

The two men sat. Somewhere in the bowels of the place deep machinery grunted, groaned, rhythmic and cold, echoing softly through the room. For a long time they said nothing. For a long time they did not dare. It was late. If they wanted to go to sleep they could, try this whole mess again in the morning, but they did not. Something stopped them--if not now, then when? They nursed glasses of fine scotch, ostensibly in celebration but really to steady the nerves. One smoked an old, thick cigar. No one smoked these days, and yet. Finally, one spoke:

“Shall we?”

“I don’t see why not.”

And yet they did not. The room was large, cold, sterile-- machinery whirled quietly in the distance, efficient, unobtrusive. Large computer interfaces showed a whirl of code, of long, difficult diagrams the men knew but did not dare speak. If this would work... If this would work.

“What is it, Sige?”

“Hm?”

“Grief, I mean. We are told many things-- not that I would know, but... What is its purpose?”

“It is that which limits us. It is that which destroys us.”

“The body would not create such a thing without reason, no? Some evolutionary advantage.”

“Grief, it—Klaus, I am old. older than you. I lived *before*.”

“Before? You mean...why did you not tell me?”

Sige was silent. Then: “I would not know. We are not allowed to remember. We only feel echoes, aftershocks.”

“I wonder what it feels like.”

“Klaus, are you sure you haven't felt it already?”

They spoke no more. Quietly they stood up. A great, monstrous thing stood in the center of the room. A mass of wires, nodes, offshooting pieces of great black machinery jutting out from the cylindrical core. It was entirely quiet. Without warning, Sige shook his hand, paused, and then hugged him. The two men took their positions. A switch was flipped, then another, then 20 more. The beast made no noise, but it pulsed--a bright blue light flowed through its veins and wires. It glowed. And then it worked.

They were somewhere else. Something had happened, something had gone wrong--but what? God, not that it mattered now--they were falling, falling, and stretched. Their minds, no, their souls, were *stretched*.

They were enormous and small all at once, enormous, then small, children and the eldest methuselah one after the other, again, again. They were other people, themselves, but most importantly they *hurt*. Nothing could describe the way they hurt. Parts of themselves wriggled and squirmed. Burning, burning, cold as ice.

At last a voice. Something constituted itself. The...*space*, it was pure, blinding white, burning into them, erasing them, constructing them again. It pierced every part of their being. And yet they saw it. And yet they saw.

“What is your desire.”

They...They couldn't say. The thing spoke, yes, but the voice, it was so loud--they wanted to scream, it was unbearable. It repeated:

“What is your desire.”

At last, the words came out, panicked, strained:

“Change us.”

And thus it was so.

Chapter 1

The lights were off again. Jasper woke slowly at first, then all at once, his eyes adjusting to the fuzzy dark of the room. Instinctually, he started to fumble over to the nightstand for his glasses, but he stopped himself quickly. He knew better than to move. Something was in the closet. At first it thrashed and sputtered with furious intensity, but it quickly stopped, became silent, still. Again? He grimaced. If they're just gonna keep shutting the electric off then why even bother paying? It wasn't like it was cheap, and the battos only did so much. Batteries were expensive too, you know, and the depot was a long way away. Slowly, slowly, Jasper reached for the batto on the nightstand, practiced, precise. He slipped the covers out from over him in one motion, rising to his feet, then, all at once, turned on the switch and flung the closet door open. Light flooded the room, pearl white and synthetic. The shade came rushing out, ready, waiting, and then stopped at the edge of the batto's light. It screamed. No, it couldn't scream- this was worse, inhuman, cold, but there was still pain in that voice. Primal, unknowing pain, and *anger*.

“Back, back, get out!” The shade looked him with blind fury. Its face was twisted and hollow, its body white and translucent and cut in jagged edges like saw blades. You couldn't tell where the shade ended and the room began-but that didn't matter much to him. They were everywhere these days. Couldn't go two days without one finding its way into your closet or latrine. He swung the batto wildly about by its handle, and slowly backed into the far end of the room, never turning his back, eyes on the thing. With

one hand he reached behind him and threw open the window, cool air flowing into the room. Okay, heres the hard part. Be cool. Don't want it fucking with mom, after all.

He switched the batto off. The shade flew towards him, letting out something he could only assume was a laugh. All at once, he ran to the closet door--the shade was on the other side of him now, and switched the batto back on. It shrieked and flew back. He stepped forward, the shade another step back. Then he lunged, face first, quick, furious, falling onto the bed. It flew out the window and vanished into the thick night. No time, he slammed the window back shut, and collapsed onto the bed, panting. Fuck. that never got easier. Never. Jasper caught his breath. Footsteps appeared, drew closer. His dad peeked into the room, candle in hand, clutching it tightly, leaving imprints on the softened wax.

“Another one?” He said, glancing around the room. The candlelight cast long, strange shadows, dancing slightly to the flicker of the flame. “You okay?”

“Yeah. that one wasn't too bad. Just a no-name.”

“Shit, we gotta go to the depot tomorrow, Jas. They’re scaring your mother half to death, and im sure as hell losing sleep over it too. We’ll see if they can fix the lights or at least comp us some battos.”

He nodded, got back into bed, and closed his eyes. When he was sure his father was gone, he sat up again. He took the box of matches from his desk and lit the old candle on his nightstand. His dad would kill him if he knew he was wasting wax, but he didn’t care. He waited for his hands to stop shaking. They never did.

Sleep came late, foggy, light. Strange, sad dreams, and he woke at first light. As he awoke he tried to remember, to clutch on to the last bit of sleep- what was I dreaming? He thought he remembered, for a second. But it was gone.

The hills drew by in scattered pockets, green, inviting, rising gently to the north towards some terrible peak. Jasper sat at the back of the carriage, looking east, half there but mostly somewhere else. Dad avoided bits of missing road as best he could but it was still bumpy as all hell. Twice they had to stop to get the wheel out of a gutter or some deep pothole. He wondered when the repavement team would finally move out west and fix this mess. They had great big machines, painted yellow and orange, that made a terrible sound as they smoothed the cracks and threw down fresh asphalt. He dont think he would have minded the noise if it meant a better road--not like autos came down here much, anyway--sometimes from Highlake a barron or two would take their cars south, wondering how the poor folks lived like this, gawking, asking for photos with the locals. You could see their kids plastered against the windows, wide eyed. He imagined the barrons saying “glad thats not us, huh kiddo?” Yeah, go fuck yourself too, asshole.

Every so often he would swat a mosquito, or fiddle with his clothes, but mostly he kept silent, tried to sleep. When they got on the freeway, the road smoothed out--78 ran all the way east, from the lehigh, to the pavement team kept good care of it. Every so often they would pass a merchant, wave, smile, or fly by a journeyman below. When the bumps became infrequent, less harsh, he drifted to sleep.

Jaspar woke to the sound of chatter, terse and clanging. He rose with a quiet panic, looking around, searching for the source of the commotion. Had something happened? His eyes adjusted to the sunlight. They were at the depot, parked, somewhere between the market and the depot proper-- from outside the strange synthetic walls of the depot he saw a throng of angry townspeople stir uncomfortably, angry. They were crowded around a makeshift podium, just a couple planks and a wooden crate, on which stood a tall, thin man dressed in the highwear--he wore a navy 2 piece suit which had once been pristine but now showed signs of abuse and wear, and a ragged, thin necktie. A thick shock of black hair had been combed to death and hung loosely down to his shoulders. He was trying frantically to calm the angry townspeople, obviously to no avail.

“Listen, the fact is we don't know when the power's gonna get better. We gotta talk to the folks up North and--”

It was clearly not what the people wanted to hear. They said the power came from the great river Hudson, that somewhere up North there was a huge monster of metal that turned the water into electricity, but Jasper scoffed at the idea. As if the company would ever waste the water like that.

“Give us our fucking power back! Three children taken by a shade last night and two more the day before! 12 the week before that! ”

Murmurs of *unbelievable* or *how could they?* rose among the crowd. It seems everyone had had the same idea today-- go to the depot and tell the company off.

“We're more than happy to sell battos in the meantime. In commemoration to those lost by shade attack, We're offering a discount to those affected.”

At this the oversized doors of the depot swung open. It was clear the man expected a surge of hungry customers fighting to get in, but there was only silence. No one moved. The man was slightly taken aback, though Jasper saw he was trying his best to hide it. He nervously straightened his tie, considering what to say.

At last he cleared his throat. “We are working with the power company as we speak. Outages are to be expected due to the recent drought up north. Power will be restored as soon as possible.”

This did nothing to placate the crowd. Whispers became murmurs, murmurs became chatter, and finally erupted into outrage. At this an older man pushed his way through the crowd and stood face to face with the company representative. He was short, stout, dressed in farmers clothes, and sported a long, unkempt beard speckled with mud and clay. He scratched his beard absentmindedly, as if considering something, and then finally spoke:

“Turn the power back on.”

“That's really out of our purview--”

“Turn. the power. Back on.”

