Kingfisher Blue
Aura City burned. Waves of fire spread out beneath his feet forming a deadly maelstrom consuming everything in its path. Blood curdling screams filled the air, countless voices rising as one howling their desperation and agony. Like cattle brought to the slaughter, they were trapped, their miniscule limbs flailing about in unreason as they sought to escape the black night of eternity.

The flames were his; he lived and breathed them, fuelling their lick and burn. Watching from on high, his spirit sang and bones wept. In and out moved the corners of his mouth, delight and horror present in equal measure. Deep in his chest a spark wavered, craving air. A dull echo haunted his mind, a longing for something forgotten.

Fury surged, spitting and gurgling and craving more; more fire, more pain, enough to drown out the voices. Extending his arms, he reached and pulled. From deep inland and out to sea, something answered his call. In seconds, a roiling cauldron formed in the sky. Pulsing tongues of light met terrestrial illumination, driving back night and spawning florid day.

Someone was laughing, their hysteric lashing the air around him. The invisible conduit connecting him to the artificial storm writhed, shunting electric serpents into his body. His cells quivered, hovering on the point of destruction. Consummation incinerated the safety switch and the world turned white.

He drew deeply, sucking in air until his lungs ached. Blowing out he repeated the process until a semblance of calm returned. Blinking his eyes, he squeezed them shut and ground his palms against closed lids. Where had that come from? Freaky real and far from pleasant; another waking nightmare. This meditation business was meant to breed calm, not madness. If it wasn’t for his temper, he would have refused from the beginning no matter how much Edward had pleaded. But there had been, as he knew oh so well, the problems of self-sabotage and an irrational fury. Edward said genius came at a price and the slippery little eel would suggest and do anything when the stink of money hung in the air.

White froth covered the shoreline. Each breaking wave brought a fresh supply replacing those bubbles lost to air pressure. Using its rhythm to focus his scattered thoughts, he watched the water flow in and out, responding to the moon. Overhead the orbital body was already visible, it’s current position bypassing the need for darkness. Brilliant golden rays flowed out from the sun, striking moon and transforming the ocean’s surface. Innumerable mirrors danced, merged and vanished; shifting water choreographing the play.

Together they had eased him into a meditative state and the bizarre dreamscape thereafter. Perhaps he’d let greediness taint his mind. The books said forego desire and use mental discipline to eliminate it from your life. Then what had caused his nightmarish vision;
an emotional imbalance, a death wish, some overriding need to crush and destroy? He liked to think himself a pacifist who opposed violence and oppression. His outbursts, lack of self-control, and lecturing of others said otherwise. Harmony, that desert oasis, was essential for peace of mind; only then would he find freedom from anger and its stranglehold on his life. Prophets, messiahs and all the other holy folk, preaching the same feeble message. A growl rose up out his belly and escaped clenched teeth. He twisted halfway around and glimpsed what lay behind him, his chin nudging a shoulder.

It was impossible to ignore, an eruption of greed and avarice; gleaming towers, spires and domes looming in the distance, the grand Aura City standing at the ready. One look was all it took to inflame his nerves. Its presence cajoled his anger, dredging up images barely a week old, unpleasant scenes flash burned in his memory he wished forgotten, where volatile emotions had ruled his mind and dashed a dream he did his best to scorn.

Contradiction and hypocrisy, he saw them wherever he looked, infecting everything, especially his own life and the decisions he made, feeding bouts of discontent and rage. Ironic that Edward the petite hedonist had sourced the reading material and made him swear to follow their teachings. A week gone and he had made steady, and to be perfectly honest, surprising progress. Strange new experiences had unfolded that first day and continued since, mental and physical sensations foreign and bizarre. What he’d just experienced was different. Everything else thus far he could say within reason had been positive, soothing even. Each experience a tip toe crawl towards emptiness; the treasured goal of meditation that opened the gates of transcendence. Comical, ludicrous, outrageous; he could keep going. A fanciful mirage for a different age. Not something for today’s war-torn world ruled by its ultra-wealthy industrial aristocrats. How many songs had he written about that depressing crap, one morose ballad after another.

Beneath his rump the gritty ledge began to bite. He grumbled softly and wondered why he had chosen to sit here rather than on the soft sand below his feet. Abrupt noise further down the beach finished the job and his focus vanished.

Walking in his direction along the shore line were a man and woman. Both wore blue denim jeans and black shirts at odds with the sun and sand. The woman looked distressed. She strode ahead of the man, words pouring out her mouth as she responded to a verbal barrage hitting her from behind, her long hair whipping about as her head jerked this way and that. Decisively the man broke into a run, overtook the woman and planted his body in front of her. Rough hands snared her arms and he bellowed ‘STOP!’ In response she thrust her head forward, screamed in his face and fought to break free. The sharp sound of his hand striking her cheek cut the air.

Levering off the ledge he ran towards the couple, action strange after his period of rest. As his red shoes fought against the shifting sand he watched the man continue to harangue the woman. He winced at the sound of a backhand swing connecting with the woman’s other cheek.

“Leave her alone!” His weak plea between pants escaped the man’s notice. Needles of consequence skated across his forehead and down his cheeks, adding a sense of unmistakable reality to what was unfolding. Many were the creations of his conscious hours hailing his bravado in the face of adversity. Operating in real-time was shocking, he tasted the jangling
secretions that heightened each moment and made every step electric. Too far gone to stop, he let fly, this time finding more breath and greater volume.

“You bloody coward!” Absorbed by their animal conflict, he failed to notice the hole left by a beach miner and stumbled forward, hit the combatants and sent them tumbling, flailing limbs thudding into sand amidst cries of protest.

“Who the fuck! Get off me you piece of shit!” It was the man’s voice.

“Creep! What the Neverend do you think you're doing?” His mouth opened in alarm at hearing the woman’s hostility. Her foot closed it, smacking his teeth together to grind down on a mouthful of sand. Before he had time to spit it out, a second kick hit him square in the stomach, driving air from lungs. It was just the beginning. A flurry of blows from both sides left him on the edge of consciousness. Managing to open his already swelling eyes, he sighted fathomless blue staring back at him, an unmistakable and menacing presence filling its vaulted height. The oddity was interrupted by two faces caught in the grip of anger and glee.

“Go play the hero somewhere else dickhead! Fucking piece of shit.” The man spat out the words before lifting a foot to say goodnight. The leather clad hammer of muscle and bone descended towards his face, imprinted on its sole his ticket to the land of nod. His head ground against the shifting sand and saved his life, reserving an alternate fate for Zane Foster. The lights went out. Consciousness ceased and the blue above flashed a wicked grin.
“He’s waking up.”
“Everyone move back, give him some air.”
“I don't think there’s a shortage of that out here, he’s not about to suffocate.”
“If you don’t want to help, I think you should leave.”
“Hey, I’m just trying to stop you from making stupid comments.”
“What you’re doing is being rude and offensive.”
“Awww, my head.” Partially opening his swollen eyes, he found multiple faces hovering above his own. Gone were the two responsible for his beating.
“Do you want to sit up?”
“Yes,” he replied weakly, not knowing what else to say.
Hands eased him into a seated position and his body sagged from the redistribution of blood. If not for their support, he would have flopped straight back down. He couldn’t lift his chin to examine the people around him and stared at his legs, feeling pain up and down his body. The wooziness faded and he raised his chin. A bearded man, a hippy couple, a business woman, and three teenagers pressed in around him, their faces bright with excitement and concern.
“We saw what happened. The behaviour of some people is an absolute disgrace. To think you came to the aid of that young woman and she attacked you. I just don’t understand people anymore.” Holding one arm across her mid-rift and the other up to shield her sight from the sun, the attractive middle-aged executive kicked a pebble in frustration, causing it to bounce up and strike the injured man in the chest. She yelped, reached out, and tentatively patted the air above the man’s head.
“Try and understand people and you’ll end up drowning in shadows,” commented the male half of the hippie couple, trying to ease the woman through her distress.
“What would you know about anything? You walk through life with your head in the clouds.” His comment was a welcome distraction and let her focus on something other than her carelessness.
“You should get away from all the shit down here, come fly with us in the perfect blue, might do you some good?”
A retort formed on her lips but she swallowed it when her eyes touched his and found an open invitation instead of the expected hostility. Their play was ignored by the circle around them, the other spectators were too engrossed with the victim at their feet, hypnotised as they were by his bloodied face and pained expression. Thudding feet and a raised voice interrupted flirtation and the morbid appreciation of violence.
“Step aside. Move out the way. C’mon people, give us some room.”
In their silver striped green jumpsuits, the paramedics pushed their way through the ring and dropped to their knees, one on either side of the injured man. It was the one on his left who spoke.

“Hi, my name’s Tom. This is Alison, we’re paramedics, we’re here to help. Looks like you found a spot of trouble. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Ahh, yeah, still a bit dizzy. I was sitting over there on the ledge when I.....”

“Some biker was beating up on his girlfriend. This guy tried to stop it and got smashed. Freakin nuts it was.” One of the teenagers failed to keep his excitement in check and blurted out an event summary. From either side, he received prods of congratulations from his companions, another boy and a girl. All three had multiple piercings and wild hair sticking out in every direction.

“Thanks guys, but we need to talk to.....sorry, what’s your name.”

Staring straight ahead, it took the seated man a moment to appreciate who was supposed to answer, distracted as he was by the visual oddities confronting him, notwithstanding the teen rebels.

“Zane Foster.” The name came to him unbidden, forming out of nothing in his head. He knew it was right, even though the three syllables sounded distant and impersonal. It was a passing concern, his attention had other things to focus on at this point. At first, he took it as part of regaining consciousness, but as the seconds ticked by nothing change. Around the paramedics and the others, he noticed fine needles of light. They were subtle and playful, sliding and spiking along the curves and blunt angles of the bodies around him. Something had happened to his eyes or maybe his brain. Thankfully most of his dizziness had abated. Sharing seemed the right thing to do.

“My vision’s a bit weird. I’m seeing flashes of light.”
“Good man for telling us. You noticed that when you woke up?”
“Yeah, pretty much straight away. I don’t think it’s getting any worse.”
“Ok Zane, I want you to lay down for me. Are you feeling nauseous, lightheaded?”
“There was a bit of dizziness before but it’s gone now. I don’t feel sick.” He listened to and answered the questions as they came, replying honestly as Tom placed a hand behind his neck and eased him back. What point was there in lying? Tom and Alison conferred before announcing it time to leave; they wanted Zane at the hospital where the doctors could check him out. Alison left and returned with a stretcher. With the help of the spectators, they moved Zane onto the plastic cradle before the paramedics took full control. The medicos lifted their patient and negotiated the shifting sand to where the ambulance waited. Lowered to the ground by the cabin entrance, the two paramedics helped Zane to his feet and inside onto a barouche. Each movement was an exercise in pain and a series of groans escaped his mouth as he lay down under directions from Tom. Alison exited and headed around to the driver’s door. Through the open rear he heard voices offering support and rolled his head to one side for a better view.

“I’m going to report those people to the police, don’t you worry. We shouldn’t have to put up with that kind of behaviour! No one’s safe anymore, not even in broad daylight.”

The motley crew had followed them up, hungry bees reluctant to let the nectar go. At the front stood the business woman, an incongruous vision in her suit and sneakers, facial features still marred by fear and disgust. She flinched as a hand came to rest on her shoulder.
“Look after yourself brother.” Calm and dreamy, the male hippie declared his wisdom and gently pulled the woman away in the direction of his partner who stood waiting nearby, her face radiating welcome. Together the three walked off, severing their ties with Zane and his poor fortune. Half hidden by his beard the silent member of the now broken circle ignored their departure; he was caught up in mustering enough courage to address Zane. Having found an adequate store, he mumbled his advice.

“Just be careful where you go sticking your nose son, some people do more than just bite.” Shocked by his forwardness the man deflated and left. Off to the side Zane noticed the teenagers tittering conspiratorially, they were content to drink in the sights and enjoy the show. Two had mobiles out, alternating between snapping shots and no doubt spitting the results out into the net. Satisfied faces said this encounter was a small coup. Tom closed the doors and Zane returned his gaze to the ceiling. Tom positioned some straps over Zane’s chest and legs and tightened them to stop him from rolling off. In the background he heard the engine ignite and soft vibrations spread through the cabin. The ambulance pulled away from the curb and merged with the late afternoon traffic.

More questions came his way and he answered each one during the twenty-minute ride as his pulse and blood pressure were checked. There was nothing in the paramedic’s reaction to say he should be overly worried. Letting his body relax he closed his eyes and found calming distraction in the gentle roll of the ambulance as it rounded corners.

Behind his closed eyelids the striations of light were muted. Tracing their lines formed an impression of the cabin’s interior, including Tom seated on his right. The light in its denuded aspect wove a delicate pattern in counterpoint to his physical discomfort and the slight vibrations infecting his body. Mesmerized by what he saw, his body shed tension and found unexpected peace. He did not give it too much thought and flowed along out of time, content despite his injuries.

The ambulance slowed to a stop and Tom declared their journey at an end. Opening his eyes brought the skating light back into sharp focus; it was stronger and more definite. Throughout the cabin arrows flitted along edges and hugged curves, accenting the interiors jumbled unity. He supposed he should be feeling anxious but he didn’t. The spectacle around him possessed a charm too great to rouse fear.

Strapped securely on the barouche, Zane jiggled in his restraints as the bed slid out the ambulance. Wheeled over concrete fronting the emergency department entrance, he spread his gaze around and found the same spectacle detailed along every visual intersection. Behind him doors closed. Noise replaced noise and the level kicked up a notch. Around him nurses and doctors crisscrossed the floor, walking with purpose, dodging and weaving each other and the anxious visitors of other patients.

A minute later Zane found himself being pushed into a bay. He thanked Tom and Alison before they moved off toward the medical station dominating the department’s central
space. One of the nurses stayed behind, introduced herself and helped Zane out of his clothes and into a gown. Her name was Linda. She was slim and attractive in her own undeniable way. Had his attention not been dominated by the unnatural light show, he would have found the whole experience erotic in that quiet hushed way no one was supposed to admit but everyone was consciously aware of. After helping him onto the hospital barouche, she gave Zane one of those indecipherable looks that said - ‘I’ve just undressed you, seen you naked and that’s perfectly normal. I may or may not have enjoyed the whole experience in a sexual sense but under no circumstances would I acknowledge it either way’ - and pulled the curtains together with a sharp tug. Footsteps receded and he forgot about her altogether. Zane began a detailed study of his surrounds and their altered character, oblivious to the passing minutes.

The whisk of the curtain being drawn back grabbed his interest. Through the opening walked a doctor and nurse - the latter responsible for his undressing. Introductions were offered and the doctor began asking many of the same questions Tom had in transit. He gave near identical answers with a few minor additions, particularly in relation to his vision; a few adjectives that provided a richer description of his altered world.

Sharing his attention between the chart in his hand and Zane’s responses, the doctor nodded. Finished writing, he placed the chart beside Zane’s clothes and stepped forward to inspect his patient. Using a pen torch, he examined Zane’s pupils, flicking the light away and back, frowning and mouthing silent words throughout. Stepping back, he turned to the nurse and shot off some short sharp sentences. He said something Zane took for a goodbye and strode off tapping his chin.

