

Matt Dymerski

# PSYCHOSIS



**Psychosis**

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Tales of Horror

By

**Matt Dymerski**

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I'm not sure why I'm writing this down on paper and not on my computer. I guess I've just noticed some odd things. It's not that I don't trust the computer... I just... need to organize my thoughts. I need to get down all the details somewhere objectively somewhere I know that what I write can't be deleted or... changed... not that that's happened. It's just... everything blurs together here, and the fog of memory lends a strange cast to things...

I'm starting to feel cramped in this small apartment. Maybe that's the problem. I just had to go and choose the cheapest apartment, the only one in the basement. The lack of windows down here makes day and night seem to slip by seamlessly. I haven't been out in a few days because I've been working on this programming project so intensively. I suppose I just wanted to get it done. Hours of sitting and staring at a monitor can make anyone feel strange, I know, but I don't think that's it.

I'm not sure when I first started to feel like something was odd. I can't even define what it is. Maybe I just haven't talked to anyone in awhile. That's the first thing that crept up on me. Everyone I normally talk to online while I program has been idle, they've simply not logged on at all. My instant messages go unanswered. The last e-mail I got from anybody was a friend saying he'd talk to me when he got back from the store, and that was yesterday. I'd call with my cell phone, but reception's terrible down here. Yeah, that's it. I just need to call someone. I'm going to go outside.

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Well, that didn't work so well. As the tingle of fear fades, I'm feeling a little ridiculous for being scared at all. I looked in the mirror before I went out, but I didn't shave the two-day stubble I've grown. I figured I was just going out for a quick cell phone call. I did change my shirt, though, because it was lunchtime, and I guessed that I'd run into at least one person I knew. That didn't end well. Nothing was happening. I wish it did.

When I went out, I opened the door to my small apartment slowly. A small feeling of apprehension had somehow already lodged itself in me, for some indefinable reason. I chalked it up to having not spoken to anyone but myself for a day or two. I peered down the dingy gray hallway, made dingier by the fact that it was a basement hallway. On one end, a large metal door led to the building's furnace room. It was locked, of course. Two dreary soda machines stood by it; I bought a soda from one the first day I moved in, but it had a two year old expiration date. I'm fairly sure nobody knows those machines are even down here, or my cheap landlady just doesn't care to get them restocked.

I closed my door softly, and walked the other direction, taking care not to make a sound. I have no idea why I chose to do that, but it was fun giving in to the strange impulse not to break the droning hum of the soda machines, at least for the moment. I got to the stairwell, and took the stairs up to the building's front door. I looked through the heavy door's small square window, and received quite the shock: it was definitely not lunchtime. City-gloom hung over the dark street outside, and the traffic lights at the intersection in the distance blinked yellow. Dim clouds, purple and black from the glow of the city, hung overhead. Nothing moved save the few sidewalk trees that shifted in the wind. I remember shivering, though I wasn't cold. Maybe it was the wind outside I could vaguely hear it through the heavy metal door, and I knew it was that unique kind of late-night wind, the kind that was constant, cold, and quiet, save for the rhythmic music it made as it passed through countless unseen tree leaves.

I decided not to go outside.

Instead, I lifted my cell phone to the door's little window, and checked the signal meter. The bars filled up the meter, and I smiled. Time to hear someone else's voice, I remember thinking, relieved. It was such a strange thing, to be afraid of nothing. I shook my head, laughing at myself silently. I hit speed-dial for my best friend Amy's number, and held the phone up to my ear. It rang once... but then it stopped. Nothing happened. I listened to silence for a good twenty seconds, then hung up. I frowned, and looked at the signal meter again – still full. I went to dial her number again, but then my phone rang in my hand, startling me. I put it up to my ear.

"Hello?" I asked, immediately fighting down a small shock at hearing the first spoken voice in days, even if it was my own. I had gotten used to the droning hum of the building's inner workings, my computer, and the soda machines in the hallway. There was no response to my greeting at first, but then, finally, a voice came.

"Hey," said a clear male voice, obviously of college age, like me. "Who's this?"

"John," I replied, confused.

"Oh, sorry, wrong number," he replied, then hung up.

I lowered the phone slowly and leaned against the thick brick wall of the stairwell. That was strange. I looked at my recent calls list, but the number was unfamiliar. Before I could think on it further, the phone rang loudly, shocking me yet again. This time I looked at the caller before I answered. It was another unfamiliar number. This time, I held the phone up to my ear, but said nothing.

heard nothing but the general background noise of a phone. Then, a familiar voice broke my tension.

—“John?” was the single word, in Amy’s voice.

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I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hey, it’s you,” I replied.

“Who else would it be?” she responded. “Oh, the number. I’m at a party on Seventh Street, and my phone died just as you called me. This is someone else’s phone, obviously.”

“Oh, ok,” I said.

“Where are you?” she asked.

My eyes glanced over the drab white-washed cylinder block walls and the heavy metal door with its small window.

“At my building,” I sighed. “Just feeling cooped up. I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“You should come here,” she said, laughing.

“Nah, I don’t feel like looking for some strange place by myself in the middle of the night,” I said, looking out the window at the silent windy street that secretly scared me just a tiny bit. “I think I’m just going to keep working or go to bed.”

“Nonsense!” she replied. “I can come get you! Your building is close to Seventh Street, right?”

“How drunk are you?” I asked lightheartedly. “You know where I live.”

“Oh, of course,” she said abruptly. “I guess I can’t get there by walking, huh?”

“You could if you wanted to waste half an hour,” I told her.

“Right,” she said. “Ok, have to go, good luck with your work!”

