

THE LIMINAL,  
a novel-in-progress

by

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Chapter One

Etan stretched out on the toxic earth at the center of a ring of wild mushrooms.

He unzipped the hood from his hazmat suit, bunched it under his head for a pillow, then plucked off his gloves and set them on his chest to cover the suit's flashing panic lights.

The perimeter between Community 17's blurred electrostatic barrier and the surrounding birchwood felt vast for its rare solitude. He was glad he'd decided to sneak away, to escape his classmates and their anxious chatter. The Spore Day assembly this morning had everyone on edge.

A contaminated breeze prickled across his exposed skin. The air smelled minty, like the tube of old-world toothpaste they passed around class to teach kids what an emergency smells like. Someone had written in marker over the original label and the flavor now read "sporemint."

Etan would have crept farther along C17's barrier...but for the fairy ring. To find this formation of mushrooms—*today*, of all days. He thought it was more than a coincidence. He thought it was a sign, a wink. Like something out here, out where a ten-year-old was surely not supposed to be, was saying, *We knew you'd come.*

*We know your secret.*

He wriggled his fingers in the dirt, like they were the fungal roots shown in the Spore Day video: a grub-white net of mycelium projected on the schoolroom screen and spilling out to the walls besides, writhing and spreading at dizzying magnification, sickening speed. Connective

shoots of fungi branching in frantic patterns from floor to ceiling, ceiling to floor, thick as cables. The rest of his class was terrified.

He drew a deep breath of raw outdoors air. The sporemint taste was more intense than it had been moments ago. A storm was brewing.

The mushrooms forming the circle in which he lay were stunted. He was surprised they had been able to sprout at all in the cleared divide. He didn't feel any roots with his fingers but mycelia would be tiny, finer than thread. And he knew there *were* mycelia alive under him. This fairy ring proved it.

He sunk his hands deeper into the soil.

Would the mycelia sense him? Would the fibers wind their way into his flesh—under his nails, beneath his skin, up his arms and into his heart and belly to erupt from his mouth and eyes?

Would that be the cost to enter the fairy ring's network?

“Go on,” he said, closing his eyes. “Do it.”

Green lightning strobed his eyelids.

“Etan,” said a muffled voice beneath him.

He startled, then sighed. It was the recess Monitor, calling him home through the speaker in his crumpled hood.

“Citizen Etan Blum!”

He ignored them.

“Go on,” he said, a whisper. To the mycelia. To the fairy ring. “Please.”

The green lightning flashed again.

“*Etan!*” Panicked, now. If the Monitor caught him like this, exposed to the elements, his secret really would be out.

“*Fine*,” he said, and sat up. He gathered his gloves in one hand and braced the other against the dirt to stand and— Something stabbed up from the ground into his palm.

“Ah!”

He scrambled away to his feet, gloves scattering. He looked down at his throbbing palm, expecting blood.

His hand was unmarked.

Lightning arched the clouds above, now joined by thunder. The breeze tipped into gust. The recess Monitor was silent, likely on his way.

Etan collected his gear with shaking hands. The filtered atmosphere inside the hood was thin and flavorless. He clasped his gloves in place and the lights on his chest blinked relief. He started back toward the gate.

Those who remained in the fairy ring watched him go.

After the day’s lessons, eager for some *applicable* information, Etan went to the library. It was dark when he arrived; the lights came on as he crossed the threshold but the power-share this time of day only afforded a dim twilight from the overheads.

He itched for more information on mycology. Today’s intentionally traumatizing Spore Day video and subsequent lessons on wilderness survival—*don’t go outside the barrier!*—and hostile shroomer self-defense—*run! Kill it with flames!*—would be the *final* lessons provided to Etan’s coming-of-age cohort. What else did you need to know?

He scoured the shelves: nothing on the toadstools he’d found outside. Nothing on mycelia or any of the mundane, old world mushroom species. Nothing even about bread mold. His mom had told him all about bread.

*Think around the problem*, his mom advised when he was stumped on something. He'd found it vague and unhelpful advice in the past, but now it resonated. He decided to *read* around the problem, to learn around the edges of his subject and hopefully discover enough to fill in the blanks, to find his fungi.

He grabbed down a book called *How Does It Work? Volume 3: Forests* from the Science section and settled into a deep, turnip-colored sandbag chair.

*Forests* was a big picture book about wooded ecosystems. The book was well-worn, like all the others stashed down here. Wide and flat, the cover and inside pages were complemented by antique scrawls of wax crayon, as well as the more vibrant smears of the algae-oil doodlers produced by the Community's Recreations department. He opened the book across his lap and wrinkled his nose at the damp smell rising from its pages.

A single tree spanned the first spread: on the left-hand page it was rendered in watercolor, emerald leaves and an earthenware trunk set against a bottle-fly sky brushed with cotton; on the right-hand page, the tree was diagrammed in stark, tidy black and white, vivisected, its inner workings and anatomy revealed and tagged. Bark; sapwood; heartwood. Tap root and pith. A single inked leaf, magnified, in a box in the corner, all veins and venules. Detached.

In *Forests*, he learned about the phenomenon called 'crown shyness.' It was just about the saddest thing he'd ever read; his own reaction startled him. Why should he care if the branch-tips of some trees species never touch, that vacant cracks run through a forest canopy? It was a logical evolution to allow sunlight to pass, to prevent pests and disease from spreading, to permit light to reach supportive shrubs on the forest floor. He didn't understand the pang he felt as gazed at the picture provided alongside the definition—this one a photograph, not a drawing—of a web of blue sky threading between treetops. He blinked through the moisture in his eyes and

studied the photo closely, the book bent in his grip. He'd never seen trees so healthy and unencumbered, in real life. So why should he miss them, now?

Etan read *Forests* cover to cover. His hopes peaked at the section on roots, but the few passages on *that* part of the forest—a little about the dirt, a little about the fallen leaves, a little about the little creatures that scampered down there—left out the vital mycelia. That's what the assembly video had called it. *Vital*. He wondered how the authors of a book about forests neglected to even once mention what connected the trees, livened the soil, *made* the forest a forest. He tapped his fingers on the cover. If not the forest, or the trees, where could he find his way? What other subjects would lead him to within sight of a fairy ring?

He smacked a hand to his forehead. Of course. There *was* an adjacent dimension of knowledge to explore. He tossed the disappointing botanical volume to a nearby table and went to the Children's section.

He thumbed along the mottled selections until he found a text that had an encouraging title glimmering on its spine. He pulled the book from between two heavy dictionaries that wedged it in place.

Back at the sandbag chair, he settled cross-legged into the still-warm hollow. He read the new book's title aloud to the silent room:

“Legends, Alive!”

The cover showed a kid, like him, sitting on an oval carpet with a book on their lap. The rest of the room in which they sat was rendered in charcoal smudges, but a brightness shined up from the book the child held, a vibrant geyser pouring up from its pages. The ink had a metallic shimmer, a beautiful effect even in the dim library.

Figures took definition in that geyser, streaks of color coalescing into a tangle of mythical beings: a hydra, its many heads roaring toward a sphinx, stoic, its gold fur meshed with a scaled dragon, wingless and winding 'round a unicorn who smiled a secret smile. A woman waving a tooth-topped wand buzzed low around the author's name while a leprechaun climbed a rainbow toward the book's title.

At the bottom of the cover, situated on the oval carpet with the child, sat a tiny figure on a toadstool. Its face was sketched with squiggles that suggested, somehow, intense focus. But it wasn't watching the creatures emerging from the child's book. The tiny being on the toadstool faced outward. Toward the reader.

Etan's heart raced. He opened the lopsided cover and felt an instant crash of disappointment—someone had shredded the pages to ribbons!—but then the tangled strips of paper rose into something...beautiful.

*Legends, Alive!* was a pop-up book.

“So Rises the Phoenix Bright,” he read. The words spanned two pages in an arc of flame, letters of blue, white, yellow, orange, red. They hovered above the tableaux's focus, the phoenix, worn with age, its flame-feathered torso askew, one wingtip torn, its coal claws stapled to the glued doilies miming ash at the bottom.

He turned to the next pop-up: a field of ancient stone columns, the wingless dragon snaked between. Silver and gray ink granted the stonework the illusion of depth, though some were just torn stumps. He wondered what it would be like to step into those ruins and scurry from plinth to plinth to stay hidden from the dragon. He wondered what would happen if it found you. He turned the page.

The sphinx before a wrinkled pyramid; the tooth-woman gliding through a window; the unicorn, vanishing behind a paper hill, visible only in the moment of turning its pages.

Etan flipped passed these scenes, noting which he'd like to return to examine in more detail...once he found what he could no longer wait to find.

And there it was, the final spread. He turned the page and saw the best-preserved display of all, less complex in its construction than the others but far more detailed. He let out a low whistle of appreciation.

It was a fairy circle of perfect red-and-white spotted mushrooms sprouting from the book. The scene was crowded with tiny figures, the smallest raised from the page on grasslike strips of paperboard, simple outlines of frolicking beings that swayed in the wake of his breath. The largest of the figures sat atop the mushrooms in poses of relaxation, merriment, dance. All had features akin to the sprite on the cover, faces and expressions suggested by squiggles and dashes.

And also like their cousin on the front, each and every one of these fae figures faced the reader. Faced Etan.