“The doctor thinks it’s a good idea for you to have a CT scan. We need to have a look inside your head to see if there’s been any bleeding from the accident.” Her veneer of professionalism slipped for a second when she mentioned the incident responsible for his injuries. Touches of the vaguest red and violet accentuated the lines and curves constituting her body and disappeared. Their transitory presence formed a question mark in his mind which faded in turn. The nurse continued.

“How’s your pain level? Can you rate it for me, ten being very high and zero being no pain?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe a six or seven, it’s hard to tell.” Truth be told, he’d stopped thinking about his pain. Only her question had brought what he supposed remained back into focus.

“The doctor does not want to influence your physical state to ensure we get a clear picture of what’s currently happening internally. You’ll be having a scan shortly. Once you return we can see about alleviating your discomfort. In a few moments the orderly will arrive and take you to x-ray. Until then, lie down and relax and keep still.” Another elusive expression and the nurse exited.

Privacy restored, he did as instructed. His mind toyed with the expectation of fear and dread. He knew those two emotions well, had spent many a night held in their grip as he contemplated his worthlessness and the wretchedness of life. Right then and there they were seemingly absent. No, they were non-existent. His mood was even. Where were they? Given what he’d just been through and the very real possibility his brain or some other internal organ was leaking blood in a ticking time bomb kind of way, he should be on the edge of hysteria, wailing on the inside and counting down the seconds until excruciating pain
exploded throughout his body and death followed not long thereafter. But no, Mr Wild Rage Violent Mood Swings Constantly Anxious was perfectly calm. Crossing his ankles, he positioned his hands under his head, fingers threaded through his thick mop of hair, unaware of the relaxed picture he painted, pain once more forgotten, swollen eyes a fine contradiction. The calm he felt had freshness to it, a clean feel not at all out of place. At the beach and before, he’d always been one breath away from doubt and anger. They were gone now. He thought about them and nothing happened. Awareness had other fish to fry.

The calm he felt had freshness to it, a clean feel not at all out of place. At the beach and before, he’d always been one breath away from doubt and anger. They were gone now. He thought about them and nothing happened. Awareness had other fish to fry.

The ceiling lights were a spectacle to behold; their edges twinkled and pulsed. Flowing out from the ordered rectangular bars, invisible light splashed down spears of illumination, dazzling his altered visual register. This wasn’t normal, he acknowledged that. What did it matter though when it made everything so damn beautiful. He heard the approach of feet and the clatter of metal parts through the curtain. He smiled in greeting to the orderly who drew back the fabric partition and positioned a wheelchair beside the barouche.

“Hi, my name’s Glenn, I’ll be taking you to x-ray for your scan. Are you ok to get into the wheelchair? I’m more than happy to help if you need me to.” Dressed in two shades of blue, the man exuded a garish sense of enthusiasm.

“No thank you, I’m fine.” Setting his feet on the ground Zane paused to contemplate his reply. He was fine? His puzzling vision aside, he felt good; relaxed and grounded. What of his pain? How many times had that lovely couple put the boot in? Too many, he’d been all too aware of that at the time. Surprise at his light mood and absence of hurt melted away on the instant and he gave the orderly a second smile, which made Glenn’s slacken. The reluctant chauffeur - now somewhat uncomfortable - practiced engrained patience and waited for his cargo to do as required. Zane couldn’t help but grin like a fool and lowered himself into the wheelchair.

“Mind your feet,” said Glenn. Coming around the front he bent over and flicked the foot rests into place.

“Could you hold these please?” Zane was handed a folder which he took.

“Sure.”

“Ok, let’s go.”

Glenn released the brake, backed the chair out and headed towards the exit.

Minutes later they arrived at the x-ray department after taking an elevator ride up one floor and swift passage down a long corridor. Zane took pleasure in the jiggling bounce of both the aged contraption and driver’s haste. Shooting another cheeky grin at the orderly as the fellow said goodbye elicited a mumbled response. Zane thought he heard the word nutjob and wondered who Glenn was referring to. Forgetting the exchange, Zane shifted his attention to his new surrounds and found many others like him waiting their turn to have their picture taken, if not in the ordinary sense. Many and varied were the faces he discovered staring back or into the distance at nothing and no one.

Amused by the choice of sea side panorama’s decorating the walls, he was caught unawares by the touch of soft fingers on his arm. He found a female staff member by his side, bent at the waist to lower her face close to his. She showed no alarm at surprising him and kept her hand in place. From her open expression and the fall of her buttoned blouse Zane felt excitement dance a merry jig. His newfound ease let him return the feeling in full measure. It doused the flames. Sensing his ardour, the woman retracted her hand and straightened her
back. Apparently it was to be given but not returned. He’d noticed the traces of colour accenting her body change the moment she closed the metaphorical door. A link formed in his mind between mood and colour. Around him he saw a rainbow performance, subtle in nature, lending its chromatic weight to the sick and their attendants. Walls, floor, and ceiling shared the gift, their colouration muted and steady, a sympathetic backdrop framing the animated bodies holding his attention. Had it been there before and he’d simply overlooked it; impossible! How could you not notice such a spectacle? Striations of light and planar colour turned the visual world on its head and he sat there well pleased with what he saw.

Things began to shift their position in space and he watched the forms relocate. He was moving. Practiced hands pushed the wheelchair towards and through open double doors situated down an adjoining passageway. Behind him the doors were closed and his chair positioned beside a slim pallet extending out from a large doughnut shaped white machine roughly two metres in height. Evidently this was the CT scanner.

“We need you to lie down on here with your head at this end.” His driver pointed at where the pallet passed under the donut’s arcing mass. Her voice possessed a formal politeness.

“Ok.” Zane complied and began examining the flat ceiling above, its upper limits obstructed slightly by the large curve sweeping above and behind his head. From inside the device energy rays would emit and probe his cranium and reveal the structures hidden within. A faint sense of concern brushed his thoughts. What would the outcome be? Unnatural calm did not stop the deduction his injuries had caused his altered vision, this marvellous spectacle he indulged in, what could be a very serious problem. The possibility rolled itself around in his thoughts, another vagrant drifting through and failing to disrupt his even disposition.

“The scan is sensitive to movement. We need to get a clear picture of what’s happening inside your head so please keep still once that red light comes on.” The nurse indicated an unlit dark plastic casing on the ceiling above. “We’ll let you know when it’s about to start. It won’t take too long. Just remember to stay nice and still.”

Told twice to do the same thing. Her reinforcement was unnecessary; he wanted to facilitate a successful scan. Despite his unflustered state of mind, he desired an all clear verdict. It would be foolish to sabotage this process. His mind remained even and foresight told him the films would show nothing untoward, of that he was quite sure.

“Zane, we’re about to start. Relax and keep your head still.” Her voice came from a speaker, telling him she had left the room. Calmly he let abdominal muscles and intercostals extend and contract. His diaphragm rose and fell, elevating and accommodating the cyclical passage of air in his lungs, the expulsion of carbon dioxide and absorption of oxygen sustaining consciousness. The regular action granted him fullness. The extraordinary lightshow made every fold and intersection too real and redefined the room’s volume, its pulsations falling in synch with his respiratory seesaw. In and through the panorama a high keening sound of no volume joined the score, affecting a permutation of lasting quality. In and out, up and down he floated, listening and observing. Gently it receded and relaxed its degree of captivation, leaving in its wake a token to behold.

“The scan’s finished Zane, you can relax now.”
Who wouldn’t be significantly alarmed, perhaps even driven insane by having their world transformed? Fundamental change strikes deep and raises the questions of place and identity. If what you recognise of the world turns inside out and what is left in its stead has no connection to the accumulation of years that have built up to define experience and form memory, how does and how could an individual cope? Visual hallucination, the reimagining of the seen world has a profound impact on a person’s state of mind. Ubiquitous colour defined Zane’s vision. Gone were the accents and allusions. He confronted a fauvist interior bereft of plain white and stark black.

Paradoxically he regarded it and ingested the terrifying beauty and felt correctness. There was no screaming, internal or external; no deep shock to incapacitate and render the host immobile and dumb. Zane incorporated. What need for the pallid world of his past beside this righteous luxury. This was glory to exult in. He had come home.

There was no point in waiting for a staff member to issue an instruction. On her return the woman who had brought him in found a seated patient ready to leave, his eyes glowing and sporting a modest smile. Won over, she reflected the sentiment and carefully pushed him back out to the waiting area.

“Someone will be here shortly to take you back to emergency. The results will be passed onto the doctor and he’ll discuss them with you.” She looked on the verge of adding something more but stopped. Looking a tad confused, she moved off to find her next patient. Brisk steps saw her wheel an elderly woman towards a different room. He watched the lateral parts of her form fade from oranges and reds to violets and blues. In contrast, her head and medial line extending down to her groin remained shimmering patches of dawn. Under her feet the hard floor glowed a steady blue. When the orderly arrived, Zane paid no heed to the perfunctory comments nor the roll of wheels as they set off; he flowed down a scarlet vein interrupted by splashes of fire in the shape of people and electrical fixtures. Empty space had a translucent quality. Pastel clouds floated freely about, merging and dissipating, a weak soup incapable of detracting from the virulent opacity seen through its dragonfly wings.

Arriving back at the emergency department, he transferred onto the barouche. Caught up in a swell of awe stopped him from speaking thanks to his driver. He neglected his outward appearance too. Zane’s unguarded expression made him appear simple, an odd mix of confusion and shock. The discrepancy waned and he relaxed back into his rapt delight, feeling at peace in his multi-coloured wonderland.

This time the curtains had not been closed giving him greater scope to observe. Zane found the doctor sitting behind a raised desk leafing through sheets of paper, bookended by fellow practitioners. Letting them fall, the medico turned around and stepped over to a light box attached to the wall. From beneath its rectangular bulk he extracted a large envelope resting in a storage slot and pulled out several films which he slid under a lip running along
the upper edge of the box. Switching on the light the doctor began examining the images. Zane averted his vision from the yellow blaze when the bulb ignited. The discomfort lasted only seconds and he was able to bring his gaze back to touch the glow. Yellow had taken the place of white in the gamut of intensity. The beacon extinguished and faded down through the spectrum, merging with wall colour. The doctor removed the film and tucked them inside the envelope. A practiced action returned them to their place of keeping and he paused, lost in thought.

Leaving the man to ponder, Zane scanned the incessant activity cutting across his line of sight; busy nurses strode about, questions and answers abounded in the medical station and worried relatives and friends arrived and left bays. The hustle bustle tickled the soles of his feet and sparked restlessness in his chest. Outside waited a new world, reordered and re-imagined, and he sat in this room waiting for others to decide his fate. His body and mind wanted action for themselves, they needed movement; that stretch and flow and rhythmical dip and rise. He no longer had any concern for his wellbeing; there was nothing intrinsically wrong with him. Wry amusement told him the people in charge here would see things differently if they knew the state of his ocular function. His mirth deepened when he imagined the confession - ‘Ahhh, let’s see, your face is orange and red and your teeth are blue. Now your eyes, they are miniature suns spitting out radiation. And before you ask, yes, the whole damn world looks like I ate a sheet of acid and my brains are fucking melting’. Pointless anyway, considering there was no way for them to confirm he dwelt in a phantasmagorical wonderland, where colours were fusing and fading with each passing moment. Walking out offered no immediate solution, people tended to be fastidious in these places and preferred it when patients followed protocol and respected legalities. If they were taking this long it was a safe bet his skull wasn’t about to explode from a haematoma. There were bigger problems than some guy dazed and confused from yet another beating on the streets of Aura City.

Tense muscles relaxed and his body lost its sense of urgency. The pallid unease washed away, a weak barrier against his newfound calm. Unclenching his hands from the edge of the barouche he brought them up before his face. Their shape was unchanged, broad across the palm so as not to appear feminine, and long fingers, good guitar playing fingers. Instead of white with a touch of pink they were a striking maroon riddled by lines of yellow, orange and red. He stared as the network pulsed with each heartbeat, grading through the triple scale. Clenching and relaxing the flesh sent bright waves coursing outwards, miniature explosions contained inside their mass that faded as the regular pattern of colour reasserted itself. He repeated the process, enthralled and amused by the transformation.

“Mr Foster? I’ve had time to view the results of your CT scan. There is no indication of any trauma to your brain. Your external injuries are only superficial and will heal in time. Earlier on you related to me some discrepancies with your eyesight. Are those still present?”

Zane raised his head and regarded the doctor’s infernal face. Under the scrutiny of twin quasars, the decision to forego disclosure and err on the side of caution seemed perfectly sound logic. Disclosing the phenomenal character of his sight would guarantee a prolonged stay in hospital and more tests.

“No. Over the past hour everything seems to have returned to normal. The flashes of light have stopped.” He had no qualms in lying, no ethical imperative called him to account
for his deception. Awareness told him - ‘Tell them you are fine and get the Neverend out of here before they make the decision for you’. His sensibilities appreciated the wisdom in that thinking. Mistrust and doubt had been ever present in the past. Neither sentiment surfaced as Zane held the stellar gaze that was pulling apart the reply it had received and considering its options.

“I think it would be a good idea if we kept you in for observation overnight, just to be sure nothing has been overlooked. When dealing with head injuries caution is best.” It was a statement full of authority and made every suggestion it would be foolish to do otherwise. Having already made his, Zane showed no hesitation in rebuffing the doctor’s suggestion.

“I don’t think that will be necessary. I appreciate your concern but I feel fine and I’d like to organise my discharge.” His blunt tone was unintentional. The doctor listened to the response and nodded gravely.

“I see. I advise against it, simply, as I have said, to ensure no latent factors have been overlooked. It would unfortunate if you were to suffer a relapse away from medical care. I will give you some time to think the decision over. One of the nurses will be with you shortly.” Zane received one last look designed to dissuade him from making a rash decision. Regaining his solitude, he set about doing nothing and waited for the nurse to arrive, immersed in tinsel town madness.

Fifteen minutes later he exited the emergency department wearing his jeans and hooded jumper with advice to visit his GP the next day. The change in scenery filled him with an intoxicating vigour. Stopping on the footpath, he drank in the stellar spectacle. Breathing deep, he began to laugh, a genuine expression of joy, swimming in the here and now, past and future folding back on themselves. The stars revealed colours he had no names for. What had once been black space variegated between the darkest blue, flares of green and bursts commonly associated with daylight hours. Night was no longer dark; it had become its own terrain unmasked by his optical metamorphosis. Rearing up from the ground the buildings around him assumed similar hues as the walls, ceilings, and floors seen inside the hospital, excepting the instances where light shone out through windows. Whichever structure he spied or feature he noted, nothing retained its historical character, the surrounding landscape greeted him lurid and proud, new things for a new age.

Zane headed for Central Station. Around him a carnival spectacular slid past in either direction, a disjointed herd out to fulfil a myriad of tasks mundane and important by degree. Purring, roaring, growling engines complemented the vivid intensity. Zane let his legs swing and made no inward complaint at feeling the stiff soreness in his ribs. He recalled having limited tolerance for physical ailments and chuckled at his old frail self as if it were an annoying acquaintance of yesteryear. Those few people he passed gave him a second and on occasion third glance, staring at his face. Gentle confusion lifted a hand to touch features and provide understanding. Puffy eye sockets and one cheek likewise afflicted reminded him he was far from an attractive or comforting sight for those people braving the City night.

