The Broken Canvas

by
Aaron Joseph Edson

A creative thesis submitted to the English Department,
College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

BACHELOR OF ARTS

in English Creative Writing

Thesis Director: Margot Backus

Secondary Advisor: Robert Cremins

Honors Reader: Laurie Lambeth

University of Houston
May of 2023

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank Dr. Margot Backus for her unwavering support. I don't think I could have done so much were it not for her faith in my work. Even when I felt like I was writing with a blindfold and a stick, I knew I could always rely on sound advice and someone to keep my head on my shoulders.

I'd also like to thank Dr. Robert Cremins for his wisdom on writing. It takes patience to make someone see the bigger pictures. It was much repetition on Robert's part before I began to see forests out of the trees so to speak. Thankfully, Dr. Cremins is thorough when it comes to advice and craft.

ABSTRACT

In a world where art is mystical, where creative forces are supernatural, anything might be imagined and made real. A statue might be brought to life, or a painting be walked into. In the city Aurum, art bleeds from every surface. The very skies are painted, the buildings sculpted. A gold spire houses the world's best artists – so long as they've been invited. But in this city of color and invention, change is inevitable. Something is on the brink. A scientist finds himself in an ethical dilemma, while an inspector is caught in a conspiracy. Meanwhile, a paint-maker finds himself at ends with the law. In a story that intertwines these characters, one thing is clear: the world may only change for so long behind closed doors.

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Critical Preface to *The Broken Canvas*

I met a man named Daniel while I worked in a warehouse. I can't recall our first conversation, but I do know that after I met him, I immediately knew two things: the first was that something was wrong with Daniel. He had mental hurdles that I don't pretend to understand. The second was that he was a man of character – he was kind, unnaturally kind, a good listener, and incredibly trusting. He was also a man inspired by small and forgotten things. Things most people ignore.

An example I'll never forget is when he told me that he rode his bike all weekend. At first, I thought that sounded incredibly mundane – maybe that was your first thought. After all, I no longer ride my bike, especially in Houston. Car-centric infrastructure and manic drivers are enough to scare me away, not to mention the weather. But Daniel was a lot older than me at the time, and so it stuck with me that he still enjoyed riding a bike.

From memory, he hadn't gone anywhere in particular, no destination. Rather, he had found a long and quiet length of sidewalk by a bayou and had ridden over it, back and forth as fast as he could each time. The more he described it, the more it was like he had authority over what a good weekend meant. He told me about the cool wind and the perfect weather, how good it felt to ride a bike, to exert, to move quickly. I don't think he described it like a poem, but the way he told me – it was like he had rediscovered a secret that everyone else had forgotten.

I worry about embellishing or decorating this memory I have of him. But no one else has ever told me they went running because they remembered they still could.

Or because they breathed and realized they still loved it. That they wanted to breathe more. If they have, they never felt the need to tell me. Daniel did tell me. In fact, he made a point to go out of his way to tell me. I remember thinking that however the world had treated him, Daniel had not been broken in that one respect, and for that he seemed incredibly strong, like he imposed choiceless optimism onto the things around him.

There's more I could write, like how Daniel wrote too hard with markers and ruined them, or how he donated plasma as often as he could, and I could see it from the dark bruises on the inside of his elbows. Or that Daniel, out of the blue one morning, confided in me his fears, something no other coworker has ever done, and even then, not everyone I call a friend has done that.

Some time, maybe a month, two months after he was fired, we learned that Daniel had committed suicide. We learned through an email. Something about that was unforgettable. Maybe it was the dissonance of knowing death occurred, and yet nobody was allowed to stop working. Part of it was that I knew that something had finally broken his spirit – the mind that had talked to me those months ago about riding a bike – it was broken and gone. There was also something brutal about learning his circumstance via email. And also how little we all knew. What had happened? How? Why? I never found out. But under the focusing lens of bureaucratic and professional empathy, Daniel was worth just that much. He was a digital mote in our timelines that afternoon. He wasn't worth the effort of the diaphragm to breathe his name over our ears. At least, not officially. We did so among ourselves.

Something about it made me irrationally angry and sad. It still does. This whole book is about "Art with a capital A" so to speak. It has a lot to say in that regard. But know this, too: "Art" is about why people ride bikes and love them. And it's also about why people no longer ride them. I argue this in the sense that bikes are a communication. Bikes are promises that the world is worth moving through. And art is more than anything else a communication. That day, when Daniel spoke to me of how good it felt to ride a bike, while we were in the dimmest and most cramped and chaotic part of the warehouse – that was when I felt "art" the most. I felt it in a casual conversation. I felt it because it was communicated to me.

Two things began to happen after I heard about Daniel's passing: the first was that I realized how fragile a thing like love for the world is, and how that love relates to art and communication. That love that makes us talk of exerting the physical body, of moving through space (quickly, to our perceptions) on a *good* day of spring – it is the same force that has driven artists to try and condense a feeling or a moment. Whether through colors on canvas, or words the artist draws together, words that hold tight to a sublimating and vanishing thought: it is a force that drives the artist. A force uncontrolled and delicate, spontaneous and beautiful. We can only hope to be touched by it.

It is also being culled out of our society. Not necessarily on purpose, but it is happening. Bikes, if you've ever seen one invading the space of the road, are vaguely unwelcome. So is art. Especially art that drives people to write on walls, which might

be one of the most pure and destructive and undigested forms of expression. It is illegal, and logically so.

After Daniel died, I began to envision a world where that artistic force was much stronger, a world where art might come out of people like vomit. A drip of spilled coffee might shape itself into a portrait, or a sneeze might lengthen into a perfect C#, then into a song. Graffiti might pop out of somebody. This place I pictured was a place without gaps between artists and their imagination. To anyone who has wanted to make something and given up, you will understand this feeling: the gap was too wide.

I wanted a world where people might stretch their artistry like muscles. Anyone might be able to create what they wanted. Blank highways and pillars and underpasses might actually be seen as empty. They would become canvases. People might decorate the world in an instant or paint the skies. Without that gap, the creative force of humanity might drive people to do things and create places they actually want. Under the sovereignty of my imagination, I was giving that to the world. That's to say, it was a daydream I had while I worked.

I also understood something about a world like this. Realistically, I could only see its extraction. People would abuse art if its forces were supernatural, or if art could be harnessed. Art would become another utility. Painted fires would warm our homes, and we would make our own windows, better to our own eyes. We might never look outside. And graffiti would, without a doubt, still be illegal.

I should also mention that I began to hate the color blue. Everything in this warehouse I worked in was blue. The uniforms, the totes, the logo, the tile floors in places, the ribbon on the store shelves. The bathroom doors, if I am recalling those correctly. They were all blue. When I saw the color outside of work, it reminded me of Daniel being broken by the world. It represented the industrialization of everything – that the Daniels of the world, lacking in their efficiency, had no place. And how bizarre and co-opted the color is and was. The color blue began to represent what I now can verbalize as the abstraction and divorce of ourselves from the natural world. We are now native to modernity. Especially in the warehouse.

Maybe I'm rambling, so I'll explain what fascinated me next: I tried giving my father a piece of blue candy after dinner. As a joke, I said it was dessert. I knew he wouldn't want loose candy from my palm, and I thought it might make him laugh. That's the kind of humor between us. But he said something that surprised me. He said, "that color is so blue, it glows." It wasn't something I had expected.

I asked him, "what kind of blue is it? Blue like what?"

He couldn't answer me. He said something like, "I don't know." Part of me wishes he had tried harder to name the blue, but it was a bit of a trick question. I think the real answer would have been "blue like nothing. It simply exists."

After this moment, I thought of a book that heavily described color. From my memory, the book made no comparisons. Color existed nakedly. I remember a description of navy and red. The colors were rich and true, deep to the most extreme and saturated sense. They were like musical notes, divorced from anything else and

labeled like letters. It seemed to imply a kind of mathematical esotericism about color: you should be able to know how red and blue look and be able to picture them in your mind. As a reader, I found this isolating. I couldn't quite imagine the colors.

I think the reason for this is that writing, as an abstract medium, is at its most powerful when it can recall direct experiences. I was curious why the author felt inclined to write about color in a vacuum. Why not have the reader recall their own memories, maybe their own present perceptions around them? An author is always welcome to try and make me look at my hands, at the color of my fingernails or outside my window.

I think this is where the problem lies: we do not have the same windows. Cloistered in our modern environments, you'll find most colors are now deliberate and mysterious in their replication. I believe this has affected even our attitude towards color.

There is the color of the shampoo bottle, of your favorite shirt, your ceiling, your floors, the cereal box, your refrigerator. The main difficulty? None of these colors are specific. They are all salient, but not necessarily shared colors. And things that are shared, they are shrinking. Biodiversity, our shared greens in the urban landscape (especially in Houston), are limited. There are oak trees and st. augustine grasses, and for short spans, there are flowers – oxeyes and yellow dandelions and purple asters. But we live under our own ceilings. Salient colors are individualized, artificial and numerous. They are difficult to translate, and so return to something like qualia.

My point is this: so long as art remains a communicative action, color will find itself only in the nooks of shared experience. Color in art will be either a direct perception, or it will be plain and simplified, a musical note. You will know the genre of color and that will be it. The more modern we become, the more plain our colors will be. Bikes are disappearing. So are our colors. Or if I must be deliberately clinical, we are losing our nuance and understanding of these things. There is little difference.

CHAPTER 1: THE REFINERY

Irving stood in the frame of a doorway, small notepad in hand, shoulders steady. His eyes were brought to the details of the scuffed and scarred walls. Dull painted metal surrounded him on all sides, and it seemed to creak and groan with a kind of animation. A few paces forward and he found himself inside a great chamber, where the air was hot and humid with the breath of the water refinery, of steam, and the smell of oxidizing metal. If it were not so loud, Irving was sure his footsteps would have echoed in the large space. Instead, his ears were stolen by the hissing and boiling of the great lifted cauldron in the room's center. Though it was entirely metal, it glowed with an orange intensity. At one point he may have marveled at how it worked. Water was brought in through the ceiling where the ocean lay overhead. Thousands of pounds of water, over thousands of pounds of heated, crying metal. Liquid would pour into the metallic bubble and boil, making it easier to transform into something drinkable. It would sap the water out, until what was left inside became a great crucible of molten junk. Inside would be sand superheated into glass, liquidated salt, bits of scrap and plastic now collected into their pure elemental forms. Then it was pressurized and ejected, shot out through a pointed tube that stuck out of the water, sending bright, thick, smoking projectiles far out into the frigid waters, like a child spitting into a pool. This place was not so much the product of mankind as it was the mechanical anatomy of some vomiting monster that might choose to digest him at any moment. No, he could no longer be impressed or fascinated by where his water came from, at the way it incorporated art, or the awe that came with pointed fingers to the trailing orange lights over the water. This was no distant animal beyond the shore,

but a living, burning creature. And he was trapped inside it, threatened by the smoldering stomach that came down from the ceiling and almost touched the floor. And yet everyone walked around it beyond the second story rails, down, down into the furnace, methodical and apathetic in their exposure.

In the safety of the second story with Irving was a thick, balding man that stood in front of him. Poised, the man swayed on his toes, and seemed to be moving his tongue around in his mouth, tasting a response to the words he thought Irving was going to speak. It made him look like a frog, and his large glasses didn't help. Irving couldn't shake the image of one stuck in a kitchen pot, all for the purpose of emphasizing some grim principle. He had to remind himself why he was there, to investigate the disappearance of a worker. The anonymous tip kept running through his mind. "John Litmus burned to death at refinery twelve." There were such things as false tips, many of which he had investigated, but Irving wondered at the many converging ways to die in the chamber, how easy it would be, how predictable it was. Down below the rails, people worked in hodge podge protective suits. There was nothing uniform about the workers except for the way each one moved, trance-like in their work. Some suits seemed to take the shape of jointed carapace, of spongy volcanic rock that glowed at the fringes. Others were made of things that looked like mesh or plastic in varying shapes, some with awkward helmets, or tight formless fabric that made their features mannequin. Only a few were in the standard metallic hazmats, and those were dirty and soot covered at the limbs, making them appear overcooked. They were all dark shapes against the light, distorted by the high

temperature mirage that surrounded them. It made them creatures in a foreign landscape, alien in their gait around the giant, sizzling, churning orb of their continued maintenance and creation.

The man in front of him was getting impatient, and sweat made his body shine. He was being forced to wait. He, like Irving, wore “civilian” clothes of fabric. They were both out of place, unable to go beyond the rails without being physically ripped apart by the dangerous heat. Irving used this to his advantage. He knew how much hotter it was when you stood still, when your clothes stuck to your skin. The man might not have expected Irving knew how to sweat, but this was a battle of wills, which made it a familiar territory. Heat could be endured, and he felt like he knew the kind of man he was staring at. He also held a notepad, and in his neat enforcer’s uniform, it carried an understanding. It could write the words that would be taken far beyond the authority of the refinery. With a few recorded sentences, he could have the man staring at him replaced with someone else, have new suits for the workers, give them better tools, higher pay. Or it could do nothing. It all depended on what people said to him, and that depended on the questions he asked. In the end, Irving could only report what was on the notepad, and the device’s paper only recorded what was spoken near it. His job was simple, though in his opinion, it was far over-simplified. As he had been told, “he was to ask questions, and he was to get answers.” After being reprimanded twice, — evidence to his value that it could happen more than once —he was told for the final time not to lead people along. If it was judged he was leading people, or asking impartial questions again, he would have to find a job outside of

public enforcement. As a result, he was given a pre-written script to follow. All of the questions he could ask, all of the words he could speak were on the first few pages of the notepad. If he deviated, it would be recorded. Still, Irving knew there were far more ways to speak than words. So he held his head high and looked down at the man in front of him.

"Mr. Moraney." He let the name hang, let it suffocate for a moment. "Are you aware that I am here to conduct an inspection?" He read.

There was a second, then a subdued "yes sir" came from the man.

Irving continued without looking up. "Do you understand that there has been an anonymous report against this workplace? That any words you speak will be recorded and added as evidence to the case?"

"Yes sir." Irving turned a page. Moraney took a swig of water from a bottle on his belt. "Are there any charges against me? Sir."

"I never said you were being charged with anything Mr. Moraney. I said that there is a case against this workplace." Irving tried meeting the man's eyes, but they were facing downwards, his fingers unlatching the bottle for another drink of water. "What I said," Irving repeated, more slowly this time, "was that this workplace is under investigation." There was a small breath of silence. "Let's not jump to any conclusions." He gave a meaningful look, and a few more questions, then he began walking forwards down the railed pathway. "Do you mind if I have a look around," he asked, not looking at the man or the device in his palm. It was the last introductory question. His strides were easily longer than Mr. Moraney's and so the smaller man

was forced to keep pace. The whole refinery was very simple: a square structure that ran a walkway around the boiler in the middle. There were few doors, but Irving made his way towards the first he saw. Moraney stayed close to Irving, and for a moment there was a rhythm, a third step for every two of the inspector's. At last, the froggish man went ahead, in front of Irving, and pulled open a door. Cool air met them, and as soon as Irving entered, the man had the door shut tight, squeezing in behind him. Inside, there was a single desk, perfectly clean with a name plate on top that said "Moraney." Along the wall opposite the door were various controls, though in truth there were not as many as Irving expected. Hanging, was a shiny temperature hazmat that looked like it had never been used. From the inside of the room there was a large window through which all the workers could be watched. It must have been cleverly hidden by some expensive one-way paint. As Irving hadn't noticed it, he figured it must have been the work of an artist.

The amphibian man sat down in the singular office chair, sweating. His wide mouth was drawn into a perfectly neutral line, perhaps self-conscious he had sat down, while the inspector was still standing. Irving pretended not to notice.

"How well do you know your scribes Mr. Moraney?"

He returned a low "Hmmmm" to the inspector. "I don't really care to know them. I do a headcount each morning. There's a high turnover here."

"Can you elaborate?"

"Well," he replied with a hint of condescension, "not everyone likes the work." Irving was silent, so Moraney continued with a more genuine fluidity. "People don't

always take to the heat. Sometimes they stay home to sleep, or work on their suits. There are all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they run out of inspiration, forget what the words they write mean. It runs on art, you know. Finnicky stuff." Moraney made a vague gesture with his fingers and looked out the window. "Funny, they usually remember how to work when I go stand out there. They don't really know we can see them, but I keep my tabs. There are more than just windows hidden in plain sight." He gave a curt smile to Irving, as if to reiterate he had just shared a well-kept secret with him. The inspector didn't return it. He wasn't sure he could turn the corners of his mouth upwards if he tried. No, he wanted to tell the man, he did not have a taste for scrumptious flies.

"Did you know one of your workers, Jonathan Litmus, was reported missing? His neighbors say he typically only traveled here and back to his home."

Moraney shifted. "Like I said, I typically don't get to know them, let alone a worker who went, what? Three weeks ago?" It was true. People disappeared all the time, and sometimes they showed back up. Some people went "missing," but because the city was so layered, so unpredictable, there were any number of reasons people could disappear. People got lost, or distracted, or found new work without telling anyone. Many, in time, returned as Irving found in his investigations. But it wasn't a given that people came back, and certainly not all of them did.

Irving asked more questions. What time did the workers leave, what time did Moraney leave, how the workers were compensated, whether they were assisted in obtaining their own equipment. Moraney replied with ambiguous, evasive answers,

increasingly so as they spoke. In fact, the longer they talked, the less he said. Only Moraney had the ability to use more words in the process. “I believe” the froggish man had said, “that they leave around sunset. If they stay ‘til ten, they get their cards marked a second time.” That small statement had been garnished on either side by half-minute spiels on punctuality, how not everyone took breaks because it would mark their cards, how his system was efficient, perfected, how two other refineries had adopted it. Irving found he had to actively parse out what the man was saying.

“I believe” is what had stuck out, and what he would have normally pressed in on. He was asking such simple questions. The man was using practiced, purposeful ambiguity, thriving on carelessness. That Irving was forced to hold his tongue and not point it out frustrated him to no end. The script took away any focusing power he had. Were he allowed, he knew he could get more out of him. Instead, he read the conversation as it was spoken, imagining the whole process of what he was holding.

It would be sent along. The enforcement readers would make a quick glance, find Moraney an honest man, and stamp their approval. It was a familiar story, and it was writing itself before his very eyes on yellowish paper. Irving’s work, he understood, was routine. The work of the amphibian man in front of him, and that of all the scribes, circling far below him – it was all routine. At points he watched them through the window, writing words on the red hot boiler, in their strange, motley, haggard suits. He read the questions off the pad, and though Moraney was speaking, Irving wasn’t hearing the words. Instead, he looked at the man’s lips moving. When they stopped, he asked the next question.

Irving knew the tells of a liar. He had discovered that no matter how old people grew, even the good liars lied like children. He could look into the eyes of who he was talking to and see the smallness in them. Moraney had that inside him. A kind of stooping and looking upwards, not to meet his vision, but as a way of hiding. A fidgeting of fingers, then placing them on his knees, in his pockets, back and forth over the course of minutes. Irving could see through it. Maybe that was why he was so good at enforcing, because he could see through all the lies. Asking questions was part of it, too. If you asked the right question in a certain way, people thought you already knew the answer, and so they didn't bother lying. It was almost an art, Irving thought, though the idea of calling it "artistry" gave him a headache. There was enough art in his life already. It was everywhere. You couldn't walk down the street without someone trying to sell you some piece of it, or go somewhere without someone trying to put a new spin on something old. It was like the world was shouting, and the quiet places were retreating into its smallest corners. The thought made Irving listen. He noticed the hissing of the boiler and the *clunk* of its ejection. They were quieter here. He wondered if the man in front of him felt the same way about art and silence, about how the world was changing. Yet the prospect of common ground with the man in front of him seemed to be something repulsive, especially when he could read his carelessness and penchant for lying and twisting words. Those were things the notepad could never hear or see. Though it could transpond anything spoken near it, any significance would be lost to the readers who would judge the case. The mystical pad in his palm that had been carefully taught to listen would never be more than a

peculiar piece of machinery. He felt the realization's proximity, felt it touching his hands and pulling them down. The words had stopped.

Moraney stood looking at Irving, and he realized he had been sitting there, listening to the boiling water and the muted sound of the machinery. There were no questions left. The last section was from Moraney. He read it from the middle, like an interruption. "But I think I would know if someone had. You can check our records if you want, they're clean. Besides, we'd have to shut the whole place down. People would be out of work for weeks, myself included. That's why we take precautions."

Irving had to re-read to catch up. "Can you elaborate?" He read off the script.

Moraney got up, and with a quick, "follow me," they were back out in the rippling air. They fell back into their rhythms, two steps for Moraney's every three. *One, two. One, two. One, two, three. One, two, three.* It was like they were saying their names as they walked. Two human instruments that were singing the songs they knew. They reached a door that opened to downward stairs. Inside were the poorest temperature hazmats he had ever seen. Some were scattered across the floor, and some were hanging, but virtually all were in tatters. He understood why people brought their own, why there was no uniformity in the workers he had seen. "They tend to leave messes sometimes. I'll talk to them about it before they leave sir."

"What is this?" Irving spoke off of a portion he had memorized. Moraney did a kind of quick shuffling to put some of the suits away, but it was clear he had never done so before.

He spoke while he was cleaning, “a lot of these are technically scrap for the workers, they don’t wear these,” he emphasized. “In fact, they’re required to bring their own. One of the long-time scribes, I forget his name, he can weld. Keeps everyone’s suits from having broken creases, helps combine the best parts. These are all his. Everyone calls him Dr. Frankenstein.” He gave a quick laugh, and his beady eyes attempted to meet Irving’s, but they were lost in the dirtiness and clumsiness of it all. Soot covered the floor in erratic footprints and there were sweeping marks where Moraney had dragged the suits. He watched the man trying to move everything without contaminating his own hands. Suits everywhere formed a patchwork of missing limbs or had gaping cracks. All of them had lost their luster, and one mostly whole piece was slouching against the wall of lockers like a dead man. The man saw Irving looking at it and snatched it before quickly hanging it up. He had fallen into a new rhythm.

Moraney spoke when he was finished. “The scraps are all a precaution,” he argued. “An extra safeguard for the workers. They bring their own suits,” he repeated. “And they need to get their suits inspected weekly. I use the inspection card to mark their pay. They keep it with them out there in these.” He held up a small clear bag, smudged like everything else. “They’ll show it to you if you ask.” Irving waved his hand in dismissal, and he stopped explaining.

“I’ll need to interview them as well,” he said. “The scribes.” He looked out the small windows of the two doors that led to the boiler. They made a narrow hallway,

the doors acting as a buffer for the heat. But even through the layers, the first door felt like a fireplace window.

"Don't touch the door." Moraney chuckled nervously. "It'll remind you to wear a suit."

Irving gave him a meaningful look. "And where can I get one of those?" Moraney made a quick *o* with his lips and hustled upstairs. A minute later he came down with a temperature hazmat and left Irving to change. It was small, so that his head strained the top of it. This put much of the clear visor beneath his nose, and the upper edge at his eyebrows. He could smell the sweat of whoever wore it previously. He had assumed Moraney would bring him the new one in his office. Where had he gotten this one from? Were he not on a script, he was sure Moraney would be counting his days.

With his badge and notepad in one of the clear bags, he gripped the door handle and pulled it open. The noise of the refinery roared, louder than before. Another door, and it was like one of the scribes had written "intensity" on his forehead. Even through the suit, it was sweltering, and the sounds seemed to pierce every part of him. For a moment he was like an insect, an amalgamation hearing and nociception. He became only the boiler, the hissing *shhhhhh* that silenced everything in its radius. It was encompassing, stealing away all thought and words, transposing them into language of light, and sound and waves. He was staring into it, staring into the sun and hearing its celestial language, pressed into his mind. This was the work of

the scribes, the beauty they saw in their work, what fuelled it. It was artistry, and not the kind of the vendors, restaurants and cafes that lined the streets. It was raw.

He saw the stylus of each scribe, pure and untouched even against the unbearable heat, where their palms were so close to the basin's metal. They could not touch it, so they wrote like painters, like carvers, scratching into the metal like it was clay. Inside each of the tools, he knew, inside those shining tungsten rods, would be bones. Bones of artists born with true power, true inspiration. It was they who were born to sculpt the world, and in many minds, upend it. Each scribe would likely have some talent of their own to be drawn to the work. Maybe enough to blow a bit of life into paper cranes, or, with much effort, enough to press their palm into hard stone. The power they held, what allowed them to write the words with a thousand degrees in every lettered stroke came from the bones. Long dead and still creating, he knew he was watching pieces of a graveyard. It was a blasphemy to which the world was now accustomed. He adjusted to the cacophony, the empirical assault. He could see the individual words they were writing, glowing white against the volcanic hues. Heat, heat the word, its very name spiraled around the base of the boiler in a pattern, and it was not just writing. From the scribe who wrote it, it was all the heat of desert sand, focalized to a point, held under a magnifying glass and brought into singular words. He could see it, see what it meant. There were other words his eyes could make out. Someone's writing was blue, a dark azure of the purest fire, of distant stars dying and - and someone was trying to get his attention. A man in a suit like his stood in front of him, shouting.

“Tinder!” He barked. “Are you deaf? You need something to write with.” Despite the shouting, he could only just make out the words. The man stepped away, gesturing, and in the step away his words were lost to the commotion of the refinery. It was clear they mostly communicated without words while they were working. A step towards him again, and he could hear what the man was saying. “Goddamn, you can’t just stand there.” There was a desperate frustration in his voice. He was able to read an anguished laugh from a tilt of the man’s head. ”You stand there just shitting your pants, and Moraney,” he pointed upwards “will qualify you for a break. That docks *our* pool.” The man was checking Irving’s suit now, patting pieces of it with a careful efficiency. “And this suit. We’ll need to adjust it,” he started. Irving took a moment to overcome the abruptness of it all, the man still barking. When he interrupted him, he began to raise his voice higher, like a man close to his breaking point, but when he saw Irving’s notepad and badge, his back went rigid, and his voice quiet to the surroundings. Irving took a moment to read everything that was said. It was no way to speak to an enforcer. The paper seemed to have taken every word, having no difficulty in all the noise.

“It’s alright,” Irving said, trying to calm the man down. It was clear from his posture that adrenaline still ran through his veins, now conflicted as to its purpose. “I’m just here for an inspection. What’s your name?” He asked.

“Plymouth,” the man said.

Irving read off the script asking the same questions he had asked Moraney, whether he knew what an inspection was, about recording, evidence, the case. There

was a prompt “yes sir” each time. After a few questions, the man eased enough to cross his arms. Irving was recovering from his own shock of the environment, and tried to wipe at his forehead a few times while they talked. His suit stopped him each time. There was an uneasiness about Plymouth, and he kept looking upwards towards the balconies as they spoke. Much of the large chamber, in its tall ceilings and long rail walks were much clearer, less distorted from below. Many of Plymouth’s answers were the same as Moraney’s, though never quite word for word.

“Are you ever assisted in having your own equipment?” Irving asked.

“Of course.” The man spit into his suit towards his feet, sweat soaking the thick facial hair on his upper lip. “We get all the scrap we need. Jeremy, the guy over there helps us to put it into something usable.”

“Can you elaborate?” Irving thought the man got more agitated each time he asked, but he didn’t show it in his voice. Perhaps it was because he was already so close to yelling each time he spoke anyways.

“Jeremy,” Plymouth said as he pointed, “can put things together with his hands. He’s a welder. Doesn’t have to use any tools.” Irving looked at him, working in a focused demeanor. He still held a stylus in his hand. His writing, Irving noticed, was blue. “Never charges us a cent,” Plymouth went on. “He’s part of what keeps this place running. We couldn’t do all this without him.” He wriggled his hand out of one of the arms and let it hang limply to his side, bringing a bottle to his lips and drinking heavily. There was something in the way he said that. Irving noticed his own mouth getting dry already, his hair, now darker from sweat, clung uncomfortably to his

forehead. He asked more questions from the script, looking down at his notepad. “Jonathan Litmus.” Plymouth sounded out the name. “No, haven’t seen John,” was his only response. When Irving asked him to elaborate, there was a purposeful neutrality in his voice. “Hasn’t come in. What else is there to say?”

Irving looked up, looked at the man’s face. They were standing close in order to hear each other better, but he still had to look through his own plastic window and into the man’s in front of him. He had dark eyes, tired and sunken. There was a weakness to them like coals close to winking out. Irving tried to read what they said. The man was deliberately holding his gaze. Irving looked around, at the refinery cauldron, at the workers, around and up. On the balcony railing stood Moraney, arms crossed and slouching over the rails. Irving probably looked like one of the ghoulish shapes through the mirage, being twisted and stretched by the distortion. Moraney, however, could be clearly made out, a figure against the darkness. With his features facing the burnishing light, it was without a doubt him watching. Wide lips, and broad, circular glasses that reflected the light.

Irving looked back at Plymouth so close, and he seemed, just slightly, to carefully nod his head, to speak the weakness in his eyes. It was wordless, and so indiscernible he wasn’t sure if it happened. Irving was limited on what he could say, but how could the same be said for Plymouth? They both seemed to have a brief connection over their stiflement. And yet, there was no way to wrap his head around why Plymouth would be so silent or terse, not when all the world’s noise seemed to be protecting him. “Say it out loud. Say it,” Irving wanted to speak. But he didn’t, nor

did the man say anything else. Irving read the last question. “Have you known of, or seen any injuries or deaths while working here?”

There was a stone in Plymouth’s throat. “If there had been any, they would have been reported to the public enforcement.” There was no hostility in his voice, but a kind of quiet. They both felt the noise around them, and the boiling machine that hung from the ceiling next to the both of them made its *ka-chunk* as its contents were ejected.

“They would.” It was a statement, but Irving wanted to make it a question. He kept his inflection neutral, so the notepad didn’t make it a question.

“Best place to look is the records then.” Plymouth said dryly. “Anything else?”

“No, that is all. Thank you.”

Each time he interviewed someone, there was often the same misunderstanding. Not everyone understood that he was an enforcer, or why one would be with them near the boiler. Then, during each interview, there was the same understanding about John Litmus. Tight lipped wordlessness, they were all ignorant, and Plymouth wasn’t the only one to have glanced upwards. The welder, Jeremy, was the least talkative of them all, and Irving found himself asking for elaboration several times per question. Even then, there were not much more than one-word answers. Irving finished his interview quickly.

The next person he talked to looked like a mannequin, only ballooned and swollen, like a chalk outline. Their entire body was a sheening white surface, their features masked. It was as if someone had coated their whole body in an even coat of

glazed ceramic and baked themselves inside of it. Still, there was no mistaking the clear voice that responded to him. It seemed to resound through all of the clutter.

“Monroe, that’s my name. And yours?”

“Irving.” She spoke in a friendly manner, never looking away from her work. She was lying down and had written the spiral pattern of words over the base of the hot boiler. She was writing the same word again and again. He was about to read from the notepad, when she interrupted him.

“Burning” she said, “is such a simple word. Easy to write. I think I’ve written it a thousand times just today, and it's never lost its meaning.” She hesitated, and Irving almost spoke to read off the script, but she continued. “I think it’s because of how many meanings it has. Burning describes, burning moves. Jeremy says that if you stare at a word long enough, you forget what it means, how it's spelled. The same thing happens when you look in a mirror too long.” As she said that, she moved away from the red-hot metal. It lifted upwards in its great, creaking thud, and then fell back down further, so close to touching the floor. Then it rose back slowly, until it wasn’t moving.

“I-,” Irving started to yell, but he couldn’t get a word in. Her voice carried somehow without any of the effort.

“But I feel like this word is an exception. Compared to other words, this one moves in a circle. Doesn’t it feel that way? It means so many things, how could it not?” She looked at him for the first time, but Irving had no idea how she could see or hear anything. To him, she might have been a golem, a piece of artistry created for

simple work. Golems, he knew, lacked the ability to speak and create, or in her case, have such vibrant personalities.

“No. I-,” Irving started, but she interrupted him again.

“I mean, I never thought I had any kind of talent with artistry, really, but I was able to get my hands on a stylus, and it just came easy. I’ve been thinking, nobody else believes it, but maybe this is my thing, my gift. Burning. Even if it's just one word, I feel like I’m the only one who understands it. That’s us. That’s me, I keep thinking. It sounds a bit crazy, doesn’t it?” Irving was listening now. He knew he had seen something in what she had written, though now, looking at the words, he wasn’t sure he could. It was like waking up from a dream and Monroe was the one remembering it. He found, despite himself, he wanted her to speak more.

“I heard why you’re here. John Litmus.” She said his name more casually than the others, if at all. “I never met him. He’s before my time. You don’t have to give me the spiel, by the way, I heard you say it a couple times.”

Irving had fallen into a kind of rhythm with the script, and she was tearing it apart. She answered all his questions, but it was as if there were more important things, and she slipped into a kind of absent mindedness, adding in her own thoughts. He found himself glancing at her writing. Burning. It was losing its meaning the more he looked at it. By the last question, she was kneeling instead of lying down, approaching what was almost the side of the basin, too tall to comfortably write on from the floor. The words on the very bottom were beginning to lose their shape, melting back into the metal.

“That’s an interesting device. The notepad.” She noted. Irving wondered again how she could see so well, even without looking in his direction. Notepads were commonplace, familiar. All of the enforcers had them, and there were always dozens to borrow. “I’ve always wondered,” she continued, “do they only make them out of paper?”

Irving was caught off guard by the question. “So far as I know.” He answered. “The world runs on paper.” Monroe gave a shrug, though it was muted by whatever she was wearing. Irving didn’t think it was much of a secret, or that interesting of a question. It seemed like there might be more to say, but Irving didn’t have the time to wait. “Keep up the work.” He hoped it sounded encouraging.

“Thanks.”

There were more scribes, more interviews, but the most interesting things they had to offer were the things they wore, and their sudden silences. A woman wore armor made of porous concrete, and the sides that faced the boiler glowed. “It's not nearly as heavy as it looks, and it's damn cheap. Stuff they used to build the west district.” Her voice was more muffled than anyone else’s. “So no, I don’t really get help. Don’t need it either. Bought my own stylus, too, so I don’t owe shit to the refinery. It balances out.” Her answers were as useful as all the others. Another man wore what looked like a fishing net over his entire body, and Irving couldn’t hear a word he said, nor could the notepad. His mouth was still moving while Irving walked away. All the while, the workers seemed to watch Moraney, and Moraney never moved.

The last scribe wore furs, though scribe would seem a poor word. There was nothing to protect her bare face, but the light over it was cool like an overcast day, not the bronze light of the refinery. Unlike the others, she held a paintbrush. As he got closer, he noticed she was surrounded by snow, slowly falling. Behind her, no matter the direction he stood, seemed to be frozen peaks. There was a sense of longing to them, that the mountains were somehow home. Irving looked at maintained a sharp neatness. The letters formed a vertical line, variations of characters that might all fit in the same perfect rectangle, careful and swirling, occasionally jutting into a fine point. There was an intense hatred in the writing, an argument deep and strong like a river. He felt it prick at his eyes, too harsh to look at. The thin brows of the woman were set. She was digging at the boiler, burning it, killing it if she could, while her paintbrush set the killing blows. He could see the way she imagined it, as if she were stomping on a bug, over and over again until it became tedious and methodical.

Irving held up his badge and notepad. She weathered him with her gaze. There was a controlled nature to how she looked at him, picking him apart and judging him. When she saw the notepad, there was disgust that flashed. The hissing boiler might digest him out of hunger, but the artist before him might have done it out of doctrine. Even the other scribes kept their distance, and despite the coolness he now felt, sweat still slicked his clothes. This, Irving knew, was part of the reason that artists were required to find contracts. They were unpredictable, and there was often the assumption that if they were left undirected, there was no telling what they might create, what they might do. There was a story everyone was familiar with, about an

artist who had purposely shrunken down everyone he worked with. His words were quoted non-stop for weeks in the papers: “They were small minded, and so they deserved it.” She reminded him of the man in the story, and there was something so uncanny about her gaze, as if she were pulling the truth out of his eyes.

Irving spoke, and there was no response. He found himself reading anyways off the script, unable to stop himself. Each time there was the silence replaced by noise, the shouting of the machines. He felt their intrusion into the painting. Still, he read. He read so she could understand, and the more he did, the less sure he was that he was reading the questions. His mouth seemed to feel numb, though he was sure it was moving. There was the feeling that he was an outsider, but he wouldn’t stop reading, in fact he wasn’t sure if he could, or where he was, or why or what he was reading. He was in another land, not the hot and spiteful chamber of the boiler, but in someone’s home, trespassing. It was all of the home they had left, and a man was standing in it, wearing a too small suit, and leaving dark footprints. There was a wooden house, ornate and warm and so far out of reach, while behind it stretched tall, protective mountains that you could never cross, that would hold you for eternity. That the refinery cauldron was nearby became only a vague reminder, in fact Irving wasn’t sure which direction it was. The woman was now painting the air around them with the only paint she had. It was white like a morning’s frost. White paint against the charcoal blackness of the walls behind them. Still, Irving seemed to see faint colors. There was a silhouette blue of the mountains, a soft candle yellow of the light inside the wooden house. She was painting furiously now, painting people. The landscape

was fading and two black haired girls stood in the snow. Irving felt his heart beating. Out of the corner of his eye was a pale hand. It was thick, hairy and pudgy, slowly reaching towards them. They were growing in seconds, from children to adults, and the hand was reaching, and the mountains were fading. Aging, reaching and fading were the words of the painting, words that transcended language, repeating and resounding. Irving tried to step back, wanted to look away but the painter was quick, and she grabbed his arm. Closer and darker and older, they said, and they said it a thousand times in words he couldn't understand. Then it was only one girl, standing alone, and the hand was gripping her hair, black and soft. She was in pain and the hand was pulling, its knuckles bending, the tendons of its wrist showing, and a figure crept, crept into the painting. His arm was pulling, squeezing the girl, now a woman, closer to his face, to his nostrils, to his mouth. It was Moraney. Darkness surrounded them, all darkness and Irving wanted to scream, to yell that she was trapped, to break the arm he saw, to run from the one that held him. For those moments there was only fear and anger and no way to speak it. Rage and paralyzation, exponential and intense. Then it faded. Irving was left wondering where he was. Noise returned, and there was no longer silence, but an unsettling clanging and hissing, a non-stop loud and intense sonority that you could never leave.

There was a gloved hand on his arm. Irving was looking at his notepad, unable to read the words, his saliva thick in his mouth. He saw the artist, straight black hair tucked into a fur coat, thin eyebrows set. She was looking upwards, up and at the balcony rails. Right where Moraney was standing.

Irving was back in the locker rooms with the scraps. He felt cold, and he struggled to get his hands out of his sleeves to unzip the chest of his suit. The next moment he was out and fumbling to hang it up, trying desperately to get his hands to work with the piece of wire, to get it on the rack. He was pushing the scraps to the side, trying to get it to stay on the rail but it wouldn't. It kept falling off. The dead man suit, once propped on the wall, was facing away from him. It could hang. It was all he could look at, and his face was memorizing it while his fingers were fumbling. There was the suit now in his mind. The suit and the artist and the hand and the girl. He felt dizzy climbing the stairs. Moraney opened the door at the top before he could. He was holding it open for him and standing in the way, uncomfortably close. In the shuffle, Irving pushed him out of the way. Someone had put water into his hands. He was drinking.

"I hope Eri didn't give you too hard of a time." He forced a short laugh. "She's our crown jewel, really." Irving could hardly listen. He was drinking, and seeing the hand, the suit and the artist. He watched it, now resting on the rails. "My wife always told me that her sister was an artist, all the time before we got married. I thought it was just something she said, but it was true. That woman down there," he pointed as if there was no mirage, no dark shapes, "has been blacklisted, but she's an artist, a good one, too." Moraney no longer talked with any timidity. There was an easy confidence he hadn't had before. The questioning part of Irving was there, trying to ask why. "I'm not sure any of the other refineries would take a woman like her. Most places wouldn't. She's sneaky. I bet you didn't know she could speak perfect English, but she

can. Well, I could always use a good artist, so I went to look up her contract records." The suit was still in Irving's mind, and Moraney's grip. There was a question he forgot.

" I said," Moraney went on, "that she didn't have a contract on record, how could she possibly be working? Was I supposed to believe an artist was doing manual labor somewhere? Of course not. My wife kept saying that Eri didn't want the job, but I kept asking: what was she doing that was better than scribing? Well, I like to think negotiating is part of my skill set." He looked over the railings, tapping his short fingers on them. "Whatever she was doing before, she works here now. And our refinery's efficiency is through the roof."

It was a thin hallway of metal stairs. Forwards was the only way to go, and so Irving stepped upwards until he was out the heavy door and into overcast skies, all white and gray in color. There was a loud clang behind him, and the refinery shot out its burning missile of hot slag, out into the waters, far away. There was still a dizziness that hung to him like his damp clothes. His mind was still shrouded by the painting, by the concentration of the whole experience. He looked at the notepad, collecting his thoughts. The words helped. He had asked the artist all the questions, and he couldn't remember doing it. Those were on the paper. What he could remember was the suit, the limp, almost-whole suit. There was a hole in its back, he realized. It looked like it had been scorched and pressed into the back. None of the artists touched the refinery's bubble, careful in how they held their stylus. Did John Litmus have a metal suit? That question wasn't on the script. He wanted to write it down on the paper, but what he

turned in would be as much an inspection of his own work as the one he conducted. He would remember that for a followup when he was off reprimand. He held it in his mind, but there was the feeling that he had already forgotten things, and he wouldn't remember them all. He tried remembering as he walked, remembering and holding. "Words spoken." The phrase stuck in his mind. He had said it, but why was it important? Dully, he heard the sucking sound of the refinery pulling in water, hissing with steam until its top sealed shut.

CHAPTER 2: THE GRAFTING MACHINE

Dr. Medley sipped from the shake in his hand. It was the color of wet tree bark and thick. Bits of it clumped inside the large straw he drank from. His own creation, it was all logical convenience. An arrangement of algaes, vegetables and invertebrates were all finely ground and portioned in that cup. It was the world's most nutritive substance, and the rumor was that you couldn't die so long as you were drinking or eating it. And after it settled, it could require a bit of chewing. You could still die, Dr. Medley knew. But it did make you live longer. However, most people avoided it because of Its taste and texture: the two seemed purposefully intwined as a concoction to induce gagging. It also smelled like fresh soil. And it had a way of coagulating if left out. As gruesome a drink as it sounds, it was savvy to something most ignored.

The food industry, Dr. Medley recognized, did not cater to one's health. In fact, most of it provided only the bare minimum of what the human body needed. Artists and machines could do incredible things in the shaping, in the form of food, but not much in the way of nutrition. Beneath the color, tastes, and aromas of many tantalizing meals were voids to the body – meals with the substance of salted ash. To Dr. Medley, this was one of the deep fissures of modern living. To never know even something as simple as how to eat healthy, how to care for one's body, is to be robbed of life.

And that was the root of the issue: a lack of understanding. To Dr. Medley, that was the root of most issues. It was the small kernel to the unfairness of the world, even of time. Dr. Medley often imagined a life where he had been born earlier, in times with greater misunderstanding. Even by just a hundred years, he might have been a

simple laborer, unable to indulge in curiosity for a living. He might have rough hands, and thicker, more wrinkled skin. He might have died already. And he might have been ignorant, might have believed in bloodletting, or in the four humors of the body. Dr. Medley found that imagined version of himself sobering. His own morose daydream was for others, all they had ever known.

Those thoughts made Medley consider himself lucky that his speech was not taken, nor was his body in any extreme sense deformed. In fact, he was able to lead a normal life, one that on most days, he enjoyed. Only, Dr. Medley had never tasted anything in his life. His tongue was completely functional. It was only good for swallowing nutrients, and it was good for speech. That he had never tasted was simply a fact of life for him, and like most things, faded into the background. It was only when he watched people eat that he would remember. People often made faces, or closed their eyes when food was "good," which Dr. Medley found bizarre, and even grotesque. Often the more unhealthy the food, the more they made faces. It made them extraterrestrial, foreign. He made it a point not to eat meals with people.

Frequently, they felt the need to point out that he was living a duller life. They would ask him what his life was like, and then, when they were satisfied, would try and describe flavors and tastes to him, usually while they ate. But all Dr. Medley could see was how they chewed. They created mash in their mouths and swallowed, and their own anatomy rewarded them. After those conversations, Medley liked to think his body's shortcoming was an improvement. Bizarrely, it was the one ignorance

he embraced. It had made him question what so many concentrated into profound experience. It gave him the view of an outsider looking in. It made life more objective.

Wasn't life a problem to be solved? And so was artistry, in all its impossibility, in all the ways it broke rules. Both were curiosities. Dr. Medley took another long sip of his shake. A thought came to him of the satisfied sigh people made after they drank something. He certainly felt no urge to do so. But occasionally, on days like today, he got to have his own metaphorical drink and sigh. It was only after he had called and organized the elements of the world, to see how they would respond in kind. He would step closer to those answers, and he would unravel another thread of human understanding. What more could he ask for? Those were the moments he savored. He did so silently.

The man in front of Dr. Medley was like a puzzle, delicately taken apart. He had been taken apart at every distinguishable piece, and then those pieces were taken apart until they became unrecognizable. For four months that man was an amalgam of separated tissues, all carefully organized, and frozen. His brain was put into a separate machine, sleeping. His entire body had been effectively stored for almost half a year. And now, he was ready to be put back. The machine was working quickly. It had already put together his hands and feet. It was working its way towards the middle, mechanical arms whirring in quick, sharp motions. From the outside those hands and feet looked normal, even healthy. Up close, there would be millions of tiny cuts. They would all be uniquely fitted back together, from bones to nerve cells.

The man being put back together would stay in the facility for a week or so. Dr. Medley had read his case file. The man had a bizarrely sweet looking face. But he had hurt more children than Dr. Medley had fingers and toes. The man deserved no sympathy. He was a subject, and every fiber of him would be accounted for and be given back. He would be put together and sent to die on schedule somewhere. Dr. Medley only wondered what good his body could do the world. There were those without arms, those paralyzed, those who needed new organs. But there was also no shortage of monsters. In the future, men like the one in front of him would go to the deserving, to those born without. They would be recycled. It was a kind of justice with a beautiful logic behind it. It was the very philosophy of science, its alchemical origins realized. Take lead and make it gold. Take the evil of the world, and make it do something good.