I lowered the phone once more, looking at the numbers flash as the call ended. Then, the droning silence suddenly reasserted itself in my ears. The two strange calls and the eerie street outside just drove home my aloneness in this empty stairwell. Perhaps from having seen too many scary movies, I had the sudden inexplicable idea that something could look in the door’s window and see me, some sort of horrible entity that hovered at the edge of aloneness, just waiting to creep up on unsuspecting people that strayed too far from other human beings. I knew the fear was irrational, but nobody else was around, so... I jumped down the stairs, ran down the hallway into my room, and closed the door as swiftly as I could while still staying silent. Like I said, I feel a little ridiculous for being scared of nothing, and the fear has already faded. Writing this down helps a lot – it makes me realize that nothing is wrong. It filters out half-formed thoughts and fears and leaves only cold, hard facts. It’s late, I got a call from a wrong number, and Amy’s phone died, so she called me back from another number. Nothing strange is happening.

Still, there was something a little off about that conversation. I know it could have just been the alcohol she’d had... or was it even her that seemed off to me? Or was it... yes, that was it! I didn’t realize it until this moment, writing these things down. I know writing things down would help. She said she was at a party, but I only heard silence in the background! Of course, that doesn’t mean anything in particular, as she could have just gone outside to make the call. No... that couldn’t be it either. I didn’t hear the wind, I need to see if the wind is still blowing!



I forgot to finish writing last night. I'm not sure what I expected to see when I ran up the stairwell and looked out the heavy metal door's window. I'm feeling ridiculous. Last night's fear seems hazy and unreasonable to me now. I can't wait to go out into the sunlight. I'm going to check my email, shave, shower, and finally get out of here! Wait... I think I heard something.

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It was thunder. That whole sunlight and fresh air thing didn't happen. I went out into the stairwell and up the stairs, only to find disappointment. The heavy metal door's little window showed only flowing water, as torrential rain slammed against it. Only very dim, gloomy light filtered in through the rain, but at least I knew it was daytime, even if it was a gray, sickly, wet day. I tried looking out the window and waiting for lightning to illuminate the gloom, but the rain was too heavy and I couldn't make out anything more than vague weird shapes moving at odd angles in the waves washing down the window. Disappointed, I turned around, but I didn't want to go back to my room. Instead, I wandered further up the stairs, past the first floor, and the second. The stairs ended at the third floor, the highest floor in the building. I looked through the glass that ran up the outer wall of the stairwell but it was that warped, thick kind that scatters the light, not that there was much to see through the rain to begin with.

I opened the stairwell door and wandered down the hallway. The ten or so thick wooden doors, painted blue a long time ago, were all closed. I listened as I walked, but it was the middle of the day, so I wasn't surprised that I heard nothing but the rain outside. As I stood there in the dim hallway, listening to the rain, I had the strange fleeting impression that the doors were standing like silent granite monoliths erected by some ancient forgotten civilization for some unfathomable guardian purpose. Lightning flashed, and I could have sworn that, for just a moment, the old grainy blue wood looked just like rough stone. I laughed at myself for letting my imagination get the best of me, but then it occurred to me that the dim gloom and lightning must mean there was a window somewhere in the hallway. A vague memory surfaced, and I suddenly recalled that the third floor had an alcove and an inset window halfway down the floor's hallway.

Excited to look out into the rain and possibly see another human being, I quickly walked over to the alcove, finding the large thin glass window. Rain washed down it, as with the front door's window, but I could open this one. I reached a hand out to slide it open, but hesitated. I had the strangest feeling that if I opened that window, I would see something absolutely horrifying on the other side. Everything's been so odd lately... so I came up with a plan, and I came back here to get what I needed. I don't seriously think anything will come of it, but I'm bored, it's raining, and I'm going stir crazy. I came back to get my webcam. The cord isn't long enough to reach the third floor by any means, so instead I'm going to hide it between the two soda machines in the dark end of the basement hallway, run the wire along the wall and under my door, and put black duct tape over the wire to blend it in with the black plastic strip that runs along the base of the hallway's walls. I know this is silly, but I don't have anything better to do...

Well, nothing happened. I propped open the hallway-to-stairwell door, steeled myself, then flung the heavy front door wide open and ran like hell down the stairs to my room and slammed the door. I watched the webcam on my computer intently, seeing the hallway outside my door and most of the stairwell. I'm watching it right now, and I don't see anything interesting. I just wish the camera's position was different, so that I could see out the front door. Hey! Somebody's online!

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I got out an older, less functional webcam that I had in my closet to video chat with my friend online. I couldn't really explain to him why I wanted to video chat, but it felt good to see another person's face. He couldn't talk very long, and we didn't talk about anything meaningful, but I feel much better. My strange fear has almost passed. I would feel completely better, but there was something... odd... about our conversation. I know that I've said that everything has seemed odd, but... still, he was very vague in his responses. I can't recall one specific thing that he said... no particular name, or place, or event... but he did ask for my email address to keep in touch. Wait, I just got an email.

I'm about to go out. I just got an email from Amy that asked me to meet her for dinner at 'the place we usually go to'. I do love pizza, and I've just been eating random food from my poorly stocked fridge for days, so I can't wait. Again, I feel ridiculous about the odd couple of days I've been having. I should destroy this journal when I get back. Oh, another email.

