The lighthouse

"Why are you traveling?"

Out of obligation, he thought, neither business nor pleasure. He could say 'family obligation,' but that would erroneously imply that the trip to the lighthouse was happy, or that it was sad. He had always kept a distance. Perhaps that was why the obligations fell so often to him, since everyone else was busy with each other.

"I have two weeks off. We have a boat here."

He considered it an insult to be forced to stretch the truth, so he preferred to trim it instead.

"Who's we?"

"My wife's coming in a couple days."

A stamp, a passport slid under glass, a gesture to step through to the right.

He wasn't married and had never been. He had nothing against it, he said to them, but there was so much of the past weighing on him that he felt he had to wait until everyone else had settled in before involving himself in life. He had to know where he stood. But there were already nieces and nephews almost old enough to inherit these stories which he could neither claim for himself nor even disown.

Perhaps on their next birthday he would show them the stair where his new stepmother slipped and took his dad down with

her, searching for the old gramophone, while he cowered in the entrance hall with its bright lights and metal gate. Counting down the days. Six more and the iron slab would open again, back out to the staircase and the rocks below, where their motorboat was waiting. She would officially be a part of the family.

Ironic that such a coward would end up spending so much time there. In adulthood, he replenished the stocks of water and wine, retrofitted lights with modern plugs, added signage and closed off the unpleasant areas. The rooms under the lighthouse were almost comfortable now, though the seven-day stay, like a mandatory honeymoon, could not be shortened without damaging the original mechanism.

There were certainly no stories about him, but it was fun to think that another generation would see these conveniences and wonder who installed them.

This time, he had only the one backpack full of ultrasound equipment and repeaters. He would buy a mask and batteries after he landed. Devices such as these had been controversial ever since his uncle Aaron disowned his brother Matt for doing his seven days remotely. For Aaron, the lighthouse was a tradition. The locking mechanism, the phrase in the fifth room that appears when the gate locks, and the neverending repertoire of stories were just aids to keeping a tradition of surviving for seven days in a complex whose origins he did not care to question. Aaron himself, for his first solo stay at sixteen, carried a bag of water bottles, as their thrice-great-grandfather "The General" was rumored to have done, and nothing else.

He was interrupted from his limeade by a wave at the corner of the bar.

"Hey, man! You're here too?"

"Oh, hey." He smiled weakly. "Small world. How's it going?"

"I'm here with Emma. We went rafting today, gonna do surfing tomorrow. West beach. There's a place right off the coast where all the rocks jut out like ramps, all along the fault line, and they put you on skis and tie you to one end, and …"

"That sounds amazing."

"And how are you, man?" Then, quietly, "are you here for the lighthouse?"

"Always."

"Never seen you this far out."

"It's not the usual trip, to be honest. I have to do some shopping tomorrow."

"Wedding gown, ring, tux, I feel you." Gentle punch on the shoulder. "When do I get to meet her?"

Laughter. "We might outlive the lighthouse, you know. If I have kids, they might never see it."

"No way. No, no, no. Isn't it your family tradition? Passed down from times of myth? Surely you Gardners are gonna maintain it no matter what."

"It's weird. There's things that break if you try to build anything on top, like it doesn't want to be changed. Like it was meant to be preserved, not maintained."

"You really have no idea how old it is?"

"Nope. We don't know who built it either. Only it wasn't us."

"The most humble pretentious family I've ever met."

"Hey, if you saw our wedding speeches …"

At some point, Aaron had concluded that the purpose of the lighthouse was to prove that a Gardner could do anything they set their mind to. His own bio described him as a bodybuilder, endurance athlete, marketing enthusiast, devoted father, and proud member of the Gardner family. The last phrase was not quite true. He initially refused to attend any event where Matt the drone pilot

would be present, then refused to talk to anybody who supported Matt, and finally stopped associating at all.

In fact, Aaron had shared a beer with him at the lighthouse once, not Matt, of course, but him, Matt's brother, who was at the time too young to drink. Uncle Aaron offered him a bottle and a salt pack, and they sat in the shade of the entrance hall and talked.

"You know, when the General came here for the last time, they were fighting pirates."

"I thought the land wasn't ours yet."

"It wasn't. He was fighting for the Americans."

"The Americans? Here?"

"Because of shipping, you goofball! Why do you think there were pirates?"

"Baron said the General was only called that because he fought for the lighthouse." It was always his habit to refer to his father by his name, Baron, when talking to older family.

"Nope. He was a colonel, to be exact. But he left his post that day. For the lighthouse."

"…" He glanced into the hall, dark and spare, shadowed by an iron slab which stood open at the moment.

"You see, his battalion was gonna get wiped. The pirates were at the door. He requested the mission in the first place because the lighthouse was there, but the Army didn't know. At the worst of it, he took an injured private with him and they limped their way into the fifth room, and he pulled the lever. Picture it. A fortress with no water or light. They spent seven days in there, sipping out of a few canteens they had on them."

"…" Surely the story would be true only if it were unflattering, but he couldn't decide whether it was.

"His unit survived without him. Fought off the pirates. Everyone ended up getting a medal except for him and the guy he took with.

Imagine that."

"Wait. That means that guy, the other soldier, is family, right? He did the stay."

"You're just like your brother! Listen to me. He stayed over, but he didn't earn it. He didn't apply his will to move his body toward those doors, step by step, on purpose. Didn't formulate an intention. You understand me? He was present but he wasn't there."

Aaron's worst gripe was not the insubordination of any particular relative but the recent trend of using the space as a venue, interchangeable with any other resort destination, a background for mundanities. The rest of the family argued that the lighthouse itself had never been exclusive. It was the code in the fifth room that marked you as an insider, and the lever in that room was cordoned off not only for secrecy but also to avoid trapping a house party underground for seven days. The parties were weekend affairs. Birthdays, graduations, promotions, weddings, with catered desserts on tablecloths and a bar in the corner of the second room.

His stepmother liked to invite her colleagues from work, who rarely came. His cousins, Lisa and Erica, would bring their boyfriends, unless they already had summer plans, before they too became part of the family. Even for outsiders, the only hard rule was to not wander beyond room twelve.

One such Saturday, when he was still a student, he had gotten bored and slipped away with the handheld label printer under the pretense that he was going to "tidy things up." Guests rarely went as far as the fifth room, beyond which the warnings made it feel like private territory. There, the music from the party came muffled through walls of stone and iron.

Label: "Scurvy-b-gone, Patent No. 123445." Placed below the still life of oranges in the gallery of the fifth room.

Label: “Welcome to Centipedeland! Population: too many.” Placed on the wall of the corridor between rooms six and seven, beneath one of the still-working lights.

Label: “Gardner Family Oubliette.” Stuck on the door of the bathroom in room eight, which was a hole in the floor with the ocean churning below.

Label: “This way to the weird statue ;)” Placed below the mesh glass window of the door that leads out of room twelve.

Label: “The weird statue ;)”

A voice behind him: “There you are!” He jumped, let go of the handle, and turned around.

It was Baron, his father. In his surprise, he had felt for a second that it might have been Aaron because the two men had the same voice. His uncle who never came to such frivolous events. In that case, he would have been allowed to drift deeper into the complex, where the dust on the lights and the ill-kept paintings lent an air of sanctity to the rooms. But the two men, so meticulously different, would have agreed on one thing:

“Stop wasting the label maker.”

Baron continued, “Your Aunt Martha was looking for you. She wants to introduce you to her friend’s daughter. She’s impressed with your science grades.”

“The friend or the daughter?”

“Cut the arguments and come on.”

