

*It was but a wisp
a whisper in the skein
a dream, a game
in mirrors reflecting
only themselves*

Qil, Ai Poet

A warm and sullen drizzle cascaded out of the gloom of city lit clouds, soaking an assembly of tight and leaning buildings, their facades shiny and stoic. Light from scattered windows extended wan tinsel through mist-laden air, creating a morose and smeary sheen across brick and sidewalk, stairs and lonely traffic lights. A siren wailed somewhere in the distance.

Unsteady footfalls of a lone man splashed through grimy puddles, soiling his shoes and pant cuffs. Groaning, groping, he emerged from the shadows of an alley, lit by a green traffic light, a specter in a casual white suit, teetering into the street like a boozy tap dancer poorly managed by invisible strings. Soaked to the skin, hair plastered to the sides of his face, his eyes were vacant, staring. The man stood out like a lit thing in a dark room.

First, pounding bass music like from a college nightclub; then appeared a black hulking metal beast in the guise of an SUV. Its lights glanced off the white and stumbling puppet-man as the tires squealed. It slammed into him with a sodden *thump*, launching him pinwheeling through the air. He landed shoulder- and face-first onto the asphalt and flopped into the gutter.

The black beast came to a screeching car-rocking halt, the brake lights dowsing, and the pounding bass went quiet as two muffled voices argued. The passenger door flew open and a skinny scorchy thing in a short pleated school-girl skirt hopped out, covering her head with a twinkly sequined purse as she *clacked* on cherry red heels to the victim. Stooping over the unconscious man, she took a last drag of her smoke and flicked it into the flowing gutter, then put her fingers to his neck, her skinny calves and stiletto heels reflecting pale in the traffic light.

As the light switched to green, his cheeks and brow ridges emerged from shadow, revealing a nasty cheek gash oozing blood cutting tributaries across his face. "Hunnee, don't you be dyin' on me." She loosened the collar, her long silvery nails flashing. "Nice looking suit." She twisted the inside collar to where she could see the tag: *GS*. "Never heard of them."

This seemed to open his eyes, and their stares met, but his awareness didn't seem all there. "Not going to jail tonight," she said with a red-lipped smile. "If you can hear me, we'll get you some help." She patted his tummy with some semblance of bedside manner and pointed in the direction of bright lights slicing between buildings. "There's a hospital right through that alley. Just hang on a tick."

The SUV's dark-tinted window rolled down and out billowed a cloud of vape vapor. "Yo, baby. He good?"

"He's all right," she yelled back with a quick glance over her shoulder.

"Let's shimmy!"

The woman *clacked* back to the SUV in the rain, like an arm-candy starlet in some postmodern sleuthing noir, ducking through the SUV's open passenger door. The murderous black creature wisped silently away into the wet-thick urban night.

The man in the gutter folded his body into fetal pose while tucking his elbow under his torn and bloody cheek. His elbow was his pillow, and he cuddled it like it was a teddy bear, rainwater in the gutter streaming past his face. In his head, a whole different movie was playing out.

Something massive hurtles in orange-white flames through space, its tail trailing behind forever. Music pounds and beautiful people gyrate like natives to it. Lasers pulse and slice over the glow of their painted faces and popping glitter shine.

A vague awareness of pain. He was a particle in an endless gray-blue matrix, a frothing ocean of image particles in white and moving shapes, and sounds were a symphony of muffled *woofings*. He felt air moving in and out of his lungs, which connected to more memories associated with life and living, steadily replacing floating in nothingness.

Soon, the forms became people, the angles a doorway, the softness under him a bed. The muffled *woofings* separated into a quiet bustle of voices. A filmfon ringing in the background. Tearful cries from a girl in the hall. Quiet beeps to his left. His head pivoted that way as his eyes fluttered open, and he squinted at a bank of foggy geometries, machines, squiggly lines and numbers and tones. Beside those a device hung from an IV stand, pumping a clear fluid into his arm.

With that realization, he focused on the pain, and on it came in consuming waves...everywhere. Especially in his hip, which hurt like demon wolves were gnawing on the bones, and in his cheek, which felt like a branding iron were sizzling away at it.

Movement outside the door caught his eye. A man walking past stopped and leaned back into the partially open doorway, his face a carnage of blood and burning, dead but smiling anyway, his lumberjack plaid shirt almost burned away.

The patient's eyes widened to white-eyed, jaw-hanging shock as he croaked, "Daddy?" This made the nightmare melt away as the visage morphed into a smiling black-haired man in hospital scrubs. He wore a beard with symbols shaved into it. "Hey...he's awake." Stepping in, the caregiver padded across the shiny floor in almost silent shoes. "How you feeling?" Arriving bedside with an unnaturally white smile, he gripped the bed-ridden man's wrist. "Your pulse is strong, and that's a good thing."

The man in the bed blinked in utter bafflement. Were it not for the sizable bandage on his cheek, the sallow facial lines, the traumatized pallor, you'd see a boyish man with roundish cheeks and a set of furry and expressive eyebrows holding sway over shocked plum-gray eyes.

"Be right back," said the caregiver, who turned and left.

Under his breath, he said, "What am I doing in a hospital? How did I get here?"

The dark-headed caregiver was back, and following him was a female who filled her smock like a linebacker. Wearing silver wireframe glasses, her hair in a too-tight bun, she plodded into the room with the elegance of a dragged chair.

