before landing on his feet and rolling forward onto his back only to finish the maneuver by popping back to his feet as he exited the roll. Larry dusted off his black leather jacket, though the young man noticed he wore the same white button up shirt beneath the jacket and the same red trousers and heavy boots with the buckle. "What's all this now, Atty?" he said coolly while brushing off his sleeve. "Who's the young blood?" Atticus chuckled and patted the young man on the back. "He's the bloody Riddler, this one. Got the sixty-five thousand dollar question which, incidentally, happens to actually be sixty-five thousand questions." "Well," Larry said slowly, drawing the word out as he stepped closer to the young man. He looked the young man hard in the face. "How you doing there, Riddler? The name's Lawrence. Folks around here call me Law, you know why?" Atticus chortled. "I'll call you Law when you call me fucking Atticus." "Okay, fucking Atticus," he smiled at Atticus and looked back to the young man's face. "As I was saying, folks around here call me Law, you know why?" "It seems they're not very creative?" the young man dared. "No," Law snapped. "Because I see all, I hear all, and I never forget. Folks come to me when they need to know the score, the rules, the *law*. You see where I'm going with this?" The young man smiled. "Yeah I gotcha." "Now what is it that you had this sorry sack of shit," he shoved Atticus, "call me all the way down here for?" "Okay, well," the young man began. "I was asking Atticus about trying to leave," "You can't leave," said Law, cutting him off. "Yeah that's what Atticus said too. Something about bats in the belfry and dogs and ninjas with lasers and shit." Law chuckled. "Yeah that's right. You go up to high in this mother and you end up frothing with rabies. There are bats in the belfry alright and all over the higher levels to boot. Thousands of them. You go up and start seeing bat shit all over everything you turn around because you're just about to run into them." "And the dogs?" queried the young man. "Oh, they're not dogs, my friend. Those are fucking hyenas. Laughing motherfucking hyenas. You see the size of them yet?" The young man shook his head and gestured to the milky glass. "I can't see anything outside with these windows." "You'll know those aren't dogs the minute you see the size of them. But there's at least a dozen of them out there, roaming the courtyard. You can't run anywhere because the entire place is surrounded by a damn wall. I'm talking a big

fucking block wall and there's nowhere to go." Atticus piped up "In fact, take a butcher's at the lad who made it back inside from out there and you'll see bloody well what those beasts'll do to you." "Yeah," continued Law, "Only, he's one of the lucky ones." He turned his head and shouted over his shoulder. "Hey Trent! Come on out here for a minute buddy!" After a few lingering moments a set of double doors far down the main hall creaked open. A young boy around the age of ten who had closely cropped dark hair poked his head out and looked around. When he spotted Law he hobbled out of the doorway. It took some time for him to slowly make his way over to the three men who stood silent, watching the mangled boy. "Hey Law," he said softly when he finally reached the trio. The young man looked on in horror. The boy's face was badly disfigured. He was missing an eye and ear on the left side of his head. He was also missing his right arm and left foot, although the extent of his bodily injuries couldn't be surmised due to his clothing which was the same garb as the others. Law smiled warmly. "Hey buddy, how you doing?" he said as he tried to tousle the boy's short hair. "Okay," the boy said softly, never meeting Law's eyes. The boy was evidently very shy and stared down at the floor whether speaking or being addressed. "Whatcha been up to palykins" Atticus asked in his chipper demeanor. "Just playing with my turtles," replied the boy in his soft voice. Law squatted down to the boy's height and looked him in the face. The boy continued to stare at the floor as if he hadn't even noticed. "I haven't seen you around in a bit. You doing alright?" asked Law in a gentle voice. "Yeah, I'm okay," came a soft response. "Alright now, you just let us know if you need anything or anyone bothers you. You know that." "Yeah I know." The shyness in the mangled boy's voice made the young man emotional. He spontaneously wished there was some way he could reach out to the boy and comfort him. "Do you mind if I go back to my room now, Law?" the boy asked. "Yeah, buddy, run along. Give your turtles a pet for me, okay?" said Law almost lovingly. "Okay" the boy said in a near whisper as he turned away and hobbled back toward the room from which he had come. "Ah, poor bugger," Atticus sighed. Law stood and turned back toward the young man. "If you're lucky, you come back like that when you go outside," said Law gruffly. The young man furrowed his brow in thought. "There must be something, something obscure, tunnels I don't know, is there anything at all that you can think of?" he asked Law. "Look, you're just asking for trouble, son. I laid out the facts for you. If you choose to ignore what you just saw with your own eyes then that's on you. You do so at your own risk. If I would have heard the walls whisper anything different than what I told you, you and Atty'd be standing here with your thumbs up your asses because I'd have become a ghost by now." Law laughed. "What, you think I stick around this place for the company. Come on now. Atty sucks a mean dick man, but he ain't so good I'd choose it over my own personal freedom." He smirked at Atticus. Atticus chuckled and turned to the young man. "I knew this wanker would come along spouting off to you, I told you yeah? Larry here is about as camp as row of pink tents but, oh what's the word? Projection, I think. He projects." Atticus laughed hard looked back toward Law. "Don't let him fool you with it," he continued. "He loves himself a good beef