The old man sprung into action. He ran deceptively fast towards the makeshift stage, face bulging with anger. He ran for less than 5 seconds before a single, piercing shot came, and all at once the man fell face first onto the mud. A pool of blood emerged from the place where his head had been and mixed with the brown earth, viscera splattering in a rough circle where he lay. A troupe of men dressed in dark, murky green emerged from the depot. They marched 10 beside, new, synthetic boots at first clean and then splattered with the thick mud of the wet earth. In their hands were rifles, real rifles-- black and menacing and altogether alien. They curved in odd shapes, had odd instruments attached to their sides, and they were all pointed directly at the audience. The message was clear: disperse. Or else.

The man at the podium winced at this, his eyes fixed on his would-be assailant. Bits of brain and blood were stuck to his blazer. He took a handkerchief out of his coat pocket and tried to wipe away the matter, to no avail. Then he straightened himself and addressed the audience shakily.

“The power will be back once the conditions in the hudson have returned to normal. We appreciate your patience. Battos will be sold at 20 dollars each. Thank you.”

The crowd dispersed uneasily, disappearing into the depot walls or back to the bustle of the market. Jasper glanced at his father, who was watching with curious intensity. They stayed silent for a while, sitting in the carriage, watching the people go about their days. His father stroked Bruno’s mane absentmindedly, more for himself than for the horse. Bruno had seen worse, he wasn’t spooked.

“Well then,” he said. “Jas, help me outta here, will you?”

Jasper obliged. As he got out of the carriage, he wondered what would happen to the poor old man. Eventually, he settled on the fact that his body would be left there in the mud.

They walked briskly past the man’s corpse, into the large, unwelcoming doors of the depot. Strange wood lined the floors-- it *looked* like hardwood, but it felt odd and slick under his feet like the whole thing was covered in the faintest bit of butter or grease. The electrics here were large, fluorescent whites that hung from the ceiling suspended on metal chains, swaying slightly with the breeze. Long, thin rafters snaked and ensnared the upper section of the building, made out of the same material as the floor. The whole thing was put together to look like an old barn, but it didn’t even come close. Goods sat on thick wooden tables, arranged neatly and obsessively in long rows, prices below each. The high value stuff--battos, batteries, medicine--was kept behind thick glass, guarded closely by the shopkeeper.

Jasper slipped out from under his father’s watch and wandered aimlessly for a while. The old man wouldn’t mind--he was too busy convincing himself that he could afford another couple battos and the compulsory stack of batteries that came with it. Now that it was clear the power wasn’t coming back on, it was his only option. Watches, packaged food, bottles of clean water and purifying tablets-- he stared at them lustfully. Like anyone could afford that shit anyway. He wondered why they even put them up if no one from Hunters could afford them. One big fuck you to the hill people, I guess.

He was staring at a porno mag when he saw a girl walking up to the front of the store. She was short--round face, shoulder length hair, and *well fed*. She had odd clothes on--some sort of synthetics, new and clean. She had a basket full of provisions--tinned rice, dried meat, tablets of water purifier. Some girl from the highlake? She clearly wasn't from here. He watched her from a distance, getting closer so he could hear.

"Just this, please." the girl said.

The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow.

"All this?" he said.

"Yep, all this. Say, do you guys have a restroom?"

At this the shopkeeper laughed. "Restroom? What, do you need to take a nap?"

"Uh--a latrine, I mean. I really need to use one."

He sighed. "Look, there's one in the back, but I'm really not supposed to--"

"Thank you, sir! I'll be quick, I promise."

She ran through the door behind the man before he could say anything more. The shopkeeper just sighed and returned to his magazine. Huh. Wonder what that was about? What did she call it, a restroom? The thought made him laugh. He was just about to turn and leave when the girl came back out.

"I really appreciate it, sir," she said.

"Mhm."

The man nodded, then, suddenly, looked up. A look of shock came about his face.

"Wait, whats that in your--?"

She leaned over the counter and kissed him on the cheek. The man squirmed, tried to pull her off, but her hand clasped around his and squeezed. Suddenly, the man relaxed. A look of pleasant stupidity came about his face. His eyes drooped.

"Thanks for coming in, miss..."

"What do I owe you?" She said.

"Don't, don't worry about it..."

And then the man was asleep. The girl turned around, walked out the front door.

What the hell just happened? How did she--? Fuck it, he had to go ask. Dad wasn't gonna be done for hours. Something to kill the time, at least.

He followed her out to the marketplace. He scanned the crowd, nothing, looked at the road leading north, nothing-- where did she go? He pushed his way deeper into the market. There! A glimpse of her hair pushed its way deeper and deeper. He followed. Where did she go? He stood there, in the middle of the crowd, wildly searching for her, when he felt someone tap his shoulder. He turned around.

It was her. "Looking for me?" she asked.

"What--no, i-- how did you find me?"

"I know when someones staring at me. You like what you see, or..?"

"No, I promise--*how did you do that?*"

She smiled. He got a better look at her now. Her hair was a strange color, clearly dyed some shade of artificial blond. On the top of her scalp the roots came in dark brown. Her face was covered in freckles, and she had bright, pale blue eyes.

"Its Sera, nice to meet you. And you are?"

"How did you--?"

"And you are?"

"Jasper."

"Well Jasper, what did you see?"

"You kissed him, and then he...fell asleep."

"I'll tell you, but...Do me a favor, first."

And there it was. Everyone wanted something.

"It depends on the favor."

"I'm traveling, I'm just passing through, you see, but I've been sleeping on straw the past week. Do you have a bed?"

"Highlake?"

“Y-yeah, how did you know?”

“You bought something. From the depot. And it wasn’t just a batto.”

“Well, what do you say, any beds?”

“None to spare.”

She stepped forward, put her arms on his, leaned in.

“Not even yours?”

He laughed. “I’m stupid, Sera, but I’m not that stupid. You don’t like me.”

She scowled. “No, I don’t. But I’ll do it anyway.”

“Are you that desperate for a bed?”

She paused. A strange look came on her face, like she was thinking of something. “I don’t know.”

“Why did you do it, Sera? They’re gonna check the tapes.”

“I was bored.”

“Bullshit.”

“You’re right. I dont know, I--”

“What, common occurrence up in Highlake? Those private stores may not care, but the company does.”

“I know.”

“Are you gonna tell me?”

“No. Are you gonna let me stay?”

“Fuck it, yeah.”

Why was he saying yes? He didn’t...no, he knew. He was bored, yes, she was pretty, yes, but more than anything, he *needed to know*. Some bored highlake girl doesn’t steal from the company. Doesn’t put their shopkeeper to sleep with god knows what. She was, well, something. She was in motion. And he wanted to follow her, wherever it may lead.

They walked back on I-78, the road wide, the sun sinking low and through the rolling hills. They talked a little, shared a tin of beans, and then walked in silence. Down exit 11 and across 614, through the winding valley, as the last of the sunset streamed golden, tinged everything with long shadows. His dad was asleep when they got home, passed out on the rotten couch with a bottle of shine laying on the coffee table, dirty magazines and old novels strewn between.

“Hold on,” he said, leading Sera through the dark house, batto in his hands swinging wildly from its handles. “My room is the last in the hallway. Go there.”

She nodded, and obliged. He ducked his head into the master, knocking softly on the bedroom door.

“Mom?” He asked. The room was flooded with the bright, inhuman white of battos. They were arranged in a circle around the chair which she sat on, knees to her chest, staring vaguely at the caked old window.

“Hmm? What is it, sweetie?” Her voice was sweet, gentle, but she didn’t turn her head to look at him. She shook, ever so slightly, rocking a little, shaking her leg.

“I got you more batteries.”

“Thank you, sweetie. You can leave them in the clean pile.”

He had bought the last of the strange, narrow things before they had run out for the day. 1 dollar each, each lasted about a night--assuming you ran it constantly, which she did--it added up...

“Shall I take the dirties for you?”

“Hm? No, no, we dont have any running water tonight. Cant wash properly.”

“Okay, mom. I love you. I have a girl over.”

“Thats nice, Jasper. Turn on the radio when you leave.”

“Goodnight, I love you.”

The radio played strange, sad songs. Horns blared through the other room, mixing with the light of the batto. He wondered if she ever really slept. Never, he thought. Not a real sleep.

Sera was already in bed. She looked up when he came in, flashed a smile.

“Are you gonna tell me?” He asked.

“I did promise, didn’t I.”

“You did.”

“I slipped his drink with a sleeping pill.”

“Ha! I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to.”

She paused.

“Kiss me.”

“What--why?”

“We’re here. We’re in the same bed. We’re young and stupid and bored. I’d be surprised if it didn’t happen. Do you need any more reasons?”

“Sera, I--”

“Kiss me.”

“Okay.”

Jasper lay in bed. A shade flew by the window, peering in, then recoiled, repulsed by the batto light. Sera lay asleep. He turned to look at her. She seemed so unburdened, so peaceful. He wondered what she was dreaming of. *So thats how it feels*. He felt...powerful. He had taken something from her, and her from him. They had helped each other, really. And yet Something strange stirred inside him, like he was sick, but he wasn’t, but he was. Too warm, too close. He wanted cool water, and to be *alone*. Really alone. He fell asleep with the batto on. And there were no shades that night.