In fact, Martha’s friend’s daughter was already going out with Rohan, Lisa’s friend, who had told him and sworn him to secrecy. He was rescued from the awkward conversation by his stepmother, who called him over to help top off the floats. The cherry jar had tightened in the cooler and was hard to open.

“What’s on your mind?” She was the only one who would ask.

“I was at the twelfth room. I wanted to see the weird statue.”

"The stalactite-looking thing? Stalagmite?"

"Perfect description."

"Bit creepy, isn't it?"

"Is that the reason we don't let guests past twelve? Or because thirteen is unlucky? It's not like anyone wants to walk that far anyway."

Laughter.

"Seriously, who came up with it?"

She bit her lip and thought. "You know the myth about the General? Where he holes up in one of the rooms with the excuse that he's saving one of his men, and he ends up looking like a coward?"

"Yeah."

"Well, the night before my wedding, your grandfather told me a different version. He said the General actually took two soldiers here, both injured, carried them in as far as he could. They had water but no food. Neither had eaten for days, and they'd been malnourished for months."

"Please don't say what I think you're going to. They drew lots?"

"The General made the two sick men fight. He wanted the healthier one to live."

"…"

"Supposedly one of them died in room thirteen. Months later, your grandfather said, after the skirmishes died down, the General went back with a tank of water and a tank of fuel to burn what was left."

"You're messing with me. There's no way the General would have admitted that. His whole thing is family legacy. Character. Nobility. Who would even have told the story?"

"When your grandfather did his Sudan tour, one of his roommates was descended from the soldier who survived. Their family has a tale, passed down like ours. They call it the story of the prison.

It's about two gangsters, or rebels, or prisoners of war, who turn against each other in captivity. Sometimes it's two brothers in a famine. But all the versions which that young mercenary knew of had two things in common. The memory of biting into flesh in the dark. And the hunger in the eyes of a grey-haired man, cupping a candle with both his hands."

"The plot isn't even consistent. Grandpa was probably high on antimalarials."

"Neither is ours. That same night, before the wedding, your father swore up and down that your grandfather had told him that the room was number fourteen. He even remembered 'ten and four,' which is what the mercenary said because his English was bad."

"That's a detail though. I bet grandpa misremembered because thirteen is spooky. It works just as well with 'ten and three.' Why would the General take two men, when one was enough for the excuse? It doesn't make sense."

"There's one more thing. Your grandfather also said … he said the mercenary's family had passed down something else."

"Yeah?"

"The phrase in the fifth room."

Later that night, he found the unused label crumpled up in his pocket, the one that said "The weird statue ;)". He held the paper to the flame of the lighter for the birthday candles and watched the letters wither. Some ash caught on the cuff of his sleeve. He let the last bit fall and saw the emoji suspended in a dot of fire, saw it hover and tumble and fade away.

With his backpack full of sensors, he reminisced on those days when the lighthouse seemed endless, like it had always existed, necessitated by the universe. Even now, it was vaguely frightening, not so much for its darkness as for the internal logic which seemed

to dwell behind the walls, poking out here and there, like bones through skin.

It was this final understanding which he sought with his scanners and transmitters. Nowadays, nobody in the family saw the lighthouse as something to explore. Even the maintenance work which had been carried out for centuries seemed pointless. Each repair caused some deeper rift in the structure, and the erosion of the bedrock and the rising sea levels would flood the building within a hundred years. His mission, now, was a farewell. To archive what could be saved, digitally, with his brother Matt on the other end of the call.

It was even sometimes difficult, in his advancing maturity, to distinguish his own childhood memories from the tales of that other lighthouse so expertly portrayed in the works of Alice Baudelaire, his once-favorite writer, whom he discovered from a scathing review posted by "Aaron" that lambasted her fiction as "puerile, superficial vampire drivel for kids and tweens, utterly lacking in depth and the faintest understanding of human nature." The lighthouse's role was cryptic but present in all of her later works, as a castle with a high tower adorned by stairs or a hamlet above a labyrinthine prison. And her characters! The knight and the convict. The lovers and the mob at their door. The dragon searching for a place to stash his hoard. In them he sensed the same breathless instinct that gripped him when he gazed, for the first time, through the porthole of door twenty, where the lights stop completely, and saw the dresser on the opposite wall, missing its face, looming dark and empty like a silhouette.

Once, he asked his father if Baudelaire had ever visited or been a part of the family. Baron replied:

"Who? Alice Baudelaire? Never heard of her! Don't ever say that name to me again!"

But the name resurfaced, unbidden, some months later. He was accompanying his grandmother Agatha, Baron's mother, down some half-remembered corridor looking for a gown which had been sketched by her own mother, Hanora, in a yellowed journal which they had just rescued from an attic. Agatha was in a historical mood.

"The Castle, we called it, this room, we did, and your great-uncle Owen and I would chase up and down the stairs quarreling about this or that, and on those ledges – you see? – where the rocks just out, they put lamps, traditional oil lamps, just like my father used to use, and I married your grandfather under starlight …"

And in the room after that one, there was a dusty breastplate and a few stripped wooden planks, propped up in a corner, with matching crescents cut out at the edges. Two halves of a pillory. A whisper escaped from Agatha: "The knight and the convict."

He hesitated for a second. "You mean the book?"

"Oh!" She laughed. "Do I give it away that easily? Yes, we all read it, in my generation at least, I don't know about your father, he was young when she left."

"Baron hates her. I found out the hard way."

"I suppose we all did, for a time. Your father was so close to his uncle Owen, you know, always blamed her for breaking his heart. My poor long-lost brother."

"So she was here."

"And not only! She invented half the stories we tell about this place. She and Owen, this really was their castle, in their good days. They holed up, decorated, partied. Settled down. As much as you can settle in a place like this. Not so dreary was it when the kids would drag her around and ask her everything, I mean everything, and she'd spin a story out of thin air."

"She was a part of the family, then. Because you can't unlearn

something, even if they, I don't know, divorced? Separated? You can't unlearn the phrase."

"It's funny you say it that way. By any reasonable measure, she was a part of the family. Even had a ring from Owen, this deep red ruby in a golden band that barely seemed to touch it, as if it were floating … We teased them, called it their engagement ring, even though she had an estranged husband, but despite all that she wore it proudly. Only switched it to her middle finger when the journalists came for her. She was there for everything, my dear, I mean everything. She and Owen, me and your grandfather."

"So we offered her to stay and she didn't?"

"Yes. It was baffling." Agatha's eyes sharpened with memory. "All those years with Owen, with us, having the lighthouse as her own, but just before the honeymoon stay – we'd been pestering Owen about it for years, the lazy sod – it was just her and her beloved, as it always is, having the whole place to themselves – just before the stay, she gets cold feet. She yells at him, she screams, she can't spend seven days in that place, not with him, not with anyone, not even alone, or the Devil would have her. She pleads. They plead with each other, and she finally comes with him, as he holds her hand, to the fifth room, where he pulls the lever."

"She didn't see the code because … she fainted?"

"No, no, nothing so innocent. She ran. Pulled away from him and ran, with all her skin and bones, while the machine ground its gears. She was faster than him. The last he ever saw of her was through the closing gate, frozen in a block of daylight, turned to look at him with her face red, her eyes full of tears, looking at her fiancé as he charged the shrinking gap."

"So he didn't make it."

"That's what you men all say. I say she made it. Something was tormenting her, something she couldn't tell anybody, not even her

dearest."

"And he never figured out what it was? None of us did?"