"Mr. Doe, I presume?" she joked with a snort.

Her white-smiling cohort rolled his eyes and moved across the floor to the bedside and touched the confused man's arm, his perfect toothy beam unfazed by her gimp attempt at humor. "Are you with us?"

"I...I guess so," the afflicted man's dry raspy voice squeaked. He looked around the room, his eyes like a trapped rodent's. He weakly forced enough breath to speak again. "Wuh...what am I doing here?"

"Do you know your name?" asked the bearded guy while tapping his chest above the hospital ID badge. RANDALL SEARCY. "That's me," he said with a smile meant to be kind, but it was more subtly sinister.

Wearing a small secretive smile, Randall's stocky female superior held a glaspad, which she lifted and pretended to officially check from time to time. "Are you having trouble with memory?" Her voice was constricted, gravelly, like it had been damaged. Maybe in the war, where she was a drill sergeant-cum-medic or whatever, shouting orders over explosions at men with smaller balls than hers.

The patient worked his jaw as he blinked, but nothing came out. His hand wandered to the bandage wrapping his head. Then his fingers felt their way down, where he found stitches around the outer orbit of his eye, and ample bandaging on his cheek, and...ow...more pain. Name?

A smiling woman. Construction paper. A crayon rolling off the coffee table in a sunlit room. She's talking to her child, whose tiny hands pick a color. Her mouth and voice make his name and he draws it in purple.

"Gavin Simms."

"That's a start," said Randall, grabbing a glaspad from a stand. Like the big gal's, it was the commercial ruggedized model, clear Lucite from edge-to-edge. Go ahead, claimed the ads, throw it off a cliff. It'll just open more apps!

The block-shaped female authority figure was absorbed in her own glaspad, muttering to herself. Gavin squinted hard to get a better look at her. In some ways she looked like a thumb with a face painted on it, wearing an off-white smock.

Randall retook his attention. "You're OK. Some scrapes, a few bruises and dents. Better than most people in here." He made a circling motion with the glaspad's stylus and leaned in. "Listen," he said with a conspiring grin, "I know a guy here who would love one of your kidneys."

"Randy," groaned the woman, glancing up from her glaspad, "don't torment the man."

Randall persisted, like he was trying out new material. "You need only one, you know. Could fatten your bank account, amigo. And I've got other angles we can work," he said, tugging on his collar. "Yeah, I got angles all day long. You know where to find me."

"Forgive him," she said, taking over, and she shot Randall a communicating glance. "Can't you see he's frail?"

He looked back at her. "Yeah, Doc. I can see he's frail," he said, trying not to laugh. His next words were ostensibly for her, but he looked at Gavin. "I wonder if indecision is the more pressing issue."

Gavin had been in hospitals, many times, but this freakish clown show was starting to spook him. Was he dreaming? He needed something rational to fasten onto. He looked back and forth between them like *what crazy house am I in here?*

The girthy woman fixed Gavin with an authority face, and rattled out words like it was a recording. "You're in Langhurst Memorial Hospital. Your vitals are stable, no internal damage, nothing broken. But you do have a severe hip contusion that could bother you for some time. Possibly months. Do you dance?"

Gavin blinked at her like she'd just said something in an alien language, his brows alarmed and stupefied in one shape.

"I ask because if you were a dancer, recommended therapeutic courses would be...um... different."

"No," said Gavin, quelling an absurdity-induced chuckle. "Not for a living."

This was all so strange, it couldn't be real. He needed tactile feedback. Gavin looked at his feet making circus tents under the blanket, wiggled his toes, and they worked. The sensation in the tips of his toes matched what his eyes reported.

Good feedback.

He clenched and unclenched his fists, squeezing till his fingernails impressed painful crescents into his palms.

Even better feedback.

In that moment the slow bake of the world completed, bringing most his routines back online. "We have three to four out of ten pain everywhere, and some places six to seven. This hip is a solid eight," he said, lifting his butt cheek with a pained squint. "I'm dehydrated, and I feel like I should know what's in that IV."

Gavin's sudden alert and lucid presentation changed their expressions to nodding approval, as Randall nodded at the IV stand, saying, "Right. We're giving you something to help with the pain. Is it also helping with your grumpy mood?"

Gavin gawked at him like *who are you?* but said, "What's in the bag, Boy Wonder?" With no information immediately forthcoming, he shifted his focus to the lady, who was clearly the boss.

She looked up and removed the stylus from between pursed lips, gazing at him as though this support question wasn't to have escalated past her underling. She looked back at Randall.

He shrugged like, *you're in charge.*

"Conzall," she said at last.

Gavin's chin dipped to his chest. "My point exactly," he said without looking up. "Please stop the IV."

"Excuse me?" asked the burly gal doctor.

"Please stop the IV."

Again the two with him in this tightening space shared creepy communicating glances.

Gavin threw out his hands. "Hey. I'm over here."

"Churlish," she said with the air of an examiner. Looking at Randall, she said, "That's a good sign."

Randall frowned with approval, nodding and saying, "Reveals instinctive assertion when threatened."

Either these bots are bong bong, or I'm dreaming. None of this can be real.

Turning back, she focused hard on Gavin. The glasses were too small for her ample face, and the prescription magnification made her greenish eyes look cartoonish. And wow was she solidly built! Somebody should do something about those smocks, though.

Please!

"We know what we're doing, Mr. Simms," she said primly, her mouth firm.

