

THE TRUTH OF ALL ENDINGS

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ABSTRACT

THE TRUTH OF ALL ENDINGS

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Dark recesses pock the world, cavities of degradation, predation, and perversion both overt and obfuscated. Those places are not just inhabited by us, but are us: the unspoken or unwitnessed potential—made real or fiercely hidden—for horror and evil. One of the major drives of my writing is to contextualize and explore the capacity for the disturbing and maligned. In this collection of work, I both want to speak to this capacity and display a multifaceted approach to writing horror fiction. One of the major themes threaded throughout this collection is amorphic self-identity and its intersection with the supernatural. The unexplainable or the maligned not only challenges and changes the protagonists, but also offers a lens through which to see their make-up and interiority. In this way, my fiction and the horror genre in general reveals the best and worse we have to offer ourselves in spite of ourselves. That connection extends my characters' identities to a vast, dangerous world beyond comprehension, emulating the tradition of cosmic horror. Cosmicism and the supernatural/paranormal are what suggests a reality beyond our scope and understanding, and I use these elements as antagonistic forces that drive the behaviors and decisions of my characters.

This is most notably displayed in “Circle 6,” my cosmic horror story, and my novella, *Those That Walk That Do Not Walk*. Another concept explored in this collection is dark futurology, or viewing transhumanism and near-future technology through a pessimistic lens. Instead of enriching our lives, technology in this viewpoint is a peril and constraint against agency, autonomy, and the human condition. My essay, “Zersetzung de Dasein,” is a rumination

on dark futurology and such complications of constraints of “post-modernity.” Agency and survival, or reductively “fighting against the evil,” is a motif I wish to expound upon as well.

I want to push my imagination into stories that captivate my audience the way the world in all its terror captures mine. So many dark narratives hold the public’s attention, a recognition of what we are capable of and what evils are out there, and I want to enter that conversation with my fiction. This collection ranges from supernatural to cosmic horror, and threads philosophical pessimism, dark futurology, and transhumanism in fiction and non-fiction creative modes.

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The Truth of All Endings



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Circle 6

Grant watched Cody's waking through the hidden cameras. Roused from nightmares again, up before his alarm, pacing in front of the dry-erase boards set up around his apartment, Cody marked another nightmare-addled night with a greasy squeak. They were adding up. The Office would be pleased.

Confident in Cody's morning routine, Grant returned to bed imagining the man's morning process. A shower with the lights off until the hot water ran out. Clothes, then breakfast; smoked salmon and cream cheese over toast, sometimes a veggie omelet. Always French press coffee. Yet more and more he skipped breakfast altogether, any remaining time spent fiddling with code or math on the whiteboard, perhaps to rouse the brain before the workday marathon, then out the door to the 7:40 train. Grant hit snooze and lay in bed, at least through Cody's shower. He had all day to check the feeds.

He got up to find Cody scribbling on the massive whiteboard in his spare room, the hidden camera set up in such a way that Cody's back obscured what he was writing, but that didn't matter. Grant savored his coffee, picked open his Adderall pill, and downed the bitter amphetamine pebbles. The hollow echo of Cody's footsteps down the apartment stairs cued him to prep for site entry. He had pictures to take; a meticulous accounting of the life of Cody Pollan.

* * *

Circle 6 is in the stream.

"Circle 6," or Cody Pollan, wrote code for Slattek Technologies, the "stream." The robotics company contracted for biomedical assembly lines, but that wasn't Grant's concern. The Office's interest in Slattek, if any, fell outside his "need to know." Grant was the apartment

analyst, the most intimate to Cody, or the real Cody, the Cody no one saw outside his dwelling. Not that there was much to see. Most people were miserably dull, just daily motions with the occasional quirk. The Office's special attention to Cody suggested more, though Grant had yet to see it.

Grant put on khaki cargo pants and a logoed polo shirt to match the apartment's handymen, then took the stairs one flight up. He checked his surroundings before slipping shoe covers over his flat sole loafers and unlocking Cody's door. Stepping in, he was met by a sterile smell tinged with some unknowable undertone suggesting a lived-in space. Grant turned on all the lights, casting every room in a low sodium glow that churned his stomach. It felt as much his space as Cody's, and he wondered if the accumulative hours he spent there approached the waking hours Cody spent alone. Cody's cat, Planck, greeted Grant with a welcoming nudge above his ankle. He returned the affection with a brief pet, then began his work.

He photographed the banality, worn dips in Cody's neglected couch, food-crusting dishes in the sink, the bathroom, the shower. Cody's bedroom held an unmade queen-sized bed and piles of clothes he wore in rotation before finally washing in bulk. Beside his bed lay a rudimentary mp3 player and expensive earbuds, the first agenda in Grant's extended orders for the day.

He sat on the bed and hooked the mp3 player to his phone, but not before listening to what Cody had last played. The same binaural tracks as before. Grant didn't know what to think of the emerging therapy, some convergence of mystic acoustics and numerological clout in frequencies; like symphonies for fetuses, meditation for the unconscious. A simple program replaced the tracks with modified files from the Office, loaded with infrasound, untraceable dark

whispers whose effect Grant catalogued: the nightmares, the apartment's slow descent into uncleanliness, the whiteboards.

Grant's phone buzzed.

Spare room optics experiencing video distortion. Check devices, record, and standby for live drop.

The message deleted itself seconds after Grant read it. Whenever the Office requested drops he had always slipped packages in faux-mailboxes or plugged USBs into well-hidden wall ports. The Office had never requested a live drop before, and had never interrupted site interrogation. He felt vulnerable and exposed under the hidden camera eyes, and unease grew into a knotting weight between his shoulder blades. His loose movements became deliberate, cautious. Had Cody ever felt the vague, intuitive unease of Grant's eyes following him through the room?

He checked the tiny cameras, each a miniscule indentation, a blemish in the wall or bookshelf wood covered by a two-way polymer lens. He wiped their surfaces, saw no obstruction, and turned around to test their viewing angle. A deeper, more nagging sensation of unease bloomed as he parsed the whiteboard.

What at first seemed to be a scribbled blob retraced itself in Grant's mind, a geometric spiral within a spiral, non-Euclidean fractal squares spinning out from a center point like bismuth crystals, imperfect yet uniform in their echoing growth. Messy equations marred its edge, some consumed and overwritten with several days' worth of scribbling. Sun glare penetrating the room's single window faded, drawing his attention away from the white board. It had to be a drifting cloud, but it cast an unnatural warping across the room. He gasped for breath, unaware he'd been holding it.

The bismuth-like fractal now flowed inward. Or was it outward? The replicating corners pulsed and undulated like those Magic Eye stereograms that danced when one unfocused their vision. The room looked at him. Not just the cameras and the Office, but this whiteboard, this bismuth spiral of imperfect self-similar patterns, stared like an eye. He photographed the whiteboard, letting the digital screen become the barrier he needed to reclaim equilibrium.

* * *

Grant left without fulfilling the last step of site interrogation—misplacing objects to suggest someone had been inside. It was a subtle art, a toothbrush at the wrong side of the sink, the rearrangement of drawers or books or used dishes. Just enough so Cody couldn't dismiss it as the playful meandering of the cat, but not substantial enough to convince him to up and move. Just enough to suggest he wasn't alone. But was he alone? Yes, in the literal sense. Grant had watched his handful of ill-fated online dates, sometimes resulting in occasional sex but no lasting romance, and Cody rarely contacted them afterwards. Not bad hook-ups, Grant presumed, only missing connections.

As he brought the flash drive to his handler he couldn't reconcile this new thought. Logic concluded yes, Cody was alone, but a cold gut said otherwise. Something resided in that fractal eye, presence but not intellect, being but not a being. Vague awareness wrestled with intrusive irrationality, a silly idea whose insistent intrusion Grant couldn't evade.

A rainy fog shrouded the city, the air cold but muggy enough to keep him warm with sweat as he strolled. He liked walking, mostly because he hated to commute. When he was idle, when out of the apartment, his mind spiraled, but walking distracted him, drew him closer to a world he didn't have to view through cameras and monitors. It never rained like this back home in Pullman.

The Office's recruitment had been half dangled carrot, all blackmail. They'd caught him installing bathroom cameras for his side racket, the dark web market insatiable for toilet and shower cam videos. Gender didn't matter. Grant never watched them, just recorded the feeds and sent them along. At first they reminded him of his military stint, drone intelligence delivered from half a world away. Back then he had learned the whole world was one revolving zoetrope of surveillance, perverts with upskirt cams, big business stealing browsing histories and eavesdropping through smart TVs, governments dredging the settled topsoil of texts and app usage. The unlucky drew the unmanned eyes of predator or reaper drones or, worse still, the Office.

Grant wasn't a pervert for voyeur cams or guided missile "splashes," but for tenant dishonesty. In Pullman, he'd been the property manager of an apartment complex close to university. There was no shortage of students hiding pets they didn't want to pay deposits for or cannabis growing in the closet. Grant got a thrill calling them out, catching them. They'd look at him astonished and fearful, protest with vaguely understood tenant laws or shallow pride. The smart ones could almost piece it together, but how could you point the finger back at your accuser? *Gotcha*, he'd think. *I caught you, and there's nothing you can do about it*. What an incredible thrill it had been.

When the Office found him, they had started with scare tactics. Police interrogations, lawyer voicemails, PGP messages on the dark web. He finally cracked when Sheila hanged herself in her apartment. He'd get jail time and be reviled, the sort of criminal who doesn't last long in prison. Or he could get paid so much more to surveil for them, and what choice did he have? *Gotcha*.

They met in a busy coffee shop where his handler sat nonchalantly along a glass-paneled wall. Her bony fingers curled around a newspaper, index and middle finger closing and opening again, one of many signals confirming her identity. Older than Grant, her face almost devoid of features hiding by how much. Light eyebrows nearly nonexistent, deep-set eyes rimmed in dark makeup, glimmering like angler fish lures in a well. Grant sat across from her and slid the drive across the table. She left it there, eyes still scanning the newspaper.

“Were you able to photograph the spare room?” she asked.

Grant shrugged. “I photographed the whiteboard, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Did it come out?”

“I didn’t check,” he half-lied.

He had seen the whiteboard through the camera display, but he hadn’t checked the photos. He hadn’t wanted to, but couldn’t quite understand why. She pursed her lips and lowered the newspaper to meet his gaze. “How are you feeling?” Her tone was neither pleasant nor accusatory.

“Um, good. Just uh...”

“The whiteboard.”

“Yeah, Cody—”

“Circle Six,” she corrected.

“Circle Six,” Grant said, nodding slowly. “I’m starting to see changes.”

“We’re aware of the behavioral changes. What about the whiteboard?”

Grant shook his head, now staring at the drive inches away from her coffee. He couldn’t shake the thought of the fractal as an opening. No, just a drawing, a sketch from a stressed out,

lonely man. Had the photos turned out clear? He felt fine, but his memories of taking them were blurred.

“It’s strange,” he murmured, his mind’s eye retracing the boxy spirals as they grew, breathed.

“Strange how?”

Grant met her expressionless gaze. Weeks of gaslighting Cody Pollan, subtly upending his reality one small change at a time, and she appeared indifferent, almost disinterested.

“It’s just a strange doodle, is all,” Grant lied again. The last thing he’d want is the Office questioning his resolve. This case seemed to be a step up, something beyond the previous recruiting or blackmailing of politicians and businessmen. It was just a drawing, an idle expression. “Just haven’t seen Circle Six react this way.”

“Continue as directed,” she said coldly. “Record all peculiarities. You’re doing good work, Grant. We’re watching.”

Pressure rose in his stomach, the nagging burn of stomach acid peaked and capped below his throat. She knew his name. Probably knew everything about him, what little there was to know. Perpetual loner, morally recalcitrant, socially invisible. Beady, dark eyes behind large, thin-framed glasses. Skinny, average height. Average everything. Another human drone, transparent and disposable. Yet she knew his name, knew his everything, and he hated it.

She snatched the USB and left, and in her departure he envisioned an unending spiral eye.

* * *

Dreamless sleep was forbidden. Ambien addled nights, Grant’s reprieve from the void between days, was a luxury the Office restricted. Perhaps it was to ensure coherence through his

tasks, though Grant felt far from focused after waking. His daily stimulants helped, yet Sheila still lingered as he shambled through the days. He tried to focus on her smile the way he remembered it, warm and vibrant in late spring, framed by her wavy mess of blonde hair glowing in the sun. Her height barely eclipsed him, everything about her just a little bit more. Warm skin with divots of childhood acne, her dark eyes he was always suspicious of despite how they gleamed at the sight of him. That was his own conscience.

It was harder to capture who she was in his mind's eye. Her fixation on communal gardens, volunteering for counseling services at the local state college until her burden of external pains was too stressful to bear. Physically she was strong, stronger than any woman he had ever met, but she tried too hard to take the suffering of the world and shoulder it as her own. His indifference made it hard to console her, at odds with her bouts of despair. She wasn't meant for this world, too empathetic to endure its injustices. Those recognitions were difficult, so Grant instead focused on the pleasant memories, the lively ones that gave him hope. Through her was the promise he was more than his voyeurism or callousness.

These static moments were easier to conjure when he was medicated to sleep, but at night without them only the worst moments came. Sometimes they weren't even real, phantom memories of arguments, or the crushing weight of her slowly losing the passion and warmth she had for him. He'd dream of her laying on her book nook by her window. Everything grayscale, her face sunken and her thoughts not distant, but dejected. Grant couldn't tell what was worse, reliving the moment seeing her body swaying, unnaturally suspended by the cord squeezing her neck, or the living death of his dreams, where everything once promising and redemptive was the coldness of a relationship and love ran to its end.

* * *

For appearances Grant worked at a mail delivery warehouse. The Office could have given him an identity of someone who worked from home, freelance work or payroll, but he could also appreciate the presence of others. At work they knew him as the quiet, religious type, and kept a social distance with an unsavory, militant piety. Work Grant didn't drink alcohol or caffeine. His interests were solitary affairs and admittedly boring. Religious themed puzzles, sudoku; nothing too niche or technical to be called out on. A memorized bible quote was surprisingly easy to fit almost any circumstance, and there was never a shortage of rolling eyes at their usage.

The persona was inspired by one of his former apartment tenants, a Latter Day Saint whose only people in life were those of his faith. There was a deep obligation to such a selective social life, and much like the saying goes 'you can't pick your family' Grant imagined the mormon couldn't pick God's family either. Everyone and everything in its conforming embrace. Deep, gasping sobs had come from the Mormon's restroom cam some nights. Curled up next to the tub and just out sight he'd stay there crying for hours. Other tenants had similar blood lettings of emotion, pain hemorrhaged from throats and eyes. To this day, Grant was no different. It was like pressure. Sometimes the loneliness and guilt felt like it could explode out of him and he couldn't help but let it out. It was soothing in small releases, pillow-muffled screams and sob choked questions. When the Mormon asked the same, he did so in the cold, sterile confines of his bathroom where he could hide his doubts from the world. God wasn't listening, but Grant was.

His memory was honored in its utility, perfect for avoidance and easy to keep up appearances, but the Office ordered him to quit several days after the live drop. Not a moment too soon either; Cody was deteriorating. He began working from home, by order or choice Grant wasn't sure, but that didn't suggest descent—it was the fractals. His whiteboards were now dominated with imperfect rectangular spirals. Scribbled hieroglyphics of equations still bordered

the drawings looking more frenetic and desperate. There was a fevered energy to the fixation, a volatile mix of anxious impatience and revelatory excitement, like he was on the cusp of something powerful and unprecedented, and Grant felt it as well. The algorithms and fractals were still a mystery, but the approach of some unknown discovery possessed them both. He was like one of those vicarious onlookers watching rockets rumble away from the planet. Any moment now the rocket would reach its expectant place, an end result more like an impending explosion than a break from the atmosphere.

On top of this, the gaslighting was beginning to take its toll. Every day now Cody took inventory around the apartment committing the contents to memory. Now that he worked from home it was impossible for site entry, and although there weren't any more misplaced toothbrushes or disappearing dry erase markers Cody still checked every day. The Office also had means of affecting Cody's binaural soundtrack, to continue the unheard infrasound whispers and their panic-inducing frequencies, but that technical know-how was beyond Grant's clearance or care. Instead of listening while he slept, Cody now began listening as he worked the whiteboards.

The more Cody's fixations grew the more the office ordered Grant's undivided focus. They were grooming Cody, though Grant felt similarly targeted in his growing isolation. There were daily updates to his status, clinical check marks more like monitoring than any intended well being. Meal deliveries further limited his need to leave and his apartment was beginning to feel like a plaster cage. When isolation spoiled into the nagging suspicion of being watched he checked the walls, ran his index finger down their textured grooves searching for the slick surface of tiny camera lenses.

More than anything Grant wanted to know why Cody deserved this. Such a concerted effort for a normal man, a seemingly innocent one. Maybe Cody had Grant fooled. Even before the Office, Grant had learned that normal and unassuming was the perfect sheepskin. All manners of indecency fit comfortably under the forgettable visage of an average appearance. Attractiveness had its privilege, but its uncanny otherness ultimately bred misgivings. A normal appearance was less intrusive, a statistical average that fit nicely with the herd. Sheila had said it was Grant's unassuming appearance that attracted her to him. She said it meant there was more under the surface, something for her to uncover. And uncover she had.

When would Grant pay for Sheila? The question exhumed itself before he drifted to sleep and it now came in the silence of his waking hours. *When are you going to pay, Grant?* He often felt she wasn't punishment for his cams, but the mere sum of their sins. So was he being punished now, to be complicit in the mental torture of another man? But this is what Cody deserved, it had to be. Nothing made sense without it. I'm doing good work, Grant constantly reminded himself. There were no good people sought by the Office, and maybe that alone was penance.

Or maybe it was all for the fractals. The photographs he had taken of them were distorted and ultimately useless, but this didn't stop the Office's intent to record them. They were a beautiful disorder, band over band travelling inward, outward. When peering into the first one the world had been in free-fall, converging on a single point like a whirlpool of reality escaping into some other unknowable side. It made Grant feel exposed, laid bare. The mere thought of them now created a drifting heaviness like twirling vertigo. Cody would keep going—this Grant knew. The fractals remained unfinished and demanded completion. Even so, Grant felt an unease at this prospect. What was Cody Pollan coming upon?

* * *

A week into Cody and Grant's isolation an incident set Grant's phone wailing. The Office warned of an imminent discovery. It came during one of the few times Grant was asleep at a normal hour, his sleep once reserved only when Cody was away at work. He ran to his desk and its multiple screens, each displaying a monochromatic CCTV feed of the various cameras throughout Cody's apartment. Cody was animated, his thin frame a blur as he paced his apartment searching each cupboard and drawer. From a sliding door closet he produced a hammer and quickly returned to his bedroom.

What should I do? Grant texted the personless number that always sent his instructions. It was a far cry from their professional, military lingo.

Stand by was their only response.

Cody studied the hammer for a moment, settled with the claw end, and whipped it into the wall. Grant could hear the demolition from above. He swung the hammer again, claw end buried in the drywall, and then ripped chunks of it away.

"I saw it!" Grant cried. "I could hear it...I can hear it."

By now he had worked a softball sized hole into the wall. Cody tested the breach with his hand, found it couldn't fit, and clawed away more until he curled his hand elbow deep into the empty space beyond, reaching for something. At first alarm and panic spread through Grant's gut with an icy lurch, but then he remembered the bedroom devices weren't on that wall. What was he reaching for then?

Another thought occurred to him, something vague yet impressionable and familiar. There was something in the wall. Yes, Cody did know something was in the wall. He dreamt it, the eye showed him. The fractal. Its cognizance came on suddenly and it felt real, like his own

half-remembered memory. How did he know Cody dreamt it? He watched Cody bury his arm further, now to the shoulder, pleading to the empty apartment as he found nothing. He gave up, falling back against the side of his bed and began crying into his hands, the sound so similar to the crying of Grant's past tenants at his former apartment complex.

The nagging assurance of the idea lingered. He looked around his room, the layout a carbon copy of Cody's, just like the rest of the apartment units. He felt nauseous, panicky. He found his own bag of tools and went to the wall in his bedroom, the same one Cody hacked at were it his own room. In the same place where the hammer blows were upstairs there was an impression, the slightest indentation of a square spiral. Grant didn't pause to study it, instead swinging his own hammer into the wall. It gave easily, and he swung again after clawing away a sizable chunk. There was a metal clang, something different from the sound and texture of the drywall. After a few careful wedge and pull motions a device broke free. A tiny box apparatus with a snaking wire that had been embedded into the sheet rock. At its end was a tiny speaker. Cody had dreamt of it, heard the same infrasound whispers as his own gaslighting. The Office was doing it to Grant as well.

* * *

Circle 6 free swimming. Ad Hoc window for site entry.

A week of unanswered questions and the teasing progress of Cody's scrawling, and now Grant could finally enter his apartment again. He was beginning to miss it in a way, and the thought of seeing the whiteboards up close was both exciting and dreadful. The Office wanted clear documentation of them this time, even delivering a new camera with analog film.

At first he roamed his apartment in a stiff, almost rehearsed manner, trying to emulate a normal demeanor but coming off as anything but. The speaker he found gave way to a fear of

repercussion, that discovering the Office's own machinations against him would lead to reprimand, termination, or something even worse. Monitoring him was to be expected, but the speaker was a revelation without answer. Its snake-like output device had been positioned to whisper its fear inducing frequencies right to the side of his head. He considered sleeping in another room, but it would have made his behavior that much more noticeable and subject to response. In all that time he had expected them to say something, anything, but they were silent. He had also returned the device to its nest in the wall, making sure to point it away from his bed. The drywall he had clawed away was returned as well, the crumbling bits void of any fractal pattern he had imagined before. What remained of the hole was a smoothed-out patch of repair putty, a blemish and reminder of what lay behind.

When he approached Cody's door for site entry, Grant came upon the thought that his world was shrinking, its breadth now the distance of the stairs between their floors, its poles their two apartments. What was beyond those borders was complete abstraction now. Day and night just shifting spectrums of light and darkness, switching on and off in cosmic automation. There was the unending motion of the world beyond their isolation, but Grant didn't miss it at all, seeing it now for what it was, all empty space and droning filler.

Once inside he saw what the camera feed couldn't pick up. The fractals had become something more. Square-like spirals were now embedded in the whiteboards themselves, grooved into their surface. Their pattern was disorienting, Grant's eyes unable to hold focus on the spiraling lines. They breathed, replicating inward towards its center, but also spiraling outward as if escaping. Grant snapped photos idly as he walked towards Cody's spare room, his internal voice now a background buzzing. Grant shot without peering through the viewfinder, the camera flash overpowering the apartment's yellow haze.

And the fractals weren't only on the whiteboards. They were in the wall plaster, in the carpet, barely visible until he strained to see them. The whole apartment seemed to blink then, every surface undulating. Grant's cell phone buzzed but he ignored it, venturing deeper. At the spare room's massive fractal edge was Cody's messy script of equations. Grant unconsciously approached, a lurching gravity making his head and chest feel leaden. The closer he approached, the more the background fuzz of his thoughts relented to the fractal's intrusion. Something unseen spooled from Grant, a thin cord of himself unraveling and pulled into the fractal's center—*Cody was feeling so lonely the thought of suicide was becoming a welcome relief, but that was the way of this world. Loneliness was the catalyst of unbeing. Suicide was a zero-sum gain. That's why he needed to finish the algorithm, to join the fractal—*

It came so suddenly, the intrusive thought made Grant's head throb. And he *knew* it. Like a half-remembered dream or an incomplete memory prompted by a sensation, the revelation was vaguely familiar. Grant *knew* this of Cody, as if their thoughts were the same. It was just like the shared familiarity of the wall a week before. He studied the white board closely, realizing now his legs and arms felt stiff and achy as if he'd been standing for hours. Along the fractal's edge one portion of writing caught Grant's attention, a name and an accompanying question mark. *Sheila?* it read.

The crunch of a key working the front door's lock sounded from the living room, breaking Grant's trance. He sprang upward in startled reflex, then bound into the room's closet and collapsed the metal bi-fold door just as the front door squealed open. The murmur of two voices filled the apartment.

“—so hopefully it isn't too bad,” Cody said.

“I’m a clutter bug too, don’t worry,” another man’s voice replied. “Oh this? This isn’t bad. You should see the back of my car. Fast food bags and old mail. You’d think I was living out of—What’s wrong?”

There was a pause, then Cody answered, “I don’t remember leaving on the lights.”

“Too busy thinking about me, huh?”

“No,” Cody said, breathing it out as a sigh. “I never turn on this many lights. Sometimes I swear I’m not alone.”

“I used to have a ghost in one of my old places,” the other man said. “Cupboards always opening when I wasn’t around to see it, faucets running. Smudge your house. That got rid of my problem.”

