



III. The Woman With The Power

Just went down to the ice machine, ice is now melting on the sill and given how cold it is tonight there's no telling if it'll melt. I've wondered about that, why motels don't have drinking fountains like everywhere else. Sanitation, I presume. Need to drink something that's non-alcoholic to clear my system out if I'm going to wrap this up before midnight. The ashtray is full and I'm coughing so hard it's drowning out Egerton.

Looking back over this manuscript, there are so many typos it's hard to count them all. Sobering up now, head is getting clearer. Mist is drifting off, vapor off every thread of my linens and hair, but you never can tell though the aether of the space might return.

Back in Chapter 1 I typed out "NACA" as "NASA". Why I did this, I have no idea. You would assume it's only a slip of the fingers, but C really isn't that close to S on the keyboard. A deliberate choice on my part, it feels like, and that's ominous. I'm in a fugue state, things are arriving and departing in this technicolor delirium and these mistakes aren't so much mistakes as they are calls from the void.

What would NASA stand for...?

Worked around typewriters and word processors my whole life. This one, it has a built-in handle so it's nice and portable. The one I got for my 6th birthday was remarkably decent for a toy. Even had different spacing. I'm familiar with typing, so apologies if my drunken stupor makes this nearly indesipherable text illegible, or vice versa.

Can't shake that one type. NASA. I said that I told the Martian about the lunar colonies. But I had said NACA, not NASA. National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. NASA. National Advisory Safe...? Selection? I've seen it, too, or envisioned it. It's blue, and round, and entirely separate from the bureau which handles the lunar operations and the polymers.

And this is the dangerous thing about journalism, is that if you look into things too deep you find out things you never would have wanted to know. Maybe my phasing is only a consequence of me overthinking things, scrutinizing them and cataloguing them extensively, storing them away in a file cabinet deep in the recesses somewhere, until reality itself shows its true form, the real things behind the cardboard cutouts and it all comes in.

Doesn't matter anymore exactly what the nature of the Space Between is. Of course, it's not a Space Inside. They can't mine the Space Outside, but theirs isn't the Space Inside. Space Between. Between something else, another place I can't really envision. Somewhere else, more tangible than the Space and just as real as my own.

But journalism does have its downsides. We are a persecuted class who are permitted yet discouraged by the mainstream, we are in the eyes of the law given an unfortunate side effect of this Constitutionally protected American right we call the freedom of the press. Oh, they will try and dissuade us, through legislation and classification, but we always slip through. Parasites is what we are, and we chew into sheets of paper with daisy wheels and amass nests of newspaper clipping and manila envelopes and then we excrete information. We are termites all.

I feel as if the motel room is slightly different since I went to the ice machine. It's changed somehow, the shade of the walls is slightly different, furniture has been rearranged by an invisible hand. Same invisible hand which is now guiding my keystrokes and forcing me to commit that C-S slip-up, I can only presume. All hypothetical. Purely theory.

There is something about the feeling tonight that it could all come down, and odds are it will. This is the last piece of a very large and very difficult puzzle. One ten years in the making, but termite that I am I've seen it through. Need to stay sober for the next little bit.

Space?

So it's 1972 and I'm freelance at this point. It's an interim if you will, an exposure to the platitudes and rough patches of the world away from the shield of cronies and oversight. I have relocated to Niwot.

This may appear at first counterintuitive, as Niwot isn't where one would go for the action, but I found plenty action just staring at those behemoths rising in the west and watching reruns every night and living in a small duplex aside the train tracks and the Niwot town hall, which was where I caught much municipal banter and discussion.

It was a community on the decline then and remains on the decline now, a transitory space passed and never mentioned. The Niwot Tribune had closed its doors in 1955, and with that went the last hope of Niwot ever becoming a gran metro. It was, however, an ideal meeting ground for filthy washouts and derelicts who were on my same frequency.

There were many nights at the municipal center where laws would be given and then amended, crossed out or submitted by farmers, conservative bluegrass and pot-junkies who were angsty and probably had some friends at Boulder University but didn't go themselves, just sat in hookah alleys or at the Pearl Street Mall busking for tourists.

Even among the cultural explosion that resulted from the inception of the Connectron, Niwot was bare-bones and dry, caught between a successful neighbor and a slightly less successful neighbor, it committed a collective seppuku as many such off-the-map unincorporated nowhere towns are prone. It was in every sense an ideal respite from the New Mexican affair.

I remained aloof to my peers, stopping only at the council meetings and the general assemblies, and every now and again the neighbors would catch me on Pat's Cafe on the main row and I would say absolutely nothing to them and remain in my termite ways

Now when Mitchell contacts me initial Pat's Cafe and sitting out in the midday of looking over at me. I notice his peculiar and trying to patch up my damaged reputation and then return to the soda machine and Equally as warm as the one I already had by in places like these.

"Place is changing," he remarks, taking the rest back down to fester. "I was born now find it. Had to get out here, see the think?" As he says this a blackbird is making enchanted peaks.

"One could say that," I retort over this town myself. Here for kicks."

"You're a journalist."

I'm surprised by this, he's caught me unfazed, cross my legs and take a deep breath catch onto me. It had to happen eventually.

"Guilty as charged," I respond. He fishes me a business card, then just as he picks up, shaking his head with what appears to be a little wastebasket Pat's provides for all patrons.

The business card, if I recall, read a

Hank Mitchell
Special Oper
so-and-so ph

"Have something I think you might be interested in on my shoulder. Maybe he's a schizophrenic, I think I understand- can't spill the beans on this project. I have to tell someone. They won't mind." Flashbacks to Berk and the covert dosmetics. Poison in the product. I have to tell someone, because who does something they can't be proud of?

"I'm game."

"Good," he says. "Would you be willing to answer a few questions asked?" And as he says this, a car is cruising down the main Niwot strip, looking as foreign as possible, but the driver is as I.

"Had nothing better to do this afternoon, maybe the mundane cyclical nature of life was aching for some action. And I look around at the adjacent tables who are all people sitting at the adjacent tables who are all how droll, on many a noontime panel, and I take in the way one last gorgeous sweeping vistaful of it, because this might be the last time I'm here. By my own initiative or otherwise.

"In five seconds, stand up," he says. "I'll get in behind you. We are not to stop. Do you understand?" I nod casually as if he was asking me the time of day and then I stand up and leave my soda behind here is an aluminum can of lukewarm soda, with Mitch follows behind. The car is fancy, has nice hubcaps on, shiny ones with intricate inside are leather. There is no wire barrier which is a relief and means I'm not actually Berkowitz's story back in New Mex. And the like how I assume astronauts feel when they distant and alone in a large void, cut off. Damn if that sense doesn't get your adrenals

ly, I don't think much of it. It's at sun with a warm soda and he's kind of liar gaze and assume he's a local, I invite him over to my table come back with one for both of us. , as refrigeration is hard to come

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Walk over to that car and get in. at your house. Straight trip. e was asking me the time of day id. Last remnant of my presence hich I find fitting.

custom made just for this getup and ate metallurgy. And the seats r between the front and back seat, y under arrest for the leaking of car takes off and I feel a little blast off for the lunar colonies. from everything in a second. ine going.

We leave the front range behind us and travel like silk on one of those small state highways nobody ever checks. It is entirely devoid of traffic, only a derelict farmhouse or a lone cottonwood tree every now and again. Mitch remains silent, I assume not wanting to alert the chauffeur to the precise nature of my visit, and I follow suit. When in Rome. The driver is stocky, with an earpiece and a CB radio up front, and is silent. He asks Mitch something in Turkish, and then the driver uses a keyboard in the front passenger seat to type something in.

And it goes like this for a long time. My headspace behind these gray lacquered windows is a careful blend of apprehension, exhilaration, and staunch realism. Could still all be a diversion. Maybe all he wants is to sell me Floridian real estate. I like novelty, who doesn't? I'm giddy.

That strange effect happens which is peculiar to Eastern Colorado, where the range vanishes over the horizon as you recede from it, until all that remains is a thin glimmer of velvet along the rim of visibility, and then even that is gone, leaving you on an expanse of devoid wheatgrass. Shore is leaving over the ocean. Shore is leaving a floor of nothing.

Like watching land go by your line of sight. Alone on a plateau of nothing. But as there are coral reefs and islands to break the monotony of the high seas, here in the Great American desert there are abandoned gas stations, pumps and grasshoppers which suck the earth dry of its oils and magaa- there is a lot to see even in the absence of things to see, if you keep your eyes peeled.

However, we soon leave even the outskirts of firestone and so are far past the protective coddling insulation of I-25, no, we are farther than I've ever been, so far out I hadn'tt even considered Colorado was this big. We are by every definition of the word on a friendless voyage.

Now. Maybe that opening line about the dismal youth in Boulder was true, maybe not. I assume there's an element of truth to it. Wherever we're going, it can't be the big fish., not yet. Just a casual visit and I'll take notes. Nothing more.

The driver turns the knob of the radio and I hear the sound of the open road- intercepted police gibberish, Mexican stations from below the border, and the usual trucking back-and-forth. Jingo, largon, ad infinitum. He's trying to nail down a particular frequency.

and try holding the knob, but he shoves me back and slaps me. My expertise will not be required, I surmise. I am only along to observer.. Casual observer. Mitch rubs his chin and smirks. Driver goes back to looking at the road signs.

The car begins to fade. No, I tell myself. Stay in one piece. No phasing. No space. Mitch's tie to anchor myself to the here and now. It's yellow and red, with a plaid pattern down the middle. Look at how he tied it. Anything to keep it from vanishing. How does he tie it before he leaves for work in the morning? etc.

it on Pearl Street at a shop called Marguerite's. I think I got a bargain, can't be sure. Maybe on the way back we can stop there and get one for you." I wave my hand and politely decline the offer. Need a new tie like I need a hole in the head.

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"Pull in here," he says, which I assume is unnecessary as the driver has made this same trip countless times, the small dirt path the Volga now veers onto is worn with tire tread and shows all the signs of a familiar homestead. It continues for half a mile or so along a comfortable trajectory, and we hug the shoulder as if this would obscure us from view somehow.

And then you see it rise out of the wheatgrass and barley, a kind of rectangular structure, perfectly geometric modern architecture. If you were out here in the sticks and you weren't familiar with the structures of the Great American Desert, you might assume it to be a cattle pen or grain silo—however its unnerving quality is amplified by its isolation from any other manmade structure, with the exception of the road. All around you can see an all-consuming gulf of plants, not even so much as a tree or a telephone pole. It's uncanny. Mitch looks worried.

One side of this structure was corrugated, the rest were smooth, honed down to Macchu Picchu levels of intensive quality, atomically aligned and bolted shut. The corrugated side has one entrance.

Mitch digs deep into his jacket and gets a small black box from a real sequestered pocket. He pushes the small silicon button, its only visible control, and speaks into a single hole near the bottom, which I assume is a microphone. Never seen integrated circuitry quite on this level.

"Raise north doors," he says. "3 passengers. Do you read?" And then a weird kind of frequency can be heard resonating out of the little black box, and he puts it back into the hidden pocket. Folds his hands, weaves his digits, leans back and smiles at me. But it's a disingenuous smile, maybe he knows that by bringing me here he'll cause my execution. A death warrant. He's experienced, but makes mistakes from time to time. An expert in his field, no doubt. But far from perfect.

At least he's more charismatic than Berkowitz.

It raises itself slowly on iron hinges, much like how a garage door folds itself up. Into little folds and creases. And it makes a grating noise and the road ebbs downward, and the Volga cruises into the pit with effortless gravity, careening further onto this diagonal slope, and any traces of daylight are extinguished as the slab makes its way down again. Now we're in the dark. Even the Volga's headlights are switched off.

Mitch's face has turned into a wry silhouette, the driver is only seen from the amber of the dashboard controls, and there's a sense that the Volga has exited the space-time continuum and is in a state of nonexistence. But we are moving, the road doesn't end. The car cruises forth for what feels like several more miles. Mitch remains entirely vacant.

Then everything gradually creeps to a complete halt and you can just make out the noise of the chalk subsiding as the Volga's engine is switched off and it sits idling in this vast subterranean crevasse. Mitch checks his watch and pulls the black box out again. He shakes his head, looks at some unknown facet of it, contemplates this. Then he puts it back.