Drained to near empty, Gavin said, "I'm sorry, you are...?"

"I'm Dr. Sticks."

"Like the river in hell?" he said.

Her eyes, and her cheeks, were indignant. "It's not in hell. And it's spelled i c k s."

"It's a waterway between Gaia and the Underworld," said Randall evenly.

Blinking like he couldn't believe what was happening, Gavin said to him, "Is that right? Thank you so much."

Randall shrugged. "Well?"

Gavin's swiveling eyes and face said *I'm about to start throwing things around*, but with due measure, he said, "I'm guessing it's a compound? Anti-inflammatories cause inflammation in me, and I'm allergic to opioids. Stop the IV. Get into my medical records. You'll see the problems."

A faint sneer rode the lady doc's stone face, mixed with obstinacy, challenge, and a little sexual tension. Stranger still was that it looked like an act, like everything else had so far. That or his perceptual routines were being typically...adaptive. "OK," she said, flicking her stylus imperiously toward the IV pump.

"Thanks," said Gavin.

He watched Randall's hospital ID tag hang over his face as he powered down the pump. What a great big smile for the camera, but no facial scrub in the pic. Gavin's eyes shifted to the symbols. The whole look was off trend, and ideologically conflicting, but while Gavin watched, it devolved into the sparse scraggly mountain folk beard his dad always wore. Blood ran in rivulets upward, crossing his dad's face and dripping toward the ceiling from his blood spiked hair. With the images came the smell of gas and burning tires.

Look at me, son.

Gavin's jaw unhinged, eyes like saucers, as his dad's shredded and crusty face turned to him and became Randall's again.

Breathing deeply and evenly, gazing vacantly, Gavin shook away the hallucination and focused on Randall. His eyes were pretty, his lashes long, his irises dark brown. Gavin decided they demanded a full, but kempt, Middle Eastern beard to round out his strategy above the collar.

Randall gestured at a squeeze-cup on the bedside table. "You thirsty? It's water."

Gavin didn't even flinch toward it as he said, "I wonder if you could bring me an unopened bottle of water? A fresh clear glass filled with reverse osmotic ice and a lemon slice?"

Randall and Doc Sticks looked at one another.

"Please?"

Seeing their doubtful expressions, Gavin said, "I'm not a diva...well...in the relativity of all things, but my history will explain everything. And I do get that the ice and lemon aren't on the menu." He smiled a little and shrugged a shoulder, trying to lighten things up around this freaky-clown crowd.

Randall slipped over to the door, leaned out and said, "Kyla, bring a bottle of water, please?" and then whisked back to the bed.

Doc Sticks retrieved the glaspad from beside Gavin's feet, tapped it and said, "It's Simms, one m?"

"Two."

"Date of birth?" she said without looking up.

"October fourth, 2005," said Gavin, so cotton-mouthy from the Conzall his teeth were sticking to his lips.

"At the 414 address?" she said, glancing up.

"Yes."

The big solid lady doc stepped around the bed, and handed the glaspad to Randall. "Get his records on here...please."

Randall took it, said, "It's good you said please," and flushed himself from the room.

A candy striper, a young lady with short blue hair, showed up with the water, hurried silently over and handed it to the patient, turned and left.

Stepping to the rail, Doc Sticks forced a twitchy smile. "Do you know why you were found unconscious in a gutter...right over there on Fourth Avenue?" she said, vaguely gesturing at the room's window.

Gavin opened the bottle and downed the contents in throat-glugging gulps. His blood-shot eyes blinked at her like, *excuse me*? His lips were wet as he said, "What the hell was I doing there?" His eyes dropped, searching the sheets. "I don't know, Doc."

"Someone hit you in their car and took off. Someone anonymously called it in. Maybe it was the folks who hit you, trying to do the right thing. You're lucky to be alive. The police said you were airborne for at least twenty-five feet." She fiddled with a gold band on her finger. "We don't know your legal status, and the police aren't yet showing any interest in you as anything but a victim, but they'll be back for a statement. We may need to keep you for a few days, but we'll see." For a flicker, her inscrutable green-gray eyes softened, almost like she knew him. It made for a weird moment, adding to the carnival side-show effect of this place.

"Thank you, Doc," he said in a tone that was trying to smooth over their bumpy start. It had suddenly become time to start manipulating everything he could to get out of this temple of horrors.

“Get some rest,” she said, patting his hand like she’d learned bedside manner from a GluTube tutorial. She turned to the door and Gavin watched her go. Her gait was mismanaged, a little janky, like she was trying too hard to walk normally.

The memory and images of an awful crash when he was a kid persisted, as his dad’s burnt and crusty face hung vaguely in his vision like a paused movie. Now the flaming heat spilled from the mental into the physical, spreading into his body. While he watched, the scene transformed into an enormous flaming visitor from the depths of space, hurtling toward the face of a yellow-striped world. Pounding music. Beautiful people.

“I don’t have any idea what that vision is trying to tell me,” he said as the vision evaporated. Looking around, he asked the room, “And why was I in the street in the rain?”

The room was shrinking, and Gavin couldn’t help thinking the longer he lay in that bed, the smaller it would get. A panic attack was making lazy circles around him, but hadn’t yet pounced.

“I have to get out of here.”