“It’s not haunted,” Cody said. Grant heard his footsteps come from the living room to the hallway. They traveled to the spare room and the bathroom within a right turn, the path leading to his bedroom. Grant could feel his heartbeat in his ears, the beat so harsh and anxious it swayed his chest off the closet wall. Cody’s cat meowed, greeting him from inside the closet.

“Woh,” the other man said, “What is that?”

“What I was talking to you about at dinner,” Cody answered, returning to the living room.

The mention of dinner disoriented Grant, and he peered from the closet door’s slits to the window. Darkness. Not just night and the dull haze of a streetlamp, but utter blackness. *How long was I staring at the whiteboard?* He checked his phone. It had been hours since he had entered Cody’s apartment, but he knew it could have only been several minutes.

“So, run me through it again,” the other man said.

“It’s like Buddhism,” Cody answered. “I mean somewhat, that’s a bit reductive. You know that idea of moksha. Nirvana?”

“Uh, sort of. But this is math. . .”

“Live, die, rebirth, redeath. At some point in this cycle, you’re supposed to ascend. Enlightenment. Something like that. Even in Christianity there’s this oneness, right? Like an end state. A finality.”

“Oh, so this equation is your enlightenment?” the other man asked teasingly.

“Hold on, I’m not done,” Cody said. “In that state, you’re supposedly non-self. You’re like everything and nothing at once. Part of the universe. For Christianity it’s the eternal joy of worshipping in the presence of God.”

“I might need a drink to finish this.”

“I have some rum in the kitchen.”

“No, no, I’m teasing. Please finish.”

There was another pause before Cody said, “So follow me on this. It gets a bit wonky.”

The other man chuckled, an airy, flirtatious laugh.

“If Biocentrism is at all accurate—”

“What’s that?”

“A theory about reality. That you and I, everybody, renders the universe simply by being in it and observing it. But that collective observance isn’t a bunch of people just looking at things and collectively making the universe, it’s one observation.”

“Like God then?”

“If you thought of God as a giant mirror and we’re all the broken shards of the same mirror.”

“And this equation. . .”

“Sort of like mathematical proof of that oneness. Non-self. Everyone as one. There are constants in nature, right?”

“Okay, get me some of that rum. This sounds like a deep burning man acid trip.”

Cody laughed, a sound Grant had never heard from him. It was shaky and nervous, but he sounded delighted and Grant was near envious. When had he last laughed? He checked the message he had previously ignored.

Circle 6 heading home.

Do not abort. Find shelter. Do not return to your apartment.

It didn’t make sense. The Office had all the time in the world to warn Grant, at least enough to not have him trapped in here with Cody. It could be days before Cody left again and the Office knew that too. They wanted Grant here. He texted back his predicament, and their response was immediate.

Do not leave. We are watching.

“So, how do you know it works?”

“The algorithm?”

“Yeah. It’s just a series of numbers, so how can you tell it’s right?”

“Look around you.”

Grant looked around the dark closet as if Cody was talking to him, but the lack of light obscured everything. He reached out and slid his hand against the wall, feeling the groove of several small fractals beginning to grow. At first they felt like indentations, but in the darkness they also felt as if they were protruding from the walls. Vertigo returned and the closet seemed to shudder.

“Hold on, cowboy,” the other man said. “You could have just made those yourself...”

“Sure. Here, follow me. I’ve been wanting to try something but I need someone else with me.”

The stranger appeared through the closet door’s thin slits. He was taller than Cody but not by much, dressed fashionably but still casual in denim jeans and a blazer. Handsome in a typical way with pompadour-styled dark hair and the growing shade of two days of stubble.

“Take a look at that fractal,” Cody said beside him. “A close look. I couldn’t carve that out of the whiteboard or into the wall.”

“What am I supposed to be seeing?”

“Don’t look for anything in particular. Don’t overthink it. Don’t think of anything if you can. Just look at it and let it look at you.”

Grant pet Planck to keep him from meowing, leaning off the wall to watch as both men stared intently at the whiteboard. Something changed, but Grant couldn’t observe it. They were both stiff but wavered like their heartbeats were swaying their bodies. Cody’s date looked shocked.

“Your first time. Max, the boy that bullied you. How do I know that? How did you show me that? That was your memory...”

Cody looked elated, giddy even. Whatever it was that he wanted, an experiment with another person, had been successful.

“Wasn’t me. It’s whatever this pattern is. Opens something. I’m still trying to figure it all out, like how it even got here in the first place. I gotta pee, I’ll be right back, Okay?”

“Sure,” the man said, narrowing his eyes and leaning forward as Cody left. Grant watched him through the door, his pulse coursing so hard he could feel the friction in his veins.

This had to be what the Office wanted. Poking and prodding Cody, covertly torturing him into some new understanding of reality. Did that make Grant an unwilling accomplice? A cruel, unseen tutor? There was solace in the idea he was pushing Cody to something incredible. The dirty means to an end, a little strife for the greater good. Maybe Grant could live with that, but it did nothing for him now.

The man took out his cellphone and began taking pictures of the whiteboard with a rushed intent. After a few shots something caught the man's attention. He mumbled a "what the fuck" and looked from his phone directly at the whiteboard. His fingers traced over the grooves of the fractal, his chest now heaving. Then he began to frantically wipe the whiteboard, his fingers squeaking.

"Hey, what the hell!" Cody shouted from the door. The man whirled around, his face rigid and dark.

"Where did you hear that phrase?" he asked, his voice low and tinged with anger.

"What phrase?"

"Where?!" The man pulled a small revolver from his blazer and pointed it at Cody, his thumb barely able to pull back the hammer.

"What phrase," Cody said frantically, "What are y—"

"They have to love you, Gilly," he said, the revolver shaking in his hands. "You wrote 'she didn't jump' next to it. How do you know that? Did the Office tell you?"

"What office? They're just phrases from my dreams. They'r—"

Cody stopped mid-sentence, and both men stared at each other trembling. Grant couldn't see Cody from the closet but felt him thinking. This man, this Gilly, was a plant. He was part of the Office just as Grant was, here for Cody. His presence didn't make sense. None of this did.

“That’s what she said to you,” Cody said suddenly. “Wasn’t it? She said that to you and you pushed her off the ledge.”

The man’s shaking was nearly convulsive. His eyes were bloodshot and streaming now, and he shook his head at Cody’s sudden knowing. But Cody was right. Somehow Grant knew Cody was right. His rapid pulse gave way to an aching throb in his skull. *Cody was right, the fractal had shown him.*

“How do you know that?” Gil sobbed out.

“The fractals...” Cody murmured. “I don’t know I just...know.”

The other agent lowered his aim, his eyes darting wildly back and forth studying the floor. He raised his pistol back up to Cody, then his face contoured in an anguished scrunch, and he lowered the pistol again.

“They’re watching you,” he said. “I don’t know who they are, but they’re watching you. There’s a man living downstairs. He has cameras all over your apartment.”

Another pause, then Cody mouthed, “What?”

“I didn’t mean it. I was just a kid. They forced me to do this. I didn’t mean it.”

“...but you did,” Cody said. Grant’s equilibrium jumped and he felt as if he was being slowly rotated upside down.

“I’m going to go now,” the man said, his tone lacking any of the emotional rawness from moments before. He stepped towards Cody and Grant could hear him lumber towards the front door. It creaked open and there was an extended moment where both men were silent. Cody shouted a pleading no and the revolver discharged in one great crack. It was all Grant needed to jump out of the closet and run from the spare room.

Gilly had his revolver raised at Cody, whose hands were in front of him and his body hunched over. A dime sized whole was bored into the wall behind Cody, the fractal pattern now churning in the tunnel the bullet had driven, the impact depressing further to show the hole continued, beyond the wall, the next apartment. It was endless, a spiraling hole to nowhere, everywhere.

There was a bridging taking place. Grant felt mental sinew attach and braid, spin outward with the fractals. He didn't know how he could confirm Cody's claims, but he could. And the great knowing, the vague familiarity of understanding connecting them all in this apartment, was both uncanny and natural all at once.

All three of them knew Gilly's revolver was a useless thing now. Just a moment before it demanded authority, a potential lethality, but death was beyond them. Still bewildered, Cody stood and approached the nearest fractal churning on the wall. He pressed his palm flat against it, staring at Grant with both dread and confusion. The stranger emerging from his home, Grant, was a revelation superseded by what waited; the fractal, the eye. Grant copied Cody and pressed his hand flat against the nearest fractal on the wall, Gilly watching them both at the foot of the apartment's door.

Cody's hand was the first to unravel, flesh meeting fractal, replicating the bismuth pattern as it spiraled into the lattice of being. Grant could feel his hand giving way to the pattern as well. It wasn't painful. Each fragment of his hand was like a probing finger, each atom linking to the enormity of the fractal's unending reach. It bore into the universe, into all of them. Soon it was swallowing Gilly as well. Each of their bodies were beginning to be unworked and reimagined, pulled into the fractal like a frayed string unspooling from the whole.

The circumstances of this moment meant nothing now. Cody had done it, he had found the very thing he sought without ever knowing what it was. It was beautiful, unfathomable, and altogether dreadful. Then they realized what was happening. Every moment of their existence, every second remembered and forgotten, every thought laid bare to each other. But there was something else watching, something lurking beyond the scope of their endless awareness.

It was too late now to pull away. Grant couldn't see or feel the other two men, the sensation of their presence too abstract. He merged with them, somewhere the concept of Sheila within. Having discovered his hidden cameras, she couldn't bear the monstrosity of it. They all knew of her suicide now, of Grant's implication of her undoing. They joined her in the collective consciousness of every person undone, and there was more: things without form, presence too alien and bizarre to make sense of. Swimming through them, collecting, tending the web. All were there, now merged with Grant and he part of all of them. What was left of his mind protested, screamed and raged, thrashed like a wounded animal until that too became meaningless, and the full intensity of the universe bearing its eye on Grant turned him into a maddening, spiraling fractal. A gibbering code of chaos.

From their cameras the Office was watching. Notes were made, plans set to breach the aftermath of the event. Circle 6 had made the furthest progress yet recorded. The Office was pleased.

Paratrachosis

Aisley had taken the drive to Ella's house countless times, but this muggy afternoon felt altogether foreign and new. Each stretching, tar veined road she had followed by bike, every unfenced lot and worn pasture trail the girls had pedaled through, were routes Ella had taught them. She and Aisley were the two that had traversed them most. But seeing them now through the car window as she passed, her mother and father quiet and oblivious to their significance, Aisley saw them as places distant and unknown. Their familiarity made the roads and passageways that much more alien now that Ella was gone.

When they reached Ella's house, her mother answered the door as if hiding behind it, one sunken, makeup heavy eye breaching the door's edge before noticing who they were, and pulled the door open with a tense half-smile. Aisley's mom bound inward past the door, hands outstretched, and they hugged and sighed in a way Aisley hadn't seen before. Her father gently nudged her inside and made his way to the kitchen. Aisley had expected the house to be different, she didn't know why, but everything was as she had always seen it, but messier. Unopened mail was jammed between the staircase's balusters beside the front door. Wine glasses protruded like stalky, flowering weeds throughout the living room and kitchen. It made her feel warm and her newly buzzed hair felt itchy under her cap. Ella's mom noticed her scratching while panning the room.

"Let me see, Aisley," she said, and plucked the cap from Aisley's head. Her mom's hairdresser had tried her best. It was must buzzed off now, about an inch's length on top at its longest, with several crude patches where the girls had cut close to the scalp. Ella's mom gasped.

"What did they do to you?" she breathed, snapping upright and peering down with glossy, manic eyes. "Oh Aisley. Aisley, I'm so sorry."

“The whole team,” Aisley’s mom exclaimed, throwing her arms up, pointing at Aisley as if she was evidence. “All of them were in on it. The pack too. Brittany probably started it, that little bitch.”

“Hey now,” Aisley’s father said, handing each woman a drink. “You remember middle school? Smart enough to be nasty, dumb enough to not care? They don’t know why they’re doing it. They miss Ella.”

Their parents called the five of them the pack—Aisley, Ella-mae, Brittany, Sarah, and Courtney. A pack of four now. Mrs. Breeson took a gulp of her drink and wiped at the thinner patches of Aisley’s hair, smearing her thumb along the bristling spots so firmly Aisley could feel the clammy texture of her thumbprint. She pawed at Aisley’s scalp, all of them silent, until her father said, “Um, thank you so much Gloria. I know this will, uh, mean a lot to Aisley.”

Mrs. Breeson stopped her caresses, murmured a yes, and abruptly ascended the stairs. Aisley didn’t know what they meant, and when she looked at her mother she whispered for her to follow. The four of them made the all too familiar trek to Ella’s room, a photo congested hallway casting uncomfortable smiles that loomed in their silence.

At the end of the hallway, Mrs. Breeson cracked open Ella’s door just enough to slide her hand inside and flick on a light. She avoided looking inside through the narrow space.

“Aisley,” her mother said, “we thought you would appreciate having something of Ella’s. Something you can take from her room. Why don’t you go in and we’ll be downstairs once you’ve found something. How’s that sound?”

Aisley looked up to Mrs. Breeson who seemed reluctant to nod in approval.

“Okay,” Aisley replied. “Thank you, Mrs. Breeson.”

“It’s just so good to see you, Aisley,” Mrs. Breeson said, her eyes glassy and anxious.

Aisley wanted to be anywhere but under the hunger of Mrs. Breeson's gaze. She quickly slunk into Ella's room and slid against the door until her face was pressed against her bent knees. How did she get here so suddenly? The day had been a series of forgettable motions, but her memory failed to bridge the foggy gap between then and now. There had been a movement of time that had swept her along, submerged her in the uncomfortable vagueness of a faulty memory. It made her think of running water, of surging white against rock.

Outside the adults were whispering, her mother assuring Mrs. Breeson the way she had comforted Aisley last night. It was for the best, her mother insisted, and it didn't sound like it was for Aisley's sake that she was saying it. A faint tinnitus ringing, a symptom Aisley had developed since the accident, drowned the adults out as it grew louder. It flooded her focus, crescendoed to a roar, and the scene washed over her suddenly. They had all been on vacation after their sixth grade year river rafting. Aisley insisted she and Ella brave a rocky tributary laden with driftwood, bloated and quickened from a recent downpour. Ella had shrieked from behind her as the churning water broke their raft line. Before Aisley could brace herself on a slimy rock and turn around, Ella's hair had tangled itself on a protruding branch.

The thought made Aisley run her fingers over the top of her head, missing the tension of her hair between them. Even at its longest, before the pack had cornered her in the bathroom and sheared it off, it wasn't anything close to Ella-mae's. Her best friend had obsessed over her hair, constantly groomed the entirety of its length, from head to knee. It was the first thing anyone noticed about Ella, and she was always quick to boast she had never had it cut, not once since birth. In the river Ella had clung to her hair like rope, tugging desperately to free herself. Aisley lost her raft pulling herself back to her friend, and she could do little but bounce her weight against the driftwood pile. When the branch had shifted it had dragged Ella beneath the surface.

Aisley hadn't stopped pulling on Ella's tangled hair even when her body went limp and wavered in the current like caught fabric. Several minutes had passed before anyone had found them, minutes where Ella looked up through the water, stared lifelessly at her best friend.

Creaking steps pulled Aisley from the memory, announcing the adult's departure. Standing reassured her of solid ground. It had been a year and a half since she was last here, sleeping over before the trip to the river, yet nothing in Ella's room had changed. The walls were still their cool powder blue, littered with movie posters and photo collages. Ella's bed was made, the comforter wrinkled as if someone had slept on top of it recently. Its general messiness mimicked life, or being lived in, but there also a sterile coldness that made the room feel vast and empty.

Aisley examined the room instead of rummaging for something to take. She traced her fingers along the dressers and walls, noticing that even the dust had avoided the room's funereal stillness. Countless hours had been spent here between them, giddy sleepovers and internet binges after volleyball practice. The unquestioned assurance that their happiness together would never end.

She ran an idle hand back and forth along one of her near bald patches the way one tongued at a freshly chipped tooth, the other tracing a finger on whatever surface was closest. Her foot tapped a box as it dragged along the empty space below a dresser, and as she looked down she realized nothing could fit in the three inch gap between the dresser and floor. She tried lifting the dresser but it was too heavy, so she pulled open the bottom drawer. A false bottom revealed a shoebox with the plastic corner of a Ziplock bag protruding from under its lid. She pulled the shoebox out and sat on the floor, feeling something light shift inside. Aisley cautiously flipped the box's lid open.

Bound by twist ties and in a few crinkled sandwich bags were nearly two dozen bundles of hair no longer than three inches. Straight hair, kinky and curly hair, each with its own texture and color and unmistakably real human hair. Some but not all of the bundles were labeled with a messy black ink script.

Bria.

Becky.

Destanee.

Ms. Roland.

Mom.

Aisley.

Aisley grabbed the small bushel of her supposed hair and leapt to the vanity mirror across the room. Against the stubby length of her new haircut the bundle looked awkward, alien, but the color was a perfect match. When did Ella steal her hair? How had she never noticed? How did any of the girls not notice? Ella had been the single person Aisley felt she truly knew but the collection of hair began to unravel her memory. She went back to the box and sat in front of it, tossing the bundle inside when she noticed something thin and dark on her forearm. A coarse black hair protruding from her skin, the length of a fingernail and encircled with pink, tender flesh.

For whatever reason she felt compelled to remove it, pinching it between her fingers and pulling. It didn't pluck away, but grew. The skin protested as it rose, a slight itch blooming deep in her forearm as the hair lengthened, elongating by two inches before she paused. Her body swayed to her heartbeat. She tugged some more and the hair kept coming without end. By now it

had spanned the width of her body and she would have to stretch her arms out to continue. The room now smelled of rain and damp earth, and the faint ringing of her tinnitus returned.

“Aisley, baby, are you alright?” Her mom called from down the hallway.

Aisley jolted and whipped her gaze towards the closed door, her hand jerking open and dropping the end of the impossibly long hair. As it passed the threshold of the box’s open top something seized the hair and pulled. It unraveled from her skin, its length coursing through the meat of her forearm until it was plucked free and the box shut with a dull cardboard smack. She immediately kicked away from it, scrambling across the carpet in animal reflex.

Her mother’s footsteps approached and she opened the door, asking, “what was that?”

Aisley didn’t answer, just stared at the box.

“Aisley,” her mother said assertively.

“I was just startled,” Aisley said breathlessly. She studied the box, waited for it to shift or bounce, but it didn’t move.

“Have you found something yet?” her mother asked. “I don’t want to leave you up here for so long. It’s been half an hour already. Is it in the box?”

Her mother had to be wrong, she had only been in Ella’s room for a few minutes. She stepped inside making her way to the box, but Aisley jumped from across the room and grabbed it before her mother could. Her mother threw her hands up and chuckled the way she did after a few drinks, and backed out of the room.

“Okay, okay,” she said. “Come on, I don’t like it here.”

Aisley followed, clutching the box to her chest, feeling as if she was leaving a stranger’s room.

* * *

It had been a few weeks since her visit to Ella's room and Aisley's hair was shooting down from her head at an alarming rate. At first her parents said it was a good thing, a convenient growth spurt, but then they too realized how unnatural the growth had become. In one week alone Aisley's dad had measured almost two inches of growth. Aisley didn't find that particularly troubling until she found online the average person grew only half an inch in a month. Soon after her armpit hair had begun emerging in itchy clumps and renegade hairs, thick and spastically kinked, began to sprout randomly from her back, buttocks, and thighs. The fuzzy blonde of her forearm hair began to darken as well, and several kids in class began referring to her as wolf-girl. She didn't mind the name calling, not as much as she might have in the past. Being labeled your best friend's killer had a way of thickening your skin. It only seemed normal now.

Doctors visits only deepened the mystery of the growth, several medical conditions posited as the culprit but each underlying test failing to confirm them. And when professional assumption was still forwarded Aisley's mother dismissed each with indignance, seemingly distrustful in her protests. She began spending more time at their home computer fixated on finding a cure. She stayed up into the late hours muttering at the glowing screen, downing glasses of wine until her face drooped with drunken weariness. It was comforting for Aisley at first, her mother so fierce and protective, but it soon began to feel as if something was wrong with her.

"No, honey," her father insisted, spotting her watching her mother from a shadowed angle in the livingroom. "It's just different, and when things are different and we don't know why, it can scare us. Your mother just wants to make sure you're healthy."

But she was healthy. Aisley felt strong, proud the way Ella was proud of her hair. When Aisley was younger she had wandered into her mother's bathroom as she showered, enamored with the slick scrapes of her razor as she drew it up her legs, watching the field of tiny hairs erased to smoothness. She had asked her mother why she did it, and when would she start shaving.

"When you're a woman," her mother said, her smile warm and comforting.

Was this not becoming a woman? Maybe too quickly, all at once, and there were still parts of puberty that hadn't yet begun to bloom within her. Her body hadn't changed, taken the womanly shape of her mother's, but she did notice things were different, and it showed in unexpected ways. For starters, it seemed all at once she was better at volleyball.

Before, in the harrowing moments she was even on the court and not benched or practicing by herself with the wall, she would have a hard time measuring the trajectory of the ball falling towards her. Feet would waver to find solid ground, knees buckling as the enormity of the guesswork and focus on technique (technique, Aisley, always technique! her coach scolded) would have her miss the shot. Usually she would collapse or send the ball in a wild, random direction. Even Ella's help, the star of their middle school team, wasn't enough to fix her clumsiness.

But now it seemed so effortless. She felt bold. Nevermind the bruises or burning scrapes from the hard wood, she dove and rolled like the professional women she saw on television, when Ella would make the whole pack watch and declare she'd be a professional one day. The ball would go where she wanted, to who she wanted, and for the first time in her life she could do the set-ups, follow throughs, and scores like she always desired. Her coach began putting her into the real games, not just practice, and eventually the other girls were passing the ball instead

of outright avoiding her. The rest of the pack, who ostracized her after their punishment for hacking off her hair, now wanted to hang out again.

“It’s what Ella would want,” Sarah said.

“You kinda look like her now,” Courtney said. Brittany scoffed.

“You can sit with us at lunch, I guess,” Brittany said, looking around the court as the parents and students began filtering out of the stands after one of their games, another win now thanks to Aisley’s new-found talent.

Among them were their parents, always together, a pack themselves at their age. Even Ella’s mother was with them. They watched with approval, as if things would return to normal again. Only Aisley’s mother looked different, staring at them coldly, staring just at Aisley.

“And, um, we can hang out at Brittany’s,” Sarah added. “Right?”

“Sure,” Brittany said, looking bored.

Aisley knew better, knew Brittany didn’t want her around at all. And why would she return to them? *But you must*, a voice insisted, more a compulsion rising up like surging water in her thoughts. She looked at the girls, looked at the messy strands of oily hair, sweaty from the game. Aisley wanted to reach out and touch it, feel the slickness between her fingers. And Brittany’s hair—she wanted to rip it out.

* * *

Courtney had a habit of taking food from the other girls, so when Aisley returned to their lunch table at school she knew Courtney wouldn’t be able to resist grabbing for pieces of her lunch when she wasn’t looking. Instead of waiting for it to happen, she’d do it herself.

Aisley asked her mom to help her bake some cupcakes. Her mother always asked Aisley for help, who at first found it a chore, but it seemed now her mother hardly cooked at all and

when she did she never asked for Aisley's help. Maybe this way they could cook more, and they could cook together like they used to, and this time Aisley would enjoy it. But when she asked her mother stared at her from across the room, rigid in a long moment of silence. Her fingers rasped her wine glass and her eyes gleaming with something rejectful.

"Why."

"I wanted to make the girls something. I'm sitting with them at lunch again."

"Those girls?" her mom spat. "Those nasty little shits?"

"Woh," her dad said from some unseen place nearby, overhearing them. "Take it easy babe, she just wants to have some friends."

How wrong he was, Aisley thought. She wanted friends but these cupcakes weren't for friendship. She didn't know what they were for really, but friendship was not what came to mind. At first she didn't know what to say. "I just thought we could bake together, like we used to."

Whatever she said had unsettled her mother, her eyes narrowing in disbelief and her face, once flush from her drink, was placid and bloodless. Even her father rounded a corner to peer at her, looking quizzical.

"We didn't cook together," her mother said. "We never cooked together."

Aisley was confused. Of course they had cooked together. Her favorite times were making stuffed pasta shells, one of Ella's favorites.

"But we did," she said, now unsure of herself.

"Honey," her father said. "You never cooked with Mommy. That's okay, she can do it with you."

"Tracy cooked with Ella," her mom said. Tracy was Mrs. Breeson's first name.

“That’s alright, Mommy will cook with you. Cupcakes, right? You’re going to bake me one?”

She didn’t know why, but Aisley shook her head.

“I don’t want to cook,” her mother said coldly, and disappeared somewhere in the house, somewhere away from Aisley. She and her father were even more confused. He helped her find a recipe and gather the ingredients, but for some reason it didn’t seem the same. It wasn’t with her mother, the way she knew they used to do it together. She felt blamed. It wasn’t her fault, not over Ella, nor her hair. She didn’t understand why her mother was so cold to her, acting like Aisley wasn’t her daughter.

