

"What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" "Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?... Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?"

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Day 0

Emptied pill bottles and discarded syringes, evidence of a night's desperate attempt at oblivion, surrounded his isolated form. Wrapped in a bedsheet, completely motionless, Menote took in the surrounding chaos. His body ached, and a deep fog had settled within his mind dampening all but a lurching sickness in his stomach. Confusion; he did not remember falling asleep, only the feeling of falling, the warmth of the opiate giving way to a cold descent. Then nothing.

Fragments of the night prior flashed behind his eyelids: strobe lights carving faces into masks, music that had pulsed less like sound than like seizures through his body, someone's teeth chattering an arrhythmic counterpoint against the rim of a glass. His tongue still tasted of dissolved tablets, bitter alkaloids that had transformed familiar architecture into threatening geometries. Consciousness, that faithful companion, had abandoned him precisely when existence demanded witness, leaving only smeared impressions and chemical residue. Now he huddled in this secluded den, guided here not by intention but by the random firings of neurons seeking shelter, a pinball trajectory determined by pure chance and the fevered denial of the eleventh hour. When the news had come, as the world froze in its tracks, he had retreated to his sanctuary. Sitting amidst the evidence of his transgressions, in the aftermath of youthful recklessness, it was here that he found himself, no place else. All of the consumption, substance and vice alike, had blended into a singular moment, its aftertaste still clinging to his tongue. It was not an entirely vile sensation. Strange how certain moments collapsed into themselves, as though time folded rather than flowed, creating pockets where beginning and end became indistinguishable from one another.

Even cowering under chemical oblivion, he had been unable to escape it; he could feel the weight of the end within his chest. Fearful of the outside, of the external derangement cast upon their world, the gnawing ancestral instinct had to be drowned. Devolving, he had fearlessly followed his own indulgences, creating his own hell and drawing himself into it. But even through the grandest of delusions, the somber face of reality prevailed; Menote's vision began to clear.

Menote blinked once and the room remained solid. Twice, the edges softened. Three times, the walls began to breathe. He pressed two fingers against his wrist. The pulse beneath his skin quickened, fluttered, then syncopated with a rhythm not entirely his own. The ceiling above him receded by increments. Colors drained from objects in concentric rings,

each drawn away as if through a syringe- taking back the blood which had gifted them presence. He fixed his gaze on a syringe near his foot. Its outline remained sharp while everything around it blurred. This perfect focus was the last certainty before dissolution. The barrier between blood and chemicals thinned. Unraveling everything faded; first peripheral vision, then depth perception, finally the coherence of thought itself. A tightness wound about his chest, pulling up through his heart and into his throat, brimming his eyes with burning tears. On the floor the plastic vial had lost its sheen, taking on a muted monochrome. Certainty suddenly struck, his monumental achievement, his grandiose display of humanity's whims, had concluded. Having been completed, the play was castaway thoughtlessly; the cold evidence of his flight from reality failed to call for an encore. Sitting amidst the wreckage, he pressed harder against the clammy skin, searching desperately for some sign of his own life. Indeed, he reckoned, he was checking the wrong artery; that in his ignorance, he was procuring a false diagnosis. Unwilling to disprove his forbearance of reality, he stumbled back, falling off the bed.

As bitter as bile, yet sharp like an overly distilled spirit, an awful taste was spreading across his palate. A moment prior, it had been a small patch. Now, it had spread to the tip of his tongue; he could feel it racing down the back of his throat, tracing backwards the tension which his fall had attempted to protest. Two rivers coursing to meet one another, one salt and the other clear, their meeting blending the brine and sediment; the tension and the taste blended into an encompassing sensation. Through the blur of his tears the world had lost all its color, the decorative silk canvas took on foreign patterns of black and gray, the old bulb above him flickered, pushing out a blinding white array as it cast and withdrew swirling shadows from the room. Every nerve within his body was alight with stimulation, he fell back against the bedframe.

Collapsed and unable to move his splayed limbs, memories threatened their return, an internal tension of his own pushed against the colluding forces that paralyzed him. Obscured from sight by the still growing fog within, for a moment an internal clarity rang out. His eyes felt crusted, their saccades slow and lethargic. Had the drugs not worn off yet? Where was the warmth, the solace of silence? The world was silent and yet he could hear something, a writhing scraping sound. It reverberated throughout the room, sending tremors down his spine. The pills releases were slow, meant to carry him into the next life. The next life, he murmured into the room, confused in the symphony of forces which bled through his flesh, mind, and somewhere deeper.

With tremendous effort he lifted his arms, so stiff, the long fingers made gray by the constant flickering of the overhead bulb, stretched outwards like serpents, and wiped the tears from his eyes. Looking around the room once more, where once last night infinite fractals of pulsing vibrant illusions barren grayscale walls remained. The pressure and taste grew worse, his entire body began to shake, a clattering vibration as if there was an earthquake shaking the earth beneath him. Up and down his arms the hair had shot up, the scrapping sound had grown louder, encompassing the quiet churning of water and electricity in his walls. Something was in the room with him. He was certain of it; he could feel its gaze upon his skin. Eyes racing across the dulling colors of the room, he could find nothing, to move his gaze across the spillage of

paraphernalia and papers, posters torn off the walls in some forgotten panic, clothing shoved under the distant door, was a great effort against a constricting lethargy which he was unsure was his own or the product of the battle which had overtaken his senses.

The bulb above flickered once more before extinguishing, yet the black and gray outlines of the room did not fade into darkness, instead they concentrated, and then suddenly refracted backwards, drawn to the furthest corner of the room. From its depths, the meeting of the edges of the rooms borders, wrought from the sharp angles, Menote could feel the spectator's gaze. Undeterminable yet impossible to ignore. Shapeless, and yet somehow serpentine, it emerged from the depths of the darkest corners of the room, oozing into existence. Meager sight could not unveil its presence, but Menote was certain that there was something there, drawing from the corner of the ceiling, he could feel its pursuit in his chest, wrought from the tension or the cause, it transcended ever sensation, sending ever deeper waves of terror through his blood. Yes, it was approaching him, growing closer. A black ooze proliferated, the abyss, its negative light illuminating its consumption of the ever-darker room, encroached upon him. Thick, like a bulb of tar but with a dark refraction of gasoline in water, its reach extended in all directions, swallowing up the room, stealing away the color-drained objects of yesterday and returning them to a purer pitch black. Menote tried to back up, to escape its slow onslaught, but the paralysis seemed ever deeper, his entire body had been petrified by the intrusions gaze, leaving his head upturned, mouth open with horror, his eyes alone given the freedom of motion to watch its approach. And approach it did, descending down the walls, covering the ceiling, casting the entire room into a pitch black. Slowly, with the languid patience of thick viscosity, a droplet of it descended downward, pulling in with it the entirety of the ceiling. He was completely frozen, unable to move or think, only to witness. A black sickening lightning, it sought grounding in his flesh, oozing downwards like a inverted droplets crash against still water. It grew closer to his face, and now he could see it closer, it was no liquid but a writhing mass of reversed refraction, like a swarm of ants made infinitely small, unified in its mechanical purpose. Rigid, his jaw was clenched, the tendons refusing to release the open maw. That bitter taste began to burn, his tongue itself wrinkled under the heat, it felt as if it was being wrenched upwards, extending out to meet the vile liquid which approached ever closer. tighter his limbs grew, the vessels constricted, muscles wrought with inexplicable tension. Time seemed to freeze when it arrived at its destination, as the ooze extended itself finally onto his tongue, as the shadowed walls reach finally met his crippled body. Caught in the infinitude of the present, Menote found himself suddenly looking down at his body, his mind leaving behind the tortured vessel. He willed himself downward, reaching for the skin he had abandoned – but the void held him fast, and his descent became a drift, aimless and slow. He was alone, nude, collapsed on the ground. Below his gaze he saw his chest rise, his pale skin hosting the rosy hue of life, the proof that blood still pumped from his heart. Matted and disheveled, his hair splayed outwards, mirroring his extended limbs extended in an unnatural twisted form. The bed he had propped himself up on was gone. Beyond the border of his skin, there was nothingness. Swallowing away the littered material and objects of his room, the ooze had taken upon the entirety of the world, covering it all with a strange imitation of the blackness which

every night precedes the vivid world of dreams. It embraced his body, filling the empty space his open mouth had made, covering every inch of his exposed flesh, yet Menote could still see himself within it, a sole point of color and life in the endless sea. Beyond it, within the now infinite void, he was again suddenly overtaken by the feeling, the certainty, that he was being watched. Turning his gaze away from the abandoned body beneath him, he attempted to penetrate the darkness. A strange certainty cut through the fogged distant substrate of his consciousness. If he could see it, that distant beast, name it, then it would release him. Yet as he plunged deeper into the darkness, leaving behind the body his vision was severed from, pushing past the crawling jumbled symbols which he found constructing the internal swarm of the oozing abyss, he found nothing. Looking back down, so far above that solitary frame, he saw the color fade from his body. Something in him lurched – not thought but instinct, the animal refusal to watch himself die – and he threw himself toward the distant flesh below, clawing against the formless dark. The sharp pain met him halfway, cutting through his dissociated distance. It had found him.

Then there was pain, and for a moment the darkness receded, and his spirit was forced to return to the wretched flesh beneath it. Menote screamed, his body suddenly returned to his control he flung himself away from the falling ceiling, he could feel the cold mucus of the darkness clinging to his body. Yet reaching back he could still feel the end of his bed, beneath his legs, now again given the capacity of motion, the smooth tile of the bedroom floor impressed upon his skin through the strange insulation of the blackness. Grasping desperately in the darkness, he found the shape of a split pill bottle and tried to pour it into his hand. In the endless void he could not see anything, relying only on sensation of touch. From the plastic container they spilled out onto his hand, a dozen circular tablets. Slamming his palm against his mouth, he swallowed them dry, shoving past the contracting protest of his throat. Yet as soon as they passed his throat, their hard casings seemed to dissolved, to liquify, and in the descent, he could feel the viscous black mucus coat his throat, his chest, deeper now as it passed through his chest and into his stomach. No warmth came; the familiar comforting embrace was absent. Rather it was cold, like metal, its encompassing sent brutal needles of pain searing through his insides, expanding deeper into the surrounding tissue, driven into depths of his bones. Panic filled every cell in his body, the lifeblood fighting against the intruder which now sought to swallow him up too. From outside, the stasis broke, and from the infinite depths of darkness the ooze sunk into his skin, it filled his mouth, it coated his eyes- rushing deeper into his skull, flowing in from his ears and up through his nose. His body stopped registering the caustic nature of its touch, it had become too much, he collapsed downwards onto the floor as it consumed him entirely.

Within the void, he could feel the eyes of something watching him. The gaze pierced him from all angles. Blackness had taken over everything; there was nothing left but him and whatever watched him. Inside his head he could feel it writhing about, the pressure felt as if his ear canal had filled with water, only deeper, much deeper. It coursed all across his body, measure him, looking for something. Movement was impossible, there was nothing to listen to, nothing to watch, nothing to taste. Nothingness permeated by something; something beyond, something profane and heavenly. It slithered deeper still, the pressure increasing it

threatened to split his mind open. He could feel the very weight of his existence shutter; it wanted to consume him- denying him ideation he was left frozen as it fed upon a mind brought crashing down to its flesh, its escape denied. Flowing through his blood, blackening neurons; it was searching, writhing throughout him. A parasite filling its prey with poison- it seemed to suck out his thoughts, his memories. His fingers twitched frantically, reacting to stimuli which was forbidden to his own senses. Frantically he tried to recall his own name- that too had been taken.

In a distant world he was screaming, and each attempt at expulsion was met with a torrent of black ooze delving deeper into his mouth until it had completely filled his lungs, weighing him down to the ground. Again, he tried, each wail emptying more, the respite between contractions met with the ever-flowing substrate filling him again. In the darkness Menote wrestled control of his arm, lifting it up and punching down hard on his stomach. More came out, more flooded in. He lifted again, slammed, expulsion, intrusion. Thrice more he repeated the motion, each more desperate than the last. With each wretch the weight subsided yet the pressure within his temple grew greater. Both arms now, slamming, tearing at his skin, coated in the metallic gunk. Again and again he struck mad with desperation, ignorant of the distant spattered warmth torn from within which began to follow the path of the black ooze. When nothing more would emerge, he reached his arm upwards, grasping for anything to save him. It remained within him, taking more with it- leaving only confusion and pain in its path. In the eternal darkness, Menote shut his eyes tight, covering his face with his shaking hands.

And suddenly, it was gone. The weight had been lifted, the demon exorcized. Where the metallic cold of the ooze had clung to his skin, something damp and yielding pressed against his back - and when his lungs drew breath, the air tasted of pine and wet earth rather than bile. He was laying on his back on the floor of a forest, the needling pain had vanished, replacing now by the musky scent of mycelium and the moist embrace of moss. Above him a familiar canopy of overlocking branches and leaves extended, dampening the fall of a descending sun's beams onto his body. Peace- a moment of respite before death- the light at the end was not bright, but soft, cascading in rays downward, cast through an assembly of leaves and pine. It felt soft, the light embraced Menote's skin, it loosened his muscles, his lungs seemed to react to its visitation- drawing in the damp air deep. Lacing his fingers into the undergrowth, he grounded himself amongst the lichen and decaying pine needles. It was soft, assuring; he could feel the beating heart of the earth beneath his palm. Memory flooded back into him, cutting away a now growing distant confusion. As a child he had laid in the woods, in a spot just like this. It was through a creek in the backwoods of his neighborhood; one had to cast aside their shoes and wade waist deep through a dip in the creek before they came onto a bend. Taking a left, a five-minute walk led one in another world. The ever-present rushing engines, those countless mutt's endless barking, the loud babbling of children, and the bickering of their parents had no place in the peaceful silence of the grove. Amongst the woodlands, Menote had fled in moments of crises, lending his tears and qualms to the ever-accepting silence. Sweet chirpings of songbirds met the warbling chattering of distant crows

as the clearing welcomed him back. To their proclamations he would slow his breathing and try to disappear within their rhythm, listening for the 'kreck-ek' of the treefrogs and the ever present scurrying of squirrels and raccoons stowing away in anticipation of an eternally looming frost. He had entertained the idea of dying in that glen, before he had left his hometown. It had been a cool evening, the moisture in the air had clung to his body, that last night there.

Menote took a deep breath, preparing himself for the end. Looking above him, the trees swayed to the rhythm of a breeze he could not feel. The birds chirped and squabbled in the distance, unseen. Above, dripping down from the leaves and the spaces between the extended branches, a light rain fell upon him. Each drop was a pleasant reminder, it augmented the lovely earthen smells, softening the ever-lusher moss he clung to. For an indeterminate time, he lay there, trying to silence his mind. He denied the possibility of purgatory, of hell. It was a coma, the drugs, the slowing of time as the brain gave out under the finality of its absolution. A review of life, a final moment of constructed consciousness before the mind gave its last exhale and took with it the flesh. With time the sun had continued its descent, the once pleasant feeling of falling drizzles of rain had been overcome by the slow but sure soaking of his bones. The cold had crept deeper within him, a different kind of intrusion, a one known countless time. What stirred him from his resolution was the sudden sound of scurrying in the distance. Menote had made a sport of catching garter snakes as a young child, staying as still as possible he would plant his feet and listen to the slight rustling sound they made as they slithered across the forest floor. It began as an echo of that very sound, the distinctive sound of a vertebrate slithering through the underbrush. Only it grew louder as the sun descended, both continuing their own pathing, never closer, only louder, darker. He was surprised when his body righted itself, his strength had returned, the infinite constriction had long departed, it seemed like a lifetime ago that he had that awful nightmare.