Chapter 2

Sera was gone when he awoke. It was well past dawn, and warm, muted light filtered through the stained window, casting trails of dust and decay down to the hardwood floor. *Figures*, he thought. *Left without saying goodbye*. As he lay there, slightly dazed, he realized-- he wasn't tired. Usually when sleep came it came quick, and it was brief and light. Some part of him had trained himself to never fully go to bed. He awoke constantly during the night. Sometimes there were shades. Most of the time there weren't. He thought about Sera. What caused her to leave so early. What strange and lonely road she was on now. How many more people shed fuck for a bed.

He got dressed, took a piss, and made a pot of coffee on the old wooden stove. As it bubbled, he heard a loud, sharp knock on the front door. Mom was buried somewhere deep in the inner chambers of the house, and dad was still passed out, sleeping the drunk off, so he answered, for once incautiously.

Three men stood at the front door. Two behind, weapons--company weapons-- drawn, standing at full attention. The man in front was dressed not as a soldier but as a company man--a wrinkled but clean dress shirt and old black suit. His face was sharp, angular, and worn. Bushy eyebrows crawled on his wrinkled face.

"Jasper Patton?" The man said, calm, cold.

"Yes?"

"Down on the ground. Hands above your head."

Without giving him time to comply, the two soldiers burst through the door and tackled him to the ground. They stood over him, emotionless, as he lay on the floor, head reeling, boots on his back, pressing down.

"Something was stolen from Depot 23 yesterday. Our video evidence confirms you were the perpetrator. Come with us."

Jasper didn't have time to process. Without thinking, he blurted out "What, is this about the girl who stole the food? Cause I had nothing to do with--"

"We do not arrest people over tins of canned rice, Jasper."

Yeah right, he thought. *I've seen men killed over tins of rice*. He spit, blood spattering the stained wooden floor. *Fuck*. The men grabbed his arms, bringing him to his feet. He felt unsteady, like he was liable to fall, but he reached out and placed his hand on one of the men's shoulder.

"I-I dont understand--"

The man was silent. He motioned for the soldiers to follow, and they led him out the front door and into the blinding sun. His eyes adjusted to the daylight, and, slowly, he saw an auto parked out front--shiny and new, thick and bulky. He had never seen a new car before. How could they even make them? It was square and boxy-- like a wagon, almost, and as they swung open the back doors and loaded him in he couldn't help but feel the slightest bit amazed. Under different circumstances...

The auto jerked into motion. It was strange--he had been inside one once, a long time ago--some richie had taken one down to the market and offered rides for a dollar a piece. This was different: it drove smooth, fast, seemingly impervious to the cracks and bumps of the old country road. A small, tinted window showed the world blurring by faster than hed ever seen. It was dizzying, nauseating. He threw up. Bits of splattered puke drenched his shirt, flung this way and that by the moving car. He was sat on a cold, hard bench, and each time the car jerked he would be flung a little. They were headed east.

Thoughts rose and fell, but they were not clear. Vague notions of panic filled him, but he could not notice-- everything was distant, like looking through a window, everything distorted, quiet. He must've hit his head pretty hard.

Eventually, he passed out, slumped onto the steel floor of the vehicle.

He was dreaming. Well, he was, but this was a strange dream. He watched the world from somewhere above, staring down at the crowd of people below. They sat in a large hall, on tables placed all over the room, talking, eating. The crowd chattered incessantly, each conversation overlapping, feeding back into a mess of human noise. He tried to turn his head only to find himself unable to move. Slowly, he felt himself move downward.

His eyes found themselves fixed on one of the tables in the place, though not by him. As he moved closer, the two people eating gradually came into focus.

"My dad's not gonna like you, you know," The boy on the left said.

"Fuck your dad. Can you cover this?"

"Jesus, fine-- He's not exactly a fan of your kind, Steph."

The boy threw a bit of money on the table. He recognized it--It was their money.

"My kind? What is this, Star Trek? I like The Cure, dude, I'm not killing strangers for dope money."

“I know, but my dad, he’s...paranoid about that stuff. He thinks anything after *Rubber Soul* is straddling the line towards satanism.”

“Vietnam?”

“Worse, Korea. At least they had dope in ‘Nam.”

“It’ll be fine, Tristan. We’ve been going out for a year now and you haven’t brought home any pentagrams yet. I think you’re in the clear.”

“Its not too late, you know. You could still say no.”

The girl reached across the table and put her hands in his. She smiled.

“It’s okay. What are they gonna do, kick you out?”

Tristan laughed. “Of our own apartment?”

“Say, Tris, I was thinking...How come you haven’t quit, yet, anyway?”

“Why, because I don’t make enough for your luxurious spending habits?”

They laughed.

“No, I--I really believe in it, Steph. Look, I know that sounds stupid, but it's true.”

“It's not stupid. It just makes you look a little dumb.”

“We’re 30, 40 years away, tops. We’re both young. We’ll be around. Imagine--”

“Yes, yes, you’ve told me this spheal before. A lot. All the kids in Africa will be drowning in pop tarts and wheat thins. World peace. You blow the president.”

“Or the president blows me.”

She kissed his cheek. “Okay, science boy. We’ll be alright.”

“I know.”

Then he was jolted awake.

“Fuck, get over here!”

Jasper awoke the sound of gunfire-- terrible and piercing but rhythmic, like he had never heard before--it just *kept going*. Constant, deafening. The back door of the van was swung open-- outside only darkness, cut by passes of handheld battos sweeping through the thick night air. How long had he been asleep? Everything hurt. So much he couldn't stand it, but he didn't register. No one would waste bullets like this unless... He had to move.

He rose to his feet, sweaty, heart pounding, and leaped out of the van and into the darkness. A yellow crescent moon hung overhead, providing dim light to see by, but it wasn't enough: he could make out soldiers, yelling, confused, running frantically to and fro, screaming obscenities and cries of pain. And then he saw it: Something darker than dark, floating, a sphere of pure nothing. Shimmering like oil, pulsing, beating. It swept almost lazily across the interstate, stopping at a soldier, who would shoot his auto-rifle blindly, until it touched the man, subsumed him, swallowed him whole. They weren't dead. They were just...gone.

Jasper was terrified. Soldiers *never* freaked out, and not like this. What was this? A shade? No, it couldn't be. Soldiers would sweep their battos right towards it, and the light would be *eaten*. Swallowed whole. Soon all the soldiers were gone. The *thing* turned towards Jasper. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. Shit. Oh my god.

It paused, stopped. Made a strange noise, whirling, processing. And then it flew away.

"Jesus christ, oh my god.." he couldn't help but mutter out loud. Without thinking he fell to the ground. There were questions, yes, a thousand, but more than anything there was silence. In his mind, in the world--squirrels and deer wandered haphazardly across the interstate, grazing on bits of overgrown grass. Somewhere a cicada brood chirped in the distance, making strange communication. What were they saying? Somehow that was all he could find to think about. What strange language they talked, what they had to talk about. He stayed there for hours--the moon made its slow procession in the sky, ducking behind clouds, emerging, disappearing again. Shades flew by and vanished, uninterested.

His whole life. It was gone. Even if he went back--god, they would kill him. Mom, dad...they didn't have anyone now. What would happen...? *Jesus, they're gonna kill me, god!* He stood up, paced around, clutching his hands to his head. Then he stopped.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up-- Sera? She said nothing, made no conversation, only sitting down next to him, quiet. He was--well, he knew he *should* be angry, and he was, but.. I mean, he should kill her. If he hadn't gone and fucked around with her... Part of him wanted to. Many times he felt his hands tremble, threatening to shoot out and grab her neck. Jesus, She almost got him killed, got him arrested, and... *Now* he realized. There was no way he could go home. It was her. She had stolen something, or at least they thought she did. God, Why was she even here? Why come back?

"What--Who--*why*?"

He stood up. Walked over and punched the sheet metal of the van. It hurt. Then again. Again. Finally, he screamed. His hand throbbed with pain. He screamed again. Finally, he collapsed.

“Why would you come back..”

Suddenly he was small, standing on the back porch of his house, the wooden planks and pillars supporting the deck towering above him as he looked through them and into the yard below. Trees filtered the summer sun into patches of shade and light. The railroad tracks that stood behind his house stretched endlessly from side to side, inviting, beckoning... He felt the ground rumble and quake, and waited eagerly, head pressed against the deck's rails, as the locomotive approached. It passed by with a terrible roar, but he was not afraid. He waved at the conductor, and the conductor waved back. They said the rails run all the way east from the lehigh, towards some great congregation, some place of tall buildings and steel. He stared east. He would go there one day, he decided. He would walk along the rails and see the place the trains went.

Eventually, Sera reached into her coat pocket. She pulled out a dusty, yellowed pack of cigarettes, took one out, and lit it with a mechanical lighter. The ember on the end burned a dark red, illuminating some of her face, just barely. The expression was odd, sad. Somewhere in there was pity. Silently, she passed the cigarette to him. His throat tightened and burned. Smoking was a luxury that he could not afford. He coughed, sputtered, felt a buzzing rise and dissipate in his head, as if the world had been turned up in volume and then slowly released to normal. He relaxed. She got up, and took his hand, and led him to the back of the van, locking the thick doors behind her. In the passenger seat of the car was the company man. He had been shot in the head. In his slumped hands stood a pistol. He did not look again.