"Not a clue. Seven days later, when he got out, she was gone and the boat was too. I went to look for him that day when both of them didn't come back. He was searching all over the island, rock by rock, cave by cave, trying to find a trace of her, or so I thought. The truth was, he wanted to prove to himself that she had kept the ring, even for a little while, as she fled the man who loved her. I told him, I said, you can't prove a negative. I had to drag him away. In the next months he asked her parents, publisher, even her estranged kids if they knew what the Devil had with her, but not a word. She never wrote again. Not to us either. She vanished herself completely."

"And what about Owen? I have to admit, I didn't even know you had a brother. Nobody ever talks about him."

"He was heartbroken. Stopped coming to the lighthouse and eventually he disappeared, too. His last letter was from a monastery in Georgia. The country."

"So he's probably buried there, in monk's robes …"

"No!"

"He's not?"

"Years later, I forget if it was ten or fifteen, we got a letter from some Brother Levan, typewritten and signed, addressed to my mother, who had died by then, though we never registered the death because of you-know-what. There were ashes in the package, which were Owen's, according to the letter. He had renounced his faith just to have the cremation done, just so he could be mailed and buried with his family."

"Strange, after absenting himself when he was alive."

"And the strangest thing," she said and met him with an expression that he could have mistaken for fear. "The letter made it sound

like he had never left. There were years' worth of stories, parties that we held long after he was gone, the first renovation of the lights, the howling in the thirty-first room, all these bits of life in his absence that he had no way of knowing, printed there in that strange typewriter font. And all the details were right."

"Could one of us have been secretly writing to him? Spying for him, in a way?"

"No." She hesitated. "No, I won't believe it. In the end, before he left, he wasn't easy to be around. People didn't like him. Didn't talk to him. I was his closest one. We would walk this very same corridor and reminisce on our mischief, before he told me, on the last day, that he despised me too. It's impossible."

"What did you do with his ashes?"

"As the letter said. We scattered them in room fifty …"

"Fifty! That's prehistoric!"

"He wanted to be buried in the lighthouse, the letter said, the real lighthouse, woven of iron and stone, untarnished by the fabrications of Alice Baudelaire …"

He passed now through the same corridors that he walked with Agatha, the same rooms and dusty shelves in a flashlight's dancing window, where they finally found Hanora's gown. To access these deeper floors, the fifth room lever had to be pulled. There was no other way. He was grateful, back then, that his grandmother was there with him for the seven days, nor was he completely alone this time. His brother Matt's voice came through the earpiece:

"Sensor here would be good, Type A. We got signal through the last bend."

"Any sharps ahead?"

"No spatial hazards, you're all clear. Keep the mask on, though."

"Will do."

It was the first time anybody had gotten an internet connection

this deep in the complex. In every other room, he would stick one of his brother's repeaters on a flat surface, preferably metal. The sealed iron gate at the entrance hall had one repeater on each side, communicating through conductance. This was one of Matt's tricks. "Far more fun," Matt said, "than your stupid idea of, what was it? A very very thin wire?"

He did not complain, as Matt's monitoring had already saved him from one collapsed ceiling.

"Hey, Matt, did I ever show you this?" He panned across a golden frame.

"Woah. That's gnarly. Who's it by? Bosch? Bruegel?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. But look at the labels! I did them myself when I was, like, fourteen."

"One sec, let me zoom in. 'I should have quit while I was a head'? 'I am absolutely beside myself'? God, you're terrible."

He laughed. "Hey, I was scared out of my mind, okay?"

A puff of static. " … made you come down here at that age. Why didn't you just go at eighteen and sit your ass down in rooms one through five like the rest of us?"

"Your drones had asses? Fascinating."

" … not ashamed? For defacing a famous work of art?"

"If it were famous, it wouldn't be here. I elevated it."

"Christ, did you put a fucking ecks dee emoji on that poor guy's face?"

He was at room thirty and had used up only a fifth of the sensors in his backpack. This conservatism was by design. In the weeks leading up to the expedition, as they called it, Matt had been obsessed with figuring out how the rooms' contents would be distributed in history. "There's two models," Matt said, "stratum and wave."

That night, he had Matt's video open on one screen and World of Sand on the other. He was trying to make a working toilet.

"The stratum model is easy. Things get older as you go deeper. That's how it would be if the lighthouse had been built from bottom up."

He couldn't get enough water in the bowl because he was hitting the particle limit. The trapway needed to be narrower.

"But the wave model is, well, it's like waves breaking on the shore. Each wave goes some distance up the coast. Decided randomly, independent of time."

"Time matters, though," he replied. "There's bigger waves at high tide." A pinch point was causing turbulence. He needed to smooth out the trapway to make the siphon work.

"Assume there's no tides. Just flat ocean. Picture it. A weak wave splashes three feet up the beach, and that's like an excursion that goes as deep as room three. Beyond that point, you have no idea when was the last time a wave hit further up."

The flush still wasn't working. The water was coming out too slowly. It needed to be dumped all at once.

"If a typical wave goes three feet up, and every now and then you get a four-footer, and so on, and once in a hundred years you get a twenty-footer, from a freak storm or something, then think how fast you go back in time as you walk up the shore."

Everything was in place now. He just needed to fill the tank one more time, and then …

"Walk four feet up and you've gone back in time by an hour. Five and you're at yesterday. Twenty and you've gone back a century. Fifty feet and you're at the beginning of the universe."

A cascade of blue powder falls in slow motion, splashes into the bowl, and simulated suction ripples like sound waves through the blue dots, pulling them up and around and down the drain. The bowl gasps and lies empty. A few stray dots wander left and right, surface tension driving them to seek one another, before

another click restarts the filling process. He looked over to the other monitor:

"So you're saying the rooms follow the wave model. Because when we go on an excursion, we use all the rooms up to some arbitrary stopping point."

"I'm saying that everything follows the wave model."

He pictured himself stranded on an island of presenthood, sized for him alone. Its cliffs plunge into water, high enough to kill if the water weren't there. If it weren't submerged in all that history. Erosion and forgetfulness. How far away is the next landmass? The next voice? The next beacon? Vertigo took him, looking down from a tiny morsel of something out across the enormity of what could have been. Only for a moment. He replied:

"Thank you, Deepak, but this is a Wendy's. Now, does this mean you figured out how to put the sensors?"

"Yeah. We don't even need to know how many rooms there are."

It may be surprising that the Gardner family had never reached the last room of the lighthouse. We have already mentioned how the building was so familiar that it hardly seemed like something to be explored. The last systematic record was in Hanora's notebooks. But even with the once-considerable resources at her disposal, her documentation never aimed to be exhaustive, only sufficient, perhaps another manifestation of the humble practicality which came so uneasily to her and which she had learned at great expense. Or it was an unconscious surety, not echoed by the two present-day brothers, that the lighthouse was destined to survive its dangers.

Because the number of rooms was not known, there was also no need to figure it out. She was free to believe, as some did, that the complex was infinite.

Hanora's notes dealt with more practical matters. The integrity of the first ten rooms, the locking mechanism, the strength of the

materials, and the repairs which were mandatory or forbidden. There was also a section on navigation. How to reach the island, or avoid it, no matter if the light at the crown was lit or shrouded. How to stage a battle in those waters.