bayonet every now again. He talks about me todger so much I gotta shove it in his fat gob just to shut him up!" Law reached for Atticus who danced around the flash of leather sleeve and fingers with a playful laugh and then jumped away, beyond reach. "He's got a pet name for me in fact," said Atticus as he ducked behind the young man, using him as a shield. "Calls me the Artful Todger, he does!" The young man spoke up, spoiling the fun the other two seemed to be having. "Is there any sort of main office or maintenance room or anyplace where there might be some sort of schematics or layout of the grounds?" he asked. Atticus remained playful but Law, ever serious, turned away from Atticus to reply. "There's nothing." He was becoming irritated at the young man's persistent nagging. "Anything you might think of has already been thought of. The only thing in this whole place is an empty room down in the basement. That's the only thing that's still got me puzzled. I can't figure it out." Law got a distant look in his eyes as his thoughts shifted to the room. "What's so puzzling about an empty fucking room?" the young man said impatiently. "Well, it's not completely empty. You see, there's this thing standing up in the middle of the room. It looks like a table turned up on its end but it has these two arm rest things like you're supposed to stand in it. There ain't no straps on the arm rests or none of that shit so I can't figure out why it's there. But here's what's really got me wondering. On the floor, there's a square around the whole thing; real faint so you'd almost never see it. It's like a crack or a seam but it's already in the basement so I don't know where it might lead if it does actually go somewhere." "Take me to it. Can you show me?" The young man was eager to find answers; to get home. He felt a wellspring of hope and agitation deep in his chest. His excitement was visible. "Yeah I'll take you there," Law replied. "Like I said there's nothing there. No controls or anything so don't get too worked up." The three set across the incredibly large, airy dayroom. The young man's attention was drawn upward. Each level was visible from the dayroom. A large square shaped void continued upward from the area and each level had a balcony on all four sides. He was unable to count the number of levels as they continued higher and higher, evermore upward until disappearing from sight into an inky darkness. "Holy shit!" the young man cried out in surprise. The other two stopped and turned to the young man whose attention was still lost in the darkness above and he crashed into Law's firm chest. The young man stumbled backward for just a moment. "How many floors are there?" he asked. The other two men looked upward into the darkness, no longer impressed by the ominous sight. "Don't really know, mate" offered Atticus. "Like I told you before, there's bats in the belfry. You get up there and, well, you don't come back. Not really leastways. But I can tell you that it goes up for a shite sight. I get distracted with exploring the rooms though, you know; lost count." The young man looked to Law for a more authoritative answer. Law shook his head. "No one who's gone up can tell you about it. Quite a few have tried; went up in this big group one time too thinking safety in numbers. I don't know high it goes." He turned away and continued walking and the others followed, the young man staring up into the darkness as he walked until they entered a hallway and his view was cut off by the low ceiling.