He fell asleep. He did not dream.

When he awoke, Sera was already awake. She was sitting on the edge of the van, legs swinging absently off the raised platform, staring west, back towards Hunters. It was cold for the season, and he shivered a little as he rose. Sera turned to him. Where silence had taken him yesterday now he felt the words cramming, leaping out of his mouth, a hundred questions.

“Should I ask?” He said.

“Ask what?” she gave him a coy smile.

“Stop it. Stop that. Please stop.”

“Okay,” she said. And there was nothing on her face at all. She said this quietly, softly.

“Sit, Jasper, sit down.”

“Okay.”

He sat next to her. They were somewhere past the depot, past exit 18, but still in the hill lands-- he couldn't tell where. He wondered why they hadn't traveled further yesterday. They had been traveling well into the night....

"Why did you do this to me, Sera?" as the words came out of his mouth he realized how much he meant them. They didn't *know* each other, they didn't work on the same farm or live in the same community-- why would she do this? She had to have known. She had to have figured *something* would happen to him.

She tried to speak, but he cut her off. "I lived there my whole life. And you've *fucked* everything up! I was--I was gonna take over the homestead, I was gonna open a stall one day! I--"

His words trailed off. He realized he was crying. He couldn't remember the last time he cried. Sera said nothing. He couldn't tell if she looked guilty or resigned but a *look* came across her face. He sobbed. For a long time.

Sera hesitated, reached out a hand, slowly cautiously, towards his, and then stopped, recoiled. Finally, she spoke.

"I didn't know. Honest to god, I didn't know. I thought they'd come after me, sure, but--"

"What did you take, Sera! What did you take? That wasn't the depot representative who took me. That was *management*. *Fucking Management*, Sera!"

She hesitated. At last, she reached into her pocket and pulled something out. It was small, round, and pure, reflective black.

"Do you know what this is? No, of course-- listen."

Without warning she pressed down on the object. The very air pulsed from the thing, like ripples in a pond, radiating out, but with force--he felt it hit him and almost got knocked on his back. It felt like being punched in the gut. And then it was gone. The air grew still. She put it back in her pocket, and sighed.

"You see?"

"No...?"

"This thing *kills shades*."

"What do you mean it...really?"

"It's the real deal. I used it last night, found a big old fuck and it was gone."

"You cant kill them, theyre--"

“Spirits? Dead friends and relatives? I don't know. I don't know.”

She paused.

“I'm not seeing the world, Jasper.”

“I know you aren't.”

“I'm gonna kill the shades.”

Kill the--?!

Of course, of course. I mean... If they could die, he thought, if we could get rid of them, things would go back to how they used to be. Things would be normal again.

“Take me with you.”

“What? Jasper, no, I--”

“Take me with you, Sera.”

“No, you can't, I--”

“What else would I do, Sera? I would be killed if I went home. I would die If I went north. Take me with you. You did this to me, and now you live with it. You live with me. Take me with you.”

It was true. It was all true, but it didn't matter. He was so excited he could hardly breathe. This was *something*, something he could do. If the shades were gone, and he could help... It didn't matter. Hunters didn't matter anymore. If he could kill shades.

She sighed, paused, considered. “Don't fuck this up. Okay.”

“Okay.”

Shades...what were they? The company classified them as “Unidentified non-corporeal entities”--ghosts, but everyone had their own theory. *I reckon they're agents of the lord*, and a drunk had told him once. Another said *they're the angry spirits of the Old Ameri's--we took their land, and now they want it back*. He did not know. He did not care. They could be killed. They could be hurt.

He didn't sleep that night. In the late hour he arose--Sera lay asleep, slumped over the side of a tree. How could she sleep like that? How could she sleep so *well*? Slowly, carefully, he reached into her pocket. She stirred a little, but did not wake. He felt it. It was so smooth, so small, but---

He walked back towards the highway. Shades flew overhead in their nightly procession, sweeping the world in lazy strokes of white. One spotted him. It approached.

It stood face to face with him. Its face shifting, changing, places where eyes would be stared and did not move. It roared.

He felt for the device. There was a small, round button on one side--he pressed down. The air quaked, reverberated, dissipated. He felt the air hit him. It felt good. The wave passed through the shade, at first he wondered--was Sera lying? But then...

The shade screamed. This time, it was a scream. The ripple had cut through it, right through, and splotches opened up, then holes, then fissures, places where the real world shone through the thick, translucent white. It lunged at him--desperate and pained but with the most fury he had ever seen one move in his entire life. And then it was dead. It was gone.

He returned to the makeshift camp, sat down, and slipped the device back into Sera's pocket. Then, he fell asleep.

Chapter 3

The sun rose slowly over the interstate, bringing warmth and hard light to the winding corridor of the road. It had been a cold night-- the ground still wet from the rain of yesterday, and they had had trouble building a fire. They had taken everything from the auto that might've been useful--clothes, strange metal blankets, a matchbook and old mechanical lighter off of the company man, and a sleek, silver watch. This Jasper had strapped on his wrist tightly--they were too precious not to wear. They had huddled up under the forest that sprawled on either side of 78, wrapped in foil blankets, shivering, wet. So the sun was a mercy--no shades, at least, they never strayed too far from the main roads and settlements. And even if they had...

"Jas, look."

On the edge of the highway was a large, green sign. It was faded, beat to hell- slumped off its metal support and wedged diagonally into the ground, but it was still readable : exit 26. In large, spray painted letters someone had crossed out the old town names and wrote THE QUAD, SUPPLIES AND MORE. A sloppy, haphazard arrow pointed to the right.

"I'm hungry. Lets see if they have any food."

Jasper nodded. Sera had brought some provisions-- a couple cans of rice and some cured meat, a loaf of bread that had since started to go bad, but it wasn't anywhere near enough. They were still in the hilly country, barely, so they could have foraged if they needed to--Jasper was all too familiar with that, but they lacked the equipment or time. Sera had insisted they push east. He wasn't sure why, and she wouldn't explain, but she was obviously not willing to give up the matter, so he relented. Part of him

wanted to go back west, though he knew that would be a death sentence, and bring the device back to his people. Sera called it a disruptor. But he knew not to push her by now.

“Alright,” he said. “Maybe we can try out the--”

“We don’t have time. Let’s move.”

And that was that. The road narrowed after the exit, long, straight, and gently sloping. It had obviously seen a visit by the repavement team long ago, but had since fallen into slight disarray. Someone maintained it, though. The grass in the cracks was kept short, and potholes had been filled. The road led north, through farmland now overgrown with wild grass and shrubs. Every so often a herd of deer would cross, glance at them, and continue. The autos didn’t come out this far, he guessed. No fear of getting hit.

They stopped for lunch somewhere along the edge of the forest, which had come into view a little while previous. It was short, rest the legs, eat some moldy bread, and then continue. By 2 they had reached a gentle incline, and as they crested the hill they saw a large, stone sign, again spray painted with THE QUAD. This time the arrow led left, towards a small, old road--paved but crumbling.

Eventually, they descended into a large field, and a building came into view. It was huge, larger than he’d ever seen before--it stretched from one end of the field to the other, and it was tall. He had heard about these types of buildings before, metal and cement, with multiple floors, but he’d never thought he’d actually see one. Even in highlake the buildings didn’t grow this tall. Sure, two stories, sometimes, but this.... It was 5 or 6, from what he could tell.

He creened his neck up to look at the large monster of a thing. “Oh my god,” he murmured.

“What?” She shot him a glance.

“It’s huge.”

“Not really.” She seemed to regard the whole thing with casual indifference. What kind of buildings grew near her? What kind of house did she live in?

He couldn’t help but stare. As they approached the front entrance, it became almost overwhelming--how many rooms were in there? How many people lived in one giant building? They climbed a large stone staircase. Two brick arches flanked either side, looming, leering. They approached the front door. It was made out of glass, thick glass. Inside, a maze of halls and corridors let inward, inward...

“Should we just go in?” He asked.

“No, give it a second. Someone’ll come.”

Sure enough, two men appeared from somewhere within the mess of corridors. They noticed them--stopped, glanced, and walked towards the entrance. The doors swung open.

“Hello. Are you here to attend class?” The man to the left asked, sporting a slight, uneven smile.

“No, we’re--class?” At this Sera was taken aback, genuinely, if only slightly.

“Class is starting soon. You’re welcome to join.”

“We just need some food, it said you guys were--”

“Of course. You’re welcome to join. First class, and then food.”

Sera paused. She seemed unsure.

“You’re welcome to join.”

There was a pleasant veneer to his voice, but it was measured, controlled. They were welcome to join, but it seemed they were not welcome to abstain. Sera shot him a glance.

“Sounds good.”