She was, after all, the informal chief of a family business that came into existence because of a threat. The island had always been public land, but the government of that maritime nation had suffered during its second debt crisis and was now being looted by every remaining buyer. Western Minerals was interested not so much in the island itself, which was worthless, but in the waters around it. A public auction was held. There, the company's chairman and his retinue of advisors were repeatedly outbid by a private gentleman in a fine suit and heavy cufflinks, soft-spoken to the point of submissiveness. For the gentleman had nothing to lose. His well-curled mustache kept him unrecognizable even to the gossips who had come for fun, and who would otherwise have pegged him as one of the local tramps, a fallen actor, whose credentials Hanora had forged and who had been paid handsomely for the role. The hammer fell twice. Arrangements for the final transfer of deeds were to be made by mail which took months to arrive and then never did. It took a year for Mr. Chapman, or rather his advisors, to petition for a redo.

Hanora would later recall this as one of the family's two great 'gambits.'

In the meantime, the Gardners grew their business. They had always owned the one ship, the same one in which Hanora was born prematurely, shrieking between blasts of salt and wind before she finally quieted down and opened her eyes wide and still, as was her habit throughout life, those impenetrable eyes stained by the sea, while the men changed course for the nearest town. With the trading proceeds they bought a second ship and then a third. They

posed as professionals and observed the grizzled seamen that they hired until their posture became the truth. It was in this context that Mr. Chapman first knowingly met Hanora Gardner:

"Pleasure to meet you Ms. Gardner. Your affiliation?"

"I represent the Hudson Maritime Historical Society, which has an interest in the stewardship of old ports, lighthouses, and other structures."

"So you're interested in our land," Mr. Chapman interrupted.

"Not land in general, but only certain buildings which we have identified as being of interest not only to our sponsors but to the maritime tradition as a whole. We wish to document and maintain them with no commercial intent and no annoyance to you."

"I can't give away our holdings for free, you understand."

"And we wouldn't be in possession of them. Our only interest is historical, indeed, philanthropic—"

"Forgive the interruption, Ms. Hanora Gardner, but I find it hard to believe that a fledgling charity that is so closely intertwined with the Gardner–Stolz Trading Company that one might as well be an alias of the other has no interest besides history and philanthropy."

"With respect, sir, the charters of the two organizations—"

"I beg you," said Mr. Chapman with that same impeccable politeness, "please do not ask me to do something which our shareholders would never approve."

"Western Minerals is privately held."

"And we, too, have a charter and a mandate, which we must follow."

"Your terms, then?"

Mr. Chapman opened a drawer and handed over a single-page document written in a secretary's hand. "This catalog," he explained, "should corroborate your own research into our holdings.

The available leases have a duration of one year, with additional charges for pre-existing structures as specified here and here."

When Hanora was lost in thought, her eyes took on that same wide, quiet expression that her own parents had found so marvelous during that first rough night at sea. A sadness, not from grief or pity, but from resignation, with all its silent lightness, the lightness of a pamphlet carried off by a storm. As if she was resigned to all the tumult of the world rushing by her. Resigned to the inevitability of her own actions. She raised her eyes from the page.

"These five," she said, pointing at the paper. "Averoff, Carroll, Finch, Westman, Zephyr–Main. We have an essential duty to these and cannot give up even one."

The yearly rent for each of these tiny islands was over a hundred pounds, at least a twentieth of the income of the Gardner business. Of course, the Gardners only really wanted one, and even one would have been equal to an extra tax. Yet Hanora maintained, to the end, that this obfuscatory largesse was the second of the family's two great 'gambits.'

"But the sums required are beyond our means. We shall have to petition our board and our sponsors, and they will want something in return."

"Yes?"

"The right to buy from your Jubilee mine. Any amount, at the option of the buyer, up to a million tonnes, September contract. Even priced at five percent above market, if that is amenable to you. I can get our sponsors to agree to this."

The woman spoke so dejectedly, almost ashamedly, that Mr. Chapman wondered if she would shuffle away in defeat if he refused her proposal. A meager income from five useless islands would be better than none. And the Jubilee mine was a fledgling operation, the first of its kind in the Ormuth Bay, with barely proven reserves. Its

September production would hardly exceed five hundred thousand. He was bored by this woman who had nothing to offer and nothing to say. His assistant had assured him that the Gardners' business was pitiful. There was little ground left to gain.

"That is feasible." Without waiting for a reply, he added, "Find my secretary down the hall and he will draft the contract. I will be there in a minute."

In fact, Hanora had not given anything up with her second gambit, because Mr. Chapman had already guessed that the Gardners were truly interested in only one of the five. That is why, when the renewal took place in July, he had randomly chosen one island, Carroll, and increased its price tenfold. The other rents only increased by forty percent. In response to Hanora's questions, under her unreadable gaze, he explained that Western Minerals had found reserves there and was simply ensuring, at the shareholder's insistence, that the prices reflected market value.

"Proven reserves on a rock in the middle of nowhere, to be mined by a company with no standing fleet?"

"Our operations are not your concern. I assure you we are charging a fair price supported by research."

But the Hudson Maritime Historical Society did not have the funds to pay, even if Hanora had insisted, which Mr. Chapman knew. He had done his own investigation. The rents of the other four islands would amount to a fifth of the Gardners' net income, and he was sure that the charity had no other 'sponsors.' So Hanora acquiesced, crossed out the Carroll lighthouse, and signed the contract.

Of course, Mr. Chapman followed through on the threat. He hired a demolitionist and a private sailor, both as unconnected as possible to ward off any reputational injury that the Gardners might stir up. A week passed after the scheduled excursion, then

two weeks, without a word from his contractors. The lighthouse stood oblivious in peaceful waters. On the life insurance claim, the sailor's family had written "pirate raid."

A larger detachment, escorted by mercenaries and led by a former commodore, hired against the protests of the more conservative shareholders, lost several men and a piece of salvage equipment to the same peril. But the lighthouse came down. When the former commodore was called to appear in court for the new life insurance claims, he billed Western Minerals by the hour.

August saw a ten percent tariff passed on all bauxite imports into the Ormuth Bay. The measure had met with resistance from all of the trading companies which operated in those waters, except for the Gardner–Stoltz group which inexplicably lobbied against its own interests. The Jubilee mine's output began on schedule. It was, for a time, sold exclusively by the Gardners at a four percent markup from what they had agreed to pay.

Things progressed in this way for two more years. Due to the shareholders' fastidious monitoring of the balance sheet and the mercenary companies' recognition that the Western Minerals missions were fraught with real danger, Mr. Chapman was limited to one demolition per year. The Averoff and Westman lighthouses fell. The Gardner enterprise grew and so did their rent payments on the remaining two islands.

Of those two, it was not clear to Mr. Chapman why either should have any heirloom significance. The only features of note were the crumbling old library at the crown of the one, and the four bare rooms underneath the other, terminating in a metal wall of unknown but potentially valuable composition. Making the right guess for the wrong reason, he led his mercenaries to the base of the second lighthouse, where he saw Hanora again, wearing a tattered shawl to keep the sand out.

"So this is it?" He motioned to his men to stand back. "Was it worth it?"

"Ten generations," she began. "fifty-some marriages, tragedies, funerals. We know exactly where in this building they happened, and when, and how. If you could see this place unfolded, you would understand."

"I could have them tear it down right now."

She nodded. "And we wouldn't be able to pay anymore."

"Give me an offer then. I have to feed these men."

"Sell it to us." There was hardness in her voice. "Ten thousand pounds to be paid in a month. The island and its waters, in today's condition."

He laughed. "The shareholders would roll out my head on a plate! Western Minerals is supposed to be developing its holdings, not pawning them off. They'd jail me."

"So." In the hot shade her eyes were pale, as if bleached by the sun.

"Forty-five percent of Gardner–Stoltz's income, with an audit at your expense, for a term of two years." At their present rate of growth, this would be worth more than any sum they could pay. And if the crushing tax hampered their expansion, then so much the better.