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Oh my god. I almost left the email and opened the door. I almost opened the door. I almost opened the door, but I read the

email first! It was from a friend I hadn't heard from in a long time, and it was sent to a huge number of emails that must have been every person he had saved in his address list. It had no subject, and it said, simply:

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*seen with your own eyes don't trust them they*

What the hell is that supposed to mean? The words shock me, and I keep going over and over them. Is it a desperate email sent just as... something happened? The words are obviously cut off without finishing! On any other day I would have dismissed this as spam from a computer virus or something, but the words... seen with your own eyes! I can't help but read over this journal and think back on the last few days and realize that I have not seen another person with my own eyes or talked to another person face to face. The webcam conversation with my friend was so strange, so vague, so... eerie, now that I think about it. Was it eerie? Or is my fear clouding my memory? My mind toys with the progression of events I've written here, pointing out that I have not been present with one single fact that I did not specifically give out unsuspectingly. The random 'wrong number' that got my name and the subsequent strange return call from Amy, the friend that asked for my email address... I messaged him first when I saw him online. And then I got my first email a few minutes after that conversation! Oh my god! That phone call with Amy! I said over the phone - said that I was within half an hour's walk of Seventh Street! They know I'm near there! What if they're trying to find me?! Where is everyone else? Why haven't I seen or heard anyone else in days?

No, no, this is crazy. This is absolutely crazy. I need to calm down. This madness needs to end.

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I don't know what to think. I ran about my apartment furiously, holding my cell phone up to every corner to see if it got signal through the heavy walls. Finally, in the tiny bathroom, near one ceiling corner, I got a single bar. Holding my phone there I sent a text message to every number in my list. Not wanting to betray anything about my unfounded fears, I simply sent:

*You seen anyone face to face lately?*

At that point, I just wanted any reply back. I didn't care what the reply was, or if I embarrassed myself. I tried to call someone a few times, but I couldn't get my head up high enough, and if I brought my cell phone down even an inch, it lost signal. Then I remembered the computer, and rushed over to it, instant messaging everyone online. Most were idle or away from their computers. Nobody responded. My messages grew more frantic, and I started telling people where I was and to stop by in person for a host of barely passable reasons. I didn't care about anything by that point. I just needed to see another person!

I also tore apart my apartment looking for something that I might have missed; some way to contact another human being without opening the door. I know it's crazy, I know it's unfounded, but what if? WHAT IF? I just need to be sure! I taped the phone to the ceiling in case

THE PHONE RANG! Exhausted from last night's rampage, I must have fallen asleep. I woke up to the phone ringing, and ran into the bathroom, stood on the toilet, and flipped open the phone taped to the ceiling. It was Amy, and I feel so much better. She was really worried about me, and apparently had been trying to contact me since the last time I talked to her. She's coming over now, and, yes, she knows where I am without me telling her. I feel so embarrassed. I am definitely throwing this journal away before anyone sees it. I don't even know why I'm writing in it now. Maybe it's just because it's the only communication I've had at all since... god knows when. I look like hell, too. I looked in the mirror before I came back in here. My eyes are sunken, my stubble thicker, and I just look generally unhealthy.

My apartment is trashed, but I'm not going to clean it up. I think I need someone else to see what I've been through. The past few days have NOT been normal. I am not one to imagine things. I know I have been the victim of extreme probability, probably missed seeing another person a dozen times. I just happened to go out when it was late at night, or the middle of the day when everyone was gone. Everything's perfectly fine, I know this now. Plus, I found something in the closet last night that had helped me tremendously: a television! I set it up just before I wrote this, and it's on in the background. Television has always been my escape for me, and it reminds me that there's a world beyond these dingy brick walls.

I'm glad Amy's the only one that responded to me after last night's frantic pestering of everyone I could contact. She's been my best friend for years. She doesn't know it, but I count the day that I met her among one of the few moments of true happiness in my life. I remember that warm summer day fondly. It seems a different reality from this dark, rainy, lonely place. I feel like I spent days sitting in that playground, much too old to play, just talking with her and hanging around doing nothing at all. I still feel like I can go back to that moment sometimes, and it reminds me that this damn place is not all that there is... finally, a knock on the door.

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I thought it was odd that I couldn't see her through the camera I hid between the two soda machines. I figured that it was bad positioning, like when I couldn't see out the front door. I should have known. I should have known! After the knock, I yelled through the door jokingly that I had a camera between the soda machines, because I was embarrassed myself that I had taken this paranoia so far. After I did that, I saw her image walk over to the camera and look down at it. She smiled and waved.

"Hey!" she said to the camera brightly, giving it a wry look.

"It's weird, I know," I said into the mic attached to my computer. "I've had a weird few days."

"Must have," she replied. "Open the door, John."

I hesitated. How could I be sure?

"Hey, humor me a second here," I told her through the mic. "Tell me one thing about us. Just prove to me you're you."

She gave the camera a weird look.

"Um, alright," she said slowly, thinking. "We met randomly at a playground when we were both way too old to be there?"

I sighed deeply as reality returned and fear faded. God, I'd been so ridiculous. Of course it was Amy! That day was somewhere in the world except in my memory. I'd never even mentioned it to anyone, not out of embarrassment, but out of a strange secret nostalgia and a longing for those days to return. If there was some unknown force at work trying to trick me, as I feared, there was no way they could know about that day.

"Haha, alright, I'll explain everything," I told her. "Be right there."

I ran to my small bathroom and fixed my hair as best I could. I looked like hell, but she would understand. Snickering at my own unbelievable behavior and the mess I'd made of the place, I walked to the door. I put my hand on the doorknob and gave it one last mess one last look. So ridiculous, I thought. My eyes traced over the half-eaten food lying on the ground, the overflowing trash bin, and the bed I'd tipped to the side looking for... God knows what. I almost turned to the door and opened it, but my eyes fell on one last thing: the old webcam, the one I used for that eerily vacant chat with my friend.