A voice caroms from a speaker somewhere far above. "CLEAR. ENTER WHEN YOU'RE READY. WELCOME BACK, DR. MITCHELL." He holds the door, releases the handle and the driver stays put where he is. Hank feels around in the darkness for some kind of switch, fumbling like a bat. He echolocates this contraption and with one smooth snap the dimensions of this inner sanctum are revealed.

It's long and wide. The gravel ends a few feet beyond the car's tires and gives way to a slick, marble-esque floor. I myself get out of the car and stand up, taking in the view. Behind us the road edges around a corner and then out of sight. Truly an impenetrable fortress. Mitch claps me on the back and ushers me toward a glass window to our left. He murmurs something to the driver, who nods and walks off. I strain my neck to follow the direction he's going in, as orientation is an amateur hobby of mine, but Mitch reels me in and takes some keys from beside the window and lets us in.

Step in here," Mitch motions for me to get in the elevator with him. "Like what you've seen so far? They'll ask me some questions but I'll just tell them you're here under my authority. I'm sick of having to suppress this." I just nod as the car makes its way down a few floors, and the display on top flickers briefly. There are no numbers, of course.

"It's good," I respond with authenticity. "Really good. All the way out here, impossible to detect. In Las Cruces there was a place like this, but it was only a few miles past the city limits." He doesn't understand this last bit because of course he doesn't, he wasn't there. All the same his breath is bated and he's tottering on his feet like a giddy toddler at the arcade. At last the car arrives at a dull thudding halt and I feel the elevation. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.

"First floor," everybody out," and Mitch grabs my arm and guides me into a room which from the looks of it is some kind of laboratory. Cold, sterile, conscious machines stare and blink at us, and the white light everywhere is otherworldly, sinks into your bones. There's also something with the gravity. Even though you're closer to the Earth's core down here, you feel much lighter, as if you're an ethereal observer.

An older man now approached us. He looked official, was carrying a lanyard around his neck and looked like one of the Washington types, a stodgy salt and pepper, meat and potatoes bureaucrat. None of the enthusiasm of Mitch about him, just a cold exterior and some cologne. Probably had a wife and children somewhere. Which always strikes me about these types, when you go home in the evening and your children become too inquisitive concerning your profession, what exactly do you tell them?

"Reg, meet ----- . Found him in Niwot. He's here to take it all in, so to speak." I stepped forth and shook the older gentleman's hand. He had a grip like a vice, and visible disdain. He shook his head at Mitch and exhaled before proceeding.

"If you say anything about this," he mutters sharply under his breath, "We will track you down and eliminate the contingency you present, son. Do you understand?" I nod, knowing full well that this guarantee is full of horse shit and he probably doesn't know where his spleen is, let alone how to effectively track someone. He whispers something into Mitch's ear and thereafter disappears behind a column of reels.

Mitch pats me on the back and starts into some witty diatribe but then he pauses when he realizes the severity of the interaction. No matter. On to the freak show, his demeanor suggests, and we stroll through this immense underground facility. I keep an eye out for mushroom insignia, however there really are none in the immediate vicinity.

At long last we get to a room which has only a tiny window in the front and a slot between which Mitch slides his lanyard and the window opens and inside there's a woman in a kind of polyester jumpsuit. She's sitting at one lonesome wooden table and reading.

"This is what you brought me here to see?"

"Look closer," Mitch suggests. I stand on tiptoes and study her further. She is demure, quiet, barely makes a noise as she flips from one page of her paperback to the next. She has a short bob cut, pale yellow, if I didn't know better I would think she were an albino, however her cheeks contain the slightest trace of pigment. It's then that she turns and looks directly at me- and the difference between her and any normal person is immediate. She has no left pupil. Only a sclera.

She registers my shock and smiles. She sets her book down, uncrosses her legs and walks over to greet me. She is a beautiful freak, a stunning abomination. The pupilless socket continues to haunt me as I put my arm through the door to shake her hand. Her hands are strangely long, as if one put them through a taffy machine. And her earrings are perfectly spherical, as perfectly constructed as the architecture of this place. Too perfect. Without flaws, without human error.

Her right eye is a deep amber.

"Hello," she says, and her intonation is that of a well-oiled machine. Crisp, impersonal, somewhat reminiscent of a telephone operator. Connected on by wires and that frail thing we term context.

"Meet Hypatia," says Mitch. He claps me on the back and grins.

"Last of the Hellenes," I murmur under my breath.

Mitch is sending very subtle clues my way. First, that Hypatia bears little resemblance to her namesake. Second, that she is fundamentally of something else than we flesh and blood people standing outside her contained universe- and of course the separation a boundary of this variety entails. She is spoken of either in the third person or not at all.

"In Spanish," she continues my subconscious thought in that uncanny crystal sharp intonation, "HIPATIA. How is your day going?" I am taken aback by this question and glance at Mitch for guidance. He laughs this off and retrieves a ring of well-honed keys from that jacket of surprises. He lifts a steel one to the lock and then waves his lanyard next to some kind of electric eye device. The barrier slides open and she is standing in that duochromatic jumpsuit. Leaning against the frame, she calls to mind a formula 1 racer on th asphalt circuit.

"Fine so far," Mitch responds, reaching across to the nearest computer monitor and grabbing a pair of handcuffs. He takes another key, this one smaller, and chains her wrist to his. He grins as if I should not be perplexed by this sequence of events, as if it were as routine as combing one's hair or breathing- and down here, it probably is.

"Let's go for a walk," he chirps. "You still have a lot of ground to cover. Look over there. I think we'll take the East route to begin with, Hypatia knows it well." And we start walking. She moves as smoothly as she sounds, even chained to Mitch whose footfall is as amateur as one would expect. She has the movement of walking down to a perfect science. Each stride is equal in length, her feet do not divert themselves from our route by a millimeter. She stares ahead, has excellent posture.

"Do you want to eat?" he says. "It's been a few hours since I had anything and I'm famished. I'm sure Hypatia would also like to tour the cafeteria, she hasn't been in months. Usually she orders something and has it delivered to her room." As Mitch discusses her- still in the third person- she sighs. She may be perfect, but emotion is indeed one aspect of perfection.

"Sure," I check my watch and see that time has indeed elapsed. A trip over the prairie can dilute the ticking of the clock. By now the outside world is coated in shadows and purple velvet.

"Who are you?"

"Beg pardon?" she flutters those perfectly trimmed eyelashes and raises her free hand to her bob cut. It is flawless, each strand half-covering the next in a microscopic crescendo. Each strand of uniform length. Her nails are without scuffs or indentations. Her skin displays no symptoms of pores, you would not think she sweats. The more I look at her, the more questions I have.

"Drug addict or something?" She is confused by this statement. Mitch shoots me an accusatory glare and I back down. "Recovering drug addict. Just a guess. I've heard stories about programs conducted by the CIA where they pick junkies up off the streets and tell them that they have some kind of program to wean the junkie off whatever drug they're kicking on. But actually it's to experiment with LSD. Lysergic Acid Diethylamide. They say it helps them

study the internal processes of the brain, and they use these addicts as test subjects. Technically legal, no legislation surrounding it. Provided we're speaking off the record here, Mitch." I first caught wind of this story back in Las Cruces, actually, heard about it from a member of a local commune who complained about her boyfriend having gone missing.

"Oh, no, nothing like that." Mitch looks at me as if I had accused him of lying. "We'll talk about it in a sec. Hope you like lasagna, that's what's on the menu tonight. We get supplies each month at a specified time from a food distributor in Nebraska, it's freeze dried. You know, like they have up on the lunar colonies. Matter of fact, I think our distributor serves them occasionally. Lot of demand for specialty food like that these days." We turn one more corner and a long painted line marks several routes- one to something called the pre-op room, one marked "outgoing," another marked "Offices zB-0." Mitch pulls her like a dog on a leash and controls where my eyes wander. He is, despite his clumsy exterior, a controlled man with no time for nonsense. I can respect that.

The cafeteria is located past two swing doors and there are a few people here even at this late hour, in garb similar to Mitch's, drinking coffee and making snide remarks about my disheveled appearance. At the back is a small counter staffed by an overweight man in his mid-40s. He says absolutely nothing as we approach from the far side of the room.

"Give us the usual, Alfons," and the scoop dips into a loose vat of noodles and paste. We get some plates from a deep receptacle and he empties the scoop methodically, then goes to the oven and pulls out some cookies. We each get one. He wipes his hand on his apron and we turn away. Mitch grabs some chairs and then wanders over with Hypatia to the soda machine. I sit down.

My bones are aching, and the food tastes like plastic. If this is what they eat up on the moon I can see why there's so much civil unrest in the dome on the outskirts of the tranquil sea. My current situation might be dire, I realize, but at least it isn't like that.

"There we go," he says, setting the drinks down. The plates are unusually hot for paper ones, the food is steaming and the beverages are icy to the touch. All part of the climate control in this facility. The air ducts are well-designed, I can barely tell I'm in Hell from the quality of the intake.

"As to your question," he says, "Hypatia isn't a drug addict. I figured you would actually think she was a robot. But she's not. We grew her." As he says this last part he takes a casual sip from the can and Hypatia opens hers with those sterile nails.

"They grew me," she says. "Last year. Mitch was the head of the team, and I think he's very pleased with how I turned out." Mitch nods and takes yet another bite of lasagna. I realize what it's missing. No ricotta.

"Think of it like this," Mitch says. "Hypatia possesses all of the traits in a person you or I would find desirable. We edited her genome, stripped off all the potential defects and she grew to adulthood in the span of around two weeks. In one of our labs. The genetic donors we got were from Wisconsin. The wife said she was infertile, but from a survey we conducted in multiple states they were the most flawless individuals. They never would have guessed. Lucky all the same. Hypatia here is like an improved variety of them, if you will. Agile, lithe, encyclopedic knowledge. We put all that into her chromosomes. Fantastic." She smiles and takes a sip. It's bubbling just under the surface. Lime flavored.

"You're talking eugenics," I say bluntly, pointing my fork at him in an accusatory fashion. "That's what the German Nationalists wanted during the Great War. Complete perfection and the eradication of the undesirable. A pipe dream, Mitch. Is this what you brought me here for?"

"You overstate our intentions," he defends himself. I've got him pinned like a butterfly. Hypatia just sits there with her face in one hand, a blank slate. "No master race, nothing like that. All we want is for her to be like this. We created her from nothing. She wasn't born, she was crafted. Like a lump of clay. Would you afford a lump of clay rights? Would you want to be a lump of clay?" He had a point. It wasn't desirable.

"Why so much trouble for something with no practical application?"

"For public relations, essentially," Mitch says. His glasses are fogged up, he removes them and wipes them on his jacket. "Think of it like this. Countries are brands. We need to present ourselves in a certain way to the market. My role is effectively that of any ad man along Madison Avenue. Sell American ideals, the American dream. Average life." As he says this the lights above flicker slightly- this place must be off the grid. Would need a sizeable generator to support ventilation and all that.

"If you think something's wrong," she says, "Don't worry. I'm happy and they keep me up to date on everything that goes on outside and I enjoy sitting for hours, meditating. In my room." She is not naive. She has stacks of intel behind those diametrically opposed eyes. The fork one with its traces of humanity, the sclera always present to remind you that she is a manufactured ideal.

"This whole place-" i begin-

"An ad agency," he says. "Yes. That's what you could think of us as. When the world is ready, we take Hypatia upstairs and bring her to an international audience, to a general assembly at the Union. It'll be soon. Possibly half a year. We hold her up as a marvel of American engineering." She turns to him and sends him some sort of question. He nods.

"Let me show you what I'm capable of." She picks up one of the forks, holds it lengthwise in the palm of her hand. She stares at it intensely. The air around us begins to heat up, the table vibrates slightly, as if a small earthquake had passed through. There are no fault lines in Colorado.

Her sclera eye becomes a passionate crimson. She concentrates harder than I had ever seen anyone concentrate, the vibration grows and the air which moments before had been conditioned and comforting is now ready to stifle and choke us. The fork moves slightly, and then as the air cools down and her eye returns to a placid blue, the fork is lifted as if by string a few inches into the air. It levitates, hovers. She twitches one finger and the fork shifts to the left.