He shivered and shifted his eyes to the spread's caption. The words were borne from the scene as with the phoenix's flames, though in this case leaves and flowers. He tried to sound them out:

*“Fa-eries of the Hidden World. Hmm.”*

*F-a-e-ries* was a formulation of the word he'd never seen before. He didn't know what to do with the conjoined 'ae.'

He examined the busy scene with purpose, avoiding the voyeuristic gathering. Would this circle of mushrooms include—yes! There it was!

Thread was glued flush to the pages, winding from toadstool to toadstool. A mesh of the stuff, bundled white threads yellowed with age.

Mycelia.

Etan ran his fingers along the threads. What he could glean from this remained to be seen but he didn't let that uncertainty spoil the moment. This was confirmation, at last, that the information withheld from him did exist, in one form or another, and that "reading around the problem" might prove success—He pulled his hand away from the page. He saw what lay at the fairy ring's center.

It hadn't caught his eye at first because it wasn't a pop-up element; it was drawn on the page itself at such an angle that the paper toadstools obscured it, unless one peered over their tops or otherwise traced the thread to its end.

It was the child from the cover. They lay on their side in a posture suggesting sleep...but their eyes were open. Wide open. Terrified. The child was enspelled, trapped.

A loud chime rang in the library, startling the book from Etan's hands. It thumped to the floor.

Dinner. He slid out of the sandbag chair and picked up *Legends, Alive!* He considered taking it home, but reasoned it would be safer here, back between the supportive press of dictionaries. Safer here, than in his room. Those faces looking out.

Soon after he left the library, its twilight returned to full dark.

## Chapter Two

By his final day of recess monitor duty, a stressful post that he was sure was payback for years of truancy, Etan realized that the adults charged with his care through his childhood had not been, entirely, melodramatic.

The youngest generation of Community 17 citizens laughed and chased each other within the recess boundary, playing “Spored Interpack”—one child a cat, another a dog, a bird, a deer, a rabbit, a bear, all pretend mind-fused by the pretend Spore. The game was to predict the leader animal’s next move, be it hop or creep or run, and perform it at the same time they did. The “Interpack” eliminated those who guessed wrong, each round, dismissing them to ride the faded tilt-a-whirl, or to built castles in the sterilized sand with blue plastic molds thinned with age.

The children moved with eerie fluidity in their protective “Outsides” hazmat suits, unrestrained by the suit’s material and layered life support systems beyond an occasional, subconscious adjustment. The suits were nothing to them, totally natural. At seventeen years old, Etan had never achieved that level of grace with his own Outsides.

Today, he schooled his successor, Gilly Fletcher, in the fine art of Not Letting The Children Die A Horrible Death.

“We haven’t seen any shroomers around here in years,” he said, “and the Interpacks—the real ones—don’t really stray this far from the lakes out east. But you don’t want to let the kids know that, you’ll need a bit of fear to keep this crew in line.”

Gilly leaned against the gate, their eyes on the frolicking youngsters.

“Mm,” they said.

“I’ve found an occasional forehead-wrinkle, maybe a little frown while looking into the distance, does the trick,” he said.

He demonstrated and was gratified to see Gilly glance his way.

“In an emergency,” he said, “like a fist fight, you can shout and point. Over toward the woods, or the old orchard...”

They both looked northwest, past the outer barrier’s translucent shimmer, to the ordered rows of charred stumps.

“Alright,” Gilly said. “Emergencies only.”

He saw they did a headcount as soon as they looked back to the children. He nodded in approval. “Come to think of it,” he said, “Just go with the orchard. The C15 ruins out there make for a more convincing and spookier shroomer source.”

“That’s where Dari’s taking you tomorrow, you know,” Gilly said. “The *spooky* ruins. You as up for that as you act, almost-Scout Blum?”

“She told you that?”

“She’s not going to leave the C and not tell me. *Through the orchard, to C15’s sight line, and no farther.*” Gilly did a pretty good impression of their sister Darienne. “So, are you?” they said. “Up for that?”

“I am,” Etan said. “*Believe* me. Here.” He held out the gate key.

Gilly took the heavy orange card from him casually, as though it *wasn’t* the first time they’d even been trusted with it. They zipped it into an Outsides pocket, eyes never leaving the kids.

“Thanks,” they said.

Allowing Gilly a trial run on their monitor duties was a good excuse for a walk. He hadn't had a chance to visit his old hangout along the perimeter in a long time. He gave the gate a double-tap and left Gilly to their first solo watch.

He chuckled to himself when he arrived at the spot where he had once seen that inexplicable ring of toadstools. It had felt so far back then but it was barely out of sight of the gate around the perimeter's bend.

Since then, he'd decided that the incident had been an invitation. One he was too frightened, at the time, to accept. An invitation to something bigger than himself, bigger than one tenuous Community circling the drain. Something that might endure, even if it consumed him in the process.

There was no fairy ring today. The ground all around C17 was sown with mold-deterring elements like charcoal and bleach, per protocol; how that first ring had appeared, he'd never figured out.

What if there *was* another ring, today? What if he had another chance to vanish as he had wanted to, back then? Would he have the courage to accept?

Scout Fletcher led Etan away from C17, into and through the burned orchard. Trees that, with his Community's help, had once held their own against the Spore to produce apples and pears for both C17 and C15 were now reduced to grayish husks. The Spore strain that had overtaken C15 on the orchard's other side spread too virulent. There was no choice but to burn it all. He remembered what the fruit tasted like. The kids Gilly was back home supervising never had the chance.

Their footsteps through the orchard churned up ash and exposed dormant beds of smoldering embers that stirred up, even after all this time, coils of smoke. They had radios in their hoods but he knew what it was like to be out there *without* his suit—without an immediate line of communication. He knew the truth of their distance from safety. It wouldn't take much—a tech malfunction, a sudden sporestorm, a ranging Interpack—to cut them off from home. Or worse.

Scout Fletcher led him, as Gilly presaged, to just within sight of Community 15's remains. The citizens of this Community had excavated steps into the land between their barrier and the co-op orchard. Vague outlines of farming plots could be discerned under several inches of cobalt mold that covered it like snow.

The inner structure itself looked intact from here, but Darienne assured him the far side was collapsed. The inside was coated, she said, along with all their resources and people, in the same quick-dispersal growth. What happened here remained under debate, but the people of C17 were selfishly relieved to see that the strain of Spore that had taken hold out here was not, despite his recess threats, a shroomer-generating strain.

Darienne refused to take him any nearer the ruin, citing Community Leader Frederick Mason's civilian guidelines.

"When you're eighteen, and a full Scout," she said, "we can argue about it. Right now, the subject is closed."

"Eighteen," he said.

"An arbitrary number, right?" Darienne sounded sympathetic. "It made sense long ago, as a benchmark of maturity." She turned to him. "Actually no, it didn't make total sense back then, either. But now as then, it denotes a rite of passage, a tradition."

“A structure of authority,” he said. There were odd formations of mold scattered around the stepped plots. Cairns and columns. Where there crops underneath? Stalk poles? People?

“Now as then,” Scout Fletcher said. “Now as then.”

## Chapter Three

Scout Blum reclined on a patch of moss sprung from the cracked asphalt of his favorite abandoned parking lot. The bed of dark green coils had grown in breadth and depth, having struck some happy symbiosis with the Spore. The bare pavement around the moss patch diffused the scent of tired tar and the sun's borrowed warmth in a peaceful haze. He'd come here to think, without distraction, aided by heat and the privacy he enjoyed as an official Scout, about something very important.

Faeries.

The wide-open world he'd dreamt of as a cloistered child had shrunk with each rotted-out bookstore and mold-swathed landscape he'd encountered as a Scout, soggy doors of opportunity squished in his face.

But there had been *some* salvage: books and materials preserved through happenstance.

When the Spore ran fresh and new and horrifying across the continent, people threw up shelters all over, all doomed to prove insufficient, none as specific to the threat as the capital-c Communities. Nonetheless, their hastily gathered supplies had included not just food and water, but also things to keep their families occupied. Toys, games. Books. Fairytales.

Reading around the problem in these scavenged, smeared tomes had brought Etan to something encouraging. He learned about "between places." Shorelines, groves, islands, oases. Fairy rings. Such places bridge worlds—solid to insubstantial, shade to sunlight, lifeless to living. 'Tween places are *thin*. Midnight made material.

Through this thinness, spoke the tales, came beings. Fairies, in some stories; faeries, in others. Guardian spirits. Mischievous imps. Hostile entities. Savvy humans, sometimes, though few survived the passage unscathed.

The notion occurred to Etan that this parking lot, an acre or so of eroded gray pavement and thriving Spore, with a hillock of mold in the near distance describing the outline of what was once a shopping mall, could be considered *between*.

Could this place bring back what he'd felt in that fairy ring, years and years ago? That invitation, as he'd come to think of it. He didn't believe in faeries. But something out here had utilized a 'tween space to say...what? Hello? *C'mon in?* And what had he done? Turned tail and ran.

This place wasn't a natural borderland, like a shore, but rather an island of abandoned human artifice that the natural world was obliged to reclaim.

A space once busy with trade, now forgotten by all.

"I. Am not. Forgotten. The voice came from beneath Etan, borne from vibrations in the blacktop. Pebbles scattered and weeds swayed and Spore puffed startled clouds. He jolted to his feet.

"I *am*," the voice said—adding, with audible, rumbling uncertainty, "I am...Ezar?"

Etan looked around. The lot was empty.

