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The Rat Kingdom

Laura Gauggel

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The Rat Kingdom

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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the Upper Division Honors Program.

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Introduction

In its earliest incarnation, my Honors Thesis began as a poem entitled “Think No More.” In this poem, the speaker is a separate entity from his or her brain. Both the speaker and the brain are conscious beings. While the speaker possesses a body and cognitive abilities, the brain possesses superior intellect. Conflict arises from the brain’s attempt to control the speaker. After I wrote this piece during my junior year, the poem’s basic premise continued to intrigue me. In the remainder of my undergraduate studies, I explored the conflict between a conscious body and its brain in a one-act play and a novella. For my Honors Thesis, I incorporated my poem’s basic premise into a science fiction novella set in a world of mass organ failure. While my Honors Thesis focuses on the novella, I have also included the poem and play. Both add context to the novella, since all three works share the following themes and motifs: the separation of brain and body, hyper-intellectualism, rats, and physical violence between the brain and body.

The story follows a scientist named Vera and the subjects of her experiments, Frank and Justine. Vera discovers internal organs who have developed consciousness and exist apart from humans of the City. When her sister, Justine, needs a heart transplant, Vera implants her with one of these unusual organs. Meanwhile, Vera studies a complex, hyperactive brain capable of telepathy. The brain, thirsting for new knowledge, requests a body with which to examine humanity. Vera creates a human body, Frank, capable of basic thinking to protect the brain. As the heart and the brain coexist with their new bodies, Vera continues studying the organs. In the remainder of the novella, the characters collide with their diseased world and each other. In my Honors Thesis, I contextualize the original conflict between the brain and body within a larger narrative.

In preparation for my Honors Thesis, I conducted research in relevant fiction and nonfiction. For example, I researched organ donation in nonfiction works such as Lesley A. Sharp's *Strange Harvest* and Nancy Scheper-Hughes' "The Ends of the Body." In my novella, this research influences the way the City treats its citizens as patients and potential donors as a collection of parts. During part of my fiction research, I focused on relationships between creators and created beings. Science fiction works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl*, and Ekaterina Sedia's *The Alchemy of Stone* delve into the minds of brilliant creators and their dehumanized creations. This research shapes the relationship between Frank and his creator, Vera. My research includes other areas of interest, such as bioethics and mad science.

Through my Honors Thesis, I hope to contribute a new voice to this existing body of research. While tropes of organ failure, mad scientists, and oppressive regimes are hardly new, I hope to contribute some inventive ideas to the conversation. For example, my thesis reimagines internal organs as organisms that can survive independently or within a human being. Not only is the brain an organ but also an organism. This element ties into novella's treatment of human beings as collections of parts. In addition, my novella approaches science fiction subject matter through the lens of fantasy or magical realism. For example, while my novella discusses organ failure and scientific progress, the world exhibits elements of irrationality and mysticism. The merging of science fiction and fantasy mimic the relationship between science and superstition in the novella.

Ultimately, my Honors Thesis aims to explore fundamental questions about consciousness and the self: What is the relationship between the brain and the self? What is the relationship between the body and the self? Does the brain or body control the self? In the

novella, I explore these questions through Frank's tumultuous relationship with his brain. In addition, I explore questions about the basic nature of humanity: How does society define "human"? Does humanity arise from the conscious mind, the physical body, or another component of the self? Does humanity arise from the human brain? Does humanity arise from intellect, sentiment, or conscience? Does humanity arise from our moral and physical flaws? I address these questions in the character development of Frank, Justine, Vera, and the brain.

Finally, I aim to explore questions about ethics in science and other intellectual fields: What are the dangers of pursuing intellectualism at all costs? Is intellectual progress worth potential human rights abuses? How do we reconcile potentially unethical methods with the necessity of life-saving advances? I address these questions through Justine's and Frank's relationships with the City Research Center. In addition, Vera's characterization and relationships come into play here.

It is not the purpose of my Honors Thesis to provide definitive answers to these questions. Instead, I apply these questions to characters and their relationships. Sometimes, each character arrives at a different conclusion. Other times, the extreme world of the novella pushes characters towards a collective understanding of their situation. Through my Honors Thesis, I encourage the reader to explore a range of worldviews and arrive at his or her own conclusion.

The Rat Kingdom
Laura Gauggel

Vera awoke in a glade, her skull aching from the fall.

She had been chasing a fox when she slipped through a hole in the ground. The fall knocked her unconscious. As she awoke at the bottom of the hole, Vera explored her surroundings.

A canopy of leaves and branches blanketed the sky, and a spot of white light shimmered through the leaves. It was the hole she had tumbled through. The hole was low enough for her to climb a nearby tree and pull herself through. Now that she had found a way out, Vera could explore this uncharted territory. Her skin prickled at the thought of new land, raw and untouched. How had this patch of forest escaped the contamination of the City?

The vegetation was different here. Gone were the ordinary pines and firs near Vera's estate. Branches spiraled into corkscrews. Around her, leaves glowed azure, veins splaying. Vera wandered over speckled purple mushrooms. Bobbing lights carried her deeper into the glade. Vera promised herself to sketch the trees later. But first, there was so much that was new. Not since childhood had Vera found an entire world at her hands.

She ducked under a spiraled tree branch and emerged into a clearing. Hazy figures peppered the landscape. At her feet, a thick snake coiled in an intricate tangle. Its skin glistened pink, slithering slowly. As Vera crouched to inspect the creature, the pattern of the snake's body looked familiar. Not a snake. Intestines.

As she stepped around the intestines, the figures on the landscape came into focus: vital organs. Two kidneys sprouted from the ground. The organs flushed red. She ran her index finger

across the kidney, firm yet springy. Vera passed a liver and a bladder. In the corner of the clearing sat a heart, bleeding freely into a pool of crimson grass.

A human brain rested in the center of the clearing. Its furrows pulsed in soft hues, electricity crackling in a halo. She kneeled before the brain. Vera had thoughts that were not her own. They tore through her mind. Above where the brain had been, her own face now stared at her. It was as though she had escaped her body. The brain. The brain was communicating telepathically. It was sentient and filling her mind with what it could sense.

Visions swept over her in a cacophony. Grass wrapped around her body while leaves melted through her skin. Vera swam through a blood vessel, ruby splashing her vision. Before her, a humanoid figure glowed then dissolved into droplets of water. Electricity sparked through her skull. The images pierced her eyelids, and a blaze of light shot through everything. She fell unconscious as the trees, grass, and organs faded around her. So was the first communion between Vera and the brain.

Vera stumbled towards consciousness, blood vessels flashing against her eyelids. Was any of it real? Had the Plague finally targeted her brain? After all, hallucinations were among the first symptoms. With the City's particular brand of organ failure, victims often suffered bouts of hysteria and irrationality. Perhaps her own brain was failing.

The thought of losing her mind crawled through her spine. She could not become another victim. Not before she could solve the riddle of the illogical Plague. Her years of training, research, experiments, and inventions would mean nothing if she failed to cure the Plague.

Her temples throbbing, Vera rolled onto her side. The brain sat inches from her nose. The air squeezed out of her lungs. The organs were real, and Vera was sane.

The brain's thoughts flowed through her mind again. Vera could only describe it as a tingling in her forehead. The tingling stopped, and the brain sat meticulously still. She slowly rose to a crouch. The brain tingled into Vera's mind again, and a new image appeared: her own dead body sprawled on the grass, eyes rolled back into her head. In response, her stomach recoiled, and a gray haze fell over the trees.

Why would Vera react this way? Whether it was hers or otherwise, dead flesh was simply dead flesh. There was no reason to feel sick about it. The brain shrank into itself.

Remorse.

The brain projected remorse into her mind. Not only could the brain feel remorse, but it could also convey that emotion through triggering a physiological response in Vera. There was much to learn from the brain.

"It's alright," she said. "You didn't kill me."

The brain waited, pulsing slowly. Of course, language meant nothing to the brain. Vera closed her eyes and visualized her own dead body. She had no idea if the brain could see her thoughts. Nevertheless, she made her imaginary body walk, vigorous and flushed. "I'm fine," she pronounced. She awaited a response. Did the brain's telepathy flow both ways? After a few seconds, the brain tingled into her mind again. The organ reflected the image of Vera's healthy, conscious body. Message received.

Vera asked her first question. She visualized the glade without the organs. Then she placed the organs back in the landscape. She repeated this image, making the organs materialize in the clearing. "How?"

The brain tingled again. In her mind, the organs sat motionless, rooted to the earth. Time stretched as the lungs, heart, and brain remained stationary.

Vera's eyebrow arched. "You were always here?"

The brain repeated the image, a confirmation. The scene remained for a few minutes until Vera herself stepped into the glade—the first human to stumble upon the organs. They were organisms. Not just organs, but organisms. They must be the key to explaining the Plague. If the City Research Center ever found this place, Vera knew what would unfold. Officers would swarm through the trees within hours. Vera could never let anyone find this place.

The brain tingled with a thousand questions about these humans. Vera conveyed the concept of an internal organ in relation to a human being. The brain then tingled into her mind with an image: a human being cradling a brain in her hands. No, Vera tried to say. She lifted a scalpel to the imaginary woman's head, cut her skull open, and nestled the brain inside.

The brain cut open the imaginary woman's head and altered her brain. Within seconds, the woman's brain resembled the creature sitting at Vera's lap. "You want a body?" Vera asked. The brain lingered on this word. *Body*. A murmur ripped through Vera's mind as the brain tried to sound out the word. *Bbboobbboooooodyyy*. "Yes," Vera said. She would prepare a body for the brain. Jets of light shot through Vera's mind, red, blue, yellow. Glee.

As hours passed, Vera prepared to return to her estate and made assurances that she would return. As Vera rose from the grass, another organ lay at the edge of the clearing. The human heart pumped blood in a sleek pool. Vera transmitted the image to the brain. In her mind, she revived the imaginary woman. Vera cut open the woman's chest and inserted the heart inside her rib cage. Vera asked for permission to take the heart.

In reply, the brain tingled indifferently. That would have to serve as consent. Two extraordinary organs would inhabit two ordinary bodies. Two new experiments would begin.

Vera would discover the origins of these organs and explain the unexplainable. The Plague would finally make sense.

Her shirt and trousers stained, Vera slammed the door behind her as she arrived at her estate. The white walls burned in her vision after trekking through miles of brown and green. Vera crossed to the metal communication box in the hallway. She flipped nine switches in a precise pattern, and the box buzzed as Vera awaited Justine's voice.

A month before, Vera had confirmed her older sister's diagnosis. The Plague had claimed Justine's heart. In order to receive a legal heart transplant, Justine would need to register with the City Research Center. Vera's sister always hesitated to involve herself with the Research Center. There were always strings attached, she said. At the time, Vera dismissed her sister's hesitation. Now the pieces aligned almost too perfectly.

As the communication box buzzed, Vera could only hope that Justine had not committed to a City-sanctioned transplant yet. Throughout Vera's research and experiments, her sister remained her only companion. Her earliest projects would have been impossible without Justine.

After a moment, Justine's voice crackled through the earpiece. "Vera? What's wrong?"

"Justine." Vera chose her words carefully. Undoubtedly, there were officers monitoring the wires. "Have you gone to the Research Center yet?"

"No, not yet. Why—"

"Good. Don't go anywhere. There's something I need to tell you."

Before Justine could respond, Vera shut off the communication box. Her steps echoed on the marble floor, and she plucked her long coat from the wall. As Vera prepared to venture into

the City, she smiled. Her sister did not know yet, but Vera possessed the solution to her problem—and perhaps much more.

That night, the City celebrated its fourteenth year of survival. No one could pinpoint the exact day the Slaughterhouse Plague began. However, every child learned of the day the Research Center partnered with the military to overthrow the Council of Elders.

After the Elders' ineffective handling of the Plague, the new order exiled the Council and discouraged its tradition of superstition. Fourteen years ago that day, General Pierce and Dr. Kane declared a holiday, a recommitment to ideals of progress and rationality.

Below Justine's window, jesters and musicians swept over the cobblestones. A young boy in a green military uniform marched at the head of the parade. He threw his head back, catching Justine's eye as he flailed the City flag. Above him, the faces of General Pierce and Dr. Kane bobbed on banners. She let the curtain fall over the parade. Justine found it hard to celebrate rationality when the laws of nature no longer made sense.

When the Slaughterhouse Plague hit, it defied everything her parents knew. From the beginning, the Plague targeted random animal organs – the liver of a chicken, the brain of a sheep, the heart of a cow. When the sickness spread to humans, no one could find a pattern. Justine's parents, both scientists, could never determine why a father suffered from kidney failure while his son lost control of his brain. Only one aspect of the Plague developed logic: once organs failed, symptoms followed their logical course to death.

Justine had accepted death before Vera offered her a heart transplant a few hours ago. When Vera burst into her apartment, Justine almost told her to keep the heart, to give it to a child

in the next apartment. As usual, her sister saw through her. Vera said, “This is for *you*. I need you to take this heart.”

Vera said *this heart*, as though it were some family heirloom that no one else could touch. Whatever plans boiled through Vera’s brain, Justine agreed. Perhaps this new heart would mark the beginning of an era. Perhaps she could do some good for her patients, for her sister, for whomever was left to miss her. Perhaps when Justine awoke, the pieces of the City would make sense and she could join the parade.

Vera performed the heart transplant effortlessly. After six months of tests and recovery, Justine returned to the City. Once every two weeks, Justine hiked to her sister’s estate for more tests. For Vera, the heart was easy. The brain, on the other hand, was complex. Far too complex to study in a few sittings in the glade.

The brain now lived in the laboratory while Vera finished preparing the body. Occasionally, the organ tingled into her mind, blinding her with its stray thoughts. Eventually, the brain understood that there was a time and a place for telepathic communication—and during the preparation of a fully functioning body was not the appropriate moment. Once the brain learned this rule, Vera completed her work in a matter of weeks.

The day of the operation, a perfected male vessel lay on the metal table. Vera never concealed her pride in this particular product, the finest possible specimen for the brain. Long, thick limbs waited to carry the brain into his new life. With her back to the body, Vera arranged her instruments. After a few moments, the brain tingled into her mind with a warning.

Vera turned around. The body writhed slowly on the table, muscles flexing under the lamplight. The body pushed itself upright. Its forehead clanged against the metal lamp, and

groans scraped through its teeth. As the body pushed itself off the table, Vera gripped the chair behind her. The body's bare feet met the floor. Vera's fingers curved around a scalpel, but she held her position. The body shook, threatening to unravel everything she knew. They locked eyes, and its lips formed a half-whisper. Finally, the body clattered to the ground.

