



**THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND**  
AUSTRALIA

**Mercury (a novella) and critical essay, Cycles of Sickness: The Role of the Abject in Robert Louis Stevenson's Jekyll and Hyde and the Millennial Zombie Outbreak Narrative.**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis questions how sociocultural anxieties are evoked through representations of the abject in the horror genre. Two interlinked components – a creative piece and a critical essay – form this analysis of the abject in horror texts, and its reflection of broader, and recurring, concerns in a cultural context. Evaluating deeply held sociocultural fears and concerns, as they emerge through horror texts at the turn of the century (*fin-de-siècle* and millennial), has resulted in the identification of shared preoccupations at these times. These include fear of disintegration of the self and loss of individual agency, fear of invasion, the collapse of society, and an overall loss of purpose and order. These themes are expressed through the literature of both these periods as states of madness, infection, and degradation. This research locates the zombie resurgence in the gothic, rationalising the cyclical nature of millennial sociocultural anxieties, and the way these can be mapped through extant horror texts. A focus on the gothic and its perennial expression of sociocultural anxieties serves to draw parallels between Victorian and millennial horror narratives, demonstrating a historical continuity with its culmination in the hollowed-out walking dead of modern-day zombie apocalypse narratives. The reflexive activity of simultaneously writing horror fiction while investigating this process exposes and amplifies the compulsion towards the abject of both horror writers and audiences, whether these are subconscious or otherwise.

The creative component is a horror novella, set in an abandoned asylum on a remote island. Jack wakes to find that he is imprisoned in the Facility, his memory wiped, his identity a mystery. A contagious virus has devastated his hometown, transforming the population into berserk beings, afflicted with a degenerative skin condition. In an effort to contain the outbreak, authorities have removed affected citizens to the safety of the Facility. The Facility staff keep Jack and his fellow patients suspended in a chemically induced twilight, while a team of scientists and medics, under the supervision of their controller Dr. Omar Bain, work diligently at finding a cure. Soon after his admission, Jack encounters Hadwin, a mysterious, eccentric sage who warns him of more sinister motivations behind the Facility's operation. With the aid of a third ally, Jack and Hadwin uncover the Facility's dark secrets and determine to overthrow Bain and his colleagues.

Throughout the novella, abjection is explored through the recurring motif of the contagious and degenerative skin condition. There is gradual, and grotesque, movement from corporeality to formlessness (a point of departure that Bataille describes in his philosophy of formlessness, *l'Informe*, and which Kristeva imagines as being the transgression of corporeal boundaries). This explicit abjection is accompanied by a persistent sense of isolation and disconnectedness – a sense of otherness, experienced both personally and interpersonally. This psychoanalytical concept is commonly found in horror narratives, and particularly the gothic subgenre represented in *Mercury*.

The critical essay examines the role of the abject in horror and connections between *fin-de-siècle* horror fiction and millennial zombie outbreak narratives. I have selected Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Zack Snyder's 2004 reimagining of George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* as representatives of these respective narratives; and, through a close reading of these texts, I explore the sociocultural anxieties they reflect. Kristeva's work underpins my exploration of the boundaries and breakdowns experienced by consumers of horror texts as they willingly seek opportunities to engage with the abject. My research finds that certain horror tropes persist at times of sociocultural stress, and that audiences at the turn of a century, especially, consume horror narratives in order to engage with and process their core anxieties. Horror consumers synthesise and apprehend such fears as moral decline, social disenfranchisement and inadequacy, cynicism about emerging technology, and distrust of the Other through the complex mechanisms involved in abjection's interplay.

## **Declaration by author**

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

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No publications.

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No publications included

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None.

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## **Keywords**

gothic, abject, horror audiences, *fin de siècle*, millennial, zombies, doubling, sociocultural anxiety, robert louis stevenson, zack snyder

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## Part 1

### *Mercury*

Blood's acid tang hit him as he hauled his eyes open at 7am. Dry-mouthed and wracked by insistent, pounding pain in his temples, he made an attempt to focus on the blank wall before him. Vague, small thoughts coalesced and dissipated like a sputtering TV set. He struggled to regain transmission, for signal over noise. He was on the floor of an unfurnished white room. Only the sound of blood rushing in his ears. Unable to find clarity, he surrendered. Blackness again.

At 7:27am, a razor-sharp twinge prised his eyelids apart for a second time, forcing him into violent, unforgiving consciousness. Salt water filled his mouth, his gut heaved, and he threw up over his filthy jeans in spasmodic, involuntary bursts. He dragged himself to his knees and wiped his hands across his shirt front. The heavy door to the room swung open and a team of serious-faced bruisers filed inside, forming a semi-circle around him. Salt water again, but he choked back the rising tide of bile. When he lifted his head again, he could see that another person had joined the group: a bespectacled woman of Asian appearance. She surveyed him shrewdly, then stepped over the threshold into the stark, close room and stood beside one of the bruisers.

'Good morning, Jack,' she said in a business-like tone, the phrase more announcement than greeting. 'I am Dr Cheng. How are you feeling this morning, hmm?'

(Doctor?)

It hurt to attempt an assembled thought. He winced in response.

'Do you recall anything about last night?'

(Last night?)

He closed his eyes, thought for a moment, and then shook his head gingerly from side to side. The vomit's acrid smell nauseated him further and he dry retched pathetically.

'Oh yes,' said Dr Cheng in a small voice. 'You're in a very bad way. We tried to help you. We are very disappointed with you and your behaviour last night.'

Jack's head swam with fractured images: lights, slamming car doors, strangers' faces, smoke. Presently, he was sitting. Before he knew it, standing—silently jerked to his unsure feet by two of the white-clad, eagle-eyed half dozen. He groaned.

'What do you remember of last night, Jack?' Dr Cheng asked, her voice filled with concern.

(Nothing).

'Nothing,' Jack replied.

'We... took great pains to help you.'

(Great pains).

‘We... found you in very bad shape. Very bad. And we have done our best to make you see the light.’

(The light. The light hurts.)

Jack swayed on his feet, bilious and light-headed.

‘We are trying to help you. What do you recall?’

(Nothing.)

‘Nothing.’

Dr Cheng pushed her rounded spectacles further up her nose with a middle finger. She flipped through pages on a dull metallic clipboard before gesturing toward him, palm up, fingers splayed.

(No ring. No visible marks where there were once rings.)

Her white coat was too large and swam on her like a child’s Halloween costume.

‘We...’ She searched for words. Carefully.

‘We think it’s time you saw some footage. We... think you need to see the full picture. Why you are here. We are trying our best to help you.’

Pain’s vice tightened over his temples, but he was able to convey a single thought.

(Hurry.)

‘I want to make a phone call,’ he said, surprising himself.

‘Whom do you wish to call?’ Dr Cheng asked, unblinking but congenial.

(Whom?)

‘Home.’

A ballpoint hovered over unseen paper on the dull grey clipboard.

‘Home? What number?’

(What?)

‘I—.’

‘What name and number, Jack?’

(Nothing.)

‘I—.’

‘Memory concerns. This is typical of the illness. The lesions... Atypical, usually aggressive behaviour. Do you recall lashing out at our nurses last night? I am certain you were not yourself last night, Jack.’

‘Lesions?’

(Lesions).

Turning his hands this way and that, he could see that there were marks all over his arms: ugly, purple, indented blotches of various shapes and sizes. As if responding to his attention, they began to itch. A slight, buzzing itch to begin with— and then a nagging, full-blown crawling all over.

‘We will have you cleaned up and then we will show you the footage.’

Mossy-toothed, aching, sweat-drenched, he forced one foot in front of the other and followed Dr Cheng down a long corridor. The semi-circle broke formation and followed, spearheaded by a heavy-set man with disproportionately large forearms and a disconcerting underbite.

Jack (and his name was the only thing he remembered) licked dried blood from his lips as he shuffled down the hall.

A dim light filled the conference room with a flat glow. The room was warm. Stiflingly so.

‘Jack?’

A honey voice, warm and liquid, trickled into his ears, coaxing him out of a daydream. So tired. A low ceiling pressed upon the close, oblong space; down lights illuminated the faces of every second person in attendance in haunting amber streaks. About a dozen other patients sat silently in large, straight-backed chairs, arranged in a wide arc facing a TV screen.

‘We’d ask you to pay attention. This is vital.’

Jack looked at his arms. New clothes. The scent of freshly laundered linen. His knuckles were bruised violet and covered in abrasions. He ran his fingers across his split lips absentmindedly. The pain was so very far away.

Across a broad, hardwood desk, the owner of the dulcet voice stood, arms outstretched, regarding the patients gathered before him. A tall, grim-faced man with lank, blond hair and narrow shoulders, he was informing them about a catastrophic incident that had befallen their city. Something about unbridled mayhem. Chaos in the streets. Jack couldn’t muster any interest, and instead enjoyed a strange floating sensation as the voice persisted with its information.

‘Now that you’ve heard the key details,’ said the man, turning towards a black monitor behind him, ‘let’s watch the footage.’

Jack watched as the speaker’s slender hands pressed buttons on a small remote. He thought to ask where they were, just as a startling image burst onto the screen. A journalist, almost shrill, drew her duffle coat around herself against lashing winds. Her auburn hair escaped from barrettes in unruly curls as she earnestly addressed the camera. Behind her, a city street in disarray. Youths leapt, acrobatically, across the hoods of police cars. Cops restrained wild-eyed, raving dissenters as distraught onlookers huddled together in dismay. Sirens wailed. Warning shots were fired. Across

the bottom of the screen, a news ticker scrolled non-stop, alarming details: \*Violent outburst in Newhope Mall: Five charged with grievous bodily harm\*... \*Three slain in pub brawl—witnesses report disfiguring marks on attackers' faces\*... \*Mayor Franken declares state of emergency at press conference this morning\*. On and on the sensational news churned, almost faster than the audience in the room could read it. Onscreen, the reporter cast a nervous glance over her shoulder.

'Frightening scenes again today as the strange illness grips our city in its hold for the fourth consecutive day.'

Jack watched passively, (everything so far away) as the reporter delivered a long, impassioned spiel about outraged citizens, spreading hysteria, and the importance of civilian cooperation. Jack blinked slowly and cracked his knuckles as she continued, while a Molotov cocktail found its mark against a store window behind her.

'A number of highly respected medical researchers are currently stationed in a quarantine facility just off-shore,' she was telling the camera, in slow, deliberate syllables.

'Dr Omar Bain and his team are working around the clock to find a cure for this horrifying mystery disease. Earlier today, Dr Bain implored citizens to comply with law enforcement efforts to contain further spread. A steadily growing number of our city's population are now being transported to The Facility for monitoring and containment purposes, as the rest of us wait in hope that answers will soon emerge about this puzzling event in the very near future.'

Jack crossed his arms and fought to keep his head upright. So very warm in there.

The grim-faced man switched the monitor off.

'I wish you all the very best,' he said. 'It's a trying time for us all, and I guess the best thing we can do is to pull together and try to support Dr Bain's efforts in this matter.'

A man with a neat red beard and arresting blue eyes spoke up.

'I have a question!'

The speaker turned toward him and paused indulgently.

'Sure, yes. Go ahead.'

'I—'

(Nothing.)

The red bearded man took his seat again, defeated. Jack felt something approaching surprise, but it dissolved into apathy.

Questions were unimportant anyway, he realised. They were fortunate, really, to be so far removed from the violence. He passed his bruised right hand over the scaly, purple blotches on his left wrist.

Lucky to be where the technology is.

Lucky to be.

27 June

*OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION*

*The Facility to Central 1.*

*Correspondent: O. Bain.*

*Open:*

*We have introduced a new pathogen to the L-150 distributed in North block, another to South block, and have left East and West as is. Bulmer reports increased incidents of liver failure and respiratory disorders. (Clinical details on attached form).*

*Lesions in West/East individuals spreading to torso and face. Larger and more pronounced.*

*Reports of dental caries emerging.*

*Tissue degradation noted in a significant number of West/East, with marked ulceration.*

*Constant temperature of 34 degrees Celsius proving conducive to both bacterial promotion and parasitic incubation.*

*Norris developing 2 further synthetics: a more potent tranquiliser with longer elimination time and a stimulant with corrosive properties.*

*We acknowledge receipt of your arrival date of 12/09 and appropriate preparations have been made.*

*Next reporting date: 09/06.*

*Close*

*Omar Bain*

*Controller*

27 June

*Internal Correspondence*

*Attn: Lance Wagner*

*Have filed with Central as usual. Expect now to be left in peace until next transmission. They keep promising a meeting, yet I'm still waiting. They have now set an e.t.a. of 12/09. Besides you, I speak only to Hoffman and trust that you are sharing this news with nobody but Truscott in your area.*

*When the time comes, remember that we have many trusted allies gathered just beyond the walls who are eager to help us realise our vision. Do not lose hope. Do not break confidentiality.*

*We are two but stand as one, my brother.*

*Forwards.*

*O.*

Omar leaned back in his chair and stared at the tapestry high on his study wall. He sipped claret leisurely from a pewter goblet and surveyed the battle scene, crammed from edge to edge with warring, entangled figures: knights and horses; shields and lances. He studied the expression on the face of a fallen soldier, blood-soaked and impaled on a sword. The idea of the metal piercing skin stirred thoughts of the parcel at the back of his bottom desk drawer. He slid the drawer open and removed the cylindrical container from within its leather pouch. The metal lid slid off with a faint sigh. Within seconds, he had the contents assembled in a neat arrangement before him, ready to begin. He held the small glass phial up and savoured the way the pink crystals shimmered, even in the low light of his study. Zeusamine. Wagner's most splendid creation yet, it was capable of keeping Omar awake for days, which meant no sleep, and, subsequently, no nightmares. Wagner was the chief chemist and the man Omar knew would ultimately be the Facility's most valuable asset.

As the solution entered his bloodstream, Omar's eyes darkened and he gasped at the intensity of the sensation. His mind exploded with a million electric suns, a synaptic switchboard flipped to overload. GODLIKE. He clamped his hand over the puncture site and held his arm above his head, his heart belting a ragged rhythm behind his ribs. He closed his eyes. Yes. Yes. YES. Hoffman would be the one to bring all plans to fruition, ultimately. Wagner was capable of great things, of diabolical things. And he was 100% loyal to Omar, even better. As the rush peaked, Omar's eyes flew open and focused, with renewed interest, on the fallen soldier woven into the tapestry's fading fibres. Wagner would help him with the Elders, too. Nothing would match their combined efforts. If the Elders would just present themselves, just set foot upon Facility soil.

When? Six months now, and only distant communication and empty promises from Central. His eyes fell on the heavy locked box on the desktop. The burnished metal lid was inscribed with an intricate map of the heavens and various esoteric symbols: glyphs of the planets; astrological signs. He felt his cheeks flush immediately and pulled the box forward. The thought of the contents filled him with a mixture of excitement and abject fear. His face contorted into a crooked smile as he felt along the silver chain around his neck for the small, ornate key. Why not look? He wouldn't use them, wouldn't even touch them. He'd simply revel in their awesome potential.

No.

Even he might be seduced by their pull.

No.

He pushed the box away again and thought of the Elders. His lips formed a taut line. Restless now, Omar stood and strode across the expanse towards one of his bookshelves. Dark artefacts perched on shelves, things he liked to have around him. Surgical equipment, tomes about population control, jars of various substances known only to him. Iridescent, coloured liquids filled

shiny glass vials. Small mammalian bones were housed in stacked, labelled plastic crates. Inanimate, sallow-fleshed creatures hung, suspended in darkening, viscous fluids. He selected a book, the spine of which read: 'Pathogens: Interactions and Potential.' He then returned to his chair, where he spent the remainder of the night, his dark eyes collecting further information. Some of the information would be useful for Central; some would be useful against Central.

Bed was a starched haven. Jack languished in a pleasing heavy headedness. He had his own room, albeit a small one. He glanced at his arms—still marked. But he felt relaxed—cocooned in the bed linen and not at all perturbed by his memory loss. In fact, the blankness of his mind was almost comforting: he felt the newness and hopeful expectation of a child. He noticed his lip was no longer swollen and he was wearing fresh grey pyjamas. Time playing tricks? How much time had passed? The room was quiet. Too warm, but quiet. A bed, a small, timber wardrobe, a chair.

After a time, he tried to home in on a thought, but his mind jogged through meaningless imagery. Almost-memories teased him until fatigue overtook him again and his head fell limply to one side on the pillow.

What day was it? Jack's eyes opened reluctantly. He felt limp-limbed and weak. He remembered snatches of a dream that confused him: sand, stark sunlight and the sound of mocking laughter. Sitting cross-legged on the floor of an unfamiliar room and listening to strange voices speaking urgently. Then the door to his own room opened and a smiling nurse came to monitor his stats. He passed out while she was speaking to him, lost to the dreams once more.

Tranquil birdsong filled the relaxation garden on a humid Thursday morning. To be truthful, it wasn't much of a garden. Instead, hardy perennials were outgrowing their concrete planters – all scattered haphazardly around a paved, enclosed courtyard. From his bench seat beneath a grimy casement window, Jack had a clear view of the others. Absently, he scratched the lesions on his forearm until they were surrounded by angry, red skin. He stifled a yawn and scanned the dismal expanse for a familiar face. He wondered, idly, how long it had been since his admission. A wave of tiredness almost sent him toppling to the ground when he felt a firm hand on his arm, righting him.

'You almost fell,' a gruff baritone declared. Jack focused hard and lifted his head towards the voice. The sun behind him, a stocky black outline of a man was standing, eclipsed, stooped at an odd angle—arm out ready to steady Jack again. The sun was warm on Jack's back, he felt light-headed and distant.

'So tired,' he murmured.

The man shuffled around with the aid of a large wooden cane and sat heavily beside Jack on the bench. Now Jack could see that it was a ruddy-faced, weather beaten-looking fellow of about

sixty. Spiky, ginger whiskers covered almost every millimetre of skin, from his high cheekbones to his collar. He was bear-like, with a profusion of coarse hair, broad, sloped shoulders, and gigantic hands. He waved a broad, work-worn hand in front of Jack.

‘You’ll be okay, buddy,’ the man said. Jack gave him a sidelong glance and smiled. ‘You’ll be okay, but you have to take this seriously.’

Other patients observed the two with vague suspicion. Some were too overcome by fatigue to notice. They stood about awkwardly, heads bowed, some nodding off. Some leaned against the concrete walls, staring into space; others ambled aimlessly in circles. Jack felt himself beginning to slip away again. The man slapped him sharply on the back and thrust out his hand.

‘Hadwin,’ he said loudly.

‘Jack.’

‘Jack of swords,’ Hadwin said, grinning inanely. ‘You’re a man of great personal power, should you choose the right path. Yes sir. Great personal power.’

Jack snorted in amusement and closed his eyes. Hadwin slapped him on the back for a second time, harder than the first. Jack glared at him, suddenly enlivened by the hot surge of adrenaline.

‘Jack, you need to listen to me,’ he hissed. ‘We have things to discuss and you need to take them seriously. I have a plan. But as you can see,’ he said, waving a hand over his crippled left leg, ‘I’m unable to implement it. I think you’ve got what it takes to put things into action. What do you say?’

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

But Hadwin was right. They had things to discuss. Jack knew it in his bones somehow. And there, in the confines of the warm, bright courtyard, Jack listened to everything Hadwin had to say. And he took every last word seriously, despite himself. Hadwin’s words were a revelation, and something for Jack to grasp hold of. A prophecy. A strange, disjointed prophecy, but a prophecy none-the-less. And Jack felt crazy listening to even a word of it, but something in him recognised its truth and a pact was made.

That night, when the smiling nurse handed him the little paper cup and pill, Jack smiled right back with a new focus. And after she’d gone, he crumbled the small, white pill between his fingers and let it disintegrate and fall to the floor.

Just after midnight, Jack began his first, tentative exploration of the Facility. His legs were shaky, but he’d cast off most of the fog caused by the meds. With each passing day, he was going to feel stronger and more in control of his thoughts. He recalled the first day in the white room: the thuggish staff and the self-satisfied ‘doctor’. How he’d succumbed to their trickery was beyond him, but then he had no way of knowing what he’d been through prior to admission. For a split



second, Jack had a flash of confused recollection that made him unsteady on his feet. A large, black watch, covered in an array of digital symbols and instruments of measurement. Bright, blinding sunlight reflected off a large vehicle. Loud voices competing for attention in urgent rounds of indistinct yelling. His inability to make sense of the images frustrated him. But since he'd stopped taking the medicine, the memories had become more vivid and regular, and he hoped that soon he'd be able to piece the puzzling information together.

He thought of Hadwin's serious face and expressive eyes—the way he nodded reassuringly as he spoke, emphasising important details. Some of the information was difficult to swallow, that was for sure, but the entire predicament was hard to fathom anyway. Where in God's name were they? Hadwin was able to offer some insight into the layout. So far, it was all correct. A labyrinth of twists and turns. As he slipped down the waxy-surfaced tiled corridors, Jack was surprised to find his fear diminishing, gradually replaced by a burgeoning feeling of confidence and sureness. He searched for the room Hadwin had described, filled with a sense of purpose and, yes, obligation. His memory was not yet restored, and it was frustrating not knowing what lurked beyond the recollections of his admission day; but he was instilled with such belief in Hadwin and his visions that the past and future seemed immaterial in the face of the immediate task at hand. He was going to find the ally and he was going to find them tonight.

At the outermost edge of West Block, Jack cautiously pushed open a door marked WB18. The door was as unremarkable as any other in the large rabbits' warren of hallways, but it was the room Hadwin had insisted he locate. He held his breath until he was on the other side and pulled the door shut with a soft click behind him. A woman's voice startled him.

'Who's there?' she gasped. He hushed her and stole deftly towards the head of the bed. All the rooms were of similar layout, so he had learned to expertly gauge proximity in the darkness.

'My name's Jack,' he said quickly, and wondered how he was going to explain himself convincingly. When there was no response, he continued. 'I've been sent here by a good man who has information about this place and what's going on here.' As the words left his mouth, he was as surprised as she was to hear what he had to say. It was as though he were being directed by an external source. He relaxed and trusted that the information would flow through him. As it did so, the woman listened without interrupting.

'We've been brought here under false pretences,' Jack went on. 'We're not patients. We're specimens.'

Jack was surprised to find his own voice fusing with Hadwin's. His speech adopted the inflections and cadences of the older man's.