Only three turns were required to reach his goal. The ambulance had taken him to City Medical, the largest and closest hospital to the beach. Extracting his wallet, he pulled out the multi-ride plas-ticket and read the colourful markings, calculating the number of fares left. Three more. Where would he be now if none of this had happened? Most likely at home playing or writing music, or maybe out drifting between venues searching for something
good? They were strange endeavours when the world stood naked and raw, an inviting parlour demanding attention. This admission did not stop him from passing under the enormous electronic board listing arrivals and departures on his way to platform seven and his ride home. Zane failed to notice his fingers pressing and plucking at phantom strings as he walked.

Old habits and a new self. Reminiscing about who he had been seemed natural enough, the link existed and was still fresh. He knew his name, where he lived, and that he was a musician. Pushing further out and stretching awareness to grasp more of him - his identity - yielded little to nothing. There were things there but when he tried grasping them they slipped through his fingers; it was like being an old man fumbling with loose memories of a young boy riding his bike down a laneway, dust floating in the air, clouding recall. He thought it a little strange, but it lacked emotional weight, so he let it pass and resumed his study of the transformed station.

The platform held a few evening passengers waiting for their transport to arrive. A young family stood quietly beside one of the cold metal benches provided for patrons. From their posture, he recognised discomfort. Further up the platform lounged a cluster of young men. Their tight jeans, bulky shoes and patterned shirts indicated a particular mindset. Certainty formed when he counted off nothing but brilliant yellow orange bald heads and heard snippets of crass banter. He laughed openly regarding the red faces sneering and guffawing and received a glance or two for his trouble; they would not appreciate being seen thus. Zane stopped halfway between the family and skinheads and sat down, oblivious to the hard surface beneath his rump.

From the corner of his eye he noticed the family whispering in hushed tones. They cast furtive glances around him at the mob. The second take allowed him to appreciate their cultural identity. Modest clothing and demeanour told him they were connected to a heritage at odds with supremacists. He imagined the caramel skin concealed by his fantastic vision and its potential, in this situation, of causing them untold grief. The misanthropes were aware of the family and being observed by them was unacceptable. As one they sauntered down the platform, more than one foot clipping Zane on their way toward the cringing family. From the massed congregation emerged a particularly hulking man wearing a vest over a snug T-shirt. The mob halted a bare metre from their prey.

“Munch, munch, munch. That’s all I ever see your kind doing, so what’s the story? Where’s the curry Kumar? You off to get some now, eh?” Coarse laughter rose up behind him. “You know what really pisses me off, like really gets under my skin? Come on! Have a guess, or ya just too chicken shit? Not surprising. All a ya a bunch a cowards. Well, I’ll tell ya anyway. You could call it a bit of free advice from one of your betters. You ready?.... Nothing? No reply. Fucking typical, probably can’t understand a single word I’m saying, can ya? Ok, nod if you u-n-d-e-r-s-t-a-n-d w-h-a-t I a-m s-a-y-i-n-g.” His blunt lumpy head stabbed the air and the family members leant back under a blast of hot breath - what appeared to Zane as a translucent cloud of red and violet - disgust and fear compacting their bodies. Carefully the father nodded, afraid the required action would somehow offend rather than please his tormentor.

“Well done little fella! Three cheers for Kumar boys!” His followers obliged and let out three deafening roars of approval, attracting attention from other platforms.
Thoughts swirled inside his head. Words popped to life and rolled out in lines, one after the other, something belonging to him:

*Inside inside, see the centre*
*See the walls, so distant, far and wide.*
*What can we find within within*
*Empty space, such disgrace.*
*What to do, what to do?*
*When a robot lifts a hand*
*Raised and curled, fingers curled.*
*Empty space seeks to gain*
*To stand above, to crush, to crush*
*A different face, such disgrace.*

Unhurried, Zane left his seat and crossed the gap separating him from the mismatched confrontation. At first his presence went unnoticed. Pressing himself into the minimal gap between the family and their tormentor ended his anonymity and made the leader pause, confusion lining the broad forehead. Zane regarded this grotesquery that stared at him and began to doubt demons were creations of fiction. The misshapen rectangle pulsed red and orange, and yellow eyes let off sparks.

“Fuck off gimp!” He spat out the command and shoved Zane aside. Nuisance dealt with, he turned back to his sport. “Now Kumar, here’s my advice. Up north, way, way across the water there’s this hole of a place that’s your home. In that filthy place there’s one thing you can always be sure of, they never run out of the hot stuff. Shit, no matter which street you walk down, you can find stinking pots of the brown muck just sitting there.” He spread his arms wide to emphasise the breadth of his imaginary landscape and received hoots of support from the clone army standing behind him. “And there’s ONE more thing you need to remember, this place here is ours; mine, my boys and all the rest of the fine white folk that live here. YOU DON’T BELONG!” Each of the last three words coincided with a finger stab punching the father’s chest. Behind the Neanderthal a pack of leering faces pressed up close, fighting amongst themselves for the best vantage point, hissing and spitting at the family and spurring their captain on.

Zane regarded the rearing gallery, a pounding red wall of sadistic glee whose sights were locked on the huddled family cringing under their collective hate. Around them the air had condensed and lost some of its transparency, blurring the station beyond. Nonplussed by the excessive display, Zane surged forward and reclaimed his original position beneath the great beast’s chin. Invigorated, the monster appeared on the verge of upgrading his jabs on the father to punches when Zane interrupted his play.

“I thought I told you to fuck off you right ugly piece of shit!” He examined the disruption to his fun and games. “Oh, I see; get a load of this boys! We’ve got ourselves a curry lover, one of those pathetic do gooders out to save the world. Well, you’re not going to save this lot. Take a hike before I set the dogs on you.” The canines made the appropriate animal sounds, pumped fists and stamped feet in readiness. One brought its blemished
pierced face too close, teeth snapping together a centimetre from Zane’s cheek. Its head went back and howled animal satisfaction.

Having shared his gaze between the family’s plight and the thirsty animals, Zane sought out and locked eyes with their general. An appetite within him had bubbled to the surface and given direction where a moment before he was acting naively. He let his vision penetrate the man’s ocular cavities. He acted with purpose, wading into the garish recesses that were pumping out so much hate. Past the yellow blaze colour changed, as he charted a course along nerves to the fatty tissue driving the monster. Contact sent electrical jolts in the reverse direction, making Zane twitch. There was no thought given to danger or retreat. Seeing the bruised fool remain in situ, the general eased back a touch and braced himself to unleash the first blow and strike down this whelp so he could resume the critical task of social terror. Only a single consonant escaped his mouth in the form of a garbled G before his face contracted and the word froze on his tongue. Muscles reached their threshold and held his face in a sickening state, giving the impression of deep pain. The skin folds around his eyes and nose buckled, creating steep contours, silently declaring his abjection. The animals behind him slowly realised something was amiss; their general had not issued his final command. Stuck in a holding pattern, they floundered. Heads were quick to look about in search of someone, anyone to tell them what to do. One courageous soldier overcame his confusion and mumbled the man’s name, softly at first and then with greater need.

“Tex?”
“TEX?”

Disconnected and isolated, Zane hovered inside the man’s skull, a novice dabbling in the arts of a master, unaware he transgressed. He sensed more than saw a maelstrom. Fiery hues and tempest winds thrashed in the enclosed space, a seductive display lunging at the intruder. Repulsion reaffirmed his separateness. Easing back, he distanced himself from the storm and consolidated his position as a spectator. Freed from the risk of being absorbed, he felt a different attraction, to prod and poke. Examining the madness, he discerned clusters that resembled knots, their forms pulsing and changing colour, things angry and livid. Innocently he extended out toward one knot - with what he had no idea - touching the tangled mass. It convulsed and threads writhed and snapped apart. He continued, moving from one knot to the next, performing the same naive surgery. Reaching the last mass, he watched it uncoil when touched. Instinctively he retreated from his handiwork and regarded the total structure, its network of lines no longer complicated by snarled tangles. The storm had lessened but remained active. An elastic pull drew his awareness away and back along the nerves to the outside world.

The space immediately beside his head was now empty. A gap of several feet separated him from the animal pack. Every head was bowed and he looked to find what held their attention. Lying flat on the platform, apparently unconscious, was their general. A question mark formed in Zane’s mind and vanished. This was the result of his handiwork. The experience had left behind a strange residue numbing his insides. Gradually he acknowledged the babble of noise coming from every direction. Beside him the animals remained still, their mouths closed. Opposite them he noticed the family removing themselves from the scene. They too were quiet. Extending his search a full three hundred and sixty degrees to the other platforms, he discovered a handful of people staring in his
direction, aware of the volatile situation and waiting to see how it would pan out. From what he could see no one was talking, their attention caught up in watching the confrontation. Who was making the noise? It seemed to be coming from every direction with no breaks or interruptions.

Zane found no more time to contemplate this puzzling anomaly. Down the tracks came the train, screeching on the line, semi-transparent scarlet clouds rising along its sides. Its arrival snapped the animals from their trance. Together they knelt around their fallen leader and picked him up. In a tightly clustered group they headed off the platform and out the station, their crowns leaking subdued violet streamers. A few people watched them leave and cast uncertain looks back at Zane. The family had disappeared.

Fatigue washed over him as he boarded the train. He inserted his ticket into the scanner and took a window seat in a corner alcove at the back, facing the direction the train would travel. His drowsy eyes watched the handful of people pass through the door while he waited for the train to depart. The mechanical doors closed and declared it time to leave. He paid scant attention to the ludicrous aspect of the world about him, accustomed as he was to yellow, orange and red skin, green and blue walls, and those other nameless colours defining people, objects and space. A scant hour had passed since he left the hospital and change continued unabated, his mind incorporating each development. Inspecting the faces and advertisements decorating the train’s interior, the confrontation on the platform receded into the past. Using an invisible baton to conduct the structure of a man’s mind seemed almost normal, something he was simply capable of doing. The constant rumble of noise, like indistinct voices, continued unabated. Up and down the aisle passengers sat isolated and silent, either listening to music or reading, there were no two’s or three’s or four’s sitting together engaged in conversation. Suspicion rose of its own accord, it seemed strange lights and pretty colours were just the beginning. Fatigue snowballed down the hillside and caught up with him. Powerless to fend it off, he tumbled head over heels and lost consciousness.
Driving his finger down, President Armand Keller ended the call, seized the luxurious hardwood desk by its edge and froze. One long minute passed before he began tracing the intricate patterns in the timbers grain, the convoluted twists and curves Muilon hardwood was famous for; the same pathways his thoughts navigated dealing with this latest provincial uprising. The Unions strength came from its common sense of purpose and shared ideals. Shockingly in what seemed like a blink of an eye, it had vanished and become a thing long dead; Arcadian fantasy. It sat in his mind fat and heavy, that one decision a year before; the order for military intervention in an insignificant Eastern province where some lunatics had gained a foothold and raised a banner calling for revolution and an end to corporate plutocracy.

Abruptly he spun to the right and stood, leaving behind the artificial security granted by his organic plinth. Of the two heads in attendance one swung and followed his movement, the other held its steady focus on empty space. Orientated towards the Muilon block, the men were seated a mere arm’s distance apart. Neither acknowledged the other’s presence, which made contact unlikely; unless of course some vaguely justifiable opportunity arose to choke the enemy. Blank masks were the order of the day for these visitors. The older man watched the President cross the marble floor, hard soled shoes clicking with each step, bypassing couches and bookshelves to reach the room’s far end and its panoramic windows. Outside Aura City stared back, dazzling lights illuminating the urban topography beneath the moon’s silvery glow.

Following suit, the older man eased forward in his chair, levered himself upright and ambled after the President. He stopped several metres short of the Union Leader, sensing Keller’s need for breathing space.

Behind them the third party sat patiently, ignoring the President’s agitation. His features had forgotten their need for austerity and were much animated, reflecting the alacrity of his mind. Discord in the Union came as no surprise to him and the escalating problems were a bonus. They’d been encouraged of course, hoped for, absolutely, and now, warmly embraced. Elongate fingers began dancing on antique wooden arms, delicate pink flesh and clear manicured nails tapping a merry tune, the frustration wafting off Keller their inspiration.

Closing his eyes, he let the percussion roll on and the volume increase as he sunk into the rhythm and drove it on, seeking refinement and heightened pleasure from the President’s discomfort.

“Deacon, for the love of Zesus, stop it!” The words were flung out the window, a Presidential cry of deep frustration lashing more than its immediate target. Snuffed in an instant, the outburst roused the old man’s baser instincts. Positioned between the antagonists, loyal beyond question to the President, the wizened figure longed for more. What joy it would bring him to see Prime Advocate Deacon verbally lambasted and reduced to a snivelling mess. Charged with monitoring and ensuring the upper echelon of Union
Government came to no harm, Argyle Riley, the Domain Keeper, had no love for the ‘monster’ taking its ease drumming out piano concertos on the vintage wooden chairs that had belonged to the President’s father.

Riley knew more about the many Advocates than all the media outlets combined. Every nauseating indulgence and carefully concealed secret did not escape his watchful eye. They were recorded on Domain’s mainframe, and in Deacon’s case, the affiliations which had propelled his career into the stratosphere to reach the number two position in the Union hierarchy. He grunted sourly at that thought, it was a half-truth. What citizen of the Union, even in its most far flung provinces, did not know about Prime Advocate Deacon’s close industry ties, notably the connections between the Ministries top official and the Helix Corporation. There in the public sphere rumours took control, whereas for Riley, cold hard facts stared him in the face and declared Hector Black, Helix Corp. owner and Chairman, the mastermind shuffling the deck, placing pieces adroitly and facilitating Deacon’s ascendance and iron clad grip on the Ministry. Disturbingly there were no laws against corporate support for Advocates, a matter Riley had lobbied unsuccessfully to have changed many times. Noting the Presidents back expand, Riley cleared his mind and waited, and for the umpteenth time was reminded why his loyalty rested at this man’s feet.

“What is the Ministry doing to allay the public’s fear that Government has become nothing more than an ancillary arm of private industry? If the current trend continues, we’ll be dealing with multiple rebellions in the outer provinces inside the year. Give it two more and there will be civil war, the Union turning in on itself. Who knows what the ramifications for the outer settlements might be? One hundred million kilometres separates us from Ulum and Pliot, where the hue and cry for self-governance grows steadily stronger. Thankfully our influence over the lunar colonies has not diminished. Perhaps these developments are something you deem unavoidable, acceptable even?.......You have never struck me as being particularly egalitarian.” Mid speech Keller turned his back on the evening spectacle Spire One’s lofty height afforded him and retraced his path to stand beside his seat. One hand atop the backrest, he waited for Deacon’s response.

“Your allusion is misplaced Armand. The ties between industry and Government have always been close and will continue to be so. Prudence decrees as much. These men and women sit atop vast mountains of wealth without which the Union would never have ventured out past its planetary orbit. Those sitting on the slopes far below can do nothing more than conjure fanciful conspiracies depicting the Ministry as nothing more than a corporate pawn. If I ignored the oligarchs and let them maraud unchecked within the system, the seat of power would have another home, and you Mr President, would be shackled to your phone, a puppet in truth.”