He led them in, introduced himself as Cole, and led them deep into the mess of intertwining hallways. The place was brightly lit--it had the best working power he had seen for years. The lights never flickered, never blew out. The place was covered in strange paper--shiny, sheetlike, strewn about the walls, some haphazard and some perfectly arranged. They said strange things, utter nonsense: *looking for financial aid? Talk to your advisor today! Student Jazz Recital: April 22nd, 2110. Help prevent the spread of STDs!* At one Cole had stopped. It showed a large image of a smiling woman, in strange robes, wearing an odd, square hat, and holding a piece of paper. He stared at it, and then, as if realizing the moment had gone on too long, abruptly moved on. At last they came to a large set of wooden doors. Cole stopped.

“You’re just in time. Come, come, sit down.”

He handed them each a piece of paper and an old ballpoint pen. Jesus, these things are worth a fortune. How could he give them away like that?

They walked in. The room inside was huge-- hundreds and hundreds of chairs stood in large, neat rows, stretching from one end of the place to the other, each row on a slight decline, leading down to the bottom, where an older woman stood. She was dressed in the same robes as the woman on the picture, and same strange hat. There were two empty seats near the back. They sat down.

A man stepped from the far end of the room and spoke.

“All rise.”

Everyone stood.

“Welcome to Econ-101.”

“Welcome to Econ-101,” the congregation repeated. The men and woman stood reverently, heads down, as if praying. Finally, the woman in robes spoke up:

“And now, a reading from chapter 3.”

The congregation abruptly reached into their pockets, bags, or desks, and each pulled out a piece of paper and a pen.

“You may begin.”

The woman spoke, firm, reverent. “In traditional market systems, scarcity functions as the regulating mechanism of value. Under a scarcity paradigm, the relative lack of goods or services...”

The woman kept talking. Every person in the room was writing fervently. He glanced over at the person to the left of him. Every word that came out of her mouth was written down, perfectly transcribed. *What the hell was a scarcity paradigm?* She continued:

“...In response, the Scarcity Reintegration Act (SRA 2.1) was passed. Among its measures were regulations on memory access, multipath employment, and grief permissioning.”

He stopped listening after that. He slumped down onto his desk, hiding his face in his arms. At points he almost fell asleep. But not Sera, she was listening, intently. She wrote down everything. Every last word.

At last the service was over. The congregation filed out one at a time, obedient, docile. He turned to get up and follow, but at once a hand shot to his arm and gripped tight.

“No,” she said. “Stay.”

The room emptied until it was just them and the woman leading the service. She let out a small sigh and took her cap off, then sat down. Sera motioned for him to get up. They walked down the long descent towards the bottom of the hall. The woman glanced up.

“Hm, what is it?” she asked.

“Do you guys get a lot of shades here?” Sera said. She adopted her stupid, innocent voice--he was learning to tell the difference now, mostly--when she dropped it there was this air of seriousness about her that he could not place. Her voice would become so intense he often could not respond.

“No. Never.”

“Thank you, I was worried. We’re from out west, so we’re a little spooked, naturally.”

“Of course.”

“That sermon, it was so interesting, could you tell me more about it?”

“The text says everything it must. How was it interesting, girl?”

Her face widened. She seemed to startle a bit, but in an instant it was gone. “Well, it was just so moving, you know. I couldn’t help but wonder what it all meant.”

“Ha! And why would you wonder?”

“Who wouldn’t? I mean....”

“No one wonders. They simply listen.”

At this she stepped forward. “Stay here tonight, you two. We have good rooms, fresh food.”

Sera paused. “No, i--we couldn’t, we’re heading east and--”

“And you cannot pause to sleep in a fresh bed?”

“No, really--”

“Stay with us.”

Serra nodded. Jasper felt a hand grab his, Seras-- she squeezed tight.

“Okay.”

“I’m glad. Someone will show you to your room.”

And that was it. She turned and strolled out of a side door, and they were alone.

Cole was outside, waiting for them.

“How was the service?” He asked.

“Wonderful. We were very moved.”

“Amazing! Dinner is being served. Please Follow me.”

He led them through the winding maze of corridors--up a set of stairs, to the left, to the right, another set of stairs. The building had rooms strewn about each corridor--some were closed, some left open to peer

into. Some held beds, makeshift furniture, some seemed to be a meeting space, and others were left barren. At last they came to a great hall.

Hundreds of people filled the great space, crowded into small tables and scattered chairs. The hall itself was *two stories*--a long, winding metal staircase led up to a room with additional seating and, evidently, more people. Towards one end of the room a great line was formed. It led in to a long, narrow alcove. Food was placed behind a long counter and served to each who passed through. The line moved quickly. When they reached the front, they grabbed a plate from the large pile and silently held it out to the servers like they had seen everyone else do. A ladle-full of rice and beans were scooped onto his plate. Then a ladle-full of meat. Meat, *Meat*-- it had been so long, and the company crap certainly didn't cut it. He walked over quickly to one of the few empty tables and began eating. He didn't stop.

"What're you so excited for?" Sera plopped down on the other end of the table. She picked at her food.

"Meat," he responded, in between bites.

"Here, have some of mine. I'm not hungry."

"Okay," he mumbled, and shoveled the contents of her plate onto his. He left her a little. It was beef, real beef--thin and tender and drenched in a thick, brown sauce. It was the best meal he had ever had.

After dinner, they were brought to a small room. It lay furnished-- a bed, dresser, and desk all stood strong if a bit decayed. They threw themselves onto the bed and sighed from exhaustion. They fell asleep almost immediately. He woke up once-- Sera was sleeping comfortably. He rose, and stumbled in the dark, waiting for his eyes to adjust. He found her pants strewn recklessly onto the floor. He fumbled around--fuck, where was it?

In her hands, clutched tightly, was the disruptor. He reached out, grabbed her hand, softly, gentle. He clasped it in his. He rubbed his thumb on her palm a little. He squeezed. Then, softly, he unclenched her hand. She did not move. He slipped the disruptor into his pocket. Then, without thinking, he fell back asleep, exhausted.

Sometime later in the night he woke up again. Sera was gone.

The air was still. Jasper stood at the foot of the bed. He was silent, unmoving, listening closely. No movement. No sound. Good. Had Sera found out? Had she woken up and assumed it had been stolen? Fuck. Okay, stay calm-- go out, check it out.

He dressed silently, quickly. The world was in thick, murky strokes of black and white. He could make out the vague outlines of the furniture, enough to not trip by, and he managed to avoid them as he crept out the door.

The hallways were silent. Every so often, a small incandescent light stood still powered on, so there was light, but it was different. Shadows bounced around and grew menacing, long. At regular intervals, the light would grow darker than before, somewhere far from the bulbs, and it would grow hard to see. He looked behind him once, then again a minute later. Then again. He accepted the fact that he would have to peek behind him every so often.

He stumbled down a dark stair well, then turned right, left, shit- how did it go? Then another stairwell--he almost tripped-- and down onto the first floor. He guessed his way from there. Eventually, however, he found himself in a large auditorium. The room was covered in thick, velveteen seats that had now been eaten partially away from the years. Chunks of foam and covering would stick out, rot, and fall in large black piles onto the ground. He heard voices from the stage.

He snuck crouching from the rear entrance to the seats, not that he needed to--the place was dark except for the lights on the stage. He listened carefully.

“Even now, things are changing. There's a civ in europe that's worth watching-- two in africa, four in the middle east.”

“Then why are you here?”

Was that--?

“I wish no part in that.”

He peeked his head over the seat in front of him. It was Sera, and the woman from the class--what was happening? Why had...why was Sera talking to her?

“And yet you stay here. Wasting your time in a former community college?”

“We are privileged in both food and electricity--for this region, that is. The inhabitants have their basic needs met. We are completely off company electric.”

Off company electric.... Everyone knew the company made the electricity. They were the only ones who knew how. The power company wasn't real--everyone knew that, but there wasn't much they could do. Anyone who protested, well...

“So this is your way of penance? Indoctrinating kids and vagabonds with things they would never--?”

“It must be told.”

“What's your end goal, here, Sarai. Even if it gets passed down...”

“It will get passed on. I will be here to make sure it does.”

There was a pause. Sera...*Europe, Asia*--these were names he had heard before, vaguely, tales of distant, distant lands across the ocean... Men that ate people alive and cities made of pure gold. Had Sera *been there*? Who was she?

"You came here quickly. Have you observed any company development since last?"

"2 new depots in Central PA and New York. Repavement teams fixing up most of the interstate system. Haven't been to the CORE yet. I will send you my report once I visit."

"If this keeps up..."

"I know. I know."

"You've grown unwary, Sera. Stealing from a company depot? When did you get that stupid?"

"Listen, I--"

"Grow up. You're a big girl now. Act like one.
She paused. "Don't fuck this up. We're counting on you."

At this he heard footsteps. The woman--Serai, had left. He peaked his head out from the seats again. Sera sat down. She waited. And then she began to cry.

He waited. She stayed. He wanted to...no, never. Even if... Eventually, he snuck out from the side entrance. The door creaked ever so slightly. She did not notice. He walked for a bit, listless, unsure. What *was Sera*? She stole the disruptor. She gave him that, that *power*, but it did not come alone--something had been taken from him, something was lost. He reached for the disruptor in his pocket, felt it, thumbed it over. He brought it out.