Its silent black sphere lay haphazardly tossed to the side, its lens pointed at the table where this journal lay. An overwhelming terror took me as I realized that if something could see through that camera, it would have seen what I just wrote about that day. I asked her for any one thing about us, and she chose the only thing in the world that I thought they or it did not know... but *IT DID KNOW! IT COULD HAVE BEEN WATCHING ME THE WHOLE TIME!*

I didn't open the door. I screamed. I screamed in uncontrollable terror. I stomped on the old webcam on the floor. The door shook, and the doorknob tried to turn, but I didn't hear Amy's voice through the door. Was the basement door, made to keep out drafts, too thick? Or was Amy not outside? What could have been trying to get in, if not her? What the hell is out there?! I saw her

my computer through the camera outside, I heard her on the speakers through the camera outside, but was it real?! How can I know  
She's gone now – I screamed, and shouted for help! I piled up everything in my apartment against the front door –

At least I think that it's Friday. I broke everything electronic. I smashed my computer to pieces. Every single thing on the network could have been accessed by network access, or worse, altered. I'm a programmer, I know. Every little piece of information I gave out since this started – my name, my email, my location – none of it came back from outside until I gave it out. I've been going over and over what I wrote. I've been pacing back and forth, alternating between stark terror and overpowering disbelief. Sometimes I'm absolutely certain some phantom *entity* is dead set on the simple goal of getting me to go outside. Back to the beginning, with the first phone call from Amy, she was effectively asking me to open the door and go outside.

I keep running through it in my head. One point of view says I've acted like a madman, and all of this is the extreme convergence of probability – never going outside at the right times by pure luck, never seeing another person by pure chance, getting a random nonsense email from some computer virus at just the right time. The other point of view says that extreme convergence of probability is the reason that whatever's out there hasn't gotten me already. I keep thinking: I never opened the window on the third floor. I never opened the front door, until that incredibly stupid stunt with the hidden camera after which I ran straight to my room and slammed the door. I haven't opened my own solid door since I flung open the front door of the building. Whatever's out there, if anything's out there – never made an 'appearance' in the building before I opened the front door. Maybe the reason it wasn't in the building already was that it was elsewhere getting everyone else... and then it waited, until I betrayed my existence by trying to call Amy... a call which didn't work, until it called me and asked me my name...

Terror literally overwhelms me every time I try to fit the pieces of this nightmare together. That email – short, cut off – was it from someone trying to get word out? Some friendly voice desperately trying to warn me before it came? Seen with my own eyes, I don't trust them – exactly what I've been so suspicious of. It could have had masterful control of all things electronic, practicing insidious deception to trick me into coming outside. Why can't it get in? It knocked on the door – it must have some solid presence behind the door... the image of those doors in the upper hallway as guardian monoliths flashes back in my mind every time I trace this path of thoughts. If there is some phantom entity trying to get me to go outside, maybe it can't get through doors. I keep thinking back over all the books I've read or movies I've seen, trying to generate some explanation for this. Doors have always been such interesting foci of human imagination, always seen as wards or portals of special importance. Or perhaps the door is just too thick? I know that I couldn't bash through any of the doors in this building, let alone the heavy basement ones. Aside from that, the real question is, why does it even want me? If it just wanted to kill me, it could do it any number of ways, including just waiting until I starve to death. What if it doesn't want to kill me? What if it has some far more horrific fate in store for me? God, what can I do to escape this nightmare?!

A knock on the door...

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I told the people on the other side of the door I need a minute to think and I'll come out. I'm really just writing this down so I can figure out what to do. At least this time I heard their voices. My paranoia – and yes, I recognize I'm being paranoid – has been thinking of all sorts of ways that their voices could be faked electronically. There could be nothing but speakers outside, simulating human voices. Did it really take them three days to come talk to me? Amy is supposedly out there, along with two policemen and a psychiatrist. Maybe it took them three days to think of what to say to me – the psychiatrist's claim could be pretty convincing, if I decided to think this has all been a crazy misunderstanding, and not some entity trying to trick me into opening the door.

The psychiatrist had an older voice, authoritarian but still caring. I liked it. I'm desperate just to see someone with my own eyes! He said I have something called cyber-psychosis, and I'm just one of a nationwide epidemic of thousands of people having breakdowns triggered by a suggestive email that 'got through somehow.' I swear he said 'got through somehow.' I think he means it's spread throughout the country inexplicably, but I'm incredibly suspicious that the entity slipped up and revealed something. He said I am part of a wave of 'emergent behavior', that a lot of other people are having the same problem with the same fears, even though we've never communicated.

That neatly explains the strange email about eyes that I got. I didn't get the original triggering email. I got a descendant of it. My friend could have broken down too, and tried to warn everyone he knew against his paranoid fears. That's how the problem spreads, the psychiatrist claims. I could have spread it, too, with my texts and instant messages online to everybody I know. One of those people might be melting down right now, after being triggered by something I sent them, something they might interpret a way that they want, something like a text saying seen anyone face to face lately? The psychiatrist told me that he didn't want to 'lose another one', that people like me are intelligent, and that's our downfall. We draw connections so well that we draw them even when they shouldn't be there. He said it's easy to get caught up in paranoia in our fast paced world, a constantly changing place where more and more of our interaction is simulated...

I have to give him one thing. It's a great explanation. It neatly explains everything. It perfectly explains everything, in fact. I have every reason to shake off this nightmarish fear that some thing or consciousness or being out there wants me to open the door...

so it can capture me for some horrible fate worse than death. It would be foolish, after hearing that explanation, to stay in here until I starve to death just to spite the entity that might have got everyone else. It would be foolish to think that, after hearing the explanation, I might be one of the last people left alive on an empty world, hiding in my secure basement room, spiting some unthinkable deceptive entity just by refusing to be captured. It's a perfect explanation for every single strange thing I've seen and heard, and I have every reason in the world to let all of my fears go, and open the door.

That's exactly why I'm not going to.