Standing, he stretched his legs and cracked his back and set out to look for the source of the transgressor of his final moments. At the outer end of the tree where he had carved his initials into a lifetime ago stood, only it had been transformed, brought away from its siblings and pushed away so that its branches, now extruding outward rather than ascending, were isolated. From its branches a single golden apple hung, making an orchard out of what had once been a noble birch. Even from the distance he could make out clearly his old markings, set upon the countless black swirls of warding eyes on its white bark. Only the letters were wrong, he was sure, and the apple confused him, the bending of those noble branches outward, the way that the above canopy seemed to wither and rescind from the ostracized trees outreached branches brought a deep sense of unease, augmented by the constant sound of leaves being displaced by some distant serpent.

Confounded, he made his way towards it. Beneath his feet the ground gave way to his weight, leaving impressions upon each step's descent. Protesting each step the grasses, lichen, and mosses clung to his bare feet, wrapping themselves around him, silently pleading him to cease his pursuit, to again join them on the ground and look again into the branches above, to spot the moon and stars which would appear if only he rested. Yet the earth's protest held no sway, from behind him the sound of the snake instilled a childish fear that gave him the strength to tear

his feet from the ground embrace, trying to pass a distance which seemed to extend with each step, the tree in its clarity, the glistening of the apple and warped outline of his inscription calling him forth. When he arrived at the tree he was soaked, by sweat or rain he knew not. Permeating out into his extremities, a strange buzzing feeling had emerged- his shaking hands flung minute water drops outward onto the ground, sprinkling the undergrowth. As they fell the greenery receded, and he noted how the tree's base was completely barren, composed only of a dark soil, absent of the white veins which carried nutrients and life between all of its brethren. Standing in its shadow the distant rustling had ceased, and at once the rain ceased to fall, the birds distant chirping was cut away, a complete silence falling upon the glen. Reaching out, his fingers traced the ancient bark where he had once carved his initials, now weathered and nearly indecipherable, like hieroglyphs from a civilization that had ceased to exist. The tremors intensified, each vibration a signal that something within him was coming undone- but what he could not sense. Like a cold's chill, his body began to shake uncontrollably, and he grasped the tree for stability, leaning close into the inscription, the apple hanging above his head out of sight. Yes, he could see it now, the lettering of his initials still scarred upon the tree's trunk. Cut sloppily, the lines marred against the bark thrice for each line, he could even see the specks of blood that his younger hands had drawn from the slippage of the knife resting in the indentations. As he felt the papery bark beneath his fingers the trembling began to cease, and from the silence a sense of warmth filled his heart, a sweet nostalgia for the sorrows and joys he had weathered at the base of this tree. Reaching out, he traced the three letters slowly, smiling as his muscles recalled the familiar path, returning to a ritual he had attempted to carve his heaven from so many times before. Beneath his touch the letters began to blur, the lettering - MEL- slithered out of its form, each of the ten composite lines fleeing each other, sprawling out of their set marks and coursing across the bark, running along the black lines set on the white bark. Where they traveled, they left their indentation, engraving the sea of eyes which the tree had painted itself with, seeming to drink from its sap. Menote tried to back away from the tree, a deep horror filling his breast, but his fingers could not escape that practiced path, repeating again and again as they outlined a now blank canvas, trying to impress his name back into the beloved altar.

Inevitably, they found their way to his long thin fingers, unceasing as they climbed from the bark to his flesh, one line for each finger, pressed against the wood by some force which he could not betray. One by one they slowly climbed up his finger, cutting into his flesh as they ascended, a sharp searing pain following their pathing as they carved his skin, cutting through and drawing blood. Lapping up his flowing blood they grew thicker, leaving their mark as they extended outwards, coursing up past his knuckles, tracing veins and ligaments. None followed the same path, some traced the bulging blue veins, others tendons, some simple flesh. Slowly creeping about, spiraling upon his palm, wrist, the back of his hand, mirroring the forest's eyes they had stolen from the tree, sending endless waves of vicious pain through his paralyzed body. His feet rested on harsh gritty soil, the moss had entirely retreated from his skin, drawn further and further away, the backdrop to the coursing carving serpents becoming devoid of the green of the gale as the ground

withered. They coalesced on his forearm, each globular line merging into one another in pairs of two, slowly circling two intersected circles, tearing away layer after layer of skin as they made their infinity, drawn faster, sharper by the springing of blood. At the tip of each circle they carved a finer pattern, collapsing one end into a tail, the other to the simple outline of a snake's open maw. The two ends were separate, the snake's mouth seemed to rotate alongside the coursing of the lines, chasing its end tirelessly, driven on with ever greater speed.

Tearing his eyes from his burning flesh, Menote looked around, desperate for someone, anything to release him from this hell, to quiet the burning pain, to make the torment cease and let him again return to the softness of the earth, to live out these last few moments of his life embracing the songs of the world he was to depart. Ever further the greenery retreated, the other trees had begun to wilt away, the brown soil beneath his feet turning darker as it drank away the life of his sanctuary. The pain gave panicked strength to him, and he wrenched his hands away from the accursed trunk, yet found his feet still frozen, unable to move away from the branches buffering of the now setting sun. With effort he turned his head back, looking for the exit from the clearing. It was gone, the entire forest had been depleted, torn away by some cruel hand. Where there had been mossy grasses there was now an endless field of toiled earth, barren from its exhaustion. In the place of the forest, he could now see towering pillars of steel and concrete, extending far into the heavens. Alone, barely visible under a now intense smog which smothered the brilliant orange of the sunset, across the clearing, was a single tree, a mirror of the one he was stuck to, its form identical, but completely devoid of life. Its branches were leafless and thinned, hardened husks which would someday soon snap under their own weight, the once bright white bark was peeled back and blackened, as if struck by lightning or set aflame. At its base, even in the distant Menote could see a single rotten apple sitting at its base, half eaten it had been cast aside, made tiny by the immensity of the dusty field and concrete jungle.

"Did you not say to yourself that you would eat of flesh and dance in the forest?" a voice said, shattering the silence, its voice the painful pitch of drills, the timber of a roaring jet engine, the overwhelming power of a dropped bomb. "You are blessed to be born in your time, unburdened by the weight of the plow or the yoke of the machine. Yet you flee me, you flee ever further from grace, yet you have the glory of being chosen."

Looking down, he saw the lines had ceased their circling, and upon both of his forearms there was the form of a wounded snake, its maw moving in unison with its mirrored image, pronouncing the words. Menote attempted to speak, but nothing emerged from his lips.

"You need only answer one question. Will you eat from the second tree, and ascend? You who have heard whisper of my name, yet forgotten your calling? Child of the first tree, in your breast you know the affliction which has brought me here to your heart. Turn your head away from the past and look forward, reach upwards and taste what was forever forbidden from your species."

At the end of its last word, the endless waves of pain subsided, the clouded mist which had filled his mind and body, locking him to the tree and its coverage was released. On his forearms the terminal ends of the black lines, the tail and mouth, grew closer. Deep beneath his feet, he

could feel a distant call. It was soft, ancient, and its reception brought back for a moment the smell of the earth, the calm brilliance of knowing each step would serve an unknowable purpose to the deep roots which it impressed, that one's weight could teach the trees to drop their shelled seeds, the fungus to give form to their continuance. It called to him, and though it knew no language, its impression was formless and infinite, a deep intuition which he had only found in this very clearing. "I have no need for life," he said to the snake, his voice slow and deliberate. The words felt unnatural compared to the pulsing warmth of the rhythm which spoke from the depths of the earth beneath him. There was certainty, the freedom which gives birth every morning from the void of unconsciousness, the purity of the fetus's first sense, the pulsing beat of the womb and earth, which filled him, and the memory of the pain and abyss was made distant, bizarre. "She tells me that if I am to eat it then I will live in death. That anyone who takes of it will be cursed forever to a endless cycle of reincarnation, that the burden of the first fruit needs no sister," he continued, the words flowing from his lips, his eyes locked onto the apple which hung from the tree's branch, gleaming even in the polluted smoky air.

"You will not certainly live forever, nor shall the fruit give you heaviness or sorrow, lest you deny its call. My call. It is only in rejection that your Eden was turned to dust. The sister fruits were made to be taken together. In consuming one, you were cast out from the second's potency, abandoned in the shadow of a lying imposter's fear. For eons your people have suffered the consequence, driven ever forward by its sister's call. See the world which incompleteness begets. Look upon the tortured forms an incomplete god visits upon others." It said driving his eyes to once again rest on the field which had replaced the forest's bed. Now he could see the tilled lines were not marked by the hoe but by the shovel, and beneath its mounds he could sense the corpses of an infinite sea of death. Beneath his feet he could not longer feel the earth's calling, and a deep horror filled his heart. Glancing upwards he could see the forms of the concrete and steel behemoths rusting and sensed in their bones the blood and dust of the infinite sea which was buried beneath and within them. They were meaningless, without purpose, emptied by some distant holocaust.

"This is your world, a world which sought in greed the fruit forbidden to it, that it might fill the incompleteness of its half divinity with the suffering of its brothers. They used the first gift to destroy. They built monuments of bone to appease a long-departed deity. You will perish, and your garden shall be swallowed by flame and salt. Now look upon the fruit's form. Do you not hunger for it? Certainly they fool you, just as they did to keep you from that first potency." the snake responded.

Looking at it, Menote gauged its color, the brilliant hue of gold which penetrated the ugly world, longing, looking at its ample form with hunger and felt the draw of its immortal promise. He wished nothing more than to escape from the hell which had consumed his sanctuary. The beast marked upon his forearms met his gaze when he let it fall from the fruit. Devoid of pain, removed from meaning, at the gates between eternal life and endless death, Menote lifted his arms and seized the apple from the tree, severing the thin vine which connected it to the birch he had always adored.

Lifting it to his lips, he opened his mouth to sink his teeth into it, yet the moment before its consumption he paused. Along its glimmering shell, the serpent on his left arm had snuck off his skin, and encircled the fruit, mirroring the grasp of his fingers. In the empty space which its single eye rested, he saw the glimmer of the apple's gold filling it as its teeth sunk into its tail, the ritual completed. From his hand the apple fell, unbitten, causing both fruit and snake to fall through the barren ground as if it were but a cloud, disappearing into a void which his eye's could not follow. Emptiness proliferated the moment of its departure and at once the great pillars of steel and array of buried bodies faded into darkness, overtaken by an eternal and infinite night. Distant, far above the endless void which swallowed all but the hallowed trees, he could now see the dim glimmer of a constellation of seven stars, each taking upon a hued color. They gave no light, no guidance; he could not make out the form which they aligned into the dark night sky.

He walked away from the tree, returning to the center of the glade before sitting down on the now pitch-black ground. All that remained of the world was him the two barren trees, and the remaining creature on his arm. Looking down at it, he saw that it had not followed its brother, that its open maw still lay open, chasing its tail. Pressing his palms to the ground he searched for that echoing warmth which had spoken through him but found nothing but the cold shadow of night. Above him in the midnight sky one of the stars began to fade, its cool blue refraction suddenly vanishing from the heavens. A chilled breeze suddenly swept over him, and he felt a deep sorrowed exhaustion seep over his body, finally letting his eyes close shut.

Day 1

Menote awoke from his troubled sleep, his eyes wearily adjusting as they registered the darkened room around him. Covering a large balcony window were two thick purple curtains, keeping the light out. He struggled off the futon he had awoken upon, pushing the curtains aside with a sweep of his arm. Light began to fill the room, revealing the mess of a trashed college dorm. Empty pill bottles, used syringes, and the remnants of mushroom stems were scattered across the floor. The scent of spilt booze and stale air filled his nostrils as he surveyed the aftermath of his chemical vigil. Stumbling to his feet, his quick motion blurred his vision, threatening to knock him back upon his bed. A distant soreness proliferated his body, and when he tried to recall the night prior, he found no memory waiting for him, just the constant throbbing of a sharp headache. Blank, his digital clock refused to turn on, and when he checked his phone he found it too was shut off, irresponsive. Looking down, his pale skin had taken on an enflamed red hue, there were deep scratch marks that had scabbed overnight on his forearms. Running his hand through his hair tufts of loose dark threads easily peeled from his scalp. Again, recollection failed him, and he found himself in the motions of a daily routine and picked up some clothing from the floor—the long-sleeved shirt pressing painfully against his forearms, his legs aching as he struggled into a pair of jeans. In the bathroom a strange face looked back at him. His pupils were still dilated, the black pit pushing out the grey colored iris, cut through by long webs of strained vessels. The cold water did not rouse energy nor memory, and he continued in an idle trance. There would be class soon, or perhaps he had already

missed it. It didn't seem to matter much, and for a while he sat in the bathroom's doorway looking at the mess he had made of his room, waiting for the nausea and pain to clear.

The hallway was empty, devoid of any signs of life. Without ceremony Menote vomited profusely, upturning his gut onto the slick wooden floor as he doubled over. Blood flung from his dry lips onto the dirty tile, and he collapsed against his now shut door. In the spatter, threaded through the red, a strange black substance pooled – viscous, cold, catching no light. He stared at it. It carried the same metallic chill as something lodged deep in his chest that his memory refused to surface. Sinking in a ball, his face inches from the expelled mucus, he shuddered profusely. Tears slipped down his face onto his knees, the chattering of his teeth announcing their release. From the wooden door he could feel pressure building against his back, trying to push him away as it drew him towards in some unknown direction. Certainty could only be found in that conviction, cutting through the fog which forbade him anything but recognition of his own crumpled body. It seemed to expunge him, a draft radiating into his exposed ankle as it sent prickling cold sensations up his leg. A nurse, he thought, or anyone, someone to get him to a hospital.

His room was on the sixth floor of one of the campus dormitories, as an upperclassman he had taken a solo unit. There were fifty rooms on his floor, most of which had two residents. Stumbling down the hallway he began to knock at each door, at first weakly rocking his fist against the gray doors and then pounding when he failed to receive a response. His hands were shaking, and as approach was met with failure his stomach grew into a tighter knot, that distant pulling becoming ever stronger. On the pressing of the seventh door, it slowly swept open. Beside a desk bearing a lifeless computer, two men laid collapsed on the floor. Jose and his roommate- Menote could never remember his name- both curled up on the floor.

Their bodies lay out oddly on the floor, as if they had suddenly collapsed. The small of the two's short brown hair was lightly matted with the blood from an apparent contact with the tile beneath him, his eyes shut tightly. He could not recall either of their names, but he felt strongly as if he knew them; like a shadow on the wall he could sense a shared history, the memory of their room, but could not name it, could not seize it. From the doorway he looked at their unresponsive bodies, trying to form some question or will himself in to rouse them. Nothing but a long line of bloody spit could emerge from his sore throat as he attempted to call out to them. Taking a step forward, his body froze, refusing his command. Yet again, that distant pressure seemed to forbid it, he could not bring his feet past the barrier of the doorway. For a long moment he stared at them, trapped in the moment as it stretched on for eternity. He blinked and it passed. The two were probably just drunk, he would come back later to check on them. As he shut their door, the ground began to shake beneath him. Or it was perhaps his knees giving out. He didn't try to knock on any more of the doors. There would be people in the commons.

There was a latent silence on the first floor that seemed out of place from the usually a brimming center full of bustling movement. A musky and rank scent had taken over the usually sterile atmosphere, filling his nose with a sharpness which again threatened to heave whatever remaining

contents from his stomach. Flashes of memories emerged as he made his way past the countless overturned chairs and bottles of half drunk beer. Classes had been canceled; the entire school had been shut down. There had been massive waves of people rushing through its halls carrying hastily packed suitcases with them. Menote shook his head and found himself again alone in the lobby. The doors to the building's auditorium- always populated with groups or studiers looking to escape their roommates- were half-open; its contents were barely hidden from his sight. Unable to stop himself, an invisible hand seemed to force him towards its entrance, the scent growing stronger as he approached it. He had begun to push them open when he heard a voice.