"I *am* Ezar," the voice said in quaking syllables. "I am not empty."

"Sorry," Etan said. He zipped up the hood of his suit. It was the only thing he could think to do. The parking lot seemed to be reading his mind.

A sigh gathered itself from the lot's far corners; leaves and rocks and gobs of fungus stirred and swirled to the center of the space, rising up, up, into a tight spinning pillar of debris.

“Epiphany,” Ezar said.

The coil of wind and rock and mold loomed over Etan. He took a step back.

“It is hoped,” Ezar said, “that you survive the passage. Unscathed.”

Etan continued his retreat and realized: he was doing it again. He was panicking in the face of the extraordinary.

He opened his mouth to speak but his heel caught a buckle of pavement and he fell, backward, on and on, cleanly through the solid earth, without a trace.

## Chapter Four

“Nurse Blum?” Professor Stamets appeared from an office door down the hall. “A word?”

“Hello, Stamets,” Raben said. “Need a tester for the new crop? I like my algae crispy. Oh,” She saw his expression, the bags under his eyes. “What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“Nothing emergent,” the researcher said. “Or, maybe, but, we don’t need to *run*. Would you please join me downlift? In the lab?”

She put a hand on her office door. “Call it,” she said, “I’ll tell Dale—”

“*Don’t*, ah, don’t let anyone know, okay? Just yet. Please?”

She sized him up. She hadn’t seen the professor in a few days; his razor and comb hadn’t, either. He looked pallid in the hallway LEDs.

“Alright,” she said, “Let’s go, I have my kit right here.”

She followed Stamets down the curving hall to the elevator. Stamets lifted its yellow scissor-arm gate and opened the inner accordion doors and motioned her inside the small car. He followed her in then lowered and pulled the doors shut, navigating each track’s hitches and warps from practiced memory.

He gave her a queasy smile. “I’ll need to explain,” he said.

“Yes.”

The professor produced his lift key and turned it in the lock. The service button flashed red and he pressed it. Chains older than she was comfortable thinking about unspooled, and down creaked the lift.

“It goes back a-ways,” Stamets said. He wiped his brow with a kerchief, then worried the fabric’s edge. “I have to consider confidentiality...where to begin...”

“Do you? If it’s life or death, confide in me, Stamets. There’s no conflict.”

“I don’t doubt you at all Blum, never have. It’s...others.”

The Farm level rose into view, slowly, and she wondered which lab they were heading toward, there. Processing would be most likely, since Development was a rather low-risk environment, unless you count someone drowning in a shallow algae tank.

The lift clanked to a stop at Farm level. The service button lit red. Stamets had left his key in the elevator lock, and now he turned it again. The service button turned orange and he pressed it.

The elevator continued to sink.

“Uh, Stamets?”

“I’m going to have to hold you to that confidentiality, Nurse Blum.”

Farm level rose up and away. There was raw earth outside the lift, now, limestone streaked white and black. “Where are we going?”

“We have a research level.”

“I know, we just passed it.”

“There’s no new algae crop. Well, okay there *is*, but I’m not on that project, nor is Mason. And it’s more a hybrid varietal than *new*. Development’s really doing wonders though, you know they’re working on a strain that tastes *just* like walnuts. God it’s been forever since I’ve had a wal—”

“*Professor.*”

“Right, sorry, I’m rambling. You’re not supposed to know any of this. Well not *you*, specifically—well yes *you*, too, but not you *specifically*—nobody is supposed to know, you see. For a least several years. So, you understand, I’m quite anxious.”

All the while the lift continued its descent. Here it shimmied, there it wobbled; Stamets rode the turbulence as he chattered with the same unconscious grace with which he'd worked the tricky gates.

Her ears popped and the lift came to a stop, as though that was its cue.

It was cold, down here. And silent; she'd not heard such silence in a long time. She could hear her own racing heartbeat.

She heard something else, too, as Stamets opened the inner gate: a bottomless echo under their feet.

The professor opened the outer gate. Ahead was a small landing. The landing granted access to an steel door set with a small window, and below the window, a wheel. It looked like an airlock.

“Stamets. What subject are you avoiding?”

Stamets pointed at the door.

“Him.”

She disembarked the lift. The slim gap between elevator car felt more ominous than a few moments ago. It seemed prudent not to peer down the gap, but she couldn't help herself. She saw nothing but darkness; sensed only an endless fatal gravity. She stepped across and strode toward the airlock, concerns sorted behind the imperative to attend her mysterious patient. It was warm, near the door. She stepped to the window and looked inside. She gasped.

“Frederick,” she said.

Stamets joined her at the window. He was smiling.

“I'm not surprised you recognized him, even under all the Spore. Has a distinctive profile, does our Leader Mason.”

## Chapter Five

Etan squelched across wet carpeting and came to a stop against something metal that dented with a squeal under his shoulder. Particulate scoured his eyes and he gagged on air sour with the carbon reek of long-burned things.

A frenetic rustling enveloped him and he raised his hands in defense against whatever it was that slapped and sliced at him. The assault stopped and he wiped his eyes in time to see a flock of loose papers sail away through a wall of broken windows, to scatter like embers. Far, far below the tower penthouse in which he now found himself, a dead city smoldered under red dusk.

He slid back from the brink and crumpled into another metal object. A filing cabinet. Rust snowed around him as more jostled pages sheafed out into the crimson void.

He'd never been in a building this tall, nor a city, for that matter. From the sanguine air outside, he saw why they were called skyscrapers.

A long, rotting wood table dominated the room. Leather chairs with busted seams and sprung stuffing circled the table, most of them keeled over, their wheels wagging in the constant wind like snapped ankles.

Something scintillated, blood-red, in an upright chair at the table's head.

A man—a *corpse*—in a shredded business suit, body laced with innumerable shards of glass. One tattered arm lay upon the tabletop; the other was gone at the elbow, below which flashed a single large shard, idly slicing at the armrest. Tufts of filler drifted up and out.

The mosaic cadaver had no face; just a wedge of glass, in which Etan saw himself reflected.

“Eeetttaaannn.” The sound crawled from the room’s charred corners. The skewered corpse gestured to a serving cart that was caked to the wall by barnacles of dark red Spore. Atop the cart was a glass carafe full to the brim with murky gray liquid. “You’ll want a drink.”

He heard the voice, and understood the words, but could only stare, and stare back at himself. There was no accounting for his impression that it was the *glass* that puppeteered the body’s movements, but he knew it to be true.

So what force, he wondered, with a wave of vertigo, controlled the glass?

“Forgive my appearance,” the voice said. Shards streaked with tarry innards shifted to raise its remaining hand in a gesture of modest apology. “This was the best I could find. You’re in shock, you understand. Drink the rainwater, *you* can tolerate it. You wouldn’t wish to swoon and take a tumble.”

Etan sidled to the cart, not turning his back to the apparition, and unzipped his hood, letting it dangle from his neck. He lifted the carafe and took a sip. The liquid had the familiar sporemint flavor, charcoal grit aside.

“Now sit.” The shard-arm pointed at another upright chair at the table’s side.

He moved toward the table, entranced, and just as he reached the ring of fallen chairs, the floor gave out. He dropped the carafe and grabbed, successfully, at the floor’s edge. His legs kicked into the empty space below and he coughed through the waft of rancid air that rose from the lower floor.

Etan pulled himself up from the sinkhole, floundering a bit in the spilled water, and looked back down. The room below was similar to this one, but was filled with bodies sprawled across tables and chairs and heaped on the floor.

He vomited, there among the scattered chairs, and wished he hadn't dropped the water. Then he crawled closer to the table and used it to stand and take the seat that the monstrosity indicated. It hadn't moved during this ordeal, merely reflected his struggles in its face.

Being seated next to the thing was as galling as the reasonable, shrieking part of his mind thought it would be. This close, a thousand horrorstruck Etans reflected back from the flesh-bound shards.

“What *are* you?” he said.

“What do you think I am?”

“A nightmare.”

The voice laughed and hearing the razor sound of it seeping from the file cabinet drawers, echoing up from the sinkhole, Etan wished it never would again. The corpse brought its hand and pointed shard together on the table, and leaned forward, conciliatory.

“It is a complicated situation. I'll grant you that,” it said. “Let's start again on *terra firma*. What do you think of Ezar? What is *it*?”

“A parking lot.”

“Come now.”

“The Spore?”

“Closer.”

“Do *you* know?”

“I do know, citizen.”

*Citizen*. The title applied to all Community members, but it was most often deployed in the same way a parent will a child's full name: in reprimand. He'd heard it used that way, plenty.

“Are you this building?” Etan said.

The voice laughed again, louder, a lashing squeal that tipped cabinets and summoned a musty gout of flaking human remains from the lower floor. Etan covered his ears and pressed low to the table. He was certain the sound would shred him to strips, to bald bone.

The laughter faded; the room stilled, save for the ever-present wind. In glee's aftermath the corpse was less its ears. Etan could see through the body now, here and there, to the chair, the stars now peppering the sky beyond. Bits of glass remained suspended in these gaps, confirming his early intuition—just as another impression of certainty arrived to him:

“You’re this *city*,” he said.

The body stood. Its chair rolled across the floor, struck the pane, and tumbled out. The nightmare figure stalked around the table, dragging its shard-arm across the bloated wood, parting it like flesh. It stopped across from Etan.

“My name is Olam,” said the voice creeping from all directions to center in the corpse.  
“And we are the Liminal.”