'There are two energies at play in this scenario: one within the walls of this place and one beyond. We don't understand what the external source is, but we're certain that what governs

everything within this place is malevolent. You've been identified as an ally and we need you to help us find a way out. Will you join us?'

'Jack, I'm Imogen. I'm terrified,' she whispered, too startled by his revelations to offer anything further. Still, she seemed amenable to his ideas, as Hadwin had insisted she would be.

'We're going to remember before,' he told her. 'And we can help you, too. But you need to stop taking the medicine.'

'I tried what you're talking about,' she confessed. 'I didn't remember anything but dreams that I'd prefer not to revisit. I'm not going to tamper with their methods if it means recovery.'

He sighed. 'And why are you awake now?' he asked.

There was a long pause.

'You're still not taking their pills, are you?' Jack whispered.

'I should be recovering,' Imogen replied in a frightened tone.

'Imogen, this is not recovery. Listen to me. I'm still working it out, but you need to trust me and you need to continue to reject the medicine.'

He felt his face tense with worry. He studied her silhouette in the moonlight, just able to make out a slight frame—that she was hunched forward and hugging her shoulders self-consciously. Sadly.

'I've lost track of how long I've been here, Jack. I can't remember how I even got here, actually. My lesions started ulcerating. I've had horrendous nightmares that I can't make any sense of. I'm afraid of going to sleep at night. I feel like I've lost my mind. What's happening to us?'

He stared out the window, momentarily lost for words. Outside, the moon's waxing crescent bathed the sky in its delicate sheen. Not enough light to see by, but just enough to make out basic shapes and forms—the grilles on the window, a tree beyond, and closer to him, Imogen's long hair falling over her crossed arms. He hoped Hadwin knew what he was doing and immediately felt guilty about doubting his word. But it was difficult not to worry. Everything was so fantastic, beyond comprehension. When he realised she was sobbing softly in the darkness, he felt helpless. And he truthfully felt afraid for them both. For everyone in the place. But he straightened and summoned a pragmatic, if not optimistic, tone.

'We'll work it out, okay? You know what's right, Imogen. And you know we're onto something.'

A little boldly, he felt for her hand and squeezed it—a gesture of reassurance. To his surprise, she clasped his hand between both of hers. Her hands were cool. Smooth. He could just make out her features now. Possessed of a melancholic beauty, she regarded him steadily with dark, almond-shaped eyes, her full lips set in a sad curve. Her dark hair fell over one eye and, as she

shook it aside, Jack's attention was caught by a bejewelled crucifix around her neck which was momentarily illuminated by the dim moonlight.

'Do you speak to anyone else?' Imogen asked.

'Only Hadwin,' Jack whispered, gently placing his other hand over hers. 'Most of the others are too blitzed by the meds to communicate with, not that I'd trust anyone in here. What about you?'

She went to speak but thought better of it and stopped herself. He tensed.

'Go on,' he urged her, 'Who?'

'One of the doctors visits me occasionally,' she confessed.

'Who? What for?'

'I don't know his name,' Imogen told him. 'But I don't mind. It makes me feel less alone. He talks about my recovery. He updates me about the city. Things sound pretty dire out there.'

Jack turned her hands over in his, thinking.

'Well, that's what they want us to think anyway. What's he like, this doctor?'

'He's kind of unusual looking, but he seems okay. Sometimes, if I'm having a bad night, he'll just sit and read to me from a book of poetry.'

'Well just be careful, alright? Nobody here can be trusted. Please, don't you dare say anything about me.'

'I won't,' she agreed.

Suddenly self-conscious about their closeness, Jack set Imogen's hands down on her lap and then folded his arms. He cleared his throat. The sound seemed deafening in the silence of the dark room.

'What are your nightmares about?' he asked her.

'The same things, over and over,' Imogen whispered. 'I get flashes. White rooms. Labs. Instruments. There's a little girl and she's running away from me. I try to call out to her, but she disappears every time. Then there's an explosion...Flames...and I can't breathe.'

She gasped at the memory and drew her knees up close to her chin.

'Imogen?'

'Sorry. It's starting to get to me. The longer I go without the meds, the worse the dreams are.'

Unseen tears snaked down her cheeks. He heard her sniff quietly and felt useless.

Jack took up one of her hands again.

'Hey.'

'Sorry,' she managed, her hand limp in his warm grasp.

And then she succumbed to the sorrow and wept silently, her whole body trembling. Jack couldn't think of anything useful to say and instead patted her hand gently until her sadness subsided. He remained seated beside her on the bed until she fell asleep, wondering how they were going to escape the Facility and why Hadwin had chosen her. How were they going to be any match for the hundreds of guards and officials within their prison, let alone whatever awaited them on the outside? Despite Hadwin's insight, the fact remained that Jack's allies were an incapacitated middle-aged man and an emotionally broken, fearful girl. As the synchronised Facility clocks struck 04:00, Jack slipped undetected along the maze of corridors back to his room in the southern block.

Omar sat forward at his desk, considering the paperwork laid out before him. He felt impotent. Swamped. Things were not progressing and the ongoing delays frustrated him. The emerald green banker's lamp on his desk illuminated a collection of other items: photographs, a journal, the burnished metal locked box. He knew he shouldn't, but he looked at a photo of Mother. Sometimes he couldn't help himself. He knew he should have destroyed all the images, but it was also important to remind himself of who he was and what he was destined to achieve. In the fading image, Mother's long hands were clasped around his shoulders. They were standing together in the camp, both smiling. Her face was partially obscured by shade cast by an overhanging tree and this frustrated him. He would only ever know half of her face and remember only a handful of things about her. She was tall and slender, with long, straight hair that fell over a dark blouse. Around her neck she wore a large, ornate cross and Omar remembered its significance with a familiar pang. He gazed at her half-smile and felt his rage grow, allowed it to swell within him.

She was smiling despite her son's wretched appearance. Even as a young boy there, you could see the monstrosity—the damage.

'In many ancient cultures,' she once told him, 'modifications like this were made to indicate greatness. Closeness with the Elders. When they come, they will know you on sight. And they will make you something special in the new world. You will be a leader, my boy.'

But what he had become was an outcast. The other children at the camp were not utterly aligned with their parents' zealous beliefs and tormented Omar until he could take no more. When the camp relocated to a more remote area, and when Mother had taken up with the latest in a long succession of Leaders, Omar started planning. He developed a fascination for chemistry and eventually created something of which he was very proud.

On his fifteenth birthday, Omar poured a compound of his own design into the camp's sole water supply and returned to his barracks. And then he took a tomahawk, a hacksaw and some other items and went into Mother's bedroom, where she lay sleeping. Slowly, and without sentiment, he disassembled her, like one might butcher a pig or a calf. And then Omar gathered some reliable allies,

walked out of the camp, and never looked back. There were no remaining witnesses and the mysterious episode continued to confound people for decades.

There, in the glow of his desk lamp, he remembered his power and felt a wave of calm. Mother was right about one thing: The Elders had arrived and they had most certainly chosen him. Then he took up a photograph and, with a fine scalpel, he idly removed Hoffman's eyes and Wagner's mouth. There would be no competition for him.

In the canteen, the line moved slowly, snaking from outside the door right up to the frowsy, surly woman dispensing soup from a large steel canister at the far end of the counter. Her glazed, expressionless gaze fell on Hadwin for a split second and drifted on. At her elbow, a cheap stereo was blaring country hits through tinny speakers, fraying Jack's nerves. The serving woman began to mouth the lyrics:

*It's all around you now, but you don't know it  
It's tugging at your heart, but you don't show it  
It's just a matter of time  
It's gonna hit you right between the eyes  
You'll wake up in the middle of the night...*

Jack shuffled forward, clutching his metal breakfast tray between tense fingers. Across the room's vast expanse, he observed the Facility's various staff members—orderlies, canteen workers—with renewed curiosity. His fugue state was ending, and though he welcomed it, the increasing clarity was also unnerving. What was this place, really? The staff looked more like guards than facilitators if one looked closely enough. His eyes drifted toward one medic, standing rigid and vigilant next to a colleague beside the large, double doors in the entry way. The man was chewing gum—his jaw tensing and flexing as he scanned the room. Another big guy. All of them imposing, watchful types, heavily muscled and possessed of a coiled preparedness. Blinding shafts of yellow light blazed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, bleaching patients in their brilliant glow and offering the only relief from the suffocating solemnity of the scene.

Someone at the front of the line dropped a tray that fell to the floor with a deafening clatter. Jack's heart hammered in his chest and he fought an instinct to run out of the room. Noticing this reaction, Hadwin touched his elbow lightly.

'Hang in there, buddy,' he said. 'Things are going to start emerging that will rock you for a while. But I can tell you that you have the strength to get past it.'

The sour-faced serving woman slopped a ladle full of grey sludge into a bowl and shoved it toward the tray dropper, who hung his head and ambled slowly in the general direction of a table. Nobody in the line took much notice, so consumed were they by their dreams from the previous night, the things that were missing from their memories, the burning, red welts and craters under their pristine linen shirts. Jack watched them with alarm. Everything seemed drawn in high contrast that morning. He was excited by the new level of clarity, but with it came a jarring version of reality to which he was unaccustomed. He was ashamed to find himself almost wanting to retreat to the soothing numbness of the pill fog. But a glance at his cohort immediately negated that notion. Almost all of them were dragging themselves forward, eyes glued to the shirt back in front, like a chain gang with invisible shackles.

A distinctly odd-looking individual appeared for the briefest of moments at a nearby table and then disappeared again. For a fraction of a second, they made eye contact and Jack felt his blood chill despite the room's standard balmy, oppressive atmosphere. The man was tall, almost elegant in a strange way. He was wearing a doctor's white lab coat and a stethoscope hung around his long, thin neck. He surveyed the room with a cool and curious expression. The crowd's unfortunate appearance would logically inspire sympathy, at least even a touch of solemnity. But the man's face registered satisfaction. Pleasure. The face was the most unsettling aspect of his unusual countenance. His head was freakishly narrow. Elongated. His eyes were too closely set, his mouth gaped obscenely, almost lasciviously, revealing jagged, uneven teeth, over which he passed a worm-like tongue in a similarly indecent manner. Thin hair hung in long, unkempt strands in irregular patches over his strange, high-crowned head.

Hadwin leaned in close to Jack and smiled grimly.

'Omar,' he muttered. 'Omar Bain.'

'The head honcho?' By the time he ventured a second look, Omar was gone.

'Blasted tower, my friend,' Hadwin said mysteriously. Jack narrowed his eyes, perplexed. Hadwin shrugged.

'You don't need to understand that. Never mind. I'm not sure I do completely, either. This thing... This knowledge... It comes and goes. I don't know how to explain it and I'm damned sure I don't need to. I just... Well, it's not like a radio I turn on and tune in to, Jack. But I do know that it's never wrong.' Hadwin dug at his ear with his pinky finger.

As they sat opposite each other at a long, wooden bench, Jack studied Hadwin's profile in the hard, flat fluorescent light of the canteen. He looked at his unshaven jawline, the manic look in his eyes, the deeply etched circles beneath them. And he felt a deep and crushing despondence for the first time in weeks. How were they going to manage to do this alone? There were so many of the others and only two of them. Three, if you counted Imogen, and he couldn't imagine what

purpose she was going to serve. Hadwin shovelled porridge into his mouth in large forkfuls, without pause. His eyes flitted from one thing to the next around the room, his free hand drumming the table in a repetitive tattoo. He glanced at Jack momentarily and noticed his concern. Immediately, he shifted gears and became a study of intense focus.

‘A little discouragement won’t derail this, Jack. You need to trust me. It’ll come. You’ll get there.’

Based solely on those words, Jack felt inexplicable faith. It was so penetrating and insistent that he questioned his own sanity. Was he losing his mind? An intense mental pressure of indefinable force gripped him until he felt nothing but absolute confidence in Hadwin. When he looked at Hadwin again, he was surprised to find him smiling. When a large, melancholic man slumped down beside Jack, looking at the two men with sad, imploring eyes, Hadwin wiped his mouth and pushed his tray forward.

‘Let’s go to the courtyard.’

Later, in the concrete-walled space, the two men sat on their usual bench together in the sunlight, deep in thought. A few other people had gathered, mournful-looking and silent. Most of them stood alone, lost in their thoughts and untrusting. An orderly sitting on a nearby bench scratched his soul patch as he filled in a newspaper crossword with a pencil, occasionally casting a watchful glance at his charges. Even when they seemed relaxed, Jack could see they were on guard. The orderly looked at Jack for a second and seemed curious about Jack’s attention. Jack looked away, feigning confusion. Hadwin closed his eyes for several minutes, and Jack wondered if he hadn’t fallen asleep. With a sudden gesture, he stabbed a finger at Jack, who flinched in response.

‘Tonight you go further,’ Hadwin announced. He nodded in confirmation. ‘Yes, I know where you’re going tonight.’

Irritated by the command, Jack bristled.

‘Okay, but what difference can we make, Hadwin? Surely you know we’ll be crushed by their sheer numbers, whatever your plans may be. I’m sorry. I just... Well, I’m scared. I don’t understand how this is remotely possible.’

Hadwin closed his eyes again, infuriatingly.

‘Questioning this will be counter-productive, Jack,’ he said quietly.

Jack snorted and shook his head. Clouds drifted in front of the sun, gradually darkening the courtyard.

‘That’s supposed to make me feel better? I don’t understand how this whole scheme is coming together.’

Hadwin looked at Jack directly, meaningfully.

‘I don’t either, but it is. Stop questioning it,’ he ... and what was it? Commanded? Suggested? Warned? Was Hadwin threatening him?

Yet again a charge of relentless, inexplicable energy pulsed through him, insisting that he take heed. Insisting that he surrender. And he realised that surrendering wasn’t part of his make-up, but found himself unable to resist the feeling. Light rain started to fall in the courtyard, and Jack looked at the low, gloomy sky with a combination of discontentment and resignation.

‘Tonight you’re going to find significant information,’ Hadwin told him.

‘Blasted tower?’ Jack enquired, thinking of the man with the distorted features and close-set, unsettling eyes.

‘Yes,’ Hadwin said, nodding. ‘I know where he keeps the information. I can see a map of this place in my head like it’s written on a chart in ink. So clear.’

Jack pushed remaining doubt from his mind and nodded.

‘When do I move?’

‘I’ll let you know. I’ll come to your room after supper. This is bigger than I suspected, you know. I knew there was something sick going down, but it was tip of the iceberg stuff, buddy. There’s a whole mess of shit beyond that. He has a room in the depths of this place, okay?’

Jack’s senses sharpened.

‘Go on.’

‘Not just one room, but this one’s important,’ Hadwin explained. ‘This is the mother lode. I can see what you need to look for. You need to get in and get out fast.’

Hadwin closed his eyes and shook his head, as though he’d seen something he wished he hadn’t.

‘You’re going to feel the urge to stick around in there, Jack. You need to get in and out, you hear me? Whatever you feel in there will be unreliable. Think clearly and avoid being overwhelmed by fear or doubt. Listen to my directions and don’t deviate from them.’

Jack nodded, though he was incensed by Hadwin’s condescending tone.

‘Well, you can disregard it, Jack,’ he suddenly shot at him. ‘And we can be here indefinitely. All of us. You can shamle around like that poor bastard over there,’ he said, gesturing discreetly towards a dishevelled man in his early twenties who was staring at his shoes as he dragged them past planters, over the grass, past fellow inmates—all without a skerrick of awareness.

‘You can take the meds and scratch up a storm. Let those lesions fester and grow. Let everything in here eat you alive, including those flashbacks of yours.’

Jack stiffened defensively.



Hadwin's tone softened after that and they discussed the night's plans. Hadwin would visit Jack's room after supper. They'd play cards and by the end of two games, Hadwin would have passed on all there was to know. And Jack was to close the door on his emotions absolutely. From 9pm onwards, Jack was not to trust one single instinct that arose in him. He would be eyes, ears, and a robot otherwise.

Doubt was the enemy.

While Jack was in South Block, preparing for a night of investigating, the door marked WB18 opened slowly. Feigning sleep, Imogen watched the odd-looking doctor through almost closed eyes as he entered the room and approached her bed. His grotesque features disturbed her, yet his expression was pleasant enough. She could see that he'd brought his poetry book with him again but felt ambivalent about this visit in light of the new information she'd received. She wondered if he was part of the treachery Jack had described. Or were some of the staff merely hapless pawns themselves? He was dressed in his usual attire: a white doctor's coat over a long, burgundy Nehru jacket and dark trousers. He removed the stethoscope from around his neck, folded it up, and tucked it into his pocket. Then he sat straight-backed, across from her bed on an aluminium chair and leafed through his weathered hardback. Imogen opened her eyes and observed his steeply sloped, soaring forehead and close-set, coal black eyes. Without looking up from his book, he greeted her and started reading:

*I sent my Soul through the Invisible,  
Some letter of that After-life to spell:  
And by and by my Soul return'd to me,  
And answer'd "I Myself am Heav'n and Hell."*

He went on for some time in a voice rich in timbre and resonant. If she kept her eyes closed, she found herself becoming seduced by his reading. When she looked at him, however, she was repulsed by what she saw. It was hard to believe that such a beautiful sound could emerge from that cruel, twisted mouth—from behind those crooked tombstone teeth. She watched dust motes drift past the lamp light as the doctor read, paying more attention to the way he sounded than the content of what he was reading. Presently, he stopped reading and looked up at her with what she suspected was affection. She reached under her collar and toyed with her necklace chain. She could feel his eyes following her movements and her face burned. Busying her hands, she idly pulled the crucifix from beneath her shirt and then stole a glance at the doctor.

Her blood turned icy when she noticed his expression. His inky eyes had narrowed to shining slits, his mouth twisted into a fierce grimace. Her own eyes followed his hard stare down to the cross she was toying with. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came. Without a word, he clapped his book closed and left the room, the force of the slamming door creating a sudden vacuum that pulled a piece of paper from the chair to the floor. Rattled, Imogen climbed out of the bed to investigate what the doctor had left behind him. It was some kind of list. As she read its contents, her heart began to pound with increasing intensity until she was afraid it would explode altogether, right there where she stood. It was a list of complex medical information. And her name was written, in spidery script, at the top. Bad enough that it was about her. Even worse, she was, inexplicably, able to interpret every word of the scientific jargon. And what she learned sent her collapsing to the cold floor in a faint.

Lance Wagner took an eyedropper and delicately applied the solution to a slide. With a fine pair of tweezers, he selected an almost invisible sliver of material from a small phial and laid that over the liquid, watching it transform. Degrade.

‘Wonderful,’ he murmured, smiling.

He nodded and stood back from the microscope to make notes in his lab journal. He checked his watch. He’d been working at this for five hours and his eyes ached. He sat at his desk, preparing to write to Bain with the results. Bain would be nothing short of delighted. He rolled the mouse forward slightly until the monitor came to life. But what would he say? He had an instinct about Bain that concerned him. His hands poised over the keyboard, he searched for the appropriate words. His feeling was that if he gave Bain everything at once—made it too easy—he’d find himself dispensable. He’d seen it happen on other projects to people who were much closer to Bain, as close as anyone appeared to get to him, that was. Whittaker had been found in his lab, throat slashed from ear to ear. And although nobody shared their speculations openly, they all suspected Bain. Yes, he was effective, but also completely unstable. Nobody else had a connection to the Elders like Bain’s. Nobody really had the guts to deal with them directly, either, truth be told. Wagner himself had heard all the myths, of course, but had never actually laid eyes on them personally.

He pushed his spectacles on top of his head and rubbed his eyes, frustrated. He was too tired to make such an important decision, really. But he had to send a report and there was only so much he’d be able to conceal. Bain had been reasonably happy with the work to date. The tissue degradation pleased him, and he was excited about further developments concerning organ failure and muscle atrophy. Wagner could understand his ambition and he knew there was no room for sentiment, but Bain’s obvious pleasure-taking during the whole enterprise disturbed him. It

disturbed Truscott, also. He remembered the night recently when they'd talked of what to do about Bain. How neither had been able to find a workable solution. They needed to connect with Hoffman, but it was too dangerous to contemplate, and they agreed to reconvene in a week to reconsider their options.

All three were being paid handsomely for their work. Wagner himself had never dreamed of financial recompense of the order Bain had organised. Soon, he would be a made man, spending his time chasing adventure in warm climates aboard a yacht. No more pressure. No more lab coats or fluorescent-filled rooms. He understood that for the Elders, money was no object. That in itself confounded him. He had no idea who these people were, beyond being ruthless and hell bent on destruction. Psychopaths, certainly. But Bain never informed anyone about their background, who they were working for. What the point of it all was.

Anyway, whether Bain was overthrown or otherwise, he and Truscott consoled themselves with the thought that they would both be immeasurably wealthy and far removed from the whole endeavour within a year. He had no feelings about the lives that were going to be lost. He really had little or no capacity for empathy. But he was curious about their motives. Who could help it? And he had absolutely no trust in any of them. Anyone who was planning on such widespread devastation wasn't likely to be adhering to any codes of conduct. He wasn't foolhardy enough to expect that his neck wouldn't be the next to be slit if he didn't continue to produce results. It was, however, difficult to keep coming up with new innovations. Bain acted like it was all a foregone conclusion, making little of the effort it took to find something increasingly deadly, increasingly pleasing, as it were.

He took a deep breath and collected himself. Bain would expect word today. He had to say something. The truth was that Wagner had just formulated something so destructive and so powerful that he was afraid he would be unable to better himself. So instead, he wrote Bain a note about something else he had discovered earlier in the evening: a substance that would promote paralysis in its victim. Fast-acting and irreversible, the substance would render the subject completely lucid and conscious, but completely frozen for all time. And it wasn't so much the effect that was significant as the ease of its distribution. It was elegantly simple. A couple of hundred litres added to a city's water supply would disable the entire community. And that would be right up Bain's alley, wouldn't it?

Hadwin shuffled the deck casually, unhurried. Jack was amazed by his composure in the face of such a dangerous undertaking. Then, it wasn't Hadwin who would be taking any risks. He watched as the older man deftly dealt their hands, his broad hands working with unexpected agility. They were facing each other, sitting cross-legged on Jack's bed, speaking in low voices.

‘Are you overthinking, Jack?’ he asked, without looking up.

Jack sighed heavily.

‘Where’s this going? Even if I do locate this room you’re talking about, how am I going to know where to start looking? And what if I run out of time? I have a bad feeling about this.’

Hadwin paused and pinched the bridge of his nose, frustrated.

