

Spire

By Aaron Safronoff

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All characters and events in this book are fictitious.
All resemblance to persons living or dead is coincidental.

To Evangeline, my muse and best friend.

To my brothers:

Jason, Mark, Jeremy, Joe, Aaron. I hope I've made all of you proud.

For Brock.

Down Time

One

I liked coming down. I liked the way it solidified my sense of solidarity. I took comfort in watching the people around me, the way they were consumed entirely by the concerns of day-to-day existence. These people, they seemed to move quickly and with purpose, but when I was on my way down that impression changed. On my way down, the motivations of the world slowed and the people did too. They began to float like they were moving through water, and I floated along with them.

The street was a strong current, sucking some people up along with it while it pushed others aside. The river of traffic along the road dropped off new faces and carried others away, mixing them up. Those that were carried away were immediately replaced by new, completely satisfactory replacements.

A brief-cased-male, five-foot-nine, dark hair and suitable shoes, with matching suit and tie, hailed a taxi, got in, and disappeared completely. Next, a perfectly coifed female, standing an easy six, carrying a sleek leather-pouch-folder-thing in her left hand, raised her right to bring, was that the same taxi?, to a brief stop. She too, was sucked into the current. But sucked into the space she left behind, was another.

It wasn't just the young urban professionals. The drunkards and harlots were just as easily interchangeable. It didn't really matter. The fat, the handsome, the toothless, the pregnant, the strung-out, the straight-haired, the loose-legged, and the tight-assed were all so...indistinguishable when I was on my way down. I might have seen them as equally indistinct while sober, sure, but I was not an authority on that state of mind.

Where was I going...? Oh yeah, solidarity. Right. Solidarity, because I could be any one of them. Solidarity, because I was never more a part of the community than when I was sitting there on that bus stop bench, floating right along with them.

My friend, Demy, he says coming down is the hardest part. Or maybe that was a song? Something like that. Anyway, he describes the experience as completely unholy, unreasonable torture, as though his happiness is slipping away in an agonizing, slow, un-medicated, tooth-pull. He wanted to be back There.

But I didn't get it.

When I'm dosed on...well anything that's worthwhile, I'm not really There. See, that's the point of dropping chems. Your 'I' slips into this limbo-abyss nirvana-euphoria and loses all reference points. Coming down is really more like coming back, very slowly, to self-awareness. Quite honestly, I am so amazed to find my body after a trip that I get a little weepy happy. But you really don't know where you were once you're completely back, so coming down is the only time that your 'eye' really gets to enjoy anything. Coming down is when I get to see where I was while the trail is still burned against the sky. Coming back, the body is fresh, every movement fascinating, each wrinkle curious.

Anyway, I didn't know why Demy hated coming down so much. It wasn't as though he wasn't "leaving" again anytime soon. There were millions of ways to fade out. All reasonably priced, all reasonably available.

One just had to know when to be Here.

"You got a light, Jack?"

"Sure," my name wasn't Jack, but it could have been.

I pulled a Zippo out of my jacket pocket and flipped the lid. As Harley sat down beside me, he casually lifted the lighter from my offering hand and dropped his thumb quickly down the wheel. I felt the echo on my thumb as the wheel's steel teeth bit into his thumbprint. The flame slipped out with a purr, then flickered quietly. He took a long drag on a clove. The crackling sound, a quick-crushed-paper sack, was like Harley camping in the cave of my ear.

“You got some money for me?”

His question brought me around, stirred me up, put me in motion, and brought some sense of the familiar to the surface.

“Sure, sure.” I reached down deep into the pockets of my jacket. I know the money will be there. It is always there.

These types of interactions, the back and forth and squaring off, were necessary to maintain a sense of broadcast-reality. The passing of money and goods between two no good hoodlums is a classic scene. It felt different though, when you were in the scene, when you were the hoodlum. But when the transaction goes smoothly, you feel like you've done the right thing.

I pinched a folded bunch of bills and extracted them calmly from my breast pocket. The denim jacket had been with me through so much that its smell and weight were as familiar as my own skin. It was a little heavy today which basically meant that I didn't trust Harley at all. I hoped I wasn't showing.

The bills were folded once, but smooth otherwise. I vaguely remembered counting out the amount obsessively, flattening each paper again and again. Of course, the last time was completely indistinguishable from all the times before it, and it occurred to me that I might be visualizing several separate instances as one event. Didn't matter.

Only one thing mattered at this point: the quality of the shit this asshole was going to pull out of his pocket. Good shit and everything would be good. Low-grade, cut-bag and I would have to play it cool while I figured out my next move. It was a fine line that I knew well enough, but knowing it didn't make it any easier to handle.