Vera stood over the vessel. The brain tingled into her mind. The surgery must continue, the organ insisted. It was not what the brain had planned, but this particular body was the next frontier. It was a heap of anatomical parts—still fit for a brain transplant.

As the body sprawled on the floor, Vera gave grudging assent. The surgery would continue, but only after she learned more about this peculiar body. It was supposed to be inanimate, yet it walked with purpose. Autonomy was not meant for bodies. This was not part of the scientist's plan.

After the body awoke, Vera concluded that it was not a threat to the brain or to anyone else. Though the body possessed abnormal physical strength, it remained docile. The body was capable of rudimentary thinking, even basic language. What did this mean, a body with consciousness? Two thinking entities sharing one form—it was a mistake. But the idea intrigued her, nonetheless. A new component of the experiment.

To the brain's glee, Vera proceeded with the transplant.

After a few weeks, the brain and the body adjusted to one another. Even though the body possessed its own will, the brain was stronger. The body walked of its own accord only for the brain to hijack its muscles. It was no less than Vera expected of the alien organ.

However, defined personalities emerged when both the brain and the body learned to speak on a more sophisticated level. Once the brain mastered language, he became insufferable. Day and night, the brain would chatter, rattling off each new addition to his vocabulary. Eventually, the brain learned to switch back and forth between his telepathy and his voice box.

“Cavalcade.” *Oxytocin*. “Rubber.” *Elephant*. “Truncate.” *Apocalypse*.

Either way was torturous for the body, who could hear every word. Even though the body had its own thoughts, the brain submerged them with sheer force. Of course, the brain and the body could hear each other’s thoughts, but only if they chose to share them consciously. And the brain usually chose to share. Sometimes, the body tried to speak, but the brain took control of his voice. The excitement of discovering words consumed the brain.

When the brain discovered the body’s discomfort, he learned to restrict his word flow. The brain even learned to share his voice box with his body so that they could take turns speaking. The two beings continued thus as Vera quietly collected her data.

A crowd had gathered on the steps of the City Research Center. It was a cube-shaped structure of white concrete, towering forty stories high. Normally, its only visitors were scientists, students, and officers. Today, ragged citizens congregated with signs that read, “Who owns my body?”, “RESULTS NOW,” and “What will they research when we are EXTINCT?”

At the head of the crowd stood a man in his early thirties. Behind him, a cluster of officers blocked the entrance to the Research Center. “It’s been fourteen years, and they expect us to believe they’re *stumped*,” the man shouted, drawing jeers and snarls from the crowd. Every few minutes, he coughed into a dirty rag, which only incensed the crowd further.

“Why don’t they have a cure after fourteen years? They’ve got a cure, but they think we won’t notice because we’ve got rats’ brains.” Hisses rose from the crowd. Four more officers joined the guards by the Research Center’s entrance. “How do you think Pierce and Kane have survived this long while the rest of us die by the hour?” When he mentioned their leaders, a handful of people shouted at the concrete building. They demanded that Dr. Kane address them.

“They keep the cure for themselves. The rest of us are expendable.” The man coughed as the crowd chanted. Once he recovered, he spoke over the chants. “We’re just a heap of parts to them, fresh bodies for harvest. At least the Elders valued our souls, at least—” The man broke into a coughing fit, sputtering violently. As he doubled over, the crowd’s chants split into overlapping shouts and demands. Hair flying, they clawed at the Research Center.

After a few minutes of coughing and shouting, dozens of officers surrounded the crowd. Two officers grabbed the coughing man from behind. They told him to go with them for treatment. “Don’t—don’t believe them! You’re the sickness!” As the officers dragged him up the steps to the Research Center, he repeated, “You’re the sickness!”

At the organ’s request, the body plucked the manuscript from the highest shelf. After exhausting half the resources in the west wing library, the brain hunted for new reading material. To his perplexity, Vera never used the east wing library and its hundreds of books. How could Vera abandon such a repository of knowledge?

Dust particles shimmering, the body cradled the manuscript. “*The Cityscape: Labyrinths and Legends.*” The brain pronounced each velvety syllable, careful not to damage the body’s voice box. “Mythology. A perfectly *apposite* window into human culture, is it not?”

“Um, sure.” The body grazed the manuscript’s tiny pores. “It feels nice.”

“Nice,” the brain said, dropping the body onto a stool. His tailbone smarted against the wood. “The collective psyche of humanity is more than *nice*. It’s grandiose, sublime.” The brain released the body’s muscles. “If you would do the honors...”

The body gracefully turned the pages. Even though the brain was more powerful, he never grew out of his jerky movements. When taking control, the organ always clamped the body’s muscles as though clutching a writhing fish. It comforted the body to know that movement, however limited, was his domain.

After half an hour, footsteps pounded in the hallway. Vera’s face appeared in the doorway. “Thank goodness,” she breathed, running her fingers through her scalp.

The body rose from the stool, and the manuscript clattered to the floor. His throat knotted whenever he looked into his creator’s face. He asked, “What’s wrong?”

The brain lamented the manuscript’s flailing pages. *I was reading that.*

Vera’s fingers plucked dizzily at the edges of her jacket. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I thought you’d—” She jammed her fists into her pockets.

“I’m sorry,” the body said, cheeks flushing. Vera’s eyes sliced against his cheekbones with the warm precision of a scalpel. “We were reading.”

Vera’s shoulders uncoiled. “Fine, just...don’t run off again.”

Everything changed the day the body chose a name.

In her laboratory, Vera hunched over her microscope, and the body stood at her shoulder. “I think I should have a name.” Vera’s cheek muscles tightened under a stray lock of hair.

The brain tingled to the room at large. *Homo sapiens is a perfectly sensible name.*

“No,” the body said. “A real name. Like you.”

“Alright, then.” Vera’s chin tilted to the side. Her eyes glinted, jagged sapphire, under the light. “Is there any name that comes to you?”

The body shifted, gripping his forearm with his hand. “You want me to choose?” Vera held his gaze. Heat prickled through his chest, abdomen, and legs. The body looked down. The brain resisted the urge to interject. After a few moments, Vera turned back to the microscope.

“I think I should have your name.”

The room fell silent. Finally, the brain sputtered. *Vera is a female name.* The brain seemed pleased with his knowledge of human gender.

As a laugh escaped the scientist’s lips, the body spoke. “No, not Vera. Your second name.” Vera’s rib cage slowly expanded. “Frank.”

Her lips curled. “How do you know my surname?”

Frank’s forehead furrowed. “I saw it in one of your books.”

The newspaper headlines gripped the City by the throat: GENERAL PIERCE IS DEAD.

Clusters of citizens approached the Research Center for more information, but the officers had formed a perimeter around the building. Outside the line of officers, people discussed what this development meant for the City.

Two vendors stood by their carts. The first vendor told his neighbor what he remembered from the day General Pierce and Dr. Kane seized power. “We used to think he was immortal,” he said, his lips tugging upward. “And in the end, it’s the gall bladder that gets him. What are the odds?” His neighbor shook his head and commented that the Research Center was weak now.

Beside the vendors, a group of teenagers ate their sandwiches. A boy said, “Well, now Kane will have to hand over the cure, won’t she? Now that the muscle’s gone.” The other kids

overlapped their comments. One said, “The vultures are only gonna crack down harder,” and another said, “If they had a cure, don’t you think they’d have used it on Pierce?” The first teenager retorted with, “Well, Kane is hiding *something*.”

As they argued, an old woman huddled under a bench. Her fingers shook as she twisted her hair into a long, stringy tail. “The Elders foretold their fall,” she gasped, rocking back and forth. She moaned that the Council of Elders cursed the Research Center when Pierce and Kane exiled them. “The Elders cursed the City. The Research Center can’t save us.”

Frank lingered outside Vera’s study. Through the floor, her footsteps traced familiar patterns. She murmured about a plague, and Frank caught “illogical chain of transmission,” and “genesis.” He hesitated to interrupt Vera’s moods, but he needed her now. The brain had fallen asleep in his skull, so Frank wanted to talk to Vera before he woke. Frank rapped his knuckles on the door.

The footfalls ceased, and the door scraped open. Tiny creases pressed into her cheekbones, Vera appeared in the doorway. “Is everything alright?”

Frank’s stomach prickled with warm thorns. “Yes. I mean—nothing’s wrong.” The words tumbled, water through his hands. “Can I talk to you?”

Vera held the door open, and Frank brushed past her. A mahogany desk piled with books and metal instruments anchored the corner of the room. Above the desk hung a glass case. Inside, a taxidermied squirrel sat on a patch of plastic grass. The squirrel’s tiny arm stretched upward, caressing a butterfly. Pins pierced its sapphire-streaked wings. Was it an art piece?

Vera gripped the chair behind her. “Is something wrong with the brain?”

“No, he’s just taking a nap. That’s why I wanted to talk with you.” Behind her, Vera’s fingers tightened around the chair. Her eyes cavered, peeled wide.

Vera had only worn that look once before: the first time Frank awoke on her table. When he first saw Vera's face, Frank tried to speak as though he had always known her. Her blue eyes, auburn hair, and angular cheekbones etched themselves into his skull. What had she been thinking at the time? Now, Frank spoke as though sweeping shards of glass. "The brain says I'm not supposed to think. But I do." Vera's grip on the chair slackened. "Why do I think?"

Vera stared into the floor. "I used to think the age of discovery was long past. But now...I don't know how you think, Frank. You're a body." Vera's eyes spiraled deeper into the floor. "You should have been a body, a—" The corner of her lip twitched. Frank tensed his muscles, afraid to rustle the air around her. After a few moments, Vera met Frank's gaze. "But I do think you have a purpose."

Frank's voice rasped. "A purpose?"

"Your cognitive abilities may lack sophistication." Vera took inventory of Frank's wide eyes and creased forehead. "But you do have common sense. You can be the brain's caretaker." Vera's irises flowed in dark blue brushstrokes. A gentle turning in his stomach made Frank look away. "Your physical form and unusual strength shield the body. Maybe your mind can, too."

His brow knotted. "But why would I need to protect the brain?"

Vera's head tilted the way it did whenever Frank pressed her to explain a difficult concept. "There are things happening in the City. People are sick...their organs don't work as well as they should." Frank opened his mouth, but Vera sliced through his question. "No one knows why. The point is that the brain is a fully functioning organ. And there might be some in the City that would find the brain valuable." Vera's fingers tightened around her left wrist.

"There might be some who would try to take the brain. That's why I made you strong."

Frank's neck flushed under the lamp. Warmth ruffled through his hair as Vera stared through him. Frank drew comfort from the fact that someone mapped every cell and molecule of his body. While he would never understand the machinery or witchcraft that made him, at least Vera did. Vera was his creator. Frank nodded. "I understand. I won't let you down."

Vera's eyes searched Frank's for a moment before she said, "Good."

Shortly after, the brain consumed the last of Vera's reading material.

I need other brains. I don't know how Vera expects me to progress if I can't exchange ideas with anyone else.

"You can exchange ideas with Vera," Frank said. Why would a brain want to meet anyone with an intellect inferior to his creator's?

Well, yes, but talking to only one person gets boring after a while. All she talks about is the glade, my origins, that silly Plague. The brain rustled, a restless rhythm. I left the glade to learn about humans. And if I hope to know humanity, I need variety. I need a larger sample size.

"You can always talk to me."

You don't count.

"I'm human," Frank said. His ears glowed like the hot metal coils on Vera's machines. "You said so yourself. I'm *Homo sapiens*."

The brain paused as though inspecting a specimen under a lamp. *Alright, then. Let's start with some basic philosophical musings. No extensive scientific knowledge required.* Frank nodded. He had never discussed the brain's intellectual pursuits before.

Your legends speak of a coming era. The Age of the Rat. These legends foretell the rise of a kingdom of rats. The brain's words fell in a rapid, swirling stream. This kingdom, long thriving

underground, will rise to the surface and swallow the City. Prisoners will become kings, and the world shall overturn. The brain's thoughts vibrated through the cells in his neck. *Do you believe such a place can exist? Can the laws of nature allow prophecy?*

Frank's tongue tapped lightly against his front teeth. "Vera says that legend and superstition have no place in the rational world."

The brain scratched the inside of Frank's skull. Why couldn't the brain keep still? *Yes, Vera would say that.* The brain assumed control of Frank's voice box. "But what do *you* think?"

Frank blinked. His eyes lingered in the gasping white spaces between the words and letters on the page. "It's not my job to think. That's your job."

My point exactly. I need other thinkers. Afterwards, the brain kept his musings to himself.

During the night, Justine's heart escaped her body.

She awoke that morning, gentle light seeping through her blinds. Her arms and legs strained against layers of damp sheets and blankets. A moundlike shadow loomed through the dim light. Her own heart, shudder-pulsing and sputtering blood, sat atop her chest.

It was a clump of bleeding tissue, molded like clay. Ripples flowed through glistening flesh. Still it pumped, bulging the size of her fist. The tissue stretched from the pressure of so much blood, more blood than could fit inside. If Justine pressed a scalpel to the heart, how much blood would pour? Gradually, the heart's shudders slowed to gentle pulses.

Justine pulled her limbs from the sheets. She grabbed her blankets and captured her heart in the blanket like netted fish. The organ gently swished inside. Justine's heart was still working. How long had her heart remained outside her chest? It happened in her sleep, so it could have been anywhere from five minutes to five hours. She lifted her nightshirt. Flaps of skin gently

peeled away from the scar from her heart transplant. There was blood, but it was long dry, more like ink stained on parchment. Had the scar simply popped open, allowing the organ to crawl out from her ribcage?

However it happened, Justine did not know how much time she had before her body remembered to die. But her body kept functioning. She had no idea how. It defied everything she knew. Every death Justine witnessed was logical. Her parents, her governess, her patients, her colleagues – these deaths made sense to her. But this, her heart beating for hours outside her body, defied everything she knew. Why should Justine’s heart continue bleeding with no apparent source of blood? Why should Justine live when the others died?

Perhaps it was the heart itself. Where had her sister procured the organ? Vera never revealed all she knew. In the days before the transplant, Justine pressed her sister for details of the donor. Finally, she assured Justine that no one died to give her life. “You mean you didn’t kill anyone,” Justine corrected. Vera’s eyes watered dark, uncharted depths. She never answered.