‘I was right about Imogen. I was right about the medication. You’re out of the fog. You’ve seen your skin begin to clear.’ Jack looked down at his cards. An unbeatable hand. He smiled.

‘You give things away, buddy,’ Hadwin said, laughing. ‘That surprises me about a military man such as yourself.’

Jack felt an electric spear through his chest, fine and agonising. He stared at Hadwin, wide-eyed with revelation. Hadwin looked at him levelly.

‘Your dreams,’ he said carefully. ‘They’re memories. You were stationed in the Middle East on a tour two years ago, Lieutenant Colonel. A field officer, Jack. And you knew how to take a calculated risk.’

Jack reeled, his head spinning. He had a sudden, vivid image of boots on sand. An aural memory of automatic weapon fire.

‘This news has knocked you out, huh? You took calculated risks because you kept your head. Because you were a strategist and a leader. Guess what? You still are.’

Jack’s head swam with fragments of the past six month’s nightmares. He barely resisted the urge to vomit, and instead steadied himself against the lowboy beside the bed with a trembling hand.

‘I’m not telling you this to rattle you, buddy. I’m telling you because you’re ready to hear it. You probably don’t think you are, but you are. And now you need to man up and listen to the plan. There is absolutely no room for emotion tonight. No room.’

Jack steadied his hand. Righted himself.

‘If one iota of fear, or sentiment, or self-doubt, or any other bullshit starts clouding your thought, you bat it away. You man up now and you do what’s necessary to get this information. There is only logic and the plan.’

Too stunned to speak (and what would he say, anyway?), Jack nodded and proceeded to listen to Hadwin’s instructions about a particular room, several floors below them. The Facility ran several levels deep and was a maze of corridors, tunnels, and concealed rooms. Many years ago, it had been a notorious asylum, eventually shut down after reports of abuse and human rights infringement had emerged. Its very lower levels had housed the luckless, disenfranchised souls too broken and removed from reality to resist their captors. Sinister experiments of all varieties had taken place down there; physical and mental torture had been carried out by perverse men of

science under the guise of medical research. Now, of course, it was inhabited by Dr Omar Bain and his crew of scientists, the ghost of its grisly history reanimated in a contemporary horror show of experimentation and exploitation. The Facility heaved with the essence of malevolence; its walls had borne witness to countless acts of blood-curdling experimentation.

Jack would be venturing into the very bowels of the place, seeking answers to a confounding puzzle that seemed too large and too fantastic to comprehend, let alone solve. He was going on the advice of a capricious man he barely knew, with only his wit and a strange set of instructions to guide him. And yet.

And yet.

Something inside him stirred. The image fragments intensified in his mind's eye until one particularly lucid, extended scene exploded into his consciousness. A group of senior officers assembled before him, Lieutenant Colonel Jack Monroe was speaking in a compelling, but controlled, tone, urging the men to remain focused on their objective. Something catastrophic had occurred and they were losing heart. One young second lieutenant spoke up, voicing their collective pessimism. Jack flared, hitting a wall chart so hard with a pointer that it almost snapped in half.

‘This,’ he said, slowly and deliberately, ‘is all you need to consider. You have an objective and it is your responsibility, while you are here, to achieve it. You can and you will. And there is no room here for fear, sentiment, self-doubt, or any other bullshit that might cloud your thinking. You are strategists and you are leaders.’

Jack felt his heartbeat thudding in his ears and glanced up in time to catch Hadwin disappearing down the corridor. Hunched over his cane, he seemed like such a tired, broken man.

The message seized him at around midnight—cutting in over his other thoughts, insistent in its urgency.

*Time to move. Right now.*

Already dressed and ready, he wasted little time surveying the hallway beyond his door. Hadwin would navigate, surely and without error. That's what he kept reminding himself of, anyway. No doubt tonight. Just faith. Blind faith and sure-footed, forward motion. The twisting corridors again described a complex maze of a floor plan. Almost silent in his white trainers, Jack made his way to the outer extreme of the western wing and stopped in his tracks opposite a massive, steel service elevator, the doors of which gleamed with a dull sheen. Something made his breath catch in his throat and his heart double beat until he froze in an adrenaline surge, stricken with fear and rigid.

His own face. In the unforgiving, cold light of the lift alcove, his features were shocking. He looked like death. Sunken within two round hollows, his grey eyes were flat and lifeless. His

forehead was etched with deep lines and his light hair appeared washed out under the harsh fluorescent. His mind raced through distorted images, retrieving sound bites and snapshots at a rate that made him squeeze his eyes shut to avoid further sensation. Then his mind's eye sifted through static for one particular still: an image of his erstwhile reflection. There, before the colossal steel elevator doors, he remembered. He saw a clip of his life before in a tantalising, lingering replay. Unable to stem the flow of recollection, he fell to one knee and allowed the unknown past free reign of his present consciousness.

He was standing before a mirror, in which he could see a robust image of himself, straightening a tie beneath a starched military collar. Cleanly shaven, alert-eyed and strong, his younger self was reassuring someone just out of frame.

'Baby, it'll be okay. I promise. This is just another tour. Oh no, please be strong Julie—'  
Julie.

JULIE.

Gentle, devoted Julie is peering up at him through streaming tears, all intentions of being strong for him crushed under the weight of the day's grim reality. Leaving day. The day that hollowed her out and left her, stricken, with a rigid smile masking searing thoughts of potential horror.

He might not return.

They were embracing now—her careful not to leave tear stains on his uniform, him helping her through the moment's grief with his stoicism. Routine for him, leaving day still got her so down that it pained him. He recalled, as he always did at times like these, their blissful courtship—pulling into her driveway on summer mornings in his weather-beaten station wagon, their long boards strapped to the top. Her, smiling, running towards him in short shorts and a bikini top. Sliding in beside him, arms encircling his neck as she peppers his face with cherry-scented kisses. His girl. And, buoyed by romance and youthful hope, they ran wild together—only very occasionally entertaining a solemn thought. Later on, though, Jack noted the legacy of the military years on his wife's worried face. It never seemed to get easier for her. His grasp around her waist tightened for a moment, and then he looked at her squarely and pushed sentiment from his mind with the skill of one adept at having to regularly do so.

'You be strong for Danny,' he instructed, brushing her auburn fringe from eyes reddened by sorrow.

DANNY.

Just beyond the doorway, the bassinette moved slightly as their infant son stirred. Danny was teething and the discomfort made him break into heart-rending squalling. His young parents regarded each other with tender eyes.

Danny.

A son.

A family.

Back at the Facility, the man who was Jack's weary shadow felt everything in him collapse into crazed despair. Into wracking, unthinkable pain. All-engulfing horror rose within him—writhing within the hellfire of his recollection. Were they lost to him forever? Beyond the mental tempest, Jack felt something else: a silvery, electric something was slicing through his thoughts. Pulsating and insistent, it called to him.

'Honour', it said. Hadwin.

Jack heard a noise in the corridor and froze. Half out of his mind with anguish and bitter memory—and now this signal, jamming his radar—he froze. The sound grew large in his mind: a guard. He stiffened. The image of the crying baby boy persisted, and Jack lost sensation in his legs. His large palms pressed hard against the brushed steel of the elevator doors behind him, and he steeled himself. Again, Hadwin's signal.

'Honour.'

*'Honour them.'*

The guard's footfalls drew close. Jack adopted a combat pose, solid and prepared. Better. The guard stopped short of the lift alcove and responded to a message on his radio, before turning on his heel and heading back in the direction from which he'd come. An image of Julie flared bright in Jack's mind, but this time it was fuel to act, rather than a disabling memory. After all, he was a strategist. A leader.

The strange directional instinct kicked in again, and Jack stabbed at the lift button.

'DOWN.'

Four floors below West Block, Jack slipped out of the elevator's yawning doors and flattened himself against a rough-hewn concrete wall. Another corridor stretched to an impossible vanishing point in the distance, where he could make out an almost imperceptible glow. He surveyed his dark surrounds, noting the diminished dimensions of everything. The murky, soundproofed ceiling pressed down towards the derelict slate floor. Jack headed into the silent, confined space. Small, hardwood doors punctuated the corridor's length. A dim scratching sounded beyond one of the doors. From behind another, what sounded like a cough, but he couldn't be sure. Sound was impossible to determine. A persistent, low droning emanated from beneath the foundations, deep, but indistinct, as though the entire place was encased in a silencer, or as though Jack's own ears were stuffed with cotton wool. As he moved forward, he noted that the noises were increasing in number—creating a dull, muffled wall of sound. Eyes closed, he tried to single out—what? —a murmur to the left, was it? The scraping of a chair to the right? Now it was almost

impossible to see. Beads of perspiration collected on his upper lip, under his eyes. The heat was stifling. Unidentified bugs skittered along the crumbling slate, some becoming casualties of his rubber-soled white trainers. And, God, the smell as he passed the seventh or eighth door. The sweltering darkness was pervaded by the nauseating stench of a broken sewage pipe's fetid contents.

Jack stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes. Focus.

'Through the Dark.'

Through. He was afraid that would be the case, but pressed on. His feet very occasionally faltering on the disintegrating slate, Jack strode forward without slowing his pace. Julie's face appeared in his mind for a brief moment, her eyes trusting and warm—hopeful. Such belief in him. His heart ached for her; for the memory of her, lost to him for all this time. He would complete this mission in honour of that faith.

In the pitch black, his mind cleared of the present and recollection was restored—immediate and complete—as though he'd jacked in to a hard drive and uploaded a lifetime, in one violent operation. Countless memories arrived in his consciousness, perfect and true. By the time he'd reached the end of the hallway, Jack Monroe had been miraculously, yet wilfully, restored. The silvery sensation snaked into his head once more.

'Resolve's reward, buddy. That flood has washed your mind free of constraint.'

Jack stopped in his tracks and wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his sleeve. A few feet ahead of him, a small line of light glowed on the floor. He raised both arms and walked forward, until he felt a solid metallic surface.

A door.

The room.

He barely needed to search for a signal. Automatically, his left arm shot out at a right angle and found a square configuration of raised, metallic buttons.

*1665.*

In.

Vast, but vertically cramped, the room seemed to have an energy of its own. One that made Jack's skin crawl. In under an hour, he made discoveries beyond his comprehension. What caught his eye first was a steel, locked box on a desk, gleaming beneath the glare of a broad, green lamp. He lifted it, not without some effort, and turned it over in his hands, careful to memorise the strange inscriptions he observed. His search uncovered no key to the intriguing item.

He stole across the room, stopping at a sleek laptop computer. His fingers flew along the keyboard in a blur, searching through files at an inhuman speed. Hadwin burned bright in his mind.

'You will have its secrets,' he whispered.



Jack's head felt light for a moment, and then an intense pain pulsed behind his temples. His fingers tapping without pause, Jack speed read memos, reports, medical examination results, and private emails. He closed his eyes for a second and saw Hadwin's face, nodding grimly. After only a few minutes, he stood back from the laptop, ashen faced and attempting to catch his breath.

So much evil.

He sifted through shelves full of bizarre and twisted scientific matter. He opened boxes and jars. He kept inspecting the space until he came upon a heavy black curtain, stretched in front of a grey compactus, which stood in a darkened corner of the room. Keeping an ear out for Bain, or anyone else for that matter, he pulled the hulking shelves sideways on their metal tracks. From floor to ceiling and deep back into a cavernous recess, its shelves bulged with thick, labelled folders. Now dark-adapted, his eyes took in as much as they could gather from the vast trove of hidden information. They were files. Files on all of the Facility's inhabitants. Of its prisoners. Thousands of sheets of paper, filled with details. Each person, it seemed, had been sourced from situations opportunistically: vagrants from alleyways, invisible to the rest of the population... junkies from hospital beds, declared deceased... runaway youths, whose parents had surrendered hope of their recovery. The lists went on and on. Jack could hardly tear his eyes from the pages.

Hadwin's voice in his head: 'Enough. Out.'

But Jack felt a pull toward a large folder on the top row of one particular shelf. His gut lurched in anticipation. He closed his eyes when he thought he heard footsteps, but blamed it on his imagination. Paranoid.

'No.'

Hadwin's disembodied face hung in his mind's eye for a moment, stern and cautionary. Jack closed his eyes again and it was gone. He slid out the volume that had drawn him. 5097MM. Terrorist hostage, reported missing by government operatives. 37 years of age. Male. Caucasian. Military personnel. Officer. Rank: Lieutenant Colonel. Survived by wife and son in Minnesota. Jack's lungs contracted until he could hardly take a breath.

'NO.' Hadwin again, firmer.

His face flickering to a visual again in Jack's mind. Looking past Jack's shoulder to the door now, concerned. Jack shook the image off. Mind playing tricks. His hands faltered along the edges of a row of folders until his hands found 7710DF. Internationally renowned chemical engineer and molecular biologist. Three-time recipient of the Abel Mercer prize for scientific innovation. Expired in laboratory fire. 38 years of age. Female. Caucasian. Single. Pre-deceased by 15 year-old son. There were newspaper clippings in Imogen's file.

For a third time, Hadwin's voice sounded in his head:

'NO!'

This time, the exclamation was accompanied by only the image of Hadwin's shouting — white teeth bared in rage. Then... Did Jack hear something on the other side of the wall? Or, maybe it was nothing. A third folder drew him, with an indescribable magnetism, to read its contents. Although he knew who the subject would be, he had to know the rest. Needed. Hadwin's voice raged, now an indistinct roar. Jack ignored it. The anxiety was causing hallucinations, probably. He thought he heard something again as he opened the folder's heavy cover. 71307HM. Dangerous schizophrenic. History of psychosis and violence. Incarcerated several times for assault with intent... Jack's jaw clenched. Suicide, recovered from shelter...

'JACK! YOU. ARE. IN. DANGER!'

A soft shuffling sound, maybe near the door now.

...54 years of age. Male. Caucasian. Single. No kin. 185 centimetres.

Certainly footsteps now. Outside. But where? How far? He slid the compactus shut and closed the curtain, his ribcage barely containing his thumping heart. Beyond the curtain, he felt along the wall's contours. There was another recessed area and he felt his way into it, until he found that it deepened into a doorway alcove. His hands found a handle in the dark and he waited in silence.

On the opposite side of the room, he heard the tumblers of a lock. Back pressed as far into the darkened alcove as he could manage, Jack's held the handle behind him in a firm grasp. Someone entered the room and walked, unhurried, to the desk, where they paused. There was a deep sighing sound, followed by a sudden outburst of urgent beeping from an intercom. Then voices, one flattened into a metallic twang by the intercom speaker.

'Omar?'

Bain.

'It is. Why do you interrupt me here?'

'The girl is in distress.'

'Which girl?'

'West Block 18.'

Jack's biceps turned rigid as his hands tightened on the door handle behind him.

'WB18 in distress?' Omar confirmed.

'We thought you should know,' said the voice.

'Thank you,' Omar responded coolly. When the intercom clicked off, Jack heard him turn on his heel and run back towards the entry door, which he slammed hurriedly after himself.

Omar cleared his throat. From the floor beside the bed, Imogen stopped her desperate searching and smoothed her hair down. She looked drawn, pale, he thought. Signs of the decline, he supposed. Still so pretty, regardless, he thought.

‘Have you lost something?’ he ventured, admiring her softness—her very feminine way of moving, almost feline in its grace.

‘No, no,’ she said quickly. Then, ‘Oh, I thought I’d lost a hair clip. I lose everything. I’m a bit vague.’

‘How have you been feeling, Imogen? One of the orderlies mentioned that you seemed restless.’

‘I suppose,’ Imogen said, choosing her words with care. ‘But the medication can only do so much to counter such an aggressive disease. Are the scientists very far off a cure, do you think?’

Omar had hardly been listening, so enchanted was he by her dark eyes and the pleasing tone of her voice. The thought of losing her pained him, but sparing her was out of the question. Or was it?

‘I don’t know,’ he replied, shrugging.

Imogen sat on the far side of the bed, straight-backed and cautious.

‘You left in such a hurry. I wondered if I’d said something wrong,’ she said, without making eye contact.

Omar’s lips pressed into a firm line. His focus shifted from her lovely eyes to the smooth skin just above her open shirt collar. He wouldn’t think of it. Instead, he allowed himself to luxuriate in her beauty.

‘No,’ he lied. ‘I’m just under a lot of pressure. Our patients are everything to us and at times, the frustration becomes too much.’

She nodded silently, aware that she was still being held fast in his gaze. For several more minutes, Omar remained in her room, until the unfamiliar softness of his feelings made him uncomfortable. He’d have to consider her fate later, in a more objective state. The way she was making him feel bothered him and he left her room filled with mixed emotion, but reluctant to go.

In the canteen, the breakfast line was crawling. Jack sat down across the table from Hadwin, fierce-eyed and tense. Around them, other patients drifted by with glazed eyes, dragging their feet and scratching at open sores on their arms, some of which oozed viscous fluid. They were invisible to Jack, whose eyes bored into the top of Hadwin’s head as he ate, until the older man set down his fork and wiped his mouth.

‘Productive?’ Hadwin asked, through a mouthful of porridge.

Jack gave a sharp nod and sipped his coffee.

Hadwin nodded in return and surveyed the room. ‘Bain,’ he murmured, tipping his head in the direction of the doorway.

Only Jack's eyes moved. Omar was moving slowly through the canteen, observing the pitiful zombies in his midst. Flanked by Wagner and one of the orderlies, he studied each of the seated patients individually. Jack's eyes searched the tables desperately until he found Imogen, sitting hunched and alone at a table a few metres from the service area. She was pushing food around her plate with a knife, her gaze fixed, staring at nothing. Pathetic coughing sounds peppered the otherwise quiet atmosphere of the room. Bain was only a few tables away now. Hadwin pushed his tray forward and then took up his cane.

'Meet in the courtyard?' he asked, looking over Jack's shoulder at Omar.

Jack nodded and dragged himself to his feet, still groggy from lack of sleep. He took his tray back to the service area, passing dozens of the afflicted, coughing and hacking and scratching furiously under their shirt sleeves.

He passed Omar, head bowed, making a show of rubbing the back of his neck and exaggerating his fatigue. Although he didn't see it, as he passed by, Omar's nostrils flared and his attention turned to Jack for a split second.

That grey afternoon in the courtyard, a fierce wind lashed at the potted plants, licking off leaves and sending branches into waving disarray. Few patients had chosen to weather the inclement conditions, opting instead to remain in their rooms or congregate in lounge areas or games rooms inside. At the corner furthest from the door, two figures huddled together talking, hands jammed in pockets. The dark cast of the stormy cloud cover, coupled with thick foliage from an overhanging vine on the wall beside them, partially obscured them from view. From the rain-spattered hall windows inside, you'd have to be looking for them to notice them out there in their mid-blue linen shirts, standing against the grubby stone backdrop.

'Tell me again about the box, Jack,' she was saying, doing her best to be heard above the squall without shouting.

He flipped his shirt collar up around his ears and bent closer to her. Squinting against the wind, he repeated what he'd told her only minutes earlier. Moving his hands this way and that, he indicated a rectangle of about 20 centimetres in length and about 12 wide.

'About yea big,' he told her. 'Heavy. Metallic. Steel, I guess.'

'Did you try to open it?'

He nodded. 'No. No chance.'

'And the inscriptions? What did you say was on it?'

'One of those... You know those maps... Charts of the sky? The constellations...'

'Map of the heavens,' Imogen said, nodding. 'Go on.'

‘Yes, that’s right. And zodiac signs... Virgo and whatnot. And right across one half, there was this symbol.’

‘Astrological?’

‘I don’t know much about stuff like that, but that sort of thing, I guess,’ he replied casting a nervous glance at the door for the umpteenth time.

‘Can you remember it?’

‘Mm. Hold on.’

The wind riffled through Jack’s short, thick hair as he dug into a pot plant and scooped out a handful of rich loam. Smearing the dirt on the concrete like finger paint, he knelt down and repeated the image from the box lid on the concrete. Imogen watched as the symbol appeared on the ground before her. Jack stood and rubbed his hands together slowly.

‘What do you think?’ he asked. ‘Familiar?’

Imogen stared at the rust-coloured image until the rain threatened to wash it away. She closed her eyes for a moment. As the rain grew heavier, the last couple of patients in the courtyard headed inside for shelter. Jack wondered how much longer Hadwin was going to be. He’d asked Jack to bring Imogen to meet with him, and they’d been standing in the cold air for at least half an hour. The sky was darkening and Jack could tell that it wouldn’t be long before the heavens opened further, and it started bucketing down. There really wasn’t anywhere inside where they could safely get together and be seen with Imogen. Not now that it was clear that Bain was taking such an interest in her. He turned his face to the sky and let the fat raindrops fall on his face. What was Julie doing right now? How far away was she? How old would Danny be? Old enough to ask about his father? The files contained no dates. They might have been seized a year ago or five years ago. He wondered, darkly, whether there would have been a memorial service of some kind for him. Who would have gone? Dozens of familiar faces raced through his thoughts: school friends, military buddies, ex-girlfriends, family. To think that they were all going about their lives, somewhere else in the world... How far? Ten kilometres away? A thousand kilometres away? A day’s flight away?

‘Jack?’ Julie shook his sleeve.

He forced his thoughts into the present and looked at her. Her eyes widened with recognition.

‘It’s a glyph,’ she said. ‘It’s a symbol representing the planet Mercury.’

The door to the hallway opened across the courtyard, startling them both. Jack smudged the dirt symbol into an indistinct mark with the side of his shoe. They both sighed at the realisation that the door had been opened by a fellow patient. It was Hadwin, hobbling out into the rain. Jack pointed towards a spot further along under an awning, and Hadwin nodded and met with them there.

‘Imogen,’ Hadwin said, looking into her eyes for the first time. ‘Good to meet you finally.’

Imogen nodded and wrapped her arms around herself, shivering.

‘I’ve just told Imogen what I discovered,’ Jack began.

A guard appeared at a window and watched them with suspicion for a moment. Right then, a scuffle broke out between some crazed-looking patients beside him, and he was distracted from the three figures standing together under the crumbling eaves in the rain. Jack lowered his voice.

‘But there’s more. There are files on us. On all of us. Everyone in here, I guess,’ he said.

‘Imogen, I wanted to wait until you were together to mention this.’

The others listened as he spoke, both nodding slowly.

‘Imogen, you know that Hadwin asked me to locate you those weeks ago when I visited your room late. What you don’t know, and what I didn’t know, was where you fit into the plan. Wait. It’s pretty confronting stuff. It might be easier if I start with me. How I came to be here.’