"I couldn't find what you wanted, but I got something even better. It'll go twice as far, twice as long, and it'll go for the same price. Consider it a favor."

This guy was talking too much already. Not a good sign. Changes are rarely good in this business. Paranoia being the prime side effect of the lifestyle, change invited all varieties of lengthy and expensive thoughts. And I've never met a dealer who does favors.

"Street name?" I kept it brief.

The money was out already because I had been operating on auto-pilot a few seconds ago, but I was growing more alert by the second, adrenaline kicking in. This little give-and-take was going to require my full attention, if I didn't want to get taken.

It was time to size this guy up, not chit-chat. I couldn't get caught up in the words. His eyes were a little jumpy as he sized me up, too. The dealer always thinks he's smarter than the user. But I wasn't a casual user and he knew it. So why size me up? What's he worried about?

Shit, I'm already doing loops. Talking myself in circles.

He's going to get the money one way or the other: conclusion.

"Pez. Really nice trip. Set aside a day or two though...and don't expect instant action. It takes a bit to get rollin'..."

He kept talking but I wasn't listening anymore. The sky was a crispy blue, and I was chilly. Was it March? October? It felt like spring or fall but there wasn't a tree in sight to verify one or the other.

"Pez."

I recognized the name. Some hippy punk kid called the new designer drug the Pleasure Zone, and *Pez* followed quickly and stuck.

My breath was condensing in the air. My skin was a little itchy and my bones were a little achy. My eyes were glassing over. Shit. I couldn't remember the chemical name for Pez. I remembered the courses, the hours reading over the material, but I couldn't remember the name of the drug.

Consideration time was up.

I nodded. Seemed appropriate. He seemed to buy it. So did I.

That was it. I gave him another nod and a perfunctory pleasantry. I traded my cash for his satchel of happiness. I got up smoothly from the bench and took my leave of that life, that scene, that event...it was already behind me. Really, so far behind me that I wasn't sure it happened at all.

My feet were heavy, but my stride was confident. I thought about the Pez in my pocket. I thought about the thirty hours of endorphins and asphyxiatic dreams that waited for me. I thought about the possibility that this shit could be my last. I should have been more careful.

I liked coming down. I liked coming down, but I hated crashing down. It was time to take another trip.

The Pleasure Zone

Two

Twenty minutes.

Nothing.

I needed an innocuous and mundane task to waste some time and get my mind off the anticipation. My apartment didn't have much to offer in the way of distractions though, because I didn't spend much conscious time there.

There was a hideaway bed, revealed, and unmade, taking up the bulk of the space of the room. It was a little sad looking with a pillow drooping half off the mattress and a blanket rolled and wrinkled at the foot. There was a standard Wall displaying my last search and a stream I didn't care about above a base-model Desk opposite the bed. The kitchenette in the corner served no purpose except to accumulate the unnecessary, daily sludge of living. There was a pile of junk mail in the sink and trash on the counter, neither of which was distinguishable from the other. For that matter, the kitchenette area was not really distinguishable from the rest of the studio, save the linoleum tile floor that bared itself there like a bald spot in the carpet. Cold and stained, it almost made the carpet look inviting. Finally, there was an armchair. Which I was sitting on. And me, of course.

I guess I could count the closet to the right of the apartment door as something if it contained anything at all. And then there was the bathroom to the left...

What was in that bathroom? I tried to picture it but I couldn't. It was interesting to me that I couldn't remember the contents of my own bathroom, and that was motivation enough for me to make the trip. Off to the restroom I went.

Walking to the bathroom was a vigorous exercise of sixteen steps. The sliding door to the bathroom was open as expected. It was dark, but as I crossed the threshold the luminosity adjusted to match the main room.

Luminosity. I stood there just inside the bathroom, and chewed on the word for a minute.
Luminosity.

Lew-Min Gnaw's City. This bathroom belonged to him, to Lew-Min, the spider in the corner of the ceiling, above the sink.

"What do you want Lew?" He just stared at me with disdain, like I should have known what he was thinking.

Strangely, outside of Lew's web, the rest of the bathroom was clean. It was almost pristine compared to the clutter in the rest of the tiny apartment. There was even toilet paper available in the dispenser which I could not recall having replaced. The toilet paper, I kept that in the cabinet beneath the sink.

The cabinet.

There was something about that cabinet. I stared at it anticipating... something, I had no idea what, but I was excited. It was patiently waiting for me. It wanted to be opened. What was it about that cabinet?