Her shawl hung motionless and deflated. "Forty-nine percent for a five-year term."

"Deal."

Despite all the annoyance that he had endured in squeezing out these barely significant payments, despite the unconventional bookkeeping and the ugliness of lives lost, he felt a shred of satisfaction at the tremor in her handshake and the trace of a smile, brimming with weakness, that played across her face.

In those years, it was not just Mr. Chapman's expeditions which

fell victim to pirates. The Gardners did not fare well either. More than a few of their ships were captured by boarders, and when the same vessels showed up in their rivals' fleets, there was nothing they could do. For the rival companies had paid fairly, if cheaply, for assets that they did not know were stolen. Towards the end of the five-year term, their family income had been reduced to a fraction of what it once was; even the guards' wages counted against it.

Mr. Chapman was livid. He blamed himself for underestimating the Gardners' appetite for self-destruction. But there were more important problems. The Jubilee mine's output had dropped to the tens of thousands, and other sites also experienced incidents that suggested sabotage. Perhaps not all of them were related to the suspicion that readily presented itself to him. The government had, after all, been having trouble for a while.

He focused on the small victories. The Gardners had mounted some legal challenges to Western Minerals' plans. In fact, the lighthouse had been in use by the family for at least ten generations, as Hanora testified one Tuesday morning to a nearly empty courtroom, while the building itself, with its layered construction, was of architectural and historical value to the same government that had wrongly auctioned it away. The judge rejected the first argument since, by Hanora's own admission, the family had absented themselves ever since Western Minerals acquired the island more than five years ago. Furthermore, her testimony proved that the company was productively employing the land: they were earning rent from it. Lastly, a historian contracted by Mr. Chapman affirmed, to the assembled court, that there was no record that the lighthouse had ever been operational. It had no maritime history. Nor could it be reclassified as something else, a castle or a villa perhaps, that might lie within the scope of the government's other departments.

At the next negotiation, Mr. Chapman knew that the family

had nothing left to offer. His decision, inspired more by revenge than any profit motive, was one of the more capricious ones in his generally reliable career.

"And you are?"

"Elliot Gardner, sir. Regrettably, Hanora is indisposed at the present moment and couldn't be here. I assure you that I have all the necessary capacities to sign on behalf of the Society."

"Finally replaced her, I suppose."

"Actually—well, I don't see the harm—actually, sir, we haven't been able to get in touch with her for weeks. She's disappeared."

He laughed. "Well, she has my blessings. As for the present matter," he looked up at Elliot and seemed to sigh, "I regret to inform you that our board does not believe that you have executed the agreement in good faith."

"How—How so, sir?"

"Don't treat me like I'm stupid, I beg you." He paused to adjust his glasses. "Things being as they are, the board has removed my power to negotiate this case. Here is the agreement, take it or leave it."

Elliot read with widening eyes. The text was brief. Fifty thousand pounds, to be paid in a year, in exchange for a five-year extension. The alternative was the immediate demolition of the lighthouse which Mr. Chapman had already arranged.

"There must be a mistake, sir," Elliot said. "We can't pay this. Not even our company, but our whole extended family couldn't pay this. They told me there was going to be a fixed percentage or a recurring payment, or something …"

"Son," he replied, with the tone of a father whose child had done something wrong, "sign the paper or get out of my office."

And Mr. Chapman sat unmoved as Elliot looked down, tugged at his hair, stood up, reached out for a handshake and then decided

against it, and shuffled through the door.

The Gardners never heard from Mr. Chapman again. Even after the lease term ended and the payments stopped, there were no more politely worded threats on company letterhead, no more scheduling, indeed, no communication at all from the company which had been their bane for so long. Nor had they learned anything about Hanora's whereabouts. They feared the worst. To have left no plan and no notes, for someone as meticulous as her, must mean her absence was involuntary. The government could not spare the officers to search for a missing foreigner. And so they waited, in an uncomfortable lull, with the suspicion that something hidden was working itself against them and would burst into the light of day.

The shock came in the papers. If the "confidential" interview had been published in some lesser rag, it may not have been taken seriously. But it appeared in The Atlas, under the pretense of an anonymous source claiming to be one of the five policemen who trekked up the terrace of the Chapman home that morning. All five officers issued public statements denying its veracity and casting doubt based on the manner of expression. The journalist had surely altered the diction, perhaps even at the source's request.

"So you entered by the front door?"

"With force, yes, since nobody answered."

"The kids weren't home? No servants?"

"Usually at his wife's this time of year. And he never trusted third parties."

"So you were expecting him to be alone."

"Correct."

"What did you find when you entered?"

"There was commotion in the east wing. Footsteps and rumbling. We went to investigate."

"All five of you?"

"Yes. Two for the lamps, two with weapons, one to take notes. It was morning twilight and the house was dark. Mostly dark. We went room by room, noting the doors and disturbed items, like in training, where the academy contrives the details to tell a story and they become boring because of that. You start thinking, 'that door is ajar because they're going to test us on it.' "

"And when you arrived?"

"There was light under the door. The tinkling of metal and rustling of paper."

"Did you announce yourselves?"

"No. Once inside, we're not supposed to. Keep the element of surprise, keep the scene as intact as possible. We entered with force. The room was lit but empty, and the windows were beginning to lighten. The newspaper on the breakfast table was turning by itself. My colleague had seen it before. He played in an orchestra before his injury, played cello I believe. Across the whole ceiling, there was this rotating shaft, like you see in factories, with hooks and attachments to places just out of sight, and it was bringing something out."

"What was it?"

"A jacket. Hung on metal hooks that barely touched it, as if it were floating. It descended, silent as snow, and hovered right behind the turning newspaper. Stopped and perched on the shoulders of a man who wasn't there. We heard a puff of air. The jacket crumpled onto the seat and slid down a little. Its cuff touched the carpet."

"So he wasn't planning to be gone."

"Or it was easier to let the machine run as usual. Why not?"

"The commotion was a red herring, then."

"Not at all. It was his whole routine, minute by minute. We figured out how the machines triggered each other from room to room. There was a tank on the wall, high up in a corner, and two wire-thin pipes going into it, all along the molding, one beaded

with condensation and the other presumably empty.

"A water clock."

"A whole chain of them. We followed the bedewed pipe to another room with spinning racks of shirts and ties, then a set of stairs, two more rooms, a long hallway with one of the doors ajar, and there was the bedroom. A canopy's corner intervened on a window now livening with the sun. The stains on the ground, like rose petals, led us into a room of soft white marble, something more than a bathroom with its arches and columns and cherubs in their painted sky, its mirror playing with the sunstained light. The woman stared at us. Reflected behind her velvet chair, nimbleness dwelled in her wide-open eyes and in her smile, pale and indistinct, as if apologizing for the corpse which lay prone at her feet. Its wound was ragged and crumbling, telling of great heaving breaths breaking like waves against the shark fin, stainless steel, that hid itself in a flap of lung. Its face was impossibly turned and white like a theater mask. Just above, the mirror seeped blood through its spiderweb cracks which we traced, each one of us, to their center, where her head shattered like an egg made to stand on a table. Like the crunch of glass underneath our boots. Her silver skin, her expression, and the unnatural enlargement of her head, viewed without perspective, front and top and side all at once, recalled for me a day when I wandered into an orthodox church, into its tiny sanctuary, and came face-to-face with an icon, I can't remember if it was the virgin or a saint, and the candles flicker and catch on the gold foil and on the embossments and on the color inside her eyes and you forget for a moment that the woman in front of you is dead."