Hadwin listened with interest but didn’t seem at all surprised by the revelation.

‘I’m an army officer,’ he said, pressing a thumb to his chest for emphasis. ‘I was on a tour in the middle east when a bunch of stuff went down... I was taken by a guerrilla group. Terrorists...’

When he felt his voice falter, he thought of Julie and clenched his teeth together until he forced the panic from his mind. ‘I was delivered here by them, but presumed dead by the outside world.’

Imogen shook her head in disbelief.

‘Delivered by them? What do you mean ‘delivered’?’

‘Okay. Imogen. We were all seized. Ripped from our realities by people working for...’

‘Bain,’ Imogen finished, her voice low.

‘No. Not Bain. Bain’s a middle-man. He answers to an outfit called Central. I have no idea who they are, but I know that they’re powerful. It looks like he runs this entire show, though. He’s in charge of experiments. Trials.’

Jack turned to Hadwin.

‘And you were right—they’re making us sick. They’re...’

Imogen interjected suddenly, explaining exactly what they were doing, in complex scientific terms. The men listened as she told them what she’d gleaned from the chart Omar had left in her room.

‘I can’t tell you how frustrating it was, not being able to communicate with you,’ she said to Jack. ‘Right out of the blue, I was interpreting all their medical jargon. It was essentially a plan to monitor a virus they’ve infected me with, and a progress chart of my deterioration. And really, don’t ask me how I know. I have no idea.’

Jack nodded.

‘Because you’re a scientist, Imogen. A chemical engineer. You won awards. Later on, you changed paths and worked in microbiology: virology, to be exact.’

The others took time to absorb the information. Hadwin smiled.

‘I might’ve known,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘With you,’ he said, nodding his head toward Jack, ‘I had time to take a proper imprint. When we were together, I had a chance to read you. With her, I got the feeling, but I couldn’t quite work out why it had to be her.’

Imogen shrugged.

‘Then how was I taken?’ she asked.

Jack recounted what he’d read about the chemical explosion in her lab, that she too was presumed dead. The opportunists operating on behalf of Central had moved in and seized her, perhaps acting as emergency services. It was difficult to speculate, but some details had been left for them.

‘And what else about my life?’ Imogen asked, breathless with revelation.

‘Nothing,’ he lied, adopting a poker face and looking at her steadily. ‘The details were sketchy.’

He thought of Julie for a second, but pushed the memory aside. They needed Imogen to remain strong, to be a functioning member of the team. His thoughts returned to the other information included in her file: that she’d been embroiled in a political controversy involving Big Pharma; that she’d been chief of a firm accused of dangerous drug testing in third-world countries. He also kept from her the particulars of her messy divorce from a high-ranking politician after the tragic drug-related death of their teenage son—something her husband, and the general public, felt implicated her. Chemical engineering giant, Dr Imogen Moreau, had disappeared from the radar for a few years as she retrained and reinvented herself, emerging from her chrysalis of media shame as a diligent virologist whose work attracted increasing attention and praise. After the explosion at the laboratory, the newspapers reported an elaborate requiem for the lauded scientist.

No, Imogen didn’t need to hear any of those things. Hadwin was watching him.

‘And so, you read my file of course,’ he said.

‘Of course,’ Jack said, wondering how to proceed with Hadwin’s story.

‘And you realise, then, that I didn’t suicide in a homeless shelter?’

Jack sighed.

‘Hadwin... How did you...?’

‘And you don’t believe, either, that I’m a unhinged psycho with a violent history? Do you?’

Jack hesitated. In truth, Hadwin’s file had been relatively empty. There was the shelter incident and the criminal insanity. But nothing much else. No particulars. Hadwin, it seemed, was

an unknown quantity, both to him and to the intelligence behind Central. But there he was, as large as life—leaning on his sturdy cane before Jack in the courtyard in the gathering darkness.

‘No, of course not,’ Jack said.

After that, Jack related the laptop’s contents. About a second holding section in the Facility. About Omar’s messages to Central ... his plans to collude with colleagues to overthrow their superiors. The information was disjointed and confusing, but spelled treachery. Omar was a monster who had to be stopped. There was no way of knowing who or what Central really was, but Hadwin’s grave expression hinted that they were beyond his worst suspicions.

‘I wish there were a way to get to Omar,’ Jack said. ‘They have all of this information about us. I wish we had some idea about him.’

‘Mm,’ Hadwin mused. ‘So, what else did you see among his personal effects? Think. Forget about our files. Ah, you saw the box, the sick medical stuff, the perfume bottles. Anything else?’

‘A photo,’ he remembered.

‘What of?’ Hadwin asked.

‘Nothing much. Him as a kid.’

‘Tell me about the photo,’ Hadwin instructed, closing his eyes in concentration.

Jack thought of the small, faded Polaroid he’d found in the top drawer.

‘Nothing much to tell. Just a kid with a woman.’

‘Try,’ Hadwin insisted. ‘Try to picture it in your mind.’

Jack closed his eyes then and again saw the serious-faced young boy and the faded colours. He saw a fuzzy image of the woman. Hadwin gasped and Jack looked at him in panic.

‘What?’ he asked. Imogen looked from one man to the other, filled with rising anxiety.

‘Keep looking, Jack. Go back and try to focus,’ Hadwin rasped. ‘There’s more detail in the image. What else can you see?’

Bewildered, Jack thought of the picture. There was a cabin behind them with a large banner draped across it. Little by little, his memory coaxed it into focus. In brilliant red letters on a yellow background, it said

‘CAMP SALVATION!’ Hadwin exclaimed, his words furious viper hisses in the driving rain.

Jack’s eyes flew open. ‘Yes.’

‘Go back there, Jack. The woman. Look at her face.’

Jack’s mouth was dry and his heart pounded. He saw the boy’s face. The woman’s long fingers around his shoulders.

‘The woman, Jack. Her face,’ Hadwin repeated.

With great effort, Jack brought her features into focus. Imogen watched the men, confused.



Hadwin's eyes darted behind closed lids, searching for a second-hand memory. He trembled as the rain pelted against his lined, haggard face.

A pale complexion... Soft, full mouth... Dark eyes... Long hair spilling over her shoulders...

Hadwin breathed hard, labouring under the weight of mental fatigue.

'Keep going,' he urged.

Jack connected the features to form a cohesive whole.

Hadwin's eyes opened with sudden clarity.

'Loretta Dean,' he said, in a voice just audible over the weather.

The rain poured over them, drenching their clothes.

'Loretta Dean, who was found butchered in her bed in 1985,' Hadwin told them.

The dinner bell sounded around the Facility.

Jack felt hollow. Overwhelmed by the painstaking puzzle solving. By the cryptic, slowness of it all. By the unpredictability of Hadwin's gift. He looked at Imogen, who was shivering violently in the cold.

'Loretta Dean?' Jack said.

Hadwin nodded, spent.

'You knew her?' Jack asked.

Hadwin nodded again.

'She's Omar's mother?'

Hadwin closed his eyes.

'Bain's mother, yes,' Hadwin said slowly. 'Loretta Dean, whose murder was pinned on me.'

*27 August*

*OFFICIAL COMMUNICATION*

*The Facility to Central 1.*

*Correspondent: O. Bain.*

*Open:*

*We acknowledge your updated arrival date of Thursday next week. And we humbly and joyfully welcome the coming of the Elders.*

*Close*

*Omar Bain*

*Controller*

Omar felt jubilant. The day had arrived. Across the high gloss of the cherry wood conference table, three representatives from Central sat, calm and expectant. Two well-groomed

men of indeterminate age—perhaps in their late 40s, maybe 50s—flanked a stately woman dressed in sombre grey, sporting a short, silver bob. Luna, the chief of Central’s intelligence department, had never deigned to communicate with Omar before now. Deep-set and dark, her small eyes resembled glittering granite, and were fixed on Omar in focused anticipation. Neat in their dark suits and staring, unblinking, they waited for Omar to speak first. Only the sound of an attendant filling water glasses broke the room’s stony silence. Along one wall of the room, a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows framed an inky sky beyond. A storm had just passed and the smell of fresh ozone hung in the air. Wagner sat on Omar’s left; Hoffman on his right. Truscott arrived late, taking his place beside Wagner and set a clipboard down on the table in front of him. Omar clasped his hands loosely on his lap and started proceedings.

‘Now that Truscott has joined us, we may start,’ he announced, in a casual, controlled manner that belied his excitement. ‘I would like to present my team, with whom you’ve had some correspondence during our time together. Truscott is at the helm of our... biological and molecular experiments. He’ll be giving a demonstration today of moments of departure and efficient suggested means of reanimation.’

The tall scientist gave a short nod of his head in acknowledgement of the introduction. The woman from Central turned her head a fraction to regard Truscott, as though reluctant to expend any energy on anything not absolutely essential. Omar looked to Hoffman, who appeared typically self-possessed and watchful.

‘Hoffman is coordinating our people... Our legions,’ he explained.

The woman pricked, her eyes narrowing.

‘Your legions,’ Omar corrected himself. ‘Hoffman has made great progress over recent months and expects to have access to a number in excess of 60,000 by the end of October.’

‘60,000?’ the woman asked, in a commanding voice as she studied Hoffman’s own impenetrable gaze. ‘Formidable. And that will be only the first division?’

‘Yes,’ Omar confirmed. ‘The first division only. But our role in your operation will be over. Once your first division is complete and prepared for reanimation, Hoffman will hand over instructions and information to your unit for ongoing assembly.’

Luna seemed satisfied. One of the suits was taking notes, scribbling on his PDA with a stylus without a sound.

For the next introduction, Omar stood with ceremony. If they were impressed with Hoffman’s efforts, they’d be knocked out by what he was about to say about Wagner and what they’d let them know about his recent research. After that, Truscott’s sideshow would be a clincher, and the four stood to become very wealthy men. Well, four for the time being. He looked at Luna’s steady expression.

‘I will wait,’ he thought, controlling his anger with great effort. She really thought she was holding all the cards, and he only wished he could be present when the affected poise was knocked right out of her. But for the time being, he’d play the game.

‘And, of course,’ Omar said, ‘we have made great strides in the area of chemical and biological resistance testing. Of this, I’ve sent ongoing notes. Because of our innovations in both psychological control and corporeal erosion, we are able to offer you not only insight into moments of departure, but also means by which your legion will be able to combat similarly corporeal...ah...beings.’

Luna observed Omar’s hesitant diplomacy.

‘And the person behind these extraordinary efforts is...’

‘Lance Wagner,’ Luna interjected, turning to face the slight, perplexed-looking man in the red bowtie sitting opposite her. ‘Finally, we meet.’

Omar was confused. How was Luna able to identify Wagner? All correspondence went through him—none of the others made direct contact with Central. Or so he’d thought. He turned to look at Wagner, who resembled a nervous rodent.

‘Hello, Luna,’ Wagner said, his voice reedy with anxiety.

‘Thank you for your correspondence of recent weeks,’ Luna said, noting Omar’s posture stiffen in her peripheral vision. ‘We are delighted to learn that the reanimation serum is almost completely correct and that you and Truscott are going to be able to show the Elders a series of reanimations today.’

Omar clenched his jaw until his teeth almost exploded with the force. Reanimations? Today? Wagner and Truscott had advanced so far already? Today was supposed to be a show of departures and hints at reanimation. Suggestions. How long had the two been cooking this up? How long had they been colluding without his knowledge? His rising emotion threatened to destabilise him, but he held on. Barely. Wagner, the turncoat, was sitting, gazing at Luna like an obedient schoolboy—not once daring to look in Omar’s direction. Truscott busied himself reading his clipboard, but Omar knew he’d be quaking in his boots. So, they thought they’d undermine him right in front of Central? What was their game? To usurp his power? Without Omar’s influence and foresight, there wouldn’t have been any project at all. Certainly, they wouldn’t have had any chance at greatness. He’d assembled the team himself. And he’d counted on their loyalty. He cast a baleful glance at Luna then. She would pay. Sitting there, going over his head, addressing his team like old friends? She would pay, the old whore.

‘Omar? Sit down,’ Luna ordered without looking at him, waving a neatly manicured hand towards his empty seat.

‘Luna,’ Omar said, leaning forward and placing one hand on the cherry wood table.

One of the suits stood, unbuttoning his jacket casually. Standing a good head taller than Omar, he had a lean, wiry build and calm, yet menacing, demeanour. That his colleague didn't find it necessary to move to help was sufficient statement of his capabilities. Omar's temples throbbed. His eyes blazed in their sockets. Unbridled fury raged throughout his system, finding nowhere for release. It doubled and tripled in intensity until his face burned crimson and, balled fisted, he drove nails into his palms until they drew blood.

But he sat.

And he listened as Wagner, uninterrupted, outlined all of his recent experiments and findings to an interested Luna, who nodded slowly, soaking everything in. Presently, the information session reached its conclusion and Luna spoke once more.

'Thank you, Wagner. Most illuminating, not to mention satisfying.'

She leaned back, resting her head against the back of the chair as though being pushed by the weight of thought. Omar looked at her throat and imagined opening it with a straight razor, the way he'd dispatched Whittaker and countless others.

All waited in silence for her next remark, which was, 'Truscott, we are ready for your presentation. I will now summon the Elders.'

Light fell on Hadwin's weary face in dappled shapes through the rain-stained windows of the lounge area. Jack, trying to affect listlessness, crossed his legs and slouched forwards, hunching his back. Imogen's eyes darted across the otherwise empty room, over a shabby coffee table and along the hallway outside.

'Gone,' she said, referring to a patrolling guard, who was now watching an elderly woman throw her weight against the glass door between the walkway and courtyard.

'Wait, watch this,' Hadwin muttered, nodding towards the pair. 'This woman's about to die.'

Jack observed as Imogen's facial muscles tightened and she looked at her shoes. Then he glanced at Hadwin, who was counting backwards from twenty under his breath. There was a crashing sound, as the woman careered into a nurse pushing an empty gurney.

'Straighten up, you!' the guard shouted.

Delirious with fever, the woman babbled something incomprehensible and, arms flailing, staggered towards the guard. The nurse stopped as the guard shouted again. The woman turned towards the lounge, and Jack saw her eyes roll back in her head. She was falling now, tripping towards the guard at a tilt. Hadwin was down to five. The guard quickly glanced up and down the narrow hallway. As the woman landed against him, still babbling, he pulled something from his belt and, catching her with one arm, he made a quick motion with his other arm. The nurse was at his

side in an instant, and the woman fell silent as she slipped to the floor. Together, they loaded her onto the trolley. Jack could just make out that a bloodstain was growing, contrasting against the light blue of her shirt. The nurse shouted something, sounding panicked. The guard lunged at his colleague with what Jack could now see was a knife, and the nurse backed off and pushed the gurney out of sight.

When Jack looked at Hadwin again, his blue eyes were surveying him. He shook his head and turned to Imogen.

‘Well, not the first, is she? And we all know she’s better off for it, as cold as that may sound. She didn’t have much longer. But you both look very well,’ he told them. ‘Strong.’

‘You can look now, Imogen,’ Jack said, and patted her on the back. She cleared her throat and shivered.

‘I wish I had died in that lab fire,’ she said, without emotion. When nobody said anything, she told them that she had been making late-night excursions to Wagner’s lab.

‘I’ve interfered with his existing concoctions,’ she said in a quiet voice. ‘I’ve attempted to neutralise what I couldn’t completely replace.’

Hadwin nodded, relieved. ‘I knew you could do it.’

‘I’ve spent the past couple of weeks altering dozens of notes on his database, too. Not much can be done about the infected to date, but his future pathogens will be rendered benign and his memory suppressants will be useless.’

The men exchanged glances.

‘Which is brilliant,’ Jack said. ‘But it also means it’s time for us to make our move. Won’t be long before they work this out.’

Hadwin nodded in agreement.

‘Time to disperse,’ he said, as the guard reappeared and waved them towards the courtyard.

‘Sun’s out, folks,’ he smiled, cracking his chewing gum. ‘Why don’t you enjoy this pleasant day?’

The room fell silent as Luna stood and pulled a small gadget out of the pocket of her straight, tweed skirt. Still furious, Omar looked on as she pressed a series of buttons and then set the device down on the table. But he felt sick with anticipation, too. The Elders. After all this time. After all these *decades*. Luna took her seat again and bowed her head in reverent expectation. Within a few minutes, the air cooled to an almost unbearable chill. A deep, gathering droning began, which seemed to unsettle Omar’s inner organs until he felt nauseated and afraid. The table vibrated with such violence that a few glasses fell from their stand and smashed, the sound a

pinprick in the now deafening hum. A storm brewed outside, and all eyes turned to the windows, which heaved with the force of sudden air pressure. Luna remained still, head forward.

The storm picked up and great bolts of lightning sliced the sky in an awesome display of electrical might. Rain belted the windows in heavy, slapping sheets. All but Luna and the suits held tight and watched the windows in alarm. One, two, three deafening cracks split the air until the windows imploded in a violent spray of glass shards, many of which landed on the table. Already rattled, Wagner jumped, pressing one hand on the table for support. He made fleeting eye contact with Omar and could almost taste his rage. Truscott made to stand, and Luna's eyes flew open.

'Stay!' she roared. 'It's you they're here to see!'

He fell into his chair and brushed glass from his suit pants, horrified.

At the height of its fury, the storm collapsed. Completely. The rain stopped falling. The thunder stopped crashing. But in through the windows, three white, tailed spheres that resembled ball lightning exploded. Then, before the gathered group, three flickering orbs of energy appeared and danced on the spot like 6-foot flames. Nobody spoke. Luna slowly opened her eyes and looked at the familiar entities.

'Welcome, Elders,' she said in a loud voice. 'You have come so far. Thank you for your presence.'

The three orbs lengthened momentarily and brightened, in an apparent acknowledgement of her greeting. Then, to the surprise the others, a sighing, static whisper responded:

*'What has been done to serve us?'*

Omar's skin crawled and his hands gripped his arm rests until his knuckles ached. Energy. Formless, blazing energy. He understood their desire to attain corporeal form—had heard, for years, about their desire to take shape and walk among the other beings on Earth—but the reality was still shocking. These were the ancients of whom his mother had talked decades ago? These were the first beings? The supreme ones? His mind immediately turned to the steel box in his room.

'Not *my* overlords,' he thought.

Luna smiled. 'Many developments,' she said, comforted by their glow. 'This man, Truscott, will show you departure and reanimation.'

'And reanimation?!' an Elder exclaimed.

Truscott found his voice. 'Yes, Elders,' he ventured, unsure of how to properly address the alien entities. He was alarmed when one vibrated in a shimmering display of light and replied:

'You are Truscott? We want to see reanimation. Show us.'

A second Elder blazed with an intense light and agreed: 'Show us!'

Omar could hardly stand it. Addressing Truscott first? No introduction to him, the one who'd engineered everything for them? He was beyond outraged and glowered at Luna, who by now had disregarded him completely.

Truscott led the group, Elders included, out of the room and across the hall into a huge, cavernous workshop which was divided into a series of antechambers and cells. He invited them into the first antechamber, where across the full length of one side, a large dark curtain hung, concealing his first show. As his audience assembled, Truscott strode towards a white cord to one side. Omar positioned himself towards the back of the group, furious and plotting the demise of every last one of them. The Elders gathered eagerly at the very front, almost right on top of the curtain.

'Show us,' one unearthly voice demanded.

Truscott introduced the display as a moment of departure. He then pulled the curtain aside to reveal a gravely ill patient, staring hollow-eyed and imploring at the group. Her sad eyes begged for mercy. Her skeletal frame clothed in a green cotton gown, she lay motionless on a white hospital bed. A drip hung above the bed, and a long tube fed saline into her emaciated left arm. To its right, a series of medical machines blinked and issued a variety of intermittent bleeps and alarms.

'It's very simple,' Truscott explained. 'We measure the moment of departure, roughly, with the aid of this machine, which monitors heart function. When the heart ceases to work, a Human is pronounced dead. Officially.'

The woman on the bed hardly responded. Her eyes found Omar's across the room and locked with his gaze. Omar watched, impassive and empty. She should be glad to go the way she was. The rest of them in the room wouldn't be shown such mercy. He considered what he would do with Truscott and Wagner, idly, as Truscott continued with his demonstration. For the next several minutes, Truscott and the Elders discussed the mechanical details of Human death. Of the importance of the heart. Luna looked pleased and watched the proceedings with great interest. It was exciting to be there to see the Elders' first formal introduction to death. Although they'd witnessed it, this was the first time they'd been shown, firsthand, a deliberate killing. A planned departure from corporeal form, with scientific commentary.

And they were thrilled.

Without acknowledging the patient, Truscott flicked the switches of the machines until the lights died and the sounds ceased.

'You do not find this difficult?' an Elder asked, unexpectedly.

'Well no,' Truscott replied. 'I've done this many times. And anyway, we're much like those machines,' he said, pushing a monitor out of the way. 'You pull the plug and we're switched off. Gone.'

‘You fool,’ the Elder said.

‘Fool,’ another Elder repeated.

‘Proceed,’ said the third, impatient.

Shaken, Truscott pulled a final plug. They all watched as the heart rate slowed and then flatlined.

‘There!’ exclaimed one Elder, the brilliance of its orb filling the room suddenly.

‘Yes,’ said Truscott. ‘That was it.’

There was further discussion then, across the patient’s lifeless body, about various causes of departure, various complications. The Elders had many questions, some of which were out of Truscott’s frame of reference. Then Truscott started to talk about the ‘sweet spot’ for reanimation: the optimal moment for the Elders, and their kind, to inhabit a host body. He talked about cell death, degeneration, muscle waste, rigor. He told them that he had found the best time for them to make their move, and the best means of preserving the host prior to departure. And he also told them that he had effective ways of their obliterating other humans. Widespread decimation. He talked in an excited voice, animated and maniacal. Omar realised that Truscott wasn’t just ruthless; he was mad.

The group moved into the next antechamber, where a similar set up was in place. This time, he pulled the curtain aside without ceremony and wheeled the ailing patient forward, closer to his audience. This time, he had a contraption fitted over the head of the unfortunate on the bed. Luna edged forward, pleased to see Central’s equipment being implemented and pointing out, in a loud voice, that she had helped develop that particular piece.

‘This is the director,’ she announced, taking over from Truscott. ‘At Central, we understand how the Elders transport. We needed a good, research mind to help us achieve this vision. And Truscott recently advised me that he has followed our instructions to a tee. Here we have, hopefully, the first demonstration of a successful reanimation. Would anyone care to volunteer?’