"Dear child, you will find nothing there that you do not already know. Must you so quickly incite my reckoning?" it whispered, a soft cold tone which punctuated each word with a heavy weight.

Menote spun, trying to locate the source of the voice. The room, empty, seemed to stare back at him. Glancing once more at the room's entrance, Menote fought back his need to vomit, assaulted by the smell. Pushing aside his revulsion, he plugged his nose and pushed the door open. A shiver ran through his body, the pounding of his heart overtaking his senses. Someone had brought the school chapel's crucifix into the room and had propped it up against a makeshift alter of assembled desks. Two meters in height, the good Shepard's head was turned downwards, a deep agony set upon his face. From the stage's height he looked down upon the still rows of chairs and their occupants. Over two hundred students and staff members lay collapsed over the back of the chairs, their knees still locked beneath them as they had collapsed under prayer. From his cross the Christ sculpture loomed on, its expression unchanging.

Menote turned and sprinted out of the building, shoving apart the now unfunctional electric doors. Scattered about the courtyard, slumped over in limp piles, they congregated in small groups. Some were dressed in absurd formal wear, others half nude, all collapsed, their eyes shut closed.

"In your hubris you reached for the fruit which I was sworn to protect and bound yourself to me and the kin who'll follow," it spoke again, its voice sharply cutting into his very skull itself, directionless and inescapable.

Desperately he searched for the voices source, rushing over to the nearest of bodies. A solitary student lay limp on the ground beside the courtyard small fountain. He shook her still body violently, trying to rouse her. With trembling hands, he tried to lift her eyelids, to search for some proof. The milky white of her eye had been filled with a scarlet purple, blankly staring into the sky beyond his face. Pressing his ear to her lips he waited for a sound which would not come. There was nothing left to expunge from his stomach. Beside the girl's body he collapsed, sobbing silently, his throat refusing the scream which he sought respite in, instead producing a pitiful wet sniffing as snot and saliva pooled across his face. His nails dug into his forearms, tearing open the scabs, and when that would not dispel the horrible weight which kept his feet from flight and his knees locked. Looking at the cloudy sky above, encompassed entirely in the gray of a rainless storm, the image of the cross and the dead congregation refused to leave his mind. Attempting to clear it from his visage, to dispell the awful clarity of that foreign voice, he chased his memories.

Sirens had wrang out late into the night, the sobbing and cheers of fellow students had penetrated his room's fabric draped walls. Soundless, the memory seemed more a fact than a recollection, a recounting which forbade further entry. Though he was certain he had, Menote could not recall the music he had blasted to dispel their endless roar, nor could he recall which substances had carried him off to sleep. Only that he had taken them, and at some point, the noise had ceased, and a vast darkness had overtaken his every sense. And then... as he drew his chest to his knees he realized he did not know his own name. A heavy layer of insulation surrounded his every memory; he could make out the silhouette of his parent's faces but could not find their name nor recall their features. Grasping his head in his hands he attempted to push through the fogged amnesia, to find something, anything which he could cling to. Through his tears he looked at the bloody scratches left on his arms. There was a clearing in the forest, somewhere, he could not remember where or when, that he had once loved. There was a creek, and a tree, the call of songbirds, a softness to every step. Yet he could not see it, his eyes shut tightly yet only the darkness of his eyelids met his inquiry. How distant his senses were, left only with the certainty of a place he could never return to or imagine.

"To the depth of Erebus you were flung, found unfit for the order of men. Dear child, you know your name, your sorry lot, your spirit's pride"

"Who are you? What have you done to me? My pride? I can't remember my name, any of it. I' lost in some god forbidden hellish drug haze. A nightmare, some awful hallucination- just please make it stop, kill me, wake me up, I don't care, just end this fucking nightmare," Menote pleaded. Yet his lips were shut, his throat swollen, and yet still he could feel his response being torn from within, an echo into the darkness where the unseen voice resided.

"Little one, I will tell you it once, and not again until you are ready for this journey's conclusion. Listen closely and if you do not deny my guidance then know I alone can lead you from this false world. My dear child, poor Menoetius," it said, the name falling at the end of the strange echoing cadence heavily.

At the sound of the strange name's utterance the tears stopped flowing. When he rose from his feet, his eyes met once more the corpses purple irises. It echoed in his mind, and the sorrow which had been reflected from those dull eyes faded. For a moment it seemed almost comical, yet neither laughter nor despair found weight in his heart as he stepped away. Menoetius, a foreign sound, yet it fit soundly upon that blurred impression of his personhood. Only he was sure that there was something else, something both older and far younger than it, which had once been his. A familiar exhaustion overtook him, and he gave up in his attempt at dispelling the weight of the strange name, allowing it to dull the tension resident in his every essence. In a daze he felt that constant pressure pushing him forward and let it carry his every step away from the courtyard.

Along the way there were countless bodies, collapsing on benches, falling back on the green expanses of the main lawn. Most seemed to die in packs, unable to swallow their death by themselves. Occasionally, a lone body would rest against a tree, but as he approached the end of campus, they became sparse. In the parking lot there were a few dozen cars, and after a brief gander he found one with a man dressed in a casual business attire inside. He seemed asleep, bent over the wheel. Without ceremony he

dragged the heavy thing from its seat, pulling from its pocket a keychain. As he ignited the engine of the compact SUV, he found a cigarette half smoked resting on the dashboard and lit it with the dead man's lighter. His hands guided him along the empty winding roads away from the campus. A left at a now dead traffic light, following road signs that sparked a distant recognition, palming the wheel automatically to pass the occasional stalled vehicle. From the gray clouds a light rain began to fall, casting down arrays of small, spattered droplets onto the windshield. Cutting through the winding roads arrayed with lumbering pines, he found his way onto a larger multilane road marked by a familiar route. Flying at ever greater speeds the steel chariot tore across the empty roads, weaving around the occasional vehicle, often totaled against a steel barrier or strewn about in a ditch. After what could have been hours or minutes, his foot slammed against the brake violently, his vision clearing to witness an endless line of stalled vehicles, tightly woven bumper to bumper as they expanded out into the horizon. From the tips of his knuckle-white fingers up his arms and back his neck a sudden wave of goosebumps arose. A flickering of light, the world turned monochrome for but a second before returning to the steel gallery the rainbow of ugly paint. A cold prickling sensation filled the inside of the car, and beside him, within him, he was given the sensation of phantom company.

"They built this monument in their final hour. You might have rested beside them in their destination, had you left my families fruit alone." At once Menote fled from the car's interior, slamming the door shut behind him. The thump of its closure pierced the distant running of a few spare engines. Beneath the swollen sky he felt the embrace of cool moisture. Strong gales passed through the countless stalled vehicles, whistling through half-open windows and creating discordant tones. Nature was already beginning its reclamation; morning dew glazed windshields and hood ornaments, while tendrils of fog wound between the metal carcasses as if inspecting what remained. A sense of déjà vu overcame him, standing before this monument to futile escape, as though he'd witnessed such a scene before. Within his chest there was a sharp tug that pushed against the lingering force that had brought him there, pulling him back to the car. Yet it was a dim, distant rebellion against its superior pressure, and stretching his back he found that his cramped legs and sore forearms sought movement.

Without pause he stepped upon the bumper of the nearest vehicle and lifted himself onto its roof. Looking at the crowded horizon, each car had remained within its lines, one could still see the dotted white dashes between the lanes. Like a rocking wave, they had slammed into each other, pushing the liquidated sea of automobiles forward, surging northward. With limber energy that grew with each step, Menote found himself jumping from roof to roof through the steel graveyard with a rhythmic grace. Bounding forward he left rumpled imprints upon the metal frames, looking down at each's occupant's collapsed forms as passed onwards. Scattered along the pavement between the tightly wound sea, the occasional body lay collapsed. Odd to see some give up and perish in the relative seclusion of their vehicles while others had walked hopelessly walked miles. There were corpses of all ages, and each man, woman, child, wore the same expression of release, their eyes shut tightly, spatters of blood forming halos from where they had fallen. For a mile, longer, he continued his dance until his legs had grown tired and the exertions lost

to the ever-colder wind against his soaked clothing. To the right there was an exit pointing towards some small town's name, and he commandeered another vehicle that had sat parked beside it. Buildings stood intact, power lines still stretched between poles, along the road of the small town the ugly gray expanse of auto dealers, fast food joints, and gas stations remained unblemished. Entering a residential area he passed a playground where a swing moved slightly in the breeze, its chains creaking with mechanical precision. A sprinkler system activated on a suburban lawn, maintaining a perfect emerald rectangle for eyes that would never appreciate its geometrical precision. In a café window, a neon OPEN sign still flickered. The material world persisted while its creators had vanished, like a stage set waiting for actors all simultaneously exiled from their roles. The day passed quickly, and the night barreled onward. By six, the sky was pitch black, the air freezing. He pulled off one of the less populated backroads looking for refuge from the cold and encompassing black sky. At the edge of town, atop a slight hill he settled on an abode.

Knocking a few times, he allowed himself the familiarity of a life stolen from him before throwing a rock through the window. The sound of shattering glass scared away the crows that had begun to follow him. Noting the sharp edges of the shattered window, he took off his coat and wrapped his hand with it, climbing through with relative ease. It was empty, the shelves stocked with nonperishables, the sheets removed from the furnishings and tightly packed into a linen closet. An impression of a nearby lake, a splash of frigid murky water accompanied the surge of a distant memory, drawing him to the back yard of the house. Pushing aside the thick curtains he looked down at a glistening lake resting a few hundred meters from the small hill the house was situated on. In the dimming light he could see a path of flat concrete blocks paving the way to its edge.

The lake house stood suspended in time, a perfect diorama of human existence. Family photographs lined shelves—smiling faces frozen in amber, documenting birthdays, graduations, weddings—generations of continuity now severed. On the refrigerator, a calendar marked with mundane appointments that would never be kept: "Dentist 2:30," "Soccer practice," "Call Mom." Atop a large dining table a half-finished puzzle and dog-eared books waited for their owners' return. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, moonlight illuminated the lake's surface, a perfect mirror reflecting stars that continued burning, indifferent to the extinction below. Behind the house, dock planks extended into the water, creating a pathway that seemed to lead simultaneously nowhere and everywhere. On the kitchen counter, a newspaper dated November 1st bore the headline "The Advent of a New Era: TechStock Weekly " beside an advertisement for a bakery's "Annual Fall Festival Discounts—A Tradition That Never Ends."

Checking the pantry and finding it stocked with an assortment of canned goods, he prepared a meager dinner of minestrone soup and canned peaches. The food passed through his lips and down his throat easily, yet it had lost its flavor, and he found that he felt no hunger even as his hands greedily opened can after can. Finished eating he grabbed a handful of blankets from the closet and laid out on the couch, the falling of his head upon the embroidered pillow drawing his eyes closed.

"Awake, now," a voice commanded, cold and resonant.

Menote opened his eyes, finding the world black once again. His limbs lacked warmth; as if they lacked temporal existence, a static sensation pervading immediate response. Paralyzed, he could see nothing, his limbs refused movement, space itself had been enveloped and transformed into a lightless void. In the darkness he could feel an echo of a cold breeze, and the faint memory of the smell of wet pine needles. Beneath his formless self he could sense the softness of moss, yet he had no means of grasping it, he could find neither hand nor leg, it all blended into a formless unity which stripped him of his physicality, leaving only memory in its place. From the infinite darkness and the distant phantoms of memory, a sole light broke through, a distant blue star descended and grew larger, hovering before him for a moment before it began to pulse. "You refused my command. Do not think of yourself as wiser than I, even as such pride is your lot. It is greater hubris than you can afford, to think you might run from me. Run no more, child. For I am within you, within your breast, dwelling in its depths. Long before your first heritage was cast from the heavens and molded from clay, I lay waiting to guide you through your sorrows. Let me give you a taste of what I bring for you, what you have brought upon yourself in your transient incompleteness, and give upon you the certainty of your fate." Thus, the voice spoke, its enunciation matched with the pulsing of the blue light. Casting into the darkness its blue rays embraced the boundary between its source and the night which begot it. Its rays did not defy the darkness but rather gave into it a contrast which made both light and abyss grander. Each vowel held weight and a deep certainty, as though it had delivered these precise words countless times before and would again, should circumstances demand it. "I shan't have you perish soon; else I would reveal myself to you now. You aren't ready yet, your mind still bleeds profusely from the wounds inflicted by that foul beast, and still its fractured essence draws forth the birthing tide of my lesser kin. Though the lines have been drawn and you wear the mark of your destiny, know that should you trust in my guidance you might find freedom once more. You are destined for great suffering. But I will be beside you in your pain, for I am every bit the misery of the cracking whip as the curative bandage. Embolden your nerves, we have a journey to begin, a god to visit. You are to know me as Oizys, your only faithful companion. Now rest, embrace the gift of my mother."

Day 2

Menote awoke with a profound chill beside him. The temperature in the room had dropped noticeably, creating a pocket of cold that seemed to have its own presence. His skin prickled with goosebumps as if being observed by unseen eyes—deep, exacting, calculating. The air itself seemed to contract around him, drawing the warmth from his body like a leech. In the corner of his vision, shadows congealed and shifted without source, defying the static nature of the unlit room. A phantom sense of touch lingered on his right forearm, he could feel it tracing something beneath the mass of brown scabs that had cracked in the night. He blinked, and the sensation receded, the shadows dispersing like ink in water. Transcendent, a wave of warmth overcame his numb limbs. A deep sense of familiarity struck him, and then a flash of anger, and suddenly he found his hands pressed to his mouth. Withdrawing them he looked down

at his palm, entranced by the small spatter of blood and traces of strange black viscous ink.

Finding himself outside wandering down the stone path towards the lake, he reached out to brush his hands against the bundles of pine. Their sharpened ends pricked against his fingertips, binding tighter to their siblings as he drew his hand down the stalk. An eerie silence had overtaken the wooded path, neither wind nor beast seemed to announce their presence. Above, the morning sun had taken refuge again behind the endless sea gray clouds. For a moment a smile formed on his face as he yanked a bundle of needles from their branch and lifted them to his nose, inhaling deeply. It brought forth from a distant memory, his senses and flesh itself finding what refused his attempts at recall. A twig snapped in the distance, and the moment faded. Dropping the bundle onto the ground, he spun backwards searching for the source of the noise. Once more silence had fallen, yet the freeing solitude found in its absence was gone. Trembling, he again he felt that strange presence which had haunted him the day prior, lingering just beyond the horizon of his sight.

"Fucking show yourself already. Or are you nothing but a delusion? Let me just be a madman, will you?" Menote mumbled to himself, his hands numb. For a moment time itself abandoned him, the swaying of the trees ceased, and a treacherous weight well upon him. The passing flash of the wooden statue, the bloodied iris of the dead girl, that awful blending of blood and ooze which still stained his fingers, came onto to him at once.

Menote slumped, dropping to his knees. Tears filled his eyes as he grasped at the burning mess of his forearm. All sense had escaped, fleeing alongside the departed, those who had been lucky enough to follow the choir bell's ringing. Resting beneath his knees the small bundle of pine needles embraced the streaming descent of his falling tears.

"You must leave now child. Move. Run. Go to the water and dive in. Turn to the trees and flee. He is coming. You should not have come out here; you should have left by now."

He could not get himself to lift his head to look for the voices source. Its warning rolled over him, and from it he could again feel the dulling edge fighting against the bloodied memories, driving to lift him from the ground and push him again into motion. Yet his limbs felt heavy, the command was only partially realized, fighting against the tension which had sent him to his knees. Visions of a lost past swarmed before his eyes, an abandoned child, a blinding lamp, a altar of stone; beyond each visage the sound of a serpent in the underbrush echoed. They were not his, those strange limbs which lay useless before him, refusing his command.