Last night, Gavin had been wheeled on a gurney into Langhurst’s emergency entrance without his wallet or anything else to identify him or connect him to the outside world. He’d never opted for the wrist chip for constant tracking, auto-id or auto-pay, or hospital personnel wouldn’t have listed him as “Patient Doe-No SAT Code” on ER intake.

Randall was kind enough to lend him his personal glaspad to make some calls and do whatever else, and he was sitting up in bed with the flat semitransparent supertech unit propped on an angle on a pillow. Tapping an icon, he logged into his Sphere account, which contained every scrap of information of his existence—contacts, texts, xmails, VMs, call logs, posts, music, shows and movies. Sphere was like a metacloud, and all accounts included private and secured partitions so every account holder could do anything they needed to from any device, as all computing was done on the quantum server side. Most devices were now just Sphere terminals.

When in trouble, his sister Heather and her two daughters were his support system. He opened his favorite set of pics of them all together, taken last Thanksgiving at her place. “Even Momma was there,” he said with a nostalgic smile, his plum-grays flicking around the shot. Conspicuously absent was his dad, like a hole in every photo since he was fourteen. It was as though the flames of the terrible and fateful crash had burned away every trace of him.

In this shot, they were all mugging for the camera with hats and pulled faces. Thanksgiving for them was like Christmas for other families. In it were Celia, a high schooler, Lissa, who came years later, Heather, his mother and himself. He touched Heather’s face, and lines sprang from under his finger, leading to Call, Text, Recent Posts, Favorites, and other data. He tapped Call. The device whirred with a pleasant tone.

Her face bloomed into view, and looking back at him was a summer-freckled, oval-faced woman with dark, “normal,” shoulder-length hair, no highlights, and he’d tried hard to get her to get some. Heather’s gray-blue eyes widened as she looked first at the head bandage, then the

thick cheek dressing, then the hospital gown. She puffed out a breath, like *not again*, the long-suffering younger sister of a sickly brother she'd taken care of for most of their growing up years.

"Oh no. What're you doing in the hospital?"

"They tell me I was a victim of a hit-and-run," he said, tapping the device's edge with his thumbs. He seemed self-satisfied about this bit of survival heroism.

"You OK?"

"I'm sheek. Banged up some," he said, his hand wandering absently to his cheek. "I really just needed a familiar face." He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "This place is freakin' me out a little. These people are weird."

"You're *always* freaked out by something. Where were you?"

"In an alley two blocks from here."

"Did you have a retrograde episode or something?"

Gavin licked his lips. He didn't want to have to explain that he had no explanation for anything. "I assume it was something like that."

"Were you sleepwalking?"

"Maybe."

They chatted on for a bit about the usual nothings, then he said, "Let's keep this between us. I don't want to worry Momma, and—"

"I agree."

"—and I don't want Lissa knowing about this."

"Gavin," said Heather, leaning in. "She's going to see whatever's under that cheek dressing."

"I'll come up with something. I'll go with heroic and dangerous."

"Really?" she said, shaking her head like *puh-lease*. "You're such a crappy liar, but Liss does like your stories, and she doesn't care at all if they're true."

"Why would she? For a kid, everything's true," said Gavin, his face saying he was feeling better and better just talking to his sis.

"When do you go home?"

Gavin's eyes shifted to the partially ajar door, then back. "I'm sure I'll be discharged today or tomorrow. No doubt they'd like to ring up a big bill on my insurance, but I know the game. They can't hold me. A couple detectives came and asked me some questions, but I haven't done anything they can keep me here for."

Heather leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "Even by what's in your psych history?"

"I don't think so," he said with obvious uncertainty.

"OK," she said, also unconvinced, her eyes narrowing. "Call me when you get home."

"OK. Love you bye."

"Love you bye," she said, reaching towards her own unit before the v-pane went blank.

He thought about calling Gina, his neighbor, to check his front door, "But would that set me up for a robbery? Nah. Nobody knows if that door is locked. The keys would have to be in their bowl."

He then checked xmails. "Nothing pressing there." Then his subscriber numbers. "It's only been a day, Gavin." He logged out of Sphere, set the device aside, lay back on the pillows and breathed easily for the first time in twelve hours.

The afternoon wore away and night came, and Gavin's patience for a concrete update on his stay here was wearing thin. At last, Dr. Sticks ambled gingerly into the room, carrying her glaspad. The smock was gone, revealing her summery linen dress and what turned out to be a quite ample bosom. The dress worked all right with her chest, but the buttons needed to be less prominent, and certainly not gold. She'd released the bun from its tightly wound purgatory and her brown hair now hung in waves to her shoulders.

In a conciliatory tone, Gavin said, "Your hair is better that way...what it does for your cheeks."

Heading for a chair, she said, "I doubt you and I will ever connect on that level."

"Maybe *you* won't. Believe it or not, I'm a—"

"Fashionologist," she cut in. "I've looked over your public vitae and profile. You have a multi-platform channel with fun and experimental threads and accessory concepts." The doc dragged the chair over and sat, set the glaspad on the bed, leaned her elbows onto her thighs and went on. "Why would I take style advice from a battered amnesiac who goes on inexplicable nocturnal expeditions?"

Gavin yielded with open palms and a dip of his chin. "You'd be surprised where you'll find inspiration."

She leaned back and put her arm on his bed. "Mr. Simms, by what I've seen in your medical history, your retrograde amnesia fills in some of these blanks, and there's more than enough in your labs and tests to be concerned about. Have you recovered why you were out wandering around?"