‘I,’ said one of the Edlers, finally, moving towards Truscott.

A debacle followed. The experiment failed, the Elder was cast back out of the directional device, Luna exploded in fury, and the Elders raged with anger. Truscott couldn’t fathom how things had gone awry. He’d followed Central’s directions absolutely. He’d spent months agonising over every last detail, researching transference and inhabitation techniques from esoteric journals and ancient texts. He was stumped.

Omar scarcely concealed his glee.

‘Well, Luna,’ he said. ‘Thank you for taking the time to meet with us. It’s a shame that the experiment didn’t go as planned, but I’m sure that with further tweaking, Truscott will have what you need soon.’

He turned to address the three orbs.



‘Elders,’ he said, ‘Thank you for coming so far. We are humbled by your presence and promise to continue to faithfully serve you. My apologies, on behalf of the incompetents assembled, about today’s disappointment. I personally vow to put this right and make amends.’

‘You will make this so,’ an Elder said.

‘You have my word,’ Omar replied.

‘And we will order your departure, if we do not have your word,’ an Elder snapped.

With that, the three orbs faded to a dull glow and dissolved out the window, becoming one with the darkness outside.

Omar turned to his colleagues.

‘We will be meeting later this week,’ he said. ‘I will contact you with a time and venue.’

The three scientists exchanged glances and filed out without speaking.

‘Luna,’ Omar said. ‘Please give my regards to your colleagues at Central. I must attend to some work, so I’ll ask you to show yourselves out.’

Luna fumed. ‘I would advise you not to choose incompetents in future, Omar,’ she snapped. ‘They make you look very bad.’

But the words had no effect on Omar, who was so filled with unspent fury that his head pounded. He considered heading to his study to indulge in some Zeusamine, but then he thought of something that would make him feel much better.

In the Recreation Garden, Hadwin slouched against a wall and, when it was safe, addressed the other two. Imogen sat within earshot, barely resisting the urge to scratch at a large ulcerated patch of skin on the back of her hand. She regarded Jack, whose strong jawline was now pockmarked with a number of angry sores. At least the pathogen hadn’t advanced as far in their systems as some of the inmates around them in the courtyard. Small mercies. It wasn’t unusual to find guards restraining people who were trying to scratch their own eyes out or to see others rubbing or peeling off great scabs or blisters. For the most part, however, they were unaware—all inhabiting their own worlds, as they stumbled by one another, subdued by the tranquilisers and awaiting their next dose.

After a while of listening to Hadwin talk, Jack sighed.

‘So, he only thinks he knows what the box is for?’ he asked Hadwin, careful to appear to be mumbling to himself.

A female guard wandered past them, completely ignoring their presence. She gestured to a colleague indoors and together they wandered to a distant quadrangle for a smoke.

‘Mm. You see, the key to the box is three,’ Hadwin replied, typically mysteriously. ‘Three has a higher meaning. Don’t scowl, Jack. If I could explain these things, I would. Some of them are beyond explanation.’

‘But you understand,’ Jack countered.

‘I do. I was approached as a young man, you know. This has been a long time coming. And no, the contents of the box are not what Omar was led to believe they are. He’s a delusional fool who swallowed a line he was fed many, many years ago. Something he wanted to believe.’

‘This concerns you and his mother?’ Jack ventured.

Hadwin nodded.

‘Partly. In that I was approached soon after her death, the poor, mad soul.’

Imogen drew closer to Hadwin, crouching near him against the concrete wall.

‘Who approached you?’ she asked. ‘Someone Omar knew?’

Hadwin chuckled softly.

‘Oh, someone Omar wished he knew.’

He explained to his fatigued allies that everything was about opposing forces. That, just as Omar was connected to a world of dark beings, he himself had once been in touch with a force of light. He talked of ancient hatreds and cosmic battles. Of an ongoing and eternal tug of war that was currently being drawn in favour of the dark.

Jack sat on his haunches, bewildered by the information and wondering how any of them had a place in the tale.

‘So, it’s good versus evil then? These things... This force... It must be stopped, before it does what? Destroys the world?’

Hadwin sighed.

‘So much to explain but no time and not really any useful means,’ he said. ‘But it’s not good versus evil, Jack. It’s larger than that. Take morality out of the picture. There is form and there is formless. There is matter and anti-matter. We, well everything we are, is compelled towards creation. Procreation. Survival. Engineering. Building. Making. Evolving. We exist for corporeal life. Creating environments. Occupying space. For becoming. Do you see? The others... The Elders, if you will, form part of an opposing force. They exist to destroy. Deconstruct. Their goal is entropy... Disorder... They empty out. Dissolve. Things that every fibre of our beings resists. That is their imperative. Their drive is toward non-existence. But they are not evil. Or good. And we are not evil or good. We follow what we are driven to do.’

‘Then why bother with any of it?’ Imogen asked flatly. ‘Why not let them have at it?’

‘It’s not in our make up to do so, Imogen,’ Hadwin said, in a low voice. ‘It’s not in our bones, our spirits. Why would Jack put his life on the line to fight for his country?’

‘But he believed in a certain justice,’ she argued. ‘In fighting a political enemy he believed to be in the wrong.’

Hadwin shook his head.

‘It’s self-interest, ultimately. What do the troops on the other side think? They preserve what’s precious to them. We preserve what’s precious to us. Nothing very noble about it.’

‘This is horse shit,’ Jack spat. ‘It’s most definitely a moral issue. I went in with the aim of liberating helpless people. Of helping quash a regime that I believe, whole-heartedly, to be inhumane and against my principles. It’s about freedom and protecting a way of life. Why insult me? If you don’t see that, why have me onside in this matter?’

Hadwin smiled.

‘Because it’s precisely how I feel about the Elders, Jack. I just don’t have the arrogance, or the short-sightedness, to view our kind as good and theirs bad, necessarily. They have their agenda. We have ours. And the funny thing about the Elders... The funny thing that Omar doesn’t get... Is that they don’t operate in that way, either. They have a certain wisdom that views everything...’

He stopped and waved his hands over his head for effect.

‘Everything as being part of their prophecies. They are driven to push onwards with their destruction because it’s the way they further themselves. Their formlessness. Their nothingness. They march towards a final undoing.’

Imogen rubbed the back of her neck and felt a raised welt there. Scar tissue. They’d been in the Facility for so very long.

‘I don’t understand who we’re fighting for,’ she said.

‘Life as we know it,’ Hadwin said, plainly. ‘It really is as simple as that. I can show you more, but I can’t account for how much you’ll comprehend. Do you want to see?’

The others nodded.

‘Close your eyes,’ he instructed.

For some moments, Hadwin projected, through their minds’ eyes, some history of what he called the Light Beings. Their prophecies. The time they approached him. Things they directed him to do. He tried to explain that the struggle would never conclude as long as operatives were found to enact the prophecies. That, as bedraggled and confused as they felt, they were part of the prophecy. And he showed them what was in the box and how it related to their mission.

‘Alright, Hadwin,’ Jack said finally. ‘I doubt there’s much more to say on the matter. I wish I could’ve remained ignorant, but I guess that’s a luxury we three were never destined to enjoy. I do maintain that I’m doing this out of a sense of it being the right thing to do, though.’

Hadwin nodded.

‘That’s why you were chosen, Jack. We all share in common—on a cell-deep level—a total and utter resolve to protect our own. Call it righteousness if you want. If you weren’t a righteous man, you wouldn’t have had the integrity to dedicate yourself to this. But it’s righteousness born of a sense of entitlement too. And that, my friend, is a very human response.’

Imogen stirred, hoisting herself to her feet. ‘Then I’m happy to be human,’ she remarked.

‘What’s Omar? Part of the other side?’

‘Oh, no. Omar’s not on any side. Omar’s creedless. Lawless.’

‘Well, I guess that makes him less of a threat,’ Imogen mused. ‘If he’s got no alliances...’

Hadwin turned to Imogen slowly, considering her words.

‘What could be more threatening than something operating without any rules, dear girl?’

Omar may not be able to overthrow the Elders with the Mercury box, but he may stop us from getting to them, too.’

Jack and Imogen looked stumped. Hadwin cleared his throat.

‘On the other hand,’ he muttered in a voice almost inaudible, ‘it’s also impossible for us to get to them without him.’

Dusk’s shadows softened the edges of the Facility’s walls, blurring architectural detail and engulfing the structure in an increasingly inky embrace as evening wore on. Silence descended, as the patients beyond the crumbling walls accepted their meds and crawled, weak-limbed, into their beds. Time was nothing to them; they’d long stopped enquiring about the outside. As long as they were ensconced, noiseless and passive, in their cocoons of oblivion, they ceased questioning anything. If one was to stand on the rooftop at the southern end of the building, looking out across to the horizon to the vast river beyond, the Facility’s remoteness was immediately apparent. In the city, with its dense population of unsuspecting citizens, it was business as usual. Restaurants bustled, shares were traded, cabs jostled for space on the teeming streets. Out there on its marshy patch of real estate, the Facility remained overlooked and invisible. The helicopters that patrolled the city’s skies as part of the metropolitan police unit never ventured out to the island, if that’s what it could be called. No, the city was interested only in what could benefit the city, or what might threaten the city. And the collapsed mess of buildings nestled in the overgrown, twisted vegetation of Lot 4130 (marked CONDEMNED in large, red print on municipal maps) remained out of sight and, subsequently, mind.

Within the confines of the Facility’s decaying concrete walls, guards rounded up stragglers who had missed the final night meds alarm. Some were newer arrivals who were still afforded some latitude, before the tranqs had started to do their thing and render them altogether impassive. Others were simply missed, later discovered in hidden corners, tearing at their own flesh and raving wildly

to unseen enemies. In the relaxation garden, a heavy-set female guard peered warily over her shoulder before pressing a kind of extra-high voltage taser to the temple of a frail elderly man at her feet. With bland disdain, she pressed the button and watched as he writhed on the dirty ground before her. With one steel-capped boot, she wedged him under a bench and kicked him twice for good measure, ignoring the sound of his breaking bones. His pale grey eyes grew blank. Sightless.

The guard observed him as she rolled a cigarette. Nobody would miss him, whoever he was. Nobody here and nobody from his former life. Whoever had given birth to him would never have guessed that he'd end up like this—unloved and anonymous, taking his last breaths in such a cursed place in the middle of nowhere. She looked at her watch and saw that there were 55 minutes until the end of her shift. Just then, an exterior door opened, and the relieving officer appeared, early and eager. He was a rangy, sallow-faced young man with gapped teeth and a butchered hair cut that made him look simple.

'Hi there,' he grinned, raising an arm in greeting. His eyes fell to the crumpled body crushed under the bench. 'What do we have here?'

The other guard took a final, deep drag on her cigarette and squared her shoulders.

'Bit of taser practice,' she said, throwing the cigarette to the ground next to the old man's head.

Hand inching towards her utility belt, she watched as the rangy young man surveyed the scene for some seconds. Finally, his face split into a wide smile. He shook his head and looked at his colleague in disbelief.

'Fuckin' amazing, those things, aren't they?' he said. 'What sort of voltage you reckon they are?'

'No idea,' she said, relieved. 'But they do the trick.'

The young man chuckled.

'Fair enough. Listen, you knock off. I'll deal with this mess.'

He nodded his head toward the dead man before them and then strolled off, head filled with creative applications for his taser.

The female guard shrugged and turned on her heel. She felt the tension leave her shoulders as she headed back through the glass walkway and into the Facility's main building. Time for some chow and a decent night's sleep. The 14-hour shifts were running them all into the ground. Lucky that freak Omar was supplying them with as much speed as they could handle. Hard, pure, premium stuff that kept them alert and awake, but also angry. Before sleep, they had their seds: small, clear capsules of liquid peace. There was nothing outside of those two states, but it was only going to be another six months before they were all free to return to their off-base lives. They'd recently been addressed by Dr Cheng, who'd informed them all that the hefty payments they'd been promised

were being processed, along with bonus incentives that would compensate for their shitty working conditions. Hush money, they supposed, though nobody cared. They couldn't have been a more mercenary bunch. She passed a few of the medical staff on her way to the central elevators, but didn't acknowledge them. None of the workers were friendly with each other, and nor were they encouraged to be. She punched the elevator's 'down' button with the side of her fist and, once inside a car, selected floor 2.

Blissful descent.

Two floors below, a door opened on a nightmarish scene. Across a vast, dank space, once-human creatures were dragging themselves, wretched, howling and rasping, like something from Bosch. Sunken eyes rolled in gaunt faces. Tongues lolled, swollen and poisonous, from gaping, drooling maws. These were the Originals—the early detainees of the Facility—in whom the Illness had taken hold and conquered any last shred of humanity. Over the course of approximately a year, these god-forsaken souls had been left to rot, deep in the bowels of the building. A nausea-inducing, cloying stench described all manner of fetid filth in dramatic pungency. Nobody ventured into this place without protective clothing and a full face mask. Flies swarmed over decomposing food, piles of faecal matter, open sores that ran with greenish pus. Women and men of indeterminate ages made unearthly sounds of violent dismay—moaning and raving, screaming and grunting. The walls, once painted a fresh shade of institution green, ran with sewer fluids from broken pipes—the Facility's noxious, diseased arteries draining into its own internal cavities.

The sole individual who entered without protection against the incredible stench and disease was Omar, who now stood inside, assessing his handiwork. For it was Omar who had left the poor souls linger on past any scant quality of life. And it was Omar who had insisted that the Illness be left to ravage their unimmunised systems for no reason justifiable by order of what the Elders required. The Elders were interested only in departure and reanimation; any chemical means of overcoming their human opposition could be covered by large-scale poisoning, gassing, or weapons technology. It was Omar, in fact, who had been most pleased by the sight of the physical decline. As he paced through the space, unflinching, the large, heavy object he held in his hand occasionally caught the dim light throughout the room. He swung it now, like a tennis player practising a shot—back and forth, to and fro. Lost in a reverie and immersed in his eerie private menagerie, he walked.

The infected beings occasionally acknowledged his presence, hands outstretched in gestures of desperate pleading. Though, there was nothing that could be done to restore any of them to their former states. Omar basked in their ruin. His doing. His will.. Their pathetic, deformed frames. The way the rags that they wore clung to their weeping, lesion-covered limbs. Their degradation. Their disfigurement.

‘So ugly,’ he murmured, staring into the haunted eyes of a creature in front of him who had stopped in its tracks, almost defiantly.

At least, it seemed defiant to Omar. Or, near enough was good enough. The creature held up one discoloured hand and attempted communication via a hoarse moan. Around them, bodies staggered and crawled. Some fell where they stood and were trampled underfoot. Dozens of infected. Omar held the object in his right hand high over his head, until it was visible in the half-light. A machete, shining and deadly. With one swift movement, he severed the creature’s extended arm. Watched its dark eyes roll back in their sockets. Drew a booted foot aloft and kicked the creature square in the chest, sending it flying backwards, its shoulder spraying blood from a stump.

‘Ugly,’ Omar repeated. ‘All of you. Freaks! Outcasts!’

In the semi-dark, a few creatures stirred at the sight of the violence—something in them registering alarm. They hastened to avoid Omar, which angered him. Pushing bodies out of his way, he pursued these semi-cognisant beings first.

‘You know who I am!’ he shouted. ‘You remember! I put you here! I! You will not flee from me! I am the ONLY.’

Omar thought of Luna and felt his blood turn hot in his veins. Felt something surge through his limbs—explosive and unbridled. Around him, the creatures began to circle like frightened livestock in a slaughterhouse. Mass hysteria. Some of it confused. Omar went after them, one by one, hacking and dismembering, cutting a crimson swathe through the crowd, until he himself was covered in blood. He thought of Wagner, Truscott, Hoffman. Judases. Their betrayal. He slashed a creature open from throat to groin, stopping to rake out darkened entrails as he glared into its horrified eyes. Smelled the familiar intestinal gases and excretions that spurred him on, wild-eyed and rabid.

‘You are nothing!’ he thundered, his voice enough to send the miserable figures lurching for the shadows, operating on the most basic of their remaining instincts.

Omar raged and rampaged until everything around him was drowned out by his own thundering intonations. Until he felt that his head or heart would explode with the fury that now possessed him. He sheared muscle away from bone, separated heads from spines with single blows of his heavy, razor-sharp blade. The dark slate floor ran with blood. The creatures skidded and fell in their own fluids and entrails. Blood-soaked and trembling, Omar thought of Mother and murdered a slew more, unleashing primal screams so raw and guttural that his throat burned, hoarse and torn. He killed Mother, over and over. Felt the blade cleave her limbs, cutting through muscle and bone alike. Ended her, again and again, until his muscles ached and the blade grew blunt. He found the strength to swing the machete into the side of one last creature, but the blade clumsily tore apart flesh and stopped, thudding into the dense pelvic bone. The creature opened its mouth, as

if to cry out. Omar grasped its thin face in his hands and smashed it against his own, biting hard and tearing away flesh and cartilage until both their faces were painted dark red, and the creature fell to the floor. When Omar finally stopped, he realised that the room was silent, and that the only sound now was the blood rushing in his ears.

Steadying himself against a grimy wall, he surveyed the expanse of corpses, calm now, but unsatisfied. He closed his eyes. Enough.

Enough. He drew the back of his arm across his face to wipe away sweat, until his red-painted face was left with a thin, white mask. Stepping over the bodies, he headed for the door. Time for composure now. Time to collect himself and get some rest. After all, tomorrow he was going to bring Luna down. Luna and his three despicable vipers. And he was going to do it all in the presence of the three supernatural beings. He thought of the prophecy and the locked box in his study as he left the charnel house behind and made his way back out of the depths.

In the quiet of the boardroom the following afternoon, Wagner felt increasingly uneasy. Omar was unreadable. The correspondence, in which he'd CC'd Hoffman and Truscott, had asked that the three meet him at midday. Wagner had thought better of it, but realised he had little choice. The 9mm Luger strapped to his ankle was cold comfort. He stole a glance at his watch and saw that it was twelve-thirty. His stomach lurched and his head swam.

'Is everything alright, Wagner?' Omar enquired, feigning concern.

The other man cleared his throat and unbuttoned his suit jacket. Omar's dark eyes bore into his. The high-gloss finish of the desk's cherry wood reflected Omar, whose elongated twin appeared to emerge from a crimson lake. Wagner felt sweat beads collect on his forehead and above his lip. Where were the others? His eyes were pulled to Omar's once more. Still penetrating, and impenetrable. Neither man spoke again for several minutes, though Omar continued to hold Wagner fast in his gaze.

As the numbers on Wagner's digital watch changed to 12:53, there was a sharp rap on the conference room door to his left. He looked to Omar, who appeared composed and uncharacteristically unaffected by the tardy arrival.

'Please enter,' Omar called towards the door.

Unhurried, he lifted a large black briefcase onto the red table top and entered his security number until the latches opened with quiet snaps. Wagner started twice. There was some muffled sound from behind the door and when it swung open, Wagner froze in his seat.

'Luna,' Omar nodded.

Luna nodded a curt response and made her way to the head of the table without invitation. Her two security men followed close behind and took the seats on either side of her, as they had on



the previous visit. Stunned, Wagner planted both feet flat on the floor in an attempt to steady himself. His muscles were taut and he felt perspiration running in itchy rivulets down between his shoulder blades. He watched as Omar opened the briefcase, the contents of which were not visible to anyone else in the room.

Luna looked at Wagner with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion and gave voice to his thoughts. 'Where are Truscott and Hoffman?'

Omar turned to her and gave a polite smile.

'They were unable to make it on time. They send their apologies, but will be here a bit later.'

Luna seemed agitated.

'Unable to... This is highly irregular and highly, highly disrespectful, Bain. Who do they think they're dealing with here? The Elders aren't to be trifled with. They will be most dissatisfied ...'

'My apologies, Luna,' Omar interrupted. 'They needed to make preparations.'

Wagner swallowed hard. He'd been told nothing about a meeting with Luna or the Elders and had heard nothing from Truscott or Hoffman about the meeting. He wished he'd contacted them, but his internal email had shut down straight after he'd acknowledged receipt of Omar's message. And then he closed his eyes as terrible realisation dawned on him. He felt the leather holster bite into his leg and the Luger seemed small and insignificant. The colour drained from his cheeks and he sat slumped in his chair for the remainder of the exchange between Luna and Omar.

Luna's face was a study of distrust and disdain. She shot Omar a savage look and then thought for a moment. Wagner watched as she wrestled with her thoughts. She wasn't about to allow Omar to retain the upper hand and instead regained her poise.

'Very well,' she announced. 'We'll proceed without them for the time being. I shall summon the Elders and you can begin with Wagner's progress.'

Wagner's gut churned. What progress? What the hell was going on? Afraid to raise Omar's ire, he nodded in silent acquiescence, though his mind raced, trying to think of impressive developments. If only he'd been given warning.

Omar issued a sober nod and avoided eye contact with Wagner.

Within moments, Luna had employed the mysterious electronic device that communicated with the Elders. For a second time, Wagner and Omar were witness to the dramatic drop in air temperature, followed by inclement weather outside the newly replaced windows. This time, Omar appeared very cool, though Luna was now too preoccupied with the visitation to notice. As the tempest blustered around them, Omar reached, unnoticed, into his briefcase and removed the metallic box. He then took something from around his neck and palmed it.

Once again, the windows imploded with the violent change in air pressure. Again, the broad desk was littered with broken glass, and the squall outside seemed to stop as abruptly as it had begun. When Wagner opened his eyes after the event, he saw that Omar was sitting away from the table now, holding the metal box in a firm grip.

The Elders swept in with a rush and assembled opposite Omar. The orbs danced brightly, in a display as energetic as the last. Though it was difficult to look away from them, Wagner looked again to Omar. What was he up to? Everything happened in slow motion from then on. Omar produced a small key which he inserted into the keyhole in the box. Luna was too busy greeting the Elders to take any notice. Omar's countenance shifted from composure to panic as he jiggled the key in the lock. Luna turned to him then and demanded to know why he wasn't paying attention to his superiors after their having deigned to give him an audience. Omar slammed the box on the table in a rage and stood.

Wagner pulled the pistol from his ankle holster only seconds before the conference room door exploded inward and tore from its hinges. A dishevelled-looking, unshaven inmate shuffled in, with the aid of a cane. Luna roared.

'What is this?' she demanded, but was ignored.

