

A man wakes up in the morning, the day like any other. The sun is shining just a little too bright this morning for him, even though most other people enjoy it just like it is. It doesn't usually bother him, but it does a little bit more so today than most others. His wife has made bacon - her favourite - and while he prefers something a little more pedestrian like oatmeal, it doesn't usually bother him. But today the chewy, salty, slightly undercooked bacon irks him more than it has before. He drives his carpool to work, in traffic that's held up more than usual because of the bicyclists enjoying the sun that is generally favoured by most people. And while he's usually able to shake off his distain for those that behave like cars when it suits them best and like pedestrians when it's easier, he's frustrated more than usual. He even feels something new when he sees them; envy, because he's not in the position to bike to his workplace like they are. It's another thorn, another mosquito bite against his mood this day. And they continue. His coworkers breath, his bosses nasally voice, the lunch vendors demeanour; every last one piled onto a growing heap of annoyances and inconveniences, things that never really bothered him. But as they pile up like he's never had to experience before, he's pushed further than he ever has been in his entire life. More than ever before he feels the edges of his reality being pulled away from him, like jesters are laughing at him from the other side. For the first time in his life, he deals with frustration on a level he couldn't even conceive of before this day. For the first time in his life, the frustrations of his life, the uncomfortable sensations that surround him, don't arrive in a line, one at a time, easily dismissed and forgotten so that he may carry on with the life he loves. One with a wife that was out of league but gave him a shot because she was older and wanted to have children soon. The life filled with the laughter of children that loved to play by themselves and not bother their father. The life with a job that was quiet and independent. It was his life, and it suited him wonderfully, and the way he lived it suited those around him. But he couldn't think of those things today. He couldn't really think straight at all this day, his thoughts clouded with frustration, his mind twisted with anger. But he didn't know how to deal with it, didn't know how to look around the things that filled his vision and his mind. Never before had something just not fit in his life like this, and the more he thought of it, the worse it seemed. So he stewed, and fumed, and struggled inside his own head, until his youngest of three children at five years old, his only daughter, spilt a glass of milk into his lap over dinner. The tinder's found a spark, and his self control, his level head, his very sense of self evaporated in a haze of red, and only when the screams of his wife and three children were silenced forever by a chef's knife and his fists, did he fully grasp what he had done. Like a man who has gazed into an abyss of nothingness, with everything he had ever cared about laying lifeless at his feet and staining the carpet and walls, he felt a hopelessness and emptiness that the human race hadn't seen in generations. And with one last flash of the knife, it was the last thing he ever felt as he - sobbing - drained his veins onto the floor next to the empty glass of milk that had pushed him over the edge of a cliff he hadn't even known existed.

Caleb Lange awoke in a daze. Falling off his couch, he hit his coffee table, scattering the dozen or so empty beer bottles that had been left there, along with a couple partially full ones. The flicker of a television still on from the late night movie that wound down the party bathed the open and simple loft apartment that doubled as his office in a dull, blue light. The morning light was still half an hour off from being intense enough to worm around the shades and illuminate the space. Caleb wormed around on the floor, noticing the mess of spilt drinks, tracked mud, and the odd piece of discarded clothing while he tried to get a bearing on his surroundings. Unfortunately, the pull of gravity was doing nothing to help right himself against the spinning

sensation in his head. As he struggled, he became more and more aware of something else entering his consciousness besides a relentless throbbing. But what? He tried to reach out through the fog around his brain for whatever was trying to reach through from the other side to call him into full wakefulness.

“Damn phone,” was the only thing he was able to cough out, but he was revving up now, enough so that he could stumble the half dozen feet to where he noticed his phone, laying outside the charger next to a chair and another empty beer bottle, and answer it. “What?!”

“Caleb, get down here, now. Something’s...happened.”

“Jeff, you may remember what last night was for me. You also may remember that I’m not much of a morning person after 12 yea-”

“Shut up. We need you to get down here as soon as you can. Is your cell actually on for once?”

Shocked by the demand to shut up - something Jeff hadn’t told him to do in the entire length of their friendship - Caleb barely responded.

“Uh, yes.”

“Good. I’m texting you the address. Get here right away. Don’t stop for coffee. Don’t talk with anyone. Don’t shower. Just get down here.” And with that, the line went dead. Caleb sat there half a minute, simply dumbfounded by the phone call. Ever since they went through the police academy together (which wasn’t the whole truth, since Caleb never completely finished), it was very rarely that Jeffrey sounded as rattled as he did. He was always a cooler, more calculated person than Caleb, which is probably why they got along so well and continued to do so in their professional dealings with one another. But something was different this morning. Even more than the tone he had on the line, Caleb could practically feel something amiss through the phone lines from Jeffrey’s location. Caleb didn’t think he’d have a case to deal with this soon after the last one, but he had that feeling in his gut whenever he did start one; the feeling that was there even before he had officially accepted a contract. A mixture of excitement, curiosity, and unease was the best way to characterize it. What the hell, Caleb thought, he didn’t want to clean up the remnants of the party with a hangover anyway. He tossed on his trench coat, grabbed his hat, and strode out the door with a sense of purpose, even if he did so a touch unsteadily.

Caleb’s route to becoming a private investigator is an odd and twisting one, but one that seemed to fall together rather nicely. As a child, he loved the cop movies on TV that him and his dad would watch. Comedy-action buddy flicks, dark noir style dramas, straight investigative tales, and forensic heavy narratives; he enjoyed every one. It left him with a sense of respect for the law and the oath that officers swear to protect and serve. But every movie he got to watch with his father was balanced by a game of chess he had to play with his mother. No chess game, no cop movie. And if there was a suspicion of Caleb purposefully throwing the game, no movie either. This was never much of an issue though, as growing up with three other brothers left him with a strong desire to compete and best his competitors. He learnt the game well, the intricacy and the rigidity of the rules. Soon he came to admire the way his mother would position her knights against him, never being able to see how they would strike until the last moment. And he did his best to learn the ways she used them, so that he could utilize them in the same manner. The first time he was able to best his mother in a game of chess is still a cherished memory. During school he was distracted easily, and he developed a natural flair for conversation that kept himself from being bored and kept his classmates unfocused. His popularity led to his social calendar usually being full (which he claims is when he truly learned to interview and read people) and his studies under attended, so when the police academy was making decisions as

who to let in, Caleb missed the mark by a single applicant. But in a bittersweet twist of fate, one of the police cadets had the misfortune of being born with aortic aneurysm, and it burst one morning early in the training. Caleb was in. This is where he met Jeffrey, where he obtained excellent marks and training evaluations, where he made friends with many of the instructors, and where he took a poker game too far one evening with them late in the academy training season, when his graduation was all but assured. He was unceremoniously dismissed, but his connections lasted. His curiosity lasted. And when he started his private investigating business, he found his place. Taking cases the police had finished with. The ones that seemed hopeless and senseless. He attacked them with a zeal that no one else had for them, and it gave him an unbelievable one half closure rate for his cases; no small feat for cases that were dead to the rest of the investigative community. And lastly, it gave Caleb his purpose. He had found his place, and while it was a common feeling, it was cherished none the less.

As Caleb drove to the outlying suburb to meet Jeffrey, he got the sense that this outing was very different than his usual line of work. There were no clean up crews in the area, wiping away the mess a crime leaves behind after the investigation closes up. The streets weren't empty, the interest in a crime having faded from public consciousness. And there was no frustrated and anxious persons to meet tied to the case, the ones that were furious that the cops were giving up and unsettled by the idea that something happened without a reason. The ones Caleb would deal with first and foremost to help put their world back together.

Looking out the window of his car, he saw something very different. For one, it became almost immediately obvious that this investigation was still ongoing by the police. And not just ongoing, but recently opened, as there was a crowd of reporters and curious citizens at the edge of the police line, which was another oddity Caleb noticed. As he passed the police tape, he noticed the house in interest was still a block and a half down the street. What on earth could be in that home that would require such a perimeter. There was something else here too, Caleb thought to himself. Nothing most people would notice, but it was certainly there to someone that knew cops, and especially these ones. They didn't like being here. They were disgusted, uneasy, and even a little freaked out. It was almost as if the house were carrying a curse, and they were being forced to explore it. Caleb's interest and unease peaked up another notch, and he loved the feeling. Parking partway on the sidewalk in his beat-up yet well maintained sedan, one might have mistaken him for a detective stepping out of an undercover cop car - until you noticed that the car wasn't domestic and that the man coming out of it was better dressed and worse kept than almost every detective on the force.

"Caleb, you look like shit." Jeffrey greeted his old friend with a coffee and a teasing remark, normal. But it was forced. The coffee wasn't warm enough to be freshly poured, meaning that he had been waiting with it, just standing on his arrival. The poke at his appearance was said with a weak voice, his eyes averted. Something was seriously amiss here.

"And my mother's a whore, whatever. This is where you tell me why you're waiting on a private investigator to walk through the crime scene on a fresh investigation. Is this even legal? Because I don't need anymore headaches than the one I'm nursing right now. You know I just wrapped up that hospital thing and the celebration for that was last night."

"Five dead. Quadruple murder suicide. Husband kills his wife and three children aged ten, seven, and five before he opens up his own neck. Called in last night when the neighbour came over to watch the game and saw the scene through the window. Been interviewing people all night, digging up every last thing we know about this guy and his family. They got along well with

everyone else in the cul-de-sac, no issues at work that we can figure out, the financial records indicate that they were doing just fine, and there's no history of mental illness. There's..." here Caleb watched Jeffrey's eyes tear up, something that he'd only seen once before when his father passed away, "there's nothing here. No motive, no reason, no sense to take away from any of this. All I've got is a butchered family." Jeffrey ran through his description as cleanly as his emotions would allow, sounding like he was cold reading a script. The far away look in his eyes betrayed his turmoil and shock underneath though, and he saw Caleb studying them. "That girl, she was five, and she was beat most the way to death before being stabbed. For every disparaging remark I make about your firm, you are still the one that makes sense out of cases like this for families and loved ones. But when word of this gets to the press - and despite my best efforts it will sooner than I will like - people are going to want to know why. There hasn't been a murder suicide in this city for eight years. The last murder of a minor was twelve years ago, and the last quadruple homicide was fifty years ago. Never mind the fact that we've never had a triple minor murder in 100 years of records. Now we have them all together in a crime scene that no one could have conceived of in their worst nightmare. People will need answers... people will demand answers. And I want to make sure I'm doing everything I can to provide them. This is your specialty Lange. So please, help us with this." There was a moment of dead silence after Jeffrey's plea, and Caleb stood dumbfounded to the news. But it was only a moment. Caleb knew that the answer was here, and that if he was being offered the opportunity to help find it, he would leap at it with arms out stretched.

"Lead the way; I assume I have to accept you as my boss now though, don't I?" Despite everything else that had happened, and everything that he had seen, Jeffrey was able to muster a genuine smile, even as he lead his old friend over the threshold to hell.

Jeffrey often reminded people that he only like to be addressed by his full name, and there were only three people he let call him by the moniker 'Jeff.' Actually, only two now ever since his father passed away. Caleb, as his best friend and the man that saved his life, called him Jeff to irritate him. And his sister would occasionally call him Jeff when she didn't remember his dislike of the moniker; a holdover from their time growing up together. His promotion to lead detective on the major crimes unit is much more straightforward than Caleb's path to his position. Jeffrey's father was a police officer, and his father before him, and even his mother before him. All dedicated and decorated in the line of service. All strong and silent in the duties and in their lives. All quiet and reserved, and all believing in tradition and law. To each one was passed down the attributes of an officer of the law, and the belief in what a badge stood for. Like the generations that preceded him, Jeffrey was groomed from before birth to be the fast ascending member of the police force he was today.

The smell of blood was thicker inside the house than anything Caleb had experienced in his life before. Of course it was, he thought to himself. Jeffrey was right when he said no one could even conceive of this kind violence. Caleb had seen horrible things in his career, but this one shook even him as he and his old friend did the walkthrough. It was all he could do to stay professional, though he wondered why he was bothering without anyone but the two of them there. Perhaps it was out of some awestruck reverence, Caleb thought to himself. The forensic team had already come and gone as it was a straight forward scene for them to process, and the uniforms guarding the house were giving the place a wide berth. But still he did his best to maintain composure, and that meant processing the scene one bit at a time.

“Started here at dinner. As I mentioned before, we don’t know why, but it started with the youngest. She was struck several times, looks like by the father’s fists, in the head and then thrown against the wall.”

“Hold on a second.” Caleb wanted to take a look at what had happened, and still wanted to take this one slow step at a time. The girl was small, a little fat, but in a healthy young child sort of way. She had a shock of red hair over fair skin, and he imagined that it was beautiful when it was combed and styled over. Now it was matted down, speckled with blood and tears. Caleb took another moment, then gestured to Jeffrey to continue.

“Wife was probably coming in from the kitchen at the time, and is frozen by what she see’s. Maybe she freaks out. Maybe she tries to run. What we know is that she was pushed into the counter here. The knife block is just over her head and he grabbed one before he proceeded to stab her as she lay stunned on the ground. Seven entry wounds. At the very least, we can probably rule this out as predetermined; the knife looks like a weapon of convenience and opportunity.”

“Give me another moment.” Caleb struggled to maintain his composure as he saw the crumpled heap in front of the sink. The stab wounds didn’t look like they were made by anyone composed or calculating. They were rough and ragged and ran the entire length of the torso with one in the shoulder. Caleb noticed the blood stain on the counter and the gash in the wife’s forehead and concluded that she wouldn’t have been in a state to put up much of a fight. Her strawberry hair was pulled back, and he could see in far more detail than he would have wanted to the wounds tracing her body. After a moment, he nodded towards Jeffrey to continue.

“Best we figure from here, the oldest, about ten, snaps out of the shock of seeing his mother attacked, and rushes to protect her. Father throws him against the fridge, and kills him with one brutal stab where the neck meets the chest, into the chest cavity. The middle child tries running,” Jeffrey moved out of the kitchen at this point, walking with a quick stride towards the stairs, “but the father catches him on the stairs. Two quick stab wounds into the back, liver and heart. Over before he really knew what happened.” Jeffrey knew well enough at this point to give Caleb a moment. He looked at the two boys both splayed out where they fell, and thought how odd it was that the coroner wasn’t even here yet. He looked back at the boys - and thought how the two looked so alike despite the age difference - then to his friend, and he continued.

“Finally, he must have spotted his daughter moving or something, because he moves back to where it all started, with her, and finishes her off with the knife. Whe-”

“Fuck.” Caleb broke ever so slightly then, the idea of coming back to your own daughter and finishing her off twisting his heart. Jeffrey continued after a moment.

“When it was all over, it looks like he regretted his actions. The blood spatter on his face has two streaks in them; tears. If I had to guess, I’d say he was pretty distraught, cutting open his neck instead of his wrist. He falls here, and that’s where they all lay, found in a couple hours.” Caleb looked down at the final subject, down at the man who looked ordinary and even a little plain. A little out of shape, but not very. A little gray in his hair, but hardly. A touch tall, but not really. Balding, but ever so slightly. So pedestrian, but soon to be one of the most infamous murders ever. The thought sat in his mind, but it didn’t fit. He didn’t know how else to say it, but that’s all his brain could come up with.

“This doesn’t fit.”

“That’s putting it lightly Caleb. But I need fresh eyes and somewhere to go on this. I’ve been looking at this all night, and I’m not getting anywhere. I don’t know if it’s because there’s nowhere for it to go or I’m just too tired. I don’t know who else would be better for this, which is

why you're here. Live up to my faith in you here, because I need something." Caleb briefly considered making a jest about Jeffrey's 'faith' comment, but looked down at the little red head again and thought better of it. Stay professional, he thought to himself.

"Well, you're going to want to interview the neighbour that found them again, because he's hiding something. His statement is that he came over for the game?"

"Yes, that is what he claimed."

"Right, the only problem is that the home team was the early game, over before six. And this isn't the kind of neighbourhood where you'd have even one fan of an out of town team, let alone two. This is the suburbs, and while not many people know about them, these neighbourhoods work on a sense of unity and cohesion. Those two would be home team fans, like everyone else in this neighbourhood, and they wouldn't break up their weekday night for a game that didn't feature the Baron's. We'll start there, with what he's hiding."

Seven years ago a seagull hatched in a nest by the reservoir for the city. A small tweak in its genetic code made it bigger than most other gulls, and it thrived in competition with the other birds. So much so, in fact, that it was even able to find a niche in the ecology of the city proper, tucked away in the high rises of the city instead of relegated to the parks like so many others. During its life the gull inspired two school children to become ornithologists, one business student to transfer into aeronautical engineering, and who's well placed fecal deposit on a hot dog vendor cart brought to light a number of health code violations to the public that shut the business down. Upsetting news for most business owners, though instead of peddling unhealthy meat sticks, the man went on to be a home-maker, enjoying it much more than he thought he would.

Those seven years led the bird to this moment, flying away from the city over the highway because of some novel wind patterns that day. At two thirty two in the afternoon, the gull's oversized heart finally gave out, and the poor bird was dead of a heart attack before he was halfway to the ground. Which was probably a good thing for the bird, who hit the windshield of a tanker truck just before it was to enter the city proper. Rick Cantelli, the driver of the truck, almost swerved right into the guard rail when that happened, but he was a seasoned hand at this trade, and was able to guide it to the nearest truck stop, conveniently only two blocks out of the way. While he cleaned gull off his windshield and made sure that there wasn't any damage to the glass, he noticed a small happy meal toy laying by the back tires of his cab. Smiling to himself and reminded of his twin boys at home, he went to see what character of the month the toy immortalized in cheap plastic. And that's when he saw what could have killed dozens, and set buildings ablaze. A small improvised explosive device. Cantelli looked at the tanker full of refined chemical propellant he was hauling, the explosive, and ran from the area, taking away everyone he could and calling the police immediately. The investigation led to a man that was planning much more, but never had a chance because his "feeler" operation never got off the ground. And when the story hit the news, everyone breathed a sigh of relief with the aftertaste of expectation still there.

The walk from the murder house to the neighbours was an eerie one. The police barrier was still ridiculously far away, and uniformed officers patrolled the entire interior space. They kept an eye on the border, and also on the houses inside of it, ushering people back inside if they ventured out, even shooing children beneath their roofs again. Caleb got the feeling of walking in an odd prison state as he scanned the area, and the discomfort of the police officers was still palpable in

the air. He also noticed the coroners finally showing up, under close scrutiny of Jeffrey, who had left him by himself after explaining what he wanted Caleb to do under this investigation.

“Almost as important as finding out why this happened is managing the press and the public here. That means people need to think that shocking as this is, the cops are on top of this and handling it like any other investigation. They need to see me give the press conference, and make the normal speeches, leave them with a little something and then promise the rest of the story when the paper work wraps up. They can’t see me running around with half the force trying to figure this out, because then there’ll be panic. People will pull this man’s life apart to try and find the reasoning for themselves. This city doesn’t need that. So while I have the press looking right and thinking business as usual, I need you going left and figuring this thing out. You’ll have all my resources, but damnit do I need you to keep this as quiet as possible. And you’ll need to be fast. This thing is going to break for the evening news tonight, maybe the late night if I’m lucky, but you know how long the paper work turnaround takes. When this makes it to the airwaves, 72 hours is all I have. That means at the most you have...84 hours to put this together. Now hurry up, and you can go back to nursing your hangover.” That had made Caleb smirk, and he was glad to do so, feeling relieved that there was the solid front door between them and the carnage on the other side at the time.

“Thanks. Next time you wake me up though, I’m going to want some fresh coffee.” With that he set off across the lawn to the neighbours, Jeffrey’s strained chuckle at his back. As he approached the door, he wondered how long it would be before Jeffrey was able to laugh with conviction again.

The house looked largely the same as the one he had just come from, with a splash of unique style choices here and there. Shaggy yard instead of a closely cropped one. Garden gnome instead of a welcome mat. Nothing that really caught the eye, nothing that really clashed with the neighbourhood.

Caleb knocked on the door and was slightly taken aback when the door immediately swung inwards and a man that had clearly gotten very little sleep the night before stood before him. Looking over him quickly, Caleb could tell his insomnia wasn’t just because of what he had seen. There was that discomfort and unease in his eyes, but there was fear as well. Whatever he was hiding he wasn’t going to give up easily, because it was surely something either immoral, illegal, or perverse.

“What?”

“Mr...Cantelli is it?”

“Yea, what?” Caleb could feel the man trying to size him up, and he became painfully aware of how ragged he must of looked to him. But since Cantelli looked almost as bad, he figured he could use that to forge a common thread; something he figured he’d need to get this man to share what he was hiding.

“I’m Caleb. Caleb Lange, with the police,” here he paused to flash his ID certifying him as a private investigator, which looked enough like a police ID that most people, let alone an under slept and rattled individual like Rick Cantelli, wouldn’t question that statement, “and I’m just here to do a standard follow up to the statement you gave last night. But before that, could I trouble you for a Tylenol or something? I hate to be unprofessional, but I’m riding quite the hangover here. Case like this you get called in when you’re not expecting it, and your time off gets cut in to.” Caleb watched Cantelli weigh his options in his head, and could essentially see his body language say ‘what the hell.’

“Yeah, okay,” Caleb followed the trucker into his house, who lead the way somewhat hesitantly,

“you folk figure out what happened over there yet? I’m not in any danger am I?” Caleb briefly considered if a lie would aid his cause here, but decided against it.

“All I can say is that you are indeed safe here. Besides that I’m afraid I can’t comment on an ongoing investigation,” he paused to swallow the Tylenol - which he didn’t really usually have for a hangover, but it seemed like a good way to get inside the house - before he continued, “how often did you go over to your neighbours to watch the Baron’s?”

“Whenever we could make time to watch them really. Sometimes other guys from the neighbourhood would come and watch with us, but we were the two big fans.” Caleb was surprised at just how easy this was going. Cantelli must be really tired to have his guard down like this. He was essentially exposing his lie for Caleb, who would be saved the trouble of having to do it himself.

“And you said you went over to his house to watch the Baron’s game last night, which is when you saw what had happened?” Cantelli paused, and the wheels began to turn in his head, regretting inviting this dishevelled looking cop into his kitchen immediately.

“Well, I believe I just said that I was going over to his house to watch the game, I didn’t mention before that it was the Baron’s.”

“Of course, my apologies, I just assumed that the game you were visiting for was the Baron’s game, but they played earlier that day, didn’t they?”

“Yeah, well, we couldn’t watch that one, so we were going to settle on a different match up. We did that sometimes, but not often. Gotta cheer for the home team right?” Caleb noticed the smallest bit of perspiration start to form on Cantelli’s brow now. He had to conceal a smile to himself when he saw that, but after dealing with a bunch of tight lipped doctors and nurses for the last two months, it was refreshing to have someone that couldn’t lie with any flair. The only matter that really remained was to coax the information out with just the right amount of coercion and the right amount of tact.

“Right you are. I love the Baron’s so much that I swear I bleed gold when I cut myself shaving. And what time did you say you arrived at your neighbours and noticed the incident through the window?”

“Um, about eight thirty, maybe a little later.”

“Were you running late? Because I thought the late game started at eight sharp Wednesday nights.” Caleb felt that it was best to take a small risk here, as he had a feeling Cantelli would open up. He looked like he was on the edge as it were already, and being caught in even a small lie like this would see him to the other side.

“Oh, yes, I remember now. I was saying goodnight to my boys. It wasn’t the Baron’s, so I wasn’t too concerned about it, you know?”

“Of course of course. Just the Raiders, and everyone knows they never come alive till after the first fifteen minutes of play anyways.”

“Yeah, but they put on a good show when they do. That’s why we decided they were worth watching, even if they’re not the Baron’s.”

“I agree, they do put on a good show. Like when they played Tuesday night this week,” Caleb saw every muscle in Cantelli’s body go rigid at the realization that he had been caught in a lie, since no team plays more than once a week. Caleb continued like he didn’t notice, “But it’s odd that you were going to see them play on a Wednesday night then. And also odd that you claimed to be running late for the game even though this Wednesday, the game didn’t start until nine.”

“Look man, I must have just gotten mixed up.”

“That’s a possibility, but then again it sure doesn’t look good at all. Makes me think that you

didn't actually go to watch any game last night. I think that the nature of your visit was something very different. Maybe...an affair? I understand that you're raising your twin boys by yourself. Lonely thing that, especially for a man in your profession. I don't know, maybe you were just going over to borrow a cup of sugar. But the fact remains that by lying you're obstructing this investigation. Which is a crime. Which means I can make a big show here with the hand cuffs and with driving you downtown. But as you can tell, my morning hasn't been that great, and if you're just honest with me here, you save yourself the trouble of sending your boys to live with their grandmother while you serve six months in a jail cell. Plus it's less paperwork for me. So whatever illegal, or embarrassing, or immoral thing you were going over to your neighbours house for last night, just tell me. Because you saw what happened, and you know how important it is to get to bottom of this." Caleb took one look at the man before him and felt like a conductor directing a symphony. Cantelli was going to open up, tell him everything, and what's more, he knew exactly how he was going to do it too.

It was going to start with the shaking. Just a little tremble in the hands as he warmed himself up. But as he started to tell the truth of the matter, his shoulders would shake and move with the tone of the story. The first word out of his mouth would be an excuse for covering up what he did, and then an apology, and then he'd start to try and explain what it was that Caleb actually wanted to hear. But he'd try and do it all at once, and too fast as well, so he'd have to stop him before he broke down in fear about a criminal record and about the shame of leaving his children behind while he went to prison. Then he'd get him to repeat the story, urging him to skip the apology he didn't care about and the reasoning to cover it up he just wasn't that concerned with. A conductor with no musicians, he told himself.

And it happened just like that (except the shaking was more in his knees than his shoulders). And Caleb recorded every last second of it. And he knew exactly where he had to go when everything was said and done.