It was glowing. Slowly, softly, it pulsed, vibrating, casting a soft light on the corridor beyond.

Sera hadn't told him about this. What was going on? It had never done this before. It had never glowed. He held the device up to examine it under the lights, and it stopped. Not completely, but it was faint, pale. He brought it back down. It started again. Huh? Is it...?Then that would mean... He swiped it to his right. It grew brighter. He brought it too his left. It grew dim. Right and... He held it downward. It started to shine. Down and to the right!

He broke out into a run. Down and to the right, was there a basement somewhere? Stairs that led down? He ran through the halls, empty, strange, swiping it to and fro, until at last-- a large steel door stood in front of him. He held the disruptor out. It began to pulse faster, faster, until it hummed constantly.

He burst through the door. A set of concrete stairs ran downward, lit by a single, uncovered lightbulb, the walls black and stark, covered in grime. He ran downward. He held the disruptor close, tight. He reached the bottom.

There were shades. Hundreds of them, packed into a single, thin cylinder that stood from floor to ceiling. They swirled, groaned--god, the sound was horrible, it was a choir of voices, disgusting and thin and raspy and loud. So loud. They groaned more than usual, constantly, never ceasing. It almost seemed like...they were in pain. He would believe it if he knew they could not.

The room was enormous--he could not see either side beside him. Long, Long bookshelves ran from the center path to *Somewhere*, far off in the distance. The cylinder was at the far end of the room, hooked up to a mess of machinery, humming, buzzing. A maze of tangled wires stuck in and out and back into the machine, criss crossing the entirety of the thing. He ran over to the great machine.

He clutched the disruptor tightly. Should he...? This thing, it was *powering here*, wasn't it? That's how they got their electricity. That's why they didn't need the company. Shades... you could use them like this? He paused. Then, slowly, he reached for the button.

"Dont, kid."

A hand was on his shoulder. It clutched him firmly but not angrily. He looked up.

The woman--Sarai-- stood beside him. She was tall--taller than him, muscular and thick-built and *strong*. Long, Brown-gray hair ran to her waist. She looked down at him.

"I know what you're trying to do. I wouldn't."

He was taken aback. "Why?" He said.

"Don't get defensive--you think I'm gonna hurt you? Dont do it."

He clutched the disruptor stronger than before. "And what if I do? You can't generate your power without them, right?"

She stood silent, still. Jaspar pushed the button.

The disruptor activated. The shades writhed, screaming, and then disappeared. At once the power shut off. The room was covered in warm dark.

The room was still. And then, slowly, the world started to shake a little. He heard a rattling sound, metal on metal, and then the room lit up. There was a shade in the tube. It screamed. The lights came on the tiniest bit. And then another--rumble, scream, power, and more, rumble, scream, power, until the room stood bright and the container was once again full of shades. They screamed.

Sarai sighed. “There, are you happy, kid? Do you feel better now?”

He was silent.

“You really hate them, huh?”

He nodded.

“These things--they cause so much sorrow. And yet... With a push of a button, gone. Like they were never there at all. Why all the fuss over such a thing, I don’t know...”

At last he spoke. “Small thing? How are they... how can they be small things?”

“I am not haunted by them,” she responded.

“Go back to bed. Wake up and have some breakfast. Go with Sera. Stop stealing her disruptor.” She said this calmly, slowly, with no anger.”

“Who are you?”

“Can you not tell?”

“No.”

“Then you are not ready to know.”

“O...Okay.”

He couldn’t argue. Literally, he tried, but he *couldn’t argue*. Something was stopping the words from escaping his mouth. He stammered, tried, but nothing. It was like a piece of him had been taken out.

She turned to leave, then stopped.

“Sera--I think you have helped her, Jasper. She seems to have grown up a little.”

He nodded.

“Take care of her. I worry.”

And then she was gone.

Chapter 4

When he returned he found the bed still empty. He undressed silently. For a long time he did nothing. He sat up in bed, still, quiet, staring--at nothing in particular, the wall, maybe, or the rays of quiet moonlight that pierced through the narrow windows. Sera, sera... He knew he shouldn't care. They were helping each other out, really, but that was it. He clenched his fists, unclenched them, clenched them again. They were nothing to each other. Still, he had to thank her--where would he be if she hadn't came back? Probably dead in a mass grave somewhere, rotting. And she gave him the disruptor. She gave it to him.

Sometime later the door swung open. Sera emerged, the light of the hallway bathing the room with an eerie half-light, before it shut, and the room was quiet. She stumbled towards the bed and flung herself down onto the mattress.

"Oh, Jassy, you're awake! I need something you--i need you to do something for me."

Fuck. Did she know? I mean, she must've, she had--was she *drunk*?

And then she kissed him.

"Lets do--lets do that thing again, Jassy. *Come onnnn*, It's okay, I-I want to."

"What did you drink, Sera? Jesus, your breath..."

"Its whisky! Here, you wanna see?"

She sat up, then without warning fell down on top of his chest, laughing. She reached into her coat and pulled out an old glass bottle, short and round. She took the lid off and prepared to take a swig. He grabbed it from her.

"What the--why would you do that? I'll behave, I promise."

"Sera, I...how much have you had?"

"Enough. I'm safe, I-I cant get too drunk, dont worry, my body wont..."

She trailed off. "Cause im so strong, I can't get, that is--- Give it back!"

Then she kissed him again. And she did not stop.

“Sera, stop! Jesus, wait--”

She did not stop. She pushed him down to the bed. At last, he managed to wrestle her off of him.

“What’d you do, what’d you do that for?”

She sounded so earnest. So sad. He thought she might burst into tears.

“Wait.” he said. And then he drank. It was strong, acrid stuff-- unspiced and high proof, from the way it burned his throat. He kept drinking. At times he thought he would puke. But he finished the bottle, and set it gently onto the table beside them. It hit him all at once--this is what it feels like-- *oh my god shes so beautiful i cant-I’ve always wanted to fuck her again, you know, last time was practice, wait let me--*

“What’d you do that for?” She sounded so amused, he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Why--why are you laughing? Im being serious!”

“God, Sera, Ive always thought you were so beautiful. Wait, do you like me?”

“Do i like you?”

“Yeah, you know. Do you, like me?”

“I want you, Jas.”

“But like, do you..”

Fuck it. Then he kissed her.

Jasper lay in bed. Sera was asleep, snoring lightly. Her arms sprawled lazily across his chest, her head nestled in his shoulder. He was starting to come to, slowly. Why did he do that? Sera had saved him, brought him up *into something*, but was this what they were? They weren’t friends. They weren’t lovers. Would they just hook up every time the other needed it? Did he need it? Something didn’t sit right. He felt wrong. Really, Really wrong. Who had used who? Maybe they didn’t use each other at all. Nothing was gained, nothing was taken, but something was lost.

He pushed Sera off him. She stirred a little bit, then returned to snoring. He took the pack of cigarettes from the nightstand. She wouldn't mind.

He stared out the window for a long time, smoking, saying nothing. The world outside moved slowly--foxes and rabbits would scurry across the asphalt, lit up by long, tall lights, and he would watch. Deer would cross in herds, unhurried, some strange, sad communion.

Maybe he should have been a fox. Maybe he should have been the asphalt below. Maybe he should have been nothing at all.

The world came to. It was early, *too early*, the last rays of sunrise sweeping in from the windows, casting the room in gold and brown. Fuck, his head--what was happening? The room spun, clicked into focus, then spun again. Sera was above him, shaking him awake.

"Jas, Jas!"

"Wha--what is it? Jesus, Sera, its early, can't we sleep in?"

"Somethings happening."

He sat up. "What? What's going on?"

"Listen."

It was faint, far away, but in the distance he heard the sound of gunfire. It seemed to be downstairs, but as he listened... It was growing louder. At intervals he heard the sound of screaming, yelling.

"Shit! What do we do?"

"Hold on! Let me--shit, where's the disruptor?"

She searched frantically, throwing the pillows onto the ground. Had he forgotten to put it back? He could've sworn...

"Found it." She held the device briefly above her, then quickly clenched it to her chest. She got out of bed. She was already dressed.

"Come on," she whispered. "They're getting closer."

"Let me get dressed, at least. Jesus!"

She threw him his shirt, quick and hard. "Hurry up."

He scrambled to get it on, but he could not focus--the room was still spinning, his head still pounding. He got his arms caught in the wrong sleeve, grumbled, fixed. He stood up and reached for his pants.

The door flew open. It made a terrible crashing sound as it slammed against the far wall, knocking loose chunks of old, fragile drywall. Clouds of dust flew up from the ground. In the doorframe stood a man. They could not see him clearly, through the dim light and dust, but he was... large. He walked towards the center of the room. Each step was firm, hard, but controlled. At last he walked from out of the clouds of cascading dust.

And then he laughed.

“Ha! Caught you with your pants down, did I? You have fun last night, Jassy?”