“How very educational of you Deacon. Most days I barely remember my name, let alone the position I hold. If it weren’t for my assistants, I seriously doubt I’d be able to function beyond wiping my arse and brushing my teeth.” Keller fixed Deacon in his sights, the slivery swaths of hair at his temples an advertisement of authority and wisdom. “We are not in the business of accepting public perception. The question remains constant Prime Advocate; what is being done to convince the masses their representatives are not slavishly haunting the corridors of trans-continental corporations, picking muffin crumbs from the
polished floors after the plutocrats have sauntered by?” Drawing his seat out, Keller settled in for the long haul, his blunt gaze holding in its sight rare and unruly prey.

Meeting the challenge head on, Deacon returned the compliment; piercing green irises rebuffing the offensive and counter-attacking in good measure. He did not rush, and made his adversary wait, unfazed he might appear lost and scrambling for response; the petty criminal caught red handed with fingers in the cookie jar.

“Who to appease Keller? The little ones digging in the dirt, nary having basic mastery of their own language, the world beyond their noses a foreign land shrouded in frightening and abstract visions, or the brilliant moguls building the Union around us, expanding our horizons and setting us free. There is a price for all things and sacrifices need be made. So, there are no vidclips of you playing on the bedroom walls of sweet fifteen-year-old girls? In your stead, they worship Beatle Neck Spell and Ben Jackson. Are my cheeks wet; you think I mourn your absence? Is that all you think of Keller, being celebrated? You’re a glorified manager juggling the interests of those who have the real power. Thinking differently will land you in all sorts of unfortunate trouble.”

“As to your bemoaning of discord in the backwaters, when has there not been a dissident voice attacking the system crying foul in the dead of night? Squash them hard Keller, show your authority and let them taste the mastery you so covet. The Ministries pathetically under resourced PR department is not the tool you need here, you are the President of the Union, the grandest empire in recorded history. Shed that softly, softly skin of yours and give the masses something to fear, someone to adore, and then you will hear the sound of excited giggling as the young gaze up in adoration as you stand proud and deliver another heroic speech against the backdrop of pink and lavender paint.”

Riley found it excruciating listening to Deacon’s drivel. The supreme egotist deftly toyed with words and circumvented direct questions, spewing out his special brand of good old fashioned hot air; trademark political gymnastics. Individuals who possessed monstrous intellect spoke with a gilded tongue, threading allusion and suggestion into seemingly mindless babble. Deacon was their shining light, the poster boy for the art galleries of Avenue One and their High Conceptualist manifestoes.

“Teenage girls? A particular obsession of yours Deacon? Any other confessions you care to make? We’ll have to take a closer look at what you’ve been up to and see where the gravy trail leads.” Standing beside the President’s desk, Riley bent forward, found support on its edge and levelled his weary gaze at the Prime Advocate. “Can you recall the last time you gave a direct answer? There’s no press corps in here, you fool!”

“Easy Keeper.” Hovering in the air not far from Riley’s face, the President’s raised hand reinforced the message and his trusted aide retreated, showing Deacon his back. “Heavy handed tactics will only incite the situation, and as such your suggestion is absurd Prime Advocate, we would have a full-blown rebellion on our hands. Perhaps this once you speak the truth. Do you covet my position so, that you no longer make the slightest effort to conceal your desire?” The President’s hands spread apart, inviting a response.

From his reclined position, the Prime Advocate showed no unease and did not respond. Instead, he shared his measured gaze between the two men, the impediments blocking his destiny. They would fall eventually, possibly sooner rather than later;
circumstances were slowly working in his favour, largely thanks to his primary supporter. Impatience now would jeopardise years of careful orchestration; ego driven folly was for the younger men in the world.

“Tell me then Keller, what will you do? If asserting authority is fraught with danger and repercussion, your position is essentially redundant. Presidential power equates with presidential impotence. A ruse sold to the populace, one it would seem you have embraced wholeheartedly. With that in mind, outline your sagacious plan so I can identify my role and help steer this wayward ship back on course.”

Having shed his frustration, Riley stepped around to stand beside the President’s chair, the wise grandfatherly figure once more, and took up where his charge had left off.

“Side step as many times as you deem necessary Deacon, all positions are clear and the watchers watch. If sufficient evidence is uncovered, there will be no plea bargain, no political cover-up; the hounds will hunt blood, your scent stinking the air. In the meantime, you still need to fulfil your duties; you are the Union’s Prime Advocate, responsibility dictates action on your part. Gather your lackeys and those under your thumb, formulate strategy, alert the media and begin a multi-platform attack. The public must choke on the message; government policy is not formulated by corporate heavyweights. This is now your focus, all other Ministerial matters are of secondary importance. I don’t feel I can be any clearer. This has been officially mandated by Presidential decree. The directives have been forwarded to the Ministry.”

Ice picks crawled up Deacon’s back, white hot anger penetrated bones and boiled marrow. Externally he smirked, the only indicator Riley’s words had had any effect. To be told and summarily ordered into action bore a hole straight through his forehead, clove his brain apart and smashed a exit out his cranium, inviting all and sundry come hither, tinker and toy, play tunnel ball with a friend. That it came from a geriatric, ex-alcoholic riddled with arthritis, put the icing on the cake.

“You know how much I value clarity Keeper. The Ministry has so very little to do, implementing your directive will give it some purpose.” Deacon stood elegantly, buttoned his grey silk jacket, brushed at his arms and let them drop, unconcerned they hung unused beside his legs. “Our friends on Avenue One won't be best pleased when the airwaves start decrying their wicked influence on the government. I hope your office is prepared for the polite requests for clarification it will receive. Shock horror, there may even be the odd voice raised in anger. The corporate sector tends to be somewhat protective when it comes to their public image. Good day.”

The Prime Advocate vacated the President’s office, leaving the two men staring at the door, both rolling through the various permutations likely to confront them in the coming days.

“As good as can be expected, I suppose?” Leaning to his right, Keller stared pensively at the closed doorway. Snapping upright, he turned and addressed the man responsible for his ongoing safety. “He rose so quickly through the ranks. I’ve examined and re-examined every promotion he received and every victory he won, there was never a chance for us to derail the Deacon Express. Undoubtedly a thing of beauty; no overlooked communication records or tongues ready to wag, nothing; everything on the level so to speak. And still, ask anyone,
high or low - ‘How did Michelangelo Deacon rise to power?’ - and you'll get the same answer...”

“.....on the back of Hector Black.” Head locked forward, the Keeper spoke the name belonging to the centenarian working tirelessly in the shadows to bring democracy to its knees and install Michelangelo Deacon as a corporate controlled despot.

“Please Riley, sit down, you make my knees ache just looking at you.”

Grunting, the elder of the two complied and made his way back to the marginal comfort of an antique armchair.

“You looked worried old friend? What’s on your mind?”

“You manage to hold onto your humour Armand. That is a good thing, considering what lies ahead. He will be the death of us I fear; his ambition authorises everything for him. Nothing is ethically suspect for a mind that places complete power at the apex of moral virtue.”

“We have our difficulties before us Keeper, that much is true, but assassination? You judge him that far gone?”

Riley’s bent posture reinforced the fragility that had wheedled its way into his body over the past decade, attacking joints and debilitating a previously stout constitution. He bore the discomfort without complaint, he knew where the blame lay.

“Deacon will go as far as necessary to secure his desire. It will be achieved circumspectly, as was done with his elevation; meticulous sleight of hand and nothing linking the victor to his crimes. Assuredly other hands will dirty themselves for him, advancing their own agenda in the process. What remains unclear is how and when, not if. Things have progressed too far and the industry captains salivate for more. I hazard they merely wait for an opportune event, something to run with, a catalyst to spark the firestorm.”

“What do we do? Sit and wait? Arrest Deacon on trumped up charges? I need your direction on this one Keeper, my mind rests heavy on the provincial unrest. Having to sit and stare at the man who would brush me aside and turn the Union into a dictatorship boils my blood!”

Riley straightened his frame and stroked the aged wood beneath his fingers, ignoring the President’s emotion.

“They are one and the same; we cannot separate Deacon’s longing for Presidential glory and the growing resentment in the minor provinces. Tackling one affects the other; we must have a coordinated approach to the situation lest our efforts collide and aid the enemy. We must label him thus now and those he represents, it can no longer be smoothed over or sugar coated. Domain has been watching and seen very little. We know the Blacks are the driving force behind Deacon and therefore what is taking place in Ortakia and Velstrade. Specifics are vague; they like to keep their activity behind closed doors. Efforts are being made to confound their plans, but as you are aware our success has been limited. Who do we approach, obstruct, take into custody; we have but two sitting in Domain cells giving us nothing. Money and weapons appear in the hands of those attacking the established order. The former circulates and buys cooperation while the later eliminates those rare cases of resistance. The smaller provinces are beginning to fall. Civil war is not an idea nor a possibility belonging to the future; already its dark clouds are massing on the horizon and the first peals of thunder can be heard.”
The elder of the two men dropped his eyes and stared at his weakened knees, horrified by the situation he laid before the President. Knuckles tightened around the intricately carved wood and relaxed, the pain fading in response.

“Our methods are too pure. To watch, however carefully, respecting virtue and refusing to tread heavily upon the individual leaves us vulnerable. We can see that plainly enough now; the eye no matter its size, if not coupled with the fist will only deter the snakes for so long. Legal consequence and public disgrace are fighting a losing battle.”

Riley’s insistent face took on an uncomfortable mien; sighting a proposition he had not the stomach for and was nonetheless impelled to entertain.

“We stand at a crossroads Mr. President. They force themselves upon us every so often and determine the course we travel. Your very public stance against the heavy-handed tactics employed by the state under McCormack and those before him earned you unprecedented popularity, but it has also, over time, emboldened the militants to crawl out from under their rocks and start throwing stones. Now these Union outposts with corporate support are ready to take it up a notch and we look on, hands tied, ideologically bound, our recourse to action of a very definite nature - sever funding, cut the supply lines, prosecute if and when legally gathered evidence identifies a crime. To date, we have managed remarkably well, though it is now clear our enemies have decided the time is ripe for a secondary push. They have tested our defences and received nothing more than a rap on the knuckles in return. Deacon is more than ready to publicly mount a challenge. I fear our internal and external systems are facing more than a mere test. The knives are sharpening Mr. President.”

“You suggest a return to the old ways Keeper?”

Abandoning his study of the floor, Riley met the President’s incredulous face and frowned deeply, not at the champion who had restored his faith in life and order; rather, at his tepid logic rationalising barbarism as a valid option.

“No. The savages won’t tempt us with their fire and sticks. It would be our undoing.”

“Then we stay the course old friend. Widen the network, train more Analysts, strengthen the legal department. It is well within my charter to increase Domain’s funding. Grayson can recruit more into the security forces; defence and protection are not the same as a raised hammer. We know where the army turns for guidance, which needs redressing, though exactly how continues to elude me? At least it has not gone so far the Generals would ignore a Presidential order.”

“I find it hard to blame them. They are warriors trained for battle and we turned them into the world’s largest concentration of gun toting engineers flown around the globe to mend bridges and build houses for the impoverished. Try and find one who hasn't daydreamed of blowing our brains out?”

“It isn't that bad Keeper. They resent us, true enough, but the wound will heal. Time is our friend in that regard. The Honourarium is tomorrow and top brass will be in attendance. Perhaps I can use the event to our advantage; an opening to build a bridge of our own. Something must be done, the number of Provinces requesting army aid continues to grow.”

Riley regarded the President, his features carefully neutral. The Honourarium presented its own set of variables to contend with, not the least the supposedly secret affair Keller had plunged into. Sure enough Emerald Green was a remarkable beauty, but not one Riley would have chosen to stand at the President's side. She headed New Light Recordings,
the music industry behemoth. His analysts described her as an ambitious, ruthless executive who’d shown great acumen in manipulating musicians and the market to dominate the opposition. Not the type Keller should find appealing. What purpose in judging attraction, it was pointless. The cerebral ideal can and will collapse in on itself when sublime contradiction walks through the door. Perhaps he could hope for a lasting stable relationship and turn the unlikely couple into this generation’s paragon of virtue and fidelity.

“That’s better Keeper, it’s good to see you smile. Strange, but good.”

Levering himself up, Riley stretched his joints and they cracked in protest. He offered a farewell and made for the door, grinning as he went. Discipline reasserted control and he swept detritus aside to begin assessing security checklists, comfortable adequate measures were in place for tomorrow's orgy of self-congratulation. Mentally reviewing the award schedule, he saw Emerald's name on the list and began chuckling; it was to be a free for all.

Having followed the Keeper to the door, the President watched unsteady legs carry his confidante down the corridor. Unexpectedly he noticed the stooped back begin to shake and heard what seemed like muffled laughter. Perturbed, he drew back into the room and scratched his head. Had he ever seen the Keeper laugh before? A smile and laughter? The world was indeed turning upside down. Back at the window, he resumed his study of Aura City and felt acid climb its way back up his throat.
Movement stopped and so did the lulling vibrations. Zane stirred from his slumber and groaned. His head and lower back ached. Sitting up, he rest both hands on his thighs and breathed deep till his lungs filled. Discomfort forgotten, he glanced out the window and read the station sign. Acknowledgement yanked him off his seat and towards the already closing door. Throwing his hands out to either side, he braced the halves, squeezed through the gap and overbalanced. Stumbling onto the platform, he barely avoided landing flat on his face and felt the hot flash of attention from those standing nearby. Equilibrium quickly returned. He examined the others moving off, their show of interest forgotten lest the oddball should find offense.

Around him every face and body shone the same luminous white, their contours defined by shards and slithers of grey and black. Bounding the forms was the same brilliant light and contrasting definition. Above the night sky had managed an inversion and the stars twinkled black......the colours were gone. His perceptions had been transposed to reveal a winter wonderland. His frame of reference shimmered and sparkled and his skin tingled. An upwelling of feeling marked his awareness of change, direct and palpable. Held captive by a reconfigured world, his feet remained fixed to the concrete underfoot. Eased intensity restored his powers of observation and he noticed a few stragglers now static, spellbound by his odd stillness. Lifting his left and then his right foot, he moved off and broke the spell holding those around him.

Walking amidst the commuters, Zane headed out through a tunnel splitting the station building in two. Having overshot his destination by a single stop, the distance back was of no concern. As he moved, he listened to the thoughts of those around him. ‘freaks everywhere nowadays, the world’s going straight to Neverend’, ‘they should have better security on the platforms, what if that weirdo had a gun, he looks the kind to do something crazy’, ‘jan will get a good laugh out of this one, what a loony tune’. Brought up short, Zane listened while the feet of those passing by on either side scuffed concrete. More unspoken thoughts could be heard aside from those people surrounding him, though not as distinct. Straining his mind, he ranged even further out - how far remained unclear - discerning faint voices. What came through made no sense; there were tonal differences among the words and the sentences were garbled. No thought was given to how he was doing what he did; no one pondered how a brain heard things, it just did.