Wait, wait. What was I doing in here? I blinked my eyes and rubbed my face vigorously. My heart felt stiff and hot. My skin began urgently nagging me to remove my shirt. Itchy and hot and terribly uncomfortable there in the bathroom, I decided to obey my skin's desires.

My hand shook as I slid down the smooth-zip on the front of my shirt. It parted down the middle, cleanly, and I shrugged the shirt off, allowing it to fall to the floor.

Both of my hands were shaking as I put them on the sink counter to settle myself, to steady myself. I accidentally triggered both the faucet and the Mirror. The rush of sound from the water falling into the sink fell over my mind like a curtain.

I looked up into the Mirror and the magnified image of my face stared back at me. The Mirror must have been malfunctioning because my face appeared bulbous, my cheek bones pronounced to a ridiculous degree. It was an altogether unseemly and disturbing image. I shook my head.

Whoa. Euphoria. Vertigo.

It took me a few seconds to recover and to focus, then a brief happy memory occurred to me from somewhere over my shoulder. The memory was like a lighthouse beacon calling my attention to the Pez I swallowed earlier. It cast warmth on my back and soothed my nerves. But the warmth, the light only remained diffuse for a few seconds, and then it focused and moved down. Eventually it became a beam, directed right at my tailbone.

I was warm all over but at the base of my spine, in that one spot touched by the light, the strongest feeling sat. The focused warmth moved slowly but steadily up my back. Each vertebra was excited and heated gradually.

My eyes rolled and found the back of my skull as I inhaled, filling my ribs with the progression of the light. My hands lifted from the counter as my chest expanded and the focus of light reached the base of my neck. Every hair in my head lit up like a fiber optic pincushion and I exhaled loudly in the ecstasy of the moment. My hands, were they mine?, rubbed my face and scratched my head vigorously.

The drug's effects had crept right up on me like a cat, like a thief. Pez the cat had stolen my awareness right out from in front of me and made me smile as it passed. I marveled at it, impressed.

I peered into the mirror which displayed the left half of my face only, an eye, a portion of my eyebrow, and my cheek. The view was a customized setting that I used for placing and removing contact lenses.

My pupil appeared small in the pseudo-reflection. I couldn't help but be mesmerized by it. Then, as I stared deeper into it, it began to grow. A giddy-rush filled me with expectation. The pupil was growing, swallowing up the blue, the natural blue, of my iris. It was eating it, absorbing it.

Another pleasurable flood drenched me as I realized the pupil was actually pushing through the iris, not digesting it. The blue was peeling back to accommodate a lengthening and broadening black protrusion. The blackness grew and elongated and stretched out of the mirror. I was paralyzed by the intense pleasure of anticipation, the thought of my pupil touching its own reflection.

My chest gave and I heaved forward with another rush of hot air. I held myself there, head hanging down, looking at nothing for several seconds. Then I realized the water was still running.

I touched the counter lightly and the Mirror flickered off. I touched it again, lightly again, dramatically, and the faucet dispensed with its dispensing. I smiled a ridiculous smile.

“Oh, this is good shit.” I shuddered a bit happily.

The cabinet.

I turned my attention there once again. Scared, exhilarated, intensely hot, sweating, and giddy, I was drawn to touch the sliding panel that hid that space and to discover the contents of that little place. The place beneath the sink. My hands steady, I knelt down and stared at the door. Reaching up, I slid my finger along the near edge of the counter.

The door panel parted swiftly and I fell to the floor as water poured out from the cabinet driving over me and pushing me down. Staring at the ceiling, there was only one sensation, the cool flood drenching my skin. I was vaguely aware of my hands unfastening my belt buckle, unbuttoning my pants and sliding them from my body. I was relieved to have removed the fetters of my clothing.

Lew-Min made eye contact with me again. He was mocking me with an enormous smile. He was spinning a descending thread. He was floating down to the sink. He was stealthily stepping to the edge of the counter. He had an interesting glint in his eye.

He knew something I didn't know.

He was motionless for a moment as he looked for a position even closer to my head. Then his spindly legs started up again, smooth and silky, and my eyes were drawn to his movements.

Lew-Min had something for me. He slid down another thread and out of sight. I thought my eyes were closed... *when did I close them?*

I felt a heavy touch on my shoulder. My shoulder shook. Lew-Min must have grown considerably in the last few moments.