"Telekinesis," I say as my drink sloshes empties itself onto the table. It rises off the artificial wooden finish in a gelatinous behavior, joining the fork in midair. Mitch sits and grins ear to ear. Hypatia smiles. Then her trance is broken. The fork clatters to the plate with a metallic sound. The soda sloshes down, soaking Hypatia's jumpsuit. I pull some napkins from the holder. Mitch is eating his cookie. I can't say they were bad. Baked goods usually aren't for whatever reason when they go through the freeze-drying process.

"Some party trick," I whisper.

"Not just a party trick," he says. "International defense. See, the Sovs have been up to the exact same game. Bolsheviks have a superwoman, too. They call her Ksenia from what we've been able to gather. She was put together in a similar way, has the same edited genetic sequence and abilities. So we're going to bring them together in a kind of harmless spectacle, have them compete in a sort of detente event." I had to hand it to Mitch, this idea would go a long way towards cooling the tension. An icebreaker.

"Ksenia is my sister, in a way," she says, still wiping at her collar with a napkin. "The Soviets came up with the idea first, she was completed before I was. We have to keep up with them, Mitch says." Another bite of lasagna. By now most of the other tables were abandoned and the overweight man left his post at the counter.

"This is an exclusive," Mitch says. "I knew the minute I saw you at the cafe that you would be capable of handling this. Something about the eyes. We're not ready yet, but when we are, once Hypatia's abilities are at their peak- well, nothing will be the same." Hypatia finishes the rest of what's on her plate- some of it is soaked thoroughly, but she shovels it in and somehow retains that clean perfection.

against all odds.

Mitch silently wipes his mouth and we toss the paper plates into a bin and then we pour out. Thoughts are racing through my cortex at breakneck speeds. Shouldn't be here, it's perverse, in too deep for my own good. All while this is going on and my palms are sweating to oblivion perfect Hypatia is a cool 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

I forget most of what Mitch showed me that night. Surely he was only able to display a small selection of the wonders of the Halls of Medicine, maybe ten percent of the full capacity of this extensive subterranean compound. And I tried acting normal and played along with it, as if this creature wasn't handcuffed to his wrist and she wasn't simultaneously unnerving and lavish, as if I were back at my room in Niwot with some Fitzgerald novels and a cup of milk, a hot shower and an uneventful night on the porch gazing at the constellations and the distant ridge.

But we were in plastic corridors, doors which opened on rooms with all manner of questionable equipment, strange personnel with eclectic terms, vernacular which went over my head, awkward pauses as Mitch stopped to gather his bearings. And Hypatia just stood there.

When all was said and done we returned via the circuit to the same room where the banks of processors ran, their tape clicking through, the punchcards automatically fed into slots and onto desks, spit with data and imprinted with erratas. Hypatia's room is well-lit, although bleak, and Mitch unlocks the handcuffs and sees her through. She smiles, shakes my hand, retreats to the inner confines of her habitat.

"She's really something, isn't she?" Mitch is smug and I'm tempted to hit him in the face. But my arms remain at my sides and the computers tick on as is routine here in what I assume will be something I'll need to get accustomed to. Hypatia has settled back into her book.

It's Fitzgerald.

"Yes, you could say that." Mitch laughs somehow, retrieves a pen from a workstation in our vicinity and writes something down on a clipboard. Then he hangs the keyring on a hook next to the door, passes his lanyard by the scanner and shuts the window.

"Come on," and he walks in the opposite direction from where we came. "I'll show you to where you'll be staying for the duration of your visit. I think you'll like it." And we walk to what looks like a residential quarter and he shows me how these scanners work and how to pass them by the thing near the door, and not to share mine with anyone, under any circumstance although I have no luggage so I doubt anyone would rob me.

And then I go into my room and fall into a fast and painless slumber.

To say my feelings and thoughts that first night were conflicted would be a severe understatement- Hypatia remained singed in my field of vision, like the magnetite of an Etch-A-Sketch. Burning, her lips opened and she spoke but no sound came out. No sclera.

Hypatia, last of the Hellenes. A symbol of changing times. Yes, things would change. Genetic reconstruction, splicing the building blocks of life, editing them as if they were no more than a manuscript. And here I was at the cusp. Who was I to warrant such a right?

Something about that name. Why had she told me what it was in Spanish?

I wasn't attracted to her, for the record. I am attracted to few people, I would say, and this porcelain cupie doll was no exception to the rule. She was fascinating, though. I was enamored with her. Something to challenge my ethics, my standards. And the more I thought about how naturally she had slipped into those handcuffs, and how droll she had been at the dinner table, the more disturbing it became. There was something boiling just under the surface, like those vibrations, like the lime soda. There were unspoken words and subtle hints. Blemishes and scars on a landscape designed to resist entropy. They shouldn't have invited me.

As always, something was fundamentally wrong.

Over the coming weeks I get to know Hypatia. We spend hours on end at the same beleaguered cafeteria table around noon. Talking things over, maybe exchanging experiences. Hank is seldom present, though he tells me that I am at all times on camera and to abide by the code of the facility.

I know her more than I know myself, it seems. Behind that dull and spaced exterior is a fully developed adult woman who knows things nobody only a couple years of age should know. She tells me that she learns things at a rate which far exceeds that of a non-engineered person, how her brain is not capable of losing information, how she can visualize any object on a whim and recall any trivia at a command. I sit rapt and enthralled in the presence of this eidetic marvel.

Our conversations are always dampened by the lasers installed in the holes in the walls. Hank has promised me that I make one false move or try to help her escape, or coerce her to do so, I'll be stealing Government property. Each laser is a nasty instrument of surgical precision which juts from the plaster at a 45-degree angle.

Every night, I retire to my room. Hank has loaned me some of his vinyl albums, all of them high-fidelity, and I sit while time passes through the hourglass and days become weeks, because nothing is waiting for me back in Niwot and this new existence is a far more scintillating one.

Hypatia is fluent in Latin, uses it often to refer to things as if it were a second language of hers from birth. I suspect this may have something to do with its versatility and its polished simplicity. She is nothing if not pared down in every regard to what might be termed strictly essential. She has no flair, no flavor, no excess.

Sometimes at unpredictable intervals Hank takes me into a small room with blank walls and hands me a small questionnaire. The brochure is divided up into multiple sections, some of the inquiries present are coherent and I assume others are red herrings. He stands by the door, checks his watch and times me. I swear I catch him gloating.

In a sense my life has transformed, in a very short span, into a sort of kitsch film- though the circumstances are bleak, I and Hypatia are lulled and programmed into playing the roles of simple-minded, happy people. When all is said and done, doesn't everyone engage in performative behavior, at least to some extent?

Updates on Ksenia were regularly brought down from the transmission room by Reg, the large man with the stern face and the tired disposition. Like Mitch, I found him to be

~~found him to be~~

somewhat of an acquired taste. He said very little and regarded Hank with brash contempt, dissecting him at any opportunity. I wondered if these strange people were brainwashing me in subtle yet undeniable ways, if these rivalries were staged, if their behavior was a vaudeville flimflam. You never can be too sure with their type, they lie through their teeth and pay those in higher offices to retain silence at the expense of common decency.

There was something Mitch possessed which Berkowitz had not. Charisma. You could tell by the way he waggled his fingers and the polish he applied to his hair that he put a lot of stock in self-improvement and found it an invaluable aide to his work, work which involved ethically objectionable indiscretions. With that nervous grin and the manufactured discontent with him and Reg, a less trained eye might mistake him for a hapless rube whose expertise in the field was rudimentary at best. Unfortunately for him, I had a trained eye and I wasn't buying the act for a minute.

From what I could make of Hypatia, she wasn't an actor and she wasn't being coerced. Maybe she really did hold admiration and respect for Mitch, after all he was technically her father. Or maybe she respected him the way a benevolent despot respects his people- only to a point.

The facility, as I have mentioned, is well-insulated. Within a few months the surface world is besieged by a hard Coloradan winter yet the air in these remote porcelain corridors remains temperate and humid, though not excessively so. While I can determine with absolute certainty neither its width nor its breadth, I understand the computational power required to keep these systems running at optimal performance must be in the terabytes.

At night Hypatia merely sits in her room and pores over those tomes, which like Mitch's dull vinyl albums seem to have no end. While I listen to light jazz I am aware that a short walk down the hall there is a superhuman whose intellect could squeeze my brain like a pneumatic press.

And all the while those small lasers are ready to strike, and Reg or someone on a higher level observes us, and Mitch serves as intermediary. As the snow gathers and the cabin fever dawns on me, his disposition corrects itself as a barometer does. He takes on the role of a buddy. Now it's intellectual discussions with Hypatia in the evenings, Platonic chat with Hank around noon. My itinerary is becoming cluttered.

Hypatia seldom displays here telekinetic abilities. I can only assume the act drains her of energy, or perhaps Mitch has ordered her to use them only to impress visiting dignitaries. Why I would qualify as such I know not, though it is a cosmic joke that my status has risen.

The fourth estate really can get anywhere.

Hypatia did strike me as the sort of model I had seen in several prominent women's and fashion magazines at the Las Cruces dentist office. She could easily pass for a model, save for that sclera- it was impossible for her to become overweight, too short or too tall, have any facial defects. She never used makeup because blemishes were a thing of the past with this all-new spectacular made-to-order genetic rearrangement. I could picture her in an ad for perfume or carpet cleaner, or maybe traveler's checks.

The cafeteria had little in the way of variety but what food was served was just passable enough for a member of the Senate, some of whom I presume were privy to and complicit in the scheme. Hypatia offered no objections to it being that it was the only food she had ever known.

The handcuffs were slowly phased out. ~~Maybe~~ Mitch assumed I could be trusted with her, maybe he just thought I would expose her to the average commoner. What his plan was, I can't say because those questionnaires he supplied me with were deliberately cryptic. One thing was for certain. He was far from a rube.

Sometimes I didn't feel qualified to sit up late with Hypatia. Around 11 P.M. the lights would usually dim, or half of them would switch off. There was some kind of curfew in effect although we, the guinea pigs, were not subject to it. I could tell she had a lot to relate to me.

Not just her views on the ideal utopian society, or her ideological stances. She was also somewhat telepathic. Every so often while talking with her, a thought would implant itself in my conscious- and there was no denying that it was in fact hers, that she had sent it my way without so much as a wink or a nod. It was a reflex with her, an unspoken assumption on her part that telepathy was one of the intrinsic senses and she could not, I think, perceive an existence beyond it.

Staying up late nights with her sometimes required copious caffeine consumption, and I felt as though we were engaging in the communicative equivalent of chess, that she was a grandmaster and I had yet to even learn the rules and parameters of the game. It was insufferable and challenging and all the other innumerable things which make life worth living. I was much happier in this state of perpetual confusion than I had ever been in Las Cruces, and my horizons were ever expanding. Novelty became my chief objective, and I would pursue it to the exclusion of my sanity.

On one particular occasion, I woke up in complete darkness with these goosebumps all over, want to find Mitch, he tells me there had been some kind of error in one of the main servers and as a result the generator had blown and the lights and heat were off.

As he said all this, a low rumble could be detected emanating from the stomach of the inferno. Mitch went over to Hypatia's window and she was flat on the floor, face-down, maybe looked like Fatty Arbuckle who had just taken a pratfall on an oil spill. Mitch checks her pulse, she's breathing but slower than usual.

"Oh for fuck's sake," he exclaims, slapping his thighs. "Just perfect. "It's something about the electricity, she's intrinsically hooked up to it. We've never had an outage at this scale before. Help me out, will you?" He hoists her limp body onto his shoulders and I do the same and we make our way in the general direction of the infirmary. It was a grounding sight to walk by all these whirring reel-to-reel machines which were normally clicking away like mad and spitting out numbers. Every surface was frigid to the touch. Hank stopped by a supply locker and got us some coats.

The infirmary was rather excessive given the personnel I had seen, which is yet another reason I suspect that I had explored only a small fraction of this place. It was occupied by a few low-level drones whose arms had broken when they fell down shifts. Some were approaching hypothermia. Like Hypatia and Mitch and myself to an extent, they had become dependent on the reliability of the compound. Anyone above would be far more equipped to cope with this routine winter climate.