Vera had gone to great lengths to save people she needed. When she was fourteen years old, her mentor developed unknown heart problems. Shortly after, Vera took materials from their parents’ laboratory and asked Justine to hide them. In their shared room, Vera created a device to diagnose heart diseases and apply drugs to the organ. But she could only progress so far until Justine offered herself as a test subject. Vera’s eyebrows kindled under the lamplight as she numbed her sister’s arm and cut into her vein. She snaked a rubber tube up Justine’s arm, crawling over her shoulder and into her heart. When the device proved successful, her mentor lived to teach Vera for two more years until the Slaughterhouse Plague began. Justine wanted to call the device the Snake Bite, but the City had other ideas. It was this device that brought Vera to the attention of Dr. Kane and the Research Center.

Vera had gone to great lengths to help her ailing mentor. What would she do to save her sister? As the organ's bleeding gradually lessened, the next step was obvious. Justine stumbled to her metal communication box. She switched the levers and waited for Vera's voice. No answer.

Justine would have to find her, then. Below her window, the street bustled. Only a few hours had passed since the heart's escape. Orange City lights bobbed in the morning mist. Little figures darted about, cable cars and pedestrians. As was customary, two officers stood guard on her block. Above them hung a banner that said, "IF YOU FEEL SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING. REPORT TO THE RESEARCH CENTER." The City seemed normal. Justine, too, needed to seem normal the minute she stepped outside.

After wiping the blood from her chest, Justine dressed. She wrapped her heart in three layers of blankets, but the bundle still trickled blood. Justine rummaged through boxes, pulling out her maximum-strength medical gauze. Indispensable during house calls, this gauze once stopped a man's guts from falling out when a transit car hit him. Justine had seen this gauze defy reason. Now, she unrolled yards and yards of gauze until it was gone.

Once Justine finished, the heart beat against layers of tape. Now encased in a soft, stretchy shell, the heart was the size of a premature infant. Justine wrapped the heart in her last unsoiled blanket. If anyone on the street asked, the bundle was a sick baby entrusted to Justine's care. An obscenely scarred baby, its face wrapped in medical gauze, apparently. Logic be damned, Justine thought.

After grabbing her heart and her coin purse, Justine walked out the door.

Only ten more blocks until the nearest transit station. Justine's apartment was in the thick of the City. After taking a transit car to the other side of the City, Justine would walk the rest of the way to Vera's estate.

Vera isolated herself in their family's inherited home outside the City. Her sister could have lived anywhere in the City, even in the Ivory Quarter. The City had honored Vera for her work in anatomy, genetics, and neuroscience. Dr. Kane even offered her a position at the Research Center as an assistant director. But Vera pursued more unorthodox projects. She possessed the materials and equipment to conduct her research in solitude.

Justine, on the other hand, preferred the City. It was easier to make house calls this way. Even though she never finished her medical training, her neighbors gladly accepted any help. Her apartment was only a few blocks away from the shantytown, where the most desperate lived. The nearest transit station was on the other side of that shantytown.

As she walked, grimy tenements rolled past. Little boys and girls chased each other through the fire escapes. Vendors barked, their wooden carts clattering over the stones. There was no reason she should appear conspicuous. Whenever Justine passed an officer, she plastered her face with a fiercely neutral expression.

Once, a young guard nudged her arm. The heart nearly slipped from Justine's grip. The guard simply handed her a pamphlet and wished her a happy and healthy day. On one side of the pamphlet, a sheep stood on its hind legs, donning a lab coat and stethoscope. Below, the pamphlet said, "SEE ANY PESTS OR STRAY ANIMALS? DONATE TO THE CITY RESEARCH CENTER! DOCTOR BAAAARNYARD IS HAPPY TO HELP THE CAUSE!" On the other side of the pamphlet, a young boy curled into his ghostly mother's embrace. "Your

mother is not gone forever,” the pamphlet said. The mother’s kidneys, liver, and heart bore red outlines. “Parts of her will live in us, thanks to the City Research Center.”

As Justine neared the shantytown, the market spilled over both sides of the street. Pressed into narrow rows, wooden stalls propped up a patchwork ceiling of colored cloth. People weaved in and out. Men and women squawked at them from their stalls. Officers mingled in the carts and stood on street corners. Normally, a few officers positioned themselves every few blocks. In the case that someone dropped dead, a guard could quickly remove the body and transport it to the Research Center. But even in the shantytown, the job only necessitated a few officers. Now, green uniforms peppered the scene.

If the officers found her carrying a beating heart, she had no idea what they would do to her. An inexperienced guard might arrest her for smuggling organs. A more discerning officer might recognize the heart’s abnormal resilience and send her to the Research Center for testing. After expending so much effort to avoid that place, she could end up there anyway.

Justine pressed her body between the market stalls. One woman loomed over ceramic bowls and jars. Another touted ancient spell books and healing potions. These could cure even the most damaged organs, she insisted. Across from them sat a man with a stall was full of gear for new mothers: cradles, rattles, blankets, bottles.

A sharp pain in Justine’s stomach almost made her keep walking. She hadn’t thought about having children since Galen fell to the Plague. The trinkets of motherhood teased Justine. That future died with him.

Nevertheless, Justine reached for a baby satchel. She ran her fingertips over the rough, stitched cloth. Justine spoke to the woolen bundle in her arms, visualized a face there. “What do you think?” She asked, bouncing the heart slightly. “You deserve to ride in style.” Justine tossed

a few coins into the vendor's can and took the baby satchel. After adjusting the strap across her back, Justine placed the organ in the satchel on her chest. Now the heart hugged her like a breathing baby.

Justine left the market and made an aggressive course towards the transit station. She passed more green uniforms, never slowing. The faces of Dr. Kane and General Pierce stared down at her from banners. Finally, a huge canvas dome loomed before her: the shantytown clinic. From the outside, the structure looked like an unusually large tent. Inside, the clinic housed one hundred cots and basic machinery, provided by the City. Justine volunteered here four times a week, treating the City's poorest, most desperate patients.

Justine refused to stop there that day. She couldn't afford to spend any time at the clinic. The organ beating in her arms was more important. The clinic rolled past, and the steel of the transit station glinted in the distance. Someone called her name. Justine's stockings chafed as she walked faster. The voice sliced through the air again, and Justine stopped.

She turned, and Erica trotted a few yards behind. At fourteen, she was the clinic's youngest volunteer. The Sisterhood required service of all its novices. Without Erica's dying spiritual order, the City's poorest clinics would lose half their volunteers. Justine herself considered joining the Sisterhood. However, she struggled with its strict regulations regarding personal attachments. Erica's heels danced on the pavement as she caught up to Justine.

"Thank goodness," Erica breathed, her hair frizzing around her scalp. She dug her fingers into bloody splotches on her apron. "You're a fast walker, Miss Justine."

The heart pulsed through baby satchel. Justine could imagine the girl's face if an aorta peeped through a baby's wraps. "I have something," Justine said. "It's urgent."

“Yes, I understand that,” Erica panted, and her wet fingers flattened her hair. Justine winced as the girl left streaks of red on her hairline. “Really, I do, but something’s happened.”

Behind Erica, a crooked toothed man crouched against a stall. A guard waved his baton within inches of his nose. The man’s neighbors inched away. “Vultures,” he rasped. A uniformed woman joined her comrade.

“What’s wrong?” Justine kept her voice gentle, unobtrusive.

Erica led Justine to the opening of the tarp. They stood before a river of bodies.

Waves of flesh and cloth rippled out from all sides, limbs melting into one another. The regular patients occupied the clinic’s original hundred cots. New bodies filled every inch of space between the cots. Five volunteers waded through the crowd, arms lapping at their waists.

“It happened last night.” Erica’s voice swam through the fizzing chaos.

Justine’s throat knotted. Two men pushed past her, carrying a young woman. They lowered her between the nearest cots. Hair matted across her forehead, the woman coughed blood onto her neighbors. Erica sidestepped three young girls dragging a middle-aged man into the tent. Splashes of red bubbled across his face, his eyes swollen. “What do we do?” Erica said. The wet spots glistened on the girl’s forehead. The roar swelled.

In answer, Justine adjusted the straps on her baby satchel. She willed the organ to wait a little longer. She crinkled her sleeves and rolled them above her elbows. “We get to work.”

His brain buzzing inside his head, Frank awoke. He had slept through the day.

“Good morning,” Frank said.

Well, good morning. It took you long enough. The brain continued its soft buzzing. *We’ve got a busy day ahead of us, Frankie boy.*

Frank's brow creased. "Why was I asleep so long? Where's Vera?"

Oh, she's gone on an errand. Left while you were sleeping.

The brain never answered his first question. Frank sat upright. "When will she be back?"

Vera didn't say. But she sent us out to gather herbs. The brain turned slowly in Frank's skull. *You wouldn't want to disappoint Vera, would you?*

The brain had no intention of collecting herbs. At first, the brain directed Frank towards some trees and bushes. After the first few hours, the brain instructed Frank to keep walking. They climbed over streams and hills for several miles until the City began. A densely packed cluster of lights and buildings rested at the bottom of the valley. The brain was taking them to the City.

"Um, I think we've found enough herbs," Frank said. The brain made no answer, so Frank kept walking. "Where are we going?"

The brain kept his thoughts light and airy. *Just a little field trip.*

"We can't go to the City," Frank said, his voice hushed. "Vera will find out."

Relax, we'll be fine. The organ attempted a tickle, but it translated as a needlelike prodding through Frank's lower back. *Besides, it's educational. Vera will approve.*

"It's not safe," Frank insisted, rubbing his spine. "We don't have a plan."

Speak for yourself. I have a plan. We're going to the Research Center.

The name crumpled through Frank's stomach. "What?"

The Research Center. An institution devoted to scientific progress. What better place to engage with other brains and learn the true nature of humanity?

"No," Frank said. The crumpling spread through his body. "We're going back. Now."

As Frank turned toward Vera's estate, his spine jolted. The brain hijacked his muscles, and Frank's legs jerked. He faced the City again. They walked farther from Vera's estate. Frank tried to speak, but the brain gripped his vocal cords. Frank finally croaked a surrender. The brain released his grip, and Frank's muscles slackened. He stabbed his legs into the ground to steady himself. "I'll take you to the City. We'll get there faster that way. But we can't go after sundown. Vera might be waiting for us, and we won't be able to find our way back."

The brain hesitated. *Fine. But walk fast.*

For the next hour, Frank descended deeper into the valley. After the sun sank behind the hills, Frank stopped. "There," he said, flapping his arms around him. "It's sundown. It's too late to go to the City." Frank climbed towards Vera's estate. The brain locked Frank's knees.

No. The brain sent another pulse through his spine. *We've come too far.*

The City now lay less than a mile below. "Vera will be back by now. She'll be looking for us, and we'll both be in trouble." Frank enunciated each syllable. "We agreed."

The brain squirmed. *You're not supposed to argue. You're a faulty body.*

"We can't go to the City," Frank said. Vera's voice vibrated through his pores. She had warned him never to go there. "Besides, Vera wouldn't like it."

The orange lights blazed brighter, watering in the darkness. *Vera is part of the problem. She wants to hoard me, lock me away from anybody else.* The brain vibrated faster, generating heat inside his body. *This is what I get for taking a faulty body. But I will fix you.*

The brain slammed against Frank's skull with an impact that would be impossible for an ordinary brain. Frank tumbled down the slope, rolling towards the City. Twigs and rocks sliced Frank's cheeks until his body came to a stop. They were now at the edge of the City, its outer

buildings within sight. Grass scraped through Frank's throat as he gagged. The brain took control of his vocal cords. "You may think. But you are a body."

Digging his fingers into the grass, Frank clambered off the ground. Vera's crystalline eyes hovered before him. Vera made him strong. He walked five steps before a jet of electricity ricocheted through his body. The brain sent a calculated signal, the crack of a whip. Frank's limbs crumpled. Tendrils of grass caressed his neck, whispering, coaxing him to stay down.

You are a body. The brain delivered another electric shock. Frank's skin hissed against the grass. *And the body obeys the brain.*

Frank lay limp, a tangle of body parts. A breeze filled Frank's forehead, swirling through empty space as though the brain were not there. His fingers strayed to the scar from his brain transplant. The knotted line ran the length of Frank's head. What would Frank be without his scar, without the brain?

Frank scratched at the scar. Plucking, clawing, Frank's fingers ripped his scar open stitch by stitch by stitch by stitch. Finally, he pried open his head. The orange lights blazed before him, flooding his skull as Frank pulled out his own brain, holding it high to taste the light.

Justine lost count of the lives she failed to save.

Within Justine's first few hours at the clinic, the drugs ran out. She sent Erica for supplies, but the girl returned empty handed. Prices had skyrocketed since the patients poured into the clinic. It was happening all over the City, Erica said. No one knew how long it would be until the City could provide supplies. Moreover, at least ten of the clinic's regular volunteers had fallen ill. That evening, more volunteers dropped into the tangle of limbs. All Justine could do

was wade through the bodies. Without government-issued drugs, she might as well have tried curing the patients with the healing potion from the market.

Four volunteers remained when their supervisor called them to the corner of the tent. They huddled around a small radio for an official announcement. Dr. Kane's voice was fuzzy amidst the roar of the clinic. "...the City is currently in a state of crisis. As such, the Research Center will implement emergency procedures. Stay in your homes unless you are already at a hospital or clinic." For a few seconds, the speakers scratched. "Officers will perform a sweep of the City to gauge your needs. When they carry out their emergency procedures, we urge you to comply with their instructions."

Justine's heart shuddered in its baby satchel. With officers combing the streets, there would be nowhere to run. Dr. Kane's voice softened. "In the wake of General Pierce's passing, we have suffered unimaginable losses. As we mourn, the Research Center and the military renew a commitment to prosperity and progress." A rasp rose from the speakers, perhaps a cough. After a few seconds, Dr. Kane spoke with aggressive syllables. "The City will not only survive, but we will move forward in scientific advances. Your sons, daughters, mothers, and brothers may be gone, but they have left us a beautiful gift. Their remains will not go to waste. Our suffering will provide opportunities for new discoveries. The City will thrive again."

The speakers crackled with static. The clinic's supervisor sent the volunteers to their posts. As she tended a dying patient, Justine resolved to stay. The patients needed every bit of help. Even if she ran, the street would crawl with officers. Half an hour passed, and she kneeled before a dead man. She withdrew a long piece of red tape from her pocket and tied it around his skeleton wrist. There were now dozens of patients marked with red tape. Dozens ready for the Research Center.