With a force of pure will I opened my eyes to take a look at the new bigger and badder Lew. A long, black, hairy arm was there hovering over my face. There was a suction cup

attached to the end of it. My head was lifted toward it, and the cup was sealed around my mouth and nose.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't breathe but the ecstasy pouring through my body, the water dousing my skin in cool waves, the closeness of the best orgasm imaginable prevented me from caring anymore. Suddenly, I was seized. It was rapture so pure and undeniable, that I felt completely free. I was just rolling and flying, everywhere and nowhere at all. There was an echo of coherent thought making its way to the surface; *there were hours left of this.*

Pez was good.

...

"Look at this one."

"Holy shit."

"Is he stable?"

"Every time I clean him up he just messes himself again."

"Check out those pupils..."

"Yeah, guy's completely gone."

"Pry his lids open. Let me shine a light in there."

"Sure thing... uh, there. Shit."

"No kidding. It's like shining a light into a couple of black holes. Can you make out his eye color? I can't even see an outline of color."

"Nah. There's nothin' there."

"Well, this is definitely the guy. No Chip and his Creds match up."

“So, we’re takin’ this piece of shit to the Spire?”

“Yes. Put some clothes on him. Let’s go.”

“Sure thing, but what about the...?” A wet, plastic glove snapped, and then crumpled to the ground.

“Button him up. He can have all the fun he wants as long as it’s in his pants.”

The Chemist

Three

The man sat at his Desk, intently studying the chemical reactions displayed on the Wall. The bright colors of the reactions were reflected in his spectacles as he furrowed his brow at the images. He focused on one morsel of data after another, chewing up bit after bit of the complex readout.

He touched the top of his Desk with only his fingertips, tapping and sliding them along the smooth surface. The display of the reaction stopped, and the focus slid around, following the movement of his fingers. He found something of interest and gradually increased the magnification, sliding his pointer finger forward. He stared deeply and leaned even closer to the Wall.

The man's attention shifted suddenly to the hologram on his right.

The source of the hologram was a heavy-looking instrument, an elementary particle projector. The black metallic base of the instrument was a perfectly square brick, about four inches thick and about eight inches to a side. The top inch tapered toward the center, creating a truncated pyramidal shape. Out from the base, several shiny probes, lights, and knobs, protruded at various and irregular intervals.

His hands deftly adjusted several settings on the base, which adjusted the image. He turned one knob, then another. The floating globule of a hologram grew and swayed and came back into focus. A window on the Wall began scrolling text. The readout described complex chemical relationships among the viewed molecules with highlighted linkages, hue-shifted to represent attractions and energies.

He read.

Eventually, he tilted his head to the left, and then to the right. He took a deep breath and quietly sighed back into his chair. He slumped a bit. Finally, he relaxed his face, which revealed kind and round cheeks. He closed his eyes and looked down, removed his glasses with one hand, and massaged the bridge of his nose with the other. Setting his glasses down on the Desk, he rubbed his face with both hands, exhausted.

It's been a long night, the Chemist thought to himself. Tapping the Desk, he turned the microscope off and then changed the Wall with a few gentle strokes. The display became blue and liquid, rippling and shimmering; an underwater camera pointing to the sky.

The Chemist's room was a small and cluttered space. Books and papers littered the floor and several tabletops, but his Desk was clear. There was a bookshelf awkwardly placed in the center of the room, separating the kitchenette from the Desk area.

The room was mostly dark and warm. The watery Wall display was accompanied by liquid audio; the overall effect calmed and relaxed the man and nearly lulled him to sleep. The Chemist was just about to nod off when a scratching at his window startled him.

He turned around in his chair and looked in the direction of the disturbance. The window was closed and there was nothing obvious that he could see to explain the scratching sound. Peering into the distance through the window, he tried to focus on something, anything, but there was only darkness there and nothing more. Nothing obvious anyway, so he hefted himself up out of his chair and began ambling across the room.

The floor creaked under his weight. He put his face to the window and stared into the night. What little light there was in the room still managed to create some reflections in the pane,

so the Chemist leaned in closer to the window, his hands cupped around his face; he touched the cool, smooth surface of the glass.

There was a casual knock at the door.

The Chemist turned his head too quickly, and his neck and back tightened in a brief spasm. He immediately began rubbing between the base of his neck and his shoulder. He listened intently for any other sound, some indication that the visitor had left or that maybe the knock was at the next door and not his?

Knock-knock, this time slightly more assertive.

The Chemist, more alert, slowly walked over to his desk. His attempt to move silently failed. The floorboards punctuated each step with a creak or groan, and he seemed much louder this time coming back across the room. He slid a finger quickly across the surface of the front of the Desk, and a drawer slid open. He lifted the gun out, uncertain, then slowly pushed the drawer closed. He tapped several buttons on the surface of the Desk and a thin red line demarcated and slightly illuminated the keys.