They mixed the batter and whipped the icing together, and when her father was distracted, Aisley plucked a strand of her now mid-back length hair and coiled it in a tight spiral. With a quick poke, she submerged a strand of hair in each pool of uncooked cupcake in the baking sheet.

She was beginning to do little ticks like this often. In new places she would pluck a hair and tie it to whatever she could, a post or a doorknob. At her therapist’s office she had hidden her hair between the books on her therapist’s shelf, opening some and pulling them deep in pages against the binding.

She’d twist her finger around her locks and pull until the tips would grow purple and throb with pain. Aisley would torture herself this way until she couldn’t bare it, hypnotized by the prickly sensation of blood returning. She used to love hot showers, but now she only took baths in cool water. The way her hair looked under the surface, swaying like tiny stalks of kelp, was mesmerizing. Aisley would also submerge herself, eyes open even if she had used soap or shampoo, and she held herself there until she couldn’t stand it. Her lungs burned and her chest

convulsed as it pleaded for breath, but she remained under until she felt like she had to fight herself to sit up, terrified in those split moments of near drowning, gulping for air.

After baking the cupcakes Aisley found her mother in the office study she and her father used for work, hunched over in the red leather chair she loved, reading a book. When she saw Aisley she grew stiff, eyes questioning.

“Mom,” Aisley said. “I’m sorry for earlier.”

Her mother sighed. “No Aisley, I’m sorry. Things just feel. . .different. You’re growing up and Ella—” She stopped herself, bit the skin of her lower lip the way she did when she was deep in thought. “I’m just worried that what’s happening to you is going to hurt you. I don’t know why, maybe I’m worried you’ll be bullied even more.”

“But I’m growing up. I can even shave my legs now.”

“I guess you are, Aisley.”

“Can I brush your hair?” Aisley asked. “Just a little. While you read, I won’t even talk.”

Her mother gulped, hesitated, but then dismissed whatever she was thinking with an exhaled chuckle. “Of course, baby.”

Her mother pulled her hair over to one side and leaned forward, her chestnut hair resting in one palm as Aisley worked a brush through it. The study’s lamp light gave each strand a golden glow, and Aisley became transfixed. She thought of the choppy lines of waves, of river currents coursing through bramblewood.

“Not so hard, Aisley.”

Her mother’s hair was shining like the sun, a warmth she could never have again. Everything was cold, dark and drowned, and even though she could see the light above the surface she couldn’t feel its warmth. Couldn’t feel anything. Aisley separated a strand, wove it

into her fingers and yanked on it, tugging it free. Her mother lept from the chair, dropping her book and spilling her drink on the floor.

“Aisley, what the fuck!”

Her father was quick to enter the study and asked what happened.

“Nothing, I just—I need to be alone. Can I be alone, Aisley?”

While she listened to them argue downstairs, Aisley wound her mother’s hair in a loop wishing she had more. She folded a piece of tape over the strand, labeling it “Aisley’s mom.”

* * *

“Why are your lunches so big now?” Courtney asked Aisley, watching her pull out a heap of food arranged in plastic containers. Along the row of lunch tables, the row the volleyball girls occupied, the rest of the team looked on as if something was about to happen. Aisley’s presence was enough change for their fixation, even if she had once sat with them, always at Ella-mae’s side.

“My dad makes them now.”

When Aisley snapped open the last tupperware container, each of the cupcakes kept as pristine as possible throughout the day, Courtney couldn’t help but stare. Brittany acted like she didn’t notice, but Aisley could see the way she turned away as if disinterested, staring off at nothing in particular. Sarah, as always, seemed to shrink, her thoughts betraying her.

“Why do you have so many?” Sarah asked.

“There’s only three,” Courtney said. “Who doesn’t get one?”

“Who said they were for you,” Brittany snapped.

“I baked them for you,” Aisley said. “For being back at the table.”

“I guess we had to let you back,” Brittany said, her nasty little smile fading when none of the other girls responded with their own. “You are part of the team now.”

“I bet she’s going to score more than you this season,” Courtney said, chuckling.

“Excuse me,” Brittany said breathlessly, “I’m still the lead scorer this season.”

“Not for long,” Courtney teased.

“Shut up,” Brittany said. “My dad knows the guy in charge of the state volleyball division and he said he wouldn’t be surprised if we went all the way this year. Said I’ve been one of the star players to make it happen.”

“Your dad said that,” Courtney said.

“Well so did the other guy.”

Aisley’s own grin floated up from some dark, murky place deep within. A satisfaction she couldn’t define but accepted easily. Brittany’s discomfort made her body tingle. And the promise that each one of them would be eating a piece of her felt good, exhilarating. If they had wanted her hair so badly before when they hacked it off why not give it to them?

Courtney was first, having grabbed one as soon as Aisley had mentioned who they were for, and took almost half of it in one wide bite. Sarah slowly reached for her own, and pecked at it with a smile.

“It’s really good,” Sarah said. “Better than my sister’s.”

“I baked them from scratch,” Aisley said, truly proud of the fact.

“My sister always uses the boxed kind. I can taste the food coloring.”

Brittany hadn’t reached for hers, so Aisley slid the last one in front of her. “I made one for you too. For my friends.”

“I don’t want it.”

At first Aisley felt rejected, but soon hurt boiled over to anger. She swallowed it down and smiled again.

“You’re missing out,” Sarah said, looking between the two girls.

“I’ll take it,” Courtney said, fingers already pushing into the cake flesh before she finished her words.

Fine, Aisley thought. *Have your fill, eat until you drown in it.* And then a thought occurred to her. Ella hadn’t collected any of their hair. She looked at each of them, Courtney with her thick, dark hair and Sarah’s golden thin strands, stringy and flat. Brittany’s shone black like polished stone, and the urge to have hers was the strongest. She’d do it for Ella, have a little of each of them for her friend. If she could she would go back to the river again, sure that Ella’s strands were clinging to the driftwood, and collect the remainder of her best friend for safe keeping. But at least she could have theirs.

It was too easy to hide her glee with the acceptance of the cupcakes, both Sarah and Courtney moaning their approval with full mouths. They hadn’t even noticed the hair.

* * *

It had now been several weeks since Aisley had unsealed Ella’s shoebox of hair. After taking it from Ella’s room she had kept it hidden away in her closet, afraid of what revelations it might hold waiting to tarnish Ella’s memory. There wasn’t a day that passed when she wouldn’t take the shoebox from its cloistered pile of clothes, open it, and handle each bundle. There was something soothing in the sensation of the strands rubbed between her index finger and thumb. She’d even bring the strands to her nose and try to pull out the person’s smell, but by now the shoebox’s faint suede aroma had choked any trace of them. There could be so much more, but any new addition had to be from the other girls first.

Her first chance came at practice, the team broken up into small groups across the gymnasium, running practice drills, and in front of Aisley, Sarah stood twirling her hair in her fingers as she waited for her turn at their station. Aisley walked up behind Sarah and pinched a few strands hanging over her shoulder. She yanked downward, felt the roots give with a sudden release. Sarah shouted out and whirled around, but once she saw Aisley she shrank away.

“Sorry Ella,” she mumbled.

The rest of the team watched but did nothing. Aisley thought that’s what she must have felt like before when they held her down in the bathroom and worked the scissors crudely through fistfuls of locks. It seemed so distant now, as if the memory of her ostracizing wasn’t ever lived, wasn’t her memory. And Sarah had called her Ella. She didn’t protest, welcomed it in fact. After all, she wasn’t the same Aisley as before. She didn’t feel like Aisley at all. It frightened her, but the power she felt plucking Sarah’s hair was overwhelming. There was something pitiful and disgusting about Sarah taking anything dished out at her. Was that how Aisley used to be? Sarah was nice to Aisley, though, and perhaps plucking her hair would be enough, though she didn’t understand what that thought meant.

After practice only a few of the girls washed off in the locker room showers, most still too self-conscious of their bodies to reveal themselves in front of each other. That was the case for Aisley before. Recently, strands of hair had begun to encircle her nipples. More growth trailed down from the middle of her stomach past her belly button. It was almost as thick as the teenage boys she’d seen shirtless on television, and even though she was proud of the way her body was maturing it was still different, not like any of the other girls, and to expose that fact was to invite a ridicule she couldn’t stand to bear. Aisley reached under her volleyball jersey, circled her finger around the hair of her stomach, then plucked one to feel its sting.

There was a collection of shouts and gasps from the showers. Rising above them was Courtney's voice. She exhaled in panicked heaves ringing with disbelief. Aisley ran over to the entrance and saw the team circled around Courtney but keeping their distance. Their hands covered their mouths and they stood motionless. Sarah was breathing as if she had just run for miles, and in a trance stepped back until her slender frame met the wall. She began to nervously twirl her hair.

"Move your hands, I wanna see it," Brittany said, the only one willing to be close to Courtney. She was crouching in front of her, focusing on Courtney's hand covering her stomach. Courtney pushed her away with her free hand and her whole body jiggled as she began sobbing. Something discolored and viscous drooled from the space between her fingers.

"There's more of them," Courtney gasped out. She desperately looked around at the other girls while a chunky glob of pus left her hand and slapped on the bathroom tile. Still clothed, Aisley stepped into the showers. Some of the showerheads continued to spew water, their noise rising with each step inward, and her tinnitus peaked with a shrill ringing. Brittany stood up, her face scrunched up as her nostrils flared. She gagged. Some of the team saw the phlegmy glob drift towards the drain and shrieked, running away into the locker room. By the time Aisley stood in front of Courtney, there was just the pack left.

She noticed then how distended and bloated Courtney looked. She had been gaining weight but Aisley assumed it was because of all the food she pilfered. Courtney pulled her hand away and stared wildly at it, slick with infected blood. Aisley could see a black hair drowned in the infection. She looked at Courtney's stomach, saw a long tuft of hair poking out of an inflamed bulge leaking more pus. Courtney moaned out a sob, grabbed at the tuft, and began pulling.

“Get it out,” Courtney whimpered, the hair already three inches long and still unraveling from her stomach. That’s when Aisley saw them, little sores like pock marks on Courtney’s gut, each with a small curly hair at its center. Her entire stomach was protruding sickly, the inflammation mostly obscured by her dark complexion, and her skin was tight, overfilled. The roar of the showers became deafening, as if they were directly under a waterfall. Aisley looked up at Courtney, did her best to hide the sickening satisfaction at the sight of her. She didn’t want to feel this way, didn’t want to feel good, but it still coursed through her. She wanted that hair even if it was covered in Courtney’s pus. Their gazes met, and Courtney’s horror washed away. She looked confused.

“Ella?” Courtney asked, then turned and vomited. There was hair in it.

Aisley walked into the shower and plucked a gory tuft from the tiled floor, not noticing Brittany watching from the lockers.

* * *

A select few of the team were staying over at Brittany’s house, a sleep over once reserved for the pack, but both Courtney and Sarah had fallen too ill to attend, leaving just Aisley as the remaining member of their old group. The team had started a fundraiser to support Courtney’s aggressive stomach cancer, and their coach had to sit the team down and explain that even though rare, cancer could grow random cells, even hair. Aisley knew better, though. It was Ella, it was *both* of them.

Sarah’s illness was less definitive, but no less impressive. Her ungraceful exit from their daily presence was an equally traumatic moment when she couldn’t hide the weeping sores that had accumulated all over her scalp, once easily hidden by hats until the sores became too painful.

Her hair was falling out in clumps. Brittany was the first to loudly point out one such tuft, gooey skin slicking one end, hanging from her shoulder. By now, she hadn't been to school in a week.

In all that time, Aisley had failed to find any opportunity to collect Brittany's hair. She seemed constantly watchful, always cognizant of Aisley's presence. She had given up trying to feed Brittany some of her own hair, but tonight would be the perfect chance to complete the collection of the pack.

The sleepover was altogether boring, Aisley on the periphery as the girls lost interest in one suggestion and quickly jumped to another, each one not unlike what she and Ella had done together during their sleepovers, but they weren't Ella. Still, her presence lingered, hidden deep beneath the surface, both of them catching moments to gaze at Brittany and her shiny ebon hair.

Besides, anything was better than being at home. Her mother was like a shadow, pulled against the walls of the house, always staring from the length of a room or hallway. When she looked at Aisley she appeared as if she was staring at some gruesome animal, fear and worry masked by sternness. And she could see how it was eroding her father, once a sturdy rock now worn down by the current of her mother's cold distance. Maybe Aisley would feed hair to her as well, let it choke her insides so she felt what it was like; to be forsaken just like the girls had forsaken her, and then she would love her again.

"Earth to Aisley, hello?" Brittany whispered. It now occurred to Aisley that the majority of the sleepover was already passed out, several girls sprawled across the living room furniture, snoring lightly, illuminated by the ghostly flicker of the television.

"You've been quiet all night," Brittany added. "Not having fun?"

"No, I am," Aisley lied. "Just missing Ella."

"I have something to show you. It's about Ella, up in my room."

Brittany led them upstairs, both light on their feet as to remain alone. The colors of Brittany's room were nauseating, the walls painted something like canary yellow but more closely resembling the color of stale cheese. Brittany's face was all over the room as well, most pictures of her with friends and family, others just by herself. It was all vaguely familiar, distant but recognizable. When had Aisley last been in this room?

From a dresser drawer Brittany produced a locket, a gleaming pendant with a hinge and hanging from the thinnest of chains. She opened it in front of her, the tiniest picture of Brittany and Ella within. Aisley knew that picture, knew that the rest of the girls were unseen beyond the pendant's edge, all of them posed together. They had taken it just before that fateful trip to the river.

"She gave this to me," Brittany said. "I miss her so much. She was like a sister to me."

"Ella hated jewelry."

"I guess you didn't know her like I did."

"You're making it up."

All at once Brittany's face darkened and her lips curled. "You gross little wolf girl. Your hair is so disgusting, *you're* disgusting. You know we don't really want you around, right? Never did. Only Ella liked you and guess what? You killed her."

"No I didn't."

Brittany stepped closer, eyes glowing like coins from the bottom of well.

"Yes. You. Did. And I know you have something to do with Courtney and Sarah. I just know it."

At first her pulse throbbed in her ears, then came the ringing. A reedy tone like roaring rushing water, the same tone she heard in Ella's room and in the locker room showers.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” Brittany hissed, now mere inches from Aisley.

“You’re trying to be her, but no matter how good at volleyball you get, no matter how long you grow your hair, you will never be her and I know that because I was her best friend.”

Aisley pounced on Brittany and they both crashed to the floor with a dull thud. Aisley was on top of her, fingers curled in her hair, and with a strength she’d never felt ripped a handful away from Brittany’s scalp. Brittany tried to scream, but Aisley’s hair cascaded over her, blocking the light, and it fell inside Brittany’s mouth as she gasped. She panicked, the wispy intrusion inhaled straight down her throat, and as she struggled to breathe she took in more. The hair seemed to move by itself, snaking deeper, strands crawling around Brittany’s face, flowing towards her gaping lips, muffling her choking coughs.

The rush of water crashed in Aisley’s ears, her hair moving like a current. It pulled her closer, nose to nose, and she felt it then, felt Ella. She was cold and dark, but Aisley took her in. There was nowhere to go, no place for her rage to flow but with them, the pack, the girls that mangled Aisley’s hair. Each lock, each secretive strand plucked brought her closer to being a girl again, a woman, *something* in this world. And she would take them all with her, to be them, to be something. Ella would drown them all.

Brittany’s panic gasps were becoming spasmic. Her chest jolted as her body struggled for air, her nose and mouth infiltrated. Her panicked face was right in front of Aisley, and for a split second Ella’s rage subsided. Brittany looked just like Ella then, desperation tinged with the faintest realization there was nothing else to do but die. It was enough to break Aisley’s trance. She pulled back from Brittany, feeling the tug of her hair released from the girl’s throat and nostrils. She wrung out the snot and spit in her hair, mortified yet equally serene as she watched

Brittany sobbing between haggard gasps of air. In Aisley's other hand was Brittany's hair, and that was enough to satisfy Ella.

* * *

Aisley lay in the bath, hair draped over her body, and each strand from the collection floating around her. They were like roots, tangled fingers of the earth holding her in the water, in darkness. It was where Ella resided, lonely, drowned. With the light off, she felt closer to her best friend, emulating what she felt deep within. How lonely she had been before Aisley had found the shoebox. Aisley's walk back from Brittany's house was a haze, a dream whose route was intimate but foreign. Her mother's voice preceded her footsteps, and light broke the serenity of the dark bathroom.

She stood there silently, studying her daughter.

"I found the shoebox," she said, voice wavering. "The hair. That's when it started, didn't it?"

When Aisley spoke it wasn't her voice. "Each one of you is closer to me now. Aisley wants to come."

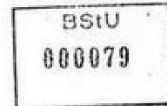
"Come where?" Aisley's mother asked. Her voice struggled for volume. Nostrils flared, forcing breath.

"Underneath, with me."

Aisley's mother approached and she leaned over the tub, seeing from the faint light of the open door the form of a girl half submerged, shrouded in wispy locks of hair. What she saw wasn't her daughter but instead a corpse, some other girl that had replaced her child. Her hands gripped wet shoulders and she pushed down, shaking. Ella didn't fight, but let her and Aisley

both sink deep below the surface, deeper and deeper until it was cold and dark again, but now she wasn't alone, and the rush of the river finally faded.

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Zersetzung de Dasein

Decomposition of Being

. . . δῆλον γὰρ ὡς ὑμεῖς μὲν ταῦτα (τί ποτε βούλεσθε σημαίνειν ὁπότεν ὄν φθέγγησθε) πάλαι γινώσκετε, ἡμεῖς δὲ πρὸ τοῦ μὲν ᾧόμεθα, νῦν δ' ἡπορήκαμεν . . .

"For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression 'being.' We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed."
-Plato, *Sophist* 244a

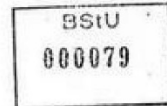
For reasons unbeknownst to me I'm placed in a wheelchair and paraded through the bustling labyrinth of post-op waiting rooms. These rooms are no more rooms than open spaces sectioned off by patterned sheets and restless hope, the grave and stony anxiety of the old and haggard I try to shrug off. I'm led to the operating room, my procession ending in the sterile, alien landscape of a central operating table and its whitewashed satellites of equipment, lighting, and scrub donned nurses. The doctor will be in shortly they console, and I'm ushered to the table and laid face down, ass exposed.

The nurses get a view of my back tattoo, a cybernetic spine from the middle of neck to the base of back, my shoulders also covered in the spine's supposed power complex. There is much elation and wonder. The questions begin, but there's no follow-up to the mention of transhumanism or the cyberpunk genre. The doctor is also quick to remark upon the artwork when he enters, and I quickly realize the tattoo is a pleasantry of sight more than a talking point for futurology. Besides, how serious can one be when their ass is the facing end of the conversation?

My tattoo does strike up a talking point as the doctor is worried the incision will scar the bottom segment of the mock-spine, tarnishing what was meant to be permanent. The tattoo sits right over the incision area to access a herniated disc. The faulty accumulation of annulus fibrosus and nucleus pulposus has ruptured out of my spine and is jammed against a diverging spinal cord branch that eventually makes up the sciatic nerve. To mend my organic spine the futuristic one must be compromised, decomposed. If the irony is recognized it's left unspoken.

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I've opted to not go under, finding the exposure of my spine and spinal cord a morbid curiosity best exemplified by being awake. Much in the way a patient might play the violin or attempt mathematics mid-brain surgery, I too want to flex my cognition while my flesh is punctured and subsequently amended. Unfortunately, I'm on my stomach and left to converse with the operating team; no doubt a brief distraction from the monotony of a day's worth of 'elective' procedures. What are you thinking about, they ask, and in truth I answer lions. The most curious of the nurses repeats the word as if she's never heard it before, as if its mention is esoteric and filled with uncanny power.

I don't explain that a few years ago I discovered a nature documentary on an infamous pride of lions. In it, a particularly vicious brotherhood of five lions wreak havoc over an unprecedented swathe of wildlife refuge, terrorizing all others unfortunate to be in their path. Their brutality towards other lions is remarkably savage, enough to warrant special attention. One of the most brutal lions, named Mr. T for his mohawk like mane, is eventually ambushed and attacked by a rival group of male lions. In the ensuing carnage one opponent clamps his jaws down on Mr. T's lower back and bites down, crushing his spine. Mr. T is left half paralyzed, encircled and desperately clawing at the male lions just out of reach. They wait for him to tire, then collectively rip and tear. This, I think, is the true way of things. Not the savagery, not dying as one lived, but to die itself. Not a returning, but a forfeiting.

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MINISTERRAT
DER DEUTSCHEN DEMOKRATISCHEN REPUBLIK
Ministerium für Staatssicherheit
Der Minister

Berlin, Januar 1976

Geheimnis- und Schlußsache

MfS Nr. 100/76

Nr. Ausf. 20 Blatt

KOPIE BStU

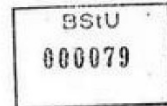
Richtlinie Nr. 1/76

zur Entlassung und Bearbeitung

von Verurteilten (OV)

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The infamous East German Ministerium für Staatssicherheit, known in English as the Ministry of State Security—or more commonly remembered as the Stasi—produced a manual for its operatives to conduct psychological warfare (commonly referred to as PsyOps by militaries the world over) on suspected dissidents. Anyone from suspected western spies to east Germans wanting to migrate were targeted by the insidious organization through gaslighting and surveillance.

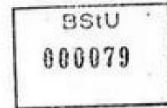
A target could be repeatedly passed over for promotion, denied travel permits, or could be unduly harassed by bill collectors. Telephone calls would wake up the target at all hours of the night. Random citizens would become hostile, or even 'report' the target to the authorities. Police would appear for random interrogations on bogus allegations. And the Stasi were everywhere. After the reunification of Germany it came to light that many neighbors, co-workers, family members, and significant others were secret agents of the Stasi. An artificial reality fabricated for the betterment of the state.

The manual labeled the psychological techniques Zersetzung, or Decomposition. In a 1985 document the Stasi defined the goal of Zersetzung as 'the fragmentation, paralysis, disorganization, and isolation of the hostile and negative forces.'

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We do not know how to reconcile death.

When the Buddha introduced maranasati, the contemplation of death, his disciples were so gripped with its finality they too plunged into nihilation. In their attempt to transcend their animal notions of persistence they over reached, finding life itself an inconvenience not worth baring, not when eternity was one suicide away. Ask any Christian or monotheist what transcendence means and you're likely to be met with the hopeful deliverance of a benevolence removed from death. Yes, even God had to die to pave this way, though a debate over this notion has undoubtedly produced enough people to have found out the truth one way or another.

If one isn't too preoccupied with religious sublimation, death may be circumvented with technology and healthcare. In the span of two centuries we have grown from a global life expectancy of twenty nine years to seventy two. A severed limb may now be replaced with a synthetic prosthetic. Advanced computer chips pulsing electronic frequencies can give quadriplegics motion again. We are even attempting a full cranial transplant all in the pursuit of extending our time on this whirling rock. Technology and healthcare have become a welfare to circumvent our inevitable decomposition, if only in a state to extend it for a few more years.

There will be a day when the methuselah are a realization, when seventy years relents to one hundred, to two hundred, to a human being so far derailed from its original, organic inception it is simply not human anymore. Who would elect to join their divine end game, and who would remain to watch the inevitable heat death of the universe?