Her lips cracked, Justine drifted to a familiar patient, a pocket of stillness in the hurricane of writhing limbs. His eyes peeled wide, and his lips sagged over his chin. This man had stayed at the clinic for weeks, but no one knew his name. He suffered from brain failure. There was not much help anyone could offer. This particular ailment baffled the Research Center. After no known trauma, victims of brain failure suffered bouts of confusion and irrationality before becoming unresponsive. Patients needed no food or water but remained alive.

People called them the Sparkless.

Justine had witnessed its effects in people she loved. She wound her fingers around the patient's hand and murmured ancient verses. There was not much she could offer but her voice. She could pretend that her patient could hear her. She could pretend that her parents, her grandparents, her governess, and Galen could hear her. Justine's heart wheezed through the gauze. She peeled back the blanket. The baby pink flesh shivered as though catching a chill.

A hand tapped Justine's shoulder. She jerked forward. Justine looked over her shoulder and locked eyes with Erica. "Sorry. Didn't mean to spook you." The girl's eyes wavered above the new corpse. "I, uh, saw that you were free. They want to talk to you."

Erica jerked her chin to the left. At the opening of the tarp, officers waited with stretchers. Their captain was an unusually tall man with the delicate features of a rhinoceros. When Justine made eye contact, he moved through the crowd. Three pairs of officers followed with stretchers. The heart throbbed.

"Are you alright?" Erica asked.

Justine's jaw muscles tensed. Justine could excuse herself. She could say that the smell was too much. She could dump the baby satchel on Erica to keep the heart from the officers.

However, the image of the organ attached to someone else's body killed that idea. Relinquishing the heart was out of the question.

"I'm fine," Justine said. As Erica left, the head officer joined Justine. The captain's forehead glistened with sweat. Behind him, two officers carried a stretcher into the pool of bodies. A third officer transferred dead patients into the stretcher.

The captain's thick eyebrows knotted as he surveyed the damage. "They tell me you're one of the regulars." Justine nodded, and he introduced himself as Captain Zaetz. He stood almost two heads taller than Justine. "This shouldn't take up too much of your time."

"Thank you," Justine said, keeping her voice light. Zaetz's eyes grazed the baby satchel. Justine synchronized her breaths with the heart's beating.

"Can you tell us what's happening here?"

"No, I wasn't here," Justine said. Several more officers arrived carrying a wider stretcher. "I was hoping you'd know."

Zaetz's dark, glassy eyes remained opaque. "I understand you've been treating folks around the neighborhood. Have you noticed anything unusual? Any common threads?"

"No. Not that I've noticed." The baby satchel wheezed. Zaetz's eyes flickered to the bundle, and Justine squeezed her cheeks into girlish dimples. She raised her voice enough to cover the heart's noises. "I'm afraid I'm not much help to you."

Zaetz's eyes lingered on the satchel. "That's alright." In rapid succession, officers loaded bodies onto stretchers, collecting bodies unmarked with red tape. Two officers scooped up Justine's Sparkless patient and heaped him onto the stretcher. Justine started towards them.

"Those patients haven't been pronounced dead."

“Emergency procedures,” Zaetz said. There were now six bodies on the stretcher, backs pressing into noses. “We’ll be taking all unresponsive patients to the City Research Center.”

The heart pressed deeper into her sternum. “Not for harvesting?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” he said. A grating sound pierced the satchel. Both Zaetz and Justine looked at the heart. Zaetz stepped closer, his voice softening. “Is he okay?”

Justine took a step backwards, but her spine bumped against a cot. “She. And, yes, she’s fine.” Another scraping noise. Justine’s teeth flashed. “Well, she’s sick. Her mother had an emergency.” Zaetz’s eyebrows furrowed the skin on his forehead. “But she’s not sick like *this*.” Justine swept her arms over the mass of bodies. As the baby satchel sputtered, Justine patted the bundle. “Just cold and flu-like symptoms, that’s all.”

“Of course.” Zaetz’s eyes bored into Justine’s. “Make sure you take that baby back to her mother in one piece.”

Justine pressed her palm into the satchel. The organ squeezed, surprisingly strong and rubbery. “Now that everything’s under control, I should be on my way soon.”

“Of course.” Zaetz’s lips pulled back, his teeth sizzling white. “Thank you for your time.” He stepped over a body and joined the other officers. More stretchers appeared at the main entrance, and bodies slowly disappeared from the floor.

Erica hopped between patches of open space. After tripping on somebody’s knee, she stumbled to Justine’s side. “What did he say?”

Justine’s forehead crinkled. “They’re taking unresponsive patients to the Research Center. Some are Sparkless, but not all of them.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.”

Bodies dragged, scraping the floor. Green uniforms bobbed above the waters. “What should we do now?” Erica’s voice misted, tiny and distant.

Justine pressed her fist into her back, listened to each vertebra pop. “Let’s take care of that side,” Justine said, gesturing to the edge of the tent, away from the officers. The mass of green uniforms lingered towards the main opening. It would be a while before the officers could migrate to the end.

“Did you know him? The Sparkless patient, I mean. You seemed to spend a lot of time with him.” Justine shook her head, pressing the heart closer to her chest.

“I’d be happy to hold him if you want,” Erica said. Her hand strayed toward the heart.

“No.” Justine almost pulled the heart into her rib cage. Erica withdrew her hand as though from a slap. “Thank you. The baby is my responsibility,” she added. Justine softened her voice. “Besides, I wouldn’t want to distract you from all this.” Justine gestured to the steadily diminishing bodies.

“I just thought it might be easier for you,” Erica said.

They walked in silence. The Sparkless patient’s face swam before Justine until they reached a cot at the edge of the clinic. A man lay on the sheets. Skin stretched tight over his forehead, he cradled his upper right abdomen. Beside the cot rested a tin bucket, fresh vomit festering inside.

Erica crinkled her nose. “Can you diagnose him?”

Justine bent over the man’s yellowed eyeballs. “Could be acute liver failure. Or the gallbladder...or the...the pancreas.”

Justine’s lungs weighed down her ribcage. The Sparkless patient’s blank eyes, too familiar, hovered in her forehead. Erica shifted her weight. “Miss Justine.”

Erica pointed at the baby satchel. The blankets now swelled as large as Justine's head. The heart pushed against its restraints, shuddering, coughing. Warm fluid seeped through the blanket. The gauze snapped open. The satchel writhed faster, almost hyperventilating. Zaetz faced away from her as he supervised the other officers. The satchel nearly snapped from the weight of the heart.

She pushed past Erica, rooted to the spot. Justine waded through canvas walls, searching for any tear or opening. Zaetz's deep voice barked. Finally, she squeezed under the tarp, crawling across the dirt floor. When Justine emerged on the other side, she carried her heart away from the muffled shouts, deeper into the City.

With his brain in his hands, Frank kneeled at the edge of the City. Flaps of skin and hair peeled away from his cracked skull. The organ glowed gray as it resisted Frank's grip. Once in a while, the brain invaded Frank's mind and tried to hijack his muscles. However, the brain had no control anymore. When Frank pulled the brain out of his skull, he won.

As Frank stared at the mushy thing in his hands, his memory sparked. Something about the brain's color nagged at him. Before Frank could pursue the thought, a young girl emerged from the City's outer buildings. From several yards away, she stared at the brain.

The organ wriggled closer to the girl. Clutching the sides of her apron, she leaned towards the brain. She doubled over, and her eyes bulged. Frank ran to her but could only stand helplessly. The brain tingled with electricity and invaded the girl's mind.

Frank squeezed the brain. "Stop it. Now." The brain either no longer understood him or chose to ignore him. Frank had never appreciated the constant flow of thoughts when the brain was inside his head. Now that it was gone, Frank might as well have tried arguing with a slug.

Meanwhile, an older woman had slipped through the doorway and now stood a few feet away, holding a tree branch. She swung the stick towards Frank. He held the brain before him in surrender. The woman froze. She screamed, and her eyes unfocused. The girl's body slackened as she fell unconscious. Frank took her pulse. She was still alive.

Frank squeezed the brain tighter. "Why are you doing this?" The brain had tingled into Vera's mind plenty of times without rendering her unconscious. Was the brain so ecstatic to meet other humans that his thoughts were too powerful for them? Was the brain trying to spite Frank? Was he making others suffer to sabotage Frank's victory? The brain offered Frank no answers.

Frank ran past the buildings. Shadows loomed through the darkness as the dirt road transitioned to large cobblestones. Deeper into the City, ragged people huddled close to small fires. The brain struggled against Frank's grip, invading the people's minds simultaneously. Their bodies slackened.

A metal hatch glinted in the lamplight, and Frank ran towards it. He tossed the brain on the ground as he unscrewed the hatch. When the hole opened, a ladder stretched into the darkness below. Frank cradled the brain as he descended. He moved farther from Vera, wherever she was. He was failing her. But Frank could no longer afford to care.

Justine plowed through the mass of people on the streets. At this time of night, the street was usually deserted except for a few officers. Now a sea of brown rags swallowed the green uniforms. The crowd moved towards the Research Center.

Justine gathered from one couple that the Research Center was offering supplies, possibly even cures. But then someone else said that the people were rioting. Justine struggled against the

current. It didn't matter why people flocked to the Research Center. All that mattered was the heart, still sputtering and growing.

Justine's heart had broken through layers of gauze about twenty minutes ago when she left the clinic. Now the baby satchel was no more than a few pieces of shredded cloth. Still Justine clutched the heart to her chest. After a few minutes, she peeled off into an alleyway. Arms aching, Justine sorted through her options.

With her heart in this condition, reaching Vera was out of the question. Stopping by a hospital would be impossible with the sudden influx of patients. Besides, the doctors would report her heart's unusual properties and her own miraculous survival to the Research Center. Even so, how could anyone possibly stabilize her heart?

Green uniforms passed. An officer glanced in Justine's direction, propelling her towards the other side of the alley. Her heart bucking in her arms, Justine chose her destination. When the City stopped making sense, she could always find refuge with the Sisterhood.

Beneath the City, Frank waded through miles of muck. He hoped that there were no people above for the brain to terrorize, that layers of concrete would protect them.

After a few hours, the path sloped slightly upward, taking Frank to a corridor lit with small lanterns. The stones on the walls bore markings, twisting lines, dots, and slashes. The brain wiggled in his hands. He waited for thoughts about the markings' history and meaning, but the brain remained silent.

The corridor diverged into seven paths. Frank chose the path directly ahead.

By the time Justine reached the Sisterhood, an officer was definitely following her. After Sister Cassidy ushered her into the cloister, Justine descended into the crypts. As much as she admired the Sisterhood's ways, she knew there was no spiritual remedy for heart. It would be better to stay underground, out of her pursuers' reach.

Golden runes emblazoned each stone on the wall. Justine could almost feel the bones pressed between the walls. The Sisterhood's crypts ran beneath the City in multiple paths. The walls separating the paths housed the bones of generations of citizens. Some were ordinary people, vendors, and beggars. Some were soldiers and scientists. The Sisterhood made no distinctions among the dead. As long as the bones remained, all were one.

Justine's heart had stopped expanding but still shuddered. She sat and placed the heart atop her lap. It resembled a sweating, swollen child whose limbs had outgrown its baby carrier. Justine sang. Her grandmother's lullaby echoed off the crypt walls:

*There once was a lad, a feller of the town
Who wandered, solitary, lost, among the reed.
He wished to escape the chains of mankind,
Shedding the bondage of every fleshly need.*

*"No food or drink shall I need,
Nor slumber to rest my mind.
I've heard tell of an impossible place.
This wond'rous glade shall I find."*

*When he reached the glade, its beauty struck him blind
As golden drops of light fell across his face.
His body dissolved, born anew atop the grass.
Thus, the lad of the town left the human race.*

Justine laid her head on the stone wall, and generations of bones pressed against her back.

"What's the name of that song?"

The voice sent Justine's stomach into spasms. A tall figure waded through the dim lamplight. Justine knew the voice but didn't dare speak the name. The man was carrying a

human brain, gray and mushy. His face swam before her exactly as it had been—only now, his head bore a long red scar. It was exactly how Justine imagined him as she tried to fall asleep at night, as she tried to forget the names of the dead. The heart pulsed faster.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said, pulling the human brain into his chest. His eyes were the same, only they looked at her with a stranger’s distance. “The song just sounds familiar.”

Justine’s voice rang hollow. “You’re dead.” The man stopped, eyebrows creased. The brain wiggled in his hands. “You’re not real,” Justine said, pressing her heart against her chest.

The man’s cheeks flushed red. “I am human.” His fingers pressed deeper into the brain. “I may have been *created* rather than born, but I’m every bit as real as you.” The brain bounced. The organ leaned towards Justine. “Don’t even think about it,” he growled at the brain.

The brain tingled into Justine’s mind. The dead man talked to the brain in his hands. He said, “Let her go.” The brain ripped through her thoughts, and Justine’s mind swarmed with voices. Her mother, her father, her governess. Vera. It was searching for something. Then the brain flooded her with her own memories. Galen. The brain lingered on his face. The face that Justine buried years ago when he fell to the Slaughterhouse Plague. The face that now appeared in the crypt. The brain forced Justine to admit that Galen was still alive.

The brain released her, and the memories faded. The dead man stood before her, resurrected. The brain tingled again. It spoke to both her and the dead man at once.

Oh, dear. It seems that Vera lied to you both.

Frank stood in the crypt, facing a woman who looked all too familiar. When he first saw her pale skin and auburn hair, Frank thought it was Vera. But he knew her name. Justine. How did he

know her? His throat tangled at the sight of her face. When the brain invaded her mind, his first impulse was to strangle the organ. It wasn't like watching the brain attack a stranger.

He remembered Justine. Yet he refused to believe that his creator lied to him.

The brain tingled. *It seems as though Vera was never your creator at all.*

Frank ignored him. Meanwhile, Justine looked at him the way Vera did when he first sprang to life on her operating table. Except there was pain in Justine's eyes. "How do we know each other?" He asked.

Justine clutched a human heart the size of a toddler. "You're dead," she said, eyes hollow. "We were friends. Good friends." Justine rocked the heart back and forth as the story poured out. She explained that they both studied at the City Research Center. Frank was working in neuroscience while Justine was training to become a medic. "And then your brain failed. You were Sparkless." Justine's eyes remained on the brain in his hands. She bounced the heart atop her knees. "But I don't understand. How are you here?"

In absence of any other explanation, Frank recited what Vera had told him. That Vera created him as a body for the brain, but that he developed a mind of his own.

"Wait—Vera?" Justine stopped rocking the heart back and forth. "*Vera* did this to you?"

"You know Vera?" Frank asked.