Gavin took his lower lip into his mouth and shook his head. "No, Doc. That one's got me stumped." He instantly regretted saying it.

Should have lied, idiot!

Her eyes ticking back-and-forth on his, with that cloying little smile, she said, "That's...unfortunate." Glancing down at the sleek computing gadget, she tapped it and said, "I see you have multiple drug and food sensitivities and autoimmune problems." She rattled off a cook's list of official complaints and diagnoses of record, but her voice trailed off, like she was just too drained to go through it all. Looking back up at him and leaning again on her thighs, she said, "You were poisoned by organophosphates in your home's water for three years. Have I got that right? That must've been tough."

Gavin's eyes defocused.

A man shouting at a woman in a dreary kitchen, waving a pint bottle of Old Home Bourbon. Water system? Where we gonna get the money!

Sell your precious Jeep! she shrieks back.

"It was," said Gavin, his eyes refocusing on her.

"The bottom line is we can't discharge you until we know more about what's going on with you, and it would have helped so much for you to have recalled what you were doing. So, we're going to keep you a day or two...observation and tests...you know the drill."

Gavin's innards plopped like rotten fruit into his colon, leaving him sour. "That's not possible, Doc. I have commitments, xlogs to write, a deadline on my Jym Sum piece. I'm good to go, bad hip and all."

"Your mental well-being is far more important than any of that."

"Just get me a pad and I'll get my work done here."

Her face gave nothing away as she affixed his eyes with hers. "Let me think about that...no I don't even need to ponder it, Mr. Simms. Those pressures are not a good thing for you right now. You're just going to have to let it all go, for a few days, anyway."

His face glum, Gavin looked out the window into the sprinkling late evening. Neon blue rivulets streamed down the window glass, and he could see the sign from the Blue Tsunami Sushi Den blinking in the distance. Challenging these people inevitably led to tears and ruin. He'd have to reconfigure his gameplan.

"So a day or two just became a few days?"

"I'll be frank," she said, clasping her hands. "This is my call, and evaluations take time."

The look she gave him was the kind that said *little men like you aren't in charge*, while her mouth said, "It's time for you to commit to something, and in this case, to my plan. Do that and we'll see what we can do."

Gavin inwardly cringed. What she said, and how she said it, was the creepiest thing yet.
What horror show hospital have I landed in?

Gavin's room in the psych wing wasn't as bad as all that. They didn't have any of the colors right, but with some imagination bland could be rationalized as subtle. A bed and a little desk and chair were in their places, and a sink and toilet in a closet-sized washroom, the tiles showing little tufts of grass blades.

The scrubs they handed him...now *that* was a different story. The mirror in the washroom was made of a shiny metal, which reflected in distortions—couldn't have anything glass in this wing. Lamentably wagging his head, he stood in front of his "funhouse" visage reflecting back, looking over the too-large fit, the faded orange from a few million launderings. His attention switched to his bandaging, his eyes earnest, furry brows in arcs of curiosity, as he gently palpated around the cheek dressing.

An ancient memory swam in, and the face in the mirror morphed into the younger Gavin, but now his whole pre-pubescent body stood before a full-length antique mirror his mother kept in her sewing "parlor." In his underwear, he was all refugee bones, blue veins showing here and there through pale wax-paper skin.

The dayroom was aglow with waning sunlight shafting through divided window-panes. The décor was meant to be happy, but it was merely tape over a ghastly wound. Colors were all the muted pastels in rooms designed to keep its inmates in a calm comfort zone, with big dots and flowers and rays of sunshine.

The patients milled about, all in scrubs. A group sat in front of a big XV, riveted by a show Gavin was passably interested in. XV was TV, but with cross-platform capability for content from Xenxu. Xenxu was the wildly popular alternate world used by billions, and Gavin maintained his brand presence in it, tied to his Pholo Design Studio. Xenxu wasn't just an artificial reality, but was a fully developed world, with AI citizens, laws, entertainment galore, a complex biosphere, economy, drama, love, and it was as strange as it was beautiful.

Gavin watched a lone young woman across the room. Dry messy hair, pallid, bones showing through the fabric at the shoulders. Face twitching, she typed and typed at nothing right in front of her face, like she was forever keying in an access code. It was blowing hard outside with a building storm, and a girl of maybe eighteen stood at the window, like a ghost, staring out there, her hair floating around like with a static charge. Another woman used a "safe" erasable marker on a child's white art-board, making red scribbles that appeared to be random, but as she scribbled furiously away, surprisingly well-done renditions of people and places would emerge.

"A mad genius," said Gavin under his breath.

Lindy was among the few names he'd managed to remember so far, mainly because they shared a passion for fashion. She was a middle-aged blond-graying gal who thought she was at lunch with her friends. Her body and face, tested and weathered by time, could not hide the fact that at one time she was undeniably scorchy, and too smart to be some fat rodent's arm candy.

"You're an elegant and pretty woman, Lindy," Gavin had said earlier.

"Oh you're just a charmer, now, aren't you," she'd said, giving him a coquettish wave at the wrist.

Set behind a PlexiTuff clear cover, the large screen XV was recessed into the off-white wall near the shelf above where the board games were stacked. A detachment of inmates gathered around it every day at this time to watch this one show. He sat alone behind the medicated audience, watching them absorb it.