Mobile once more, he reached the street and began the short walk home listening to the internal banter of those passing by in their cars, each headlight a cosmic black hole inviting annihilation. He had become a human receiver picking up thought near and far. Not for a moment did he think this absurd. Each of his transfigurations entailed a casual acceptance. There was nothing in what he did now that was not as it should be, it had to be this way. He appreciated his frame of mind had not accommodated the changes; it was
undergoing a series of fundamental modifications, rendering his total being as manifestly different. Thus, his actions and perceptions were anything but remarkable. The caterpillar stuffed itself stupid and wove a cocoon to reinvent itself. Inside that place one thing become another, feeding on itself to contravene the past. Zane’s head swam and he remembered a stream of blows and a pressure from without, a time of heat and pain when the two aligned to rip open a refuge for consciousness; and a return, one which had brought with it irrevocable change.

Twenty minutes later he climbed the steps to his third-floor flat. He had lived there for the past two years in relative peace, entertaining the occasional guest and once even hosting a small party. Unlocking the door, he headed straight for the kitchen to satisfy his hunger awakened on the walk home. Opening the pantry door, he located the rice and got it cooking on the stovetop. Grabbing an egg from the fridge he whisked it up and heated the wok. Pouring in a splash of oil he swirled it around to coat the metal. A hot mist told him it was smoking and he poured in the thick fluid. It hissed and bubbled and the edges puffed. Folding it over he moved it to the centre of the wok and gave it a flip.

He negotiated the visual landscape with ease. Every nuance of shape and texture was given form and feeling by a white scale of infinite variation. Black touched the edges, present then absent in fleeting caresses only to reappear and ghost away once more. Reaching above his head, he removed a bowl from the cupboard and placed it beside the stove top. Picking up the wok, he tipped it over and slid the egg into the first bowl and set it back down on the stove and turned off the flame. Moving over to the fridge, he opened the door and bent down to find the tofu. His movements picked up speed in haste to complete the preparations before the rice was ready. Three thick slices of soft curd were cut from the block and diced. He threw the cubes into the reheated wok and doused the sizzling morsels with honey and soy. Whooping in delight, he stepped back to avoid being spat upon. Flicking his wrist that held the wok sent its contents up and over and tumbling back down to strike potent metal.

Glancing at the time on the clock elicited a curse and he removed the pot containing the rice from its heat source and lifted the lid. An aggressive cloud of steam roiled up and dissipated, softening the air. Dropping the heat down to low on the wok he smothered the tofu with rice and added the egg. Spatula in hand, he dug deep and mixed the three, an eager hungry glow radiating out from his eyes. Splashing in some fish and oyster sauce and a dash of sesame oil, he continued folding and turning and added the final ingredient, a handful of bean sprouts.

Picking up the bowl he’d whisked the egg in, he filled it, grabbed some chop sticks and adjourned to the couch, flicking on the TV out of habit. Blindly watching the tube, he set the bowl down on the coffee table, chop sticks carefully placed side by side atop the rice, his appetite gone. Leaning back into the couch, his mind tuned itself to the world outside. Naively he separated flows and voices filled his head.

"......if I knew this was going to happen I would have....what! what would’ve you done you damn fool! nothing makes sense. i feel like a brain dead idiot, a fucking robot! there’s no going back....."

"......tomorrow when she asks for help she’s in for a big surprise. i’ll look her straight in the eye and let her know how i really feel, what i’m going to do and where she can stick it!"
YES! brilliant, perfect, i can’t wait to see the look on her face, it's going to be priceless, whooo....

......we’ll need to get more glue in the morning for those pictures, the kids are going to use a ridiculous amount if they do two each.....

........why can’t they just leave me alone? i’m sick and tired of them asking me ten million questions every time i ask to do anything. i wish for once they’d trust me. they’re so paranoid.....

........how many more days of this am i going to be able to handle? when is it going to end? i can’t see an end, the only thing i can see is more of the same, day in day out. what am i going to do?.....

......he was so nice to me yesterday, maybe he does like me just like amber said? i don’t know if i can trust her though, she’s always making things up. i don’t want to make a fool of myself again, not like last time. but the way he smiled at me, it wasn’t a normal smile. you don’t smile at someone like that just to say hello; do you? maybe i should.....

The voices rolled on, combining and overlapping, a constant flood saturating the air, open to his mind, and all he had to do was listen. Offhand thought made him press outwards and create what he took for a kind of mirror, reflecting the voices back the way they’d come. A feeling akin to fatigue spread throughout his body and made its way down his limbs. He watched the people on TV caught up in their games and found it very strange. Neither of his hands moved from his lap as he fumbled with the remote sitting on the cushion beside him. He found the power button and switched off the weird machine. Heavy eyelids sagged and as they fell, he wondered how anyone could sleep when the world shone so white. Darkness seemed a thing of the past. His body sank deeper into the couch and he fell asleep.

He walked on a barren landscape. Ground and sky were mirror images, places of silver where nothing grew. Far in the distance they met a line of pure light, interrupting the uniformity. Rotating around, he followed the line and charted a perfect circle. Twin halves joined by photons. It confused his mind and threatened a vertiginous fall.

No longer did he stand alone. At intermittent points in the faultless terrain he spotted umanoid shapes the same illusive colour as their surrounds. Differentiation came from light bending and folding around their bodies. Contained and feral, the bounded shapes shimmered, straining their shells, resenting the distinction between ground, sky and bounded form. The bodies multiplied, decreasing the space separating him from those already present. The closest stood no more than twenty metres distant. Beneath his feet the ground shook, and above the sky trembled, or was it the other way around? More bodies appeared, filling gaps and obscuring the line that separated up from down.

Again. This time space vibrated and the appearance of more bodies placed silver umanoids within arm’s reach of where he stood. Temptation tickled his fingers, a desire to touch the glistening surfaces brought so close, too close to his position of separation. In quick
succession the remaining empty space filled, and the planes and curves of his body met silver flesh. The contact revealed the lunar glow of his own form and a frantic desire to run and escape welled up inside. It was too late. The chance had come and gone. Greater pressure squeezed his body, emptying his lungs. The multiplication escalated. On and on it grew until the balloon burst.

Sleep terminated. He opened his eyes. Through the open window he could see the sun, its blackness surrounded by unmarked darkness. His memory of sleep brought with it a lingering sense of attenuation. He felt strangely thinner, less definite. Taking in the latest alteration to his world reinforced the sensation. Broken up by shades of black, the objects inhabiting his flat kept their identity and gained familiarity. If it were not for the white flashes caressing edges and rounding corners, homogeneity would dominate. Calm held sway over his emotions, but he knew their time was drawing to a close, something else loomed on the horizon, a new transaction for him and the here.

Swinging his head, he stared at the door. He waited and was rewarded by a crisp knock tapping out a rhythmical pattern. Sweeping two black hands before his face he ran both through his hair and stood. Focusing, he listened to discover who stood outside.

.....i wonder what kind of state Mr Foster will be in this morning? i could do without one of those black moods. my bit of fun last night means there's no money for a restaurant to help calm him down. if he doesn't damn well sort out his shit, i'll go elsewhere and find some other cow to milk. i don't care how much talent he has if he can't even talk to people without flipping out all the......

Edward? Zane hadn’t moved from in front of the couch. This person was talking about him, of that he was quite sure. So, he had a temper? His mind began digging. Thinking back, he discovered his memories prior to the beach were hard to pin down, making verification near impossible. Edwards’ description of him sounded fanciful, unreal thoughts of someone else. Events following the change were clearer, they remained distinct episodes in his head when he scrolled back. Less than a day had passed and it seemed his life was now defined in hours, not the years he must have lived for him to be who he was. Rage. What was that? He felt as if he should know. This reinvented world had wrested meaning of certainty.

Another round of knocking set his feet moving. Zane swung open the door and regarded the short man standing before him. Dressed in a well-cut suit that belied its expense, Edward half grinned, half smirked. The pose was a well-practiced tool.

“Finally. Were you standing in the middle of the room deliberating whether to open the door? I told you yesterday I’d be around in the morning. We need to sort out this mess with the Label. After your ‘display’ at the meeting I was sure it was game over. Why she’s given you another chance is beyond me.” He stopped talking and crossed his arms. Squinting his eyes, he leant forward and frowned. “What happened to you? Those are some pretty hefty bruises you’ve got there.” Not waiting for an invitation, Edward backed Zane into the room and closed the door.

“Come on, talk to me. Almost looks like a shoeprint.” One of Edward’s fingers came up to trace a line down one edge of the yellowing bruise adorning Zane’s right cheek.
Zane regarded the black man with an even gaze. He was having trouble remembering any specifics about this person and the nature of their relationship. Edward’s mention of a Label sparked something but it proved an elusive catch. The guitar leaning against the wall tugged at his memory. There was a simple solution to the problem but he refrained from listening too deeply for the time being and set about trying to learn more using the normal methods.

“Sorry, I had forgotten about the call. I caught the train down to the beach. I tried to help someone but it was unwanted. They did this.” Speaking slowly, Zane found using words a strange experience, like trying to play an instrument after many years of neglect. Only yesterday he had spoken to the hospital staff and the thugs at the train station. Funnilly enough, even then speech had felt disjointed; an unfamiliar action requiring distinct effort. He knew a much simpler form of communication, one requiring seemingly no effort at all.

“Would you like to sit down?”
“Civil today, that’s good, have you been meditating?”
“...Yes, I’ve been trying. Can I get you a drink?”
“No, I’m fine. Get yourself one if you need and then we can talk.”

...he’s on an even keel today. that meditation must be doing something. if things are going to work out with the Label, it needs to stay that way. any more tantrums and we’ll be kissing that fat pay day goodbye.....

“Please sit down. I will go and get myself a drink.” Zane received a raised eyebrow for his insistence. Despite having resolved to rely upon his ears, he found it hard ignoring Edward’s thoughts. There were others, multiple streams from the surrounding flats and beyond. He brushed his awareness against the individual flows and quickly lost interest. There’d been that wall he’d erected last night to block them out. He tried it and found the silence unnerving and let it collapse.

When he returned Edward was seated comfortably on the couch. In one hand he held his phone, tapping the oversized qwerty keyboard, while the other plucked at a pant seam. Zane sat down in the chair beside the couch and looked at Edward, disregarding the thoughts that washed over him. A decisive tap on the keypad sent Edward’s message on its way and he gave his attention back to Zane.

“You’ve had a drink? Good. So, did you go to a doctor yesterday after your fun at the beach?”
“No, an ambulance came and I was taken to hospital. They were worried I may have suffered a head injury. I had a CT scan and they couldn’t find anything wrong. The doctor wanted to keep me in for observation overnight but I decided to check myself out.”
“You sure that was a good idea? You sound a bit spaced out to me.”
“I’m fine.”
“Sure you are.” Edward’s sarcastic tone said he was far from convinced but he didn’t press the issue. “I’m not going anywhere until we get this business sorted out, so I can double as your personal nurse for the day, but don’t expect a sponge bath.” His jest garnered no reaction from Zane and he looked long and hard at his client come friend. “Shit Zane, I know it’s a crap joke, least you could do is say so.”

“Things have changed Edward, I see the world differently now.” It was appropriate to make the statement.
“Neverend, each morning I wake up to a new world, everyone does. Doesn’t mean I go off the deep end. Lighten up, we’re this far from the jackpot.” Holding up his empty hand he made a tiny gap between his finger and thumb. “Just a touch of diplomacy is all that’s needed my friend and the Label will sign a fat cheque and hand it over. They love the material Zane. Try as she might, she couldn’t hide the fact when I spoke to her last. She hinted at a three-record deal! All we need do is bow our heads a couple of times and we’re in. People like that want to see a bit of gratitude. It’s not going to kill you.”

“I died last night Edward.” The words came out in all seriousness. Sitting up perfectly straight in his chair, Zane stared at nothing. His personality drifted, lacking clear boundaries. What he could see with his eyes formed just the barest fraction of the world; so much more swamped his awareness. Edward’s talk of success, money and submission were perverse and out of step with his shifting topography. The ‘Label’ could have whatever they wanted; it was of no consequence to him.

“What do you need from me Edward? Take what you want, give these people anything, everything; I have all I desire and more; too much, far too much.” Coming back to himself, Zane looked over at this man he was supposed to know, waited for a reply and listened.

"...what the Neverend?! is he losing it. he’s always been a handful, but if it gets worse we’re fucked, i’m fucked. those shit for brains bookies want their money. well, i can always find another horse to hitch my wagon to. wait a minute, if he’s gone nuts, i can work with that, for a little while anyway, until they want to record something and find out billy no brain has lost the fight. that’s when i take the money and run. there’s always another project around the corner......

"Billy no brain? Who is this man you speak of? Am I this man?"

“Excuse me?!” An expression mixing outrage and shock distorted Edward’s features as his head jutted towards Zane. By increments he shifted forward and appeared ready to stand up, his fingers tugging at his pants in a fit of panic.

“You made reference to a ‘Billy no brain’, and now I understand you were creating an analogy between this fictitious character and myself. You fear I will sabotage your chances of further monetary success by suffering a breakdown after the deal has been signed and they wish to begin recording.”

"did i imagine what just happened, did i? i swear i never opened my mouth. but people can’t do that, they can’t! that’s for movies and make believe, not the real world. it must have slipped out without my noticing it; yes, of course it did. his strange mood is just rubbing off. i was up pretty late last night; and those girls, Neverend, those girls wore me out........

Unable to stay seated any longer, Edward stood and began to pace the floor, biting at his nails and shooting fearful glances at Zane, knowing full well he had not spoken a word and desperate for the ugly event to be erased from his memory.

"did that really happen, no, yes; did it happen, yes, no......

“Yes Edward, it did happen. Come and sit down and I will help you.”

Swaying visibly on his feet, Edward collapsed onto hands and knees. He raised one hand to his face and blotted out the man seated calmly across the room. Piece by piece he
reclaimed his composure and pushed up off the floor, a series of slight wobbles betraying his fragile stance.

“What the fuck are you doing? People can’t do that. It’s all a myth. This isn’t happening. What are you?”

“I don’t know that I am ‘anything’ other than a human being. I am still Zane Foster..., but I have trouble remembering my life before I was knocked unconscious. I barely know who you are. Perhaps we would be better served by you telling me who I am.”

Having not moved from his standing position, Edward’s face began to contort in a series of strange expressions contrasting dramatically with his static hair. His mind squirmed; it battled against the idea could see inside his head.

......I can’t stay here, this is disgusting! he can hear my thoughts! Zesus, don’t think about last night. those damn whips and chains. SHUT UP you idiot, he can hear you! i’ve gotta go, i’ve gotta go......

“Calm down Edward, I have no particular desire to listen to your thoughts, but if you keep screaming like that, it’s hard not to. Yes, I have changed, I am a new born lamb and the world has shed its skin. Day has turned to night and fear no longer lives in my heart.”

“You’ve gone mad! Why are you talking like that? How am I supposed to calm down when you sound like a religious nut! Mother in a bucket; I need some laudanum...?”

Edward’s voice trailed off at the end and he pressed hands to eyes and rubbed hard, seeking erasure through physical action. He knew how futile his desire was but he carried on massaging until his arms dropped, flaccid and spent. Very slowly he raised his head and cautiously examined the man eroding reality. Without warning, the bruises on Zane’s face faded to yellow and disappeared, leaving behind unmarked skin. Edward whimpered and tilted his head toward the door.