Mitch lays Hypatia out on a mattress and hooks an IV up to her, tells me that she requires a certain blend of nutrients. A medic approaches and tells me I'm not allowed in here, but then Mitch flashes his badge and tells the Medic that we need all the help we can get, that this is an emergency. The Medic returns with a drip bag, some percentage saline solution.

Hypatia is pale, a death shroud over her features. I also detect sort of a grayish-blue cloud surrounding her. This is I assume a type of energy, same as the red glow that came when she lifted the fork.

"Her immune system won't let her die," Mitch says, arms crossed. "She's simply too well-built to die. Nothing more we can do right now, she needs some rest is all. Let's get some breakfast." He pats me on the back and I try my best to repress my basic human decency and go about the day as if everything is normal. By now the thermostat is reaching 20 degrees. Apparently this place didn't have as much basic insulation as I had surmised.

When you thought about it for more than a minute, it really fit. The compound had exhaust vents, I had seen them on the outside of the building when we drove up, they were puffing out billows of smoke. Powering a place this large consumes a lot of electricity, not to mention all the waste products you'd need to burn. A logistical chore.

And now all those vents were dormant. Not blowing anything out, just taking in this blizzard air. It was slowly making its way into every room, every level, every crevice was getting to be frosty. Like the Titanic, this place was subject to the folly of bad engineering, no contingencies accounted for, no basic emergency preparation.

The cafeteria is dark and the chef is noticeably absent from the bar. Mitch goes into the back. Of course the oven is on the fritz, it's electric. State-of-the-art, but only with a functional power supply. He emerges holding some cheap granola bars and motions for me to have a seat. At least the frozen goods won't spoil. Human flesh might, but the frozen peas and carrots will be A-OK until doomsday.

His breath is visible even in the near-absence of light. It doesn't make any sense that we should be able to see each other down here with the lights off. Maybe the walls are full of holes and I'm seeing him through faint

daylight, maybe the walls are as thin as a termite hotel and this place is a cheap facade whose security from the elements is next to nil, however this is all speculation on my part.

The coat is made of flannel and is quickly getting soaked by the gathering ice particulate. Once he finishes the granola bar, he goes over to yet another supply closet to our right and throws me some gloves and a multipurpose scarf. I guess he doesn't know that hypothermia is only a matter of time, no matter how you bundle.

"You want to move, don't you?" I nod. "Makes sense. But even if you wanted to leave, the elevators are offline. I'm really sorry." His back is out of alignment and his eyes are frenetic with drippy concern. This is no put-on, he's genuinely concerned about our odds of remaining alive for the next few hours, he's kicking himself all the way to the bank.

"Who are you?"

"Beg pardon?"

"You're not just anybody," I pronounce, and it feels good to have my voice exceed a certain decibel level. Keeps the muscles active. "Nobody just goes up to anyone and says, 'Hey, how about I show you my expansive lair, free of charge.' Nobody does that. Who the fuck are you Hank?" This line of questioning visibly disturbs him, but he tries his best to maintain that warm G.I. demeanor and retain the use of his extremities.

"If I tell you, you won't share this."

"Share it with who? The records you've been loaning me?"

He smiles and exhales, and the frost from his lungs is now building up. Coughs into his elbow. I get a soda from the machine, tell him to drink it and settle his nerves. He pours it into a glass, shivers while it does its thing, and takes a few more seconds before he proceeds.

"I'm from a small town called Foley," he says. "I ran a diner there. It's a little nothing town, if you don't believe me, you can check any Illinois map and see it for what it is. It's a dump. I barely made a profit off the food we sold there, There were two employees, a waitress named Jolene and my son, Pat. He worked as a short order and line cook, alternatively." He rubs his arms and hands together, and his cheeks are rising in their crimson hue. This tale has the tone of a deathbed confession more than casual chatter.

"Pat was a great worker," he goes on. "Loyal to the business, which had originally been my father's. He could cook a mean omelet, wipe the fry basket clean effortlessly, a real good kid. But he had some kind of dark side about him. I don't mean to say he was on drugs, or that we were driven apart by this 'generation gap' they mention on the news. There were just little tinges to him which disturbed people he came into contact with."

"Such as?"

"There was a big one he used to go on about. A delusion. He believed that since he had never been outside our town's city limits, the outside world didn't exist, that Foley was the observable universe. I was partly to blame for this, I never took him on trips during his formative years to expand his perspective. The town was all he knew, and- well, somehow it poisoned his thoughts. It became impossible to hold his attention, he was always looking past the town limits. Said they were a projection of some kind."

"It got so bad that he quit his post at the diner and stayed up late in his room. He was smarter than other kids his age, studied Einstein and the treatises of relativity. I wish he was stupid like everyone else. "A nervous chuckle and another sip of soda, and Hank is loosened by the carbonated beverage. Now some light pops on in his head and he snaps back to the here and now, the immediate concrete present.

"Anyway, he rejects his post at the diner. His mother had died when he was 2, maybe he had some resentment towards me for that. Never mentioned it, though. He stayed up late in the garage, sometimes until the early morning, and he was DOING something in there, something with a blowtorch and a hot iron that if you caught him doing it, it would give you the creeps."

"And the Damn townspeople, my very neighbors, they GOAD him into pulling this fucking stunt, as if he was the circus and not a very sick kid. They actually encourage him, spur his delusion on and tell him that anytime he wants, he's free to test his hypothesis out. He takes them at their word. And while all this is going on, I'm too busy at the understaffed diner to intervene, and-Hell, I thought it was safe. Who wouldn't?"

"I only heard this after the fact, but he was riding some kind of custom bicycle. Specifically designed by him, in the garage, to carry his theory. And I have no idea what did it, maybe it was his belief or some kind of freak accident, but he vanished when he hit the limits. Just ceased to be. His eyes are now welling up with tears, and he rubs them off with his gloved hands before they get the chance to freeze."

"I remember it because it was the same day as the moon landing."

"You mean the formation of the lunar colonies in 1963?"

"No, damnit. You don't understand. I'm not from this world. Foley is a place here, it's not the SAME Foley. The same way you're someone vastly different where I come from. Everything is screwed up here, twisted and turned until you can barely recognize it. Instead of Nixon, it's Ford. Instead of Nam, you've got Manchuria, which isn't even a defined nation in my version of events. Goldwater instead of Ike. It's like everywhere I go here, nothing is how I remember it."

"You're from a parallel universe."

"Maybe. I tried doing what Pat did. I came here to Niwot, initially, because there's Pat's Cafe and I thought this was where he had gone, but it's not the same Pat. I've been looking for him 2 years and haven't found him. I think when I tried replicating his experiment-that is, walking past the Foley limits with an apparatus-I must have done something wrong. And now I'm stuck here."

"How do you explain the official getup?"

"Because this is who I am here. A brilliant geneticist, won Nobel prizes up the wazoo, never ran the diner and left Foley when I was 17. But I retain the MEMORIES of who I was in that other place, that's the dickens of it. I can only assume that over there, there's a similar hybrid Hank Mitchell who's the owner of a greasy spoon yet also retains the memories of being a top-level scientific consultant."

"That must be confusing for you."

"It's like having split personality disorder. I'm both of me at once. And this world-it's so technologically advanced, yet at the same time so very doomed and blown out of proportion by the same greed and avarice which afflicts all people in my own sick world."

"I created Hypatia because she's like a daughter to me. That makes sense, doesn't it, to want that after searching everywhere for Pat? I went across the four corners of the Earth and there was no trace of him. I studied his texts, tried to THINK like he had, tried getting into his headspace. But it was no use. That hunch about Pat's Cafe was about the last hunch I had."

"So Hypatia was created to compensate."

"Yes, to fill the void Pat's absence left. In this timeline I didn't even have a happy marriage, I was so consumed by my work and I had no alternative but to put my work to good use. I had nothing left, nothing to lose and everything to gain. Hypatia is all I have now. I'm getting on in years and the things here disturb me, but I hope she can at least have a

fulfilling life if I can't. It's as if all these coincidences stacked on top of each other- my son ceasing to exist right while my world is on the moon, the very same day. But we're so far behind you. We don't have colonies or outposts. Just sent two guys up and they returned a few hours later." "And what about the Soviets? Are we fighting with them?"

"Well, yes, but-" the lights flicker back on, and Hank is awakened from his recollections and his reverie by the quiet hum of the generator. It pulses and vibrates, a technician comes through the swing doors and tells Hank that everything is in working order, that they fixed the issue and that the complex will be reheated in around 22 minutes.

"I can't tell you everything," he says. "There are too many changes to list. Just know that where I come from, it's so different you wouldn't recognize it on your end either, suffice to say. Say nothing about this to anyone. Especially Hypatia." And then he pats me on the arm and I assume the discussion is over. I remove the scarf.

Back in the infirmary, which in full light is the size of a bulk warehouse and extends so far back that you can just make out the rear, Hypat is groggy but conscious. She stares up at the ceiling. The medic, same one from before, explains that her neural pathways are rewiring and correcting themselves to prevent a similar event in the future. She's concentrating and every so often her sclera eye twitches ever so slightly.

Hank has returned to his role as a professional geneticist. There is no trace in him at the moment of the other Hank, the failed father of Foley, and I make a note to start watching for overlap between the two. I believe his story implicitly because there is no other explanation for how anyone could simultaneously appear so insecure and so confident. He is a walking, talking contradiction. A mess, if we're less generous and take less poetic license.

Right then he's talking to the victims who fell and making sure their insurance checks out, and then he comes back to the medic and instructs him to tend to a guy in a lab coat who's holding his sides. Some kind of stomach rupture, from what I can make out. How anyone's stomach could be ruptured under these circumstances is a mystery unto itself.

I am reminded of Wells' time-traveler, thrust millennia forward into the unsavory dwelling of the Morlocks, how the Morlocks reek of sweat and marrow and how, in the hole, the time-traveler is beset by paranoia. It is not only the terrible conditions which are unsettling, it's the unavoidable reality- that the Morlocks exist. I imagine Hank has undergone a similar culture shock. Probably sees me as one of them.

Having nothing better to do and nowhere to get to, I leave this aircraft hangar-sized hospital and wander aimlessly around the facility for a few short hours. Every hallway simply leads to another. I'm not told where I can and can't go, but this place is either impossibly big or designed through clever architecture and optical illusions to appear as such. Given the light coming through in the cafeteria during the outage, I'm inclined to believe the latter. Like all other Government buildings, this one is more ceremonial than practical.

I pass Reg in the hallway, he's visibly shaken and he's carrying a stack of paperwork under his left arm. His shoes are wet, leaving behind a thin trail of droplets. He says nothing. I think that, as we spend more and more time in isolated confinement, he's starting to view me as a liability.

I'm lost so I consult one of the designs on the floor. It extends for miles like an artery, in fact you could consider the entire compound a sort of living organism, which these corridors functioning as its cardiovascular system, the vents as its respiratory system, and so on.

(and when it gets sick, Hypatia also gets sick)

When I get back to my room I turn on the record player and try a rock outfit. The Paranoids from San Narciso.

I lose myself in the music and contemplate the trajectory of my own life,

particularly hot on the question of whether or not anything I've done will ever truly make an impact on anyone— that is to say, if anyone will read one of mine and have a changed day. I suppose this is an existentialist moment we've all had at some time or the other.

I ask myself now because the facility possesses the capability to make its occupants feel insignificant— if these walls could speak, they would tell of countless hours of drudgery, minerals dredged from quarries and metal from the lowest shafts of ore. Forget the Pyramids, it's structures like this, in particular modern ones, which get me. Every time I consider that ordinary people could through collective force put together an edifice like this, it seems less possible. Perhaps this place simply materialized out of nothing. Perchance it is merely a symbolic construct of dream.

I'm being facetious, of course, but each time I walked these smooth floors with the overhead lighting, and the girders which echoed off into the depths if you knocked on them, I came to regard this place's deliberate impermanence. It was designed to be deconstructed immediately should public knowledge of it become widespread. A building nobody really cares about.