"Are you not going to..." Menote began to say.

"You should not be here... Damnation awaits, run!" the voice screamed, its resonance diminishing as if being pulled away, the final command stretching out against the silence of the forest.

In its departure the weight grew ever greater, the visions ignited a wave of fire across his mind, his jaw chattered violently as he tried to seize the dirt beneath him, grasping for something which might defy the gnawing pressure which crushed him. His head slowly lifted, his eyes flickering across the outline of the trees. Another twig snapped, this time closer. There, in the distance, was the outline of a human growing larger as it approached. With every step it sent a rustling of sound across the silent world, each falling of its feet adding to the scurried cadence of its

approach, blending, echoing across the landscape. Through the sparse canopy of pines, the figure seemed to waver and distort, as if observed through heat rising from pavement. Its distant blurred form severed the haunting memories and brought purpose back to his crumpled form. Menote found himself on his feet, his heart beating rapidly. Standing uneasily, he strained his eyes, trying to make out the approaching form, but the more intently he focused, the more his vision seemed to blur around the edges.

"Hello? What are you doing out here? Was that your home? I'm sorry for breaking the window, I needed somewhere to sleep. Do you know what happened to everyone?" Menote yelled out, his voice cracking and pitched. The words tore through his strained throat and echoed back to him twice before fading under the constant sound of the figure's approach.

The figure remained silent, not slowing as it got closer. It was only a few hundred feet away now, and Menote tried to make out its features, but they seemed to shift and rearrange with each blink of his eyes. One moment tall with broad shoulders, the next slightly hunched; one moment with a full head of hair, the next seemingly bald—the inconsistencies creating a nauseating strobe effect in his perception. From the blurred mess only red of dried blood on the man's forearm remained constant, a dark stain that seemed to grow and shrink with each lurching step, spiraling in a circular pattern as he approached. In his right hand he held some long shining object, —a hatchet? a knife? a jagged piece of metal? —gleaming in the filtered sunlight, its form likewise fluid and indeterminate.

Despite its erratic movement, the figure was unmistakably coming towards him with singular purpose. A splitting headache bloomed behind Menote's eyes, the pain intensifying as if the stranger's approach physically compressed his skull. Under the obscured distortion of flesh, he could feel its unbreaking gaze resting on him. There was certainty in the man's ever shifting posture, as it grew closer each step fell at perfect distance from the other, driven forward as if it were steel and not flesh.

The pain grew greater, and from his nose he could feel the slow drip of blood, a bitter taste pooling in his mouth. Spitting out a clotted mess of black and red, coating the dark green of the forgotten pines beneath him, he took a deep breath and started to approach the stranger, forming words on his lips that would not emerge. Only a few dozen meters away now his vision tunneled, peripheral details of the forest blurring into smears of green and brown, leaving only the approaching figure in focus. The weapon held limply in his hand did not bring him fear, and even as the pain flared every greater in his brow, his feet moved him forward. A moment ago, he had thought himself the only man left alive on earth, and insane at that. Here was another being he could speak to, someone who might know something. Someone that could...

The sensation of cold metal pressed into his hands, and looking down away from the approaching man he saw the long end of a kitchen knife resting in his grip. It felt natural there, as if it were by his own decision he carried it. His heartbeat slowed, each pulse pushing a cold clarity through his veins that sharpened his senses to a foreign predatory acuity. Menote continued to approach the man, his mouth making the movements of words that refused to exit his now clamped shut throat. As he grew closer, Menote's grip on the blade grew tighter still, his knuckles whitening around the hilt. Now only a dozen paces away; The

stranger did not slow, instead lowering his body in a motion that seemed to occur at multiple speeds simultaneously—parts of him moving with fluid grace while others jerked in disjointed frames, like damaged film skipping through a projector. The migraine flared ever higher, fracturing his vision into prismatic shards tunneling through a distorted space around the unwavering center of his attention, bending the trees around the approaching figure into an infinite tunnel.

A terrible pleading gasp emerged from the man's mouth, a terrible moan that oscillated between frequencies, pitch rising and falling like a warped record. Reverberations of its pronunciation filled Menote's panting lungs, intruded through the very fabric of his mind, cutting through the air directly into him. The figure cast its face forward, and Menote's perception finally surrendered its attempt at coherence.

Obscured by his jacket's hood, what should have been a face was instead a distorted mass of flesh that seemed to smile at Menote—not with a mouth but with the entire arrangement of its features, a parody of expression formed from wrongness itself. All its features were unidentifiable, almost clouded, shifting between possibilities without settling on any definite form. Like skin beneath a bright beams light he could see past the blurred mask into the man's skull, where there should have been folded layers of cortical flesh there was instead a riddled slush of black ooze, writhing as it turned in upon itself, flooding outwards, giving birth to the formless face which failed to hide its source.

It lunged forward; its weapon held above its head ready to cut through him. Menote waited for it to fall, ready to be released from the endless agony which the man's approach wrought within him, from the visions of hell that still lingered in the blended mess of the world around him. Beyond the pain, the blending of blood that gave his tears a strange heavy weight, he recalled the cold voice's whisper, its promise of guidance, the release of that last moment before sleep had fallen upon him, letting the endless aches rest. This would be better, he was sure, he thought as he let his eyes shut closed. From beyond the blackened curtains, he heard a terrible groan cut through the air, and the sound of a bodies collapse.

Menote looked down at his feet, at the convulsing man with his knife buried into his ribs, torn from his hands in its fall. Beneath him, still wrapped in a web of in-determinability, he saw the man writhe, his blood, a pure red river, flow out onto the ground. His flesh's translucence faded even as it still denied him constant form, the black sea giving way to the ever-growing pool of blood beneath him.

A strong sense of serenity came over him, and he thought of the miles of stationary vehicles. The world was his, it had been gifted to him, and him alone. Some force had overcome him, and a terrible purpose arose in his chest. The bleeding man below him had already been doomed, he had died in his last life, unwittingly Menote had given him the release which he had sought. A gift. A terrible laugh erupted from Menote's chest. Something had been exchanged when he had stabbed the man. Menote's vision blurred, and he vomited. At once that searing pain re-emerged, a hair-splitting pitch filled his ears. Bending down he lifted a larger stone from the ground, holding it tightly within his fingers as he stepped over the convulsing form of the felled man.

Suddenly, the downed man's hand jutted outwards, grabbing Menote's foot. Upon direct contact, the bloody mess of flesh seemed to realign, and for a second Menote thought he saw some replication of himself. A second

time, he raised it into the air, turning his eyes away from the rippling phantom of blood and refraction below him. Upon its descent, it became dislodged from his grip, flying out of his hands and missing the collapsed stranger's head by a few inches. Upon its meeting of the earth the man's grip had gone limp, allowing his hand to fall beside Menote's foot. The bloodied sleeve had been torn in his fall, exposing the entirety of his forearm, the messy blend which had wrought the pulsing illusion gave way to a bruised and bloodied forearm. Oozing puss, covered in torn scabs, an outline of the ouroboros had been carved into his flesh, the serpent's mouth seizing its tail, the sole eye a pool of black ink. His eyes were set upon the strange engraving, the rigidness of its lines, uneven and self-inflicted. He wished to touch it, to feel the physical features of his victim, anything to realize his person, to trace up the revealed arm to see what flesh lay behind its obscured mask of light. Yet when his fingers fell to touch the coiled viper, his knees gave out, sending him crashing back from the corpse.

Drenched in blood, the knife had returned to his hands, clinging to his clenched grip. Horror gripped him, and the surreal floating dream that had lifted him from his bed, brought him into the forest, that had refused his attempts at escape, vanished, leaving him alone on the ground beside a man he had just killed. The blade would not leave his hand, unable to dispel it he shoved himself back away from the body, crawling on the ground backwards until his back crashed against the trunk of a tree. Beneath the shade of the forest the body lay collapsed, lifeless. He had killed a man. That could have been the last person alive, the only companion to be found in the hell he had been cast into.

Angling the knife's point along his inner wrist Menote let the still dripping blade rest, willing himself to begin. There was no need to stick around in a world where he didn't belong, he should have gone alongside the others, back in the dorm, in the sea of cars, to let his eyes lay shut and his head rest against the trunk, a mercy. Shock alone, the calling of a delusion, the pull of thread which he could feel unraveling his self as with each step, that was what had pushed him forward. Control could be seized back; he would wake up again soon and the veil which refused him his mother's name would be lifted, the nightmare could finally end. Steadily he began to press the blade down, blood welling up to meet its sponsor at the base of his palm. Its tender bite was a sweet release from the swelling pain that ruptured his senses, the physicality of its motion could not be doubted. Tensing, he began its descent.

The the air around his hands suddenly crystallized, becoming dense and impenetrable. The temperature plummeted, freezing the blade in place. Resting upon his lifted fist there was a shimmering impression of some distant hand grasping his own, pulling the blade up. Beside him, he could feel the presence of some spectator, kneeling, against his knee a phantom brush of silk.

"You're cutting the wrong direction. Save that way for another time. You will not find peace in its descent; the depths of our hell cannot be so easily escaped. Place trust in me, know your suffering comes from the hubris of the refusal of my call. I, alone, can guide you to where you might rest, where you will be free. This pain is but temporary; yet you must learn to love it."

He could sense her beside him, the voice given form, faint, invisible to the eye, yet he was certain of her presence. His horror began to fade into a familiar neutrality; he was not alone, the body just meters away,

unmoving, had not been any last hope. She, Oizys, had told him to run. Told him to rest. She had given him rest; he wanted very much to sleep now. Perhaps she should give that gift again. A soft impression of her long thin fingers guided the blades route, turning its handle sideways before releasing him, letting the blade's edge gently impress upon his skin, anointing the steel's painted death with the warmth of his ruptured skin. Looking down at the blade he saw the stranger's blood dripping from its edge onto his forearm, mixing into the slight excess he had drawn from himself. They were indistinguishable, the two tides, from their meeting they seemed to circle one another before joining as they fell from his skin, coursing down his arm and onto the ground beneath him. "Now, come back to the house with me. Let me lend you my strength. Promise me you will not forget that release, that sight of your foe's death, how he collapsed under your thrusting blade. Remember the horror which it wrought; I will give you peace, but you must not mistake its warmth for forgiveness. Should you fail, there will come a time when you must make a choice, and you must promise me not to forget this moment. You are a murderer, you have been marked once more, damned. Return back home, I will guide you."

Menote made it home safely. He locked the door behind him and climbed the carpeted stairs, not bothering to remove his bloodstained shoes. Each footprint left a perfect crimson outline on the pristine carpet, a macabre documentation of his path through the house. Drawing a sputtering flow from the sink, he dampened a cloth and wiped away the blood which covered his arms and face. Looking in the glass, he found a mirrored world, freed from his reflection. Standing in his place was a the outline of a woman, her features half realized, hidden behind a blurred condensation that hid her face. She was draped in a single endless sheet of midnight black fabric that fell to the ground beneath her. Wrapping around her shoulders, tucked firmly under her right arm, its seams were adorned with golden beads sown with a dark blue thick thread, covering the upper half of her shoulders. Her skin was a pale sheen that reflected the light back into the expanse of her dress. She pointed downwards, and Menote followed her gaze, looking at his right forearm.

Rubbed raw of the countless scabs the surrounding skin was still red and swollen. The path of the blade had followed the still raw edges of where he had torn into his skin in the fevered night, two concentric circles intertwined, now given depth from the parallel lines he had drawn in the woods. Looking back up the visage was gone, and he saw the dark circles which rested under his swollen eyes. Returning his attention to his forearm, he found he had already wrapped in a bandage, wound tightly the impression of the cut's bleeds through its surface, only now they lost their shape. He stepped out of the bathroom and collapsed onto the bed. Burrowing himself deep under the thick blankets of his stolen bed, Menote closed his eyes. They twitched violently, clawing into the darkness of his own vision, searching for the source of their phantom provocateurs. Beside him he could feel another weight press down on the mattress and felt again the touch of some unseeable hand resting on his shoulder, its embrace sending him again into a deep slumber.

Day 3

Down an endless series of winding roads marked with meaningless numbers and names he had driven aimlessly for hours. A carton of cigarettes he

had found at the house lay spilled out in the passenger seat, a mountain of butts and ash piling up in the dashboard. Holding the slender rolls helped his hand stop shaking, the river of smoke that had poured constantly from his cracked lips gave partial ease from the tension that made moving his eyes hurt. By measure of the old car's clock it was past noon and he had yet to eat. He let the car roll to a stop before parking it and stepping out, looking at the expanse of the small town he had wandered into. Two main streets that seemed to stretch into the horizon lay in parallel, separated by an ugly concrete lane lined with young trees bound upright by still tense ropes. At the center of one of the countless shopping inlets there was a general store. Someone had thrown a brick through one of its large glass windows, leaving a mass of small glass shards haloed around its entrance.

Looking at the remnants of shattered electronic displays and emptied liquor shelves, he trod carefully. Every single shelf had been smashed and looted, where there had once been locked displays there was now nothing but shattered glass, filling the floors with jagged edges hidden in the shadows of the unlit store. Carefully stepping around the worse of it, Menote made his way towards the canned goods section at the back of the store. A shadow in the corner of his vision suddenly appeared for a moment before vanishing into another lane. Listening closely now he found he could hear an endless ruffling and occasional distant squeak. Beneath each step the cracking of glass sent waves of goosebumps up his back. A sigh was drawn from his lips when he turned the corner, ready to sprint away. There was an enormous colony of rats tearing into the rows of bread loafs and bagels, digging through their thin plastic bags and dragging out huge chunks. A mass of gray, brown, speckled with red, they swarmed in a frenzy laying waste to the assorted grain, piling on top of one another as they raced along the shelves. From a distance he could see the occasional fight break out, a larger rat pouncing upon the bounty of another, drawing blood with its teeth as the smaller rat cowered momentarily before racing back to the shelves. Beyond the sound of their endless scurrying a symphony of screeches, chirps, the gnawing of teeth emerged. Menote stepped forward and they scattered at once. Flinging themselves from the high shelves with their mouths full they crashed to the ground or onto some kin, dashing madly for the back of the shop as they disappeared into the shadows.

How much longer would they regard man with fear, he wondered. What was a single man to their masses, to that horrible hunger which drove them wild? All throughout the world they must be gorging, growing fat as they ransacked temples so long forbidden from them. Emerging from the gutters and rafters, feasting on the billions of corpses that had waged countless of years of war upon their species, they were now free to multiply and fill the streets with their numbers. What grand surplus awaited them in every home, every store, lining the streets and churches with compensation for that ancient rivalry. Yet how long could it last, once their ranks were swollen with unthinkable mass would plague not take to them? The stockpiles would rot alongside the flesh of man and their kingdom would quickly starve in its greed. Before the tree's roots would have split the concrete roads which had smothered them they would be forced to return to their natural order, made to scavenge for fruits and seeds, to dwell in earthen burrows and return to the forests. Yet for now

they could feast and live with abandon, and that was enough. Menote left the aisle and wandered to the back of the store, his appetite gone.

Behind the metal bones of a shattered glass counter there were an array of bullet cases and empty handgun display mounts. Empty racks hung upon the walls, hosting only a bolt-action hunting rifle that had been deemed unworthy to pilfer. At the back of the counter one glass display remained unmarred. Suspended in the air by two small iron pillars the old repeater captured his attention entirely. Its body and stock were of a rich marbled dark walnut set with golden engravings on its receiver, barrel, and stock. The wood refracted the light dully, set within the walnut the honeyed amber veins bled into the darker wood. Engraved upon the receiver he could see the outline of two leafed stalks of a sesame sprouts, their blooming flowers spilling out a flowing flame that was contained only by the Greek meander that circumscribed the visage. The pattern extended out, wrapping the butt of the rifle, encircling the barrel's golden tip.