“You had to go and do that, it’s just plain wrong...”

“...Oh, the bruises; it was necessary and something I should have done before. Please Edward, come and sit. I will make every effort to respect your privacy.” His friends’ appearance had given Zane a frame of reference to connect his twin histories, to learn about this stranger - three decades and more old - whose body he occupied, while this newness that seemed his everything had yet to pass a single day. Memory failed him; the bridge spanning the gap to link then and now had crumbled to dust. The desire for a reconnection seemed reasonable, even beneficial, a boon for his integrity. But did it really matter? The question interrupted his search and snuffed reconciliation; his new history needed no bolstering from the past. His psyche embraced the shift and cast uncertainty aside.

Throwing a final uneasy glance at the door, Edward shuffled over to the couch and sat down. Delicate meek steps indicated the desperation from seconds before was gone. Hunched forward, he shot a weak smile at Zane. Gone were the recriminations and the need to leave this odd bod to his own devices. Twice Edward attempted speech and failed. Finally on the third attempt he succeeded and asked a question, his demeanour that of servant to master.

“What should we do Zane?” There was a complete absence of personal need in Edward’s question. His tone asked for direction and help in charting the immediate course for the minutes ahead. Nothing in his request indicated any particular imperative need be addressed. Perhaps he desired clarification in relation to the Label negotiations, or what they
should do for lunch. Irrespective of its intent, Edward knew Zane would make the correct decision.

The master paid no heed to his subject’s sudden shift in attitude, it was of no more consequence than his own. It did not please, surprise, or shock. Zane had made no effort to control Edward; guile and subterfuge were absent. A flower attracts the bee, a natural consequence between complimentary parts. The majestic embraces its seductive power, just as a radiant blossom welcomes its insectile worshippers.

“You’re hungry and in need of coffee. Let’s go for a drive. The day has just started Edward; we’ll do as it demands. Does that sound alright to you?”

“Wonderful! Excellent! I think coffee is the perfect remedy right now. You know how I get without a decent fix. Good old wacky Edward, a right little bitch without his caffeine.”

Though his words were in tune with his personality, another voice strained to be heard, both in his tone and deep in his mind. Operating in tandem to his buzzing mindless attraction, he searched for an escape from Zane’s influence, desperate wings craving empty sky.

Together they rose and exited the flat, Edward reminding Zane to lock the door on the way out. The direction was ignored. Once inside Edward’s old LVT, the supplicant started the vintage engine and charted a course for the local bakery. After purchasing pastries and coffee, Edward returned and together they sat in the car and consumed their meal, Zane gazing out the front window into manifold blackness while Edward ate nervously, waiting for his King to speak.

“How did it all come to pass? How is it that we be, and what makes awareness any different to nothingness? I came out of a nothing, as did the me I was before and both of us will go back to it. Then, is not being a part of the nothing, so making the two into one and the one a thing of difference. Before, tomorrow and the very next second, identical in their mystery; each lucid, real and irrefutably clear, containers of the misunderstood. Do you think we have as many skins? Are we onions Edward?” Something approaching a smile played across Zane’s face, though it lacked genuine mirth, his past self-supplying behaviours incorrectly utilised in the present tense.

“Onions? I’ve been called a chameleon before, but it wasn’t a compliment. I just like to get what I can from people when they’re in the mood to give. Is that so bad? Seems pretty harmless to me? Doesn’t everyone else do the same thing? Sure as Neverend comes across that way.” Edward muttered his thoughts in between mouthfuls, crumbs falling down his shirt from the flaky pastry. He showed his teeth at the end and glanced at Zane to gauge his reaction.

The lordling, engrossed in reflection, appeared not to hear. Acting on time delay, he turned his head and regarded Edward. A face, blank and hard, unaware of its ponderous aspect pounded down on the cup holding worm and inspired a head sinking contraction. With the awful thing seated right beside him, Edward had nowhere to go. Alienated from history and engaging with the world under duress, the vassal had no freedom nor voice. Edward typically delighted in verbal banter, especially vague conjecture that had no relationship to reality, which should have made his current situation a veritable treat. Instead he sat, trapped, his mind gripped by a phantom hand belonging to an innocent boy who’d been placed on a throne and proclaimed emperor.
A tap on the window made Edward jump. He squealed and dropped the nub of pastry in his lap. Peering in through the glass was a face familiar to both men, one whose features exuded a disproportionate amount of giddy enthusiasm for life. She flashed beautiful white teeth, smoothed luxuriant orange hair behind her ears and gestured for Edward to wind down the window. It took the twitching puppet several moments to gather his wits and compute the request. An unsteady hand worked the handle and lowered the glass.

“Hi Sweetie! What’re you boys up to? Any news on the big deal? Can’t wait for my invite to the Sonics!” She let out a cheeky laugh and topped it off by going cross eyed and sticking her tongue out the side of her mouth. There was more to come. She scrunched her eyes and grinned maniacally and raised her shoulders up to her ears.

“Heh, heh. Not yet Jem. Zane’s still......thinking things over. You know how he can be; Mr Stubborn.” Back and forth shot Edward’s head from his passenger to the paroxysm of joy standing outside, his expression snapping between dire alarm and feigned amusement with each swing. Leaning his head out toward Jem, he lowered his voice conspiratorially.

“He’s.....Zane’s feeling a bit....he’s not...” Edward battled under an internal restraint, evidenced by the contortions gripping his face. “Want to come for a ride?” He switched tack with obvious relief and saw in his invitation a way to share his burden, to free another person of their independence and place them under Zane’s capricious rule. The opportunistic request did not rouse the least guilt and he summoned a mysterious expression that spoke of exclusive fun.

The magic worked. Jem quickly forgot Edward’s stammering confusion and succumbed. Bouncing up on her toes, she let out a little yelp of pleasure and opened the rear door. She slid across to the middle seat and sat on its edge, ensuring inclusion in all the shenanigans up front, radiating enough expectation to overwhelm both the men should they choose secrecy and not divulge their plans. Jiggling about, Jem set the car rocking and disturbed the musing King. Noticing his movement, she watched transfixed as this shaggy haired man swung his head to face her. She fancied hearing a bass rumble fill the car’s cabin, strong enough that it quelled her thoughts and stilled her body. When his eyes touched hers, she flopped back against the seat and hugged herself, stricken and overcome by fear.

“Hello Jem.”
Nothing more was said. Zane returned to his former position and continued staring through the windscreen at the cars streaming past in either direction, their perpendicular flow a mass of shadows defined by serpentine light. He caught snippets from those inside the motorised carriages, scattered thoughts heard and discarded, new replacing old. Lacking separation, they formed an incoherent babble, vehicles and their occupants overlapping, unspoken words merging. Not more than a few seconds of relative silence filled his head at any one time during the rare gaps when the road stood vacant. He absorbed this radical development like the rest, calmly and without fuss. His learning, if that’s what it could be called, was operating at a dizzying rate. Blocking out the noise from the other two in the car now happened automatically and his ability to selectively choose what to ‘listen to’ required only minimal effort. Awareness told him the reverse must also be possible, that others could hear his thoughts, sentient radios awaiting transmissions. The conclusion interrupted observation. He faced his test subjects.

Having not taken his eyes off Zane, Edward flinched when the shaggy head shifted. He did his best to keep his head up, but staring into those unblinking augers proved too much and he sought vacant space and the balm of emptiness. Where, he wondered, had that horrible weight come from. Out the fringes of consciousness a voice of his own making whispered, ‘you wouldn’t want to know’. Finding refuge given his confinement was senseless and Zane’s next step ended the short and senseless respite.

why do you look away Edward? i have no desire to hurt you.

The clarity of the words sent an electric shock through Edward and he melded with the door, kicking his legs to get as far from Zane as the constrained space allowed.

what the fuck!...he just, not again, NO!....NO!

yes Edward. what need is there for panic. am i trying to hurt you? am i attacking you?

Zane’s attempt to rationalise the bizarre met with no success. By contrast, his continued presence inside Edward’s head heightened the stink of terror wafting across the small gap; flaring nostrils and retracted eyelids clear evidence the poor fellow found the intrusions unpleasant.

its’ ok, it’s alright, Zane’s my friend, he...he’s....there’s nothing wrong with him, this is normal, NORMAL! THIS ISN’T NORMAL!

“HELP, somebody help me!” Edward’s sudden and startling break from the passive control exerted by Zane lasted all of a second. His tormentor found the antics disturbing and reached out mentally, this time in an active sense and re-established dominance. Ghost fingers performed a rare action; the suppression of a fellow uman’s mind. The process was akin to laying a web over the active regions of Edward’s brain to curtail expression. Zane gazed over at Edward’s limp body and pondered the unfortunate display responsible for his intervention. While he could appreciate the strangeness of what he’d done, he found it hard to
fathom the level of dread it had evoked. Why should simple communication cause such a reaction, even if it was not a common form used by simple folk?

Heavy breathing from the back seat filtered into Zane’s ears. His internal blocks relaxed in the same direction and a flood of noise filled his mind.

what’s happening? what’s wrong with Edward? why did i say yes, i need to learn to say no, it’s always yes. come in Jem, lay down, take your clothes off; sure, why not. what’s wrong with me! he’s not blinking. leave me alone you monster!

“Edward! Wake up! Please! Stop it Zane, don’t look at me like that, you’re scaring me.” In an effort to block out the ghoulish vision before her, Jem slapped her hands over her face. It only served to emphasise the eerie silence inside the car and provided no defence against what came next.

Edward’s fine Jess. he just needed calm. the world he knew and understood has changed. i thought it a good idea to help him find some peace. you can relax now, there’s nothing to worry about.

Incrementally her fingers dropped their guard and she stared, stone-faced, petrified by the stoic creature craning its head toward her between the front seats. She didn’t last long and flopped over sideways, unconscious from shock, her body bouncing slightly on the upholstered softness. Zane watched her disconnection and experienced disappointment; again his sooting thoughts had resulted in ostentation.

His regarded the two bodies, one then the other, observing every nuance in shape and contour. Scanning their faces, he noticed slack cheeks and smooth brows, fear now absent. Curiosity bade him investigate what stood in its stead.

Having twice influenced Edward’s behaviour he knew the path to follow. Memory recalled a scene, savages fawning over their unconscious leader, his first foray into subterranean depths. This time his unseen hand branched in two, flowing to his side and behind, entering two minds simultaneously. Navigating the electric landscapes, he found the sought-after repositories.

Undetected, Zane floated beside an immaculately dressed Edward stepping over and around writhing naked bodies. They were all women, from every corner of the world, paragons of beauty in the throes of sensual delight, bodies entwined, caressing, touching, tasting. When Edward drew near their attention shifted and they began imploring him down, faces radiating need. He kept moving, they were not enough, the shelter of perfection pulled him on. Only the pinnacle, the most perfect concubine could confound his senses sufficiently to mask his loss of autonomy and obscure the terror without. Edward plunged ever deeper into this forest of silky flesh, his senses haunted by the monstrous shadow lurking unseen just beyond the edge of sight.

The other mind had likewise sought distraction. He found Jem lying in a cloud, surrounded by fluffy toys promising eternal security and warmth. She wriggled and squirmed in the puffy white softness, not satisfied with the impossible bedding. Any position in the velvety terrain should have rendered her content. Overhead drifted fanciful creatures singing sweet lullabies from mouths full of perfect white teeth and full pouting lips. Zane appreciated the similarities at work in this second nightmare. He was the spectre from which both these children sought to escape. They sought to erase and forget the monster who’d violated what should be theirs and theirs alone.
He observed these two illusory realms in their splendid detail and discerned an established order and a familiar experience that came from repeated and prolonged visits. They had both fled to places of regular use, constructs which soothed frightened minds and sheltered them from every manner of attack. The crass artificiality suggested a prevailing motivation driving these constructs, whose constant presence was great enough to transform the smallest irritation into a source of existential woe. The ceaseless hunter, never absent in its vigil. Zane nearly smiled. What use was there in running from something that had no mind, whose presence negated every conceivable defence and laid an indisputable claim on all animate creatures.

Exploration and abstraction tipped the balance and Zane’s focus shifted back and forth. Extended and outside his own mind and delving two others placed him on slippery ground. What he regarded began losing coherence, the fabric of what he thought to be real stretched and popped apart, splaying individual threads and revealing a deep indigo soup. This was a place he’d visited before, where the juncture between old and new had its origins. The rush came upon him with shocking abruptness, breathless giddiness that should have wiped his mind blank and ended life. Into this place between places energy flowed, compounded and leached out. Never more than a simple fold away, accessible through a confluence of energies, present yet obscure, it was a dimensional realm minds did not perceive and were unsuited to. Yesterday had seen Zane shunted here by violence, his neural flow disrupted to create what had to be a one in a trillion, one in a decillion chance event. For those brief minutes while he’d lain unconscious on the sand his mind and body had coexisted in two worlds and functioned as a living conduit. He was part flesh and bone, part energy, the percentages unstable; an entity in flux. Accumulation in time dictated he clung to his material heritage and maintain a bounded form incumbent with its history. Drift he did towards an energy state, but existential need pulled him back to self and the intrinsic security the ego cherished. Given his psyche’s current seesaw between dissolution and integration, he failed to appreciate he walked the same tightrope as Edward and Jem. All three wavered in their struggle to reclaim coherence and control.

Mild surprise marked his re-emergence. His vision of constant night was gone. Every surface inside the car and out, and space itself, wore a new skin. Another visual transformation. Absorbing the shift, he appreciated a fusing of brilliant whites, rich blacks and mesmeric colour. His three previous visual platforms were now one, intermingling and forming a networked system breathing coherence and regularity. Skating and flashing amidst the colour, binary opposites established definition between things and maintained the functional character necessary to negotiate space. Beside and behind him, Edward and Jem remained closeted in their dreamscapes. He began pondering the future and stopped. Winding down his window he listened to the approaching footsteps and waited.

“I’ve had a complaint. What’s going on here?”

Not answering immediately, Zane meditated on the man’s lack of manners. No introductions, just a brusque question requiring an answer. From his radiant uniform Zane judged the man a security guard for the local businesses comprising the strip. Unruffled, he studied the interruption and remained silent.

“What’s wrong with those two? This isn’t a camp site buddy. It’s time for you and your friends to move on. Wake up the driver and off you go, find someplace else to sleep.”
He stepped back and crossed his arms, waiting for his orders to be carried out. Zane saw no reason not to comply.

Stretching out and beyond his body he rummaged inside Edward’s pocket and retrieved the keys. They came free and floated up and slid into the ignition. Exerting force, he depressed the clutch and turned the key, sparking the engine to life. Manipulating the gear lever, he put the car in reverse and commandeered the steering wheel and accelerator. Zane depressed the pedal and released the clutch, swung the wheel, and reversed out at a forty-five-degree angle.

“Hey! Stop that....you can’t?” Displaying his consummate powers of observation, the security guard registered the driver was not conscious, making the car’s movement somewhat absurd. Rooted in place, he watched, disbelief tugging at his chin. Duty bade him move and what started as hesitant footsteps became an uncertain run, one arm stretched out imploring the car to stop and cease its vulgar display.