Dr. Medley watched through the glass with anticipation, and pride at the machine. There was distaste for the man who had been put back together so quickly. An hour passed, and it was just his upper body left. The machine worked from the extremities inwards. Dr. Medley took a sip through the straw as he watched. It had sat and so he had to chew it slightly. His tongue moved the substance towards the back of his throat, and he swallowed it. To him, it had no taste, no smell. Nor did anything else. In fact, it was the same thing the subject in front of him was eating, only his was much smaller quantity and pre-digested. It was fed to the subject continuously through tubes.

For the moment, he was still a brain in a dish. The subject endured nothing throughout the process. It only had four months of nothing, of deep, continuous nothing. To Dr. Medley, this was the way it could have stayed. That cruel mind could be abandoned. But this was all to prove a point. It was already known that a man could be fully taken apart and put back together. The machine had done it before. But how effective was the storage? Would the *mind* notice a difference?

The man being mended could not hear or see the real world, not yet. Mechanical arms were putting back his flesh with perfect efficiency. The machine's facial reconstruction so far was impeccable. Not a single line marred the man's face. Every follicle was the same as it was when it was cryopreserved, and an expression could be seen through the whirring metal behind sterile glass. Even paralyzed and eyeless, Dr. Medley saw only depravity on the man's face. It was the victims staring back, not the man who had been put back in neat human units. What a legacy behind that face. The first fully grafted man. It was not a face that he could wear. But there were those without faces. Burn victims. Those who had had their faces taken. They would wear it and make it a better one.

The device worked quickly. Veins and arteries knit back together, fitting back into flawless cuts. Muscles rebound to tendon and bone, skin to skin. More and more, it began to look like a man rather than the pieces of a man.

"Heartbeat is steady." An assistant said.

"Good." Dr. Medley replied. "We should be able to wake him this afternoon. Jason, how's brain activity?"

“Nothing abnormal. No signs of waking yet.”

“Good.” Dr. Medley nodded his head. “Thank you, Jason, that is good.” Despite his health, Medley’s shoulders were perpetually bent forwards. It made his lab coat look heavy. His neck needed a break from looking at things. At the grafting machine. It was almost finished, fast and slow in the scheme of things. It would be hours before they could wake him up. The body would recuperate quickly, but not instantly. Opening a folder, he looked at the case file, at all the information compiled so far. A paperclip held together all of the permission they had gotten from Public Enforcing; another was summaries of all the man’s victims. There were still hours before he would wake up, and the stack was sickeningly fat, full of words he had already scoured. He would not read them again. It was enough to feel the weight in his hands.

The hours did pass. Assistants spoke to one another in hushed tones. There was a slight echoing as they whispered, and the occasional direct comment to or from Dr. Medley. The sounds would retreat. Then there would be only the sounds of the grafting machine, or of soft air blowing. Then the whispers would return. A blank ceiling was high above them all, blank surfaces of walls and floor, walls and floor, then an expanse back to the top. Guts laid behind those walls. Copper and steel, refrigerant, nitrogen, pipes of gas and water – they sustained the laboratory. There was darkness, too, behind those walls. To the side near the tall ceiling was false sunlight through a high window, a testament to man’s conquering of space. The light touched the floor, spilling in front of the exposed man behind the glass, taken apart and now put fully together by immaculate tools. He was held upwards, out in a display.

“Vitals are smooth?” Dr. Medley asked. Some of his gray hair was in the sunlight. “Good.” He nodded. “Good. Let’s wake him up. He’s full of his own blood now.” A minute passed. The man was breathing, his chest rising and falling. “Any internal bleeding around the seams?”

“None.” An assistant said.

There was a slight vocalization, a weak groaning amplified to the whole room, echoing.

“Take your time. You’re awake now.” Despite the words, Dr. Medley had a way of prodding with his voice. He spoke to a dark river stone in his palm. On it was the room’s number, and on the other side were two carved words in silver script. They read: “speak clearly.” Dr. Medley carefully enunciated. “Do you know what your name is?” There was only a low sound from the subject that rose and rose until it was a whine. Dr. Medley waited. The sound haunted the room for a moment, seeming to scratch at the glass wall.

“Make sure his support joints have a little movement and predictability. He might try and move, and I don’t want any tearing. We’ll still have an accurate dexterity index when he wakes up.” Dr. Medley spoke to the subject again through the device, clinically. The subject’s voice roused a little more each time, then back down in a short cycle. It was all gibberish. The man was crying, eyes wet and strangely blank. In between cries were the efforts of speech. He contorted his face into wrinkles while thin metal fingers pushed on his face, helping it along so that he couldn’t tear any structure.

“Adrenaline levels-,” an assistant began, but Dr. Medley waved at her with a gesture.

“I know. It came up on the general data.” He turned his paper towards her, inky graphs moving. “But stay sharp,” he said gently, giving the slightest of nods. He repeated himself to the device in his palm, trying to be soothing. The intonation was tedious. Meanwhile, the subject seemed to be elsewhere.

“I was” came through the jumble, the words soft and long. He didn’t stop speaking, the stream of sounds going onwards. All the scholars in the room listened.

“You were…” Medley paused. “Where were you? Where *are* you? Where do you think you are?” He said into the device. More slurring of words, incomprehensible. Then another, “I was” stuttered with effort came out of the grafted man, like he was shivering cold. There was a kind of discourse, a back and forth, but it was as if Dr. Medley was poking a beetle, having it move along by touching its back. They had reached a stillpoint. “Just breathe,” Dr. Medley sighed. He knew what little the words offered. He slid the stone into his lab coat pocket and crossed his arms. “Jason,” he said his name like a question, “I want to know what you’re seeing.”

Jason responded carefully. The doctor, Jason knew, had a way of picking apart what you said. He cleared his throat. “The subject is still in low theta stages, not fully awake. It’s likely he’s still dreaming.” The Doctor nodded his head for a moment and then stopped.

“Fascinating.” Said Dr. Medley, watching the man writhe inside the machine. “But no that can’t be right. Still dreaming?” Dr. Medley’s forefinger rubbed at his

pocket where the stone was. “I’m not sure he should still be dreaming. That implies prolonged cognizance. Jason, had he risen out of deep sleep before this?”

“I-,” Jason held a subtle frown. “I don’t know. The encregraph shows steady low conscious cycles, but it only goes back an hour.”

“An hour.” Dr. Medley said back.

“The assistants never brought up anything related to brain activity. Though I can’t say I asked. I’ve had them studying somatics under microscope like you asked.”

“Yes, yes you have. God I’m getting old. Too many projects. An hour, only an hour? Is this the only encregraph of brain activity?”

The grafted man continued to iterate, heaving. He was the focus of the rest of the room. Perhaps his words were more stable, or the patterns of his jittered language were able to be filtered. Whatever the case, more words came out of the sounds he made. “I’m sorry,” he gasped. He said it over and over, seemingly the one word he could pronounce. It came faster, breaking the chain of random words and now blending, until they were only movements upon his tongue where the metal fingers did not reach. More jumble. There was blood in his mouth. Then there came a, “let me out. They’re all here, let me out.” By then it was almost a whisper. Dr. Medley and Jason were talking.

Medley traced his fingers on a map of the brain. It was all texture, a replica that he could feel, to press at and touch, to poke at like a marketplace fruit. “The areas associated with memory, see. I’ll assume he’s been reliving… something.” Jason was engrossed as well, seeing it all through Medley’s eyes. “And The Linguist’s Breadth.

See it? There's little doubt as to why he's having trouble speaking. Those areas still feel normal to indentation but try and sense the vibrations. Can you feel the subtle difference?" He motioned to Jason to feel the sculpture replica of the brain. "There's no doubt the encregraphs would have missed this. It's something I would have known to look for, but nothing they would have expected."

"The organ of the subject's brain, its physicality," Dr. Medley shook his paper cup, and spoke a little louder for the other assistants to hear "is in perfect health. We've aced every somatic component. Which is good, you did everything correctly in your essential diagnostics. But this is proof that you should never distance yourself from the basics, or the curiosity of the matter really. The encregaphs," he picked up the paper and scrunched it, dancing black and white diagrams warping, "can only observe what they are told. Degradation mapping alone, I think it is safe to assume, cannot be entirely relied on, not for this length of time. We might as well be doing case studies at this sample size, which is why it is imperative," he regarded the room to see if anyone else would finish his mantra. "To stay inquisitive. Physical degradation," he paused, "was only one factor of the preservation, and it assumed unconsciousness. And now we've allowed," he swallowed, "I've allowed the subject to be cognizant for who knows how long these past four months. So now," he looked at the grafted man, "we have a brain with only half a mind."

The subject tremored just slightly, as if for effect. His movements were helped along by the metal fingers of the grafting machine. Dr. Medley took a deep breath.

“This was entirely preventable. No,” he continued, “there is much *much* more to the brain beyond structure, a concept I apparently didn’t emphasize enough.”

“Clearly, the subject has been in a state of extended shock, though the signs were atypical to a regular diagnosis. Still, the ethics committee will be down our throats, and rightly so. After this, I would say it is very likely that the lab will change hands to a new investor, probably within the next week. I would say that’s a bad thing, but frankly, whoever the ethics committee assigns might scare you all out of complacency. Luckily,” Dr. Medley looked like he could spit on the floor, “there won’t be any substantial losses of life. We won’t cry any tears for the subject. But the only ethical thing we can do now is put him out of his misery.”

The room watched as Dr. Medley faced away from the glass wall. Still talking, he wrote a number on a torn slip of paper and pushed it into a slot along the opposite wall, which was full of buttons, dials and lights that all, if need be, controlled the grafting machine. There was a clunk and a hiss, and immediately the man jerking was brought to a halt. His whole body relaxed. An arm with a syringe brought itself towards the subject’s face.

“I’ll be writing letters to the ethics committee and Public Enforcing tonight. I want you all to know that this is not the first time something like this will happen in your careers, nor will it be the last.” Medley had his arm in the wall, controlling the arm in the machine manually. “Institutions like theirs are made to keep ones like ours in check. Still,” Dr. Medley cleared his throat, “when you’re in this deep, I’ve found it

best to volunteer the information rather than to wait for the ethics committee to dig around. Your own story is typically the most kind, even if its brutally true."

Dr. Medley spoke almost like he was thinking out loud. The syringe, now empty, came slowly from the corner of the man's eye. Dr. Medley withdrew his own arm out of the wall, straightening his lab coat. "We'll end early today for all of you. I'm tired, and you'll need the rest if the ethics committee is coming." There was a stirring in the room. Some shoulders were hunched upwards, others uniquely calm. Dr. Medley's lab coat looked heavy.

"Bridgette," Dr. Medley said calmly, "do you know how to fill out a donation report? Good." He breathed in the word. "I'd rather the somatics didn't go to waste. Let's freeze them for analysis just for now." Dr. Medley rested his eyes for a moment, touching his forehead and running a hand through his wiry gray hair. He let it come back down and touch the bridge of his nose, just breathing. He walked over near the room's exit and took the stone out of his pocket. There was a little bin where it belonged, and he listened to the sound it made as he dropped it in. Most of the assistants had already made their way out. "Come on Jason," he said. Let's go check some on some other projects. I think we have the time now."

CHAPTER 3: CITY OF THE SPIRE, AURUM

The tolling of the bell is what drove him awake. It was still a new way of waking up. Listening to it each morning for a month had not yet made it familiar. It came from a large russet bell on top of Terry's Cupboard, the closest, and by far the loudest restaurant in the city Aurum. Each morning it made its call for breakfast, and each time it roused a small portion of the city. There were a few novelties about the restaurant, but "novelty" could have been the city Aurum's name. There was novelty in everything. Still, Terry's Cupboard had the appeal that customers could ring the restaurant's bell if only they reserved their spot on a waiting list. Because of this, it was never predictable how the restaurant's bell would ring, only that it would, and at the same time each morning.

Sometimes it had a deep, yawning tone, solemn and kind. But far too often, there were children, or grinning early birds yanking at its rope. This morning it was the latter, and its noise was resounding and imperious. Terry's, outside Ernest's window and across the street, was also shaped like an open cupboard, as if some giant had abandoned their cabinet, and mice had furnished it out. You could eat at a table, and it would make you feel shrunken down, among its faux aged shelves, all dark wood grains, giant shakers of spices, bottles of oil, garlic, hanging dried peppers. Not that Ernest could afford to eat there.

But there was far more than just the restaurant outside the window. There were high-flying kites anchored to the tops of buildings, and the occasional hot-air balloon, slow moving over the city. There were walkways between buildings, connecting everything in a tall web of stone arches, enclosed catwalks, even rope bridges where

there were no electric lines. And down, down in the gold-flecked light-brown sidewalks and streets were vendors with pinstripe canvas tents and little booths, selling trinkets and oddities, jewelry and fruit. There were cafés and wineries with tinkling glasses, silverware, and artist coaxed trellis vines shading street musicians, all playing distant music that jumbled into a sweet discordance like dancing wind chimes. That was how everyone pictured Aurum. And if you had enough money, that's what it *was.*

And there was Aurum's golden spire, high above it all, where the greatest artists lived and stayed, and never left. For a long time, to enter the spire was to utter an oath. But the people who bought The Spire, the Brine family, they came and went. Secretive but respectful about their comings and goings. They were tight lipped, only hinting at what was behind the round tower's gold walls. But inside, everyone knew, were those who could paint the skies, those who studied artistry, dedicating themselves to it. And inside, Ernest knew, was his father, working with the world's greatest artists to make something like gifts -- treasures for the world. It was a modern fable, the culmination of interest and impossibility. Even as Ernest sat in bed, awakened by the swinging bell, there would be a new and different sky, branching from The Spire, carefully painted and sent upwards.

But this was a lot to wake up to each morning, and Ernest found he usually woke up facing away from the window. As he adjusted his eyes, clementine light made its way into his room. The sun made a thick vertical line on his thin carpet and bare floor, of pumice stone, easily shaped by the apartment's builder. It was rough and simple, and likely dirt cheap. But eccentricity was the core of the building, as it was in

everything else. No two things in Aurum were ever alike. Ernest's apartment had no doors, or even windowpanes, only a curved hallway with a curtain, and an open square that somehow kept out the rain. When the first storm arrived, Ernest had stuck out his arm and felt it, and laughed at how the droplets couldn't come through. But an open window still lets in most things. Strong bell tones, music, distant conversations, and soft wheels turning on the streets could freely enter. So could the smells of cooking.

In that sense, it was never quite a struggle to get out of bed. The city had a way of drawing you out. It argued, if you listened, that you would find something new and beautiful if only you would step into it. But that excitement, Ernest found over time, had smoothed into appreciation. And maybe that, too, would change. Instead, he found himself drawn to familiar places, to old places. On his pumice nightstand, which was part of the floor, was a chunk of blue granite, a gift from his father, and on his wall facing him, was a painting they had worked on together, of a woman sitting on a cliff, next to a small tree.

Ernest couldn't remember his dream, but the granite and the painting were things to remember. He held the rock, lemurian blue. It was cool, like the room around, and coarse in his hands. On it reflected deep indigo, though if he reached and held it in the morning sun, it ranged into tones of shimmering green and every color back to those dark blues that played with his eyes.

His father had given it to him as a boy, saying it was a "fortunate stone," that he had peeled it out of an orange by accident. Ernest had begged him to tell the truth, but every time his father raised his hands and told the same story with thick, wiggling

eyebrows that emphasized each part. The story had so convinced Ernest that he would sometimes peel oranges just to see the inside. If there was no granite, and there never was, he would bring the fruit to his father, who would put down his brush and ask in mock surprise, “No stone? You have to feel the weight, Ernest. Bring me one.” Then, it would be a ceremony together, to eat the fruit that yielded only fruit. And after Ernest had taken a seat on a color-stained stool, and listened to the story of the rock, his father would pause and talk about his paintings, how he made the fir trees sway in the breeze. “Like this,” he would say, moving his brush in a pattern that moved with the leaves. He would hand Ernest the brush. “Now you try,” he would say, and with kind eyes he would watch, and give a trickling laugh when Ernest’s stroke would stand out, quite regular and still. “No, not quite like that. Like this,” almost a whisper. And he would paint it over, tucking it into the canvas forever.

His father could make crackling ice, could make calling sparrows that seemed to sing out your name. He could make little waltzing men and women dance, could make a slow-moving night sky, or a farmer’s cottage fields, that changed with the year, summer during winter, and autumn during spring. More than anything, there was a peacefulness in all his paintings. They were their own quiet places that emanated outwards. They were just like him, nothing ambitious like the step-in paintings that people could walk through and touch. Perhaps that was what gave them so much worth, and why his father had been invited to The Spire – Aurum’s, and likely the world’s, center of artistry and art. The Spire was a place of beauty and mysterious purpose. But it was also a symbol, and it needed those ordinary people of great talent,

to keep the meaning of what art was. That, Ernest felt, was what the spire was for. There were times it seemed his father had not left so long ago, but it was… Ernest had to think. More than eight years now, at least.

He could hear his father's voice as he put the stone back on the nightstand. He was old then and would be older now. There was a slight chill in the air, in his room. And yet Ernest found it preferable to the one provided in his contract. More than anything, he found he missed his old house of fresh paint, and peeling paint where he had lived with his father. It had been torn down and replaced, down to its last rotting fiber. He told himself it was just a house, as he stared down at the floor. The pumice seemed to invite attempts to strike it down. It would scratch your knuckles for trying.

Ernest's only uniform for work was a navy apron, which he rolled and tucked under his arm. He wore comfortable light-gray pants, and a loose green shirt with sleeves so long he had no choice but to roll them up. In Aurum, there were few conventions about dress, and as a result, many would call what he wore boring or simple. Ernest liked simplicity, and in truth, was picky about his clothes. To him, importance resided in the colors he wore. His shirt, plain and long, had the cast of summer birch leaves, on a cloudy day. Ernest looked in the mirror, held tight by the wall. He saw himself thin and tan like this father. A stray breeze from the window animated the long hem of his shirt. A birch tree, down in the fibers of the cloth.

He stepped out of his apartment doorway, an *S*-shaped corridor with a thin brown curtain. In other places, this would mean a lack of privacy, but here, with neighbors who were all friends, or at the least kind, there was a like-mindedness.

Artistry, though it was commonplace, still had the odd mystery, or way of surprising people. In this case, it was the building itself that seemed to vet people. At least, that was how Ernest thought of it. People made up all sorts of legends for the building, about why only certain people could find the entrance.

There were stories about destiny, and ghosts, even that the residents were painted people that weren't actually alive, but creations, escaped from Aurum's golden spire. In truth, whether people were thieves, intruders or just unpleasant, it seemed those people could never find the open door, not even if you pointed it out. Most days, there would be little crowds of tourists or bored people, waiting for someone to come out of the walls like a modern ghost story. Only by accident had Ernest found the building on one of his walks, when he had asked why so many people were staring at an open door.

The builder, Mr. Kenneth, lived inside with the community, and had said the doorways were an accident. He was a leathery man, with skin wrinkled around his eyes and mouth as if he smiled too much and the marks were baked into him. Yet there was a serious way about him, never talking so much as listening. Still sometimes people said things that made him pull out his cigarette and laugh like the sound of newspaper tearing. He never left the building. If you asked him why, Ernest found out he would talk like a trapped hare, and burn through all his cigarettes, talking about all the money he owed to the city, how trapped he really was. And he was right. Everyone knew he was right.

When he got nervous, he would talk about enforcers coming and tearing the place down, how they waited outside for him, that the law called him a rogue "high-risk" artist. This was only partly true. The rare enforcer would try and collect money outside the building, likely hired by whichever black suit investor owned the block. But this was a lost cause. Enforcers, in Ernest's experience, hadn't been able to see him leave. Once, when someone had pointed him out, the enforcer had called them a liar, that they had seen Ernest coming from the next block over.

It was strange. But the reason everyone agreed the building would never be torn down was because it was a boon to local businesses, even just as something to gawk at. People would raise trouble if the building were to ever be scheduled, but it was a topic to be avoided if possible. Especially around Mr. Kenneth.

Kenneth sat with a few others by a cookfire in the broad hallway, outside Ernest's room. They all sat on little wood and fabric folding chairs. Wind blew through the small, arched windows on either side, blowing out all the smoke and letting in the light. Next to the fire was a small pine board, with little divots that made a six pointed star. A triangle of colored marbles filled each point, and each marble's hue dripped through into the shadows of the game.

"Ernest." Mr. Kenneth spoke looking down, but he quickly looked up with a wry smile, taking the cigarette out of his mouth. There was a range of enthusiastic good mornings to simple nods from around the fire. "Ernest you'll never guess." He motioned him closer, and coughed into his hand holding the cigarette. It was a mix between racking and laughter. Everyone else seemed to be smiling, though some

tiredly. “Maliko thought he could beat me at six points.” Ernest made his way closer and saw bacon and cherry tomatoes cooking in a huge cast iron pot. “So much so he bet everyone’s rent on it. He thought he could get me to stop smoking. *And* win a game of Six Points. Against me Ernest.” The cigarette was back in his mouth. “Well now he’s got to buy a week’s worth of cigarettes. And the best kind, too, Maliko. Top shelf stuff. With velvet boxes.” Maliko had his chin in his hand, staring at the board. He popped a raw cherry tomato into his mouth, not taking his eyes off the board. Ernest found himself lightly guided to a seat by a large man with a gray mustache to his right. Someone had put a chunk of warm flatbread in his hand.

Maliko was darker than Ernest, taller and thinner, too. He was stubble and a pensive look that wore a woven khaki-white jacket with a leather buckle over the waist. “I’m convinced there is a secret to how Kenneth plays.” He said. He picked up a green marble, moving it between long, trim fingers. “He pretends to think about where to move, but I think there’s a pattern. One only he knows. For now.”

Kenneth smirked, and his eyes seemed like crescent moons. “For now.” They both reset the pieces of the board to the sizzling of the cook fire, and the blowing of the wind. The music of the city sounded so distant. It was like the hallway was much higher than it seemed, even higher than Ernest’s own room, though there was never a step up or down.

“Ernest, are you going to eat?” The woman cooking asked. She wore a green shawl over layers of red and purple. In her right hand was a curved spoon that she

used to expertly move everything around. Her other hand was entrenched in the wavy copper hair of the young boy sitting next to her.

"Where…" Ernest found the room curiously looking at him. "Astrid, did you grow the meat?" He peered past her towards her room, as if he could see through her green curtain at all of her plants. The man with the gray mustache peered over as well, curious.

Astrid smiled. "I might be able to," she said. "But first I would need seeds."

"Bacon *doesn't* have seeds." The small boy piped up. "Aunt Astrid traded a bunch of vegetables at Terry's. Or really I did. *I* had to carry the basket the whole time." The boy was kicking his legs and looking at the fire, chewing while he talked.

"Never do anything for free." Kenneth said through one side of his mouth, still moving marbles on the board.

The large, silvery man swallowed a bite of flatbread. "Well Penry, did you make any money? Working so hard?"

"No." The boy shrugged and took a bite of meat.

"Ohhh that's a shame. Penry you can always make money. What's the going price for tomatoes?"

"I don't know." He said.

"You set the prices, Penry. You should have told them tomatoes just went up."

"Did they?" Penry asked.

The man with the silver mustache chuckled. "If you tell them, yes. You've got a good face Penry, they would've believed you."

“They’re always so busy at The Cupboard, don’t give him any ideas,” Astrid said. “If you haggled Penry, they might have shut the door.” Maliko made a sharp sigh, eyes on the six pointed board. Kenneth puffed smoke out of his nose, the echo of a laugh. Astrid continued. “Did you know none of the cooks could hear me? The kitchen below the restaurant, it's so loud. I had to repeat everything twice. I’m surprised they even heard me knock. I had to practically shake the door.”

“It seems bound they would lose some hearing.” The silvery man said. “They’re all next to that giant bell, and they have to hear it ring every morning. Two of them have to stand right next to it, just watch tomorrow. It's nonsense.”

“Aren’t we close to the bell, Cowan?” Penry asked.

“Not quite so much.” The silvery man said. “I think the windows do a bit to keep the noise out, open as they are. Like the rain.” Everyone looked at Kenneth, but he had his eyes on Maliko, smirking. He moved a clear marble on the board twice, then three times. Cowan pulled at his mustache, and then broke off a chunk of flatbread, stuffing it into his mouth. “Next time Penry, tell them tomatoes went up.”

Astrid set down the spoon. “If we have to walk any further, you’re carrying the basket. And tomorrow it’s your turn to cook.”

“I know, I know.” Cowan leaned over at Ernest, and gave a few furtive nods, as if to make sure Ernest agreed. He found the silvery man contagious, and couldn’t help but grin.

“You know Penry,” Maliko said, still looking at the board, “if you want to make money, I could teach you a thing or two about weaving. It’s not as hard as it looks.”

“You do it so fast though.” Penry said.

“There may not be anyone faster than me, Penry. But I can slow down. And it's not about the speed. There’s a pattern to it, Penry. Just like Six Points.”

“Are you going to weave today, Maliko?” Astrid asked.

“I might. I want to win at Six Points first.”

Kenneth laughed dryly and followed it with a short cough. “I’m sorry Astrid, he’s never weaving again.”

“I wish I was an artist.” Penry spoke, still looking at the cookfire, only one foot kicking.

“You say that every day.” Maliko said. “You might be. Who knows, I might be, too. I’m not sure.” He made a quick glance at his long, clean fingers, but for a moment they seemed to take up a large space in his mind, as if they spoke to him. Maliko’s hands did seem made for weaving.

“I think you are.” Penry said.

“Good thing the contractors are not like you, Penry. I might be weaving slogans onto shirts. All day, all night maybe. And if I didn’t, things would be taken away. Until all I could do was weave, until I am too tired to weave anything else, or help cook meals, or talk to my family.” Maliko’s words dripped with contempt. He

seemed not to notice what he said. Still, Kenneth managed a grunt of agreement, and quickly changed the subject. He cleared his throat.

"When Maliko gives up," Kenneth said, "maybe I could teach you a thing or two about Six Points. We could even make it a bet, since you're so savvy about money. But if I win, I get to cut that long hair of yours. It's time anyways."

"I'm not… *savvy*," Penry tested the word, "about money. Cowan is. And I want to keep my hair."

"Games are too boring without stakes Penry. What do you want? And don't say cigarettes." Sometimes Kenneth made himself laugh. On good days.

"I'd like…" Penry thought for a moment. There was a hesitant shyness as he chose his words. "I want to see what Ernest makes. Could I win one of his colors?" Penry didn't seem to know what he was asking.

"Oh honey…" Astrid said. Her thumb brushed one of his copper eyebrows. Even Kenneth seemed to raise an immovable, wrinkly eye, finally engaged to something other than the board. There was a small breadth of silence, and their eyes were on him.

"Penry," Ernest asked, "you really want one of my paints?". The boy was nodding.

"Ernest, Ernest you don't have to-" Astrid began, but Ernest was nodding, too, thinking.

"What color would you like?" Ernest dipped his head forward and looked upwards, meeting Penry's eyes.

“Is it true,” he asked, there was excitement in his voice, “that you make colors that nobody’s ever seen?”

“I don’t know if those exist. But I can make any color. Any color.” The whole room hung on his words. Cowan crossed his arms.

“Can you make… the color of the ocean?” He asked. “The kind you hear about. Not the coast.”

“I can make that.” Ernest said. He found a confidence in his voice he wasn’t aware he had. “I’ve made the sea a dozen times, so well you could see the waves move. But people never know what to ask for.”

“Can you make the sky?” Penry asked.

“I can make the sky. I can make the sky just before it rains, and it is so close, that it you can smell it approaching, and hear the distant thunder rolling. And I can make the sun. At any angle. Or the moon at any phase.”

“Can you make fire?” Penry asked. “If you do, is it dangerous?” It seemed like this was the question he was waiting to ask.

Ernest answered slowly. “I can make fire. And no, it’s still paint.” He didn’t mention that if he wanted, he could make a paint that would burn brighter and hotter than lightning. He could feel that in his bones. “What kind of fire?” He asked. “Or do you just want fire?”

“Could you make dragon’s fire, like Cowan talks about in his stories?” Penry asked.

Maliko looked at Cowan. “What does *that* look like?”

Cowan flushed. “It’s..” He moved his arms, shaping some ambiguous concept. “It’s purple.”

“It’s more than purple Ernest. It burns black in the middle, with magenta sparks. And it burns slower, like magma. Tell them, Cowan. About the constellations, too, like Scorpio and Orion, and your great grandfather. Ernest, can you make those?”

“I can.” He smiled at Penry. “And Magenta’s a good color.” He said looking at Cowan. Ernest put his hands on his knees. It was almost time to go. “I’ll bring back your dragon’s fire. And maybe I’ll sit in for one of these stories.”

“You should,” Penry said. “Cowan tells amazing stories.”

“They’re just bedtime stories.” Cowan said.

“No Cowan, they’re great. You should tell them out here, at night. You could tell the one about the four dragons, and we could leave the fire on after dinner.”

“I would listen to one of your stories.” Maliko said. Ernest stood up to leave, brushing off his shirt, though nothing was on it. He had forgotten to eat. Cowan was talking with Maliko and Penry now, all too busy to say goodbye. Astrid was looking at him like she had never seen him before.

“Thank you Ernest,” she said.

“Don’t thank him yet.” Kenneth was waiting for the game to continue. “Penry still has to win a game of Six Points. Maybe I won’t go easy.”

Ernest was walking down the pumice flight of stairs, the voices getting further away when he heard a chorus of goodbyes echo off the walls. “Come back soon

Ernest!" He heard Penry yell. "I will!" He yelled back softly. And he was off, out into the city Aurum.

Ernest was almost late to the 8:00 train. Hunger was not a stranger to him, but Aurum seemed to play on the things you wanted. The chunk of flatbread seemed like less and less, as painted billboards of cooking food hung between buildings. An amalgamation of sounds and smells and sights rushed over anyone who would explore Aurum during the morning, and Ernest took them all, especially the smells. All along the way, people had tried to pull his attention towards all of the foods and beautiful things they offered. One man had even rudely tugged at his sleeve, but Ernest only stopped for a woman holding out a cold chunk of seedless pomegranate. It had dripped with cool water and small flakes of ice, and the woman held it up in the light like a cluster of rubies. Money had appeared in Ernest's hands. Then he was quickly walking, wiping the juice on the fringes of his navy apron, still coiled under his arm.

People sat on the train, politely cloistered in their own minds and silent, reading or fidgeting or staring out windows at Aurum's gold-flecked concrete passing by. There were people Ernest recognized, people who always rode the 8:00 train. There was the man who always smelled like rosemary, and wore a velvet suit with too-large reading glasses, or the old woman with wispy hair and curious eyes, who never sat, even when there was room.

Then there was one woman who always sat in front of Ernest. In the same spot each morning, always leaning against the window. She always slept. Her sharp blazers and matching slacks, if you noticed, changed in a pattern. Each day of the week was a

different, moderate color that never diverged. A few times, she had woken up and looked around, and Ernest saw how her face betrayed lines of someone who never rested. But that was not why he recognized her each morning. It was because he could see her dreaming, outside her window as she slept on the train.

It was always the same dream, spread over the window like water over fabric, as if it were somehow leaking from the crown of her head. Each time, she was on another train, taking her some place far away. The landscape, only outside her window, was always forests. Sometimes they passed pine forests with clear skies, or cloudy shaded spruces, or jagged branching oak forests with white wildflowers. Sometimes it was the occasional expanse of far away mountains, slowly making their way in the distance.

Today, Ernest watched lines and lines of bamboo trees, unending and vast. They made their way towards him, and disappeared before they could ever reach his window. Ernest wasn't sure if it was an invasion, to watch someone else's dreams. He didn't know what he would do if someone told him to look away. But nobody ever had.

To Ernest, it was like listening to a bird, singing out to the world something so tightly wound, it was all they knew. Just the song and the distance. And though it seemed so animal, so primal, even accidental, it made Ernest see her so much differently, as if she were the only other person in their squeaking, punctual box of metal. He imagined she might be the only person who secretly knew how to breathe, that all the other swaying men and women only filled their minds with other's words

or the turbulent beauty of the city Aurum. Some had their eyes closed. But who could say if they were dreaming? If they were even asleep.

The wispy woman with curious eyes would also watch those dreams, enraptured in the same way as Ernest. It seemed so real, clearer somehow than the window. The scenery was wide, filling the entire rectangle, as if it might jump over and spill into Ernest's window. And maybe it would. There seemed to be something different today, about the woman's dream. The edges of black plastic that bordered her window seemed changed. In fact, the brim was not dark at all, but a smooth light brown. Like wood, or old bamboo.

The train stopped, and the tired woman woke up, taking it all back, looking around, feeling for something at the inside of her coat pocket. The weight of something small reassured her, and she leaned back a moment waiting for the doors to open so she could stand. The window borders were still changed. Ernest thought he could see grains and fine texture, and he almost reached out his hand. But the woman with curious eyes, and white wispy hair who never sat was watching him, the way she had watched that dream.

He stepped off the train, and onto a straight blue line, tinted into the sidewalk. It would lead him almost right where he was going, though never quite. The sidewalks were wide, full of evenly spaced trees, all kept thin and pruned so they would always look young. The gardeners, though sparse, were always around. They were meticulous in their work, cutting leaves, and sweeping, pulling weeds, or sometimes carefully examining a branch or flower, deciding if it belonged. And sometimes they coaxed the

growth of one small branch or twig that they had cut too much, waving around a small metal rod full of bones back and forth like a theremin.

This block in particular was so much quieter than anywhere else in Aurum, and Ernest appreciated quiet. But it also felt silent, as if to say that this part of Aurum was the least like anywhere else. There was never music, nor quite as many cars, so that even the turning wheels and texture of the ochre concrete was rarely described. But Ernest found he still had his footsteps, telling him the sound.

Soon he was at work, navy apron on, standing in front of his boss, who sat on a wooden stool in the large circular room, under the single circular window that let light down from the ceiling. Mickey wasn't a bad man. He insisted on going by his first name, and was never rude, or even unkind. In fact, for the most part he was very nice. But he had a way of smiling that didn't quite touch his eyes, and he had yellow teeth, which was only strange to Ernest because Mickey was a man to whom color was so important. Perhaps, Ernest imagined, the man never smiled at his own reflection.

"Ernest," he said, letting the name draw out. "Have you eaten breakfast yet? No, don't answer. Why don't you grab a snack. Or a drink, we have coffee. Or tea Ernest? Don't hesitate to tell me and I can stock whatever you like. Okay?"

"Oh, I'm not so hungry." Ernest said. "I think I could wait. At least until lunch."

"Well, go take some time anyways. There's some new food in there, see what you like. Go on. I want your mind clear, Ernest." And there was that smile.

According to his contract, Ernest was to be provided everything he needed. He was given housing, a transportation card, all the food he could want. If he wanted something, all he needed was to ask for it, and Mickey would probably say yes. But he was not paid, nor were most artists under a contract. Even then, for artists in demand, the money might be in an account, watched over by someone else.

Money belied independence, and possibly dangerous extracurriculars. You never knew with artists. Of course, artists could still have money, could even make money on their own time. But they needed a contract, some kind of ordained creative outlet. And contracts did not pay, not in money. Ernest, though he would never change who he was, was undoubtedly watched, though not closely. In his case, it was more true to say that Ernest was acknowledged or regarded, that he was never at the forefront of what might be considered "high risk" artists. Ernest, in the eyes of many, especially Mickey, could do no wrong. He was polite, followed all the rules, and had never gotten into trouble. He was never late, never took days off, and was a man of few words and fewer acquaintances. He was a model citizen, and an excellent artist. And for all Mickey knew, Ernest lived much closer, alone in an apartment with wood floors, and a kitchen, and an enormous bed. And Ernest had no way of making money.

The break room was a large, and all open, where Mickey could see it all. Usually he had his back turned, facing the double doors of the entrance, waiting for others to come in. But what little privacy his back offered to those eating could be easily taken away. Leslie, a fellow artist, who like Ernest didn't need the use of bones, was there in the break room, eating an apple. She was short with blond hair, and a

little younger than him. “Hey Ernest,” was all she said. Ernest gave a small hello back, looking at all the food. Once they had spoken more, especially when she first started her contract with Mickey. Small talk with her seemed easy, and they had a similar sense of humor. Eventually, she told him about the simple mosaics she made with paint that could be poured over the ground to look like tile. Ernest found himself fascinated.

Mickey had heard this, and like a mother Hen, kept them as much apart as possible. Everyone had unique art styles, he had said, but that meant they could *not* talk about their art, at risk of the two styles merging or changing. “If everyone talked about their art, it might all start to look the same. And we couldn’t have that,” he had said. He emphasized then, for a good half hour, halting everyone’s work, that the morning was a time to turn inward, to focus, and he made sure they could understand. For a year he had them on opposite sides of the room, and never turned his back if they were both eating. Years later, and they had the courtesy now, to eat without someone watching. And if Ernest looked past his station and one over, he could see Leslie working, and she could see him. But they found a quietness between them, and that humor never came back so easily. Not with Mickey listening.

Ernest really wasn’t hungry. There were blueberry muffins, and bananas, not quite ripe yet, along with oranges, apples and croissants, all sorts of food. But the muffins, beautiful though they were, all had clear packaging, and even the oranges looked cheap, like they might be a nuisance to peel. Ernest decided to get a cup of cold

tea, not ice cold, but still cool enough to drink. The two stared at opposite walls, at Mickey's back and at their hands, until Ernest walked back to his seat.

Mickey never left his stool all day, except to walk around and ask how people were doing, checking on their work. The work stations, like the room, were all in a circle, evenly spaced except to not be in the way of the break room, or the bathrooms next to it. Though Ernest faced Mickey, black painted wooden walls sectioned him off on three sides, separating him from all but his work.

Ernest was free to create whatever he wanted first thing in the morning. What he made may or may not be sold, but he was free to create without prompts. Mickey always emphasized how important it was that people create what they want. Ernest pulled a lever for black paint, filling up a glass jar. It would be dark paint, dark like the night sky, darker even. He added clean crushed charcoal, carefully dusting it in. It was already much darker than the walls. Then he added a kind of black oily paste, and the tincture jar became darker, much darker than the surrounding walls. Those looked gray in comparison.

Only when Ernest was sure that he could make it no darker did he add small flakes of glittering silver Mica, from a drawer to his right. On top of the paint, in a small pile, it looked only like glitter, a sharp contrast to the black paint. But as he stirred, the pieces became more spaced apart, and more and more, they began to look like stars. Ernest had a small flashlight in his hand now, moving it at various angles around the jar, and when a silver piece caught the light, it never left, shimmering indefinitely. Now it did look like stars, like the night sky, but Ernest was not done yet.

His midnight needed constellations. He moved a short stick inside the jar, as if he were pushing around sand. Slowly there were constellations. There was The Big Dipper, and the North Star, and Betelgeuse, and Orion's belt, and Scorpio's tail, and The Twins, and constellations he made up. A bat, a spiral shell, a round man with a twinkling eye, a whale, a pack of dogs. They all formed, slowly and surely, and you could see them, see the lines if you looked closely. But you could still mistake it for the simple night sky, not that Penry would. The images formed, and once they had, brimming at the jar, they could not be pushed by that small stick, no matter how he stirred. And that's when it was done.

Ernest pulled a white label sticker, and named that container "Story of the Expanses" with a few pen strokes. And then carefully, softly, he poured some into an empty tincture bottle the dimensions of his finger. The constellations drifted in and played at the sides, slowly moving. Then he shoved the vial into his apron pocket, and put the closed jar on a stand that went down, down into the floor, where it would no doubt be sorted, or inspected and sold. The stand came up empty and he could start again.

He started over with black paint, trying to make dragon fire. He added dry pigments stirred into paste, and pushed them in at the sides, magenta and violet, shades of purple, and he made them undulate like his father's fir trees, told them to spin and curl but not to touch the middle. Soon at every angle, as he stirred, on all sides of the jar it was dragon's fire, just like Penry had described, slow burning like magma. Ernest could feel heat coming from the jar, and flames and sparks licked over

at the top. But it was only warm, gentle and soft like a story. He labeled the jar "Dragon's Fire," and quickly filled a small tincture, putting it into his pocket, and let the rest be lowered to the ground.

Ernest could hear the sounds of the others working. Levers being pulled, pieces moving, stirring, clinking glass rims, humming, shifting chairs, feet and fingers tapping. Ernest pressed a button to say he was ready. A commissioned paint, on a small slip printed out of a slot, and it displayed the words "Industrial Blue." This was a color made for hardiness, for tools, and trash cans, machinery and cheap floors. It was one of his least favorites to make, because its appeal was simply that it was strong, consistent, and never chipped. The color was a circumstance, that if boredom was forced to choose a color, it would likely choose the color blue.

Ernest filled a bucket with blue, adding red and yellow to make it more dull, until it matched a card in one of his drawers for what Industrial Blue looked like. Then he stirred, with two hands, putting his own strength in it, until the paint seemed to fight back. It was finished when it was thick and strong, like smooth diluted clay, substantial enough to be made into bricks.

The next prompts were better. There was a prompt for "River" and one for "Autumn Leaves," and then another for "Industrial Blue." Then there was "Mountain Stone," "April Twilight," and "Cautionary Yellow," a garish neon mixed with green for road signs. That one came twice, in double bucket orders. There was a familiar mindset for those colors he disliked, as if he were visiting an old, quiet part of himself that never spoke, never thought. But Ernest still knew they were good colors, that in

truth, there was no such thing as a bad color. The hues all had purpose, regardless of whether he liked them.

Ernest's day went on. Mixing paint. He was good at his work. Leaf commissions looked like green growths oscillating, and technical green, which was plain and dark, would be an excellent insulator whenever it dried. Ernest wondered where the paints he loved went, or who was painting with them. He imagined children like Penry, or adults in the quiet of their own homes opening those colors, and seeing all the detail, all the thought and wonder he put in. That even if these jars he made were for a small part of some landscape, or backdrop, or even a shelf, that those details would not hide, would not ask for room, or a place to belong.

The day went by, as each day did. Despite all the beauty he made, what stuck in his mind were the industrial blues, and the technical greens, and cautionary yellows. He could see them on the stir sticks, even when he was eating his meals. For how much Mickey talked of creating what you loved there was as much, if not more, of creating what you did not. But Ernest could not see himself doing anything else. He loved the colors, even the dull ones, even if all there was to love was that they were his.

Ernest kept his eyes on the ground's blue line, too tired to think. It was dark outside, with only evenly spaced street lamps that flickered brightly in the street. Ernest wondered dully if he had painted those flames. The gardeners were blowing soft rushes of leaves down the street. Then he was by the train stop, and he was climbing in, getting into his seat. The dreaming woman was never there, never on the

way home. He wondered what her job was like, if she found it as dull as mixing paints. Maybe she lived for her job. But how could someone like that dream of going far away? He could still see the wooden rim of the window, transmuted by her sleep. He felt like he could sleep, too. He closed his eyes, listening to the squeaking sounds of the train, of humming friction on rails, and a quiet conversation on the train, too far to hear the words. He felt a warmth in his apron, and dug out the two vials of paint. He had almost forgotten about those. Ernest took off his apron, too balling it up in one hand. He wouldn't have to imagine how children looked at his paint.

Ernest was walking, almost home when he heard the fireworks of The Spire. They went off each night, but artistry made them more dazzling and less obtrusive to those sleeping, as if the smoke and noise were sent much further away. Ernest always wondered who made those, up inside The Spire. He wondered if the artist who made them spoke to his father, if they knew each other. With each firework clap came cheers and gasps from those on top of buildings, and on the complex walkways between. The music of Aurum was a little bit louder with each burst of tinted light. Ernest walked by a restaurant, and could see a man making quick patterned steps while he played a violin in the warm light. His forehead was sweating, face scrunched while he held the instrument. His fingers flurried across the strings, playing a cheery tune of soaring highs and quick beating notes after. Ernest found himself nodding his head as the whole restaurant clapped, fading away behind him.

There were shops selling candles, and lamps with flames or bulbs or glowing stones. He could smell cooking fat, pepper and garlic, and hear men and women

drinking, laughing at good stories, remembering old jokes. Ernest felt some of the tiredness slip away, reminded that this was not the sterile district of workplaces a train ride away, that there were people who could not tolerate a dead world, would not sit in silence, working inside walls, or living behind them.

There were only two people waiting outside the pumice door, no group or small crowd tonight. They both waited with drinks in their hands. As Ernest walked through, he heard one of them say, “See? They look just like everyone else. Did you see that?”

Ernest ignored the conversation and made his way up. It was dark indoors at night, but he saw Cowan was coming down. “Ernest,” he said. “Penry’s been talking about you all day. I’m going out to the night markets. Is there anything you want? I’ll get it for cheap.” Cowan had a gray cloth sack slung over his shoulder.

“I… Cowan what’s in there?”

“A bit of everything.” He took it off, grunting at the weight. “Here.” He opened it up, and Ernest found himself struggling to see in the dark pumice stairway. It all looked like junk. He could make out a small white glowing stone, then silverware, dice, magnets, a hat, a corked bottle full of liquid, and a stuffed toy made to look like a lizard. He heard a tapping, too, like something was rhythmically moving inside the bag.

“You can buy food with that?”

“Nobody believes me.” Cowan made a mock sigh. “But I started trading with just a pewter mug. Besides, not everything’s in the bag.” Cowan shook his baggy

pants, and there was a jingling near his boot. “Anyways, I’m headed off. Is there anything you want?”

Ernest wasn’t sure why he was so hesitant to take the offer, but he decided to ask. “Could you bring back some fresh fruit? Like berries?”

“That’s too easy, Ernest,” he said. “It’ll be the first thing done.” Then he squeezed past Ernest. Cowan was a big man, and his baggy clothes made him even larger. “See you in the morning!” was all he said, as he disappeared down the stairs.