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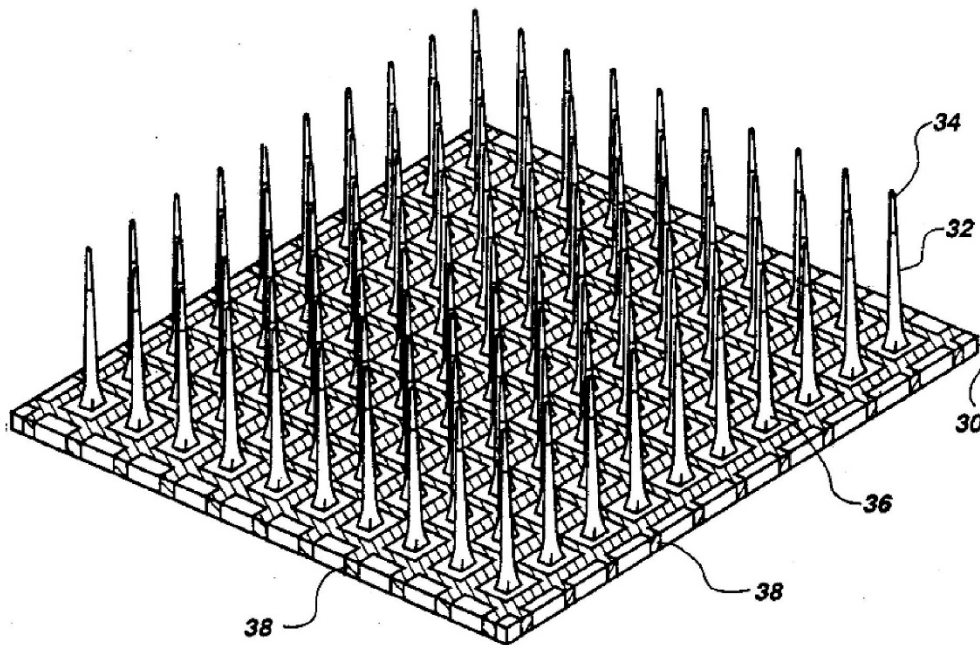
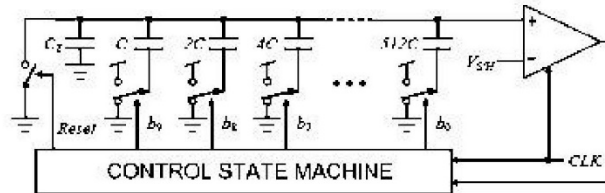
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Utah Ansammlung für die Verwendung der Neuronalen Überwachung

Utah Array for the use of neural monitoring



30: Silicon grid

(31): (cranium contact)

32: Alumina & Parylene-C encapsulation material

(33): (intracortical bridge)

34: Titanium microprobe with sputtered iridium oxide film

(35): (ganglion stimulus)

36: Silicon frame & housing

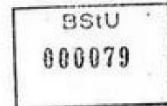
(37): (frequency anomaly)

38: Glass substrate moat

(39): (anima non grata)

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The german philosopher Martin Heidegger gave much focus and attention to the phenomenology of existence, that is the study of experience and consciousness as it relates to being. His seminal *Sein und Zeit*, or *Being and Time*, introduced the notion of Dasein, a higher order of being preoccupied with its own existence. The analytics of Dasein ultimately spirals into a confusing nuance of distinctions only philosophers can decipher without becoming dizzy, but an important distinction is concluded: a fundamental aspect of Dasein is its relationship to its own death, a Being-towards-death.

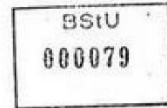
In Heidegger's eyes a full being, a Dasein, is not whole until enacting the one universal characteristic of all living beings: death. Yes, even our anticipation of death is a mockery of the actual event, an inevitable impossibility of the self because we do not know what entails death as it relates to the self. What we do have is the death of others, the endless wave of dissolution wrought from every step to every dropped bomb.

It is generally accepted that Heidegger did not embrace the Nazi party's overt racism when he endorsed and integrated the party's ideas of historical and cultural destiny into his own philosophy, though the pairing has created a long lasting problem addressing Heidegger's otherwise pivotal philosophical work. One wonders how his ideas of Dasein may have changed were he to confront in person the reality of gas chambers and genocide.

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Death is as easy as breathing,
as abundant as air.

But we've created a vacuum. We've held our breath. In the anxiety of our very being we strive to forfeit the fundamental thing that makes us Dasein. In our pursuit to continue living we have decomposed the very nature of being, derailed ourselves from the primordial phenomenon from which we have crawled out of. Our celebration of persisting life is no more a perversion of its very essence. Existentially, we have gaslighted ourselves.

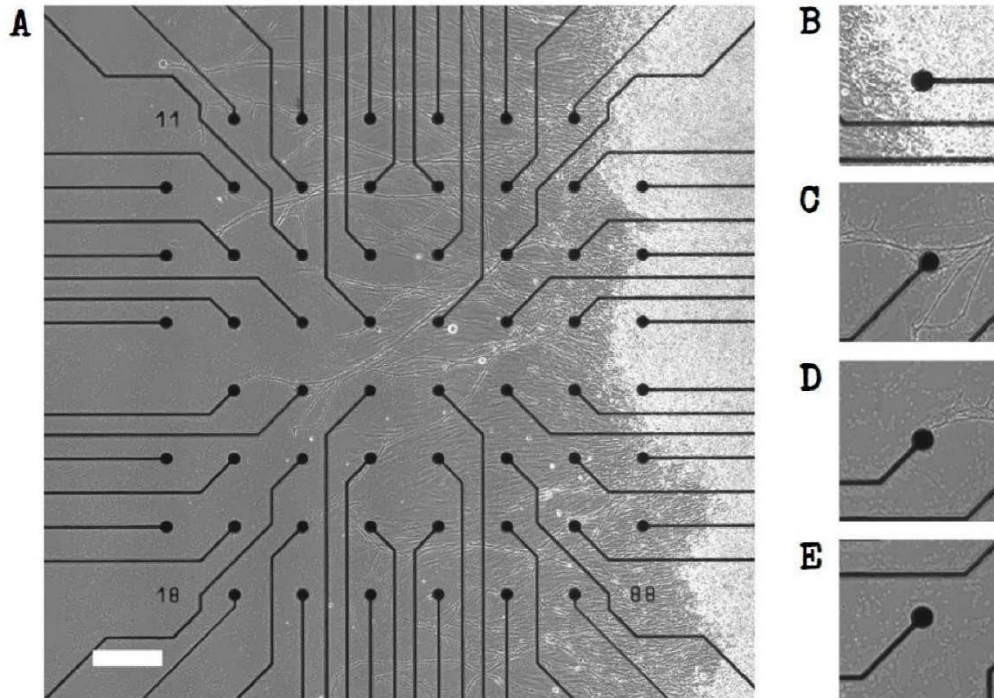
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Dasein-Diagramm

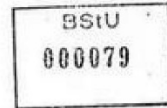


(A). Everything inherently “self” can be classified existentially extracellular, or materialistically intracellular, both visually defined as (B). An electrode visually classified as having contact with soma neurites, representative of either an external receiving (existential), or an internal expansion (material), yet (C). The presence of the electrode is also confirmation of Zersetzung, technology and biology in union, a brief array and impending (D). Disarray, visual degradation until (E). Complete dissociation.

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There is not one universality of being, but two. If death is inevitable then it is also inevitable that we will do anything to distract ourselves from it, or as the philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe said, "most people learn to save themselves by artificially limiting the content of consciousness."

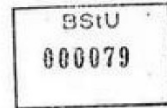
Otherwise known as

Zersetzung de Dasein.

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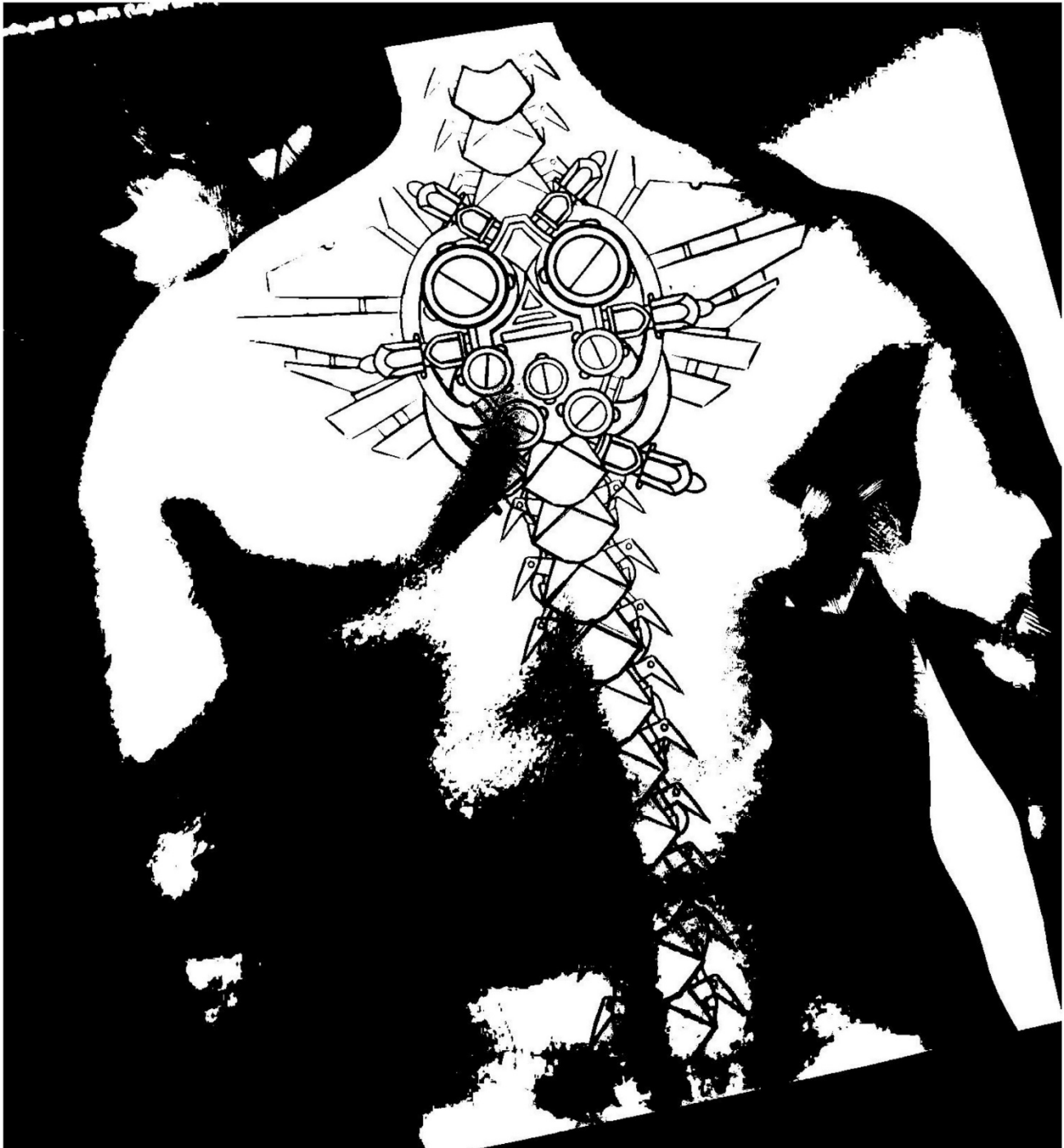
It should be known that Zapffe committed suicide, one of the few philosophical pessimists to enact the addage, "it would have been better to have not been born than to suffer life." This complicates the notion of Dasein, as Zapffe ultimately concluded the cycle of existence laid out by Heidegger. Zapffe too, enacted a favorable outcome of Zersetzung. A target's self-elimination was a desirable conclusion for the Stasi.

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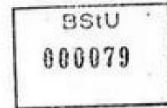
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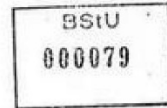


There are no spinal surgeries for lions.

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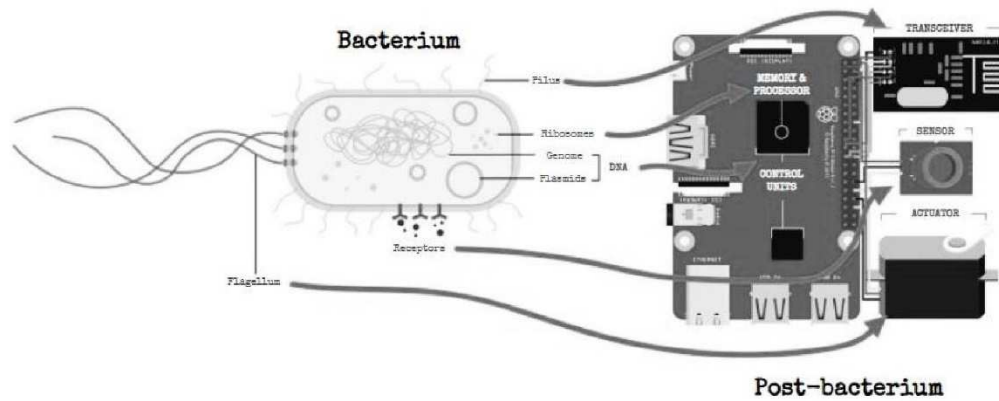
But suppose there was, what then? And suppose it was not just lions, but everything. The whole world not only mending but amending, not just repairing but enhancing, what then? Propagation unchecked, an entire world gone cancerous until tilting and spilling over. Everyone and everything experiencing Dasein. All while desperately attempting to avoid it. Decomposing all the same.

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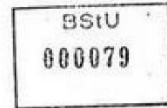
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This is all to say my spine, both cybernetic and organic, represents a greater problem. What was once a celebration of transcendence is now the symbolism of false progress. It is a demarcation, the boundary of human and post-human, Dasein and the intercession against it. It symbolizes the inconclusive circle of Being and attempting to continue to be, a march into a dark future where we have discarded ourselves in spite of ourselves.

Zersetzung de Dasein.

This I don't explain as I feel the faint, numbed sensation of a scalpel beginning to rip and tear.

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~~SECRET~~

Those That Walk That Do Not Walk

I

April 1999 The pressure washer sputtered to life and the leathery, middle-aged man blasted the side of the bridge in lazy, rhythmic passes. A sturdy wooden single-lane somehow used as two by the locals, the bridge arched over a waist-deep creek running through the western edge of Urosevac, Kosovo. The creek ran from a wide mountain valley south to the Sharr Mountains where they parted in a narrow escape into Macedonia. Soaked wood was revealed as the local worked the pressurized water in a scraping motion, stripping away the fresh yellow paint he had applied just two days prior.

Gerald watched him from the perimeter of the base, knowing the man was intent on stretching out the task to last all day. They each enjoyed a morning cigarette, prolonging even that out to its longest possible duration. The man would be stripping the paint for two more days, much to Gerald's initial surprise. One more day of pressure washing and another to buff the stubborn flecks of yellow away. Then it was another two days of painting, sometimes three. One day to dry, then a day of rest for what Gerald assumed was their local sabbath day. The same Sisyphean painting and stripping had been in motion for two weeks now since Gerald had arrived.

"Can you imagine we've been paying that guy for two months?" Sergeant Sheriff said, having somehow snuck up on Gerald. Sheriff's wide, rounded chin was turned upward as if pointing at the painter, it made him look even taller than the half foot he had on Gerald.

"The U.S. is paying for that?" Gerald asked, nodding at the bridge.

“NATO, at least. Same thing in this case. Been paying him weeks before we even got here. Employment program.”

“I think he’s just happy to get paid,” Gerald said. That sort of monotony would drive him insane, but he imagined the man preferred uselessness and boredom to what he may have endured here. A line of ash fell from Gerald’s cigarette and settled on his BDU fatigues. He wiped away the gray smear, disappointed his cigarette was spent so soon. It didn’t really matter now anyway. Sergeant Sheriff’s presence marked the end of his morning ritual.

“One way to bring the Albanians work,” Sheriff said, and frowned the way he did when he was thinking.

“He’s Albanian?”

“Bosniak, actually,” Sheriff replied, and eyed Gerald’s cigarette. “I think that’s what Darko said. I can’t tell, it’s not like they look any fuckin’ different.”

Gerald found the generalization hard to refute, but he wondered what his squad leader meant by “they.” To him, “they” were no different than the indistinguishable mix of the general caucasian back home. Darker or paler, taller or shorter, features hinting at an ethnicity now distantly removed. Sometimes Gerald could point out who was Albanian Kosovar, Bosniak, Serb, Macedonian, Croat, or Roma, but the distinctions were still too foreign and new for him to be accurate in any sense. It didn’t matter much to him, but for the painter and the other half dozen ethnicities that called the defunct Yugoslavia home, ethnic background meant everything. It meant mass graves or communal looting, vanished families and ethnic reclamation.

It was what they had been told, at least. He hadn’t seen any of the atrocities up close, not yet, but there wasn’t a night that went by that his company couldn’t hear the crack of automatic fire and distant, dull booms of artillery. The fighting would erupt sporadically from the northern

valley or mountains to the west. In the barracks tents the most eager of them would look around excitedly and hoped to respond, ushered into a rite of passage every green infantryman dreamed off. Combat. Their NCOs—a few of them Desert Storm veterans, to include Sergeant Sheriff—watched either in disdain or with that look of an amused father figure reminiscing about a long-past, naive bravado. His fireteam’s automatic gunner, Murphy, was the most obnoxious of the bunch.

“Ah hell,” he’d coo, as if some pleasant surprise had just fallen into his lap. He’d give Gerald a wicked grin that reminded him of Mother from *Full Metal Jacket*, all sadistic glee. “What’s the word, Vizitae? We gonna smash some Serbs today?”

“In the same tent as you. You’ll hear the order as soon as I do.”

Their two weeks in Urosevac, or Ferizaj to the Albanian Kosovars, hadn’t amounted to any combat action. Gerald couldn’t decide if that was a decidedly good or bad thing. From Fort Benning to Spangdahlem to the ass end of the Balkans, they were embodying the inalienable constant of the military. Hurry up and wait.

The general state of things upon their arrival had only amplified their anxieties. The regiment had flown into Macedonia first, convoyed up for a major push into Urosevac, and had passed an incredible refugee camp along the border. Gerald hadn’t seen anything like it before, an expanse of unorganized tents and colorful lean-tos churning with people. It hugged the highway system and spread beyond sight, people moving like unsettled, simmering liquid through the maze of temporary dwellings, fed by a steady stream of vehicles that poured out of Kosovo.

When they had approached Urosevac, they were first met by smoke pillars and glowing patches of fire that dotted the city. Cruise missiles had destroyed the most important hard targets

first, the Serbian military base one the first, much to the chagrin of the bloodthirsty grunts. Air Force F-15s and 16s had come in next and terrorized Serbian armor throughout the early spring to the point that they had withdrawn from Urosevac before any of the NATO forces showed up.

It had been an overcast day, distant bullets pattered like rain, dogs barking somewhere unseen while others lay bloated along the sides of the street. Altogether it was a bleak, dilapidated scene Gerald had expected of an eastern European conflict, but strangely familiar. American squalor had a different decor, framed in its surrounding opulence, but one sad, sagging building in the U.S. was just as telling as one in Kosovo.

Securing Urosevac had teased the promise of combat as well, and again the bloodthirsty were disappointed. British paratroopers had flooded the city before they had landed in Macedonia and pushed Slobodan Milosevic's forces out, who fled north and east. Gerald always wanted to meet other NATO troops, but Murphy or any other member of his fire team being present would be like that obnoxious little sibling that refused to keep their cool.

"Well," Sheriff said, both of them still watching the bridge painter. "Mounted patrol. We're pushing a little further today, LT says we're slowly expanding ops."

"I'm no Murphy, but it would be alright for a little change, Sergeant."

"I'll keep that in mind when I need some boots for a suck detail."

II

Patrols were both tense and dull and it was hard for Gerald to reconcile the difference, but he knew he felt both sensations simultaneously throughout each one. Generally, he and his fireteam—Jones, Murphy, and Bobbie, or as most of the platoon called him, B-15, on account of

his Thai surname, Bowornjaratpong—took the same paths throughout the week, while Sergeant Sheriff took the sister fireteam that made up their squad on the night patrols.

Their typical mounted patrol was slowly cruising in an unarmored Humvee through the streets of Urosevac, leaving their growing forward operating base at the city's eastern edge (or Tent City Uro as their company liked to call it, Camp Murphy on paper) and drove to either downtown or its surrounding districts. Downtown Urosevac resembled the conventional notion of a city, a few high-rise buildings and eastern bloc apartments, but most of the city was an unplanned patchwork of modern low rises and brick or stucco complexes choked by trees and unkempt patches of grass. Rubble protruded into the street where heavy fighting or bombing had occurred, and there wasn't a building they'd pass with shattered windows or bullet pock marks. As they patrolled the team was frequently confronted by the same groups of kids in their respective neighborhoods, all dingy faces and faded clothes, watching with both awe and glee as their vehicle rumbled past, sometimes singing what Gerald assumed were their local schoolhouse songs.

Often the fireteam would dismount on city patrols when their wide vehicles wouldn't fit through the narrow bystreets, two keeping watch while the other two—usually Bobbie and someone else, but never Murphy—roamed whatever neighborhood was their daily sector. Both Bobbie and Jones drew the most attention, one Thai and the other Black, a rarity for the Serbians, who were the only ethnicity left in the city; the Albanians, Bosniaks, and Roma had fled the brutal reprisals of the Serbian Armed Forces or the emboldened police and paramilitary gangs. That was beginning to reverse itself in the other order as well, the threat of Albanian reprisals upending Serbian Kosovars.

Otherwise, most of their dismounted patrols occurred outside the city, and they roamed the cool valley plain surrounding Urosevac. Just twice now they had scouted the mountain trails leading into the southeastern edge of the Sharr mountains, but only where UNPREDEP forces had cleared the anti-personnel mines. When refugees would emerge from the forested slopes, some in cars or farm carts drawn by horse, a good number on foot, he was astonished none of them had stepped on one. The heaviness of their gaze made him think a mine was perhaps a lesser sentence than what they had endured. Even still, the monotony of these daily jaunts was a dullness he could barely tolerate.

For security they switched around the order, time of day, and the starting point of the patrols to keep any Serbian forces guessing, but you didn't need to be a whiz kid to figure out anyone could see the actual routes were the same, and that became the opposed tension. Grunts like Jones and Murphy wouldn't put much thought into it, common sense giving that gut wrenching intuition, and he imagined they ultimately swallowed it down. Bobbie probably thought about their vulnerability, but would be wound up no matter the circumstance, ever the anxious and apologetic troop.

To escape the tug of these contradictory feelings, Gerald practiced an idle distraction as he thought about how he would ambush the team if he were the enemy. It wouldn't take much. Two small teams, one to draw fire and funnel them into a machine-gun kill zone. Some place in a congested street on the city's outskirts as they dismounted from the Humvee, or in the forests of the Sharr mountains, a killzone intersecting the same trails they'd take into the steep terrain. Over in a few minutes. He often visualized the intensity, the roar of automatic fire and the animated ragdoll of his fireteam as they were violated with a hail of small metal pieces. It made every narrow path a potential death trap, every advantageous terrain or defillade an enemy

position. It didn't help with his tension, but gave it a face. At least this way he had some control of it.

But there was no enemy to encounter, not yet. Their only encounters were dead livestock, goats or sheep caught in barbed wire or the victim of some hayway military ordinance. A kid lacerated with shrapnel after kicking a rock into an undetonated cluster bomb in the back alley, carried in a heap of blood soaked sheets for their medics to work on. Gerald had no idea if he had made it. In their first week a farmer had come to them on one of their patrols, his hands caught in a tractor grain cutter and mangled into what looked like deflated balloons of flesh dangling from broken forearms. They had handled a few disputes of theft in the city, only Serbian on Serbian crimes and never the looting of the routed and displaced. He found it despicable, but it seemed so prevalent and accepted by the locals he eventually had to turn a blind eye to it, especially when he watched a policeman waddle away as he struggled with a boxy television. Settling local disputes was fun the first few times, but Gerald realized there was no adjudication in being there to settle them. No one could talk to the other and it was all the same shit.

Teetering between these two axes was making everyone stir crazy, but a slight change to the routine was in store for them today. Both fire teams took their Humvees into the woods, what Sheriff described as a slow dip of the toe into a new phase of operations. A mile past the treeline on a worn dirty road they encountered what looked like an allied UNPREDEP vehicle, an unarmored jeep of European origin, and a group of thirty or so locals, half of whom were in hysterics. When they approached and dismounted from their vehicles, a British soldier wearing an emerald beret trotted over with a half hearted urgency.

“About time you Yanks showed up, Captain Edwards with you?”

“Negative,” Sergeant Sheriff said, and looked past the soldier to take in the scene. “He’s my company commander though. What’s going on here?”

“KLA unit was walking us through the mountains, came upon these poor souls. It appears to be a mass grave.”

Sheriff acknowledged with a near robotic shout of commands, first for their interpreter Darko, and then for their radioman O’Connor to get a hold of their platoon commander, Lieutenant Vick. Gerald repeated the order to his team and they set up a perimeter several dozen yards away when a group of Albanians in black military fatigues showed up, who he guessed were the KLA. There was a sincere thankfulness in their otherwise disaffected expressions, each of them taking turns to shake each American’s hands.

“They say they are thankful for the Americans, and that you can see what Milosevic is doing to the Albanians,” Darko repeated in accented English.

“They’re happy about this?” Murphy asked, and walked past them toward his defensive position up the road.

“So we can see war crimes, you dip shit,” Jones said, following close behind.

Bobbie looked more worried than usual, eyes darting to the crowd of wailing civilians that obscured whatever scene had engendered the anguish. “Corporal Vizitae, can I take point from where we came?”

“Well, it’s not really taking point if it’s the rear, but sure thing, Bobbie.”

He left hurriedly as the KLA commander, a tall, gangly man with a hawkish nose and impressive mustache, waved them over to the crowd. Sergeant Sheriff sighed and obliged him; he, the Englishman, Darko, and Gerald approached together. They rounded a hedge into a narrow clearing where two gradual slopes met, several of the KLA ushering the family members forward

with held hands and palms pressed against their backs. One of the KLA soldiers was at the nearest body, and turned it over as a distraught elderly man looked on. The victim was frozen in an unnatural pose, arms bent awkwardly. The corpse was wide eyed, mouth ajar as if he inhaled harshly in his final moment. They must have shot him suddenly.