He walked haltingly to the door. Not sure how he should hold his gun, he awkwardly tucked it close to his side as though to obscure it from view even though the knocker could not see inside. He touched the center of the door with a single finger. The door flickered to life with the bright light of the hallway, a face, and a fist that was about to knock again.

"Oh, hey, decided to come to your door? *Finally*. Come on, open up and let me in." The man looked around as though he saw back through the door but really he was only reacting to the tiny red light on the exterior that came on when the Chemist began viewing the hall.

Vanya, whew. "I wasn't expecting you. Uh, just a minute." The color returned to his face as he walked back to his Desk and quickly placed the gun back in its drawer.

"Hey, come on! What are you doing in there, Gabe? Let me in. It's not exactly summer out here..." The man spoke into the door, urgently at first, and then trailed off to himself.

"Actually, I wasn't expecting anyone tonight." The Chemist was nervous as he opened the door just a crack.

"I wasn't expecting to be here... Gabe, I've got news. We have to talk."

Gabe was blocking the way with his body, holding the toe of his shoe against the bottom of the door. After a moment, though, he acquiesced. He stepped back and turned on the light, letting go his paranoia. Vanya wasn't exactly the trustworthy sort but he was paid well enough. "Sure, sure. Come in. Come in, Vanya."

"Thank you," the man said dryly. "Honestly, I don't know why you are so paranoid. Where do I put my...?" The man looked around for a bit then just dropped his coat on the floor.

"Yeah, just put it anywhere," Gabe grumbled to himself, then petulantly, "What are you doing here anyway? I don't have much to offer a guest. How about scotch?"

"Nah, nah," he waved both hands dramatically, "I have to keep my head on straight. There are some heavy hitters looking for you, my friend. I've been baiting the line and some nibblers have contacted me."

"Well, don't keep me in suspense," as Gabe bent down to pick up Vanya's jacket.

"First, I think you should lie down." Vanya sneered as he stepped full force into the back of Gabe's right knee and in the same motion, reached his hand around, and covered Gabe's mouth as he fell hard to the ground. There was a snapping sound inside Gabe's knee as it bore the full weight of his body. He grunted, a sound full of pain and confusion.

Vanya was kneeling partially beside and partially on top of Gabe, applying extraordinary pressure to Gabe's mouth. Gabe felt like his teeth might push right through his lips or his head through the floor. The Chemist tried to unfold his leg but was met with swift, searing pain.

"I know this suddenly seems complicated, Gabriel; but it's really pretty simple."

Gabe's eyes were glassed-over and quivering. The pain and fear made it almost impossible for him to focus, for him to understand what was happening.

"You paid me to keep an eye on inquiries into your whereabouts, investigate anything suspicious. Well, I did just that. Found some pretty impressive information."

He leaned in closer, "Do you have any idea who is looking for you?" slowly, he articulated each word with greater emphasis than the last, bemused.

Vanya waited, eyebrows raised, reading the face of his victim.

Gabriel's shaky blue eyes pled for relief from the pain, pled to be released.

"Yeah, I didn't think so. Well, Gabe, these people are pretty damn well connected."

Vanya reached into his back pocket. "A couple of anonymous, but sufficiently detailed emails made their way into the right mailboxes and the next thing you know... we're here."

Vanya shrugged, "They made me a pretty impressive offer: this," he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a palm-sized piece of clear, flat, thick Glass.

"On," the Glass turned opaque and lit up.

"Recent," several icons appeared.

"Ophthalmology," the icons faded out and faded back in, rearranged alphabetically. The icon at the top-left looked like a photograph of a woman.

"Closest, Open" The photograph icon expanded and a picture of a gorgeous woman's face, half in sharp focus, the other half blurry, was at the center with the caption, "See what life

has to offer." The accompanying text described why full orbital replacement was superior to intraocular lens technology, but the text was cut off by the edge of the view.

Vanya held the Glass so that he could see the image himself. "The surgery is expensive. I could probably afford it, but the military-grade occipital neuroface, and ten-times zoom, reflexive-lens implant? That isn't exactly legal. Which tags the price up with a few trailing zeros."

He held the picture so that Gabe could see it again. "I'm thinking I'll go thermographic... forgive me, I'm losing the thread here... I said this was simple and it is. I get this..." He emphasized the advertisement by giving the Glass a little shake.

"When you give me..." then a little mechanically, "Mail, From, "Sharp," Closest, Open." The crystal clear image on the Glass morphed quickly and fluidly with each command. The dizzying display stopped at a simple picture of someone's office whiteboard. Chemical symbols, numbers, and equations filled the space. And one large question mark. "This."