The hallway seemed endlessly long. The light from the opaque windows of the dayrooms began to wane until the hallway was dimly lit by flickering lamplight from overhead globes and an occasional lamp jutting out from the wall. At last, they reached the end of the hallway. The young man was beginning to feel claustrophobic and was visibly anxious. Atticus and Law chuckled amongst themselves. At the end of the hallway was a lift. Law pressed the illuminated button to call the lift down. After about three minutes of waiting in silence, the lift door opened with the ding of a bell and the three climbed in. The young man noticed that there was no panel of illuminated buttons to indicate a desired floor. Instead there was a numbered keypad on which Law pressed the zero key. The doors of the lift closed and they descended to the basement level which was as dimly lit as the previous. Law strode from the lift without waiting for the others. Atticus and the young man followed after. The room Law had indicated was at the opposite end of the basement level. The young man could not quite see that far in the dim light and the hallway disappeared into a point. The three continued down the hallway for an interminable amount of time, passing door after door after door, all of which looked exactly the same. The young man began to feel as if he had become stuck in a time loop. He wanted to ask how much farther but the question seemed ill-mannered and pointless so he resolved to let the question rattle and echo in his mind which seemed to him as empty as the hallway through which he now travelled. All at once, Law came to a stop and again the young man crashed into him as he had been vacantly watching his feet for the last several minutes. Law gently pushed him away but frowned disapprovingly. "This is it." He opened the door and bright white light flickered on inside the very small room. It was much smaller than the young man had imagined and he began to feel slightly deflated as he stepped inside. The ceiling, floor, and walls were all gleaming and smooth like white glass. He could not tell from where the light was coming. It was as if each surface was itself a light or somehow lit from behind. Law had been right. There was absolutely nothing inside the small room but upended metal table with the armrests. He crouched down near the apparatus and ran his hand over the surface of the floor, searching for the crack of an opening somewhere. "It's right here," Law said sounding bored while he motioned to an area with the toe of his boot about eight inches out from the smooth steel surface. The crack was nearly invisible. The young man ran his fingertips over the surface of the area but could feel nothing. Whatever it was, it was a precise and tight fit. "I tried to get a blade down in there, I tried to beat on it with a hammer and chisel; nothing works. I don't know what this stuff is but I didn't even scratch it," Law said. The young man stood and inspected the smooth silver surface of the upright table with the armrests. He ran his hand up the back of the apparatus and across the top. "Tried that; ain't nothing there," Law said sounding impatient. He watched the young man for only a moment more. "Well, you have fun with this thing. Let me know if you figure out anything revolutionary," he said as he walked out of the room. "I trust you can find your way back without getting lost?" The young man was running his hand across the top of one armrest, his attention completely

consumed by curiosity. "What? Oh, yeah. I'll find it." He answered looking over his shoulder toward Law and Atticus who were walking in the opposite direction now. As if by instinct, he walked around the armrest and stood erect with his back against the apparatus while he placed an arm on each arm rest. "Law who had looked back over his shoulder smiled and shouted back down the hallway "Tried that one too, kid." There was no response. He glanced back over his shoulder and stopped in mid stride. He turned back toward the room, his face slack. Atticus noticing the look on his friends face frowned curiously and made an about face in time to see the apparatus disappear silently into the floor. The two sprinted back toward the room. Law dropped to his knees as he entered the now vacant room, sliding across the floor to the space where the apparatus had stood. The floor was as smooth as ever. "Hey!" he shouted with his lips nearly touching the floor. "Hey! Can you hear me?" But the young man heard nothing. Once the apparatus had disappeared into the floor which had reclosed with a soft click he was in complete darkness. A heads-up display began to glow faintly in the darkness before him, growing brighter with each passing moment. It glowed before him in a crescent shape, surrounding him on three sides. It was filled with scrolling numbers and colored meters and gauges. In the full glow of the display, he could see there was also a crescent shaped control panel before him, below the display. It was filled with levers and toggle switches and buttons and keys. He stood for a long time staring at the control panel and watching the flickering display. He licked his dry lips and reached a trembling hand toward the control panel. In the darkness he felt the cold, slick buttons beneath his fingers. He was sure that if the lights suddenly came on, every surface in this cramped space would gleam too, like the room above. He pressed a button then another and then a third. A small window jumped to the forefront of the display which read "Initiate emergency shutdown sequence?" He reached out and blindly clicked another key. "Are you sure?" the window read. He pressed another key. "Please enter 18 digit alpha-numeric access code," the window prompted. The young man licked his lips again, his breath ragged. He wasn't sure how he knew what to enter but he felt as if he knew so he reached toward the control panel once more. Ever so slowly he clicked and clacked eighteen keys, pausing, then pressed a nineteenth. "Emergency shutdown sequence initiated" read the window. On the rest of the display, the numbers and meters and gauges all began to slowly zero out. For a moment he stood in silence staring at the inactive display before it faded out and he was engulfed in utter silence and darkness. Before the young man had enough time to gather his thoughts, the square above him opened and the apparatus began to ascend. He could feel the movement but the gleaming white room was now dark as he rose from the floor and came to a stop with a soft click. The young man stood unmoving for a moment. He could hear breathing. "What the fuck just happened? What did you just do?" asked Law calmly but sounding strained. "Never mind," he said without even pausing for an answer. "The ventilation just shut off so we better get our asses back above ground most ricky tick." The three blindly made their way into the hallway and moved forward. "Should we run?" the young