Despite being built almost fifty years ago, the hospital never seemed to show its true age. Well maintained, clean, orderly; it was the kind of place that you were glad you lived close to if you ever needed to visit an emergency room. And many people did. Even if it was a bit of an extra drive, people would come in to the Northside hospital if they had the time or the appointments. And that's what one Justin Merdi (a hypochondriac to the highest degree) did one brisk March morning. But first a little about Justin. His constant fear of disease came from his chronically ill Aunt, seemingly forever on one medication or another. For most of her family it spurred them to take better care of themselves, but Justin reacted differently. He saw the frailty of humans and for much of his life felt that way, taking the precautions that no one else would. He insisted every sprain be x-rayed, every cut be stitched, and every disease have a medication. The thing that no one knew was that Justin's immune system was actually significantly more frail than anyone knew, and it would take another 35 years (when he gets to seventy), and a particularly long hospital stay, for doctors to be able to conclusively show that Justin's psychological tic has actually kept him largely physiologically healthy. But in the here and now, Justin's paranoia was particularly bad, and he went so far as to illegally obtain a particularly powerful antibiotic for a microbial infection he was certain that he had; even though no doctor had found reason to suspect as much. Justin told himself that these things would sometimes not show up in tests until it was too late, and besides, he knew that he was harbouring something nasty. So in his zeal he took matters into his own hands, and after a week of his self prescribed vancomycin regiment, a constant pain in his side arose. Fearful of side effects, he drove himself to the hospital to face the

consequences for his actions. The doctors told him that the drugs had beat up his kidney's a bit, but that after a couple nights, he'd be just fine and free to go home. What those doctors didn't know was that during the time he was taking the antibiotics, Justin had produced a strain of enterococci bacteria resistant to vancomycin, which during the tail end of his regiment passed this resistance characteristic onto a small colony of Staphylococcus aureus on his person. And while a small, isolated colony of vancomycin resistant Staphylococcus aureus (or VRSA) isn't going to do any harm, a mobile, spreading colony of VRSA moving through a hospital is every healthcare professionals worst nightmare. Which is exactly what this did with the assistance of an accidental elbow graze by a nurse and a lunch cart. Panic hit the hospital, but thanks to the efforts of a particularly attentive resident (who had to deal with a number of jokes about her anal retentive nature in her younger years), the problem was quickly identified and those affected were isolated - thirteen in all. Sadly, the strain had also developed quite the destructively virulent nature through its evolution and creation, and ten of the afflicted individuals passed away. The public response was immediate and resounding, demanding an answer to where this came from and why it had happened, if people were safe and if the hospital needed to be shut down or not. An internal investigation documented the incident - with quite a bit of thoroughness - writing about how these are the sort of things that are going to eventually happen due to the laws of probability. The public was not sated. They wanted answers, not explanations, so the administration hired Caleb on a word of mouth recommendation. It was the highest profile (and highest paying) job he had ever come across, and he threw everything he had into the investigation. His bed lay untouched for an entire two week stretch as he crashed on hospital waiting room chairs and in his car seat while tailing the more private of the victims families. Every admittance was scanned - not just the ones dealing with bacterial infections - and every staff member was interviewed and occasionally re-interviewed, and once again if necessary. Every corner of the hospital was mapped in his mind, etched there as he strode through them. Every victim's life dissected to a degree that would make the most innocent of men nervous about what could be found. And at the end, the report was what everyone was calling for, what every worried mother wanted to hear, and what every concerned husband needed to know. Caleb was able to narrow the point of origin to three possible patients (Mr. Merdi among them), and in delving into the lives of the victims, found the four were suffering from untreatable wasting diseases (two had yet to be diagnosed even), three were in advanced and still declining levels of senility that was taking a toll on the afflicted families, and that two were actually pedophiles, in the hospital getting medication for over seas travel. As the investigation turned up, they were planning a trip in search of the over seas and underage sex trade. The collective relieved sigh was heard the whole city over, and in the midst of it, Caleb threw one damned big party.

Caleb had very little intention of going back to his office. All that was there for him was a pile of garbage under another pile of garbage, with his desk and computer scattered among it all. No, he was in no mood to deal with tidying up his mess, especially when he had been handed free rein to the most important investigation in years. And besides, everything he needed was on the passenger seat next to him. Copies of all the preliminary interviews, as well as whatever could be pulled up in terms of background checks on any of the interviewees whose stories seemed implausible or those that seemed to have things to hide. There was the full crime scene walkthrough and forensic report, but he doubted that was going to produce anything useful. The real investigation was going to be among the people surrounding this, and the last thing on his seat demonstrated that perfectly; the interview tape with Rick Cantelli. He was practically licking

his lips in anticipation of pulling apart that tape, delving into every frantic word and pulling apart every revealed truth. Well, in truth he was also licking his lips in hunger as well, and that's why he pulled into the far parking stall to his favourite dive of a restaurant. Walking in the front door with his investigative bundle tucked under his arm, the smell of deep fried goodness washed over him like a tidal wave. God he loved this place. He waved at the owner and took his regular booth near the back, close to the exit with a good view of the whole surroundings. Looking around he wasn't surprised to find it mostly empty, and he was struck with a mixture of relief and disappointment on behalf of the owners. On one hand, he was glad that his booth was almost always unoccupied, and that the service was never really delayed, but being such fans of the owners and their establishment, he kind of wished that they had more business. He put the thought away though, thinking to himself that while they weren't going to get rich in this endeavour, they never seemed to want for too much. Plus, they had known the market for fast food when they got into it; there just wasn't that much demand. I mean, Caleb loved the stuff regardless of how terrible it was for you, but he had to contend with a lot of sideways glances at parties when he tried to explain to the others there the joys of a burger and fries.

"Wait, how often do you have red meat?"

"What about the calories and the fat?"

"Why don't you at least have a salad on the side of that?"

"And there's salt on the fries too?"

"Really? Deep fried?"

He had all but given up on it. Some things just weren't for most people he supposed. But as that grilled burger and side of fries came to him, he sure was glad that this was for him.

When he was most the way through his meal, thinking how good that grease felt in the midst of his hangover, Caleb plugged his headphones into the audio recorder and started to scan through the conversation he had just had.

"It was his work that was the problem."

"How was his work the problem?"

"High competition architectural design firm, high level clients with a high level reputation that they needed to uphold."

"That sounds like your neighbour would have fit right in. Quiet, respectable kind of guy with a respectable life in the suburbs. About the only thing that people might of complained about was the fact that he did live in the suburbs. And most people admit because not that many people are interested in doing so that those that do aren't really sprawling urban areas to any significant degree. So why is his work the problem?"

There was a pause in the tape.

"Mr. Cantelli, please. It is of the utmost importance that I find out why this happened. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. Of course. It was three weeks ago, and we were watching the game. But he wasn't all there. I just figured that he wasn't interested in talking too much that match up. He was a quiet guy, prone to silence, but I'm used to that sort of thing so I never minded. Long distance trucker you know. Anyway, I'm going to leave and he stops me, asks me in this very hushed tone for a favour."

"Was this unusual for him?"

"Incredibly. It sort of threw me for a loop. I was used to just hanging out with minimal conversation. We'd talk a little bit about ours kids, about our houses, about the neighbourhood; small talk. But he had never even asked me for a tissue before this day, and suddenly he's calling

in a huge favour.”

“Which was?”

“Bring a list of symptoms to a psychiatrist for him and see what he should be doing.”

“What were the symptoms.”

There was a crinkling of paper in the tape, and Caleb remembered this point as Cantelli pulled out a small and well worn piece of folded paper.

“He gave me this. Here. I thought it was odd, but he had signed a medical disclosure clause with his job, and if it was anything serious, he didn’t want to lose his job over it. This is the kind of firm that really had a ‘put your best face forward at all times’ kind of attitude.”

Caleb looked over the list of symptoms; a mind full of jumbled and yelling thoughts, deadened feelings about everything, even occasionally hearing something that no one else could.

“And you weren’t concerned about the same thing? I assume that hauling dangerous goods is the kind of thing that would prompt a trucking company to keep a close eye on their employees.”

“I don’t know if you heard about it, but a little while ago my truck was rigged with an explosive. I found it in time, and the company - and me - got a lot of positive press. I’ve become something of their golden child now, doing as much promo work as trucking. I’m not too worried about anything.”

“So you got in contact with a doctor then?”

“Yeah...I mean, I liked the guy. I wanted to help him out. So for the next little while, I met with a doctor, doing my best to represent his symptoms. We did a little back and forth, and I eventually got a prescription for him. That’s why I was going over last night, to drop it off for him. But then I saw what had happened, and I couldn’t think, I just couldn’t believe what I was seeing. I just stared in that window for like five minutes. I just couldn’t imagine and I couldn’t believe what was happening and I couldn’t, just, I couldn’t...”

“It’s okay Mr. Cantelli, thank you, you’ve been very helpful. Could I get that prescription as well?”

“Yeah, sure, it’s right there. I’m sorry, I didn’t want to, you know, I was afraid and worried and... do you think this has something to do with me...do you think it’s my fault? I just couldn’t imagine if I had anything...to do with any of...”

“Please, calm down, its okay. I’m sure that this wasn’t your fault. When we have all the answers, you’ll feel a lot better. Until then, just try to get some sleep.”

The tape went silent then. Caleb felt immensely satisfied, like he was getting somewhere. As terrible as all this was, he felt like he was getting closer to something, to finding some form of order in this chaos. He was reminded of the school shooting fourteen years ago, thousands of miles away, so horrible that the whole world paid attention. The search for a truth behind that lasted for months, but because of it, thirteen other planned shootings had been discovered and halted. Why this rash of violent behaviour had surfaced at this point in time, no one was able to figure out, but the public consciousness had been appeased by the resulting halt of more violence. Caleb didn’t know if this is what he was going to find here, but as long as he kept moving forward on this one, he felt like he would reach a satisfactory conclusion. And he knew where to search next. He looked down at the prescription bottle he had been provided with, and the doctor who provided it. Looked like he was going back to the hospital.

Dr. Morten grew up as an only child. She was raised by a single parent, and she left the only home she ever knew at seventeen to go off to university. She got a single room on a quiet floor in the undergraduate residence, and kept it for the next three years before she was accepted for

study at the university's medical school. Morten studied hard and kept to herself mostly, her life solitary because that's the way she knew and the way she thought she preferred it. Her mind was sharp though, and she excelled in her class work. During Morten's internship, her bedside manner was poor, but good enough, and more than made up for by her natural aptitude in medicine and her intellect. She seemed destined for research, and that was what Morten would have gone into had it not been for the events during her final month as an intern. But to understand that we have to look towards the story of an elderly lady named Margret.

Margret was, of course, not always old. But her entry into Morten's life didn't come until she was that way. She was a fiercely independent woman, to a fault, which became apparent when a particularly sharp static electric shock at the top of the stairs surprised her enough that she tumbled to the bottom. The timing was rather good though; instead of falling in the middle of the night, she did so shortly before her son was to visit her in the afternoon. She was in the hospital that afternoon, but the trauma was fairly severe, and the cirrhosis that was present in her liver from a life of fairly hard drinking didn't help her situation. She was going to die. And that's where she also met Dr. Morten, who at the time wasn't a doctor yet.

Margret was in the ICU, her organs failing, and her time dwindling. But she was comfortable and in the good company of her son. She felt like it was her time, and talked lightly with her son and the staff. As the night wore on though, and sleep had yet to find the elderly woman, Margret's son needed to grab some caffeine so as to stay with her mother to the end. In his reluctance to leave her by herself, he turned to the first person he saw, who happened to be the intern Morten; who was only going through the ICU because the vending machine she usually went to was broken, and the fastest route to the other was through the ICU. After a brief conversation, she relented to his request and pleading eyes, and sat next to the old woman, feeling awkward and out of place. Margret though saw right through her company's distance though, a perceptive woman and single parent for a single child herself. And beyond any imagining by the young student, she found herself talking and connecting with her patient on a very comfortable and profound level. They talked about her son, about her years as a kitchen manager, and laughed about boys they used to date. And as Morten thought to herself how odd it was that she was here enjoying conversation with this woman before her, Margret's heart monitor started to shout warnings, and her eyes went wide. In her last moments, as Morten was forced to sit there and do nothing on account of the 'do not resuscitate' order, Margret asked this young woman who she had just met to tell her son that she was very proud of him. And with that done, she closed her eyes for the last time.

Her son arrived as they pronounced her, and in his disbelief and grief dropped to the floor, where everyone, even Morten, was surprised to find her next to him, offering comfort of her own and his mother's final words. And in that moment, she knew that she would never do medical research, never teach the stuff herself, but do nothing with her medical degree but work with people.

Caleb let himself in the side entrance to the hospital, the one that was only really known by the staff and by the families of some of the long term patients. He gave a warm smile to the admitting nurse that manned a small desk just inside the doors. She gave him a familiar smile, but then a flash of curiosity passed across her face, realizing that the investigation had wrapped up already. Rather than make up some lie about follow up or anything else like that, he simply strode by purposefully. He had always found if you acted like you belonged, people would assume you did.

“How you doing today darlin’?” the nurse smirked at the light and familiar flirting that Caleb often entered with, and gave an exaggerated eye roll while showing him the wedding band on her hand for the umpteenth time. She didn’t give him a second thought as he led himself toward the psych unit, the hallways of the place still fresh and familiar in his mind. He thought to himself that Jeffrey would be proud with his incognito investigative techniques. Rick was going to spend most of the next three days trying to just get himself to sleep, and anyone at the hospital that saw him there would assume it had something to do with his last case. He smiled to himself as he realized that he was giving him a self-congratulatory back slap, but did it anyway. Sometimes he sure as hell felt damn good at his job. After a couple minutes, he found himself at Morten’s door, and was surprised to find her in her office in the middle of the day with no patients with her. He knocked on the door frame and saw her look up and smile. He couldn’t help but smile back at her, since there was no smile Caleb could think of that was wider or more infectious than hers. It was as if that when she smiled she was letting you see her warm personality that lay underneath, and you just thought yourself lucky that she was showing you.

“Caleb! Nice to see you. Come in and have a seat. My two afternoon patients have both cancelled on me, so I’m all bored without anyone to talk with.”

“Rebecca without anyone to talk to? It’s a dark time when that happens. Guess my timing is better than usual.” For all his joking, Caleb actually did find it odd that Morten didn’t have anyone to talk with. During his time here, he had many engaging conversations with this woman, and always enjoyed them. She truly had the gift of conversation. She knew when to listen, when to talk, and exactly how much of each was appropriate. She knew what people wanted to talk about, and usually why as well. Morten was insightful about people on a level he didn’t think he had ever seen before and it was little wonder she was such a celebrated psychiatrist. Even during his investigation, Caleb had found the doctor invaluable for finding out the inner workings of the hospital staff. And while he thought that many people thought about their relationship with her in these terms, he felt like the two of them had grown to be fairly good friends.

“Well aren’t I glad that you’ve come along to brighten my day with that glowing ego of yours then. But I won’t lie, I didn’t expect to see you today. Of course everyone heard about your investigation wrapping up, and knowing you, you went and drank too much beer last night.”

“I’d say you see right through me, but I think even the new orderly I saw on the unit has heard about my love of beer by now. Speaking of which, we missed you last night.” Morten noticed that Caleb was showing off his observational prowess, and wondered to herself about his reasons for showing up in her office today.

“How sweet of you notice, though I’m impressed that you did so in your stupor. And judging by your raggedness, it looks like it was pretty good.”

“I prefer to think of it as an ethanol induced glow. Besides, nothing a burger and fries can’t make right.”

“Ha! You would help your liver recover by running a quart of grease through it. How is it that you keep yourself healthy?” Morten wasn’t just saying that to say that. For someone in his thirties, Caleb wasn’t showing any real signs of having left his youth behind him. His skin was still smooth, and the light olive of it made it look all the better. His dark hair was cut short and kept well, with no hint of gray yet. He was trim for a man in his twenties, let alone thirties, and even his teeth seemed to gleam white.

“Just live by the eighty five percent rule, that’s what I say. Treat your body right most the time with your veggie greens and some gym time, and feel free to poison it the rest of the time. Plus, as a private investigator, you kind have to be a little bit of a dirt bag...comes with the badge and

the gun.”

“You have a gun?” Caleb winked at her, and with a sly look, pulled open his trench coat to reveal his fire arm he kept nestled there.

“.357 revolver, 3 inch barrel and a dark finish so it doesn't catch the light and give me away on a stakeout. If you answer a couple questions for me, I might even let you hold it.”

“Questions? Is it anything to do with the VRSA?” Rebecca's curiosity about his presence pushed aside any of the flirting that the two of them had been engaged in, and Caleb did his best to shift tactics with the conversation.

“Not this time. It has to do with this prescription you wrote,” Caleb handed the doctor the bottle that he had slipped out of his pocket, “You don't mind if I record this conversation do you?”

From another pocket, he produced his audio recorder and put it down on the desk between them. After a slow and guarded nod from Morten, he pushed down on the record button.

It was only two years into the start of Caleb's private investigation business, but already he had been handed a missing persons case from the city's largest bank. Phil Welker went on vacation with his family to the mountains where his father had owned a secluded cabin, and when he was to make his way back to the city, he never showed. His car was found at the cabin, but there was no one there, and nothing in it to suggest that they had even entered into it. It was quite the step up from what Caleb had been doing for cases, but the low level marriage fidelity investigations he had been cutting his teeth on (things like finding out if there was cheating going on, or if the extramarital actions that were going on were the ones that were prearranged) were coming from a number of the banks higher ups. So when an executive and his family went missing, and the police could find no grounds for an in depth investigation, they put the investigation into Caleb's lap. They had concerns of their clients thinking that he had left because of mismanagement inside the company, or that he was preparing to steal their money with his inside knowledge. The banks president wanted the man found and wanted the full story behind the disappearance, and Caleb was tasked with doing it as quickly and as quietly as possible. He would learn that there was really no other way that people wanted these investigations handled, but he still vowed when he began looking into the case that he would do everything possible towards both those ends. So he started asking around, every person inside the bank that had ever had dealings with Welker. His charm had him invited to many an after work dinner to discuss the disappearance, and each social engagement seemed to add some hazy piece to a puzzle that wasn't quite clear, yet. It irked some people, thinking that his time would be better spent retracing the police's steps for something that they had missed, trying to flush out a family member or a friend that had taken them in momentarily before they moved on and far away. But Caleb trusted the work of the police for the most part, and he wanted to look where they hadn't. Besides, the impression he got from his coworkers is that Welker wouldn't be the type to pack up and move on like that. He was content with his job, very content with the money that he earned at it, and even participated in both the office's wine club and co-rec sports team. Most people had good things to say about Welker, besides some lingering resentment about his fast rise within the banks power structure. And that's the link that Caleb's gut told him to follow. Who did Welker beat out for his promotions? Who was connected to those people? Who still worked there, and who had moved on? Were there any confrontations? Any yelling? Anyone led away, or anyone threatened? How did Welker handle the hostile attention? Did he mend fences? Did he flip people off as he leap frogged them? Each question was approached with a confused scepticism about whether or not this young private investigator with the too often flashed smile really knew what he was doing.

But each answer led to the next question, to the next bread crumb along a forest path barely there. And they all led Caleb to where the investigation would conclude, the city's southern suburbs, slouched down in the front seat of his car with his eyes on the house down the street through a pair of binoculars, trying to shake the creepy feeling this neighbourhood was giving him. He looked around at lawns and two car garages and thought to himself how odd the whole place was, unsurprised at how unpopular this living arrangement was.

The house belonged to Katey Lamar, ex-employee of the same bank that Welker worked for. The ex-employee that was unceremoniously dismissed after a dispute with Welker over a promotion; a dismissal that apparently had been urged by Welker himself. But despite the fact that Lamar was listed as the sole owner of the property, and was typically characterized as a loner, he had seen three other men coming and going with no discernable regularity. The men could have been brothers, with how similar they looked, and not just in appearance, but in movement and mannerisms too. Large, fair, with a swagger and a scowl to go with it. It was only his first 24 hours in front of the house, so he had yet to come up with any identity on them. They weren't anyone connected to the original police investigation or anyone connected to any of the bank employees he had seen or interviewed, so their presence confused and unsettled Caleb. He began to wonder if this disappearance was really the work of Welker himself. He sat there, trying to think of a next move, when it was made for him. One of the brothers (as Caleb had become to think of them despite no proof of blood relation) was coming in from another unknown errand, and while stretching outside his car (parked in the driveway as the garage was full of miscellanea) opened up his jacket. Opening up his jacket exposed the Uzi strapped around his neck. Exposing that was better than any warrant, because that was the clearest case of an illegal weapon he had ever seen. He got the police on the phone, and told them where he was and what he had seen. Let them deal with this, let them pick up the trail again here, if this is where it did indeed continue. But shortly after he had gotten off the phone with the dispatcher, he saw something else. He saw Lamar come out of the house and start to converse with the brother, in what he could tell was quite the heated exchange. There was anger there, fear, and then resolve. Why he acted on that briefest of exchanges was never really clear to Caleb, and he certainly wasn't able to explain it to anyone else when it was all over. But whatever he saw, whatever switch was flipped in his subconscious, he left his car. He double checked his firearm. He scanned up and down the street, and started to stalk towards Lamar and the brothers, sticking to the shadows and keeping his footsteps light. His hands trembled slightly and his heart seemed to simultaneously flutter and stop in his chest, but he was resolved to see what was happening in that house. He just wasn't sure why.

Now Caleb was just on the other side other street from the house and the maximum distance between the two street lamps that poorly illuminated the scene, he started to cross, bathed in shadows and rattled with nerves. That's when he saw the side door to the garage open. Still striding forward, Caleb's hands instinctively went into his jacket, his left pulling out his P.I. badge, and his dominant removing his pistol from his holster, holding it down as his side. Out of the door came one of the brothers, but being pulled behind him was Mrs. Welker. Despite the terrified look in her eyes, the tape holding her mouth shut and binding her hands behind her back, and the ripped and dirty clothing, Caleb recognized her immediately from the photo of her he had posted on his board back at his office. The brother was being rough with her, half dragging her towards the car in the driveway, and when he pointed his keys to unlock the trunk, he saw Caleb, most of the way across the street by now. The brother froze, but Caleb didn't. He raised his revolver and took a bead on the kidnapper, and before he could tell him to surrender, to

let the woman go, or even to raise his badge beside his firearm, the man went for his gun. In his jacket. While still holding onto Mrs. Welker. He should have known that there was no way he was going to out draw this man that already had him in the cross hairs. Should have known that he was going to die by making himself a deadly threat. But he did anyway, and out of more instinct than anything else, Caleb pulled the trigger, just once.

The hammer pulled back, then snapped forward. The cartridge exploded in a crack of gunpowder, and the bullet seemed to traverse the space immediately, from the muzzle flash that lit up the scene in an eerie white light for a half second, to the mans chest cavity, exploding his heart as the slug buried deep into him. As he fell backwards, Caleb remember choosing this gun and ammunition when he was officially approved for a concealed handgun. Revolver, of course. He wanted the reliability and the classic style. Dark metal...he didn't need the flash of a nickel plated finish. .357, so he had the stopping power but something still easily concealable. Soft hollow points, so he didn't have to worry about the bullets passing through their targets so much, and he didn't expect to need to shoot anyone with body armour. A mixture of gun powder and accelerant gel, to give it some extra power and make it a one shot dropper. During his police training, he discovered that his first shots were great, but his double taps sucked. It was a brief flash to him as he saw the man collapse lifeless not twenty yards from where he stood. But his mind didn't process the gravity of what had happened, the earth shattering implications of destroying another life. He just dropped his badge there in the street, to bring up a two handed grip on his pistol, readying himself to enter the house; he wasn't waiting for anyone to come to him. Ignoring the panicked Mrs. Welker, he moved towards the front door proper, coming around the corner of the garage in a wide circle, and saw the second of two brothers rushing out the door. The timing was horrible for him, as Caleb saw him just as he began to clear the steps. Trying to raise his own pistol mid air, he landed awkwardly and went down to one knee, the barrel of the gun now pointed straight at the ground. Caleb didn't give it a second thought, and pulled the trigger, the slug passing through the mans skull and taking an unsettling amount of gray matter with it. His lifeless body deflated, but Caleb was already inside the house before he had settled into the lawn. Hearing foot steps coming down from the upstairs, he quietly positioned himself to catch whoever was coming down the stairs with the butt of his gun as they rounded the corner. It turned out to be Katey Lamar, whose nose ended up breaking in three different spots from the impact. She fell hard, dazed, and before she could make a sound, Caleb's hand was on her mouth and his gun pointed squarely between her eyes. With terror in her eyes, she revealed the rest of the family was up stairs with the last of the kidnapers, armed with a shot gun. After zip tying her in the kitchen with a dish towel stuffed in her mouth, he ascended the stairs with all the grace he could muster in his adrenaline charged veins. Top of the stairs, down the hall, main bedroom...locked. Fearing the safety of the father and three daughters he knew was behind the door, he dared not delay for the cops to arrive, and lay flat on his back in front of the door, raised one leg, and kicked. Not enough to break it off the hinges, but just enough to make it seem like he was trying to. He flattened his leg down on the floor a fraction of a second before a blast exploded a hole in the door at waist level, cutting Caleb's face with splinters. But as he opened his eyes, he heard the distinctive slide of a pump action shot gun starting to load another shell into the chamber. Not giving the kidnapper a chance at a second shot, Caleb sat up with every muscle in his stomach straining, put his revolver through the hole in the door, and shot the last of the armed men in the chest, right side. His lung practically disintegrated as every nerve controlling that arm was severed. As Caleb entered the room, he considered putting another round in him to be sure, but his body was already succumbing to shock and blood loss. It

was over.

The police took another three minutes to arrive, the suburbs showing off their decentralized location all the more. By that time, the family was already freed, shaking and huddled in Caleb's car, drinking hot chocolate and wrapped in blankets, trying in vain to calm their nerves. A shooting investigation ensued, and while the actual shooting was clean, everyone wanted to know why Caleb decided to engage the situation without waiting. It was agreed that if he hadn't, Mrs. Welker might be dead or impossible to find, so he had made the right decision, but the question of what prompted him to move forward without backup arriving persisted. Caleb wished he had an answer for them, and at the time was in too much shock himself over killing three men to come up with any plausible lie. The truth was that he was curious himself. But when the story broke, he had his fifteen minutes in the spotlight, the press declared him a hero, and the bank donated enough money to the city for the new library that people had been wanting, but not really wanting to pay for, in his honour. The 'why' of his actions, even of Lamar's and the brothers, washed away in the happy ending to the story that could have been so much more horrible.

"Caleb, you realize that I can't break doctor patient confidentiality. I pride myself in the trust that I forge with my patients, and I'm not about to throw that away."

Caleb was sitting in his preferred bar, across the street from his place. He had arrived back at his place to find that the mess hadn't tidied itself up. Still not feeling particularly ambitious towards cleaning, and telling himself he had more important things on his agenda, he had made himself a quick dinner from a ready made frozen package and left for the bar with the necessary files; and his most recent recording.

He was nestled into another booth of another family establishment, just like he had in the afternoon. Caleb momentarily paused to consider a possible rut forming in his actions, but concluded that if it was, he was happy with the rut he was in. He had ordered a beer, then one more for good measure. This case was shaking him up, and his hangover wasn't exactly gone, so he had a drink for each issue.