Gabe struggled a bit, but it only sharpened the pain and deepened his anxiety. He could not see his knee, but he imagined someone driving a screw into it with a hammer.

Vanya removed his hand from Gabe's mouth. Gabe raised his head a couple of inches on impulse, sensing escape and relief. Vanya slapped him, still holding the Glass steadily in his left hand. He leaned deeper with his knee, and shoved his hand back into Gabe's face in a flash, slamming his head back down to the floor. A dull thud. A moan.

"Focus." Vanya stared deeply into the blue eyes. The eyes finally focused and stared intently back at him.

"There," Vanya spoke calmly, directly, "There's no escaping this, fat boy. You're going to give me what I came here to get. You know I'm not leaving until I get it. Take another look."

Vanya shook the Glass and motioned to it with his eyes and a tilt of his head before staring back at Gabe.

"Don't just look at it; read it."

A kind of calm blanketed Gabe as he squinted to read the formulas on the whiteboard in the picture. Vanya held the Glass closer to Gabe to help him see. The pain and the situation fell into the background as Gabe worked on the numbers and pictograms. He thought it odd to have everything written out by hand, or to even use a whiteboard, but it was familiar to him nonetheless.

"There. Now, put your mind to work. In fact, I'm going to help you out." Vanya eased up, removing some pressure. "I think you know you can't run with that leg..." He removed his hand from Gabe's mouth slowly. There was some blood on his lips and in his nose, and a splotchy red patch on his cheek.

"Let's make that leg more comfortable, too. Whaddya say?" Vanya took his weight completely off of Gabe and slowly, gingerly, unfolded the twisted leg.

Gabe moaned, "Fuck," through his clenched teeth.

"Better?" Vanya patted the side of the injured knee, drawing another wince and groan from the wounded Chemist. "Now, I need you to fill in that blank. And don't think you're going to fool me with some random symbols or something like that. I'll be checking your work with my client."

Vanya slid his Glass into the back pocket of his jeans.

"What makes you think..." a pause, a wince, "... that I even understand it?"

"I'm not going to kill you, Gabe."

Vanya waits for the words to sink in.

"I'm not." He shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm not afraid of you Gabe. You have nothing. You're not calling the local arm of the Collective that's for sure. What's that on your Desk? No way does that equipment belong to you."

Gabe knew each object in his apartment, each piece of lab equipment, each book. He knew which ones were stolen, which ones were illegal to have, and which ones were both. He was obsessed.

"But, I really don't understand it, not all of it anyway."

"Look Gabe, I'm not going to kill you, but I will finish this job. I'm telling you so you don't waste my time, our time. Let's not play games. You understand. I know that you do."

Gabe propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at his leg. "I don't believe this is happening... "

"Believe it."

Nervously, "Well, I understand some of it," a shrug, "I mean, that's what I've been working on, but I'm still working on it. I could never have predicted the effects I've seen... the virtually inert compounds inexplicably change and become reactive... "

Vanya placed his hand gently on the swelling knee.

Gabe, nonplussed, defensively blurts out, "What?! What do you want? I'm explain—"

A slight squeeze, "I'm not here for a science lesson. You have a sample. A sample of brain tissue. You will give me that sample. You have a full recording of the reaction. You will give me that recording. You can answer the question mark in the picture, and you will."

"The sample? You can have it," Gabe smiled hysterically, "Take it. The recording, too... neither will do you any good. You can't synthesize the missing piece." He began laughing, a

slight nervous twitter. "I can't anyway. That question mark? Yeah, even with all the information, there is no explanation."

Vanya sized up his captive. He leaned deeply into the Chemist's personal space. Gabe tried to shrink away. His body shriveled and collapsed, and his nose inexplicably closer to the ground, pushed through his face. A bead of sweat formed on his forehead. Vanya and Gabe were close enough to feel the heat of each other's skin.

After a moment, Vanya sat up. He looked toward the red lines illuminating the Desk. "Unlock the Desk. I'll take everything you've got."

Vanya positioned himself behind Gabe, who was now up on his elbows, grimacing. "Ready?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply, he looped his arms around Gabe's chest and hauled him across the floor. He stepped behind the desk chair, holding Gabe out in front of him, and deposited the unbalanced Chemist in it, not completely without care.

Gabe steadied himself with the arms of the chair. He took a deep breath, and felt his aching knee with both hands, evaluating the injury.

"Here, allow me." Vanya grabbed the back of the chair and turned the Chemist to face his Desk, sliding him into position.

"Whoa! Whoa. Okay."