It was a series called *Pods*, and it was about AI nanotech embedded within space dust bombarding Earth and turning people into cocoons of creeping nano-slime during the victims' transition. It was a marathon, and this was an early episode. In the show, Dr. Frank Carney was sitting in a posh Georgetown restaurant across from Dr. Maggie Willen, a lady colleague at the university, and with whom he had some hazy past.

"Frank," she said to him, "I know this is going to sound crazy, and I can't even *believe* this could come from my mouth, but I don't have anybody else I can turn to."

"Margaret," he said, covering her hand with his own, "we have always been able to tell each other anything."

"The truth is just too horrible to even contemplate," she said, her eyes getting misty, her face trembling.

"Please be calm," he said, tapping her knuckles and having himself a sip of wine.

She looked from side-to-side, then leaned in, lowering her voice. "Better have another swallow of that wine." She watched while he gulped it to finish the glass. Satisfied, she said, "Dale is not my husband. I don't know who that man is, but it's not my Dale."

"I can't believe they let them watch this in here," whispered Gavin into his fingers, which were busy tugging and letting go his upper lip.

"Don't you see, Gavvy?" said Lindy, who'd appeared at his elbow. "The staff is in on it. Haven't you noticed how they move? That's the first sign."

Dr. Sticks trying to manage the stilted movement of her bulky body.

He looked at her with all sobriety. "I've wondered about that."

"They've all transitioned. I know the signs. Look at them. Their eyes are dead even as they go about pretending to work."

Gavin looked at the ladies in the observation booth. He had to admit—wasn't a lot going on in those eyes.

Lindy leaned in closer, and he smelled her perfume. "Lindy, is that Petale you're wearing?"

"You have such sophisticated tastes, young man."

He turned to her, and her face was close enough to kiss. Though her gray-yellow eyes were steady on his, within them was a quiet quiver of crazy. Waving a painted fingernail, she said, "They all think this is an XV show, but the nano comes right through the display, and from Xenxu through UV-directed nano and the radio headsets. Get in-Xenxu and you're theirs to start the acquiescence entraining."

Eyes snaking side-to-side, she leaned closer and lowered her voice. "If you can find some chlorine, add a little to your water. I have some hidden in my room, in case you'd like to stop by," she said with a sly smile, tickling his arm with her colored manicured nails. "It inhibits precursor protein breakdowns they need for the DNA conjugation phase of the transition."

Gavin's eyes flew open. "Lindy, are you a scientist or something?"

"Was, but now I'm here," she sighed, waving the same painted fingernail and looking around. "These specimens are now my area of study. But please keep that to yourself."

"I'm in your debt, Lindy."

"The silly pods in the show?" she said, her eyes shifting to the XV. "That isn't how it *really* works. It's subtle, but sinister. You just won't know. But *I* will know. I promise, if your transition starts, I'll end you, as a favor."

"Thank you so much for thinking of me, Lindy."

"By no means am I a saintly flower, but some of my thoughts about you have been less than pure," she said with a cute lecherous grin, turning and moving off.

Gavin watched her go, eyes and brows disturbed. "*Jeezus*," he muttered. "People amaze me." He turned back to the XV, aware he'd missed a few things.

The low dirge of spine-chilling music became louder as Dr. Carney leaned back, his briar patch brows bristling. "I saw him two days ago, but I just can't—"

"Not here," said Dr. Willen, then dropped her filmfon into her open clutch. She finished her wine and stood, leveling him with granite eyes. "Meet me in our old place," she said with some command, then turned and swept away with classic movie grace.

As Gavin watched the scene cut to Dr. Willen in her car, the room rippled, barely enough to notice. What was that? The room vibrated again, like it had glitched for a tick into pixels. He kept his line of sight unchanged and he remained perfectly still, jaw muscles rippling.

Breathe. Release. Breathe.

Another wave rippled in the air across the room. By the corner on the opposite wall was an artsy-craftsy table and materials. On the other side of the table, a sizzling energy was forming, something tall and lithe, like rising delicate ice-blue smoke tendrils. The more it took shape, the more startled his widening eyes, his cheek twitching, wrist and hand beginning that old tremor.

Gavin blinked, an old technique to make this emerging nightmare go away. But it didn't work, which was not a good sign. Gavin's eyes darted hither and yon, hoping to see that others saw this, some there undoubtedly susceptible. But no. She was *his* hallucination. She? Maybe.

As she resolved and clarified, she was like a nervous system made of ice-blue flows of plasma electricity, with a central course of flowing sparkles and light, dividing and subdividing out into ever smaller sinews of branches and twigs. At the top was a sunburst head of tighter wound vines and twigs, with lines flowing in all directions from what could have been eyes in the shape of an oval. All this shimmering, flowing beauty fanned out at the bottom, like an evening gown. Or a sinewy tree trunk delicately enveloped *within* a sheer evening gown.

Gavin's eyes *looked* like they wanted to go as wide as saucers, but he doggedly maintained control, given that he was in a psych ward dayroom. Still, his eyes stared, white and vivid, as he huffed through his nostrils. He became fidgety, eyes shifting like *how do I get out of here?* A flush of heat surged up his neck, sheening his face with pre-sweat.

Not the heat!

He grabbed and luffed the scrubs at his sternum, fanning in air. Licking his lips, he glanced at a security camera, then back to...to...*that*.