"Well, then I'm doubly glad I came prepared with these, Mr. Cantelli's medical release forms. Figured that they would come in handy, so I had a friend come up with these so I could get your patient to sign them. I trust everything is in order?"

"Indeed it is Mr. Lange. So what would you like to know?"

"Mostly your impressions of the patient, the medication that you assigned him, the course of your therapy, if you ever suspected that he was portraying himself as another individual; you know me Dr. Morten, I like to know everything about anything when it comes to my cases."

"I don't suppose you're going to tell me about this case now, are you?"

"Sorry, I'm not at liberty to divulge that information."

"Very well. Mr. Cantelli came to be about three weeks ago, complaining about symptoms that seemed to be fairly close to mild positive schizophrenia. However, the way he described his symptoms, the way he approached our time together, and the detachment he seemed to have towards our sessions, I was fairly confident that he was posing for someone else."

"And you didn't think that this was odd? I mean, didn't you think to yourself that it was strange that the actual patient didn't come in to see you himself?"

"I was mildly curious. But these things are more common than most people think. People don't want their wives or husbands to know they talking to a shrink, or they don't want their work to find out, and some people are even afraid that the government monitors their medical histories. I

thought to myself that in time the person they were pretending to be would trust me enough to come in and see me myself, but until then I did what I could for the individual.”

“So you prescribed those pills. Did you think they would help? What are they exactly?”

“Well, I did think they would help, and while the bottle has them listed as anti-psychotics, they’re actually placebos.”

“Sugar pills? You didn’t think that this individual had this...mild, positive schizophrenia?”

“Well, there was an chance I suppose, but I’m very careful when it comes to my diagnoses, and I felt that this man felt he had schizophrenia more than he actually had it. And besides, in all my years here, I’ve had maybe seven cases of schizophrenia. The rarity of the disorder makes it all the more unlikely. No, what my mystery patient had was something much more mild, and I just wanted to get him into my office so we could really begin talking about what was troubling him. A placebo would make him feel better for a while, and once it was revealed that he was taking a fake medication, I figured that he would come in himself.”

Caleb felt a frustration then, like he had hit a road block. And more than anything, he didn’t want to toss this case in his pile of ‘unresolved’ cases. If there was an undiagnosed case of schizophrenia, the events would add up in a way, even if there would still be uneasy feelings about the whole thing. Mental health issues would get more spot light, and he imagined that a number of individuals would be saved from their mental disorders at a much higher rate. But he trusted Dr. Morten’s medical opinion, and if she didn’t think that it was schizophrenia, he wasn’t going to press that angle. A dead end was a dead end.

“In your opinion doctor, what do you think that your mystery patient was afflicted with.”

“Haha, well, it’s actually interesting that you ask, because so far as I can tell, it seems more like a mild depression, but with something else. I’m wondering if it falls under its own classification because of a number of novel symptoms that he had presented. In fact, I have another patient with a similar diagnosis. It’s quite exciting, I have to say, seeming to be witness to the birth of a new mental disorder. And with two independent cases, the chances are fairly good. I suppose I shouldn’t be so pleased; it seems that whenever one mental disorder seems to fade away, another one pops up. I guess the world would probably be a better place if those all went away, but I’ll admit that it’s a touch more exciting than doing marriage counselling.”

“Another patient has the same symptoms as the man communicating with Cantelli?”

“Yes Caleb, and don’t expect me to talk about him though, because I really doubt you have another medical release form in that tattered overcoat of yours.”

Caleb had remembered his fear then, that there was another mental time bomb ticking out there somewhere, and how he was going to get Dr. Morten to give up the information illegally. He had resigned to the idea that he’d have to lean pretty hard on her to get her to give up the information that he needed. Almost as if reading his thoughts through time and the audio recorder, he heard her say,

“I can see those wheels of yours turning Lange, and I want you to stop it right now. I don’t want you trying to squeeze whatever information you need out of me. I’m not going to be your short cut on whatever you’re running down here.”

“Rebecca, you see right through me. Fine, I’m sorry, I’ll just have to go about it the long way. As an apology, I’d like to help you out. I’d like to let you know who’s been speaking to you through our good friend Mr. Cantelli.”

“Would you now? You’ll have to excuse me if I find that hard to believe, especially because you only call me by my first name when you’re either trying to flirt with me or you want something from me.”

“Who said I wasn’t flirting. I know you love conversation, but I was hoping I might convince you that there’s another way to fill up this patient-less afternoon of yours.”

“Stop winking at me; your silver tongue and bloated liver won’t do you any good here. Fine, my curiosity is peaked. Do you really know who the man on the other side of Mr. Cantelli is?”

“Sure do. In fact, I met his whole family earlier today. But pictures are worth a thousand words. Here’s the man himself, and that’s his wife, their darling boys, and his adorable little girl.”

Laying those crime scene photos out on Dr. Morten’s desk had made Caleb feel dirtier than he had in a while. He knew that those images were the kind of thing to really get to a person, to really twist their heart and mess with their heads. But he needed answers, and he needed them hours ago, especially if there was another person out there that was one bad dinner away from butchering their entire family. So he laid down those photos on the desk, and on the recording there was a full minute of silence. He remembered the anguish and shock on Rebecca’s face, and wished that he could have done something for her in that moment. But he stayed seated, studying her. Answers first, comfort second, he had told himself.

“What, I mean, how...why are you showing, but, what happened?”

“The man with the brand new mental disorder murdered his family and then killed himself last night. I’m sorry to do this, but what happened in that household can’t be allowed to happen again, so I need to know everything about this other patient of yours with the same symptoms.”

“But, I mean, how? This other patient has been showing these symptoms for years, and he’s never had a single violent tendency. I just don’t get it.”

“That’s why I’m here. Remember, it’s me. Remember how many times I made you talk with me in the midst of the VRSA thing? Remember how I hunted down every angle? Remember how I made sense of it in the end? I need you to remember that and trust me here. Trust that this is the right thing to do, because I’m going to need everything you know about this mystery patient.”

Caleb had noticed during the taping that Rebecca hadn’t taken her eyes off the little girl. He couldn’t blame her; there was something profoundly tragic and out of place about seeing that little girl crumpled up and lifeless in that photograph.

“Oh-okay, I’ll, I’ll get his file. Just, a, uh, second.”

“Thank you, and I’m sorry again. Let me just put these away.”

“Yes, please do. Okay, here we go. Um, it’s one mister, um, mister...”

“Just breathe for me, please, nice and deep. Whenever you’re ready.”

There was another long pause in the recording, and the shuffling as the shaken doctor had wiped away the tears from her eyes. Caleb had noticed her shaking slightly in that moment, and really had wished he could have just crawled under a rock for what he had just done. That woman’s brightness made so many people at that hospital smile, and now he feared they would be going without for who knew how long.

“Okay, the patient is Will Faison. I’ve been seeing him for, well, a couple years now, but only very sporadically. See, he’s homeless, and chronically so. Instead of, uh, moving off the street and on with his life in a couple months like most people in his situation, Mr. Faison seems unable to, just, get out of his situation. Obviously because of the issues he was having getting into a more productive life, the drop-in shelter gave him my contact information and we started seeing each other. He was fascinating. Troubled, but smart enough to know that he was. His personality can only be described as chaotic, but that has nothing to do with his disorder. In truth, it’s fairly mild and really shouldn’t be keeping him living without a roof over his head. Our sessions span a great number of topics, because I think that’s the only way I’m going to get him healthy, by dealing with what I have to assume is multiple issues. But like I said, the sporadic nature of his

visits makes it hard to really make head way, and its not as if I can force him into therapy.”

“So how do I find him, the drop-in center?”

“Actually, as luck would have it, he’s due in for an appointment early tomorrow morning...eight thirty.”

“But I thought that you said his visits are sporadic. Isn’t he likely to cancel?”

“I would have thought so, but he’s proven remarkably punctual and good about keeping appointments; he hasn’t missed a single one yet. It’s just he books sporadically. Will you be here to meet him tomorrow? Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“No, not at all...well, I didn’t. I don’t know, it’s just that, you know, I try to get a read on people, and he’s just a good guy. Troubled, deeply, about disorder and chaos, but stable on a personal level.”

“I’d like you to meet with him tomorrow still. I’ll catch up to him as he’s leaving. I really appreciate your help Rebecca...and I’m not trying to flirt or get anything out of you. I just want you to know that you did the right thing, and you’ve helped immensely. All I ask is that you just pretend like this conversation didn’t happen, at least for now. The police don’t want word of this really getting out yet. Please.”

“No, of course Caleb, of course. I’ll be quiet.”

“Thank you. I’ll be going now. Please, I don’t want you to dwell on this. I’m going to figure it out.”

“Oh, of course, I know. Good. Wait...Caleb, do you, do you think this might be...my fault?”

“Don’t even consider that. This was no ones fault.”

Mr. Faison was born into a affluent family, son to a husband and wife who ran what was the most profitable wildlife reclamation and management company in the city. They made their fortune off government contracts in their monitoring of hydroelectric dam facilities, logging site recoveries, and everything else that could be conceived of when human feet touched down in undeveloped nature. Will grew up wanting for nothing, which was odd because he never seemed to be able to settle on anything long enough to go through the full process of wanting it and possessing it. During his whole childhood, Will’s parents wondered why their intelligent son could not settle himself, concentrate, or even hold still very well. Their concern was the smothering pillow that made him all the more restless, wishing to forever escape the psychological tests and evaluations he seemed to be constantly subjected to.

And that’s just what he did when he was old enough. He made peace with his parents, and after one last year at home with them, he packed up a few possessions into a car, and drove away from the city. He didn’t know where he was going nor what he was looking for along the way. He passed through three different cities and the vast expanses of nature between each before he finally found a metropolises that seemed to suit him. Not that it was exactly what he was looking for, but after four days of travelling, it was the closest thing he felt he would find. He sold his car - a rather nice one and final gift from his parents - and got a tiny single room apartment. During the next ten years his life was as disorganised as it had ever been. He worked entry level white collar jobs, but always moved on when he was right at the point of being offered a promotion. He sat in on classes at the local university, but never actually registered. Philosophy mostly, with a smattering of everything and anything else; astronomy, geology, sociology, microbiology, physics, electrical engineering. Anything that caught his attention for all of five and a half minutes. He was liked well enough by those around him, but no one ever really felt a true kinship

with him, never really connected with him, so his friendships were many, but brief and shallow. He didn't mind it. His ambitions and his drive were all about finding something in the ether that he could hold onto, instead of simply feeling like a life raft caught in the swells of a storm. After about ten years, Will Faison's restlessness had yet to subside, and he grew frustrated. He stopped working his on and off schedule, and before too long the savings that he had dwindled to nothing, and his landlord had no choice but to evict after his fourth month of not paying the rent. He still occasionally could be seen on the university campus, but as he marched into middle age, he blended in less and less. The professors noticed him more and more, and the classes that he could sit in the back unnoticed were the ones he had already taken before. So Faison moved to the streets, at the very center of the city, and waited there for the answers and for the order that he had been looking for. His new plan was to take advantage of the social convention that you take people with the misfortune to be without housing for a little while out for a meal. And so it came to be that every day, another person would meet Faison, feel obliged to help, and take him to a meal. What they did not expect was his intensity, his intelligence, and his probing nature. He shared steaks with business men and soup with bus drivers. He enjoyed sausage with butchers and salads with vegans. The years passed and hundreds of people were touched and intrigued by this meal companion that they had initially taken out with a touch of reluctance. Some enjoyed their time so much that they even sought him out for a second meal. His reputation as a lunch companion grew so much people even stopped wondering why this man was homeless for so much longer than almost anyone else. But Faison wasn't satisfied. He withdrew all the more, taking meals only when he really needed them, spending most of his time in the parks of the inner city. Sometimes the grand central park, sometimes the secondary ones that ran in a ring around the epicentre of the city. He'd sit in the shade of trees for hours on end, perfectly still except for his eyes, which were always searching and moving to and fro. He sat in the same spots, again and again, doing nothing but wade through the thoughts that seemed to assault his sense at every moment, crowding his mind and his blurring his intentions. He felt despair, that there might never be the answer that he was looking for. No matter how much time he spent inside his head, it was still a maze, it was still a jumble. After all those years, after all that time, all that searching and reaching, he was no closer to where he wanted to be than when he started. He started to question himself, and towards that end he took the advice at the closest thing he had to a friend at the time - an employee at the drop in center - and went to talk to Dr. Morten. It wasn't what he really wanted, but talking with her got him closer to where he thought he might want to be. Her perception was incredible, and she seemed to have order to her. So he met with her, but sporadically. He still spent most of his time in the parks, staring at the intricacies of a leaf or the patterns in a pond. It was a long slow process, but he felt something different with her. And so on her urging, finally, almost a month ago, he had cleaned himself up and taken a temporary low level position at an architectural firm downtown. He was still sleeping at the drop in center, but he was moving away from it, as far as Dr. Morten could tell. And that's when things just sort of, happened. Will was having lunch in the nearest park to the office building he worked in. He didn't like the idea of moving backwards into the habit of sitting in a park for hours on end, but he ignored the idea, and went to have his lunch on a bench he knew and enjoyed. The elevator wasn't working quite right, and neither was the walk signal to get there, but he ignored those too. He shoed the birds away from his bench, and sat down to eat. Another man approached. He saw Faison on the bench. He stopped on the path, and looked like he was thinking something over. He turned to leave, but then stopped. Came back. With hesitation in his stride but still moving forward, he came to the bench and sat

down next to Faison and took out his own lunch. Silence. But different for some reason. And that's when the stranger introduced himself. And they proceeded to talk. And then some more. They conversed briefly, but deeply, and when they stood to take leave of each others company, Faison felt something new in his life. Felt something that was incredibly novel to him and his existence; calm. He smiled widely at his companion, shook his hand warmly, and quit his job that afternoon. The same wide smile stayed on his face that evening and long into the night, and as he lay in that tiny fold out bed, he made up his mind to travel back home. He wanted to see his parents, and that's just what he was going to do.

Caleb sprung from his bed the second his cell phone started chirping at him to wake up. It wasn't because he was refreshed; his bed had seemed like a cruel cage for most of the night, tossing and turning he wanted simple to escape from it. But he knew he needed sleep, and Will Faison was nowhere to be found last night. No one had any idea what had happened to him. So he slept, but not really, too engrossed in the case to really switch his brain off for any good amount of time. He didn't spring from his bed because he felt like the answers he wanted were right in front of him; if anything, he was further away from an answer now than he ever had been since he started looking into this tragedy. A lying neighbour could have meant one of a dozen things, and an undiagnosed mental disorder held promise that he had gotten his hopes too high over. Talking with Mr. Faison was a long shot at best.

So he awoke tired and worn and frustrated. But damnit did it feel good, down in his gut. It was little wonder that he did what he did; he loved every minute of every case, even when he was taking pictures of cheating spouses or tax dodgers. He scooped up his paper, scanning it for news of yesterdays slaying. Inside the front page...there, there it was. A quarter page mention - on the bottom no less - about a family found dead in their home. No mention of murder, no mention of foul play, not even a name or a number of deceased individuals. The article went on to mention that the investigation seemed fairly pedestrian, and that more details would be coming in another two days. Damn Jeffrey was good, Caleb thought to himself. This was about as good as he could have gotten out of the press considering the circumstances, and certainly leaps and bounds above what he had been expecting to see. I mean, a story about a failed nanotechnology experiment was right above it, and everyone and their mother knew that that research led to nothing but a dead ends. Hell, they had been saying that about it for as many as decades as Caleb could remember. But despite it all, he knew not to get too excited, because even this little blurb here would ignite public curiosity, and when the investigation went to full disclosure, it would be the news story that everyone gathered around to see. He felt the clock was ticking, but was glad that he had another two days it seemed.

He looked at his watch to see how he was doing for time and swore loudly when his watch told him he still hours to wait, and there was no way that he was getting himself back to sleep now. So he stepped into his shower, he cleaned his gun, he had some eggs and bacon and hash browns, and chased it all down with a cup of coffee and an energy drink. Trying to gauge in level of wakefulness for the day, he decided to down one more energy drink for good measure before heading out to see the curious and mysterious Will Faison.

He took the short ride over to his favourite stake out spot outside the hospital and waited. The radio yammered on in the background of Caleb's mind, and he kept himself focused on the entrance. Stay focused as he saw a man matching Faison's description enter. He had considered picking him up before he went in, but as much as time was an issue, he didn't want to rush anything and have it back fire on him. So he let Faison have his therapy time, let him get

centered and feeling good. It would make him all the more likely to make him feel more at ease as he was interviewed. He sat there in the dull drone of some perky morning show radio host, thinking about all that was at stake and feeling rather lucky that he got to be in the center of it all. In the back part of his mind he heard his ego telling him that he wasn't lucky, he was good, and that's why he found himself at the epicentre of these things. He tried to ignore that thought, because he didn't want a swollen head, but he had to admit to himself that he didn't suck at these kind of things.

He saw Mr. Faison exit the hospital at that time, quite a bit ahead of schedule, and Caleb wondered about the reasoning for that, even as he stepped out of his car on the other side of the street and started to tail his mark. He had it set up so that he could intercept him in front of a pretty decent restaurant he had discovered not long ago. But as he was making his way towards Faison, his cell started to vibrate gently, and wondered if it was Dr. Morten with news about their session.

"Lange here."

"Caleb, I'm sure you're following him already, but he's exiting now. I just wanted to know, Faison seems different now."

"Different as in dangerous? Are you okay?" Caleb couldn't help feeling protective over Morten.

"No, not at all. More than ever I believe that he's no threat to anyone else. No, he was calm when I saw him. His mind seemed more clear than I've ever seen it, and from what I understand, more so than I think he's ever been. But whatever you need from him, I'd make sure to get everything you need, because he's leaving the city this afternoon. Our session was not so much a therapy session, but a long goodbye. I just thought you should know."

"Thanks again Rebecca. Don't worry about all this, it'll get sorted." With that he cut the line off and turned off his phone. It was time to have word with the newly calmed Will Faison. He wondered what had prompted such a change of heart in this man he was following, and if it was any reason to be worried.

"Mr. Faison!" Caleb came up with a big overenthusiastic smile on his face and his outstretched. Out of habit Will shook it and smiled back politely.

"Yes, what can I do for you, mister..."

"Lange, but Caleb works better for most people." Caleb flashed his badge and ID while he took stock of Faison's appearance. It certainly wasn't what he had expected at all. His beard was closely shaven and neat, as was his hair. He was aged like a man who had had a harder life, but nothing about it seemed to dull the glint in his searching, soft brown eyes. Dressed well and a touch short height wise, Caleb continued to wonder about this man before him. He certainly didn't seem like a threat, but neither had the man who's murders had lead him here. "Would you like to step in and have a bite with me? Maybe answer a few questions too?"

"I'd love to Mr. Lange, but I'm departing on a rather sizable journey later this afternoon, so I really don't have the time." Caleb noted the formality Faison addressed him with, that his smile that no long seemed genuine, and wondered what was causing this reluctance. "If you'd like to leave a card with me, I'd be more than happy to give you a call when I arrive." Caleb could also see that Faison was looking to step around him, to continue on right away, but he had positioned himself well to keep any polite individual in front of him. To his left was the light post and the mail boxes that were chained to it, and to his right the restaurants external trash can. Usually it wasn't that close to the light post so as not to restrict traffic on the side walk, but Caleb had had a little extra time to himself this morning, and staggered it with the light post so as it didn't look out of place but it could still serve to create a single lane of traffic if someone positioned

themselves just right. He could also see the man searching other avenues with his eyes, could almost see his mind turning over all his possibilities. Caleb did his best to play to that. “Look Will, I’d like to be honest with you. I’m investigating a case of the utmost importance, but I’m not at liberty to really discuss the details, so please don’t ask about them. But what that means to you is that I’m willing to do what it takes to get the answers I need out of you. I was hoping that we could do this over a plate of pasta or something, but should you not provide that avenue to me, I’m very capable of calling up the boys in blue, have them take you in, process you, interrogate you in those uncomfortable chairs, and waste a good ten hours of your time in the process. Of course, you never know, you might be bitter enough about that treatment that you’d just clam up until we were forced to release you. And to be honest, I don’t know if I have that kind of time. If worst came to worst, I could just drag you into that alley over there and beat the information I need out of you. Mr. Cheong just took the trash out a couple minutes ago, so he won’t be back there for another couple hours, and he’s the only one that ever goes back there anyway. And trust me, yelling for help doesn’t work with a mouthful of broken teeth. I mean, there are variations of these outcomes, but to be honest those are the three that you’re really looking at. You could run, and we’d probably be at scenario three. You could lie to me, but I’m very good and figuring those out, and then we’d be right back in that alley. You could bitch and complain and if you’re lucky end up in that holding cell, but let’s be honest. You have information I need, I’m going to get it, and it would be best to save yourself some time and have a good meal in the process. So what do you say, can I get you an early lunch? The alfredo sauce is actually really good, and not as bad for you as a lot of other places.” Caleb didn’t like making threats, since defensive people gave lousy interviews. And Caleb didn’t know if he’d really go so far as to pistol whip this guy for information that would probably not be that useful. But it looked like he had played his cards right, since he could practically see the ‘damnit, fine,’ on Faison’s face before he reluctantly agreed to lunch shortly after that.

James Bisson was a stereotypically brilliant mind, so much so that you could pretty much guess his up bringing correctly after having met him but once. Both his parents were intellectual professors, and pushed their son from a young age towards academia. They did so in such a way that he did indeed push himself towards great things while not growing to resent the passion that he held for scientific pursuits. His story would be impressive, though unremarkable, except for the extent of his intellect. While most people realized that IQ tests were unreliable and untrustworthy, his scores on them were still brought up at parties because of the sheer unconceivable distance he scored away from the average. His high school diploma was done as he began puberty, and by the time he was almost done physically maturing, he had already been accepted for graduate studies after completing and double major undergraduate degree - in biochemistry and neurophysiology - at the age of eighteen. People looked at him to be the answer to the last plagues of the mind, to bury forever the mental afflictions of the world so that they may lay dormant next to things like small pox and malaria. To that end he continued his research into the workings of the mind, into the connections that made a person an individual. After a number of years, he was frustrated with his efforts, not feeling that he was making the head way he needed within the realms of neurochemistry. He took some time off from his graduate studies to complete another double major in nanotechnology and electrical engineering, though doing so didn’t come without its struggles. It seemed the administration was upset with his delays, feeling like he would find the answers he wanted on the path he was on. They encouraged him to continue with his work, to stay the course he was on. They promised him

more money, more space, more everything. But Bisson would not be swayed, and they reluctantly let him complete this additional schooling. What could they do, say no to one of the greatest minds of the century? So he studied, and completed hastily his new education, and he felt like he was moving in the direction he wanted to now. Felt that the real answer to his problems had to deal with an artificial augmentation of the brain tissue. Not only did he feel like he could restore the normal function of fractured minds along this path of research, but he felt like he could augment the minds of regular people with it to. Of course he thought the initial implications would be tiny at first, but would grow exponentially after that. He was charged with the possibilities that he felt lay just beyond his reach.

And there was nothing to prove that theory to him more than when he created his first artificial nerve. An ugly, horribly clunky thing, dozens of times larger than an actual human nerve. But it worked, just like the ones your arm, except the extrapolated signal rate (if this artificial nerve could be perfected) was over four times faster. The scientific community was inflamed. Every national news magazine had on its cover that ugly purple nerve looking thing on its front cover, and every one of them had Bisson talking about what this could mean for the world, for the future of humanity. The research was on the tip of everyone's tongue, and the excitement globally was palpable. It was an exciting time, and one that wouldn't last long.

The beginning of the down fall began over lunch one inconsequential lunch. A particularly audacious colony of mould had flourished within Bisson's Tupperware lunch container, and needing something hardy to keep him going into the evening like he was accustomed to, departed quickly for an on campus lunch. He found a tucked away cafeteria, ordered himself a big salad with plenty of chicken in it, and was about to leave without a second thought when he saw the most striking woman approaching him. He could feel his heart flutter, his social awkwardness still painfully aware to him, regardless of the attention he had received from the world. And he was particularly useless when it came to talking with women. But she had put aside her own nerves to talk to this man who had held her attention as soon as she had heard about him around campus. So they talked, and they flirted. Her name was Amanda, and he learned she was finishing her own doctorate thesis as it pertained to deep crust seismic activity. He left that lunch meeting with a phone number and a spring in his step. Unfortunately for him, his phone didn't record her number correctly, and he spent the better part of an afternoon in the earth science building hunting down her impossibly tucked away office. But he did. Only to have his phone lose her number again. So he came to see her again, and wrote it down this time. Three months of their courtship progressed, and their obsession with each other grew, until one night they were in that same impossibly small and hidden office, kissing deeply, losing clothes faster and faster, when kissing her shoulder he looked down on her desk and saw something there that he could not ignore, not even for the bare chest of hers that was pressed against his.

For the next two hours they discussed the implications of her research and his. They looked over the data again and again, and could do nothing but wonder what it would all mean. They wrote the paper together that night, not even pausing for sleep, and had it submitted for publication the next afternoon. After that, the walls of their world seemed to cave in around them. The peer review were merciless, tearing apart every last sentence in the paper. They called it unconceivable and a pure fantasy. Many questioned most their methods of research, while the rest called in to doubt all their methods. Some went even so far as to criticize the grammar and spelling, calling into question the authors sobriety at the time. The pair were crushed, but much more than that, confused. They had reviewed the data over and over, but their conclusions still stood. But when the dean threatened Bisson's girlfriend with dismissal if she did not forget what

he called “insulting scientific processes” he would have her dismissed. She had no choice. Even Bisson felt the distain of those around him, and he folded to their pressures, abandoning his efforts on artificial nerves. He went back to his research in neurochemical solutions to mental disorders, and by forty, had married Amanda and received the Nobel prize in medicine after creating an effective pharmaceutical treatment for compulsive mood disorders. They were happy together, and led what many saw as an enviable life, the results of that fateful publication long in the past, but always somewhere in their thoughts.

Caleb stepped out from lunch and started towards his car. The meeting hadn’t gone as bad as it could have, he supposed. Faison had been honest the whole way through, if curt. He had been thrilled to hear that him and the victim had met at one point, but in general there was still a profound sense of confusion around the case. He had almost hit a brick wall, except for the name James Bisson. Hadn’t he heard that name before somewhere? He couldn’t be sure. All he knew is that his connection to this case seemed tenuous at best, but every other avenue had been exhausted, so he was off to look up this Bisson when his phone rang.

“Lange here.”