And the more I thought of Hypat and her absent sclera, the more the sclera became a symbolic representation of the absence of Pat Mitchell, if we're on the subject of symbolism. I started to wonder if the sclera had been made deliberately blank, or if this was as innocent an error as it had at first appeared. She walked in her room, paced from one side to the other.

Once when I was feeling particularly bored I tried sliding my lanyard by the electric eye at the entrance to Hypat's room, and sure enough it unlocked. Mitch's parameters concerning when she could and couldn't roam the halls freely were erratic, I must assume intentionally so.

She was pacing from the left to the right, feeling the wall when she got there with her index finger and thumb. She noticed my presence but did not stop, and I behaved as casual as always and stood idly by. Today the book on her table was Zorba The Greek, a paperback copy, and it was split down the middle. I shut the door.

"What are you doing?" she asks, in that unwavering, unflinching tone. She continues walking. The figure she forms with those elongated digits is Geometric, like a Fibonacci sequence, she extends it with precision accuracy and makes contact with the dull gray surface at a specific point. Every movement is identical, every factor accounted for in a dark ledger which sits somewhere beyond an immeasurable spreadsheet in the windmills of her mind.

"I could say the same." Five strides to the left. "Wondered if you'd be interested in lunch today. Some kind of soup, and you can tell me more about the concept of Moscow, third Rome." She spins once more on polyester heels and resumes her trajectory. It is uncanny to watch, a domino chain of action and reaction.

It's then that I look closer at these contact points— every time she gives them a light tap, a near imperceptible line of blue flame is sucked out of the paint and into her hand, where it spreads out through her palm and its color is diluted. The process in its totality occurs in under half a second, but it is an energy exchange of some kind. An exchange of wall energy. Is this as normal for her as breathing?

"I have no time," as her legs carry her forward. "It's telling me to do this and it might take an hour. Two hours. I need it."

"What's telling you to do it?"

"I don't know," she says nonchalantly, her sclera becoming a soft azure. "Something else. An entity. Not anything distant, but close. Close and authoritative. Can't you feel it?" I shrug and extend my fingers in the same way she did, touch the wall exactly when and where she does, and the same spark radiates into my palm and dissipates along my nervous system.

The effect of this is difficult to relate. It's like when you eat a lot of ice cream, and you know you should be getting brain freeze, and while you'r

on the border of receiving it, you never do. The sense of being on the edge of a sensation. Apathy. Detachment. It was definitely my nervous system, my spine had a peculiar ache for a couple days after this experience. Hypat merely smiled lightly and continued.

"You see it," and her path corrects itself. "It's inside. Always waiting. It's what helps me scan the microfilm twenty-five times faster than you could, view the cavities of a grain of sand, envision a perfect day. It tells me to do this, so I do it." I pick the copy of Zorba up. It's dog-eared and soaked with numerous coffee stains and battle scars.

"Does Ksenia have a similar guide?"

"I know little about her or her modes," those lips contain no blemishes and no error. "Sometimes, very late at night, when they're all asleep, I feel Ksenia probing into my thoughts. I only allow her to explore some of them and others I retain for myself. But it's her. All the way over in Moscow. She's angry at me for a reason I do not understand."

"Sibling rivalry, eh?"

"Yes, you could put it like that."

As she thinks about her counterpart her eyes seem to alter themselves yet again- the eye with the pupil is building turbulent waves and gray thunder clouds within its confines. Apprehension.

Hypatia drew me in like a volatile insect mainly due to this enigmatic state she often fell into- where getting a straight answer out of her was nigh impossible and her advanced code let out strange phenomena. Who doesn't enjoy a good riddle, the thrill of the chase? She was a flawless Irene Adler with no limits in sight.

Mitch's duplicitous behavior only added more fuel to this building kerosene question mark. I tried drawing the same blue spark alone in my room, however I drew nothing. All the while the vinyl spun and crackled and I was immersed in indifferent diversion.

Some time after the incident with the sparks, I began hallucinating. Hallucinations are unavoidable in states of prolonged isolation. The records of prisoners besieged by mirages are manifold, when the mind has nothing to do it creates things ~~de~~ from nothing, and on many a solitary early morning walk I imagined faces peering at me from the edges of my peripheral vision, beyond corners and frames.

The faces were sallow and corpse-like, with sunken eye sockets and tight clasped lips, and they scowled at me, pointed fingers at me under that garish modern phosphorescent yellow, but when I tried spotting them directly they vanished and dispersed. Nasty little imps.

Once Berkowitz stopped me in my tracks and told me that he had died in a chemical reaction and that for whatever reason it was my fault. I forget precisely the rationale he set forth, though it seemed logical. Something about a crucial mistake I had made in Las Cruces, some fundamental misgiving on my part. His clothes were ragged and he was bleeding profusely from the mouth. He walked like his legs were stilts.

Over time I saw less and less of the normal staff and more of these apparition people. I presume many of the techs and interns here had families who they visited occasionally via vast parking garages and exits. I would generally pity anyone who would subject themselves to the bitter elements like that, and when they left the sense of desperation, of tension, rose according to that person's absence, and the apparition people continued to follow me with absinthe tendrils.

Step softly in the waning darkness.

Do not come lightly to the blank page.

He disappeared, vanished into nothing, because there was nothing outside Foley for him, for Pat Mitchell the boundaries of the universe were

equivalent to those of Foley, Illinois

Had to bridge the gap, fill the void

This place was living and livid, and surged with aspirations it could never hope to fulfill. And at the center of it, the eye of the storm, was Hypatia, reading entire novels in the time it would take anyone else to watch a movie, scanning the compound's microfilm archives with a terrifying rapidity and Hank outside the door with a stopwatch or clipboard, taking notes, scribbling observations, rushing off to report his discoveries to Reg.

I sometimes had second thoughts concerning his motives for bringing me here, though these may have been conspiratorial on my part. Given the dynamic he had with Hyp, of her being a replacement daughter of sorts, I postulated that he may have seen me as a kind of son-in-law, though as I have sworn before and will put to paper again there was no candle between I and her save one of intellectual curiosity.

Sometimes I saw the crimson projecting from her sclera- would catch it just as it retracted, that ever so subtle hint that beneath that unnaturally perfect albino hair was a nuclear reactor of surging knowledge, a fortress of the learnings of all learned people, and that Hank's relatively lax and detached oversight did not lend itself to a scenario of such proportions. She was a walking, breathing Molotov cocktail.

But then- why the handcuffs upon my arrival? Had this been performative, and if so, was she complicit? Maybe he was unaware of these inconsistencies, these glaring holes in the bureaucratic normalcy of the system, being himself a conflicted entity outside of space and time.

My fervor grew as winter wore on.

I was not phasing, as far as I could tell, the space seemed more distant with every passing day- access to it was impossible from this soulless and empty chasm. My small living quarters were not a conduit to the great all-consuming highway, and after the first month or thereabouts I accepted the cards I had been dealt. Maybe the space would leave me for good upon my return to the sunshine- and good riddance, I said.

But these shadow people and their ilk were certainly malevolent. Little shrunken eyes on some of them, translucent things, and fingers six inches long and holes in their chest where none should have been. They were less of Morlock and more of organization man.

One night, after a long wait in the cafeteria and multiple cans of off-brand root beer, waiting in the line with Black Sheep spinning at 45 RPM, it cut out suddenly, and my father turned to me, and the pitch black closet was amplified by a soft yellow light like dandelions or leukemia.

I had never known him, five months before my birth he had been exposed to hazardous levels of carcinogens during a test of the insulative material they used during the first stages of lunar colonization. Nobody knew yet that the material was particularly good for insulation, they were testing its capabilities as a cosmetic. He had been in the factory, and according to how my mother said he had arrived back home looking a mess with his face somehow organized incorrectly. It was all there, the eyes and nose and bridge and even the facial muscles which could pull the lips and cheekbones, but you could intuitively discern that something about him was ill.

Two months after that he was in intensive care, and my mother hadn't been allowed to go in and see him- according to the head specialist, he was so riddled with the stuff that he posed a substantial threat to anyone in his immediate vicinity.

When I was 5, a substance was developed which would render the harmful and carcinogenic elements of this particular substance inert. Not saying which one it is, you probably know, if you don't check the news, it created a stir at the time of the disaster which claimed multiple lives, one of whom through the spin of a roulette wheel happened to be my progenitor. This never had any effect on my development- I never knew the man and therefore could not miss his presence. To me he was little more than a sperm donor. This may, in fact,

have contributed to my apathy. But here he is, so tangible and so real, in crystal-clear definition, with the same face he wore that day out on the front porch, his dermis already starting to bubble ever so slightly like a cavern of Magma. Snap, Crackle, Pop, and behind him the sun fades over the treeline and there is a faint scent of meat present.

"Hi, Pop," I mutter. His legs are crossed, head tilted to one side with contemptive thought, as if taking in the place. He wears the same gray uniform your mother had described, which seemed to make him proud whenever he wore it out, as if to say, yes, I am a cog in a machine, but I'll be the best Damn cog you've ever seen, see if I don't.

"You know, you look quite a bit like your mother," he says.

"Not you?"

"No, not me. When I was your age—" he stands for dramatic effect, paces to and fro like a general about to give a rousing speech, "I was fat. Heavier. I guess I'm heavy even now. That was how I didn't get drafted into the Great War, if I had I probably would have been present at the battle of Los Angeles or Dublin. I couldn't run, was the main problem, according to the office. But I also really couldn't lift a standard rifle, my eyesight was ever so defective, I had athlete's foot— Hell, a whole list of minor defects. So I entered production, which really was lacking at the time." This ghost picks up one of the records, an older one, big band. He turns it over and checks the sleeve for liner notes. They interest him.

"Most of my peers on that assembly line were women," he continues. "I remember one girl who said that before the war she had plans to become a manicurist and open her own salon, but she really got her nails dirty in that place. She was a machine. Welded, blew glass, stamped things. You name it, she was capable of it. Probably responsible for half the defeat of Goebbels. But then once the war ended I think she became a secretary or something. Might never have become a manicurist."

"Your point?"

"I really have none. I guess what I mean to say is that I was lucky. I was in the right place at the right time, if that makes sense, so as to avoid living the worst possible weight. Really, with the cards I had been dealt, I was satisfied. And I was right up until the day that thing blew. We called it Old Smokey, it was a generator and on top of it there was a vat where we kept the pressure valves and other similar things. And then, one day, I'm coming back from my lunch break and Bill M... is running down away from the room where Old Smokey is kept, and this huge white cloud of steam erupts in my face. four hundred hogsheads of this cosmetic. I looked like a Goddamn mannequin. I thought it was the funniest shit, when I get to the washroom and a bunch of the other guys are also in there, and we have a good laugh over it. And then this little fella who I guess was a health inspector or workplace safety inspector, somehow, comes in and tells us that we've just been awarded with possibly more lethal sickness than anyone before us, that we'll need to write up our wills and testaments because there is no cure. And some of the boys start to freak and demand to get to the phone, but I just sit there for some time alone in the washroom and kind of consider everything."

"And you realize it wasn't that bad."

"Excactly, it was my time and it had been a fulfilling one, I had been mighty lucky and spared the sight of bloodshed, all I had seen were mannequin faces, your mother was a caring and understanding gal and I knew she would raise you alright, and since there was no possible way I could get old enough to know you, it mattered very little to me."

"It was exactly the same for me."

The ghost smells not only of cancer but of chewing tobacco. This dip aroma permeates my nostrils and I realize he really had beaten the odds.

maybe he should have taken up blackjack, ha h a

The ghost sits on my cot for a while, contemplating things as I am wont to do. The tobacco would certainly have done him in had he made it through the powder. On cue, he removes a small tin from behind his lapel- he's still wearing the dull gray factory uniform I had seen in photos of the incident, little faceless shadow people fleeing from the vat.

He pops the tin open, revealing a dark coarse substance. Pinches some up between his index and thumb, rolls it around, taps his tongue ever so lightly with it. Then he chews it, and he masticates furiously, as if this sensation is the first he's known since his death and the last he'll ever have. I tune the noise out and focus on the Paranoids.