Before them stood a thick, lumbering hulk of a man, staring down at them and *grinning*. He was dressed in the strangest clothes he had ever seen in his life. A long, thick cloak hung from his shoulders down to nearly his feet. A thick leather belt cinched his waist, and in the middle a huge, strange metal buckle. A white cravat was tied to his neck and tucked into a puffy white dress shirt. He sported a long, scruffy beard.

Jasper started to move. He didn't know where, but--how did he know his name? This man... Before he could even get two steps in, the man's arm shot from his side and gripped his shoulder, forcing him back down onto the bed.

“Jassy, Jassy, Sit! Where's there to go? Whats there to see?”

He let go. Then, without warning, he flung Sera onto her back, hard. She groaned in pain. She clutched the disruptor in her fist so tightly he thought it would break. He leered over her. And as he did all of this he spoke:

“Its Damian, you two, by the way. What a pleasure it is to finally meet you. Im sure you have--”

“Oh? Whats this? Holding something, are we? Sera, Sera...”

Then, he climbed on top of her. Jesus! He was so big, *hes gonna crush her! Jesus!* He lunged over towards the man, furious, blind and dumb with rage. And Damian *slapped him*. It was so hard he was thrown to the other side of the bed. His cheek burned white hot in the imprint of his hand.

Sera screamed. “Get off me you sick fuck! Jesus christ, Get off me!” She punched and kicked and once tried to bite him, but Damian just *laughed again*.

“Relax, Relax!” He grabbed her arm and forced the fist open like he was opening a jar. “Aint gonna do anything to ya. But Sera, my *dear*, what are we doing with this?”

He got off her, stood up. “Tsk, ts, ts, you two. You should know better than to play with something like this. You might get hurt!”

Without warning he pressed the button. The air crackled and whipped across the room. Lamps fell and shattered to the ground. Bits of paper we're strewn across the room in a frenzy of falling white. And Jasper and Sera, they were *thrown*, hard, all the way to the other side of the room, hit the wall, and slumped to the ground. Drywall went flying. He emerged from the thick dust that formed and stood once again over them.

"Surprised? Guess what, dumbass- they work on *people, too.*"

Jasper could barely see at this point. Everything swayed, fuzzed into patches of black, refocused. His head... Jesus.

"Don't play with toys you can't comprehend. Its a strange, strange world out there. It might swallow you if you aren't careful."

At this a man peaked his head into the door.

"Jesus, cap, there you are! You find them yet?"

At this he looked down. He threw the disruptor into the air. It spun and spun and spun, catching the sunlight, shining bright as it flew through the air. It landed right back in his hand. Then, he threw it into Sera. It hit her chest and landed gently in her lap. He smiled.

"They must've snuck out in the middle of the night. I'm coming."

And then he left.

The room was quiet. The gunfire receded, turned into static at the edge of hearing. Sera, Sera..... She was groaning, lulling her head back and forth as drool fell from her mouth and onto her clothes.

"Disruptor... disruptor..." she was saying, over and over.

He was so sick he could barely move. Yet he grabbed her in his arms, fell onto the ground, and dragged her on all fours until they were underneath the bed. He pulled the covers down from the edge of the bed to cover them from view. He held her.

"Sera... Sera..."

He kissed her forehead. And then there was nothing.

He was talking. The words escaped his mouth but he was not saying them, his lips moved but he did not feel them. There was a girl sat across from him, dressed in the highwear--as his arms moved and eyes

adjusted he could see that he was too. The feeling--of movement without control, action without intention--it made him sick. He wanted to close his eyes, but he couldn't.

"What do you think?" He said.

"Of what, the OSH's? I think it's a wonder if they last a year."

"And why's that?"

"Why do we go out to eat, Eitan?"

"Hm?"

"There is no need. We do not want for food. Anything we want can be delivered to us in minutes. Logically, there is no reason. It is not cost efficient as it does not cost us. It is not better. It is not easier. So why?"

"Because we must," he answered.

"Because we must. How many times have you eaten this?"

He felt himself look down at his plate. It was strange-- brown, thick circles stood stacked on a plate, coated in batter. He picked one up and threw it into his mouth. The taste... oh my god, he tasted it too. It was amazing. Crunchy and sweet but salty at the same time--what were they? He wanted another, so badly he could hardly stand it, but his hand did not reach again.

"What, onion rings? I don't know, maybe... I get them every week."

"You could have piles of sushi that would outclass the best of the old masters. Curry that hasn't been tasted in millenia. Platters and platters of meat roasted so tender you couldn't believe. All here, All for free. And yet you get onion rings."

"I like them."

"Of course. We may spread, eventually, but... We always come back to what we know. Where we belong."

"I disagree. We grow crowded, Noa."

"Crowded enough that we may not sustain ourselves?"

"Of course not. But people...people grow restless. How long until a junior analyst gets his first promotion, hmm? 50 years, if he's lucky? For a 2 percent raise and the title of senior junior analyst? Out there... You can reinvent yourself."

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of going.”

“Of course not. . .not right now. Our marriage does not expire for another 25 years. I will stay until then at the very least.”

“How romantic. Come on, we will be late. They’re gonna launch without us.”

The two stood up. He felt himself carried to the door. It opened.

And then he woke up.

He heard someone breathing beside him. A hand was clasped in his. It gripped tight. The room was *cold*--like it was autumn, and the first snow had just fallen, but It was only May. He started to open his eyes, then stopped--someone was talking. *Sera* was talking.

“No. He’s fine. I scanned him last night, no structural damage. Just a concussion.”

He waited for a reply. It never came. But she kept talking.

“I’ll tell him the truth--No, you know what I mean. He’s...fragile, right now.”

“Sarai? Monitor her. Somethings not right.”

“She’s close to *something*. I don’t buy it, the whole quad thing.”

“Yes sir. Understood.”

Then she was silent. She squeezed his hand.

Sera...There was one time, they were on the interstate--it was getting dark, they were looking for some place to bed down for the night, when she abruptly stopped.

“Jasper, have you ever been to the lehigh?”

“What do you think?”

“Right, sorry. It’s pretty out there. I went once-- I was a kid, my dad, he...He brought me there on business. I always thought...”

“Hm?”

“We could turn around, you know. 78 runs that way. We would be safe.”

“Sera...Don’t do that to me. Dont give me hope then take it away.”

“Is that what this is to you? Hope?”

“It is.”

“Jas...Okay.”

What had she gotten herself into...What had she brought him into? That was real, right? It had to have been. He didn’t care who she was with, in the end. That was real. And she was against the shades. She could kill the shades.

The company brought the power, yes. They brought the water. They brought death, too--poverty, suffering, battos and the batteries that powered them. Could a world exist without the company? He didn’t know. If Sera was fighting the company, then... She was gonna get herself killed. But he couldn’t leave. He couldn’t.

He squeezed back. Sera let out a soft gasp. Her hand unclasped. He opened his eyes.

“Jas?”

“I’m here, I’m here.”

“You were out all night. I--I got you away. We’re safe now.”

He sat up in bed. “Where are we?”

The room was brightly lit, covered in drywall, old but clean. In the corner, an old machine attached to the window blew cold air into the room, humming quietly. The room was clean, well kept but bare-- a bed, desk, and some dressers were the only furniture, save the chair Sera was sitting on. He couldn’t help but stare at the machine. How many summers had he wasted, sweating his ass off inside a hot, stuffy room? How many times had he almost drenched himself in sweat just trying to get to sleep? He pointed at the machine.

“Hm, that? Thats an AC.”

“AC?”

“Air conditioner. It keeps the room cool during the summer.”

“It’s incredible.”

He looked up at her. She didn’t laugh. “Yeah, it is, isn’t it?”

“Sera, I...what happened?”

“You lost consciousness. I woke up a couple hours later...everyone was dead. Everything was torn off the walls. I brought you here, had a doctor come look at you. You’re okay.”

“Where are we?”

“Somerville. I brought you here last night.”

Somerville--that was a name he had heard. On the edge of the interstate, right before it disappeared. Big town. Traders came from Hunters to here sometimes, telling stories--not that he believed them. Company wasn’t as big here, they said. He got out of bed.

“Whoah, Jasper! Are you sure you’re okay to walk?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

She nodded. “Let’s stay here tonight. I got us a room. Tomorrow, we’ll--”

“Im hungry. Let’s go get some food.”

She paused. “Okay.”

They walked out into a long, straight hallway, dotted with doors on either side. A staircase led down. He went down, expecting to find the ground floor, or maybe one more flight, but it *just kept going*. Down and down and down in winding square boxes until he just couldn’t see the bottom.

He stopped. There was a window in the stairwell. He looked out.

Jesus christ, he was--how high up was he? The ground looked tiny, the buildings looked like toys--jesus, how could a building grow this high? He saw people on the ground below, walking to and fro like ants and....Oh my god.

The room spun. He felt unsteady, liable to fall, and instinctively sat down onto the concrete floor. He moved his hands over and over on the floor below--*this* has to be solid, right? It has to be...

Suddenly he could feel his heartbeat. Every part of him pulsed with the beat, his fingertips, his toes, his shoulder. It sped up. It kept speeding up. Sweat beat down his forehead. Some sensation was rising in him--hot, burning, clawing its way up into his chest and shoulders.