man asked. "No," Law replied sternly. "You'll just use up more oxygen that way. Although I would like to hear your ass smack into that elevator door at full tilt." In the darkness, the young man could not see the sour expression on Law's face though it was entirely evident in his voice. "There's a very old stairway that was used before the elevator had been installed. It hasn't been maintained since and it's in pretty rough shape. The damn thing is hazardous enough with the lights on not to mention in complete darkness but it's our only access to the upper levels without power," Law continued. It was fortunate that the route was a straight passage which was easy enough to navigate in the dark, but the incredible length of the passageway began to show in the three men's breath which grew more and more labored as the oxygen level diminished over time. The smell of the air began to change as it became more suffocating. The temperature began to rise with the stillness of the ventilation, complemented by the heat of three moving bodies. Each man began to sweat. It was just a bead on the brow at first, then a trickle down the cheek. Before long they were all sweating profusely and each began to inwardly worry. Although they were nearing the end of the passageway, it was impossible to determine any progress in the absolute darkness. Of course, Law had memorized the number of steps it took to travel the length of the hallway but to the young man it seemed there was no beginning anymore and no end. It was just one step after the next into infinity; into oblivion. Above, the bearded old man shuffled slowly along the hallway with one hand dragging across the wall for support. When he reached the large open dayroom he stopped and propped his body against the wall. He scratched his bushy white beard as he rested and surveyed the room before him. He glanced upward into the darkness which was far more pronounced with the power out. Only the light from the opaque dayroom windows scratched meekly against the blackness. The old man heaved his thin body from the wall with considerable effort and shuffled on into the dayroom, spying Sheena occupying a couch against the nearest wall. He staggered along quietly with just a faint sound of his boots scraping the floor and stopped at a tattered reclining chair next to the couch. He placed his withered hand with its cracked, yellowing nails on the frayed fabric arm of the recliner and ever so carefully maneuvered his body to sit. At last he let his light frame crash down the last few inches into the chair and he sighed heavily. For a moment he sat quietly with his eyes closed recovering from the taxing journey since his last rest against the wall at the edge of the hallway only halfway across the room. He scratched at his beard again and opened his eyes to smile at Sheena who returned a slightly quizzical gaze. He patted the arm of the old recliner and studied the fraying fabric. "I wonder what this is all about," he said in his soft crackly voice without looking up. "Suppose it don't really matter to be honest though eh?" He smiled again at Sheena, the skin around his faded eyes crinkled. "It seems that what's happening is something almost inconceivable wouldn't you say?" replied Sheena with a faint hint of softness about her face and in her voice. "Mostly," she continued, "we seem to be entirely absorbed and enthralled with pleasure. Food, entertainment, any pleasure of the senses