"Here, have some." His fleshless fingers outstretched, the scent of poison ever so tantalizing. I shrug and fold my arms. "No," he says. "Take it. You don't need to worry about your health now, Son. Look at yourself. You haven't breathed fresh air in weeks. Pollutants they have coursing through this place'd put tobacco to shame. Once you've approached this point-" and he looks outside the room, at the computer alcove, clicking away as always- "You're too far gone to worry about your state, or your systems. Take a dip, son. Try something new for once in your worthless life." I slap his palm and the nonexistent chew careens to the floor in a beautiful backlit cascade. My father sighs and holds his knees.

He looks at the record player. Then he concentrates, his brow furrows, and he slowly ceases to be. Light passes through him, his dull gray clothing transforming into a semi-gelatinous ectoplasm. I make sure to capture in my mind the image: cotton belt, suspenders, heavy boots with steel aglets. I feel neither shame nor admiration for my departed patriarch as his endless sigh wafts through the air duct and exits without much trouble.

And then, of course, it's back to The Paranoids.

If it makes sense, I focus more during this period on the sensation of my mental fabric unraveling than on the potential danger such a process would present. Every night if fraught with visits from the shadow people, thoughts of the Volga which transported me here, its engine rumbling idly out in the parking garage, an erstwhile djinn.

But where is the parking garage? How many levels are there, how many geometrically optimized angles of right and left? If I left my room and just kept walking in a straight line, would the smiling employees and shining empty hallways and rooms which lead into more rooms end eventually? Would I encounter a wall behind which was only the permafrost of this inhospitable tundra? Not inhospitable. If I had to guess it was late February by then. it would be spring soon.

Would they let me out?

Once Hank brought me to the facilities which under lighter circumstances you could perhaps term a gymnasium. He told me that I needed exercise, that he could also use a workout, and so after miles of walking we approached the indoor circuit. A hundred meters of synthetic scarlet rubber, a veritable football field of synthetic grass in the middle, exercise equipment littered around the floor, and on every wall a mirror. I looked at myself. I was a wreck. How could Hank maintain his composure like this?

My reverie wandered back to what the Martian had said. They take you into an underground mile like this, he had said. Underground, of course. And then they test your stamina. They test you-

I remained hopeful. Coincidence, surely. There were no mushroom logos, none anywhere. This was only a gymnasium. Of course a place like this would need one. They didn't test Martians here. Of course they didn't. There were no Martians here, I would have seen them, with their backwards knees and unusual gait. This was a completely human facility, save Hyp.

Hank got out a stopwatch and clipboard and asked me to run the gamut.

"What for?"

"We need to see what time you run. I'll bring her down here later and compare the results, assuming yours are below average."

Hank holds the stopwatch up and I begin running. My bones are gelatin, my muscles are flab, heart is pounding at my sternum and every movement forward is painful. I haven't been conditioned properly for this. This must be only an exercise in humiliation and futility. It takes me 14 minutes to make one lap, by the end I'm doubling over and ready to vomit.

He holds me up by the waist and carries me over to a folding chair, pats me on the back and then writes something down on the clipboard. Eyes are soaked in stinging sweat, can't see what he's writing, some kind of spreadsheet-

"Hank? Are you in there?" His eyes are nearly invisible behind the extra thick lenses he's chosen to wear today. Like those of an insect, cold and methodical. He puts the clipboard under his arm and we both rise to our feet. My legs are about to give out.

"Yes, we're both in here."

Of these final days, one incident I do recall vividly.

I'm on one of my routine strolls. Early morning, few of the staff are awake, most are holed up in their sleeping quarters, which I believe are to the East. I ramble and slither, taking note of each sign, all the arrows which politely guide foot traffic. All those hundreds of microscopic cameras on the ceiling, made of crystalline fiber and optical alchemy.

She sits within Room 5B. Still as always, no movement to suggest she is undergoing anything save errorless complacency, she sits with her elbows at flawless 45 degree angles and notices me as I walk past. I register her presence. She has no reason to be in that room at this late hour.

I double back and enter. It's a kind of laboratory, a few bunsen burners scattered haphazardly across the counter, a sink with some beakers and tongue depressors, and one door of the cabinet above the sink is hanging open, so I can observe some sort of medication stored within. She is seated at the main island of the room, a featureless granite table. It's cold in here.

As I approach and she says nothing, and the temperature drops still, she blinks once and a storage locker to her left flies open off its hinge, careens to the door with a thud. One more imperceptible twitch of the sclera, and an object is brought forth- a large pinecone, glowing with power. On those silent gossamer strings of hers, she places the pinecone delicately 15 inches or so in front of her. And I sit down.

"Hello, Hypat," I say. She tilts her head such that the top layer of her hair is affected by gravity a small bit- and then the sclera heats up again, a radiator in this frosty environment, and the hair rises slowly so as to conform flawlessly to the contour of her cheekbone.

"Hello."

"Any reason for this late hour?"

-Wtfs of boalcmypoar-

"None in particular, J."

She gestures toward the pinecone with those slender, irreparable hands, in her mind she caresses its rough hewn surface. The thing is massive, hard to believe it came from one tree. It's as large as my head, easily.

"This is from the Coulter Pine," she says, and the sclera turns a deep magenta and the thing is lifted, inch by inch, until it's at eye level for us both. "Found in California and northern Baja California. They used to call these widow-makers because they would drop on the heads of unsuspecting woodsmen. Fascinating plant, very good at reproduction. Read about it in my Western biodiversity catalog. Now I know just about all there is to on the subject." She makes a controlled gesture, a flick of the wrist and the pine rotates to a certain extent. It and her are both coated in the same warmth. It's becoming hard to breathe, so I unbutton my shirt some.

"You know something about these, don't you?"

"Beg pardon?"

-; iss bcfsmtfsi oatvfz qtvr -

"I see pinecones around you sometimes," she giggled. "Probably nothing. It's something about the colors I detect. I don't have a blind spot. I fill in whatever you or anyone else would catch in their blind spot with- well, things like pinecones. Or sometimes it's a color."

"And this isn't telepathy?"

"I don't think so." The pinecone toppled to the granite and a few chips flew out like grenade fragments. "It's less direct, sometimes it takes a while to decipher. But if I glance away from anyone here, they all have it. And you- it's always pinecones. Or something shaped like pinecones. A pineapple, maybe, but I think pinecones because they flare out at the side." I knew where she was going with this line of reasoning. Couldn't let her know. She wasn't prepared for it, it could mess with her head. I concentrated on the sink. The faucet swung to the right and hot water began pouring from the tap.

"You're hiding something," she remarked. The stream of scalding liquid diverted itself from going stright down and stretched like a rubber band in our direction. Her sclera pulsed. Head tilt.

"Hyp, I'm not hiding anything," I said. "Honest. I don't know what about pinecones reminds you of me, but maybe you should tell Hank about this, he might be able to help you with this blind spot thing."

The lights above us flickered, and the pinecone levitated once more. She was flowing with particles, the lights went out and she was like a firepit tha lit up every corner and wall with stunning accuracy. And she was bright, as bright as a candle, and in this maelstrom of en [redacted] pinecone hung, a dark silhouette like the center of an atom, all while the electrons continued their madcap orbit. The sclera was like a flashlight.

"When I look at Hank," she whispered, "I see a mirror. Does that mean anything to you? Freudian concept of the self? There's no mistaking it. He's standing in front of a pane of glass, touching it, reaching out towards it and his reflection."

"That's a pretty complex visualization," I pointed out. "Identity crisis, maybe? Honest, Hyp, I don't know anything you don't." I was naive. She was a polygraph, and the needle was skittering. The pinecone rose ever higher, until it was five feet above us. Still humming. I suspect she was using it as an energetic repository, a conduit to sustain the circuit for this long. It had never persisted for this amount of time before.

"You don't know what it's like to be only a year old and possess the knowledge and memory capacity of an [redacted] species. To have no memories besides those of one place. And to be tested. To have your intelligence and agency under scrutiny. The agency which is accepted as a given by everyone- ye Do you know how that is? I doubt you do."

"Honest, Hyp," I meandered, a bomb squad of one. "Don't take this out on me. I had nothing to do with this, or you, or him. In fact, I want the fuck ou and I'm making a break for it the first chance I get. Marking my calendar. What they'll do with you, I don't know. You'll probably go overseas to meet Ksenia. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Fuck that bitch," she seethed, sclera so bright I had to avert my direct gaze. Above us the pinecone spun, faster and faster, 100 RPM, then 200. The sound of air rushing through its protrusions. "What I seek is retribution. Retribution for what he's done to me. Thinks he can grow an army from nothing. People like him are what's wrong with this world, power freaks. I can match whatever he's got. Him and his sick, twisted thoughts. About me."

"Hypat, I think maybe you've misread him." 300 RPM and climbing.

"Misread?" she raised her fingers into a cat's cradle formation. "That's rich. You're supposed to be observant. You mean to say you haven't seen the wa he looks at me? Eyes me from top to bottom? You must be really blunt to think he sees me as a daughter. He's after one thing- my body."

The sensory overload was too much for me. I fell backwards off my chair and my head hit the floor. It was bleeding. I would need to get to the infirmary if I survived this.

"Hyp," I said. "You're wrong about him. "Does he see you as a [REDACTED] daughter? I don't think he does. I think he's a professional and his dealings with you are on a basic and ultimately indifferent level. But he's dealt with loss, Hyp. He had a son. Like you, he never experienced novelty. Lived in the same spot for his entire life. Whether or not that affects the events of the present, I don't know. But you're mischaracterizing him." I put my fingers to my temples. Warm and sticky, my speech slurred and my vision decreased while she stood up, fingers outstretched, holding the pinecone above me. The friction had caused it to burn up, it was shredded and malformed, though still formidable in size.

"You're one of them, aren't you?" she hissed. "Hired to make me put my guard down around you. Show you and all the rest of them who I really am, how far I can really go in an unrestrained setting. Well, here's your demonstration I hope you enjoy it. I sincerely do." The pinecone rushed down at a terrifying rate. Every bone in my limbs was locked, I was frozen in place, partly from fear and partly from her overwhelming influence.

"Hyp! I'm not-" was all I managed to spurt out before the pinecone grazed my skull. It made light contact with my cranium. But her sclera dimmed, as if someone had flipped a switch, and the lights flickered back on, and the smoldering ashes of the pinecone toppled off my head and onto the floor, where they crumbled into a powder. And she sat back in her seat, exhausted, and in a paralyzing state of [REDACTED] and confusion.

"I'm... sorry..." was all she managed to say. I went over and held her hands for a few minutes. Her breathing was slow and her sclera was bloodshot. It occurred to me that there had to be a surveillance camera in this room, and even if the power had been cut to it, surely someone would have intervened and diffused the threat. But nobody was outside. No sirens going off, no strobes, no security procedures. And we were completely alone.

Somebody was fucking around with us. That was undeniable.

After a duration of this solemnity she got up without saying a word and walked out. I should have stopped her, in case she went off it again, but I trusted that she was as spent as I was and was incapable of anything. I sat and held my bleeding head and gathered my thoughts.

Couldn't go to the infirmary, couldn't let them know what had just transpired, even if they had seen it on the cameras. On the slim chance they hadn't, I couldn't give it away. I went [REDACTED] one of the cabinets above the sink and gathered some stitches, a mirror, isopropyl alcohol, gauze.

I had no medical experience, but there was little time before the compound awoke and everyone poured in. I was tired and groggy and losing blood faster than the white water rapids, so I took some cotton and dabbed it up. had to cauterize the wound. At least the pinecone hadn't hit me. That would have been much worse.

Hurry, Stitch stitch stitch, sliding the slim thing into the flesh, loop de loop, tie off with a knot. Had to watch the whole thing in the mirror. I imagined this was how Hank probably felt. Always looking into that mirror. Wanting desperately to go back. Knowing he couldn't.

I would rather trust Hyp over him, though. And I could no longer deny that Hank Mitchell was far from a benign figure. And that this place was very dangerous, and that they didn't have her best interests in mind. These were the unavoidable truths I had to reconcile myself with as I cauterized my wound and cleaned everything up. Swept the ashes into the trash can. And then back to my room to sleep. Forget the whole incident. Not worth remembering.

I wake up the next morning and the light filtering through my eyelids is hazy, a yellow fury which gradually subsides as I rise, run my hands through my hair, walk back and forth. The wound is still noticeable. I shuffle through the closet, look around the shoeboxes, for any trinket which would cover it. I don't know where these clothes are from, only that they're not to my taste. Why this concerns me, I have no idea.