"She's my sister. But I can't believe she was *keeping* you all this time." Justine patted the heart as though burping a baby. Her auburn hair fell over flushed skin. Even though Justine explained their relationship, Frank couldn't help but wonder what lay underneath. What had Justine been to him? What had Vera been to him? "Actually, no. I believe it," Justine said. Her voice had an edge that unsettled him. Perhaps it was because she never spoke that way. "You donated your body to science. *Of course*, Vera would keep you for herself."

Frank had too many questions. He settled on one that had nagged at him from the beginning of his memory. “What was my name?”

Justine paused. She spoke quickly as though removing a thorn. “Galen.” Frank’s muscles slackened. The name felt right. Justine rose from the floor.

“So, this brain,” she said, eyeing the brain from a curious distance. “It has awareness. Where did it come from? Is this also where Vera found my heart?”

Frank turned his attention to the brain. “Did you know about this?”

The brain ignored him. *To answer your question, Justine, yes. It’s been a while since I’ve seen this heart, but we did come from the same place.* The brain leaned toward the enlarged heart. *Of course, we’ve all changed since then.*

Frank squeezed the brain. “Answer me.”

Well, then. No need for violence, Frank. Or Galen. Or whoever you are. If you must know, I didn’t particularly care where you came from. Vera promised me a body, and that’s what I got. But I did feel a little bad watching you follow her like a little puppy-slave.

Something in Frank’s stomach snapped. He pressed the brain against the wall as though crushing a man’s windpipe. “Stop—*stop it.*” Justine never touched the brain or made any physical interference. Instead, she stared up at Frank, over a foot taller than her. “Please, this is more important than your pride.” Frank looked down into Justine’s blue irises, a shade brighter than Vera’s. Frank’s chest muscles uncoiled. He peeled the brain, still intact, from the wall. The organ remained silent. Neck flushing, Frank faced Justine.

Justine’s heart throbbed as she spoke. “Your brain and my heart came from the same place. For some reason, you can still think without your brain. I’m still alive without my heart. Our organs are connected somehow. It’s all connected.” Justine’s eyes unfocused the way Vera’s

did while deep in thought. “It could even be connected to what’s happening in the City. If we only had more time...”

Boots thudded down the corridor. Justine’s heart wheezed. The brain buzzed warmly, presumably at the prospect of meeting new humans. Within seconds, men and women in green uniforms blocked their path on both sides. At their head stood a tall man with sharp features.

“That’s quite a sick child you have there, Miss Frank,” he said to Justine.

Justine pulled the heart closer. “Captain Zaetz. You don’t seem fazed.”

The Captain turned his gaze to Frank. “I’ve seen strange things tonight.” Had he known this Captain Zaetz in his former life? The brain tingled into every mind in the room. It was a gentle sweep, a breeze rather than a typhoon. The officers’ eyes unfocused, but Zaetz never flinched. “You’re both coming with us to the Research Center.” The Captain gestured, and his officers snapped to attention. They restrained Frank and Justine. Two more officers plucked the brain and the heart from their arms.

Frank reached out to the brain, unsure if he would hear him. *If you’re going to bombard people with visions, now would be the time to do it.*

Why should I do that? I’m finally getting my wish. We’re off to the Research Center.

Zaetz led them through miles of catacombs. As they neared the Research Center, Justine listened for noise above. Masses of citizens had flocked there. Had the crowd dispersed?

Justine focused her thoughts on anything except the fact that her heart now rested in someone else’s arms.

At the edge of the Research Center, Captain Zaetz gave a signal, and the officers took Frank down one end of the hallway, along with his brain and Justine’s heart. Zaetz remained

with Justine. “Where are they going?” Justine asked. Officers placed the organs inside temperature-controlled containers.

“They’re going for testing. But not you.” Zaetz made no move to restrain Justine. Instead, he held his arm in front of him. “Dr. Kane is waiting for you.”

Justine’s parents always spoke highly of Dr. Kane. On the anniversary of the overthrow of the Council of Elders, her family told stories of Dr. Kane’s speeches, discoveries, and research. As scientists, her parents respected the Research Center’s efforts to eliminate superstition. Justine herself had only caught a few glimpses of Dr. Kane during her medical training. Early in her career, Vera even had the honor of collaborating with the Director of the Research Center. That was before Vera chose to conduct her own research in solitude.

At the Research Center, Captain Zaetz led Justine into a room with metal walls and chairs. He instructed her to wait. Justine’s skin squirmed at the thought of someone else poking and prodding at her exposed heart. What would happen if she remained separated from her heart? The organ was already severed from her chest, but was physical proximity the key to keeping her alive? Would Justine feel it if someone harmed or even killed her heart?

Where did they take Galen? No, he wasn’t Galen anymore, Justine told herself. The person she knew died with his brain. She sat by his bedside for days, weeks, months. His speech slurred as his thoughts degenerated into Sparkless ramblings. For a few hours, he fixated on a moth that didn’t exist. He dragged his finger across his white bedroom walls as he followed the invisible moth. He rested his finger on Justine’s nose and said, “It likes you.”

Justine told herself that Galen was gone. But every time she looked at Frank, a crumpling spread through her limbs. Every bone in Justine’s body whispered that he was alive.

She remained in the room for hours. Was this waiting game part of her heart's tests? Was Dr. Kane watching her now? She felt like one of Vera's childhood lab rats when a large, fleshy face hovered above. Justine lifted her chest. She refused to become anyone's rat.

A metal door opened beside her. A short woman in her late sixties strode into the room. With cropped gray hair and black eyes, Dr. Kane stood before her. It was difficult to believe that this slight frame belonged to the woman who partnered with the military to overthrow the Elders.

Dr. Kane spread her hands before her in welcome. "I see your body is functioning properly." She circled Justine, a casual inspection.

Justine drew herself up. Without her heart, she had nothing to lose anymore. "I've seen what's happening at the clinics. The Research Center is taking living bodies for harvesting."

Dr. Kane walked behind Justine. "How are you feeling? Any weakness? Fatigue?"

"Those patients are sentient beings." Justine grabbed Dr. Kane's arm, forcing her to meet her gaze. "They're unconscious, but they deserve a chance to recover."

Dr. Kane stiffened. "Despite not completing your training, you have worked as a medic. We both know that the Plague always ends in death. It is our duty to save as many as we can. However we can." She pulled out a metal chair and offered it to Justine. When she remained standing, Dr. Kane herself took it, drawing slow breaths. Though Justine now stood several feet over her, Dr. Kane retained her statuesque composure. "I understand that you object to our methods. If the Council of Elders were here, they would explain the Plague in religious terms." Dr. Kane's breath rattled slowly. "They would say that we deserve our fate—and that, by extension, so do our subjects."

Justine stared into Dr. Kane's creased eyes. The Director of the Research Center undoubtedly lost countless friends and colleagues while trying and failing to develop a cure. "No one deserves this," Justine managed softly.

"I know you value the old ways. And there is merit in them—to an extent," Dr. Kane rose from her chair. She and Justine were almost eye to eye. "But if we are to solve this crisis, it must be with logic and reason. Not prophecies and amulets."

The metal walls shimmered dozens of shades. "With all due respect, this isn't logic. We call this sickness a Plague, but it's only for the sake of labels." Dr. Kane's jaw tensed. For the first time, Justine knew she was stronger without her heart. She breathed slowly, letting cool air swirl through her chest cavity. "This organ failure is random. In fourteen years, no one has been able to find a logical chain of transmission. We need to change our thinking." Dr. Kane raised an eyebrow, and Justine stepped forward. "We shouldn't go back to the old ways. But we need to adapt to this mad world."

The two women stared at each other for a moment. The creases in Dr. Kane's cheeks deepened. "If that's what you believe, then help us," she said. "If not for the Research Center, then for the people of the City."

After expending so much energy avoiding the Research Center, here she stood before its leader. It seemed like days ago that Justine visited the Shantytown Clinic, waist deep in bodies. Since then, her heart lasted longer than should have been possible. Justine survived losses, shocks, and miracles. Unsure if it was fatigue or strength, she nodded. Justine would stay.

Dr. Kane interlocked her fingers. "Good. Because the organ failure is only part of the problem." She turned to face the wall. Dr. Kane cranked a lever, and the metal coverings on the wall creaked. They were blinds concealing a glass window behind them. She kept winding the

lever, and the blinds opened bit by bit. “You assumed we were taking live bodies for harvesting. We are. But only a portion of them. The others we need for testing.”

The blinds opened. “These are the bodies we have used for harvesting in the past few weeks,” she said. On the other side of the window lay a room full of cots. Each bed housed a body, fully restrained with leather straps. Nurses and officers milled between the beds. The bodies moved. Some opened their mouths. Others tried to roll their heads back. One man kicked, nearly breaking his restraints.

“Galen Richter is not a unique case. Other bodies are beginning to develop consciousness.”

The scientists strapped Frank to a chair and took the brain to another room. Despite the Research Center’s thick walls, the brain tingled into the minds of everyone in the vicinity, including Frank. The brain searched multiple minds simultaneously, searching through the scientists’ memories. He ached to experience as much humanity as possible. This time, the brain’s invasion was gentle enough to allow the scientists to conduct their tests.

As a technician measured Frank’s head and marked his scalp, the brain’s thoughts tingled through his mind. The brain explored one scientist’s childhood friendships and another technician’s wedding. Via the brain’s tingling, scenes from other people’s lives fell through Frank’s mind. The birth of a child. The death of a grandmother. A mentor’s pride when a student discovered a stepping stone to curing the Plague. What had Frank experienced in his past life? What had he forgotten when his original brain failed?

Justine could tell him. If they had more time, Frank could ask her for every detail of his life. Frank closed his eyes, and the underground crypt floated before his eyes. They could have

stayed there forever as Justine wove her stories into the shimmering gold runes. Her auburn hair glinted, fire against his eyelids. Warmth spread through Frank's body until someone jostled him.

Leaning close, a technician attached a pair of electrodes to Frank's scalp. When the technician pulled away, he made eye contact with Frank. The cold leather chair seeped into Frank's skin. Wrinkling his nose, the technician broke his gaze. Was this person once an acquaintance or colleague? How many of these scientists and technicians had Frank known in his former life? Galen, his previous self, had knowledge and relationships. He was more than a vessel for an alien brain.

"Please close your eyes during the test," the technician said, staring into Frank's forehead. What did the technician see when he looked at Frank? Nothing more than a vessel? A machine in the corner of the room hummed. As Frank closed his eyes, visions of laughing children tingled through his mind.

Masses of people huddled outside the Research Center. The Plague's recent escalation sent the citizenry into a panic. Officers formed a protective ring around the building. Captain Zaetz stood above them, supervising from inside the Research Center.

About half the crowd seemed extremely ill. Families clustered together, begging the officers to let them pass. Their children were dying, they said. Parents offered to donate an organ, but only to their sons and daughters. The other half of the crowd consisted of rioters. Some held signs, others brandished crowbars. They demanded that Dr. Kane appear before them. Waves of people lapped closer and closer to the building, but the officers' ring held.

Zaetz kept watch, but the building was secure. Before the crowds arrived, he had lowered the blast doors over the building. These reinforced titanium doors would keep out the rabble.

After half an hour, the officers' protective ring wavered. A citizen managed to drag down a guard. Another officer fell, and people trickled through the line. The guards called for reinforcements. But as long as the blast doors held, the Research Center would remain secure.

After hours of testing, Frank and Justine sat before Dr. Kane. She shuffled papers, her eyes hidden behind fringes of gray hair. As she explained their situation, Frank checked Justine for any signs of mistreatment.

On the contrary, Justine's skin glowed a healthy pink. Her spine straightened into a spear. After fearing the Research Center for so long, what caused the change in Justine's demeanor? When Dr. Kane addressed her, Justine's cheeks tightened into a cold focus.

"After extensive tests, it appears that your heart..." Without making eye contact with him, Dr. Kane tilted her head in Frank's direction. "...and his brain are connected." Dr. Kane launched into a technical explanation that flew over Frank's head.

He surveyed the concrete office walls, textured like crumpled eggshells. These layers of concrete spanned the entire facility, stretching forty stories. Frank had never seen the building from the outside, but he imagined it as a mountain of bone, towering above a miniature city. How heavy was this structure? How many years, decades, centuries would the Research Center survive? He swam in these thoughts until Justine's voice jolted him back to reality.

"So these organs, the heart and the brain...they're connected to each other." Justine glanced at Frank. "But they're also connected to our bodies."

"Yes, your bodies. That's another matter." Dr. Kane leaned forward on her elbows. "Both of your bodies are fully functional despite your ailments." She rose from her seat and circled her desk. Her breathing labored, Dr. Kane stood a few feet away from Frank and Justine. "You have

no heart, yet your body remains healthy. He has no brain.” She gestured towards Frank while still addressing Justine. “Our tests show no electrical activity in his...skull. Yet he is fully conscious.”

Justine folded her arms, twitching slightly. “Do you think our new organs are the cause? Or is it something else?”

Dr. Kane’s chest rose and fell slowly. “Normally, I would hypothesize that these remarkable organs are responsible. However, this man gained consciousness before your sister implanted the brain.” Even though Dr. Kane sat feet away, the words swam through a vacuum in Frank’s ears. “His ability to think throws everything into speculation...If we can truly call it ‘thinking’...” Her eyes remained hidden beneath her hair. Frank’s neck flushed. “The others have never reached this level of consciousness.”

Frank’s pulse quickened. “Others?”

After a few seconds, Dr. Kane turned to Frank. Her eyes were opals in the earth’s crust. It was the first time she looked at him since they met. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Show him,” Justine said, her voice firm. “He needs to see this.”

Dr. Kane led Frank and Justine to a room with metal walls and floors. A dull hum rose from a tank in the corner of the room. Inside, the brain was hooked up to a network of wires and machinery. After explaining the situation, Dr. Kane nudged Frank towards a large window. Frank passed the brain with no acknowledgement.

When Frank reached the window, his legs locked. On the other side, hundreds of bodies writhed on cots. Limbs twisted against their restraints. Teeth flashed through silent screams and groans. A woman rolled her head back, her jaundiced eyeballs circling in tiny figure eights. His

chest tight, Frank gripped the railing before him. Dr. Kane had called these bodies “others,” as though Frank were one of them. She had called them “living corpses.” Yet Frank had never thought of himself as a corpse.

He pressed his forehead against the glass, and the bodies blurred into faceless patches of skin. Who were these people? Could they remember dying? Did endless memories flash before their eyes? Above all, why could Frank think and walk when these bodies could not? Out of these hundreds of citizens, why should he become more than a corpse?