Even though her eyes were just flowing lines away from oval voids, he felt her piercing into him, like a psychic scalpel. Probing. Invading. He touched his diaphragm. The tendrils seemed to be taking samples from *way* in there, with unbelievable intimacy.

Gavin's eyes defocused, moistened, gazing at nothing. Then they wandered back up to her. Flows of lines like Tesla bolts shimmered out from the main "trunk" of ice-blue plasma, creating a branch, which then pointed at the table with all the colored pens and sketch sheets.

The invisible tendrils withdrew from his diaphragm, lightly brushing sensitive nerve fibers on their way out, like a violin bow barely touching the strings. Intense pleasure. And pain. And they were so close. Gavin gripped the chair to keep himself from wiggling.

And then she languidly withdrew into nothingness, like curling and smoky veils being sucked into holes.

Gavin felt released like from a tractor beam, and he realized he hadn't gulped in a full breath until he tried. He stood and pulled his shoulders back, hand on his tailbone, and then set off. Helped by his quad-base cane, he almost tripped over his own rubbery legs as he waddled over, finally reaching the art table, feeling close to collapse from the ordeal.

On the table was a well-executed work of a cylinder made of hexagons, colored gold on graphite, set against a backdrop of rings, like Saturn was just out of the view. Levitating inside

the cylinder was a gold-shimmered obelisk, about a quarter the cylinder's length. It tapered to a pyramid, then a point, like a smoky crystal with highlights. On its face were tiny internally lit markings, symbols, script. Leaning on the cane, Gavin reached down and put his finger in the middle of the cylinder and moved the sheet side to side.

"It's real," he said, so low it was below a whisper.

Then his eyes widened. In the corner was his own signature, an overlapping stylized GS, but this signature was modified: GS5.

Five?

"What the hell is going on?" he said, then looked up, hoping nobody heard him.

Picking the mystery art up, he made a show of how much he liked it, holding it up to the light, getting different angles. With a forced smile, he said to no one in particular, "I think this one should hang in my room." By now, the monitor lady behind the window was eyeing him, and Gavin showed her the art, slowly mouthing, "May I take this for my room?"

She squinted and scowled at it, looking like one of those super furry cats with the smushed-in face, where they look irate but seem to be amicable creatures. She waved a glaspad stylus at him, like *Take it and go*.

Forever and always, Time was an aloof tyrant, too occupied with sadistic stratagems to give Gavin any respite from the grind and flow of it. In that grind was idling, and idling was tough on him, always had been, for then the skeletons would come *clickety-clacking* from the closets he'd stuffed them into.

His mother in one of her weirdly colorful housedresses, hunching over the sewing machine. Idle hands are the devil's workshop, she tells him without looking up.

Circling over and over in his mind was Lindy's face, her eyes, her words. He couldn't get her quietly crazy eyes off his mental display, and it was wearing on him.

The feminine alien apparition made of plasma electricity.

Pods.

Is she the queen? Is my transition underway?

Her probe of me. Is that when she injected the conjugating agent Lindy told me about?

"I don't think she's one of them," he'd said again and again, unable to fully convince himself.

Gavin found himself in front of his distorted metal mirror, checking his skin for the formation of the sticky new membrane with the squiggling worm-like organisms. In his aimless wanders through the halls, he'd found himself standing in front of what he took to be supply closets, thinking he might find some chlorine. They were numbered, or coded, always locked. There were times he imagined himself stealing into a sealed lab and finding Lindy in the vile chrysalis, the sticky secretions creeping ice-blue flickers over her surfaces. He'd also passed Lindy's room, hesitating with his knuckles up and about to rap quietly on the door, but this kind of fraternization was forbidden and could buy him more time here.

No way I'm risking that, but where had she been the last two days?

Passing patients and staff in the halls...he didn't dare look them in the eye. The last thing in the world he could do was cross the line and see them transitioned, making Lindy's words come true. At lunch it seemed a group of security staff stared at him, their faces fixed, and then turned to each other for private conference.

For no reason he could think of, they didn't make him take the usual meds for this wing. This was the lone blessing from on high, for the cruel chemicals would have been devastating on his mentality. He would exhibit no suspicious behavior. He would do *nothing* to alter this lucky pattern. But each time the nurses stopped in front of him with their squeaky cart and cups with pills in them, he felt like a child, terrified of unknowns he wasn't mature enough to understand.

The hovering terror of being forced to take the drugs became a drug unto itself, warping him further, immersing his mind into a dream-like hallucinogenic drift. Added to it all, he couldn't help feeling an invasive intelligence acting upon him—a watcher—prickling hairs at the back of his neck. Paranoia could escalate to a serious condition for him, and it was a mental discipline to steer away from it.

"I miss Lindy."

Lindy, close to his face. The silly pods in the show? That isn't how it really works.

He sorely wished she were around to explain more about what she knew, for she had elevated to a status of authority on the grim matter Earth was facing. "In the show, I mean," he said, constantly talking himself out of believing it was all a real threat.

True to Doc Sticks's plan, he was allowed no connectivity to the outside world, like a cult isolating him from family and friends during inculcation of the group's increasing power over him. It was almost like a tradeoff for not having to take the meds. "Give this, but take that," he said one day while washing his face.

Not being able to talk to Heather was its own blessing, because when he got like this, she could see it immediately, and he didn't want her worrying. As always, at the worst possible times, he had to switch to solitary mode to spare everyone else of his little departures from grounded sanity.