The inmate flung his cane aside and began uttering a series of incantations, apparently in a foreign tongue, growing louder as he went on. An invisible force flung Luna and her guards backwards onto the floor, from which she entreated the Elders to assist her.

'Why do you wait? Take action!' she was yelling.

Wagner turned to the Elders, whose energy orbs were suddenly static, as if on pause. The room fell silent, except for the inmate's chanting, booming and relentless.

Omar was staring at the metallic box through eyes that had become dark slits. The key protruded from the lock, useless and unbudging. After all these years. So many years leading up to this moment and now this. He turned to the inmate in the doorway, who was now—no, surely not—but yes, he appeared to be glowing with a phosphorescent aura similar to the Elders'. The glow was becoming more intense by the second and it was impossible to make out the man's features. Who was it? There had been some kind of treachery. He glowered at Wagner then, and thought of Truscott and Hoffman, who were lying lifeless on their respective study floors, throats slit and bleeding out like slaughtered swine. Had this been part of the prophecy? The three? Three enemies within? The rage he felt towards Wagner temporarily blinded him to all else in the room.

Luna and her men made to stand up, but the mystery inmate pointed one glowing index finger in their direction, and they were sent flying across the room where they were impaled on jagged pieces of window glass. Their bodies went limp—rag dolls hanging, bloody and still on the window frame.

‘What do you want?!’ Omar shouted at the older man.

Omar saw the electronic device fall from Luna’s lifeless hand and made a dash for it. As his hands closed around the small control, he heard another explosion behind him, next to the door. He turned, stabbing at the control with wild jabs. The Elders remained where they were, frozen and blinding. But two large holes had appeared in the wall behind the unknown, glowing man. Omar watched as the man thrust his arms behind himself and, with a terrific, blinding sweep of his luminous arms, somehow pulled two individuals forward into the room on either side of him. The light seemed to drop in intensity, for the time being, and Omar could now make out the three individuals on the other side of the boardroom.

‘Imogen!’

Omar couldn’t contain his words. The girl was standing, fierce and poised, on the left of the mystery man. To the man’s right stood a serious fellow, whose face, ravaged by the illness, was set in an expression of steely resolve. Unable to place the men, Omar stared in wonder at Imogen.

‘What is this, Imogen? Who are you?’ he spat, his mind reeling in confusion.

Without responding, Imogen walked to the table and lifted the metal box. The Mercury box.

The glowing man had turned his attention to the three orbs, which were now slowly regaining some motion, though it was very slight.

Wagner, who had slipped the pistol from its holster and crept behind the two men in the doorway, lifted the gun towards Imogen, as she returned to her position.

‘Take the box for God’s sake, Omar!’ Wagner roared, expecting that its contents were their only hope for survival.

‘The box is useless, Wagner! Forget it,’ Omar ordered, surprised by Wagner’s loyalty and now further confused by the events.

‘Then, I’ll take it,’ Wagner replied, taking aim now at Imogen’s head.

As Wagner moved into view, the serious-faced young man dived forward. In what appeared to be one smooth action, he disarmed Wagner and forced his head onto the hardwood desk under the gun’s weight. Seeing this, Omar pulled a knife from a scabbard under his coat, not with any intent to aid Wagner, but to safeguard his own life.

‘Stand back, Omar,’ the young man growled, pressing the nose of the gun against Wagner’s temple.

‘Finish him,’ Omar commanded.

To Omar’s surprise, the young man did just that, executing the scientist right there before them in cold blood. Imogen saw Omar lunge for the box and assumed he was going to attack her comrade. Summoning more power than she’d bargained for, she leapt across the table and threw all her weight at Omar. Omar dropped his knife and Imogen snatched it up, in a fast, fluid action. She

stood over him then, pointing the blade in his twisted face. Over her shoulder, she called to the two men behind her:

‘Hadwin! Jack! Leave this to me.’

Hadwin was muttering another incantation, trying to keep the Elders bound. He knew that Imogen was capable alone. After a few minutes he relaxed.

‘There. They’ll hold for a while longer, but they’re slipping. We need to move,’ he warned the others.

‘How long do we have, Hadwin?’ Imogen asked, holding the knife point level with Omar’s left eyeball.

‘I’m not exactly sure, but not long,’ Hadwin responded.

Omar’s eyes darkened as he studied the older man’s face.

‘Hadwin?’ he asked. ‘Your name is... Hadwin?’ His thoughts raced, trying to access a memory long-buried.

Jack walked around the table and took up the Mercury box, which he then passed to Hadwin. Hadwin’s eyes studied the box—memories flooding back now, intense and strange. His large hands traced the glyphs and maps etched in the dense, other-worldly alloy.

Omar studied Hadwin’s face as he did so. A flicker of recognition sparked within, but his mind seemed to balk at full recollection. Something long-gone and buried with tremendous force of will. He watched as Hadwin’s mouth bent into a satisfied smile.

‘1966,’ Hadwin said.

Omar’s head tilted to one side, confused. ‘I don’t...’

‘Yes, you do,’ Hadwin said, nodding. ‘1966.’

Omar’s skin crawled. Everything in him fought to shut Hadwin out.

‘Shit of a thing happened, in 1966,’ Hadwin went on.

Imogen kept the savage-looking knife trained on Omar, but stole glimpses at Hadwin as he spoke. Jack stood at Hadwin’s shoulder, as the older man said his piece.

‘I was young and impressionable back then,’ Hadwin said, turning the box over and over in his strong fingers. ‘Idealistic, too.’

Omar studied Hadwin’s craggy face. Tried to resist the tantalising urge to connect the memory fragments he’d been carrying with him for so long.

‘I fell in with a bad crowd, you could say,’ Hadwin said. ‘Zealots. People with some very strange ideas about how to live. Who to believe in.’

Omar felt a chill rise in his spine.

‘And I did some foolish things myself,’ Hadwin continued. ‘Some of them had dire consequences.’

Behind them, the light orbs began to stir again, only very slightly. Imogen and Jack were engrossed in Hadwin's monologue and paid the Elders no mind.

'I lived on a kibbutz of types,' Hadwin recollected. 'Shared everything. Work. Food. Women, too,' he said, nodding towards Omar. 'I got a girl knocked up.'

Omar's eyes widened. 'No.'

His mind reeled as 1966 came up, through the years, on a sure mental thread, to his consciousness. Hadwin observed Omar's expression shifting and went on, savouring the moment that had taken so long to arrive. He thought of Loretta, dancing in the camp gardens with the other girls, in her long skirts. She'd always stood out. He remembered the set of her smile, her moonstruck eyes when they were close. Looking back at Omar, he nodded.

'A real glamour, too. Beautiful girl. Bats in the belfry, that one, but one beautiful girl, that's for sure.'

Omar closed his eyes. Wished he could close his ears to Hadwin's voice.

'She did get around, though. Had a thing for the spiritual types. She had the child. A son. A bastard, in theory, but I knew he was mine. I used to steal into her quarters pretty regularly to get a glimpse of him. Just to be around him.'

Omar's eyes met Hadwin's. Surely not.

'Loretta didn't want me,' Hadwin said, shrugging.

The sound of her name on the man's lips almost made Omar convulse.

'Loretta was interested in status. She had plans for the boy. Saw him as a chosen one. And she was right, he was. For some time, I thought it was all malarkey, but that child was tapped into something great. He had a purpose beyond what any of us could imagine.'

Omar's eyes glistened.

'I guess the other thing I should tell you is that Loretta had another child before that. A frail waste of breath and bone. We all knew that child was a bad seed early on. The signs were all there. People said she should've drowned the damned thing at birth. But you know what mothers are like.'

The room was silent, apart from Hadwin's voice. In the corner, the orbs grew slightly longer, slightly brighter.

'Long story short, that monster murdered my son. His own half-brother. Took a pocket knife and cut that baby's throat from ear to ear. Didn't want any competition, you see. Loretta lost her mind. She had it in her head that the second son might make the same cosmic connections as the first, so she didn't do what we all begged her to do—to get rid of him. With the help of some other folk, though, she mutilated the boy so that he could forever be identified as the monster he was.'

Hadwin studied Omar's face with contempt. 'So ugly,' he muttered, in fascination. 'Distorted, in body and mind.'

Omar had a flash of his infant brother's face. His muscles and sinews sang with hatred, murderous and black. Like a raw, exposed nerve, he raged with the throbbing, furious pain of knowing. As soon as Hadwin's back was turned, he was going to end him. Omar didn't care about the Elders, or the prophecies, or the knife in Imogen's hand. Every cell in him had been turned, like hot switches, to one focus: to end Hadwin's life. He needed Hadwin closer.

'What of the prophecy then?' he seethed.

Hadwin ran his hand across the top of the Mercury box.

'Your actions changed the course of things, Omar. When you butchered your mother there, in cold blood, the prophecies sure changed. When you cut your baby brother's throat, you animal, the prophecies changed. And you were too stupid to see it. You were too blinded by your own greed.'

'But the Elders,' Omar said, in a quiet voice.

'These aren't the Elders Loretta Dean was talking about, you fool. They came to me. I was the closest thing to the chosen child, after everything you did.'

Omar seethed. Hadwin was drawing nearer.

'These creatures,' Hadwin began.

The creatures were beginning to regain full energy. They were elongating, sharpening. They were starting to edge closer to each other, presumably to create something larger. Hadwin knew that they were capable of cataclysmic destruction if they combined and focused their energy. He motioned to the others.

'Jack! Imogen!' he called. 'Here!'

He turned his head, for a split second, from Omar and stood. Imogen broke concentration. Omar shot forward and closed his crooked teeth around Hadwin's throat, tearing muscle and ligaments free, biting hard into veins. They fell to the floor, wrestling for dominance.

The Elders vibrated and their colour turned a deep electric blue.

'Cease!' they commanded, in one combined voice.

'Hadwin!' Imogen shouted, trying to devise a way to get Omar away from him.

Jack grabbed the Mercury box out of Omar's reach and tried to recall Hadwin's chanted refrain. He yelled, over their struggle, and prayed that the Elders would respond to his words. Over and over, he chanted, hoping his words were accurate.

Imogen yanked on the rosary around her neck and broke it free. She threw it at Omar with great force and was satisfied to find him immediately incensed by her action. He turned to her now, mouth red with Hadwin's blood.

‘You lied! Every day, to my face. I came for you and you deceived me. Woman, I should have painted the walls of that room with your blood! I should have torn you apart!’

He advanced towards her, oblivious to the others. He kicked debris from his path as he moved. When he was upon her, he grabbed a fistful of her hair and snapped her head back until they were eye to eye.

Imogen gripped the knife tight in her right hand and plunged it into Omar’s chest. Over and over, she lunged, until she, too, ran red with blood. Badly wounded, Hadwin dragged himself towards the Mercury box and shouted incantations as loudly as his paining throat would allow. Jack continued and their voices rose to an urgent roar. The Elders advanced towards them, their auras now beginning to overlap at the edges.

Omar swiped at the knife, still filled with crazed bloodlust. Imogen took the weapon up in both hands and plunged it repeatedly, to its very hilt, into Omar’s neck until he was close to decapitation. Dark red froth and an animal sound escaped Omar’s thin lips as he fell to the floor, embracing Imogen in his dying grasp, her face the last he would ever see. The realisation of his failure curled his lips back from his teeth and widened his eyes in disbelief.

Kicking free of Omar’s hold, Imogen staggered over to Hadwin and the Mercury box. Jack joined them on the floor. Imogen and Jack put their arms around each other’s necks and around Hadwin’s between them. Bowing their heads, they formed a tight circle. Hadwin shouted the incantations over the growing sound of the Elders’ uniting. The room was a confusion of deafening sound and whirling wind. They could do nothing to slow the process down, and needed to press on with activating the box to do whatever it was that it did. Not even Hadwin was completely certain. All they knew was that the three would become as one and the ancient opposition would be cast into bondage.

‘Thank you!’ Hadwin shouted, with what was left of his voice. ‘I wish things could’ve been different. I thought there might’ve been another way.’

Wild wind whipped against their backs as the Elders merged to form a deep blue stream of flickering cobalt-coloured light. The room erupted into whirlwinds and mini tornados around them. The remaining glass in the windows was sucked out, like bad teeth, Luna and her goons along with it. The room’s effects were pulled, one by one, into the atmosphere outside, where lightning flashed and thunder broke in deafening claps.

Jack clenched his jaw and the incantations became guttural. Internalised. His mind found focus on an image of Julie. He pictured her, sitting in their lounge room, sipping coffee and reading a paperback. He imagined her looking up and him standing before her, touching her cheek one last time. Concentrating his peripheral energy into the imagining, he made himself believe that wherever she was, she could feel it too, even if only as a strange daydream.

‘I tried to come back to you,’ he smiled. ‘I love you, and I am with you, and I will always be with you. I will *always* be with you.’ In his mind’s eye, if that’s what it was, Julie looked a little confused, but pressed his hand against her face and smiled. He felt a strange surge in his chest and let her image fade for the time being, with a sense of peace. He understood somehow that he could revisit her at any time and felt at peace, though his immediate reality whirled about him.

Hadwin chanted the verse he was told over forty years ago. It told of other worlds, warned of outer reaches. It reminded an opposing force that his side were legion and that they had stood together from before time. It promised to hold strong against enemies and to honour ancient wisdom. The powerful words grew more familiar in his mouth with every incantation, and his certainty of their sacred power increased by the minute. He remembered his time at the camp and the older men’s insistence that what seemed like their weird riddles were meaningful, and would one day prove to be essential. Oh, to be a young man again and to be free of the burden of the responsibility of his final years. He recalled one of the camp elders once asking him whether he’d rather be awakened and in turmoil, or blissfully oblivious and at ease. Already suspecting his fate, his twenty-something self had laughed in response. ‘If I chose the latter, would you allow me to go on sleeping?’

As they sat there, unmoving, the wind chilled their bones and made their clothes flap madly against their skin. With each successive line Hadwin uttered, the box was transformed. Nobody took their eyes from its inscribed lid. On the fourth recitation, they were amazed to see that the glyphs on the box lid glowed a startling shade of scarlet and began to shift into some kind of formation. Between the planets and symbols, white light shone, bright and blinding, until the glyphs and planets looked to be slim rivers of blood, giving life to the display. On the fifth, by which time Hadwin was almost hoarse, red outlines seared around the small metallic box-top planets until they lifted off the lid completely and dissolved into thin air.

Wherever the metal was removed from the lid, blinding light shone from within the box. Hadwin carried on until all of the planets were missing from the lid. All except Mercury, which stayed intact and instead revolved, like a cog-driven piece of machinery, until the entire box exploded into an atomic storm and three phials of deep red fluid were exposed, nestled in a red velvet tray. Amid the squalling, blustering room, the three managed to take up a phial each; and, although their choices were random, they were amazed to find that their names were printed, in small tags, around the necks of the bottles, along with small inscriptions.

‘Hadwin’, one bottle read. ‘Inspired. Sacrificial. I Provide.’

The second bottle, which Jack clasped between freezing fingers, said: ‘Reliable. Tactical. I Protect.’



Imogen turned the tag of her bottle over until she was able to make out the words:

‘Analytical. Meticulous. I Project.’

She looked at the men and nodded.

‘I wonder if the words appeared, or whether they were always there,’ she said. Memories came to her in cruel fits and starts. Since the full recall, she’d consciously driven the painful parts away by focusing only on science and strategy. Now she felt a sense of resignation that seemed less difficult to accept. She allowed her mind to select an image of Chris – her boy – just before his thirteenth birthday and held it fast for a moment. She’d allowed herself to think of him only once or twice since her memory restoration. She wondered if he knew she was on her way and immediately chastised herself for sentimental thinking. Anyway, their jobs were done. They had somehow found the wherewithal to stand strong and everything would continue to be anyone’s guess. In considering possible outcomes, she glanced at the Elders and wondered whether they felt anything: regret? anxiety? Probably not. She realised that everything mattered and nothing mattered, all at the same time.

‘I Project,’ she read again, and thought of what she’d accomplished, through her pain.

She turned to Hadwin.

‘Alright?’ she said, holding up her vial.

She was surprised to find him looking calm, amidst the chaos around them. It was as though they’d been suspended in time somehow – held fast, in the eye of a storm. He only nodded. Jack took her hand and squeezed it lightly, making her think of his tenderness during his night visits to her room. She smiled and looked at him with gratitude.

Instinct dictated that they drink the liquid, which they would find tasted like warming cherry brandy. Each of them tore the cap from their bottle and downed the contents in one swallow. Then they leaned forward, heads pressed together, and held their breath as the red liquid flooded their senses.

Mildly anaesthetic to begin with, the effect spread, until they felt nothing. Their bodies lay, inanimate and silent on the boardroom floor. After that, their corporeal selves disintegrated, in quick time, as liquid curdled and brewed within them, like a solvent—bit into their flesh and dissolved them until their bodies melted—finally disintegrating into a common pool of sanguine liquid. There they vaporised and liquefied, over and over, until they purified into a potent mass of red fluid. The Elders had not yet reached complete fusion. The red fluid reconstituted into a solid, akin to quicksilver, and rolled towards the Mercury box, which it enveloped and consumed. Seconds later, light engulfed the room, and the Facility and everything in it was blanched in a white-hot glow.

The deep cobalt of the Elders was bleached, stark and sudden, as everything emptied into white. Everything returned to its original state, reality as the ancients had described it. The Facility and its inhabitants were effectively returned to their original cosmic forms, starlight awaiting reassembly—light energy, never losing matter, just assuming new shapes. Without witness, it might have never taken place at all, which is the tradition of cosmic battles.

This was what took place within the Facility. Outside its walls, nature was uninterrupted and the universe appeared unchanged. The city went on, as it would for several millennia to come, with its randomness, its chaos. On the other side of the Facility's concrete skin, however, something unexpected stirred. As its grounds recovered from the conflict that had taken place, its surrounds remained untouched. And so did anything that had transgressed the Facility's crumbling borders. On foot and in their dozens, lines of infected ex-inmates trudged towards the city as the sun went down on another unremarkable, temperate afternoon.

*end*

Part 2 Critical Essay: *Cycles of Sickness: The Role of the Abject in Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and the Millennial Zombie Outbreak Narrative.*

With a view to examining its continuity, this essay will consider parallels between *fin-de-siècle* and millennial horror narratives, with a focus on the gothic and its perennial articulation of sociocultural anxieties. Persistent preoccupations are mapped historically and further highlighted by an exploration of prominent examples from the Victorian and the millennial periods. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Snyder's 2004 reimagining of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* are closely analysed, demonstrating marked connections between *fin-de-siècle* fiction and the current resurgence of zombie fiction and film, which can be located within the gothic tradition. Recurrent themes of fear of collapse and disintegration of both society and the self, loss of agency, and fear of invasion are common to the literature of both these periods. These themes are articulated as sites and states of infection, madness, and decay. They are realised in the monstrous double and the abject. They find their culmination in the hollowed-out walking dead—the zombie apocalypse of the twenty-first century. The essay concludes with a reflection on the creative process behind the accompanying novella, *Mercury*, the sociocultural anxieties it expresses (such as social dislocation, loss of self, and extreme and existential loss of sense of purpose), and the writer's cognisance of and response to the willing engagement, if not compulsion, on the part of the audience, to engage specifically with the abject as the agent of gothic horror.

## Chapter One: The Gothic Mode and Millennial Horror Trends

In the opening sentence of his seminal essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H. P. Lovecraft remarks that ‘the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown’ (1). In this essay, I examine the sub-genre of gothic fiction, which Hogle identifies as ‘an entirely post-medieval and even post-Renaissance phenomenon’ (1). Tales from classical antiquity (Pliny’s, Plautus’s, and Lucian’s tales of hauntings, for example) pre-date what has long since evolved into the contemporary form of gothic horror with which we are now familiar (Felton). Writers including Poe, Lovecraft, Shelley, and Radcliffe have formed part of an extended lineage of gothic writers, the father of whom is widely accepted to have been Horace Walpole, whose 1764 work, *The Castle of Otranto*, popularised the genre. With a rich history, the gothic has been shaped by social and historical trends, developments in science and technology, changing attitudes towards religion, and the position of the individual in society. In the past 200 years, the annals of gothic fiction have included Mary Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, H. G. Wells, Oscar Wilde, Bram Stoker, and Daphne Du Maurier. Since its inception in the mid-eighteenth century, the gothic mode has not been restricted to any historical setting, however, and its tropes and conventions have continued to evolve and persist for contemporary audiences. Dickens’s 19<sup>th</sup>-century readership, in the midst of social and industrial transformation, discovered in his subversive fiction a means of processing their concerns. Contemporary audiences enjoy the fiction of Stephen King, with its moralistic underpinnings and reflections on individual agency. Strengell situates King in the gothic, asserting that ‘the gothic atmosphere permeates’ his work (*Dissecting* 26). In his non-fiction treatise, *Danse Macabre*, King describes his writing as operating on the reader’s ‘phobic pressure points’ (5).

Routinely sidelined in favour of the literary canon, as it was back in the time of the so-called ‘penny dreadfuls’ and ‘shilling shockers’, the gothic continues, however, to perform an important role of mirroring societal discontent and tensions between the individual and society. In expressing these concerns, recurrent motifs appear which have been adapted over time. The critical literature observes that horror fiction tends to increase in popularity at the turn of a century (Thompson; Hughes; Edwards). With a view to examining its continuity, this essay will consider parallels between *fin-de-siècle* and millennial horror narratives, with a focus on the gothic. Specifically, I will closely read Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde*, a preeminent gothic text of the Victorian period, and Zac Snyder’s *Dawn of the Dead*, an example of the millennial zombie narrative. Stevenson’s work, representative as it is of Victorian, post-Darwinian anxiety, not only features a clear set of gothic conventions, but also accesses its reader’s anxiety via the psychological core of horror’s agency: the abject. I argue that the millennial zombie narrative is a direct and graphic representation of post-

9/11 fears of invasion and outbreak, which again relies heavily on the abject to manipulate its arguably more horror-savvy audience.