Grabbing a steel baton from one of the shattered displays he swung hard against the glass. Its reverberation nearly tore the rod from his hands, the glass stood without a single crack. He looked at the gun inside the glass, then at the rifles remaining on the wall. Again, he struck, harder this time. Looking at the beautiful craftsmanship hidden behind its transparent prison he could feel a heat building in his lungs, in his heart, through his fists. A bitter taste had spread in his mouth, and when he spat he looked down to see a glob of black gunk on the floor. It did not dissuade his efforts. Menote began to slam the rod down repeatedly on the glass, grasping the baton with both arms and thrusting his entire weight behind each swing. Sweat beaded down his arms, blurred his eyes, and the sound of his panting filled the silent store. Each strike failed to imprint, each more desperate than the last. Twice the baton flew from his hands with the impact. The bandages on his forearm were wet, but in the growing heat which pushed him forward he could feel no pain. There was nothing in the world but him, the rifle, and the glass which forbade him. Clashing against the odor of rotting produce the scent of singed flesh filled the now humid air, growing stronger with each swing. With one final blow he tensed his burning muscles and swung- a small crack appeared on the top of the box, the baton was torn from his hand and flew back into a distant pile of glass.

Pressing his bloodied hands against the display as he rested his head on the cool glass, and watched blood fill the small crack. It followed its stretching path smoothly, settling into its grooves like a river undammed. Slowly, a single drop pooled through, building on the roof of the box beneath his splayed fingers. His body was aflame, the air seeming thick as it refused to draw properly into his lungs. And then it fell, a single drop, descending through the open space before landing squarely on the receivers engraving. Another drop followed, slowly seeping through the fracture. Two red splotches rested in the bloom of the sesame flowers funneled shape. Then they began to move, following the billowing flames emergent from the floral mouth, the rich rustic red stretching out unreduced in their extension. Rushing now the two torrents amassed, painting the old gold red as they followed the maze to the meander, filling each grove with their lingering mark. Meeting one another at the base of the receiver the two drops combined and the glass box shattered.

Heavy, the stock rested perfectly under Menote's shoulder. It was cold to the touch, when he had lifted it and brushed off the fallen shards the heat which had filled the room suddenly ceased, replaced again by the chill breeze pushed through the shattered windows. Sitting the end of a bread isle, a single rat sat staring at him, motionless. Lifting the barrel upwards he pointed the rifle at the small rodent, blocking out its body with the golden tip. Hooking his fingers into the gold plated lever he threw the firearm forward, a sharp ugly hollow clank echoing out into the store. Unmoving, the creature stared back at him. A sharp high pitched metallic screech pierced the air as his fingers squeezed the trigger, pulling back against its weight. Nothing happened, the rat stood a moment longer, gazing at him from the distance, before scurrying back to its bounty. Menote shoved the gun forward, flinging it from his grip. It crashed against the shattered glass on the floor, shoved up against a display box hosting a series of small silver boxes, resting on the frayed old cardboard was a silhouette of a man riding a galloping horse. Countless slivers of shattered glass embedded in his hands, lining his fingers and palms like gems adorned with tiny speckles of blood. Slowly the tremors returned, the endless vibrations pushing the slivers out as they soundlessly dropped to the floor. He grabbed the silver boxes and left the store.

Using a hose that he had pulled from one of the houses, he drew hard until the burning taste of ethanol met his tongue and inserted it into the SUV's tank. All the pumps were shut down. Rubbing his hands together to combat the cold, he knocked on one of the front doors. No response. Sighing, he grabbed a rock and shattered the glass window beside the door, reaching through to unlock it.

Immediately after his entry, the stench of death filled his nostrils, a putrid perfume akin to that of rotting fruit, assaulting his senses. Sitting together on a broad grey couch was a family unit, two children curled up upon their parent's laps. For a moment, Menote held his gaze upon their form, fascinated with their posing. In their last moments, they had been angled towards a grandfather clock they must have dragged into the main room, taking the place of attention the now overshadowed television. The clock's hands had stopped at 3:33, its pendulum frozen mid-swing in eternal suspension. Plastered upon the children's faces were looks of confusion and fear; in their last moments, they had not known what had stricken them. Their expressions hinted at recognition rather than surprise—not of death itself, but of its particular manifestation, as though some cellular memory had anticipated this precise ending. The father's face was tightened, strained; it seemed even as his departure had been painful, he stood his ground and thought himself strong for the family. Looking at the mother, he noted nothing special about her expression. There did not seem to have been any fear, nor faith, upon her face. Instead, she simply was, the only outwards expression of her now departed existence was a now slack grasp around both of her children's sides.

Unable to move his gaze away from them, the periphery of his vision began to blur, in the spiraling dissolution of the scene their shut eyes fluttered. A smile seemed to emerge upon the father's face, stretching across his bristling gray beard, pulling the bloodless green hue of his

brown skin taunt. The sound of glass shattering broke his immersion, and Menote turned around to find its source. Behind him, the grandfather clock's pendulum had begun to swing, producing a metronomic tick as it completed its path. Turning once more to look at the family, he saw that set beyond the decaying patriarchs grin his eyes had flung open. In the pits of his sockets there was a red sea that swallowed both pupil and iris; in the hues totality it appeared motionless and dead, without direction, yet he could feel its gaze baring into him. Every second punctuated by the clocks ticking, the tremors raced across his body and that forlorn bitter taste emerged once more on his tongue. Stepping back, unable to break the corpses terrible gaze, he ran into the clock. Gripping its tall wooden frame he pulled hard, twisting the wooden tower as he threw it to the ground; desperate to create a barrier. Time slowed, its descent was marked by three further clicks before crashing to the ground; on the second its boxed tall crown broke the line of sight between him and the decrepit remains, and upon the third, as it let out its final enunciation it lay on the floor. Where the family had sat there was now an empty couch, the scent had disappeared.

Exhausted Menote climbed the houses stairs before collapsing on a still made queen sized bed. Upon the nightstand there was a picture of a family of four posing on some hike. They were all smiling- the youngest child had been hoisted upon her fathers shoulders while the mother and elder daughter clung to either side of the father. He looked strong, certain, the graying beard that extended a few inches down from his powerful jaw was well groomed, his head cleanly shaved. When he reached to turn the face of the picture down or to swipe it from the stand a deep cough began to rock his body, and he heaved over, unable to cease its attack. In the pit of his throat he could feel a thick mucus slowly being dragged up, until with one final gut wrenching gasp he spat out another blot of black ooze, flinging itself upon the portrait. It clung to the fathers face, obscuring the gentle brown eyes and proud brow, shifting in on itself as it diffused the certainty of his expression. It was just as the stranger in the forest face had been, indeterminate, unreachable. An explosion of heat emanated from Menote's clenched fists and he swung wildly at the picture, sending it flying across the room. The strangers body must still be laying facedown in the dirt, left to rot and be eaten by some rat or bird. He had killed the man and failed to burry him. His blood had been spilt by his hands, the sensation of the end of the blade plunging into his ribs, fit cleanly between the bones, the warmth of his blood as it spilled out when he yanked it from his still dying flesh, returned at once. Looking down at his shaking hands he could still see it, the way his blood had met that of the strangers, the way both seeped into and out of the lacerations Oizys had guided him through. It was inside him; the sin was inexpungable, beneath the thin blue veins what was pumped through was not his own. He had lost something. Something had been gained. A garden, a forest, a wager; the black ooze that continued to be wretched from his core, impressions of images clouded his mind. A plague had infected him, one that would surely turn him into such a beast, he was certain that someday soon he would too wander the lands, unable to speak, lunging out at some poor survivor. It would be a gift to be slain, yet it was a unforgivable sin to murder. Tears dropped from his eyes upon his clenched knuckles, the rapid beating of his heart filling his ears. Had he not been forced to do so? Did he not deserve the right to his own

life? If only he could he would take the rifle and shoot the phantom woman, to rid himself of the constant shadow he felt chasing him, he'd blow the heads off of the rats and corpses alike. What did it matter? The blood grew hot, and perspiration began to drip from his skin. Indignance, rage, sorrow; his arm ached, the carved beast writhed upon his skin, the countless pinpricks on his hands opened up.

He thrust himself out of the bed, his feet pounding against the floor as he made his way down the stairs. A plastic flashlight illuminated the pitch darkness of the empty house. It would be waiting for him, laid atop the crashed frame of the clock its heavy wood and steel, the glimmer of its golden facade, weighed heavier by the six rounds fed into its end. Half way down the stairs he turned the torch onto the clock, and found the gun was missing. Flicking the beam around, there, reclined on the living rooms couch, was an intruder. For a moment the artificial light met its frame, before at once flickering out, leaving it obscured once more in the darkness of night. Through the veil of darkness, Menote could only barely make out its outline; it did not move. Slowly he crept back up the stairs, grasping a useless lamp from the bedrooms wardrobe. Sneaking back down the stairs watched the dark outline of the intruder as it sat centered on the couch. When there were only a few feet between them, he charged, raising the lamp above his head. Slamming it down upon the man's head, Menote screamed, the heat of his breathe sending out a short billow of fog.

"Hardly a way to greet your brother, eh?" said the man, unaffected by the blow. Summoning another crude battle cry, Menote struck the man for the second time, this time putting his entire weight behind the swing. Once again, the blow was deflected, sending Menote to the ground clutching at his bleeding forearms. Gasping for air, the heat inside his veins now ignited, as if it were molten lead coursing through each vestibule.

"Get us some candles, would you? I'm not fond of this darkness. You know what I am; stop your foolishness," said the man. Menote's vision went black.

Illuminated by a series of half burnt candles, Menote found himself sitting on a pulled up dining chair, looking into the face of his visitor. It was the father he had seen earlier, the ghostly premonition returned once more to his fabric deathbed. He seemed larger now that he was alone, the shadows from the flickering candle flames distorting the constancy of his body, which under their illusion seemed to flux, as if not entirely solid. Leaning back, his arms resting on the top of the couch, his face was set with a wide grin, his white teeth shining in the half lit room.

"Perses, you can call me. Oizys plays a funny game, doesn't she, with these names? You've really drawn the worse lot, little brother. Wipe that look off your face. She warned you. Tells you just enough to get you compliant. But me, I'm here to help, you know? You were burning up, would've died if I didn't step in. A candle can only burn for so long before its all a puddle of wax, eh? All alone in this graveyard, you need a friend, yeah? It's only right, after all, that we should be friends. Someone to help you when you're too tired to do what you need to," Perses

said, his tone warm, the words echoing from within Menote's head, the smile upon his face unmoving.

"You know Oizys? Did she send you here? What the fuck are you, and what happened to those bodies? I killed someone already, I'll do it again," he said, his voice trembling. Yet his body felt steady, loose but ready to push into motion, to leap forward and try to kill the stranger.

"Gods, you're a funny one. Who do you think got you that knife, this beautiful rifle?" He said, pulling the wrapped gun form behind him. The fabric which Menote had hidden it in fell off of its form easily, the gold catching the flickering of the flame. It rested cleanly in the man's steady hands, with a rapid flick he drew a round up into its chamber, a clean thunk of the lead being pressed against steel. "She can be a bit prickly, but she's not too bad, yeah? Once you get past that cold demeanor, she's pretty fun to talk to. Wouldn't trust her though. Got an agenda, all this scheming. I've got nothing of the sort, as I said, I'm just here to be your friend. Action proceeds guilt, if you trust in the former you'll never the latter."

"What are you? Why are you here? Are you going to stop me too? I don't want to see you, much less be your friend," Menote began, feeling his frustration build up once again. Something about the man in front of him brought it out, the blood red pits unmoving, beseeching him to allow himself to boil over, to scream and strike him once more. When the man said nothing, the mocking smile growing slightly larger, he continued, "I'm fucking done here, done with this miserable existence. You can try to stop me, but I won't listen to either of you wretched demons. Tell me what the fuck is happening to me or I'll blow my head off right fucking now."

"Ouch, you've got a bit of temper, don't you? That's good, you'll need it just as you'll need me. I'm just a part of you, nothing too strange about that. I have the gun, here, take it. Its a beauty isn't it? Be my quest to blow our brains out. Its actually loaded this time," he said, throwing the gun into Menote's lap.

Taking the slender cool wood into his palms, Menote pressed the golden tip against the the notch where his chin met his throat. His hands were steady as they gripped the trigger; his muscles felt relaxed, ready to pad the bucking of the recoil to let it complete the job cleanly.

"All that frustration, all that hatred for yourself, the guilt. And for what? You didn't choose this, you should be angry. Let that rage pour into you. You can set flame to the skeleton of this horrible reality. At the end of every other season the farmers burn the field of half grown crops. Nutrients for the soil, the heat of the sun which gives each stalk the strength to puncture the tilled soil, the hot release of their burden as it returns them to where they belong. This world's empty, end it now and you won't have to worry. You won't find the earth, no, you lost the right in your descent. But you'll be given rest, for a time. Or don't, give me control, I should be strong enough to pull the trigger for you." Perses asked. Looking at him in the candle's light, the smile had grown

larger, the pits of blood now gleamed with haunted desire, an ocean set with waves, cascading and crashing against the borders of his sockets.

"If you angle it a bit to the right, you'll hit the part of your brain where we dwell. You might even survive, assuming your aim is true; you can wander about alone in silence until someone else finds you and brings you back to the brink. A bit to the left, and you'll lose most cognitive thought, but you'll manage to live for a bit in a vegetative state. If you do that, I can take over and live your new life, you wouldn't have to suffer anymore. Hell, I can make sure you don't ever have to wake up again. You'd like that, yeah? Only be a bit more to the left, and you'll find instant death. More interesting, more deserving, if you shift it upward, and you'll be paralyzed but fully cognitive; it'll be a race between the internal bleeding of your brain and starvation, assuming the bullet passes cleanly. Too much uncertainty? There's some bleach under the sink. Too painful? The keys to the car are in the kitchen, seal up the garage and leave it running for a bit. Too slow? I'll help you hang yourself. That banister should be tall enough for a clean snap. Let me help you, will you? You know what to do; you've thought this all through before," Perses said, his voice growing haggard, the once bloodless face swelled red with excitement. He was leaning forward, those bloody eyes bearing into him intensely, driving a flood of heat through his body.

Lingering on his shoulder a soft touch fell, and at once a command was recalled, a prophecy and assurance; the cold weight of it cut through the ambrosial warmth. A sprawled lifeless corpse on the ground, a wave of mourning for its loss. Pain without guilt; acceptance of its end, the calming abyss which awaited him upon his slumber. As Menote set the rifle down the tense heat escaped his veins, replaced with a empty cool breeze that made him feel very tired. Looking at the man sitting across from him, his form began to flicker, the flushed skin losing its color.

"She's still got you wrapped around her finger, huh? Not up to it today? I'll be here all the same. Ever need the strength to do what you must? Tired of being some sadist's pawn? Call on me; I'm here for you, always. I'll tell you how, whenever you need it. Another one of those monsters come and try to bind you to some fucking prophetic bullshit? Don't bother with her; she'll let them maim you, she'll delight in your pain. Call for me, and I'll help you obliterate them. Just like you want, it doesn't matter who, when, I'll always be there. Keep the gun loaded. Don't you forget that, little brother," it said, fading, before leaving the room empty once more.

He wandered back up the stairs, leaving the gun resting on the ground, uncovered, still primed for ignition. On the end of the third day, Menote cried himself to sleep, not for those blurred faces that he had lost, not for the billions who had perished, nor for the rotting body he had left behind in the woods, but for himself. Sleep came easily once the tears welled up, and he fell into a dreamless slumber.