How can I be sure?! How can I know what's real and what's deception? All of these damn things with their wires and the signals that originate from some unseen origin! They're not real, I can't be sure! Signals through a camera, faked video, deceptive phone calls, emails! Even the television, lying broken on the floor – how can I possibly know it's real? It's just signals, waves of light... the door! It's bashing on the door! It's trying to get in! What insane mechanical contrivance could it be using to simulate the sound of men attacking the heavy wood so well?! At least I'll finally see it with my own eyes... there's nothing left in here for it to deceive me with, I've ripped apart everything else! It can't deceive my eyes, can it? Seen with your own eyes don't trust them they wait... was that desperate message telling me to trust my eyes, or warning me about my eyes too?! Oh my god, what's the difference between a camera and my eyes? They both turn light into electrical signals – they're the same! I can't be deceived! I have to be sure! I have to be sure!

I calmly asked for paper and a pen, day in and day out, until it finally gave them to me. Not that it matters. What am I going to do? Poke my eyes out? The bandages feel like part of me now. The pain is gone. I figure this will be one of my last chances to write legibly, as, without my sight to correct mistakes, my hands will slowly forget the motions involved. This is a sort of self-indulgence, this writing... it's a relic of another time, because I'm certain everyone left in the world is dead... or something far worse.

I sit against the padded wall day in and day out. The entity brings me food and water. It masks itself as a kind nurse, as an unsympathetic doctor. I think it knows that my hearing has sharpened considerably now that I live in darkness. It fakes conversation in the hallways, on the off chance that I might overhear. One of the nurses talks about having a baby soon. One of the doctors lost his wife in a car accident. None of it matters, none of it is real. None of it gets to me, not like she does.

That's the worst part, the part I almost can't handle. The thing comes to me, masquerading as Amy. Its recreation is perfect. It sounds exactly like Amy, feels exactly like her. It even produces a reasonable facsimile of tears that it makes me feel on its lifelike cheeks. When it first dragged me here, it told me all the things I wanted to hear. It told me that she loved me, that she had always loved me, that it didn't understand why I did this, that we could still have a life together, if only I would stop insisting that I was being deceived. It wanted me to believe... no, it needed me to believe that she was real.

I almost fell for it. I really did. I doubted myself for the longest time. In the end, though, it was all too perfect, too flawless and too real. The false Amy used to come every day, and then every week, and finally stopped coming altogether... but I don't think the entity will give up. I think the waiting game is just another one of its gambits. I will resist it for the rest of my life, if I have to. I don't know what happened to the rest of the world, but I do know that this thing needs me to fall for its deceptions. If it needs that, then maybe, just maybe, I am a thorn in its agenda. Maybe Amy is still alive out there somewhere, kept alive only by my will to resist the deceiver. I hold on to that hope, rocking back and forth in my cell to pass the time. I will never give in. I will never break. I am a hero!

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The doctor read the paper the patient had scribbled on. It was barely readable, written in the shaky script of one who could not see. He wanted to smile at the man's steadfast resolve, a reminder of the human will to survive, but he knew that the patient was completely delusional.

After all, a sane man would have fallen for the deception long ago.

The doctor wanted to smile. He wanted to whisper words of encouragement to the delusional man. He wanted to scream, but the nerve filaments wrapped around his head and into his eyes made him do otherwise. His body walked into the cell like a puppet and told the patient, once more, that he was wrong, and that there was nobody trying to deceive him.

8:51 PM...

I place the last bone in my carefully laid trap, and check my watch. I told it to meet me at thirty seconds past nine, and it has never once been late. I feel an odd sense of freedom and calm as I stand at the crest of the desolate junkyard, the battleground for my last stand. In nine minutes, one of us will die. If it must be me, I will at least go down fighting, and no longer held in thrall by fear. I hope that this act will somehow provide me a slight redemption in Audrey's eyes, if there's an afterlife, and if I go to the same place as she did.

It was her death that started all of this. No, I shouldn't say that. My inability to cope with her death was what started it all. When she died, I let a crushing depression grip my soul, and I let it fester within me, turning my heart black and desperate. Elation fills me as I realize that I am finally able to take responsibility for my actions. I am doing the right thing, standing up to the bonewalker like this. It's been over nine months since she died, and ever before I found something or someone else to blame for my choices and misfortunes.

8:52 PM...

Eight minutes. It's strange that I think of that detail now, that it was on my eighth and final visit to the occult bookstore that the owner approached me. He'd seen me at the 'rituals,' poorly veiled excuses for anonymous orgies in which I could never bring myself to partake. Still, I lurked on the edges of the underground, watching what became of people who were even further down the path of losing themselves in the darker human emotions than I. He handed a book to me, one which I almost refused out of frustration. The other books on occult powers I'd tried, ostensibly to speak to or gain knowledge of Audrey or our unborn child, had never worked, and had left me feeling ridiculous. This one, he insisted, held something more.

The powerful surge of freedom and elation in me begins to ebb as I remember the stress and nightmare of that first ritual, exceedingly simple in design, yet so terrifying in result. The eight pages of instructive text, found near the back, were free of elaborate prose and vague promises. They merely... led. I prepared a vial of my drawn blood as the pages instructed, performing rituals based on geometric angles, observation, and thought, rather than the arcane or satanic themes I'd seen elsewhere, a fact which had curiously disturbed me.

8:53 PM...

I remember debating within myself over whether to go through with it, but, seven months into my downward spiral, I was too cynical to stop. In the end, I went through with the final step, and poured a bit of the prepared blood on my fingernails. Nothing happened at first, and I was sorely disappointed. After giving it seven minutes, I stood to leave my dim basement... and crumpled on the floor as an agonizing pain tore through my left shin.

8:54 PM...