All the while, Justine and Dr. Kane discussed the question in subdued tones. Dr. Kane said, “Perhaps it was Galen’s original intellect. Yet he retains nothing of his old brain... Your sister would be a great help with this.”

“I haven’t been able to contact her,” Justine breathed, flexing her arms. “I’m a little worried about her, given what’s happening in the City.”

In his tank, the brain stopped humming, and his wires sparked. The brain tingled into every mind in the room. *Oh, Vera went away.*

“Where?” Dr. Kane and Justine asked. Frank turned from the window.

The brain tingled with electricity, his voice drawn out. *The place where she found us.*

“Us?” Dr. Kane asked.

Frank’s stomach bristled, and Vera’s face swam before him. She wouldn’t want this. *Don’t tell them about the organs,* he thought. Then he questioned this reaction. Why shouldn’t he let the Research Center find the organs? Why should he protect Vera? Frank remembered the day he asked for a proper name. Vera gave him a cold stare and told him to choose.

At the time, Frank thought that Vera gave him a gift, a choice. In reality, it was only part of the experiment. It was the perfect opportunity to discern whether Frank remembered his past self. She knew who he was. Yet Vera let him believe that she was his creator.

The brain paused before answering Dr. Kane's question. *The place where Vera found me and the heart. And all the other organs.* Frank exhaled, his chest lighter now.

"There are other organs like you?" Her breath rattling, Dr. Kane walked to the tank. "Sentient? Where?"

In a glade outside the City.

"And you know the way?" Dr. Kane asked.

But of course.

"We need to find this glade," Dr. Kane said, directing a few technicians to the tank. They unplugged the brain from the machinery. "These organs, your kind, they could be the key to our survival. Speed is of the essence."

"Good," Frank said. He dug his fingers into the railing. "I need to see Vera."

The room fell silent. Justine stepped towards Frank but stopped short when Dr. Kane said, "No, not you. Both you and Justine need to stay here."

"Why?" Frank held her gaze. He would no longer follow orders without explanation. Meanwhile, a few technicians carried the brain's tank out the door. The brain tingled, laughter shimmering across the room.

"We're keeping you in custody," Dr. Kane said. Frank's jaw twitched. "At least until we figure out what you are." Captain Zaetz slipped quietly through the doorway. Keeping his eyes on Frank, he signaled to Dr. Kane.

"You don't understand." Frank started towards her. "I need—"

“You’re staying here,” Dr. Kane said. She raised a hand, and a line of officers separated her from Frank and Justine. Dr. Kane joined Zaetz at the door. While they talked, Frank stood in front of the window. Bodies writhed below as Justine walked to his side.

Keeping his eyes on the bodies, Frank spoke too low for the guards to hear. “We have to find Vera.” Justine took a slow breath, wrapping her arms around herself.

“I know it’s been difficult for you,” she said. Below, one woman’s wrist slipped free of its restraints, dangling over the side of her cot. When a nurse tightened the restraints, Justine turned to Frank. Their faces loomed inches away. “My sister has never exactly been transparent, not even when we were children. We both deserve answers.” Justine lowered her eyes. “But we can find answers here.”

Frank’s palms sank into the railing. “You’re not going along with this?”

Justine turned back to the window. Her jaw tightened as the officers’ green uniforms reflected on the glass. “I don’t approve of their methods...but people are dying. The Research Center is trying to help.” More bodies thrashed against their restraints. Justine’s breath rattled. “They’re the City’s only hope of survival.”

Below, the cots stretched into hundreds of gray splotches. Nurses and officers floated, ghostlike, through the aisles. Frank’s breath misted against the glass. “This isn’t my city.”

Before Justine could respond, Dr. Kane stepped through the line of officers. Captain Zaetz had already disappeared through the doorway. Dr. Kane’s cheek muscles tautened as she addressed Frank and Justine. “If you’ll follow the guards—”

“What’s wrong?” Frank asked.

“The situation in the City is worsening,” Dr. Kane said. She waved a few officers towards Frank and Justine. “Which makes it imperative that you stay here for more testing.”

Justine stepped forward. “It’s the crowds, isn’t it? A while ago, I saw tons of people headed here.”

Dr. Kane ran a hand through her short hair and nodded. “You don’t need to worry about that. I can assure you that the facility is secure.” With that, she dismissed them. The guards escorted Frank and Justine into the hallway, away from Dr. Kane and the writhing bodies behind the glass.

The guards separated Frank and Justine. They led Frank down endless corridors of white concrete. He passed metal doors with small windows. With two guards in front and two behind, Frank managed to catch a glimpse inside some of the rooms. There were nothing but bodies stretched on tables. Human bodies, animal bodies. Hair and fur blurred together. Through the green glass, Frank had no idea whether the specimens were alive or dead.

As metal and concrete rolled past, cold air filled Frank’s lungs. He could not become another body for the Research Center. As they approached a corner, Frank slammed into two of the guards. One officer pulled out his firearm, but another barked, “Kane needs him unharmed.” As Frank punched a guard in the throat, he laughed. Wasn’t he dead already?

Once he broke free, Frank rounded the corner and ran. Vera told him he was strong. She hadn’t lied about that. The guards pursued, and he dodged a couple of scientists in the hallway. A technician pushed a cart full of jars towards him. Frank shoved the cart, shattering the jars and splattering yellow fluids. Frank lost the guards and ran down a staircase.

With no idea of his destination, Frank descended the staircase and entered another level. He ran down another corridor and stopped at an intersection of four hallways. His veins throbbing, Frank realized where he was. In his past life, he had worked at the Research Center.

Who knows how much time he spent here? He chose a hallway, taking more turns and staircases. Frank arrived at a familiar door. He entered a room full of glowing panels and switches.

The room shouldn't have been empty. Where were the workers? Perhaps the Plague had struck them. Whatever the reason, Frank took the opportunity. Without hesitation, he flipped switches and pressed buttons. His fingers numbed as he shut off the electricity and ventilation. Frank no longer felt rage or fear, only icy purpose. His hands steady, Frank reached the final control panel. The blast doors. The only barrier between the people of the City and the interior of the Research Center.

Frank slammed the button.

Outside the Research Center, the crowd had descended into a frenzy. The officers fired warning shots into the air, but people dragged down individual guards. A roar swelled above the sea of rags and sweat. From inside the building, Captain Zaetz could no longer distinguish between the rioters and the citizens seeking aid. At any rate, the entire population could fall ill. There was no longer any difference.

Zaetz spoke into his communication device. He authorized the guards to use lethal force. Moments later, the lights dimmed, and a creaking ripped through the air. For a full minute, the crowd stilled. The blast doors shuddered open.

The roar swelled as masses of people rammed into the guards. Within minutes, the first waves of citizens penetrated the Research Center. Zaetz drew his firearm, but he knew that he would inevitably fall into a tangle of snarling limbs and teeth.

Justine waited in a secure room when the lights went out. She knocked on the window. On the other side of the door, the guard never turned around. In the absence of an explanation, she turned on a flashlight and waited.

With the chilled floor under her skirt, Justine sat against the wall. Metal instruments loomed through the shadows. After hours of running, climbing, worrying, and calculating, Justine's muscles ached for her pillow. She hadn't slept since her heart escaped her chest. How long ago was that? She hugged her knees, imagining her cheek sinking into her beating heart. As her breathing slowed, the remnants of the baby satchel flashed before her eyes. Where had she dropped the baby satchel? How many people had trampled it?

As her eyelids drooped, voices scratched outside the door. Something slammed against the walls, jolting Justine awake. She tripped as she felt her way behind the cabinet. Her fingers gripped the flashlight. The door creaked open, and Frank stepped into the room. "We're getting out of here," he said, squinting into Justine's flashlight.

Justine rose from the floor. "What's happening?"

"The doors are open," Frank said.

"All those people," Justine breathed. Her pulse quickened. "They'll come flooding in."

Frank's face twisted in the white spot of light. "That doesn't matter now. We're leaving." He grabbed her wrist and pulled her to the door.

"Did you do this?" Justine broke his grip. "Why?"

Frank's voice was hoarse. "They deserve it."

Justine stared into his familiar features, now hard and blank. Who did he mean? The Research Center or the citizens? "So you've endangered everyone," she nodded. Justine tightened her grip around the flashlight. "You chose this for everyone."

Frank said, "They chose for me."

Justine stared at him. The man she knew was gone. As she pushed past him, Frank said, "They're all dead anyway, Justine." She walked out the door, leaving Frank in the dark. "Alive or dead, there's no difference!"

As a technician prepared the tank, the brain sensed new people in the building. The organ pulsed, electric with glee. At last, people from the City. An ocean of humanity. The brain tingled into all these minds at once.

Voices. Blood. Screaming. Vomit. Groaning. Scraping. Stabbing.

The brain vibrated faster as he drowned in the tidal wave of thoughts and emotions. The organ screamed, piercing the minds of everyone in the vicinity. The technician collapsed and dropped the tank. Glass shattered, leaving the brain to sputter in agony on the floor.

Still gripping her flashlight, Justine crawled through the ventilation shafts. She heard commotion in the hallways as people raided the rooms. Some demanded miracle cures while others smashed machinery. Shuffling feet and shrill squeals pierced the ventilation shaft. Justine pushed her elbows and knees, forcing herself forward.

More than anything, Justine wanted her heart. After she arrived at the Research Center, Justine thought that she was stronger without her heart. Maybe that wasn't true. She ached at the thought of some frenzied citizen finding the organ. Blood rushed through Justine's ears. She would choke anyone who tried to harm the heart. No, she would never choke anyone, Justine reminded herself. Perhaps it was selfish, considering the lives lost every second in the City. But Justine could not evacuate without her heart.

Almost on cue, a heartbeat throbbed in Justine's ears. Was it her imagination? The pulses shuddered through her palms. She crawled forward, and the heartbeat pulsed harder. Justine followed until the heartbeat rocked through her entire body. She stopped and peered through the grating. An empty room waited below her. It was dark, but Justine knew her heart was there.

She silently removed the grating and dropped into the room. When her body hit the floor, the heartbeat stopped. The heart had to be there. Voices spiked as people hurdled through the hallway. Justine picked up her flashlight and checked the lock on the door. She rifled through cabinets and drawers. Her hands shook after a few minutes of fruitless searching.

"You're looking in the wrong place."

Justine shone her flashlight on the corner of the room. Dr. Kane sat on the floor, her legs dangling before her. A bloody gash glistened on her forehead.

"Please, just tell me where it is," Justine said.

Dr. Kane heaved a coughing laugh. She winced and clutched her side. "Even as the City burns, your attachment to that organ remains." She breathed heavily, staring into the gaping ventilation shaft. "If we had more time, I would find out why. I would hypothesize that your heart's sentience binds it to you. That your extraordinary heart creates this dependence." Dr. Kane managed another laugh. "But here we are."

"We need to evacuate now," Justine said, gauging Dr. Kane's condition. Boots skidded outside, and a gunshot rang. "So please tell me where it is. I'm not leaving without it."

Dr. Kane's eyes glinted in the flashlight. She jerked her chin towards a safe in the corner. Bodies slammed outside the door. Dr. Kane told Justine the combination, and she withdrew a small black box. Inside pulsed her heart, now healthy and fist-sized. Justine couldn't explain the heart's stable condition, but a warm ringing settled in her bones. "Thank you," she said.

Dr. Kane nodded and said, “Take it.” She then told Justine which hallways and staircases led to the underground tunnels.

“You’re not coming?” Justine asked.

Dr. Kane’s chest wheezed. “Without this facility, without any possibility of a cure, there’s no hope.” Her lips twisted, either a grimace or a smile. “Not for me.”

Justine stared. “You’re—”

“Dying, yes. My heart.” Dr. Kane gave a wry grin.

Justine’s breathing slowed as she stared into the pink, fleshy organ in her box. She would live. For how long, Justine could not say. But she would survive whatever happened here tonight. Justine kneeled in front of Dr. Kane’s huddled figure. “When we get out of here, we can help you. With this.” Justine held out the box.

Dr. Kane shook her head, her eyes tracing slow patterns on the walls. “My time is past. I’m not proud of everything I did.” She turned her gaze to Justine. Her eyes hardened, black markings on stone. “If there’s anything left of the City, anything left of humanity, it will be up to you.” Noise bubbling in the hallway, Justine stared into the floor. Dr. Kane’s voice softened. “I hope your choices will be easier than mine.”

After a few minutes, all movement in the hallway stilled. Now was the time. Justine took one last look at the director of the Research Center. She gripped the box as she turned away. Locking the door behind her, Justine slipped into the corridor.

Eyes shut, Frank huddled in a storage closet. He had witnessed too many deaths to count. The first was that of an officer. A gang of rioters crushed him beneath toppled machinery. The last deaths were the worst. A couple hurdled through the hallway, begging for a transplant for their

son. A bleeding guard rounded the corner and shot them. A gagging sound escaped the guard's throat when he realized what he had done. It was pure reflex.

That was when Frank locked himself in the supply closet. Justine's eyes plagued him, spreading cold needles through his chest. Why would he spark this mayhem? Was Frank the kind of person to do this? Veins bulged through his thick arms. Frank watched his skin swell in the shadows. Who was he?

Frank stood and unlocked the door. He needed to face the consequences.

The hallway was silent. Stale air rippled through his nostrils. Frank walked the corridors, stepping over bloodied bodies and shattered equipment. He took staircases and hallways until the walls blurred into unending white mist.

After a few moments, voices simmered around a corner. Frank followed the sound. A flashlight rolled on the floor, and a group of ragged people surrounded a figure. A sharp cry rose from inside the group. Justine. She clutched a small black box to her chest. Two large front teeth glinted as a man jostled her. The group prodded her, goaded her to hand over the box.

As the noise spiked, Frank ran into the group. A man shoved Justine into the wall. Frank retrieved Justine's flashlight from the floor and smashed it into the side of the man's head. Snarling, he clattered to the floor. The faces blurred together as Frank fended people off. After the first few fell, the others scuffled into the shadows. Justine winced as she leaned against the wall. Warm blood pumped through Frank's veins. "I'm sorry," he said.

Creases squeezed under Justine's eyes. She nodded and said, "I know the way out."

They drifted through staircases and corridors in silence. As they walked, a piercing scream tingled through their foreheads. Frank and Justine looked at each other. The brain. The

screaming intensified the farther they walked. They followed the sound until they arrived at a room full of fallen bodies. Frank stepped over shards of glass and kneeled before the brain.