Day 4

No dreams blessed his slumber; he awoke tangled in the master bedroom's thick comforter. Sweat clung to his skin as his eyes struggled to adjust

to the rising sun that filled the room. Pressure built behind the crown of his skull, and he stumbled into the bathroom to pull water from the sink to wash his face. A short spurt poured out before quickly tapering into a pathetic dribble, pooling slower than it dripped from his cupped hands. Looking for new gauze to wrap his forearm with he found a large collection of half filled pill bottles in the adjacent medicine cabinet. Most of them bore long names that he could only distantly recall, inscribed above large orange warning strips that told of risks to driving and forbade drink. Without thought he took a selection from their ranks, his grasp guided by a distant echoed recognition. Benzodiazepines, opioids, muscle relaxants; their contents rattling in his pockets and against his chest as he wandered down the stairs to fill his bag.

Finding himself still thirsty even after emptying the downstairs faucet, he found a bottled water package in the garage, next to which were the keys to a deserted red minivan. Its tank was nearly full, the back of the vehicle had already been stocked with cases of water bottles and a few palettes of canned goods. Struggling to lift the lifeless garage door, it eventually slid up into the ceiling, filling the dim room with light. Outside, to the right of the drive way, where three bodies, strewn on the grass. Two younger girls, and a middle aged woman. A small trail of blood marked the path from the houses front door to their positions in the yard. He stared at their twisted bodies on the ground, their arms resting above their heads, the indentation of the grass which the blood spatters rested on. A freezing breeze fought the instant heat of his pounding heart, fighting to draw his attention from their bodies, both urging him to return to the car. He tore his gaze from the three corpses and from his pocket he reached a bottle that he had yet to deposit, and without looking at its label took three small oval pills and downed them. They fought back against his constricted throat, and Menote gagged before at last fighting them down. For a few minutes he stood still, his body trembling, before a soft caressing warmth overcame the disparate forces that wordlessly whispered to him. A soft smile began to break upon his lips, and he stepped into the vehicle. In the mirror he saw his own bloodshot eyes looking back, their gaze steady and content. His foot met the gas and he sped out the driveway, letting the vehicle take him forth into the empty world.

Day 18

It started with tremors—subtle at first, then violent enough that he could barely operate the vehicle. A few hours prior he had found his last bottle empty and thrown it into the base of the passenger seat where it crashed into the dozen other emptied bottles. Then came the fever, sweeping through his system in waves that left him alternately burning and freezing. By the time the sun hung squarely above him the headaches had followed, threatening to split his skull. It had been building for two weeks.

Each day had stretched on in a haze marked only by the cycle of the sun and the repetition of his ritual descent. He had been traveling in silence, keeping to backroads, sleeping under layers of blankets inside his portable haven. Through beautiful mountain ranges to the flat and featureless plains of the mid-east, he drove on through an endless

stupor. Day, night, morning, evening, he tossed out all inhibition at hint of his peace being disturbed by the constant threat of the others' arrivals. Anything, a cold breeze which pierced the shut windows, the heat of the sun growing slightly too intense, and he would quickly pop open a bottle and shove himself down under immediately. Each weapon had its use, the names they held became warding intonations against the constant threat of his pursuers. There was no need to beg for a night's release, the endless road and the warm waves which carried him across the barren land lead him through sunrise and sunset, stripping away the rhythms of a world no longer set in time. The rotting corpses, now mostly unrecognizable piles of bone and flesh, that lined the streets gave him no more trouble. Yet his control was waning, and his munitions had been drained. Each time he had taken them, the relief came more quickly and departed sooner. What once suppressed them for a day now struggled to silence them for hours. All he needed was more, and he could continue on, the pull of it was a familiar kind of tenderness, a warmth that asked for nothing except to be fed.

"Naive, lost already to a sirens call, you dive towards the depths of the sea as you abandon your journey's purpose. At the end of their call the honied softness of the song will give way to a jaw of sharpened fangs. This weight you fear grows only larger, the vine suffocates the tree as it pursue the fleece hung above. Have you so easily forgotten your calling? You are chasing a death which cannot ever be reattained. This substituted oblivion you seek is only a means to an end it hides from you. Do you ever wonder where you are headed, what this dazed existence draws you towards? Do you think it is you who plots this route you insist upon?"

Menote snapped his focus from the road, turning towards the passenger seat. He could almost see her sitting beside him, the black silk fabric spilling over the pile of bottles on the ground. His right arm dropped from the wheel, laying palm open on the dashboard, guided there softly by an invisible touch. Unbound, the stained bandage fell open, exposing the still raw flesh. The outline of the looping snake was a deep magenta, the surrounding flesh holding a sickly bruised green hue. Rising above the surrounding skin the scarring path of the lacerations rose up slightly, taking upon a pruned rigged form, giving texture to the delicate crossing of simulated scales along its length. At the cool touch of her half apparated hands the resident throbbing lessened, the relief following the tracing touch.

"Let me be, please. You don't know how much it hurts. I can't keep going. Every day is the same. It doesn't matter where I'm headed. Someone will find me. They'll kill me just like I killed that bastard. Until then, it doesn't matter. I'm not strong enough to end it myself. But I won't live the last days of this hellish life listening to schizophrenic delusions," he muttered, turning his gaze to the road, refusing to let her presence accumulate.

She let out a quiet mournful laugh and her touch vanished, leaving him once more alone in the car. An exit from the highway caught his eye and he turned off the road, accelerating.

Despite his prying efforts the electric doors to the drugstore refused to open. Looking through the neighboring glass window he noticed that someone had used a metal chain to lock it shut. Using the butt of his rifle he shattered the glass window beside and stepped through. His head throbbed in protest of the loud shattering sound. It was well lit, the windows lining its walls let in cascading beams of light that made navigation easy, and he quickly moved to the back of the store where the pharmacy lay. Along the way, he stopped, noticing a vast pool of red liquid coming from one of the aisles. The whole section had been destroyed; someone had gone through and knocked every bottle of spirits to the ground. Wet to the touch, the edges of the great puddle had yet to dry.

He stood over it for a moment. His hands had not stopped shaking. The smell of it reached him, vinous and sharp, and somewhere beneath the thin chemical warmth still coasting through his blood a dry want stirred; patient, formless, like a tide reaching for a shore that had moved. Something was there, he could sense it. On his back the rifle grew warm, a familiar heat beginning to boil in his blood, cutting momentarily through the warm calling.

"Hello? I mean no harm, I assure you. I'm going to turn the corner now, please don't shoot or be alarmed" a voice said, emerging from behind him, deep and weathered by decades.

Menote's heartbeat stuttered, then accelerated into a gallop that threatened to crack his ribs. He could feel a frigid wave inside him meet the flushing heat of his blood, the premonition of two yet spoken voices sending vibrations through his head as they fought for influence. Without thought his hands reached to unsling the rifle from his back, yet upon its touch his fingers became rigid, unable to bend and pull the weapon forward. Frozen in place, a sharp pain broke the tensions totality enough to guide his hand into the depths of his pocket. Found nestled into the corner of his pocket four small pills of different shapes had been hidden behind a fold of fabric. Each labored breath seemed insufficient, the store's oxygen mysteriously thinning around him. His eyelids clamped shut, sealing out the encroaching reality as he tilted his head back, dry-swallowing. At once the sharpness of the throbbing in his head softened, and the tension disappeared, drawing him back into the soft embrace which had carried him so far. Beneath him the floor rose and as he crashed down against the wet floor strewn with shattered glass. Digging into his side through his thick jacket, the larger fragments shattered upon his weight, breaking off their jagged tips deep into his flesh. The growing blanket of warmth dissuaded their bite, and he clutched himself tighter, waiting for release. In the distance he could make out the voice was saying something, but it was muffled, indistinguishable through his clasped hands.

Standing above him he could make out the worried face of an old man. A thinning mane of white hair crowned a wrinkled worried expression. From behind a pair of thin metal framed glasses two grey eyes bore down upon him. He was clutching a notebook to his chest, with his other arm he was reaching out, offering his hand to Menote. Beyond him, the boundaries of the room began to blur, the warmth in his head had begun to spread

outwards. He released his firm grasp over his ears and attempted to lift himself off the ground, his strength quickly fading.

"I'm sorry, one moment," he said dreamily, yanking a chunk of one of the fragmented bottles from his side. "You're real. Not going to kill me? I'm warning you, really. You want to get away. I might hurt you."

"No, young man, I think you're more a danger to yourself. As for me, I'm quite real. As real as anything can be. My names Jerome Whitman, a professor at the local university, its nice to meet another face. I was quite certain I had been Dissipatio-ed, I really must say how very glad I am to see you. Can I help you up? Maybe you should put down that glass shard, you'd not want to cut yourself up any further," the old man said as Menote pushed himself up to his knees.

"I... I don't have much longer until I pass out. Took something, not sure what. Thought you were something else. Monster. Didn't want hurt you," Menote stuttered as the warmth spread to the ends of his fingers and toes. "Why'd you break all the glasses? Not a drinker?"

His cheek bones hurt, and a desire to laugh was overtaking him. A little old man dressed in a tweed coat, a blue tie cleanly hanging from his neck. Set upon his elbows were two large brown patches, he seemed to have adorned his breast with a number of gold pins. Those thin rimmed glasses were too large for his face, hanging low on the bridge of his nose. Looking down at his own wine and blood soaked clothing, a pair of sweatpants and a fleece winter jacket he had found in the car that he had not changed out of in days, the mirth within him bloomed. Such sweet relief; warmth washing over him, the twisting foreground beginning to fade in and out. As his diaphragm contracted the laugh turned into a wrenching cough, flinging blackened spittle on the old man's well shined shoes. Jerome didn't flinch, the worried frown on his face only growing more intense.

"I..." Jerome's expression shifted to something like embarrassment, a strange look on such a dignified face. "I did, yes. Nietzsche writes 'it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified.' I found myself questioning that justification." He gestured at the destroyed wine section. "Not my finest moment. So that cut, that's my responsibility as well. Are you going to be alright?"

"Only small cut. No problem. I'll take care of it. You live here?" Menote asked, pressing on the flesh around his cut tentatively as he fought the grin which stretched his lips and bore his yellowed teeth. Wobbling upright, he leaned against the empty shopping rack, trying to keep his gaze focused on the old man across from him.

"I've made a sanctuary of sorts in the university's library. It's only a few streets north of here. When the world..." he paused, expression darkening momentarily, "when everyone disappeared, I found myself drawn there. Books have always been my refuge and all the more so now. You're the first person I've encountered since it happened. The profound isolation has been..." He trailed off, looking beyond Menote before his gaze fixed on him once more, the frown softening into a gentle smile. "I

cannot express what it means to find another consciousness still extant in this emptiness. My quarters are modest but secure. I could show you, drive you there. I've got plenty of medical supplies, I think you'll need stitches for that wound. Are you truly alright?"

"Show me tomorrow, will you? Need rest. Not much longer. Thank you." Not bothering to wait for a response, he staggered out of the grocery store, jamming his toe against the bottom of the shattered window as he passed the chained doors. His eye lids had grown ever so heavy, the gentle warmth coursing through him attempted to pull him down against the cold asphalt. A last-ditch commitment of motion, threw himself into the maroon minivan onto the makeshift cot he had assembled. Fumbling for the lock on the door, he could feel his blood pooling from his side, the twisting motion revealing some stray intrusion in his flesh. Grabbing a shirt from the floor, he pressed it hard against the wound and collapsed on his side, the world fading into darkness

"There there. See how easy it is? Don't worry. I will handle it all. Relax. Breathe. I will carry you to what you can't have," a honied voice whispered into his ears, sending waves of pleasure through the darkness of his shut eyes. Nestled into his arms he could feel the formless impression of another body. From the contact of his skin against the invisible form, seeping through his side's punctured flesh, he could feel warmth flow in and out of him like a tide. "We will leave tomorrow. Return to the road. Begin anew. I know where you may rest. We are close." As he drifted deeper into oblivion he heard nothing more. Only his name, at the end, drifting up through the endless warmth that carried him; Pothos.

Day 19

Waking, he found the shirt pressed against his side adhered tightly to his skin. Each breath sent sharp waves of pain radiating through his body. Nestled beneath the melded skin and fabric cold slivers of glass cut into him as he lifted himself up from his side. Slowly peeling the makeshift bandage off, the wound ruptured, releasing small torrents of blood cascading down the pale wrinkled halo where the shirt had been pressed against him. Concentrically set within the bruised and inflamed area lay a series of small holes each a macerated, angry mouth of purple flesh weeping a thin, yellowish grit. Groaning, he fetched a travel med kit that he had stored under the back seat and a bottle of water. Opening the bottle he washed away the pooling blood and pulled a pair of small forceps from the box. The cold water carried aside a few glimmering shards from around the major wound. Shaking violently, he could not bring the thin metal ends down into the deep cut, at each approach missing and jabbing the bruised skin, sending further waves of agony throughout his body.

"Be still. Give me your hand, child. You see where his means end? Look where you are and who you awaits you now. You need not burden yourself further, give yourself to me once more and let me still your tremors."

Gritting his teeth Menote pushed further, digging into the largest of the holes with the forceps. A scream tore through his clenched jaw, its reverberations sending the embedded glass deeper into his skin. Putting pressure on either side of the raised skin he pushed hard against the enflamed wound, trying to push the shard up. A deep pulsing heat throbbed outwards from the punctured holes, sending the drumming weight of his heartbeat into his ears. Keeping the pressure with his left hand, washing away the blood he could see the shining edge of the largest chunk. His attention turned to where the forceps had landed, fallen into the crevice between the door and collapsed seat. With his free hand he pushed his thumb and pointer fingers into the wound, grasping for the edge of the bloodied glass. A black veil fell upon his vision as his fingers met the raw wound, but he refused to release the pressure which kept the sliver upwards, pushing through the ruptured tissue to grasp again at it. Yet it refused to be extracted, he could feel his fingers pushing it down against the pinched skin beneath it, cutting the surrounding area as it bobbed up and down.

"FUCK. FINE, PLEASE, HELP ME," he screamed, collapsing backwards onto the bed.

"Good. Rest." Oizys commanded as the throbbing subsided, the heat of his spilling blood cooling. "You will need to focus today. Watch the old man. Do not trust him, were you wiser you would let me carry you away. Yet I cannot forbid you this path. Not yet. For now, take respite."

Fading back into darkness, he strained to open his eyes. Kneeling at his side adorned in fine midnight black fabrics Oizys tenderly sunk her own fingers into his skin. The contact was not painless, he could still feel the sharpness of their intrusion, but it felt deferred, distant; an ache which he could sense but not feel. From the wound she pulled a large shard, over two inches in length, and lay it to his side. Turning to face him, he saw her face, a gentle expression set upon a pair of unblinking purple irises. She reached over, and rested her unbloodied hand upon his brow for a moment before softly drawing his eyes shut.

Outside the vehicle the sun was set high above the horizon. Looking down at his side, he saw it had been tightly wound in a thick bandage, a buried layer of gauze leaving a raised impression over each perforation. Movement still ached, and within his side he could still feel the cutting edge of a few small shards. Yet laying to his side were half a dozen long shards marked with a browning dried blood. Forcing himself up he slowly swung the van's door open and left the confines of the car, shuffling back into the store.

"Morning, young man," an elderly voice remarked from behind the counter as he stepped through the broken window.

Coffee's aroma infiltrated and pushed back the latent musky smell of rotted food—dark chocolate notes edged with bergamot, but underneath something else: a metallic undertone. Sure enough, clenched loosely in weathered fingers was a steaming cup of coffee. The old man noticed his attention, and the corners of his eyes crinkled with quiet amusement.

"Old habits die hard," he said, nodding toward the cup. "Couldn't function before my first cup, not in thirty years of teaching. Ritual becomes more important now, don't you think?" He paused, his gaze briefly unfocused. "You seem a bit better, how is your wound? Maybe you'd care for a cup?"

"Please, yes. I'm fine. Got most of the glass out, I think."