“So far they’ve found about twelve,” the Englishman said. “Looks like they rounded up the men from a fleeing village. A few others aren’t accounted for, KLA chaps are trying to figure out from which one.”

“Jesus.” It was all Gerald could muster, and watched the KLA hoist another stiff body towards a growing row of corpses nearby. All around them people wailed, some so horrified they simply collapsed to a squat and covered their faces. An oppressive grief hung heavy in the air, the cool spring wind somehow gone and leaving a stagnant energy. Gerald didn’t know what to think, how to act. How does one conduct themselves in this sort of scene? Condolences meant nothing, especially with a language barrier. He hoped his grimace was enough to show his sincerity.

By some luck, Sergeant Sheriff had latex gloves and he and Gerald helped haul a few of the corpses from the brush. It hadn’t been the first body Gerald had carried, a field accident with live fire had killed a soldier from another platoon. He hadn’t been squeamish then, but his body hadn’t set to rigor mortis and this man’s rigidity made his mouth water as if he was about to puke. Knowing the difference between accident and intentional murder eroded his expected indifference.

Lieutenant Vick arrived soon, one of the few times responsibility was delegated up the chain of command. It was their unit’s first mass grave found and he’d have to write some sort of incident debrief. It would eventually go straight up to NATO reports and a sterile intelligence

cable recycled until even President Clinton himself would read it, though by then it would be just a faceless number in a long list of similar tragedies. Gerald tried not to dwell on that fact.

While they arranged the victims in the low grass others combed the brush for more bodies. A woman constantly hounded Darko, speaking rapidly and waving her hands at the corpses.

“Darko,” Gerald said. “Is she alright?”

“Alright, sir.” He sighed and repeated the same phrase tiredly to her. It didn’t seem to deter her insistence.

“What’s she saying?”

“She says the bodies must return to the village. That we cannot take them.”

“Tell her I’m sure we won’t.”

“Not so fast, corporal,” Lieutenant Vick chimed in. “They might have to go to Urosevac first.”

Darko repeated that before Gerald could stop him, and the woman erupted into a heightened level of dismay. She looked more terrified than offended, and her tone changed from a persistent indignance to pleading. Lieutenant Vick eventually asked one of the KLA to escort her away from the bodies, and she yelled at Darko as she rounded the path that led back to the road.

“Hey Darko, what was she so mad about?”

““Super-stis-em’.”

“You going to tell me more?”

“She’s from a mountain village, old place with old tales. Lots of fighting, so the dead must have special care or—”

“Corporal,” Lieutenant Vick said, “rejoin your fire team, I want eyes half a click up that road, hooah?”

“Hooah, sir.”

“Darko, stay with me,” the Lieutenant added.

Gerald called Bobbie over and joined Murphy and Jones, who were predictably arguing over some dumb shit he didn’t have or want any context to. They scouted their intended trail, now a futile attempt to spot any long gone perpetrators. By the end of the day everyone involved convoyed back to their forward operating base, even the KLA. When asked the next day, Lieutenant Vick explained the KLA had heard of a group of Serbian paramilitaries hiding in the mountains and terrorizing the locals, so the rebel commander was invited back to help develop a plan of action. It teased the promise of combat, and that seemed enough to boost morale. Gerald was relieved more than hopeful, happy enough to know something new and potentially exciting was around the corner, but he couldn’t help but fixate on what the old woman was pleading to Darko, and he made it a point to remind himself to ask the interpreter the next time he saw him. His curiosity quickly faded away, lost in the revolving focus of tasks, orders, and the endless cycle of patrols.

III

Of all the memories and instances in Gerald’s short enlistment, what happened in the barracks stuck with him the most. At Benning, there had been the ill-planned Vaseline wars, the entire barracks slicked with it and private Todd, the mastermind of the prank, surfing away on a foam skimboard as their First Sergeant desperately tried, and failed, to get back to his feet and

chase him down. At Fort Lewis, a party in the Air Force dormitories was broken up by a picket line of officers and senior NCOs, and the ensuing chaos was something out of an 80s frat house movie. Naked soldiers and airmen jumped from second story balconies and sprinted into the darkness, people hid in locked closets, under beds, even in the ceiling. A haul of contraband was displayed in CQ for weeks after, arranged on tables was a collection of booze, drugs, sex toys, a disassembled motorcycle, a pet baby crocodile, and all manner of prohibited fun, the “war spoils” of their so-called leadership.

When their unit had arrived at Kaiserslautern in Germany, there had been plenty of shenanigans off base as well. Just outside their base was Germany’s best attempt at a honky tonk bar, George Strait and Brooks & Dunn their favorite country acts, and it was the local haunt for mature German women to pick up young, dumb GIs for some casual fun. Espinoza from their sister company had snuck in a rather forward and eager woman in her forties, who after finishing her business with Espinoza solicited other men in the barracks. Instead of being mad, he followed her from door to door with a guitar, strummed it drunkenly and wailed his attempt at mariachi music as he serenaded the soldier inside. She found it funny, giggling and slapping him on the shoulder playfully, and Gerald remembered the way her smile beamed at the attention she sought and was happily given. Gerald had wandered in after a night of his own at a techno club, and caught her leaving one room while Espinosa tended a bottle of German beer as he leaned against the wall. She approached him with a smooth, feline like gait. When she wrapped her arms around him he could smell the musk of sex and sweat, and her breath was tinged with sweet gin.

She said something in German he couldn’t understand and leaned in for a kiss, but Gerald shrugged her off and looked at Espinosa questioningly, prompting him and the woman to laugh.

At first he was disgusted watching her saunter down the hall looking for another partner, but the more he watched the more a nagging thought whispered. Why should he be disgusted? Espinoza had put it in a less elegant, but still accurate, way.

“Don’t yuck someone’s yum, Vizitae.”

“You’re not bothered by it?”

“Chaplain Vizitae, folks! Hell no, man. *She’s not mine, and I’m not hers,*” he said, still strumming his out of tune strings and singing out the last part of his explanation.

Something clicked in Gerald then, an epiphany, a broadening of perspective. It was unformed and raw, more a sensation than a revelation, but it was the start of a realization that his upbringing and perspective wasn’t as learned and worldly as he had once imagined. In the end, Espinoza was busted and faced military trial on a bogus prostitution charge. He ultimately escaped a harsher punishment with loss of rank and reduction of pay, now forever known as Big Daddy Spins. Worldliness wasn’t the Army’s business; Structure, order, and killing was.

So when it came to fun in the barracks at Tent City Uro, the soldiers had to be inventive. Not the brightest the Army had to offer, their first official pastime was a wrestling bracket with an impressive amount of betting. The rules were becoming more outrageous each day to mix it up; wearing full MOPP 4 chemical protective gear, blindfolded with earmuffs on and starting at opposite ends of the tent (it was called the Hellen Keller fighting league), tied to each other and pepper sprayed. It would have lasted longer and ventured into more dangerous territory until one troop had dislocated his shoulder and few fingers, an incident Vizitae had to begrudgingly dismiss with a fake alibi to avoid a company wide punishment.

And that’s when their special game was invented. Jones and “George” Andrade from second platoon were the first two to come up with it, and with a smuggled bottle of Serbian

vodka and the platoon's boredom the official "rules" were born. It was a lot like the college game Kings Cup, though the drinking element was dependent on what they could smuggle from the city. For that Darko usually came through, though one time he had brought a spoiled cask of sherry and has since not been able to live it down. Most of the time it was the most popular liquor in the Balkans, Rakija, a fruity concoction that was different, the closest anyone could compare it to was Schnapps had a baby with vodka, but everyone quickly grew to love it.

The rules were simple, you drew from a standard playing card deck with each number and suit a different rule. No traditional kings cup rules were allowed, so they had "the scroll," a list of all made up rules. Gerald was proud to say that the six card was his doing, saying Bobbie's last name five times fast. Not the hardest or most fun, but it always gave Bobbie both grief and admiration, and it was worth seeing the short, stout Thai man turn beet red. And he wasn't without his own antics as well, not always the butt of the joke but their endearing, quirky brother-in-arms.

"Bobbie, what are you going to do when you grow up?" Jones asked, the four of them playing the game, Kosovo Kards the working title but still open to a better name.

"Work at mom's restaurant," Murphy said. "Thai fried rice, right B-15?"

"Shut up Murphy, like you won't be an assistant manager at Mickey-Ds in some podunk Tennessee shithole," Jones fired back.

"Texas, and it's shift manager to you, *fry specialist*."

"I don't know," Bobbie said, "use the G.I. bill. I'm thinking accounting."

That riled up everyone in earshot, snickers and quips fired off between shots of rakija.

"Jesus, Bobbie come on," Gerald said, and pulled a card. Eight of clubs. "Shit."

“Eight’s a spank!” Murphy yelled, and the barracks echoed the call with satisfaction. It was the first for the night, and corporal Humbert from Charlie squad found the cutting board turned paddle for the deed. They had a machinist in the motorcade drill holes so that when someone swung it there was an intimidating whistle, and the imprint on bare skin had a spatula like bruising.

“Who’s the lucky one?” someone asked out of view.

“Vizitae!”

“Aw shit!”

“Corporal V, baby!”

“Alright, mister accountant,” Gerald said. “This is your one shot.” Bobbie was never picked, so he figured why not make the occurrence interesting.

“Bullshit, let me do it,” Murphy said, to which Gerald dismissed with a hefty string of curses.

“Give him the muay thai slap, Bobbie!” Someone yelled.

Gerald bent over, hands braced on the railing of his bed with his ass bare. The whole barracks attentively watched when someone entered their tent in a rush, walking in on almost two platoon’s worth of soldiers, one bent over with his back side exposed and another with a large wooden paddle raised as if to swing it like a baseball, frozen and staring back at him.

“Uh,” the soldier said, no one they were familiar with.

“We’re fuckin’ busy, dude,” Murphy said, and everyone remained straight faced.

“Who’s NCOIC?” he asked, meaning who was in charge. Everyone grumbled, knowing it meant something was wrong or someone was needed.

“Check the NCO tent,” Andrade said.

“Yeah I went there,” the stranger said. “Staff Sergeant Beckham wants a squad leader to handle this. I just need a squad leader and someone else. That’s what he said.”

They had a protocol for this. The least drunk one was the sucker to get it, and Gerald had been babysitting a shot of rakija for over an hour. It was a good game tonight and he had been lucky with his card draws, but now the night was turning sour. Everyone on the fireteam knew it was going to be Gerald, and they looked at him pensively.

“Come on, V,” Jones said. “It’s not you.”

Gerald took his shot and looked around. Everyone suddenly shied away from his gaze. “I’d like a volunteer before a victim.”

Otto from Sergeant Sheriff’s team stood up, not out with the rest of his team on night patrol due to a bad case of the flu he had been recovering from. He had just today been released from sick bay.

“I’ll go,” he said.

Gerald thanked him. He pulled up his pants to gear up, but Murphy stopped him.

“Hey,” Murphy said. “You pulled a card. Eight’s a spank.”

Jones already had the paddle in hand and gave it back to Bobbie. “Rules, corporal.”

“With friends like these,” Gerald sighed, and pulled down his pants again. Bobbie, it turned out, was surprisingly strong.

VI

“Do you believe in dreams, Corporal?”

Vizitae studied Otts over his shoulder while the runner drove them into downtown Urosevac, not knowing his angle and feeling like he was about to be trapped in another “profound” grunt revelation. These were not unlike the tried and true stoner thoughts. It hadn’t been the first time he’d been on the receiving end of one, but by now refuting the harebrained ideas had lost its luster. Even their driver, the runner who had snatched them from the barracks, looked quizzical under its suddenness. The city passed by through their windows, power returned and the streets lit with enough light to make out alleyways and districts. It was beginning to be more of a city the longer they stayed.

“I believe the mind has to work itself out. Our fears, anxieties. All the stimulus it filters out so we don’t go crazy.”

“I used to have these dreams as a kid,” Otts went on, “Like stupid stuff. Running into those hanging racks in the grocery aisles. Things that would happen at school. And a lot of the time it would happen, just as I dreamed it.”

“My grandma is a psychologist,” the driver added. “Talked about how dreams can be linked. Some student of Freud came up with it.”

“So why are you bringing it up?” Gerald asked.

A wimpy car horn sounded out and grabbed their attention. Otts and Vizitae tightened their grips on their M-16s and looked out their respective windows. The culprit was a rusted out Yugo parked with the headlights on, its occupants waving. They collectively untensed as their driver ignored them and continued on.

“When I got the flu a week ago I started having those dreams again. Hadn’t had them in years, but now it’s near constant.”

“What do you dream?” the driver asked.

“Sometimes I’m driving, just like this. Other times I’m in the mountains and I’m terrified. It’s like a whole crowd of people in the dark but they’re all gasping and wailing, but I know they want me. Want me to be part of them.”

“Fever dreams?” Gerald asked, a bit unsettled by the imagery.

“Well, I’m still having them.”

“Alright, we’re here.”

The road opened into a wide five-way intersection, signs of past fighting pocked in the brick and mortar. The driver stopped in front of a narrow apartment building wedged between two of the intersection’s roads, a massive concrete slab with run-off that stained the windows and sharp edges a soot like color.

“Our checkpoint is across the way there.” The driver pointed at the intersection, then pointed at the building in front of the Humvee. “That’s our problem in there.”

As they approached the door the distant echo of a screaming man resounded from the halls. A few occupants were huddled just inside the door, who Gerald guessed tried to distance themselves as much as possible without having to feel the chill spring air.

“And you couldn’t check this out yourselves because?” Gerald asked.

“Can’t leave, Corporal,” the driver said. “Not enough manpower at the checkpoint and the patrols are all tied up at the moment.”

“Interpreter?”

“None, but we have a guy waiting just inside and he speaks some English. Said the guy is shooting at NATO troops inside.”

Gerald and Otts exchanged puzzled expressions before they opened the door. The looks given were a spectrum between disgust and relief. One gaunt man in a wool coat and ivy cap hurriedly stomped out a cigarette as more yelling echoed within.

“Please, do not shoot,” he said.

“We’re not going to shoot you, chief,” Otts said.

“No, do not shoot him. He is being punished by domovoy.”

The last word caused the other residents to scold him in their language. The crack of AK fire thundered through the halls, everyone ducked, and Gerald readied his rifle.

“Get on comms, try to find Sergeant Sheriff and give him the sitrep, tell him Corporal Vizitae is requesting his patrol.” He looked at the Serbian man and nodded down the hallway.

“Alright, you’re coming with us. Let’s talk him down.”

The driver was quick to leave the building.

The resident led them to a staircase and they ascended as tactically as they could, and at the third story the man stopped and pulled out a series of white candles. He pushed one into the ground a few inches from the side of the door and smashed down the base to stick to the concrete, then lit the candle. He licked his finger and tested the air, as if to check for a breeze. Beyond the door were footsteps and agitated muttering.

“What are you doing?”

“When domovoy is angry he will blow out candles. I must show you. Is there a breeze?”

“Is this guy for real?” Otts asked.

“What is domovoy?” Gerald asked.

“House spirit. Mostly good, but can turn angry. You have turned him angry by coming here, in Kosovo, and he shows the soldiers to the man. He fears they are those who walk that do not walk.”

Everything about the scenario seemed ridiculous, but the man’s sincerity demanded Gerald take it seriously. It was matter-of-fact, but he could feel something off, an intuition tensing his shoulders. Otts looked worried now, and the three of them stared at the wavering flame of the candle. All at once the flame danced as if caught in a wind and was snuffed. The man screamed again and shot a round at some invisible foe as soon as the candle flame had extinguished.

“What the hell was that?” Otts peaked into the door’s windows before Gerald pulled him away.

“Domovoy,” the Serbian man said.

“Alright, tell him we’re here. We just want to help.”

The man reached for the door handle but Gerald stopped him and told him to shout through the door. They exchanged words, the man inside desperate and panicked.

“He sees Americans in the rooms, he thinks they are ghosts. Those that walk th—”

“Tell him no Americans have died, okay? Is he mentally disturbed?”

“He is a drunk.”

“Well tell him we’ll have some Rakija together, just don’t shoot us, alright?”

“Corporal.”

The man relayed Gerald’s words. When Gerald turned to Otts he was void of color, staring wild eyed down a maintenance hallway that led away from the stairwell. Gerald followed his gaze and saw a figure barely outlined in the darkness. An old man, ancient and bald, a

yellowed beard hanging a foot from his chin. His skin was dark but Gerald couldn't tell if it was the lack of light or an unnatural charcoal hue, and his eyes glinted white. The resident signed a cross and muttered something, his tone pleading. Gerald reached for his flashlight and the old man retreated further into the darkness, bare feet scampering on concrete.

“Who the hell was that?”

“Domovoy,” the Serbian said, and muttered something again, not as bewildered as the two American soldiers. Otts quivered and he wrung a hand into his fatigue pants. Through the doors the troubled man cried out again. He sounded exhausted.

“He said he will see you,” the man said.

“Can you go first? Just so he feels safe.” Gerald meant it, but he felt ashamed to ask the man to brave danger before the soldiers did, and the man's expression seemed to share his sentiment. Slowly, as he pushed open the door, Gerald slid his boot inside to catch it from swinging shut.

Words were exchanged, and after a moment's pause Gerald asked Otts if he was ready, who answered an emphatic no. “Too bad,” Gerald said, and grabbed one of the two doors. Otts hesitantly grabbed the other. As calmly as they could, both soldiers opened the doors and stepped in, the hallway surprisingly bright. A faulty overhead bulb flickered above.

The man saw Gerald first and then Otts, and he seemed to recognize something, now horrified. He raised his AK as Gerald protested, took aim at Otts and fired. Gerald returned fire instinctively, let off three rounds that sent the man collapsing backwards. Otts sprang from a crouch as Gerald ran over to the grounded man and kicked the AK away from him. The man stared blankly at the ceiling, moaned weakly, or tried to, a wet gurgle coming from where one of

the bullets had punctured a lung. Gerald tried to apply pressure, not knowing what to do in the moment, but the man's spasmodic breathing faded quickly as he died.

"Fuck! Otts?"

"I think I'm good."

Their third mouthed something Gerald didn't bother to focus on. Instead he got to his feet and stared at the slick, still warm blood on his hands. He had killed someone, his first. He was mad at the man, ashamed at himself, and the blood was still warm and it wasn't like the time at Benning with the accident, or in grade school when his leg was punctured by a tree branch and blood had spilled all over him. It was heavy, still warm, and no matter how hard he wiped his hands on his fatigues there was still some left.

He ordered Otts to stay up there so he could get help, but Otts pleaded not to be left alone, so Gerald made him go out to find the checkpoint and radio in an available patrol. While he and the Serbian waited in the hallway, a pool of blood seeped from the stilled man, Gerald tried his best not to look at the body. The Serbian, eerily calm, walked past the dead man and lit another candle in the hallway.

"What are you doing that for?"

"If the domovoy is still angry—" A swift flicker of the flame and the light blew out again. Gerald tried to convince himself it was just a breeze, a draft pulled through the apartment building. He tried not to think of the old man with the charcoal skin.

"Where did he see the soldiers?"

"The rooms, the walls. The domovoy showed him bad fortunes."

"What does it have to do with the soldiers?"

The man just shook his head and pulled off his hat. They both sat on the floor of the hallway for a while in silence. The Serbian kept any of the other residents from gawking at the scene, both of them jumping at the footsteps they heard down the hall.

It felt like Gerald was there all night by the time Sergeant Sheriff arrived, but his watch only claimed an hour. His first words were, “You look better than Otts.”

“Yeah, well he didn’t kill the guy.”

“Still, the boy’s in hysterics. Keeps saying he saw himself on the way out.”

Gerald didn’t say anything to that, couldn’t, not even when they drove back to base and the outline of helmeted soldiers watched him from the dim windows.

V

Lieutenant Vick first offered a break from the patrols and then even a little time off duty in Macedonia, but it was all the result of misreading Gerald’s quietness after the domovoy incident in the apartment building. They thought he was shaken up from his first kill, and he was, but more so from the strange man, the candles, and the silhouettes in the windows he still couldn’t explain. Gerald would replay the events in his mind’s eye but stopped himself from trying to rationalize any of it. Everything was a mental dead end.

Sergeant Sheriff pulled him aside one day, one of the few sunny days that had graced them with the faintest kiss of warmth, and offered him a large Russian beer as he led them to a quiet spot among the rows of humvees deep in the camp’s vehicle motor pool.

“Bodies are one thing,” he said, and peeled the label from his bottle between large gulps. “I remember in Kuwait we were clearing an annex of the airport and Saddam’s guard had

rounded up a bunch of Kuwaiti officers and lined them up at the edge of an empty pool.

Executed them, firing squad style. They had been sitting in the bottom for days, you know, in the heat. It was fucking awful. But it wasn't the same as my first kill."

Gerald wanted to protest, wanted to tell him about the domovoy, who he still suspected could have been an old man, but he thought it would be wrong to interrupt the sanctity of his Sergeant's confession.

"He was a boy," he said. "Hell, fifteen maybe? Shot his jaw clean off, mangled the poor kid. He just, uh, he didn't stop. Not after the warning shots. Just kept driving towards us and we let the .50 CAL rip. Poor boy was in pieces. Everyone in the car was." He finished his beer and folded the label, staring at it as if it was a puzzle to solve. Gerald decided he needed to finish his beer as well and gulped it down.

"Anyway, I found out what helped me best was to leave thinking about it until after it was all done. Some old hat from Vietnam taught me that, Master Sergeant Teeke. He said 'you're lucky it isn't every day all day, when it's as easy as breathing.'"

"I'll be fine, Sergeant," Gerald said. He saw his reflection in one of the humvee windows that surrounded them. Gerald looked the polar opposite of Sergeant Sheriff, lean and angular, his straight black hair blending into the window. When he was in thought Gerald looked worried, and it hadn't noticed how apparent that was until staring at himself now.

"I know you'll be fine. LT is working up an award for you."

Gerald scoffed at that. "Come on."

"I know, I know. But it'll make E-5 easy, and the unit needs more NCOs. You've got a good head for it."

"Did you see anything weird in Iraq? Anything you couldn't explain?"

Sergeant Sheriff stared at him for a moment. His lips bulged as he licked his teeth. “When it’s all over, Vizitae. Ask me again when we’re back in Germany.” It was the most vulnerability he had ever seen in the Sergeant, who was quick to mask it.

The rest of the squad had varied responses to the apartment incident. Bobbie, as always, was overly sympathetic. Murphy was jealous, and Jones teased him whenever it was brought up. Otts’ fever had returned, now developed into meningitis, and he was shipped to a field hospital in Macedonia. With his departure went any clarification on ‘seeing himself’ in the apartment when Gerald sent him away for help.

What Otts left behind were his nightmares, recurring images of damp earth and rain choked woods. Gerald would dream of voices unseen. They cried out for him, hungry for him. And amidst them was something else, old and terrible, compelled to gather not just Gerald but all the dead rotting in the earth, and when he realized he was one of the dead wandering the forest he would wake up damp and gasping in the barracks.

“Losing your shit, V,” Murphy said one night, when Gerald woke him up at the end of one of his night terrors.

“At least I have something to lose, Murph.”

“Yeah, fair enough,” and he turned over, asleep almost instantly.

Vizitae spent the nights retracing the sequential path of his life that led to now. He could barely remember life in D.C., but the pain of Detroit scarred his memory. Like the decayed city around him, Vizitae had felt patchworked and rusted. There was always something missing in their home, usually one utility or another, but their shitty house was cheap and his mother didn’t seem to care enough to move anywhere else. She thought she made up for it with camping trips

and cross country jaunts into the American west, but she had just dragged Gerald around in her own escapism.

By fifteen he lived with close friends to stay in his highschool, his mother vanished in a haze of cocaine and pain pills. Despite his good grades there was no way to afford college, but the military had been a way out to an otherwise dead end. He didn't know his mother was even alive until he graduated from basic training. She had surprised him at ceremonies, a shadow of her former self. At least she had gained some weight.

Their relationship now was an arms length affair and that was fine by him. All of those moments led to now, to this place he could make little sense of. Being stationed in Germany had made the world smaller, understandable. It had been the most fun he'd ever experienced. But Kosovo reminded him there were corners left unexplored. It's amending mystery wasn't comforting, nor was what little familiarity he had in memories. Life would continue to be one discovery after another until something comfortable stuck. Maybe he was destined to burn out like his mother. Maybe that would keep him in the Army until retirement. These were the things that lulled him to sleep each night.

Their day to day remained the same so far, only tinged with the reality of the gruesomeness of Kosovo. Their time so far was a prelude, an opening act, and what came next started with an impromptu call for Gerald to show up at the command center. Lieutenant Vick, Sergeant Sheriff, and their company commander Captain Edwards waited tensely, around them every squad leader from their platoon and a collection of Air Force officers, a few of them in crimson berets he hadn't seen before.