is blindly indulged with an urgency bordering cultish worship." The second woman leaned forward on the couch, "But a few have only light dust on their eyes and those are the ones that will be able to see the truth." "Ain't it so," he crackled. "Still I wonder. I have an idea though. Something I've wondered about for quite some time. But then, you probably already see it though, I imagine." The old man smiled with his kind, crinkling eyes again. Sheena cracked the faintest grin for the first time in recent memory. The old man chuckled to himself as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Her grin mixed with shadowy blank eyes struck him as slightly demented but he was perfectly at ease, though he winced and put a hand on his chest. At that moment Atticus, accompanied by the young man, burst through a door on the opposite side of the room. Both were entirely drenched in sweat and breathing heavily as if they had just completed a marathon run. The two collapsed in a heap on the floor after taking one step through the doorway. The door swung back with a soft creak and bumped against the two bodies. They lay in the doorway for several minutes as their breathing gradually returned to normal. Atticus sat up and leaned against one side of the door frame. "Welcome back. Where's Lawrence?" Sheena asked evenly. "Went off his trolley when we reached the lift! Started babbling about then he just turn and run off the way we came." Atticus paused and took a deep breath. "Must have been lack of air to the brain or something but he went right bloody barmy. We was about to suffocate down there! It's not as if we could just go gallivanting after him." The man in the straightjacket stepped over Atticus and through the open doorway. Atticus leaned his head back into the stairwell and looked on as the man climbed the stairs and disappeared into the darkness. Atticus turned his attention back to Sheena. "Don't rightly know what happened. This gormless wanker," he kicked the young man who was now sitting up with his back against the other side of the doorframe, "went pissing about someplace and made the dog's dinner." Atticus scowled at the young man in silence for a few moments. "How's everything here love," he continued, looking back to Sheena. "Can't you see?" Sheena asked. A scream broke the conversation and the man in the straightjacket fell from the darkness above the dayroom. His scream cut off as his body smacked against the wood floor, bounced once, then came to rest in a black puddle. Everyone stared silently at the body in shock and horror. Sheena looked back toward Atticus. "We're just peachy keen, darling." "Bloody hell," Atticus snarled and jumped to his feet. "I need to find Trent." He trotted off into the darkness of the hallway in the direction of Trent's quarters. For a long time the dayroom was silent. The young man eventually got to his feet and walked toward the body. The door to the stairwell which he had been blocking open slammed shut behind him. He jumped, startled as the sudden noise broke into his thoughts. He cast a sheepish glance toward Sheena who was watching him but made no movement. The young man knelt down near the body in the middle of the room. He examined the mess curiously although he didn't dare get too close or touch it. The blood was already beginning to crust along the edges of the puddle. Thin rivulets traveled this way and that along cracks and low spots in the wood paneled floor. Small droplets fanned out in

every direction, creating a pattern that one would expect to see on a canvas in a museum of modern art. The skin was beginning to look waxy and the eyes were open, staring out at the wall with a blank, thousand yard stare. The gloss, the sheen of life, was gone from the eyes. The young man seemed to be lost in his thoughts and was startled again when Sheena suddenly spoke. "Don't let him get to you. Atticus, I mean, not that one," she gestured to the body on the floor. "I'm glad this is happening. I harbor many regrets but no resentment. It pleases me to know the festering sore is at its end." Atticus strolled out from the dark hallway. "He's not in his lodgings. I can't imagine where he's got off to." He picked up a desk chair and walked toward one of the windows. "We ought to open up these windows though, yeah? The air's getting a bit heavy in here without the ventilation." Holding the chair by two of its legs, he raised it over his shoulder like a baseball bat and bashed it against the window. The chair bounced as the strands of wire remained intact but opaque shards of glass rained down on Atticus's head. Bright streams of sunshine slithered through the broken window and beamed across the dusty air, then cool gust of fresh air issued forth from the window. Atticus banged the chair against the window a few more times to loosen the remaining glass for better air flow. "I figure we don't need to worry about the other rooms or the upper levels. If we get the rest of these in here we'll get some good fresh air. Suppose we can each take care of the ones in our own lodgings too so we don't suffocate in our bloody sleep." Sheena had risen from the couch and was standing behind Atticus when he turned away from the window. He nearly bumped into her she was so close and they stood face to face. "You're his favorite you know," she reached up and ran a hand through his messy black hair and looked into his eyes. "That means you're going to have to help." "Help by not fighting," the other woman added before Atticus could say anything. Atticus sputtered in confusion as he was kissed on each cheek by the duo. The two women then backed away from Atticus and extended an arm to each other, grasped each other's hand and stared at one another in silence for a drawn out moment. Atticus and the young man looked on in silent confusion but neither spoke. With her free hand, each woman held a shard of glass against the other's wrist and slashed simultaneously. "No!" Atticus screamed and lunged forward knocking the shards to the floor. He gripped each woman's wrist in his hands in a vain effort to stifle the blood flow. Blood rhythmically poured over and through Atticus's fingers in time with each heartbeat. "No, no, why," Atticus pleaded with tears beginning to stream down his cheeks. Within moments each woman began to look weak and more pale than she already was naturally. They soon began to slump. Atticus struggled to hold them up by each bleeding wrist. But it was too late. He sat on the floor with the head of both women cradled in his lap. He was hunched over with his face pressed against theirs, his bloody hands caressing their cheeks, and he sobbed. "Why, why," he was saying to himself. "What have you done?" his face still pressed into theirs. "What have you done?" He turned his head and looked at the young man who had silently watched the scene unfold. "What have you done!" Atticus shouted. He leapt to his feet and seized the young man