The brain shuddered, a clump of twisting gray tissue on the floor. Frank picked pieces of glass from the organ's furrows. The brain tingled delirious thoughts, snippets of old books. *The Age of the Rat. A kingdom of rats.* Screams vibrated through Frank's pores. *The kingdom will rise to the surface and swallow the City. The world will overturn. Prisoners will become kings.* The screaming faded, words tingling in Frank's ears. *Can such a place exist?*

As the brain writhed, Justine pulled a piece of cloth from a drawer. She held it out to Frank. Gently, he wrapped the brain in a soft bundle. After everything they endured, Frank would carry the brain one last time. Frank and Justine cradled their organs and ventured into the hallway. White concrete walls flew past. Justine led the way to the underground tunnels, and they descended into the crypt.

As they left the Research Center and the City, Frank remembered the other bodies like him. What happened to them when the citizens stormed the Research Center? His stomach knotted at the memory of all those stretching limbs. After that night, he would never find out whether they were alive or dead.

In the glade, Vera lost all conception of time.

The grass glittered green, red, purple. Trees twisted through the mist, rolling over the never ending landscape. Through the hours and days, the organs were her constant companions. The lungs, kidney, and liver pulsated slowly as Vera continued her work. She collected soil samples, tissue samples, everything she could find. Vera had to make sense of everything.

Vera wanted no food, no water, no sleep. She desired nothing more than to become part of the landscape. Part of the organs.

Vera existed in her own world until two figures emerged through the mist.

For the first time, Frank and Justine entered the glade.

After trekking through endless stone crypts, the trees and grass shimmered like painted glass. Human organs slumbered atop the landscape. In Frank's hands, the brain pulsed silently. The organ no longer tingled. Since they left the City, the brain withheld all thoughts. When Justine and Frank passed the organs, the brain only released a deflated wheeze.

With her back to them, Vera kneeled in the center of the glade. When Frank and Justine approached, her head twitched, breaking her porcelain composure. Vera slowly turned around. Her eyes squinted, and she took a moment to recognize them. "Good, you're all here. Good," she said. "I've been waiting for you."

Justine kept her eyes on her sister. Vera's pallor and blank eyes worried her. "So, this is the place," Justine said. She gently placed a hand on Vera's shoulder. "This is where you *acquired* my heart."

A grin stretched across Vera's face. "I told you. No one died for you."

The gray mist settled into Justine's lungs. "What are you doing here?"

Vera shifted her knees, throwing her gaze across the glade. "Ever since I found this place, I wondered how all this was possible. This world, it's illogical, impossible. It shouldn't exist. I've been taking soil samples, tissue samples, anything to learn where the organs came from." She leaned towards Justine and smiled. "The soil, all the organs, Justine. They share the same DNA. As though they all came from one organism."

Justine blinked. “What are you saying?”

“I think—it’s too soon to tell, I need to run so many more tests—but I think that all these organs came from one human being,” Vera said. Her words fell quickly, ringing across the landscape. “That someone shed his body and *became* these organs. That someone transferred his consciousness to these organs. That someone evolved.” Justine held her sister’s gaze. With their noses inches away, Vera laughed.

“Where is all this coming from?” Justine asked. Was Vera’s brain failing? “This doesn’t sound like you.”

“You’re carrying your heart in a box, and you think this is impossible.” Vera’s laughter ricocheted into the trees. Justine stared. Her eyes unfocused, Vera spoke again. “When I first communicated with the brain, it bombarded me with images. One of the images was a man. Or a woman. A human who dissolved into the grass. I think it was the brain’s earliest memories.”

Justine tilted her head to the side. She rested her gaze on the lungs and liver. Her grandmother’s lullaby rang in her ears:

*When he reached the glade, its beauty struck him blind
As golden drops of light fell across his face.
His body dissolved, born anew atop the grass.
Thus, the lad of the town left the human race.*

The image was too close for coincidence. But Justine couldn’t believe her sister. She had to be ill. “Like the song. Like our grandmother’s lullaby?” Justine said. Vera nodded and gave a blank stare. “This doesn’t sound like you.”

“Does it matter if it appears in a song? There’s got to be an explanation for all this.” Vera waved a dismissive hand as she grimaced. “It needs to make sense,” Vera breathed. “You and I, we need to make sense of this together.”

Justine’s voice was hollow. “Why?”

“I thought you wanted to cure the City,” Vera said.

A stone rolled into Justine’s throat. Hands trembling, she pulled her beating heart out of the box. Justine placed it atop her lap as she explained what happened in the City. All the while, Vera’s gaze remained unfocused. Justine wasn’t sure if her sister understood. “I don’t think there’s anything left,” Justine said.

Vera nodded. “Still, I need to know. The Plague needs to make sense,” she said. They sat while the giant pair of lungs exhaled a light breeze. Justine hummed, keeping her eyes on Vera. She would watch for the symptoms of brain failure, but it was too early to tell. Vera’s eyes narrowed. “Where’s the brain?” she asked.

Justine ventured a glance over her shoulder. While the sisters talked, Frank had remained at the edge of the clearing. The leaves cast speckled shadows across his face. He held the brain, bundled in cloth, to his chest. He gave a gentle squeeze to wake the organ. The brain never responded, but Frank knew he was conscious.

Frank walked slowly towards Vera. His former creator kneeled, her legs skewed beneath her. Frank stood over her. Hours ago, there was so much he had ached to say to her. Now his fingers numbed. Frank unwrapped the bundle and placed it on the grass. The brain’s furrows pulsed a sickly gray.

Vera stared blankly. “You were supposed to take care of the brain.”

Frank made no answer. The brain shrank in his vision. He tried to muster a proper goodbye for his companion and tormenter. When Frank closed his eyes, all he could see were hundreds of bodies thrashing in their cots at the Research Center. He opened his eyes. Without looking at Vera or the brain, Frank said, “Good luck,” and walked back to the trees.

Placing her heart in the box, Justine pushed herself off the grass. She followed him into the shadows. “Wait,” she said. Frank never slowed. “Where are you going?”

Frank stopped and leaned against a tree trunk. “I need to see what’s out there. Beyond the City.” His fingers picked at the thick bark. As Frank inhaled, the screams of the Research Center bubbled in his memory. The buttons on the control panel flashed against his eyelids. Frank pulled his hands to his side. “I need to learn who I am. Not who I was.” Frank held Justine’s gaze. He traced her nose and eyebrows in his memory. If Frank died and came to life again, would he recognize her face?

Justine’s face was the only thing he remembered from their friendship. Nothing more. There was no way to reclaim his old life. “I’m done with my past,” he said.

A small grin touched Justine’s lips. “So am I.”

After exchanging goodbyes, Frank turned and disappeared into the trees. His footfall left jagged creases in the soil. Justine stepped through the twisting shadows into the glade.

As gray mist flooded her vision, she walked towards Vera, the heart, and the brain. The three figures loomed, statues rising through the shimmering fog. Lungs, kidneys, and the other organs formed a ring, pulsing dimly, enfolding her in the glade. Justine didn’t know if the City survived. But she needed to find a cure.

She had to try for her sister.

For whomever remained.

Think No More
By Laura Gauggel

It began as a strand of golden thread, unspooling through the dust in glittering fractals.
I sigh into the web, and the strings quiver. The thought yearns to become flesh.

Conception.

Tendrils of thought interlace, sprouting fingers and tails until the brain is complete.
It is alive. Exquisite creature.

I knelt and caressed the brain, poured rubies into his cup, watched him lap up the vowels.
I spoke and felt his groans. Grown into his tongue, I learn to communicate. We create.

I forget where I put them...I think he ate them...my brain, I mean...he bit through my scalp so
he could taste the light. But it's past his bedtime. He shouldn't be out here, throbbing, sweating
through my skin. Exposed. Must drag skin over the taste-bud tentacles of my brain. Precious
organ. Cannot expose.

Tear the edges off notebook paper, enough to cover the frontal lobe. Paste with saliva. College-
ruled brain adapts. Absorbs the graphite, peeling away scribbled Arabic proverbs and
defunct theorems from the scraps of bandage-paper. Sweep the graphite into fine
lines...ellipsis...Follow the lines until he slowly nibbles himself to sleep.

He was born in the ellipsis...puffs of thought drift farther away as my brain attempts to
tether them...He nudges my hand, offers to take me there...He breathes through the skin-paper.
Neck prickles as his voice twitches my leg. Don't you know what time it is?? Bedtime is over.

I peel away the eyelids, pale light pulsating at the floor of the cabin.
Worldwide slumber, a grid-globe of lab rats dreaming in twin-size cages.
Sleep, feather-fingered ghost, grazes all but me. I think, therefore I cannot. The body rises.
I walk to the kitchen, but it has moved. I ask, but the lab rats didn't see anything.

I realize I am drifting there.
In the ellipsis.
The eyes invert and see the arms.
Legs. Irrelevant.
Only thought matters here.

They can't see the ellipsis...hovering, condensing over their pillowed rat-heads...maybe it soothes them, caresses their temples, kisses their brows...lulls them into their bed-cages. But he won't let me ignore the clouds...the ellipsis' kiss only sends my gaze ricocheting through the cerebral cortex. And he's awake. Why don't you realize what time it is?!?!

the body stretched over two
bind me to his forehead as

electrodes on the creature's scalp
torrents of sweat submerge me

I grab his cheeks, pry open his ears and scream.
Pouring WORDS into his scalp.
Devouring. Tearing. Kissing.
Searching for another to share my empty-ecstasy.
Not his scalp. My scalp. When did mine become his? Arms-legs irrelevant. His.
Through the ellipsis I crave.

Let me slam back into this body
And taste the clumps of broccoli-syntax-vomit that
Sputter and tumble from this soiled brain. Organ of pain.
Choking on the rubber-rope tongue as it slithers down the throat.
Squeeze, twist, snap the body before it evaporates into the ellipsis.
Make it MINE again. Choke the brain.
Excise the brain.
Scoop it out.
Through the scalp. MY scalp. Not his.

Cradle the precious organ(ism),
Kiss him once more
Before I throw him to the rats
To wheeze and sleep, sleep at last, under the ellipsis.

The Age of the Rat
Laura Gauggel

Characters

The Brain: Can be male or female. Preferably small, thin, and wiry. Buzzing with intensity and increasingly scattered from organizing so many thoughts and controlling the Body's systems.

The Body: Can be male or female. Preferably of a larger, stronger build than the Brain. Ideally, the two should look incompatible in every way. Calmer, slower, more centered than the Brain.

Setting

The place is an abstract space that represents the workings of the human mind or the human brain. There will be platforms on the stage that represent different parts of the brain. The physical setting functions as a kind of laboratory space with file cabinets, desks, and scientific equipment. As indicated in the stage directions, certain platforms, desks, cabinets, etc. will be labeled as different parts of the brain, such as the "Primary Motor Cortex", "Cerebellum", etc. In addition, stage left and stage right are divided along the middle with stage left labelled "Left Hemisphere" and stage right labelled "Right Hemisphere". The style of each hemisphere should look distinct in some way.

The time is the twenty-first century, an age when advances in organ cloning and genetic manipulation are underway.

The Age of the Rat

Darkness, then the gradual sounds of feet shuffling, papers rustling, and hushed muttering.

Brain: The growth of a rat's limb...decellularization...then recellularization...first, strip off the tissue...then seed the scaffold with new cells...yes, that's it...need a bioreactor...then watch the new tissue grow...groundbreaking...yes, now, where is that encyclopedia? Right next to...

A dull crash as the Brain trips over something. The Brain limps to the wall where he flips a switch. The lights gradually ignite, revealing a cluttered laboratory space. The Brain darts between file cabinets at different points in the room, shuffling research and storing it in the appropriate compartments. All the while, the Brain keeps muttering. In the center of the stage rests a large, metal wheel. Inside sleeps the Body, his arms outstretched, all four limbs restrained and tied to different points on the wheel in a position resembling DaVinci's Vitruvian Man. The Body remains sleeping as the Brain moves about the laboratory.

Brain: ...injected a mixture of cells...*Rattus norvegicus*...included myoblasts...the brown rat...blood vessels and muscles regrown in two to three weeks...those lucky rats...these go in the...yes, there...transfer to long-term memory later...electrical pulses clench and unclench the rat's paw...huh. Those lucky rats.

As the Brain's ramblings grow louder, the Body wakes. Still restrained, the Body blinks and absorbs the room.

Body: What time is it? And what's this about a rat?

Brain (*not looking up, still darting about the room*): What they've done, it's amazing. Groundbreaking, really – the scientists, not the rats. Well, the rats, too, but – Anyway, these scientists, they've grown the world's first biolimb. They regrew a rat's forelimb from living cells (*speaking and moving faster now*). See, first they strip the tissue off a donor's organ, then they seed the remaining scaffold with the recipient's cells and the new tissue grows. Since the donor's soft tissue is gone, the recipient's immune system doesn't reject the new limb. Isn't that fascinating?

Body (*noncommittal*): Sure.

Brain (*gleeful*): I know! It's all still in the early stages, but someday they may be able to do it with humans (*gesturing towards the Body*). But the rats come first. I envy them. They're right there on the front lines. Lucky creatures.

Body: So, are we adopting a rat now?

Brain: No. Yes. Now that you mention it, having a rat as a specimen would be extremely useful. Why didn't I think of that? Quite logical.

Body: Please don't get a rat. I hate rats.

Brain: Don't worry, it won't be a pet. Lab rats aren't the ones used as pets – those are fancy rats, the domesticated ones. Lab rats are different – they're for science.

Body: Somehow, that doesn't help.

Brain: It was only a thought.

Body: That still doesn't help.

The Brain keeps moving about the lab, ad libbing as he goes. Meanwhile, the Body stretches his muscles as far as his restraints will allow.

Body: So, is that what you've been doing all morning? Storing all that stuff in your files?

Brain: At first, I was just updating my short-term and long-term memory. You know, the new biolimb info. But then it hit me. What about the rats, themselves?

Body: What about them?

Brain: Exactly! What about the rats makes them so special? Why are they at the forefront of these discoveries when we're not? Don't you see it?

Body: No.

Brain (*struggling to organize his buzzing thoughts*): Well, you see, the human scientists come up with these experimental procedures...

Body: ...yes...

Brain: ...and we, the general public, also humans, by the way, hear about these experimental procedures...

Body: ...yes, I'm aware that we're human...

Brain: But the rats! They're the true pioneers! Those lab rats are the ones who actually *experience* these things. They feel the presence of a new limb – a real, biological limb – for the first time. Don't you ever wonder what that must feel like?

Body: It must hurt.