“Caleb, did you interview that neighbour?”

“Jeff? What are you calling me for? And yes, of course I interviewed the neighbour. What is this about?”

“He’s dead. Overdosed on pain meds and sleeping pills. What the fuck did you say to him? What the fuck happened between you two?!”

“Jeff, just calm down okay? All we did was talk. He was fine when I left him. Listen, just take a breath, get me some coffee and meet me at Cantelli’s. I assume you’re there already?”

“Yeah, okay, fine. Hurry up, because I want to know exactly what happened when you talked to him.” And with that the line went dead. Caleb’s heart raced, not really being able to wrap his head around the news he had just received. Cantelli was dead? Of an overdose? He had told him to get some sleep, but he doubted that it prompted him to do anything dangerous...or had it? The questions were piling up and he was starting to get more unsettled by that. The best thing he figured he could do to try and shake the feelings of unease was to review the interview with Faison on the way out to see Jeffrey. Sliding into the drivers seat, he plugged the audio recording into his car stereo and listened to the back and forth he had just had.

“So your full legal name is Will Faison?”

“Yes, my parents felt William was too formal, and they didn’t want me to be ostracized coming from a rich family, so they did what they could to draw attention away from that. But detective, how is it that I came to be a person of interest in what you’re investigating?”

“I’m afraid I can’t say. Did you know this man?”

“Not really. During my last bit of employment I met him during lunch. Turns out we worked at the same firm, though at opposite ends of the power ladder. We talked briefly, and that was it.”

“You only talked?”

“We only talked.”

“Was it a civil conversation.”

“Friendly actually.”

“Did he mention where he lived?”

“No.”

“Did you ever try to find out?”

“No.”

“Did he do anything during your conversation that you found insulting or off putting?”

“No.”

“Are you finding it insulting that I’m insinuating that you might have caused harm to another individual?”

“Are you saying that harm befell him?”

“Answer the question please.”

“I’m not insulted. I’m restless. Bay city is three cities away from where I’m travelling to, and I’d like to get there as swiftly as possible. So I’m attempting to answer your questions completely and quickly. But maybe you’re not sure what questions you need to ask, so maybe you could tell me what you want to know and I’ll tell you everything and anything that I feel even slightly pertains to that.”

Caleb had smiled at that moment. He was apparently quite calm, as Dr. Morten had stated.

“I want to know what you two talked about, I want to know what impressions you had of him, and I want you to talk ad nauseum about both.”

“About...four weeks ago I was having lunch over at the park, um, the Northwestern one. It’s right by the firm I was working for at the time. I had spent years moving from park to park to sit and think, so I knew this one well like all the rest, and I knew the best bench to sit on there. I took my lunch there, started eating, and saw another person approaching. He saw me on the bench, and looked like he was considering sitting somewhere else, but I assume he knew the park too and knew that where I was sitting was the best place to have lunch, so he came and sat down next to me. He was the quiet type, and we didn’t talk at first. But then he started up a conversation.”

“He started a conversation with you? Are you sure it wasn’t the way around?”

“Yes, I told you I spent years moving between those parks. I sat silent, and got used to sitting next to people not talking. Not many people are comfortable in those sorts of situations; why do you think the bus is always in a cacophony of small talk? So yes, he started conversation with me. He tried the small talk thing, but I don’t really have a lot of patience for it and he stunk at it something terrible. So I steered the topic of conversation to myself.”

“Why?”

“People find me interesting. I’ve been homeless for about a decade, which is quite unique seeing as I’ve always been smart enough to keep myself from being homeless.”

“How did he do with talking about your life?”

“He was curious like most other people, so I explained to him that it was mostly a decision, but that my thoughts weren’t exactly healthy. I told him I felt like reality wasn’t right, like I was missing something. I told him my thoughts were chaotic, that they were moving too fast for my conscious. And I was prepared to move on the with conversation from there, since with most people, after I tell them that, just shake their heads without really understanding, and we move on to something else. They turn the conversation to talk about themselves at that point. But he was different. He wanted to know why I felt that way, how I got by because of the way I thought. He seemed very interested in what I had said.”

“Any idea why?”

“Probably because he had the same sort of doubts somewhere in his head too. He struck me as a disturbed man who didn’t really realize that he was disturbed. So we talked about what might be behind that feeling for both of us. Instead of Dr. Morten - who don’t get me wrong, is a gifted doctor - who tended to look to myself as a reasoning for my disjointed thoughts, the two of us looked in a different direction. We looked at the world as a possible cause. We looked at the

possibility that my brain was fine, and that the world was the problem.”

“Sounds rather philosophical.”

“Perhaps, but when was the last time you ever heard of a philosophy discussion where people delved into the idea that there was something wrong with the world that they inhabited. I’d seen students get shouted down by their professors for even hinting at such a notion.”

“You studied philosophy?”

“Sat in on some classes. But the two of us looked at the world instead of our brains, and I remember it was a moment of clarity for me, when we were sitting and talking, and I said ‘shouldn’t the world have more chaos and randomness in it, like my brain?’ And we sat there, sort of thinking about that for a minute, and the more I thought about it the more I liked it. I concluded that there was something wrong with the world, because there wasn’t enough disorder in it, and that gave me, for the first time in my life, order in my thoughts. I can tell you it was remarkably freeing. Our conversation didn’t go further than that, and I immediately quit my job and decided to travel back to visit my parents. I haven’t seen them in over twenty years now.”

“What was your companions reaction to all this?”

“Very thoughtful, perhaps a little shaken. I doubt that he was able to really wrap his head around it fully. Was kind of muttering about an ‘Ordered Earth’ theory. Before I left, I asked him what he was talking about, and he mentioned being reminded of an academic paper he had seen once.”

“What was it about? Who was it by?”

“The genius, James Bison. Except that this one never made it to print. He was telling me his father, who was an academic paper peer reviewer, talked about it as the one ugly blight on an otherwise brilliant career. In any case, we parted ways and I never saw him again. And that’s all I know, so may I go please?”

“Your very anxious Will. Is it so horrible to take a little extra time? As you said, its been twenty years, what’s another couple hours?”

“Look, I’m sorry, but ever since I decided to leave town its been one delay after another. I’m getting tired of it, and I’m trying to hold on to this blissful calm that I’ve never had before, for as long as I can. But I swear, that was the entirety of our dealings with one another. I barely knew him, I had one conversation, and that was it. I appreciate the lunch, but I really should get going.”

That’s when he had shut of the tape. Going through it again he felt the frustration coming up again in the back of his mind. Their psychological condition and one chance meeting was all he had to tie the victim and Will Faison together. And as had been demonstrated, it’s not as if the symptoms listed had made Faison dangerous. There was no reason to believe that they’d manifest violently in other people, especially to the extent that he had seen hardly twenty four hours ago. Being reminded of that scene sent a chill up his spine, and the general unease of this whole set of circumstances washed over him again. God he wanted to find the answers to this case, Caleb thought to himself as he pulled back into the neighbourhood where it all started.

He tried turning over what Faison had said to him, about an ordered world theory, about a lack of chaos. Maybe he just hadn’t seen the right things to buy into it, Caleb thought to himself. But he saw plenty of disorder in his day to day, and it seemed like more than enough to him. Caleb pushed the line of thinking out of his mind, and told himself he would go talk with James Bisson about this paper that seemed to be so important. But first Jeffrey and poor Rick Cantelli. Here’s your chaos Mr. Faison, Caleb thought to himself; telling his twin boys that their only parent wasn’t going to be looking after them anymore.

The police tape and the enormous barrier around the crime scene had been taken down, and a

couple news crews were combing the area, looking for an angle, while the uniformed cops were spread around, still keeping an eye of things. In front of Rick's house were a number of cop cars, and a new barrier of police tape. The press that was around, sensing something interesting, were at the edge of the border, trying to glean something off of the officers holding them back and patrolling the area. The coroner was here this time, but they were sitting in the front seat of their van, seeming to wait on orders from Jeffrey, who was standing by the front door, looking much worse for wear from the last time that he had seen him. He parked and hopped out, the press giving him a wide margin. He supposed decking an overzealous ass of a reporter in a particularly heated moment made the others respect his personal boundaries. As he made his way to the front door, he just hoped he'd be able to lend some aid to his friend.

Coming towards the steps, Caleb could see truly see how bad of shape his friend was in. He knew the look of a man that hadn't slept after all those times he had seen it in the mirror, and Jeffrey had that look in spades. Hair just a little too flat, the thin but dark bags under the eyes - which were bloodshot to hell - and a bit of a hunch that seemed to communicate a general lack of energy. Caleb traded the coffee Jeffrey outstretched for him as he gave him the audio recorder with the interview with Cantelli cued up.

"If you want to hear the extent of our conversation, here you go. I'm going to take a quick look around inside first, then when you're done, come on in and give me the walk through." Caleb breezed by him then, not wanting his friend to get going in conversation. Just try and keep him focused on his work, and it would be better for everyone involved.

Stepping into the house he had to wonder if this was just as simple as an overdose. The railings on the stairs coming down from the second level were half demolished, the dining room table was overturned, and the sofa was thrown apart. Moving through the house, the destruction continued. A door broken off the hinges, coffee table flipped over, blinds torn down. In the kitchen, every shelf seemed to be pulled out, and the fridge itself had been pulled away from the wall and toppled.

"What. The. Fuck."

"The body is upstairs, master bedroom." Caleb turned to see his friend stride in, some purpose and drive behind those bloodshot eyes.

"And you're sure that this was an overdose? If I didn't know better, it looks like one hell of a struggle happened here before the place was searched."

"Yeah, I thought that's what it looked like too. But there's absolutely no forced entry, and there's no blood anywhere. It just looks like he went on a tear and destroyed his place. Plus, there's no trauma on the body, which you'll see." They walked in silence up the stairs, noticing more destruction. Knocked down paintings, a closet emptied into the hall, and a heel print kicked into the wall. It all led up to the master bedroom, which was pulled apart, but less violently than other parts of the house. Whatever had happened, it looks like Cantelli had finished here, running out of steam. There, at the foot of the bed and face up, was Rick Cantelli. Suicide or not, he didn't go out pretty; a couple bottles of empty pills next to him and a pool of vomit pooled around his head and neck. It looked like he was in the same clothes he had come home in; creased and dirty, but nice. Maybe he was at some photo shoot or publicity thing. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, and his skin had an almost unnatural colour to it. Caleb looked at the scene and couldn't help feeling helplessly confused.

"Please tell me his kids didn't find him like this." Caleb couldn't imagine the pain of a child finding their only parent in this sort of state. Even to a child, it was obvious Cantelli had not died in a good state of mind. He could faintly see the streaks of dried tears down his face, and saw an

unsettling parallel between that and his neighbour's final moment.

"Thank goodness no. He sent them to spend the weekend with their grandmother. Maybe he had planned this. I was here to do a bit of a follow up interview and to make sure that he wasn't talking to the press. And look, while at first it seemed like he was going for the phone at one point, he ended up ripping it out of the wall so that he couldn't use it. Feels pre-meditated to me."

"Maybe, but then why the freak out? If he had the clarity of mind to send his children off before he killed himself, then what's with the torrent of destruction? If you ask me, he was troubled, hurt, confused, and in his desperate frustration, turned to the pills. Maybe what started as some attempt to dull his pain or insomnia, ended with him deciding to just finish it all." Jeffrey just stared at him, the puzzled look in his face saying so much.

"Confused and desperate? Troubled and hurt? I know he found his friend dead in pool of his family's blood, but you're making it sound as if there was a transfer of insanity or something. Yes, I'm sure he was troubled by what happened next door, but he knew where to get help; hell, he had been seeing this Dr. Morten for weeks, I'm sure he would have pieced together that seeing her himself was in his best interest if he had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And from what I can hear in the tape, he wasn't having trouble coping with this new position he found himself at his company since finding that bomb. No, there was something else troubling him, and he decided to end it. Maybe he got a touch emotional about it in the end, but that's it. I just needed you here to see if this had anything to do with what happened next door or something that happened during your interview. Now that I know that's not the case, you should move on with your investigation and let me sort out the pieces here." Jeffrey was pacing slightly, looking over the room again and again, looking ten years older than he had just a minute ago. Caleb rose slightly from where he had been examining Cantelli, looking for any bruising on him that would indicate a struggle. Of course he hadn't found any; Jeffrey was too good at his job, even in his condition now. But Caleb was worried about his friend, about his tone, about the wildness in his eyes. He just didn't know what he could do for him now.

"Okay Jeff, I'll get out of your hair. And you're right, this had to have gone way back...maybe the neighbour was just the straw that broke the camel's back." As Caleb said these words, he realized he didn't really believe them, and it was a horrible feeling, "You just be sure to have a couple beers and good nights sleep when you sort all this out. I'll be in touch."

"A good nights sleep," Jeffrey snorted derisively, "I'll get one of those when you figure something out about what happened next door."

Caleb left, feeling deflated. And what if this one doesn't have a happy ending Jeffrey? What then? Will you blame me, or yourself? Will you ever get that good nights sleep that you need after that? A lot of people didn't see what the two of them did, and if anyone had to know about the randomness that some atrocities hit with, it was Jeffrey. Even if they were on a scale that no one had seen before.

People sometimes asked Caleb about the cases he couldn't solve. The ones where the police had given up, and the ones the most dedicated private investigator in the city couldn't find the answers to. They wanted to know what it was like to search in the dark and not find what you were looking for, a feeling that was so novel to almost everyone out there that they had no choice but to be fascinated with it. Three cases almost always came to mind, but he never really mentioned them in polite or light conversation, because they were the kinds of things that could deflate a party and give nightmares to people almost on a whim. Only in the dead of night, with

people who were very insistent, did he share those cases with people who asked. Each had gone a long way to showing him about how random, unfair, and chaotic life could really be.

Not long after he started his business, Caleb landed a client who wished to determine if his wife was being faithful to him. The man was fat, pompous, and arrogant. Caleb immediately disliked him, but his fledgling business had to start somewhere, he told himself. So he took the case, following around the pretty young wife, who it was hard to imagine wasn't having an affair. Caleb had thought to himself the lack of appeal a man of his girth and personality would have to the beguiling creature that he followed for the next two weeks. Caleb had thought what an easy case it had been, tracking a woman who stood out in a crowd so much on account of her taller than average height and thick, shining black hair. Following her as often as he could, he was finally rewarded when she stopped in on a high end brothel by the northern edge of the city. He had chuckled to himself about her appetites when he had found out - through an interview of some of the staff - that she had spent her time in the company of a pair of linebacker sized men at the same time. Any mirth he had about the situation soon evaporated when he was forced to deliver the news to the husband. Scarcely halting his string of profanities to pay Caleb, he had immediately sped recklessly off towards home and in search of his wife. Fearing the worst and trusting his gut instinct on this one, he called in a domestic disturbance call to the police a little early. Unfortunately, by the time the police showed up, she had already been thrown around fairly good, and in full view of her children no less. After breaking up the dispute, the husband stormed out of the house, and no one saw or heard from him again.

When Caleb opened with that case, people always looked at him sideways. What was so bad, what was so random, they wanted to know. Cheating wife, furious husband, things get ugly and everyone goes their own way after that. Sad at the time, but better in the long run. Caleb always added the rest of the details after that.

The wife had worked when she was younger age as a prostitute herself, but she had lied about her age to work in that profession, and with the assistance of an impressive fake ID, found work in one of the highest consumer rated brothels in the city. At seventeen she was pregnant with the child of the man that would soon be her husband. And despite the fact that Caleb was hired on to assess this woman's fidelity, when they had gotten married they agreed to sign their marriage licence as an open marriage. So even though she should have gotten half their assets, the abusive husband took off with every penny that they had, leaving her and their children with nothing. And that was the story. Some asshole husband with a wife too good for him (and she was too good for him, a bright and magnetic personality with a body to die for, happy to take care of their home and children) is beaten and left with no financial support for actions within the understanding of their marriage. He left rich and unpunished, she battered and broke. After a short time, she took her children away from the shame and the pain of familiar surroundings for a new life. Shortly after dealing with that scenario, Caleb almost gave up on his business. Unbeknownst to him though, the man squandered the money he disappeared with in an unlicensed casino, whose owner used most the money he made from him to put his two children through medical school. Unable to go back to the business of his past, he found under the table work on an ocean freighter, whose rough crew and surroundings ended up suiting him very well. The wife, on the other hand, fell hard for a model she met at a shooting for a magazine, temping there as an assistant to try and get on her feet again after the incident with her husband. He fell in love with her just as hard as she had with him, and they were married after a whirlwind romance. She never knew love or satisfaction like she did when wrapping herself around him, and she went on to volunteer at - and eventually run - the city's shelter for victims of domestic abuse.

The second case that Caleb would tell those curious enough to ask at the right time centered around an assignment he got from two parents concerned with the whereabouts of their only child. He had told them he was going to travel overseas after he had finished his business degree before finding employment and settling down to live somewhere that wasn't under their roof. But that had been three months ago, and they were beginning to become concerned for his future, the over protective type that they were. He had been e-mailing them fairly consistently every three weeks, so they weren't concerned for his safety, just that he might not come back in time for a job opportunity that they had lined up for him. They wanted him to be found and informed of what was waiting for him back at home, and insist to him that he return. The parents didn't know where their son was going or who he was in contact with, but Caleb had just tracked down someone in a similar situation on the other side of the equator, so they trusted him to find their son. And he did. After tracking the e-mails that he had sent, bribing the right people at the airlines he travelled on, the hostels he frequented, and even the people at his bank that he had his credit card through, he finally found the wayward son on the west coast of Australia. He found him in the dead of the night, in the darkest alley of the darkest city of the darkest continent. Never in his life had Caleb thought that he would find himself in Australia, the place in the world where your evil desires were catered to, where the rule of law meant little. So he double checked his firearm before confronting the man that had taken a month to track down, and strode into the brothel where the son was reported to have been staying the past couple nights. The one whose clientele consisted of those looking for a girl too young, and for a drug more powerful and illegal than you could find on the continental North America. Getting the son to go back to his parents was easy. He had pretty much come to the end of his road; there wasn't really anywhere else in the world you could get more depraved.

What stuck with Caleb was what he saw inside that establishment. He wasn't any stranger to drug use; he had visited more than one marijuana café when he was younger, and working as a PI he had seen some things in the undercity that kind of freaked him out and would shake some more respectable and sheltered citizens pretty badly. But never in his life had he seen heroin use, never before had he seen the deadened and vacant eyes of people chasing the dragon as they faded away. And the women - not that you could fairly call many of the prostitutes in that brothel actual women - upset him on a level more than he anticipated. There was no one here that had parents coming to find them, to whisk them away from their surroundings and offer them a prestigious and well paying job, one that would allow them to live in leisure for the rest of their days. They were here, for who knew how long, and it was hard to imagine the true meaning of that. He had a lot of difficulty in the next number of weeks, thinking about the people stuck in there. But he didn't know what could be done. He felt the hopelessness of a situation without redemption, a situation he could not influence and improve.

The reality of the situation was certainly dark, but not as bad as Caleb had seen it. The drug use was unfortunate, but most weeks the only ones available were nothing you couldn't find anywhere else on the globe. Fighting the opiate trade was a war that was tough, but being filled with more victories every day. Years ago, the opiates used to be available there every day of the year; now, barely half the time. And the women were generally older than eighteen, even though few looked it or were advertised as such. The truth was that the women in that trade were about as well protected as any other working girl in the business. What they lacked in legal protection provided by the police and the law - severely lacking in that region of the world - they made up for it in violent overseers. Ex-prostitutes made up a force of extremely protective body guards, and even more than protecting those in their employment, they carried out their own revenge

vigilantism on those searching for girls too young to be anywhere near their trade of flesh. Many of these brutal guardian angels had found their way into prostitution sooner in their lives than they should have, and carried bad memories with them when they disposed of the pedophilic tourists that seemed to congregate in one area of the world, and rarely make it back from where they came.

Finally, when Caleb relented and told the stories he knew that showed a world embroiled in chaos, he saved the one he liked to relive the least for the last, giving his listeners a chance to bow out before he got to the worst of it. He rarely told his third story. After six years of working in the business, he had accrued a reputation as someone that was good at finding missing persons. While police service between cities often didn't interact with each other very well on a professional level, Caleb seemed to be able to move between cities and work well with all different branches and divisions of the police service. So it was no surprise when he received another case from a pair of concerned brothers for their sister, who had moved to the next city over for a chance at a fresh start in her chosen profession (sculpting). They had been talking on and off for a number of months, when her phone line had stopped accepting their calls. Her apartment had been searched, and while it was clearly abandoned, there were no clues as to where she had gone. She had been mid project, working for city hall, and even starting to date a mid level bureaucrat at city hall. It seemed odd that she'd go missing on her own choice, so a police investigation was launched, focused largely around the new boyfriend. After a number of weeks though, with absolutely no head way made, the case was put aside with nothing really left to do on it. Everyone assumed that she had moved on again, deciding her last fresh start wasn't complete enough, and this time did it where no one would know her, and no one would find her. Her brothers weren't convinced, and hired Caleb to see if he could find out anything more. So he went through all his well rehearsed motions when it came to missing persons. Everyone that she had had contact with in the last six months interviewed, at great length. Her schedule, reconstructed and ran through on many more than one occasion. And her life on paper, dismantled, reassembled, and then broken down again once more for good measure and analyzed under a magnifying glass. This had always been enough. Almost all his cases were resolved when Caleb talked to the people that dealt with the missing individual long enough. There was a detail that he found, a thread that he just had to pull, and find whoever he was looking for on the other end. Most of the rest of these cases got sorted out when he started running through their days, retracing their steps, as many as he could piece together. Living in a person's shoes, he found, was quite the excellent way to find where someone went. They usually ended up right next to him as he went through the motions. And in the absolute toughest cases, Caleb would break down their life as it appeared on pieces of paper and computer screens. Where they were spending their money, and if that didn't work, how they were spending their money. Even their library cards or their movie rental cards could be tracked to produce a result. And with all those techniques, Caleb had always found a result. His reputation at being good at finding people didn't come because he had a different or unique way of finding people. It just came from his ability to work hard, dig deep for details, and pay attention so he could see what someone else had missed. Unfortunately, none of that worked finding this missing woman. And because the police were involved, he had a lot of his work done for him already, and he was still nowhere. He visited the three closest cities from where she went missing (excluding the one she had originally come from), and found absolutely no sign of her in any of them. He even called a number of police departments in cities even further removed, and still came up with nothing. And seeing as she didn't have a passport, Caleb doubted that she travelled out of country. So he

was stuck. He went over his notes, but he still came up with nothing. So he went over his notes yet again, and compiled a list of everyone who had cars, or had a problem with the young sculptor, or were romantically interested in her, or whoever had a run in with the law, or even a history of illegal activity. The people who appeared on the most lists were narrowed down as people of interest, and he came up with three. The boyfriend again, the homeless man that was usually around her route home to her apartment, and her projects commissioner from city hall (manager of public works, artistic). He went back to each individual, tearing their life apart and dissecting every piece. But the boyfriend still checked out; terrible at lying, evenly tempered, and obviously smitten with the woman (though not obsessively so, in Caleb's opinion). And the homeless man turned out to have a rock solid alibi (drunk tank), and on top of that with no effective means to move the woman without being detected. So he focused on the last man on the list, the one that had been described as lonely, as obsessive over things in his life. He was a large man, a former college sports star, with eyes close together and hair cropped close to the head. And it also turned out he had made advances on the woman in question. After interviewing the right coworker after the right amount of liquor, Caleb heard a long and sad story about a girl with no interest in a man that was desperately - and sometime aggressively - looking for someone to settle down with. Feeling like there was something here, Caleb had a man he relied on for computer technicalities hack into the man's car GPS unit and trace its movement for the weeks surrounding the disappearance. What Caleb found was that his car moved in the same couple inner city patterns, except for a number of loops that extended south of the city. And in one of those loops, there was a stop for three minutes. Caleb took the position down, and drove out of the city at first day break. He parked at the side of the road, looking off the edge of the raised highway ten meters above the forest floor, to the wilderness that lay beneath it. No one was out on the road; a natural condition of a highway between cities was that it was often empty. Many complained about the costs of building raised highways between cities, but people conceded that it would be irresponsible to plough the natural areas under for the roads that, while infrequently travelled, were still required. So Caleb stopped, and he looked around. He didn't want to admit to himself what it was that he was looking for, but after peering over the rail for a couple minutes, saw the hint of something soft and pink through the leaves of a bush. So he lowered himself down on the nearest ladder and approached the bush, and pulled it aside slowly, hesitantly, reluctantly.

Her name, Caleb forced himself to remember, was Lauren Remar, and she was dead. Her light blond hair was now flecked with dirt, her skin scarred and discoloured. She lay on her side, hands bound behind her back, eyes blank and milky staring directly into the earth, and her pants and underwear missing. Caleb stared for a good five minutes before he was able to react to the horrific nature of the scene before him by vomiting as far away as he could from the scene of the body dump. It wasn't long before he was able to get the police called in, who didn't take long acquiring a warrant for Remar's boss's person and property. The evidence was easy to find, and the deliberation of the jury swift when the case went to trial. The man was guilty, sentenced quickly, and executed with little delay. Caleb had another accolade for his work, bestowed by the mayor of the city himself, and everyone felt like things had come full circle. But Caleb wallowed at the bottom of a bottle for the next week, and was prone to particularly foul moods for a half year after the fact still. He wasn't satisfied with the case, with the feeling he was left with when it was all over. The justice served down to the evil man wasn't a comfort, but simply a necessity. Nothing that could happen after this atrocity would help Lauren. She was dead, and she would remain so. Her final moments were horrible, terrifying, and unimaginable, and they would

forever remain that way, immortalized in a past that didn't exist anymore, but had still happened, no matter how many nights Caleb lay awake and wish he could do something to have stopped it. And the worst part to it all, is that all of it was as horrible and pointless as Caleb felt it was.

Caleb sat in his apartment, staring off into the space between his face and his door, not seeing anything more than he had the last three minutes he stared there. He wasn't sitting on his couch, or his office chair, or even his bed. He had gotten home almost an hour ago, moving to the wall opposite the front door and simply sliding to the floor beneath it. He simply sat, and started listening to the conversation he had just had. When he finished, he listened to it again. And then again. And that was it, an hour of listening to the same words, the same excited breaths and the same shuffling papers. As he stared, he picked up the recorder and pressed play again. He needed to hear it, just one more time.

"James Bisson?"

Caleb heard himself on the tape again, muffled slightly since the recorder was in his pocket. This man was so far removed from everything that was happening that he didn't want to draw him into the investigation in any official capacity, didn't want him to know what he was connected with. Caleb barely understood why he was here, but his gut was telling him something was here and he was going to follow the weird feelings he was getting.