Chapter Six

Etan gripped the table's edge, afraid his chair would roll along the sloping floor and into the pit.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?" he said.

"It will," Olam said in an uncanny, creeping voice. Behind the cadaverous avatar its derelict city succumbed, block by block, to the fall of night.

"How did I get here?"

"I brought you. With your father's help."

"My father's dead."

"Jacob's work lives on."

"No," Etan said, startled at his own daring. Nobody ever talked to him about his father. "My father's research died with him."

"The Spore is a catalyst," Olam said. "It is an eager agent of change. Your father knew this. He knew that there was potential hidden in the horror of the outbreak. That the Spore might be the key to adapting. He tried to meet it half way. Rare is the citizen so determined to achieve environmental congruence."

"How?" he said.

"Boundaries represent power. Energy. Waves strike shores, roots churn earth, wind erodes cliff. All the planet's in transition, now. Artifice to nature. Presence to desertion. The Spore, designed to bridge a gap, actualizes that potential. Gives it something to spark. Jacob knew this. Though even he did not foresee *us*."

"What *are* y—"

“You presume to interrogate our own consciousness, but what is the origin of *yours*? From what starry well was your essence plucked, to be placed inside that vessel of meat?”

“We have...no idea.”

“Then kindly grant us the courtesy of kindred spirits.” Olam’s corpse marionette smiled, its glass splinter teeth gleaming red dusk. Etan understood he’d see that smile, forevermore, in what dreams remained for him. “Your genesis, and ours, were miracles born of science. You, native to peril, the air itself inclined to strangle. Yet you survived. Thrived—well-suited to this world. To stalk its margins. Like us.”

“How do you know all this?”

“The Spore’s mycelial network data,” Olam said, dismissive. “But *you*,” it said, indicating Etan with a gesture of its shard-arm, “are a new kind of transmission.”

The serrated blade pointed his way, Etan had a powerful urge to zip up his hood. His hand twitched at his side but cooperated no further.

“Information travels along the network,” Olam went on, “electrical impulses. Guidance. Warnings. Even nutrients, stimulants. The Spore goes about its autonomic business above, under, and through we who are Liminal. Busy with its business of proliferation.” Olam’s remaining fingers curled, skin flakes dusting the breeze, as though it were grasping at a notion. “...and then we felt something novel. Each other. Here,” it pointed to a point on the horizon, “and there and there and there. And through that last place, the Liminal Ezar, I sensed something else that was different from all that came before. You. And with my singular might I *drew you to me*.” The omnipresent voice relished the suggestion of its weird power. “I felt it likely you would arrive through the mycelial network, broken down to your component molecules. A mist of blood and bone. What a happy surprise that you did not.”

“My father’s research,” Etan said. Focusing took effort; family matters seemed a safer avenue to pursue than the image Olam had just conjured. “*He* made me immune? My mother said it was a random mutation. That the nature of my resistance to the Spore was useless to help anyone else.”

Night continued to swallow the cityscape below, the Spore’s variable glow taking over in the shadows to limn broken edifices. Etan’s mind populated that darkness with fresh dangers. He thought of his usual Scouting routes, both sanctioned and secret. The risks he’d taken over the years—and the risks he’d have to take to get home, granted the chance. An hour ago he’d felt immortal, or near enough, traversing a landscape that would have killed even the hardest of his fellow citizens in seconds.

Now he felt vulnerable. In a way that even his abduction and reckoning with a jagged zombie hadn’t made him feel.

Humanity’s only hope of survival hid in his blood—or his DNA, or who knows what component of this meat vessel that he’d put at constant hazard since he was a child.

All these years at hazard, and he’d never know...*what was his mother thinking?*

“Epiphany is disorienting,” Olam said. “We understand.”

Olam didn’t sound understanding so much as it sounded sarcastic but Etan’s head swam with, yes, weighty, distracting epiphanies.

“Now that I’m here,” he said, “now that you’ve taken me, what do you want?”

“For you to reach your full potential, citizen. We will have you as our herald. You will travel, as only you can, among the ruins of your kind. Find those who remain, and tell them: die quietly. Any attempt to reclaim your forsaken geographies will result in extermination. It’s the Liminal’s world, now.”

“You plan to fling me around the map, looking for people to threaten?”

“It is within your power to travel the network at your *own* behest.”

“How?”

“The possibility now understood, trust reflex. In time, it will become deliberate.”

Sudden light blossomed across Olam—reflections on its countless glass pinions—and it turned to face the city. It waved Etan to its side.

He rose and stepped around the table to stand near the gaping wall. He braced a hand on the moldy window frame. Buffeted by the wind he watched as light flared from hundreds, thousands of windows in the buildings all around. Shades of yellow, orange, white, purple, red—refractions from the thin hemisphere of sun bleeding on the horizon—all the city’s shattered windows attuned to reflect the dusk, in unison, up to their perch. He thought Olam a terrible show-off.

A sound reached their lofty penthouse, the tink and clink and crunch of glass flowing and floating from the razed buildings to gather in the wide square between. Other debris joined the exodus; human remains, aged and husked and weathered, stirred up and out from the crooked buildings to join the courtyard dervish. He at last found the impetus to zip up his Outsides hood.

The debris swirled just above street level in a wide, glimmering funnel of stolen twilight. The force of it swept the streets clear, drew up and consumed the dust and ash and Spore and bodies into a rising tornado of colorful glass and flesh. Olam incarnate.

The convection grew to, and then above, the penthouse, the top of the funnel growing up beyond Etan’s sight.

The noise was apocalyptic.

“Send me back!” Etan said, unable to hear his own voice in the savage gale. “I’ll tell them! I’ll tell them all!”

Something slashed at his back. He gripped the windowframe and turned to see Olam’s puppet pressed near him, its terrazzo maw gnashing against his visor. The vortex howled and tugged him toward the brink.

Etan closed his eyes and jumped.

## Chapter Seven

“Into that?” Raben said. She pointed at mold-swaddled Frederick. “What does that solve?”

“Everything,” Stamets said, opening his arms wide. “Hydration. Oxygenation. Reproduction. *Adaptability*.”

“You don’t intend to do this to yourself, too?” She looked at him sharply. “Or to the rest of us?” She pictured the lab aflame.

“No, and no,” Stamets said. “I said adaptability, not symbiosis. The goal’s to stay *us*. We speculate that the *myc.0* Spore can be *merged* with a subject—and you’d never know it, not by looking at them or by interacting with them. But they’d reap the benefits.” Stamets counted off on his fingers: “External digestion; passive moisture absorption; long range communication via spore shedding; freedom from exposure, without a suit!”

Raben’s eyes widened at “external digestion.” “And this,” she gestured to the creche with Leader Mason inside, “is the process to achieve that end? Is he in a, what, a cocoon?”

“No. When we achieve the process, it won’t look like this.”

“Then is this a failed attempt, is Frederick lost to us? Did you bring me down here to pull the plug for you?”

“No—no no,” Stamets moved over to the creche. “This work doesn’t involve *myc.0*, the strain we’ll use for the hybridization. Frederick, saturated here in an atmosphere of *myc.X*, is going on an expedition!”

“So we’re moving him? Is that it? You need discreet help moving this thing?”

“Again, Nurse Raben, no. Fair guesses, but not on the mark.”

“Stamets, if you say no to me one more time I’m going to strike you, regrettably, and the stitches you’ll need won’t be pleasant either. *Tell me what’s going on.*”

“Frederick is *already* on his expedition, you see.” Stamets tapped the side of his head. “In this sense.”

“He’s out of his mind, I know.”

“N-, uh, I mean, *n-ot* exactly.” Stamets smiled. “His *mind* is *out*. In the network. You see this conduit?” He indicated a glass tube that fed from the creche lid up into the ceiling. It was filled with a dense mesh of gray filaments. “It goes to the surface. outside the barrier.”

“To spread, what was it, *myc.X*?”

“No,” he raised a warding hand, “Or at least, I don’t think so. Active cultures wouldn’t make the trip. The mycelia likely dead-end at the egress: our focus is its dispersing Spore. *Myc.X* is the, ah, *sticky note* of the mycosphere, if you will. Its lab-developed “dataspore,” as we call it, my coinage, can travel inert for long durations. To eventually encounter *and be accessed by* strains of disparate variety. There are many compatibilities. The true extent of its range is one metric Frederick’s attending to, in the field. Just how many other strains of Spore will accept data from *myc.X*, and pass it along. Said dataspore being, in this case, Leader Mason’s own mind.”

“Frederick’s turned himself into a fungus Post-It.”

Stamets laughed—long and with a gibbering edge. Exhaustion, maybe. Maybe not.

“That’s funny,” he said. He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes. “Something more elegant, perhaps. *More active*. Fredrick’s still Frederick, his consciousness sustained within the dataspore. In time, he’ll be back.” Stamets nodded his head to the plastic-curtained thresholds along either wall. “And so will the others. And they’ll all have such wonders to tell us.”

## Chapter Eight

Etan leapt away from the corpse, out of the broken window, into the slicing gale. *Olam will get its mist of blood and bone, after all*, he thought—realizing, as he did, that that was to be the final thought of his life.

The vortex of metropolitan debris roared and churned and through it he dropped, scree scouring his visor while who knows what decomposed objects bludgeoned him in endless succession. He felt the tornado's power, felt himself ragdoll to its currents, his body only afloat per its whimsy.