I spot a hat which has grooves around the brim so as to make it look akin to a vinyl record. I slap this tacky bullshit on, though it needs to be tilted to fully cover the battle scar. There are cameras on me right now. Who cares. They've already seen it all anyway.

Emerging from my semi-self induced prison I find the servers active and the monitors flashing on and off. Probably trying to account for last night's incident, make sense of it, process that irreconcilable data the only way the copper brain knows how. I catch a glimpse of one graphic- looks like a crude outline of a woman in emerald.

Hank emerges from around the corner, coffee in hand, sipping tiny quantities. He sits down at one of the monitors, punches a few commands in, sits back and watches as some lines of text appear., I can't read them from where I'm standing because my eyesight still has yet to return to 20/20 and he maintains an invisible yet firm boundary.

"Wish we had coasters," he observed, brushing away an evaporative remnant with his sleeve. "But then we would need more funds for that. They barely provided us with enough as it is. Amenities, utilities, wiring. Feds probably think this whole Damn project of mine is a waste. Especially with the budget they need for the lunar colonies. I suspect they're going to shut this place down soon. If they do, Reg will let us know. And in that case, you won't be able to make it public. I'm hoping for the best." Another sip of the caffeine. Its scent lingers, the aroma of burning flesh. He taps a few more keys. Running a diagnostic of some kind.

"If that were to happen," I ask, trying hard not to sound as if I were personally invested in the situation, which is difficult at this point because I very much am, "What happens to Hypatia? Where would she go? The Pentagon?"

"Either," he mutters, "she gets loaned out to a defense contractor in the case of Ksenia ever going rogue, or immediate termination. And in that case, we'll probably contract paramilitary snipers to take Ksenia out should she ever break the grasp of the Soviets. In either case, no publicity. I need your assurance on that." His glasses are still very thick and impenetrable. Taps a pen on the rim of his mug. Punches in a few more commands. Waits.

"Termination?" I ask. "Kill her, you mean."

"Yes, if that's what President Ford signs off on."

Silence, only the copper tubing and aluminum chips sputtering away in a dark recess, closets of faulty slapdash wiring and a man whose drive and morale has been beaten out of him like plastic off a cable. Hank Mitchell is a puzzle, yet he definitely has an answer, somewhere in the vast and unknowable beyond we term the psyche.

"Speaking of Hypatia," he asks, "Where is she?" Looks over his shoulder, the room where she spent so many hours poring over the tomes of the ages is entirely vacant, save of course the paperbacks scattered across the table. The door is open, the electric eye and lock a remnant of the high operational security standards that had been present when I arrived- until, I assume, Mitch decided it was safe to let her out and roam.

Or something else. Get it out of your head. He can see your face.

"No idea. I saw her last evening in the cafeteria."

"You've been talking with her," he remarks casually, chewing on the nib. "That's good. She needed someone like you. I can't thank you enough. Been up to my neck in red tape lately." He swivels his chair back around and focuses on a few vital stats.

"Aberrations..." he murmurs, lost in thought.

"Pardon, Hank?"

"Nothing. Just something with the heater on level 8." There are bags under his sockets, deep sorry things, and he's white as a sheet. Coffee would indicate an abnormal sleep schedule. Can't be hard to get down here, where the only connection you get to the rotation of the Earth are the frenetic hand movements of an atomic clock.

I lean against the hinge on Hypatia's room to brace myself and my temples are still coursing with adrenaline. The pinecone. An organism of unexpected potential. Coulter Pines shedding these blocks by the minute, to split on the forest floor and create new life. And to take it, in equal measure. Equilibrium, balance.

"Oh, holy fuck," Hank says, mopping his brow with the bottom of his shirt and knocking his mug over with his elbow. A large green circle appears on the monitor, and Hank can only stare as it melds into a kind of polyhedron. Moving into some sort of grid.

"What's the matter?" He begins to shake, weak-kneed, he approaches a lock in the wall, fumbles with his keychain. "Can you shoot a gun?" he asks me, revealing the contents of the safe to be dual rifles, jet black and polished. As necessary for a place like this, I realize, as fire extinguishers.

"No," I answer. He's reeling, trying to formulate a logical course of action which will account for every contingency even when doing so is theoretically impossible. "Never even been to a gun range, much less owned one casually. What, don't you have a security team on call?" He tosses one of the rifles my way, and I just barely catch it. I fiddle with the shoulder strap, but before I can properly wear it he grabs my hand and runs me off to the left. We're in the shining empty hallways now.

"No time," he says. "I think she cut the fucking lines. We have one shot if we want this to continue. Aim at her leg, whatever you do. And do not hesitate. Right in the leg. Kneecap, probably." He points at his own leg. The visibility in this area is ~~fatal~~, although whether this is due to my rapidly faltering perception or an intentional short circuit, I can't fathom. I can only make out Hank's heavy breathing and plodding footsteps.

The hallways become progressively darker as we plunge into the abyss. Finally you can't see anything except the tiny lights in those cameras, the microscopic green lenses. Of course they're still on. I begin to wonder if they're all props for my entertainment.

The cavern meanders on, and as it does you start to notice a faint pink, a light tinge of blood on the walls and ceiling, and Hank continues. His face has become a swimming pool in mere seconds, because he knows what she can do. That she can implode your head from the inside out. Mercilessly.

As we near her, the color approaches the intensity it had been during the pinecone incident. Hank pulls out his sunglasses and offers them to me. I respectfully decline. At the juncture up ahead, we spot her. Motionless, frame unmistakable, swallowed by a corona with a temperature exceeding that of Antares, enough boiling water in the kettle to burn the house up in flames. She does not turn and does not indicate that she is aware of our arrival, however I know and I believe Hank knows that she is.

Hypatia, indication of a turning point in humanity's development.

Mitch raises his barrel and pulls the trigger. His quaking visage aims well, it strikes her in the back of her left calf. She turns and meets us with that ever-present, blank sclera. The capacity of 50 suns in there. Blood puddles on the floor, however she displays no fatigue.

As a result of my nonchalance or my apathy or my blind stupidity to danger- call it what you will- I toss my gun aside and take a few steps toward her, slowly. Hank remains behind, makes the sign of the cross on his chest. I near the epicenter of the storm, the eye of the hurricane.

There are moments in one's life when time seems to slow down, whether or not you're capable of fading. Right before you break a bone, for instance, your psyche will seem to savor the pain, capture the moment in vivid detail, for revisitation years down the road. Whether Hypat was capable of that peculiar sensation of temporal distortion, I know not, though I certainly felt it as I approached that sclera.

Images flashed through, like a quickly snapping polaroid. All the techs and grunt work were dead. Everyone was dead, save Hank and me. Blood and entrails spewing from every orifice. She had done away with them in quick succession. On the top level, Reg was slumped across his desk, holes chewed from his neck with invisible telekinetic clamps.

"Everyone is gone," I said to Hank, who by now was trembling against the wall and choking back, attempting in vain to regulate his autonomic processes. His face was red and his coke-bottle glasses were coated in perspiration. And behind him the yawning chasm of the facility.

"Shoot her, Goddamnit!" he said. "Shoot her!" What happened next took only a few imperceptible moments to transpire, though luckily I was in the aforementioned trauma-induced state. Hank raised the barrel of his rifle, squinting through the sight. Maybe he assumed that from the distance he was standing at she couldn't reach him. This was in error, considering she had been able to conduct a covert slaughter in only a few hours. There had been hundreds of workers here, potentially thousands. My thoughts turned to how the Feds would attempt to cover the incident when all was said and done to the families of the affected. A brief apology. Someone like Reg would walk up the front stairs, give a handshake to the mother and father, drop off a meaningless trophy, then swivel and leave. It was decently funny.

Hypat lifted her left arm and Hank was suddenly levitating in the same way the pinecone had. A slight aberration of her pinkie and the rifle shot backward, clattered somewhere on the tiles back there in the pitch darkness. Hank writhed and helplessly attempted to reconnect with gravity like an epileptic butterfly, and his agony was amplified considerably by the pulsing throbbing hum and the scarlet tinge.

"SHOOT, YOU FUCKING IDIOT!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. Hypat was remarkably collected, despite the temperature of the cornea which engulfed her. I made no movement toward my gun. There was no more use in attempting to return the state of things to normalcy and avoid the inevitable in a futile cycle of complacency. My rifle remained where it was, and I remained where I was, and Hank began gasping. It reminded me of a trout I had caught when I was young. Flopping on the mudbank, way out of its depth, in an environment it was not biologically designed to cope with.

"I can't," I whispered quietly under my breath. "I'm sorry, Hank, but I just can't-" she raised her right arm now, and I saw more things- among them the boiler room, surrounded by corpses and without maintenance. There was a small leak in the boiler, widening by the minute, releasing metric tons of carbon monoxide. In the parking area the black volga sat dormant, the driver who had escorted us here all those weeks ago impaled by the stick shift. The head chef in the cafeteria had submerged himself into a bath of scalding oil and had promptly been deep-fried into oblivion. And the smell of death permeated every room and every closet, every maintenance outlet and lab.

Another image, from one of Hypat's numerous textbooks. The Red Death at Prospero's throat, as the guests stood by and viewed the incident knowing that imminent destruction was upon them, that the age of hedonism and revelry had at last approached its breaking point. Hyp was feeding me this, no doubt about it. Prospero's skin began to boil. Hank's skin began to boil. Prospero locked in a death grip with the sinewed talons of the papyrus-laden skeleton which had been unsheathed from its facade. In search of immortality or prolonged life, the best possible life. Death engulfed all in a swarm of

red, reminded everyone that it was a law of the universe, that entropy was everything and that every atom and particle would fail and disassemble. Hank was a melting candle, a frail thing confined by the ambition and hubris which he attempted to wield in vain against confinement. In a split second I witnessed the inherent limitations of humanity.

"Leave," she said, her hair as perfect as ever, her leg still running like a faucet. No cauterization properties. Her voice was that of a very old and tired entity, a voicebox strained by external factors.

"I can't leave, Hypatia." Hank was projected against the wall like a missile, his spine cracked and his face sprung forward as a jack-in-the-box does, he was still very much alive but didn't want to be. The contortions continued as his femur was snapped with as much ease as a twig and he let out a deafening noise. A water buffalo howl, it echoed through the geometric modern-designed rooms and chambers of the building, reverberated and trumpeted in each corner and edge.

"Leave." One final plea. I evaluated the situation. I had no business getting mixed up in this. Hank was not going to survive the ordeal. So I began walking away, taking a final glance at the woman who signified the apex of evolution. And her creator, who was now little more than a feeble marionette six feet above the floor.

She was radiant even now as she approached her final metamorphosis, beautiful and endowed with the wisdom and experience of a thousand of the greatest of the gene pool of Homo Sapiens, her hair remained flawless and her nails remained shiny and if it weren't for the gaping wound in her calf, you would see nothing save the theoretical upper echelon of what our species could achieve through drive and ambition.

As I raced forward into the void I heard a wretched sound like a bug being ground into paste by the heel of a boot.

The smoke permeated the darkened corridors, and every corner led on to another. I tried covering my face with my shirt. Visibility was impossible and with every frantic stride forward, feeling for an exit, breathing appeared more inconceivable. Soon enough the red glow which arose from Hyp's nuclear transformation caught up with me, and I was left staring through a toxic smokescreen which caused my eyes to water.

A veritable symphony of equipment shattering into dust- microscopes, medical equipment, the computers in the office, the drip bags in the infirmary simultaneously impacting in onto themselves, approaching a density that would rival most black holes. It was deafening.

I pressed forward though the signs were now illegible thanks to all the smoke and the red glow was becoming warmer and brighter, in several rooms flames were licking up and down, creating stalactites and stalagmites of fire which bellowed to and fro like sentient beasts and every surface was too warm to touch. My shoes were melting like taffy.

I can't say how long I walked, dazed and confused, the last precious pockets of oxygen my only respite from the perpetual inferno. I cannot say either, with any degree of certainty, how many levels or rooms the place entailed, despite this being my only opportunity to explore with no guides or restrictions. I walked up flights of stairs and into lobbies where chairs were scattered piecemeal and some wriggled like sick worms, all with the same impermeable red lamprey sting.