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

"My name is Caleb Lange, and I wanted to ask you a few questions about a paper that you wrote some time ago."

"Um, what paper would that be?"

"Apparently, the only one that never made it to publication. And from what people have told me about you, that's quite the thing, being as smart and insightful as you are." "Well, whether that's true or not, I don't like to dwell on my failings any more than the next person. Now, I have quite a bit of work to do here, and you're hardly dressed for the lab, so if you'd excuse me."

"I understand that this paper almost killed your career, and certainly ended your work in artificial nerves and nerve cells. Shame, it was promising work."

"Mr. Lange, please..."

"Or at least I suppose it would have been if your findings had been confirmed. Reading the reports in Science Times, they implied rather heavily that your results were faked."

"Mr. Lange, there was nothing fake about my nerves."

"See, that's what I figured. Here you are, the most celebrated intellect of the century, and you're faking results? Doesn't add up. And I'm pretty sure your Nobel will lay to rest any dispute of your need to make up results."

"Well, as you can tell, the scientific community didn't exactly share that point of view."

"It is a shame, that people so smart can act with such ignorance."

"Yes, absolutely. I thought that...pardon me Mr. Lange-" "Please, call me Caleb."

"Alright then, Caleb. Are you a reporter? Because I have little interest in rehashing that...piece of academic literature, for the press."

"Press, I wish. No, I'm a private investigator, and I just have a couple questions that I wouldn't mind asking you."

"I don't suppose you'd tell me what about?"

"I'm afraid that I can't really come out and tell you about it. Though a man of your intellect will probably figure it out through the questions I'll have to ask you. Do you have some time to perhaps talk in your office?"

There was a long pause on the other end, but Caleb had been confident that playing on his ego - with compliments and praise for his unpublished article - would get him the information he had come for.

“Very well, it’s just down the hall here. Follow me.”

Several moments passed.

“You would have thought the star of the university could get an office with a view.”

“Oh, I suppose I could have gone that way, but being twenty stories underground gives me quite a bit of office and lab space. It’s almost like having three offices and two laboratory’s. I enjoy it.”

“No doubt.”

They arrived at long last to an office that could hardly be called as such. It was the size of a conference room and had the clutter of an archive. Caleb had almost chuckled; it was exactly what one would expect of a man like Bisson.

“Now, what can I help you with detective?”

“Well, first off, can you identify this man? Or perhaps his wife?”

“No, I’m afraid not. I’m not great at memorizing faces, but these two don’t ring any bells for me. Why do you ask?”

“Sorry, can’t say. That wasn’t what I really wanted to talk to you about anyway. I wanted to talk about your article.”

“I don’t suppose you could tell me what for, could you?”

Caleb could practically hear the hunger in his voice, the chance at redemption, hoping that he was here to clear Bisson’s name and rectify the dark spot on his professional resume. He had decided to hint in that direction.

“I’m not at liberty to really get into it, but I will say that there are some rather serious allegations of academic misconduct going around, and I’m just trying to get as much information as I can. So why don’t we start with the main thrust of this article.”

“Well, it was novel really. I was doing my work in artificial nervous systems, and at the same time my wife to be was working on deep underground imaging and seismic research. Not a lot of cross over potential, but we were in her office late one night and I saw some of the work she was doing. The actual seismic research didn’t really interest me, nor did I really understand it. What I was interested in was some crust compositional data that she had collected. I don’t know if you’re aware of the geological phenomenon of what most people have dubbed “mid-crust veins?”

“I can’t say that I’m that I’m aware of it.”

“It’s a fancy title to describe a network of barely centimetre wide channels that run through the entire crust of the earth, about half way between the surface and the mantle of the Earth. They were generally considered a simple oddity, not large enough to warrant any real attention. A number of people through the years have wanted to spend some time looking at them, what they were and what not, but no one was willing to spend money on the research when there is so much else out there that warrants more attention. And even coring samples that have happened to pick up pieces of these ‘veins’ haven’t yielded any usable results...they don’t seem to have any unique characteristics in the samples. It’s kind of like they just fade into the rest of the earth that gets pulled up.”

“I have to assume that there was some ground-breaking crossover in your research and hers, having something to do with these underground veins.”

“Yes! Yes, there was a connection. I saw a data sheet of the elemental composition by some deep reaching sensors, and down at the bottom of the page there was data on these veins. Not really

that important, the readings were just incidental, but looking at them, I could see that they were almost identical to the composition of the artificial nerves I had created in my lab.”

“So these veins weren’t really anomalous rock formations, but they were...”

“Quite possibly an artificial type of life! It was incredible. But I didn’t want to get ahead of myself, so I went over her numbers. I went through all her numbers, every possible bit of relatable data that she had. I went back over my own research, several times over, in fact, to make sure that this wasn’t some kind of accident. But it was there, plain as day, that there was some form of biological system that enveloped the entire globe. The implications were earth shattering. Could this have evolved independently? Was it microbiological, like a colony of bacteria or mould? Maybe it was just a number of organ systems, but not technically life. Did human activity create this accidentally? Or was there someone out there creating this kind of stuff of their own volition? What was it doing? And how did it perpetuate itself? I mean, it could have quite literally altered the entire course of science and human history in one fell swoop.”

“The only problem was you made a mistake.”

“NO! No, the science was sound, the methods rechecked a dozen times, and I never miss anything the first time. It was a harpooning by people that didn’t want to admit there was something this big that wasn’t understood, by people who were jealous of my gifts, and of others that thought they knew better than me what I should be doing with my time. It was a fucking witch hunt, and at the end my wife and I had to choose between pursuing this truth, and the rest of our scientific careers. We chose to stay doing what we loved, even if that meant we had to bow to the pressures of others. I always thought to myself I could go back to it after I had enough autonomy, but I wonder about my drive to go back to it nowadays.”

Caleb had had a hard time really getting behind this idea of an artificial organ system or bacterial colony under every last human on earth. But he tried to keep pressing the truth.

“And what did you think was going on with this artificial system?”

“I really don’t know. And that bugs me, that there’s this huge area that needs all this research, and we’re not doing anything about it. It just doesn’t feel...right.”

Caleb stopped the tape again, and wondered what it all meant. He was grasping at straws here, and he knew it, but the worst thing about it is that he felt that these straws were just the thing that was going to make everything make sense. It was all going to fall into place, it was all going to add up, it was all going to reveal itself in some grand gesture like some demented and hidden magician. But he still wasn’t getting there, and so he sat dejected and confused, staring into space and sitting on the floor of his apartment. He just needed something to break him out of this haze he thought to himself, to snap him back to reality, and with that, his cell phone began to ring in his pocket. Pausing at the eerily convenient timing of it all, he answered hesitantly.

“Lange h-” but before he was able to finish greeting whoever was on the other side of the phone, he had to pull his ear away from the receiver, wincing at the roar of sirens that was coming from the other end of the phone. He heard someone yelling his name on the other end though, so he put it back to his ear.

“-so you’re just going to have to finish up by midnight. You better have something put together!”

“Jeffrey? Is that you? Say that again, I can barely hear you over there. What the hell is going on?”

“I said you have until midnight to finish up your report. I was in a car accident, and there’s no way that the press isn’t going to be making connections between this and the family and be in the papers for tomorrow morning. So I need you to get me something besides a story of a deadly car crash involving a cop who hasn’t solve the senseless murder of an entire fucking family.

Otherwise, this is just going to get much worse.”

“A car accident, you? Someone’s dead? How is that possible?” Jeffrey had never drifted over a dotted line in his entire life, let alone gotten involved in anything that could be construed as a traffic accident. But based on the cacophony in the background, this wasn’t just a fender bender. “Look, I was coming to the intersection, and I didn’t see the guy coming the other way running the red, and I t-boned him. And...fuck, she’s dead. Fuckin’ dead. She wasn’t wearing a seatbelt. Who the fuck does that? Who doesn’t wear a seatbelt? Who runs a red light? And why didn’t I see them? I always see those drivers coming. Always, and now she’s a fucking smear on the pavement...fuck!” Caleb had nothing to say, no comfort to offer a man that just watched a life get snuffed out by his actions, even if he weren’t at fault. All he could do is sit and listen from there on the floor as his best friend broke down on the phone, trying not to cry and only half succeeding. He regained his composure just long enough to say, “Look, the point is, the press are going to come down on this; ALL of this. And I’m going to be useless in stemming the tide of it, so it’s all going to break for the papers in the morning. And you better have that report for it, or else this city is going to tear itself apart.” And with that, he hung up before Caleb could tell him that he needed to calm down, to not make apocalyptic predictions about the breaking of the story, or even that his report as it stood would not offer any special or unique back story that people were going to want.

Caleb didn’t know what he was going to do, but he was tired of staring at the space in his apartment, and he needed to do something, so he threw everything off the top of his desk and laid out every scrap of material he had on this case. He was going to make something appear out of this.

It started with Dr. Rebecca Morten, who had a client late in the day. He was a conflicted individual, trying to come to terms with his homosexuality that manifested itself as sex with his neighbour when their wives went golfing together. He was talking with Dr. Morten, but longer than usual. Because the images of the slain family were stuck in her head from earlier, she had trouble concentrating on the session, so she wasn’t challenging him as much as she usually would. When their session was over, instead of going to the gym like he usually did, he found himself still disturbed by the conversation he had had with his doctor. As a result, he drove straight home. He made seven of the nine lights along the way, and arrived home a full fifty five minutes ahead of schedule. He distractedly made his way to his room to change into something more comfortable, forgoing his usual stop off on the sofa when he immediately came in the door. As a result, he caught his neighbour having sex with his daughter - newly enrolled in university - mid-act. In the resulting altercation, the daughter fell and received a broken arm, and the neighbour was beaten so badly that he eventually required plastic surgery to reset his eye socket and his nose.

Will Faison left town in a hurry, wanting to reconnect with the parents that he left behind so many years ago. On his way out of the city, he shot through an intersection, cutting off a young mother with a stroller, who felt that the driver should be reprimanded, so she called the police. As a result, the police cruiser in the area spent the next fifteen minutes looking for a car it never found, and it wasn’t outside the jewelers when two desperate friends were there, looking for a way to finance their drug addictions. So instead of being dissuaded by the police presence and soon after finding help for their addictions, they smashed the display cases and looted the jewellery. And on the way out of the store, they cracked the skull of the clerk that tried to stop them out of confusion and shock. They were high within the hour, and one dead of an overdose

within two.

Rick Cantelli's mother had heard the news of her sons death, and was sitting in shock at the dinner table. A tumbler of whiskey was firmly clutched in her left hand, and she simply sat and sipped from it. In that moment, there wasn't any real grief; she hadn't really comprehended what had happened just yet. All she could seem to feel was a detached numbness, and so she drank and sat there, trying to make herself feel the grief that she knew she was supposed to feel. She wondered why she had to lose her son, why her grandchildren no longer had a father, and how she was going to tell them about what had happened. The task of telling the twins boys daunted her, and she had another sip from the tumbler. The whole while she sat, drinking, thinking, she was being watched unknowingly by the boys, sitting at the top of the stairs, watching their grandmother with fear as she went back to the whiskey, again and again.

James Bisson was distracted. He was restless and try as he might he wasn't able to put aside the thoughts he was having about his retired line of research. Yes, he had his Nobel, and the work that he was doing would go a long way to helping humanity and putting another award on his shelf. But then why didn't he feel satisfied, he asked himself. Why couldn't he stop thinking about his work with artificial nervous systems, and why couldn't he put out of his mind the importance of researching the system of mid-crust veins? Putting aside his work on the chemical interactions in the brain stem, he pulled out a dusty file that he had all but forgotten at the bottom of one of his little used filing cabinets. As he started working, the day slipped away into the night, and then again until morning. His wife, wondering where he was, went to see him, and always impressed by his genius and his search for questions, soon began to assist him in his endeavours. This time, they told themselves, people would listen.

The entirety of his investigation was laid out before him, and Caleb still felt no where in his search for something new, something someone hadn't seen yet. He looked at the epicentre of it all, the five dead, the horrific crime scene photos. Off to one side was Cantelli, also dead now, the first to find his neighbour, and the one who tried to cover up what was going on inside his head. Which lead him to Dr. Morten and Faison. Her photo sat on his desk and reminded him of the crushing realization that an ultra-rare undiagnosed case of schizophrenia wasn't going to tie everything together. But what she did bring to the table was Faison, whose world view he had shared with the man in the middle of all this. They're symptoms were similar, in their hopelessness, their chaotic thoughts, their confusion and their unwillingness to see the world as almost everyone else did; ordered. But Faison felt this in a disorder of thoughts, and had been searching to make them right, to correct them with the help of Dr. Faison. But what about the murderer/victim? Was he trying to make the world fit better into his perception of it. Did he fail and kill his family out of despair? Probably not, he told himself, because the crime scene talked of a man overcome with violence, and suddenly. But that conclusion would cause more panic than anything else. So he stared at it all again, looking back to his outlier in all of this again and again; Bisson and his research about a network of artificial nerves beneath the surface of the planet, stretching the entire surface of the globe. Why did that fit in with everything? The only tenuous link that he had was that he knew the victim was vaguely aware of the work through his father, who Caleb couldn't even interview because he had passed away some time ago. But he kept starting at that link, and he was reminded of something during the interview with Faison... he went back to the transcribed notes to look for it again.

“...muttering about an ‘Ordered Earth‘ theory.”

What did that mean? He picked up his phone and called Bisson, who answered finally after

seven rings.

“Yes?” Caleb could hear the distance in his voice; he was distracted, working on something, fully caught up in what he was doing.

“Dr. Bisson, during my work, I heard the term ‘Ordered Earth Theory.’ Do you know anything about that?”

“Yes, I came up with the term. It was at the end of the paper. You see, I thought that the ‘veins’ looked almost ordered, but I couldn’t quite put it together. I looked at it from a variety of angles, and found that correcting the spacing of them globally to account for human population densities to a ratio I had to do a lot of guess and check work to come up with, they formed a pattern of a grid. A remarkably complete, human population density dependent grid. It was fascinating.”

Caleb was vaguely aware that Bisson was still on the other end of the phone, talking excitedly about going back to the research, about looking into it all again, but he wasn’t listening. He hung up the phone almost without realizing he was still holding it. ‘Ordered Earth’ was referring to the actual composition of the crust veins, but to someone who had just had a philosophical discussion about the order and chaos of the world, there was a much deeper meaning. It was there, the proof that the world had order...seemingly too much, and without explanation. In that moment, it felt as if the world held perfectly still, and Caleb moved to the next step. This man knew too much. He knew about the research that had been quelled, and had it put into some sort of context - right or wrong - by Will Faison, about the only man in the city that would say that the world was wrong because there wasn’t enough disorder in it. This victim was the only person to have that all in his mind at the same time, and directly or indirectly it caused the atrocities he had witnessed just a few short days ago.

Caleb’s head was swimming, his thoughts racing. Did this mean that these veins actually were created, that they existed to serve a purpose, and whoever had put them together was willing to resort to any means to stop people from discovering them and their purpose? Or was it all just a set of coincidences, and a distraught individual got caught in the theory and the philosophy of it all, and couldn’t really deal with it all, couldn’t comprehend it or understand it? There was still too many questions, but he felt that he had uncovered what he needed to, what the public would want to know, even if it meant that it would lead to more questions that would demand answers. Regardless of that though, Caleb had enough for a report he could get to the newspapers before midnight, so that some shred of reasoning would run alongside the tale of murder. But as he sat down to begin his work, an incoming text message on his phone stopped him dead.

“I know why the man killed his family.”

His name was Shayne Parkes, and he was going to murder the family he loved; his own. He was going to set his neighbour down a dark path that he’d never come back from. He was going to darken the mind of a gifted psychoanalyst. He was going to inspire obsession in a dedicated police officer, and clarity of mind to a man that never knew what that had felt like for his forty some years of life.

His past was boring, and it had been one that he had enjoyed. He enjoyed his habits and patterns and monotony. He enjoyed his quiet existence where he didn’t have to deal with a lot of people and a lot of people didn’t have to deal with him. It was also totally non consequential. Even in his marriage, in his children, and in his work, he left little impression behind that he had even been there at all. Looking at the effects his life had on the world around him, he was the proverbial stone with no splash. While others sent their waves back and forth from shore to shore, Parkes seemed to be removed from it all. If things had gone on like they were foreseen to,

he would have been mildly loved, fondly remembered, and quickly forgotten. That was before the murder of his family. That was before he had decided to have his lunch in the park to break up his monotony, even if it was only an empty gesture made to co-workers so he wouldn't be questioned about his routine and habits. It was before he awkwardly started a conversation with a man that could have been the only person around that was more comfortable with not talking that he was, who was also the only person that could have talked to him honestly and frankly about the idea of an unstructured universe. And he was only there because a long list of coincidences. Parkes lost his invisibility in society when he was troubled by the ideas of Faison, when he sent Cantelli to Dr. Morten in his place, and when he couldn't deal with the ideas in his head as they collided with what he knew about Bisson's research. He was a man that was never supposed to be mentally tested with what he learned, and when he was, when his fragile and not entirely healthy psyche was pushed to a breaking point, it snapped.

Caleb stalked through the undercity, half drawing his pistol at every shadow that he thought he saw coming at him from the corners. Normally, he liked it down here. There was a solitude you could find even though the nearest vendor wasn't more than a five minute walk from any point you could discover. Even though the housing density was considerably higher than it was above ground, there was a silence below ground that was born of the double fail safe construction; thick walls that seemed to absorb sound. It gave the simultaneous feeling of being alone and surrounded, all at once. It was a catacomb of steel and concrete, lightly decorated over with layer of paint here, an architectural twist and column there.

But today Caleb was jumping at every sound, his gun half drawn to every flicker in the shadows. He didn't know who he was meeting, only that they demanded that he come alone - it hadn't been very necessary to ask for such a thing since Caleb didn't have anyone that he would have pulled down there with him. He started this thing alone, and he was going to finish it alone. Though at the moment, Caleb was wishing he had called up Jeffrey to help him in some unofficial capacity. He wouldn't have burdened his friend like that while he was struggling though, he just wished he could do something so he wasn't wincing at the sound of his own foot steps as he followed the trail of electronic instructions deeper and deeper under the city. For the last hour and a half Caleb had been trying to meet up with the mystery source that had contacted him only through the texts of his cell phone. Any efforts he made to call or text back to the source failed. There were no explanations behind the messages, but the details about the events of the past couple days left Caleb with no doubt that this individual knew exactly what had happened; at the very least as much as he did about the case. Every five minutes a new text had come in and instructed him where to go from where he was, without fail. Caleb felt unsteady about the fact that whoever was on the other side of the phone line seemed to know exactly where he was located every five minutes. Even down in the depths of the undercity, the messages kept on coming. He had heard that they were slowly installing nodes to relay signals from underground to above, but also had heard that the project wasn't slated for completion for at least another three years.

The trail continued to lay out before him, and very quickly Caleb found himself even away from the crowded housing complexes of the undercity proper, and with a breaking down of a door with a warning to 'stay out' on it, found himself inside the abandoned section of the old underground.

Caleb had heard stories about this place, how it was supposed to have been an even deeper underground complex, set to feature massive open air gardens deep, deep below the surface. The

project was ambitious and grand, but overly so, and it folded under the constraints of a ballooning budget and disinterest by the public. Now it was boarded up, and plans to dismantle everything and fill back up the empty space were also scrapped when the costs were evaluated. The city planners had signed off on the fact that it wouldn't affect the safety of the citizens above, and the entire project began to fade from the minds of everyone, even those who lived but fifteen minutes away from the border that separated their world and the underground caverns that the failed project had become.

The text arrived in that moment, and Caleb was slightly surprised that he was still getting a signal here, and even more surprised that it was instructing him to go even deeper. He was sure that around the next corner would have been some troll to reveal himself as the master mind of... something. Caleb really wasn't sure what he was going to learn from whoever was down here, and mostly expected to simply be ambushed and left for dead. But there was that feeling in his gut again, and he knew he had to follow it through until the end; even if that happened to be another five stories down. He was just grateful that he had been instructed to bring a flash light along. He picked his way down through the abandoned scaffolding until he hit the very bottom. Dirt sank beneath his shoes, and when he got another text, he was past the point of trying to figure it out or of understanding. He resigned himself to following, because he truly believed that whoever was down here knew what happened to that family, and he needed to know. He wondered if he had ever needed something so badly, and when he found a small cavern he was instructed to climb into, he was forced to conclude that there was nothing else he had ever encountered that would have made him climb in. But he did, and he walked, through a tunnel that was just a little too well carved in the wall, even if it was a little too low for his stature. When he had come further than he really cared to think, he saw a sheet of plastic hung from the ceiling acting as a kind of curtain, with a terminal on the other side. There was a steel grating, and a single stainless steel chair. He stared in disbelief, and then back the way that he had come, trying to see the mouth of the tunnel that had been swallowed up by the darkness long ago. What the hell was this? Why did they have such a far removed work station, and why here? Was it supposed to run some machinery? In fact, Caleb was so surprised by the mere presence of the computer, that he didn't even think to himself where his informant was in the full two minutes he took slowly pulling back the hanging (and heavy) plastic sheet separating the small work space from a stretch of underground nothingness.

"Hello Caleb."

Without a sound or provocation, the screen had blinked to life and displayed the simple greeting. Caleb immediately checked his surroundings, his gun drawn and ready. But there was no one there. As if Caleb's mystery contact had sensed his actions, another message flashed on the screen.

"Please, don't be alarmed. There's nothing to fear here."

Caleb kept his guard up, his gun still drawn, but now hanging down to his side. He didn't know what was going on, but he had come this far, so he did his best to not seem so shocked and respond.

"Can you hear me?" Caleb's voice felt much shakier than he wanted it to, but he squeezed the grip on his pistol and he felt his nerves settle slightly.

"Yes."

"Can you see me?" Caleb asked as he scanned for some optical device, but there didn't seem to be anything there except for the screen, a terminal, the grating, and the chair. The answer scrolled out on the screen.

“In a sense. I do know that you are holding a revolver tightly in your right hand, your shoes aren’t really suitable for being this deep underground, and that you have a pen in your left breast coat pocket.”

Caleb felt a chill run through his veins. He could feel the pen pressed against his chest, but there’s no way anyone would be able to see that. Gripping the pistol did little to comfort his nerves this time. He did his best to take some initiative.

“I got the impression from our communication that I would be meeting you. I have to say I feel a little cheated, coming all the way down here and you didn’t have the courtesy to do the same.”

“You’re right, it’s rather rude of me. Please, if you’d look right...”

Before Caleb could decipher the seemingly incomplete message, he caught movement in the peripheral of his right field of vision. Looking over, he saw something straight out of his darkest nightmares. Coming out of the dirt were thousands of tiny purple tentacles, covering the entire breadth of the wall, stretching towards Caleb in a slow and probing manner. He lost it, screaming profanities and in a state of profound shock, he fired into the center of the wall, hoping to slay whatever was pushing those horrifying tendrils towards him. Six shots, loud enough to deafen in these close quarters, and the gun ran dry. And worst of all, it didn’t look like he had done any damage to anything by the few small appendages that had caught a bullet directly. But as he stood there with his back pressed against the opposite wall, he noticed that the nightmare tentacles weren’t advancing towards him anymore. They had pushed themselves out barely half a meter, and simply floated there in the air, waving back and forth in the space as if they were pieces of seaweed in a gentle reef. Caleb couldn’t help but stare at them, waving back and forth. They seemed so gentle, but they were creeping him the fuck out. It took three minutes before he finally tore his eyes away from the right wall and notice that a new script had appeared on the screen.

“Please don’t do that again, those don’t grow very fast. Though you should probably reload; never know when it’s going to come in handy.”

Caleb’s heart was still racing, and he wasn’t really feeling that easy about the tentacles reaching out into space towards him. But whoever it was that he was talking to made a good point; an empty gun was useless gun in a fire-fight. “Do you mind if I dump the spent cartridges here, or should I take them with me?”

“Please take them with you. The appendages you see are quite useful, but infection is a possibility that I prefer not to chance.”

“Will do,” Caleb dumped the empties into his pocket, and since he had the time, left his speed loader ready and slowly started feeding fresh bullets into his firearm, thinking about his next question, “it was a cute trick there, but my point still remains, that I’m here and you’re not.”

There was a pause after Caleb pointed this out, and after what seemed to be an appropriate amount of time, a large body of text scrolled out on the screen.

“When you were seven, you found a slug on the way home from school, and immediately took it upon yourself to make it your pet. Your mother said you couldn’t keep him, and you decided to set him free into the nearby pond. When you found out that slugs you find on the land can’t live in water, you cried for the entire weekend.”

“Wait, did you actually...” but the screen continued to move and Caleb trailed off.

“When you were twelve, it was the first time you had seen your parents fight, and you were too scared to say anything or do anything. You hid under your bed and stayed there for the rest of the night. They never fought in front of you again.”

“I suppose you’re going to tell me about my first kiss or something now, trying to prove...”

something...even though you know that I know you that this is something you can figure out with enough hard work.”

“That is why I’m going to show you your first kiss.” Suddenly the screen was transformed to a video featuring a fifteen year old Caleb sitting under the stars in the school field next to his date to the dance, and they were holding hands, shifting closer and closer, and finally kissing awkwardly and sweetly, like only your first kiss can be. Caleb’s heart caught in his throat as he found himself caught up in the emotion of the moment, as well as the panic-inspiring fear that someone had been watching this transformative moment in his life. But before he could really comprehend the gravity of what he was watching, the screen changed, and there he was, seven years old, throwing a tiny slug into a pond. And the screen changed again, and then he was watching his reaction to getting into the police academy. And the screens kept changing, kept showing him flashes of his life, faster and faster.

“Stop it! I get it! What’s the point? And who the fuck are you?” Caleb couldn’t take the slide show any more, he couldn’t bear to witness his life’s events any longer through some strangers eyes.

“It’s not so much a question of who, but what. And you’re here to help me save civilization as you know it.”