Matt's voice broke through his reverie.

"You're shitting me. There's no way a newspaper actually printed that. Especially not from a cop."

"Agatha copied it word-for-word. She showed me her notebook."

"The newspaper doesn't exist in any archives. I had someone check."

"Their headquarters burned down!"

"Suspiciously convenient."

"Come on, you know this. That's why I helped Agatha find her stuff in the first place. This was never printed anywhere else but this one paper, on a day with no other big stories."

"I declare, I maintain, I insist: there is no way a real newspaper printed those words."

"Isn't there? Look, I'm not saying that one of the five cops actually said all that. Maybe the source was fabricating or fabricated. None of the cops were ever disciplined. They never released official details. It was all good fun. The newspaper got a shock story with no consequences for its long-term allegiances. The public read, reacted, and moved on. Everyone wins."

"Or grandma made it up for her book."

He put a sensor down in room forty-nine. There was no point in a second one because the room was empty, four concrete slabs, just like the one before. Down one of the walls was a copper-green stain with a clean rectangle in the middle, as if something had once stood there.

The earpiece sounded again: "Sorry, man, I didn't mean to go there."

"It's all right. Did you know, it was her least successful publication?"

"Because it wasn't fashionable?"

"Worse. It was unrigorous. A hodge-podge of family myths, said one reviewer, funneled into the machine of reconstruction without any convincing account of their common origin or authenticity of transmission."

"That guy sounds fun."

"But he was right. All the legends are about different events. Why should there be anything to reconstruct? Unless the commonality is that the lighthouse itself is cursed, or we're a family of psychotics who keeps making up the same story, over and over again."

"So the work is either superstitious or embarrassing."

In room fifty, there was powder on the floor. He walked along the walls, careful to pick up as little as possible.

"Matt, I'm thinking we should do a mass estimation here, compare it with the human body. Would five Type C's work?"

"Let's do six. You haven't used that many."

"Got it."

He spread them out on the floor as much as possible, at the corners of a hexagon now blinking dim-yellow.

" … getting about … "

"Matt, come again?"

A cough through the earpiece. "I'm getting about 4.5 pounds of loose matter on the sensors. Big error bars, but seems about right, no?"

"I thought the average was five? And Uncle Owen was supposed to be a big guy."

"For you?"

"Fuck you."

"Check the bottom of your shoes."

He tapped his shoes against the wall, one foot at a time, and watched the yellow lights blink faster for a moment.

" … really did take him all the way down here after all? That's funny to me."

"Why?" He turned the volume up a tick.

"Our family never comes this far down. Our mapping proves that. There is no tradition in these lower rooms, no history that

anybody can speak of. The traditions are up there in rooms one through five, ten if you're generous. And the only time we went down here was to execute the will of a bitter, heartbroken man who was convinced that the retreat was more traditional than what he was running away from."

"The fiction of Alice Baudelaire."

He opened the door to room fifty-one.

"Stop!" Matt's voice made him jump.

"What's up?"

"Echogram's showing something sharp in the next room. Right in the middle of the floor, too small to say what it is. Should be empty otherwise."

"Got it."

"Proceed when you're ready."

He opened the door again and swept his flashlight around. Something glinted red. He stooped under the low doorframe and went into the room.

"Matt, I see it."

" … hearing you. Can you put down a repeater?"

"Matt, I don't want to put down a repeater here. I'll do it in the next room."

"Is something wrong? Are you all right?"

"It's a ring, Matt. A ruby in a golden band. Barely touching."

" …"

"Matt, you said the room was empty, right? I panned around just now, and there's this black stain on one wall, halfway on the wall and halfway on the floor, and if I were sitting there it'd be just a little shorter than me, and …"

" … peater …"

"Fuck."

He felt around in his backpack with one hand and kept the

flashlight raised with the other. The repeaters had three jointed legs that would poke and catch on the wires. He set one down in front of the ring, with the reference of an offering, and turned it on.

"Signal is healthy again. Tell me what you're seeing. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right."

"Thank God. Now, I'm seeing an empty room, the object on the floor, an irregularity on one wall, and nothing else. Can you confirm?"

"It's a stain, Matt. Black stain on the left wall, where the wall meets the floor, and there's some of it on the floor too. Same proportions as a person sitting down. Or hiding."

"…"

"That's Alice's ring, Matt."

"I see." Quiet static during a pause. "Should I wipe the logs?"

He wavered. The story of her life was so convenient, so neat in its unanswerable mystery. The author who disappears at the height of her fame; the outsider whose charm proves too good to be true. Too cliche to inspire any scrutiny of the details. Everyone wins. But, he thought, if Owen had truly hated her, why would he have demanded to be buried in the neighboring plot, as it were? Was he playing with fate? Laughing at his heirs for not daring to go even one room further?

"No," he finally replied. "No one will ever care enough to listen to the whole thing. We'll just censor the map."

"What about the room?"

"We don't touch it. There's no treasure at the bottom. Nobody will ever come here again. It's been untouched for half a decade and who knows how long before Owen died. Our kids might not be able to come at all. You said it yourself."

"Like a national park, then. Leave no trace. You don't think her

family deserves to know?"

"It's only circumstantial. But they and the public would take it as fact."

"The old story is just hearsay from Owen."

"We'd be disowned. The family wouldn't be the same, ever again. Your funding would be cut."

"I have other investors. I'd be fine. But I trust your judgment."

The ruby blinked on and off in sync with the repeater's status light.

"Did you ever read Agatha's book? The end at least?"

"Sadly never got around to it."

"It's titled 'A Reconstruction' but she actually has three. The last chapter starts like this. 'There is a certain impenetrable veil between valence and action that forbids the reconstruction of the former given the details of the latter.' "

"God, that's awful." Matt's smile was audible.

"It was the peer-reviewer's favorite part, actually."

"So what are they?"

"Stories about the creator of the lighthouse."

"Mythical, I suppose."

"Semi-mythical. She says there probably was an actual nobleman, Frankish or Norman depending on the time period, who controlled the lighthouse and gave it to us. In the first version, one of our ancestors fights off a raider, or wins a showmatch, or executes a rebel, and gets elevated to minor nobility. All the land is already claimed, but the chief gives him the lighthouse and the ships to reach it, thereby making him a landowner. A free citizen. And his descendants keep the crown lit forever after as a symbol of their freedom."

"We're descended from a killer."

"We had to kill to be free."

"We could have walked off and discovered new land instead of selling our souls to have it given to us."

"Her point was, we killed for nobility, not profit, and consequently obtained noble status. We could have killed a man for his land but we didn't. We could have discovered new land but we didn't. Our ancestor took a life for no reason other than to defend a system of power larger than himself, and his reward therefore was not land per se but status within it."

"And the second version?"

"Our ancestor is a slave who kills another slave in a dispute. The chief exiles him to the lighthouse and binds him and all his descendants to the punishment of keeping the flame lit forever. Doomed to always return to that place, no matter how prosperous they became or how far they wandered, lest all his sons be killed."

"How would the chief ever know?"

"She said the lighthouse probably functioned as part of a beacon system. Chain of buildings each monitoring the next. The 'punishment' would have been analogous to being conscripted as a guard."

"A bunch of prisoners all ratting each other out, long-distance. A panopticon with no warden."

"According to her, piracy was always a problem here, for thousands of years, not just during the General's life. The nearby mainland was fertile. Obviously not anymore. But conscripted roles were inherited and eventually became a mark of pride, like a military family."

"So that's what she meant by valence."

"Rogues and princes have always been sexy."