Lieutenant Vick waved a hand at one of the bereted airmen and introduced him as, "Tech Sergeant Skiles from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron. He's a combat controller needing our

help.” They shook hands and exchanged nods. Skiles, burly and mustachioed, looked more like an army ranger than an airman.

“Sergeant Skiles needs to acquisition a Yugoslav radar tower in the mountains, could help the air campaign raining hell on Milosevic.”

“And give your boys some close air support, if needed,” Skiles added.

The cluster of airmen and soldiers opened up to show a large topographical map on the mission planning table, all manners of military chits marking the congested, waxy paper. The plan was fairly simple. Assault the radar tower while they escorted the Air Force radar technicians to the site. Intelligence expected it to be manned by Serbian forces and they expected a fight. Their squad would have the embedded airmen as they advanced in a direct assault while the rest of the platoon would flank the radar station from the east, and their sister platoon would be on a western road that led up to the station in an attempt to draw fire and movement away from the tower. The operation would begin before dawn. They had only the rest of the day and night to prepare.

Vizitae insisted the rest of his team try to sleep before it all began, but everyone was too excited to even attempt it. Cigarettes and coffee helped, though the real thief of sleep was their anticipation. By three A.M. both platoons were geared up and staged near their vehicles, the combat controllers in woodland facepaint and the radar technicians jittery and nervous.

Riding at night was a comfort, but only within the cab of the Humvee swaddled in what little warmth the engine could lend. Its vibration was soothing. Two direct paths led to the radar station, both winding, mountainous roads. When they reached the fork that split before the foot of the mount, every vehicle turned off their headlights and the humvees crawled in darkness as

dismounted troops guided them without night vision. The moon was nearly full but its light was swallowed by overcast, which made movement an arduous, torturously slow task.

The combat controllers—Sergeant Skiles now accompanied by another operator—occasionally spoke to an unseen aircraft overhead, who relayed a consistent lack of enemy movement, but there was a new problem.

“Enemy armor,” Skiles said, listening in on his radio.

“Numbers?” Sergeant Sheriff asked.

“One tank. We keep moving.”

And they did, traversing the thick forest hunched over and alert. Their earlier patrols had already revealed the eerie stillness of the woods, the lack of birds or animals and its uncanny chill, but in the dwindling hours of night it took on a new stasis. Just over a kilometer away, the slope of the peak already laborious to scale, the controllers stopped their squad and motioned for both Sergeant Sheriff and Gerald over.

“F-16 overhead is watching the Serbs wake up, they see the bait platoon. Once we strike the enemy armor we scale up. Your boys ready?”

“As ever,” Sergeant Sheriff replied. Gerald looked back at the radar technicians. They were terrified, and Bobbie beside them shared their sentiment with long, despondent stares into the gloomy forest. Gerald ordered Jones to keep close to the airmen, and then they waited.

Minutes drew out, the stillness revealing the quickened thump of their hearts. Every sound caused whiplash as each hyper alert person focused in on the potential threat. Each time it turned out to be nothing, an acorn knocking on wood as it fell, the breeze scraping branches against each other.

Sergeant Skiles abruptly hand signaled them to move and they scaled the elevation as a firefight rang out far away to their left. The other combat controller yelled into his radio mic when the first explosion rumbled through the earth.

“That’s on personnel,” he yelled, and then another blast thundered ahead of them. “They just busted the armor, let’s go!”

They were three hundred yards from the treeline at the summit. Murphy called contact and a machine-gun roared to life. Gerald dove to the ground, damp soil and rotting leaves pushed against his face, infiltrating his nostrils, wood cracking as tree trunks caught the incoming rounds. Gerald crawled to a tree that leaned away from the slope at a questionable angle and held up by a trio of boulders, and returned fire up the slope. He couldn’t see what he was shooting at, and after a few bursts slumped behind his cover. He looked around to spot each member of the squad and get a read on the terrain, what little he could see in the dark. The tracer rounds from the machine-gun arced in brilliant green streaks as they raced through the trees, and he couldn’t help but find it beautiful to watch.

Jones and the radar technicians took cover behind a shallow cliff held by tree roots. One of the technicians repetitively pulled the charging handle of his jammed rifle with no success, and he looked like he was going to spiral into panic. The faintest tease of dawn peaked from beyond the summit, the entire hill erupted in combat. Shouts were drowned out by the patter of bullets and the long, screaming bursts of machine-gun fire. Someone called out a live grenade and a loud detonation echoed several seconds after, the fragmentation clattering amongst the tree trunks. Gerald chanced a move and sprinted over to the radar technicians, and demanded the one fumbling with his rifle to hand it over.

“You’re safe here,” he said over the fire. “Take your time.” He scooped the offending round out of the ejection port to work out the jam, doing it slowly to show the airman. The other technician was folded over, no attempt to fight back. Gerald handed over the rifle as the combat controllers appeared out of nowhere.

“I can’t see anything,” Jones said. Gerald couldn’t either, but there was no point agreeing with him.

“Get your automatic gunner to draw fire. Keep them busy, corporal,” Skiles said, and he and the other operator disappeared east into the woods. Gerald yelled for Murphy to let loose, who was further west and lying prone behind a fallen tree trunk. His machine-gun spat an intimidating volley of lead up the hill.

Jones and Gerald periodically stood up from behind the cliff and fired upwards at their unseen assailants. The cacophony and twilight made it hard to spot anything, but Gerald did his best to follow the tracer's start point and aim at the flash-bursts ahead of him. The airmen hid behind their defilade, only occasionally courageous enough to mimic Gerald and Jones to fire back. For several minutes they exchanged fire, but all at once the Serbian machine-gun stopped. Ahead the combat controllers yelled an all clear, and the squad ran up to them as quickly as the terrain allowed.

Three bodies were slumped over each other in a C-shaped dug out reinforced with sandbags, blood everywhere, and Sergeant Skiles was covered in it. Murphy was the last to join them. He set down his M249 and rolled over the top body on the pile.

“What the hell are you doing, Murph?” Sergeant Sheriff asked.

“I wanna see if I got one.”

“One of them was shot already when we reached them,” Sergeant Skiles said. “Snuck up on the rest.”

He pulled out his radio and spoke to some unseen authority, the rest of the squad scanning the buildings several dozen yards to their north past the treeline. One of the body’s heads was bent at an extreme angle, the white of bone exposed in his heap of a body, all of the squad unsettled by both Murphy’s trophy hunting and whatever fate their imaginations conjured for the dead soldiers. Gerald had to force himself to look away.

“I’m claiming it,” Murphy said. “I know I had one lined up. I killed this damn guy.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gerald breathed.

“Do not say this,” Darko said. He looked offended.

“We’re already sinning with our boots on,” Sergeant Sheriff replied. “Jesus already takin’ note. Murph, grab your damn weapon.”

“I did! I’m sure of it.”

“Fuckin’ psycho,” Jones said, and shook his head as he followed the two combat controllers to the break in the trees. The radar station sat on the slope’s leveled peak, its narrow metal tower looming far overhead. The complex was illuminated by perimeter flood lights, what Gerald thought was the rising sun a few moments ago, and the rest of the Serbians manning the buildings emerged with hands up, a total of five. Skiles called for Darko to help communicate while the other combat controller restrained them with zip ties, their arms bound behind their backs. There was still small arms fire to their west as the rest of their platoon approached from the east, but Sergeant Skiles relayed the remaining combatants were losing fast, or so the fighter pilot circling overhead claimed.

“Let’s flank them, screw them from behind,” Murphy said, but Lieutenant Vick emerged to order him to help clear the buildings. In a matter of minutes the engagement was over.

Gerald found Sergeant Skiles back near the treeline looking at the machine-gun nest they had encountered just an hour before, a trail of cigarette smoke wafting over his shoulder. Dawn was finally cresting over the mountains and the forest’s depth was revealed, the mountain slope spanning further and more treacherously steep than he had realized in the dark. He relayed the message and approached to find the same three bodies as before, but they had been moved. Not moved, but sunken in the earth, one nearly bent in half backwards as if the ground tried to consume him. The middle portion of the sandbags had been ripped open and a freshly dug trail of earth descended down the hill for a dozen yards and abruptly stopped.

“What the hell,” Gerald thought aloud.

“Yeah,” Sergeant Skiles said, and dragged off his cigarette. “Haven’t been operating in this AO for long, but we’ve been seeing strange things already. This though, this is a first.”

“Maybe it’s a sinkhole,” Gerald said, trying to make sense of it. “A water table or something. A cave below us.”

“Where you from?” Skiles asked.

“D.C. originally, grew up in Michigan. Detroit.”

“I’m from West Virginia,” Skiles said. “Appalachia. When you grow up in mountains and woods like that, you realize they hide things. Things people never get to see, don’t want to see. I think this is one of those places. So much hate makes the earth come alive, makes it hate as well.”

He finished his cigarette and threw it away, and patted Gerald on the shoulder as he walked back to the radar complex. “Thanks corporal, good job today.”

“Hey Sergeant?” Gerald asked. “How’d you do it? These guys, you know. Everything sort of stopped all at once.”

Sergeant Skiles tapped a large knife handle hanging from his belt, then shrugged. “You were a good distraction.”

VI

April gave way to May but the cold remained, a bitter reminder of the state of things all around them. The platoon was the golden child in the eyes of company leadership after the radar tower mission, the example to follow for other units. Lieutenant Vick wore a constant grin, what Murphy called a Texas shit eating grin, and Murphy walked around with one too, even when no one was around to see it. Gerald had to admit it was hard not to have a little swagger around tent city.

The platoon mouthed off about the Air Force radar techs but most forgot to mention the combat controllers, who Gerald was convinced had killed the Serbian machine gunners with knives. The platoon didn’t believe him. What Skiles had said about the earth coming alive stuck with him, brought context to the apartment and the domovoy and what he once thought was a meaningless hatred between Serbians and Albanians and everyone else caught in the middle. When he asked Darko or any of the locals, Gerald discovered Kosovo had been a nexus of conflict since medieval times, and perhaps longer than that. Everyone here was poisoned with hate and death, and maybe the earth swallowed those men up and was poisoned as well.

It didn’t occur to most soldiers in the company that their presence in Kosovo was legally ambiguous, if not an outright lie, and Gerald wondered as he watched the political scenes on

television if President Clinton even knew who and where they were, not their squad or platoon but maybe their company and the rest of the battalion scattered around Kosovo and Macedonia. Or maybe like so much of this place, their company was lost in the shadow of the Balkans.

Rumor trickled down that a new mission was being planned, an official NATO action to justify ground troops. This in intelligence's eyes was grounds for the Serbian army to exact their committed evils at a quickened pace. What the Albanians were doing in kind was conveniently overlooked. The more he pondered that double standard, the more America seemed knowingly half blind to moral obligations it so adamantly embraced. Any notion of altruism was quickly stamped out in Kosovo. The Army sold that idea to the common soldier, to secure freedom and liberty to all mankind, but the costs soon soured the goals. All the actors were bad, whatever bad meant. Even the Americans, or at least in some way, Gerald thought.

This all meant that leadership was eager to stake their claim, push out into more dangerous operations, and the radar tower was just a rehearsal. Command concocted a new company wide mission under the label of peacekeeping, but every grunt knew it was taking the fight to Milosevic's army. The idea was simple, but risky in execution. Push out into the Sharr mountains dismounted to catch any combatants off guard, deter any said combatants, and escort any vulnerable civilians away from the various isolated villages who were too easy a target for ethnic cleansing. The way Gerald saw it, the cleansing had probably already happened, but it wouldn't stop the company from an attempt to acquire more accolades and glory.

On the morning of, Gerald enjoyed a cigarette as he watched the bridge painter. He hadn't indulged in the ritual since the apartment incident two weeks ago, and that's where Sergeant Sheriff found him.

"Been looking all over for you, Vizitae. We're oscar mike."

Gerald gave the bridge painter one more prolonged study, as if it would be the last iteration of this moment, and followed Sheriff to the motor pool. A convoy of humvees and transport trucks grumbled as they idled. Their mission awaited NATO approval, a sudden tight leash to the otherwise wild west operational area. So much of the operation was ambiguous and in a dangerous way. There was a lack of defined ROEs that even the most dense of grunts could notice. *Just don't commit war crimes* was the general wisdom to follow, though whether or not NATO was breaking that convention depended on the party asked. The Media sold the air campaign as a bold response to Serbian aggression, but even the press couldn't hide the occasional mishap or collateral civilian death. They had all seen it in person in Urosevac, buildings cratered from cluster bombs, houses of no military significance leveled from air strikes.

Their squad broke into two humvees at the back of the convoy. Gerald and his fire team took the second to last vehicle, with Sergeant Sheriff and his fire team, Darko included, behind them. The rest of the platoon was mounted in humvees at the front of the convoy, and the remainder of the company were in the back of several deuce-and-a-halves that made up the majority of the vehicles. Most of the trucks were empty, meant for expected refugees to be ferried back to Urosevac.

Gerald slipped into the front passenger seat of his humvee after adjusting his M-16 to fit. In the driver's seat Jones played Lauryn Hill on his boombox atop the dash, Murphy and Bobbie in the backseats.

"Hey, Vizitae," Jones said to Gerald. "You finished fucking off? We could be in the mountains already if you weren't flicking your bean."

"I don't think you can say that," Bobbie said from the back.

“I was just getting going but Sheriff walked in on me,” Gerald said. “You know how it is, I hear you at night. Why are you so eager to be on mission, anyway?”

Lieutenant Vick’s southern drawl came in through their comms announcing the convoy’s movement. Gerald mouthed a copy into the humvee’s mic while Jones eased the vehicle to follow the slow procession.

“Because,” Jones answered, leaning in and bobbing his head to Lauryn Hill’s Doo-Wop, “I have some shit being mailed from stateside and I know the guy that processes our mail in Stuttgart. I could get it tonight if it’s in country.”

“Can you turn this shit off?” Murphy barked from the back. Jones turned the volume up and lip-synched the chorus in the rear view mirror at Murphy.

“That’s awfully ambitious of you, Jones,” Gerald said, “seeing as we’re on a dismounted evac mission. You’ll see the sunrise before the barracks.”

“Gotta have faith, corporal,” Jones replied.

“See, that’s a song we need to listen to. Faith,” Murphy added.

“George Michael?” Bobbie asked.

“No, Limp Bizkit. Who the hell is George Michael?”

“You are somehow dumber than you look, Murph,” Gerald said, and shook his head.

The convoy followed the lone highway connecting the Urosevac to the rest of Kosovo. Its outskirts faded from a drab European city to a pastoral mountain village in a matter of blocks. Strip centers and concrete gave way to wood and thatch, and the only comparison Gerald had was the urban landscape of Detroit when it faded into dreary, abandoned suburbia.

“Still gotta have faith for something, though,” Jones replied. “Murph has killing, Bobbie has apologizing—”

“Hey! I don—”

“Bobbie,” Gerald interrupted, “I need to hear comms.”

“Oh, sorry Sergeant.”

Jones and Gerald laughed and Bobbie played along with a nervous chuckle. Even Murphy’s scowl broke into a smirk. From the south and east the Sharr mountains approached, their steep green shoulders powdered by late spring snow. Where the mountains didn’t split into crags they eased into rolling hills dominated by a dense forest. Half the trees were a terminal ruddy brown, absent of leaves. The other half were dense scatterings of pines. Gerald tried to look into the forest but found he couldn’t penetrate its numinous depth. A dizzying array of tree trunks strobed in his vision as they passed. It seemed to stretch outward forever, a space between spaces. It reminded him of the domovoy, of dark spaces and what lingered within.

The highway off-ramp descended into a two lane passage then rose again, winding up the northern slopes of a narrow valley. In a matter of thirty minutes the convoy snaked through wilderness, or what Gerald thought could pass as wilderness if it weren’t for the small, isolated villages they passed every few miles. Their terracotta roofs barely protruded through the choking forest, each switchback shielding another hamlet sheltered from the world. Kosovo was like its own planet, but here in the Sharr mountains Gerald felt another displacement altogether.

“Remind me again why we aren’t taking Bradleys,” Murphy said, forehead leaned against his door window.

“Serbs and KLA have anti-tank rockets, ordinance, all of it,” Gerald replied. “Plus you know these mountain roads are ambush city for APCs.”

“But we’re in a vehicle,” Murphy replied.

“Bradleys are more valuable than Humvees,” Jones said. “Can’t take the risk.”

“Just glad they got their priorities straight,” Murphy said. “And aren’t the KLA the good guys?”

“I don’t think there are any good guys here, Murph,” Gerald said.

They stayed silent for the remainder of the ride letting Jones’s music, mostly MTV recordings off of the military AFN channel, break the monotony of diesel roar and intermittent radio chatter. The more they snaked into the remote Sredačka Župa region the more the steep slopes constricted inwards to choke the road. Gnarled tree branches reached out from the roadside and brushed the humvee’s side, Gerald fighting the urge to duck away from their touch.

Instead of the anxious anticipation of action, Gerald felt an unease he couldn’t quite define. It was as if the mountains watched from above, his skin twitchy and goose pimples from the gaze of stony, unnoticed eyes. No other cars were on the remote pass, and when he could see the nearby villages there was a noticeable absence of human presence. If not for the occasional wisps of chimney smoke Gerald would have felt completely isolated. He thought of the bridge painter, how he could very well be the last local Gerald would see before . . . what? The vague idea of closure whispered at the edge of his thoughts. He tried to push it away, but a growing silence forced the intrusion to settle.

VII

The convoy had coiled into a spiral of parked vehicles at an abandoned hotel near the edge of Mushnikově, another forgettable mountain village. It hugged the base of a group of switchbacks on the northern slopes of Sredačka Župa, once the entrance to a now defunct ski resort. Gerald trusted his fireteam to be geared and ready for their dismounted ruck, and decided

to look busy wandering around the convoy rather than micromanage their prep. As he paced he watched the rest of the company unload, the accompanied convoy drivers divvied out between the vehicles for the eventual drive back to base post-mission. Jones handed over their humvee to an overly eager transport driver, and promised a world of pain if his boombox or any of his tapes went missing. Murphy was over Jones's shoulder and threatened the same as he blew a kiss, his M249 perched over his shoulder.

From Mushnikovë the company would march into the mountains, each platoon breaking into their subsequent squads to come down from the hills into their designated villages. Anyone who wasn't a Serbian soldier or Albanian liberation fighter would be escorted back north to the highway where the convoy would be staged. Too many moving parts for Gerald to feel calm, but there was no point in protest. They'd hoof it up and down the mountains regardless and they'd do it without armor, fire support, and painfully exposed. *Hooah Army.*

Following Sergeant Sheriff orders, Gerald found Darko at the back end of the convoy, throwing his hands towards a group of buildings while he and another interpreter argued in another language, he guessed Macedonian. Darko noticed Gerald's approach but turned his attention back to the other interpreter to get another heated word in, and Gerald asked what was wrong.

"He said he saw something," Darko said, his eyes narrowed at the other man.

"Enemy movement? Anything strange?"

"No," Darko replied. "Old wives stories. He saw nothing."

"He don't know this place," the other interpreter said to Gerald. "He is Macedonian."

Person i Huaj.

The two became animated again, and Gerald didn't want anything to do with it.

“Darko,” Gerald barked. “Whatever this is, put a cap on it. We’re about to head out.”

“A cap?”

“Jesus, Darko, quit arguing. You’re rucking with us into ‘Dragsick.’”

“Drajçiq,” Darko corrected, pronouncing it ‘Drawsh-chick.’

Gerald’s neck flushed with warmth. The other interpreter looked like he could read the anger furrowing Gerald’s eyebrows, and gave Darko an incredulous look. He shook his head and spat on the ground as he left. By then the company was splitting up in scattered lines of squads ascending the hills. Halfway up the moderate slope they disappeared in a wall of tightly grouped tree trunks, fading one man at a time as they criss-crossed upwards into the Kosovar wilderness. Sergeant Sheriff called Gerald and Darko over and the pair joined the rest of the squad as they walked from the edge of the village’s empty farm plots into the forest. Gerald hadn’t seen a single local in Mushnikovë, if there were any left at all.

The climb was steep and the earth was soft under their boots, not moist but loose beneath a patchy carpet of short grass and leaf detritus. They passed between the congested trees, ducked knotted branches to avoid snagging their rucksacks, intent to block the path forward. It was a slow and quiet march, each man aware of the expanse of the woods. Gerald noticed a lack of movement or any sounds of life, bird calls and even the wind-song of swaying trees eerily absent; a natural purgatory.

Though it was a completely different terrain, the Sharr mountains reminded him of the only time he was taken camping as a kid. One of his mother’s more reliable boyfriends had led them on a week-long trek deep into the Ozark mountains, somewhere he claimed they could find themselves. While the grown ups were indisposed, half paralyzed and twitchy from a heavy dose of magic mushrooms, Gerald had wandered away from their camp and into the woods. He had no

direction or aim, just his boyish curiosity putting one foot in front of the next. In that moment he couldn't conceive of the passage of time in what seemed an eternal woodland. Had he been there for minutes, hours? It seemed all the same to him then, as it did now. Even the fading sunlight failed to impart any notion that anything had changed at all. What made him hold on to the memory so tightly wasn't the novelty of one chance at a normal, untroubled upbringing. Nor was it the grim reflection of his mother's drug induced neglect. It was the fact that he couldn't remember ever returning to their tents at all. It wasn't as if the memory was imperfect, tarnished with age. He had simply woken up the next day with no recollection of ever coming back, as if the woods had delivered him from its endlessness.

Instead of scanning their sectors, each member of the fireteam kept their eyes on the ground partly to assure their footing and partly from the rumors of land mines. This, not the Serbian soldiers, had been the greatest worry in the barracks, and that annoyed Gerald to no end. He still checked the ground all the same.

Above them, bare deciduous branches and wide, circular pines blotted out the bleak grey sky. A heaviness in the air suggested a future downpour. The rest of the company was less than a mile away, but the fire team could only hear the distance trace of their passing. Sergeant Sheriff's fireteam was a few dozen meters ahead of them, but they too were swallowed by the trees. The only other sounds the mountains carried were the distant rattles of kalashnikovs and the dull boom of either thunder or mortar fire.

"Hey, Darko," Gerald said, the interpreter's spat back at the village coming to mind.
"What was that guy on about back in Mushnikově?"

"He says he saw a *Likho*."

"What the hell is that?" Jones asked.

“Bad luck,” Darko said. “Very bad luck. Death. He is scared. ‘Super-stis-em’.”

“Superstitious,” Bobbie corrected.

“What about a domovoy?” Gerald asked.

“House spirit. Mostly good.”

“What’s it look like?” Murphy asked. “The lick-ho?”

“Old woman in all black,” Darko said. “One eye.”

Jones snorted. “Thought you’d be all atheist about this shit, Murph. You don’t believe anything,” he said.

“My abuela believed in all that shit,” Murphy said. “Had jars of stuff in the walls of my house in San Antonio. Like voodoo.” Murphy stumbled on a root snag and spit a line of curses.

“Huh,” Jones grunted. “Thought you were white.”

“Boss, this place,” Darko said to Gerald, “it is very superstitious. Old ways, old beliefs. They will not leave easy.”

“I’m feeling persuasive, Darko,” Gerald said. “Which means you should be too.”

“I don’t believe,” Darko said. He looked at each member of the fireteam for validation. Murphy laughed. Darko repeated the claim but no one responded, everyone marching forward with their eyes on the ground. Since being in Kosovo, most of the company had given Darko a hard time despite him being six and half feet and having a good forty pounds on most of them. Gerald guessed it was because of the spoiled cask of sherry from last month, or the general xenophobia of the privileged American soldier. Always eager to volunteer for patrols or to work with the Americans, Darko was one of those coalition grunts that viewed it as a badge of honor. Murphy called it earning badass points. He was one of few Macedonians that worked with the

U.S. military, and in their eyes, or at least Darko's, it meant the big time. He'd be the real deal back home.

It was several hours before they approached Drajçiq, roaming up and down the hills with few breaks in the forest. The Sharr foothills seemed endless, and would be endless, unless the desperation of the mind pleaded in silence for their destination to appear. For it to be conjured like an oasis, reality relented to sheer will. Sredačka Župa frayed Gerald's thoughts into a panic he couldn't define; simply abject fear. It was an animal sensation, nerve tension begging Gerald to break into a sprint, to leave here by any means. And that was when Drajçiq appeared.

VIII

The trees abruptly gave way to a bare slope that descended into a grove hugged by several dozen white walled buildings. Several more smothered the northern end of a ridge that overlooked a deep valley, steep forested slopes to the east and west isolating the village on its protruding geography. There was a weathered mosque at its center with a medieval, teal dome peaked out from a cluster of terracotta roofs and cornered by four narrow spires. A few blocks from the mosque was an orthodox chapel, domed in patina weathered metal. Gerald saw Sergeant Sheriff's fireteam ahead of them standing at the edge of the grove, and felt their unease as he approached.