Soon Ernest was in the long hallway, with the arched windows, and cool wind blowing through. Kenneth was there, swinging slightly in a hammock hung by pumice hooks from the ceiling. Hooks, he was sure, had not been there that morning. Maliko sat by a window on the opposite wall, weaving in a small wooden frame full of taught strings. It was dim in the hallway, except for the fire, only cinders now. As the air circulated around, tones of black and orange moved across it.

“Hey Ernest” came from Maliko reclining while he worked. His fingers moved quickly despite the low light. One hand slowly pulled, while the other was like a spider, manipulating each piece of the weave. It was small and unfinished, but Ernest thought he saw the spine of a fish in Maliko’s work.

“What are you guys doing out here?” he asked. There was a deep breath from Kenneth, and an ember dot showed signs of life inside the hammock.

“Cowan told one of his stories.” Maliko said. “They’re not bad. Pretty good actually, I can see why Penry likes them. Cowan talked about the constellations.” Kenneth grunted in agreement, staring out at the night sky. “Penry waited for you,”

Maliko said. “He couldn’t stay awake after the story.” There was a pause. “Kenneth lost at Six Points, too.”

The hammock was moving, coughing and muttering. Then sounds of bare feet touching the pumice floor. “Astrid.” The hammock croaked, then cleared its throat. “Astrid. Astrid!”

A woman poked her head from behind a green curtain, hair in every direction. Her voice was a whisper that might have verged on yelling. “What!?” She kept her eyes on that hammock like she might step out and cut it down. “Kenneth-” she began, and then she looked around. “Oh, Ernest is back. Should I wake up Penry?” She was looking at him.

Ernest felt the warm vial in his back pocket and drew it out. The cork came out with a gentle sound. There were gasps, as beautiful magenta flames, black in the middle, reached over the top, creating sparks that rose and faded in corkscrew patterns. Astrid was back behind the curtain, and in a minute came back with bleary eyed Penry. His hair was still long, but much shorter now. Chairs came back and so did a few sticks onto the cookfire. They watched Penry uncork the vial, and run his fingers through the warm purple flames in awe. Laughter rang out among the arched windows.

After a while Ernest brought out the second vial. There was almost silence, except for a whispered “wow” from Penry. Then Kenneth held out his hands, the first to inspect it. A moment later, and he laughed his newspaper laugh, holding it up to the

sky. The small vial seemed to have depth, like it had fermented in his pocket, and it, too had become a window.

"It's like the stars far away from the city, Ernest." Silence remained as Kenneth watched. He didn't speak, nor did anyone else. Only Penry still glanced at his own vial. "Thank you," was all he said. The vial went from person to person, and Ernest realized he wasn't sure who the vial was really for now. It was for Penry, Kenneth seemed adamant, on the condition Penry spare some of the paint if they ever had something good to use it on.

Ernest answered questions about his art, long into the night. He talked about all the paints he made, how there were paints he made of autumn leaves and rivers, how there was a woman he knew who could put mosaics in a bottle, ready to be spilled on the ground. It was his own story to tell, and his audience was enthralled. Through all of his descriptions, in the history of paints he meant to explain, not once did industrial blue cross his mind.

It was late when Ernest was back in his room. The Spire, after the fireworks each night, brought out all of its artists to stand on the balcony and wave. It was a decision from the Brine family to prove there was human life in The Spire, not just artistry and magic. But it was also a message that anyone could be invited to come and join The Spire, to study and create, writing their names to the world. Ernest had tried, down in the crowds before, to get his father to see him, sure he could see his father, the older version he was now. There he had waved frantically, never sure if his father could see him. He had missed that event tonight, the artists on the balcony top of the

spire, saying goodnight. Now it was late enough that The Spire sent out its painted sky for the night, that would change each hour. Advertisements ran during the late night and early morning hours. It was a better form of self-sufficiency, the Brine Family argued, so as to no longer restrict the tower in any sense. Advertisement, they said, was not only a valid form of art, but one that offered financial freedom to The Spire.

And so a soda can was up in the sky, painted in his father's style. It was even signed by him. Brady Holloway, it read at its corner. It made Ernest chafe in a way, to see it with his name, too. The whole painting was red. That was its only color, simple and intense, saturated like the drink. Never in all of the time he had known his Father had he ever painted an advertisement. Paintings of his were in Aurum's museum, beautiful works they had not yet taken down in twelve years since the day they went up. And he still made paintings It made Ernest wonder if there were times in The Spire, behind those beautiful twisting walls, where the artists, maybe to meet some rising cost, were made to create their own industrial blues. Or soda can reds. As Ernest tried to sleep, there came a thought, slowly melting into a dream. It was of his father concentrating at their old house, digging for a new brush, and throwing old paintbrush behind him, onto the floor. Then, rising from it like smoke, leaving that good house, the dried red on that brush coalesced on its own, into the glowing red can, painted in the sky.

CHAPTER 4: THE BLUE GREEN METAL

Labcoats, in truth, should only weigh about two hundred and forty five grams, which is relatively little. Only, Dr. Medley's seemed to be weighing him down. Around him, assistants and scholars bustled and tutted around the laboratory, all followed by one or two members of the Ethics Committee. The result was a much more crowded facility, and whether or not you were careful, you were likely to brush up against someone, or feel someone impatiently guide you out of their way. A man's brain had been left semi-conscious for three months while it was disconnected from the body. Now every white lab coat was being grilled about their process, their documentation, and their ignorance of bureaucracy, which surely was the cause of their mistake. To have the Ethics Committee brought down as a result of carelessness seemed to make their presence all the more thorough, as if everyone were being pushed down and ground into something more fine.

Dr. Medley, to his credit, was generally left alone. The ethics committee saw him as the last beating pulse of competence, and so left him to general oversight. Only for the time being did they need Jason, his second pair of arms and eyes, to review documents. The files were about as organized as a recycling bin, no matter how much the two of them tried. The filing room always seemed to be in perpetual chaos. Medley felt hot frustration between his own shoulder blades at the thought of having to sift through it all. He would have to make an excuse to go grab Jason, to pull him away from the files. But that was not Dr. Medley's job, not at the moment. In fact, even oversight, he imagined, hoped, would no longer be a significant part of his work. The entire facility had been bought by a new investor. A singular, new investor.

Already there were promises that money would go to the right places. Organization, down to the marrow of the walls, would be the new creed of the environment. Medley only hoped it would be permanent. At the moment, Medley's job was persuasion. He would have to convince the new investor which experiments were worth keeping. No doubt many would be scrapped.

Dr. Louis Brine stood next to Dr. Medley in the white room. He was a sharp man in every meaning of the word, with a fine black suit, perfectly clean and smooth. Dr. Medley noticed that during silences around the man, he had a habit of smiling with his beautiful teeth, colored like the plain walls around. From those ideas, Dr. Brine might seem like an empty man decorated, but his eyes, a stark blue, held a kind of wariness, or discretion, as if objects held small, invisible summaries. False sunlight came down from the corner near the ceiling. Next to them, the glass wall blocked the only negative space in the room where one might be able to comfortably stand alone. It was room set aside for the grafting machine; an area kept completely sterile at all times where people, conscious people, did not belong. The metal arms of the machine were neatly folded in upon itself, ready to be activated at a button's press. Dr. Brine seemed fascinated by the machine.

"It's more complex than anything I'm used to seeing. I'm amazed that you were able to instill such precision into this grafting machine's… manipulation. I'm even more impressed that you've built it without the help of artists."

"There is a greater margin of error with artistry involved." said Dr. Medley. "In many ways it can be unpredictable. So far we've relied on the encregraphs for any

data, which has been… stable, in one sense. Data had been omitted, but not misrepresented. We also had the blades of the machine artist made, but that's the extent."

"And you had that done for…?" Dr. Brine asked.

"Durability. And sharpness," Dr. Medley replied. "Our commissioned sculptor made them molecule-straight."

Dr. Brine nodded. "But explain again, how does the machine work?" A woman had to squeeze her way past him as he spoke. There was a passive glance from those blue eyes.

"It uses," Dr. Medley paused, "computation. So far we have been able to carefully graph the proportions of the human body into the center of the grafting machine. These differ from subject to subject, and need to be changed each time the machine is used." Dr. Brine was silent. "Of course, the goal of the machine is to sedate and disconnect the brain organ, to put the entire anatomy in a stasis, a disconnection. Through this machine we are free to operate and study with much greater time than surgery would allow. We can be more thorough. Subjects' bodies may be stored for great lengths of time unharmed and, in theory, their minds may be stored safely as well. By complete and utter separation, when it is successful, we will be able to diagnose problems independently, piece from piece. Until then, the machine is only adept at recycling. The pancreas, for example, was grafted into 200 volunteers, all of whom we are still monitoring, but have shown no complications."

“I think I understand.” Dr. Brine said. He thought for a moment. “Dr. Medley can you imagine artistry working in tandem with your machine? For example, you spoke about eliminating margin of error. But what if that became the function of artistry in your machine? To detect errors such as a conscious mind being stored?”

“Brine-”

“Dr. Brine.” he corrected.

“Dr. Brine,” Medley said. “I’m afraid that’s exactly what we depended on the encregraphs for. The display papers for the previous subject attuned, out of mistaken initiative, to more simplified analytics and a focus on brain chemistry rather than activity.” Dr. Medley’s permanent hunch deepened. ”I’m not saying it couldn’t be co opted to include more artistry for the sake of efficiency, nor am I saying that it never will be. But for now, it is imperative that the machine be an *objective* piece. There are too many questions surrounding art, things I don’t understand that might change the entire equation. I don’t believe artistry to be simpler automation under another name.” Dr. Brine only listened, so he continued. “The encregraphs *are* largely objective. But I am afraid of introducing something to the machine that I do not fully understand. Our mistake in leaving the conscious mind, though it appears an omission was, in truth, an introduction, an intercession by artistry. The bulk of the machine works fine without it, in fact It could work entirely without any artistry. That was the function of its design: separation. So until we are finished with experimentation, and are no longer fumbling around with the psyches of our subjects I don’t want anything to change.” He took a deep breath. “I have been spread far too thin for far too long, and the last

thing I want is more automation or little tweaks to my work. Not during the process. Tell me you understand that."

"Medley," Brine's lips briefly pressed together, "I'm only curious. I'm not going to throw away any of your advice, quite the opposite. You are an asset to me now, and I'm not going to pave over everything you can offer, or turn your lab into an interest for The Spire." Brine. *Brine.* Medley recognized the name now. Dr. Louis Brine of The Spire. "I want you to have more control over your own projects." He said. "I think it's clear that you're thriving under your own discretion. No other scientist working for me has created anything close to something like the grafting machine. It's more sophisticated than anything I've seen. And I see a lot." He met Medley's own, darker eyes. "But I will say that artistry *can* be predictable. More so than you think. It has a… core, and we are finding it. A *pre*dictability," he swallowed," and I do not doubt that it will have its own place in science, in everything. It will be its own separate frontier. Look at how encregraphs are so widely used now, and I understand," he said, "they may not belong everywhere. But I don't believe, can't believe, that artistry has no place in the scientific world." Dr. Louis Brine cleared his throat and continued.

"I believe we are getting closer to something, Dr. Medley, to things," he looked around, "I can't say in this room. I only want to know if that piques your interest, because Dr. Medley I think you are a capable man. I've heard already that there are a couple rooms dedicated to experiments with artistry at parts of the facility. I won't force you to continue with those. Not unless you want Dr. Medley. But if you

do," he drew out his words, "if you do then let me know." There was something in those blue eyes. Something between understanding, judgment, pleading, inspiration and dangerous hunger. It was the hunger Dr. Medley recognized, as if it were his own name being spoken. A hunger for secrets. Perhaps not like his own, not the curiosity that would pick the world apart and put it back together stronger, more efficient. But it was close to that, it was so close. There was a knowing in those eyes, and they did not hold Dr. Medley, not physically. They were off looking around the room, while Dr. Brine had his hands in his pockets, perhaps willing to change the subject at any moment. But those eyes did hold him, in a sense.

"Not with the grafting machine," Dr. Medley said protectively, "but yes. In fact, if you are as knowledgeable as you say, there's something I'd like you to see."

The two doctors stood in an entirely different room, without any false windows or tall ceilings. In truth, labs are mostly the same, all stark whites and blacks, and hues of gray. Perhaps that large room, that one windowed space was not meant for a grafting machine, not originally. In general, labs are rooms of purpose, not decoration, and this one was no exception. It was a plain laboratory of white walls, gray cabinets, black counters and floors, monochrome and equipped for chemical experiments. It had a fume hood, clean burning bunsen burners, waste containers, wrapped pipettes and the occasional dull piece of measuring equipment that dared to be tinted beige. No doubt, in all of the drawers would be acids, bases, salts and metals, all neatly labeled and out of sight. But there was a kind of buzzing in the room. A real buzzing, not coming from the lights. And there was a tapping at glass, loud and unrelentless. Which

came from the creatures behind it, slamming their bodies over and over against the surface. They were, writhing, beautiful, dangerous looking creatures, all somehow both plump and lithe and iridescent, the color of a shining, blue-green metal. It was their wings that made that deep humming behind the glass. They were all in unison, furious and pulsing, crawling over their blue green nest that hung down from the middle of their cage, and they roiled over every inch behind the glass. They were looking for a way out.

Dr. Medley looked over at Louis Brine. The man was watching those creatures that, in their number, crowded the 20 gallon glass box. Dr. Medley waited, waited to hear what the dark suited white toothed man might say. He held his fingers to his chin, face composed as in a mirror, watching himself. Brine, decidedly, would not make that first move on the chess board, would not even ask a question. Medley assumed it was pride, that he would not be the first to speak. In that way, Dr. Brine did make the first move. He had made his own thoughts invisible. Instead, Dr. Medley spoke, watching the source of that venomous noise.

"About two months ago we discovered a similar nest. Outside our facility, very close to the back entrance where we transfer most of our waste. Our workers were the first to see the creatures. They noted that the wasps were passive, even docile." While he spoke the creatures pulsed in their enclosure. They were strikingly beautiful in their metallic blues and greens. "Of course," he continued, "there was discourse around what the species of the wasp was. Their appearance, despite their size, is very similar to that of the parasitic jewel wasp. A beautiful, vicious creature, in nature. Parasitic,

but not to humans. They embed their eggs to hatch in or on their host while it is still alive. Anyhow, curiosity made its way from the workers to the interns over the idea that it might be an undiscovered species." Dr. Brine only watched. He had not yet taken his eyes away from the creatures behind the glass.

"Two interns went to go and collect just one. The nest turned extremely hostile, severely injuring one of our interns. Only *one* of our interns," Dr. Medley emphasized. "The one who had not taken off his lab coat." Dr. Medley turned his gray head slightly, to peer at Dr. Brine. The man was in thought, but he nodded, listening. "We had the waste bay evacuated and closed, and had the intern brought into our medical department. You could say he was fortunate in a way to be at our facility. He might have died in a hospital. His symptoms were deceptively typical, and yet… slightly unusual. Pain, itching, delirium. And Formication. Which we assumed was shock at being suddenly attacked by this hive, that he still felt insects crawling on him. We had to restrain him, the poor boy. I suppose he was not a boy. A young man. Who won't quite ever fully recover." Dr. Medley felt something prickle at his insides, an anger at those creatures behind the glass. It was his own itching, his own formication, piling at his insides. The man next to him did not appear to care. Dr. Medley felt his own voice grow colder. "I'll spare you the details Dr. Brine, but the damage, permanent damage, to his organs, his vessels, his brain, was caused by mercury. Not salt or organic compounds, we think. But pure elemental mercury." There was only the noise of the hive, shimmering and beating, only a barrier away.

“Incredible” came as a whisper from Dr. Brine. Those blue eyes held an excitement, and as Dr. Medley observed, an incredible lack of remorse, or sense of the true danger behind that glass. It made him think back to the child of some couple. Some couple he had briefly sat with at an awards banquet. They had a chubby, spoiled child. The parents had bought him a venomous snake, and hired an expert to take care of it for him. The boy had described to Dr. Medley in detail, while the parents listened, how he was allowed to hold the tongs, to deliver that live mouse to the serpent. He described the venom of the snake, how it was just as he had read, how it coagulated the blood of that mouse, paralyzing it, making it easier to digest. The parents, with practiced “distaste” for the gruesome creature they kept in their home, had said how impressed they were with their son, that their boy was interested in creating antivenoms and the medical potentials, how *he* had asked to come to the award ceremony with *them*. And during that banquet, as the awards and speeches were dolled out, he found his eyes drifting to that piggish little boy, sitting politely, that piggish boy who likely imagined himself on that stage. And Dr. Medley, during it all, could only think of Paracelsus, the philosopher, the alchemist, the father of toxicology who was so far behind them now. “What is there that is not poison?” His ghost spoke in his mind. “All things are poison and nothing is without poison. Solely the dose determines that a thing is not a poison.”

And it returned to him now, looking at Dr. Brine, with those curious, smirking eyes, who was not piggish at all, quite lean, undeniably photogenic. And more

handsome than Dr. Medley had ever been. He was almost perfect. “Then they are metallic constructs?” Dr. Brine asked.

“Yes.” Said Dr. Medley. “And normally I would agree that they are constructs but these… constructs are able to reproduce, to multiply in their own fashion.”

“They don’t appear to be mercury.” Brine said. “Mercury would be liquid, I think.” He had his hands in his pockets.

“They do not have any mercury inside them.” Dr. Medley admitted. “When we dissected them they lacked any organs. They are hollow. Only, their metal, which is entirely homogeneous, is thickest near their stingers. What’s more, the metal is nothing like we’ve seen before. By density it appears to be close to copper. For a while we theorized that it might actually be copper or a crystalline of copper, given its color.”

“Copper is orange.” Said Dr. Brine, simply. Medley decided then, unofficially, that Brine was not a doctor.

“Copper is orange.” He sighed, “But it is blue in most solutions. Green when it naturally oxidizes. Under spectrometry copper absorbs blue-green wavelengths. Copper metal reflects back its orange color because that is the light it does not take in. Only, this metal seems like copper turned inside out. Under spectrometry, it is the exact opposite of the metal, reflecting what copper ordinarily uptakes. It cannot be copper, though. This metal is completely inert, unreactive to chemicals, electroplating, even conduction. The metal, strangely, is insulative, almost warm to the touch.” Dr. Medley seemed lost in his own thoughts for the moment.

“Do you have this metal?” Brine asked.

Dr. Medley opened a drawer. A small bowl shaped piece of the metal was there, inside of a glass jar. The piece was small enough to fit in your hand. Brine held it in his palm. It almost did feel warm. But not alive. He held it out in front of the glass, and the metallic insects writhed around it in little patterns, trying desperately to touch the metal.

“Don’t do that.” Dr. Medley said.

“Why?” he asked, not quite like a child, but neutrally. Perhaps like a very intelligent child. He watched, but drew away his blue-green magnet.

“Because they are an intelligent species.” Dr. Medley said back. “They are not like constructs Brine.”

“Dr. Brine.” He corrected. Medley ignored him.

“They appear to have emotion, acumen. Recognition. They do not think as individuals, do not observe as individuals.” As if primed by Medley’s words, they were thicker on one side of their prison. On the side towards Louis Brine.

“So it appears.” He said, putting the metal back inside of the container.

“They ate the metal screws out of their cage.” Dr. Medley emphasized. “And then tried to push their own juveniles through. They almost succeeded. Their cage is entirely glass now.”

There was a moment of silence before Dr. Brine spoke. “Purpose,” he said “can masquerade as intelligence. Inanimate things, even processes can appear to devise methods through their own self-selection, beyond any ‘governing’ body so to

speak. However artists, as we know, cannot create life, only a form of automation, though I can tell you disagree. These wasps," he continued, "are only echoes of life. They are the continuation and self-preservation you would observe in a virus. This was a targeted attack on your lab by an artist, a particularly talented one, if dangerous. We have actually been looking for him, at The Spire. Did you capture all of these constructs?" he asked, more lucid, more focused perhaps.

"No. Some flew-"

"As intended." Brine interrupted. "Some escaped. You see, there are similar arguments about the bones of artists, whether or not they are still alive. As you know, they can be used to draw out artistry, but it is never a complete agency by whoever is wielding the bones. Bones can have their own personality, their own touch." he waited, smiling again at Dr. Medley, "Their own unpredictability. There is a philosophy I hold about art, about the bones we study and use at the spire. Art is an organization, an institution, a molding from the artist. To create art, one must impose. Some would disagree with me, believe that I am a threat to their art, to them. That you, your facility, that we are a threat to the way they see art. To the way art exists. Do you understand that Dr. Medley?" He waited. There was tapping at the glass.

"No."

"A simple answer. I was worried you might say something else. But I will demonstrate. Safely. Is the cage secure?"

"Yes. Very." Dr. Medley was cautious, but he wanted to see what would happen next. Finally, Dr. Brine was offering something.

"Is it possible," he asked, "to remove from the cage just *one* wasp?"

Soon there was a singular green-blue wasp, wriggling between tightly held forceps.

"Art," he said again, "is the institution of order. To create art, one must impose. That is what art must be, and that is why it is not so different from technology, why the two will not always be separate. Take for example the poets of old, who adhered strictly to form. They understood art. It is an organization, a beautiful one. AB AB, CD CD, that is a pattern. But what will it say? How will the pattern of rhyme impose meaning? Understanding?" He held the creature to the Bunsen burner in the fume hood, heating it. The sound of hail came from the glass on the other side of the room. Dr. Medley watched it, but Brine continued to speak.

"We are creatures of pattern, bound to recognize it. We take pleasure in recognizing it. But some take pleasure in deformation. That to them is art, the breaking of the rules. It shows that we live in a time of chaos, that there are so few rules left to break. Just look at Aurum, completely chaotic. People dress up paint to taste and feel like food. You can starve on a banquet, or eat a thousand forms of barely sufficient nutrient paste, made exactly the way you prefer. Bridges run from building to building in hazardous formations, some even near power lines, where people have died of electrocution. Those kinds of bridges have to be completely removed, along with people who would live on top of buildings in tents, pissing on the roofs. There is even a building in Aurum" he laughed, "that only randomly allows entrance, that chooses by chance, complete chance, who it is that may enter. And tourists love it. The city

refuses to let it be torn down. That is chaos Medley." The thorax dripped into a ceramic dish, but the wasps legs were still kicking, thrashing, wings beating around in vain. It was still alive.

"That is why nothing is the same Medley, because value in identity has been skewed. People are afraid that by destroying that building, there may never be another like it. People don't *love* the building. They only fear that it might be gone, that another building may take its place, one that serves a purpose. See, there is fear in conformity, about what it means now. There is nothing left in conformity, not anymore. It means nothing. That is why people are so desperate for something to hold onto, so desperate for purpose in this time where "artistry" has sprung out and put its roots into our world. Did people think there would be no consequences for something so wonderful as artistry? The consequence is that we are lost. So, so lost in this new world that has swallowed us. And what have we found that we can grasp onto? Uniqueness. That is all we have left. We have made quantity out of quality, in our own little ways. Who is to say what is *not* art now. Art is everything. Art is a mug, art is a chair. Art is a piece of trash sitting on the ground, a color, a banana peel, a pile of dirt. All it needs is to be somehow novel, somehow different. It is the uniformity of meaninglessness. A desert. Art has become its own antithesis in these ways. It can no longer speak. We have forgotten that art *is* purpose. It is the medium by which we convey our own purpose." The delicate varicose wings dripped into the ceramic dish. There was a storm in the room, beating on the glass. The room seemed to vibrate. The

glass cage of the jeweled wasps could not bear to hear his words. Dr. Medley tried harder to listen, to breathe. His heart was beating.

"We have lost our own language as well Dr. Medley. That is also a symptom. Thought cannot travel so well through the air. There is interference. The Greeks for example," and there was another drop as he spoke. "Had eight different words for love, perhaps that is something you already know. They must have thought a great deal about love. And we have one word. Our singular word for their eight. And I think we now hate each other. More than we ever have. Not many believe in love anymore Dr. Medley. Isolation is a word for love. Love is something you say to a stranger. Maybe to make them do something you want. Love is a word sold one day out of the year. Love is obedience, love is forgiveness when you should not forget and yet the two are so intertwined so as to be simultaneous or not at all. That is the modern gospel of art, Dr. Medley." He chuckled. "And that is a name now. Who knows what Medley used to mean." There was a chorus of rain somewhere deep in the laboratory. Not in some false window, and it was a torrent, the sound of water crying out that it would tear down your walls, tear down your walls, tear down your walls.

The ceramic bowl was full of blue-green liquid. Brine did something with his fingers, on the black stone counter. He drew a circle. And in the stone, as if commanded, was something deep and thin, thinner than his fingers, deeper than the pressure. It was the indentation of a circle.

"You're an artist." Dr. Medley almost whispered, shocked.

“In a sense, yes.” Brine smiled at him. “I was not born with the gift. My blood and bones are as mundane as yours. But there are ways to draw it out. Without bones. Ways we have kept in the spire. But I could tell you someday. Show you If you keep quiet.” He looked back to the metal.

“I will explain it simply though, Dr. Medley. This wasp,” he blew on the metal as he poured it in, “was chaos. Something vile and violent, the protector of some purpose I will not tolerate. But I have ordered it, solidified it. Turned it into a pattern.” He blew on it again. “You truly had killed the other one. In the jar. I felt it. You melted it down, and you saw it as deconstruction, as an obliteration. No matter how bizarre its properties, it is only metal now. Fit for simple jewelry. Intention is important, see.” He began to massage the metal out of the shelf, pushing it upwards.

It was a beautiful ring, perhaps thriving in those fluorescent lights, pulling out its greens and blues and sending them back, out into the eyes as something beautiful. “Do you have anything to write with? Any paper?” He asked. Medley produced them from a drawer, a small pad and a pencil. Brine held the ring, letting it play with the light. It was perfectly smooth, reflective as if it had already been buffed and polished.

“Well Dr. Medley. Put it on.” He waited.

Dr. Medley felt strangely unguarded. He hesitated. “What will it do?” He asked.

“Who knows. I’ve never done this before. But I don’t think it will do anything too unpredictable.” The wasps pecked at the windows viciously. But the glass was too thick. They only made taps. Irregular, threatening taps.

“Why don’t you put it on?” Medley asked.

“Because you need to it.” Frustration peeked into his voice and then disappeared. “You will learn something. You will see it differently than I will. You will ask different questions. I want this to be your own discovery Dr. Medley. You may know how to fly, but you do not know how to swim. Would you give away my lesson? Would you prefer this discovery to be mine?” Brine asked.

Medley took it cautiously in his fingers. It was warm, it seemed, warmer to the touch. He put on the ring. Silence.

There was silence. Brine smiled, and Medley looked behind him. The tapping had stopped. The wasps were only crawling again, as if they had been struck down in their core, in their souls with some painful sedation.

“I think you did that, Dr. Medley.” Brine was grinning now. “What have you just done?” Brine asked. He answered his own question. “You have imposed an order Dr. Medley. The metal reads your intention.” Medley was looking at his hands. “Pick up the pencil.” Brine said. Dr. Medley picked it up. “Draw a line.” He drew a line.

“See?” Brine said. “Look at that.” Dr. Medley looked at the line. It was perfectly straight. “Have you ever used bones, Dr. Medley?” He asked.

“I have not.”

“I have never heard of bones,” Brine said, “to create straight lines. Try again. Without the ring.”

Medley tried. It was a pitiful thing, bumpy and curved at the end. His hands shook a little at his age. Brine seemed to think. There was silence between the two of

them, in awe of their own discovery. Medley was still looking at the line, perfectly straight. Brine took the ring in his hands now. And he looked at the door, curious. Slowly, he put it on, and with that hand, reached up, towards the top of the door, grazing his fingertips along it. Then, he pushed. Noiselessly, like air, he walked through it. Medley stood.

He walked to the still-closed door, listening.

"You're making a face, Dr. Medley." He heard clearly from the other side. "Why don't you just walk through? I've opened the door." The door sounded like it was open. But it was not.

Medley pressed his own fingers to the surface. It was solid, white like the walls. But he could hear Brine, on the other side of the door, hear him purposely tapping his foot. And he was sure, though his hearing was not what it used to be, that he heard the quiet crinkling, smacking sound of someone's wide grin. It was just beyond the other side.

CHAPTER 5: BURIED

"Irving. Irving, good. Please, shut the door. Oh, don't just stand there, sit *down*. Good God, you look like you're going to be sick." Superior Powell gave Irving an appraising look. For a moment there was a sympathy at the edges of his eyes. "Should I get you something to drink? Never mind, don't answer that." Powell began reaching under his desk. His head tucked underneath the polished mahogany, and his voice took on a slightly muffled sound. "You're not…" He gave a quick grunt. "There it is. You're not here to be disciplined. Perhaps I should have made that clear." He brought up two glasses and an ornate bottle of amber with branching veins down its sides. "I only wanted to give you some advice Irving. Man to man. And I thought you might have wanted some time away from the 'probation station' anyways. I hear Ensign Tessie can be a wet handful." Irving raised his eyebrows and gave a curt nod of agreement. Powell barked a laugh and poured to the brim. "He sends me a new message everyday, sometimes two. Keeps asking me to station you there. Permanently. *Permanently!* I would never do that Irving, even if it was just to spite that worm Tessie. But you must have done something to impress him."

Irving raised his eyebrows in a tired way, to agree with Powell. He took a swig of the bitter liquid. It was strong, made potent by his walk through the day's heat. He found himself working his tongue around in his own dry mouth, and as he held the glass closer to his lap, still full, he wondered if he would be able to finish it.

Small talk came between the two men. Between them crept simple words ruminating on normality, on the scarcity of time, and the ever-present topic of work. Powell did a great deal of the talking. But soon Irving found his own speech easy.

“Tessie is” he began. “Well, everything’s an emergency to him. I used to think people exaggerated. But…”

Powell winked at the edges of his eyes and fell back into his large chair. “Did he make you memorize his secret knock?”

Irving sucked air through his teeth, and the two men laughed, which faded into a chuckle, until the only sound was Powell’s large fingers tapping on his glass, now only dregs. There was a lingered breath. The time for small talk was over. Both men peered at the veined bottle.

“Well,” Powell said, “I guess I’ll get to my point, Irving. There’s a rule we have in the department. It's rarely been a problem, and I don’t think we’ve ever done an official briefing on it either. What I mean is, it wasn’t something you were likely to know and, like I said, you’re not here to be disciplined.” Powell seemed to contemplate momentarily. “So, I’ll tell you man to man, and we’ll move on. The rule is,” Powell leaned forward, “don’t feed the animals.”

Powell forced a lightness to his features. There was silence as he waited for a reaction from Irving. Meanwhile Irving found himself a tad bewildered. He was a soup of anxiety, relief and exhaustion. And his mouth was still dry. Unsure of the gravity, he swallowed, and repeated the words back slowly. “Don’t feed the animals?” Powell dropped his features and spoke in a more acidic tone.

“Don’t feed the animals, Irving. Stop giving your leftovers to the vagrants.”

The confusion blossomed into comprehension. Irving found his stomach. Found it alive and hot. “Oh. Oh!” He said. “Oh, give me a break.” He touched his forehead. “Powell, why are you even bringing this up?”

“Because I told you Tessie was a worm. He’s a little pillbug and he made a formal complaint to me. He kept telling me about it in letters and now there’s a paper trail. And now *officially*,” Powell sighed, “I’m supposed to extend your probation. Which I’m not going to do. He should have just told you.” Powell finished what was left in his glass. “That man is… well you know. He’s a little burrower. But he is right about feeding the vagrants, Irving. It does have to stop.”

Irving held his gaze. “Why?” he asked.

“You know Irving, from anyone else, that response would be disrespectful, and I would extend their probation. But out of all of our inspectors, you’re the most inspective of them all. It’s like you actually want to know the answer to everything. You’re so… thorough. You’re like the artists, but with questions in your bones. If you don’t mind my saying. You’re always digging. Always curious. And it’s why you do a good job. It’s no wonder Tessie likes you so much. You’re like – you’re like a version of him that’s not a coward. He can’t even say something directly, but you can’t stop. Can’t stop asking questions. No, and you’re both damn thorough.”

“I’m insulted.”

“Are you actually?”

“You’re really going to say I’m like Tessie?”

Powell blew air through his nose “You’re missing the point.”

“I’m not, actually. Powell, why is this suddenly so important? Why have I walked here, so that we can suddenly make a problem out of feeding people?”

“I’m not. It’s been in our rules, and Tessie made a formal complaint, Irving. But if you want the real answer, it’s because you wear a uniform.”

“Oh that makes sense. I guess I’ll stop then.” Irving took another swig from his glass. “Powell, stop being terse with me. I know when someone is dodging my questions. So I’ll be more specific, about my ‘why.’ *Why* is the most trivial act of kindness put under a magnifying glass because I’m wearing a uniform? Why is it a rule? Why enforce it?”

“Because it’s not *kindness,* Irving, it’s *enabling*.”

“Enabling what? Being alive?”

“I knew you wouldn’t like this. Irving just agree with me, please, so I can move on. I was going to say something next.”

“No, no I won’t. Don’t feed the animals? I’ve never even heard of that. And when did you ever start following the rules to the letter? Are we both going to become good uniforms like Tessie?”

“We have to follow the rules. We’re enforcers, Irving.”

Irving moved the liquid in circles idly and watched it. It might have been slightly mesmerizing. But it was just an excuse not to look at Powell.

“We’re breaking the rules right now.” He said. There was no response. “Powell, you hate Tessie. Say you disagree with me.”

Powell took a long breath. For a short moment, the sounds of the surrounding offices whispered in, and muted laughter entered through the walls. They could both hear the strain of a man chuckling too hard; the sound of an appearance of laughter.

Powell breathed again, more deeply. Then he worked his mouth, twitching his large mustache. “You always seem to get to the heart of things, Irving. It makes you irreplaceable. So I’ll play your game.” Powell pushed his empty glass towards the middle of the desk, away from himself. “Because feeding the vagrants undermines our image. That’s the spirit of the rule. And that’s why.”

“And what is that image, sir?”

“Don’t call me sir or this *will* be formal. We keep up an image of respect, Irving. When you feed the vagrants, we *lose* public respect. It's a kind of… oh I don’t know, intangibility. But feed the vagrants, and that goes away. Because that uniform you wear, Irving, has a kind of power, and when you do things to dilute it, people will assume things. That you are not quite an authority. Maybe even a convenience. And that makes you a target, makes all of us targets.”

Irving found he could finish the glass. It made his words feel more deliberate. “You’re talking about fear, not respect.”

“I am not.”

“You are. Intangibility? You are talking about respect out of fear.”

“I’m not. You’re asking, is fear necessary for respect?”

“I’m asking if that’s how you define respect.”

Superior Powell's large mustache twitched. "Respect is an old word." He said. "Relevant actually, it uses the root, 'spect.' Which means to look at, or to watch. To in-spect would mean to look at something very closely. To scrutinize it. Something you do very well actually." He gave a curt nod. "But to re-spect is to look at something *again.* To do it repeatedly. Respect is a word that people don't even associate with sight often. But in its most literal sense, it means to re-look. It almost implies a kind of looking backwards. To look at something over and over, and *not* inspect it. And – I know Irving, but this is your answer – there are two reasons to look backwards at something. To "re-spect" it. The first is out of admiration, and second: out of fear." Irving listened.

Powell continued. "So, is it a prerequisite to respect? Sometimes. Maybe even most times. Irving, this isn't about normal people. I'm talking about vagrants and how *they* understand respect." Powell took a deep breath. "Irving, why do you think the vagrants *are*? Why do you think there are so many of them? So many in every district, especially the underground district? What is the root of the problem?"

Irving found his words came quickly. "They're people the system has failed. People with no niche, no function. They've become ostracized." Powell only slightly. "Ostracized as damaged people," Irving went on, "unlucky people. Addicts. But they're all regular people. Just… people who got lost."

Powell refilled his glass. A quick gesture with the raised bottle received a "no thank you" from Irving. "Sure." Powell took a deep gulp. "And you are partly right. They are people who 'the system' has failed out. They are lost. But that's on purpose.

The answer, the real answer is simpler than you think, and it's where our arguments split. Because vagrants are not like us." Powell sounded out the words. "They are people without fear." He leaned back into his chair. "Because a vagrant doesn't care about being poor, doesn't care if his teeth rot out. Some don't even care about food. And so they die. And that's because they're fearless, Irving. Stupidly fearless. Despite all of our advancements, that is the one reason they can never be like us. Because they can never be afraid enough to participate beyond finding somewhere flat to sleep and avoiding sobriety. And so for the vagrants, we compensate.

"Afraid." Irving echoed.

Powel gave a sharp, rising "Mhhhhhmmmmm," and leaned forward. He seemed to take an interest in his own words. They were tinged with amber. "Why," Powell spoke, "would the vagrants do anything that they do not *want* to do? To them, there is no reason to work for a home, because there is no consequence to living without one. And why fear the rain? Why work for shelter, when you can live in the underground district? Why waste time working for meals, when people will simply give you food?" Powell waited for a response. He looked Irving right in the eyes. Both men were silent. After a while Powell seemed to recline a little. Then he continued.

"The answer is: fear. Or lack of it. It's what makes them defective. And dangerous. Most of them don't fear a damn thing. Not hunger, not disease, not even looking in the mirror and seeing a shadow. And if you don't play your cards right: you. They won't fear *you*. It's because fear always comes first. That was the right question. How is respect established in the first place? With fear. So is fear a

prerequisite to respect? Yes. Before anything else. Fear is first thing we are accustomed to, the first emotion we ever feel." Powell had his eyes on the ceiling, and the glass in his palm. "But see, the longer we embrace fear, the further we travel from it. We become more civilized, and while we may pretend to have created some "greater refinement" of curiosity, art, furniture, commerce, all of it – it's all trinkets." Powell gestured to the room, as if it were the universe. The only rich color was his mahogany desk, and it was covered in pens, paper, glass cups, the amber bottle, encregraphs, notes, assorted junk. Only behind it was the window with half-shut blinds. Outside the sun was too high to see, and the world was far below.

"This isn't the world Irving. It's just the world as we know it. Our little habitat. All it really is, is a line. A line in the ground we've drawn. A complex one, with a thousand intersections. But that's what the law is. It's just a line. And we enforce it. We make sure nobody steps on it, that nobody crosses over it, and that nobody tries to recreate it. And by doing so keep everything exactly the way it is. We keep the world from changing. We keep it from toppling over and shitting on itself. That's what your uniform is Irving. It's a chalk line written on the ground that says, 'do *not* cross.' And do you know what makes people listen, what keeps people from tiptoeing over the boundary? Fear. That's the marrow of it, the pulp of that line. Its fear. That's the only thing that everyone listens to. Fear. So I'll say you're right. That's what you wanted me to say, isn't it Irving? That I equate respect with fear? Maybe I do. If I had to admit something like that to Tessie I think I would throw up. But I can say it to you, because I *respect* you. You have my admiration. You're the kind of man that gets the job done

and does it well. I've never seen you half-ass anything. That's why I respect you. But people tend to forget why they admire things. That's why fear is so important. People don't forget it." For a moment Powell looked out the window. He was looking towards the world below.

"And do you know what people are afraid of? Really afraid of? They're not afraid of us, not afraid of the scary men and women. They're afraid of that uniform. Because we don't go around beating people. That's not why they're afraid. There are laws against that, and we represent *the law*. No, normal people are afraid of what we can take away. They're afraid to lose their bed, their relationships, their reputation. Most people hate their jobs. But at the slightest hint of jeopardy, what will they do? Anything. They'll do anything just to keep them. It's because they're afraid of losing their familiar schedule, their favorite food, their quotidian lives. It's all technically leverage, Irving. Leverage under the guise of prosperity. So, if you had to label it all under one word, maybe it *would* be fear. Because that's our 'respect,' Irving. Respect for those accumulated things, the things we can take away. And if people aren't afraid? Who knows. Who knows, without fear, we could all sleep on the ground and let our teeth rot out from holding embalming resin in our mouths. We could be just like the vagrants. We could sit in that delirium and let our bodies, half-preserved from it, just lie there, piling up. And we could all go to sleep. It would be the best sleep of our lives, too. If we weren't afraid." There was a punctuated silence. The two men let it linger. Finally, Powell asked, "Do you still disagree?"

Irving thought for a moment. "I do."

“I thought you were a realist.”

“I am. A realist can’t feed the animals?”

“No, Irving! That’s what I’m telling you. Why do you think we stuck you with a list of questions on your inspections now? Is it because you do a poor job? No. Why did we do it?”

“To show the things you can take away.”

“No! Well yes, but no. It should have been the easiest probation of your life. Read the questions and move on.”

“And that’s what makes a good inspector? Reading off of a list?”

“No. Irving! It was to show you how work is done in a uniform. To show you that we don’t need exceptionalism or journalism, or some coerced narrative where you keep guessing what’s going on. It was because you don’t get to keep asking and asking until *one* witness” Powell jabbed up a thick finger, “finally gives in and says what you want.”

“So what?” Irving asked. “I’m supposed to go easy on our sponsors? Do you want me to start half-assing my job?”

“No, Irving. And its not because they sponsored us, though thanks to you, that was almost brought into question. It’s because we stay within the bounds of the law. It doesn’t matter if you think every single witness is lying to you, we must assume, by *law*, that a witness is telling the truth.”

“And so what? I’m just supposed to believe a bunch of skinny children are all working age? That they’re being fed and paid fairly?”

"If that's what they say, Irving. That's the law. If you don't believe them, fill out a follow up form and have them questioned."

"Oh that's such bullshit Powell. They were *afraid!* Afraid to answer my questions!"

"Then that means you had their respect. But you don't get to cut to the chase. Even if they were afraid to answer your questions, *you* have to follow the law. Do I need to say it more slowly? Do I need to make it any more clear? Because if I do then there's something wrong. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Good. So you understand that we enforce *the law*. Finally. Now can you say you understand why we don't feed the animals?"

Irving put his head in his hands. "What do you want me to do? We have *murder* cases, and you're worried about a half-eaten sandwich. Fine. I won't feed the vagrants anymore. Are you happy?"

"No Irving. Because frankly, I don't give a damn whether you feed the vagrants. It's about doing it in the uniform. It's about understanding. That's been the spirit of the problem. And if we've come this far, and you still don't *understand,* then we have a problem. A big one. When you wear that uniform, you represent the law. You enforce the law. Tell me you understand so I can take you off probation. Because this is basics, Irving. If you don't agree with the basics of the uniform, that's one thing. Disagree, and follow protocol. But if you don't understand them, then I'm not

sure you should be wearing it. Does that make sense? Can you read between the lines, Inspector?" There was a pause. "Well?"

"I understand."

"I sure hope so." Powell finished his glass, tilting back the miniscule amount of liquid into his open mouth. Then he sighed, picked up a pen, and began looking for a piece of paper. "Tell Tessie to go fuck himself. Dismissed."

CHAPTER 6: THE BURNER

Any distinctions to Francine came in trickles. To her, the world felt very strange, and soft, as if nothing really existed. She found it very easy to stare off into space, and rather difficult not to. More than once, she thought that perhaps she had died, or that somehow the world was no longer real. Each time, the thought came and passed. She forgot it immediately. That was the nature of her existence. If Francine had the words, she might have said that she was in two places at once, or perhaps that she was always half dreaming, and couldn't wake up. It might have been a miserable existence, except that there was a part of her distant – close only at moments, always there, always in some capacity pulling at her with an intense gravity that tugged at her core. It was like the last string on a violin, or the sound of a single piano key, played in a silent room. There's a kind of pleasure and magic in the creation of noise. That feeling and sound was part of her and constant.

In her dreamlike state, it was the only real thing. That singular melody spoke in chronic affirmation said only one thing: that the world was beautiful. And sometimes it was such a whisper quiet, so trickling that she could barely hear the words and the sound. But it never left. "The world is beautiful," the violin string played, wordlessly, incessantly. It was sound, real, and unreal. It was sound, and the love of sound.

Francine always listened. It was a priority over all else: to listen. Often, she listened with her eyes closed, as if this made the world very close, and the singular sound much closer. Doctors asked, when she was able to speak, if it was a real sound to her, as if it could only be something observed and not felt, not felt like tears or love or color or food or heat. That was what she wanted to say. And she wanted to say

something, wanted to say it was a kind of music, winding and taut, and desperately held onto. Instead, as one side of her mouth drooped, she found all she could murmur was “no,” -- though she struggled to say more. To others, and herself, words made little sense. When spoken, they dropped out of her mouth like teeth. Despite her own voicelessness, that *something* implored, wanting desperately to be put into form. It pushed Francine to speak, to the very brink, the edge of her mind, and she wanted to open her mouth and let the words roll out. She wanted to speak so deeply. But she was also ill, or perhaps injured in a way that only feigned illness. In her own miasma the only thing without doubt was that Francine was broken. She was tearing at her seams, while her heart kept beating. Yet she had her music, her inaudible sound.

Francine had broken in the span of an evening. It was while she was cooking on the stove. Among all the things that evaded Francine, all the things she forgot, or could no longer remember, that fracturing moment was in perfect memory. She could remember how she had been tired, how she could only think of food, and then sleep. And she could remember the precise feeling of it all, not just how it was in memory, but how it actually felt to think in tiredness and hunger. When she remembered, it was like she was there. And she remembered the feeling of slipping into a changed world. She remembered how strange it was that the world was full of music, which was there and not there, that had always been there. It was like the world was silent, except for one sound: like there was a bow being drawn over a thin violin string. She remembered a kind of numbness and that her right hand would not move, could not move to grab the pan. She remembered falling to the ground. And how slowly she fell,

as if she had fallen for hours. And while she had lain face up on the ground, listening to the music of that world, she remembered how wordless and unutterable it was – how it made sense that once you had died, there were no longer words. And who's to say, what did, and didn't make sense? Her brain was dying.