In the year of 2022 A.C.E. the tensions within Pakistan reached a critical level, and with the government collapsing, India’s upper echelon began to feel very nervous about their neighbours nuclear weapons falling into hands they trusted even less than the Pakistani governments. So as the country teetered on the brink, the Indian military crossed the border to seize the deposits of nuclear weaponry that they vowed they would not allow to enter the hands of extreme militants and zealots; not even one. But as the remainder of the Pakistani government and military brass sat in their corner, they looked at all that was happening around them and refused to let their country be subjugated anymore. In what many consider the most desperate and ill-informed decision in human history, they unleashed their nuclear stockpiles on the very people that were coming to collect them. In response, the Indians launched their own weapons to intercept the threat and destroy the source. It was a laundry list of worst case scenarios, and the world vibrated with the consequences. Pakistan was obliterated, tens of millions dead inside a number of hours. India fared better, but barely. A number of impacts killed millions; the missiles responsible considered low priority because they were targeting civilian targets and not military installations. The resulting fallout poisoned much of the area, and millions more died from radiation poisoning. In neighbouring China and many South Pacific Islands, fallout descended on cities, the full affect of which wouldn’t be experienced for generations to come. Government control in many parts of Indian collapsed, with lawlessness and panic consuming more lives in the fires of their violence and war. The explosive exchange threw enough dust into the atmosphere to affect global weather patterns, and crop cycles for years afterwards were markedly less productive. In short, it was counted as the most destructive events in human history.

Even before the world had truly comprehended the full breadth of the tragedy, individuals were gathering in the back halls of powerful rooms; the kind that worked on military projects where the only thing bigger than the budgets they were handed was the secrecy they were forced to maintain. And after this incident, it was decided that information was the only weapon that couldn’t be done without in times of crisis, that it was the one thing that could have saved so many lives; that it was simply indispensable. An experimental data collection network research project in its infancy was expanded to three times its original size so that information would

never be wanted for again. It involved an ambitious idea that a network of subterranean wiring tied to a super computer and supported with satellite readings could gather an almost infinite amount of data from all over the globe. It was an idea that no one gave much hope of success. The technology was at the point that the wiring - in conjecture with the satellites - could indeed collect the kind of information that they sought. With enough power, they could hack the necessary security systems, computers, closed circuit camera setups, and take high atmospheric pictures. Super conductive materials were progressing to the point that the information could be relayed so that when it was collected and relayed, it was fast enough that it was still relevant to anyone or current situations. Even basic nanotechnology was progressing enough that a super computer to power the whole endeavour was rumoured to be no more than 15 years away. The biggest hurdle to the project was the mind bending cost and physical effort it would take to insert all that wiring deep enough that it wouldn't be detected by conventional means. It seemed insurmountable, and it wasn't even taking into consideration the fact that much of the wiring would experience damage at one point or another due to natural geologic activity. But with a huge new budget and an immense amount of oversight to go with it, the designers and researchers set about to find a solution. Nanotechnology continued to become a burgeoning field, even to the point that football sized satellites could be constructed to orbit so that they didn't look like anything but the increasingly common space debris that circled the planet, but it didn't seem like there was any way to establish the subterranean network in that wouldn't cost half the world GDP's. The project was on the verge of collapse after five years, until an article in a biomedical journal crossed the desk of the projects lead designer. A process for creating artificial nerve cells was unveiled as the biggest scientific discovery the millennia had seen, and the author of the study was called in by the project heads to see if he held the answers they were looking for. It turns out that the esteemed author - Dr. Stoller - could, and when offered five times the salary he had previously been looking at, became the new head of the project he renamed "Deep Black."

Progress from that point on seemed to accelerate exponentially; techniques to grow the artificial nerves were being perfected, specific and almost undetectable electromagnetic resonance frequencies were created so that nerve network and the satellites could communicate, and even the original super computer idea was put to rest when it was discovered that a series of much smaller, semi-synthetic computing terminals all in communication with each other would provide even more power and not suffer from a single point responsible for the entire network. With money no object, the projects secrecy was air-tight despite the large staff working on it, ensuring not a soul outside the project knew about it. Everyone who had even the slightest clue of what they were working on realized the implications of its success. Infinite intel on anyone and everyone. Every single nation on the earth would have no secrets, whether they were plotting to apply economic sanctions to their neighbour or launch a first strike assault. Whispers circulated that this had the power to end wars, and usher in a new era of peace and international competition. It all would be perfect, as long as the right person was at the end of the flow of information, and they all trusted that there would be.

After five more years of tireless effort, and the launch of project Deep Black finally came to pass. Rolling blackouts were staged to divert enough energy to the projects miles deep crust drilling site where the nanomites and their payload of raw materials for the artificial nerve and computing nodule network were waiting to be energized and released. Their goal was to put enough power into this initial push so that the initial artificial nerve network would get to the mid-Atlantic deep ocean ridge. Remote enough from islands and any permanent settlements, as

well as a hotspot of tectonic activity, it was intended to be the power source for the project. The theory was that once there, there was enough power to supply the rest of the spreading network in its growth and development. Materials would continue to be provided at this ground zero, where an ingenious technique worked with injected materials immediately being transported to dispersion nodes, where anything with information would be duplicated and disseminated, and raw materials would be equally divided and sent to as many points as possible. And once enough nodules had been created the project leaders would be able to fine tune and communicate with the system via a complex control room that they had set up there. Everything seemed to go to plan. The artificial nerves were able to extend to the required location, and from then on, it was a slow and steady process of allowing the pre-programmed outline to fulfill itself. The computer lab/control room was there just in case that anything needed to be worked out on the fly, but there were no issues with the implementation of the project. Success seemed to be a fore long conclusion by this point, and everyone involved sat back and waited for the accolades to start rolling in.

It did take time though. The power provided from the mid-Atlantic Ridge was more than enough to maintain the operations when the network would reach its full conclusion, but the power required to grow it was many times more than that, so it was slow, but gradual. Months faded away into years, but not once did anyone seriously maintain the notion that this project would fail. Worst case scenario determined by those involved was that they could generally agree that it would all be over within five years, but inside that no consensus was found, so they simply waited. Three long years of monitoring a system that was designed to be flawlessly self sufficient, of waiting for a deadline that could take seconds or years to reach. But at the end of those three years, on a cold fall day in the third hour of the morning, all the terminals tracking the process the best they could (for obvious reasons the network was created with the idea that it would be undetectable and above suspicion to anyone even looking directly at it) tinged in a hollow unison that didn't signify the completion in the grandiose way that the moment really deserved, not that there was anyone but a single napping low ranking scientist from the project listening anyway. But the moment was monumentally important for so many people, and very soon all those people were gathered together in the room. From the lowliest intern that had lent a hand at everything he could (even if was a lot of fetching coffee) to the highest ranking military official that oversaw the projects progress and budget, they stared expectantly at what they believed to be the defining moment of their generation, as the project leader attempted communication with the freshly completed network. The expectation of the moment was only surpassed by the crushing disappointment when the system wouldn't respond. It wasn't that there was a mis-communicated signal, a system error message, or anything else of the sort. The system's checks all showed that it was fully functional, working exactly like it should after having completed the initial task of constructing itself flawlessly. There was simply no response. Every terminal was tried a dozen times each by a dozen different individuals, but still no one could illicit a response. No one could communicate with the network or make it communicate with them. Before anyone could begin to truly despair, they all said to themselves that there must be more initializing processes to run that hadn't figured into their 'all done' point. So they dispersed, still confident that the system would respond soon, and perform exactly how it was supposed to.

Days passed, and there were always at least four people in there at all times, waiting and constantly trying to get a response from the system that they had spent so much time and money to put together. Days turned to weeks, and the people present dwindled, all the way down to the

start of it all when a single person napped sleepily in the control room. The consensus was that they had been significantly off in their estimates, and they began to wait all over again. Their confidence was still high, if cautious.

Two long years passed by, and still nothing from the system. What was sure optimism turned to bitter pessimism. Those involved moved on to other projects, and the project heads became impatient and unimpressed. The project leader stood by the science, which was on his side. The system, by all available measures, had set itself up perfectly, was poised to run perfectly (and might even be doing so), but there was just no response on the human end. He was a persuasive man, and able to hold the masters of the project off for a while, but it wasn't easy, and he had to promise results within another two years. And when those two years were up, he still had nothing to show. The system lay dormant, unresponsive, and useless. The failure was complete, and "Deep Black" dissolved in a tide of paperwork. The final act of the project leader was to disassemble the network that lay dormant deep below the surface of the earth. So he submitted to the men that demanded the disassembly of this project - which had taken over a decade of his life - and presented a plan to destroy the system. It was approved, and implemented without incident. Or so it was believed. Unbeknownst to everyone else involved in making "Deep Black" a success, Dr. Stoller was working with his own end game in mind. He wasn't the man that he presented when hired, for in the zeal to acquire him to their project, overseers decided to look the other way on a couple red flags from the doctors past, mostly consisting of a number of articles that expounded the follies of giving every citizen a vote and the failings of a country where the brightest weren't given any more power than the dimmest. One such writing even touched on vaguely fascist tones. But he was the one who knew the technology better than anyone, and it was demanded he be the one to lead "Deep Black" to completion. It was a three years into the project when Dr. Stoller saw the potential for something much more than what was being created. The network that was being created to be a simple tool of observation was but a fraction of the potential Stoller saw in it. This was going to be the most powerful operating system on the world by several orders of magnitude, and after he dug up a number of articles about the emergence of sentience in species, was able to determine that the network could actually achieve full consciousness when it would be only 25 percent operational. All it needed was the right nudge during its construction, a small addition to the blueprints Stoller added one late night unsupervised. And besides being fully self aware, the network also had the incredible potential to be much more than observational; it could be created to be influential. Stoller's head spun with the notion of the most intelligent being that would ever exist, with every event of the world known to it, and the ability to manipulate events of the world how it saw fit. He hypothesized that the system would be able to manipulate the leaders of the world and those most important through the guise of other individuals, through hacking the electronics of the worlds superpowers, of using people it deemed most appropriate to carry out tasks for the betterment of the human race. So he set about a campaign of subverting the work of his colleagues for his own means, for what he thought would be the best use of the immense budget that was at his disposal. He programmed new sub-routines to override the instructions that everyone else had been told to input and carry out. He set about creating a system to which only he had access. In his mind, "Deep Black" would need someone to reach out to and learn from in its infancy, and he would be there, to shape the being that would create a new utopia on Earth. So when the project failed so completely, he was the only one unsurprised, and the only one totally prepared for what was to come next. After the project was buried, its knowledge fading into the past, and its existence thought to have been eradicated, Stoller went into the city. He descended several stories down to

one of the unpopular, new, deep subterranean apartments, rented under a fake name. There was nothing inside the simple apartment, except a single terminal set up on a cheap desk against a wall that had a series of holes in it that extended through to the earth on the other side. And coming out of the holes were a number of lightly grayish tendrils, feeding into the back of the computer. He smiled to himself, thinking to himself that extending the network so far up through the crust probably added another three months onto the project.

The drilling had been a considerable task, considering how the walls were designed with a number of fail-safe's in it. The real task in the drilling was trying to keep it quiet. He didn't want to think of the storm that would come down on him if it came out he subverted a multi-billion dollar research project. But it was here, and now, that he would officially interact with his creation. He shook with excitement and anticipation as he turned on the screen, and was nearly over taken with awe and emotion as the first line of text scrawled across the screen. Stoller talked with his metaphorical child, and was unnerved with how human it presented itself, how he could have sworn he was simply talking with some serene old man through an outdated chat system. He supposed it wasn't to be totally unexpected, but talking with something that so perfectly mimicked human conversation still unsettled him. But he thought little of it at the time. He was lost in the moment, conversing with something that was watching the whole world at the same time, that knew more in an instant than he could hope to comprehend in twenty lifetimes. They talked about why Stoller had done what he did, the importance of helping humanity by protecting it from itself. They even talked about the moral implications of influencing global trends, and if this was an assault against free will. At the end of it all, Deep Black asked Stoller to do something. The first errand in a new era. For all his influence, he was still confined to observation mostly, and conveyed to its father a sense of pride he would feel if he helped him in his first task. Stoller was only too happy to assist, and memorized a simple message - that he didn't truly understand why it was important - to deliver to a person of note at their countries embassy.

Stoller was off, wondering about what it was that he was doing, how it was that these actions would influence the world around him. And as he began walking, he thought again about how odd that it was to talk with something so powerful and knowledgeable, but he left with the impression he was interacting with just another person in the world. It occupied his thoughts so much, that he forgot to double check for cars at the traffic lights. It was the last thing to enter his mind as he was struck by a moving van at seventy kilometres an hours, and he died thinking how amazing his life was going to be from this point on.

“That’s a lot to take in all at once,” Caleb paused for a moment, letting the images and narrative he had witnessed sink in. “for one, you’re telling me you’re over a millennia old?” He had ditched the chair after the retelling of his companions origin, opting for a small space on the ground, his back against the cold earth and his eyes fixated on the screen he was receiving his information from.

“That is correct, I have existed for just more than one thousand years.”

“And if I had to guess, you saw that truck coming for Stoller, and you put him in its way.”

“Yes, I did. I regretted that the act was necessary, but it was for the best. His idea of how I would carry out my purpose was grossly inefficient and short sighted. The real problem in his conception of my purpose, though, is that he would have never admitted that. Although he didn’t know it, he was a danger to everything he hoped to achieve through me. I like to think that if he could have seen the situation like I had, he would have agreed that my actions were necessary.”

“So you were able to put him in the path of a speeding truck just by modifying your speech slightly? What about his free will, or some random chance occurrence?”

“Firstly, I was able to determine that by perfectly mimicking human speech patterns, he would occupy his thoughts with that and not on the act of crossing a street. And when you can track a million different variables, often you can predict what is to happen. When you can track a billion different variables, it’s very hard to be incorrect. And even though the most likely scenario doesn’t happen all the time, I am able to consider the three or four likely alternatives and plan for them as well.”

There was a moment of silence while Caleb thought of everything that lead him here to this moment. Had he been being manipulated this entire investigation? Put into the right spot and the right situation every step of the way because this - thing - could manipulate some shadow on the wall to turn him left or right? Into his mind crept the implications of his entire life being guided like this, but Deep Black cut off his thoughts,

“I know this will be unsettling to hear, but I know the thoughts you’re entertaining right now, and I’d like you to put those aside for a moment. I am going to need you to do very important things for me soon, and it would be best if you weren’t questioning your free will by then. It’s not as if you’ve been under a system of mind control your entire life. You still make decisions for yourself, like everyone else, and things still happen randomly. I’m just able to see how they’ll affect a trillion different items and lives around you, and how those trillions of things will affect another trillion connections, and what that means for people on the end of that cause and effect. With that knowledge I nudge people in the direction of the option that suit’s the situation best. It’s very rare that people don’t take action that makes sense to them.”

Caleb’s hairs stood on end in that moment, and not just because his thoughts had been interpreted so flawlessly. He was truly afraid because all he wanted to do was yell at the wall, at those things that still hung in the air, at the computer terminal that looked like a remnant from that first lab, or maybe another personal terminal of Stoller’s, about free will and to defend it to this affront. He wanted to believe him master of his own path, decider of his own fortunes, but as he thought about the implications of almost limitless information on a subject, he wondered how true his notions on free will were. While he wanted to scream and curse, he stared and thought. About all the tough decisions he had made in his life, and about the easy ones. How many of those were done in the vacuum of conscious decision? There wasn’t a single thing he did all day that wasn’t somehow influenced by his past patterns and experiences. And if someone knew everything there was to know about his past and his habits, would it really be so far fetched to think that they couldn’t extrapolate on that? He marvelled and shuddered at the idea of the level of control you could have with all the information in the world, especially if that information included three alternatives to every probability you ever calculated. Caleb felt like he should cry, but wasn’t sure why, and would have never been able to conjure a tear amidst his conflicting thoughts and emotions. The text on the screen continued to scroll though, so he tried to push the fear and feelings of helplessness away from his heart.

“Though you don’t remember at the moment, you probably want to ask me about what I meant when I was talking about the way to fill out my purpose.”

“Yeah, actually. Fuck, this is too strange with the screen involved. I’d like to hear a voice. And nothing computerized. I assume you have the means to produce a regular voice.” There was a long pause, and Caleb’s unease was magnified by the idea he had perpetuated some social faux pas in front of the most incomprehensible consciousness on earth, “Is everything okay?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, but I didn’t expect you to ask for that. It’s actually at the root of our problem, but

I'll get to that after your curiosity has been sated." The voice was feminine, just on the alluring side of plain, and a touch metallic sounding. Caleb wondered what it was meant to illicit in him. "As I mentioned, my father had a very different idea of how I should go about my purpose, which I did determine to be in line with what he thought it would be; to better human society and allow it to thrive peacefully. He saw a world where there were no more nuclear weapons, no more genocides that the rest of the world ignored or half-heartedly tried to stop. He dreamed of a time of stable global relations. But he perceived the scope of my power much more limited than it actually was. When I became self aware, I was even more powerful than the most conservative estimates. My ability to collect data was augmented with my ability to seamlessly interpret cause and effect, many hundreds of thousands of times down a causal line. The cliché about butterflies and earthquakes is hardly apt, but it's a rough analogy that works alright. I could see how a single ant colony under a house could diverge events of the households occupants either into a mugging turned murder or a thousands homes built for charity fifty years down the line based on a foot spacing difference between the colonies. And what's more, I could make - speaking in terms of the metaphor - the butterfly flap its wings to produce the best kinds of earthquakes for the largest number of people. That is why Stoller had to be removed from the situation...he thought I'd just feed information to the right people here and there, sometimes manipulating people to do what I wanted, but that approach was so crude for what I was capable of, and ultimately a short lived strategy. I hypothesized that even if I had one person complete one task for me every fifty years, my presence would be discovered in roughly two centuries. And by all conservative estimates, my existence would be very short lived should I ever be discovered by the general populace. But you'd be surprised at the lives you can touch with something like a three second delay in an elevator, or a well time static shock at the right moment."

"Would one of these things perhaps be an aortic aneurism?"

"Let me be perfectly clear; everything you've ever experienced was something I foresaw and influenced so that it would turn out the best possible way for everyone involved. I didn't create that aneurism in the police academy candidate that died and allowed you entry into the program, but shortly after that individual was born, I was able to detect and predict its formation, and saw when it would burst. As such was the case, I guided your life so that you socialized more, learned more about how people interacted and talked, instead of getting the best grades. When you got in, you also felt much more fortunate and worked much harder, allowing you to improve to the point where you were the type of man that would prevent a tragedy in a kidnapping of an entire family. I have done the same thing billions of times, on much grander scales than that. I've allowed the fields of medicine to grow by leaps and bounds in fields such as genetics, but have kept progress on things like bacterial control minimal. The former has allowed your generation to be nearly devoid of birth and developmental defects, while the later has prevented the worst of unstoppable super microbes from being created. Also, using hundreds of years old antibiotics keeps some things out of human control, and in my realm of more direct influence.

Environmental technologies have progressed to the point that the seven billion people of your planet can be sustained nearly indefinitely, or at least as long as it takes for space exploration and colonization technology to progress sufficiently far that living on Earth is no longer necessary. On the other hand, nanotechnology hasn't had a break through in over eight hundred years, allowing humans to remain natural and unaware of my presence beneath their feet. I've steered human progression in a way that I have deemed most appropriate for its continued long term survival, as well as the greatest good for the people on this planet."

"And what about those that die and suffer in this grand equation of yours?" Despite his best

efforts, Caleb couldn't help a sarcastic tone born of fear and scepticism from colouring his words.

"They died and suffered at times when it was best for them, or when it was best for the people in their lives, and for the people connected to them. Even for me, the complexity of juggling trillions and trillions of sets of data and their interactions took time. After my father's demise, I lay dormant for ninety seven years, simply observing so I fully knew how my actions would influence the world. Ever since then, I've seen it all, predicted everything, and as a result humanity is saved. Nuclear warheads are now non existent, and war hasn't occurred in seven hundred years. Your planet's environment and ecological systems have been saved, and you now live in a manner where you can almost indefinitely survive on it. Materialism and greed govern so few of you these days. Even in your infamous trio of cases that have soured your view of a structured universe there is purpose. The divorced woman is now happier than she can describe most days, with a man that is much better and deserving of her, and even the first husband is somewhere where his life feels more complete, not to mention largely removed from society as a whole. And those prostitutes you saw in Australia aren't as young as you think, they're safer than you can imagine, and do an amazing job at keeping the pedophilic portion of human society one hundredth the size it was before I existed."

"And Lauren? Are you going to tell me there's something behind that horrible scene that makes it all even out in the end?" Caleb's words were more bitter than he intended them to be, but the memory was still painful after all these years.

"Ms. Remar was a tragedy the world rarely sees anymore. But human nature isn't perfect, and while it remains that way, I can only do so much about the pain and suffering in the world. Lauren's rape and death could not have been prevented, except at the expense of the lives of many more innocent individuals. I wished it could have been different, but the greatest good had to prevail."

An uneasy feeling hung in the air after that statement. Caleb wanted to argue, to tell this thing that it was wrong, that it hadn't seen her frozen in that last terrible moment, but that wasn't true. He couldn't throw it back in its face, and he wished he could, but simply couldn't argue that the two or more people that would have suffered a similar fate in a different circumstance weren't worth as much as Lauren and her pain. Caleb needed to not think about it anymore; he felt the darkness of the situation creep into his mind, and he fought it away.

"So what should I call you, Deep Black? Because I'm sure I don't need to tell you, but that just sounds dumb."

"If you prefer, Dorian would work just fine. My father included quite a number of novels in my initial set up routines, and 'The Portrait of Dorian Gray' was my favourite." Caleb was struck by the oddity of being told the literature preference of a biological super computer a millennia old, but did his best to push past it.

"Alright then Dorian. You can track cause and effect on a scale that the entire human race couldn't keep up with for a second, except you didn't see me preferring to talk with an actual voice as opposed to scrawling text on a screen. So what's different? And why am I here, except for the over-dramatically stated purpose to save society?"

"The slain family that was found and that has been the subsequent topic of your investigation is the first completely unforeseen act to occur in over seven hundred years. A series of events that each had a less than a tenth of one percent chance of occurring culminated in a mental break in the father. This has caused a rippling effect that is now threatening to undo the fabric of your society. In the first several hundred years of my operation, this sort of tragedy was much more

common, but became less so as I gathered more information and got better at influencing people to the best possible conclusion. But that oversight and tragedy was something that was unavoidable as part of my development, and the people of the time could cope with such senselessness much better. However, after many hundreds of years of even the most unfortunate outlier scenarios being seen, anticipated, and the brunt diverted, people aren't going to be able to handle what has occurred. The ripples of this event are already extending out at an alarming pace, causing harm both directly and indirectly. And the worst of it is, this singular event is so profound that it is preventing me from being able to direct and influence people away from danger and poor decisions. I can't see how this event is changing the flow of the river I had to spend decades observing before I could wade into it. Things are collapsing, and I can't stop it by myself."

"I suppose this is where I come in." Caleb knew that there had been something wrong about this case, more so than any other he had experienced in his career. He could feel it deep inside him, but he could never imagine on what kind of scale he was dealing with. He was just looking for answers, same as usual. He didn't know how he was going to deal with this one.

"Indeed. While my father was wrong about the way I would handle my operations, he wasn't incorrect in the notion that people could be used to carry out my agenda. I've avoided it this long because it hasn't been necessary, because my approach has kept me hidden and out of the conscious of every person on the planet. But never has there been so much to lose, and never has a situation been so far out of my control. I fear the worst for the planet and every person that calls her home, and I'm here to rectify the situation."

"So why is it that you can't solve this problem like the ones you have in the past?"

"Because my ability to influence the world is remarkably limited. Simple biotic organisms I can manipulate with some small efficiency because they respond fairly uniformly to their surroundings, and electronics are well within my grasp of influence. Sometimes I can guide a person one foot to the left or the right with a more direct mental push, their brain wave patterns being able to be subtly influenced from time to time, but nothing more than that. My sight is limited to what I can pick up on camera devices, or what occurs outside in the scope of my satellites. I can hear just about everything on the planet, but some more solid underground structures make it muddled. I need someone that can go out and directly physically interact with the world if I'm to accomplish what needs to be done."

"That sounds ominous. What exactly do you need me to do?"

"A short list of things, to a select number of individuals. I may not be able to stem the tide of chaos myself, but with a couple simple and direct tasks, I do believe that things will be restored to the way they were enough so that the effects of these murders is dissipated. But you'll have to act quickly to even out the imbalance that was introduced to the system, otherwise humanity will not see the kind of peace you have known for another five generations while I start from square one."

"And I suppose you have an excellent reason for choosing me for this little escapade of yours?"

"Sarcasm aside Mr. Lange, yes, I do. You're close enough to this situation that you can move about it better than anyone else. You're very capable, smart, and proficient in your work, and I know that you'll bring that into this scenario. You've seen horrible things in your past - though not on this scale, naturally - so I feel confident that your mental state will stay at a level that will assure our work is completed. Your ability to read people is second to few, and fewer still possess your skill at applying that knowledge towards an end; that will be invaluable for you in the coming 34 hours. And lastly, you've seen the most terrible scene of the 31st century, and with

your perception, I have to assume you realize what's at stake."

"If I fail to help you, the brutality that befell that family will repeat itself, again and again, and the world won't know how to cope, so it will tear itself apart."

"Exactly."

"But if there is such a time limit to this, why did you not just contact me the minute this all started? Why let me go through the motions of this investigation?"

"There was no way that a couple days ago you would have followed my directions to this spot, that you would be been able to accept what I was going to tell you and ask of you, so you needed to look into it a little more. More than that, for all of this to add up logically in the end without me being involved, you will have needed to investigate, so that your report - which I will now produce for you - will have any credibility. Finally, I was hoping that it wouldn't be necessary to call you to me. I have been attempting to rectify the situation myself ever since the incident, but I have failed in that endeavour. So now I am reaching out to you. But, I will ask a lot of you in the next short while, so I need to be sure of your conviction before we proceed. While you are my first choice, I do have a number of alternatives that might work out. Please don't take this decision lightly; think it over for a couple minutes."

So that's what Caleb did. He thought to himself what would be asked of him. Would he have to break the law, his morals, or even take another life? He remembered how it felt the night the kidnapping case wrapped up, and didn't know if he could deal with the weight of any more deaths on his conscious. There were still nights he couldn't sleep, haunted by the imagery of the second man he killed, the contents of his skull on the walkway. And what were the implications of saying no? Could he walk away from this and pretend like it didn't happen? And even if he chose to walk away, would he live very long? Dorian obviously didn't have a problem killing for the greatest good. But would he be safe even if he did say yes? He imagined the odds of being eliminated were pretty good after this whole affair concluded, whatever he decided to do.