Brain: But then I started thinking, why are they so special? Why do the rats get to experience this stuff? So now I'm multitasking – filing my biolimb research and reading about rats.

Body: Sounds fun.

Brain: I know!

The Brain keeps moving, gradually moving faster and faster. Sometimes he goes to a table, picks something up and puts it back down twice. The Brain repeats the process as he pursues different trains of thought. At some point, the Brain walks up to the wheel and plucks a few strands of hair from the Body's head. Meanwhile, the Body tries to stretch, but his skin chafes against the restraints. He flexes his muscles and cranes his neck to try to bite the restraints on his wrists.

Body: Can you get me down from here?

Brain: Yes.

Body: Will you?

Brain: No.

Body: (*Beat*) No?

Brain: No.

Body: Why?

Brain (*absorbed in his work*): Because I'm not ready. Because the brown rat is much more interesting.

Body: Can't you get me down from here while you read about your brown rat?

Brain: I don't feel like going to the primary motor cortex right now.

Body: I'm thirsty.

Brain: Just hold on a minute (*the Brain grabs a cotton swab and holds it to the Body's mouth*). Open up and tilt back, please (*the Body opens his mouth, and rubs the Brain swabs his throat*). *The Body gags*).

Body: What was that?

Brain: Nothing.

A brief moment passes as the Brain takes the swab to the table and continues his work. The lab becomes messier and messier. Meanwhile, the Body attempts to occupy himself, occasionally humming a broken tune or trying to scratch an itch on his ankle.

Body: Can you at least give me a memory? I'm bored.

Brain (*looking at the increasingly messy space*): Uh, if I can find one.

Body: Any memory will do.

Brain: Alright.

The Brain opens the nearest file drawer, withdraws a crumpled, brown paper bag from its depths. The Brain then tosses the bag at the Body's feet. The Body peers down at the bag with curiosity, absorbing the memory. Suddenly, the Body recoils, a visceral reaction.

Body: Aaaagggghhh!!! What – what was that?

Brain (*briefly looking over his shoulder*): A short-term memory. Last week's tuna sandwich surprise, by the looks of it.

Body: I vomited for hours!

Brain: Surprise!

Body: Can't you choose a nicer memory?

Brain: You said “any memory”.

Body: Well, I assumed you wouldn’t try to gag me.

The Brain crosses to nearby cabinets, climbs a ladder, and plucks a cardboard box from the shelf. After a few seconds of rummaging through the box, the Brain withdraws a scraggly, woolen blanket. The Brain takes the paper bag away from the Body and replaces it with the blanket.

Brain: Here’s a long-term memory. Knock yourself out.

The Body looks at the blanket and slowly starts to smile.

Body: I remember this. Yes, I remember now. My grandmother made this for me. *(the Body’s muscles visibly relax. All the Body’s reactions to the memories should be physical somehow).* Yes, she used to visit every summer. She made this for me when I was twelve – at least, wait, no – she said she made it. The woman couldn’t knit to save her life. She really bought it from some yard sale on her way from Ohio *(sniffs the blanket, smiles)*. And there’s that perfume *(laughs)*. It still smells like her.

The Body remains lost in the memory for a moment. The stillness and peace inside the Body’s wheel only lasts for a few moments as the Brain’s knocks something over. The Brain’s agitation slowly disrupts the Body’s calm. As the Brain’s mutterings become more intense, the Body’s muscles begin to tense visibly again.

Body: Can you get me down from here now?

Brain: But I gave you a nice memory.

Body: You can’t keep me up here forever.

Brain: Just a few more minutes. Listen to this. Rats can survive without water longer than a camel! They can survive radiation and fall five stories without injury! Imagine being so indestructible. No wonder they survive everything we put them through. God, I envy the rats.

Body: Have you slept lately?

Brain: I’m sure I have.

Body: When was the last time you slept?

Brain: When did I – well, that’s not – why?

Body: Because you’re raving. You rave when you don’t sleep.

Brain: Why should I sleep? There's way too much – how could I possibly sleep when new frontiers are being forged without us?

Body: If you're not going to sleep, can you at least let me down from here? I'm thirsty.

Brain: No.

Body: Why?

Brain: I told you, I'm not ready (*taking medical supplies from a bag, including a syringe*). Hold out your arm.

Body: I'm always holding out my arm.

Brain: (*Beat*) Right (*The Brain ties a tourniquet around the Body's arm and disinfects the area he plans to puncture. He then takes the syringe and draws blood from the Body's outstretched forearm. Afterwards, the Brain takes the blood sample to a desk*).

Body: *What will it take to get me down from here? (Pause. The Body watches as the Brain ignores him).* Fine (*pause*). If I dehydrate, you won't be able to read about your rats. (*Beat*) Dehydration – a condition in which the body loses more water than it takes in. While dehydrated, we won't be able to carry out normal functions, which includes reading about your precious rats (*the Brain stares*). You see, I remember things you tell me.

Brain: Only when you can use them against me. (*Beat*) Fine.

Body: Finally.

The Brain leaves his papers on a desk as he climbs the platform labelled "Primary Motor Cortex". There, he settles into a chair and places his hand on a mechanism labelled "Motor Homunculus". This mechanism resembles a gear shift in an automobile. There is a lever that the Brain manipulates to rest on the following labels, from top to bottom: foot, hip, trunk, arm, hand, face, tongue, and larynx. The Brain's facial muscles go slack as he concentrates on maneuvering the Body.

The Brain shifts the lever to "hand", and the restraints fall from the Body's wrists. As the Body wriggles his hands, the Brain shifts the lever to "arm." As the Brain shifts the lever to each body part, the Body's jerky movements correspond with the commands. Eventually, the Body's feet are free from their restraints and he begins to walk. The Body's movements begin jerky and heavy but become faster and more fluid as the Brain's commands become smoother. After a few brief moments and near-collisions, the Body manages to walk to a table with a pitcher of water.

The Body pauses in front of the table for a moment then glances up at the Brain. The Brain descends from the Primary Motor Cortex to the table where the Body waits. The Brain takes out a scale, measuring the weight of the glass of water as well as the pitcher of water. Afterwards,

the Brain takes a second glance at the Body, prodding his arm muscles, taking note of the exact muscles to maneuver.

The Brain then climbs up the platform, moving to a slightly higher platform labelled “Posterior Parietal Cortex”. Here, the Brain types some commands into a keyboard and sends them. Small strings of lights ignite, connecting the area labelled “Posterior Parietal Cortex” to areas labelled “Premotor Cortex” and “Supplementary Motor Area”. In a brief moment, the Body picks up the pitcher, pours the water into the glass, and begins to drink. The Body downs the glass in one continuous gulp. After he finishes the glass, the Body looks up to the Posterior Parietal Cortex, asking for another glass of water. With an exhausted sigh, the Brain repeats the process he used to make the Body’s arm pour the water.

Body: Thank you.

Brain (*tired*): Thank you. I mean, you’re welcome. I mean – are you done yet?

Body: Am I done?

Brain: Are you ready to go back?

Body: I just got here. (*Beat*) I’d like to walk around a bit. Stretch, you know.

Brain (*agitated now*): Fine.

The Brain looks at the floor on the platform, which is divided vertically, separating stage left and stage right. Stage left of the platform is labelled “Left Hemisphere”, and stage right is labelled “Right Hemisphere”. The Brain drags the “Motor Homunculus” apparatus to the “Right Hemisphere”. The apparatus is heavy, and the Brain’s frustration grows as he drags it. As the Brain begins to shift the levers to the arm, leg, hand, etc. the Body’s corresponding parts on his left side move. After the Body stretches the left side of his body, the Brain drags the “Motor Homunculus” to the “Left Hemisphere” and repeats the process.

Brain: Better?

Body: Yes, thank you.

Brain: So, now?

Body: Now, what? (*Beat. The Body realizes what the Brain wants*) Why can’t we just stay out here?

Brain: And do what?

Body: I don’t know. We could talk. Or try to, at least.

Brain: Well, you have no interest in rats, and I have no interest in your grandmother’s perfume.

Body: Well, okay. Okay. Talk to me about the rats.

Brain: I told you about the rats.

Body: I know. Then tell me something else.

Brain: Like what?

Body: Like... What's with that stuff you've been taking from me? (*The Brain stares, his face impassive*) The strand of hair. The spit. The blood. What do you do with that? (*Beat. Brain stares*) You thought I didn't notice?

Brain (*as though trying to make a joke*): Damn your 20/20 vision (*Laughs. He stops when he realizes that the Body isn't laughing*). Well, I always make a habit of storing data for future – reference.

Body: Future reference? Or future...experiments?

Brain (*reluctant*): Both.

Pause. The Body nods.

Body: That shouldn't surprise me. (*Wryly, trying to joke but missing the mark*) Just when I thought I got that tuna surprise out of my mouth. (*Beat*) What kind of experiments?

Brain: Nothing concrete. Yet. Well, I'm hoping – (*the Brain cuts himself off mid-sentence, reconsidering as he watches the Body's face*) – You could say I'm saving you for something special (*this statement only increases the Body's anxiety*). But it's not today, or tomorrow – or even next month. Maybe not even next year (*the Brain watches the Body's visceral reaction*). But, just think – all the good you could do! Think of all the people you could help!

The Body is lost in his thoughts, giving the Brain an opportunity to guide him by the elbow back to his wheel.

Brain: Those amputees, prosthetic limbs aren't going to – (*the Body freezes, and the Brain realizes his mistake*)

Body: Amputees? (*Pause*) Amputation? You're going to try that bio-whatever-limb procedure on me?

Brain: No. Well – no. It only just crossed my mind this morning.

Body: Oh, it just “crossed your mind” that you're going to chop my arm off?

Brain: I'm not going to “chop” it off. I would decellularize it.

Body (*moving to the wheel for refuge*): Oh. Thanks.

Brain: This isn't medieval witchcraft. This is science. Tested, proven science.

Body: Except it hasn't been tested or proven. Only on – (*as the Body turns to the wheel, he stops in his tracks. The Body takes a step back. He absorbs the wheel's structure for the first time, realizing its resemblance to a mouse's wheel. Slowly*) Am I your rat?

Brain: What?

Body: Is that what I am to you? A lab rat? A specimen, a warm carcass for your experiments?

Pause.

Brain: Of – of course not. You're *Homo sapiens*. Well, technically, you're *Homo sapiens sapiens*, a newer subspecies – *with* you, not *on* you – as opposed to your bulkier ancestors, *Homo sapiens idaltu* – collaborators – partners – Either way, your genus is indisputably *Homo*, not *Rattus*. Impossible.

Body: Listen to yourself, you're raving again. I told you, you need sleep. You think you're going to amputate one of my limbs? And why? What on Earth gave you this idea?

Pause.

Brain: I don't know.

Body: You don't know.

Brain: Knowledge.

Body: Knowledge. As in, knowledge is why you do it? Or knowledge gave you the idea? (*No answer. Derisively*) Knowledge. Is that all you can say? (*Pause*) I'm not going back to that wheel.

Brain: You have to.

Body: Why?

Brain: Do you know – do you appreciate how complicated it all is? Going back and forth between the primary motor cortex and the posterior parietal cortex? Coordinating your movements, sending signals through your body, all while I try to do the real thinking in the frontal lobe? It's maddening.

Body (*derisively*): I'd say. "I envy the rats", indeed. If you were one of those rats, just for a day, then you'd go mad.

Brain: (*Pause*) You're still going back to the wheel.

When the Body doesn't budge, the Brain moves toward the "Primary Motor Cortex". As the Brain travels, the Body looks around the floor of the cluttered lab. Underneath some papers, the Body finds a baseball bat. The Body decides quickly and follows the Brain up the platform. The Body stands behind the Brain and raises the bat. However, the Brain turns and sees the Body, his bat poised to strike. As a matter of reflex, the Brain retreats to the "Motor Homunculus," pushes the lever, and freezes the Body in place. The Brain flicks the lever again, and the Body's bat drops to the floor.

Brain (*with quiet intensity*): Careful. (*Long pause. The Brain picks up the bat.*) Do you want to see? Do you want to know what you would be without me? Let's try an experiment. Don't worry. *I'll be the rat this time.*

The Brain walks to the section of the platform labelled "Cerebellum", raises the bat, and begins smashing the equipment there. The Body suddenly loses balance and falls to the floor.

Brain: How's your balance? How about your attention, hmm? Language? (*With increasing agitation, the Brain moves to file cabinets*) And all those memories of tuna sandwiches and your grandmother's perfume. Gone (*The Brain knocks over the file cabinets and scatters the contents, leaving them to roll on the floor. The Body reaches for the woolen blanket, then freezes and stares in incomprehension*). What was your grandmother's name, again? Susan? Gertrude? Cleopatra?

The Brain runs to a thin sheet labeled "Cerebral Cortex" and discards it, revealing a desk labelled "Cerebrum". On the desk lie some machinery labeled "Hypothalamus" and "Pituitary Gland". Meanwhile, the Body remains frozen on the floor. The Brain raises the bat to the desk.

Brain: Oh, here's something fun. How about your visceral functions, hmm? (*The Brain bashes the "Hypothalamus" and "Pituitary Gland" in rapid succession*). There goes aggression, pleasure, sexual response. Oh, and I hope you weren't planning on eating and drinking any time soon. Still want that glass of water? (*The Brain, crazed now, moves to another piece of machinery on the desk labelled "Basal Ganglia".*) How about movement control? (*When the Brain bashes the machinery, the Body exhibits muscle spasms, tics, and other dyskinetic movements*). How do you like doing it all by yourself?

The Brain begins bashing tables, cabinets, desks, bookshelves at random. As he does more damage, lights in the lab spark and fizzle. Meanwhile, the Body's movements become more frenzied.

Brain: Experiment "on" you! I don't do this "on" you – with you, collaborators. No, no, that's still not right – *for you is more like it!* You don't even know how dependent you are! You still want me to cut you loose? You wanna be free of me?

The Brain moves to a small, rectangular box on the wall, close to the floor. The Brain opens the box, labelled "Brainstem". When the Brain smashes the equipment in the box, the Body's spasmodic movements cease completely. The lights, some of them still sparking, begin to go out. The Body falls to the floor as his breathing stops. As the Brain comes down from his frenzy, the lights go out one by one. Breathing heavily, the Brain stands over the Body's lifeless form. The Brain gives the Body a gentle kick or prod. The Body remains unresponsive. A few moments pass as the Brain realizes that they are both finished. The weight of understanding visibly falls on the Brain. Utterly empty now, the Brain sits next to the Body until the lights fade completely.

THE END