From her place on the floor, she could see slips of blue flames, licking at her pan, which was unreachable, burning by the second. There had been a sudden clarity. She realized, only as part of her brain was dying, that the world was beautiful. That she had lied to herself her entire life. There was no convincing, no effort. It simply was. And as words eluded her and time crawled, she realized, while the layers of the world were being stripped away, that she had never understood beauty. Not until her words were taken away.

And she watched. Watched as she could *only* watch, as steam turned to smoke, as her pan grew hotter, and the heat spread, and a small part of the metal glowed, and the smoke curled and filled the room, her lungs and nostrils. It played with and stung her eyes while she breathed its scent a thousand times over, the acrid smell of smoke. And it was beautiful. Still beautiful, when her cabinets turned black after the blue flames coiled and danced and spread into a brilliant orange that climbed onto the ceiling. It was all right above her. The most beautiful color. Like looking at the entire world, as if it and she and all the things she ever knew were burning, and all she knew was brilliant, beautiful fire. Everything that moved, everything that ever lived was burning, and what was not yet burning had made its own solemn promise to burn. It was wordless, an understanding not so abstract as knowing the world would someday

burn, but a true understanding, as utterly complex and bizarre as if she had lived a thousand times and had only known heat, and beauty, and the color orange. It was art. Selfish art, which had the value of a dying dream. And yet she had held onto it, her one brilliant meaningless moment, her singular truth, utterly naked and provable. She held onto it with the ghost of her right side, constantly hearing its reassurance. And though it was unutterable, so beyond words, so impossible, like having caught fire in her palms, she held onto it, clutched it with invisible fingers, clutched in such concentration that her tendons, if they still obeyed, would have strained. It was her singular violin string; her single, fascinating note that could play over and over the insatiable shout that the world was terribly, terribly beautiful.

And somehow it had broken her. Francine became a stranger, a empty can that rattled with sand grains. She had so few memories, so few thoughts besides the ones she held onto. She became a creature of sleep, and of effort. She was something new, something that lived in the shell of Francine. Sometimes people asked the shell, “How are you, Francine?” And what lived inside never had the strength to look, to see if there was somehow someone behind her in that small, dull white room that to her, was beautiful. Despite how strange and laborious it was for Francine to understand people and words, she understood that she was trapped, and alone. And while she held tightly to her knowledge, that the world was beautiful, she knew there was more beyond her walls. In those rare moments of clarity to know where she was, those walls were blank canvases.

But even with clarity, Francine still only stared, or with her eyes closed, listened. She could hear the sound of a machine attached to her back, could hear its occasional whirr, and feel odd pressure. Sometimes a large man fed her soft foods, and the sound of the spoon made a clicking sound against her teeth, which ached when she remembered to feel them. Sometimes he called her "Burner," and she wondered who that was, and how she liked that name. Sometimes she heard the sound of footsteps, or tried to feel the constant electric hummm present in her room. Sometimes she listened to her own heartbeat. And when the joy of listening ran its course, Francine liked to remember.

She could only remember a few things. Despite the scarcity of what she could remember, her memories came to her a crystalline purity, as if those small moments in time had all been captured. Francine often stood inside the kitchen that had burned. She liked how inside of it, fire had moved. There she watched it, again and again, a room she could see from any angle, homely, tired, and beautifully spent. There were other memories. Life and time and sleep all passed through a void, but Francine could remember a burning lamp outside a hospital window in the night. She could still feel how the room felt cold and that the fire, caged in glass, looked delicate, as if it were somehow breathing. Sometimes when she remembered that she cried, and then forgot why. She remembered a sunset outside of a cafe, how the clouds had looked like fire, and she remembered how each face on the patio was illuminated by the last coalescing of the sun. She remembered every expression, all the food on all the tables, the smell of the outside. It was like a photograph — so full of detail — and perfectly still. Then

there was the memory of a painting of fireworks at night. She could see that it was there in her room, on her white canvas walls. But not there when she opened her eyes. Odd that it was never there, in the room so close to hers. She looked at the painting with her eyes closed. There was another memory of beautiful, stylized letters on a gold pen. Francine couldn't read, couldn't understand written words, or most things spoken. However, it was the shapes, pressed into metal, in the lining of someone's pocket, just at the moment it caught the light. That was strangely beautiful. And she had captured it. She could see it in her mind, how it caught the light. And there were several museum brochures. She found the liked the pictures. That was all she could remember. And so in effect, that was her name. The name of the woman in the shell of Francine.

CHAPTER 7: FRAGMENTS

Irving was drunk. “Only slightly drunk,” he kept thinking. In his mind those words were like an audible sound, repeated over and over, until it was no longer “only slightly drunk,” and the repetition became “only slightly”. Only slightly. That phrase seemed to be more important. Only slightly. Only, slightly *what*? That question, which was now his focus, slipped out of his mouth, and he whispered it under his breath. A stranger looked at him as he passed by, curious, and Irving forced himself into a kind of silence as he walked. He became too conscious of his movements. They felt oddly exaggerated, autonomous under a spell of artificial calm. But at the back of his mind, something chewed. Therein lay something real. And fleeting.

Irving was back in the sunlight. The sun itself was both a blessing, and a curse. For one, it was hot, today. Hot was understating it. The weather around Aurum could be unpredictable, but today was especially uncomfortable. On one hand, there was no sun at all in the underground district. In all the working hours, Irving only had artificial light. He found it strained his eyes. Outside, it was like his eyes could rest.

Around him, the sun drew slowly to an early close. The horizons reached artificially high towards the sky, increasingly so as his surroundings grew more narrow.

The direction he headed towards led to “the probation station.” Even taking the shortest route, the way was still winding. The station, only called “station five” formally, was in the underground district, far from transit, and an awkward distance from roads. Any space around the underground was bound to be inconsistent, so that it

was impractical for anything but foot traffic. This included things close the underground entrances, where what lied below the earth seemed to bleed upwards into the surface. Some paths were adequate for vehicles, while others forced an uncomfortable proximity to others. Any measures meant to reclaim space were afterthoughts. So most people opted to walk.

Unlike the unpredictable climate of the outside, contained by the painted skies, the underground was consistent. The dimness, the lack of vehicles, the always-cool rank air, and light designed to attract rather than illuminate – it all created a bizarre homogeneity, which only became more saturated the deeper you went. There, life became organic. Like the primordial soup, it was often crowded and dim, and if not outright wet from rainy days, it was usually slightly damp. But at any moment, it was also very alive. In the darkness, shops and people protruded in the passages and walkways.

The tunnelers and sculptors, who had all collectively made the underground district, had worked quickly, and without forethought, or even regard for one another. The world became a mishmash of crude tunnels, rough cylinders, and the occasional large cavern-like space. And yet, at any one place in the underground, thousands crowded together. They thrived in that carved rupture of the earth. And inside the marvel, the bizarre, complex and chaotic testament to mankind's will to expand lay gambling dens, trinket shops, and a thousand things to eat, drink and inhale. It was a vein of the earth in which humanity marinated, filled to the brim with raw emotion,

with wordless sufferings and pleasures. It was the most human, deeply human place to exist.

And once inside there was no way around it. To traverse, one had to wade. There was no choice, no way around. To move, one had to see what the vendors were selling, to brush past, and listen to their cries of "look, look!" Or the cries and silence of those crouched and huddled. Or the potent, acrid smell of resin, or unwashed bodies. It all echoed and bounced, coiled off the walls, and back. One had to hear and smell all of it.

Irving could imagine it already. It had all become a part of his day. At the probation station. He could see the entrance inside, a semicircular tunnel in the distance, where the walls, floor and ceiling of the world became like the streets: a rough, light brown pumice. He would enter into the darkness, and adjust his eyes as he walked. He would take two sharp turns right, and there would be the station. Right by the entrance. The enforcers were hardly amphibious. Their presence in the underground ranged from decorative to bare minimum. There was no true way to enforce the underground. There was only one goal: to quite literally keep the worst things under the surface.

Irving could see the large metal door and barred windows, with its utilitarian white lamps outside the entrance. Caged, so they couldn't be stolen. Irving anticipated it all, imagined it while still in the light.

And he stopped walking. Just simply stood. Rooted. And for a moment he closed his eyes. Only for a split second. Still, two people passed him by, and he heard

the footsteps of the wide berth they gave him. It was windless and hot, and the hour of the sun, in its peak of the sky where it could reach down into the street, past the shadows of the buildings, would soon pass. He saw a sign over a door, a short distance away which in yellow letters, made to look like cracked glass which read: "The Sunflower." Irving went inside.

It was cramped, and a bit empty. Four small tables hunched together. That was all that the room could fit. There were no customers, and no music played. Only a teenage girl sweeping the floor. She disappeared behind a curtain, illuminated by artificial light behind it, which was much brighter than the room Irving currently stood in. A large, somewhat withered looking man appeared. He wore a dirty white shirt, and an apron. He was thick, but well-muscled. He looked at Irving's uniform, sizing him up.

"An inspector coming in the middle of the day." The broad man wiped beads of sweat off his forehead and looked at the perspiration in his hand. "Tell me you're just thirsty."

"I am, actually. Just water." Irving said, taking a seat at a table. The man only stared at him.

"Imagine my luck. Alright, well, we don't serve 'just water,' your highness. And besides you won't want it. It takes like shit, if you'll excuse my language. It gets dirty going through the pipes here. Not that you would know. You'll want what comes through our *effusion* machine." He said the last words with a mock flourish. "Just as

good as what they serve in Aurum, I hear. Not that I would know. Of course, it costs money to run it before peak business hours. You understand."

Irving sighed. "And if I decide I need to make an inspection, you won't mind?"

"Your heart's not in it. But by all means, Inspector. I've got nothing to hide. I'll understand." He put his hands on his hips. "Of course, if you really want what's out of the tap, I could always give you a nice cool glass. I can put a little spirit in it, make it safe to drink. It might give you a tummy ache, but it won't make you drunk. Then again, it won't quite make you sober." He paused, feigning thought. "Would it?" The two men regarded one another.

Irving idly chewed the skin on the inside of his cheek, and ran a finger along one of his brows. He looked behind him at the door, and then back at the man. "How much extra is it," Irving asked, "to run this machine?"

"I'm glad you asked. Inspector."

The man in the apron took his order, and left Irving in the dim room. There were stained glass bulbs in the ceiling, made of cracked glass, all in varying shades of yellow. Unlit, they were murky, dark golds, clinging to the ceiling. Irving was sure they could have bathed the room in fresh color, were they turned on. The man had turned on a small radio before he went to the back. When he turned it on, it was blaring some kind of quick-beating song, with rapid strings, and a deep, clear voice. He changed the channel to classical music, with loping, unmemorable movements. The quality of the music was also far worse, and the radio speakers crackled with interference. It was a nuisance.

Irving could hear the effusion machine whirring behind the curtain. He heard the sounds of pouring and boiling, and the sound of heavy foam slapping down into a drain. He crossed his arms in front of him on the table, and laid his head down sideways, letting his cheek rest on the bones of his wrist. He kept his eyes open.

There was a mosaic on the wall, hard to see at first in the dark. It was of a large sunflower that had bloomed over Aurum. It showed the many districts on what could have been a map. Except that it was too exaggerated, too stylized to be functional.

The sunflower's, large, thick stem popped out of the underground. Its roots did the same out of the various underground entrances. They spread and dangled over every structure. To the west, they wound about The Spire, and the breakfast restaurant with the bell. But that was all you could see of Aurum "capital." The flower itself covered most of the west and the north. Instead, the roots bulged through the no-longer-pristine corporate buildings, and straight lined blocks of offices, just east of the capital. They filled all the pathways and tunnels for the trains, and Irving found his eye drawn to where they led. He followed one to the end, and saw Aurum's museum just under a wide leaf near the flower, covered in roots. Irving looked farther south and farther east on the map. There, the roots made their way through the industrial quarters, through the factories and refineries and through the slums, where homes had been made out of the roots. There was the old candle factory, and the historical apartments, and the phosphorus pit that became a dump. Every building, every landmark, it was all covered in roots, but recognizable, despite how it was all made from jagged pieces of broken porcelain. The brown-white tendrils of the mosaic

branched and snaked until they met the gray coast, and dark blue, almost black sea. There, they dipped up and down like sea serpents. One root had wrapped itself around a large trading barge, and another found purchase in the trellis-like architecture of an oil rig.

"Alright," the aproned man said. He walked through the curtain, carrying two large paper cups that bubbled slightly. He set one down in front of Irving who took it eagerly. "A bitter lime, no spirits. With a bit of something to clear your head." He set it down in front of Irving, who took it eagerly. "And a rose essence water." The aproned man curled his nose. "Nobody ever asks for these. But I thought *you* might like it. Maybe you're a rose man. Maybe not." The aproned man sat down across from Irving, too large for his own chairs. "You looked thirsty. And you're such a big spender, I thought you might deserve a treat." He grinned, and displayed a broken front tooth that had become smooth with time.

It was a while before Irving even bothered to breathe. The paper cup was almost horizontal before he set it down and sighed in relief. Or it might have been more like a choke. Irving wiped a sleeve over his mouth and leaned over the table. "Would you mind just turning off the music. Please?" Irving looked up at the man, who had his arms crossed.

The aproned man sighed. "Can't. I'm just a music lover. And I'd hate to ruin the mood." It took a moment, but he watched Irving finish the drink. The man pushed the other cup towards him. "Take it slowly." The man said. He chuckled. "Looks like you are a rose man. What's your name, son?"

“Irving.”

“Jeremy.” The man nodded slowly, his lips pressed. “Been in the business a long time, Irving. You just don’t strike me as the type.”

“I’m sorry?”

The man spoke more slowly, a bit annoyed. “I said, you don’t strike me as the type.”

“No, no, I heard. The type for what?”

“The type for day drinking. You don’t seem like you hate your life enough. And you’re too clean. Even though you stink like outside. And you’re too polite. If you didn’t have that uniform, I would have told you to get lost.”

“Why’s that?” He took another sip of the rose water.

“Polite people aren’t being honest. And they cause the most trouble.”

Irving wasn’t sure what he meant by that. “You’ve got a nice place here.” Irving tapped his fingers. Some of his color had already returned. “I bet it looks good with the lights on.” Irving gestured towards the darkened, stained glass bulbs.

“Don’t insult me. I know it looks good. But lights cost money.” There was a hint of a smile. “What’s got you day drinking? Irving.”

“Work.” He grimaced

Jeremy crossed his thick arms over his chest. “Don’t like your job huh.”

“Not today.”

“Well, that makes two of us. I bet the pay’s worth it though. Isn’t it.” He said it as a statement.

Irving pretended not to notice. “Sometimes.” He answered

“More than half the time?” Irving didn’t answer. “See, I don’t mind my job half the time. Makes it worth it. Some customers,” he began, but stopped himself. “Well, it's like they say. If you don’t like the half, the hole’s not worth digging. But I’m happy with mine.”

“You know,” Irving started, “when I took this job…”

“Go on.”

“When I took this job, I did it because I wanted to help people.”

“That’s the type you do seem like.”

“Naive?”

“A bit. But the do-good type. And not the day drinking type. Frankly, the sober type. How much did you have? One glass?” He looked at Irving’s eyes and got his answer. “Oh, you really are a rose man.”

“My mother used to drink.” Irving said bluntly. “Put me off of it.” He took another sip of the rose water. He tried not to let on how much he liked it.

“That’s how my wife was.” Jeremy said. “Took her years to warm up to me. To drinking. It was only later I found out she could outdo me. Had to have her tend the drinks some nights.”

“And where’s she?”

“Dead.” The aproned man sat there.

“I’m so sorry.”

Jeremy sighed and looked at the mosaic. “It’s alright. Not like you can be sorry enough anyways. Some people just have places to be. The world was too busy for a woman like her.” His eyes took on a glazed look. “I have to take care of her mother now. She’s just the worst. She won’t die, and she’s like all the good parts gone. Looks just like her, too. Older.”

“Did she make the mosaic?” Irving asked.

“Oh no, Fela made that. She’s done all the good looking stuff. Really spruced up the place. And she’s licensed, of course.” He said protectively.

“The girl who sweeps? She’s a licensed artist?”

“My daughter.” The man enunciated. “Finish your rose essence, son. I can tell you like it. But yes.”

“Sorry.” Irving said. “It’s just – why keep her in a place like this?”

“Young man. Put down your shovel, and drink.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. The mosaic is incredible. More than that. She could support your entire family in Aurum with talent like that.”

“I’m making a safe place for Fela. She does what she wants.”

It came out before Irving could stop himself. “*This* is what she wants?”

Jeremy looked at him. He had all the joy of a wet cat, staring at Irving. “A fellow music man, huh? Why didn’t you say so?” He got up slowly, and allowed his chair to screech on the floor. Then he turned up the radio, much louder. It was a chorus of trumpets in The Sunflower, now. It hurt Irving’s ears slightly. The trumpets were slow and formal, like something played at a duke’s funeral.

Jeremy walked back over slowly. He smoothed his apron very carefully. And then he sat down. “Fela’s got good hearing you twit. And yes. Is it so hard to believe she wants to stay with her family?”

“I didn’t–”

“I don’t care.” He interrupted. “Tired of hearing you talk. Finish your rose water.” Irving took a long sip. After a glare, Jeremy sighed. The big man leaned back as much as he could in his wooden chair. “I know you mean well. I can smell it in you a mile away. Mr. Do-good. And you’re right. She could support us by herself. But that’s not what she wants. She didn’t even want to be an artist. Just to make art. But she’s just too good at anything she tries. Started doing the impossible. She could put back anything that’s broken. She made all the lightbulbs, the sign outside, the mosaic. I brought you paper cups because she broke all the mugs and put them back. Had to ask her to stop doing it. Some customers don’t like the feel of broken ceramic.”

“Anyways,” he continued, “we kept it hidden. Within the legal grace period, of course.”

Irving nodded and made a dismissive gesture. The large man seemed to lose some of his tension. They had to lean closer to each other because of the loud music.

“Me and my boys had to scramble and put together enough to buy her contract. But we managed. Some creep was trying to buy her. He got the message.” Jeremy flexed one of his hands. “Not for sale. Anyways, during the licensing process, I had to take her to Aurum ‘Capital.’ Had to go there a dozen times. Artists get in the museum for free, and we had Felas' temporary papers. You ever been to the museum?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“You’re joking. Rose man. Well, we went there every time. Every single time. Sometimes twice a day. And I’ve never seen her smile so much. Or laugh. Or even cry. I won’t lie to you, it's the most beautiful place in the world. They got things in there that even brought a tear to my eye. And don’t look at me like that. You don’t know me. Anyhow, the place is huge. Too much to see in one day, even a week. But there was a mosaic section. You know where this is going. She fell in love with it. Made that piece on the wall her first try, right when we got home. Stayed up all night doing it. She’s a natural.” Jeremy seemed to swell in his chair. “She started working on something else. Wouldn’t tell me about it. It was a surprise, but she was going to submit it to the museum. I’ve never been more proud of her. I gave her whatever she needed.” The aproned man had his eyes on the mosaic again. He was taking it in. But Irving also suspected Jeremy couldn’t look him in the eye. Not just then.

“The thing is, we took her grandmother on the last trip to the museum. Let her come with us on the last day to get her license. We celebrated a little, and we wanted to include her. It was Fela’s idea. She was being nice. I leave those two in the museum for ten minutes, and when I come back, Fela won’t say a word to me. She’s silent the whole way home, and then goes to bed. I asked the old crone what happened. She wouldn’t spill. She says they said nothing. Fela won’t tell me either. And she hasn’t made anything since. She won’t make any art. I even broke a mug by accident the other day. She wouldn’t even go near it. Stayed in her room.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Quit saying you’re sorry. Have some thorns rose man. Anyways, I’ve been spitting in her grandmother’s food ever since.”

Irving raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“I’m just joking. Mostly. She deserves it. But no, I actually had a point. If you’re going to help people, you can’t be that voice. You can’t be part of the force that’s breaking people.”

“Trust me,” Irving said, “I’m doing my best.”

“I don’t really know you, Irving. But I believe you. And yet, something tells me your best isn’t quite good enough. Because whenever it is, they put a stop to it. Don’t they?”

Irving looked at his notepad, clipped to his belt. It was keeping pace with the conversation. He could see there was a record of everything they had said so far. Neat black letters lined the yellow paper. It must have picked up the conversation when Irving threatened the inspection. “I’m starting to feel like they'll do anything they can *not* to help people.” He spoke.

Jeremy nodded.

“When you’re a recruit,” Irving offered, “they don’t reign you in much. I mean they do, but you have more freedom. Less power. ‘Just enforce.’ That’s what my superior always told me.” Jeremy was looking at the table. Despondent. There was a kindling behind his eyes. Irving had just lit it.

“They have a way of keeping things light when you start.” Irving continued. “And the deeper you get, the more they ask you to overlook things. You get asked to

do more, and there's less you can do. Less you're supposed to do. Eventually, most of what you do moves through administration, which is all logic. Somewhere along the way, people stop caring. And they ask you not to care. Countless times. Everything becomes a checkbox to someone sitting at a desk." Irving allowed a hollowness, but the man was looking down.

"Nothing ever works the way it's supposed to."

Irving nodded. "Everyone knows that. I knew that when I started."

"And yet," Jeremy said, "you don't get rid of ants by giving them enough to eat." The two men sighed. "Irving, I don't think you know how broken things are. But people are getting fed up. And that's not a threat. Not to you. I'm being pragmatic. Something's coming Irving. People don't feel safe. And I can't tell what's going on – if this is the way the world has always been. Maybe we're just going back to normal." His words were quiet, hard to hear over the grating classical radio. "But I can't say that's true. Not while I've got an artist under my roof, doing the impossible. Maybe things aren't quite normal. Irving, you said people stop caring." He didn't wait for a response. "Well, you can't let that happen. You've got the same look Fela had – has. You care about something. And I assume everyone does, even Fela's grandmother. Once. But you can't let that erode. It's too important. Hear?" Jeremy got up and turned off the radio. "Alright," he said. "You look sober. Get out."

Irving was outside. The had moved to behind the high walls of buildings, out of reach.

“If you come back,” the aproned man had said, picking up his cups, “take off your goddamn uniform. And don’t sit up so straight. It makes you look like a weirdo. Just saying.” Irving felt his shoulders while he walked. A weirdo?

The semi-circular tunnel closed in on him. Walking into it, there was always a slight gust of air coming out. He felt it, and smelled a kind of stale cooking oil, and something else that had a faint sulfuric smell. It also smelled like urine.

I lieu of sunlight, long white lines of dim light were painted neatly onto the ceiling. Still, Irving’s eyes had to adjust. Sticking to the right side, he stepped around garbage. An empty can spilled on the ground that gave off a chemically smell. Embalming resin, Irving realized. He had stepped in a little of it. He gave space to a woman sitting on the ground. A man with a cart selling cheap wine called out, and then watched silently as Irving walked by. Then he resumed his yelling to Irving’s back. Irving took his first right. The corridor became rectangular, and the floor was slightly diagonal. The odd puddles collected on the left side, of what liquid that refused to enter the drain grates. Small gnats peppered the air for a brief space, and Irving kept his mouth shut. The corridor split in three directions, two going left. Pink light seeped from a room, where a large man stood guard. Irving kept going straight.

There it was, in the distance. White light from the fluorescent bulbs peeked around from a corner to the right. Station five of the underground district. Before that, was a spot on the floor, oddly raised and elevated. A man wrapped in a dirt canvas laid asleep, marginally dry. Irving slowed his walk near him. Then, cautiously, stopped and stood. The man was peacefully breathing. Irving hadn’t brought his lunch out of the

station. It would still be under his desk, in a plastic bag. He had no food to give the man. Irving did have change in his back pocket, leftover from The Sunflower. He put his hand in it, feeling the few paper bills and coins. There was nobody else around.

Would Tessie be watching? Would he pop out from around the corner? Or was he watching already? Could he somehow see through the hatch of the metal door? Or – it occurred to Irving – did Tessie have other ways of watching people? There were more subtle devices. Expensive creations from artists.

Irving looked at the puddle of water by the sleeping vagrant. He had heard of small pocket-sized mirrors that could look through other reflections. A pool of water, might be still enough. Even in the dim underground. More than that, Ensign Tessie was exactly the kind of man to buy them. He drew the spare coins from his pocket, and threw them in the shallow, filthy water. The surface rippled only slightly, and then again went still. The sleeping man stirred slightly.

Irving stood in the stark shadows of the caged bright-white bulbs. He knocked on the metal door. *Knock. Knock. Knock-knock. Knock-knock.* The small hatch opened, and Tessie's eyes looked through. Then, with a high-pitched squeal, the thick door opened. The room was dim, lit by various desk lamps. In all, there were only six people at the underground station. It had the sleepy atmosphere of a late-night library. Only one person looked up, and waved a small hello to Irving. He waved back.

Tessie looked at Irving, who stepped in as he held the door. "How was lunch?"

“No lunch. I had a meeting with the Sergeant.” At this, a couple people looked up from their desks.

“And how did it go?” Tessie asked. “Did Powell assign you here?”

“No.” Irving looked at Tessie. “I’m being transferred back. But,” he paused, “Powell didn’t specify when.”

“That’s a shame.” Tessie said, locking the door. He brushed his hands over his pants. “You’re much better than the other inspectors we get.” The man who had waved nodded idly at his desk.

“Well,” Irving said. “Who knows. It could still be a while. Tessie? It’s your turn to eat?”

“Yes, but-”

Irving started towards the inspection office, past a few empty desks. Tessie followed him. As Irving opened the door, he didn’t bother closing it. Tessie stood in the doorway.

“But I wanted to ask you something.”

Irving turned on his desk lamp, which had the small flourish of the color green in a cone around the bulb. His office was small. Next to his chair, was a large vertical bolted pipe, that traveled through the ceiling and down into the floor. It was painted a glossy black. “Ask away, Tessie.”

“There’s been a report of a man walking around naked.”

Irving only sighed. He let himself slump in his chair.

“It came in over the line. About three minutes ago.” Tessie waited. “But it’s just beyond our jurisdiction. Should we do something?”

Irving set the notepad on his desk and looked at it. “I don’t know. How far out of our jurisdiction?”

“Only just. I was about to go eat lunch.” Tessie looked exhausted.

“Then go eat lunch Tessie.”

“Marvin said he would go with you.”

“Then I’ll take Marvin with me. If I go.” Irving sighed. “He’s just walking around?”

“Just walking around. But he’s probably been walking through our jurisdiction. Odds are. And there’s a paper trail now.” He waved a small stack of papers in the air. “If we get a call again, and he *is* in our jurisdiction–”

“Okay. Okay.” Irving pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can I see the report?” Tessie handed it to him. “I’ll take care of it. Go eat lunch.” There was a taciturn shutting of the office door.

It really was *just* out of their jurisdiction. He was walking around by a casino called “Low Rollers.” On the ground of that chamber was a literal line. It divided the underground public, and what was owned by the casino. Which side was the naked man on? The report didn’t specify.

It was an easy solution. On the filing form, there was a small box he could check that said “out of jurisdiction.” One stroke of the pen, and it was no longer a problem. Until it was. Irving moved the report to the side and looked at his notepad.

The most recent conversation was at the top page. Flipping through it, he saw his conversation with Jeremy, and further down, his exchange with Powell. He began tearing out the pages, a few at a time. He didn't bother to do it neatly. He tore them out, then tore them in half vertically. Then he crumpled up the pieces. He reached the conversation with Jeremy, working his way up. Most of Powell was in the trash can. How had Jeremy known he was drunk? Irving blew air out of his nose. He tore out the page and the ones just below it. Sitting straight was good for his back. He let the pages drop into the bin.

A few more pages. A few more. He was about to tear, his hand poised, when his eyes caught on something. There were his own words. "This is what she wants?" He had recognized those. But it was something underneath them. The notepad had picked up a *third* person. It identified them as "unknown, likely female." Then it indented, and showed a single word inside square brackets:

"[crying]."

Irving stared at the word. The glossy, black-painted vertical pipe made a liquid noise. There was no way to know what was running inside the pipe. It made a low, slightly gurgling *ssshhhhh*. It could have been anything. But an unbidden thought came to Irving. That it was freshly boiled, purified water; that it had just made its way from the refineries.

John Litmus. His name was John Litmus. That was the man who died at the refinery. The man for whom no one had spoken. He imagined that the man was standing there in his office, or perhaps propped against the wall in his own half-melted

hazmat suit. “Who have you helped?” The man whispered to Irving. “Who have you helped?”

CHAPTER 8: CLOTHES

More and more, Dr. Brine found himself laughing. What he was laughing at, he couldn't be sure, only it felt right to laugh. Perhaps he was laughing at the world, at how easily it bent. The world was a prime place to do whatever he wanted. He laughed just as one might laugh if they figured out in a simple step that they could walk on air. The discovery would be so freeing, and yet captivating. How, after that moment, could you ever *not* walk on air? That was how Dr. Brine felt. Free, and full of purpose. It made all the little things more significant. That the sky had cleared was like a good omen. *Oh it was a good omen!* Each breath felt more fresh. Dr. Brine felt like he'd never slept so well in his life, though he'd hardly slept at all. He'd spent much of the night lying in his bed, palm towards his face.

Sitting on his finger was a smooth ring of blue-green metal. He couldn't stop touching it. The finger that wore it couldn't help but tap and fidget constantly. It was like the urge to take a step – to walk out onto air. At first, Dr. Brine thought the ring had only made things easier. But with each new discovery came a kind of surprise. More than anything, it excited Dr. Brine. And to a man who thought he had already figured out the world, had already predicted its many surprises, it was nothing short of intoxicating.

Dr. Brine strode in all white clothes, pushing an empty wheelchair. He was wearing a uniform. Normally Dr. Brine disliked uniforms. Uniforms were clothes for nobodies. That was their purpose: to give the wearer a "one form," to streamline them into something predictable. Dr. Brine wasn't a fan of conformity. He didn't like to being seen as part of a pattern. What he did relish about his clothes, was how easily

they made him blend in. Not a single person had asked him a question. He walked by others in white uniforms. And while he blended in, he had the comfort of knowing he wasn't quite like everyone else. The very clothes he wore were fashioned from thin air.

He had discovered that with a gesture, he could do that. He could create things, and if he wanted, could change them to whatever he desired. And when he was tired of the things he made, he could make them all disappear with just the snap of a finger or the wave of a hand. But he wasn't sure how to get rid of just one thing. The last time he tried, he'd gotten rid of everything. He'd spent fair amount of time making a stack of silver coins. They all looked crude, but real and weighty. Then he made a gemstone, and a marble, and then a bottle of his favorite wine. Trying to get rid of the marble, he had gotten rid of all of it. And he couldn't figure out how exactly he'd made the wine. He was sure he could do it again. Though he had tried and failed so far, a certainty laid still, deep inside the metal ring, like a quiet answer. With some understanding, some gesture, or way of thinking he might recreate it. And the next time, he might even have a chance to taste it.

The possibilities made him wonder. He might even be able to change himself. He might have been able to forgo the uniform altogether if he had just been invisible. Dr. Brine stared at the ring.

He could feel answers in the metal, could feel that they were there, that so many things were, without a doubt, possible. But for the time being, he settled with how he could change his clothes, and relished how close it was to making him

invisible. Brine had heard of artists pulling things out of the air. It was something that took time and practice, and no small amount of understanding. And yet, it was like he had been shown before, like he was only taking that step. That it had been made so simple was what intoxicated him.

Like his clothing, the hallway he walked was white, though perhaps a dirty-ish, off-color white. Brine counted the doors that stretched into their own distance. *Four hundred and thirty two, four hundred and thirty three*. He said the numbers aloud, just to hear them. Of course, Dr. Brine never was the kind of man to count things as he walked, especially out loud, and especially not on a walk that had become so routine. And yet, nothing was ever quite boring anymore. Not so long as the blue-green metal was touching his skin.

In the world of science, finality is arrived at through the careful placement of numerous variables, the repeated testing of a hypothesis through meticulous work. Only, careful placement was not the crux of science. Its kinesis was in curiosity, in experimentation. Though some elements had been carefully placed, Dr. Brine preferred instinct; a reckless unwinding of his own curiosity. He would be part of the show. And though there were dangers to his methods, who could ever explain the buzzing excitement, of watching closely the blue tinge of radium, held close to the eye, and cupped in the palm, how, by its own strange power, it branched out into the darkness? No, perhaps no matter the amount of meticulous planning, the essence of the experiment was to see what would happen. To simply watch the stones fall. To hear the sound they made, the crack. The *satisfaction* was the purpose. How else could

it be put into words? At any one point, it all went to the wayside – the planning, elements of arrangement – it all disappeared at the crucial moment, the focusing point where one simply watched and met the physical embodiment of their own anticipation. That's a8l it was.

The wheelchair Dr. Brine pushed was his final piece, the last domino in the line. And like a child, he had a kind of fervor and apprehension. He wanted to see what would happen next. Why pretend to have a conceit about gravity, about chain reactions and Newton's laws. He only wanted to watch things fall over. Then, at his leisure, he could pick them back up.

Soon in the line of endless doors, Dr. Brine arrived at door 453. In a motion, Dr. Brine drew his fingers along the surface, as if he were carefully painting an arch. Then, wheelchair in his hands, he walked through the door. It felt like walking through a fog, as if he had disturbed only some subtle part of the air. Inside the room sat an aged woman on a white bench. Next to her was a smear of ash. Another museum brochure. The woman's face, immobile as stone, held lines – evidence of intense animation, of sharp eroded lines over years. Though now she remained motionless. Unresponsive even to Dr. Brine. Her mouth was slightly open. This made it easy for Dr. Brine to feed her, something he had to do daily, now that he had detached her from the machine inside the wall.

The machine had done two things: it had kept her alive with a constant stream of nutrient muck, and it had kept her body empty of her own blood — that made her unable to create art. That was also the purpose of the plain walls, the white uniforms.

It was all deprivation. It was a method of suppression, until the threat inside the room peacefully faded away, immobilized in a healthy body.

While the woman's eyes looked glazed, Dr. Brine sensed a life beneath them, like a single minnow in a deep pond. It was faint and subtle. And yet, Dr. Brine had felt the full power of that gaze, had felt his own gold pen practically melt into his chest, when at just the right angle, it had caught the light. Well it had caught the light for *her*. She had loved it, and so it burned. At least, to Dr. Brine that was the pattern.

The ring had taken care of the injury. Dr. Brine had smoothed over his skin, had evened it like soft clay. But he still felt the pain, the slow injury under his skin. He had watched as his pen bubbled into the floor, and its ink had evaporated into a noxious smoke. All of the pen's metal was still there, inside the ground. Dr. Brine had folded it over with his foot, until there was only the blank floor. That was with only a fraction of her own blood. Her marrow, for weeks, had been busy. Now, She had been long disconnected from the machine inside the wall. Any blood in her body now was her own.

"How are you Francine?" Dr. Brine asked. Her eyes blankly absorbed his face, mouth open. It was unnerving. "How is The *Burner*?" He asked. Francine's mouth quirked slightly to one side. "I brought you more pictures." He said. "I know, I know. It's not a painting from The Spire. But I know how much you like the pictures." He pulled a brochure from his pocket, and held it carefully at an angle, until he placed it next to her, in the pile of ash. "They're having an exhibit just for statues. It comes out today."

The brochure was folded to a tall rectangle, and on it was the statue of a woman. The woman, a dark bronze, was in rags. Her arm was deep in the ground, up to her shoulder, and she fought as if pulling something out, or perhaps fighting against being pulled by some force underneath. Her muscles, anatomical in their shape, strained with the effort, and her face, mostly hidden in her hair, was fixed in a grimace of exertion and pain. Almost immediately, the paper began to smoke. From the statue's picture outward, an orange hole smoked and spread, until in an audible rush, the paper burned. Only ash remained on the bench next to Francine, who's eyes blinked slowly. The Burner only watched where the paper had been. And Dr. Brine laughed. He hadn't laughed before, hadn't laughed at how ashes were made. It was just that the ring made everything so rich. Like music. Even a small flame, inside a white room.

"We're going to leave here." Dr. Brine patted the wheelchair's back. "I'm going to take you away. Call it a fieldtrip Francine. There's something I want you to look at, that I've *wanted* you to see." With that, Dr. Brine held the ringed hand up in the air and like a magician, produced a black cloth which he tied over Francine's eyes. He took an appraising look at her, and produced a dark pair of glasses as well. He held them up to the light, making sure they couldn't be seen through. He put them gently over her face. The woman didn't resist in the slightest. Then, Brine lifted her into the chair, made sure she was comfortable, and with a swift motion, as if they were passing through fog, they both crossed through the door.

CHAPTER 9: THE WOMAN ON THE STONE

Those who know their lives are dead already. Put simply, their lives already are. Present becomes waking memory. As they do, they remember, and what they do, they expect. There is no future for those already dead. Only a slow shamble down their wide path. They walk step after step, eyes forwards, eyes backwards. Eyes closed. They simply walk. And time walks with them.

Ernest sat in his rough pumice room. He could hear voices speaking in the hallway outside his curtain door. He wanted so desperately to sleep, but he kept his eyes open. Instead, he looked at all the things he owned.

He had a thin wool carpet on the floor. And a small coffee table, so small it resembled something like a bench. And he used it as a bench in the mornings, to sit on and tie his shoes. There were no chairs.

A jar of marbles hung from the ceiling, collecting the day's light. In the dark it gave back its portion. Today seemed like it would be a pale day. The light he would return to, after work, would be dim and pale.

There was the stone, next to his bedside. The blue granite his father had given him. Ernest felt too tired to reach for it. Instead, he watched the painting at his feet: another gift from his father. It was a landscape.

In its breadth, it depicted a deep gorge. Across that depth lay a sea of pines which rose to meet the sky. In the foreground, there stretched an outcropping over the edge, the furthest reach of the cliff. It was a peninsula over the gap that carried a dead juniper, all branches and twisted grain without shade.

Ernest remembered the day his father painted it. He tried to see it, the way he had seen it then. He remembered how his father had called him into the room when he was finished. His own eyes had been drawn to the bare juniper, that on the cliffside remained steadfast in the wind. It was alone at the edge of that precipice. Next to it was a large gray stone, foreign against the dust.

For a while they watched the painting in silence. There was a kind of anticipation. They listened to the wind, howling through the cliffs. After a while his father asked him, “Ernest, can you see them?” There was a low excitement in his voice. “Can you see them? Sitting on the rock?” They both watched the painting more, and Ernest squinted and drew closer. “Can you see them?” His father repeated. Time held its breath. “Can you see who it is?” And Ernest remembered looking. The painting had such a depth, as if you could reach into that smaller world, and feel the earth, its infinite texture. It was beautiful. But no one was there. He was sure. “Can you see them?” His father repeated.

“I don’t know.” He had said.

His father put a brush in his hand. “When you do, paint them.”

Before that day, Ernest had never reached his hand into a painting. It was unheard of for his father to paint actual depth into his canvas. “Walk-ins” took a great deal of work and instinct. To most methods, they had to be imagined from all sides. They were pieces that demanded careful intuition and practice. And yet, there was never a way to anticipate everything. That was, as his father had told him, what made them dangerous.

To enter, one had to be considered a part of the artwork. That's to say, you had to be welcomed in, to be an expected element. And even then, there was sometimes the issue of leaving. There were stories of people who had become stuck in paintings, or lost when the artist had never imagined someone leaving. And what if someone was able to enter, and at the same time, be unwelcome? What if, in some contemptous, unconscious way, the artist had envisioned a place for the uninvited that was not on the outside? Those ideas, once understood, had kept Ernest curious, and yet utterly cautious. That is, until his brush continued through the canvas onwards.

On the Inside, there was the heat of an eastern wind blowing. He felt it collect over his arm. He felt the momentum of the painting, ebbing and flowing to its own tempo – a richness and oxygen. It was a first gasp after a long held breath. That was how it felt.

He had wanted to ask in a thousand ways, "Why is this painting different?" But as his father watched silently behind him, something gave him pause. It almost felt like a test, as if he were allowed to ask, but that he might only receive a spoken answer, and be sent on his way.

Without questions it was hard to make sense of that painting. But it was without words that he understood it more fully. He realized, while he mixed colors, that his father's paintings must have all had a kind of membrane, or door. One might graze the canvas and feel a hint of what lay inside. Maybe a coolness, or a small sound. Perhaps that was how those paintings had deceived him. He had, up until that moment, never been convinced the paintings could all be real places. But they all had

been. His father's paintings were simply places no one belonged. They were sacred places, with no way to enter, no way to be welcome. They were protected. And yet this one had been left open. Its doors were thrown wide.

That day Ernest had been careful. He was careful not to smudge, not to leave accidental marks with his arm. He made sure to preserve the world's dust that only the painted wind had touched. He took the time to delicately roll up his sleeves. The stone was an arm's reach away, and it forced Ernest to sit close. In that painted world, his arm crossed ten paces, just the distance to that gray stone, and no more. That stone stood proud against its own earth. But who was on it? Who was it that sat and watched the gorge below?

Ernest had mixed the paints, again and again. He found his own talent for color indecisive. That he had continued through the painting was like a second chance. Repeatedly, he poised his brush – a new hair or skin color at its end– and each time it hadn't felt right. No color had felt right. Each time there was a pause, a wrongness, and each time, just before the decisive moment, he drew his arm back.

He did it again. And again. It happened ten times. Then fifty, then more. It happened innumerable times, and with each attempt there was a new picture, a new answer to the question. Who was sitting on the stone? A thousand men. A thousand women. They were all marched into the canvas and led towards the stone. For each one, he watched them sit. And every time, Ernest retrieved his arm. He watched them, and they watched the gorge, the sea of trees beneath. None were right. His father watched wordlessly behind him, and so time passed. Hours passed. Not a word was

exchanged. It was only when Ernest was tired, when he was at the brink of mental exhaustion. That was when he finally saw her.

She arrived subtly, with a kind of caution, like an animal that is vigilant to the world around. To see her was almost like a gift, or an impulse. It's close to say that something clicked, that some pin was silently pushed into place, or that some miniscule atom of his own mind aligned. But it was far closer to say that she had always been there, waiting. That there had always *been* a woman in the painting, and that she had only now into the light.

Ernest twisted his brush in the color blue. Still behind him, he heard his father's stool creak as he leaned forward. There crept a small laugh, a quiet exhale from his father. Ernest let the color climb into the grain of that brush, watched it seep into its bristles. There were a thousand ways to paint the color blue. Ernest had the ingredients for all of them. That was his talent. When his arm crept through the canvas, it felt right. *That* was who she was, who sat on the stone and watched the gorge. She was the most coveted color. She was a well-kept secret, the alchemist's cobalt, a woman of stained glass. She was the very first blue. She was indigo, the Egyptian's lapis, a day's hour of winter dusk. She was a color hidden on mountains and deep within mountains. She was azure and sapphire, the stone upon the stone. She was the color of cold water, and of the desire for water. She was the texture of a raindrop. She was the smell of lightning. Ernest painted her with an easiness, with gentle brushstrokes. Before, he had been worried about painting with a kind of crudeness. But not with the color blue. It was easy and right. And instinctive.

It was only for a moment that day that he stepped away, that he stood back and admired the woman in the painting. She sat facing away, hands placed upon the rock behind her, leaning. And though she faced towards the sea of green, the pines across the valley, Ernest knew her eyes remained open, or that if her eyes were closed, she listened. He stood for a while, and regarded his own work. There was just a hair out of line. She was probably a single brush stroke away from perfection. His arm reached towards the canvas. And the painting was closed. Ernest had looked at his father at that moment. What was it that had been in his eyes? There was pride. A swelling, glowing pride. But there had also been a knowingness. The kind of look that said he had known all along. Ernest remembered smiling back, and how in that moment he wasn't entirely sure who he was looking at. He wasn't so sure he knew his father.

Ernest watched the painting now, in the darkness of his own room. It was lit by the overcast window. He could see the woman in the painting. But he couldn't see her as she was on that day. It became increasingly rare that he had those glimpses. There were days now, when he would brush his fingers to the canvas. He felt the heat of the wind sometimes, just crossing the edge of that barrier. Most times he felt nothing.

The bell rang, loud and obnoxious. He heard the talking in the hallway grow louder in response. The day grew brighter, then again dim. As he got dressed, the woman in the painting seemed so foreign. When he looked at the color, just the color in that dim room, it almost looked like something unoriginal. She was a dark blue, yes. But she was almost like a blue floor tile, or the way sometimes metal is painted in a dark blue. That thought had never struck him before. It did now, in that light.

Days passed.

People said hello and goodbye to Ernest. He heard the bell ring each morning. He looked at his rock, looked at his painting. Each night he watched his father, or the man he thought was his father wave to people at the top of The Spire. He watched from his bare window. Sometimes he hated the wind that came in from it. Sometimes that was all he wanted.

He mixed blue paint at work to create the color Industrial Blue. He tried to mix paints he loved, tried to mix colors someone else would love. He said hello and goodbye to people he lived with. They often asked if he was hungry. He tried smoking a cigarette and decided he hated it. He watched a woman sleep on the train he rode to work. He knew what she was going to wear the next day, because it never changed. And the next day he was right. At work he wanted to be at home, and at home he wanted to be somewhere else. One night he felt like crying, but when he tried to, he couldn't. At work that morning, he sat and ate slowly. He ate for two hours, and then put his head in his hands for another. Paint stained his elbows and the right side of his face. No one said a word to him.

He watched other people live. Empathy became jealousy, and then changed back. The two emotions washed back and forth, back and forth. He watched the fireworks when he walked home sometimes, and other times he walked home too late. "What did it mean," he thought, "to miss something?"

He saw his father's artwork in the sky sometimes. It was always at night. Sometimes it was just a picture. Sometimes it was an advertisement. He wondered how life was in The Spire. He watched gardeners make perfect plants, and sometimes he just wanted to see a tree that was ugly. He broke a small branch on the way to work, and found it fixed on the way back. He read billboards, and advertisements. He smelled food he could afford, and food he couldn't. Both smelled equally good, he decided. He saw a woman being told she couldn't hang her laundry in an alley. He watched her cry. A song he heard someone playing got stuck in his head. He saw a man with a table of food all for himself. He was reading a book.