Gabe's hands were shaking and hot. Each stroke on the Desk left an ephemeral, foggy ghost print as he entered the password. The red outline disappeared, and the Desk keys illuminated softly.

"Drop everything on this." Vanya placed his Glass on the Desk, eliciting a quick light scan. The Wall flickered to life. A new window appeared, and then rapidly faded away, an

acknowledgement of the newly connected device. Vanya executed an elaborate set of strokes on the face of the Glass.

Gabe located his spectacles, and put them on. And though he was tense, he went to work locating and transferring files. His fingers were light and fast as they danced across the surface. Never needing to look down at his hands, he just stared into the display.

Scratch, another sound at the window. Scratching, like an animal trying to get in or like someone trying to get everyone's attention.

Vanya and Gabe turned to look simultaneously at the window.

"I thought you said you weren't expecting anyone tonight?"

"I'm not... uh, I heard it before," he shrugged, "I mean, earlier, before you... I'm sure it's nothing."

Vanya looked down at Gabe, whose hands were still at the ready, poised above the keys. It was quiet again. The room was motionless.

Scratch. Vanya's head snapped back to the window, focusing intently. The scratch was unmistakably deliberate.

Let me in.

Let me out.

Over here.

Not a branch. Not the wind.

Still, there was no obvious source.

Vanya looked back at Gabe, the window, and Gabe again. Gabe shrugged slowly. Vanya looked back to the darkness beyond the window. He took some tentative steps toward it before he looked back at Gabe.

"Back to work, Gabe."

Gabe busied himself once again with the transfer of files to Vanya's Glass.

At the window, Vanya discovered nothing out of the ordinary. He put his face up to the pane and tried to look into the corners of the night. Far below and several yards away, a single streetlight was still working, casting a halo over an aging car and an overturned reclamation can. There was also a tree, its leaves rustling from a gentle breeze. The ledge beneath the window couldn't possibly support more than a squirrel or a pigeon. While still looking out, Vanya moved his hands around the interior border of the window.

Vanya looked back at Gabe, who was focused on the Wall, hands masterfully busy at the keys.

"How do you open this?"

Without turning, Gabe responded, "It's old, manual. You just lift from the bottom."

Attention back on the window, Vanya inspected the bottom and found a place to fit his fingers. He pulled lightly at first, but there was no give. He pulled harder, and harder still until finally he put his whole body into it and the window shot up, slamming wood on wood at the top.

Cool, fresh, night air filled the room. Sticking his head out, Vanya braced himself in the sill. He looked down, then up and around. No scratching sound, and no possible source; no explanation for it.

"I'm done." The Chemist's voice seemed to come from another world. Vanya took a last glance, and then came back into the room.

"Good. I'm getting the creeps," he said as he crossed the room, "I just wanna get this done and get out of here."

He stopped beside the chair, grabbed his Glass, and immediately began issuing commands with his fingers, inspecting the transferred files. The Desk responded to the Glass having been removed, but Vanya only noticed that peripherally.

"This is everything?" he asked without looking up, continuing to scan.

Gabe did not reply.

"Ah, this is the recording obviously...", he found something and paused to watch. "... and the sample?"

Gabe did not reply.

Looking up from the Glass, Vanya spied the microscope on the other side of Gabe. He was almost looking through Gabe before he noticed him. Gabe's eyes were wide and frightened.

Realization suddenly caught Vanya. It began in his heart. A slow, dull thud. His chest was open, but there was no air in his lungs. His skin cooled and the blood rushed from his hands and face, going nowhere. His eyes opened wide with betrayal and disbelief.

He didn't ever actually see the gun, but he knew it was there. He had read it plainly in Gabe's frightened, quivering eyes. He had recognized that fear. It was the fear of knowing that you had just decided someone's fate; that you were capable, that you'd made the choice.

Vanya didn't hear the shot. He didn't see the flash.

Gabe sat for a moment and experienced nothing. It was impossible for him to know how long he stayed that way, but it wasn't long enough for anyone to come to investigate the sound of the gun shot.

Hand and forearm quivering, Gabe came to his senses.

Vanya's body was several feet from where Gabe was sitting. The mass projectile had hit him square in the chest, caving it in and splitting his back open around his spine. The force

pushed him back into the bookshelf, knocking it over. There was blood dripping down through the books of the fallen shelf. Vanya's upper body was draped over the shelf in a backbend. His waist was twisted strongly to one side, and his legs were twisted, resting on the floor.

Turning back around and setting the gun on the Desk, Gabe stared blankly at the Wall. The scan light passed over the gun. Within moments, the monitor began displaying information about the capacity, power, and development of the Class 5, High-Density Mass Accelerator. The information window startled the Chemist into action. He wanted to leave and he had to clean the Desk before he could go.