The fireteam studied the ground, the earth distressed in lumpy piles for two dozen yards in every direction. It had been dug up by something big, Gerald guessed machinery, but there were no tracks; only deep, clawed grooves. The disturbed earth was caked together with moisture

and it smelled coppery, sickly sweet. Tatters of clothing protruded, half exhumed. Flies danced about the soil and buzzed between the soldiers.

“Contact Lieutenant Vick again,” Sergeant Sheriff said to O’Connor, their radioman, who spoke into the squad’s “prick-77” comms unit, a weighty, boxy piece of equipment on his back. Otts was nearby, face pale and eyes glossed over.

“What we got, sarge?” Gerald asked.

“Iunno,” Sergeant Sheriff said, and frowned. “Looks similar to what we found outside Urosevac, but there should be bodies.”

“Maybe they were reclaimed,” Gerald thought aloud.

“Nothing, Sergeant,” O’Connor said. Their squad leader cursed.

“Alright, I got the site marked. We proceed as planned. Get Darko to ask the locals about this.”

The squad split up, Sergeant Sheriff and his team disappearing down a steep descent to the east while a dirt path before Gerald led the way towards a crudely paved road. As they walked into the village a commotion of raised voices followed a gunshot. Jones yelled contact and the team bound towards the fire.

A group of black uniformed KLA soldiers surrounded an elderly woman. An equally aged man slumped on the ground beside her. The men had their weapons drawn on the woman, and the squad aimed their weapons on them. Everyone shouted all at once, a few Albanian soldiers standing off against the squad. A familiar, large-nosed officer had his pistol pointed at the elderly woman.

Gerald ordered Darko to tell them to drop their weapons, but they didn’t heed the command and yelled back at the Americans. The overcast above them opened up and a steady

drizzle speckled the city. Gerald realized his hands were shaking, and he hoped the KLA soldiers couldn't notice.

"They claim these two helped kill Muslims in the town and took their homes."

"Bullshit," Jones hissed. "We walked in on them trying to get revenge."

The weathered faces of the elderly emerged in windows, the remainder of Drajçiq's denizens. Another elderly woman emerged from one of the nearby houses. She scolded them with bitter words, hands waved wildly as if to shoo them all away.

Down the eastern fork of the road yet another woman shuffled towards them. Her hunched shoulders were draped in a black shawl, and a bandage soiled with dried blood covered one eye. She was deathly skinny, her clothes draped from the two points of her bony shoulders and collapsed inward towards her gaunt frame. Her cyclopean gaze sent shivers through Gerald, and the sudden attention she demanded confused him momentarily. He quickly refocused, reminded of the Kalishnikovs aimed at his team.

"Give me the word, V," Murphy said. "I don't like guns pointed at me."

"Albanians took their house," Darko said as the first old woman at gunpoint spoke rapidly. The one that came out of the house continued to pester them, seemingly oblivious to the stand off.

"Why is everyone so old?" Murphy yelled, a peculiar but accurate observation in the moment.

"*Ata që ecin që nuk ecin,*" the second elderly woman said, and pointed north from where they had arrived. "*Ata që ecin që nuk ecin.*"

From above came a whistle that crescendoed as it neared the village. The second story corner of a house that hugged the square exploded in a cloud of dust and brick. By the time

Gerald yelled for cover another whistling mortar round arched through the sky and exploded somewhere else in the village. The KLA officer shot the woman held hostage in the head. His other troops scrambled as mortar fire whistled in and exploded. Darko and Gerald ran towards the second old woman and tackled her back through the door she emerged from. She spat curses at them but abruptly quieted as she thudded against the entrance.

The trio pushed through and toppled over each other. The woman smacked at Gerald as he scrambled to his feet. Another mortar round exploded outside and the KLA soldiers screamed. From what he could hear the mortar round had been a direct hit. Murphy and Jones yelled, but understanding them was washed out in the patter of rain that had now picked up to a downpour. Somewhere in the distance a cacophony of small arms fire carried through the mountains. Gerald pulled on Darko's sleeve as he ran toward the sound of his fireteam, yelling, "Who's got eyes!"

"Contact west!" Murphy shouted. Gerald ran towards Murphy's voice, coming to a long, two story household stretched down the western fork of the main road. Another chest plucking boom scattered brick chunks throughout the cobblestone streets as Gerald neared. Frantic shouts erupted from within. An M-16 discharged several rounds, maybe half a magazine, and Murphy's M249 machine-gun roared to life in automatic fire.

When Gerald entered the abandoned home he saw Bobbie sitting in the middle of a coffee table he had collapsed on, his M-16 pointed at a pair of open doors and two bodies lay prone at the threshold. His chest pulsed with heavy breath, eyes both laser focused and glossy with dissociation.

"B-15, you alright?"

He didn't answer, just hyperventilated as he stared at the two bodies. Gerald knelt down beside him and gave a once over as he checked for wounds. Bobbie didn't respond to his forceful pat down, but there wasn't any noticeable injury or blood.

"Bobbie, Darko, close those doors," Gerald shouted. "Where's Jones?"

"Second story," Murphy said, and let go another pulse of automatic fire through a broken window. Jones's rifle went off upstairs, a good enough confirmation for Gerald. He watched Murphy direct his fire to a copse of barely visible trees several dozen yards outside the village perimeter. Gerald joined in and manned the window to Murphy's left, indiscriminately firing into the brush.

"Where's the KLA?"

"Ran in a building, two o'clock your view," Murphy said, then released another quick volley of bullets. "Mortar hit them."

The downpour was now torrential, any small glance of their enemy lost in the thick sheets of rain. It took Gerald a minute of intermittent fire to realize the mortars had stopped, and he yelled for a call out. Each member of the team replied except for Bobbie, who he could hear breathing in the next room. He tried to reach Sheriff on his PRC-68 radio but was answered with static, so he turned his attention to Bobbie.

"What's up with B-15?" Gerald asked.

"The nerd got some kills," Murphy said. "Lucky asshole."

"Stay on overwatch, you see anyone with an AK light 'em up. I don't care if they're Serbs or KLA, got it?" Gerald said. Murphy gave him a hearty *hooah*. "I'll check on Bobbie again. Jones!"

Jones called back from upstairs, the downpour nearly drowning him out. He emerged from some unseen staircase in another room, his rifle low ready and his expression dour.

“Take Darko and find a villager for some info, and don’t go far,” Gerald ordered. “We sit tight until we hear from Sheriff. I want everyone together. Bobbie?”

Bobbie sat still on the ground in a daze, his breath now steadied.

“Bobbie!”

Gerald hooked an arm under his shoulder and guided him to the window overlooking the building the KLA soldiers had run into, the roof collapsed, their painful shrieks replaced by wounded moans Gerald tried not to notice.

“You see anything from the building you let us know,” Gerald told him. “I need you in this, okay?”

Bobbie shook his head meekly. Gerald tried to hail Sergeant Sheriff again on his radio with no response.

“Lead them to the mosque?” Jones asked. It was technically illegal, but the biggest space available. Gerald hated mosques, but he hated any type of church. Even if it wasn’t a Geneva Conventions violation he wouldn’t fight in one. It just felt wrong.

“Hell no, find the second biggest building.”

“Copy that,” Jones said, and he and Darko disappeared into the rain. Somewhere in the mountains another firefight continued, the cracks and booms of gunfire and artillery from every slope and valley. The company was under fire, and he hoped Sheriff’s team wasn’t included. If they were, Gerald and his team were essentially stranded. Moving the elderly through the mountains and rain would be too dangerous, and if whoever just attacked them had their mortars

zeroed in on the village it meant vehicles could be taken out immediately. There was nothing to do but wait for night and hope it gave them an opportunity to leave.

IX

The adrenaline of the brief fight had faded and Gerald felt drained in a way he hadn't since basic training. His arms and legs were sluggish, and his skin erupted in a sensitive flare to any touch. The air, heavy and waterlogged, was a labor to take in. Even inside the cramped, narrow dwelling they occupied the humidity and cold found its way to them. Gerald had felt just as miserable plenty of times in the past, sure, but not in tandem with actual combat.

Jones had gathered the remainder of the villagers, twelve people in all, in the church south of their building, which annoyed Gerald but he knew he hadn't told Jones not to take them there. It was too late now. Every once in a while the KLA soldiers would shout out at them. Darko translated that they were cursing the fireteam and blamed them for the Serbian mortar fire. Not once did they ask for help. For all Gerald cared, they could rot in the rain and rubble. Bobbie acted too dissociated for him to be trusted on overwatch, and Darko was more than happy to be contributing more directly.

Gerald noticed the woman with the damaged eye wasn't with the other villagers, and he couldn't help but think of Darko and the other interpreter he had argued with in Mushnikovë. It couldn't be bad luck, not when his team and the villagers were alive. The two men Bobbie had killed were still slumped in front of the double doors in awkward ragdoll positions, a stain of blood blooming from beneath them.

Bobbie hadn't responded to anyone in hours, not in any way to suggest he was okay, but Gerald had to leave him to process the moment; getting a hold of Sergeant Sheriff was the priority. He radioed the other fire team every ten minutes for several hours, past sunset, and when O'Connor responded the relief was almost overwhelming. It flooded him with more exhaustion he had held at bay with sheer will. The adrenaline crash was an annoying inconvenience he wished he could medicate away. Caffeine or the coveted but rarely issued "go pills" would do the trick, but he had neither.

The second fire team was on its way back to Drajçiq, finding little in the way of defilade or defensible buildings at their original position. They had been attacked as well, but Gerald didn't find out until they arrived that they had suffered a casualty. Leonet, a rifleman from Idaho, had taken a rogue bullet to the neck during their firefight. They had carried his body uphill into the village, and he now lay in a spare room with a blanket shrouded over his bloodsoaked body. Casevac wasn't an option only because they couldn't get a hold of anyone, and Sergeant Sheriff guessed the rest of the company was in an even bigger engagement over the peaks to the west, most likely the sounds of gunfire they had heard all day that had continued into the night.

When they had brought Leonet in, the old woman that had argued with Darko earlier erupted in more animated language. She motioned at both dead Serbian soldiers—if you could call someone in a Reebok windbreaker and denim jeans a soldier—and the room holding Leonet's body, repeating the phrase '*Ata që ecin që nuk ecin*' every so often in her diatribe.

"Darko," Sheriff said impatiently, "What is she talking about?"

Darko tried to convince her to stop talking, and she gave him a mouthful for his insistence.

“She say we must bury the bodies,” Darko answered. The woman rubbed her forearms as if lathering her skin, then pointed towards the ground and repeated the phrase.

“Darko...” Sheriff said.

“She say we must wash them and bury them right, or they will be taken.”

“Taken?” Gerald asked.

“*Ata që ecin që nuk ecin*,” Darko replied. ““Those that walk that do not walk.””

“This shit again,” Murphy spat.

“Darko, ask her what happened north of the village. The disturbed earth,” Gerald ordered. Darko did so and listened intently to the old woman’s responses.

“The Serbs came. . .” Darko said, pausing to listen. “. . .they took all the young men, some women. . .She heard gun fire. . .they buried them outside the village.”

“No shit,” Sergeant Sheriff interrupted, “Where are the bodies?”

“That is all she say,” Darko said. “They were taken by those who walk that do not walk. Superstitious.”

“They probably came back to hide evidence,” Sergeant Sheriff said. “Which means they might make a go at us to do the same. Vizitae, why aren’t you defending the mosque?”

Gerald wanted to say that he hated churches, that he could still provide overwatch from their current location without losing sight of the building with the Albanian fighters, but what came out was, “I thought it was against ROEs.”

The old woman spoke insistently to Darko again.

“The church is defensible but it’s cramped,” Sergeant Sheriff replied, and looked around the walls with his tell-tale frown. “We’ll keep them in the church, but we’ll stay here. I don’t want them getting caught if we engage. Let’s put Leonet there as well, for now.”

“Boss, she want to bury these two,” Darko said, and pointed at the two dead Serbians.

“I don’t give a shit what she does with them,” Sergeant Sheriff said. “She’s not touching Leonet.”

“The church cannot keep Leonet safe, she say,” Darko added. “Once, yes. But KLA ruin church, and Serbians ruin mosque.”

Sheriff looked a hair trigger away from pouncing on Darko, who put his hands in front of him, repeating, “Boss, boss. It’s what she say.”

“Get her away from me,” Sheriff said.

“I’ll help,” Bobbie said, and rose to his feet.

The woman hobbled over to Bobbie as Darko explained his offer, and gave Bobby a hearty slap on the shoulder with an accompanying toothless smile. She and Bobbie reached down to grab the wrists and ankles of one of the dead men, and with labored grunts the two dragged him away, his head wagging limply as they shuffled.

When everything was settled the villagers, except the old woman, were hidden deep in the church. Bobbie helped her wash the first body by a floor basin in the kitchen downstairs, what Gerald presumed was either the kitchen or bathroom. It appeared to be both. Gerald was with Jones and Murphy on the second story watching them unpack MREs, and he and Murphy passed between them the only cigarette that hadn’t been soaked from the rain. Otts, O’Connor, and Sheriff were at the other end of the building that overlooked the church.

“You know what I don’t get?” Murphy said, squeezing cheese spread on a cracker. “That lady probably had her whole family killed by these guys and she’s downstairs washing one of them like they were her own. Darko, why didn’t they kill her?”

“She is Muslim, KLA Muslim. Fled before Serbians came, and returned when Serbians fled.”

“Well they obviously haven’t fucking fled, have they?”

“And I don’t get Bobbie helping,” Jones muttered. “That’s gotta fuck you up.”

“No, I get it,” Gerald said. He felt bad for him, even if it was expected you could kill someone here, in the army, in Kosovo. Bobbie wasn’t the type of guy eager for the kill, to prove himself with a notch or a body count. He was polite, too polite, and nice to a fault. Gerald had heard someone call Bobbie wholesome once, and somehow it made sense. He wouldn’t know how he’d act if it had been him, but he could relate. Even when they posed a threat it didn’t make it easier, maybe in the moment, but overall? It was haunting.

“He’s guilty, the dumbass,” Murphy said with a mouthful of cracker. “Ole Ivan was gonna plug him full of holes and he’s still bent up about it. Should have joined the Air Force, could fit right in with those radar techs.”

“Lay off, Murph,” Jones said.

“Hey, Jones,” Gerald said, “what were you supposed to get in the mail today?”

“Aw man, really?” he replied. “You going to bring that up now?”

“Hey, you’ll get it,” Murphy said.

“Leonet ain’t getting his mail. Got anything smart to say about that?”

“Just trying to pass the time,” Gerald said. “You seemed really excited about it.”

“Wood puzzles.”

“What?” Murphy asked.

“Wood puzzles,” Jones repeated. “You know, that particle wood shit that’s 3-D. Dinosaurs, animals, buildings. Stuff like that.”

Murphy laughed and Gerald couldn't help but chuckle. Jones sucked air through his teeth and threw his MRE condiment packets at Murphy, who didn't stop laughing as he rolled on the ground to dodge them.

"Whatever man," Jones said. "There's other stuff too."

"Why wood puzzles?" Gerald asked.

"My grandpa," Jones said. "He was basically my father. We used to put them together. He even started making his own until a stroke got him. Couldn't use his hand well after that."

"Did you keep making them?" Gerald asked.

Jones seemed surprised by the question. "Yeah, for a little while," he said. "I sucked it at, but I'd make them in front of him." His tone softened and he looked down at his MRE food. "It was hard, you know? Sometimes I didn't know if he was there. He'd drool a lot—"

"Jesus," Murphy said. "My grandpap just took me hunting."

"I'm not surprised, Murph," Gerald said. "Explains a lot."

"What about your grandfather, Vizitae?" Jones asked.

"Oh, he doesn't know his grandpap," Murphy said. "Vizitae is one of those project kids. My mom calls them street urchins."

Gerald eyed Murphy with a burning glare lost to the night. A few months ago they had been in Dublin getting shit faced, and when Murphy got emotional Gerald opened up the way you do to reciprocate, to show Murphy he wasn't alone in his pain. If it had felt good to tell his life story at the time, Gerald couldn't remember it. They had gotten into it with the locals after Murphy shouldered one and spilled his drink, and they had both wound up in the local clinic after a proper beating. That was something Murphy wouldn't gush about, at least. It was the only time Gerald had opened up to him, and not only did it not help, he now regretted it. The army

counselor had urged him to open up, to reveal himself to others, but he didn't tell him who to pick or when was the right time. He learned it was just better to keep it all inside, and it seemed to be what kept Sheriff together after Desert Storm, even if he didn't believe him.

"I'm going to see if Bobbie needs help," Vizitae said. "You guys keep watch."

"Have fun getting soaked," Murphy called out as he left.

He found the two outside with the rain beating their backs, Bobbie struggled to heft a heavy spadeful of wet earth. Surprisingly, the woman had a shovel of her own. She tilled the soil loose and pushed it towards Bobbie to shovel out of the shallow hole they had started. Gerald gently grabbed the handle and nodded at the woman, who gave Gerald a prolonged study before she relinquished the shovel. She said a quick sentence then hobbled back to the building.

"Bobbie," Gerald said, starting to shovel the dirt. "I'm not here to talk about it, I just need to know you'll be with us if it gets hot again."

"I'm here," Bobbie said in a way Gerald had never heard from him before. It didn't sound broken or defeated, but something was lost in his voice.

"I felt the same way, you know. That night I went out with Otts. It's okay."

"I know."

After an hour of digging they produced a hole deep enough, rain already pooled at its bottom. When they went back inside for the first body Gerald found the man had been stripped down and his body was now wrapped fully in a white sheet. The woman already had the second body naked, and ran a wet rag over the man's pale skin while pinkish water spilled over his torso. The entry point of three bullets dotted his chest, and watered down blood ran from the wounds with each pass of the rag. He was no older than they were.

“She has to pray too, I think,” Bobbie said as watched her. “That’s what it sounded like before she wrapped the first one.”

They hoisted the first body in their hands, now slightly rigid and awkward to handle, but not close to the rigidity of the corpses from the mass grave outside of Urosevac. They waddled outside with the body and swung him into the flooded hole. The body splashed into its grave, its features revealed as the shroud clung to his wet body, and the two quickly pushed the wet mound of earth on top of him. It felt wrong, as if they weren’t meant to bury the man, that it wasn’t their place. Just like it wasn’t their place to be here, to force these people out of their homes for their own good. To police a culmination of hatred and past transgressions marking an endless bloodletting. Who were they to bury these sons, to kill them first for the sake of less killing? Who were they at all?

X

When they finished Jones called out from upstairs, spotting movement in the distance. Gerald ran to the living room window he and Murphy shot from earlier and readied his rifle. He radioed Sheriff, but only got static in return. Instead, he ordered Bobbie to get the old woman to the church and grab their squad leader, knowing it was unlikely they would so easily get rid of her, but not wanting her in the firefight all the same. Outside the rain persisted, obscuring whatever the night would reveal.

A man came out from the brush, arms empty at his sides. Another one emerged from the darkness. They shambled in slow, small steps, faces expressionless. Gerald, Murphy, and Jones shouted in mispronounced Albanian to drop their weapons, then again in Serbian to no response,

even though Gerald couldn't see a single firearm. Then the brush lurched, a swathe of branches shifted as if a large animal trudged from within. More people emerged, some in civilian clothes and others in fatigues. They walked aimlessly, not towards the village or any place but forward, as if in a daze.

A large mass blurred in the rain behind them and disappeared quickly from view. Its footfalls thudded from the brush, then came a chorus of voices in dissonant unison. It was as if dozens of people were sighing out at once, the murmurs of language barely audible over the immense wheezing. From the village side of the building Sheriff and his team emerged, Gerald jolted up and around, training his rifle on them.

"Stand down Vizitae, shit," Sheriff barked.

"There's something outside," Gerald said, surprised at his voice caught in his throat. Another cacophony of rasps called out from the darkness. Then a succession of stomps approached the building.

Sheriff shouted something but Gerald could only hear the throb of his pulse thumping in his skull. The second fire team reached the living room windows and engaged the people outside with a successive snap of fire, while Jones and Murphy streamed out rounds upstairs.

Whatever lumbered outside rounded the building and shattered dilapidated fencing as it passed. Darko called out, seeing something enter the slender townhouse-like building where they had last seen the KLA soldiers. The men inside screamed and fired their AKs without letting off their triggers, and then came a sound that froze all of them.

Dozens of voices screamed, wheezed, gibbered in a cacophony of Albanian, Serbian, Arabic, Russian—too many languages to make sense of. Within the chorus was another voice, a deep bass tone that made Gerald's stomach turn. Wood cracked and shattered, brick and mortar

exploded, and barely audible over the terrible collective of voices came the pleading screams of the KLA soldiers. All of them forgot the roaming men that had emerged from the brush, too horribly entranced by whatever was happening to the insurgents across the road. Sheriff was the first to come to his senses.

“What do we see out there?”

“I can’t see shit,” Jones called out from upstairs.

“Rain and rubble, sarge,” Murphy yelled.

“Boss, it’s moving,” Darko said. “I see it!”

The building collapsed as whatever inside moved on, awkward, heavy thuds traveling south. The old couple, their bodies. Gerald was ashamed that he had just remembered them now, but couldn’t make out why he thought of them then. Perhaps it was the only thing he could think of. There were more voices that whispered, and they sent chills through Gerald, but then he realized what it was; Darko praying. Silently, the entire squad converged on the first floor, each of them looking at each other in shock, the thuds and collective screams of whatever attacked the KLA soldiers now drowned out by the rain.

“Darko,” Sheriff said, almost a whisper. “You said you saw it. What did you see?”

“Bodies.”

“Explain.”

Darko shook his head. “Bodies. I can’t.”

Sheriff shouted, demanded Darko tell him why he couldn’t explain, and for whatever reason Gerald yelled back, defending Darko, and Jones added to the chaos by yelling at them both to calm down. Gerald knew what this was. They were scared. There wasn’t an explanation

for what just happened, whatever Darko saw, and it engendered more questions. In the absence of answers was fear and anger at that fear.

The old woman who had buried the Serbian soldiers suddenly raised her voice, diverting their attention. Somehow she had crept back into the building, what was probably her home just hours before and not their defensible position, and with animated hands spoke to Darko. Whatever he said only heightened his terror.

“What is it?” Sheriff demanded.

“Leonet,” Darko said, almost afraid to say it. “They give it Leonet.”

All of them looked at each other dumbfoundedly.

“What does that mean?” Bobbie asked. Darko spoke to her, and she answered.

“It takes the dead and they walk with it. Spirit bound to body, body bound to it,” Darko translated. “It will not wait for us to bury the dead, she say. It will take us all. It left its mark in front of the church. She say we are cursed now.”

“Show me this mark,” Sheriff said. All of them followed her to the church, everyone on edge, weapons trained on the darkness as they entered the downpour. What she led to was hard to explain. It was a severed hand, but Gerald counted no less than a dozen fingers in a near circle. Skin tones merged together in a sickly mosaic, a tuft of hair, a fused eyelid. It was as if pieces of several people were melted together, and the entire horror was in various states of decay. Otts immediately threw up, Bobbie began hyperventilating again, and the rest of the squad stood paralyzed and unable to look away.

“When is it coming back?” Gerald asked.

“Before dawn,” Darko answered. The woman explained more, and Darko added, “We’ll know when we see the dead. That’s how it sees, it is too covered in the bodies.”

“Where’s it now?” Murphy asked.

“Gathering more bodies.”

“Whatever man, this old bag doesn't know shit,” Murphy said. “Darko, you said you don’t believe any of this, why should we?”

“Explain what just happened then,” Gerald said. “Don’t be so damn dense for once. You heard it.”

Murphy didn’t have an answer and glared at Gerald as he shook his head.

“We leave now,” Sheriff spat. “O’Connor, radio the company if you can, but we leave now. Right now.”

“We can’t travel with the villagers at night, not in this rain,” Gerald said.

“Fuck them,” Sheriff replied. “They sacrificed Leonet.”

“Finally, some sense,” Murphy added, and followed Sergeant Sheriff as he walked down the street heading north. The rest of the squad along with the old woman followed, who bickered yet again at them in Albanian, her voice finally going hoarse. Despite her being the only person to make sense of everything that had happened, Gerald was relieved.

“We can’t leave them, sarge,” Bobbie said, and Gerald agreed.

“If we walk now we could be attacked in the dark, in the rain, and we’re sure to lose. If not from that thing then the Serbians. We hold out until dawn, like this old bag is saying.”

“He’s got a point, sarge,” Jones added. “But you saw what it did to that house, V.”

“What about the KLA?” Gerald replied. “Darko, does she know how they got to Drajçiq? Maybe they left some munitions behind.”