I looked down aghast, screaming at the long, white, blade-like protrusion that had erupted from my leg, covered in crimson. Even as I watched, razors of bone slid out, tearing the skin open and forcing the iron smell of my own lifeblood into my senses. As I struggled and screamed, the protrusions spread themselves, and gripped the floor, pulling the rest of the thing delicately out through the six-inch gash in my shin.

And then, it was over. I whimpered, holding my eviscerated leg in shock. Gasping, I looked down at myself, along the floor, at the watching thing that I now recognized as being alive. It was spindly, beautiful, deadly, and utterly alien in every aspect. It seemed to be comprised of carefully sculpted bone, resembling some sort of two-foot tall spider, except that it had six legs. My blood, dark red, dripped from every delicate angle as it watched me with its six opal eyes.

8:55 PM...

Without voice, it told me that next time I would not struggle and therefore the pain would be much less. It was much, much larger than the profusely hemorrhaging slit it had made in my flesh, and I realized that it had tried to maneuver its spindly form so as to minimize the damage its entry had caused. Still in shock and breathing rapidly, I saw my exposed tibia bone, undamaged amidst the tear. Five seconds passed in silence as I calmed.

Finally, it spoke without words once more. It told me that it would do something for me, and that I would do something for it. That was the darkest moment of my life. I foolishly agreed to some unknown deal in the hopes of gaining a thing which had consumed me for months, a thing born of the blackest of all human emotions. I would visit, for the fifth and final time, the man who



had drunkenly killed my family.

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8:56 PM...

I stared at him across the table, and four guards stared at me. I had become violent on my previous four visits, yet the haggard and drained-looking murderer continued to let me see him. His beard was much longer now, and he moved as little as I did, emptiness welling in the brown of his irises as his eyes stared at mine. A part of me held back, decrying what I was about to do. The other part of me prompted the constant pain from the stitches in my leg, reminding me of the hurt that had not gone away since that moment, that last sweet moment, in our car.

I put out my hand, holding the vial hidden within. He put his hand out under mine, palm down. Four tense seconds passed and then I dripped some of the blood on his fingernails. I looked up to see his reaction, but there was none. He even seemed to relax. Could he have known? Is this what he... wanted? The guards took him away, and his empty brown eyes never left mine.

8:57 PM...

The next day, I received a call. He had died, and the coroner, a personal friend who had known Audrey, spoke to me personally. He said he'd never seen anything like it... as if something had emerged from the inside of the man's ribs, and scratched his heart for three hours before piercing it like a blade. He had died in immense and horrible pain. I hung up wordlessly. I felt... better. If anything, I felt even emptier.

It was then that the bonewalker returned. I froze at the pain, and it maneuvered its lithe body through my flesh without breaking any of the stitches. I looked at it in wonderment for a moment, but quickly remembered my promise. In three days, it told me in silence, a senator would be visiting the city. I was to go to the rally, meet him, and touch the prepared blood to his nails with my teeth, through whatever means necessary. Terrified, I refused, and the bonewalker shoved a lightning fast bladed limb through my stitches. The other end erupted from my right arm, rending the flesh outwards. I saw the skin from my arm hanging loosely where it had been torn, and I screamed in pain and surprise. It withdrew its razor limb, and said no more. I nodded, and steeled my eyes, nodding until I felt it slip back through my leg, and back to wherever it came from.

8:58 PM...

Having redone the stitches myself in the two places I was injured, I found myself unwillingly present at the senator's rally. I had been patted down for weapons, but of course I had none. All I had on me was a small vial in an inner pocket, and the security guards hadn't found it. I wish they had. I wish they'd taken the thing, recognized it like the murderous man I'd had killed. If they'd taken the vial, I could just tell the bonewalker I'd failed... but what would it do to me if I did?

Thousands of roaring people moved about the huge auditorium. None of them had any idea what was about to happen. None of them could help me. None of them would believe me. If Audrey could see me now, would she turn away? Two security guards eyed me, noticing my sweat and nervousness, but they'd already patted me down. There was nothing they could do. I moved toward the walkway that the senator would enter through, and joined the crowd lining the sides.

8:59 PM...

The gray-haired senator, clad in an expensive suit and looking cheerful, walked down the path with his entourage. People cheered and clapped, and he shook hands as he went down the sides. For one brief, terrible moment, I thought he might not shake my hand. For one brief, horrible moment, I was terrified that he would. Then, suddenly, he was past. I looked around in confusion for a few moments, but then, aghast, I looked at my hand. My instincts had taken over, and I'd done it without thinking. I saw the senator frown, and wipe a few drops of red liquid off of his fingers, and then continue on towards the stage. I ran.

In the days following, I sat by the television in horror, waiting for that one phrase, waiting for that one broadcast. I had I'd... I couldn't even think the words. I couldn't comprehend what I'd done. A week of darkness and terror passed, and then I saw the senator on the news. He was alive... I'd failed...! A moment of relief and fear washed over me... then, I saw his face. He seemed nervous, drawn, and worried. He was on the interview announcing a change in his policies. I screamed hoarsely at the television. I hadn't been tasked to assassinate the senator. I'd been tasked to give the bonewalker control over him!

9:00 PM...

The bonewalker came again, and it was then I realized that our deal would never end. For weeks, it made it clear that I had no choice, and ordered me to several more tasks whose nature and purpose I could not discern. It made it clear, as its opal eyes stared at me in silence, that disobedience would be met with death. I thought about Audrey while I lay in bed each night, scratching my poorly-stitched leg wound. My arm wound was narrow, and had healed adequately.

At some point in those black and empty nights, as I thought back on the warm and happy times of our marriage, my grief and depression suddenly fell away. I realized that I had no future with this thing controlling me. If I wanted to be worthy of seeing Audrey again when I died, I couldn't let it continue whatever plan it had for the human race. First a senator, and then... what? There was no way it ended there.