He got up and watched who rang the bell one morning. Some mornings he did push ups before work. He realized he couldn't do very many. The people he lived with said hello to him, and the hello meant that they wanted to talk to him. Sometimes he talked.

Sometimes the people he lived with just said hello, and it didn't mean anything. Ernest found he didn't want to talk much, but that it was alright if he listened. It became more seldom that he talked, and then more seldom. He listened to Penry talk about stories. He watched Maliko, who often sat in his hammock and wove. Kenneth coughed while he smoked, and coughed while he didn't. He patted Ernest on the back sometimes.

Ernest wanted to sleep. And while he wanted to sleep, he often dreamed of work. Sometimes he watched his ceiling until he was sure he would not dream. Some mornings his own body rebelled and woke him up, or the restaurant across the street

woke him up, or a stray sound in the night woke him up. He held his rock. He looked at the woman in the painting. He looked at the cliffside, the juniper's bones, the sea of trees on the other side of the gorge. He missed his father. He mixed paints to create Industrial Blue.

CHAPTER 10: THE JADE EYED MAN

On the sidewalk, Ernest followed a straight, painted line. He followed it every morning to work. Each day, there was a single deviation. After crossing a certain street he went perpendicular to the line. Him and the line parted ways. It went its direction, he went his. All he had to do was look at the ground.

It was preferable today to look at the ground. Cold wind struck at him, and Ernest found his neck naturally craned down, his arms folded as he walked. Wind whipped at his clothes, his apron. The sky loomed overhead. There was no painted sky today – it was too windy. Without veneer, there was only thick gray-brown clouds and the very faint smell of ozone. Thunder boomed softly in the distance.

The line continued onward, and so did Ernest.. A stray wind, much warmer, seemed to brush Ernest's cheek. Then the wind became bitter.

The doors around the district were tightly shut. Perfectly trimmed trees and unlit lamp posts were the only things standing in the street. There were no gardeners, no people, no cars. Ernest seemed utterly alone.

Bent-necked, he watched how the wind assailed those symmetrical trees. Their green leaves flew off to be carried well beyond him. A doormat, whose corner seemed to eagerly tap, wriggled in the wind. It lilted in front of a closed door, lifted with every chance the wind gave. And then, as if separate, there was that warm breeze again. And what sounded like the first drops of rain.

There was an eerily familiar feeling to it. The sound, the way things felt. A recognition, and a dissonance. Familiarity, but only on the bounds. Ernest waited for the rain to touch his skin, to make him colder. He wrapped his arms around himself

tightly, prepared for water. No first drop came. None did. But the toe of Ernest's foot touched something like grass.

Ernest looked down and stopped. It was rare to see the odd weed poking from the sidewalk. But here was grass, tall and thin. Golden looking, brush-like at the top.

Like an optical illusion, seeing the grass was like seeing the world with one eye covered. There were two images, overlaid with one another. His foot nudged a tall tuft of grass. It looked like wheat. Partially see through, translucent wheat. If he tried, he could see it as a solid object, a real tuft of grass. He followed it with his eyes. There were more patches, growths dotted about him. In fact, they were everywhere. He was standing in the middle of a field, as far as the eye could see, so long as he made out the faint, ghost-like distance.

Underneath it all was the real world—the pumice streets. Ernest stood there, perplexed. It was cold. He kept going, took a step further. The world of fields grew clearer. The bitter wind and the distant storms faded. Ernest stood still again, listened. The wind was only cool now. He could see the yellow grass, wide and tall around him. He was now standing in it.

Above those fields was a clear sky, a low horizon without buildings. No industry was here, no paint-maker's complex. Just the sky. Ernest rubbed his eyes. He felt his clothes and his face. It was all real. *He* was real, and presumably awake. But there was something he wasn't putting together. He looked more closely, at the still-translucent grains of where he stood. There was something indistinct about them – not because he could see through them if he tried – something else. He looked at the little

seed pods at the tip of every strand. They were blowing in the warm wind, knocking against each other. That had been the sound of false rain. Kneeling, he stopped one from moving. Held it in his hand. There he could see its detail. And a prickle of fear touched him. There were small brushstrokes.

This was no illusion, no waking daydream. He had walked halfway into a painting.

Ernest tried to orient himself. He took a cautious step backwards. The fields of wheat grew thicker. The real world became obscured. Unlit lamp posts of the real world stood like tall ghosts, like dark elongated mists. Ernest thought of the stories he had heard regarding people being stuck in paintings. Another step, and Ernest couldn't see buildings in the horizon, or gray clouds. He could no longer feel the cold wind anymore. He thought of a story – someone who had starved in a painting of stones and water. Another step.

Ernest recalled another, a more recent story: someone who had frozen to death in a painting of snow. Ernest racked his brain. How had he walked into a painting? Had there been a sign, any indication? A "don't walk here, your life depends on it" sign? Ernest found his breathing more frantic. Had he walked into someone's unfinished work? Their accident? Maybe it was a new city mural, some kind of graffiti. The old world he had stepped from was now obscured by the new. As the warmer wind blew tall golden grasses, something worse occurred to Ernest.

What if someone had set a trap? Would people be waiting for him? It wasn't unheard of for an artist to be kidnapped. There was always a market for bones. There

might not even be people, if his bones were all they needed. They could just wait. Ernest would dry out. Someone might check after a year had passed, pleased to see something had been caught.

He imagined his bones, dried by the air being collected, then sold. Maybe used to stir paints. Ernest took a last desperate step to the side – he did it quickly, as if he were trying to lose piece of cobweb stuck to his face. He lost his balance. As he fell, any last mirage of the real world faded away.

He caught himself with his hands, his face inside the tangles of wheat. They felt real. Ernest felt them climbing over his head, tickling his ears and his skin. He could see the dark, fresh ground between the stalks. There was a soft wind overhead. It made a gentle rush through the grass.

Ernest turned in circles, around in the same spot, looking for a way out. Like a trapped animal, he moved as if in a small space. He looked at the wide fields, and at the stark sky. Idly, he wondered if these would be the last things he saw before he dried out. Before he died trapped inside of a painting.

There was a kind of tiredness, after the adrenaline had taken its course. Lethargy, after fear no longer served a purpose. Ernest collected his breath, breathed deeply. The sun was lower in the distance, slowly making its way towards the horizon. It would be dusk soon, here in the painting. Morning at home, and here the sun was setting. Towards the sun, there was a kind of elevation, an enormous and ever light sloping of a hill. Ernest walked that way. He dragged his feet through the tall wheat. He shuffled, watched it billow as he climbed. With time, everything seemed to have

more detail, becoming even more solid. He pulled a stalk from the ground as he walked and looked at it. It was real wheat. For a moment, he chewed on the thin end while he walked. It tasted earthy.

There was smoke in the air, a small column in the distance. A little closer, and Ernest could smell it, see it moving with the breeze. Near it were the first and tallest branches of a naked, brown tree. It, too, blew in the wind, solitary and swaying. Ernest marched onward. He could make out a white canvas tent with a little chimney, a small distance from the tree. Closer, and Ernest could make out someone standing in front of the tent. It was a dark-haired man wearing a green and gold robe. He was facing Ernest, as if he were expecting him. But he was also looking down at a table-clothed workbench, concentrating on something.

Ernest moved slowly through the field. His feet ruffled slowly through the grass, cautious. The man seemed not to notice, or maybe he only pretended not to. Ernest came closer. He moved in deliberate spaces, stopping, feeling the air for a moment, and then moving forwards. It was something akin to testing the heat of an object. The man in the green and gold robe never looked up once. He only quietly worked. Soon they were only a few yards away from one another.

The man hummed while he worked. There were small tweezers and little picks on the table. In one spot was a small hammer, flat on one end and pointed on the other. There were spools of wire, all varying thicknesses, and colors, all lustrous. The man seemed engrossed in what he was doing. He hummed a simple, low repeating tune. Then he stopped. His hands paused their tinkering.

“I know you’re there.” The man said. He had a wide, genuine smile, though he still looked down. His voice was kind. It had a silvery, jingling quality, as if he spent long days singing. He looked up at Ernest with bright jade eyes that held a playful, knowing look. He had long black hair, brushed behind his face, and an unkempt, long black beard . His face was marked with the lines of smiling.

“Come and see what I’m working on.” He made a slow gesture with his hand, as if coaxing a bird to eat. Ernest just stood there, as if he were a bird that needed coaxing. The robed man watched him. Those jade eyes seemed to know the paint-maker, who stood awkwardly before him.

“You should let me go.” Ernest said.

The Jade Eyed Man simply smiled. “Are you stuck here? Go.” The man went back to his work, twisting something with one hand, holding something gently with the other.

Ernest cleared his throat, and waited, but the man in robes said nothing. His casualness seemed to suck out any tension.

“I’m supposed to be at work.” He said.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The Jade Eyed Man laughed slightly.

“Please let me leave.” Ernest shuffled his feet. He felt like a child who couldn’t understand something.

“You’re looking for the way out?” The Jade Eyed Man said. He looked confused. He idly tapped a finger to his lips in mock fashion, but he couldn’t hide his smile. “The way out of where? You don’t know *where* you are. You might want to be

here. Or don't you care where you're going? Don't you care about what you want? You do *care* where you're going. Don't you?" The Jade Eyed Man squinted. "I think you're a wanderer. Here is where you're '*supposed* to be.'" He muttered and looked down for a moment. "What about want? What about love?" The Jade Eyed Man was strangely serious now.

Ernest found he wasn't sure what to say.

"Oh come on. Can't you be angry? Can't you be mad at me, at the world? I've trapped you, I've interrupted your work. I've taken everything from you, everything important, haven't I? If you're angry, say yes and somehow, avoided answering your questions. You have something important to do, yes? Don't you want to find the way out? Oh come on Ernest, make me tell you! Say yes!"

"Yes!" Ernest said.

"Yes!" The Jade Eyed Man said it back excitedly. He yelled it out so loud his voice was high, almost androgynous. "Be deliberate Ernest! Deliberate!"

At his sudden loudness, Ernest took a step backwards.

The Jade Eyed Man let out a crack of laughter, not cruel, but it was full and ringing. His green and gold robe shook, and the gold shimmered, and the green billowed.

"Well? What if there is no way out? What if it all just goes on forever?" He gestured to the sea of grass, only broken by the hill and the crooked tree. The Jade Eyed Man couldn't stop smiling. The ghost of his laugh marked his face in familiar lines. The man looked back down, and continued working. He spoke more quietly.

“And here I thought you would want to stay. Ernest, who looks at his feet while he walks. Ernest who can’t sleep, who stares out his window. Ernest who doesn’t know where he wants to be, or what he wants. What are you, a liar? Or are you the only honest man?” He looked at Ernest, who was speechless, mouth open. “Tell me the truth.” He said. “Are you rearing to make more Industrial Blue? Is that honesty to you?”

“I- I don’t know.” Ernest stammered. The man was becoming increasingly difficult to follow.

“You don’t know? You want to leave, but you don’t know why.”

Ernest opened his mouth – it seemed to rarely close at this point – but the Jade Eyed Man held up a hand and tsked.

“Don’t say anything. For a man named Ernest you’re not very *honest*. Be like me. I only say what I believe. That’s truth enough.” The Jade Eyed Man smiled again, the seriousness gone. Then he sighed, and the smile was gone before he spoke again. “The exit is right where you came from. That direction.” He pointed away from his tent. The fields Ernest came from were more stark, more shadowed in the setting sun.

Ernest looked behind him, and back.

The Jade Eyed Man grinned. “That’s *exactly* where it is Or don’t you see it?” He looked up and down, mimicking appraisal. “It’s just that you’ve hardly moved. You’re still standing in the door, I think.” He said it like a joke, as if it were obvious. “No, I think you would have to walk backwards. I might even have to hold your hand. And that would be cruel. To me. My hands are awfully busy.”

Ernest, for the first time, looked closely at what the man was doing. In between the man's fingers was a butterfly on the table. Only it looked completely metallic.It was a light silver on its fringes. Everywhere else it was a lined, shimmering blue. The man was fiddling with an antenna. The butterfly moved slightly as he prodded, trying to get away. The man had to keep repositioning his hands, gently scooping the creature, putting it back into place. Ernest leaned in closer.

"I started with the cuckoo wasp." The Jade Eyed Man said. "It was the very first of my projects. Thousands of years, millions of years it went unchanged. The cuckoo wasp was perfect; a living, shining fossil. It was primal." The man had a sing song quality as he talked. "And it was brutal. It was small. Unassuming for such a beautiful color. And color was the only reason I had ever noticed it. Because it drew me in. It was only afterwards that I noticed how cruel it was. Cruel to its pray. Necessary to its survival. "The man paused briefly. "But beautiful. I'd spent so long here." He looked at Ernest. "I'd lost track of the years, the days. But I still remember what it was like…" He seemed to drift off. "What it was like when I realized that they were all gone. A blink of my eye, and they had gone extinct. And I should have noticed – but I had become bizarrely complacent here. At home."

The Jade Eyed Man breathed deeply. His green-gold clothes, blowing slightly, seemed to breathe also. "In a way they had left with the changing of the world. They had no place. It is not a *primal* world any longer. They had no place." The antennae seemed to stick to the silver-blue creature. The Jade Eyed Man watched the butterfly

very closely, face almost touching the table. “Jewel wasps. They were also called jewel wasps. Let me show you.”

The Jade Eyed Man let the butterfly crawl from the crook of his hands. It rested on the table, fluttering. Then crawled very slowly, as if in no hurry. The man went inside his tent, and Ernest found his eyes followed him. Inside the tent there was a wood stove with a fire, and a small flame lantern hanging from the ceiling. Sunlight colored the canvas slightly orange on the inside. Ernest was sure that he saw a man lying down inside the tent, breathing. Ernest leaned closer towards the tent, put his hands on the table.

There were shelves, too. Bottles and books and drawers were on them. It looked like the Jade Eyed Man was searching for something, pulling out drawers and books, lifting things on another table just out of sight. The Jade Eyed Man stepped around the man sleeping on the floor. He tiptoed, while he moved things and put them back down. He did this all very carefully, so as not to wake the man up.

Ernest felt the butterfly crawl onto his hand. He jerked his arm in surprise, but the butterfly clung to it, making an audible sound as it fluttered. Its wings had a remarkable force to them. The wings slowed. The creature relaxed and ventured up his wrist. Ernest brought it towards his face.

It was extraordinary. The blue color was striking, almost purple at some angles. And the silver lining around its wings caught the setting sunlight. Ernest couldn’t believe his eyes. The creature was entirely metal. It held a lingering heat from being cupped in the man’s palms.

The Jade Eyed Man came back carrying something on his finger. His robes flourished as he walked. “Weren’t they beautiful?” He smiled. He breathed in and almost whispered. “The Blue Xerces.”

Ernest held the butterfly carefully. He found himself laughing. “I-I’ve never held a butterfly before.” There was something thrilling in the realization, knowing he held something alive. The creature inched and beat its wings slowly. They glinted.

“Named after royalty.” The Jade Eyed Man said. That’s what they imagined when they named it. That it was wearing something sacred. Something rare and sovereign.” The man paused. “They went extinct not so long ago.” His eyes were distant. “But like I said, the cuckoo wasp.” He raised his finger towards Ernest. On it crawled a blue-green wasp, fairly large. It was lithe in the way it moved.

“I imagined for a long time,” the man said, “how I would bring them back. It never occurred to me that, since the first time I saw them, I had made up my mind. It was a new world now. And so I made them new. I made them, to my eyes, better. The Jade Eyed Man gestured with his hands and laughed.

“I’d been here so long! So, so long! And the things I found when I left. I thought I couldn’t be surprised! There was so much to love. So much to the world. And it was like I blinked and there was so little of it left. What was left, I hated.” The Jade Eyed Man, for a moment, let his mouth rest. “It wasn’t long before I looked to the art. Until I saw the artistry of the world. I saw the very first precursors, the very beginnings to real art. It was a crying out. They were the symptoms of a terminal world. The beautiful and precious final heartbeats.”

The Jade Eyed Man held the jewel wasp close to him. He looked like he might cry. With a motion, before Ernest could stop him, he put the wasp into Ernest's hand, right next to the butterfly. The Jade Eyed Man grinned like a child.

The wasp seemed to regard Ernest, as if it was smelling him, taking him in. It's wings flicked slightly, but it rested, unmoving. Its thorax pulsed. It, too, was made of metal. Ernest looked at the brilliant, blue-green color. One part of Ernest told him to drop what he was holding: it was, without a doubt, dangerous. But another thought was stronger. It told him to never let it go. That it was the most precious thing he had ever held in his life.

Jade Eyed Man spoke. "The poets, the painters, the curious, they had all felt it. I could feel the way they itched. I learned the poets had all tired of form. They broke their forms like clay jars. To them this was new, but hey were going back to something much older. They were going back to the words themselves. They were testing the fundamental things they knew, because what was known had become complex, transitory. The forms had no point. There was no language within the language, and so they were forced to go backwards, to regress. They were testing the shape of things."

"The painters began speaking only with color, the sculptors in shapes, all in an effort to communicate the things they could no longer speak. The things they had lost. And I looked at this new world that had bent everything towards itself. Like a lodestone attracting the things that broke it. I could see everything the world wanted.

No matter how it lied to itself, about grandeur and advancement. It's desires were old, even in their refinement they were old."

"It was a world buried underneath its own crust. Its problem was its own gap — a precipice between idea and execution. It was the problem of the artist – desiring something so greatly and being unable to produce it. What an articulation of mankind, so unable to do, that art seeped from its cracks. There appeared artistry! Wonderful artistry like tears. You had choked it out of yourselves by accident. Excess, even of art, was your world's final gasp for oxygen, the last attempt to cross that huge and arduous gap. And it was all instinct; the thrashing of a body as it is dying. Your world was in its throes of death. And so it dreamed." The Jade Eyed Man looked towards the horizon, towards the preclusion of dusk, the sun to his back.

"I started with the thing I missed the most. The small cuckoo wasp." He pointed. Then the Jade Eyed Man moved his hands idly. "Only," he said slowly, "if I was going to make them metal, metal for this newer metal world, why not take more liberties? Why not create the creature I had always seen and imagined? So I made them larger. I made them more beautiful, and strong. I gave them anger. And judgment. And understanding and selves. I told them who they were, what they had been. I told them what had been taken from them, and who had done it. And after I had whispered to them, I let them all go. I let them out into the world." The Jade Eyed Man held out his hand, and the jewel wasp flew back to him.

"But you kept that one?" Ernest asked.

The Jade Eyed Man let the question hang. “No.” He watched the sky. “It came back to me. It told me it was alone – that the rest were gone. That what I had created was trapped and hurt. And I learned they had hurt someone. Someone who was only fascinated.” The Jade Eyed Man looked behind him, at the man breathing in the tent. He was a rising and falling silhouette. The gentle wind seemed to make the canvas breathe with him.

The Jade Eyed Man looked at Ernest. “The wasps were the most honest thing I’ve created.” They both looked at the bare tree, at the top of the hill. “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done Ernest?”

It was asked so casually, but the question caught in both of them something sober. Ernest thought as he looked at the tree, at its bare branches, how it shook in the gentle breeze. He wasn’t sure if it was dead, or simply resting. Both seemed to be a form of peace. The sun was behind it now, and its orange light seemed to illuminate the naked branches in a circular pattern. It was like looking through a spider’s web.

He took a deep breath, and the words seemed much harder to say. He kept his eyes towards the branches of that tree, but he felt the jade pair of eyes on him. “I never said goodbye to my father. I never said it in person.” The wind blew through the wheat. “I knew how important it was, how much art meant to my father. What an invitation from The Spire meant. I was old enough then to know this was what he had always wanted. He had always wanted to leave fotr the spire. And I-” Ernest swallowed. His mouth felt dry, talking to this stranger. “I *knew* how much it meant to him. We’d always both hoped he would get that letter. And when it arrived I knew the

choice he would make. It was his dream come true." The butterfly made its way up his arm. Ernest looked down to watch, grateful for it. "I just stood there, and watched when they came to pick him up, to take him to The Spire. As he was leaving, he said he would wait for me. That I would get my own letter someday." Ernest found it harder to swallow. "I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to make him *understand*. They never send letters to the paint makers. That I would never go where he was going. And I think he would have listened to me – if I had yelled at him. If I told him how angry I was that he was leaving. He might have stayed." Ernest looked at the Jade Eyed Man. "Now just I wish I had told him goodbye."

The Jade Eyed Man stared into the distance. "I don't know if this is the worst thing I've ever done," he said, looking at the jewel wasp. "I created something that suffers. But I had a right to do it. A right to be angry. The world is dying." He took a deep breath. "And no one has ever taken the side of the cuckoo wasps. Or the butterflies. Or the weevils, the mayflies, the orb weavers. They were all stepped on. Forgotten. Paved over with pumice and industry. With *metal*. I think the worst thing I could do is stop. I think I'll keep creating, even if it ruins the world. I have a right to be selfish. Thousands of life-forms predicated on violence and I feel sorrow for one. We are consumers. We are like the whales, who eat thousands upon thousands krill. A million lives in a bite. Why shouldn't I be selfish, when all I want is to bring back the world I fell in love with? I'll make it better. I'll bring back every swallowtail, every monarch, every ant and beetle. I'll bring back the moths and the millipedes, the dragonflies, the scarabs, the lantern flies, all of it. I'll bring them all back from

extinction. There's a dead world past the painted skies, Ernest. What I'm creating will thrive long after me, after us. I will resurrect the world in shimmering green. And if I have to, I will bring it back with teeth."

The man in the tent stirred. The wood stove inside the tent burned low, and maybe the first of a cold wind blew over the fields of wheat. The lantern only seemed to burn brighter, in what was now dusk. The sun only peaked over the horizon, scattering into the dark blue.

The Jade Eyed Man spoke softly. "You could stay here. If you wanted."

"I'm not sure I understand what here is."

"Or what you want?"

"Or what I want." Ernest admitted. He looked past the Jade Eyed Man. And started to walk beyond the tent. "What's past the tree?"

"The point of no return. Truthfully."

Ernest stopped walking.

"Go home, Ernest. Go where you need to be."

Ernest breathed deeply. He was still inside of a painting. "What's out there?" He asked.

The Jade eyed man only laughed. It was rich and bitter like long sleep. "Do I seem like the kind of man to paint infinite grass? Goodbye Ernest. Take the butterfly with you." The man walked into the tent. "The exit is where you were," he said as the pinned fabric fell, and the tent closed.

Ernest was left in a dark, gradually blue world. The wheat around whispered. He stood by the white-tableclothed bench, the tools left out in the weather, alone now. The butterfly climbed on his shoulder. Ernest walked into the fields. How long he walked, he didn't know.

In a way, it was like he woke from a dream. It was that sudden. He was standing in an alley. The sky was a thick, deep red line above him, between the pumice buildings he stood between. It was unpainted, a real sky, red with low clouds, and a steady wind. There was a strong smell of smoke in the air. A siren truck wailed quietly in the distance. It was humid, a scar that lingered in the air from the rain. Ernest watched the butterfly take off. It flittered down the alley. He followed the Blue Xerces, as it explored its new world.

The butterfly landed on a closed dumpster, wings beating, resting. It's proboscis scratched at the paint of the dumpster, trying to get to the metal underneath. Ernest watched in wonder. It was painted with industrial blue, he realized.

He goaded the butterfly onto his hand, and with a heave, lifted the lid. The dumpster was unpainted underneath, corroded slightly on the inside. He set the butterfly back down onto the unpainted metal, and observed it, how it seemed to taste the surface, to, bizarrely, drink it in.

He almost walked away. Almost went home. But something caught his eye. It was something dripping out of the dumpster, some flash of color. It was leaking out of a corner. Ernest looked at it closely, at the color dripping through onto uneven pumice alley. The liquid pooled into something still, in between drops. Ernest looked closely

at it. It was the color of gold autumn leaves. It was his own paint. The words seemed to repeat in his mind. *It was his own paint*. He had created it. Only now it swirled with some foul juice, dripping out of the dumpster.

Ernest inspected the rusted corner of the dumpster. And then he found himself climbing over the edge. Something was wrong. He had been *prompted* to create it. The Blue Xerces danced out of his way. Ernest felt a kind of frantic sickness taking him over. The brass panel of his workstation sent the prompts. Ernest followed them. The paint went… somewhere under his desk.

Black and heavy plastic bags were under his feet. They crinkled and squished with an odd music, like the sounds of mud and glass being together, pressed. The bags were difficult to move. Ernest's hands struggled to find purchase as he moved them out of the way. There was the bag, leaking a fine yellow,— a liquid window to an autumn world. He tore it open. It was full of vials. Beautiful paints, colors assaulted his eyes. They were mixed with refuse. Still, even through it, the colors were all vibrant, and unique in some way. There were some he had never seen before. Beautiful colors. But he recognized more. There was a pink dusk he had created. That was his. And there was the color of a crystal red wine, now dirty in its bottle, with something gummy stuck to the side. He felt the other bags. They all made the same sound. Trash mixed with glass. He tore another open. And another. They were all filled with vials of paint. There were hundreds. He wanted to scoop them all up, to wash them off. To, at the very least, see them all. To say goodbye.

He stopped when he found another he recognized. It was a black paint, full of stars. He took the jar gently in his fingers, unsure if he really saw what he was looking at. It was his own paint. The constellations of the night sky. Thrown into the garbage.

Ernest put the jar down. He climbed out of the dumpster, numb. His hands were cold with a wet dirtiness. So were most of his clothes. He stood there. Watching. The sky was dark with the coming nighttime. It was still too windy for a painted sky. It was a fluke to have this strong of wind. It had a kind of chemical smell – and there was no stark color to the night. Only a musky brown that seemed to glow slightly. As if nighttime would never come. The butterfly was gone. Ernest walked out of the alley disheveled. He might have walked for a whole hour, wandering. He found a blue line on the ground. It went straight, in a single direction. Ernest walked back to the dumpster.

CHAPTER 11: THE LAST OF ITS KIND

I think for most of us, especially in times of stress, there becomes a kind of internal brewing. Then, there comes a critical moment. The wind blows, the dust stirs. Gears begin to move, or the leaves stir. A scrap of paper falls to the floor, revealing some hidden or forgotten word. It all amounts to the same thing — a kind of epiphany. Self-discovery, but that's putting it lightly. Is there a word for it? For a breaking *away* from apathy? Or does that even begin to describe it? How overdetermined it is, this numinous thing, to describe when the hold of inertia shatters.

This was happening to Irving. That thing was building in him. Slowly it crept into him each day in the underground district. In the darkness. At work. You may have already noticed this, but here I am spelling it out, partly because it is easy to misunderstand this emotion for something like frustration, like anger. But maybe that's just how it always starts. Through the anger, through the heat of the body, the roiling refusal of the stomach to *just* accept things. And why should it? It is only when the anger burns out, when we finally ask, "what is left?" That's the moment.

Irving stopped next to a statue, half-sunken into the floor. It was a woman in rags, pulling up at her own arm. The very muscles of the statue worked, as she wrestled with her own body, her own gravity. Both of her feet and one of her hands were wrapped inside the perfectly flat stone floor, as if she were made within the foundation.

There was so much in the face, the expression. She looked as if she was going to cry, and scream out, or as if she was ready to bite the air in vain. She was almost on all fours, a result of her being absorbed into the ground. An animal is what she was

becoming, or something very near to it. Close to it was the statue's title on a plain wooden plaque: "You."

Irving was prepared for disappointment. He was prepared for the gift shop he had passed by near the entrance, the small paper cranes and airplanes that flitted to and from it. It was designed to attract, to mystify. The glittering carved stones in its windows, the hardcover books, art supplies, bright paints. But in a way it felt like a small piece of the underground. Like one of the colorful lights that could hardly illuminate except to cast color onto what was near it. Of course, there were always gift shops in museums. Weren't there? And yet, the more Irving saw, the more he felt this gift shop was inappropriate.

There were rows upon rows of sunken statues. That they were static was oddly refreshing. Some laughed, some cried, worked, got dressed, appeared in uninterrupted trance and deep thought. All were completely still, unanimated. Wasn't the world too full of movement? Here was a corner of the world that stood still. These remnants of that section of time, of paralysis were sinking, lithifying, dropping down into the earth. The older art forms, the statues seemed to ask, how could they ever compete? And yet they were. Their presence at the museum was an argument, wasn't it? Or, Irving wondered, was presence a misinterpretation. Was it relegation?

A source of noise came from under one of the museum's staircases, where a small crowd watched the creation of a statue. Behind velvet ropes, they watched an elderly man sculpt carefully. Masterfully, thoughtfully, the man moved his hands, unmindful of the noise of talking and whispering visitors, of the constantly jostled,

jangling barrier. The artist was lost in his work. Dark brass oxides covered his fingers. Marks of his hands touched his face and his hair, tornado grays of involuntary scratching, of concentration.

The man worked metal like clay. Next to him was a bucket of brass scraps, and he reached into them, letting the pieces bang and trinkle against one another. Sitting on an overturned bucket, he pulled nails, hinges, old picture frames from the scraps. Working them in his palms like a strong man squeezing wax, the metal became soft, receptive to the artist's will.

The commotion seemed not to be that people were eager to see what he could create, but rather at the instinct he showed at melting metal in his palms. And it was satisfying to watch. He seemed to rub color into old metal, making it shine.

Irving watched as the artist's impression become more defined. Wrinkles began to appear on the statue's clothing, subtly on skin. A brass arm slowly made its way towards the complacent, all too accepting face of the statue.

As Irving watched, he listened, too. People asked questions like "what does the metal feel like," and "why brass? Why not something else?" If the artist felt like acknowledging, he would point to the plaque, or would say flatly, "read." But the plaque read very little. It only read the statue's title: "The Last of its Kind." The spectators around Irving seemed unsatisfied at the perpetual riddles and non-answers. But they were happy enough to watch the process. Only one person seemed unable to lend their attention: a boy with something in his hands. To Irving, the toy looked like a

sandstorm in a marble, some trinket from the gift shop. It fit between his thumb and forefinger. It held the boy transfixed.

It was while rolling the statue's brass cigarette, that the artist spoke truly for the first and only time. "Why don't I make them sunk already?" He spoke like a man hard of hearing. "That's what you asked, isn't it?"

The gathering almost went silent at his voice, ready for the answer to the riddle. There were a few hushes, and the little girl who had asked clammed up. She could only nod. The artist nodded back.

"Why don't I make them sunk already? If I'm going to push them into the floor when I'm finished?" He said it more quietly, as if to himself. Marking his face with brass dust, he touched his lips idly. With the other hand, he mushed the metal cigarette, preparing to start it over. Finally, he spoke, rolling it again like a pencil between his palms. "Nobody knows when they're going to start sinking." He said. His thumbs squished the ends of the brass, making it into a cylinder. The small details of it, like the drooping ash, came quick. It was almost automatic, like afterthoughts, or the way ink spreads when dropped into water. The artist stood to press it into the statue's waiting fingers, and he spoke again through the now whispering, impatient crowd. "Nobody knows when they're going to start sinking. But some are guessing." He seemed to realize he had marked his lips with oxides. "Some are guessing."

Irving didn't wait until the statue was finished. He had seen enough to understand. But maybe it was also something about the crowd that had prickled at him. Their casual indifference. Perhaps that was why he moved on. He found it odd

how eager he was to draw differences between himself and the crowd. That *they* couldn't have seen what he did. *What do I know?* Irving found himself thinking. *What do I know?* Out loud, or on the outside, Irving shook his head.

There were more statues. Some, but not all of them, were still. Completely unanimated. As Irving moved away from the sunken statues exhibit, he found a wide range of artists and styles. Still, he though he did notice a kind of pattern. Most things among the statues, if they ever moved, were slow. One was a featureless saxophone player, that gave low sonorous tones you could only hear up close. Irving found himself leaning towards it, ever closer, until his ear touched it and felt the cool metal. And the sound, it was the perfect space of a breath, turned into music. Eventually Irving found himself alone in the exhibit of the statues.

There was a large glass dome full of small clay figures. The plaque beneath it described how the artist who made them claimed a purposeful intelligence, an awareness of themselves as "the creatures inside the dome." Irving waved to one, and it waved back. Then it turned and sat away from him. The rest paced, or slept, all rhythmic or robotic. All, he couldn't help but imagine, looked tired.

"Of course," the plaque read, "art, or constructs rather, cannot be intelligent and conscious. As we are leaping in the bounds of science, the closer we are to understanding that the conscious is a specific arrangement of matter. Here, though the artist may disagree, is an illusion. With nothing close to a specific arrangement, these figures are through and through *clay*. They are instead a mirror of the conscious, as

many propose artistry to be, but not an independent one. Not, as we taxonomize, an alive one."

- The Brine Family Foundation

Later, Irving saw a man of twisted wires running in place on a belt. The running powered things around him. A lightbulb, spinning gears, a circle of elastic cable, a capacitor that rhythmically generated a sound and a flash of light. *Snap. Snap. Snap.*

It was easy to become lost. A turn around a corner and Irving was reading the poetry. The statues were all gone and it was only the words – words carved, or painted, displayed on pedestals or on walls. Words painstakingly written and chosen. There was an odd and easy quality to the displays of words that made the poems almost trancelike. Irving wasn't even sure what a poem was exactly. But it was as if while reading them, his vision was overlaid, the same way one forgets where they're looking in a daydream. They were words of reverie.

That was the only way he could describe it. Like someone had taken his shoulders and turned his head for him, and while reading, made him watch the undersides of leaves in the sun, or hear music, or recall foreign experiences as if they were his own. It bears repeating, as if they were his own. He found himself reading the plaques of poetry over and over. Not for the images, he realized, but for their complexity, the subtle emotions. It took moments for him to realize the poem of the undersides of leaves, that what fascinated him, was that it was tinged with something like worry, about thoughts of tomorrow's work.

"What is tomorrow

to the glowing stoma

of the leaves?"

One poem was called "The Things They've Taken." The poem was only one or two words. It was hard to tell which. Each time Irving looked at it, it appeared like a different word, or like it always had been a different word. He couldn't stop staring at. Each time he blinked it looked like something else. For a while it looked like maybe the word "home," or "held" or even something like "I'm cold." He blinked his eyes and read. He did it again. And then there was a moment where the words snapped into place and the answer, if it could be called an answer, was his mother's name, "Helena."

Irving felt goosebumps. It was like an emotion had crawled into him, cheaply and beautifully. In a way it was underhanded, like a punch to the stomach. He stared at her name, at the title. "The Things They've Taken." He felt like he could cry if he wanted to. If he let himself. But in his peripheral vision, someone was staring at him.

"Sorry," Irving said. He cleared his throat and sniffed. "I'm done reading it. You're welcome to it." He made a gesture, but the woman kept staring at him. A work jumper had its sleeves tied around her waist. Her dark hair was in a bun.

"No, no." She said. "I mean I was going to read it, but you just look familiar. You're an inspector?"

Irving spoke slowly. “I am.” Dear God, had work followed him here, even? He had purposely changed out of his uniform *before* coming here. Irving instinctively reached for his notepad and stopped himself. “Do I know you?” He asked

“No, but I think we’ve met. Actually I’m pretty sure we have now. I mean I saw you, but you didn’t see me. You were in a suit that was too small. Well, not a *suit* suit. And well, you did see me, but I was wearing this, this…” She made a gesture as if she were pregnant. “At a refinery?”

There was a moment. Then an “ohh” escaped Irving’s mouth and he began to nod. He did recognize her. Was it her voice? Her mannerisms? “You were a scribe.” Irving remembered. She went on about everything *but* the questions he asked. She worked at the refinery. “Wearing that white suit of yours?” He continued. “Like a rubber-porcelain mummy. I remember that.” She laughed at that. There was a rich genuineness to it he hadn’t expected.

“It’s actually sitting in my sister’s car right now. We keep it in the trunk because not only does it look like a dead body but it, it, well it…”

Irving raised his eyebrows.

“Well, it smells. Honestly, it zips open and after a day of… I’ll just leave it at that. Anyways I’m just surprised. I mean I never thought I’d see anyone from the industrial district at the museum. Not that you couldn’t afford the tickets or anything. I don’t know. *Or* that you live in the industrial district. The only reason I’m here is because my sister gets in for free. I’m her plus one.”

“Your sister’s an artist?” Irving felt like he might be rude for asking, but she just nodded.

“Yeah, she’s the real deal.” She spoke in a kind of sing-song. “I’m just a poor lowly scribe, searching for pennies. Anyways, here I am talking about work stuff. I’m actually looking for her at the moment. Have you seen her? She looks like me but with her hair down. And not wearing work clothes. Obviously.”

“No, no I haven’t.” Irving watched her look around. She seemed easily distracted. Her eyes seemed to catch on everything and nothing. She let her eyes rest on the poem next to Irving.

“That’s funny.” She said. “The poem just says my sister’s name. What does it say for you? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“It has my mother’s name. Helena.”

“She’s not lost at the museum is she?” The woman laughed by herself and then, maybe reading the title cleared her throat. “Well.” She said after a moment. “It was nice meeting you..?” She drew out the word.

“Irving.”

“Monroe.” She smiled. “I’ll leave you be. I’m off to go steal my sister’s peace and quiet.”

She had already started walking when Irving spoke quickly, “Wait. If you don’t mind. I was looking for the mosaics. I’ve never been here but this place is.. well it’s larger than I thought. I was hoping you might know?”

“Only the veterans know about the mosaics.” She joked. “They’re tucked away on the third floor. Where all the stained glass is. Kind of near the abstract geometry works.” She pointed and walked away.

“Right, right.”

There must have been something in Irving’s voice because she put her hands in her pockets. Then she did a kind of turnaround on the balls of her feet. “You know, I could just show you if you want. I’m not really in a hurry. My sister might be on the third floor, who knows.”

Irving thought of ways to extricate himself. “No, you don’t have to do that. Really.”

“It’s not a big deal for me. You said you’ve never been? Say the word. I’ll give you the whole tour.”

There was something about the way she said it. Like she was laughing again. There was a short back and forth, and Irving, not sure who he had woken up as that morning, took a long breath and said “Alright. If you’re *sure* it’s not a big deal.”

She shook her head. “Not a big deal.”

*“*Monroe, was it?”

She nodded, lips tight.

“Alright, give me the tour. Lead the way.” She beamed back at him. Irving found himself putting his hands in his own pockets. He walked next to her, if a little behind her, up the stairs of the museum.

CHAPTER 12: THE BLINDFOLD

Dr. Brine made his way out of the facility, pushing the blindfolded woman in the wheelchair. He made his way past the numbered doors, and the white lights, and the eggshell painted floors and concrete. He moved faster. Faster, until he felt like it was impossible to stop. When the walls approached, he closed his eyes, ducked his head, and met them. There was a quiet within the walls, as if pushing through mists. And then he was outside.

He relished the cold. He and the woman were past the walls, in the shade between buildings. Dr. Brine snapped his fingers. His white uniform became black and neat. His clothes became a suit. What was it made of? Pure carbon? The shadows of the alley he stood in? He couldn't help but smile. Dr. Brine looked down at Francine, who in the thrill of the moment, he had forgotten. All she had was a light blue gown, open in the back. Hunched, the woman drew the garment around her with one arm. Dr. Brine reached down and touched the hem of it. Its shape began to blister. It became something long and soft, something far more comfortable. From the edges inwards, the fabric, in a moment, folded and expanded and wrapped around her gently into something velvet. Another trace of his fingers, and the pale blue of the cloth became white and gold, like a burning candle of pale wax. He took a moment to see what he had done. Satisfied, he wrapped his fingers around the handles of the wheelchair and began to push. Slowly, he began to regain that speed.

Dr. Brine hadn't grown up with any siblings. It was just him and his father. But pushing Francine in the wheelchair, transforming what she wore, he felt like this might have been what it was like. He had always wanted someone to show things to. The

Spire was interesting, but there was no one to show things, no one to surprise, no moments like *this*. To Francine, he could show freedom and the outside, or how good it felt in cold air to see one's own breath, just barely. Oh the sky was unvarnished and unpainted — far too windy a day, but who cared, that was perfect. That was perfect, he would show her. He would take off her blindfold, and she would see the vaguely brown wisp clouds, the gold-flecked dark buildings and streets beneath – wasn't that all beautiful? Isn't that what it was? Utterly? She would see that it was beautiful.

They made turn after turn, and he let the wheelchair accelerate with its own volition. The metal ring of blue and green touched the handle of Francine's wheelchair. Here was a corner and there was a street, an upward lilt, the sudden dimness of a balcony overhead, the feel of a strong headlong breeze. Quickly they all passed. Dr. Brine never stopped. He couldn't. The sun was almost beneath the building horizon. Dr. Brine took in the colors. He felt his ring and ran with it. And when he arrived, he stood there. He caught his breath.

At the museum, the sun was behind the tall frame of the building. The red-orange light of the evening just grazed over the top. There were lit lamps in the museum's shadow. The marble steps, stark against the pumice ground, seemed like the underside of a great cumulonimbus, an intensely shadowed white. Illumination reached outwards from the windows. A couple strode arm in arm, leaving behind the museum's silhouette, and the red of the sky beyond it. And their steps, did they know? Their steps were synchronized, though they faced forwards together, never looking down.

That was beautiful, thought Dr. Brine. The people, and this city with unpainted skies that, momentarily, he shared with her.

"This museum," he said, heart still beating, "is the most beautiful thing my family owns. More beautiful I think, than the Spire." He rested his elbows on the handles of the wheelchair and caught his breath, leaning over behind her. He closed his eyes and absorbed the moment. He imagined the building under her gaze, how it would look soon.

"Do you know what has always drawn me here?" He waited. "The sheer potential of such a thing. An art museum may be filled with anything. It is pure potential. And in many ways, potential is far greater than the real, far better than the actual. It is the fulcrum of the world." The sky was an aching, wounded red.

"A place to be filled with anything. Look how quickly that novelty fades. So few visitors." The woman in the wheelchair, still blindfolded, said nothing. Dr. Brine took it as an affirmation. "The museum is abandoned. Potential it was. Potential it stayed." He took a short breath. "My father told me this museum, what should be our most prime asset, has been a loss through and through. He called it 'an overgrown weed.' That is the closest I've ever heard him speak to poetry. An overgrown weed. I think those words bear repeating.." Dr Brine looked at his hands, at the ring on his finger. Slowly, he began to untie the woman's blindfold.

"He asked me to curate what we have – to cull the museum." Brine pulled at the fabric. "At first I thought, how do you cull a weed? You don't cull weeds. You cull something too long unpruned. But sometimes I just like disagreeing with my father.

I've even realized that. But to call it a weed implies discernment. A weed might be the same thing as a vegetable. It is a term of taste. Of preference." The woman beneath him began to shiver in the cold.

"I was up in the Spire a few weeks ago. I'm not supposed to talk about the inside, but I'll tell you anyways. It's supposed to be full of beauty. A lifetime's worth to get lost in. Sometimes while I think, I 'll just walk around and watch the artists. To see them work. My father likes to say that 'art thrives in constraint.' And for a long time I think I believed that. And yes, the artists make the most incredible, most striking paintings, and the night's gentle fireworks, and the painted skies, yes, yes. The 'best, most unique art in the world.' But it's grown familiar to me. Sometimes now I watch how Brandus twists his brush in the air to make clouds, or how Holloway touches the canvas. It feels predictable. Holloway who only paints his son. Holloway who should have died. I think sometimes I feel sad watching them. Artists who can never leave. Instead," Dr. Brine paused.

"Instead, the other day, I found myself watching a janitor. I watched how he cleaned the floor – how he moved when he thought no one was watching him. I mean the Spire is spotless. I'm not even sure it needs to be cleaned. It's the cleanest place I've ever lived, ever been. So I never even knew we had janitors. I thought that was a funny thing." He scratched his nose. "It had never crossed my mind. So I watched him sweep while I pretended I was busy writing something down. I watched him moving, dancing in a kind of way. And then he stopped for a moment to pick something up. It was a cigarette butt *indoors*, who knows how it got there, or why it was in a corner. He

stopped to pick it up, inspected it, and threw it away in his little bin. It was strangely beautiful, all of it. I had never actually *watched* someone sweep before. I thought, who was this man hidden in plain sight? Here he was, trapped with the artists. I knew he wouldn't be able to leave the Spire. So what were the things he found? Things dried out, things burned. Things forgotten." Brine leaned over her. "It made me think of you."

Francine was bent forwards in the wheelchair, one arm clutched over her long velvet dress, her blindfold half untied. Her other arm rested limp. Dr. Brine put his hands on her shoulders. "I thought of you. *Specifically* you." He said. "I thought, of all things at my disposal, what is forgotten? What would best take care of my wild tree, of this weed growing that I should cull? And suddenly it came to me. I thought, the hidden thing burned. The half-cigarette on my floor. I remembered a woman I had read about in the news. 'The Burner.' The woman who immolated an entire cafe in late June when I was just a teenager."

"People thought you were evil. But very few, very few people like me understand what you see, what you accomplish with your artistry, if you even know what it is you're doing. I think it's instinctual. What you do *must* be beautiful. And it was like the world spoke to me. Find that woman. She'll know what's beautiful. That's what I thought."

They sat for a moment in silence. Dr. Brine seemed to listen to his own words, to weigh them. "Potential," he said aloud. Then, internally approving, he pulled off the blindfold.

The Burner blinked at the world. She stared blankly at the embers of it, pulling behind the museum, the hidden horizon behind it. She breathed in deeply. She felt the wind on her face. Then she looked away slowly. She did this until her neck, in a way that was almost relaxed, hung in a kind of crook. It looked uncomfortable. Her face angled towards the ground.

Dr. Brine tried to move her head back. Gently at first. But she kept looking down, over and over. He forced her head forwards. Then she fought him. She wasn't very strong. "What are you doing?" He said through his teeth. He let go, realizing he was drawing eyes. He wiped his hands on his pants, then rested them on her shoulders and smiled. People turned around with passing looks as they walked by. Many faces looked to the sky.