And then—quiet.

In an instant, gone whirlwind; gentle glide in place of terminal plummet.

Etan opened his eyes to find himself adrift like a mote of dust in a sunbeam among colossal, neon geometries: a polychromatic fractal that repeated into all distances, without orientation or end, wrought in a material he was apt to recognize, even at this scale.

Mycelia.

He glided in between the architectural strands, under arches and up flues and down wells, that which approached mirrored by what dwindled behind, left same as right, as below so above.

Behind and between it all, a vast cosmic silence.

Agoraphobia warred with claustrophobia, panic with wonder, disorientation with a clarity of mind he'd never before experienced. A sense of perfect order.

There then came a pressure, a tug at the center of himself, the sense that some *force* drew him along with purpose. He imagined a thread, extending from his chest and out into the iterating dimension's depths.

Who, or what, held the other end?

He moved his limbs about, tried to change his direction, slow his drift, exert any control whatsoever—to no end. His body spun on an axis of gravity that was inexplicable as everything else: the scale, the scope, what molecules composed these structures, what unfamiliar physics ruled this plane of existence.

He unzipped his hood; he could breathe but tasted nothing, smelled nothing. Removing the clear visor had made a difference, however.

Now, he could see.

Through an arch here, around a bend there, he glimpsed...*other places*. A flower patch in a meadow; a waterfall basin; a sandy beach made white with tiny bones.

Each vision was accompanied by a tug at his string, a draw; just as he was certain one had him in its tide, the next lurched him further into the mystifying emptiness, on to the next half-glimpsed, magnetic milieu.

Over time his drift grew more rushed; the disproportionate mycelia soared by with increasing velocity. The pressure and the pull were singular now and he knew, without knowing how he knew, that once he arrived at its source he would return to the layer of reality where he belonged.

With this intensification came, as well, the sense of being watched.

More than watched: *approached*. He looked all around, all directions the same, blurred snapshots of canyons and bridges and forests consumed by mold and nobody, nobody anywhere, not in here and not out in any of the theres.

But he knew he wouldn't be alone much longer.

That he wasn't alone *now*.

Something had found him.

He soared ever faster into the lateral plunge and despite the escalating terror that whatever had found him was about to finally *reach* him, he marveled at the spectacle of geography that grew no closer despite his velocity, infinite motionless strands in a frenzy of endless approach.

Etan staggered forward and fell onto coarse, solid ground. Pavement.

There was no sense of transition; first there, now here. The humid silence of a forest clearing. It was dusk. Again.

The air had its usual deadly, minty tang, leagues fresher than inside the corpse-choked city. The taste of that charnel tower had been spared to him in the fractal void, he realized now that the necrotic particulate was potent on his tongue.

He retched, again, unproductively but with vigor. Hunched over, wiping his mouth, he saw faded stripes on the ground.

His parking lot? The automobile fungus-cairns nearby weren't in a familiar configuration.

"Ezar?" he said.

The reply came from all compass points and at a distance, gathering in proximity and volume until a single voice rose from the ground around him:

"ssssssSo it would seem," Ezar said. "This is a new place."

"Damn. It is?"

"I did not expect to see you again," the parking lot said.

"Where are we? Olam sent me to my people. There's probably some nearby."

"I'm still where we were," Ezar said. "Nobody's there. I'm here now, too. Interesting."

Interesting was an understatement. Etan had more questions than bandwidth to process them, and the Liminal seemed to be talking to itself, so he fell into his Scout training: set up camp, get his bearings.

As for supplies at hand, he had only the Outsides on his back. The rest of his gear was left in the *other* desolate lot.

Hunger and thirst weren't pressing—he felt neither, at the moment—but it wouldn't be a good idea to let adrenaline do all the work. When the sun rose he'd hunt for edibles.

This lot was even more wild than his usual haunt, with only a few islands of broken pavement still exposed between tumbled and fractured cement blocks and molded-over cars.

Among the crowd he found a spot with some overhead cover, a nook between two derelict trucks, one tipped into the other.

Habit steered his preparations—clear enough debris to rest but not so much he lost cover; check the sightlines; set some noise-traps; establish retreat routes.

As he busied about his tasks he considered the logjam of terrors before him. The ground under his feet seemed unstable, now, untrustworthy. Liable to vanish at any moment and send him back to that scorched city of razor-sharp death.

First on his list of anxieties was just how, *mechanically speaking*, Olam had abducted him to that faraway place. And how he could stop the Liminal, if it tried to abduct him again.

“Others approach,” Ezar said. “Just as you anticipated.”

Etan ducked into his makeshift shelter and a heartbeat later heard movement along the lot's edge. Footsteps and the rip-rustle of disturbed Sporedrifts. Too noisy to be shroomers. Too quiet to be an Interpack.

Humans.

## Chapter Nine

“The *others*,” Raben said, repeating the professor’s words. She peered into the plastic-curtained darkness but saw only darkness. “Who else is down here, Stamets?”

The professor looked away, wiped at the console screen with his shirt cuff. “Leader Mason collaborated with many people, across disciplines,” he said, “I don’t know them a—”

“Is *he* here, Stamets?”

“Is *who* here?”

Raben moved away from Frederick’s moldy coffin, toward Stamets. He stood his ground, but leaned back, not making eye contact.

“Don’t fuck with me, Professor,” she said. “Is. He. Here.”

“Oh, I, well, didn’t think you’d consider, ah, let’s see.” Stamets flipped up a plastic cover on the console and flicked the switch beneath. Lights blinked awake on an adjacent panel.

The machinery gave a cough and the conveyer belt set into the floor shifted ever so slightly—some motor jerking back to life against the imperatives of disuse and grime. She smelled a coppery burn. Stamets cursed, tapped some keys.

A component on Frederick’s creche disconnected from the terminal and retracted into itself. The tubes and hoses along the top did the same, pop pop pop, apertures sealing. The glass tube filled with the *myc.X* mycelia retracted all the way to the ceiling, disappearing into a port that sealed behind it. Stamets tapped more screens and then stepped back.

The conveyor belt rotated and Frederick’s creche slid away through the plastic-strip curtain on the far wall.

The next creche in line emerged from the other wall, paused briefly before the console, then moved along. There was a woman's body inside, shrouded in a pearlescent white Spore, the likes of which Raben had never seen.

She could feel Stamets watching her, gauging her reaction. Whatever they were doing down here wasn't just secret Spore research. It was human experimentation.

"Stamets," she said. In the single word she tagged him to that...whatever it was. Let him know this was something they would revisit. She wasn't going to forget any of this. There would be consequences.

The next creche held a surprisingly palliative sight: a shroomer, as she understood the contagion to present itself. It was vibrant green and dismembered. Neither of them commented as it cycled past.

The next creche was covered in a canvas tarp. Stamets tapped a screen and the conveyor belt stopped when it aligned with the console. He tapped again and a component extended from the creche to connect to the console. The tubes and hoses dangling from above sought their ports in the creche lid but encountered the tarp's fabric. They retracted a few feet into the air and stilled.

"Let's have a look," Stamets said. He waved Raben ahead, to do the honors.

She stepped to the creche's side. Dust darkened the tarp's folds. Months' worth? Years?

*Could it be years, she wondered. Could it be?*

She dragged the tarp off the creche in a single sweep, eyes closed against the cloud of disturbed grime, and let it fall to the floor. She paused, imagining the dust settling.

She opened her eyes.

"No," she said. She pressed her hands to the glass.

Jacob.

Missing after Etan's birth. Declared dead. Buried, in ceremony.

Her husband lay in the creche, swathed in Spore that rippled with electric yellow phosphorescence. He was almost entirely covered by the mold. One of his eyes was exposed, closed, dusted in spores.

Movement beneath the lid. Like REM.

Her husband Jacob, Etan's father. Alive.

## Chapter Ten

Etan watched the strangers pick their way along the cluttered lot. Three people, wearing Outsides that featured helmets instead of visored hoods. He toggled his suit's comm channel open and scanned the frequencies. Nothing. Either they had their own lines in those helmets, or they weren't speaking. They gave no indication they knew he was there.

He'd never met anyone from outside his Community. Even in the days when C15 stood. The appearance of people whose names he didn't know—whose lives were mysteries—was near as disorienting as the business with the possessed corpse and fractal plane.

He found he was smiling.

Ezar was silent; whether the Liminal was laying low, so to speak, or gone from the area, he didn't know.

The noise of the strangers' passage faded and he waited to see if a tail Scout materialized from the forest after them. Protocol would be the surest sign these people were from an organized Community.

Nobody else appeared. Etan zipped his hood and became their tail Scout.

The strangers moved away from the parking lot and into the Spore-shrouded woods. He had followed, watching their trail, for nearly an hour before they came to a halt. He crept closer and tucked into the spongy foliage and to see what stopped them.

Just ahead, the trees had sprouted long wispy vines of Spore from their branches. The vines twined the air and each other, like Medusa's hairdo.

Shroomer sign.

“This is the spot,” one of the strangers said, their voice piping loud through the speaker in Etan’s hood. He sunk deeper into the murk, startled. So he was on their comms, after all.

“Are you sure, Jeremiah?” said another. “It all looks the same.” They both sounded terrified.

“Yeah, near the vines. This is where I met h-him. Or it. Or them. I’m not sure.”

“We can ask soon enough,” said the third stranger, tone of voice cooler but far from relaxed.