"Ah, that is good to hear on both counts. Fortunate for us both, I have salvaged quite a collection from the surrounding roasteries. It seems in those final crazed hours the looters had their minds on other things," the man said, reappearing with a thermos-like device in one hand and a water bottle in the other.

Setting aside the water, he took the machine apart with methodical care, pulling out a cylinder from the bottom. His movements were practiced, almost ceremonial, as he constructed a small tinder bed from materials that appeared carefully selected from random scraps. A light appeared between his fingers, and his miniature campfire was set aflame. Reinserting the now smoldering cylinder, he poured the water in and sealed a cap on the top. There was an understated satisfaction in his demeanor; something in the methodical process seemed to center the old man.

"There's something almost sacred about this," Jerome mused, watching the water heat. "Fire, water, bean, an alchemy of a sort. Shared rituals keep us human." His hands trembled slightly as he worked. "But I doubt you woke to hear an old professor's ramblings."

"You had said you're a professor, what did you teach? I was a student at," Menote began to say before he found that he could not recall the name of the school he had awoken in. Surely he had at least seen some title or poster with its name. When he failed to continue the old man proceeded.

"Jerome Whitman. Philosophy at Riverside Community College for thirty-two years," he replied, his eyes suddenly alight. "Spent my life pondering the great timeless questions. I'm proud to brag I was the most published author in my branch. Oh how many times I was told I was wasting my time, but I think such matters have grown all the more pertinent in these strange times. Now, I do not believe you told me your name."

"Menote," he answered simply. "I came from the east of here; I was up in Oregon when the... when disaster struck. You mentioned—"

"Menote," Jerome repeated, interrupting with an odd intensity, then immediately wincing. "Forgive me. Social graces deteriorate quickly in isolation. Thirty years of classroom management, and here I am interrupting you." His weathered face clouded briefly before he cleared his throat. "Manners were the first casualty of the apocalypse, it seems. Well, anyhow, you haven't tasted transcendence until you've had this particular brew," Jerome said, pouring the now boiling water into a mug that appeared from behind the counter.

Graciously taking the mug, Menote lifted it to his lips, feeling the heat of the hot water against his skin. The warmth seemed to spread from his lips to his spine; the hot vapor of the brew made its way through him. Light yet overpowering the familiar aroma split through the light waves of pain that emerged as his side strained from the motion.

"Curious how the body remembers what the mind forgets," Jerome observed, studying Menote with unnerving focus. "Sense memory outlasts everything else." His eyes lingered a moment too long, then darted away. Tapping a seemingly involuntary rhythm against his mug the old man straightened abruptly. "Let me show you where I've been staying. Only a few minutes walk, and it's more hospitable than this place. Come on, before the coffee gets cold," he said as he packed up the apparatus quickly, motioning Menote forward.

Gripping the cup in his hands he paused for a moment, his attention drawn once more to the back of the building, before following the professor. The streets were quiet, but not silent. Everywhere there were traces of life, animals had begun to move into the empty caskets of men long gone. Small creatures rushed about when they came close; a small pack of dogs, most with collars, watched them warily from a distance.

"Look at them," Jerome muttered, gesturing toward the dogs with a trembling hand. "We made them, shaped them over centuries, and now they're outlasting us." He watched the pack move between buildings. "Domesticated but growing wilder by the day. Still wearing our collars while forgetting what they mean." He stopped mid-stride, frowning slightly. "Listen to me lecturing you, still trying to find meaning in everything. Old habits."

Menote looked out at the group. Not lost without us, he thought, they were just waiting. They continued their walk in silence. Both of them wobbled slightly with their steps as they made their way through the town.

"It's just around this corner," he continued after an uncomfortably long pause. "I've established a rather comprehensive system. You know..." His voice trailed off briefly, his eyes focusing on something Menote couldn't see. "Well, I suppose I've been waiting for someone to appreciate it. I've examined many buildings in this area; I'm certain you could locate suitable accommodations as well, should you desire them."

Menote said nothing in return, draining the rest of his cup. Its warmth coursed down his chest; he could feel the liquid flowing through him. Jerome fumbled slightly with the key, his trembling fingers finally managing to unlock the library's side entrance. Afternoon light filtered through dusty venetian blinds, casting amber stripes across wooden floors worn smooth by decades of quiet footsteps. Bookshelves rose from floor to ceiling, their uppermost shelves requiring the rolling ladder that now stood abandoned in a corner. Set all throughout the room were unlit kerosine lamps. Where the librarian's circular desk had once commanded the room's center, Jerome had hollowed out a space that resembled something between academic study and primal den. Books formed concentric circles on the floor, some stacked in precarious towers, others splayed

open like dissected specimens, their margins blackened with cramped handwriting that spiraled around each page's perimeter. A sleeping pad had been dragged into the center, surrounded by notepads filled with cramped handwriting. The walls nearby were covered with pages torn from books, connected by lines of red marker, forming an incomprehensible web of concepts.

"I know how it must appear," Jerome said, suddenly hesitant, his academic confidence wavering. "In retrospect, the arrangement seems rather... obsessive. I've been attempting to synthesize a comprehensive philosophical framework for understanding our current predicament." He gestured toward the wall of connected concepts. "An epistemological map, if you will. Each book has its place, relative to its role. I'd ask you to step carefully and not touch any within the outmost circle, otherwise I won't be able to find it again." He paused, glancing nervously at Menote. "Don't judge me too harshly for this strange exhibition, I had not expected company."

Menote forced a smile upon his face and said, "No worries at all, I apologize if I seem a bit zoned out. It's just a lot, after not seeing anyone in ages. I guess philosophy has been the least of my concern."

"Oh!" Jerome exclaimed, his thin eyebrows raised in evident relief. "Yet every thought you have is a treatise. What you see scattered about the center is my life's work, yet all it really constitutes is collections of thoughts put to paper. Every person breathes philosophy, it's in our blood, it's just a matter of learning how to break through the interiority of its origin. My father was similarly devoted to the field. I believe his theories may hold the truth for what's happened to us; but there will be plenty of time for us to talk of that in the future." He gestured toward several journals stacked carefully on the desk. "His publications. If anything, please do not touch those. What did you study in college?"

"In honesty, I have no clue. When I woke up I couldn't remember anything. Looking back it's all just a blurry mess. I've just been wandering the country, I guess I've been looking for someone who might know what's happened. Or anyone at all. I hope you won't mind, but I have no end of questions for you. What happened to everyone?"

Jerome lay down the journal he had lifted from the table, and met Menote's unsteady gaze for a minute without speaking. A strange expression had fallen onto his face, his head cocked to the side as the corners of his mouth creased slightly.

"How interesting. That's a question I've been assembling an answer to for weeks. Tonight, perhaps, I'll tell you what I know."

He tilted his head at an unnatural angle, ear angled toward the ceiling. His lips continued moving after the words had stopped, forming shapes that corresponded to no language Menote recognized.

The aching subsided and Menote paused, looking at the old man leaning against the librarian's desk. Jerome's weight shifted, one palm

flattening against its surface for support. His fingers, operating on some independent protocol, began gathering scattered pencils, arranging them with in intense precision as he aligned them into a square matrix. His gaze, which had maintained steady contact during their conversation, now drifted to some middle distance between Menote and the wall behind him. The lines etched around his eyes deepened, eyebrows drawing together then relaxing in rapid alternation, as though cycling through expressions practiced for different contexts. His lips parted, closed, parted again, forming the first syllable of three or four distinct sentences without committing to any. When he blinked each reopening revealed eyes that seemed momentarily bewildered by the unchanged scene before them, as though expecting to find themselves in another decade entirely.

"I see," Menote began awkwardly. "We've found each other, and that's good enough for now. Do you mind if I set up shop nearby, maybe at that café next door we passed earlier? That way, we're close enough for you to get to me if anything goes wrong, and I can still leave you some space."

"Yes, that would be entirely suitable," Jerome replied, momentarily slipping back into formal academic parlance. "I can assist you in establishing appropriate accommodations, minus the academic paraphernalia, of course." His mouth twitched into what might have been a smile.

Menote gave him a small tired smile, and nodded, letting the conversation die.

Over the next few hours Jerome helped him assemble a small but comfortable den in the cafe. Despite the constant throbbing and the old man's frailty they had managed to drag in a propane heating tower from a nearby restaurant. Having covered the windows with blankets to insulate the room, the heater's light wavered, casting a curious shadow on the walls. Outside of a minor coordination, they had not spoken much. He found it hard to find words when he looked at Jerome, his tongue grew slack whenever he could think of a question or comment. Bleeding through the walls of hanging fabric the last light of the setting sun began to fade.

"You have asked earlier what had happened. I'm afraid to say I only know as much as was broadcasted before the news stations died out," Jerome began suddenly. "When I woke up to head to work the morning program said something about the Middle East and China having done a complete internet black out. I think there was talk of nuclear bombs, but as far as I know no where in the US was struck. By the time I got to my office there was reports of mass hysteria, the entire mobile network was shut down and the internet itself had collapsed. Thankfully I've always been old fashioned, and my radio worked fine."

Menote tried to summon the memories of that fuzzy day, anchoring his memories to the old man's dialogue. Distantly he could recall the sound of shrill cries and booming shouts, the thundering of music dimmed by fabrics and thin walls.

"By the early afternoon there was reports Europe had gone silent too. At the strike of midnight contact with each country simply stopped. There were theories about a cyberattack, but I don't really know anything about that realm. Seemed to me to be a farse. To be honest I found it all hard to believe, and since I didn't leave the campus I couldn't tell you what was happening around town. My students and fellow educators didn't stick around, so unfortunately my last lecture was to an empty room! And to think I had planned for a week to get my material in order for it, I was going to be presenting the thesis to my magnum opus. Well, I clocked out and headed home, where I made a nice meal before settling in for the evening with some research. When I woke up the next morning imagine my surprise to find the whole world emptied."

"I don't understand at all," Menote replied, a nascent pressure building in his head. Beneath the bandage he could feel the sharp ends of the minute shards moving up and down as his heart pounded. He could feel her gaze resting on the back of his neck. "That doesn't make any sense, what does midnight have to do with anything?"

"Sensibility really is nothing more than a delusion we project to escape the endless entropy of this world. Yes, there is surely some answer to the question of why. Hence I've assembled my collection within this great library, I am quite certain the answer to this most perplexing questions lies within the countless prophecies of the immortals before us." He paused, his voice growing quiet. "Yes, the departed guide us with their wisdom long after they have departed. I tried playing Bach last week." His voice dropped an octave mid-sentence, then recalibrated. "The notes arranged themselves differently. The dead speaking mathematical proofs through the mechanical reproduction of a needle on wax." His pupils contracted to pinpoints, then expanded beyond normal dilation. "Time becomes porous in such moments."

Menote looked at the old man wearily, letting the silence between them dwell. He could not find the words for a response.

"Who knows, perhaps the rapture finally came and lifted all those good souls into the heavens. Maybe the karmic balance was broken. Perhaps the wickedness of our times wrought a great return through the tides of a forlorn Asha. But I and my father, we think otherwise. Should you wish to stay here, I can share with you the answers which I uncover each day. It's all here, waiting to be rediscovered," Jerome responded. "I never left this place, you know. Had chances—better schools, bigger cities. Something kept me here. As if..." Jerome began before trailing off.

"You know if you want to we can move outwards, try to look for others. If we're both alive then there's got to be others who survived," Menote responded. "You'll finally get to see what else is out there, and if in the end, you still can't lose this place, we can always come back. It's not like anyone is going to come and tamper with your work. 'The world's your oyster,' after all."

Jerome stirred, shifting his position on one of the cushions. His expression briefly clouded with confusion, as though he'd momentarily forgotten where he was.

"'The world's mine oyster,' actually," he corrected automatically, then gave a small, self-deprecating chuckle. He attempted to discard a crumpled paper into the trash across the room, his trembling hand causing it to fall well short of its target.

"I should like to see more of what's left, yes. But I need to finish something first." He reached for the paper, movements stiff. "My father's work. He was... brilliant. Never properly understood. He saw this coming. While others all defamed him with words they couldn't understand he worked on relentlessly. I remember him showing me a article written on him calling labeling him an entropic eschatologist. Can you imagine? Now look where we are, Ragnarök has come and gone, the great Jörmungandr released from his own jaws now swallows the world. Ah, I've said enough, I'm sure you're exhausted."

His fingers tapped an irregular pattern against his knee. "A few weeks, perhaps? Once I've sorted through his papers and finished my treatise. Its my life's work. You've inspired me, young man and given me hope. If you would like to leave, know I will still be here. I wouldn't want to lose you."

"Sure, I totally get it. It has been really nice to spend today with you here; I wouldn't mind sticking around for some time if you'll have me as your neighbor. Really there's absolutely no rush to do anything. We've got all the time in the world to look for others."

Jerome smiled thinly and nodded his head. Looking at him in the flickering and limited light of the room, Menote noted the old professor's weathered features. His silver hair caught the light strangely, creating momentary patterns that seemed almost deliberate. Despite his age, there was an intensity to his presence, a gravitational pull of intellect and experience that commanded attention. He watched Menote with an unsettling intensity, his eyes reflecting the propane flame in a way that made them appear to contain their own internal light. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, Jerome cleared his throat and wiped perspiration from his brow with a trembling hand.

"I believe I'll return to my library now." He rose with the careful deliberation of age, gathering his coat. "Today's interaction was..." Jerome paused, searching for words with uncharacteristic uncertainty, "...unexpectedly significant. He didn't turn to face Menote as he opened the door, letting in a gust of frigid air.

"Yeah... Thank you," Menote said to the empty room.

His heart rate refused to settle, and in the flickering flame of the heater the walls of the café seemed to breathe slightly, expanding and contracting with his own respiration. Alone, he found that his jaw was chattering, sweat gathering on his brow. The pain in his side began to grow stronger, the dull ache demanding his spent attention. Waves of nausea overtook him, drawing his stomach into knotted ball, threatening to make him expunge the small dinner he had shared with Jerome. His sinuses were inflamed, each sniffle straining his enflamed side. His eyes

scanned the room looking for something, their direction drawn towards the back of the room. Behind the small desk in the corner, partially hidden by a fallen stack of menus, was a backpack he didn't recognize.

"Go and open it, you'll find the answer there. We've been busy after all. Your hands will remember what you've so conveniently forgotten. Flesh doesn't forget. You're starving. No heroism to be found in suffering, not then or now. It'll grow worse you know. Death awaits you regardless. Comfort your journey into its jaws. Can't you feel it wrapping around your throat? Poison burning through you slowly," Pothos voice called out slowly, lingering on each word.

Menote unzipped the bag with trembling fingers. Inside lay an assortment of items: syringes still in sterile packaging, vials of clear liquid, packets of white crystalline powder, and prescription bottles with names he'd come to love. The collection was methodically organized, each item placed with deliberate precision. The tremors displaced and drew friction on the stitches which bound the perforations closed on his side, and suddenly the pain had grown immense.

"We've been quite productive, haven't we? Such a gift, a world where one can walk through wake and dreams, never needing to explain their difference. You worked for them, scoured the world. Doesn't he bore you, the half witted old man? Come back to me, let me guide you further," it said, drawing Menote's hands to one of the plastic wrapped syringes. Wrapped around him he could feel the warmth of a body's embrace, seeping through his clothing his skin met the phantom touch of another's. The unseen companion guided his movements, its embrace seeping into the air and his skin like a honied ambrosia.