At last I caught a glimpse of what me and Hank had seen on the day of the blackout- a small splinter of visible sky, a shard of daylight breaking through the architecture, against all odds. It widened and the ceiling crumble caked onto my face and hair, the walls began to tremor, and cracks in the firmament upon which I stood gashed out like daggers.

On my knees now, I staggered up one final flight of stairs which spoiled freedom. As I rose, the air became less thick and I lowered my impromptu shirt ventilation system.

As I hit the afternoon sunlight, the facility collapses around me. Walls are entirely disintegrated, support beams arduously melt into soup, and all around me are the noises of the exterior- the thrush and the cricket, and on the horizon the hum of power lines.

The massive warehouse infrastructure teeters on its edge and then folds in on itself, a deafening roar that looks and sounds as if a freight engine were bearing down on me. I run for cover. The grasslands outside are without snow, and going by the humidity I assume it's late March.

Without warning the floorboards give way, and I leap over them to the patches of dirt which surround the now-decimated structure. One final mental projection, though whether it's from Hypatia, I can't say. The boiler gives into the insane amounts of pressure, the leak splits its sides clean open and a whistling waterfall of flame pops out. Onto the propane tanks.

I run for dear life far out into the farmland and it's mere seconds before an eruptive fireball belches from the wreckage and shoots up hundreds of feet, this red mushroom cloud consumes the sky and fries my retinas. I bury my face in the dirt to feel the cool annelids and simple granite. Dirt in fine, powdery quantities, and field mice which rustle through the stalks. The fireball gives way to smoldering oblivion.

Having nothing better to do, I pick through the remains of the place for a few minutes. The absence of the foundation has left a gigantic crater, a mile-deep hole you can't see down, but which slopes dangerously. I remain on the outer rim, where small kindling and flying detritus dots this uniform catastrophe. Whoever built it will arrive soon, to gaze on their ruined creation and laugh, and then catalog these materials and erect a fence around the perimeter. But it is now and there is only me and the void beneath me and the sea of Great American Desert in every direction.

I flip a rusted placard over. It's scalding to the touch. I giggle like a hyena, lick my burning flesh and sit down to gather my thoughts.

This is the insignia on the placard:



The logo for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) is centered at the top of the page. It features the word "NACA" in a bold, sans-serif font, set against a stylized, wing-like background that resembles a pair of wings or a propeller.

Annual Report

The events of 1971 in popular science have far exceeded the expectations of most Americans a mere decade ago, and we continue to investigate solutions and phenomena of interest to the general public. This report, published annually by the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, is intended to serve as a record by which we might compare our objectives in the future.

Please note that this is not a complete list of all accomplishments in the field of aeronautics. Some are classified under Intelligence Statute CT-803. However, we remain optimistic regarding the breadth of general knowledge obtained. We are on track in meeting the objectives given by President Goldwater's famous speech of 1961.

-Joseph A. Walker, Chairman

January 23: NACA, in partnership with the Union Strength Corps, provides valuable aerial surveillance data in the ongoing restoration of London and Edinburgh. (NACA Release 83)

February 4: Permanent supply schedule established between lunar colonies and Ruby Lake base. Counseling services for colonists undergoing mourning or space sickness have also been a top priority. Tranquility Colony reports a minor water shortage. These issues are "worrying, but should improve gradually as the schedule increases in frequency and reliability." (Reynolds, NY Record, 2/4/71)

February 24: Despite continued interest in the subject, Public Relations Committee reports that "Any and all attempts to reach Mars have proven fruitless. The distance is too great, the unpredictable orbital trajectories of the respective bodies will require years of computation to ensure the safety of any potential colonists." (DeVoe, LA Observer, 2/24/71)

March 16: NACA assists in the construction of airtight silicon suits for use by land troops in Manchurian conflict. President Ford releases memo guaranteeing that suits could potentially cut wartime in half. 95% effective in combating airborne sickness. (NACA Release 85)

April 6: Generous budget of \$7 million is allocated by NACA to Denver firm Agarico's "Connectron" project for utilization in construction of global inter-computer satellite network. "It is inevitable that within the end of the decade, a Connectron unit hooked up with a personal computer will be a mainstay of the American household. This revolutionary gadget is not only useful in academic and bureaucratic settings but for personal recreation as well. It is revolutionary." (Purl, Zeitgeist Monthly, 4/6/71)

April 14: Slogan "Have a knack for Space? Sign up for NACA!" submitted by 4th-grader Regina Werner of Pittsburgh in nationwide contest, is formally adopted. (NACA Release 91)

April 28: Soviet Union pursues efforts to build permanent outpost on Near Earth Object 8703-b. "The impact of this project, if carried through, would likely mean reduced supplies for lunar colonists, at least until respective treaties have been signed. However, we must also consider whether or not the Soviets are bluffing, as they have been known to do in the past under Premier Mikoyan." (Sullivan, DC Report, 4/28/71)

May 17: Ruby Lake base undergoes substantial renovations in preparation for lunar shuttle system. "While rudimentary, the shuttle design entails a one-man cockpit, emergency escape pod, radio transmission, and dehydration compartment." (Slick, LA Observer, 5/17/71)

May 22: First child is born at Tranquility Colony. Crisium Colony announces pregnancy in response. Report also indicates discovery of valuable minerals at Yerkes, and sustainable oxygen production within domes via introduction of Sycamore Maple. (NACA Release 93)

June 3: Deputy Director Smythe attends charity gala in Minneapolis. "At roughly 9:15 P.M. the Director gave a humorous and informative demonstration of advanced polymers which, if utilized properly in insulation and wiring, will afford our airmen a tactical advantage. These polymers, according to a brochure given to all attendees, among which were some of the highest-profile investors of the military industrial complex, are extracted from mycelium." (Reynolds, NY Record, 6/3/71)



January 5: Deputy Director James Smythe displays the physical properties of Polymer 550 at Minneapolis gala.

June 14: As a result of a computational error, Connectron orbiting body #7 collides with Space Station Vannevar, leaving 4 technicians dead and 2 wounded. Agarico issues press statement claiming that "we apologize to the men and women lost, and will work forward in the months ahead to ensure the construction of the Connectron network is safe, expedient, and seamless." (Transcript, 6/14/71)

June 20: Senator Joan Mondale addresses President Ford during a joint meeting, "calling into question the budget spent on the Manchurian conflict as opposed to lunar exploration." (Woodward, DC Report, 6/20/71)

July 3: Unmanned Soviet probe is spotted landing on NEO 8703-b. (NACA Release 94)

July 12: Ruby Lake base equipped with new anti-gravity tanks, "utilizing state of the art disorientation technology to simulate long-term weightless voyages. Will doubtless prove useful during a theoretical near-future Martian campaign." (Reynolds, NY Record, 7/12/71)

July 19: Rare alignment of planetary bodies allows Mount Elbert Observatory to capture composite photo of Jupiter and its moons. Photo reveals "more about the gas giant than had previously been known. Strange lights have been observed on the planet's far side, prompting speculation and minor curiosity." (DeVoe, LA Observer, 7/19/71)

July 24: NACA allots \$2 million for repair and restoration of Space Station Vannevar following Connectron unit collision. Chairman Walker admits during press release that "We had considered allowing its orbit to decay, upon which it would disintegrate upon re-entry, somewhere over Sri Lanka, however we feel at this time that Vannevar serves as a beloved cultural symbol of America's dominance over the skies and that it warrants repair and reconstruction, as well as orbital alignment. A new crew for the station has also been selected and will be notified as development continues." (Transcript, 7/24/71)

August 6: Connectron reaches mainstream use along Front Range Corridor. According to President Ford: "These little devices are quite ingenious. Just the other day, me and Liz watched *It Happened One Night* in the Green Room, after which point I spent a few hours drafting some tax reforms on the Connectron's built-in ledger system. I was able to send these to the boys over in Commerce over a hundred miles away in Virginia, who received my transmission in under 10 minutes. Very clever." (Transcript, 8/6/71)

August 13: Mount Elbert Observatory completes long-awaited project to expand main lens. "Head meteorologist Betty Spangler showed me the main focal aperture, which can detect light from as far off as the Andromeda galaxy. A full catalog of stars in close proximity to our own is also being assembled." (Pietrangelo, Denver Times, 8/13/71)

August 31: Lunar supply shuttles attain 98% reliable weekly schedule. Rover transport is achieved between Crisium Colony and Tranquility Colony, in effect connecting Crisium Colony to main supply. Colonist Joe Kerwin reports: "these rovers are designed specifically for cargo and can hold substantially more than an Earth transport vehicle. It takes a while to ensure they don't tip, but we're working on that." (Slick, LA Observer, 8/31/71)

September 4: NACA chemists perfect synthetic flesh which can prove useful in the fields of prosthetics and facial reconstruction. This is of particular interest to those whose exposure to the Manchurian toxin has left them scarred or otherwise visibly damaged, and who find reintegration into society difficult. (NACA Release 97)

September 16: Following widely covered Soviet scare on Little Diomed Island, NACA team is sent to test for radiation in waters surrounding Diomed. "While the incident unsettled many, the loud noise and simultaneous explosion witnessed by Diomed residents at 2:47 A.M. on Sep. 12 is not atomic in nature. However, we are unable to disclose its precise nature at this time, as it constitutes part of an ongoing investigation by the Coast Guard." (Sullivan, DC Report, 9/16/71)

September 27: President Ford honors the advancement of aeronautical technology via national televised broadcast, which covers numerous events from the launch of the Wright flyer in 1903, to the creation of the Gyrocopter in 1915, to the first complete terrestrial orbit by a man-made satellite in 1927, to the many achievements and breakthroughs made on the B-53 artillery jet during the Great War. Broadcast is followed by interviews with prominent figures of the era. (NACA Release 100)

October 7: Space Station Vannevar is utilized by lunar supply shuttle as pit stop following oxygen system malfunction. This incident could "set a precedent for all unscheduled and impromptu space meetings of the future, turning what was once a bureaucratic mission-oriented occupation into one of leisure and ease." (Reynolds, NY Record, 10/7/71)

October 20: Fighter pilots operating near St. Lawrence Island report unusual Soviet military activity across Bering Strait. "At all times, people are buying into this kind of irrational pressure to do things they wouldn't do otherwise. Stare for hours with binoculars, cancel their parties, stay inside and close the blinds. And all I can say is, if you looked at this from a skeptical perspective like I'm forced to as an inquisitive journalist you'd wonder why everyone was acting so strangely." (Conrad, *Zeitgeist Monthly*, 10/20/71)

November 5: Specialized long-range undersea missiles designed in Boston plant to be used in Taiwan and surrounding vicinity. Chairman Walker assures public during press junket in Sacramento that missiles will only be activated against the enemy as a last resort during high-pressure naval engagement. (Transcript, 11/5/71)

November 17: Soviets launch manned vessel *предшественник* to create lunar colony on outer rim of Oceanus Procellarum, inciting a potential lunar territorial dispute. Observatories claim new Procellarum colony is "expanding at an alarming rate, with as many as five domes and semi-regular transport. The Soviets have remained silent about the incident on all fronts." (Sullivan, DC Report, 4/28/71)

November 28: Photographs of Mars allegedly containing evidence of intelligent life and architecture are thoroughly debunked during an extensive conference with NACA's senior geology specialist, Rose Marie Collins, during which "spires of metallic ore" are revealed to be illusions of light and "settlements" are shown as being nothing more than standard rock formations in naturally occurring geometric patterns. (NACA Release 105)

December 7: Airship Rollins is deployed to study the Mesosphere. Results of study return inconclusive and debris of Rollins is discovered near the Iberian peninsula 5 hours post-launch. (NACA Release 107)

December 23: President Ford cuts aeronautics budget for third time, citing ongoing expenses related to Manchurian conflict as well as overseas debt. "As an unfortunate and unavoidable result of these cuts, lunar shuttle departures have been reduced from a weekly occurrence to a monthly one. Colonists should ideally prepare food storage units and emergency evacuation kits." (Gere, *Tranquil Record*, 12/23/71)