“No I mean, I’m not sure we should do this.”

“What else can we do?” Jeremiah said. “They won’t have us back. Not now.”

“But if we can prove—”

“They *fired* at us, Howard.”

“We can stay on our own then,” Howard said. “Like before. We’ve made it this far.”

“We had the others, before. We’ll never make it alone.”

“We can try.”

“And if another pack comes?” the third stranger said. “We had twice their number. Walls. They tore us apart.”

“Penny’s right. It’s just a matter of time out here. Our Outsides are losing charge. Then that’s that, anyway. At least if we join...them...we’ll live.”

“You really believe that, Jeremiah?” Howard said. “I don’t think you do.”

“I do.” Penny said. “I’ve seen enough out here to believe it. Those nests? The *people* in them. They’re ali—”

The conversation stopped.

Etan dared another peek. A shroomer stood near the group. From the strangers' body language, it had surprised them, too.

He crept closer, wading low through drifts of Spore from tree to tree.

The shroomer was beautiful. A pleasant round face, emerald eyes aglow with benign phosphorescence matched in the hue of its peachfuzz-mossy skin. Its right arm was fused across its chest in a posture of pledged allegiance, by a strip of Spore that pulsed with verdant energy like a heartbeat. The fungal vines snaked down from the canopy to settle around the shroomer's shoulders like a scarf; in moments, they, too, pulsed with energy, in tune with the shroomer.

"We are so pleased you have returned, Jeremiah," it said, "with your friends." After Olam's sinister crackle and the strangers' querulous fear, the shroomer's soft voice was a balm, even relayed through the suit's external mic. "Together," it said, "we will flourish."

Jeremiah looked at the shroomer as though he hadn't, until this very moment, expected it to actually appear.

Penny seemed likewise taken aback, her confidence on the bow, but her expression shifted to grim determination. "I believe we will," she said.

Howard ran. His direction was haphazard—not their cleared backtrail but right into fungal kudzu. The forest swallowed sight and sound of him at once.

"Friends," the shroomer said. It didn't turn with everyone else to watch Howard's flight. "There is a patrol from your Community in that direction. We must hurry home."

Penny gave a single nod. The shroomer turned away.

Jeremiah and Penny looked to each other, then in the direction Howard had fled, then back to each other. Neither said a word. They moved after the shroomer.

Etan wondered if he should go look for that patrol. A whole new Community to see. How would they take the sight of him? Had they ever met people from outside? What would they say if he told them a malevolent city had threatened their lives?

He hurried to resume his tail Scout duties.

The strangers followed their strange escort deeper into the forest depths. He kept a vigilant watch, making sure the noise of their passage and the smell of their flesh hadn't attracted any undue attention.

The wood was still, all seemed clear, but he had the nagging sensation that he was being watched. The shroomer's eyes, that green incandescence, flashed in his mind. He thought he saw its face peek around the shrubs next to him, then he was certain he'd seen it peering down from up in the canopy, then from behind constructions of mold back the way they'd come. All the while the three figures moved ahead, none looking back, none breaking ranks.

Yet still the feeling came. The shroomer's eyes—striking, searching—over here, then there. Etan ducked frequently behind cover, sure he'd been spotted, that the shroomer had crept up on him as it had upon Penny and Jeremiah and Howard.

Eyes, and the sense of a smile, amusement, a feeling so strong Etan smiled too, embarrassed, alone in the brush.

This deep in the forest, all was subsumed. The air was heavy with Spore. The group ahead had paused again. Jeremiah seemed on the edge of panic.

“We're going to get sick,” he said.

“That's the whole point,” Penny said. “Stop thinking of it like that.”

“No harm will come to you,” the shroomer said, and Etan heard the words not eavesdropped through his hood but inside it, directly against his ear, a whisper.

The shroomer was thirty feet away. It was an inch away.

The party moved on. The shroomer looked back at him. It didn't. Etan wasn't sure. He followed.

He'd never been this deep in shroomer territory but it was clear, the next time Jeremiah, Penny, and the shroomer stopped, that they'd reached their destination.

Full night was upon them but the shroomer nest ahead threw off its own light, pulsating, like a heartbeat or steady breath. The mold had fully roofed the twenty foot tall trees and a layered weave of strands and fibers connected them together. The density of Spore in the air was almost overwhelming. He'd seen nests before. This was something else entirely. It was a compound.

Apertures dotted the structure, tunnels framed by tree trunks, leading inside. The tunnel walls shifted colors from verdant hues to yellow, orange, and red within.

The shroomer stood next to him, its own light throwing the striations on the nearby trees into sharp relief, regarding the fortress ahead with equal parts awe and familiarity. It stood close to him but also, it did not, it remained with Jeremiah and Penny, all facing away.

It whispered in his ear, again, but he couldn't make out the words.

The shroomer gestured to Penny and Jeremiah, an invitation.

They pulled off their helmets and gloves. A vague green aura formed around their exposed faces, hands. The shroomer nodded and together they stepped out of cover and toward the nearest tunnel. They moved slowly, as if in a dream.

As they approached the tunnel, two shroomers of a variety Etan had never known emerged, each an autumnal blast of color, patterns of brown and orange and yellow that rippled as they moved. Humanoids, yet they did not lift their legs as they moved; rather, they glided

from the tunnel depths, seamless to the mold floor. They were tall, uncannily so. Their arms opened, like the shroomers, no fingers discernable on the blunted ends. They had no other human features, no faces nor anatomy.

At the sight of these shroomer giants, Jeremiah and Penny dropped to their knees.

The tall beings paused, one bringing its stub of a hand to its chest in a human gesture of concern. They bowed to the newcomers. One extended an arm to Penny.

She reached up, slowly, and laid her hand on the appendage. Gently, the creature helped her stand. The other reached for Jeremiah with similar tenderness, but he stood up on his own.

The creatures turned back to the tunnel and glided within, one trailing its arm as Penny held on to it like a child. All four figures disappeared inside.

Their shroomer escort stood where it had, looking after them. Etan wondered if he had the nerve to follow it, if it went inside, too.

The shroomer turned and looked at him.

No hallucination this time. The shroomer, its eyes alight with something like mischief, locked with Etan's. It raised its free hand to him in greeting.

Then, from the tunnel behind it, the screams began.

## Chapter Eleven

The shroomer appeared as startled as Etan by the sudden cries. It whirled back toward the compound and was outlined by an eruption of flame from the tunnel into which Jeremiah and Penny had just entered. The space illuminated to daylight. The Spore formations retreated from the fire, swatches recoiling from the light and heat until the trees beneath were revealed and then those, too, burned.

Jeremiah and Penny fled the inferno. Jeremiah was on fire. Penny beat at him, trying to help, as did one of tall shroomers that had led them in—though it, too, was aflame. It swaddled Jeremiah with its long arms and spongy chest while its back flared fatal wings.

Jeremiah staggered away from it, smoking but extinguished, and Penny helped him limp away. The tall shroomer went up in a blinding pillar. As it melted like a candle, Etan saw a familiar sight in what remained of the tunnel behind it: the distinct napalm gout of a Community-issued scorcher.

Two Outsides-suited figures stepped through the flames. They wore helmets, too. Judging from fresh shrieks echoing the night all around, there were other teams at work. Clearing.

They must have been planning this assault for months. He knew how long it took to produce sapfuel for the scorchers, a laborious process. No doubt they'd tracked this nest compound, watched it grow and grow while they waited for enough fuel to cure. They must have access to quite a grove of living trees to balance the math on that equation.

They sure brought enough. What had seemed moments ago to be an impregnable citadel of Spore had proved to be as delicate and precarious as a paper dollhouse.

It would be only a matter of moments before the clearing crew spotted the shroomer, who stood staring wide eyed at the carnage. Then it, too, would burn. He took a step toward it, wanting to call it back, wanting to call out to the clearing crew to stop this slaughter. He hesitated.

The shroomer looked back at him without turning, their eyes meeting in a flash that came and went between teary blinks against the wafting smoke.

The shroomer turned away from the firestorm and sped into the woods after Jeremiah and Penny.

Etan followed, wading through Spore around the clearing's edge. He could see along another of the compound's walls, broken as well at regular intervals by tunnels. Flames licked out from several.

More shroomers than he count flooded from these tunnels, tall ones in their autumn brilliance and the more familiar green shamblers, most fleeing into the Spore-clotted wild, chased by pressurized scorcher streams that caught the nearest like seasoned kindling.

Some of the Talls strode through the throng, helping any shroomer that stumbled, while other Talls spread-eagled the tunnel openings, to obstruct the invaders for as long as their bodies could hold density against the blaze.

Etan pressed away from the scene through mold-cloaked shrubbery and, unable to see the way ahead, stumbled down a sharp slope.

He skip-slid down a root and rock knobbed decline and struck, full speed, into the shroomer he pursued.

*It's warm*, was his first observation. *Quick and strong* came next as it caught him and kept them both from tumbling on to Penny, who crouched ahead in the brush, attending to still-smoking Jeremiah.

The shroomer had a hand on Etan's shoulder, balancing the momentum that reeled him forward. Its aura was of mint and even in this shocked moment, bemusement. Its skin shone with an inner glow, the greenish brown of tree moss. But it *was* skin, not mold. Human skin. What had evolution done, out here in the undisturbed wilds?

They exchanged an awkward smile. The shroomer released him and turned to Penny.