It was then that I resolved to end this. I devised a trap, and begged the bonewalker to come at this time on this night. I was under its control, though it was not altogether against doing favors for its slaves. It enjoyed torturing and killing any whom its 'pet' disliked, with zero compassion... I can only pray that it doesn't suspect treachery. If it does, it can rip me to shreds from the inside, in ways too cruel and horrible to imagine. I look at my watch.

Time's up.

As my arm falls from looking at my watch, a white streak appears in my vision. Horrible pain shoots through me, but I was expecting it. It's just the location that's different... it must suspect! Another razor bone shoots out of my face, tearing open the left side of my nose. Screaming, I reach up, and grab hold of its limbs, which slice deeply into my hands. I can't let it escape!

I pull with all my might, my hands quickly becoming bloody messes of flayed flesh. For the first time, the bonewalker makes a sound, a sort of roar erupting from near my mouth. My mind erupts into chaos because of the pain, and I turn to animalistic rage, roaring back. It thrashes, and bone spikes erupt from my right leg and my left shoulder. Urged on by its panic, I explode with energy and fiery pain and tear the thing forward by its limbs. The eruptions abruptly recede, and the bonewalker's body rips through the skin of my face. I feel each bit of skin and muscle tear and separate, and one of my eyes goes dark, but I can't stop. I throw the spinning and blood-soaked creature into the compactor below...

A compactor I've filled with vial-treated animal bones.

The bonewalker thrashes, and its limbs begin sinking into each bone that they touch. My guess was correct, that it uses bones as portals somehow, and I just threw it into a pit filled with dozens... and there's about to be more. Staggering to the compactor controls, I activate it. The bonewalker struggles wildly, its limbs sinking into and emerging from bones in thousands of different angles and directions. Thoroughly mired, it can't figure out how to pull itself out, let alone escape. As the compactor begins crushing the trap, I can see bits of the bonewalker extending between almost every single bleached surface, its body completely trapped in a thousand twisting dimensions. That roar comes again as the bones crack, crush, and become hundreds, and then thousands of fragments. As the compactor walls meet, there is an immense shattering sound, as of something delicate exploding.

Finally, silence falls.

I fall to the ground, going limp as the ambulance I called in preparation arrives. The paramedics load me into the stretcher, looking at me with shock, horror, and panic. I sway with the vehicle as it rushes to the hospital. A paramedic shouts at me in desperation, asking what happened to my face, but I can only lie there, floating and disconnected, as everything goes dark. I made things right... I won... Audrey...

Roan-Hinsky Receiver Transcripts

Received Broadcast #0470542 (DALTON)

[static]... Here, Dalton, you can use this one...

[light equipment noises]... [background conversation]...

[walking noises, followed by silence]...

I don't really believe in you. I just want to put that out there up front. I'm not going to worship you. I would, however, like to establish a discourse of sorts. Well, as much as can be had with one-way communication. I'm not going to lie – I'm hoping that my words may in some way... sway your favor... toward helping me in my planned endeavor. I don't believe that you are gullible, but I'm not stupid. I've seen some of your minor miracles. I call them minor purposely, to goad you. Others are astonished and amazed when they broadcast their 'prayers' to you in times of need and a piece of equipment suddenly appears, or a failing component of our domain is suddenly fixed. Amazing, yes, but the question still remains – why is that the extent of your actions for our existence? Why do we still have to live underground? Why do we have to struggle and task and fight to grow food in artificial soil by the sickly light of the mists?

This is my first time talking to you, Those Who Came Before, so perhaps I should tell you more about who I am. I always think I should do this because I have always had the strange notion that perhaps you simply do not know enough about our lives to take major action. The most purported miracles are usually specific requests about specific locations, and all regard problems with simple solutions. My own father was once trapped in an air-machinery room by a heavy door whose rust finally sealed it shut; when those on the outside 'prayed' to you for help, a can of oil mysteriously appeared in the room with him, allowing him to remove the rust and escape. Though you did put the can there somehow, I'm certain you didn't know the full story. I just wanted you to know that I recognize and appreciate your help, even at the same time that I demand explanation for why that is all the help that you provide. You've never once answered us with words, so I don't truly expect any answers from you, but it can't hurt to try.

You've probably already noticed a difference in my communication to you, as well. Amid hundreds, or possibly thousands, of mundane requests and simple-minded broadcast prayers, a voice speaking to you at length and as an equal must catch your attention. I'm hoping this is true, and that you're not offended. I am simply one of those with the rare mixture of intelligence and curiosity that causes me to diverge significantly from my fellows. The saying among my people is that I have 'a fire in my soul' and I understand why, for I feel constantly compelled by a burning spark of energy to seek, question, and understand practically everything.

It's quite painful to be who I am, as I am surrounded by small-minded and mundane people that have very little will of their own beyond the desire for friends, family, and becoming 'successful' within the confines of our underground domain. It is both sad and terrifying to me that literally everyone else in our civilization can grow up, live, love, lose, be sad, be happy, and succeed around like bugs in a puddle, completely oblivious to the possibilities of existence, entirely within the confines of the four habitable floors of this underground complex.

Many times in my youth I feared that I would be driven insane by the unquestioning and plodding nature of the rest of humanity. From an early age I questioned like every other child, recursively asking 'why?' until adults grew angry, but, as others grew up and lost their sense of wonder, I remained insatiable for knowledge. By my eighteenth harvest season, I had already delved into most of the knowledge in our computer database. Now, twenty-four, I have long since exhausted all the topics of history, biology, physics, and astronomy that our computers have preserved for what must be untold centuries. This centuries-long age I have estimated by the corrosion of various metals in the machinery rooms; chemistry, too, I learned from the aging glass monitors.