Gavin had bags under his eyes, his hair a messy disgrace, as he drank his apple juice, looking into the penny-yellow mid-afternoon sun pouring into the dayroom. His hand shook. He was losing touch with the world out there, and himself in here. He felt it—something slipping, giving way, drawing him toward the beyond, where his mind could slip and slide despite the mandates of his jailers.

I am prey.

He didn't know how, didn't know who, couldn't quite place it, but was sure of it, and it seemed even beyond the ominous behaviors and designs of Doc Sticks. She had decoded his wander patterns and found him in a lonely hall. With subtle force she backed him to the wall as she said, "I told them the usual meds protocols weren't clinically correct for you."

Gavin fought with himself to keep from fleeing, as he said, "Thanks so much for that. I owe you."

"I will have my pound of flesh," she replied with a sly smile and swaggered away with as much sexy as her physique was capable. Scratching his forehead with some consternation, Gavin watched her go, now convinced his extended interment here was choreographed by her.

Throughout the ordeal, he found himself riveted by *Pods*. It had become research, and he watched it with laser attention for clues. He'd let his eyes go soft focus, to see if he could make out the subliminal tendrils slithering from the XV into the inmates' glassy eyes. But he saw nothing that his own mind wasn't producing, and he knew the difference.

And where the hell is Lindy?

He didn't even dare inquire.

Just before dinner on the sixth day, Doc Sticks dropped by the dayroom and waved for him to join her on a nearby couch, under an expensively authentic fake schefflera tree. No glasses today, but the green-gray of her eyes was enhanced by contacts. This was new. And she'd changed her makeup? Over her shoulder hung a leather satchel from a beaded strap, and Gavin pined for it with wide riveted eyes. *Real* leather. *Way* too expensive these days. Some alarmingly stupid propaganda about bovine flatulence and greenhouse gases.

By this time, Gavin was jaded, exhausted from the mad gyrations of his own mind, his whole system behind a hair trigger. If she was the choreographer of all this, he would dance on her face with the slightest provocation. Oh, she was obviously very strong, but when his cognizance left the scene, he'd tear her bones from her flesh on rabid animal adrenaline alone.

Gavin as a glazed-eyed teen being hauled back by other kids from a bleeding bully on the ground, blinking himself back to the present moment. Good thing the kids were there, or he'd have killed him and not even known it.

Once they were seated, she brought a glaspad out of the satchel and swiped and tapped. Gavin imagined himself fondling the satchel's artistically worked surface. Truth was, he'd have licked it like a lollipop if he could.

With her gravelly voice, she said, "How you holding up?"

"It's been fine. Hungry as hell. I'm still on the water fast, and I can't seem to get enough of it."

"You are a *tenacious* little thing," she said, not looking up, sporting her half-smile he'd learned to dread. "They've complained. I told them you're a cibophobe, triggered by your sensitivities and underlying conditions."

Gavin shrugged a shoulder. "We're conspirators in a truth."

Her eyes grabbed his, like she had something important to say. "How this plays out is straightforward. My boss is of the opinion we're not the best course for you here." She looked at him like a conspirator and patted his thigh. "We're going to discharge you, but there is a provision."

Fighting to keep the sneer off his face, Gavin looked down at her hand, then back to her eyes. "I'd call it a catch."

"If you like," she said with a hard grin. "Have you heard of Deep Climb?" she said, swiping at something on the glaspad.

"Doesn't ring a bell."

She showed him the glaspad, displaying Deep Climb's xsite. "It's a Xenxu therapeutic system," she said, setting the glaspad on the satchel. "I almost went into psychiatry. It's doing top therapeutic work for those with your symptomatic profile." She looked up. "More to the point, those with your symptomatic profile and intake circumstances don't have as much latitude where certain grayish legalities are concerned. The other option is for you to be remanded for involuntary long-term care. Which, not to disagree with our marketing team, is not as fun as it sounds. I suggest you choose the path of least resistance."

Gavin tipped his head to the side. "I don't know, Doc. Therapy has never been a friend to me."

She shrugged with open hands. "See...that's the problem. Your release is contingent upon evaluative intake by Deep Climb. But if you get the ball rolling on your own, it will look much better to all involved. If they accept you, you're committed, and we both know your problem with commitment."

Right then, Randall walked by in the corridor outside the room, holding his finger and thumb up to his face like a phone, mouthing "Call me."

With an unfriendly smile, Gavin waved at him like *not on your life, pal*.

Looking back at her, with pursed lips, he was already nodding as he said, "Right. And I'm sure it's eligible for my platinum insurance coverage."

"You think we're a network of bad actors," said Doc Sticks with some humorless amusement. "But these are the delusions we want to help you get sorted out."

Gavin studied her eyes.

His dad sipping a beer at a ballgame, taking a moment to pass on some folksy wisdom. If you're on first base, and someone hits the ball, you got to move, no choice at all, even if you get thrown out. That's how life works. Just move.

"I appreciate it," said Gavin at last, his eyes insincere.

"You're damn right you do," said Doc Sticks as she shoved the glaspad back in the satchel.

"You did do me a solid on the meds, Doc, and I do appreciate it."

She stood, looking down and saying, "We're friends, then?"

"Friends that bid permanent farewell, perhaps."

She wore the grin of a fox, the only thing missing being chicken feathers. "You'll receive everything you need by registered xmail," she said, then turned and awkwardly doddered away.