"He fainted," Penny said. Her voice was distant as she examined her own hand, which was streaked with blood from a cut on her arm. The blood had a pale green glow.

She didn't acknowledge Etan's presence. She probably thought he'd fled the nest, too. Another recruit.

"We have to carry him," the shroomer said. It moved to get under one of Jeremiah's arms but they all ducked low at the approach of light and voices back up the hill. A search beam swept the forest.

"He needs medical help," Penny said. "He's fucked. Fucking Becca found this place, I can't believe it."

"If we'd had just a bit more time, you'd both have been safe in the Ring," the shroomer said.

Etan and Penny stared. It didn't elaborate.

A long, burning limb reached over the top of the hill. It was a Tall, dying. Liquid fire splashed over it and down the hill just a few meters away.

“Alright,” Etan said. “Get out of here. Find a parking lot, as soon as you can. I’ll get supplies, and find you.”

“Parking lot?” Penny said. “What the fuck? What *parking lot*?”

“It doesn’t matter which, I don’t think. Ezar will help me look. I think. Just stop when you feel safe, or close enough.”

Penny looked him over in detail for the first time. He saw her clock his Outsides, his zipped-up hood. Suspicion sharpened her focus. “Who the hell are you? Why are you helping us?”

“My name is Etan,” he said, grabbing roots to climb back up the hill. “And I’m trying to reach my full potential.”

“Help!” Etan shouted. Uphill, the area was bright as day. The heat wall pushed out by the minute. Inside the compound, shrieks of dying shroomers formed a church organ of anguished harmony. Forms ran, crawled, rolled, toppled from the tunnels. He waved his arms at the pair of clearers who were about to reach the drop. They were nearly in view of the survivors below. He stumbled, mostly for effect. “Take me with you!”

The pair changed direction, taking a few steps toward him, nozzles of their scorchers licking the air with tongues of blue flame. Etan raised his arms and turned to show his intact Outsides. “I’m not infected, see!”

“Holy shit,” one of them said, voice squawking through the helmet speaker. Their visors were shaded; standard gear for clearers at C17, as well. He thought of Olam’s broken windows and shivered. “I didn’t even know we’d lost anyone,” the clearer said. “Central hasn’t reported a wor—”

“Wait,” said the other. Their helm moved up and down, taking in Etan. “Where are you from, citizen?”

*Why lie?* Etan thought.

“Seventeen,” he said. “You? What’s the nearest old-place landmark?”

“Holy shit,” the first one to speak repeated. “How did you get the *hell* out *here*?”

“No time,” said the second. “Take him to the cart, we’re getting out of here.” They turned back to the compound and let flare their scorchers, applying sheets of liquid fire to a late-escaping Tall that was shepherding several much-smaller shapes in its shadow. As the Tall fell, trailing smoke and whistling pain like a teakettle, Etan was hustled away into the trees. He didn’t see what became of the smaller shapes.

The clearers led-dragged him onto a path wrought through the forest, a cauterized strip extending into darkness. More clearers swarmed around a solarcart parked here and boosted him onto its low bed. The crew piled in to the benches beside him, their pilot-lit scorchers pointed skyward. Nobody spoke. One elbowed him and pointed to a handle strap bolted to the railing. Etan grabbed hold as the cart’s electric engine sputtered and the clearing crew shot off into the night.

## Chapter Twelve

All the clearers in the cart with Etan wore Outsides of the full helmet, shaded faceplate variety. They remained silent; nobody said a word as the cart sped away from the razed shroomer compound. Before long, the screams faded into the sighing of the trees.

The Spore-cleared route didn't make for a smooth ride. He held tight to the grip handle as the solarcart bounded over roots and smothered shrubs that thwacked and thumped under the cart's plated wheels and undercarriage. An imminent crash into a solid wall of mold-garlanded trees turned into a hairpin squeeze between fallen logs until, with a stomach-dropping launch into starlight, they emerged on a dry riverbed. Stones clacked beneath the cart's wheels as it returned to earth and soon the forest melted away into the night.

Trees and wrecked buildings loomed in the distance to either side of the empty river, but the way ahead was wide and clear and lit by the cart's headlamps as well as stars, in fits, as the clouds overhead allowed.

They continued on this way for hours before reaching the Community. Their barrier field was deactivated, the pilons overgrown with creeper vines capitalizing on the riverbed's lingering nutrients.

Etan made a small sound of surprise—how did they survive exposure without a barrier field? He saw the driver's helmet angle his way, briefly, in the rearview.

Their passage didn't go unnoticed: a guard patrol lurked in a scaffold erected behind the pilons, obscured by the kudzu. A helmed guard raised an arm to the cart as it zipped by, answered in kind by a few of the clearers.

Could they have enough people alive to guard the entire perimeter?

They crested a short rise and he saw their destination, a Community set at the edge of the riverbank.

“There it is,” said the driver, speaking for the first time. “Community Oh-Five.”

C17’s labs produced neoplex; a staple of sustainable living, fragile but infinitely recyclable. They used it for things like greenhouse panes, decorations, dishware.

C05 used it for home. Neoplex, fused layer upon layer. The Community looked like a mountain of soap suds, bubbles and whorls of neoplex, hollow structures all piled together. Light inside cast shadows of blurry forms, like fish under ice.

Etan gaped at the edifice, forgetting for the moment that his own visor was transparent.

“We make due,” said one of the clearers.

The driver grunted.

The cart pulled up to an outbuilding, a long structure of sheet metal shored up with more neoplex. It was open on one side; a shelter for vehicles, not people. The driver parked inside and the clearers disembarked. One grabbed Etan by the shoulder.

“We’ll get you some help,” they said. “Go on and scootch out.”

He stepped out of the cart and looked around. C05 was alive with light and movement inside its bubbles. He wished he could take off his hood and sample the air, but that wouldn’t help first impressions.

“We’re going to hang tight,” his escort said. “While Becca clears a path for us. Then it’s right to medical with you. They’ll want to debrief as they examine, so be prepared for lots of questions and swabs. What’s your name?”

“I’m Etan. Etan Blum.”

“Lila. Morgan. Pleasure to save you today, Etan.”

“Pleasure to be saved.”

“Ah, there’s our all-clear.” The driver waved them over at the gate.

His escort gave Etan a little nudge. “Here we go, we’ll get you sorted out. You must have quite the story.”

“I was going to say the same.”

They reached the gate. A flash of light from behind them caught Etan’s attention and he turned to see other solarcarts pull in.

“There’s the rest of the team, safe and sound,” Lila said. “Nothing like a mission accomplished, eh?”

He felt pressure around his wrist. He looked down and saw that Lila had clipped a cuff to him while he was distracted.

“Sorry,” she said. “Protocol. Leader Svenja won’t make you wear it long.”

“Come on, stranger,” Becca said, voice distorted by the helmet’s speaker. “Let’s go learn your fate.”

The strap on his wrist was lit up with a faint yellow light, cast by filaments in the weave. Etan was familiar with this technology, a leash designed with the hope of taming ferals. He knew it could deliver shocks, or worse. He thought about the shroomer and Penny and poor seared Jeremiah. He was supposed to be getting medical help. Fuck. He hasted along to catch up to Becca’s brisk pace.

Inside C05 was a scene foreign to even Etan’s experience with surviving alongside a sizable group in a confined space with limited resources.

As complex as it looked outside, the interior of C05 was an even more confounding series of halls, alleys, floors, subfloors, twists, turns and curves than he'd expected. Inside the gate there was a series of airlocks, jury-rigged but from the way his ears popped, effective. Becca kept her helmet in place and instructed Etan to leave his hood zipped until medical cleared him to swap air with the citizens of C05.

Through the neoplex walls they passed he saw people, lots of blurry people. Before long the halls were crowded as well. The people here had a harried quality. Their glances were furtive but burning with interest. He felt spoiled and over-fed; Etan was slim, but these people were *gaunt*.

Becca had an aura that parted the way, newcomer in tow or not. The locals gave them a wide berth. There were guards along their way, standing at corners and in corrugated metal doorways. He heard them update the next in line that he and Becca were en route, and to keep the civvies clear.

“You’ve already seen too much,” Becca said, “So you may as well keep looking around. Best case scenario, we don’t let you leave.”

“Worst case?” He couldn’t help but ask.

“Worst case, you do leave, but you’re not alive to experience it.”

Becca led him through the adapted community, the general hubbub fading as they rounded more twists and turns among the makeshift hallways. In the rooms they passed here, Etan glimpsed whiteboards. Quiet people milled around these rooms, writing, speaking in low tones to one another. The competent buzz of administration was soothing after the relative chaos outside. Here Becca removed her helmet and handed it off to one of the guards standing outside a

double door—corrugate sheeting bolted to neoplex, like all the other he'd seen inside. She regarded Etan with eyes red from lack of sleep.

“They know we're coming,” she said, “but you need to keep quiet when we go inside. The council is meeting.” Without awaiting Etan's confirmation, she opened one of the double doors.

Inside was a wide, rectangular room. The far wall was a real wall, made of stone, with a real door, made of steel. A proper airlock. It was boarded over with sheets of neoplex, except for the window, presumably, as it was hidden behind a drawn curtain.

A white haired woman was speaking when Etan and Becca entered. She stood over a table laden with maps. Etan didn't recognize any of the locations suggested by the shapes on the maps, which seemed to be topographical and geologic. Around the table sat a few other people. They turned to look at Becca and the newcomer, then returned their attention to the speaker.