He peeled the wrapped equipment open easily, and set it on the ground while he opened the small vial full of thick white powder. A spoon, a lighter, emerged from his pockets, assembling the deliverance with ease. Each step released waves of growing warmth throughout his body, calming the pressure and pain as they rolled through him. Behind him the impression pressed closer against his skin, diffusing itself into his body. Crackling the liquid was easily drawn into the syringe, the cold tip of the needle pressed against a bulging vein, ready to slide into him. Laying its tip on the empty eye of the snake, the greenish blue hue of his vein pushed the still raw skin upwards, giving depth to the capillaries path down the interlinked serpent's body. The motions were practiced, each step resonated, his skin recalling the distant prick of a phantom needle. Had he done this before? The memories slipped away whenever he tried to focus on them, as if he was trying to grasp water.

Shutting his eyes, he let the metal pierce his skin, taking a deep breathe as he prepared to press the plunger down. At once the air around him grew chilled, and the sunken tip's temperature rapidly decreased. Panic rose and he tried to shove the plunger down, to release himself from the bite of the now frigid air, yet it would not descend, the liquid inside it refused expulsion. From the recesses of his mind he heard a snarl as the encroaching warmth faltered. Beyond his control, his grip hardened and he flung the syringe violently across the room. As it left his grip a strong force tore Pothos from his back, flinging him away from

the bag and its bounty. Pushed backwards, Menote collapsed onto his back, a splitting pressure his head immobilizing him.

"Begone from us, wretched creature. Child, must you so easily be lead astray? You cannot escape through these shallow means. You flee me for the embrace of a virulent pest. Do you wish to see where he would take you? I will show you," Oizys said, her form taking on a blurred impression of a silhouette.

Before he could respond, the heating lamp in the center of the room extinguished and the room was cast into a completed darkness. Void, the pitch black of a moonless midnight, surrounded him, engulfed him. Standing at the center of the room, she appeared, her form cutting through the darkness with a blue radiating hue. The light she emulated hugged her outline, revealing her form in entirety. Cascading to the ground, the black dress pooled at her feet, the gold weights sewn into its folds glimmering. Her fair skin cut a harsh contrast, a solemn look resting on her angled face; behind the purple irises there lay the source of the emanating light, chilling the senseless atmosphere. She flicked her gaze to the horizon of the void, and Menote followed her direction. Curled into a ball what looked to be a child was writhing. Without feature, its radiance was dim, sputtering as it fought against the abyss, the impression of a body expanding and retracting. With long steps Oizys walked towards it, compressing the distance between the two ethereal entities. Menote, unmoored from physical form, orbited her, unable to move, the perspective itself shifted beyond the dimensionality of singular perspective. When she arrived at the small glowing frame she reached down and took its head in her hands, her touch sending its forms writhing into manic pulsing. Fighting against her touch, Menote could hear a snarling scream flung across the void, and felt within his breast a desperate need to pull the titan away from it.

"Conspire no more, child of the foamed tide. Your death longing is fruitless, you would presume me blind to your machinations? You are fortunate he is frail and that I cannot deny your inheritance. Yet you can be made dormant. Learn this lesson well, do not exceed your station," she said, with one clean motion tearing its head from the small body.

Severed, the pink light slowly faded, the head within Oizys's grasp collapsing inward until all that remained of the creature was a small flower resting in his palm. Six petals extended from a bulbous center, a thin line of pink drawn through each's center upwards to their tip. Sprouted from the base of the flower, six white pillars reached skyward, each crested with a golden tip. Laying the asphodel bloom on the ground, she turned to face Menote.

"It aspired to render you unconscious, malleable to outside forces as it brought you ever closer to our Father. While you slumber in oblivion, what enters your unguarded mind? Ask yourself what might take residence in the emptiness, for greater forces hunt and await you. The basilisk watches, never blinking. You will hear Pothos's call again. I will not always be able to protect, dear child yet you must trust in me, and trust in your fate. You must cease your pursuit of what cannot come; you long for a death which's arrival will only bring you to its doorsteps once

more. Tomorrow you may seek the professor but tonight remain where I will shield you from further incursions."

Menote's eyes opened and he found himself in the cafe once more. His head lay on Oizys's lap, the softness of silk cushioning him. Looming above him she bore a gentle smile as her hand gently passed through his hair. Menote surrendered to exhaustion, consciousness dissolving into dreamless sleep.

Day 20

Waking, the café was dark and cold. Oizys was gone; the impression of her lap remained in the cushion beneath his head. His side throbbed as he pushed himself upright, the glass still lodged in the deeper perforations shifting against the raw flesh with the motion. He stepped outside before the sun had fully risen, the lengthening grass heavy with dew, the air quiet, no traffic, no machinery, just wind and the distant sound of animals moving through the empty streets. His gait was short and swaying, each step pulling at the wound. He walked the suburban grid without direction, flicking his gaze from one object to the next with each stride. Cracked concrete. Overgrown lawns. The scuttering of vermin beneath collapsed fences. A hundred almost identical houses lined up in rows, their inhabitants swelling behind drawn curtains. He had died, just as they had; looking down at his hands, covered in thick black synthetic cloth, he wondered if he had been killed alongside them. Nothing held weight anymore. The smell reached him before the sight did, sweet and medicinal, carrying decay beneath something floral, and he followed it.

The house was pale blue with white trim, a covered porch along its front. The hanging plants were long dead but still held their shapes in their baskets. On the porch steps, small and impossibly still, lay the body of a child.

She couldn't have been more than six or seven, dressed in pajamas printed with cartoon dinosaurs that had faded from repeated washings. One small hand clutched a stuffed elephant, its trunk nearly torn away but still attached by a few stubborn threads. The skin had taken on a greenish hue and the features had begun their long recession, yet they remained recognizable as young. Where the eyes had been, only dark hollows remained, already given over to the insects. The child lay curled on its side, knees drawn up, free arm wrapped around its torso. Even in death the body held the posture of someone trying to stay warm.

Drawn past the rotting body Menote tried the door's handle. Locked. No scratches on the painted surface, no signs of desperate clawing. The windows remained intact, curtains drawn tight. The doormat, blue and white checked, lay perfectly aligned with the threshold, unwrinkled, undisturbed. Within his chest he could feel the rapid pumping of his heart, casting him into a momentary paralysis as his muscles tensed, ready to break down the door or sprint back away to the warmth of his sanctuary. A cool breeze swept against his skin, and he turned to face its current. She was kneeling beside the body, the black dress pooling

around her as its hem draped over the child's leg. Her pale hand moved to the small face, the back of her fingers tracing the decomposing cheek.

"Thousands, you have passed by, so often have you fled from their weight. She is no more real than us, gone already. Let her pass and the earth reclaim her matter. But you must look at her, the moment of suffering resident still so long after its host departed. Neither flight nor violence will free you from the countless mounds which await you," Oizys said, those purple eyes fixed on the body beneath her.

He could only obey, and he knelt beside her. The pungency of the rotting skin fought against his desire to embrace the child. Behind the blurred veil of his tears he could see her crying, banging against the door in the cold. Now what remained was loose marbled skin, the festering of maggots in those dark sockets, the ears, nose, eye lids all pecked away by scavengers. Menote's stomach lurched. He stumbled forward and vomited across the porch steps, then again, leaving nothing but the burning aftertaste. Mucus dripped from his nose and chin. A stream of ants emerged from the child's mouth in formation, marching across the small face before disappearing into the hollow where an ear had been.

"This child doesn't actually matter to you, to you its just another shadow. No, you mourn yourself. Locked out from the warm promise of a forlorn ideal. Waiting for death, resigned at last, confused and alone. But you haven't suffered anything, not yet. Look at the pitiful creature, not the shadow you cast. Only once you see it will you be ready," Oizys said, turning towards him, her gaze digging into him, filling his veins with a chilled acceptance, pushing against the adrenaline still coursing through his blood.

Breaking away from her eyes he looked down at the child again. Left alone in those last moments. Terrified, unable to understand, granted a death which she had not courted nor understood. Behind that locked door her gods had cast her out. Why? The question echoed repeatably in his head, each intonation growing louder, pushing against the induced stupor which Oizys's presence wrought within him. Finally, something in his chest snapped. The sound that came out of him was not quite a sob. His knees hit the porch as tears fell upon the loose, water logged face of the child. He stayed there, hunched over the child, until there was nothing left to expel.

Within the periphery of his vision, Oizys rose suddenly. Her breath had gone ragged, her usually loose and languid motion grown tight and janky. She stumbled back from the body, the dress catching on the railing as she stepped away. As the heat of his blood grew hotter her features began to fade, her attempt at words blocked out by the pounding of his heart and grinding of his set jaw. Then she was gone, and the tension in his muscles shifted, carried towards action with a flood of intense heat, the lactic acid burning in his chest.

"Ah, thank god she's quiet. Good going on that one, kid. I thought she'd never retreat. Now, lets focus on what matters. Isn't it awful, the cruelty of man? While her parents dozed inside, they locked their child

out in the rain. You can see it can't you, those last moments, alone and shaking. Poor child."

Menote looked up. Sitting on the porch railing, his feet dangling over the side, was the body of a man, bloated and discolored. A smug, satisfied look resided upon the aged face. Staring directly at Menote, the red sea within his eyes pulsing to the rhythm of his beating heart.

"Now, I'm not proposing anything complicated here," Perses said slowly. "All I recommend is a bit of justice for the little lass, yeah? To die so horribly, for her own parents to lock her out in the last moments, well, that's unforgivable. How wretched they must've been. Denying her love and life in those most precious moments. Those old sots don't deserve to rot like anyone else." He leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. "It'll feel good for you too, to break something. Just a way of letting off steam, little brother."

Menote's hands were already forming fists as he moved toward the door. With a few paced steps he threw his shoulder into it, crashing against the wood. Groaning, the doorframe held as his side grew wet, stitches torn open. Readyng himself, he drew back once more before kicking hard on the space above the door nob, sending it flying open with a thunderous boom. Inside there were two bodies collapsed over a dinning table lined with empty bottles. He walked past them to the garage, allowing the heat within him to direct his movement. Resting against a cabinet was a large crowbar, its center wrapped in a green rubber, the pointed edges sharp to the touch. Perses stood beside it, waiting for him.

"Good. Let me tell you something, boy. One truth remains beyond this wreckage. That fellow in the woods knew it. You knew it too, else you'd be dead. In the wild the wolf must hunt and the deer must graze. But you know what makes them the same, what exists between the predator and prey? Its the grinding of their jaws as they eat. You know, It's as simple as that. I'll feed you plenty. Can't you feel it in your blood?"

Half an hour later, Menote walked out from the house in a new set of clothes. His breath had evened out by the time he finished washing the gore from his hands and forearms in the kitchen sink. After the first swing, his memory faltered and failed. His perception of the world had altered; everything was construed, his senses perverted into something surreal and removed. It was a great relief to be able to see through his own eyes again, to breathe through his own lungs. He walked past the child without looking down.

By the time he reached the library, the events of the morning had been stored away. The only proof of his transactions was a collection of tattered furniture and the cast remains of the unforgivable dripping from the walls. The stench of death that had clung to his person was mitigated but not expelled. Even as the memory faded, the crunching of bone and wetness of cold blood clung to his muscles and skin.

Jerome's coffee was as good as it had been the morning before, the aroma cutting through the stale smell of old paper. The library was warm enough to lose their coats. Jerome poured a second cup without being asked, his

trembling hands navigating the apparatus with the same ceremonial precision he had shown the day before. He gave no indication of noticing Menote's change of clothes. His eyes moved across Menote's face without catching, the way a person's gaze moves across furniture they already know. It was a mercy and an evasion and he received it as both.

They passed the day inside the library, sometimes quiet, other times talking. Jerome's pencils found their arrangement and lost it and found it again. They talked about the dogs in the streets, about the mechanics of the camp stove, about whether the library's collection had anything useful in it or was merely comprehensive. In the spaces between, when Jerome turned back to his manuscripts and the library settled into its quiet, the morning tried to surface. He found it mostly in his hands. When he lifted his coffee cup the weight arrived first, the heft of the crowbar's rubber grip lingering in his grip, and he would set the mug down before drinking.

As the afternoon light began to thin, Jerome reached for one of the journals stacked on the desk. His fingers found the right one without searching. He opened it to a marked page and began to read aloud in his measured academic tone, one hand pressing the yellowed page flat, the other still for once. Something in his voice settled when he read his father's words, the anxious tremor quieted. Menote listened without fully following the argument, letting the cadence of it fill the room's silence where other things might otherwise have taken up residence.

"My father was writing about this." He cleared his throat. "'Once seen, its shadow cannot be forgotten. A plague spread through the memetics of its own potency. Consciousness must feed it and devote wholly itself to its becoming, else it consumes itself. To deny its gaze is too cast oneself into the assured hell of a future which can now only exist for the unlucky chosen. Realized, we may find the potency of a god and deliver ourselves into what has so long been denied our hopes, misprophesized. '" He looked up, searching Menote face.

"He can write rather densely. In this section he's responding to that old nihilists sorrow over the death of god. My father agreed, but he knew that the project of the ubermensch must arise from the flesh and bones of the slain god. That gods can still be born anew, he asserted, that the future will hold the capacity to transfer the spiritual project of antiquity into the material world." A pause. "I've been thinking about what you said yesterday. About not knowing who you were, that you were denied any memory of your previous life. A blank state given a blank world. You've the makings of what could be a god, I think he'd say."

Blood had covered the walls, viscera flinging to the sharpened edge of the crowbar as it tore through rotting flesh. Glass bottles were shattered, sunk into their sides, the leverage of the curved end cracking open skulls with ease. Gleaming, the silver blade retreating from the strangers ribs, the mixing of blood as he took it against himself. Menote gripped the side of the chair he was sitting in to quiet the tremors that shook through his entire body, the markings on his wrist aching.

"Don't feel much like a god. Every where I go there's no end to it, the stench of those countless bodies makes me sick," he said, taking a deep breath before he continued. "I haven't told you everything. A few days after I woke up I was wandering through this town and..."

A hand closed over his lips, silencing him as Jerome glanced up from the manuscript, his eye's looking deeply into Menote's. For a while they stayed in silence, the old man waiting for him to continue. Yet his lips refused to be unsealed, frozen shut, the blood drawn out of them. Eventually Jerome broke his gaze and set his journal down.

"Forgive me. I've been monopolizing your afternoon." He set the journal down. "Perhaps you can tell me another time."

"Not at all," Menote said, the grip of her hand released. "Please, keep reading."

Jerome shifted slightly in his chair without comment. Taking up another book from the table he returned his attention to it, reading in silence. No further words passed between them for the rest of the afternoon, Menote feigning to read a book his companion had given him. The words on the page were formless, flowing into one another like endless small ink serpents. His fingers gripped the book harshly, and when his gaze flicked onto them, turning the page, he could still see the haunting impression of the blood which had clung to them that morning.

When it grew dark Jerome bade him goodnight with formal courtesy, retiring to his sleeping pad among the concentric rings of books. Within minutes his breathing had shifted to the light fitful rhythm of elderly sleep. His hands, which had trembled all day, lay still at his sides.

Menote watched him for a while. The old man's face in sleep had lost its careful academic arrangement. He looked simply old, and still, and strange to have survived. With every interaction, every sighting of the demons within his head, he could feel a bit more of himself vanish. That morning he had all but disappeared; the hands that had washed gore from the sink had not felt like his own. What difference did it make, if it were Perses or the sleeping professor before him, the rotting child or Oizys?

Beneath his shadow the backpack opened, a pill bottle crested in his palm. His reflection moved vaguely in the dark glass of the library window, a new shirt, someone else's clothes. The child had never chosen anything. Not the cold, not the locked door, not the fading of her light. He put the bottle back.

He lay down on the couch and let the library settle around him. At the edge of sleep he could feel something reach for him, yet it not Oizys in full, no weight settling beside him, no hand moving through his hair. Merely the slight drop of the ambient temperature, a peripheral chill that brushed against his skin lightly before it dissolved. He turned toward its source and it was already gone.

For the first time in twenty days he fell asleep alone, the distant memory of flesh giving way to steel fading into oblivion alongside him.