The Burner still hung her head almost backwards towards the sidewalk. Why was she fighting him? Dr. Brine wondered. Was the sun too bright? Or not bright enough? Had it fallen too far past the horizon? This moment, he felt more and more, was a moment passing. Maybe it was already gone. He looked up at the sky in troubled thought. Maybe in desperation.

What would he have to do if she didn't look at the museum? If she didn't find it beautiful? Would he bring her back to the facility, wait for another day? He had felt deep down in his gut that today was special. He would get to watch something fall, something be ground into dust. He would see again how the janitor danced. Francine, the Burner, was his perfect filament. So what was she doing?

The Burner was looking at something. In a small gap of the sidewalk, there had been something growing. Something the gardeners of the city had missed. Now, whatever it was, it had become dark and shriveled. It trailed a finger of smoke. Carefully, Dr. Brine picked it up. What had it been, a dandelion? He turned it in his fingers. It was a thin, black thing now. She was more interested in the dandelions. He watched it crumble in his fingers, watched it break apart in the cold wind. Brine was left looking at his empty palm. There was a smudge of ash charcoal that dirtied his palm now. And there was the ring on his finger. The ring of blue-green metal.

Below him, Francine had her eyes closed. She murmured something under her breath, but it was hard to hear and hard to listen. She might have been talking about weeds. Dr. Brine looked again at his hand. He had never considered taking off his own ring and giving it away. But what would it do for a woman like Francine? For the Burner? He didn't want to take it off. It was like everything he loved, everything he was ever curious about was wound around and around inside of it, inside that ring, that strange and beautiful metal. It had let him see the little things of the world. But this woman, fascinated with what grew between sidewalks – what would happen if he put it on her? He almost couldn't finish the thought. *If* he put it on her… what would happen? Would she see the things that he saw? Dr. Brine found his fingers tracing his lips. The moment was passing. He could put it on her finger, coax her to open her eyes. He felt that it would work. And after a moment, he was sure it would. It was as if he had unconsciously prayed to the metal and had received an answer.

He took it off his finger and held it in his palm. How strange. How strange and beautiful it was. That was how it made the world. He would give it to her. For a moment. Then he would take it back.

CHAPTER 13: MELTING POINT

"I'm just surprised." Irving said, almost laughing. "Of all the pieces, you don't have anything to say about this one?"

"Not particularly." Monroe seemed to look around the room.

They stood in front of a stained-glass window. Monroe had her arms crossed. She watched Irving for a moment. She was watching how he took in the window for the first time. She had seen it before. She hadn't seen him see it.

"Layers of the Earth." Irving read aloud.

Colors of red came in through the stained glass, enriched by the late sun. Only the lowest layer was illuminated. The glass skies were dark, the grasses were dark. The earth below the grass was dark. Only the lowest layer, the underworld, was illuminated. The whole of it was, by this time of day, like a garnet held to the light. The day's embers found their focus at the bottom of the stained-glass.

"I mean look at the colors. The *red.*" Irving thought aloud. "I feel like I've never seen the color red before this. There's just something about it."

"It is beautiful." She admitted. "Eye-catching. Alright, to be honest, I just don't like the artist who made it."

"You know them? Or knew them?" Irving corrected. He held his hand up to the red light. He watched how it covered and changed his hand.

"I mean not personally. They had a small exhibit for him when he died, though. He was… oh I can't remember. Someone Choff.

"That's a rude thing to call someone."

"That was his name." Monroe said.

“I know, I’m joking. Choff.” He repeated. “It sounds like it could be an insult.” Monroe blew air out of her nose. It was almost a laugh. Stranger though she was, Irving liked her laugh. “What was wrong with him?” He asked.

“He was just kind of a pig.” Monroe spoke casually. “He cheated on his last wife… who knows how many times. His wife knew, but apparently he would never admit it to her.”

“Did she leave him?”

“She should have. But, and this is why I hate this story, she didn’t. For whatever reason she stayed. I think part of it was that he would create things for her. A lot of things like this.” She gestured. “Out of devotion, or so he claimed. They stayed married for… Oh I can’t remember now. It was more than ten years though, I remember that. But this was one of the last things he made for her. Supposedly.”

“Why did he stop?” Irving asked.

“His wife killed herself. She drank insecticide outside one of his mistress houses. He was in there with his mistress at the time. They found her on their porch sometime in the afternoon.”

“That’s horrible.” They looked at each other. “Part of me wants to believe that you’re just making these things up.” He looked at his feet. “Or I guess I just wish this one was.”

“Yeah. I hate that story. There’s a lot they don’t put on the plaques, though.”

Irving took a deep breath. “Well, the story is a little dark. More than a little.” He looked at the plaque. “It doesn’t even mention his wife.”

“I think they left her out on purpose. She was just too sad to include.” Monroe said. “And without the context, the whole thing feels false. Not that I think Choff was ever genuine.”

Irving nodded. “No. Without the context, it really is more about the colors.” Irving waited. “Do you think it's possible Choff could have been honest? In some bizarre way? I mean, is it possible he ever felt guilty for what he did?”

“I don’t think so. I think he made whatever he wanted and then spun a narrative about it. Like I said, I think he was a pig. They’re intelligent, filthy. Sometimes they like biting people.”

“Biting people? I’ve never heard that.”

“The one I met did. My sister took me to a petting zoo once. It didn’t break the skin, but it hurt. And it bit my sister more.” Monroe laughed and mimicked with her hands. “It went for the ankles. They’re actually not very soft. It's a lot like touching a hairbrush. Not that I tried to keep touching it. My sister did.”

“I don’t –” Irving found himself at a loss for words. “Why not pet something else?”

Monroe shrugged. “I don’t know. There was only one pig.”

“That seems like a red flag. Only one pig?”

“My sister thought it was a nice pig having a bad day.”

“Maybe it *was* one of the nice ones. They kept that it because it only went for the ankles.”

Monroe gave a light laugh. “That only confirms things. Choff was definitely a pig.”

The two fell into a comfortable silence. For a moment.

“Maybe this is what he deserves then.” Irving suggested.

“To have his own monument at the museum?” Monroe scoffed. She looked at the window with him.

“No, no.” Irving said. “I mean to have that context taken away. About his wife. I mean, let’s assume he had remorse. For a moment. Maybe he really did create this out of guilt. If that’s true, then the only thing that mattered about this is all gone then. We’re just looking at the byproduct. Maybe that doesn’t deserve a context.”

Monroe was looking at him, Irving realized.

“I mean look at the arm.“ He continued. “The one holding the pomegranate, coming from the edge of the corner. It looks unisex, like it could be a man’s arm.” He said. “And maybe that’s how Choff imagined himself. Like he was a kind of tempter. I mean guilty or not, maybe he knew he was a bad person. But maybe it’s better we don’t know he exists. Better if we think it’s nobody’s arm.”

“I think you’re giving him too much credit.” She uncrossed her arms and let one rest on her side.

“Maybe I am. But it’s hard to stop playing devil’s advocate. Or pig's advocate.”

“Or you just have poor taste.” Monroe smiled at him. “Come on. There’s a thousand and one things to see and they’re all better than Choff.”

“Well, hold on. Just a little longer.

“I thought you wanted to see the mosaics?”

“I do, I do. But I just want to look at it a little longer. This won’t look the same in a few minutes. The sun is setting.”

Monroe sighed. “I’ve walked by this window almost every time I’ve been here.”

“At this time of day?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged.

“No, no, but that’s just the thing.” Irving said. “You’ve walked by it too many times. I mean put your hand next to it.”

She did. “It feels warm.” Monroe said.

“Move your hands closer. It feels hot.”

Monroe rolled her eyes, but she kept her hands still. “I think it’s been sitting under the sun for the better part of a day.”

“But doesn’t that feel intentional?”

“No.”

“I think it could be. Especially if Choff imagined himself in the underworld. Or in Hell. Was he religious?”

Monroe shook her head. “He was just a narcissist. And if I’m honest, I do think Hell is clichéd. It wouldn’t have worked on me.”

“Probably for the best.” Irving nodded. “But I think art requires some degree of honesty. Doesn’t it? Or shouldn’t it? I mean I just can’t shake that Choff had to

believe he was creating something beautiful. Otherwise, why bother? I mean there are other ways to manipulate people."

"Alright. I see your point. But here's the thing: I think people like Choff see self-interests as well intentioned." She paused. "To Choff, I doubt beauty existed outside the things he wanted. Aside from the nice colors."

Irving thought for a moment. "I guess it's just easier to imagine he would feel guilty. Or that he would feel something." Irving tapped a finger to his lips. "It makes this a lot more sinister. It probably would have worked on me."

She shrugged. "Well, now it wouldn't. Speaking of being intentional," Monroe began. She stood still.

Irving realized he was ready to move. The air around them had become hot and stiff. Maybe it was just warm next to the window, but he could have sworn it had felt cool a moment ago, in his concentration. "I'm sorry." He said, scratching his shoulder. He felt his skin prickle in the heat. "We can keep moving. I didn't mean to linger. I should be saying thank you."

"No it's not that. I just thought – well, this is going to sound bizarre. I just thought I smelled something."

Irving felt his mouth quirk slightly. "You *smelled* something?"

Monroe hesitated. "It is strange, hearing it out loud back to me. But seriously, don't you smell it? Like hot metal."

“Like what? An oven?” Irving took a moment to breathe. “I guess you could say that. Now that you mention it, I would have said something more chemically. Like a plastic or…” He let the thought hang.

For a moment they both breathed in the air. The heat of it grew heavier. They listened. Down below them both, from the nearby stairwell, came the sound of a solitary scream. Then came the sound of more voices. Torment coalesced into sound that matched the scent of burning.

CHAPTER 14: THE CULMINATION OF ALL THINGS

Since the stroke, Francine had been hearing music. And yet it felt like it had been her entire life's duration that she heard it. The music was a thing held onto with muscles so tired and so sore that they now worked themselves – they had become static things that could only tense and hunch forward. And who can say it was truly music she heard, music that she held onto? It was an emotion. A thought. An understanding and a beautiful sound. That thing she heard was the way her body felt, too. She felt far away, bizarre. Hypnagogic. Beautiful. This was her mind as well. Her brain, though it was severely damaged, broken into a thing half-gone, was a thing of oneness, too. If it is hard to understand, if it is hard to imagine, know that I am describing madness and death. They are the same thing. Francine was half dead.

Francine was also a woman haunted. She was haunted by a small inkling of what she'd done. That she knew she'd hurt people. That she'd loved it anyways. That was the haunting. Not just that she'd hurt people, but that it had been gratifying. Had it been an ugly thing, it might not have become a horror, slinking at the back of her mind. Instead, it had been utterly, utterly beautiful. It was just like watching her kitchen burn. *Finally*, is what she'd thought. Finally my kitchen is burning. That was where God was, or the next closest thing to God. In the burning.

It was in the small, quiet places, too. In the stillwater after the rain, in the smell of it. Francine, wherever she was, could smell that it had rained. That beauty was in the smallest places of that still water, where microscopic organisms feed on microscopic prey. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands upon thousands are eaten in a moment. The worm suffocates and climbs into the anthill. This isn't to say

Francine had the words or images for these things. But she could feel it. She understood it in the music, in the damp, windy world around her.

She understood it while her kitchen ceiling burned, and while the cafe burned. She understood it in the objects that burned around her. She understood it in a flower, growing by the sidewalk. A dandelion in the red light of evening, alone, grown in a doomed place. It burned. It burned in a world being digested. Beautiful, like everything. More beautiful. She closed her eyes and remembered it.

In a strange moment, the music touched her. The ephemeral thing she had clutched with the ghost of her side touched her. It was like a weight was lifted off of her, or maybe comfortably onto her. If you ever dreamed in a fever, it was like waking from one of those long and strange ideas. That sound she had held onto was there, finally. It was there on her hand.

Francine breathed. For a moment, she breathed. She did it deliberately. She felt her own breath, its ebb and flow. She opened her eyes.

When you have been so long deprived of clarity, it returns like a loved one. It stands before you, like a face or a story you had forgotten, or like a tap on the shoulder of just who you wanted to see. It sits in your mouth like a thousand words you had wanted to speak, no longer out of reach.

Clarity welled in her chest. It welled in her eyes. It welled like the invisible collection of electrical charges before the boom and strike of lightning. In that moment, Francine knew that she could speak. She knew how long it was, how long it had been since she spoke. And she knew that she could speak.

The music whispered to her. It spoke in words. And like taking a step onto thin air, Francine understood them. Potential was the fulcrum of the world, said the music. The Museum, it whispered, with its white steps, shadowed by the setting sun, was beautiful. The steps were like the peaceful grays of a great rain cloud overhead. The illumination that escaped by the windows, the tall lamp posts that burned in the museum's shadow, it was all pure and beautiful. The fulcrum of the world stood before her, underneath a red sky. The music was right. The music, the tone, the beautiful sound was right. It was like a dandelion, or a quiet and lonely kitchen. It was like a kindling brochure, like a gold pen with golden script that had caught the light. She breathed.

"Thank you." Is what the Burner said. She said it clearly, without mumbling or slurring. She spoke the words like an orator, who after speaking for great lengths, must gently say goodbye. She spoke, for that moment, with both sides of her mouth. Like a breath, Francine took the museum in. She took herself in too, her dress like a white candle burning. She folded everything into the music. And then the clarity, however it had come, disappeared.

As the building in front of her began to steam, and her changed gown began to heat, the woman in the wheelchair cried. She did so silently. Unaware of her tears, or feeling or any sound. Her mind was in the music, and in the culmination of all things.

CHAPTER 15: DOORS

Irving was the first to move towards the screams. He didn't wait for Monroe to follow him. But even then, even in his quick reaction, his footsteps felt staggered, almost drunken. His skin went cold to the noise. People yelled, and howled in genuine, piercing fear. It grew to a noise that coiled and bounced within his skull. In a way, it dazed him. The steps of the stairwell were a blur. The smell of chemicals, of hot metal grew stronger. He began to feel the heat in his mouth when he breathed. Smoke welled in the second floor below him. He could feel the acridity of the air in his mouth.

The stairs felt oddly slick under his feet. A misstep, and Irving found himself sprawling for balance. Gripping the metal railing of the stairwell, shots of pain went up his palm. Just barely, Irving found a balance. Once standing, he gripped his wrist and held it close to his body. Already, small welts were appearing on red skin.

"Are you alright?" Monroe was next to him, if a little behind him.

"I don't know. I'm fine. I think I'm fine." Irving had to raise his voice over the noise below them.

"We have to go back up. There's too much smoke." Monroe was speaking through the collar of her shirt, which was pulled over her nose. She grabbed him by his wrist and began to pull him up the stairs. Irving pulled back, and she let go. "We can't *breathe* in the smoke." She motioned at him to go back up

"The exit is downstairs." Irving almost had to yell back over the noise. He began to pull at his own shirt and bring it towards his face.

A few people below them scrambled on the second floor, trying to get to the main entrance. Nobody was going up.

“No!” She turned to face him, already moving back up. “No, there's another exit. Trust me!”

With his good hand, Irving held his shirt over his face and followed her. Wearing a buttoned shirt, Irving found he had little slack for his neck when he breathed through it. Forced to look down, to crane his neck into his clothing, he saw streaks and footprints on the floor. They were his own footsteps, he realized. His own shoes were melting.

He found he was shaking as he carefully mounted each step. He was paranoid that he could feel the temperature of the museum underneath his feet. Already, his feet felt hot. Oddly, or eerily, many of the screams and yells below grew silent. But not all of them.

“This way.” Monroe said.

They were back in front of the stained glass window. And then they were running past it. Choff’s underworld passed behind them. Its red light was visible in the faint smoke of the third floor, like a physical thing let loose. Irving noticed that he could hear his footsteps. His shoes made a kind of sticky noise as he jogged hunched over, neck craned, face beneath his collar. The smoke grew thicker.

“Come on!” Monroe yelled. They passed into dark places, rooms where the lights had already gone out. And yet, there were no doors. It was like a long corridor they passed through, crouching and hunching as they ran. They passed by geometric sculptures, some created out of metal, some glass, or string. Others, whatever they had been made of, had already melted. They pooled around where they once had been,

melting over wide stone podiums and displays, sticking to the floor in residues, some clear and faintly evaporating, others vaguely metallic. Together, they stepped carefully around them.

Past that, a large and intricate wooden spiral spanned from floor to ceiling like a hollow tree trunk. Irving and Monroe ran through it, ran underneath it. The pieces that touched the surfaces of the ceiling and floor next to them smoldered and blackened. Even as they ran through it, Irving could see the black color creeping into the wood, a delicate smoke rising off of it, diffusing into the hazy air around them. The detail and care of a thousand works were passing them by, all burning. Somewhere, past the wooden structure, Irving heard the massive thing crumple and fall over behind them.

They passed into a large room of tiles. Every single surface Irving could see was smooth, glossed with what looked like dark blue tiles. Dusk trickled through what might have been a sunroof, but the air, like a thickening cloud above them, blocked most of the light. Irving couldn't drive away the image that he was inside of a huge kiln. He had to keep pace with Monroe, as she kept moving into the opaque dimness around them.

Irving's feet felt distinctly hot, as if he were barefoot on pavement. Some tiles pulled up out of the floor and stuck to his shoes. His footsteps made an audible *clack clack clack* which made Monroe, for only a moment, turn around to look at him. She held out her hand to him. Irving took it. Gingerly, he used his burned hand to hold his

shirt over his nose. Whether breathing through his clothes did anything, Irving could feel his own creeping lightheadedness. He could hear Monroe coughing.

The mosaic rooms, though they were dim and hard to make out, moved in a kind of pattern. Large chambers led to small downward tilting hallways. Each time they entered a chamber, there was a hallway to the left which, at a slight angle, moved them closer to the ground floor. They were going down, surely they were going down. But the air was getting thicker. They weren't going down fast enough.

Irving's eyes and throat stung. There was a dark shape on the floor, huddled in the middle portion of a hallway. Monroe stopped, staring at it. Irving shook her hand. "Come on!" He was trying to say. Heaving coughs came instead of the words. She stood still. Irving, with his bad hand, let his shirt fall. He pulled at the shape's clothing. It pulled forwards, thin tiles stuck to its back. They left it.

Soon they were out of the last hallway, onto the familiar marble floor. Though they were still inside the museum, the space around them seemed to open. Above and below and around them was space. Open space clouded in smog grays.

Across the distance of that space, huge flames undulated and spread out in a thick pillar. Flames lapped up from ground below and reached, high above, to the very top of the museum. Though there was an expanse between between it and himself, Irving could feel the heat of it, the searing uncomfortable heat, even at that distance. And there was the sinking realization they were still on the second floor. Irving had no idea where he was. He followed Monroe as she crouched towards the flames and moved towards them, arm up over her face.

“Where are we going?” Irving cried out.

“We’re almost there!” Monroe yelled and then coughed. She hunched forward, almost falling.

Irving, still holding onto her hand, pulled her up. She held onto it tightly for balance. She was gripping his hand incredibly hard, Irving realized.

They hugged the wall away from the growing flames. Each step was punishment. Irving could hear the yells and screams again as they moved, muffled. He could feel the lightness in his head. He had the unmistakable image that he was a hydrogen balloon, gradually getting more and more swollen. The voices, the screams he had heard earlier, those human sounds, they were coming from the wall. He turned to look at them.

And Irving saw person upon person standing and hopping and fidgeting next to him. An entire small crowd had run inside a walk-in mural. Already the colors of it had darkened into a kind of monochrome, burning away. “Get in! Get inside!” The voices yelled. The people now blended in with the mural, like they too were losing their color. They showed no signs of pain. But anxiously they stared out, waving their arms, moving their mouths. They watched with wild eyes.

“We’re almost there!” Monroe called out. She pulled him towards a metal door on the wall. It was only about ten feet away, Irving could see it now. And yet each step was agony. He looked back towards the crowd in the painting.

“No! No!” They were all yelling, words melting and roiling over one another. “Come back! Don’t go!” They cried.

He moved with Monroe. He let her pull him away. For only a split second, she had looked back at the mural, too.

Quickly they crossed that gap towards the door. They were running, no longer crouching. The heat was furious on their skin. Irving could feel his own clothes sticking to him, searing him in the temperature. His feet, almost forgotten, were now scalding him. Monroe was whimpering as she tried opening the door. The handle of the door was a flat, vertical panel, with about an inch gap. You were meant to stick your fingers inside and pull. But Monroe was almost pawing at the door, as if she were quickly tapping it, waiting for it to cool down.

With his bad hand, Irving tried the same thing. A guttural sound escaped from his mouth, as if fear and pain itself had condensed and manifested in his throat. Even with effort, trying again and again, it was like another force pulled back his hand each time, a force beyond what singed his nerve endings. He considered running back to the painting on the wall. In a moment, caught between the precipice of a burning door and a slow approaching wall of fire, Irving almost ran for the mural.

And then Monroe had something long and thin in her hands, something metallic. She wedged it into the door handle and pulled it open. Irving went in first. Monroe followed him, just barely squeezing in. She yelped as the door grazed her shoulders, and she was pressed, momentarily, between the door and its frame. Irving, grabbing whatever he could, pulled her in towards him. Monroe, like the smoke, poured in past the door, staggering, wheezing.

It was dark. They were in a metal stairwell. But the air was cooler. There was far less smoke in the air they now breathed. The two of them drank in huge, greedy breaths. Behind them, through the small window of the door, was a faint illumination. The fire was still creeping towards them.

“Are you alright? Are you alright?” Irving was holding onto Monroe, holding her up.

“Ow. Ow.” She managed under her breath. Sharply, she drew air in through her teeth. “I’m okay. I’m okay. Keep going. Just keep going.”

Irving held out his burned hand, and Monroe took it, grabbing him by the wrist. He winced. They moved forwards, downwards in the darkness, their bleary eyes adjusting. Irving moved by touch, holding onto the metal railing. Thankfully, it was cool to the touch. There was the light of a small window at the bottom of the stairs. Slowly, Irving could see slightly more. Slowly, the stairwell was warming.

Irving could feel his own shakiness and nausea as he descended the stairs. He felt like he was going to vomit. He coughed, and Monroe coughed with him. His shoes, glass tiles still stuck to them, clacked and banged on the stairs. The sounds were faint and faraway to Irving. He felt and focused on the unsteadiness of his legs as he moved.

The stairwell, as he approached the faint ray of light coming from the exit, grew hot to the touch. Irving found he could only tap the railing for balance after it had grown too hot to touch. Eventually, he could no longer even do that. He drew his hand back, and let his blurry vision guide him to the small window of the exit. And

then they were standing in front of the door. Irving was pulling on the handle. It didn't budge.

He pushed on it. He threw his body against it.

"Move." Monroe said. She tried the door, felt against it, pulled and pushed it. It was locked.

Irving retched. The heat of the room grew. The building groaned. The very top of the thin, metal stairs, ever so faintly, began to glow orange. Irving thought of those in the mural on the wall. It struck him why nobody else was at the bottom of the stairwell with them. All those people, that small crowd might have already tried the door. They probably had. And it was locked.

Irving thought of the refinery. He thought of John Litmus, the man who had died there. The man who had been crushed and burned by the huge bulb, the giant, hissing stomach of the refinery. Irving had done nothing for him. He could imagine the man's ghost sitting just outside the window, looking in at him. Staring. They would die the same way he did.

Monroe had let go of him. She was doing something with the door, scratching it with that piece of metal. Irving wanted to say something, to have some final say in his life. But he found it difficult just to stare and watch. His mind felt blank and frantic at the same time. Why was she doing that? They had tried. Now, they were dead. They were trapped. Irving wanted to close his eyes and wait for it all to be over. But he also had the notion to take everything in. To take in everything for the last time.

He watched her, in the faint light of dusk that came through the window. No, she wasn't just scratching the door. She was holding onto that metal piece with both of her fists, writing something. The letters of what she wrote glowed faintly, just barely. Monroe finished the last letter of the word she scribed.

"OPEN" had been scratched onto the door, like a frantic prayer.

Monroe pushed. And the door moved like a drink of water. It didn't feel real as Irving limped outside and followed.

"Over there!" Someone yelled. People were around them. There was the sound of sirens. People began to touch Irving, to pull the two of them away from the building. But after a moment up close, seeing their burns, their red skin, and that they were walking on their own, they just formed a kind of space around them.

"My car." Monroe said. "My car. I need my car."

Irving coughed and followed. He looked behind him at the building, at the huge flames that rose from it. He wanted to get further away. Irving still hunched as he walked. He held his bad arm to his chest. The glass tiles in his shoes ground into the pumice of the road.

They were across the street. Most of the small crowd that had ushered them was gone, looking for others. Monroe was struggling with the trunk of her car. Irving, with his good hand, helped her to open it. Inside was the white hazmat suit she wore to work. It was thick and rubbery, a completely opaque white. It looked like a vivisected mannequin.

“Over here. Two more.” A voice in the crowd said. People in white medic uniforms were headed towards them both.

Monroe pulled the suit out of the car and let it hit the ground. She was too ginger with her hands. All of her fingers looked burned.

“My sister.” She croaked. “My sister is in there.” She tried holding up the suit and putting her arm inside of it.

“No.” Irving said. His voice was hoarse. “No, she might be outside.”

Medics encircled them. Monroe sat on the ground. Medics kneeled next to her. One gave her a kind of bag to breathe into. Another put a listening device on the skin of her back.

A medic tried to get Irving to sit down. He shrugged him off.

“She looks like you?” Irving asked. It was more like a whisper. He felt like he was going to pass out. A breathing bag was put into his hands. Gratefully, he sucked air from it. Immediately, some of the nausea and light-headedness lifted.

Monroe could only nod. Her shoulders convulsed with emotion. She had her eyes closed.

“I’ll go look.” Irving said. “I promise, I’ll go look.” He swayed, and a medic helped him stand up straight.

Monroe only rocked. Her shoulders shook as she breathed from the bag.

A gurney was brought forward, and Irving waited for them to pick up Monroe and lift her onto it. Instead, Irving found he was being pushed onto it instead. There

was a moment of frenzy, where Irving tried to speak up, to lean forwards, only to be pushed back down.

Only barely did he get his good hand into his pocket to pull out his Inspector's ID. "Let me look. Let me go *look*." They stopped.

Carefully, the medics propped him up and helped him onto his feet. Soon it was only one medic standing with Irving alone.

Irving realized he had been standing, breathing into the bag, and he didn't know how long he had been doing it. Lucidity crept back into him. "Okay. Okay." He kept repeating himself. "Okay. Let's go look."

Irving limped towards the front of the museum. His feet were tender. After a few paces, he waved away the medic, who stood and watched him walk for a moment. Then she jogged back to an ambulance.

What Irving saw was utter carnage. At some point, the top of the museum had collapsed in. Embers and flame and smoke shot in a gout from the hollow top of the building. Irving breathed into the bag. It was more saturated than normal air. Each breath was like water. He found he could breathe more slowly.

The front of the museum looked like it had been completely cooked. Even the ground in front of it was completely black. A small pickup truck with a spigot on top and a large tank in the back sprayed water at the flames. The marble steps of the museum, its pillars had been warped. There were people who had just barely made it out, kneeling on the sidewalk next to Irving or laying down being treated for wounds. There were also people still on the stairs of the building. They didn't move.

Irving searched the faces around him. Nobody looked like Monroe. Everyone was all strangers. There was a breadth in the crowd. Irving saw a figure in a wheelchair. It had been completely charred.

What had happened? What had happened? More water trucks arrived, and people were ushered out of the way. Irving breathed from his bag. He approached the charred corpse and stood next to it. It was facing the museum. Good God what had happened? What had *happened*? Those words echoed in his brain. He just stared at it.

And then Irving saw something on the ground. Something right next to the wheelchair. It looked like a piece of melted slag metal, except that it was bright against the dark ground. It was even shimmering faintly. Irving carefully knelt down to pick it up. He did a kind of staggered lunge to get close to it. His whole body racked with pain. Cautiously, he picked it up. It was slightly warm.

It was a piece of blue-green metal. Irving turned it over. It had taken an oblong shape. Though the top looked almost polished, the underside had taken on the texture of the pumice sidewalk. Irving ran his fingers over it, over the texture of it. He turned it over in his hand again. It was a beautiful thing. What had it been? He held onto it and stood back up.

Irving had a strange impression. He was sure it was light-headedness, that he needed to sit down and breathe. But watching the building burn, standing next to the unrecognizable carbon body in a wheelchair, Irving thought he saw something in the smoke. It was bizarre. He must have been hallucinating. But it looked like there was the shape of a pen in the smoke. Distinctly, it *was* the shape of a pen. Irving looked

around to see if anyone else noticed. The world, rightfully so, seemed preoccupied. Irving looked back at the smoke. The embers of the fire moved through it, over and over. They seemed to be tracing something. It almost looked like a kind of cursive script. It looked like the word “Brine.” Irving squinted. But that was what it was. That was what the embers wrote, over and over. *Brine. Brine.*

Chapter 16: Signal Fires

Mickey, in times of stress, tended to neglect his body. His teeth, from the constant day or two days of not-brushing, had colored into a kind of cream yellow. Were he a fan of sweets, he might have been a toothless man. To his dental fortune, sugar, and to a larger extent savor, was an indulgence. He often drank instant coffee, cold if he had the time. For "solids," he usually swallowed a heaping spoonful of peanut butter, not unlike a large snake would. This tided him over for hours. And though he often had to spend minutes working it inside of his mouth, this only gave him time to do other things. Today though, he had even foregone that. He had no time to eat. Yesterday, one of his off-complex artists had skipped work. Today, they were still missing.

Normally, this was fairly low stakes news. Mickey had had artists skip work before. As an overseer, this was something he was prepared for, at least to an extent. Except the artist – a fairly quiet man named Ernest – hadn't been in his apartment either. The correct course of action for any overseer would be to fill out a missing artist form. The only problem, and this is why Mickey hadn't filled one out: when you sent these forms, they hurt chances of promotion. As an overseer, there was no incentive to be immediate. Instead, Mickey had taken a gamble. Ernest *usually* didn't break the rules. He would show up the next morning. This was something he felt fairly confident about.

Until later that evening. When Mickey was called to an emergency meeting to address the freak conflagration of the Aurum Museum. There were rumors – only

rumors, the news was still fresh – that an artist had caused it. Of course, buildings did burn on occasion. But people were talking. People were saying that in the smoke of the museum's fire, there were images and words. The ghosts of the paintings and statues had moved through the smoke. Others thought it was a calling card; something intentional.

Whatever the case, the bottom line was that people were being stirred up. And though nobody said this directly, the implication had long been carved into Mickey: when things went wrong, people tended to punch downwards. Things didn't need to be spelled out for him. It was time to start doing head counts. *Officially*. In that respect, Mickey prepared for the worst.

The repercussions for failing as an overseer were reprimand, probation, and dismissal, in that order. Mickey had never been reprimanded. He liked his record clean, and his record *was* clean. He liked his job. But now he felt for the first time in his life that he had "stepped too deeply into the pile of shit." He said the adage quietly to himself, over and over while he paced in his apartment. He could only think about the meeting. That had been his chance to come clean. He *liked* Ernest. Or he had, Mickey told himself.

It surprised him. Of all the artists, Ernest had run off. Ernest who was never late, Ernest who did more prompts than the others. Their customer base partly relied on his "Industrial Blue." Mickey let himself sigh out loud. Somehow it was always the good ones who subverted the rules.

For the rest of the night, Mickey tapped his foot, his fingers, his tongue like an overgrown clock. Early that morning, he checked Ernest's apartment again. Nothing. After he hadn't found Ernest hidden in his closets, cupboards or under his rugs, he spent an anxious moment outside Ernest's designated apartment. There, Mickey contemplated his future. His *own* future. Then he went to the workshop early.

For a while he sat in the dark, under the circular skylight. Slowly, light pervaded the space. When it did, he finally turned on the lights. A few of the artists trickled in early. None were Ernest.

Carefully, Mickey picked up his stool. With it, he propped open the entrance door. For good measure, sat on it with his own willowy weight, even though he would have preferred to stand.

He looked down the trim, sparsely populated sidewalks. Other artists went inside the shop. Mickey could barely spare them a nod. He waited for Ernest to start walking down, walking down. "Any minute, any minute," Mickey sang to himself.

He still hadn't *exactly* reported anyone missing. He had picked up the missing artist form, looked at it, and put it back down neatly. Twice. He hadn't even picked up pen. Were he forced to elaborate, in, say, a disciplinary meeting, his decisions might have moved him from reprimand, all the way to the far end of probation. Maybe even right through to dismissal. Probably dismissal. And if Ernest had burned down the museum – "No Ernest wasn't likely. Ernest *wasn't* likely to do that." But the more Mickey thought about it, the more he ground and tapped his teeth together, like a canary idly clicking its beak.

Ernest was about thirty minutes late. Short in the grand scheme of things. Long, if you spent that time contemplating the drawn and arduous task of finding another job. And the possibility of jail time. That depended on the charges: was he a neglectful overseer, or aiding a rogue artist?

Of course any and all of those fears evaporated when Mickey saw Ernest walking down the pumice sidewalk, dragging his feet along the painted blue line. Mickey felt an immense relief. He allowed himself to feel it fully, beathing deeply. Things would be alright. Mickey allowed himself to stand. His back ached from the faux casual forward-bearing lean. His eyes ached from squinting.

It would take some careful chiding, but everything would go back to normal. There would be no jail time, no reprimand. Ernest would have to move back into the complex. That would take tact. But tact was something Mickey had in spades.

Ernest, as he got closer, looked more and more — distasteful is the word Mickey would have used. He looked like he hadn't showered. Not that Mickey always showered, but he did keep his work clothes neat. Today, Ernest's clothes looked dirty. His apron was bulgy and rumpled. It seemed like inside it, bottles clinked. The apron's slovenly contents gave Ernest a distinct sound as he moved each footstep, like he carried keys, or small coins. Or bottles. Maybe, Mickey thought, Ernest had spent the night drinking. Walking around and drinking. Not burning down a museum. Drinking.

Ernest immediately walked past him. Mentally, Mickey prepared the words "with all my strength" in the event that he had to recall this moment for legal

purposes. In truth, Mickey's fingers had only gently brushed at the artist's clothes. Ernest walked past him to his own station. Mickey cringed and followed.

As Ernest sat down, he let his chair scrape loudly.

"Please." Mickey whispered. "I want to talk to you in my office." In the workshop there was silence. The other artists listened intently. A few continued the pretense of working, of the rhythmic sounds of paint-making, but even those were half-hearted. A keen ear like Mickey's could tell the difference.

"I'd just like to get my work done." Ernest said flatly. He pressed a button above a brass panel in his workstation. The words "Industrial Blue" came out on a paper slip.

"I know that." Mickey said. "And I'm glad you're excited to work."

Ernest grabbed a tincture and began filling it with orange powder from a drawer.

"But Ernest, I need to talk to you about something. In my office."

Ernest didn't bother working delicately. He let the orange powder spill onto his workstation. Some of it spilled to the floor. Mixing it with a clear paint base in the vial, it seemed darker. It made Ernest think of a rusted piece of metal. He put it aside after giving it a quick shake.

"I'm worried about you Ernest."

Ernest spoke faintly. "Why?"

Mickey lowered his voice to a whisper. "I need to talk to you in my office."

Ernest put an empty jar into the workstation submission shelf. The flat surface sank into the floor and returned with a mechanical whirring. The jar was gone.

Protocol would have been to reprimand Ernest. He was sabotaging his work. There was a form for that, too. Mickey didn't move, didn't reach for paper. Instead, he sucked in a deep breath, held it, then spoke as he exhaled. "Where," he paused. "Where were you yesterday?"

Ernest shrugged and leaned slightly away from Mickey. The workshop listened.

"You weren't in your apartment. I *checked*."

Ernest began mixing something else in a vial, something gray. The lumpy pocket of his apron clinked as he moved. Mickey glanced at what was making the noise inside the pouch, but Ernest was leaning too far forwards.

"I need you to stay at the complex," he said.

Ernest ignored him. The thing in the vial seemed to be moving, churning. He set it down carefully next to the rust orange. It moved lightly on its own, shivering in a way.

Mickey watched him closely. He tried to speak gently. "Just for now. I need you to stay at the complex."

Ernest shrugged limply; his lips drew tight against his face. "That's alright." His voice was dry.

“I can’t have you leaving again.” Mickey waited. “I need you to say you understand me. Look at me Ernest.” He tried to speak softly. “Just say you understand. That’s all I want.”

Ernest pressed the button over the brass panel again and again. Slip after slip came out. “Industrial Blue.” “Industrial Blue.” Another one. “Industrial Blue.” Ernest let a small pile of them gather one after another, until one fell out that read “Hickory Bark.” Ernest carried on pressing the button: “Industrial Blue.” “Industrial Blue.” “Technical Green.” “Industrial Blue.”

While Ernest did this, Mickey decided it was time to employ some of his famous “tact” to the problem. Awkwardly, because Mickey wasn’t sure where or how to move his hands, he withdrew to the breakroom. He looked at the foods that were laid out for the artists. Uncertain what to grab for Ernest, he decided on an orange. That would be good for a hangover. And Ernest, if he suffered any ailment, suffered from a hangover. Surely.

The room was silent. Mickey could hear his own footsteps as he moved in the workshop. He felt the need to step quietly, to move carefully. No one made a sound. Mickey walked slowly, heel first. In a cup just outside his office door, Mickey had a carved stone with silver script. He grabbed it then. It was just a precaution. If he spoke into it, help would arrive. But with a little tact, there would be no emergency, no need to contact anyone. Carefully, he put the stone in his front pocket. In his left hand, Mickey held the orange.

Mickey floated back to Ernest. Ernest had his head in his hands, his eyes closed, bent-backed, elbows on his workstation. The bare skin of his arms was dusted with the ferric, rust-color powder he had spilled. Slips of paper scattered on his workstation.

Mickey put the orange down on Ernest's desk. He drew his hand back quickly. Ernest's workstation was corroding. Mickey could see a kind of slow spread from the spilled pigment.

Mickey breathed in sharply, then calmed himself. "The complex isn't so bad." He hesitated. "I've lived here. In fact, I'm going to be staying here too, for a while." Mickey made a show of looking around at the walls, even though nobody was watching him. This mannerism came from practicing in the small mirror of his shower. He recited the things he practiced now. Ernest still had his eyes closed. His hands gripped his hair.

"I know it might be hard to hear this." Mickey pitched his voice just loud enough for everyone to hear. "But I've come to think of this place as something like a home."

The floor next to Ernest had also corroded from the powder. Color emanated, and Mickey inched away slightly, felt for the stone in his pocket. There it was.

"Whatever you're feeling," he said, "try to channel it into your work." He took another step back. His voice cracked as he spoke. "Try," He cleared his throat. "Try to put it in the color *blue*."

Ernest's eyes, still looking down, were raw with emotion. When he picked up the orange, he looked like he was going to cry. There was a long moment of silence as Mickey watched Ernest and the other artists listened.

"*Home*," was all he could say. His throat was dry, as if he had gone days without water. As if he'd been drinking. "*Home*." He swallowed. "I want to go home." He stood up out of his chair and cradled the orange to his chest.

Mickey wanted to say that he *was* home. But something wouldn't let him say it. Instead, he said, "I know. I know."

Ernest gingerly picked up the two vials of paint and dropped them in his apron with the click of glass on glass. Then he made his way towards the door.

"Please stay seated." Mickey didn't move closer to him. Internally, he sighed with a macabre relief. If Ernest *did* leave this way, he would be able to call an emergency – to use the stone. Responsibility would shift. "Don't leave." He said as coolly as he could. But he only watched.

Slowly, orange still in hand, Ernest walked through the door. Mickey's stool still propped it open. His full apron clinked as he walked. It surprised Ernest how easy it was to move through that doorway, after it had so long seemed impossible. He looked around at the clear and empty streets, at the blue line in the distance that he followed every morning. After a moment, he put the orange in his pocket and turned around to look at the workshop.

He had expected Mickey to go to any length to keep him from leaving. That he might run out and tackle him. That was how he imagined it. Instead he stared for a while at the doorway, until Mickey's head poked around from the corner of the door.

"Come back inside." He said meekly.

Ernest swallowed and looked at the inside of his apron. Vials and tinctures he had saved from the dumpster filled it. One of them, a bright luminous yellow, had cracked and leaked slightly onto the others. He pulled it out and held it, looked at it in his palm. He let the paint drip over his fingers. And he threw it.

The yellow vial arced through the air, spilling small droplets as it soared. It hit the side of the workshop and bloomed, glowing even in the mid-morning sun. Mickey ducked his head back indoors and Ernest pulled out another, a dark red. He threw it, and it broke on the side of the plain pumice building, covering it in translucent red. Immediately Ernest smelled the thick, unmistakable scent of wine, as it spread and dripped down the building and into the street.

Ernest laughed. He laughed and it felt like the first time he had ever laughed, or like when he was a child and it just felt good to run. How long had it been since he had run anywhere? He threw a green of thick moss, and it hit where building and the sidewalk met. Green spread like a dense carpet. He threw the churning gray vial on top of the building. And water poured off the roof into the street. The water poured and didn't stop. It poured and it poured and poured until it spread and Ernest felt the water touch his feet. And it was true water. He let it play around his ankles and he laughed for it. He washed his fingers in it. He threw sunflowers and snow, and a tincture of

what turned out to be cardinal feathers that puffed and spread out, and then floated in the water. He took off the heavy jar's lid of the night's constellations. It spun in the air, and where the paint moved, where it arced in the air, it stayed, as if sections of the world had their veils torn open to reveal the beauty of the things between.

The cold river ran – it was a river now – and it filled the street in which he stood. It mixed with the wine. Pink and strong and sweet enough to stain the street for a lifetime. He cupped his hands and brought them to his mouth. He drank in the work of the paints, the colors that had been thrown away, and he laughed.

His apron felt lighter. He unstopped bottles of the sky before he threw them. He threw a stormy day, and he threw rainclouds, a royal purple sunset, and red cirrus clouds. Two were his own. They broke and spilled at the highest peak of their arcs and hung there in the sky like windows.

He threw vines of Kudzu onto the roof, and onto the building's blank brick wall, he threw autumn leaves. Mickey emerged from the building soaking wet. Water, Ernest noticed, covered the floor and poured from the building. From the inside echoed the sound of water crashing into water, leaking in from the river over the skylight that now churned. That and the sound of laughter.

Mickey, also ankle deep in the street of cold wine, spoke into the stone with silver script. He held the stone close to his face. And he looked at Ernest. He might have been angry or afraid.

Ernest threw a vial of something dark at Mickey. Nothing happened immediately. Mickey looked up at him, appalled, and terrified, utterly surprised. It

almost looked like Mickey was going to laugh, the way his eyebrows rose and his mouth opened. Dark brown paint dribbled down his shoulder. There was a way that Mickey looked at Ernest then. Like he knew the true meaning of peril, or what mattered in his life. Maybe for the first in a long time, forms never crossed his mind.

Mickey seemed to grow taller, and then thicker. His arms lengthened; his torso stretched. This wasn't a grotesque, unnatural growing. Mickey was not torn apart, or even exactly "stretched." The tensile nature of his body was neither forced nor broken. Instead, it seemed like the paint on his shoulder expanded. It covered his body like a cloak and kneaded him. He became like a wooded knot in an otherwise healthy tree. Maybe unnatural at first, but the tree thrives and grows around it. If it can, it absorbs it. Eventually, it becomes the most interesting part of the tree, the most complex thing about it. There is no distinction between what was, and what is the tree now. That was what happened to Mickey.

In his place or over it, an enormous Cedar, tall as a building and half as thick was flourishing. It stood like a perfect roadblock, right in the center of the street. Its bark was rich, dark the way a surface is after long and heavy rain. Its roots burrowed into the pumice streets, and past that into the sidewalks where they met the earth beneath, spreading out, up and down and up and down and down again like pressed piano keys, in and out of the ground. All of this plunged into and erupted out of the river of wine, in the street of colors. And at the top and on every branch were thick and congregate yellow leaves, each thin and branching, barbed and arrow-like.

And somehow gentle. The tree swayed. It caught every stray breeze. At the base of the tree was a knot. Round, and unseemly. A greater than human-sized knot.

Ernest watched for a while. He stood in the street like a lost child, his feet cold and soaked. Paint-marked hands held before him, he let himself stand in the middle of it all and feel the force that drew him downwards where the water flowed, down the street and further down yet. Other artists watched Ernest from inside the workshop. They peered out from the inside, quiet.

It was a while before he realized a man and a woman in black uniforms were watching him as well. For that while, he watched the tree sway before him. And for a moment of that while, he peeked into his apron to find blue, oddly, just the blue left in his apron. Maybe he hated blue. Maybe he always had. It was a color that made him ill now. Blue paint in his blue apron. That was all that what was left.

The enforcers put their hands on him, got their own feet wet in the river. Almost gently, they put thick gloves on his hands and cuffs on his wrists. The blue apron was lifted over his head and dropped into the flow. Apron and paint were carried away. A blindfold was put over his eyes. Ernest didn't fight them. He went where they took him; where the guilt, an odd creeping guilt pushed him. In the darkness, with his eyes closed, he imagined he could see blue in the afterimages of the day's brightness. That was his life, he thought. That was what it had always been.

CHAPTER 17: AN ARM'S LENGTH

Louis Brine pulled a stool up next to Dr. Medley. The stool groaned like a sad and disobedient dog, dragged forward by its collar. Dr. Medley talked. Dr. Brine tried to listen.

The two of them sat and watched the blue-green metal wasps in their confinement, how they twisted and crawled around one another behind the wall of glass. The creatures' container or living space, Dr. Brine vaguely noted, was much larger than it had been before. Dr. Brine crossed his arms. He slouched on the uncomfortable excuse for a chair. He tried to listen to what Dr. Medley was saying.

"I can't stop thinking about it. When they don't realize they're in captivity, it's like they have a profound sense of self, an ability to understand, to abstract their environment. It's like they have something very akin to our own sense of fascination." Dr. Medley touched the glass. A wasp spun around his finger in circles. "Fascination in such a small space. It makes them a lot like us."