She did. By car was the answer, and it was enough to get Sergeant Sheriff to stop. The rain wouldn’t let up. By now all of them were soaked and shivering, and the idea of even an

hour's worth of rucking north, to yet another unknown, seemed like agony. Gerald knew Sergeant Sheriff was thinking the same thing.

"Alright, smart guy," Sheriff said. "We defend here. What stops them from going for the civilians first? Or picking us apart?"

"We stay in the same building."

"That's not good enough for me."

"We lure it in," O'Connor said. "Like a deer feeder. It wants bodies, right?"

"Where are we going to get a body," Otts asked. "Without, you know..." He made a motion like firing a gun with his fingers.

"I know," Bobbie said, and his suggestion was a surprise to everyone.

XI

"I didn't even shoot these guys," Murphy said, and pushed the shovel down into the soggy, freshly dug earth. He and Otts dug up the men Bobbie killed to use as bait for whatever was lurking in the hills. Sergeant Sheriff, Jones, Darko, and the old woman went to the southern end of the village in search of the KLA vehicles for extra weapons. Sergeant Sheriff made it a point that they exhume the bodies before he and the old woman came back, or they wouldn't hear the end of it from her, and Jones's counterpoint was both a relief and a worry; she probably wouldn't mind, seeing as they were all cursed now. Murphy and Otts were quick about it, despite Murphy complaining the entire time.

What Sergeant Sheriff and the group returned with from the KLA vehicles was hopeful. One RPG with several spare rounds, a handful of grenades, a Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle with a few projectiles, and a half dozen AK-74s with ammo.

O'Connor attempted the entire time to get a hold of anyone with no luck, which added to their unease. The distant firefights had ceased hours ago and no aircraft engines roared in the skies, their isolation amplified by the endless downpour. By now it was past two A.M. and the dwindling night hours meant if the old lady was right they would be visited again soon, so Sergeant Sheriff gathered everyone up in their original house to formulate a plan.

Gerald's idea was to move the villagers as deep into Drajciq as possible, and set several traps along the way so that as they engaged and withdrew they would lead whatever it was, the general term for the sake of convenience was monster, to a series of traps.

"Can't work," Sergeant Sheriff retorted. "Too many moving parts. Can't remove the delay fuse to rig the grenades, and we have to split the fighting force."

"Better than bunching us together though, right?" Jones added.

"We have to hit it as hard as we can all at once. A trap, one big trap. But I like the running idea. It's huge so buildings will slow it down. We catch it in one building and hammer the hell out of it."

"Okay," Gerald said, and thought some more to make up for his rejected plan. "Lure it in, hit it once, run and lure it into a killzone."

"Rig the bodies," Murphy said, and wiped mud from his fatigues. "Prime the grenades under the bodies, then blow its ass up, you know, as it does whatever it does to them."

"That's about the smartest thing I've ever heard from you," Jones said, "and I'm not surprised it's about killing."

“Saw it in a movie.”

“Of course you did.”

“We’ll rig one body and have the other inside,” Sergeant Sheriff said. “Use it as a second piece of bait if corpses are its priority. Darko, ask the villagers to round up whatever vehicles they have, I don’t care if it’s a damn tractor, if they have the space they take off as soon as the fighting starts. You go with them, but if they can spare it leave one vehicle behind for us.”

He tried to protest, but Sergeant Sheriff wouldn’t have it.

“You can talk to them, Darko. We can’t,” Gerald said. He wasn’t happy about it, but finally agreed and set off for the villagers once again. Before he left Sergeant Sheriff also requested any spare gasoline, a last ditch ‘screw you’ if the munitions weren’t enough. The idea was to set the building on fire with it inside and race away. In spite of Gerald’s rejected plan the accepted order of operations had just as many potential faults, but it was the start of something even if none of them were confident in the execution. Sergeant Sheriff would man the recoilless rifle, the only one who was trained to operate it, and he quickly showed Otts how to load and fire the RPG. Darko returned more quickly than Gerald anticipated, but he announced his arrival with the cartoonish car horn of a European vehicle. Once inside he handed Sheriff a set of car keys, but told him to keep them in the car.

“They are grabbing their things,” Darko said, smiling in a proud sort of way.

“Who cares about their stuff, Darko, get them in their cars,” Sergeant Sheriff replied. Darko’s smile faded and Gerald felt bad for him, but their squad leader was right. “What do we got here?”

“Sedan,” he answered. “Two door, hatchback.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Darko didn't know what to say. Sergeant Sheriff told him to keep the trunk and doors open for a quick get away, and all they had left to do was to prime and place the grenades. It was a two man job and no one wanted to do it, so they drew straws. Gerald and Jones.

"Hey Vizitae," Sergeant Sheriff said. "In Iraq I saw a dog man. We all thought it was a wolf at first. Saw the damn thing get up on two legs and scale a wall."

He read Gerald's confused expression and added, "Wanted to tell you just in case you blew yourself up out there."

"Wow, thanks Sarge."

"Don't blow yourse—"

"Okay, leaving now," Gerald interrupted. Jones asked him what that was about but he dismissed it, irritated but also finding the timing a little funny. In a gruesome sort of way it was easier to move the bodies now that rigor mortis had set in, and after they dragged one just inside the building's backdoor Jones rotated it on its side so Gerald could booby trap the body. He pulled the pin from the first grenade, slid it under the corpse, and carefully retracted his shaking hand as Jones eased the weight of the corpse on its lever trigger. Gerald forgot he had to place several more and asked Jones to pull the pin from the second one in his hand while he slid his hand back under the corpse to secure the lever trigger of the first. He felt like he was having a seizure, he was shaking so badly.

"You think this is wrong?" Jones asked. His voice wavered and his breath billowed in the cold humidity.

"Everything about tonight is wrong," Gerald answered, his voice just as shaky.

But there was a deeper point in the question, one Gerald couldn't help but mentally unpack in the moment. Desecration was what prompted this horror in the first place, and the only

“good” they had done, perhaps an appeasement at best, was now reversed in the most aggressive of ways, an affront. There was an even deeper lesson to that, some bittersweet wisdom born from dark doings, but by now Vizitae was too scared and exhausted to discover it.

They had rigged the corpse with two grenades, and as Gerald pulled out the pin of a third Bobbie called out, spotting something outside their perimeter. Making it out was harder now that a fog had formed across the hills, but then they noticed a vaguely human shape approaching them. It didn’t so much walk but moved, mimicked walking, legs in motion, but in an uncanny way its movements didn’t match the distance it traveled.

Jones bolted for their building and left Gerald behind staring at the grenade in his hand. Someone hailed the encroaching person but he couldn’t make out their words, his pulse throbbing as he froze dumbfoundedly until Sergeant Sheriff called him back. When they saw the grenade in his hands they stepped away from him, wide eyed. Sergeant Sheriff said he would just have to hold it as everyone scrambled to get into position, and they now stayed clear of him. Out the other side of the building along the village road he heard the rumble of idle vehicles, the villagers gathered and ready to flee as soon as the fighting started. Gerald found Darko’s gaze through a shattered window. With his free hand Gerald waved at him, the Macedonian’s mood grim, but he returned the gesture and said something Gerald couldn’t understand. He wasn’t sure if he’d see the man again, but in a way he was happy to know he would make it out, but even that was uncertain.

Out from the foggy hillside came the sound of *it*, a chorus of voices speaking not in unison but all at once. More ‘people’ emerged from the brush, not glowing or translucent like he imagined ghosts would be, but seemingly normal, real. Half a dozen float-walked towards the building and two stopped to look down at the corpse they had rigged. They continued to move

towards the house as weighty thuds announced the arrival of the monster. What Gerald could see in the dark chilled him. A mass of flesh colored, bruised body parts shifted towards the house, the outline of a horde of limbs and bodies that crawled along the ground, arcing up more like a slithering creature, then pounded back down on the ground as it moved forward. Its body was like deformed centipede of bodies but hardly uniform, limbs like sea urchin appendages that rolled its body forward, and several pronounced arm-like growths aided in a crawl-like gait.

It reached the bodies and spilled over it, a bizarre exhale of dozens of throats emanated from the mass. Bones crunched and popped, flesh gave in a wet tearing sound nearly drowned out by the patter of the rain, the dismemberment unseen under the collective. Then there was a loud bang and second one immediately after, each time the creature convulsed as the grenades exploded under it.

Sergeant Sheriff screamed a command and fired the recoilless rifle, the back blast kicking up dust throughout the room, and the round impacted with a dazzling spray of molten fragments like sparks from a metal power grinder. It shrieked in an ear piercing cacophony, the simultaneous screams of dozens of voices, vocal chords, the nightmarish howl like the droning of a wind tunnel. The sparks illuminated the mass, Gerald's mind struggled to comprehend what he saw. It was bodies, or parts of bodies, all jammed together into a new alien arrangement. There were limbs, compounded appendages of dozens of arms fused together, some almost completely rotten, some bloated, and others still fully intact. One such appendage had covered the bodies, almost eight feet long and as thick as a person. Several fused arms blindly groped the ground with its dozens of fingers. Other parts of its flesh was a patchwork of scalp, or the soles of feet, or warty and moled skin with the occasional mouth chittering silently, the suggestion of other anatomies covered its surface.

Gerald had forgotten he had a grenade in his hand and his sweaty fingers untensed enough for the trigger mechanism to click. He gasped and threw it at the monster through a window. Nearby Otts took aim with the RPG and fired while Sergeant Sheriff tried to protest too late. The backblast reverberated through the room and knocked Gerald and Sergeant Sheriff off their feet. Gerald was slammed on his back, the air pushed out his lungs like he had been kicked in the diaphragm. His shoulders erupted in aching pain.

“Missed!” Otts yelled, and knelt down to retrieve another RPG round when several ghosts emerged from the walls, eerily calm and staring at them blankly. Gerald thought their eye sockets were empty until he noticed their eyes were replaced with stones, weeping dirt trailed like tears down their faces. From upstairs Murphy’s machine-gun roared to life, his rate of fire constant, and more grenade detonations were followed by the anguished cries of dozens of corpse-voices.

There were screams on the ground floor, everywhere, and then the snap of bullets racing through the house. Otts abruptly slumped to the ground, and O’Connor yelled, “Man down!”

Wood groaned and splintered in loud snaps, the building's backdoor ripped from its hinges and the thing pushed its arm appendage inside. Gerald crawled away on his elbows and heels, leaving his weapon behind on the ground as a mass of conjoined arms reached into the building from outside. An odor emanated from the rot that Gerald could only make out as spoiled meat and earthy, moldy decay. Bobbie shot at the creature from behind Gerald, the bullets impacted with flat, fleshy pops that elicited no reaction. The mass of arms curled towards the wall and ripped it open, mortar and brick giving way like cardboard.

The mass of corpse arms enveloped the dead man they had placed at the door, and the sickening snap of bones were heard from within the mound of flesh. The creature's arm raised,

their bait corpse now free of one of its arms, and Gerald watched the creature feed the limb towards its center mass just outside the building. Its other many hands kept probing the dead body, grabbing hold of whatever they could and pulling as if to tear chunks free. Another limb was severed from the body with a wet pop and tear, and it sank into the creature with a mix of slurping and crunching; not eating, but adding.

Murphy and Jones emerged from upstairs and Sergeant Sheriff yelled an order to drag Otts away, who was on the ground clutching his stomach. Sergeant Sheriff grabbed a gasoline tank Darko had left behind and ran up to the creature, spilling gas all over the floor as several of the ghost people watched them with expressionless, stony stares.

O'Connor grabbed Gerald's rifle and pulled him to his feet, repetitively pleading that he didn't mean it, that they had come inside and he just reacted. The squad spilled out of the building towards their vehicle, a beat up two door Geo Metro, Jones and Bobbie struggling to haul Otts into the back seats while Murphy had his M249 trained on the dwelling.

"Where's the Sergeant?" he asked, nearly shooting him as he emerged from the building behind Gerald.

"Car, now!"

He had the recoilless rifle in one hand, a spare round in the other, and he shoved them at O'Connor, who took both, still pleading, and squeezed himself next to Murphy in the trunk space. Gerald took the driver's seat and worked the jumpy clutch into first gear, Otts laid across Bobbie and Jones in the pathetic space that made up the back seats.

Sergeant Sheriff stood outside the passenger door with a grenade unpinned, and he waited. At the first sound of the thing crashing through the building, he lobbed the explosive through the front door and shouted at Gerald to drive. The vehicle's transmission squealed, metal

grinding, and the overburdened car struggled into motion at a glacial acceleration. When the grenade went off it ignited the gasoline. The building erupted in flames with a loud whoosh, and the creature screeched from within. O'Connor and Murphy screamed from the back for more speed but the pedal was already on the floor, and Gerald nearly stalled as he switched gears, but they sped off into the fog, leaving Drajciq behind.

XII

The rain had eased into a drizzle but the fog was now dense, and every time Gerald slowed down to focus on the road everyone in the vehicle protested to speed back up. Bobbie, Jones, and Sergeant Sheriff did their best with Otts in the back. They pushed gauze against his stomach wounds, tried to keep him coherent, but he was quickly fading into shock.

"I'm getting cold," Otts gasped, now short of breath.

"Get the thermal on him." Jones unfolded a metallic sheet meant to keep casualties warm and they draped it over Otts, who tried to speak to Gerald in the front seat. Gerald knew what Otts tried to say, even as it came out as confused nonsense. The domovoy, the dreams. Despite everything he had seen tonight, the fruition of those prophecies weeks before shook Gerald to his core. What did that mean for his own dreams of being dead and lost in the woods? The thought wasn't anticipatory, nor pessimistic. He was, in an uncanny mode of self realization he couldn't fully comprehend, dead. If not tonight, then one day soon or far, but dead and always would be. It was what he felt in the woods, on the slopes of the Sharr, and it showed it to him in his nightmares. Endless and timeless, once dead and always dead, as they all were. *Those that walk that do not walk.*

Otts's breathing became rapid, shallow successions and Jones announced he was unconscious. Sergeant Sheriff ordered O'Connor to work the radio again as Bobbie and Jones did their best to try and wake Otts back up, but he wasn't coming to. Then the car sputtered and the engine died. Gerald quickly shifted into neutral and kept the car moving down the descending road. It sputtered back to life after a half a minute of working the ignition.

It had been thirty minutes since they had left Drajiq, more than enough time to traverse the distance to their planned exfiltration site, but for all he knew they were in another place and time. The fog was their world, and beyond it the endlessness of Sredačka Župa and its Sharr mountains. The bridge painter intruded Gerald thoughts, the thrum and hiss of the pressure washer resonating perpetually in his skull. Was this his bridge? Was this the death he had felt all over in the woods? To drive this dying car in the fog, turning it over again and again, inching forward in an endless descent. All at once the urge to fight subsided. In that moment it was soothing to let go, to feel the sudden and ephemeral ease of not having to fight, to survive. And it was easy to slip into, to just let go and fade into the forest, into the mountains. The sudden comfort terrified Gerald, snapped him out of the deathly reverie in primal panic. *No*, he demanded of himself, *I'm getting out of here. We all are.*

The road eased into a level plane and the car sputtered again. Ahead of him Gerald could see the outline of several vehicles parked just off the road. Then he saw Darko's tall frame emerge from the far side of one car. He stood just off road, not waving them down, not moving at all. He just idly watched them approach.

"You see that?"

"Yeah," Sergeant Sheriff breathed.

Gerald eased the vehicle to a crawl as the engine lurched violently to stay alive. Murphy and O'Connor protested from the back to speed up, but Sergeant Sheriff promptly snapped at them to be quiet. As they approached Darko, Gerald rolled down his window and waved at him. No response. Gerald yelled out, but Darko remained rigid, and stared at them from the side of the road.

"Where is everyone else?" Bobbie asked, but no one answered him.

They were only several feet away from him when Gerald noticed Darko's eyes were dark pits and not shadows cast from his brow. Something blacked out the whites of his eyes. They were stones. He slammed on the gas pedal and the metro's engine squealed as its timing belt snapped, but he didn't let up and sped past Darko as the others asked what he was doing.

"Vizitae, ease up," Sergeant Sheriff said, but he ignored him.

Bobbie craned his neck to watch Darko pass. "Why are we—"

"Darko's gone. They're gone," was all Gerald could manage as his throat knotted.

"How?" Bobbie asked.

"Vizitae, ease up," Sergeant Sheriff repeated, more demanding this time.

"I don't know."

"What's that mean, V?"

"I don't know!"

The car's engine made an alarming knock and bursting sound, and smoke rose from the hood. All at once it died to the collective cursing of everyone inside. The car rolled to a stop as Gerald slammed the key over multiple times. He cursed again and smashed his fist into the steering wheel.

“Check on Otts again,” Sergeant Sheriff said. Gerald desperately worked the ignition, but instead of turning over the car produced a motionless clicking sound that strobed the already dim headlights.

“Otts?” Jones said from the back, and then slapped at his face to no response. He gave Otts a shake, then a forceful nudge. Nothing. “Sergeant...”

“Check his pulse,” he snapped. Gerald pleaded with the car as he tried to start it again.

“I can’t feel anything,” Jones said.

“Check again!”

Beyond the fog, the haze of the coming morning glowed. Gerald pointed it out, voice haggard and frail, but everyone was focused on Otts in the backseat. Bobbie leaned over and started chest compressions. Otts limp body swayed in Jones’s lap with each push. Then a human form drifted through the fog. Murphy called out as he spotted another.

There came a rapid succession of thuds and the corpse-being was on them. The car lurched to its right as the immense weight of the creature slammed into the driver’s side. A mass of flesh pressed against the window, fingers and teeth smearing a viscous residue of corpse rot and saliva on its surface. The window shattered under its weight, and several conjoined, groping hands crawling inside. Everyone shrieked. Gerald recoiled, kicked himself towards the front passenger side, and his weight fell on Sergeant Sheriff as he struggled with his door handle. O’Connor and Murphy leapt out the trunk while Bobbie and Jones both tried to crawl out the back at the same time.

The creature’s arm mass spilled over Gerald. The appendage was not just arms and hands, but every part of the many bodies that made up its anatomy. Dead, cataracted eyes protruded between fingers, on forearms, in a spiral of lips and teeth and other indiscernible parts

of whoever they once were. The majority of its arm roamed into the back seat and over Otts, but there was enough of its mass to pin Gerald's legs to his seat. Its fingers scratched at his fatigues and teeth gnawed in discovery. Its flesh was cold and sank in when pressed against him. Liquid soaked his pants and stuck to his skin. Then it began biting.

Gerald couldn't scream in his panic. He clawed across the car cab and on top of Sergeant Sheriff, who finally worked the door open and freed himself. Sergeant Sheriff fell out of the car and left Gerald awkwardly arched over the center console and stick shift. The thing dismembered Otts inside the metro, joints popping free, flesh and bone reassembling itself into its form. And it was doing the same to Gerald's legs.

He felt teeth grind and chew through his fatigues and into the flesh of his thighs, fingernails scraping and pulling. Both of Gerald's legs bloomed in a fiery agony, and he shrieked as he tried his best to kick free from underneath its mass. Its many hands crawled up his waist to his stomach, and their fingers clawed into him. It spoke to him in the voices of the dead, countless gibbering intonations like the background noise of a filled room.

Jones and Murphy grabbed Gerald's from under his armpits and kicked against the car. They lodged Gerald free and pulled him half out the car. Gerald crawled the rest of the way, his legs kicking but heavy and numb from the burning pain. The car lurched off its left wheels as the creature forced more of itself inside. The other windows shattered and the roof tore apart.

O'Connor and Sergeant Sheriff were several yards in front of the car, the recoilless rifle aimed at the thing, and as Jones and Murphy dragged Gerald away, Sergeant Sheriff fired. The car exploded with the corpse-being's long arm appendage inside. It wailed in agony, now partially trapped in the burning frame. The blast knocked Murphy and Jones to the ground, hot slag peppering all three of them, but adrenaline had them on their feet. Bobbie ran over and he

and Murphy kept Gerald on his feet. They more or less dragged him down the road. O'Connor and Sergeant Sheriff did the same to Jones. He had been closest to the vehicle and took most of the fragmentation. His fatigues smoked in several places where the slag was still cooking his flesh. Gerald tried to walk, but when he put his weight on his right foot the pain nearly collapsed him. He let them hold his weight as he hopped on his left foot.

They hobbled down the road, and broke through the fog as behind them the car groaned and smashed against the ground, the corpse-being now free of the ruined vehicle. Bright warmth enveloped them, the sunrise now crested over the mountains.

As the road ascended again the fog pooled at its lowest point. The thing reached out from the wall of haze, and as the sunlight hit its appendage the rotting accumulation of parts fell off and hit the road with wet splats. Beneath the flesh an elongated bony structure the width of a young tree trunk was revealed, spiked all over with jagged spurs. The bone-arm was covered in hair-like nerves that slid away from the sloughed corpse parts. It ended in a somewhat of a hand, a dozen long bone fingers twisted in a spiral. The thing bellowed in pain and pulled its limb back into the fog, the road littered with an assortment of fused flesh. It swiped at them from the fog's edge, each time flinging rotting meat as the sun touched its form, and as the fog retreated from the sunrise they could hear its strange gait boom away from them into the distance.

Everyone collapsed, those with weapons still aiming them down the road. Someone puked, But Gerald couldn't understand much of anything at the moment. His vision whited out. Someone spoke, but unconsciousness robbed him of sense and reason. Everything went dark.

XIII

When Gerald regained consciousness a medic was spreading QuikClot all over his legs and then wrapped them in gauze. The world shook and there was a thunderous rumble, and he realized he was in the back of a deuce-and-a-half transport truck. He tried to sit up, but a familiar hand pushed him back down.

“Take it easy,” Sergeant Sheriff said. “Your legs are chewed up pretty good.”

“Where?” was all he could muster. He felt euphoric and heavy headed, and he realized he was high on painkillers. The rest of the squad was around him from what he could discern, and that put him at ease. The medic pulled at his wrist and worked an I.V. into his arm. He couldn’t feel the intrusion of the needle and it was nice.

“Just outside Urosecac,” Sergeant Sheriff said. “Just take it easy, V.”

Gerald was in and out throughout the drive, each time coming to in a moment of terror. They reminded him they were in the back of the truck heading to tent city, but each time he slipped into unconsciousness they had to repeat themselves. Gerald was moved to a stretcher sometime later after they parked. When they pulled him out he saw the bridge painter in the distance chipping away at fresh paint, but in his morphine haze Gerald saw it as earth, damp and caked on the bridge, and as the man stripped it away he could see flesh, the fused horror of arms and teeth and the swimming movement of spurred bone throughout.

XIV

November 1999 Gerald hated the agonizing physical therapy, but hated the idea of not being able to walk again even more, so he endured the grueling sessions. It was pathetic when he focused on it, so much pain just to walk a few feet with the help of two railings, and he focused

on it all the time. His quadriceps had been mangled beyond repair and he had needed transplants, thankfully able to talk the doctors out of amputating both legs. His right foot had been severed, and although he was suspicious they had taken it when they first worked on him, the doctors insisted he had lost it in Kosovo. The squad would come to visit often, everyone except O'Connor, who had suffered a psychotic break on account of everything that had happened.

“He didn’t listen to my advice,” Sergeant Sheriff said during his first visit. “Tried to tell them what really happened and when they wouldn’t believe him, he lost it.”

“What am I supposed to say then?” Gerald asked, and Sergeant Sheriff rehearsed the narrative with him. The alibi was that they had been ambushed in the crossfire between the KLA and a large Serbian unit, and their comms had been jammed throughout the firefight. Sergeant Sheriff insisted there be no exact details, only that they had been nearly overwhelmed at night and the missing American soldiers had been kidnapped along with the rest of the villagers. That type of story was common enough in Kosovo and Gerald easily accepted the lie. The media was ignorant of their losses and still reported zero combat casualties. Gerald suspected no one would ever hear about it outside their unit. They might not even tell ole Bill, but he was okay with that. Content to keep everything hidden, the truth of things still impossibly difficult to accept.

There were investigators nearly every week, but by winter and with regular visits from everyone else in the squad, Gerald had perfected the alibi and its performance. The missing details frustrated them every time, but Gerald didn’t give a shit and was happy to let them know that. He got away with it too, given his condition. The rest of the squad were going to return to the states soon, nearly all of them seeking discharge one way or another, but Gerald would have to go to Walter Reed for more rehabilitation. He wasn’t ready to say goodbye to them, even if it meant to be further away from Kosovo and Drajçiq.

What Gerald didn't tell anyone else were the nightmares that remained. He imagined they all had some form of them, long lasting remnants of the trauma, but every time he looked down at the bandaged stump of his right ankle he remembered he was the only one that had part of him taken from that thing, added to it. And at night it would call to him, whisper deep from the forests of his mind, beckoned for the rest of him to join, merge. It spoke in the voices of the dead, and sometimes he could hear Leonet, Otts, and Darko call to him. Whisper to join them, to walk with those that do not walk.