"And version three? Is this some antithesis-synthesis shit?"

"Worse, it's metafiction. Our ancestor is the builder of the lighthouse. He is the chief, but he wants his sons to inherit a duty and

not a property, so he invents a new identity and a new family name for his children, and he turns himself in claiming to have killed the builder. He is condemned to maintain his own properties forever. His sons inherit the punishment of tending to the lands of a man with no heirs."

"That explains why the lighthouse was always public land."

"Before Western Minerals, yes."

"So Agatha thinks our ancestor never killed. He just lied about killing."

"He wanted his work to be appreciated forever with his family as eternal observer."

"He raised himself above his family. He crucified himself."

"You have to admit, if the lighthouse had truly been ours, we would have changed it beyond recognition. Hell, we already have. If we knew the builder, we would misremember him. Judge him for owning slaves or something."

"He erased his legacy trying to preserve it."

"In order to preserve it."

"You're going to argue that the lighthouse, or at least our affiliation with it, is rooted in killing, synonymous with killing, so it would be hypocritical to moralize about killing while being attached to it."

"Not exactly. I'm saying that we don't have a choice. We never had a choice. The General forces one private to kill another. The creator, whoever he is, forced us all to be descended from a killer. If Hanora hadn't murdered Chapman, the lighthouse wouldn't even exist."

"But we always have a choice. Even if we lose the lighthouse. Even if we die. In version two, our ancestors could have just stopped following orders, could have run away and maybe been executed, so what?"

"You're right. But my choice is made for me, because I can't choose for something bigger than myself. If our ancestors ran away, they'd have been sacrificing their sons too. Who am I to tell our nieces and nephews, to tell your kids or mine, if I ever have any, that they don't get to live in a big normal family? That their grandparents don't want to see them anymore?"

"Our lives were far from normal. You know that better than I do."

"That's why I want theirs to be as normal as possible."

The green light blinked in silence.

The yawn of an office chair came through the earpiece.

"I see your point. We make our paradise, and not for ourselves."

"Yeah."

"Well." A sip of a drink. "Next room?"

"Next room. Hazards?"

"None on the echogram. Tread safely."

"You got it. Proceeding."

He stepped through to another empty room, fifty-two, and placed a sensor in the middle of the floor. In the next room, a sensor and another repeater. He continued through room after room, stairwell after stairwell, protected by the blinking lights and his brother's voice. There was a rotten splinter of wood in one corner and a few scratches in a stairwell but nothing else of note.

In room eighty-seven, there was a pile of canteens in one corner and an irregularity to one side.

Matt's voice again: "Let me guess, there's a stain on the wall."

"Matt, there's four stains."

"I see." Pause. "Two Type B sensors placed parallel to that wall, repeater in the middle, and move out. Don't think about it until you're in the next room. Keep talking to me."

"Four fucking stains, Matt. Four soldiers."

"Don't think about it. What type of sensors do you need?"

"Type B."

"And B stands for?"

"Blue lights." He propped his backpack onto his shoe and shined the light in. "Got them."

"Parallel to the wall."

"Done."

"Then the repeater."

"Three legs like a spider. Always catching on the wires."

"I'll make them better next time."

"Done." Faint click, green light.

"Signal's coming in strong. No irregularities in the next room. Should be empty and safe to proceed."

"…"

"Are you all right? Get out of that room. Please."

"Matt, their tops are all huddled together and their lower halves are all melty, and the canteens in the corner are all uncapped, every single one, and …"

"It's okay. It's okay. Breathe. I know you got a mask on, but breathe."

"…"

"I know what you're going to say. It wasn't two soldiers but five. Four of them died. In room eighty-seven, a hundred minus thirteen, coded number. It doesn't change anything. Deep breath. We already knew the General was a killer. We knew he went deep into the lighthouse. This doesn't tell us anything new."

"Fuck. You're right."

"And now we know the room, and we can properly mourn those men."

"You're right."

"I reckon you're not that far from the end. Numerological

guess."

On the voice call, Matt saw his brother mute himself for a few seconds and then unmute. His voice came through the headset. "You're right. Next room."

"Next room. I'm with you."

An empty room, a spiral staircase that he stooped to descend, and then the crunch of gravel beneath his boots. He bent down to touch it.

"Matt, the ground is covered in gravel. White rocks. Are you picking this up?"

"Yeah. Acoustics are different. Can you take a wet chip sample?"

"One sec." He laid the backpack flat on the ground, unzipped the front pocket, took out a tube, and let go of a shard of rock. Slowly he tilted his water bottle over the rim and let a couple drops fall. He pointed the flashlight at the bottom.

"Matt, it dissolved."

"Completely?"

"Yeah."

Pause. "It's salt."

"So I'm standing on, like, an indoor salt flat?"

"Seems so."

"How many sensors?"

"How thick is the mineral layer?"

He stuck a gloved finger straight into the ground. "Midway between my first two knuckles. An inch?"

"Let's do Type A's, two on each wall. You're not running low."

"Got it."

The next few rooms were the same. Salt on the floor, nothing on the walls. Matt's voice stopped him.

"One sec. Up ahead, room ninety-five. There's something big on the wall that will be to your left, maybe hanging. No floor contact.

Be careful."

"Will do. Entering now."

He pointed the light toward the wall and caught the glint of metal. A square with a lever protruding from it, just like in the fifth room.

"Matt, I'm starting to get what you meant by numerology."

"Elaborate."

"A lever in room five, a lever in room ninety-five. Mirrored across a hundred. We're going to see an iron gate in room ninety-nine, mirroring room one. And that's going to be the last room."

"Mathematically, yes. Numerologically, what kind of psychopath would stop at ninety-nine and not one hundred?"

He hurried onward, with only one sensor per room and a repeater every other one, and arrived at the door of room ninety-nine. Matt spoke again.

"Careful. Looks like you were right. One wall is metal and there's no doors. There's a weird depression in the floor with no guardrail. I'm not sure how deep it goes."

"Got it. I'll keep an eye on the floor. Entering now."

There was a square missing where the floor met the far wall made of metal. He stepped closer, tested the ground, and leaned over it.

"It's about seven feet deep. Taller than me but not by much. More salt on the bottom. The metal seems to go all the way down the hole."

"That's it, then? No door handle, no passageways?"

"No tricks."

"Put down all the sensors you have left in this room and the previous one. Type A's and B's. I want to get a good read."

"Got it." Ten minutes later. "Done."

"Nothing. Just rock, concrete, salt, metal. Can't see into any of it. No cracks or irregularities."

"So we have to pull the lever, right? There has to be a message like room five."

"Hang on. Let's think through the numerology. The lever in room five closes the gate in room one. But our gate, the one in room ninety-nine, supposedly the last room, is already closed. The lever has to open it. What do you think is on the other side?"

"Either rock or water. Probably water. It'd explain the salt."

"The open ocean?"

"What else could it be?"

"It'd flood the rooms then."

"Not if everything's airtight. I had to close the entrance gate to get down here, remember? It's all sealed. Can you check on the sensors? There's no cracks, no air currents or anything? The door to the room eight bathroom is airtight."

"One sec." A minute later. "Okay. I see no evidence that it's not sealed, at least. No drafts. Pressure gradient looks right."

"So the gate in ninety-nine opens, and the water rises only to a certain level."

"And evaporates eventually."

"And it's just open ocean on the other side. You jump into that hole, duck under the gate, and swim out. No need to go back up through the rooms."

"Wait, wait, you're not thinking of—"

"I don't want to go back through, Matt. The stains, the furniture, all those insinuations, all that decay."