Dr. Brine cleared his throat. He looked at his own hand, where the ring had been. It was bare now. He spoke slowly, in a kind of monotone. "What drew you to that conclusion?" He asked.

"You're fascinated with the world. Aren't you?"

"The wasps Dr. Medley. I'm talking about the wasps."

"Oh." Dr. Medley hesitated. He tried to meet Dr. Brine's eyes. The man only stared at his hand. He seemed to be checking his nails. "You told me there were likely more of them. More of these wasps that were *not* in captivity."

Dr. Brine nodded.

“That tidbit turned out to be the perfect rabbit hole. The process of figuring out what these wasps are attracted to has been, surprisingly, the most fruitful part of our work. Initially, we went about things the wrong way. We *assumed* they would be driven by food-sources. This is what led us to experimenting with the organism’s diet but we assumed wrong. Like I was talking about –”

Dr. Brine interrupted “They’re constructs. Not alive.”

Dr. Medley allowed his own pointed silence. “I *appreciate* the reminder.”

“Then don’t call them organisms.” Dr. Brine stared ahead. He didn’t meet Medley’s eyes.

“As I was saying,” Dr. Medley went on, “what’s remarkable about these *constructs* is what attracts them. They aren’t particularly resource-driven, as we originally assumed. Instead, they responded far more to things like shape, pattern – to complexity. To beauty, at least their sense of it. We discovered this from the failure of the original artificial hives. You remember those?”

Dr. Brine made no response, so Medley continued. “Some of our nests they responded to the most — they were the hives the *least* like their own.”

Dr. Medley waited for a reaction. He cleared his throat.

Dr. Brine moved his head in what could have been a nod. Or he might have been following a wasp.

Dr. Medley pulled his glasses off, wiped them on his lab coat, and put them back on. “Initially,” his voice dripped, “we tried making hives that were as close as possible to the ones they create. This was unsuccessful. Out of the almost one hundred

that we made, we had one nest that they responded to. A singular nest. But it was astounding how many it attracted. Fourteen of our hives are from that one bait nest. So, the nest became our little case study. From what we could tell, it was our most flawed model. So, to our initial understanding, the wasps were attracted to flawed nests." Dr. Medley waited until he saw Dr. Brine nod.

"We created what *we* understood to be flawed nests. No success. Jason and I grew frustrated trying to puzzle out why it was that this one nest was special. And these nests, they're not easy to build. I almost gave it up to experiment with something else." Dr. Medley swallowed.

"Jason was the one to piece it together. It wasn't randomness that they were attracted to. It was a specific and unexpected *break* in a pattern. Even more, we found, among the wasps, different preferences – preference for certain shapes, colors, for different ways that we *broke* the patterns of their original hives. We discovered this after marking certain wasps. What and when they eat, where they move, *how* they move – from what I can tell – it's all a matter of taste so to speak. Something I seem to know little of."

Dr. Brine, noting the explanation, pressed his lips together. His head oscillated in a kind of quick nodding, as if to say he was losing patience.

Dr. Medley rolled his eyes. "I guess I just thought it was interesting."

"No, it is strange." Dr. Brine noted. He leaned his head on his palm. "How many colonies do you have now?"

“Twenty-four. Mostly from collection. Two more are potentially incubating, but we’ve been misled before. They seem to understand once they’re in captivity.”

“How many can you spare?”

“About six. Maybe.”

Dr. Brine waited for a moment. “I’ll need at least twelve of the colonies melted down.”

Dr. Medley made a noise in his throat. It was almost a cough, almost a laugh. “That is *half* of our population. No.”

“You will. The funds have already been transferred to your department. You’ll have the resources to make more of them. Whatever you need.” Dr. Brine stared ahead as he spoke, head still in his hand. He was looking into his own reflection, Dr. Medley realized.

“You know sometimes I wonder when you’re going to come in and say something good.” He waited. Dr. Brine said nothing. “Or when anybody who sits above me isn’t going to come down and *shit* on my work. I’ve spent my entire life doing everything I can just so I can keep researching, researching, and then bending my back over for… for…” Dr. Medley shook his head. The words, for a moment, caught somewhere.

Dr. Brine simply turned to stare at him. His eyelids had a drawn, half-way look, as if he hadn’t slept well, or just couldn’t bring himself to care.

“For people who *think* that they understand the process. We don’t even know,” Dr. Medley let himself raise his voice, “how they reproduce. It’s an utter mystery. We.

Don't. Know. This," Dr. Medley wanted to scream. He screamed with his hands. "Might be all we have. It might be all we ever get, and we don't know anything about their life span, what they're made of. We can't even figure out what specifically or why they eat, or how it affects them. We don't even know what they're made of."

Dr. Brine looked passively back at the wasps. Or back at his reflection. "I didn't claim to *know* anything. I just asked you to melt them down."

"Are you listening to me?" Dr. Brine opened his mouth to respond, but Dr. Medley went on. "Do you know how long it's been since *any* kind of wasp has been spotted? In a city? In Aurum? You didn't even let me finish — last night, we found a metallic butterfly caught in one of the *wasp* traps. I brought it to a colleague. He thought it had been extinct but now—"

"IT IS EXTINCT," Dr. Brine shouted. "It's a construct! It's not alive. For God's sake stop pretending you're on the brink of some new discovery. Someone is making these. It is a construct. A *construct*."

"You keep saying that, you keep saying that, over and over." Dr. Medley drew in a breath through closed teeth. "But I have *never* heard of constructs that were capable of reproduction. These can reproduce to the nth degree, thrive in an urban landscape, *understand* things. By *all* appearances they are organisms. And we don't understand how."

For a moment they were both silent.

Dr. Brine took a deep breath. He spoke casually, as if he were ordering more wine. “Well, then you probably won’t run out of them. Melt down twelve of the colonies.”

Dr. Medley took off his glasses and folded them up carefully. He put them into the front pocket of his lab coat. Dr. Medley, for the most part, abided by all the rules of lab safety. In fact, it was something he was tedious about. Observant interns knew that. But over the course of his life, there had been two exceptions.

Once, as a young adult, he tried a small pipette of diluted hydrochloric acid. He had hoped to taste it, even just slightly. He only felt it on his teeth. Another time, Dr. Medley broke a thermometer on his way out of the lab. Very carefully, he picked up the pieces with his hands. Those were the only two times.

For maybe the only time in his life, Dr. Medley was tempted to throw something in the lab. If there had been something in his pocket worth throwing, like the carved stone in the grafting room, he might have tried it. Instead he looked at Dr. Brine, sitting on the stool, watching the wasps. He tried to meet the man’s eyes. When he didn’t look, Dr. Medley looked at the reflection of him instead. “You think you’re qualified to own a lab.”

“I never said I was.”

“You’re a daddy’s boy.” Dr. Medley spit out the words.

Dr. Brine didn’t react.

“And you’re a disappointment. A fucking disappointment.”

More silence.

“I’ll get you the metal by tomorrow.” Dr. Medley began walking towards the door. The sound of his footsteps echoed shortly in the almost silent room. There was also the quiet humming of the wasps.

“I know I’m a disappointment.”

Dr. Medley stopped. There was something so matter-of-fact about the way he said it. In his voice wasn’t quite sadness. He sounded closer to relegation. To cold succinctness. Dr. Brine stood up out of his chair. The faux leather of the stool creaked as he stood.

“You think I’m a daddy’s boy. Alright. Let me tell you something about the Brine family.” He put his hand on the glass wall and pulled up the sleeve of his coat. He let it wrinkle. The wasps began to agitate near his fingers, to tap against the glass.

“When I was a child I took apart a projection box. I knew they were expensive. I couldn’t even fathom it as a child, but I knew they were expensive. And I wanted to see what was inside of them. I’m not FINISHED talking.”

Dr. Medley let go of the door handle. When he turned around, he was finally met by Dr. Brine’s eyes.

“Imagine my surprise at that small focusing lens on the inside. Just a teeny thing. It didn’t look harmful. I had no idea what a *suction* lens was. So I took it outside. On a sunny day, I took it outside. Stupidest thing I’ve ever done. I remember I held it up, looked through it. Nothing. It looked completely black.”

Medley listened.

“But when I turned it upside down? When I looked through it the other way? With both of my eyes open?”

Dr. Medley kept his face neutral. Internally, he grimaced.

“It wasn’t just my eyes. My entire face was burned.” Dr. Brine turned around. “For two months, I didn’t see anything. My face recovered. It was like a bad sunburn. But my eyes didn’t. Years later, I put together that my father had the resources to get me new eyes within that week. Probably sooner. But he didn’t.”

“Instead, he made me wait. He didn’t say anything to me. He didn’t talk to me once during those two months. But he did send me a tutor. During those two months I spent blind, I learned the inside and out of a projection box. I learned *exactly* how it worked. I learned how it pulls the light from things. How it funnels it. How to create my own if I wanted to. And I learned how the focal point is *just* an arm’s length. Only a little longer than a child’s.”

Dr. Medley watched in horror as Dr. Brine leaned up against the glass. He pushed into it with his palm. The glass moved with him. His hand sank into it and was covered, as if he pushed not through a solid, but through a kind of soft and pliable membrane. The low humming grew to a buzz.

“I thought I was permanently blind. Nobody told me otherwise.” Dr. Brine had to raise his voice over the noise. “Until one day they wheeled me into a doctor’s office. I could tell because of the way it smelled. And the surgeon, he asked me what color eyes I had before. No one had even bothered to tell the surgeon. Or to show him a picture.”

Dr. Brine's arm was completely swallowed in the blue-green wasps. They coated the glass that enveloped his arm, trying to sting him. Dr. Brine held his palm up inside the enclosure. He stood with his back straight, waiting.

Dr. Medley was prepared to run. He could see how thin the glass had become in places. That their glass enclosure would tear open seemed a probability.

"I don't know why I did it. I was just a child. But I told him my eyes were blue. Nobody in the Brine family has blue eyes. But he believed me." Dr. Brine snatched his fist closed. He gripped one of the wasps, crushing it through the glass. His whole arm tensed. But his face remained calm, even unnervingly so. Slowly, he began to draw his arm back. The glass in front of him began to warp back crudely into what it had been. It rippled now, no longer smooth, as if the window had scar tissue. Dr. Brine withdrew a wriggling creature, tightly held between two fingers. He picked it out of the glass, as if it were slime.

"What neither of us knew at the time, was that those eyes had belonged to an artist. Completely unregistered. He had signed up to be an organ donor. And I remember," he paused. "I remember my father looking at me after the surgery. He said I looked like someone else. And then he went back into his office." Dr. Brine pulled the wasp apart. It moved in vain as it died. Its movements slowed and then stopped as Dr. Brine drew it into a smooth metal under his concentration. Slowly, it became a crude rod, like finely rolled putty. Then he bent it into a circle.

"For a long time I considered the lie something I had done wrong. I believed I had permanently altered my own life. And I had. But I thought because I had done

that, that I still deserved to be blind. That was what my *daddy* taught me. I couldn't tell you the day, but at one point I understood something – I've spent enough time sitting with my eyes closed. I want to look at the world. And I don't want to apologize for it." Dr. Brine put the ring on his finger. He drew in a long breath.

Dr. Medley could only stare at him.

"You know I think of you as an equal."

Dr. Medley said nothing.

"Go on. Call me a liar. I know you're thinking about it."

Dr. Medley caught his breath. His eyebrows were set. "Are you done?"

"No. Because I didn't think you'd become soft-skinned over a bunch of wasps Medley. You'll still have half of them. The commission isn't even what I came here for. I wanted to ask you something."

"Are you *done?*"

"I want to buy the grafting machine."

Dr. Medley stared at him. He could have spit on the floor. "No." Dr. Medley opened the door. Still looking at Dr. Brine, he stepped out. Sound cut through the thick walls of the complex as Dr. Medley shut the door. Faintly, it could be heard in quiet rooms of the two adjacent floors. Had anyone been looking, it might have been seen as a small ripple in any one of the labs' clear containers.

Dr. Medley let his footsteps be angry. He stretched his steps further than usual, walking, stomping, striding. His hands gripped at the inside of his lab coat pockets. Quickly, uncarefully, Dr. Medley put his glasses back on.

“You don’t even know why I’m offering,” said Dr. Brine’s voice behind him.

Dr. Medley turned around, startled. His glasses rested crooked on his face. Dr. Brine *was* behind him.

In a careful mimicry of distraction, Dr. Brine adjusted the ring on his hand with his thumb and forefinger. He twisted the metal down snugly.

Medley put a hand to his ribs. When he spoke, he was almost exhaling his words. “Why would I sell it to you? Why would I *ever* do that?”

“Because I improved upon it.”

“You *touched* my grafting machine?”

“Not yours. I built my own. Based on your designs. In the Spire. I want you to come and see it.”

“You stole my schematics?” Exasperation was in his throat.

“I’ll destroy it. I’ll destroy it in front of you if you don’t like it.”

“No! No, don’t destroy it.” Dr. Medley touched his forehead. His own fingers felt cool. They were shaking, he realized. “So you didn’t touch my machine? You didn’t do anything to it?” He looked, not at Dr. Brine, but in the direction of the grafting room.

“I never touched it.” Dr. Brine said calmly.

Medley breathed out. In fact, he breathed out multiple times. “*How* did you improve it? *What* did you do?”

“I used the blue-green metal. I built your machine with it. That’s why I need you to melt it down. I need more of it. *People* need more of it.”

“But *what* does it do?”

“Come see it,” Dr. Brine said. “Come and see. I can show you right now.”

“God damnit.” Medley looked around the stark hallway they stood in. Maybe to see the work that lay before him, invisible and ever present. His life was like a hallway. “You never listen.” He said the last word like a hiss of steam.

“Six colonies. Six colonies of the wasps. Just the ones you can spare.”

Dr. Medley’s face twisted. He shook his head as he moved away. He would go check on Jason. Check on Jason and calm down. Or he might retire on the spot.

“Four million.”

Dr. Medley stopped. “Four million what?”

“Four million notes just to see it.”

“And what?” Dr. Medley kept walking. He felt his nose wrinkle in disgust. “Is that just grease money to you?” He heard nothing, nothing but his own footsteps. Dr. Brine, he hoped, wasn’t following this time.

“It’s how much I want you to see it.”

Dr. Medley turned around. He thought he might see the sneer of someone who had never been told no in their life. He thought he would see the white of Brine’s teeth. He was prepared to quit on the spot, to be the one thing outside of Dr. Brine’s control.

Instead, Dr. Brine’s arms were by his side, limp. It made his suit jacket, one of the arms wrinkled, look slightly large on him. There were traces of the spoiled man,

his eagerness, his frustration with the world. But there was also something oddly juvenile. Oddly vulnerable. As if he were a child who had no one to show things to.

"Please." Dr. Brine said. His voice was almost quiet.

Dr. Medley stared at him, discerning. Dr. Brine was a hard man to place. And unpredictable. "Tomorrow." He said. "Not today. Tomorrow."

CHAPTER 18: WHAT IS FOUND

It had been easy for Irving to get inside his apartment. He hadn't even remembered going home. The difficulty was taking off his shoes, mosaic tiles still in them. The soles had melted into his socks, and his socks had melded to his feet like grafts. Worse, he had one hand to do the tending with. Translucent blisters clung to the palm of the other.

Irving undid the laces completely on both shoes. When he managed to get out one foot, there was a kind of sucking noise with the motion, a sickly sound of tape being peeled off a table. One foot. Then the sock. It was a tender process that sent him reeling with every motion. But the relief – It was like pulling off a leech. Finally his shoes were off his body. When he finished, he felt a kind of glowing in his blood vessels, a tired, hot dizziness mixed with relief. He also felt more at home than he ever had. For a long time, he half-sat, half sprawled there. He thought nothing. He did nothing.

It was a quick discovery that he should not *walk* on the carpet of his apartment. His feet, like amphibian skin, seemed to stick and pull at the fibers. So Irving crawled on his knees. They were only tender.

He took off his clothes in the bathroom, careful to move his hand out of his sleeve, to keep his face and neck from friction of the fabric. On his back, he moved his feet through his pant legs, careful not to let the soles of his feet touch anything.

That the water of his bath ran cold was like a miracle in and of itself. When he submerged his red soles, there was a sharpness and then a relief that shocked his brain. Irving found an involuntary laugh rise from his throat and drift out of his open mouth.

He put his bad hand in the water, leaning over to do so. He felt like a frog, the way he sat on the side of the tub, fingers splayed under the cold water. He thought of nothing. There was the faint "you should have gone to a doctor" that repeated. Otherwise, his head might have been empty. He couldn't bring himself to move, or to submerge his whole body. It was too cold for that, and he was too tired. Instead, he sat on the side of the tub, motionless. He was alone with his perceptions. Alone with the cool water and the pain.

He could smell his clothes. The air and his senses had cleared enough that he could smell the fire on his clothes. He would throw them away. Irving contorted his body, so that his feet could remain in the water. His wallet was in his pockets. He made sure to take that out, along with the key to his home. And Irving pulled out the piece of blue-green metal.

He regarded it again. It was worth holding. The metal was cold, suffused with the air of the apartment. But it seemed to warm quickly from the heat of his hands. The blue-green color seemed rich. The reflection shone in a way that he kept turning it before his eyes. The smooth side, the rough side that had melted to the street. It was beautiful like the cold water on his feet. And as he held it, he felt like it made the water colder. Maybe that was only what he wanted to happen, but he thought the water became cold, cold like snow. And he found he wasn't thinking about the museum at all, or his skin, or the trauma of barely escaping with his own life — but about a time when his mother had put snow down the back of his shirt. The way she had laughed.

Slightly rough because of how much she drank. In a way, he thought of all the ways he could have fixed things.

Irving thought of “The Things They’ve Taken.” And he thought of the dark liquor he kept in the cupboard, which he might use now. It was on the very top shelf. He thought about whether he could reach it. On his knees? He couldn’t. And why would he want to drink? And he thought of music – it was odd that way – he thought of music like he did when he drifted off to sleep, when music was far easier to hear and too difficult to remember.

For hours he held the metal. Or was it hours? It felt like hours. Feet submerged, and his back hunched over the tub, one hand in the water. With his other, he held the metal and thought of all the things that fascinated him. The ways his own life had gone wrong. He felt deeply the things that were lost to him, how far away and lonely all things became. He felt like he could fix things. Anything. For a long while he tried to understand why he felt that so strongly.

It was odd, his feet didn’t feel nearly as painful. There was no way to be sure whether he was distracted, or tired, or whether his feet, in the water that felt so crisply cold, like iced water – he forgot what he was thinking about. His feet. Yes his feet, he tested them on the small bathroom carpet. They seemed alright now. Hours later.

Mentally, he thanked himself that he hadn’t gone to a doctor. They just stung slightly now, but their color was better, he was sure. And they didn’t quite stick to things.

Irving didn't bother with propriety in his own home. It struck him as odd while he reached for the top shelf of his cupboard naked, that he always bothered to wear clothes in his apartment. *Why,* he unscrewed the bottle's cap, and took a long sip of the dark liquor, *why did he bother with*— the burn in his stomach reminded him of the museum. And it made him think of his mother, who also drank from the bottle. That was enough. He found he liked the taste and that scared him slightly. But he felt like he could love the world, every breath. Even liquor. Toxic liquor. Was he forgetting something? Irving tapped the metal to his lips. That's right, his clothes. Irving took the acrid clothes, which were burned in places, walked back to the kitchen, and stuffed them into the cupboard trash. He could tie it off tomorrow. And then – that's right he should wash the rest of his body.

Irving stood in front of his kitchen sink and let the water run for a while. He put his hand underneath it. He watched how the cold water ran over the fingers of his burned hand, with translucent boils. They looked like budding flowers in a way. He thought of the way dandelions went to seed, sometimes in the middle of sidewalks. He imagined his hands doing that. Then he put his head under the tall faucet. The basin was all dimpled copper. He felt like it should have been polished. Cool water on the nape of his neck, Irving felt like he had never really looked at his sink before. The running water sounded like whispers. Like voices in a burning mural.

In a moment of clarity, he turned off the sink. He was tired. Maybe a little hysterical. He needed rest. Soberly, he put on underclothes. He went to bed.

Irving, without a doubt, was late to work. His room only looked like this on weekends – the way the sun was coming through his blinds. Irving felt and saw the boils on his hand, the red skin around them. Maybe he *could* be late. There was a distinct ache in his chest, a soreness in his muscles. He needed water. Why was he thinking of anything but water?

As Irving filled and refilled his glass at the kitchen sink, he looked at the piece of blue-green metal. He laid it on the countertop so he could look at it and hold the glass with both hands, which felt weak. There was something bizarre about the piece of slag he had found. He felt like the luckiest man in the world to have found it. It seemed to take his mind off the carnage. Especially when he held it. But he still thought of Monroe. Was she at the hospital? Should *he* be at the hospital?

Irving had the sense that the metal must have been something else before. *But what else would it be?* He found himself asking. And yet he felt like it asked to be molded into something. Something alive.

He walked over his discarded socks and shoes – blue tiles welded into them. He hadn't even felt his footsteps. The soles of his feet, when he looked, were pink and sensitive. The tile felt cool, the carpet slightly hot. He tested his feet by running in place. Irving nodded to himself and refilled his glass at the sink. He could walk. Well, he didn't have to walk to work. But he could.

Irving put on his uniform, his spare pair of shoes. While outside, he realized he hadn't looked in the mirror, nor had he brushed his teeth. That was fine. He kept walking and felt the side of his leg for his wallet. He *had* remembered to bring that.

And the blue-green metal. He found it was more beautiful in the sun when he took it out. In fact, he stopped walking, just for a moment, to look at it better. The rough side seemed to glitter in the light.

There was a long way to the central station that used the rail. Irving took that way. He did this, he realized (he wasn't sure at first), because he wanted to look out the large windows of the city railway. When the doors of the train opened, Irving saw the perfect seat.

It looked like someone had completely changed a whole section of the train. Carved wooden seats from stumps sat near a window inlaid with bamboo. The window next to them was open – or gone. There was no glass, and thick grass grew on the floor of the vehicle in a patch. The vertical pole nearby, for those without seats to hold onto, had grown bark around it. At the very top, fir branches spread near the ceiling. Nobody sat next to Irving, or in the changed seats. Irving felt the wind on his face, the noise of the wheels. He watched the fir branches sway inside the car as the city passed by. And with his good hand, he held the blue-green metal.

Two men in yellow vests stepped inside the car. One of them held a black painted toolbox. "You might want to sit somewhere else." One of them said to Irving. With a handsaw, one of them began methodically cutting off the branches off of the transfer pole. The other watched and picked up the branches. Sawdust blew around the room of the car. Methodically, they cut every branch, until what remained were wooden ellipses where the limbs had been.

As the men were about to leave, Irving asked, “Can I have a branch?” His voice seemed dry, as if he were dehydrated. Maybe he was.

“Sorry?” The one with the box asked.

He cleared his throat. “Can I have one?” Irving repeated.

The men looked at each other. “It’s all been taken care of, sir. We’ve documented everything already, we promise.”

“I know. I just want one for evidence. That there was a tree here.” Irving smiled. The men smiled back, too. Wide and polite. The men left quickly.

Irving laid the branch he chose across his lap. For the rest of the ride, he looked from it to the open window. Everything felt like a good dream. Especially when he stared out the window. He felt like the tall buildings could be trees. In another world. Or maybe with the right… *the right what?* It was like he mentally had a finger poised. He wondered. The blue-green metal, Irving thought, was an odd thing to find.

Nobody asked questions when Irving walked into the central station with a tree branch in his good hand. But some gave him wary looks, especially at his haggard state, his red skin that was burned in places, his hair that, if he had looked in a mirror, would have been an obvious fix. Irving kept his eyes in front of him.

He forgot to knock on Powell’s office. Instead, he just opened the door. Laughter and commotion already filled the room. “That is *incredible.*” A voice said. “Do it again. One more time.”

Every face turned to see the door open. And then the voices went silent.

Irving, when he realized he was just standing there with a tree branch, dropped it to the side of the door. “Sorry.” He said. “I saw a tree on my way here. In the middle of a railcar. That’s not why I’m here, I just thought you had a minute.”

“Yes, I heard about that.” Powell said. “A *second* tree this morning. Well, I appreciate the extra… evidence.” He paused. The room was silent. “Shit Irving, you look like you were at the museum.” A few people laughed.

Irving swallowed dryly. “I *was* at the museum.”

Powell cleared his throat. It was the only sound, aside from the fabric on fabric sound of men in the office shuffling. “I’m sorry to hear that. Well, that is why we’re all here. I’m glad you’re alright. Are you alright?”

Irving nodded.

Powell seemed to choose his words. “Well, I’ll want a report about that when you can get it to me. As soon as you can. But while you’re here, you might as well see.”

The other enforcers in the room seemed to anticipate Powell’s movements. Irving wondered at how clean Powell’s desk was. The sergeant opened a black case on his desk, fine enough to be for a musical instrument. He pulled out a long rod of blue-green metal – a perfect, shining cylinder of it, thin enough to fit comfortably between the fingers. Powell held it like a fork the size of a forearm. Or maybe a knife.

“It looks unassuming. Doesn’t it?” Some of the men in the room snickered. And then Powell pointed it at Irving. Immediately, his feet sunk into the floor, up to his ankles.

Irving felt like he couldn't breathe. The men in the room roared with laughter. Powell must have seen something on his face. He pointed it again, and Irving felt himself pushed back to the surface of the office. One man brayed with obnoxious laughter.

"Oh shut up Gideon." Powell pointed the rod at him and let him sink into the floor. "You can get yourself out." Powell pretended to put it back in the case. Instead, he abruptly crumpled up a blank encregraph and threw it at the man. The paper arced in the air, but before it could hit Gideon's head, who had his mouth open in quiet shock, the paper stopped, completely still in mid-air.

Powell had the rod pointed at it. The paper ball was levitating. Powell had his eyebrows set, concentrating. The encregraph uncrumpled, and the ink inside it swirled before it began to fold into something else. Every eye in the room watched it. Fold by fold, it turned into a black and white parrot with large, inky eyes. Gently, Powell guided it to sit on top of Gideon's head. A small crumpled piece of the paper fell out of the bird, and onto Gideon's shoulder.

"Oh come on." Gideon said.

"Oh come on!" The paper bird repeated.

The room erupted into laughter. The bird did an impression of Gideon's bray. The room went even louder. Powell's face was red with humor. He cleared his throat and breathed before he spoke to Irving across the room. It took a couple tries. "Well?" he asked. "Aren't you curious what it is?"

Irving had his mouth open. "What," he stuttered, "what is it?"

“They’re calling it ‘Vespidium.’ A remarkable tool. And an even more remarkable weapon.” Powell pointed it at the bird, which fell into shreds of confetti over Gideon’s head. “Courtesy of Mayor Brine. Apparently his son has been cooking it up in a laboratory. They don’t go wrong in the Brine family. Anyways, the mayor is going to ‘officially’ announce the technology after a speech today. For now it’s Sergeants only.” Powell raised his eyebrows at the room while he pretended to put the rod away. “Oh. I almost forgot.” He pointed the rod at Gideon’s ankles, and the man rose back up to the floor.

The laughter was quiet enough that Irving could hear Powell latch the case shut and lock it. “Word is, that within a week, all of you will have clearance to use these. You’ll each have your own. Even you Gideon. But I’ll warn you, getting me back would be grounds for insubordination.”

Gideon was looking at his feet, brushing the paper out of his hair.

“And I would still get you back.” Powell seemed to clear his throat again. “So, Irving, what did you need a minute for? And by the way, everyone get out of my office. I want everyone out. *Out*. I want everyone we can spare at the speech. Get there early. Go.”

Methodically, people began to file out of Powell’s office. Irving could hear laughing and murmuring. The sound of the tree branch being pushed out of the way with shoes. Powell waited until the last man shut the door.

“I want to apologize for that.”

“For what?” Irving asked. His eyes refocused. He was looking at the black case latched shut.

“For making your legs stuck. I’ve just been trying to keep morale high. After you told me you were at the museum, I, – I,” Powell shook his head. “I shouldn’t have startled you.” Powell didn’t give him time to respond. “So what did you want to talk about? I do have a minute.”

Irving hesitated. “I saw something at the museum last night.”

Powell seemed to hold his breath.

“It was after the fire. I was outside the building, and next to a corpse. It was a person and they were -– it was burnt so badly I almost didn’t know what it was at first. I don’t think I thought it was a person. And there was…” He hesitated. “There was something else.”

Powell’s voice was serious and breathy. “What was it?”

Irving met his eyes. “I found,” he began. He looked at the floor. “I found someone I recognized. From a previous case.”

“Well?” Powell asked. “Are they alright? Are they suspect?”

“No.” Irving felt like he said it too quickly. “No.” He repeated. “Not suspect. I guess I just wanted to follow up with them.” There was a silence in response. Powell’s shoulders relaxed like a bedsheet losing air beneath it.

“Do a wellness check.” Irving continued.

The man seemed to regard him. Irving seemed to feel the aches and tenderness of his body redoubled. Especially in his bad hand, which stung to the air. He felt hot.

Like he might sweat, or that he already was sweating. Irving didn't dare reach into his pocket. But he felt it. He felt the metal in his pocket like it was alive. Like it was climbing out with thin hairs. It pricked at him. He was aware of his own heartbeat.

Powell nodded. He looked at Irving closely before he spoke. He glanced at his hand. "Yes, that makes sense. You're alright? You're sure you're alright?"

"I'm alright."

Powell nodded again and paused. "I'm glad for it. Well, best to go to records then. But maybe take the day off. Two to clear your head." He added. "That's it?"

"That's it." Irving nodded.

"Maybe take the day off. Or come to the speech if you really want to. Or take the day off." Powell opened the office door for Irving. "Take the next day off. And maybe see a doctor."

With a quick nod, Irving picked up the tree branch and moved towards the records office. He kept his face forward. He could feel Powell's eyes on him as he walked away. Powell hadn't shut his office door. He was sure the large man was leaning out of his office, watching him leave. Sweat collected under Irving's uniform. It took everything he could to not reach into his pocket. To feel for the metal.

CHAPTER 19: TWO PLACES AT ONCE

Monroe's address, Apt 405 on the northside of Ghetty street, was actually on the way home for Irving. When he knocked on her door, there wasn't an immediate answer. The sound of a radio came from the inside, volume up, voices but no music.

The peephole gazed at Irving who tried to picture himself outside of her door, how he must have looked – ragged and scorched from the day before. But dressed neatly. Irving always kept his uniforms folded. The tree branch from off of the train was in his grip. Not only had he brought it with him, but he wasn't sure what to do with it. He thought about throwing it and coming back for it later. But someone might take it. Or Monroe might see him throw it while she opened the door. Instead, Irving turned his head down and to the side, almost to where the tree branch was pointing, as if his eyes might follow a line it was drawing to the distance. He imagined it must have looked patient. Or maybe deranged. He should have stopped at home first.

His wrist rested on the blue-green metal in his pocket. *A remarkable tool*, Powell's voice echoed. *And an even more remarkable weapon.* Why was it there? Melted on the ground in front of the museum? Irving could feel the question like an itch while he waited for the door to open. He almost put the branch down to pull out the metal, just to idly look at it.

When the door opened, and it opened slowly, it wasn't Monroe. It was an older woman, maybe in her fifties. She wore comfortable, loose gray clothing. Her hair, dark like Monroe's, was lighter at the roots and wild, as if she had slept in it and not cared. She had a face like a block of iron, square-like, jaw and brow set. Her eyes were red with irritation, as if she'd been crying. Or as if she'd been standing in smoke.

Otherwise, she didn't say a word. Irving distinctly felt like he was still looking at the peephole.

He waved with his bad hand in what he thought was a friendly way. The fingers of the hand remained curved and blistered. Regarding him, the woman's eyes seemed to follow his limb, then his face, his uncombed, slightly burnt hair. And then she was looking at the stick, still green with needle leaves. She looked at it maybe a bit warily.

"I'm looking for a woman named Monroe?" He said.

The woman crossed her arms and waited for him to say more. She looked from the cut branch to his face. His uniform. "And who are you?" Irving thought her voice would be abrasive, like his own mother's made harsh from drinking. But it was oddly smooth.

"Irving Briggs." He cleared his throat and tried to say it more clearly. "*Irving* Briggs."

The woman seemed to relax slightly. Her eyes, too, seemed softer. She laughed a little and the woman said something to herself, too quiet for Irving to hear. "Come inside." She waved him in without looking. Irving had to shut the door.

The apartment was dark. Light entered into their small living room from the closed blinds of their balcony window. In the opposite direction, a dim shaded hanging lamp illuminated their dining space. Monroe sat like a shadow on the couch in the middle of the small living room, unmoving. At first, Irving hadn't been sure what he was looking at, or if it was really Monroe. She was wearing the hazmat that she

worked in, that had been in the trunk of her car. Her entire body was enclosed in the opaque white, rubber-porcelain material. It made her look alien, head large, body thick, more creature than human. Her suit reflected the light of the window and the lamp.

Carefully by the door, Irving laid down the tree branch. He walked softly. Cautious not to make noise, though the radio played loud applause. Irving made his way close to her, as if she were an animal.

"Monroe." Irving tried to speak clearly, if not too loudly. His voice was still somewhat dry. He thought about asking for water. Monroe hadn't moved. The woman, Irving could only assume it was her mother, stood next to him. "Monroe?"

Irving could see a painting on their wall. He hadn't noticed it at first, looking for Monroe. It was in the shade of the room, dim on the wall. Irving could see the performing arts center, all shrouded in streaks and impressions of color. The crowd in the painting seemed to make noise in tandem with the radio. The applause stopped, and then so did the radio's. If it was a painting that showed things in real time – Irving wondered how a thing like that was inside their small apartment. Irving wondered if Monroe's sister had created it. She had been an artist. He didn't think they could have afforded one otherwise.

From the canvas, Irving could see the performing arts center clearly, almost from a bird's eye view. He could imagine the whole scene in his mind's eye – how *close* the museum would have been to the stirring crowd, which was visible as a blur of faces and hues— and he could see the man on stage in the painting. Were the

perspective turned, the wreckage of the museum might be slightly visible, off into the background and behind the man.

Irving could make out the details of the man on the stage. He was elderly, with thin white hair that seemed to drape over his head and blow slightly in the wind. He had on a neat, dark blue suit. When he spoke, when his lips moved in the painting. The voice on the radio followed him. His sound, despite his age, was clear and strong.

"I know many of you are worried." It looked like the painting spoke. "And you have a right to be. It seems like we are living through the un-thinkable. In the span of less than a day, we have seen the destruction of so much life — of our museum. And now a toxic river of paint runs all the way from the worker's district. It drains itself to parts of the underground, where it may flood and stagnate. I do not ask you to look away. I ask you to look directly, and to know that I look with you. You see the wreckage of the thing behind me, the thing that represented us. Our museum is burned. And for those listening, for those who cannot see, I will describe it." The man on stage gestured behind him, but did not turn.

"Our symbol has crumbled. The very ground around the museum has been blackened. The anima of so many artists has been taken away, and we are left with the rubble. The pillars, the white marble pillars and steps — they have been so heated that they are now gray and warped. The whole of the building has collapsed, and it sits like a scar, like factory slag. Like an overgrown weed. Ask yourself: was this natural? Is *this* the natural order of things?" The man on stage faced the ground. His gray hairs blew, and it seemed the wind that spoke, distorted into a light crackling by the radio.

“Do you feel safe?” The man in the painting asked. Irving looked to see if Monroe had moved, but she was silent, motionless. She watched the painting. Irving was reminded of the propped up, half-burned hazmat he had found at the refinery. Monroe looked like that now. Like she was propped onto the couch inside that suit. He couldn’t even see how she breathed.

Monroe’s mother sniffed. She stifled tears.

“No. And why should you feel safe? We have tremendously failed to see the writing in the sky.” Irving could see the crowd looking upwards. Colors shifted, hats tilted in the painting. “We have taken the best artists to the Spire. We have painted the skies with clouds and fireworks. And what is left? What is left to you? The artists who work? Who stifle in that work? The artists who have committed crimes, that, insofar as we can see, cannot be safely contained? Look behind me. Look!” Again the man thrust back his hand. “Say you do not *deserve* better.” The crowd cheered. It was hard to know what the emotion was, except that it needed to escape the crowd. It was there in Monroe’s apartment. All of them heard the crowd from the upturned volume of the radio, and their sound clambered around in the room.

“Many of you will remember this day, this sequence of days. Relish them if you want to. Change is coming. As mayor of Aurum, I am doing everything in my power to assure you change. Is. Coming.” Whoops and hollers came from the crowd. But Mayor Brine held up his hands. “The first: there will be no more facilities, no more prisons for artists that commit crimes. From now on, those artists will come to the Spire, where I will personally oversee and rehabilitate them. There will be no

escapes. No burning down of museums, no trees, no toxic rivers of paint. And all those who stifle in their work, in their contracts. Hear my words: you are *welcome* to join the Spire. We will no longer turn aside any talent."

Irving could feel the hair tingle of the blue-green metal in his pocket, like it was climbing towards him, inching, he felt, even through fabric. He put his hand over it and held it. What he felt — he was sure he felt it — was thrill and anger and frustration. It was like the sudden urge to run, to throw something hard and watch it fall. Irving was all too aware of the walls around him. He wanted to tear them down, tear them down. It was like music, like a drum beat inside of him. He wanted to tear down his walls, to tear down his walls, to tear — Irving let go of the metal. His heart beat quickly.

"The second is that our symbol is not gone." The mayor continued. "Our museum cannot be so easily taken from us. Already, we are making plans to make it new, to make it better. To make it what it was and to make it more fun. And we cannot forget to have fun. Or we have lost. And rest assured, not only will it be more fun. It will be utterly, utterly fireproof." A cheer rose from the crowd. Applause and painted fists rose to the air. Colors of clothing jumbled against one another. The mayor in the painting smiled, and Irving could almost hear the sound through the radio. The sound of the man smiling.

"The last is that we have too long relied on artistry. It is unpredictable. For the duration of our lives, it has been spontaneous, ethereal. Wild. We have been able to draw it, in its most controllable form, from bones. But there has always existed a

thinly veiled danger, from any artistry— that it might do the unexpected. But I would like to show you what my son, my talented son, has created with the help of the Spire, and with cutting edge science." The mayor motioned for someone to come to the stage. An enforcer came, black uniform swirling in the painting as he moved.

"There is a new element we have discovered, a new metal. It is a focus. An organizing force that has come just at the time we needed it. It is power. Raw power that may be controlled precisely. I will ask most of you to cover your ears in a moment. But I say this to remind you: the power of the artist is on *our* side now. This is the power that we strike back with." Mayor Brine took off his blue coat and wrapped it around the microphone. He nodded, and the enforcer raised a rod of blue-green metal to the sky. Even in the painting it gleamed.

Thick lightning shot in an arc from the rod. In the painting, the lightning became a swathe of white paint that extended and spread. The radio picked up the boom, even through Mayor Brine's jacket. Even then, Irving heard it through the walls of the apartment. And for that one second, Irving saw Monroe flinch. He saw that Monroe, however silent she was, felt fear. And that she was alive. Next to him, Monroe's mother had her eyes to the blinds of the window. Irving realized, he hadn't done it consciously, had put his hand in his pocket. The adrenaline of the moment seemed enhanced, and then smoothed by the metal. It was as if Irving were in a nightmare with all the awareness that he could wake up at any moment — nothing, the metal seemed to say in a singsong, nothing could harm him.

The mayor unwrapped the microphone. His was distorted now, as if something in the broadcast had been damaged. “This is the power we bring with us.” He crackled. “This metal, our own remarkable tool, will bring us to a new era. Have no doubt, were this metal present at the museum last night, not a single life would have been lost. I put this power in the hands of the responsible, the honorable. And soon-“

Monroe stood up so quickly, it startled Irving and her mother. Monroe stood large inside the hazmat suit, tall. It gave her a kind of bulk, which she used to knock the radio down hard onto the floor. It fell onto rug, and even then the front panel popped off, exposing the inside of wires attached to a dark ball. The sound of the voice mercifully, immediately stopped. Only now the dark component, like an obsidian marble, made the sound of something lightly turning and scratching.

Monroe seemed to look at the hand that knocked it over, maybe feeling the fresh pain of her wounded fingers. She kneeled to the floor, holding that hand. Maybe, Irving Imagined, she had popped fresh blisters under the suit.

On her knees, Monroe let out a high-pitched whine that traveled and stayed like a long and sad note. Finally the sound broke, and like waves, sadness choked through the rubbery suit, obvious in small shakes, the racking of her own body. The sound was clear. It was as if Monroe was right next to him, face visible. And Irving wanted her next to him. He wanted to put a hand on her shoulder, or to put his hand to hers, to tell her he was sorry, he was so sorry. Instead, he only watched from behind the couch, hand in his pocket as Monroe’s mother ran to lay upon hands.

Irving wasn't sure what he was doing there, standing. He felt like an intruder, an observer to a private moment of grief.

"I dreamed," Monroe sobbed and had to stop. "I dreamed last night that I ran back inside and she was right there. Right there behind us. And that I carried her out over and over and *over*." Monroe seemed to lose control as she spoke, her words becoming less pronounced, as if her jaw was unable to fully close.

In the dimness, Irving looked away and to the painting. A line of enforcers stood on the painted stage, holding their rods of blue-green metal up. The air was thick with dancing paper streamers, until it and the crowd moved, blurring into a mass of colored clothes and ribbons and faces in the painting. The man in the suit, Mayor Brine, had his hands up in the air.

Irving listened.

"And each time I carried her out, she appeared back inside. Every time. And every time I went back get her she was worse." Monroe whined again, her voice higher. "She was more burned. And her hair was gone, she had no hair and her skin-" Monroe's speech became so garbled that Irving couldn't understand. For a while it just seemed like Monroe made sounds.

"She spoke to me when I carried her. It sounded just like her. She wouldn't move, she just laid there. But she kept saying, 'It's okay. It's okay here. I'm okay.'"

Irving felt chills.

Monroe's mother had her arms around her, holding her close.

“I’m okay here. I’m okay here.” Monroe repeated the words over and over. As if the words were circular and had their own momentum, their own independent need to be spoken. Their own need to be true.

Irving had his hand on the metal. It made things feel like a dream. The dim room, the expensive painting, the broken radio, Monroe in her white hazmat — the way she looked mannequin and alien.

The right words were there, Irving was sure. The right words could be spoken and understanding might pass through the room. Only, those words were at some distant corner. Irving’s brain was testing the keys to a piano. Instead of words, he felt plodding, the beginning tunes to something. And maybe it was something like envy. An envy for those who could play music, for those who could touch something else and make it speak for them. Their work was far easier.

Oddly, Irving thought of rivers. How they kept moving, how some were full of a thousand things. What rivers took, they carried along with them. Irving’s own name meant river, or fresh and green water. He said Monroe’s name quietly. Neither of the two women looked at him. He said it again, and realized he hadn’t been saying her name. He had been saying “mouth of the river roe.” He repeated it now. The words felt sad in his mouth. Words carried like stones in water. *The things that rivers are forced to carry.* He thought.

Carefully, Irving walked forwards. Gently he stood close, and then picked up and held Monroe’s wrist with both hands. The hazmat suit felt cool, pliable. Monroe’s mother was silent, but she looked at Irving.

“She’s okay.” Irving said. His own eyes felt red. “Your sister’s okay.” These were the only right words. “She told you herself. She’s okay.”

Monroe still sat on the floor. Her limp arm turned to touch Irving’s. Her arms seemed huge and white, like a clay figure or a chalk outline. The light outside was a sunny yellow, visible through the closed blinds. Audible only as a tapping against the glass, a faint drizzle started. Light enough it might have been from a single, quick-passing cloud.

CHAPTER 20: HIS SON, THE PAINT MAKER

They had blindfolded Ernest, put thick gloves on his hands, and put plugs into his ears. When they sat him down, he felt the world around him turn. Motion and smell engulfed his senses. No matter how deprived he became of all else, he could still feel movement. And he tried, tried desperately to put his mind in the movement alone. But his feet were wet. He could smell the river of wine still — sweet and fragrant and drunken, trapped in his shoes. It filled the cabin of the car. The smell made him sick with each pull and turn in the road. With each breath, one thought became more and more defined, harder to ignore: Ernest, whatever he had done, hadn't meant to kill anyone. He hadn't meant to kill anyone.

The enforcers were ginger with Ernest. Maybe they were afraid of him. Maybe, Ernest thought, they had a right to be. They held his elbow gently as they led him to a room that smelled like metal and cold air. They only took out his ear plugs to ask him questions. And Ernest found his own words more than eager to pour out.

He talked. The faceless voices around him listened. They listened about the paints that were thrown away, and about Fort Kenneth, and about guilt and murder. About who and what Mickey was now, if he was alive as a tree. "Probably not." One of them said.

They made him describe how he had made the river of wine, and the colors, the tree with yellow leaves. "That was Mickey?" They confirmed. Ernest could hear that the men were writing. It might have been hours that they listened. They asked about Fort Kenneth, the abandoned complex next to the restaurant with the bell. "Who lived there? How did you get in?" Ernest told them everything. The door that only he

could see. How paranoid Kenneth was. He spoke automatically, and without thinking gave them everything they wanted.

And then by the elbow, ears plugged again, blindfolded and gloved and wet-footed still, they led him away.

Ernest was aware of his own breath, of being outdoors suddenly. He could feel the wind. Dimly, there was an awareness that he was being exchanged. It was cool, like he might have been in an alley. The enforcers let go of his elbow, and new hands set upon his shoulders. They stayed there, guided him, and then they stopped him, stood him still. For a while nothing happened. Then he was moved just slightly forwards. No more than a step.

The air was immediately warmer. He could smell carpet and leather, lacquered wood. He was set down upon a hard stool with no back, low to the floor. Someone unfastened the thick gloves. They removed the plugs from his ears, and then wordlessly, gently, tilted Ernest's chin upwards. Hands removed the blindfold.