Anolik describes ‘the subversive gothic inclination to empathize with the other, the non-normative, transgressive figure who troubles the category of the norm and transgresses the boundaries necessary to create the norm: the monster’ (7). In order to represent the monstrous, gothic fiction depends on its capacity to confront its audience with the abject—commonly through a spectacle of pathology: infection, madness, disability. Paradoxically, the abject simultaneously repels and attracts. Kristeva’s model of abjection denotes a certain ambiguity:

While releasing its hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. (9)

Kristeva’s theory of abjection provides a means of apprehending the horror audience’s response to, and compulsion to engage with, that which is repulsive, disgusting, and uncomfortable. For Kristeva, the abject is concerned with the collapse of boundaries, borders. She talks, for instance, of ‘the fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal’ (12). Goodnow adds that the abject is that which ‘threatens the collapse of order by threatening the collapse of meaning and the annihilation of the self’ (30). Kristeva describes the corpse as one such device:

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue’s full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders ... The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. (93)

A recurring set of gothic tropes and themes contributes to this sense of destabilisation and collapse of order: the supernatural, confinement, madness, disease, nightmares, religion versus atheism, superstition, decayed dwellings, the fixation on a haunted past. With the concept of borders comes the awareness of opposing phenomena on either side, something gothic fiction also highlights. Gothic archetypes embody this duality: the werewolf, for instance, is both human and animal; the vampire has a body but lacks a soul; the zombie is the walking dead. And nowhere is this duality more blatantly depicted than in the gothic trope of the double, which will be explored in Chapter Two, in a discussion about Jekyll and Hyde. These monstrous archetypes are manifestations of anxiety, which will again be examined further in Chapter Two, but it is worth

noting Colebrook's claim that a central anxiety of the gothic is 'the fear that the boundaries between Self and Other will disappear' (225).

Botting, for whom the gothic ended with the advent of Coppola's *Dracula* of 1992, perceives the mode as a type of nostalgic return to a time when Self, Other, and monstrosity were clearly divisible. No longer a truly transgressive genre, he argues, the postmodern, commodified hyperreality of technoculture has rendered the horrors of the gothic outdated, marketable artefacts. Van Elferen, however, argues that,

even if Gothic's transgressive gesture now moves within a commodified hyperreality, and therefore is nowhere near its 18<sup>th</sup> century precursor either with regards to its cultural context or its effects thereupon, it is still here, and recognizable as such. Why does it still occur, if it is redundant? Was will das zombie? (132)

The gothic narrative has found a place in a modern context, via this new trope: the ubiquitous, millennial zombie may be viewed as the modern-day descendant of the gothic cast. Bishop's research into the development of the cinematic zombie firmly establishes the place of the zombie in the gothic tradition, and he contends that zombie cinema is 'among the most culturally revealing and resonant fictions of the recent decade of unrest' (post the 9/11 attacks) (10).

Magistrale asserts that 'horror monsters can and should be interpreted as historical signifiers of their particular time' (xiv) and that the horror narrative conveys the dangers of historical moments. Gothic fiction has been described as being historically influenced, owing to its tendency to 'appear at times of great social stress and economic uncertainty' (Hoeveler 4). At the turn of a century, there is typically a spike in horror fiction—a direct response to sociocultural anxieties, such as fears of contagion, cynicism about science and technology, a sense of alienation, and war (Jay and Neve.)

As Magistrale observes, horror reflects societal fears, and may be considered 'nothing less than a barometer for measuring an era's cultural anxieties' (xiii). King, whose vast body of horror fiction borrows from gothic tradition, holds that the genre:

has often been able to find national pressure points, and those books and films which have been the most successful almost always seem to play upon and express fears which exist across a spectrum of people. Such fears, which are often based in political events, economic concerns and manifest themselves as psychological phenomena, rather than supernatural, give the best work of horror a pleasing allegorical feel. (484)

Moretti describes horror texts in terms of dialectical relations:

Such finally, is the bond between the reader and the literature of terror. The more a work frightens, the more it edifies. The more it hides, the more it gives the illusion of revealing. It is a fear one needs: the price one pays for coming contentedly to terms with a social body based on irrationality and menace. (85)

Fear, then, is a necessary component—edifying and revelatory—that horror audiences seek in specific representations of their time. Horror fans of the *fin-de-siècle* are uniquely positioned to pursue this experience.

At the end of the nineteenth century, gothic fiction reflects anxieties about colonial decline and post-Darwinian concerns of degeneration and atavism. Hurley describes the “‘gothicity’ of a range of scientific discourses’ and asserts that ‘degeneration ... is a gothic discourse, and as such is a crucial imaginative and narrative source for the *fin-de-siècle* gothic’ (45). In *fin-de-siècle* narratives, such as Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde*, examined in Chapter Two, degeneration, along with a clear gothicisation of medicine is also apparent. The post-Industrial Revolution preoccupation with medical knowledge and the lived experience of sickness pervades late-century writing and, especially, a number of *fin-de-siècle* narratives. Haley observes that ‘their correspondence indicates that many prominent Victorians were, or thought they were, constantly afflicted’ (12). Metaphors for illness shaped the Victorian novel; and, in some instances, the influence worked both ways. Block, for example, explains the way that writers of the time anticipated future medical endeavour, with *Jekyll and Hyde* representing ‘an important foreshadowing of twentieth-century scientific research’ (namely, psychoanalysis) (37).

Ostensibly scientific texts, such as Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, Lombroso’s *The Man of Genius*, and Nordau’s *Degeneration*, were non-fiction bestsellers of the day and their themes of atavism, degeneration, and social deviance fuelled Victorian imaginations. The emerging sciences of the Victorian degenerationist era also included criminology, criminal anthropology, sexology, and evolutionist psychiatry (Reid). English and Continental scientists alike, including Henry Maudsley and Edwin Ray Lankester, championed the theory of degeneration, recognising that life ‘did not always move from the simple to the complex, and envisaged instead a future characterized by arrested development, atavistic throwbacks, and the disintegration of overly evolved civilians’ (Reid, 8). Eager for intellectual debate on these issues, Literary London of the *fin de siècle* enjoyed discussions on evolutionist theory between Stevenson and scientists such as psychologist, James Sully, and anthropologist, Andrew Lang. Periodicals, such as the *Cornhill Magazine*, *Longman’s*

*Magazine*, and the *Academy*, featured such discussions, and were a crucial part of the cultural context of *fin-de-siècle* evolutionary debate.

The Industrial Revolution resulted in unprecedented urban population growth, which led to paranoia about the dangers of, among other things, contagion, social decay, and the rise of a criminal underclass. Urban settings became common backdrops for Victorian fiction, most notably in the work of Dickens, Wilde, Stoker, and Stevenson. A prominent trope of gothic fiction is that of the decaying or haunted environment, a common metaphor for psychological or moral decline (Otranto's haunted castle, *Wuthering Heights*'s cursed house, Usher's crumbling ruins). The concept of the individual struggling against their own 'Other', lurking in psychological undercurrents, emerged in the Victorian consciousness as a central theme. A distinct preoccupation with the Other pervades Urban gothic Victorian fiction; and, David uses Stoker's *Dracula* as a typical illustration of 'the prevailing Victorian concepts of racial disparity that associated Otherness with, among other things, criminality.' (53)

With an intense focus on abhumanness or the abject and the threat posed by the degenerate to civilised society (and civilisation itself), Victorian gothic fiction in turn offered provocative and persuasive arguments for social regulation and scientific scepticism. This Victorian fixation on degeneration and Otherness has its roots in Imperialist thought. Barrell identifies imperialism and racism in a broader cultural pathology of race-hatred ('orientalism'), as evidenced in the work of De Quincey and other Victorian writers. Gothic fiction's moral perspectives, in essence, suggest cures for personal, and therefore societal, sickness.

At the millennium, a foreboding sense of apocalypse pervaded (millennial computer bugs, super viruses, preoccupations with disaster narratives). Thompson states that, 'social anxieties, fears and ambivalence about global catastrophe...took explicit narrative form in American cinema of the late nineties and continued into the first years of the twenty-first century' (1). <sup>1</sup>This, of course, was compounded by an event that destabilised the global village in a singular way: 9/11. The terrorist attacks spawned a multitude of horror narratives, and their very nature shifted: they became 'darker, more disturbing, and increasingly apocalyptic' (Briefel and Miller, 1). Despite advancements in science and technology, communication, and weapons technology, a global unease persists, underscored by a sense of unpreparedness and powerlessness in the face of chaos (Carroll). A number of critics and academics observe the increase in zombie narratives (Bloom; Bishop; Stratton) at this time. With no real literary ancestor, or presence in gothic tradition, the zombie

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<sup>1</sup> In her text, Thompson discusses the concept of 'millennialism', stating that it 'refers to a specific form of eschatological belief that draws from Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature and that understands that the end of the world has been both preordained by God and prophesied in the Bible' (3).



originated in 'Afro-Haitian religious thought and practice, and is traceable...to colonial-era Kongo religion from Central Africa' (McAlister).

Bishop (2010), who has written widely on the relevance of zombie cinema in contemporary popular culture, argues that:

The fundamental generic conventions of gothic fiction in general and zombie cinema in particular make the subgenre the most likely and appropriate vehicle with which to explore America's post-9/11 cultural consciousness. [...] Because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios depicted by zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded to more traditional horror films. (11-12)

Over time, the zombie has evolved to communicate a range of sociocultural fears. With their master/slave theme, the racist undertones of 30s and 40s Hollywood zombies expressed imperialist concerns about colonialism and slavery. Hogle notes that:

Zombies are empty figures of the dead usually lurching silently about and, as reworkings of age-old Caribbean traditions, playing out their symbolic roles...as manifestations of the enslavement and victimizations imposed on native or transplanted peoples by continuations of past outrages (such as the primal crime of slavery itself) in the history of the Western world. (3)

In the 1970s, Romero's plodding, invasive zombie horde narrative critiqued the steady, yet relentless, spread of American consumer culture. Directly following 9/11, Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) and Paul W. S. Anderson's *Resident Evil* (2002) spawned a modern resurgence. Featuring jarring jump cuts, ultra-violent scenes of rage and infection, and an apocalyptic dysphoria, these became the new, millennial zombie narratives. Boluk and Lenz (2011) assert that:

This accelerated and pathologized zombie is not only transformed for the age of digital reproduction, but the threat it poses as a biohazard also explicitly links the zombie to the millennia-old tradition of plague writing. This once supernatural figure is now a figure of plague. (6)

It is worth noting that in millennial zombie texts, such as *28 Days Later*, zombies are referred to as the 'infected', rather than the 'undead', which serves to make the narratives more realistic, and therefore more frightening.

Chapter Two will involve a close analysis of two selected texts, with a view to understanding why audiences consume horror and how these two periods of time reflect a cycle of social anxiety/illness. Correlations can be found between the Victorian *fin-de-siècle* and millennial horror narratives, both being reflective of sociocultural anxieties and preoccupations. Through narratives of terror, illness, and transgression, a society's most deeply held concerns may be charted and exorcised. The role of the abject in horror involves a complex system of repulsion and attraction, tied both to the individual's experience of identity and a greater sociocultural context. In exploring this process, it is interesting to observe recurring anxieties and themes in horror narratives over time.

## Chapter Two: Jekyll and Hyde and Dawn of the Dead

Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886)

Zack Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead* (2004)

### *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL AND MR HYDE*

Horror fiction of the Victorian *fin de siècle* has at its core a preoccupation with evolutionary theory. Post-Darwinian fears of atavism and savagery renewed an earlier gothic awareness of the impact of the haunted past on the present, and culminated in paranoia about primitive states upsetting modern civility. Late Victorian ideology was infused with Continental scientific research, by way of Morel's medical theories of degeneration and Lombroso's determinist criminology. Reid (3) acknowledges the 'marked cultural interactions' between the scientific and literary worlds of the nineteenth century and Robert Louis Stevenson's work in this interdisciplinary space:

Inhabited by characters whose mental pathologies drive them to savage bestiality, insanity, or death, (Stevenson's) tales figure the irruption of primitive states of mind in the supposedly civilized present. Yet ... they also reveal the tacit conflict between hereditary and environmental explanations of degeneration, undercutting the emphasis on biological inheritance, and suggesting that degeneration stems rather from the denial of savage instincts. (10–11)

The urban population explosion following the Industrial Revolution created an underclass of urban poor, fostering anxieties about the threatening Other. The Dickensian slum dwellers who had elicited sympathy from the early nineteenth-century reading public had, by the end of the century, become constructed as a delinquent mob.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, a new readership of popular fiction emerged: mechanisation and capitalism meant more leisure time and money for the individual, particularly that of the middle classes. As Trollope observed in 1870, 'We have become a novel-reading people. Novels are in the hands of us all; from the Prime Minister down to the last-appointed scullery-maid' (104). O'Callaghan describes the 'seismic intrusion of a commercial class into the established social and political structure' in the nineteenth century, which prompted 'an obsession with scrutiny across (and within) all social groups.' Reid states that, 'Critics viewed mass literacy and education, cheap literature and a growing newspaper press as both causes and symptoms of degeneracy' (74). Lurid tales within the covers of the popular 'penny dreadfuls' satisfied contemporary readers' tastes for sensationalist, escapist tales. For Stevenson, whose well-

documented, lifelong struggle with chronic physical illness also influenced this focus on science and degeneration, these appetites reflected another sickness: a worrying literary degeneracy and the threat of a decline in values.

*Jekyll and Hyde*'s focus on individual duality examined hypocrisy, crime, and duplicity. Dryden observes that, 'In showing Jekyll increasingly under the control of Hyde, Stevenson gave fictional form to an emerging anxiety of the late nineteenth century: the perception that the race itself was succumbing to degenerative tendencies that threatened the very fabric of society' (253). But while Stevenson was writing in this cultural context, his intention was not to moralise in the spirit of his peers. Punter describes Hyde's behaviour as a form of 'going native', owing to Jekyll's anxieties (3). Although the idea of this lurking duality plays on the fears of atavism held by Victorian society, Stevenson's aim is to caution against repressing primal urges. It is this denial of savage instincts that causes anguish to the subject of *Jekyll and Hyde*. Strengell asserts that:

The Gothic gnome, that is, the 'dwarfish' and 'ape-like' half of the personality is hidden at the cost of hypocrisy and oft hideous crimes. Therefore, a disguise is needed, which causes further tension and the fear of getting caught. Tension also intensifies from the constant threat of transformation. (*The Monster* 1)

The central gothic trope in *Jekyll and Hyde* is referred to in this description: the gothic double. This concept of alternating personality had been around since the mesmerists, who noted that hypnotised personalities were frequently livelier than their conscious, waking counterparts. And almost twenty years prior to the publication of *Jekyll and Hyde*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* involves an autonomous life under the influence of opium. In *A Chapter on Dreams* of 1888, Stevenson discusses a series of his own dreams, where recollections from one dream are carried to the next, so that he finds himself leading 'a double life—one of the day, one of the night'. (43) Critics have acknowledged Stevenson's direct influence on later psychiatric work on dual personality, including that of the psychoanalysts (Stiles). Although his earlier works, *Markheim* and *Deacon Brodie*, deal with the moral implications of leading double lives (and the moral consequences of facing one's double, or Other) *Jekyll and Hyde* explicitly employs scientific language and extant medical knowledge (notably, the 'new sciences' of the degeneration-centric *fin de siècle* to present an allegorical case study. Specifically, criminology, anthropology, evolutionist psychiatry, and sexology are drawn upon to invoke ideas about biological inheritance and environmental influence.

In examining the book's characters, Reid notes that:

the characters of Utterson, Lanyon, and Poole are unsettled by Hyde because they reject the savage side of their nature (the dry rationality of both Utterson and Lanyon underscores their repudiation of the wild and irrational). Their atavistic responses therefore spring not from heredity but from cultural beliefs—about the importance of denying savagery. Significantly, atavism also needs to be activated by external influence. (102)

The implied danger here is of denying one's potential 'otherness', or capacity for becoming abject. Stevenson's belief, however, is that everyone possesses a potential for such savagery (abjection) —Jekyll, it can be seen, is not so much transforming into the beast; rather, his already present inner beast is being activated. Bishop states that, in Stevenson's work, this duplicitous potential demonstrates how 'fear of being or becoming the Other ultimately means fear of disenfranchisement from society and the risk of becoming a literal monster' (97). Stevenson's work, both in fiction and essays, consistently reinforces this idea of inherent degeneracy. Thus, there is not so much a concern about the threat of infectious degeneracy per se, as that of an infectious triggering of these latent impulses. And in late-Victorian psychology, contagion was considered more instrumental a trigger for degeneration than heredity determinism.

For Stevenson, who was frustrated by the hypocrisy he observed in his sociocultural environment, affected displays of respectability and morality were symptomatic of a defective society. Arata notes that, in this novella, Stevenson 'continually turns the question of Hyde back on its interlocutors so that their interpretive procedures become the object of our attention', ultimately turning 'the class discourses of atavism and criminality back on the bourgeois itself' (36). Further, Arata describes the attempted subjugation of Hyde as 'a parody of bourgeois respectability' (49). These internal and external influences correspond with the gothic's preoccupation with threats originating from within and without. Much like the Victorian degenerationist interest in heredity versus environment, Stevenson's interests lay in conflicting tensions, relating to the hopes and fears attached to scientific discovery, the duality of identity, and the civilisation and debauchery of urban environments. Nowhere in Stevenson's *oeuvre* is his employment of the double more explicit than in *Jekyll and Hyde*. Botting asserts that the novella's doubling 'discloses the ambivalence of identity and instability of the social, moral and scientific codes that manufacture distinctions' (141). The shift from Jekyll to Hyde is not transformative but revelatory. Jekyll describes the powder he takes as 'rattling the doors of the prison-house of (his) disposition' (41). By the narrative's conclusion, Arata notes, 'the doctor's body metamorphoses continually from Jekyll to Hyde and

back again, as if to indicate that we need no longer distinguish between them' (40). This metamorphosis serves to instil the narrative with constant tension, heightening the audience's sense of terror.

Stevenson also uses doubling in creating the spaces of his characters' urban setting. As Hurley asserts, 'the Gothic certainly does not scruple from identifying the urban slums as sites of especial abjection: as with the surreal Soho neighbourhood, "like a district of some city in a nightmare," described in *Jekyll and Hyde*' (162).

In the urban gothic sub-genre to which *Jekyll and Hyde* belongs, the city is the site of liminality, danger, and crime. The crumbling, countryside mansions and forbidding, haunted castles of earlier gothic narratives gave way to the anonymous, shadowy streets of *fin-de-siècle* literature. Warwick (Mulvey-Roberts, p. 289), who notes the city's uncanniness, and ruinous state of death-in-life, also describes, 'the alienation of the urban subject, leading to paranoia, fragmentation and loss of identity.' *Jekyll and Hyde*'s urban, professional world is fraught with danger, with its 'muddy ways, and slatternly passengers' (22)—an environment that Victorian readers connected in their collective consciousness with Jack the Ripper's hunting ground during the autumn of 1888, a place of corruption and vice.<sup>i</sup> In his analysis of these 'dark spaces', Vidler finds:

"Outside", even as the spaces of exile, asylum, confinement, and quarantine of the early modern period were continuously spilling over into the "normal" space of the city, so the "pathological spaces" of today menace the clearly marked out limits of the social order. In every case "light space" is invaded by the figure of "dark space", on the level of the body in the form of epidemic and uncontrollable disease, and on the level of the city in the person of the homeless. (279)

*Jekyll*'s house is another instance of doubling in Stevenson's narrative. Superficially, as both residence and laboratory, it reflects *Jekyll*'s own dual role of patient and physician. Nabokov argues that 'just as *Jekyll* is a mixture of good and bad, so *Jekyll*'s dwelling place is also a mixture, a very neat symbol, a very neat representation of the *Jekyll and Hyde* relationship' (188). O'Callaghan observes that 'the building itself suggests illness and disembodiment' (140) and discusses the prevalence of the 'malign' building throughout Stevenson's fiction. Another prominent 'malign' structure, in gothic tradition, is Poe's *House of Usher*, which, like *Jekyll*'s home, is the ruinous embodiment of moral decline. *Jekyll*'s house, reflective of its inhabitant's bifurcated identity, exhibits two distinct aspects—one of order and the other chaos. The house is, as it were, suffering from its own malady, which Utterson views as originating in the morally transgressive figure of Henry *Jekyll*.

This duality of place has also been observed with relation to Stevenson's home town of Edinburgh and its influence on his authorship. Edinburgh, with the dualistic development of its Old and New districts, Rudroff contends, 'directly inspired Stevenson to write *Jekyll and Hyde*—the existence of the two within one' (20). Rudroff explains,

The people were incongruous with one another, and though the rich may have lived next to the poor, cheek by jowl, there was a constant psychological struggle to break away—as demonstrated in the speed at which the citizenry flocked to the New Town. (21)

Miller holds that literary doubles are often concerned with escaping, explaining that 'one self does what the other self can't' (74). A point for consideration here is Stevenson's own ill health, and his later self-transformation in the Pacific. Jolly describes his 'double identity during that time, and the ensuing 'cult of personality' that formed in his final years and persisted after his death (173). The author and critic G.K. Chesterton analyses the text thus:

The point of the story is not that a man can cut himself off from his conscience, but that he cannot. The surgical operation is fatal in the story. It is an amputation of which both parts die. (67)

And, as Hurley notes,

There are two things the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic represents again and again. The first is the spectacle of the human subject undergoing dissolution, a spectacle which provokes hysterical anxiety in Sartre's analysis, a sense of metaphysical estrangement in Todorov's, repression and denial in Freud's, abjection in Kristeva's. The second is the symptom of nausea. (44)

These themes can be identified once again in gothic texts of the millennium. The zombie is among the most prevalent of the monstrous tropes we see in the fiction of the new *fin de siècle*. Just as Victorian audiences found the abjection of Stevenson's monstrous Hyde irresistible, millennial movie goers appear to be equally addicted to the gruesome, decaying spectacle of the walking dead.

## DAWN OF THE DEAD

As the 1990s came to a close, widespread fearmongering about the ‘millennium bug’ ran rife. This forecast of a global meltdown on 1 January, 2000 brought with it predictions of planes dropping from the skies, catastrophic security breaches, and worldwide systems and communications disabling. These anxieties found expression in disaster narratives, both in fiction and popular cinema. *Armageddon* (dir. Michael Bay, 1998), *Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, 1998), and *End of Days* (dir. Michael Hyams, 1999) tapped into these global social concerns. This millennial catastrophising in turn sparked religious prognostication, dystopian fiction (Don De Lillo’s *Underworld* (1997), Koushun Takami’s *Battle Royale*, (1999), A.D. Nauman’s *Scorch* (2001), David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), for example) with apocalyptic undertones, and a general unease about things spiralling out of control with the dawn of the new century.