“We can't stay here much longer. A month, maybe,” the woman said.

“We just burned that place back to hell, why can't we stay, Svenja?” Becca said, defying her own order to remain silent.

“Welcome back, Becca,” Svenja said. “I'm told there were no losses on our side. We are so pleased.” Assenting murmurs from those gathered. “But you know that's not the only enclave. McGuirk reported movement in the factory, when little Sam ran off? Inside, he saw br—”

“Oh come on, you know he's just afraid to stay here. He's not alone in that, either, and if we don't help these people understand that we're never going to find a set up like this anywhere else...we'll die out there. Without the *depot*—”

“The depot isn't the answer to all our problems. We can't drink fuel, Becca. We can't eat it. Scorchers alone won't save us.”

“They’ve done all right so far,” Becca said, waving a hand to encompass the Community. “It’s all we have, our only weapon, our only leverage. Sure, we can go, look for some other Community. But what if we don’t find one? We’ll run out of juice, out there, and ferals will sniff us out, infected will Spore us, and that’ll be that. Or, we DO find another Community. That somehow made it all this time. Why should they let us in? To share their food? What do we have to offer? A little gas?” She pinched her own cheek. “Dinner?”

“Community,” Svenja said. “We call them that for a reason, Bec. How many of us are left in the world? I admit, we don’t know. You don’t know. Even our guest, our first guest, likely our last, doesn’t know. Do you, Etan Blum?”

“I don’t, Leader,” Etan said, guessing this was indeed C05’s authority. “Our neighbor, Community Fifteen, was lost.” He paused. “To the Spore, you know. That was it for us, as far as the outside world goes. No Comms on my Scout route.” *Nor in his off-grid wanderings*, he didn’t bother to add.

Murmurs. Svenja regarded the gathering. “Thank you, everyone, for your work tonight. I’ll fill in our returned Captain on what we’ve discussed, and we’ll debrief our guest. We’ll have an assembly about all of it at breakfast.” She stood back from the table.

Etan was favored with some distracted nods from the council as they filed past. He was barely on their radar, as an individual. He understood that the reality of his presence and all that it suggested about the outside world—possibility, potential, threats, maybe even hope—complicated and already fraught situation.

When the worthies left and the double doors were closed, Svenja gestured to a vacated seat. Etan gladly sat. He felt the ache and exhaustion of recent escapades hit him when he did.

Dreamily, he looked around. A few short hours ago—had it even been that long?—he was thinking about fairytales. Now he was in an unknown place, with strangers. Strangers!

“You must be entirely overwhelmed,” Svenja said. “It’s remarkable, for us, to see a new face. I can’t imagine what it feels like for you, to see a few hundred.”

“How did you get way out here? A solarcart?” Becca said.

“Becca,” Svenja said. “Etan will answer our questions. There’s no need for the interrogation. Have a seat, yourself. Both of you need refreshment.” She gestured to glasses and a carafe of clear water arranged on the meeting table. That dreamlike feeling came back to Etan.

Becca did as she was bid but flashed Etan a look. He obeyed her directive from earlier and did not remove his hood.

The clearer Captain’s eyes remained on Etan but her relief on sitting down was clearly as profound as his own. She must have been on her feet for most of the prior day, organizing the slaughter at the compound, executing it. His ears still rang with the screams; hers probably did, too.

“I was marched out there,” Etan said, “by strays from who knows what Comm. With a bag over my hood. I was out Scouting and got forced far from home because an Interpack—uh, you know, a group of bonded ferals, that’s what we call them—caught wind of me. That’s when they nabbed me. It went on like that for a while, the walking. I lost track. They brought me to that...what was that? Biggest nest I’ve ever seen. I think they brought me as a gift. They wanted to be shroomers.”

“Proving their worth,” Svenja said. Her tone belied neither belief nor skepticism.

“I guess so.”

“Lucky we saved you,” Becca said. “You ready to pay off that debt?”

“I’m a trained Scout, like I said. You have any? I could pick up the route arou—”

“I think we’ll keep you where we can see you, for now,” Becca said.

“They approached us as well,” Svenja said. “The shroomers. A group of them. They wished to parlay.”

“We took care of that today,” Becca said. “No more pop-ins.”

“It was only a matter of time until they’d return,” Svenja said. “In larger number. They’ve changed, since this all started. They aren’t just mindless monsters.”

“They seemed...nonthreatening?” Etan said. “Scary, and tall, but...”

“They’re cunning,” Becca said. “Don’t be fooled. Mountain lions are fuzzy-wuzzies that’ll rip your throat out. And that was *before* they went feral.”

Svenja nodded. “So you haven’t seen this near your community,” Svenja said, “these new varieties of —what did you call them? Shroomers? We’ve always called them the Spored. Admittedly less flavorful.”

“No,” Etan said. “We haven’t seen anything like that. We don’t get a lot of excitement.”

“All the fun stuff happened to your neighbor, right?” Becca said. “Their problems didn’t ooze up the street and knock on your door, too?”

“No,” Etan said. “We were lucky.”

“We’ve been lucky here, too,” Svenja said, “despite everything. Protected.”

“And we still are,” Becca said. “Lucky and armed. We handled it. Like we did last time. Took it to them now, that’s the decisive difference. That’s why we’re staying.”

Svenja watched Etan during this harangue, and addressed him when Becca had finished.

“What would your Community do, if we went back with you?”

“What?” Becca said. “We’ve been over th—”

Svenja raised a hand.

“Go on,” Svenja said to Etan. “Best guess. We know how things are, but I’m curious. What kind of people, are your people?”

“Survivors,” Etan said. “Above all. Like you. But otherwise...” He looked at Becca, who was fuming. “Kind. A bit stir crazy, like everyone, but we do well enough. We have children, too. And a school. A library.”

“And food?” Becca said. “Do you eat pages out of *Winnie the Pooh* or do you have a farm level or what?”

“Algae,” Etan said with a smile. “That’s what our community was outfitted with. We had an orchard—pears, apples—but between the storms and...a fire...we lost it. What do you grow?”

Becca matched Etan’s smile with a humorless sneer of her own. “We lost our farm level. Now we eat dirt.”

“Root vegetables,” Svenja said. “We have a modest plot outside and several grow rooms throughout the Comm.”

“What happened to your farm level?” He looked at the airlock. “A fire? We always worry about that. There’s the suppression system, but what then? We don’t have the chemicals to recharge it.”

“We none of us started, or finished, construction of these places in time, it seems,” Svenja said with a sigh. “Barely got the barrier up.”

“Not that it lasted,” Becca said. There was a moment’s silence during which Etan understood that neither of them were ready to tell him what had happened to their farm level.

“We should set up a trade route,” Etan said. “When we figure out where C17 is from here, I mean. Our algae dries well, into sheets. They have a great shelf life.”

Becca scoffed. “You don’t even know where you are. And it’s too dangerous, anyway. We’d lose three people for every sack of mushy radishes delivered.”

“Our radishes are not mushy, Becca, you’re just being combative.”

“I’m right about the body count, though.”

“Probably,” Etan said. “Look what happened to me.”

“And you’re a *trained Scout*,” Becca said.

“Do you think you could find your way back?” Svenja said.

“Yes,” Etan said. “Once I get a bead on the right stars.”

“Then you are free to rest up and be on your way,” Svenja said, raising her hand again to quiet Becca. “I would just ask you one favor. I think you won’t object.”

“What’s that?”

“I want you to take Rebecca. Think it over tonight, but consider it seriously. It would benefit both of our communities, in the end, I believe.”

Becca laughed, then saw Svenja’s face. “Wait, you’re serious?”

“Yes. Sending the whole Comm, or even a sizable group, on a possible dead-end run is reckless. You’re not wrong. But I maintain that we can’t stay here. We need another option.”

“And what *else* is this, exactly?” Becca said. “Soft exile?” Becca looked at Etan. “No offense, guy, but I don’t have much faith in star-gazing taking us through feral packs and fifteen foot tall ‘shroomers.’”

“I need you to go and convince Etan’s people that we’re good people, too.”

“I lead the clearers, Svenja, not the welcoming committee. I’m the one who thinks we should *stay*.”

“Who better to convince strangers of our good intentions? Our fiercest warrior bearing a garland of peace.”

“Why would I agree to this?”

“Because you don’t trust him and I’m letting him return to his people with full knowledge of our location,” Svenja said. “The location you’re so keen to secure in perpetuity. So you’d better make sure they’re on the up-and-up, haven’t you?”

“Or just walk him out of sight and set him on fire?”

Svenja laughed. “I know you, Rebecca.”

Becca frowned. “Well,” she said. “He hasn’t even agreed to take me. Or proven he’s trustworthy, in any respect.”

“Exactly,” Svenja said, “Come, Etan, let’s have a little tour on the way to medical, get you checked out quick so you can eat and rest. We can determine our course in the morning, and whether it shall continue together.” She rose and pulled open one of the double doors. “Good night, Becca,” she said.

“Mm,” Becca said, still seated at the table.

Etan followed Svenja out, but paused at the threshold. He turned back to Becca.

“I *am* a trained Scout,” he said. “So let me be the one tell you: you’re right. If I were you, I’d shore up my walls and do...whatever it takes...to stay alive. There’s more danger out there than either of you know. And it’s closer than you think. And it’s watching.”