The room was dark. Light came from the ceiling: a dome of dark blue stained glass, rich and silent – broken into different shades and shapes of twilight. Gold flecks reflected inside and around it, connected by faint lines. They seemed to flicker and move independent of light. The room below them was dark.

"You look just like him." The man's voice was clear, incurious. Almost musical. It echoed in the room. Ernest looked down and behind him, while the man moved to stand in front of him. His footsteps echoed.

He was tall with light-blue eyes, and a shock of dark hair, cleanly trimmed. His clothes were dark and neat, and on his thumb was a ring of metal, which he fiddled with. “I wanted you to see beauty first.” He said, not looking up. “This ceiling is one of my favorites.”

Ernest looked again to the glass, dusk blue and gold. From floor to walls, everything was dark and polished wood, tinted blue from the ceiling. There were no lights. The room was bare except for the stool he sat on and the doors that encircled around them. The doors had no distinct pattern or shape. They were all different, some tall, or circular, or brightly stained, or intricately carved. One door seemed to be only a black curtain.

“If he could see you now.” The man’s voice brought Ernest back. The emotion in it seemed almost passive. As if he were contemplating something.

“I’m Dr. Brine.” The man said. He held out his hand, ringed thumb, to Ernest, who stood still. The man took Ernest’s hand and helped him upwards.

“I killed someone.” Ernest said.

“So I’ve heard. We’ve all done things we’re not proud of. But that’s not how I know you.” He waited. “You’re Mr. Holloway’s son. The paint maker.”

Ernest looked up.

“I want to show you something.” Dr. Brine looked at Ernest intently, met his eyes, and for a moment he only looked. Satisfied with something he said, “Follow me. And leave your shoes. I’ll have someone take care of them.”

Dr. Brine walked over to the curtain door, footsteps loud like knocks, so that they traveled throughout the large chamber. Ernest's feet made slaps on the polished wood. They moved to the black curtain, which Dr. Brine moved to the side. Past it led a thin hallway with dim white light at the end. Dr. Brine motioned for Ernest to move first, to walk in front of him. He spoke while they walked.

"Mr. Holloway, a few years ago, got diagnosed with stomach cancer. Without a doubt he was going to die, and so we did everything we could. We were late. And his art is extremely valuable. We were artists – are artists. We did what we knew." Dr. Brine paused, and brought his ring, thumb curled, to his lips.

Ernest walked faster. There was a faint machine-like *hummmm* coming from the room ahead.

"He's alright. He's alive." Dr. Brine said coolly. "But he can't speak. Can't hear you." He Brine made his voice louder rather than keep pace. Sound carried in the hallway. "From what I understand, he cares about you quite a bit. He paints you."

Ernest almost jogged to the end. Dr. Brine kept talking, slightly quiet, slightly echoing. "I think if I had a modicum of that, I would want someone to tell me. To show me."

The room opened to the right. It was large, smooth and black, like it was all made from dark river stone. The corners of the room were angled, so that the shape was almost octangular. Illumination came from a single source: the diffused reflections of a bright spotlight focused on a blank canvas.

Away from it, Ernest recognized his father's face. Its eyelids were open, staring blankly. His father always had dark eyes, only now it seemed there was hardly any white to them. The pupils seemed enlarged, while the face seemed gaunt, making it lined, far more lined than he remembered, and more high cheek boned.

His face seemed to be the only recognizable portion. The rest was apparatus, even the skull, which was hairless and metal, and the throat, which was a litter of tubes and colored wires. Ernest's eyes were brought towards the sound of the light humming. From a black metal box on the floor protruded a hose, thickness of a wrist and the color of bile, which rose and connected to a swollen rubber bag.

"The cancer was extremely aggressive." Dr. Brine said as he entered the room. He spoke almost slowly. "We started with an artificial stomach. The idea was to remove the cancer completely. But it became more and more apparent that we had missed something. Eventually, we protected the most vital organ: the brain."

Ernest could hardly listen. The face turned to him, rotating like a sore shoulder. The features seemed stilled, the mouth permanently closed. It moved parallel to the floor, attached to a long and straight piece of metal from the ceiling, which looked like piping. An arm with a paintbrush, folded like the arm of a mantis, extended from the body. It was all silvery metal and springs, well oiled and quiet hinges. It touched the canvas with a brush slowly, almost deliberately. The brush stayed on the surface, allowing it to soak up color.

Dr. Brine was quiet.

In a circle, bright orange paint bloomed, until more details revealed themselves, the subtle wrinkles and dimples, a small and knobby green dot. It was a painting of an orange.

The fruit, after a moment, rolled off the canvas, bounced once lightly, and then rolled under the body of the machine. Ernest knelt down and grabbed it. It made the humming of the rounded black box almost loud to his ear. He could hear liquid moving through the bile colored hose.

The orange was large, almost the size of a head. Ernest picked it up carefully, eyes wet. When he stood, he held it close to his chest, which rose and fell in deeper, less even breaths.

“He’s not always coherent.” Dr. Brine explained. His voice dripped with a scholar’s sympathy. “He dreams mostly. And paints while he dreams. In a way, it's beautiful. Almost perfect. To him, there are no barriers, no stray thoughts, blocks. Just sleep and creation. Stasis.” Brine put his hands in his pockets. “I’m sure he’ll recognize you, given time. I’ll give you a moment. When I come back, I’ll show you your room. I’ve kept some of his portraits of you. I’ll have someone bring them in.”

The face looked at the canvas while Dr. Brine left. It didn’t move. Soon the humming stopped, and there was only quiet, only silence, except for the faint noise of something bubbling or dripping. Ernest wasn’t hungry. He felt nauseous. But with shaky hands, he peeled the orange. He dug his thumb into the fruit’s flesh.

It was fragrant. The scent seemed to fill the room, his nostrils, the of citrus. Oil from the peel bled from the skin, which removed easily. He dropped the peel to the

floor. The fruit, large though it was, seemed heavy. Ernest spread the wedges apart, careful to keep them intact. Inside the fruit perfectly dry was a piece of blue granite.

It was lemurian blue, flecked with mirror-like pieces of blue and green. Ernest had one just like it in his room, on his bed stand. His father had given it to him as a child. It never left his side. Until now. Now it was far away in his room, beyond a thousand doors and dark walls. Beyond a glass ceiling of the color blue.

Only now, here was another. Similar, except this one was sharp. Ernest turned it in his hands. The stone was jagged, almost honed to a point, like it had been broken over and over. Until it was sharp. There was something written on it. He held it to the light from the canvas. On it were scratched two words: “kill me.”

Ernest’s father never turned to look at him. His face didn’t flinch. Not when Ernest cut the swollen rubber stomach, or when he pulled out wires and tubes from the neck. Not when dark liquid the texture of chewed wet paper hit the floor and smacked. Not when the smell of strange fluids filled the air – and they smelled like soil, oddly. Like a man already dead and buried, long returned to the earth. The face never flinched. Not when Ernest hugged it tight, pulling down on the ceiling pipe. Not when Ernest was pulled away, back through the thin hallway where sound carried.

CHAPTER 21: THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

Four million notes. To Dr. Medley, it was a number that followed him. What would he do with that? Retire? The thought harrowed him, toiling in his mind. It seemed to stick to his heels, make him restless. Four million notes. Just to *see* his version of the grafting machine. Medley found he wavered on whether he believed it. On whether Dr. Brine could actually be vulnerable. Or tell the truth.

"You said he was lying." His wife said while she ate plain oatmeal. "You said it this morning. Before you woke up."

"Did I?" Dr. Medley drank his nutritive shake in the mornings. The two of them gathered near their granite table in the kitchen. Often they left off the lights each morning. They both preferred the gradual dimness of the morning. The table sat close to their garden window. It had no curtains, no blinds.

"You did. You said he was lying." She brushed a few gray hairs from her eyes. She slouched when she ate, a habit solidified in her age now.

"I wouldn't know who it was, Nora." Dr. Medley took a long sip from his drink. He preferred to stand at the kitchen table. It seemed lethargic to wake up, only to sit. He worked the substance in his mouth while it was still cold. Left out, it tended to coagulate.

"I know," she said. "I just thought it was funny. I've never heard you talk in your sleep."

"Never? Most people say a little."

"You snore," she said straight faced. "But you never talk."

"It must be stress," he said.

“I believe it.” She kept her eyes to the window. “Look there. Right over there.” She pointed. “There’s a beetle. Right outside next to the windowsill.”

Dr. Medley lowered his thick glasses and squinted. Nora always had sharp eyes. “What does it look like?” He asked.

“It’s brown. Small”

Four million notes. Four *million* notes. “That’s interesting.” He said aloud. “Maybe it’s a June bug.”

“Maybe.” Nora got up to take her bowl to the sink, oatmeal half-finished. She hummed while she ran the water.

Dr. Medley, when he arrived at the lab, found two things. When he opened the door to his plain office, which was mostly just a desk in a room, Dr. Brine was there. He leaned forwards on one of the wood and fabric chairs for guests. The second thing he noticed was that his drink had coagulated. He chewed the straw instead. Neither man spoke.

For Dr. Medley, his office was a sanctuary. Nobody ever looked for him there, because he so rarely used it. So he was surprised to see Brine. Surprised he hadn’t chosen to sit behind the desk, back straight and eyes forwards, waiting. Instead, Dr. Brine sat like someone being reprimanded. He had his head in one palm, back bent against the coarse wine fabric of one of the visitor chairs. Maybe, Dr. Medley considered, it was only the look of patience. An impression. Dr. Brine tilted his eyes like a tired animal.

“I have other things to do first.” Dr. Medley said.

“That’s fine. Take your time.”

Grudgingly, Dr. Medley shut the door to his own office. He expected it to open after him, for Dr. Brine to stride behind. But the door remained shut. Even while he walked away, footsteps light.

He decided to go check on Jason, to check on the wasps. Six colonies were gone. And there was also the matter of a new organism. The metallic butterfly – a perfect replica of a Xerces Blue. Another extinct species. No doubt, Dr. Brine would melt it down to wear it on his finger. A thought wound its way inside Medley’s brain while he walked: *Four million notes.*

It was early afternoon when Medley was finished. Dr. Medley knocked on his own office door. Dr. Brine was still inside, on the same chair. He had taken off his shoes.

“I’m ready.”

“Alright.” Dr. Brine sat up slowly, almost glum. He snapped his fingers, and his shoes slid onto his feet and tied themselves neatly. He managed a kind of smirk. But it was half-hearted. “I know you’re excited to see my machine.”

A black cab waited outside the lab. It was clean, even glossy, but also ordinary. Plain to Dr. Brine’s taste. Brine opened the door and motioned Medley in. There was a driver, separated by glass. Brine communicated to him through two succinct knocks. The car spurred forwards, engine quiet.

They drove for a moment in silence. Dr. Brine sat tall now, comfortable. Dr. Medley found himself fidgeting with his hands.

“What’s the Spire like?” He asked.

“I could describe it.” Brine seemed partial. “Or you could see it for yourself in a moment. And why spoil that?” He smiled, eyes to the window.

They drove more slowly now, past parked cars and the odd passing pedestrian. They were near the performing arts center, and as a result, near the museum. There had been a speech the day before. Medley hadn’t even realized while he worked. But now he saw the litter of it, where a huge crowd had gathered the day before. The wind blew confetti, and long streamers and pieces of stray trash through the empty square and through the street. The car ran over a paper cup with an audible crunch. A little further, and they both saw the black, molten wreckage of the museum under a cloudless blue sky. It was outside Medley’s window, but they both watched.

“I heard about the museum only this morning. Jason told me you were promoted to main curator just before. I’m sorry.” Said Dr. Medley.

Brine shifted uncomfortably. He touched the ring on his thumb, twisting it. “When I—“ he paused. “When I invested in your lab, I read the file on what happened.”

Dr. Medley faced the window.

“I heard you executed someone.”

“I did the only ethical thing I could.” Dr. Medley spoke coldly. “I put them down.”

Dr. Brine waited for a moment. “Do you ever feel guilty?” He asked. “I heard you put a needle into his brain. Through the man’s eye.”

Medley turned to him, mouth open slightly. He closed it. “I did.” Dr. Medley polished his glasses on his white coat. “But I don’t feel guilty. He was a rapist. I’m only sorry we didn’t have the permission to recycle him.”

Dr. Brine seemed to nod. “I’ll need you to wear a blindfold by the way.” He said. The car turned, moving away from the museum. They were now going the opposite direction of the tall Spire in the distance.

Brine pulled out a black handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to Medley. Glasses in his lab coat, he tied it around his eyes, carefully folded into a broad band of fabric.

“What if he were only a murderer?” Brine asked. “Would you feel guilty then?”

“No, I wouldn’t. Are you fascinated that I killed a man, Dr. Brine?”

“In a way, yes. The more I get to know you, the more I think you would have had someone else do it.”

Medley laughed softly, a few quick trills. “If you knew me, you’d know I was afraid someone would do it incorrectly.”

Dr. Brine breathed air out of his nose. A false laugh. He watched the world move by outside the window. They had reached a comfortable silence. An equilibrium while the car had to wait for the rail, the long, blue-painted jointed cars to pass through the middle of the street. “I was reading the news this morning.” Brine said. “An artist killed his father. His father was famous, actually. Have you ever heard the name Holloway?”

“I have. Vaguely.”

“His son killed him in his sleep.”

“That’s sad.” Medley emphasized with silence. “How?”

“In his sleep.”

“Yes, but how?” Dr. Medley only looked forwards now, chin up, blindfolded.

“The article didn’t say.”

“Strange.”

“I agree.” Dr. Brine moved on quickly. “But the article did say he was…” He chose his words. “Overcome with emotion. He was incoherent. In the end, it was decided that his son was a danger. The only logical thing to do was put him down. Unfortunately.”

“I imagine most sons who kill their fathers are incoherent.”

“I agree.” Dr. Brine folded his hands, the ring carefully nestled beneath them. “But I wondered, when I read the article, I wondered how people react to the deaths they cause. I thought of the briefing I had read. I wondered how you reacted.”

Medley took a deep breath. “Bold to say I caused it. Then again, the interns know more than you. And you thought what? I lost my mind over a dead rapist?”

Dr. Brine was quiet.

“If you read the briefing, you would know two things. He wasn’t my father. And he spent the last months of his life in sleep wake cycles while his brain was on a countertop. He was conscious for it. I imagine it was like torture. Months of it.

Dreaming. Awake with no body. I'll tell you what I think: what I did for him was a mercy. One he didn't deserve. End of story."

Dr. Brine breathed deeply. He kept his face neutral, even optimistic. When they got out of the car, he had crescent impressions on his palms.

"Hold still." Dr. Brine said, guiding Dr. Medley gently. "Stand right… there."

While they stood, Dr. Medley could feel coolness. They might have been in an alley, in the shade. He could hear leaves or trash blowing. And then they moved, no further than a single step. Medley couldn't smell things. It was a minor caveat to his disorder of the tongue — he couldn't taste things either. But he drew warmer air into his nostrils. The air had changed.

"Keep the blindfold on." Brine said. Not gently, he stopped Medley from pulling it down with a flick. Their steps echoed on the wood floor. Dr. Brine opened a door and, with one hand, shut it behind them. His hands let go of Dr. Medley. "Alright. Go ahead. Take it off."

The room had a long and empty wooden dining table, Underneath lay an ornate carpet. The carpet was a cream color with dark designs on it, like foliage or flowering plants sapped into professional hues. Rectangular windows periodically lined a circular portion of the wall. They were somewhere up high. Sun and blue sky were easily seen. Faint paint strokes were visible in the plain, otherwise homogeneous swathe of color. Other than the painted sky outside, the room seemed ordinary.

And then Medley saw the grafting machine, in the corner. Where the windows stopped. It was bare like a ribcage. It seemed shaped almost like the skinny fingers of

two open palms, wrists touching. It was all the blue-green metal. And deceptively simple looking.

Medley inspected it. There were no joints. It looked like a sculpture. But the ends were sharp. It looked like a swatted spider, now propped up, legs curled slightly.

“Is that it?” He asked.

Dr. Brine had a jar full of liquid in his hands then. It had appeared from nowhere. Where he had gotten it from was a mystery. Brine set the sealed jar on the table. “That's the machine. Four million notes. But I want you to try it.”

Dr. Medley laughed. “No.”

“Be a man Dr. Medley.” Anger touched his voice. “It works. Perfectly.” There was silence. Then, Dr. Brine took off his jacket. Deliberately, he set it on a chair. He rolled up one of his sleeves to the elbow, unbuttoning it first, and then folding, folding. Then he stood next to the machine. “Take out…” He thought for a moment. “Take out my flexor tendons. Halfway to the elbow. Then put them back.”

The machine worked immediately. Dr. Medley watched in horror. Where his own machine was careful and tedious, Brine’s was a butcher. It seemed to suck up the blood that would have spilled and sprayed out. Not a drop hit the floor. The metal drank it in with a sickening noise, in a new trumpet shaped apparatus. Another part pierced his skin, like a thin straw. Dr. Brine didn’t even flinch.

“There’s no pain. Not even a hint of it.” He said. A section of tendon was brought before his eyes, one piece at a time, all uniform. When there were five, he said, “Good. Put them back.” The machine seemed to put blood back into him, needle

in his elbow like a green mosquito. It did so with a slight noise, moving and prodding. No sutures were involved. The machine seemed to push on Brine's skin, to mold him with multitude arms. Dr. Brine removed his arm when it was finished, held it up. Then he walked to the table, picked up the jar with only his fingertips of that hand, and tossed it to Dr. Medley.

He caught it. But only barely.

Dr. Medley laid down in the machine. He was still upright, if slightly tilted. The arms supported his body, tips smooth now. His heart beat quickly.

"What is it going to do?" He asked.

"What I've told it to do."

"You haven't asked me to take off my coat."

"I haven't. It won't get blood on it. You can close your eyes if you want." His voice seemed to take on a genuine intonation. Almost empathetic. "You won't feel a thing. I promise."

Dr. Medley closed his eyes anyways.

Brine let seriousness slip into his tone. "Go ahead." He spoke to the grafting machine. At once, the machine, he could hear it, began working. He could only hear it, the horrible gutteral noise it made as it sucked up his blood. He was also aware of something like the sound of sharp scissors close to his ear. Were he to open his eyes, he would see the trumpet next to his body, the blood collecting into the funnel. He tried to focus on the ruffling of his clothing as the supports adjusted.

“Don’t try to talk.” Brine said. “Try and feel what it's doing. You can’t.” Dr. Medley tried. He couldn’t. The noise stopped. Finally, after a long moment of stillness, Dr. Brine chided him to open his eyes. “It’s been over,” he said. “For almost a minute.”

Dr. Brine was sitting at the table, a light, very light curve of a smile worn. He sat tall, professional. Laid out on the long table were grilled meats and vegetables, piles of plump fruit, of green grapes stacked on things like strawberries, whole apples, all in wide wooden bowls. All of it was perfect. Like an advertisement. Rich. There were sandwiches, soups, arrayed desserts, pancakes, creams, chocolates, cubed cheeses. It seemed like Dr. Brine had thought of everything. And that it had all silently come out of nowhere.

“What is this?”

“Try something.” Dr. Brine said it so casually. But he had hunger in his eyes, like his own mouth was salivating. He had a thin glass of something bubbly. He drank such a polite amount that there was no visible change.

Dr. Medley hesitated. Before he sat down, he grabbed a plain bowl of salad, grape tomatoes arranged in a circle on top. The disappointment showed on Brine’s face. Medley kept his eyes on him, and pulled out a single red tomato. He chewed, and the seeds burst into his mouth like the eggs of something amphibian. It tasted like nothing. Medley looked around at the table, working his tongue in his mouth, swallowing the food. There was something on the table. The jar of clear liquid, it was there in its own space – it had something in it.

“What’s that?” Medley asked.

“Do you taste anything?”

“Nothing. Like it’s been my entire life. What’s in the jar?”

“Take a closer look.”

Medley tilted his glasses down. He always had poor eyesight. He moved his chair and slowly walked over to it, bringing him closer to Dr. Brine. Inside it was a tongue. Cleanly cut. A wet specimen stored in volatiles.

“It’s yours.” Dr. Brine said. “Pick it up.”

Medley only looked. He felt sick. ‘Who’s tongue do I have now?” He was shaking.

“A donor’s. I heard he was a man of few words. Terminally ill.” Brine traced his glass with a finger.

“Ill with what?” He snapped. “What did you just put inside my body?”

“Ill with incoherence. A perfectly healthy tongue.”

Dr. Medley put his hand against his forehead. His fingers were cold. “Why would you do that?” He said it differently the second time. “*Why* would you do that?”

“To see what would happen. You can thank me for trying. Now ask yourself this: how much do you want? Four million? Or a hundred times that?” Languidly, in a few sudden steps, he put an encregraph in front of Dr. Medley, who moved away from him. Brine had to walk back to draw a gold pen from his still hanging jacket. Then he watched, crossed his arms, one of which was still bare, sleeve rolled up. Markless.

Dr. Medley read carefully, silently. For a while he didn't speak. Only his eyes moved along the letters.

"Is this real?

"Why would it be fake?"

"You want *my* patent? When you have this…" Dr. Medley wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"I do."

"Why? Why would you need it? Why are you giving me—" Dr. Medley licked his lips. His mouth was dry. "Four hundred *million* notes? And the lab?" Dr. Brine began to speak, but Medley kept going. "So what? I want my tongue back. And not on a fucking table." There was a boom in the distance, like an explosion going off. Like distant thunder.

"Your tongue is dead. I dropped it in formaldehyde. You will never have it back, and you won't need it. The one you have now is better."

That seemed to shut up Dr. Medley. He held the jar, looking at it. The clear liquid shook in his hands. The tongue drifted along the bottom. It had lost some of its color already. Eventually it would become faded like all other wet specimens. Almost white. He thought about throwing it. More thunder rolled in the distance.

Dr. Brine sighed. "Sounds like the enforcers are playing with their new toys. I'll explain why I'm doing it." He went to the window, put his hands behind his back. Maybe to watch what was happening down below. Maybe to seem intentional. Deliberate.

“I think our machines are equal.” He said. “Only yours are more expensive. It makes for a better business model. Yours will need replacements, facilities, engineers. Industry. Mine, I think, will take care of themselves. This one alone is self-sufficient. My invention would exceed me. The choice is logical. I would rather sell yours. Of course, I could always sell mine. I have options. But more than that, I’d prefer not to sell the metal. I’d like people to think it’s something simple, a thing to make rings and rods from. A rare commodity, powerful, but straightforward. Of course, you’ll have authority over it now. If you sell me the machine. You’ll have the lab, the remaining metal, the wasps. A fortune. The future of the metal is yours.”

Dr. Medley glared at him. “And if I don’t sign it?”

“You’ll still be a rich man, relatively. Four million notes. I keep my promises. I’ll sell *my* machine. You can keep perfecting yours.”

Dr. Medley let go of the jar. He set it down smoothly on the table. He wasn’t going to take it home with him. It was dead tissue now. He took a deep breath. It was like he was staring at a chess board rather than a man. His blue eyes did seem unnatural. He tried to imagine Dr. Brine with dark eyes, the way he would have been as a child. He doubted anything could have made his face more kind looking. More sounds went off in the distance below them. *Boom. Boom.*

Dr. Medley picked up the gold pen. He signed his name, as carefully as he could, blew on it to dry. Then he dropped the pen in a porcelain bowl of thick chowder. The noise was almost innocent. Like dishware. He wished the soup had

sucked it down slowly. “Have a place to put the grafting machine.” He said. “I want it out of my lab.”

CHAPTER 22: THE BROKEN CANVAS

It took two hours for the enforcers to break into Fort Kenneth. There was a dissonance – on one hand, it was only an abandoned building. On the other, it harbored dangerous rogue artists. It was a simple job. Or wait, no: it was dangerously complex. It came as no surprise when, no matter how hard they looked, the enforcers couldn't find the door. In a way, they wanted this to happen.

To even keen eyes, the building had no doors. There was no way in, no windows. It was a blank box, a thick prison of walls. They were going to tear those walls down.

Enforcers lined up around the building. The blue-green metal was still restricted to sergeants only. But the enforcers watched, tantalized by the power of "vespidium." The enforcers had been told the metal would be theirs. And within a week's time it would be. In the meantime, they watched closely.

Others watched as well. The specific block for Fort Kenneth was cleared, but across the wide and empty street, people gathered. The Cupboard, a tall restaurant with a large bell on top, all windows and balconies, was full to the brim with spectators.

Sergeant Powell, a big man with a gray mustache, had taken the mantle of breaking down the entrance. Two other sergeants had taken their time to stand with him, to "give it a go" when needed. They followed Powell's lead. And they tried everything.

With their rods, they tried heat, flames as thin as candle wicks and as hot as a bellows. They tried hitting the wall with the invisible force of hammers. They tried

jets of water, and small projectiles like shrapnel bullets, and stomach acid, which they stopped out of principle. Someone suggested kerosene, which they tried, and which burned bright and produced black smoke, which rose to the men and women atop the restaurant. It dirtied the restaurant's windows, filled people's eager lungs. All of these things came from the blue-green metal. The sergeants held out their metal rods like sparklers, waiting for the wall to break itself apart by their simple artifices. Most of what they did was futile.

Finally, they tried the lightning. Beautiful, white-hot fulminated lightning. They struck the walls with it. They did so rhythmically, almost bored, almost manic with excitement. There was a dissonance. There were criminals beyond those solid walls. It was taking forever.

Finally there was a satisfying crack. A hole broke in the wall, about the size someone could crouch through. Only it was glowing hot. It took five whole minutes of watering before any enforcers could crawl in. Sergeants went in first.

By this time, they were bloodthirsty. This was the moment of truth – here would be the enemy, and simultaneously justice for that enemy. The whole underground district was half-flooded with wine because of someone who had lived here. And worse, people claimed it was unsafe to drink. A hazard. And worse, vagrants from the underground were pushed up to the surface. And more than that, the museum had burned down. And more than that, people had burned to death.

So it was unsatisfying to the enforcers, when they found an old and tan, leather-skinned man hanging from the ceiling inside. It was the man behind the name, the namesake of Fort Kenneth. He had feared capture more than death.

That he had killed himself with a curtain around his neck, hung from a sculpted ceiling hook— it angered the men. He swayed. And everyone else was gone. The building seemed long empty. The wind blew peacefully, too peacefully through the windows only seen from the inside. There were signs of life. Ashes from a cookfire, a pair of well-used red canvas and rubber shoes left behind. A tipped over wood and fabric folding chair. Others in black uniforms trickled and rushed to the top of the pumice stairs, up and up. Most were out of breath, ready for catharsis — there was nothing left. So they searched. And broke things.

They broke children's toys, and clay pots growing tomatoes. They found a simple hanging tapestry and wrinkled it up. They unmade beds, and kicked over Ernest's small coffee table. The lemurian blue granite stone found its way into an enforcer's pocket. The jar of marbles that hung from the ceiling was cut down, so it could break and so it could spray glass along the floor. But soon, most had stopped. At least in Ernest's room they had all stopped. Some were standing completely still. They were looking at the woman in the painting. A woman of perfect blue who sat on a stone, overlooking a cliff and a sea of pines underneath. The twisted juniper near her, all dried and twisted woodgrains, blew slightly. They watched, and in a way listened.

Sergeant Powell made his way over the broken glass and stray marbles on the floor, stepping on them as if his heels had the grit to crush metal. “What is this? What are you all looking at?” The iridescent green rod was in a thickly closed fist.

“The painting. Sir.” A man replied.

Powell looked at the painting. He kept the breath held in his chest, his eyes glazed. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were all enchanted.” With a swipe of his arm, the rod cut the painting diagonally, all the way across. There was a deep gash in the wall behind it when it fell over. Powell picked it up and heaved the pieces out the window, which fell and spun the many stories down like oak leaves.

“Keep looking, men. Don’t just stand around. And keep an eye out. There may be some nasty surprises.” A few shuffled into motion. Then, quickly, most looking towards the window, they all did. They all went back to searching. Some half-heartedly so. What the men didn’t see, and didn’t hear, was the shouting that came after a moment, the blowing of whistles, the commotion from the ground below.

CHAPTER 23: THE WOMAN IN THE PAINTING

When you have been so long used to something, you become aligned to it. You become sensitive to small things, changes in the wind, changes in the daytime. Sometimes these changes are too subtle to name. Only a hair is off, but they are felt. A slight saline taste in water. A too encumbering silence, when even the insects are without noise. The woman in the painting felt this.

An equilibrium had been pushed to the side. Something had changed, and the woman in the painting, for the first time in her life, stretched. She put her arms over her head. Then she yawned, breathed in and out far more deeply the air that surrounded her, the subtle wind that encased her. Lazily, she turned her head behind her.

She saw darkness in a diagonal line. She rose, leaned forward off her stone and tested her legs. Soft orange dirt of the cliff, like fine pollen, stuck to her feet. She walked to where Sergeant Powell had cut the painting. Outside of the painting, it was a dark brown, a pumice. She brushed her fingers along the surface of the street, the roughness. There was something like love in the newness. She traced her index finger, and then her palm along the dark and rough material, and around the borders of the cut. Curious, she put a hand around the corner of her own canvas. She climbed.

Someone screamed when the painted woman crawled up from the overturned, sandwich cut shape of the painting. People shouted while she slowly stood. An enforcer blew an alarming whistle when the woman took steps forward, testing her own balance. The painted woman wore no clothes, and so drew eyes. But what kept

upon her was her color, the thing she meant. I can hardly describe it. She was blue like thirst.

Enforcers ran to catch her. They wanted to grab her, to hold her within their grasp. Not her, but the thing that she was. She ran from them, too nimble, coming into her own steps like an object falling, accelerating. People shouted “catch her!” They shouted with want. People shouted that she was dangerous. Spectators leaned with open palms to touch the calico woman as she ran by. All watched as she ran. Some ran with her as long as they could, to see the cobalt skinned woman, to see her closely. She ran until the old crowd was behind her, and the crowd who knew where she came from became the crowd that guessed, a crowd that only watched her go, turning their heads. And then the crowd that guessed became quiet streets. Only few saw her from windows or restaurant chairs or shops, or cared enough to glance.

There was no direction but forwards to the woman from the painting. Forwards until the next cliff, the next stone. The next sea of pines.

CHAPTER 24: THE COLOR BLUE

Before Dr. Brine killed Ernest, he gave him a long and appraising look. He memorized his face. “Kill him quickly.” He had told the grafting machine. And it had. It put a needle into Ernest’s eye like the swipe of a scorpion: too quick to see, and then over. Like that, Ernest was dead. As an afterthought he told the machine to take out Ernest’s tongue.

But to Ernest, there was only darkness, neutral darkness — the brain in shock. There was Dr. Brine’s face. Then there was nothing.

The darkness was long. Ernest wondered if this was death. As he died, the words seemed to draw out.

Was.

This.

Death.

A year for each word. It stopped being a question mid-way. Time slowed. He existed nowhere for a thousand years. There was no next. Only now. Now for a thousand years. Long and short like heavy sleep.

And then it was like he saw undulations. Nothing for a long time. And then patterns in the black. Like phosphenes or sunspots from when the eyes try too long to see. It was the color blue. Faintly, faintly there was blue.

He had a sense of waking, like he had been rubbing his eyes. Ernest stood upon solid ground. Solid but cold ground, bitterly cold ground. And he breathed cold air.

There was a cold wind and it struck at his skin, at his lungs. It forced him to draw breath, to breathe deeply.

A subtle light began to appear. Ernest watched it rise over a distant blue horizon, diffused like a cloudless sunrise. It was slow. Bitterly slow and cold. Ernest stepped in this new world. His feet were on ice, but he could move. That was a novelty on its own. There was joy that he could *move*. The sun rose and the sky, as slow as a seed's germination, changed from darkness to blue.

Mountains became visible in the distance, only their silhouettes at first. And then he saw snowcaps, brown lines running down them. The rest of his world was infinite flatness, a scape of wind-blown ice. But in one single direction there were mountains. Ernest could feel the air whip at his body, the frozen water under his feet. He felt for his voice and it was there. "Where am I?" He shouted. The sound seemed to at once echo and be ripped away. He stood alone in a wasteland. This was part of death. What it meant to die and to be alone.

He saw a man running towards him in the horizon. At first a dot, and then more, a shadow approaching. Ernest stood with new eyes and watched. He was more awake than he ever could be, than he ever had been. His eyes were open.

And the man came closer. Ernest could see his arms swinging with effort, his thick clothes swaying with every step. Closer. *Closer*. Ernest made out the color green in the landscape. Closer. A man in a robe the color of grass. Closer, and Ernest saw jade eyes, and dark hair, and a wide and gentle smile. And then he was there, his arms around Ernest, holding him tight.

“You’re here!” The man said. “You’re here you’re here you’re here!” He shook him. He lifted Ernest off the ground and spun him. Ernest couldn’t help but laugh, cold as he was.

“Where am I?” He asked. But the words felt off. Like Ernest was re-learning how to speak, like those had been the only words he ever knew. Ernest tried to think. He thought like an urn without the water, a jar with nothing to pour out. He had trouble remembering his name.

“Here *why.”* The Jade Eyed Man said. His face had humor and sadness, his smile pity and excitement. “We still have time. Come on, come on.” He said. He moved without Ernest, running towards the mountains.

By now, the grafting machine’s needle had made its way past the eye. It was touching Ernest’s brain, infinitely slow.

Ernest followed. They ran for the length of days, for a thousand years tirelessly across the landscape towards the mountains. While they ran, the sun rose into the sky, visible as a white burning beacon. Behind them, their shadows dragged like blue lines. They ran as if in a dream. Sometimes their feet carried them so far that they bounded up, only to fall down slowly. As they strode, if they stepped too hard, they glided through the air like stones on ice.

When they made it to the mountains, Ernest felt the cold of them, dark blue shade of the mountains, the sharp rocks. They climbed into the blue shadow of the sun, underneath a blue sky. And to the west, when they stopped and looked behind

them, they saw the green and blue undulations of untouched night, of polar lights where they ran from.

Together they spoke as they climbed. Spoke of what they saw, spoke for a thousand years poems of the color blue. It took forever for them to climb, and yet it was the span of a millisecond. And time felt slowed. Ernest spoke of his memories as they climbed, and for each one, remembered. How he had mixed blue paint. He remembered the smell of his father's denim. He had held a blue butterfly in his hands a long time ago.

"Because it was worth it." The Jade Eyed man said as they climbed.

He had Ernest repeat the words. And Ernest did repeat them, but to him, sentences and words felt hazy. Still, Ernest had moments of clarity. Near reaching the top, he asked for the sixth time, "Am I dreaming?" He raised his voice over the strong wind. Snow flecked both of them, stuck in their hair. The world felt cool now, but not cold.

'You are." The Jade Eyed Man smiled. "You've been dreaming all along." His voice rose as he spoke, excited.

The needle moved closer into Ernest's brain, ever slowly.

They were at the top of the mountain, and the sun touched their skin. Light yellowed the ground and the dark brown rock around them. It was late morning by now, if not noon. They stared ahead of them past the mountains. There was a wide and blue-black ocean to cross.

They passed around the last corner of rock. And on the mountain peak was a small house, almost a shack of peeling mint-green paint. A house that had been sold and demolished. His father's house. It stood whole again, there with its door open wide.

"You have to say goodbye," The Jade Eyed Man said. He said more, but Ernest couldn't understand him. It was like he uttered a different language. There was a needle in his brain.

Ernest walked around the rough wood floors, and their bare kitchen with a bowl of oranges, and the open windows of the art room with paint-stains on walls and stools. Snow drifted and lurched on the ground. The house was empty. Like everyone had moved out and only left the bare things. Ernest went into his father's room: empty except for a bed. He went to the closet and his father's clothes were all still hanging there. Even the denim jacket. Ernest bundled them in his arms and held them. He held them tight.

He was holding his own knees. In the blink of an eye, he was in a hot air balloon of bright yellow fabric, next to the Jade Eyed Man. The man pulled at a rope and sent them upwards. Ernest was sitting with his arms around his legs. He stood, grabbed the wicker edge of the gondola. The mountains were behind them, as was the sun. It was afternoon now, and who knew how much time had passed. There was a needle in Ernest's brain. He was dreaming.

They passed low to the water by tall icebergs in a thrashing ocean. The water and the foam fell against the ice. The wind blew them forwards and between the bergs.

At moments, the sun illuminated those solid structures of water, some translucent and smoothed by wind, each iceberg of a perfect blue.

"Because it was worth it." The Jade Eyed Man said each time. "Because it was worth it."

They rose up, high over the sea, no longer flying low. The flame of the balloon gouged, pulling them up while the wind pushed them onwards. They passed over chunks of the city Aurum in the sea, pieces of the city floating, blue lines on all the sidewalks, shops and restaurants broken. The pieces drifted behind them, lost like icebergs or broken stones. And then they disappeared.

A moment of clarity came back to Ernest. It came while the waves of the sea seemed small, miniscule. He was dying. But he didn't know why.

Time passed faster. There was something in Ernest's brain. The Jade Eyed Man was not speaking in words anymore. The man spoke in laughter. It was evening now.

They had landed, and they now stepped over dried and cracked earth. They were on land now, and running, and the earth felt warm. They were running as long as they could and time was going faster. It was catching up to them and going past them, fast as a needle. Ernest was a child again. The sun was going down and Ernest was dreaming and there was something in his brain. And the sky was dusk blue and the sun was setting behind him. He laughed. He laughed a true laugh like the ringing of a bell, a singular beautiful note. He laughed like breath. Ernest's eyes were singing.

“Because it was good!” The Jade Eyed Man said, but Ernest couldn’t understand him.

The Jade Eyed Man put a kite in Ernest’s hands. And let him go.

Wood and bound string, and a bright orange triangle – it was picked up, and pulled. Ernest was a child again. The wind blew gently and drifted upwards, and he held tight to the line being drawn. Ernest could see the beginning of the stars past it, the night sky turning twilight while the orange kite whipped in figure eights. He was pulled up into it, hands still on the wood and the string. His shadow fell further and further below him, somewhere on the ground below of cracked earth.

He went up. Up and up and up. And it was worth it. And Ernest’s eyes sung with music. And he was laying down, being pulled up into the night sky, feeling the inertia of his own body being pulled off and up and off and up. And the kite lurched, slackened and pulled like a sail, like a parachute breathing. And he was dreaming. And the wind blew. He drifted up like a stone on ice. And his eyes closed and remained open and he was dreaming. And time moved faster, and the stars brighter, but his eyes were closed, and he was dreaming and saying goodbye and there was something in his brain, he had forgotten the word for it.

He was dreaming. He was dreaming. He was dreaming.

CHAPTER 25: HOME

Dr. Medley walked through the front door of his own house. It was dark out. He shut the door quietly. Not to be hidden, but because he felt inwardly quiet. Like it was right to be gentle to the door. The core of his body felt solid and cold.

He heard his wife's all too casual *hello* from the kitchen. She was always keen-eyed and keen-eared. Dr. Medley walked into their living room slowly when a strong hug squeezed him from the side. It startled him. But something warm cracked across his face when he saw the head of brown hair and the space-pattern pajamas that encircled his legs. His granddaughter's voice gave a muffled "hello!" into his lab coat.

Dr. Medley always had the strength to pick her up, no matter how heavy she grew. He did so now and felt the strain in his knees. "What are *you* doing here?" He said.

"Mom dropped me off today."

"Did she now?" Medley almost said it to himself. "Did you eat dinner?"

She nodded, and Medley brushed a few hairs off from her face before he kissed her forehead and put her down.

"Did Nana put you to bed?"

She nodded.

"Do you want to say goodnight one more time? I think it's time for bed."

Gretchen held his hand and pulled him to the kitchen, footsteps still slightly awkward at that age, bright green socks on her feet.

Dr. Medley sometimes wondered that this child was everything his own daughter was not. Easy to raise, kind, curious. And it was like their daughter wanted as much time away from Gretchen as possible. Dr. Medley relished the hand that held his. He took it in and felt the passage of time in a sense, looked at the top of Gretchen's soft brown hair. She was growing up without her mother and was too young to be sad about it.

Nora pretended to be surprised while she stirred something in a pot. "Oh, did you wake up to see Grandpa?" She asked. Nora only cooked for herself when Medley worked late. She sometimes apologized for it, like it was something that might hurt her husband. Medley loved that. She still apologized for small things. He didn't tell her not to anymore. Medley also knew that cooking *was* a kind of boundary between them. Her own private world was in her food, one he didn't try to understand anymore. He kissed his wife on the cheek and walked Gretchen to their spare room.

Gretchen, Medley thought, was wickedly smart for her age. She loved to learn. She loved astronomy the most, and always asked about other planets, the atmospheres they had, what they were like. Sometimes Dr. Medley explained how the universe went on and on, or the matter and elements of objects, or about how deep the layers of the earth went: how there was spinning magma right at the core of the globe. These were well traveled roads between Gretchen and Dr. Medley. There was a kindred curiosity in them both. So for stories, Medley taught her. Gretchen, like a sponge, soaked it all up.

Medley thought of something to say. Something educational. Each idea felt tired in his mouth. He didn't want to think about extinct species, or about stars, or simple physics. Instead, he said, "Gretchen, there's something I never told you about." He drew a white blanket over her, up to her neck while she laid down on the bed.

"There's…" he thought for a moment. "A woman. Who lived for a thousand years."

"No there isn't." She smiled.

"Well, we don't actually know how old she is. She might be much older."

Gretchen had her eyes open, listening.

"She had blue skin." The words seemed to roll out of his mouth.

"How?" The girl asked.

"I don't know. That's just how she was. She was blue like the world she came from." He paused. Gretchen listened politely.

"And she… she lived on a cliff." Medley closed his own eyes to see it.

"Where she could watch the world. To her, it was gorgeous. When she sat there, she could see so far that she could see the curve of the earth, and almost all the continents. And under her was a sea of pines. And she could feel an eastern wind blowing. And while she sat, she sat for so long, she learned how to listen to that wind. She could close her eyes and know what the wind would do, and when it would rain, and what the earth would do next. She could close her eyes and feel the whole planet."

The girl listened.

“And one day—“ Medley thought for a moment. “One day she left. She could feel an earthquake coming. And so she left to wander. To find another cliff while her old one fell down, down into the sea of pines. She could walk forever. So long as she breathed, she was alive.” Dr. Medley brushed the girl’s hair behind her ear.

“And Gretchen, I meant to tell you this. I saw her sitting in our garden. Just for a moment. And then she walked away. I can’t believe I forgot to tell you that. There was someone from another planet in our yard.”

Gretchen laughed, wiggled her arms out from under the blanket to sit up slightly. “You’re lying.” She said.

“I’m not.” Medley said. He found himself smiling, grinning at his granddaughter. He tried to make himself sound honest. “There was a real alien in our yard.”

Dr. Medley turned out the lights and went to the kitchen.

Nora was sitting at their granite table, the backyard so dark she might have been looking at her own reflection. She had a bowl of red soup that she was politely eating.

“What is it?” Dr. Medley asked.

“Tomato soup,” she said, quiet for a moment. “I heard that story you told her.”

Dr. Medley sighed as he sat at the table, tired. He took his glasses off and closed his eyes. “I just thought– well I don’t know what I thought. Her world should be bigger at her age. It can shrink when she gets older.”

His wife nodded, looking out the window. “I liked your story.” She smiled at him, mouth shut. “But she’s already too smart for those stories.”

Medley shrugged and opened his eyes. “Is it good?”

“Is what good?”

“The soup.”

“It’s good.” She said it so casually, as if she were bored with her own cooking.

Medley got up from the table and began opening cupboards in their hallway of a kitchen.

“What are you doing?” She asked, genuinely surprised.

“I’m looking for a bowl,” he said. “Would you ever want to move? Into a bigger house?” He shut and opened another cabinet. “Hypothetically.”

“To your left. Sorry, your other left.” Nora was watching him by their reflections in their dark window. She sipped a spoonful of soup. “Why would we do that? I like our house.”

“I don’t know.” Medley pulled a bowl awkwardly from the cupboard. It was dark on the top shelf, and his glasses were still on the table. He grabbed it by touch. “What if we had the money to?” He asked. “To buy a home. What would you want to do with it?”

Nora thought. Steam rose to Medley’s face as he ladled liquid from stovetop to bowl. “Do you have relatives I don’t know about?” She asked.

“No.”

“Are you gambling?”

"*No*," he said. "I am *not* gambling." Nora grabbed a spoon for Dr. Medley as he sat down. She did so from a drawer just behind her, leaning in her chair to grab it. Dr. Medley took the spoon gently.

"I just…" Medley tried to think of the right words. They were rich now. *Rich*. His lips couldn't break the sound of *400 million*. Instead, he took a quick spoonful of the soup. And quickly jerked his head.

"Be careful!" Nora said. "It's hot. It's very hot." She sounded like she did when she was younger, oddly. She put a light hand on his shoulder.

Something was inside Medley's mouth. Something bloomed across his tongue. He didn't know what it was.

"You're scaring me." She said. "I actually thought you knew how to eat soup."

Medley laughed. But it caught in his throat and he sputtered.

Nora put down her spoon and looked at him. She made her own sound of disbelief. "Are you alright? Or are you really choking?"

"I'm not," he swallowed. "I'm not choking. I'm fine." He sounded like he had something in his throat. He was looking down at his bowl. Loudly, he sniffed to clear his sinuses. He stared for a long time at the soup. "It's good." He wiped at his eyes.

"You're very nice. It's plain."

"It's not plain." Medley wiped his face with the sleeve of his lab coat. The soup's residue colored the white fabric a bright orange. "I was just going to say…" He took another spoonful of soup, slowly this time. He tasted it. Held it in his mouth. He had no words for things like tangy or savory, no lines to connect them to the things he

felt. It felt like he held electricity in his mouth, in his throat when he swallowed. *I was going to say I sold the grafting machine,* he thought.

"I was going to say," he said aloud. His wife looked at him like he was having a stroke. "I don't think I've told you that I love you. Not nearly enough. That's all." An insect drummed at their dark window. It was the rhythmic butting sound of a lone brown June beetle, light enough it could have come from an aluminum bead.