Zane concentrated on controlling the car. Phantom hands worked the individual parts; gears and pedals acting in concert and propelling the LVT forward. Just before reaching the exit, he glanced into the rear-view mirror and found the guard had abandoned his pursuit and stood flailing his arms and shouting pointless words.

A weak squeal announced brake application. Blocking their progress was a steady stream of traffic flowing past in either direction. Straining his eyes, he felt a kind of popping sensation and his vision drifted away from the car, angling right. Far down the road there were no substantial gaps. His vision snapped back into his head and he recoiled. Acting spontaneously, he exerted his mind and a rippling wave rolled off in the direction of the oncoming traffic. He felt its impact and observed the cars slow and stop. The closest one remained a good ten metres from where their car rest. Pleased, Zane spun the wheel left and accelerated off, leaving the hapless drivers pondering their decision to brake.

Enjoying the wind ruffle his hair, Zane eased his body deeper into the seats comforting support and let his attention wander. Buildings and pedestrians flashed past on his left and ahead more approached. This stream of replacement eased his mind with its repetition and invited him on a different kind of journey. Edward remained silent at his side, oblivious to the twitching steering wheel keeping the car on track and out of danger. The driver, sitting in the passenger seat, no longer actively controlled the car, his burgeoning senses handled the task passively, and gave his mind opportunity to range elsewhere and out of time, searching for a connection linking his newfound magnificence and a vague past fading into nothingness.

“When we get inside let me do the talking. You know how you get in these situations. If you start attacking her, we’re screwed. The only thing they respect in here is money and how to get more of it. Just keep your cool and your mouth shut, ok. I won’t hang around forever if you keep fucking things up every time we get close to pay day. Whipping dead horses ain’t my idea of fun. Shit!”

“Shit? Shit? Screw you Edward! You’re a right piece of work. Look at you! They’ll think you’ve got rabies, frothing at the mouth like that. You’re a bloody disgrace. If I let you do all the talking you’ll end up spraying it all over the place, hardly the kind of thing they want to see at this stage. Who knows, maybe you’ll get your chance later on?”
“Piss off Zane, you’ve got a temper pure and simple. You wanna end up a talented nobody? What good is talent if no one knows you’ve got it. An audience of one gets pretty depressing after a while.”

“Whatever. These people sell to the lowest common denominator. They’ve got zero interest in seeing talent get the chance to express itself. Formula’s and templates are the backbone of their trade. I write lyrics and make music about deception, misinformation and the search for meaning, not the kind of stuff you’d associate with a mainstream label. I still can’t understand why they requested the meeting?”

Edward scowled at his idealistic friend as they passed through the foyer. He appreciated Zane’s position but did not share the sentiment. Honestly, he felt a good deal of scorn for such drivel. Determining the course of your life by rejecting anything that conflicted with abstract principles was base stupidity and gave no respect to cold hard reality. Dog eat dog so the saying went, and he thought it a grand piece of wisdom more people should embrace. There were a hundred other idiots desperate for Zane’s opportunity who would strip naked and bend over backwards at the slightest suggestion from the gatekeepers. Sure, they probably had a tenth of his Zane’s ability but talent never assured anyone anything. Listening and nodding gets you results. Poor Zane thought everyone should be heard, that no one had a monopoly on taking centre stage. Pure and absolute madness. He doubted there was any real point in proceeding, but the lure of riches drew him on.

“Which floor?” Despite his bitter stance, Zane’s tone suggested eagerness, the fringes of a much deeper hope he spent a good deal of time beating down. He craved acknowledgement, wanted others to appreciate his one in a million ability to craft words into emotive tales haunting the heart and mind of any who listened.

“There.” Edward pointed high up on the board to the biggest company listing emblazoned in large bold red type.

“New Light Recordings. Who comes up with these names? You’d think they could pick one that didn’t scream pretentious self-adoration? White walls. That’s what we’ll find, white walls and black suits. ‘Enter children, welcome to the promised land’. Give me a break.”

“Don’t start; we haven’t even made it to the lift.” A hint of desperation already plagued Edward’s voice. He had no illusions they were about to make best friends with the suits upstairs, but he refused to give in. There had to be some chance of success.

The ride up held no surprises. Zane continued his acid rants and Edward kept throwing water on the fire. They were both conforming to expectation, ensuring nothing out of the ordinary spoiled the fun. Exiting the lift did not end their game, it continued across the few steps it took to reach the glass facade that formed the entrance of New Light Recordings. The pair stopped and gave their closing comments, unperturbed the receptionist on the other side observed the amusing display. Finger gestures ended this chapter in their ongoing struggle, both convinced they had the upper hand.

Edward forged on, striding through the glass doors and leaving Zane behind, staring daggers. Transformed, the ‘Smooth Operator’ sauntered up and addressed the receptionist, oozing his own special brand of charm.

“Good morning Sunshine, I’m Edward Granger, and this is Zane Foster, we have an appointment with Emerald Green. Could you be so kind as to let her know we have arrived?” He topped it off with a wink for good measure.
“Good morning Mr Granger, welcome to New Light Recordings. Let me see if Ms Green is ready to see you.” A fake smile stretched the young woman’s lips at Edward’s term of endearment. The wink she ignored unreservedly. Poorly checked scorn radiated across the gap separating her from Edward, a sentiment in greater keeping with the overriding ethic of New Light Recordings: cool indifference. Tapping a key on the nearby phone pad, she waited for a reply before speaking into her headset, somehow managing to make the conversation inaudible to Edward and Zane who stood not more than two metres away. Another key stroke ended the exchange.

“Ms Green will be with you in a moment gentleman. If you care to take a seat, she won’t be long. Can I offer you any refreshment, tea, coffee?” She desired nothing more than their polite refusal and pressed her hands palm down on the desktop, pointed blood red nails tapping out an impatient beat.

“Please, don’t go to any trouble, we’ve just had coffee.” Edward backed away warily, an ingratiating smile cutting his face in half, an olive branch seeking no further hostilities. Attaining a positive outcome, he sat down in one of the available couches running along the wall perpendicular to the glass entrance.

Zane remained standing, facing the exit, showing zero interest in the receptionists Jekyll and Hyde routine. Likewise, he ignored Edward and stared out at the lift, his body language making it clear he had one thing on his mind, leaving. Jerking his head around, he looked down the hallway leading into the corporate headquarters and back at the glass. Unmoving, he glared at the transparent rectangle, his breathing growing deeper. It wouldn’t last.

Deep in luxuriant black leather, Edward had his head stuck in a copy of Satin, the infamous fashion magazine more renowned for nakedness than promoting actual clothing. With its pages spread across his lap, Edward was oblivious to Zane’s inner struggle. When his friend lunged at the door, paper tore and pages were freed, poorly timed oversized confetti.

“Gentlemen, how good of you to come.”

Freezing, both men turned and faced the woman standing beside the desk. Her presence did not broker anything but their full attention and she received it absolutely. Crossed arms and tilted hips accentuated her delicate proportions, somehow reinforcing a natural aura of command. Grey business pants above mile high pumps and a figure hugging black top complimented her aquiline face and short slick hair. She forced temptation upon them, her beauty lashing out and circumventing defences.

Edward’s tongue failed twice before achieving success. What came out was incomprehensible and made the woman smile. Zane fared better, his guarded attitude buffered the attack. He sensed allure filling the room, smothering his hostility. It sought to conquer and control.

“I’m Emerald Green. I spoke to Edward on the phone. I’m assuming that..would..be..you.” The statement had no want of confirmation. She had deduced by their demeanours who was who. Extending her hand out for Edward to shake, her expression mixed welcome with authority, making it plain the two men were in occupied territory. The recipient of her gesture had to eviscerate himself to break through the stupor numbing his
brain. Surprised by the torn pages still in his hands - both showing images of topless models - Edward giggled nervously and slipped them back in the magazine and laid it aside.

“It’s lovely to finally meet you Emer....Ms Green.” The contraction around her eyes and the tightening of her grip adjusted Edward’s choice of words. He feigned a relaxed laugh to hide his embarrassment and reclaimed his hand, surreptitiously rubbing the compressed joints. Zane frowned at his friend, disgusted by Edward’s fawning display.

“And that would make you Zane Foster, our man of the moment.” She repeated the same gesture offered to Edward and received a predictable snubbing. Emerald withdrew her hand and carried on, displaying no trace of offense.

“If you would follow me Gentlemen, we can find somewhere more comfortable to talk.” Keeping her words brief, Emerald turned and glided down the hallway, her hips swaying in a seductive tilt, up and down, side to side. Edward was drawn along, an unthinking robot obeying pre-programmed commands. Behind him came Zane, feet encased in concrete boots, his breathing ragged. Neither noticed the gold and platinum albums decorating the passageway. The place screamed money and success.

Reaching their destination, Emerald swivelled and stood beside an open doorway waiting for her guests to join her. Hoping to minimise her annoyance, Edward picked up his pace and trotted inside the doorway, an obsequious grin plastered on his face. Zane dragged his heavy feet past Emerald. The picture he presented was something she’d seen any number of times.

Inside they found a grand office, lavishly furnished, every inch of wall covered in the glow of polished albums. The door closed behind them and Edward let out a nervous giggle. He salivated over the wealth on display and imagined his own office similarly appointed, feet up, hands behind his head receiving supplicants who hung on his every word.

Brushing Zane on her way past, Emerald’s scent filled his nose, a heady perfume further agitating his volatile temperament.

“Please, sit.” Standing behind her imposing desk, Emerald waited for them to comply before doing likewise, pulling back and sinking into a black throne. Crossing her hidden legs, she leaned to one side and clasped hands, one elbow supporting her lithe frame. She watched, bemused; Edward, the eager puppy dog, and Zane, the petulant artist. Letting the prescribed amount of time pass, she began.

“New Light Recordings has had an incredibly successful year. Our stable of artists dominates the charts and as our walls testify, their numbers are more than impressive. You can imagine we have scant room for new talent, especially unknown and untried singer/songwriters. What would be the point? To be perfectly honest, right now, we have none.” Feigning disinterest, Emerald studied the desktop and let the statement sink in.

Snapping her head up she began part two.

“What keeps New Light Recordings at the top of the pile is our future vision. Nothing lasts forever, success wains and inactivity breeds staleness. We are constantly looking for something different that shows promise and is in tune with the world at large. If we find something that might turn from a seed into a flower, we show interest. By doing this we help the next generation grow and reach their potential. All anyone needs in life is that first chance. We are not however, running a charity, and we are not sitting in this room because
we throw money at anyone who knocks on the door. No business can sustain itself in the long
term without prudent investment.”

  Piercing blue eyes regarded Edward and Zane, driving home the import of her
statement, making it plain how fortunate they were to be sitting in this office.
  “From what I have said you must surmise your work...” Emerald tilted her head
  toward Zane. “...has potential. Why would I waste my time on someone lacking promise?
Naturally enough I imagine you are asking yourself, ‘what is she offering?’”
  “Believe me Ms Green, we are more than grateful for you giving up your time to see
us. Zane and I are eager to explore any possible relationship you might suggest between
ourselves and New Light Recordings.” Bending at the waist, Edward leaned closer to the
desk, one hesitant hand reaching out, imploring belief.

  Disgusted, Zane watched his counterpart wantonly offer them both into servitude.
Shifting in his seat, he looked on the verge of standing up. Both their reactions matched
Emerald’s expectations. While her goal remained Zane’s signature on a particularly
unrewarding contract, she made sure any who joined New Light left principle and instability
behind. This boy clung to his and would be useless until they were stripped away. The first
step was always the most painful. Some folded on the instant, and others, like this one, took
time. Whether attained now or later, her satisfaction was guaranteed.

  “Relax Zane. I think Edward appreciates my position, the position of New Light
Recordings. I have bestowed upon you a rare thing in today’s cutthroat world. You have been
invited to join a family who guards its doors better than most, who will give its children great
riches if they behave. If they do not, they are cast aside.”

  A finely crafted clock can always be relied upon. Zane erupted and shoved past a
distraught Edward, making for the door. He came to an abrupt halt as his hand
snatched at
the
handle. Breathing deep he turned around and let out a verbal spray, his body shaking in
unrestrained rage.

  “I’m no one’s fucking play thing and you’re not going to use my songs to fatten your
purse! Fucking vampire!” Ripping open the door, he stormed out.

  Left sitting by himself, Edward shrunk into a ball, lost and uncomfortable. After
staring long and hard at the door, Emerald finally spoke.

  “Leave.”

  He complied.

Deceleration phased his awareness back to the here and now. A car’s stationary rear
grew as the gap diminished. Zane acted and applied the brake, stopping the growth. Black
and white flashes and their spectacular innards filled the landscape around him. In his mind
hovered a face, a mask of judgement scorning his frailty.

  An internal mist began forming. Defined and separate, these clouds filled his
awareness, attempting change through aggregation. Some mechanism resisted and won the
battle, keeping the pockets isolated. He did not try to destroy them and rid his mind of their
presence. Despite thwarting their union, he felt sympathetic toward their intent. Again, the
face coalesced and he understood the connection between the wraithlike substance and the
woman staring at him, dismissive and superior. A name formed unbidden: Emerald Green.
She had vanquished him, so easily and with the slightest of effort. He fumbled for an answer.
What was he to do? Anger, shame and hatred; each of these poisons were present in this toxic mist. They craved revenge, were urging him to act and taste satisfaction.

In his ongoing transformation so resplendent with power, doubt remained. He cringed at the possibilities singing in his ear and choked on future pleasure. How simple it would be for him to switch their positions and have her taste this weakness inside him. He surveyed his powers. Change had made him mighty in many regards yet in some facets he remained the same.

At war in his delicate psyche were two futures, each a reaction to an episode from his past life. One offered stability and the other demanded destruction. Too strong and too connected through time, this incident from the past refused erasure, it acted as a voice for many others and together they drowned out all else. Moderation and revolt were forming up, opposed and hostile, one calling for calm, the other action. Zane fought an internal war; his foe, himself. This struggle had been building in the background. Seeing the world shed its skin and his awareness flourish had overshadowed the brewing furore. Recognition stretched perception and he achieved a modicum of objectivity. He regarded these two hostile forces in their game of cat and mouse, each seeking to subsume the other. Both sought the perfect vehicle for carefree expression; homogeneity. Which camp would experience those unsullied waters was unclear. One practical decision had been made irrespective of the outcome.

Deftly he woke Edward. The man seated behind the steering wheel blinked repeatedly, struggling with consciousness. The totem of stop and go shone green and the car accelerated, giving him a helpful nudge. He noticed the steering wheel move. Mortified, Edward jerked back and hid his face, screening off the painful sight which failed to hide the unpleasant memories that came flooding back.

“It’s you isn’t it? You’re driving. It keeps getting worse. Please let me go. All I’ve ever tried to do is help you. There’s no need for this. Please, stop the car, let me go.” His tail and forked tongue were now in control, fear proving strong enough to overcome Zane’s latent influence over his mind.

“We are going to visit Emerald Green.” It came out calmly and contradicted the turmoil hidden behind Zane’s face. Edward parted his fingers and peeked through the gap. He found his overlord sitting stoically, hands on lap, head fixed and still, sight a million miles away. The openings slammed close and Edward willed what lay on the other side to disappear.