“Oh my god, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, I can’t--”

What was happening to him? The building was gonna fall, it was gonna fall he could just *feel it*. As if in response he felt the building sway and moan and tilt from one side to the other. Was this real? Was this happening?

“Jasper?”

“Get me out of here, Sera! Oh my god, oh my god!”

Sera knelt down. “Jasper...”

“Close your eyes, okay Jas?”

He closed them.

“Okay.”

He felt her hand clasp his and squeeze. As she squeezed he felt something sharp pierce his skin. Was that...? He yelped in pain, and then...Everything stopped. Relief washed over him, cool, calm. It felt good. The best he'd ever felt in his life, like--like he had been standing all of his life and finally sit down. He felt drunk--well, not really, this was different. Everything had gone away. Everything had disappeared.

“How high are we, anyway?” He asked.

She laughed. “15 stories.”

“Only 15? I thought...I could've sworn... What was that?”

“You had a panic attack, Jasper.”

“A panic attack? What's that?”

She sighed. “Sometimes your body thinks its in danger when its not. Dont--dont worry about it, okay?”

“Okay,” he said. And he truly meant it.

“Here, lets get you to an elevator. I'm not sure you should be walking down stairs right now.”

“Okay.”

She held out her hand. He got to his feet, steadied himself, and walked down towards the next door. Inside was another hallway, same as before--long, thin, dotted with rooms.

“Sera, what's an elevator?”

“You’ll like it, Jas. Its a machine that takes you floor to floor.”

He grinned.

“That sounds amazing.”

She smiled. “Yeah, It is.”

They walked down the corridor until they reached two large metal doors. Sera pressed a button with a down arrow next to it. One door swung open-- a small room stood inside.

“And i just walk in?”

“Yep. You just walk in.”

She steadied him as he walked in, stumbling a little, to the elevator. Sera pressed a button, and the thing began to move--downward. It was gentle but fast, smooth and efficient. Soon the cabin stopped moving, and the doors opened.

“Just like that?” He said.

“Just like that.”

The doors opened into a large, high ceilinged room. It was brightly lit, clean, comfortable. On the other side stood a large glass wall and a set of doors. People passed by in droves in the world outside. They walked over and opened the door.

“You ready?” Sera asked.

“Of course.”

“Alright then.”

They walked out into the night.

“Where to, Jas?”

“Who knows?”

She smiled. “I like this Jas. He’s different.”

Then keep giving me this stuff, he thought. It was a beautiful night, cool, clear, A half-moon hanging in the sky above, casting the world in muted, soft light. People passed to and fro on the streets, lit up by

incandescent streetlights, giving the world a soft yellow glow. The buildings here were *tall*--he was too stoned to be amazed, although he knew he should be, but all he could think about was how much he had freaked out over the quad--I mean, these buildings were double, triple the height. He stared up as he walked.

"Don't do that," Sara said. "You're gonna trip."

"Whatever you say!"

Everything was loose, flowing--the world seemed to shift just a little bit as he walked, this way and that, but he questioned whether it was just a trick of the light.

"Where are we walking, Sera?"

"To eat," she said.

"No, I mean--where are we gonna eat?"

"I thought you were leading the way."

"Oh."

He paused.

"Hey, Sera, do you feel bad about last night, by the way? I mean, not last night, but--"

She frowned. "What did we do, Jas? I don't...remember much. I got really drunk and--"

"You don't remember?"

"...No."

"Huh. Never mind."

She was quiet, after that. Occasionally he would think out loud, whatever came to his mind, things like *that building is pretty* or *I wonder if dad's alright*, but she would just nod or say something polite. He gave up, after a while. Eventually they found a restaurant that was still open. A sign above read *Tapastre*.

"What do you think?"

Sera shrugged. "Let's do it."

They walked in. The place was lit up, if a bit dim--the place was centered on a large, rectangular bar, crowded with people, talking, drinking, smoking. It was surrounded by tables, booths, and chairs, although those were considerably emptier. People drank, ate, talked.

There was one restaurant by his house, right in the middle of the village that surrounded the depot. It served the itinerant workers who flooded to the area every morning, hoping to catch a day job on one of the farms surrounding. It served one dish--a bowl of vegetable stew. They would pay 25 cents, stand in line, get their bowls, and eat at one of the tables as quickly as they could, then leave. It wasn't the type of place you went for fun.

What had he been hidden from? What had he missed, his entire life? There was a world out there, he knew it now--something distant and bright and clean, burning, beckoning--far away to the east he imagined a place where the lights were always on, some mess of streets intersecting, intersecting...A world of metal and people and light.

"Sera..."

They walked over to a table, far enough from the bar that the chatter would not drown them out.

"I wish I was someone else."

She stiffened.

"Jas..."

"My mother calls me that."

"I know."

"Don't stop. Whatever it is you're doing, whoever you are, don't stop. And please, Sera--don't leave me behind."

She smiled. "Never."

Would she? Would she take him with her? *Please, Sera, Let me be yours. Let me follow.*

Sera pulled out her cigarettes. She handed him one, lit a match, and brought it to his lips. Then, she lit one for herself. They sat there for a while, smoking, making conversation. He was starting to feel a bit more normal, a bit clearer headed. Eventually, she stood up.

"I'm gonna get a drink, Jas. What do you want to eat?"

What did he want to eat? The question seemed so unimportant, so distant. It was only food.

“Get me what you have, Sera.”

She nodded.

“No, wait. Get me onion rings.”

She paused.

“...Sure.”

And then she was gone. He fumbled the last dregs of the cigarette through his hands, watching the smoke rise gently from the butt and join the congregation of others.

Somewhere along the line, something was lost, something had changed. Was there a time before the company? There must have been. Old America, it still burned, everywhere--they walked their roads, lived in their houses, lived on their land. What kind of people were they? The company said a great war had wiped them out. That bombs that split the sky itself had fallen on the land. But he always wondered.

“Easy now.”

Something was pressing against the back of his head. Someone was behind him. He heard a click. Panic should have gripped him, but that medicine--he felt nothing.

“Quiet. Don't draw any attention. Turn around.”

He did.

Chapter 5

A man stood above him. He was older, tall, thin--long, straight hair hung down past his shoulders. He spotted a short beard speckled with gray. In his hand was a gun.

“Relax. Follow me.” He motioned for Jasper to get up. As he did the man placed a hand on his shoulder, firm and tight. He led Jasper through a door to one side of the restaurant and down a long set of stairs. They came to a large, old basement. It was furnished with old wood paneling, yellowed and molding, and dusty old couches that stood facing each other covered in fake, shiny leather. He motioned for Jasper to sit. The man sat down on the opposite couch.

“Forgive me for the introduction,” the man said. “ I needed to get you alone.”

Jasper laughed. “And you couldn’t have spared the gun?”

“One tends to be more cooperative with extra motivation. You don't appear to be nervous, Jasper.”

“If you wanted me dead you would have shot me where I stood.”

It was true. The man wasn’t company--if they wanted someone dead, they were dead where the company found them. But he didn’t believe the words as they came out of his mouth. Why *wasn't* he nervous? It was too much, he thought. Too much in so little time. The drugs might’ve had something to do with it. Still, he thought--it just was too much.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. You should be more careful. The company--people *know* you, Jasper. It is not a good thing to be known in this world.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Kenan. You can call me Ken.”

Jasper nodded. “What do you want?”

“I want to talk to you, Jasper. Tell me, why is it that you follow Sera? Why do you go east?”

“What else can I do? I can’t go home.”

Kenan nodded. “True, you cannot--at least for the time being. But you could go west, to the lehigh. North, to highlike. All of these would be safer and easier for you. Why do you follow Sera?”

“I-- I don’t want to be left behind.”

“You think she would do so?”

“No, not just her--the world, the shades, I want to be part of it. I want to do something with my life..I want to matter.”

“Watch those words. They will haunt you in the end.”

“Maybe they will.”

“Tell me, Do you think the company must exist?”

“I don’t know.”

At this, Kenan reached for his pocket. He pulled out a small, smooth cylinder. It whirled to life.

Suddenly there was a *picture* in the air--No, it moved, like the films he had seen as a kid, but this was different--it was in color, detailed, clear. Like a world had been pulled up for him to view in an instant. The screen showed four images, each taking up a quarter of the frame. In one, a mass of buildings stood lit up by electrics in the night. In another, a market bustled under the midday sun. The next showed a room full of children, sitting at desks, all writing, just like the econ sermon. The last showed men covered in metal from head to toe, fighting--what were those long knives they held?

“It doesn’t need to. Do you see the image on the top right? Thats canada. The top left? Brazil. Then Korea, then Nigeria.”

“Korea? Nigeria? What are those?”

“How big do you think the world is, Jasper? What lies beyond the company’s control?”

“There’s nothing beyond the company. We are the last, at least--”

“Thats what they told you. America alone survived, the rest, uninhabitable. That is false. To tell you the truth, America is behind--the northeast, at least, there’s some civs in the rockies and...I digress. When the world fell, it did not fall equally. The rest of the world is coming back to life. It is the company that keeps this land dead.”