by the collar. His hands spattered blood across the young man's face. "What have you done? What the fuck have you done?" Atticus shouted and sobbed at the same time. "My only refuge. My glittering little jewel in this wasteland." The young pulled away from Atticus's grip. "She's right. You are my favorite. The only reason you're still here is that I can't let you go." Atticus didn't seem to hear. He returned to his position next to the bodies and sat silently with his head hanging. The young man stooped to pick up a glass shard of his own. As he turned to walk away Atticus sat stroking the hair of the two women. The young man walked out of the day room and past a glass enclosed room. When he reached the front doors he took off his shoes and opened one side of the double doors. The young man held the small jagged shard in fingers and pressed it into the palm of his other hand, grimacing as he opened up the skin. Blood pooled readily in his palm, glistening in the sunlight. He rubbed his bloody hand against the outside of the door he held open and, using his socked foot, he slid one of the shoes into the threshold to block the door open. He opened the second door to smear more blood on the outside and slid the other shoe into the threshold. Atticus hadn't noticed anything as he sat, still sat cradling the dead women. The young man had disappeared into the stairwell before the first of the hyenas came sniffing at the bloody doors. The smell, of course, had attracted them, but as they began to lap the blood from the exterior of the doors, they pushed their way inside and into a new and overwhelming scent. The hyenas poured into the entryway and softly padded past the glass enclosed room. They engulfed the room cautiously; their eyes never wavering from the only potential threat that stood between the pack and its quarry as they followed the intoxicating aroma. Atticus had his back to the approaching animals. They were silent and crouched as they stalked forward. As the pack began to close in on Atticus he became aware of the many but nearly inaudible shuffling sounds of the stealthy predators. He turned his head away from the objects of his affection to look. His breath caught in his throat and his eyes widened in confused terror. The pack moved ever closer and Atticus saw the young man slip out of the stair well unnoticed. In his socked feet he moved as silently as the hungry pack while he bounded toward the front doors. He slipped outside quickly, picking up his shoes behind him and pulling the double doors shut. The young man sighed with relief but did not pause. He admired the lush grounds as he walked down large steps away from the building and to a nearby tree where he sat in soft grass and pulled off his socks. The grass felt like cold silk between his toes. He began to collect leaves from the ground around him and stuffed both of his shoes and both of his socks full of dry leaves. He scooped up his socks and shoes and returned to the building where he dropped the two socks and one shoe onto the ground. A low window sill afforded an easy perch onto which he climbed and placed a shoe onto the wood thatched eaves overhead. He steadied himself with one hand and with the other he reached into the pocket of his jeans. The smooth metallic rectangle banged against his fingertips. He withdrew the lighter from his pocket and sparked it. As he stared into the dancing flame, a sense of triumph began to well up inside of him. The

young man ignited the leaves and made sure that the shoe began to burn nicely before he hopped down, scooped up the remaining socks and shoe, and moved on to another spot. By the time he was done, the flames on the roof were beginning to fill out to a nice, full blaze. He watched from across the grounds for hours until parts of the roof began to fall in and for hours more until the towering monstrosity began to collapse in on itself. He gazed at the inferno through the night as the hideous remnants of the structure melted away before him. Before long dawn began to break and all that remained was a large pile of smoldering rubble. He rose from the place he had been seated and rubbed his tired eyes. His hands and feet were moist with morning dew. Sunshine began to creep across the lush gardens as he walked with a sense of serenity toward the rubble. He climbed the large blackened steps and turned to face the rising sun. Behind him, the smoking rubble no longer defaced the lush fertile garden within the walls. It seemed now as if it had only been an illusion all along. The fresh smell of morning purged the smoke and danced into his nostrils. He inhaled the morning air deeply and closed his eyes with his face toward the warm rays of the rising sun.

Swallowed

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