In the midst of a global atmosphere of doomsday imaginings emerged the horrific events of September 11, 2001. The terrorist attacks resulted in a proliferation of disaster and trauma narratives, including *Diary of the Dead* (dir. George A. Romero, 2007), *Quarantine* (dir. John Erick Dowdle, 2008), *I am Legend* (dir. Francis Lawrence, 2007), *War of the Worlds* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2005), and *Cloverfield* (dir. Matt Reeves, 2008). Associated fears emerged, in the guise of a new xenophobia (foreigners as the unpredictable, potentially threatening Other), emanating from the U.S. And the rest of the western world was hungry for narratives reflecting external threat: alien invasion, terrorist attacks, and, most notably, zombie outbreak narratives. Birch-Bayley describes the zombie film as reflecting ‘the worst-case fears of an apprehensive media culture, entertaining the same anxieties about world events, in this case, a fear of terrorism and epidemic in the zombie form’ (78) and refers to western culture’s millennial ‘crisis culture’. Norris, Kern, and Just view this cultural outlook as ‘a kind of vernacular expressing the concerns of a culture waiting for the next terrorist attack, the next outbreak of violence or the next pandemic’ (28).

At the forefront of the modern zombie resurgence was Zack Snyder’s 2004 remake of George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*. Modern audiences were positioned to respond to themes of outbreak, mass media virality, relentless consumerism, and government surveillance. Combined with deeply held anxieties of biological outbreak: avian flu, SARS, H1N1, and HIV, these concerns led to a preoccupation with contagion. Romero’s lurching zombies may have reflected mid-century contagion anxiety, but the living dead of such films as *28 Days Later* and *Resident Evil* were updated to tap into a biological model of viral infection. Again, Boluk and Lenz’s (6) connection of the ‘accelerated and pathologized zombie’, with its biohazard-like menace, to earlier plague writing creates a compelling lineage.



In sum, the figure of the zombie occupies ‘the position of uncontrollable threat that was once associated with the plague’ (6). In ascribing agency to the plague, Artaud argues that it has a ‘preference for the very organs of the body, the particular physical sites, where human will, consciousness, and thought are imminent and apt to occur’ (Jannarone, 39). This idea that plague targets the organs at the centre of the individual’s identity would seem a fitting metaphor for the zombie. ‘A zombie outbreak,’ Boluk and Lenz argue, ‘is an event in which the anxieties associated with social connectivity come to the fore—the more boundaries between self and other are broken down in plague time, the more the contagion spreads’ (7). It is evident that zombies are linked, in popular culture, with plague and apocalypse, as well as loss of self. In millennial texts, they are updated with culturally appropriate features.

Muntean and Payne assert that ‘in a culture suffused with a heightened sense of imminent terror and incalculable dread, meaningful fictional monsters must not only respond to the form of the prevailing cultural anxiety, they must also equal or transcend the depths of its possible horror’ (244). Snyder’s zombies ‘move like cheetahs, bounding over buildings, and climbing on walls’ (Weise, 161). And if zombies are physical manifestations of our own death, modern audiences, accustomed to special effects and graphic images of violence, expect their onscreen counterparts to be naturalistic recreations of corporeal decay. Creed reminds us why we seek this cinematic abjection:

Viewing the horror film signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images, being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator’s seat). (10)

Abjection in Snyder’s film is conveyed through his modern zombies, which are brutally realistic and unflinchingly grotesque. His remake was filmed during 2003’s SARS outbreak, and the director noticed similarities between his text and news bulletins, both loaded with panic and misinformation (Bishop). This cultural context added a further dimension to the reading of the original text. As Bishop explains, ‘Romero’s key trope from *Dawn of the Dead* is that humans in this age of technology and routine labor are essentially zombies already’ (189). While the millennial context was permeated by a sense of slavish and senseless consumerism, additional factors ensured the favourable reception of the remake. Kahane reminds us that ‘our response to 9/11 made disturbingly clear how much our perceptual experience as well as our psychic life is filtered and managed through films we have seen, even experienced as films we have seen’ (107).

In Snyder's remake, we find ourselves confronted with an inescapable, relentless outbreak, a paranoid suspicion of other individuals, adversarial consumerism, and ultra-violence. In Romero's original, the so-called Bliss Montage features main characters running rampant through the shopping mall in which they have barricaded themselves, engaging in a joyful orgy of shopping, in a display of what Bishop calls 'a fantasy of gluttony' (11). Briefel and Miller argue that 'the conflicts of Romero's Bliss Montage have proved appealing to post-9/11 films seeking to evaluate their own status as adversarial commodities ... particularly subversive at a time in which shopping represents patriotic duty, rather than a form of self-expression or leisure' (147). This subversion of consumerism may also be read as a rejection of the simultaneous loss of self (and hollowing-out of the person) that has taken place.

Snyder's take on the sequence involves his characters' interacting with the mall in subversive ways (Briefel and Miller). Couples film themselves in suggestive sexual positions with the mall's security cameras, an elderly male churchgoer cross-dresses in women's hosiery, and a young woman takes a spray can to a security camera, after graffitiing the mall's walls. In presenting this, Snyder depicts subversive resistance to the soulless consumer culture of his viewers' millennial contexts.

Youssef discusses the significance of the 'spatial and temporal being uncanny places in the urban context as laboratories for the irrational component within a cultural unconscious' (312), and goes on to remark that:

Industrial and modern ruins, by virtue of their outsideness to the normal temporality and spatiality of capitalist production and consumption, avails them as depositories for various strata of cultural anxieties ... This way of seeing them also leads to their cordoning off ... as criminal spaces in which anti-social behaviour occurs. (312)

Davis fuses this concept of urban decline with the appetite for millennial conspiracy theorising, asserting that 'Millennialist sects and the audience for Hollywood blockbusters share, for example, a certain delirious investment in the destruction of the metropolis, a key image in fundamentalist religious rhetoric, survivalist literature, millennialist groups and the disaster film' (158).

Sontag has observed the satisfaction audiences derive from 'the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess' (44). This recalls the abject revulsion audiences enjoy in their response to sensationalist depictions of the walking dead and their decaying forms.

Westmore describes Snyder's reimagining of *Dawn of the Dead* as 'a depiction of American fears and concerns in a post-9/11 world that also explores the inability of people to create and develop lasting, trusting relationships on any level' (137). Snyder's decision to increase the number of survivors in his remake (in Romero's there were only four) allows for greater emphasis on interpersonal dynamics. And one of the factors at play in Snyder's text is that of class difference. The character Steve is representative of upper middle-class avarice; and, his self-interest results in the death of other characters—a further, damning indictment of capitalism. In the film's opening scenes, we see a chaotic hospital environment (recalling America's beleaguered healthcare system) in which only a nurse, Ana, displays any compassion or sense of vocational responsibility. Doctors are portrayed as indifferent to and removed from their patients and colleagues in what may be read as a critique of impersonal modern healthcare provision. Later in the film, all but one of the survivors will be from working-class backgrounds. Privileged Steve is constructed as a loathsome figure, who alienates his fellow survivors.

There exists, in millennial zombie film, a sense of disconnectedness between characters—a mistrust for fellow survivors. This can be seen as a direct expression of sociocultural anxieties concerning disenfranchisement and alienation in a globalised society as divided as it is connected by technology and social media. As Bishop reminds us, however, 'because anyone can become infected ... at any time, everyone is a potential threat; paranoia, therefore, becomes a crucial tool for survival' (29). In this present era of viral connectedness, we fear the faceless Other that lurks online and in the anonymous space of digital media. The same vigilant mistrust the Victorians held towards the faceless, teeming multitudes of their new urban environments is echoed by today's conspiracy theorists, and by vulnerable, yet voluntary, consumers of mass media and participants in social media

Parallels may be drawn between the zombie and the gothic trope of the double. Zombies embody Freud's argument for the double as a symbol of the uncanny. In witnessing the abjection of the cannibalistic, degenerating corpse, our unease is activated by the awareness that it is our potential undead doppelgänger. Paffenroth notes that, in Snyder's text,

With such a heavy toll of characters turning into zombies, the consistent impression in the film is that zombies are from within the group of survivors: they are an internal threat and not from outside—whether that threat is from failed intimacy or callous self-interest. (22)

The zombie has become a figure loaded with meaning that today's audiences have a singular fix upon. Whether we are processing anxieties regarding (global) neoliberal capitalism, the

emergence of biological superbugs, the manipulation of viral media, or sleeper-cell terrorism, the zombie, in its soulless, relentless pursuit of the very organ of our consciousness, is a universal signifier. In the words of Comaroff and Comaroff, we have come to view the zombie as a ‘walking spectre’, an object of collective terror and desire, to use E.J Clery’s description of the ‘terrorist genre’ of haunted Gothic fiction in late-eighteenth century England, where industrialization was ... restructuring the nature of work and place’ (794). Davidson explains its impact:

The modern capitalist world emerged from the combined pressures exerted by the British Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. These forced all other states into copying their achievements in order to compete effectively with or be dominated by their more advanced rivals. But this could not be simply an acceptance of ‘progress’ as defined by the frontrunners; it also necessitated a rejection of progress in the terms on which they offered it. This process, which is more or less parallel with that of the bourgeois revolution, spread out from the unifications of Germany and Italy during the 1860s to contemporary national liberation movements in places as different as Ireland and Bangladesh. (10)

Although Mill and other theorists promoted libertarian definitions of the economics of capitalism, Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* (1860—2) vehemently opposed such notions in its derision of self-interested progress and promotion of a socially motivated model, in which individual prosperity would uphold the welfare of the larger population (thereby facilitating social order and cohesion):

Among the delusions which at different periods have possessed themselves of the minds of large masses of the human race, perhaps Victorian values the most curious – certainly the least creditable – is the modern *soi-disant* science of political economy, based on the idea that an advantageous code of social action may be determined irrespectively of the influence of social affection. (xvii.25)

The enduring influence of Ruskin’s social and economic theories on British socialist thinking has long been acknowledged. Birch asserts that analysis of Ruskin’s legacy and the subsequent financial developments may even offer a ‘framework for the interpretation of Victorian values’ (48), and argues:

The contribution that Victorian writing, in all its diversity, can offer to contemporary cultural understanding is not limited to its direct engagement with movements for social change or political reform. Its preoccupation with the felt texture of experience,

often affirming the value of emotion in concert with the force of logic in directing human action, is also of central importance. (45)

Similar concerns emerged in the neo-capitalist climate approaching the millennium. Taylor and Jamieson outline the problems facing the English commercial middle class within the globalising world economy of the late 1990s, following a backlash against Thatcherism and enterprise culture. England's declining economy, and its impact on personal financial security, created a reinforced fear of crime and violence. Taylor and Jamieson argue:

Inescapably associated with these anxieties (in the national popular press, local newspapers and everyday gossip) are a set of moral narratives that focus, in particular, on the underclass and, especially, on young men colonising public space ('yobs') and beggars ('tramps')—who are seen to constitute what Margaret Thatcher called 'the Enemy Within' and what urban sociologists and criminologists call 'the Urban Other'. Everyday use of urban space in England, especially the city centres and suburban high streets, is understood to involve a regular potential encounter with these Urban Others, and a set of fantastic theories of the depravity of the urban poor, altogether familiar to students of the nineteenth-century slum. (173)

### Chapter Three: Reflections on Writing *Mercury*

Approaching the critical component of my project has resulted in a range of discoveries, sometimes frustrating, at other times serendipitous, but always illuminating. An author and academic, Kroll describes these ‘hybrid theses, with a creative product and a critical component’ as ‘uneasy bedfellows’ and acknowledges their ‘schizophrenic nature’ (1). However, she also argues that the exegesis encourages the creative writing student to be their own expert reader, becoming both more mindful and engaged with their work than they otherwise might be, as well as contributing to wider creative discourse. In 2010, I attended an AAWP conference, hosted by RMIT, at which Kroll and a number of other academics extolled the virtues of the exegesis in creative research higher degrees. At the time, I was working on a purely academic thesis; and, although I found the arguments compelling from a pedagogical standpoint, they weren’t as crystallised in my mind as they have since become, as I reflect on the combination of academic and creative writing activity in my current project.

What I have found most rewarding about the practice of writing an accompanying critical piece is the experience of making connections. As I consider horror narratives and their contexts, I of course find horror metaphors everywhere: it seemed apt that I found Kroll discussing the creative/critical experience in terms of a kind of doubling (the ‘split personality’ of the creative writing higher degree candidate); and Perry explains her encounter with exegesis writing as an ‘exorcism’ (1). A doubling exists in the critical/creative process that reminds me of the Apollonian/Dionysian impulses of *Jekyll and Hyde*. And this, in turn, makes me think of the concept of Beethovenian versus Mozartian writing styles described by the poet Stephen Spender. I have found this doubling—and the activity of considering binary opposition—a satisfying, if fundamental, way of exploring my creative ideas.

The creative project emerged from earlier research into Stephen King and the gothic subgenre. In researching gothic fiction, I found that, above all others, the trope of the double interested me most. The double, or *doppelgänger* (the German compound noun comprises ‘double’ (*doppel*) and ‘goer’ (*gänger*)) appears in the mythology and folklore of a number of cultures. The Norse *vardøger*, Finnish *etiäinen*, and Egyptian *ka* are all variants on this theme of duality, of doubling. In gothic tradition, the double emerges as a device through which we are able to examine our deep-seated fear ‘that each of us is capable of great evil’ (Strengell, *The Monster* 2).

The doubleness in my text emerges through the characters’ ‘splitting’: the blank, ‘zombified’ selves they wake to, and the hidden, ‘real’ selves that they must struggle to re-establish. There is the sense, to me, of there being an ‘Other within’ for Jack and Imogen. They are not certain what they are going to discover about themselves or their pasts, and are unable to attain true agency

without the full knowledge of their real natures. Where Jekyll and Hyde compete for space in one being, my protagonists also contain, at the beginning of the narrative, a ‘present’ (fearful, complicit, unaware) self, and a ‘past/true’ (powerful, able, original) self. Abjection again surfaces in this concept of doubling and its boundaries. On the abject in horror, Wisker writes:

In its embodiment of Otherness, that which is ‘not I’, it produces responses of terror and disgust. Based as it is on the need to define the separate identity of the self, anything which breaks the boundaries of this self or threatens to overwhelm and disempower it, terrifies. Engulfment is one of its worst forms, and the notion of being taken over by one’s own other animal self, by devils from inside or by creatures in some overwhelming shape, is a recurrent figure in horror. (22)

As discussed in Chapter Two, there has been recent zombie resurgence; and the zombie has been regarded as our undead double. In *Mercury*, there are clear elements of ‘zombification.’ The Facility’s patients, subdued by the tranquilising drugs administered by the staff, remain suspended in a limbo between life and death. Moreover, they are treated as ‘living dead’ by the central characters. In attempting to depict this horrific state, I acknowledge the familiar zombie appearance that moves us to disgust: the degrading, disintegrating physical form. Throughout the novella, there are a number of references to this idea of form approaching formlessness. I sought to explore these and other themes, driven by what strikes me as those elements at the nerve centre of present-day global sociocultural anxieties.

One factor that interested me is the instability we experience, in the face of media manipulation, with respect to our own identities. Consumer culture propels us ever towards the rejection of whatever constitutes our individuality, and, rather, in pursuit of a largely unachievable, homogeneous ideal. We are expected to strive for what the media deems an acceptable physical appearance; we are fed a steady stream of commercialised mediocrity, by way of the ‘insta-idol’ brand of prefab pop star; we are conditioned, through planned obsolescence and media-created dissatisfaction, to clamour for the latest smart phone, big-screen TV, and so forth. We are also bombarded with endless images and rhetoric from reality TV makeover shows and sensationalist speculation about celebrity plastic surgery. In this atmosphere of sameness, the individual surrenders to media-created stereotypes—for their own survival. We are encouraged to become mindless consumers, preoccupied by waxing, tanning, buying, posturing on social media, and generally striving to disguise the apparently undesirable creature lurking beneath the public-ready veneer. Despite our strained relationship with the media, our society seems helplessly plugged in, almost umbilically, to our mobile phones, iPads, TV screens, and around-the-clock Internet news

reporting. Meanwhile, Big Pharma continues to produce unprecedented volumes of antidepressants, anxiety medications, and sedatives that consumers blithely accept, despite being largely ignorant of long-term consequences. The characters in my novella have reached a similarly disturbing level of acquiescence, with sinister results, reminiscent of Victorian and millennial representations of anxieties about loss/disintegration of self. Gothic fiction commonly focuses on identity construction and destruction, particularly in the double's identity displacement, repressed unconscious drives, and good versus evil conflict. Millennial narratives frequently reflect the heightened anxieties of audiences who, in response to an apprehensive global media environment, seem to be forever awaiting terrorist attacks, pandemics, or uncontrollable biological crises; and, again, these narratives are underpinned by a fear of the disintegration of self and of social order.

*Mercury* involves a cast of characters who, despite sharing a range of human instincts and impulses, respond to circumstances in different ways, owing to basic natures and factors which have shaped them. The two main characters I had challenges with were Jack and Omar. As I conceptualised the characters early on, they took shape in an organic way: Jack was always going to be my 'everyman', the protagonist and hero whose nature I aimed to express through a series of conflicts and dramatic situations. Antiheroes, with their complexity and their challenge to us to be understood, have always interested me more than heroes. For that reason, I initially set out to depict Jack as a darker figure than the one into which he ultimately evolved. He does, however, struggle to believe Hadwin, the seer/sage, though this is not necessarily a failing. I wanted Jack to struggle with some sort of internal conflict, but found that setting my characters in amnesiac states from the outset made this difficult. At the end of the process, I'm disappointed by my inability to flesh Jack's character out. Amnesiac states make the patients immediate doubles, in a sense. Existing in their erased state, and responding only with emerging instincts, the characters discover their true/other identities later on. For each, another self exists that is able to be reached (with effort, and at a cost). This makes it difficult to create interesting characters, with any sense of agency; although, lack of agency is also the point. In any case, writing this story has provided me with a number of learning opportunities that I hope to take forward to future projects.

The villain, Omar, is a more complex character, who has overshadowed most of the others. Omar is struggling with his feelings of tenderness and attempts to repress his basic nature. His physical appearance contributes to his monstrosity, as does his past. He has only his interior to rely on, as people are horrified by him. No regular pathology would emerge from constant shunning. The Elders' reliance on corporeal form heightens his problems in this regard.



O'Callaghan notices a recurring theme in Stevenson's works:

In *Jekyll and Hyde*, the intriguing figure of Gabriel Utterson also exemplifies the dangerous affliction between religiosity and monstrosity, as does, especially, William Attwater in *The Ebb Tide*. (13)

This was something I realised long after I'd created Omar, and it resonates with his character.

Setting functions as a dynamic element, creating atmosphere and meaning in space and time. Gothic fiction, in particular, is dependent on setting for atmosphere and to convey symbolism: Poe's Usher is a living, decaying corpse; Walpole's Otranto is a supernatural horror unto itself; du Maurier's *Manderley* is so central to the story that *Rebecca*'s editor described it as being 'as much an atmosphere as a tangible erection of stones and mortar' (Dennison, 1). *Mercury*'s abandoned asylum maintains an atmosphere of confinement and tension. My intention was also to represent a 'doubling' in the Facility's rehabilitation/death camp split. The aim of the gothic is to inspire fear; and the urban gothic subgenre presents threatening spaces in order to provoke this response in its readership. My aim in *Mercury* was to confine my characters in a space that was, if not exactly evil, at least soulless. The challenge was to provide enough information about the spaces in and around the Facility to indicate this sense of menace, without offering distracting detail that would detract from the reader's experience.

The idea for my setting stemmed from an initial interest I had in creating a sense of conflict through claustrophobia. Three pieces came to mind while I considered how to approach this. Sartre's existentialist play, *No Exit* (1944), has been a favourite story of mine for many years. With dialogue alone, Sartre creates a cloying, tense atmosphere of claustrophobia and fatalism. Sartre's concept that 'Hell is other people' is something I considered in setting up conflicts in *Mercury*. My characters are further bound by their own limitations and fears, which they must overcome in order to fulfil their potential and achieve their goals. What I found was that, rather than engaging in conflicts with other characters, they remained isolated—unable to engage because of the medication and unwilling to engage because of their trauma. I set out to create a sense of alienation and division, but more needed to be made of the unnatural sense of separation and mistrust.

Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921), which I saw performed in the late eighties, explores characters caught together in conflict, transcending their places until the plays' actors and director are unable to determine fiction from reality. In the spirit of absurdist theatre, it blurs the line between the real and imaginary. Similarly, *Mercury*'s characters are being held within the rabbit's warren of the Facility's maze-like structure. This idea was meant to reflect both chaos and entrapment. I wanted to maintain a sense of noiselessness and lethargy—of the

characters slipping away psychologically and losing any sense of community. And in light of my theme of outbreak/contagion, physical proximity is, of course, the very way the patients are being deceived. They have been deemed ‘unclean’, as it were, and are complicit with the idea of a holding centre. Living in today’s world, it’s difficult to ignore the links between this fictional depiction of enforced entrapment and the detention centres, concentration camps, and immigration facilities about which we hear alarming and conflicting reports.

The tension in Stephen King’s *Misery* is provided by the stifling claustrophobia created by a writer being imprisoned by a deranged fan. In containing my characters in limited spaces, with repetitive décor (the bland courtyard of the ‘Recreation Garden’ was one of few possible places to offer respite from the walls of their rooms), I hoped to express a sense of institutional starkness and sensory deprivation. Abjection, with regards to the setting of the Facility in *Mercury*, is experienced, I hope, through descriptions of the structure’s rank, neglected, decaying appearance. I envisaged the building as a living thing—and that the chambers beneath represented a kind of rotting bowel, teeming with dark secrets, and destroyed things—the walking human detritus created by Omar’s twisted mind.

A major problem I found was a tendency to ‘tell’, rather than ‘show.’ Part of the reason for this was my being over-ambitious in terms of the story’s scope. As I review my story, I realise that I’ve subjected my reader to a number of awkward ‘information dumps’, in an effort to convey necessary back story. Again, I partially attribute this to the inappropriate scope of the story, which was too broad for the novella format.

Rather than view my finished creative work only in terms of how it has ultimately fallen short of my expectations, however, I think it would be more constructive to consider that I have come to more fully identify and process the sociocultural anxieties and themes I observe (and feel, firsthand) through the process of writing a gothic-themed story.

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