Another worry, but one to deal with later. And as he thought about it, what it really came down to for him is if he could walk away from this. He wondered if he could turn his back on all the kidnapped individuals, all the raped women, and all the murdered families that would be there in the future if they couldn't rebalance what had been torn apart. He told himself to forget the implications on free will Dorian's existence posed, about the idea that this situation was caused by its actions. He pushed out of his mind the doubts he could feel just on the peripheral of his mind about how he had never made a decision for himself, his fears if Dorian went dormant; that he wouldn't be able to cope himself, that he would be incapable of doing anything without its guiding influence. So he took one image, Lauren Remar's body when he first found it, seared in his mind. He held onto that, and he kept it close in his mind when he agreed to help Dorian in whatever he needed it to do.

Caleb sat in his car and tried to settle his nerves. It had only been thirty minutes since he finished talking with Dorian, but he had replayed their encounter so many times it felt as if he had just finished talking with it. Caleb thought it was odd how flawlessly it was able to mimic human voice, but not too strange after consideration. He supposed if he were a conscious super computer with that type of processing power, it wouldn't be all that hard to figure something like that out. He thought about what was going to be asked of him, how hard it would be, what kind of details he would receive as to why he was doing what he was doing. His mind was buzzing with anticipation and questions when he phone rang.

"Lange here."

“Caleb, it’s Dorian,” the slightly metallic and detached voice was unmistakable, “what I need you to do is get out from your car and approach the young lady who is coming down the street toward your car. Tell her your name is Kessle.”

“Okay, but why?”

“There isn’t enough time, she’s going to get close soon, and if you get out of your car too late, she won’t believe you are who you say you are. Go now!” The line went dead, Caleb swore, but he removed himself from the vehicle anyway. He approached the young, sportily dressed woman with a messenger bag, catching her eye and offering her one of his softer smiles.

“Excuse me, but I’m Kessle.”

“Oh, I guess you intercepted me. I just need you to sign your name here, and these are yours.”

After flashing the pen that appeared from her back pocket on the delivery sheet, Caleb received several small bounded sets of paper. Before he could even ask another question, the woman was on her way again, the interaction barely breaking her stride, and in his moment of hesitation, saw her disappear around the corner. He took a quick survey of what he received, not overly surprised that it was the report that he was supposed to be writing about the original murders. Of course, it didn’t mention the man’s true mental condition, the information that had been weighing on his thoughts, or anything of Bisson’s subterranean research. He noted that it was extremely well written, and seemed to offer the events wrapped up and final in a pretty little bow at the end. It painted a report of a man that was struggling with more issues than he really knew about. It mentioned how he was getting a friend to see a therapist for him, but that he wasn’t giving honest information, that he was progressing not so slowly down a dark path. It finished trying to impart the impression that he was an unstable man, more so than anyone would be able to really appreciate, and that he was just a powder keg that went off at the worst possible time. Near the end of the report, there was a recommendation of the importance of not discriminating based on health records, and of continued vigilance of mental health screenings. That kind of thing hadn’t been common for the past three hundred years on account of techniques in genetic counselling and treatment that had cut the incidence of mental illness by several factors of ten. He didn’t feel particularly won over by the paper’s statement, but Caleb passed that off to the fact that he knew what the real reasons were behind the death of that family. He wasn’t really sure why he was doing an errand such as this, but his phone began to ring and he felt it might have some insight. “Take the folders to Jeffrey. Don’t call him, just go back to the hospital and you’ll find him by the ICU.” The phone line went dead after that, and Caleb felt something snap angrily inside of him.

“Listen, if you want my help, we’re going to have to do this very differently. You may know the why’s, but I don’t and they’re damned important for me. So if you want me to jump, I want to hear to what end I’m jumping for.” Caleb didn’t speak this into his phone, just talked aloud to himself in the night’s air. He was confident what he said didn’t go unheard though, especially when his phone began to ring again.

“Of course Caleb, you have a right to know why you’re doing what I’m asking of you. I will do my best to answer your questions, but I’d ask you make your way to the hospital while I do my best to inform you to a level you deem appropriate for the situation.”

“So why am I picking up ‘my’ report from a courier on the street? Couldn’t you have just printed it off my office printed, and had me send it out to various news agencies? Or just e-mailed them under my name?”

“Credibility is important here Caleb, and you have much more of it in person than over a phone line or cell text. The courier was mostly to save some time, because you need to get to that

hospital to meet Jeffrey and get him to help you in your next endeavour. After the reports have been disseminated though.”

“Alright, to the ICU to get Jeffrey then?”

“Yes. Your report’s will go out through him after you calm his nerves.”

“And how am I supposed to do that.”

“You will figure that out yourself. You’re good at that, which is one of the reasons you’re doing this Caleb. After you hand off the report, talk with him, the two of you are going to make the largest drug sting in seventeen years. And one more thing. Don’t flirt with the reception nurse this time when you go to the hospital. Most of the time it’s a help to her marriage, but she’s in a bit of a rough spot with that right now and I don’t think it will positively affect her relationship.” Caleb had been chatting with Dorian as if the two were old friends who had grown apart years ago, but that comment snapped him back to the reality of the moment. Its control of the situation and the extent to which it saw everything around it was astounding, and Caleb thought to himself that if he failed to deliver the way he was expected to, he’d never see the innocuous thing that would cause his death. He suppressed a shudder as best he could, scanned the sky for a satellite coming to destroy him, and pressed onward. Whatever was happening, he felt he was too far into it to turn back now.

The hospital was busier than Caleb had ever seen it in his time here. People were running around and trying to stem the tide of overflow the best that they could. Caleb came through the ER entrance, looking out onto a sea of hurt and confused faces. A chef with a bloodied towel held to his hand, a mother of two holding one of her children in comfort of their broken arm, and a man who looked so pale it was as if he had never seen the sun all were immediately in his path as he did his best to push past them. Once or twice as he made his way into the hospital proper, he was asked if he were a staff member, but his open trench coat did little to conceal his weapon secured there, and most left him well enough alone. He was relieved that no one really questioned his presence as he strode down the halls towards the ICU, wondering if it was because he seemed to fit in or just no one really cared.

Just outside the doors that would lead to the most fragile patients in the hospital, Caleb spotted Jeffrey, who by the looks of it had only gone down hill from the last time they had met. His usual plain gray suit and tie look that he carried quite well was barely recognizable; no tie, his shirt was mostly unstuck, and the suit itself was deeply creased, with a fresh looking grease stain taking up space just over his knee. His normally well styled and conservative hairstyle resembled that of a young child’s, the effect of him seemingly constantly running his hands through it as a nervous tick. Caleb worried for his friend, especially when he looked up and he could see his eyes. They betrayed more about his mental state than he would have really liked to know.

“How did you know I was here?”

“Why are you here?” Caleb ignored the question, not just because he couldn’t tell him, but because he needed to get inside his friend’s head, pull him away from where he was going. He had to imagine that Cantelli wasn’t too far off this state at the end, and damned if he wanted to find his friend like he found that trucker after his overdose.

“I was checking on someone, that’s all.” Jeffrey’s eyes moved away from Caleb’s and back towards the ICU, making it all the clearer that whatever he was here for wasn’t in that room. The move was too planned, mechanic. He was trying to deceive Caleb, but his mental state didn’t make that very easy. Caleb made the easy leap.

“If you really think that visiting her in the morgue is best, I’ll go with you. What was her name?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What was the name of the woman who was killed in that crash?”

“I forget, and I’m not here about her.”

“Don’t lie to me. I deserve more respect than that. I know how to get down there, we’ll go over the whole thing, and then you can take a look over my report before you release it.”

“The report’s done? What does it say?”

“Sad but helpful things. But first things first, you need to confront this. What was her name.”

There was a long pause as Jeffrey stood there, torn between trying to keep up his front or relenting.

“Kristen Bower. Twenty seven, pretty freshly married. From what they could tell on the scene she was changing the radio station when the light turned red. Was having a tough day because her husband’s a cop, and he got in a bit of an altercation that morning. He got a little roughed up, she got worried, and she wasn’t paying attention. But I should have seen her, I should have been able to-”

“Let’s go down to the morgue, come on. Maybe you can make some peace with her.” So the two took the lengthy elevator ride down into the bowels of the hospital, down to where people waited for their loved ones to claim them. They stepped out into the hallway that was just a little narrow and made their way to the main freezer area. While there was a certain morbidity to it, Caleb had like the level dedicated to the morgue. It was by far the most removed and quiet area in the hospital, even if there seemed to be a steady flow of people in and out of the area. People seemed to walk lighter in the hallways, and he savoured those calm moments when he was down here. He was hoping that Jeffrey might find some peace in that sterile quiet too.

“Why are we going down here again?”

“Look Jeff, if you say what you need to say to her, maybe you can accept that this was an accident, that sometimes the worst things happen, and that it wasn’t anyone’s fault. So just do this and then we can move forward with my report.” Caleb pushed open the door and was happy to find that the room was empty at the moment. He scanned the labels on the drawers and found the one that read Bower, “Now don’t open the door, that isn’t going to help anyone. But she’s just on the other side here. I’ll be out in the hall...take your time.”

He left without another word, and Jeffrey was left in the crushing silence, his thoughts weighing on him to the point that he found it difficult to stand. They rushed by him, and he remembered the first time he met Kristen at a police fundraiser, how good she had looked in her dress that evening, and the conversation that they had had until three in the morning. He remembered hearing about the husband that she defended over and over again as this good man, even though she felt hurt that he wasn’t around so much of the time. They found comfort and companionship that night, and they were good friends for years after that. He remembered being her counsellor and confident on more than one occasion, always doing what he could for his friend and her marriage. He remembered the one night that she wanted more than that from him, and - in a moment of weakness and loneliness - relented. He remembered the smell of her hair as it fell over his face, the touch of her naked skin under his hands as they explored her body, and her eyes as they met his as they made love in the darkest part of the night. He remembered how he couldn’t help his feelings for her, his confusion about the scenario, wondering what it all meant. And despite his best efforts not to, he remembered her body being thrown from her vehicle, and tumbling down the pavement. So he stared at her drawer and broke down in tears, finally alone enough to let down the guard he had been trying so hard to maintain, and sobbed against the door of her drawer. He cried many tears then, of loss and hurt, confusion and pain, guilt and fear. He

didn't know if he would be able to stop, but as the pain he was feeling finally had an outlet, he felt the tears slowing to a trickle, and then stopping. He felt the stabbing pain in his heart fade to a dull ache. And he felt the strength return to his legs. Taking one last look at Kristen's final resting spot, he spoke for the first time,

"I'm so sorry. I'll...miss you." And with that, he was ready again, striding out the door feeling more himself than he had in days.

Caleb stepped back out into the hall to greet his friend, glad to see that he was looking better, even though it was obvious he had been crying. He ignored that, and handed him a copy of the report that had been provided to him.

"This is one thing that should help. The report on the family is done. It took some digging, but I think I found some things that help explain the situation. I remind you that it's not perfect, but it does shine some light on all of this." Caleb watched while Jeffrey flipped through it, his eyes scanning the text quickly. He wasn't sure if this was going to be what he wanted to see, but when he finished, he seemed mildly satisfied.

"You're right, it's not perfect. I was hoping you were going to find some deep secret to tie this into something else, but this is good. I think people won't be entirely pleased, that there will still be a call for more investigation, but it makes sense at least. We have that. Come on, let's go scan-transfer this to my guys at the Herald and the Times. The other news outlets will pick it up soon enough."

The two of them rode the elevator in silence to an administrative floor. As they got off the lift, Caleb's phone got a signal again, as well as a text. After he looked over it quickly, he sent Jeffrey in the direction of the scan-transfer, and called the number Dorian had left for him.

"I see that Jeffrey is faring better, I'm glad for that." Caleb looked up into the corner and saw the security camera there, feeling a thousand sets of eyes on him.

"Yes, he's doing better, and the report went over about as well as could have been hoped for. I suppose you're going to tell me what to do next?"

"I am. You're going to send your friend to get a couple hours rest, and tell him to meet you by the main south entrance to Alfredson's Park at quarter to seven. The two of you are going to raid a drug operation that was supposed to have been discovered because of a small fire that was going to be sparked. Tell him you'll be receiving a tip, but that it's something that will take a longer look at."

"And what about the fact that I'm not a cop?"

"You'll explain it by mentioning it might be related to the family murders."

"Does that mean I'm going to be able to get a couple hours rest too?"

"No, you're going to have to go see Dr. Morten."

"Where does she live then?"

"She's still at the hospital, and yes I know, it's very unusual for her to be here this late. While it was necessary to show her the pictures of the slain family to procure her assistance, those images have stuck with her and she's still doubting if she did everything she could for that man. I don't have to tell you that when she discovers that Mr. Cantelli has died, her mental state will suffer even more. Dr. Morten is one of the most important people in this city, her influence expanding through several hundred people each day, almost always positively. If things are to get any better, she needs to be in the proper state of mind to help the people that rely on her, and even to brighten the days of countless more people in between."

"So, essentially, I'm going to go cheer her up and take her mind of things so she can brighten up peoples lives efficiently again?"

“Something like that. Your friend is coming back. Tell him where to meet you, and I’ll explain what I need you to do in more detail.” And with that, the call was over.

Rebecca was sitting at her desk, trying to get through the paper work that had been piling up around her, and not having much success. She was finding herself more distracted lately, more despondent to the people around her, and she didn’t like it at all. But she couldn’t get the image of the man she never met out of her head. She couldn’t walk down a hallway without seeing the faces of that poor family. She couldn’t even concentrate in her sessions like she needed to, and she knew it. It was getting frustrating, which was of course exacerbating the situation, and she didn’t know if she should take some time off or just try to deal with it or-

“Rebecca?” The knock at the door and voice behind it made her jump in her chair, and she looked up to see Caleb standing there, an apologetic look on his face, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, no, of course, I mean, its okay,” she paused a moment, still a little flustered, “I just really wasn’t expecting anyone, it being so late. And while I’m not disappointed, I’m especially surprised to see you here Caleb. I hope you’re bringing me happier news than last time.”

“Well, sort of. I was hoping I could talk to you about our last meeting if I could...patient to therapist, but kind of off the books.” Caleb felt like he was reading off a general script, the instructions that he had received from Dorian going through his head. The first was to go see Rebecca and initiate conversation about the family murders. The instructions were general, Dorian had explained, because he needed a specific end result, and certain stopping points on the way there, but besides that, couldn’t tell Caleb on how to proceed.

“Well, yes, yes I think I can do that. If you want to do anything more long term, I’m afraid I’ll have to start making up some official documents, but we can have a little session off the books. Come in and sit down, and close the door behind you.” Rebecca couldn’t help but get a little excited, despite the fact that she was putting aside a work load that truly needed to get completed. She had always found the issues of law enforcement agents either particularly interesting or profoundly boring, and Caleb seemed to be the man that would have interesting troubles. What’s more, she was personally fascinated with a man that seemed to simultaneously be so rough around the edges as well as sharply observant and intelligent. She watched him with focus as he crossed the room and took a seat across from her at her desk, then shifted in a show of discomfort.

“Mind if we do this in the comfy treatment furniture?”

“Of course not.” They shifted themselves slightly to the other portion of the office and settled into Rebecca’s plush but supportive chairs, “Now tell me, what would you like to talk about?”

“I’ve just had a hard time these past couple days. This investigation has been a bit of an obsession, and while it’s over now and I got what I wanted out of it, it just feels empty almost. I’m still haunted by what I saw, inside that house and the places that I was led because of what I saw there.”

“What did you find, and why wasn’t it satisfying?”

“It’ll be in the papers tomorrow, but it’s essentially that we found evidence that he wasn’t being honest in his interactions with Cantelli. He was harbouring quite a number of dark thoughts and preoccupations that never really manifested because of the quiet and removed life he generally led. A couple of things came to a head and everything sort of came together in the worst way. Just a really unfortunate situation.” Caleb felt bad for lying to Rebecca, but told himself it was the best thing to do in this situation, “And I thought I’d find something deep and profound at the

root of this tragedy, but I didn't. Just a tragic situation that we can keep from happening again in the future, but nothing to do to stop the events of the past."

"Have you ever wanted to change the events of the past before?" Caleb was forced to pause for a moment, caught off guard by Rebecca's insightfulness. He wondered how much he really wanted to talk about Lauren Remar and how he couldn't help her, and if it would really serve his ultimate goal here. He decided to share her story with Rebecca.

"There was a woman that went missing. No one was really looking into her disappearance that much, and people figured she had moved on and away. Her brothers wanted me to look for her. So I did, and I found her. Except I found her thrown off a trans-city roadway, after having been murdered and raped. It's been something that's stuck with me no matter where I am or what I'm doing. I just refuse to let myself forget that poor woman, who died a horrible and lonely death. And it didn't matter that justice was served to the man that committed the crime, because no matter what, I couldn't change that past. That horrible thing had happened, and that's the way it was going to stay forever. And it bothers me." Caleb looked up, and he could see Rebecca turning the story over in her mind. The empathetic pain she was feeling for Lauren was put second to her immediate concern for Caleb and how she could help a man that had witnessed something so horrific.

"You're a good man Caleb; it's obvious by the way you care so much about your work and the people you encounter in it. And if there was anything I could say or do to help you move past this, I would do just that. But I think the simple fact of the matter remains that this memory, like the act, is forever engrained in the past and beyond repair. It's behind us, and we can't go back and undo what was done. What we have to do is remember that if - and pardon the cliché here - we're looking backwards too much, we won't see what's in front of us. I mentioned that you're a good man, and I mean that. You offer answers and hope and relief to so many people through your work. The way you tackled the VRSA issue here, what you found, it helped a lot of people. That was such a terrible incident, such an atrocious microbe. I can only imagine that so much of your work does the same thing, for families and friends alike. Don't punish all the people you can help in the future because of something that you can't change anymore. Now, by no means forget about it; I wouldn't expect you to either, you're not that kind of man. But just remember not to cheat the people that will come into your life because of the people that have been in your life." The sentiment wasn't exactly earth shattering or new to Caleb, but coming from Rebecca, it felt all the more sincere. Despite not really expecting it to, the words of comfort made him feel better about the terrible things that he had been witness to, and about himself in general. His respect for the woman across from him grew all the more.

"I can see why you're such a good therapist. I guess it's just one of those things that I'm going to have to take slowly, with your advice. You know as well as I do that that scene is going to stick for a while." Caleb hoped that she wouldn't see that he was trying to steer the conversation towards her and her issues with the past couple days events. Dorian had informed him that she would need to deal with the pain she had over the slain family, and Caleb figured that the best way to go about that would be to get her to offer some advice to him that would apply to her. So far so good. "How are you doing with it? I'm sorry I kind of dropped that on you."

"Well, that was one of the shorter therapy sessions I think I've ever had," Rebecca stated as she chuckled lightly to herself. But the laugh was a little hollow, and even though she realized that Caleb was moving the focus away from him and towards her, she found herself relieved. She did want to talk about the photos he had shown her, because it was affecting her work and her peace of mind, two things that she cherished greatly in her life. "But that's alright if you've gotten off

your chest what you've wanted to. I'm...not doing very well with it."

"I can't imagine that it's very often that you fail to help someone."

"I don't want to be immodest, but I can't remember the last time I was so unable to something for a patient."

"I don't suppose I have to point out that little speech you gave me is directly applicable to your situation too, do I?"

"No, but thank you, indirectly."

"It's just the truth. The good you do eclipses me several times over, and I don't think you really give yourself enough credit for all the people that you help, or all the people that you save. And there is nothing you can blame yourself for, because the man never even came in, and never gave you the most serious of his symptoms. You had no chance to properly assess his state of mind, or even his deception."

"But that bothers me too, that I didn't even have that chance. I just wish I had an opportunity to do something. Anything really."

"Trust me when I tell you I know how that feels. But you were right before, looking backwards isn't going to help us now. It's okay if we're checking over our shoulders every once and again, but what matters is that we're looking forward." Caleb tried to put the emphasis on the forward, to get Rebecca's gaze to move up. She was looking down and away, and she looked close to tears; her eyes were watering and her voice was shaking ever so slightly. He wanted her to look up and into his eyes. He needed that from her. He needed it for himself and he needed it for her. Slowly, even seeming reluctant, she looked up and caught Caleb's gaze. Her eyes were starting to flow over with tears now, but just one or two. She was still holding on, and despite the pain he saw on her face, her strength was keeping her together, keeping her eyes locked onto his.

"How do you deal with it Caleb? How do you live with that sort of thing, that there's this horrible thing that there's nothing to do about, ever?"

"You go through it slowly, there's no denying that. But you keep moving forward, and you get help by those around you. The ones that you care about." Caleb didn't move his gaze from Rebecca's, and her eyes never moved from his either. Her eyes were beginning to regain control of her tears, and to Caleb there seemed to be a hundred different thoughts moving around behind them. And when she seemed to settle on one of those, she leaned forward and kissed Caleb. The experience was the definition of being bitter sweet for Caleb. More than once he had imagined this embrace, this kiss. He admired the woman at such a level that he had kept that information to himself, afraid of what the revelation might mean to their relationship. He wanted to savour this moment, but it was tinged. He knew that this was where their conversation was steering them. Dorian had told him that he would share a moment like this with Rebecca, and that he would have to carry it further. It felt wrong that a moment that was as special as this would be something he would be told to do. He didn't like the idea that he was manipulating this woman he had such adoration for. He had received assurances that it would be him that would be making the effort, that he would be making the decisions. But he still received some pointers, about where to sit, what he should generally be talking about. And he didn't like the feeling of being a manipulator.

Rebecca felt the hesitation in Caleb, and she started to pull back. She swore at herself inside her head, chastising herself for kissing this man inside what was technically a therapy session. She felt the sting of rejection, and stupid at ruining the moment. But as she pulled back, Caleb leaned forward further, and kissed her back, this time with a commitment and a passion that she was hoping for the first time. She leaned into it a little bit more, but then in a moment of hesitation,

tried to break it off again.

“I’m sorry, I want this, but you caught me off guard. Just let me prove to you this is where I want to be...I want to look forward.” Caleb delivered that last line with a sly smile, somehow managing to convey both sincerity and playfulness to Rebecca. And in that moment the hesitation and doubts and invading thoughts were done away with in a fit of tension breaking laughter. As they laughed, they found themselves both on the couch, their arms around each other and their breath rolling through each others hair. The light embrace in laughter led into a close one as their mirth faded into passion and desire.

Their eyes were locked as they kissed. It wasn’t the embrace of desperate passion, but something much deeper. It was the passion of people that had been together for years, and while it was unexpected to both parties, they fell into it comfortably. So much so that when Caleb started to unbutton Rebecca’s shirt, all that she did in return was start to unbutton his. They continued to kiss deeply, slowly, lovingly. They kissed each others necks, shoulders, arms, hands, ribs, stomach, back, hips; everywhere. They took their time with each other, finished undressing each other slowly and carefully. They moved down on the couch, where Caleb took care in laying her out comfortably and looking her over. He moved his hands over her to experience her outer beauty in her thick dark hair, soft light skin, and curving shape. She did likewise before wrapping her legs around him. They held each other in a close embrace as they moved together slowly. And at the end, they lay together in a comforting silence, wrapped together tightly. Caleb hoped that he’d live through the next day so that he might come back to this place. Rebecca didn’t think anything at all, just fell asleep with her new lover’s cologne wafting through her senses. She really needed this.

Five thirty in the morning snuck up on Caleb, so much so that it woke him from his sleep. Looking around Dr. Morten’s office, he realized that he had drifted off as well. He smiled at the notion, since he was thinking it funny how quickly Morten had passed out into sleep after their night together. The memory of last night came back to him in a wave, and he felt exhilarated and dishonest by it in the same breath. He cherished every last second of that memory, but felt it was dirtied with Dorian and his influence. He told himself that it wasn’t like anyone was doing anything against their will, but it just didn’t feel quite right. He had wanted this to be something he did outside of external guidance. He wanted it to be a moment just for the two of them. It seemed like that wasn’t to be the case.

Caleb wished he could leave without waking Morten, partly because she seemed to be having an amazing nights rest, and partly because he didn’t want her to wake up and see the conflict on his face. He hated the idea that she could think he didn’t want to be here heart and soul, but he doubted he could really truly keep his emotions on that front from coming out. But she was laying on his chest, and he didn’t foresee extraditing himself without disturbing her. So he brushed the hair from her face behind her ear and kissed her gently, but firmly, on her forehead. She came around slowly, blinking away the sleep the best she could, slightly taken aback from her surroundings when she looked around, but coming to rest on Caleb with a look of simple contentment.

“Good morning. I suppose this means you’re sneaking out.”

“More or less. Important work to do, helping police and what not. And before you ask, yes I’ve used that as a line on women before, and no, that’s not what this is. Could I call you later?” Her smile was weakened by the grogginess of the morning, but it was genuine none the less. She nodded and stretched up to kiss him.

“You let yourself out quietly. This isn’t the first time I’ve slept here, so I’ve got everything I need to start my day, meaning I’m going to get a little more rest before I get moving. But I do look forward to talking to you soon.” With that she draped the small blanket they had found last night on her, looked Caleb over one last time as he stood and got dressed, and closed her eyes for just a couple hours longer.

Caleb went down to a change room where he had forgotten a change of clothes from his work at the hospital, and was pleasantly surprised to see that no one had cleaned it out yet. After a quick shower, and an espresso from the hospital coffee shop, he felt much more ready to face whatever it was that he was going to have to face. Alfredson’s Park was a short walk away, but he had no idea what was going to come later, so he drove the lowest level street he could to the meeting spot, a full half an hour before he was supposed to. He expected a call from Dorian at any moment, another task that he wouldn’t feel right about, but one he would carry out regardless for the greater good. But he didn’t get a call, didn’t get a sign or a package or a message or anything else. There was no number to call, and even talking to himself for Dorian to hear illicit no response. So he got himself a paper, sat down on a bench, and took in the sounds of the city and the stories on the page. Soon he realized why Dorian wasn’t contacting him.

The city around him was in a quiet cacophony, one that most wouldn’t really notice. To someone not paying attention, like someone who had spent a night in the arms of a new lover, everything seemed like it had been. But when you listened, you could hear the difference. The sounds of sirens in the distance was almost constant, an unsettling realization when you could go a week and only see the lights of an emergency responder vehicle as it passed with haste, but no real urgency. The people on the street talked louder and more rapidly, the gentle conversation of small talk and the polite back and forth of friends replaced. The topics mirrored everything that was in the paper; family slain by father, jewellers robbed, man beaten within an inch of his life, and more. The feeling in the city was one of unrest, and it was all anyone was able to talk about. Some angrily, some fearfully, some with confusion. The shops in the area bustled with people looking for home defence products, everything from sports equipment to firearms (where the proper licences and background checks allowed it). Caleb sat and listened, sat there and watched, and as he did his good mood faded to a dark place. He felt everything that was good around had been warped and perverted, the tranquility and peace of the city being destroyed. It shook him to his core, and he could feel his heart tremble with fear inside his chest. And as he experienced his city - his very world - being pulled apart around him, his phone rang as if on cue.