He navigated the menus clumsily, going in circles. Prompts appeared for passwords that he had rarely ever used, eliciting several attempts before he succeeded. He finally paused and considered the warning displayed. "... permanently deleted. Are you sure you wish to continue?"

He tapped a final key.

He pushed himself away from the Desk, tried to stand, and was reminded, painfully of his injured knee. He sat back down, hard. He thought for a moment, then wheeled himself over to a closet under the power of his good leg. He opened the door and looked inside. Moving a couple of boxes out of the way, he found an old, cane-like umbrella at the back of the closet. He tested it, and was almost erect before it snapped and broke under his weight. Grabbing for the chair, he managed to slow his fall to the ground, but hit his head hard on the seat.

Eyeing the closet, he spotted a broom that he'd rarely ever used. He leaned forward and after a brief struggle it fell toward him. He quickly unscrewed the head from the handle and pulled himself up with the aid of both the chair and his newly fashioned walking stick.

Looking around the room, flustered, he shuffled through the inventory of the apartment and tried to figure out what he really needed. His attention back on the closet, he reached for a

jacket. Blood rushed from his head and he experienced a moment of vertigo as the broom handle bottom briefly slid along the floor, before stopping against the jamb of the closet door. Gabe steadied himself, reached in again, and grabbed a jacket and a scarf. He leaned the broom handle against the wall and hurriedly armed himself against the cold.

One last item.

Gabe placed the bottom of the broom handle against the floor molding with each step as he made his way toward the microscope. When he finally arrived at his desk, he placed the full weight of his body on his good leg, in order to free both hands. He manipulated a couple of knobs at the base of the microscope. Armatures and wiring were exposed as the base opened up like a four-petaled flower in bloom. He flipped a small lever. A pressurized sound accompanied the formation of a small liquid bubble, which originated from an almost imperceptible needle within the center of the base. When the bubble was the size of a small marble, a red fluid was injected into its center, and then the needle retracted. The red-dyed fluid swirled within, but did not mix with the surrounding material. The swirling motion slowed and stopped. The sample suspended within the tiny, crystal-clear ball was preserved and protected. The Chemist flipped another lever which ejected the ball. He picked it, like a berry, and took a moment to inspect it. Then he swallowed it.

He fumbled with the broomstick again. Positioning it carefully, he made his way to the door. Gabe tested his injured leg gingerly as he opened the door. There was pain, sharp but not unmanageable... not yet anyway.

Gabe turned to look at the apartment one last time. The Desk was off. The window was open. Standing in the entrance with the door wide, a breeze carried the smell of burnt hair to his

nostrils. He stared at Vanya's misshapen body, held by some inexplicable emotion. Finally, he shook himself free, knowing that he had to leave.

Tapping the side of the Wall, Gabe turned the lights off and left.

The sound of the auto-lock engaging was the only disturbance in the room for several seconds, and then a small amount of light coming in through the window flickered, bent, and snapped back.

Again, the light flickered and bent. It looked like a cylinder of glass moving in front of the window and into the room, only not as smooth and regular. The world was bent and distorted, casting light and shadow into unexpected locations. Suddenly, the activity stopped and there was nothing to see, no strange optical illusions, no aberrant reflections or refractions.

Several minutes passed, then as before, the wall by the window took on odd proportions. It began to move more quickly, and as it moved the outline of a familiar shape became clear. It was the silhouette of a woman.

The figure moved without a sound across the room, hovered over the Desk for a moment and disturbed nothing. She bent closer to the microscope then straightened and surveyed the rest of the room. Stepping quickly and silently around Vanya's corpse, the slender body knelt down. The Glass was lifted into the air, becoming an inscrutable visual distortion as it was inspected and flipped over by the intruder. Finally, it was absorbed completely by the silhouette.

The figure stood and took a few steps closer to Vanya. A protrusion, long and slender, extended from her chest. A bright flash lit up Vanya, flooded the room, and caused an epileptic display of colors to emanate over the entire surface of the figure. Despite the confusing array, the effect gave depth and shape to the intruder. She was slender and tall, and if she was wearing clothing, it was skin tight.

A few more snaps and tricks of light, and she became amorphous again. She floated to the front door, turned on the viewer, and found no one in the hall. The first, distant alarms of the Collective could finally be heard coming from the open window.

She unlocked the door and opened it quickly. For a moment, there was a golden aura outlining her lithe body, then an electrical snap-pop, and the hallway light died. She didn't bother closing the door behind her.