“I can see her face. How could she do that? What was I? Subuman?” Speed increased. Jerking side to side the car began weaving through the traffic, braking and accelerating by turn, blaring horns and screams tracking their passage. Edward spotted an approaching red light through his finger prison.

“Zane. Slow down. ZANE! Nooooo!” The car veered savagely to avoid an intersecting bus as they hurtled through the crossroad. Horns wailed and from out the chorus a siren shrieked in protest. Breathing heavily, Edward did not immediately appreciate its significance. A dawning sun finally rose and he whimpered; salvation was on its way. Mustered his tattered courage, he twisted away from Zane, looked over his right shoulder and spotted the red and blue flashing lights. Through fingers he watched it approach level and locked his sight on the police officer demanding they pull over. Noticing Edward’s covered face, the officer frowned before his head and upper body lurched forward and the police car
shot backwards, tyres squealing. Edward jerked around and saw the police car get ploughed into from behind. The initial impact shoved it into the median strip and kicked it skyward. Tracing a steep arc, it fell and slammed into oncoming traffic, explosions of fire and sound filling the air. Zane smiled woodenly and slammed the gear lever into sixth, ringing every last kilowatt from the LVT.
Edward felt the adjustments of the steering wheel tug his hair. Unable to tolerate his predicament, he’d curled over at an angle and thrust his cupped face against his thigh. Every change of direction caused the wheel to drag against his scalp. He submitted to the tugs of pain, a punishment for his misdeeds. This misfortune must in part be his fault, undeserving people don’t get trapped in nightmares. He tasted guilt one corner at a time.

Lost in future deeds, Zane had Edward sectioned off, neatly packed in an unobtrusive corner. After disposing of the police, he’d taken a brief glimpse inside the gibbering mess and moved on, uninterested and repulsed.

Accelerating hard, Zane questioned his conflicting emotions. There was a certain disingenuous tone to his offended pride that made him suspicious. A manufactory of voices threw up wild interpretations on his state of mind, one such suggesting a primal desire for Emerald Green had sparked his ferocious outburst at New Light Recordings. Distant and unobtainable behind a crystal wall, she had reached out and squeezed his hypothalamus, rousing the animal. He found the speculation seductive and felt it spreading throughout his mind, seeking influence.

Careening around another corner his body remained still, unaffected by centrifugal pull. Behind him, he heard a groaning noise and recalled the third member of their party and promptly forgot her. Ahead the city spires rose, looming over the car as they roared past the arbitrary boundary separating the kingdom of plenty from the shanty towns. In and around these fangs the masses tinkered, aware and resigned, assorted doctrines and promises holding them captive. Memories burst to life and Zane understood his past days as a hypocrite, the enlisted man denouncing the hierarchy. A beating on sandy shores had fractured time and space and brushed the accumulations of Zane Foster aside. The interlude was over. His old self had resurfaced, a poisoned memory dirtying newfound clarity. Pride and attraction were in control, urging him on and sullying his peace. Here was a chance to strike at those responsible for so much oppression. Zane needed calm and it was rapidly fading; his majesty waning even as his power grew.

Manipulating connections, he jerked the wheel and applied the hand brake. The big saloon screamed in complaint and slid sideways until it came to a rest perpendicular to the footpath. More rubbery squeals cut the air; those following behind declaring surprise. Traffic backed up, it’s flow blocked by Zane’s impetuous act. A continuous stream of finger gestures and abuse rained down on the stationary vehicle. Zane remained still, staring directly ahead at the building entrance, focused, a statue in repose. Waking as if from a deep freeze, he mentally slapped Edward.

The target, still huddled over, yelped and jerked upright, the sudden movement activating the pretensioner and holding Edward in place. After several heaving breathes his
hands dropped and revealed a tear stained face; cockiness long gone. Staring at his damp palms, he wiped them dry on his thighs and clutched his knees.

*come along Edward. it’s time to see Emerald Green.*

Resonant and clear, the method of transmission explained Edward’s decline. This time hearing the words sound inside his head did not elicit the smallest protest; he opened the door, exited the car and mounted the curb. The white flag had been raised; the cup holding his spirit rest in Zane’s hand.

Nearing his docile pawn, Zane paused and turned towards the outraged drivers hurling abuse. Drawing a load of static charge from the air he hurled it towards the offending cars. The response was immediate, windows and mirrors shattered and occupants collapsed, their bodies sagging against belts. As the electrical wraith moved further away its potency diminished, windscreens cracked and drivers were overcome with dizziness. Finally the energy dissipated and distant traffic slowed to a stop, frustrated at yet another unexplained delay.

The orchestrator gathered Edward and crossed the plaza. Nearing the imposing entrance, remembrance named it the place where she had crippled him. Irritation flared and he reacted, ripping apart the electronic doors, shattering glass and crumpling metal. He heard the laboured whir of jammed motors as he passed inside the building, metal grinding on metal. Screaming echoed about the foyer and people froze, searching for an explanation.

The aggressive outburst had relaxed his personal blocks and Zane heard their mental dismay. Watching their massed floridity, he indulged in impish delight.

*BOO!*

The screaming started. He laughed at the show. A handful bolted for the exit, cringing away from its buckled sides on their way through. Others spun about on their heels, blocking ears. Zane strode onwards, for the most part unheeded, his accomplice shuffling along beside him. Sighting the lifts, he increased his pace, bearing down upon suited executives still immobile with shock. Confronted by his implacable face they pried leaden feet up and cleared the way. Doubled over with eyes squeezed shut they waited, more than one mouth mouthing nonsense.

They needn’t have bothered. Zane’s interest had already ranged ahead, seeking a room of riches where shame had formed a conduit between past and present. He tried to ignore those terrible seconds when she had so expertly plucked his strings as he zeroed in on his destination.

Sliding together, the lift doors cut off the confused sounds coming from the foyer. Edward huddled close to Zane, his head millimetres from touching an arm. Raising a hand, Zane rest it on his pet’s crown, eliciting a flush of red in its uman cheeks. An electronic voice announced their floor and doors parted.

Stepping out into the foyer, they crossed the floor and walked into New Light Recordings. The receptionist watched them approach. She raised a cautionary hand as they angled across the gap and walked past her desk.

“Excuse me, what are you doing. You two can’t go down there!” Leaving her post, she hurried past the intruders and stepped in front of Zane. Instantly her body lifted off the carpet and slammed into the corridor wall. She slid down the paint and folded in a heap, groans seeping out her mouth. Edward glanced at her blankly.
Reaching Emerald’s office door Zane thrust it open. His face, fuelled by expectation, let off a faint glow. Whatever calm indifference he’d obtained from his rebirth was fading fast and his old emotive self-appeared ready to assert control. Finding the room empty stalled its imminent rise and banked the hungry flames. Enraptured, Zane’s legs did not stop moving until his thighs struck the desk. From a bowed head, his eyes bore into the vacant seat, willing the owner’s presence. Emerald Green did not materialise and the smoking coals glowed brighter.

Standing in the space between the door and his master, Edward watched Zane’s back and began to fidget. The lack of action was making him fear the worst. In a haze, Edward recalled Zane’s violent eruptions and his hands crept up and shoved nails between his teeth. Nothing happened, quiet reigned. Slithers of nail were bitten off, chewed and swallowed. The need for an outcome escalated and outweighed his fear. Appallingly his feet began edging him closer to Zane. A metre from his master he paused and extended one manicured hand out to avert disaster.

“Who the Neverend are you and what are you doing in here!”

Startled, Edward jumped into Zane’s back. Like the gears of a great clock, this reinvented man rotated, his movement ponderous. Mentally he cast off the physical nuisance weighing against his back and sent the parasite tumbling head over heels across the floor, yelping in surprise.

Zane’s fingers curled and extended, crushing handfuls of air. From under a lowered brow he glowered at the security guard standing in the doorway. The intervening space filled with deadly intent; it reached out and grabbed the questioner’s throat. Staggering backwards in a bid to escape, the guard froze. Only his eyes continued moving, darting in all directions, seeking help. Zane’s hands opened and closed. He wanted Emerald Green’s absence explained. Despite the distance between the men remaining constant, space contracted.

where is Emerald Green!

There was no need to shout. Irresistibly clear and unbearably seductive, the demand wet the man’s cheeks. Laying bare his innards, the guard turned himself inside out. One idea shone bright. If he pleased this thing before him, perhaps he would live. Zane wrenched free what he needed, uncaring of the consequences. The man collapsed to the floor. Silent lips twitched and a stream of drool pooled on the carpet.

Emerald Green was at the Millennium Centre attending the President’s Honourarium. Zane sneered, imagining the cultural plutocracy gathered together, receiving their congratulatory baubles, sycophantic applause greeting each announcement. She would be no different when her turn came. Around him his vision sparkled with raw emotion; disgust and rage accenting the world. The new age aristocracy were indulging their self-love and demanding the public do likewise.

Wind fanned the flames and his fury grew. Events were conspiring together and reinstating the past. He could not stomach their celebratory arrogance. Having found a focus for his loathing, he drew in on himself and tensed. In the distance a beacon flared, revealing their location, the place where they acted out their obscenity.

Strength and clarity mingled with savagery. Straightening his arms, he pushed out his chest and turned toward his unseen target. Desire took control and his skin tingled, his innards and the outside world syncopating, separation ending. Around him the air sparked as
the ambient energy streams accumulated and drew around him and into his body. Internally his transfigured cells set about sculpting the energy, concentrating it and honing the massed charge. He observed a spear head form, hot and bright, thirsting release.

Milliseconds passed and the energy pulsed in rhythm with his heart. Letting the sweet agony go, his body flared white hot and disgorged the charge.

With the speed of thought it struck the wall and bore through, brutal in its efficacy. Not slowing, the onslaught made true for its destination, removing steel and glass from its path. Only enough energy had been generated to fulfil its purpose, creating a clear channel connecting Emerald Green’s office and the Millennium Centre some three kilometres distant.

High above the thousands in attendance at the Honourarium, a hole appeared in the Centre’s magnificent dome, marked by a deep rumble loud enough for heads to lift and investigate. Fifty metres above, the half sphere was all curved supports, their gold anodized surfaces gleaming under the illumination shining upward from the domes circular base. A fine spray of granules floated down upon the gathered dignitaries, glittering stardust prompting exclamations of surprised delight. On the raised presentation dais, President Keller stared up at the interruption, his face a blank mask. Beside him, Emerald Green managed a fair approximation of his composure, only a small backward step betrayed her surprise. Pounding feet behind the pair announced security officers scrambling up the steps to reach their charge. They viewed the breach in the dome’s integrity as reason enough to enact emergency protocol and see the leader of the Union evacuated immediately.

Mingling with the excited cries were the murmurs of apprehension coming from the more sombre audience members. From his vantage point the President observed the potential for trouble. His immediate study of the hole marring the domes curved surface revealed nothing more and he switched focus to the growing agitation spreading through the audience.

“Stay calm honoured citizens. We have security matters firmly in hand, your safety is guaranteed. Whatever is responsible for this unexpected interruption will not threaten the Honourarium. Give security the chance to assess and deal with the situation and we will be able to continue on with our sacr......?”

The word stuck in his mouth when he spotted two figures drop through the elevated hole and float slowly downwards. His shocked study was interrupted by security grabbing his arms and pulling him toward the stairs. Engrossed by the bizarre sight above, the President failed to react until the operatives had him halfway down the steps.

“Stop! Let go.”

“President, we must enact emergency protocol. The situation requires...”

“Emergency protocol override.” A weighted glance followed the order, ending discussion. After re-mounting the dais, they formed a protective ring around the President and Emerald Green, scanning every quadrant for possible threats despite the obvious one from above. Shock set firmly aside, the President stared up at the pair hovering beneath the gaping hole. The crowd too had noticed the disturbing vision and reacted predictably. Cries of disbelief filled the air. People milled about, torn between watching the impossible and fleeing. Those who chose the latter pushed their way past onlookers to reach the exits. Unperturbed, the President’s concentration remained fixed on the intruders and he addressed
them, his amplified voice rising above the tumult, reaching ears and giving the crowd a shared anchor to which they clung.

“Greetings Friends. You have arrived by a most miraculous means. Put our minds at ease and come down and join us. We would dearly love to meet you and learn the reasons behind your visit.” The President’s address bordered on the ludicrous, his calm acceptance of what confronted the Honourarium dismissive of its improbable nature.

Silence settled over the auditorium. Disbelief urged the guests to see how the President’s rational plea would be received. Spellbound, they waited, the unmoving bodies high above providing the rarest of spectacles. The crowds breathing synchronised, thousands of tributaries feeding one great expectant flow.

Magically the visitors began their descent and the audience gasped, breaking the spell. Onward came the intruders, their trajectory putting them on course for the dais and the President. Realisation hit and voices spoke out in concern and protest.

“Who are they!”
“They’re going to kill President Keller!”
“NO!”
“Leave him alone!”
“Shoot them!”
“Shut up you fool!”

Upon entering the Millennium Centre, Zane made no effort to locate Emerald Green. After scooping up an unconscious Edward, Zane had wafted down the newly formed tunnel; severed support beams, wall and floor edges and sparkling electrical cables encircling them. Stunned people stood around in newly ventilated rooms, staring at them as they flowed past.

Outside in the morning light he’d moved on, a heat seeking missile locked on its target. Far below his feet street noise drifted up; he heard none of it. Their speed increased and moments later Zane sighted his objective and they entered the dome. She was the first thing he saw, immaculate and refined beside President Keller, not showing a shred of fear. He couldn’t wait any longer.

Hello Emerald.

She shook her head and looked around before snapping her eyes back up, glaring daggers. He was not surprised she had guessed the source of the voice in her head; after all, there were only two aeronauts in the auditorium. Her ready acceptance and aggressive posture intrigued him. So far those who’d experienced his gift had found it terrifying.

“STOP! Don’t come any closer!” The command came from the foremost security officer standing directly in front of President Keller. Like the rest, he held a loaded pistol aimed directly at Zane’s head. The command brushed Zane’s awareness and disrupted his focus. Stopping his descent, he gazed at the weapons trained on his person to defend the President.

“I want Emerald Green, give her to me.” Open hostility would not deter him, what he had come for stood a few metres below his feet. Their presence represented an inconvenience, an imposition he’d very nearly overlooked. Inspecting the guns, he felt the delicate flirtations supplied by mortality. Snatching the killing machines from the men, he sent them hurtling upward and out the hole.
Despite the exclamations from the thousands watching, the security officers did not panic and tightened the uman cordon around the President and Emerald Green. Zane’s mind ticked along and he wondered at his naivety.

Rising off the platform, Emerald Green hissed. She ignored Zane and dipped her head towards Keller. Observing her predicament, the President stretched out a hand and grabbed her leg. The touching display caught Zane off guard and he paused, holding her body in place, intrigued by the unexpected reaction. None too gently he rummaged through their minds and found a thing resembling love, an emotional organism feeding on desire and longing, sustained by respect and complementarity.

He withdrew his feelers and ascended. Beside him poor forgotten Edward remained silent, eyes closed and mouth ajar. Beneath the strange duo floated Emerald Green and President Keller, tethered by invisible cords, captive and helpless. Far below wails and screams sprang up in pockets before uniting. Seconds later the quartet disappeared and the dome exploded. Jagged rain fell from the sky and birthed tragedy.