"You're sixty feet down."

"I've dived to fifty before."

"You don't know what's behind that gate. What if it's a cave that goes further down? I can't see into water, you know. Not with these sensors."

"You're right. I might get hurt. I might die. My whole life I've

had someone there to tell me what's around the next corner. Baron, mom, and you, three grades ahead. All I had to do was stay the course and watch it play out ahead of me like a movie. Like I can see the future. Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful. And, it might sound weird, but more than anything else I'm grateful that I've had you in my ear this time. Matt. I want to take this risk. We figured out the logic of this place, one to ninety-nine, with an exit at each end. Room one hundred is the outside. Full-circle. They wouldn't have built it like this if it didn't work that way. It's the end of my path, Matt, my long path, and I want to go first for once. To prove that I got something right. That we got it right."

"You would rather that than stay put for seven days? I could come get you myself once the gate opens. In person. I'll get a sub to check if we're right about the back entrance. Easy."

"Yeah. Really. I want to stake my life on this. No heirs to protect, no General breathing down my neck, nobody to blame but myself. I know we do extreme sports together, you and me, the rest of our family, but I want to do one stupid thing myself, all on my own. Just to prove I can beat this place. I want to get out of here in less than seven days."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"I trust you. I love you, and I want you to be all right. I trust you."

"I'll be all right, I promise. I love you too."

He walked back to room ninety-five, put both hands on the lever, and pulled. The mechanism groaned. From the inner door, there came the grinding of rust, a faraway vibration, and, underneath it, a trickle of water. The puddle spread across the floor, climbed halfway up the soles of his boots, and stopped. He stood on rippling unbroken glass.

"Matt, it's beautiful."

The square panel fell and revealed golden lettering.

"Show me."

For the first time, he took out his personal phone. He opened the camera app and pointed downwards. There he stood, doubled by the mirror floor, and the handheld torch made the ceiling sparkle like stars beneath his feet.

"Just sent."

"Hang on, it's downloading." A pause. "Wow."

"Yeah."

"…"

"I just put the picture into my translator app. You know what the panel says?"

"What?"

"Built by my own two hands."

A pause.

"Hey Matt?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you really think you'll never come here in person?"

"Mom used to tell me about the lighthouse. This was before you could talk. Baron looked after you at home, and grandma and I would come visit her at the hospital. She'd tell me about this realm, always a realm, of rooms, where every room belonged to one of us and we were allowed to make it our own. Decorate it however we wanted. Baron's was full of airplanes, of course, and hers, though she hadn't been in a long time, was full of paintings. Beautiful and scary ones. And it was a place where we could hide and be safe, if only for seven days at a time. A place which would always be mine. And would always be hers, even after she was gone."

"But the family never went to the lighthouse when she was sick."

"Yeah. We just went to her room, with its shiny floors and blink-

ing machines, went there for every birthday. Had all our parties around her bed so she could be there in person, and we'd spill over next door whenever the patients would let us. We got to know them. The front desk even let me keep my stuffed animals in the daycare."

"Stuffed animals."

"Don't laugh! Baron took you once and you cried before you even saw mom."

"I was a baby!"

"So was I. But I never understood the 'realm' to be any place other than there, where I'd roam the hallways and sit with her through sterile air-conditioned nights. I'd fall asleep and have nightmares in that same room with shimmering walls where I'd look down at her bed and she'd be melting into thirds. And I'd wake up and she'd hug me and I'd cling to her arm trying to reassure myself that she was still human-shaped. That she was still my mother."

"You were seven when she died. Six? Old enough to know what it meant."

"I was there. I held her hand and she told me about all the paintings in her room, out there in the realm, the dryad, the winter mountains, the two-headed ghost. She told me about the airplanes in Baron's room, told me how he'd steal her paint to finish his models, told me how to get to every room from every other. Staircases of clouds and vines. Waterslides to nowhere."

"…"

"And I seared all of it into my little brain because I knew, somehow I knew, that she wouldn't ever get to tell me a second time. Left, right, right, three turns at the doorknob, I remember all of it even now. And then she said, I looked up at her and saw her eyelids open for once, her eyes tender and sharp as day, she said …"

"…"

"I'll always be there for you. In that room. Even if I'm not

anywhere else. I'll be with you. I love you."

"…"

"When Baron finally did try to take us to the lighthouse, I think for a birthday, I threw a tantrum and didn't go."

"Was I there?"

"Yeah. You were sad and kept asking why I wasn't going, but you went. I think you were happy there."

"You didn't go because you understood, right?"

"I knew she wouldn't be there."

"So this lighthouse is just a puzzle to you."

"A dim imitation of the heaven, the blood, which we hold inside of us."

"A metaphor, then."

"A satire."

"Maybe it's time for me to get out of here too."

He took one more look at the walls plunging into the watery floor and the unhewn ceiling with its flecks of crystal. Matt's voice came through one more time as he went to room ninety-nine.

"Snap the distress beacon if anything goes wrong. Left shoulder toward the front. The boat's at the usual place and it has wireless. Feet-first. Don't forget to equalize. I love you."

He looked down at the little square of water and the gate's rippling edge.

"I love you too. See you on the other side."

He pulled his mask and boots off, zipped his phone into a watertight bag, and strapped the flashlight to his arm. The water made him shiver. Slow, relaxed breaths, a deep exhale, then a deep inhale. He pulled his head underwater. The ear pain went away with a few tongue compressions.

His face stung. He felt for the gate's bottom edge and pulled himself under it and forward.

Buoyancy sent him toward the ceiling. It was rock. He felt ahead and found it was the same further on. Ten seconds had passed. He chanced at opening his eyes. Everything was dark except for a dim blue disk some ways out. A sweep of the flashlight showed a few rocks in the way but no serious blockage. He swam ahead.

His suit caught on something and tore. Twenty seconds had passed. He felt the edge of the fabric, felt its loose threads, felt the ragged skin below. His left side began to sting. He reached to his shoulder and snapped the beacon.

The flashlight showed another rock ahead of him. He navigated more carefully this time, gingerly, and tried to avoid flexing where he thought his wound might be. Thirty seconds. Too late to turn back now.

One more rock. Pull, bend, twist. Something caught his hair, and he pulled free. The blue disk was bigger. Forty seconds. It was all around him. The view of the ocean, black mounds declaring themselves from the abyss.

Inexplicably, he had difficulty telling which way was up. A black strand coiled around him and bloomed. His vision was dim except for the red light that flashed, annoyingly, on his left shoulder. His body was cold and stung all over. Fifty seconds. He felt small, then, small and light, like an accident of life, like the first functional molecule in the primordial soup, something that had no reason to be alive, but was.

Utterly alone in being alive. Alone and free.

The silhouette of his ship drifted into view. From its skin erupted wavy geysers of sun and ink, blending like lava, blending into the edges of his vision which had gone completely dark. Ten rivers from the halo of his ship dancing a sunburst into nowhere. And he thought, once again inexplicably, of when he would sneak out of his dorm at midnight and roam the city, puzzling over every

half-torn sticker, wandering until he felt hunger, as he did now, and lightness. Like a floating eye, a thing of beauty. The sounds of every air conditioner, every car splashing through the street, every smack of rain against a window would interpose, identical and expansive, until the city seemed to echo. Plunging into some alleyway, he would take his phone and focus the camera on the other end, on that tiny molten rectangle, bleeding out of its frame, and turn the brightness down until the edges of the shot were completely dark, and the screen would become a borderless image, a theoretically infinite map, of the flame of life in the pitch black sea.