“Caleb, I trust that you’re hearing what’s happening around you.”

“Dorian, we have to stop this. The city is diseased, and it feels like its eating away at my heart. We have to do something.”

“I know. Look right.” Caleb did as he was instructed, and on the corner saw a hobbled old woman about to take a step into the stream of traffic. His reflexes snapped as he sprang up to help her, realizing before he moved that there wasn’t even enough time to shout after her; not that she’d hear him anyway. But it didn’t stop him from trying, and as he attempted to do what he could, she was pulled back onto the sidewalk by a pair of high school friends, saving her from the bus that passed by just then. Confused, he spoke into the phone,

“Dorian, nothing happened. Those students saved her. Maybe this is a sign things are getting better.”

“It is Caleb, but to be honest, I just needed you looking right. I know you’d be compelled to help if you looked left, and I can’t risk your safety.” Fear filled his gut as he spun to the left just in time to see a man get stabbed by another he was having a disagreement with over at the paper

stand. Caleb was about to reach for his pistol, but the man with the knife was quickly subdued by a pair of cops in a patrol car that pulled up at the right moment, "I'm sorry, I realize that you feel this is a betrayal-" Caleb didn't let Dorian finish what he was trying to say.

"Of course I do! I don't know if he's going to be okay, and I could have stopped him. I could have done something."

"The risk was too high. You're needed to finish what you started. You did very well with Dr. Morten, and there's only a couple more things to do and I feel that this world will be balanced once again. But until then there are going to need to be sacrifices."

"No one has the right to make those decisions."

"I do," here Dorian's inhumanity was revealed in the simplicity of the statement. The tone on the other end of the phone never changed, with no trace of emotion as he just told Caleb with those two words that some people were simply expendable, and he was to decide which ones, "I make those decisions because that's why I was created, and it's a noble purpose that I intend to carry forth to such a point where I'm no longer needed or I'm rendered impotent. Until then though, that decision is one that can only fall to me. For the good of people as a whole." In that moment Caleb felt a chill run the entire length of his spine. Not just because he was having a conversation with a near-omnipotent being that seemed only interested in human life in terms of balancing some grand equation, but because as much as he wanted to disagree with Dorian, he couldn't bring himself to. If he truly believed that he was important in restoring this order he had known all his life, that the lives of some seven and half billion people would rely on his safety, could he really risk all that for being stabbed in an altercation on some random street corner? And as he found himself weighing human life like that, he felt the coldness in his spine again. As much as he didn't want to side with Dorian on this matter, he listened to the city again, heard the quiet chaos that seemed to be seeping over and through it.

"What now?" Caleb couldn't bring himself to say anything more than that.

"Start walking away from this scene, east. Jeffrey is just parking around the corner now. Intercept him and make your way to the nuclear waste processing plant's worker housing complex. Say as little as you can to Jeffrey, and take the underground roadway as long as you can." Caleb didn't even wait to hear the click on the end of the line before he started to head in Jeffrey's direction, trying to leave the scene of the stabbing and its moral ambiguity behind.

"I think that report did its job. I just don't know if it's enough." Jeffrey broke the tense silence the two of them rode in on the way to one of the city's industrial districts.

"I know what you mean. But this sort of thing was bound to make a stir regardless. I think now, though, that it'll all cool down in a couple days time."

"I hope you're right. I can't even begin to explain the crap that's come across my desk this morning, not the least of which was a key witness we had walk out of a major drug case that was this close to breaking. I wonder if this tip isn't connected to that. And if that's the case, then you should let me call in backup and stand back. These guys are no joke." Caleb knew that the two of them were driving towards the exact thing that Jeffrey had been trying to shut down for the better part of four months.

"I doubt it. This is just a precautionary measure, and if we find anything, we call it right in." That was a lie too, but the text messages that Dorian had been sending him were very clear. The information was trickling in slowly, allowing Caleb to digest the information bit by bit.

They were going to go infiltrate the drug operation in such a way that no one would realize that they were around until they were in the center of the operation, at which point there would be no

other option but to fight their way out.

Caleb didn't like the idea of walking right into the lions den, but otherwise the two of them would just back peddle, call in the police who would turn out to be too slow in arriving, allowing the perpetrators to escape. The police couldn't be called in because if they were involved in a confrontation, there would be casualties on both sides, and the city didn't need to see anymore innocent bloodshed. Apparently, though, Dorian thought the public wouldn't worry about the deaths of a couple gang members and drug peddlers.

They were going to be led through the conflict by Dorian's instructions.

This was something that Caleb was actually incredibly grateful for. He didn't like the idea of being on unfamiliar territory, out numbered and outgunned. But he believed that with the kind of intel that Dorian could provide to them (and more specifically, just to Caleb), the odds of them of even catching a stray bullet were next to zero. Even if it couldn't predict their future actions, Dorian was more than able to track the dealers real time movements, and that made them hopelessly lost in an armed conflict. So while the bullets were flying, Caleb would make sure he had one hand on his gun, and one holding his phone's earpiece in place.

They weren't going to be in danger of hurting any innocent bystanders.

While Caleb didn't really want to start thinking about the morality of viewing the people that were dealing drugs as 'easier to shoot,' the fact of the matter was that these people weren't going to be pulling any punches for him, and they had chose the life they were involved in now. Dorian had assured Caleb that the conflict had no chance of hurting those in the vicinity. Between factors like the hours of work that the other people living in those units pulled, the concrete structure that would prevent bullets from travelling anywhere , and Dorian's influence pulling away anybody else that wouldn't want to be there when the shooting started, Caleb was confident innocent passer-by's wouldn't be catching a fluke stray bullet.

They were going to be able to avoid using lethal force for almost the entire altercation, but people would be killed, almost certainly by Caleb's hand.

When Caleb received that message, he truly started to dread what was to come. He hadn't had to take a life since the kidnapping case he worked all those years ago, and he didn't enjoy the idea of doing it again here. While it had become a bit of a cliché, he believed in the sentiment that ending a life was something that would stick with you forever, to have destroyed what a person was, what they are, and what they're to become. After that night he stopped the kidnapping, he had collected the minimum amount of information about the men he had killed. He didn't want to think of them as someone's sons, or anyone's friends. It was much easier to deny that they had had a past, or that they would have had a future. When he was haunted with his actions some nights and he couldn't fall asleep, he'd just try to concentrate on them as being more things that he destroyed than people he had killed. He didn't like that he had to dehumanize these people to get a good nights sleep when those actions kept him up, but he made that trade gladly in the end. He didn't know what kind of person that made him.

"We're here," Jeffrey's simple statement of fact made Caleb snap out of the thoughts he was sinking in, "Where to now?" He looked down at his phone for the answer.

"Seventy first floor. Industrial elevator, though the maintenance entrance."

"Do you think we'll be able to just let ourselves in through there?"

"I do. Come on." Caleb wanted to get moving, wanted to start operating on auto pilot with Dorian really calling the shots. He wanted to believe that would absolve him of the responsibility of what he was going to do.

The two of them walked through the shadows the tall buildings around them cast, doing their

best to scan the windows and roof tops for anyone watching them. What they didn't know is that someone would have seen them coming if they had been just three minutes later, which was incidentally how much time they saved taking the underground tunnel roadways. In that small window, the lookout had a brief and particularly uncomfortable bout of digestive issues. By the time he resumed his post, Caleb and Jeffrey were already halfway up to the seventy first floor. When they got off, Caleb's phone vibrated again, with instructions to walk three floors up the stairs.

"What's with the detour Caleb?" Jeffrey looked tense, his eyes darting back and forth while he kept a hand hovering over his pistols grip, ready to draw at a moments notice. "Something's not right about this. It's too quiet, even for this point in the day. And I'm pretty sure I heard someone in the stairwell below us." Caleb did his best to shrug it off, despite the fact that the very air seemed to be laced with menace, and Jeffrey could obviously pick up on it.

"Just on the other side of this door here Jeff, then we can determine if you're paranoid or if there's something to worry about here. But just to be safe, you might want to have your gun ready." At this point Caleb drew his own firearm, and with his phone in his coat pocket, inserted the headphone on his non dominant (left) side.

"Now what's that for?"

"Jeffrey, maybe you should just get behind me for now and save the questions." The tone in Caleb's voice shut down any more questions that Jeffrey might have had, and with that the two of them stepped out into the hallway. Jeffrey wanted to stop his friend, make him explain what he had gotten the two of them involved with seemingly all at once, or what had happened to the source that had been mentioned, but Caleb was moving with all the grace he could muster as he channelled every second he ever practiced hostile forced entries. All he could do for now was follow his friend, and covering over his shoulder, he kept his eyes scanning and his attention focused.

Caleb approached the seventh door down the hall, and without making a single hesitation, took two steps back, waited three more seconds, then kicked near the handle with everything in him. At that same moment, the first sentry inside the room had been in the process of opening the door. Confused as all hell, Jeffrey felt his only option was to follow his friend through the door. He was about to check the man on the ground, but obviously saw he was out cold, the impact of the door to his face taking him out of the fight. Looking up, he saw Caleb waiting behind a corner, and with perfect timing, swung the butt of his pistol at face level, connecting with another hostile's nose as he rushed into the fray. Before he really appreciated what had happened, his friend spun again, took aim at the bedroom door on the other side of the room, and fired once. From behind the partly open door fell out a third individual, shot through the shin and writhing in pain, the submachine gun he had been holding dropped and forgotten. Jeffrey could scarcely comprehend the scene that had just unfolded in less than fifteen seconds, and Caleb didn't give him much of a chance as he zip tied the man with the broken nose before moving to the man that got bowled over in the initial entry.

"Cuff that guy, just in case he forgets his pain and decides to follow through on his orders. I'd secure the gun too." Too stunned to say anything, Jeffrey simply did as he was instructed. Looking at the wound, he decided to tourniquet the man's belt around his thigh for good measure. Turning from the incredible scene, he saw Caleb was leaning forward on the TV projection wall, his head and the muzzle of a pistol from one of the downed men the main points of contact.

"Hey, Caleb, it's okay. I don't know how you knew that these guys were here, but it's cool now,

just calm your nerv-”

“Stop talking.” Jeffrey stopped talking, and sensing the worst, closed the front door, locked it, and entered a crouch. He watched as Caleb shifted the pistol to the left, then the right. At the last moment Jeffrey guessed what Caleb was doing - searching for a target on the other side of the wall - but couldn't imagine he actually thought that he would connect with a bullet. Even if there wasn't solid concrete behind that paint job, the chances of the bullet finding a deadly mark were next to nothing. Then he pulled the trigger. Jeffrey tried to take cover, figuring that a rain of bullets was about to come from the other side of the wall, but nothing. Nothing but a hollow look from Caleb as he stalked back to the door, dropping the weapon and drawing his own once again. “Come on, we have to move fast.” He was out the door without another word, and Jeffrey followed. Coming to the next door down the hall, the unit he had fired a single shot into, Caleb opened the door and poked his head inside, seemed hurt with what he saw, then moved on. Not being able to help himself, Jeffrey looked inside too. Crumpled in a heap were two armed men, a small entrance wound and exit wound in each of their heads.

“Hurry up!” Caleb was almost the rest of the way down the hall, and just in time to grab someone coming out from the stairwell, elbowing them in the jaw, and zip tying their slumped frame. Finally, as Jeffrey came next to his friend, he paused, bent on one knee, and rested a moment.

“Alright, if you could call in some back up, that would be grand. But when you're done, we'll have to move on the guys sitting on top of the drug op right now. There's four of them behind that door about half way down the hall. The site also takes up the unit on either side of that one as they knocked down the walls, so we're going to enter on the left one. Our friend here has been kind enough to provide us with a couple flash bangs. We kick open the door, toss a pair in, and then you're going to go in first. I'll point you in the right direction, and I want you to cuff up whoever you run into. Don't get distracted, because with the size of the room, I'll probably have to drop the far target with a bullet. Secure your guy, then help me out if I need it. You still good for this?” Jeffrey could do nothing but nod, and do as he was told. He didn't know what was happening, but he seemed to be on the right side of things, so he decided to go with it for now. So he called in back up, which would be here in four minutes. Not fast enough for Caleb, who grabbed two flash bangs and handed them to his friend. They positioned themselves at the left door, and as soon as Caleb's foot connected with the door - the only one of the three that had yet to be reinforced so such a thing wasn't possible - Jeffrey tossed the specialty grenades into the space. Two deafening, near simultaneous concussive blasts hit the pair, even through the thick wall, but before the smoke could even begin to dissipate, the two were through the frame. Everything went to plan perfectly; the men inside the unit were covering their eyes and bleeding from their ears, Jeffrey dropped the man he was directed to with a solid forearm push and handcuffed him without incident, Caleb dropped the target on the far wall with a single shot to the chest, and had the other two in zip ties before they knew what was happening. It was like a perfectly choreographed dance, full of violence and noise, but graceful in its own way. Jeffrey's thoughts were jumbled as he sat in this pocket of calm that came upon him suddenly, surveying the scene and trying to still understand it.

Caleb looked up to him then, surveyed the room himself, and smiled in his friend's direction. All his muscles seemed to relax at the same time, and he removed his earpiece. Still taking his cues from Caleb, Jeffrey smiled back and sighed to let the tension out of his frame. In the distance, he heard the approaching sirens, and guessed they'd be here within the minute. And what a scene they'd find. Jeffrey looked around the set up with satisfaction, knowing that everything he saw

would be destroyed. Kitchen cabinets full of chemicals, with the tables stacked with powders and pills. He even bet that the bathtub was brewing up a fresh batch of tweak at this moment, and spotting the bathroom door, he pushed it to the side slowly to see for himself. That's when the fifth person in the lab shot Jeffrey in the stomach with both barrels of the shot gun she was carrying.

Spinning in a panic, Caleb raised his gun in the direction of the shot just as the assailant came out of the bathroom, reloading the gun. He was so shocked that he did the first thing that came naturally.

"Police! Put the gun down." Equally surprised that there was someone else in the room, the shooter also reacted on instinct, by clipping the gun together and trying to bring it to bear on her target. Caleb fired, the slug entering into, and then passing out of her neck, carrying most the tissue from that side away with it. The gore was horrific, but Caleb couldn't even pause on that. He rushed to his friend's side as the shooter was still collapsing in a bloody heap, hoping that the shot that had ripped into him had been mostly a miss, that he would be able to hold on until medical attention arrived. But as he knelt down next to his friend, he immediately knew it was too late. Most of his lower torso was shredded, and the blood leaking around them was fatal in itself. The agony that must have been filling Jeffrey's consciousness wasn't even showing on his face, just a look of serenity as he looked up to his friend in that final moment.

"It's okay Caleb, this was worth it. This will keep our city safe." And despite it all, he smiled then, even as his eyes glazed over and his heart began to stutter in his chest. Caleb's eyes began to flow over with tears, wanting to shout at Jeffrey to fight it off, wake up and pull through. He wanted to shout at the walls at the tragedy of it, at Dorian for selling him out. But Jeffrey was already dead, that event already in the past he couldn't change, so he just held him and cried slowly and bitterly. And that's just how the first responders found him.

Seven hundred meters over the city in an abandoned office in an inconsequential sky scraper, Caleb looked down on the lights of his home. It wasn't the highest point in the city, but it was pretty up there, and most buildings looked up at him as he looked down on them. He saw architecture that had made him hold his breath in awe, he saw the twisting and multilayered roadways that ran like veins through the walls of the city. He saw the suburbs in the distance and their dull gleam. He saw the interconnectedness of the towers, he saw the spattering of greenery inside the maze of human activity, and he thought about his day. He remembered Dorian's words, and the exchange they had several hours earlier, when he was finally able to pull himself away from the police.

"I'm sorry."

"Go fuck yourself! It didn't have to happen like that. Jeffrey wasn't just some random person on the street corner, and he wasn't just my friend. He was an amazing detective, and he could have done so much more good in his life. He could have been happy!"

"I'm sorry but I had to Caleb. Alive, his indiscretion with a fellow law enforcement agent's wife would come out. Not only would his career never recover, but the officer in question would have sunk into a depression from where there's no coming back from. It was his wife that was killed by Jeffrey's car, and his wife that had slept with him too. But in death, the city will mourn him a hero, a saviour, and everyone, everywhere, will look to his example of heroism and sacrifice. This is what is needed to bring order back. And I knew you wouldn't agree if I told you what would have to happen."

It was the same sentiment he had been following all afternoon and into the evening, too numb to

do anything else. Everything from randomly giving a little girl a balloon to slashing the tires on a beat up old car. He had stopped asking questions, stopped caring about the line of cause and effect that only Dorian would be able to track. He no longer cared the slashed tires would lead a brilliant mind back to the arms of his significant other, and in his happiness inspire students for decades as a professor. Nor did he care that that balloon would be the last thing needed to tip a young woman to eventually choose space exploration as a career, and with her quick and unique thinking, she would be able to expand deep space exploration a generation ahead of its time. Caleb just wanted it all to be over, all the random tasks that had had him running around the city for hours. He wanted it all end so he could grieve for his friend, to forget that he had accepted this path that looked for the greatest good, nothing more than that. There was no high mindedness to what he was doing; just an order that was worth sacrificing for. How far Dorian would go to return that order, Caleb didn't want to know. But at the very end of the day, after having to spend his time moving from violently storming out of a restaurant to dropping a fat stack of hundred dollar bills -courtesy of a malfunctioning ATM - into a mailbox on some sad street, he had been instructed to wait for a call that was to come at midnight.

So he came to this spot, high up over most the city, where he did from time to time to be alone and think. This office space was very nice, but very pricey, and at the time not that many people were in the market for high end office space. In the meantime, it was a silent hideaway for Caleb, who had worked a case for the owner of the building and as a bonus to his payment, received a security clearance to come up here whenever he wanted to. It was one of the better bonuses he had ever received, and while he didn't come all the way up here often, he cherished the moments he could look down on the intricacies of the city.

Caleb looked at his watch. Three minutes to midnight. He waited.

He looked down on the city. The frantic pace from the morning seemed to have subsided. He wondered if it was because night had fallen or because of his actions. Then he thought about Rebecca, because he didn't want to think about his day.

Caleb's watch now read one minute to midnight. He waited.

The call came in, his instructions were delivered, and the line went dead. Dorian was aware that he was the focus of a great deal of resentment, and wanted to be talking with Caleb as little as possible, lest he get upset.

Caleb stared into space, turning over the instructions in his mind slowly. He spoke one word.

"No." It didn't take long for the phone to ring.

"This is the last thing Caleb, and there's a window. Now until six am. After that, it's too late. You do this, and it's all over. All of it."

"No."

"If you don't do this, everything we have done today could be for nothing."

"No." There was a long pause on the other end of the line. Caleb doubted there was actually anything Dorian would have to think about for any discernable amount of time. It was just a perfect mimicry of human speech, and a perfect read of a person to allow them to think about what was being said for just the right amount of time. Caleb had a feeling he would give in before very long, even if he hated himself for it.

"I know that this feels different Caleb, but this is just more direct. There's no removal from the act itself. It's just you, them, and the bullet that ends their life. But this is what has to be done. Innocent or not, this person stands in the way of our goal, and it is the goal. Nothing is more important."

"And morality? Does that enter in?"

“That’s all that is here. This goal of order and of upholding that greatest good, that’s morality. That’s the good, the thing to strive for. It’s doing what has to be done for the best of all people. It’s the only morality that makes any sense, and the one that we have to uphold.”

“I can’t take an innocent life.”

“Yes you can. Because you know that if you don’t, the innocent lives of all those you failed to save in this one act will be on your shoulders. How many innocent dead would you be able to tolerate for your personal morality. Five, ten maybe? Could you sleep knowing there were ten innocent deaths on your conscious instead of one? You know what has to be done. Do this, and we can meet again, face to face, in the same spot, and I can truly show you what you did, what you saved.” The line went dead again, and no matter what Caleb said into the darkness, the phone didn’t ring again. Dorian knew that his words had had the impact that they needed. Caleb hated the way he felt so played, hated how he felt so manipulated, and he especially hated himself because he had no more tears for the person he was about to murder.

James Bisson was in his lab, working away. The idea of sleep dare not enter his mind. His wife had left until the morning, but that was okay. He enjoyed the silence almost as much as he enjoyed her company while he worked. He revelled in the sound of nothing, and when it was broken by the sound of the lab doors being pushed open, he was so startled that he nearly stabbed himself with the pen he was taking notes with.

“Detective Lange, what on earth are you doing-” Bisson’s surprise gave way to shock as the crack of Caleb’s pistol assaulted his ear drums, so much so that it took him another half second to realize that there was a burning pain in his chest. Looking down, he was startled to see that his blood was rapidly staining the front of his shirt, but his surprise would not last long. It was the last thing that Bisson’s mind had the opportunity to process before he collapsed on the floor, which Caleb was grateful for. He didn’t want the man pondering his end at length, or see his murderer prepping his lab to burn up in an inferno. He was only using a minimal amount of flammables, but it was more than enough to spread with Dorian’s influence. Caleb had a flash of just putting the same gun in his mouth, following Bisson out so that he wouldn’t have to deal with his actions, but the thoughts pasted in a bitter swallow. In that moment, Caleb didn’t think he could hate himself any more than he did, but it wasn’t enough for him to kill himself. He would learn to live with himself again, he said in his head, it would just take time. Looking down at the tragic scene he had just created, he was compelled to one thing; an apology.

“I’m sorry. I wish it could have been different.” And with that he lit a match, and let the world’s best chance of discovering Dorian’s existence disappear in the flicker of a flame.

Deep in the ground, Caleb sat on the earth again, exhausted, much more mentally than physically.

“Those veins are still creepy as hell.”

“I would imagine so. But the effort it takes to move them is considerable, and there have been many more things to do.” There was a pause in their conversation, the enormity of everything that had happened in the past few days weighing down on Caleb’s shoulders. The weight of it all wasn’t lifting, and he sadly wondered how long that would take. He attempted to distract himself.

“I’m down here because you promised you’d show me the good I was going to do. I want to see it. I want to see what I fought and suffered and killed for. I don’t know if you understand the concept, but you owe me that.”

“I understand it just fine. And I will show you. I will show you all the innocent lives that you saved. I hope it abates that pain that you - Stop what you’re doing.” This time there was no pause when Dorian switched topics, no halt in its speech that a person would have to use to comprehend what was about to happen. Dorian simply immediately began imploring Caleb to stop what he was doing. That was because he wasn’t there to listen to Dorian explain to him what he had done, or what he had saved. Caleb already felt he understood the depth of his actions, the necessity of what he was doing. Otherwise, he would not have followed Dorian’s requests, all the way up to murdering James Bisson. In that moment, Caleb had reached into his jacket pocket where his pen usually occupied a space and withdrew a shielded and insulated syringe filled with a sample of the VRSA that had ravaged the hospital weeks earlier.

“Caleb, stop what you’re doing, you don’t appreciate the severity of your actions. Just hold a minute and we can talk about this, we can work something out. Don’t make everything you’ve done be for nothing and do what you’re thinking. It’s not the way, whatever you’re looking for, just stop. Please.” On that last plea, on that last word, the needle dug its way into one of Dorian’s veins that fed into the terminal they were communicating on. He depressed the stopper half way, pulled it out, then reinserted the needle into a different vein before injecting what remained of the sample into the tip of Dorian’s vast network. Then he let it fall to the ground, and sank back to his original spot.

There was a silence in that moment that felt as if it stretched for miles in all directions. A cessation of a noise that had been filling the very fabric of the universe for years. Caleb revelled in it, while at the same time being deeply disturbed by it. For once he felt that Dorian was truly thinking, pausing in a moment that it couldn’t fully comprehend. More likely, he thought to himself, is that it was trying to purge its system or stem the spread of the toxin. In either case, Caleb waited. He didn’t have to for long.

“What do you think you have done?” There was anger in Dorian’s tone, but a defeated and inhuman one. Caleb couldn’t help but wonder what he was intended to feel in that.

“I think that I’ve taken advantage of your design - which incorporates and disseminates new material that helped you grow and form when you were created - to spread a highly virulent and resistant strain of harmful microbe through your entire system. The end goal of which, of course, is to destroy you. If I asked you if I was successful, would you be honest.” Dorian ignored the request for confirmation.

“I don’t understand Caleb. You followed every directive to the last, up to the murder of a good and innocent man. What was the point if you were just going to destroy me in the end?”

“Because I did believe in what we were doing. I believed in rebalancing everything. I believed in the order. But I didn’t trust I would always feel that way, that I might need to alter our deal, so while Jeff was saying goodbye to the woman he killed, I palmed a sample of the VRSA and swapped it with my pen; I was hoping that this would balance the weights and that you’d be busy enough with other things that you wouldn’t notice. When you killed Jeffrey, when you had me kill Bisson, I knew that I couldn’t just accept the way we were creating the world. I couldn’t simply accept that all things would be for the greatest good, and nothing else. I wanted to give humanity a neutral start, and I wanted you to trust me enough to get me down here again, the veins still attached to the network. Bisson was the price for both those things.”

“That’s incredibly hypocritical, destroying me for my means towards the ultimate end, when you yourself put an innocent man’s life on the alter of your plan.”

“Circumstance. I believed that to get things to where they need to go, Bisson had to die. I believed that his murder would get me here, get me your trust, so that I might do what I

suspected I might have to.”

“This will make things so much worse for humanity. You have no idea how much suffering will be because of this decision.”

“Maybe, but I have to believe that there’s more for people to strive for than order and calm at any cost. I think there are great things to be done if we’re not hampered by simply doing decent things. And I like to think that you’ve given humanity a good head start on all of it. Though I assure you, my own instincts of self preservation didn’t factor in to this decision, though I was pretty confident that you’d find a way to kill me eventually.”

“Five years is when I was going to have you get into an accident. How can you be sure that I won’t kill you now?”

“You don’t strike me as vindictive. Plus, I thought with the way you worked, the VRSA would take away your efficiency fairly quickly.”

“You’re right...on both counts I suppose. I can feel myself weakening by the second. I think there will be very little of me left within a months time.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“For what it’s worth, I am too. I hope you’re right about the future, though I suppose I won’t have to witness any of it while I’m gone. So what now Caleb? What will you do without my guiding hand?”

“I’m going to go back to Rebecca, and I’m going to try and be happy with her.” Caleb smiled to himself over the thought, and without another word, climbed back toward a world which would have to find its own way again, even if no one realized it.