Astronomy, as you might guess, is what tore open the largest gash in my soul, exposing me painfully to the fire that burns within. I've been underground my entire life. I've never seen 'the atmosphere,' or 'the Sun.' I want to see 'stars' so badly. When I was younger I would seek out specific hallways within our four-floor world that allowed me to see the longest distance possible. The farthest I've ever seen at once was five hundred feet, in the interconnected cloth processing rooms. The prospect of seeing into unbridled space, absorbing light millions of years old from stars and worlds across the distant universe, has seized me utterly.

I made the mistake in my youth of mentioning that, if the surface proved habitable once more after whatever

cataclysm forced humanity underground, we might even move our civilization into the open heights and infinite expanse of ‘land and ‘sea,’ where we could abandon the rigid hierarchy and monotonous industry of survival that has held our four-floor civilization together for so many centuries. The ‘rigid hierarchy’ did not like that at all. It has taken me many years to convince them to let me undertake my expedition to higher floors, and, even now, I believe they are only allowing me to leave as a clean method of removing me from society. My constant questioning and overcoming of decades-old structural and engineering problems normally left to the upper hierarchy to solve has always caused them endless trouble... though, among these plodding dullards, the slightest mental elevation, the slightest curiosity, the slightest frown of thought, is considered a drastic response.

No, I shouldn’t be so harsh. There are a few whom I feel... attached to... though I doubt that I could ever love them. Others of my kind love each other. We are simply too different. It would be like one of them loving a fly – the fly simply cannot feel or respond in kind to a human, ever. In the same way, none of the people in my world will ever truly understand me or be able to comprehend the heights to which my mind has soared, the worlds that I’ve imagined, and the understanding of reality that I have achieved. Though, my small few friends are precious to me nonetheless, for being slightly less monotonous, and for keeping me sane in my younger despairing years.

Belby, my best friend, has always stood by me, even when others would cast us both out because I caused them too much distress with my questions. He has, in some small way, absorbed a tiny bit of the fire of my soul, even sometimes able to discourse with me over the possible nature of other floors. I am careful, however, never to mention the surface, let alone the Sun, stars, and other worlds, for the few times that I have let slip concepts to that effect, Belby suffered night terrors for several months. Belby is going with me on my expedition – I pray that I can somehow, while on our journey up, expand his mind enough to handle those important concepts, before we reach the surface, or else he may go insane if we actually reach it. Wait, let me rephrase that. I hope I can do that. I don’t pray. I’m not praying to you.

Rowina, in her singular and unstoppable affection, has also become someone I care about. I feel strange saying that. I have feigned annoyance at her constant and unwavering attempts to emotionally engage me since the earliest age I can remember, three, maybe four harvest seasons old. She has never courted another, and refused every other courter, despite my two decades of rejection. Even today she brought me a yellow weed she found on the corner of a food-patch. Her intentions were true, but the weed only reminded me of the ‘flowers’ I read about on the computers, and of the fact that she had no idea *why* the giving of colorful plants was part of romantic initiation. She merely did it to follow tradition. I wish I could explain to her the hollow emptiness that her attempts cause in me, but she could never understand. She will go with me to the surface, I’m sure of it, if only to follow me blindly as she has done all her life.

The only person I care about that is not going with me is Elder Fahl. My own father and mother had no idea how to handle one with fire in his soul, but Elder Fahl, in his old age ‘wisdom,’ at least understood that I was compelled to be inquisitive. It was not something I chose to do to annoy those around me. Many times, Fahl saved me from social punishment, pulling me aside and instructing me on ways to fit in. It was an extremely painful process, learning to hide the greater part of myself from others, but necessary.

The smallest of the concepts buzzing around in my mind could easily destroy this mechanical and plodding society. I think each and every person around me sensed that deadly threat in my dangerously pointed questions, and an eventual fear-frenzy of violence directed at me was the only possible result if I did not learn to restrain myself. In many ways, Elder Fahl saved my life. When he passed away a few weeks ago, I finally built up my resolve to go on this expedition. In his old and waddling ways, he was the closest thing to family I had down here. Now, there is no reason for me to stay, especially if Belby and Rowina are coming with me. In many ways, I knew this day was destined to come, for the fire in my soul has raged against the walls of every barrier I’ve ever found, from learning to walk, to mastering the information in the database, to improving inefficient jobs as I grew older, and now to the very walls of our four-floor civilization.

I am compelled to go exploring. I have no choice.

In many ways, I imagine myself like you, Those Who Came Before. You lived – wait, are living? Yes, I suppose ‘a living’ is the correct phrasing – you are living in a time before the cataclysm. You must be on the surface! I’ve read our history data, and much of it is intact before the ancient blank-data period that I believe marks the beginning of life underground. I have always counted myself as one day being among men like Columbus and Clark & Lewis. Tomorrow is that day. Tomorrow, I go to seek a new world... actually, no. Tomorrow, I seek the Old World. Discovery and rediscovery are both important. Perhaps people will read about me hundreds of years from now, while they sit under open sky on distant worlds, reading by the light of stars and Suns. That thought, a stark contrast to the cramped gray prison of stone and tradition that now encases humanity, literally brings tears to my eyes.

Received Broadcast #0470551 (DALTON)

[static]... [male voice]... Want some food, Dalton?

In a minute, Belby.

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[distant female voice]... Will you eat with me, Dalton?

In a moment, Rowina. It's been a long day. I'm going to speak to Those Who Came Before, and update them on our journey.

[distant female voice]... It's good to see you finally praying, Dalton.

[long moment of silence]...

I wish I had the heart to explain to her that I'm not praying. Or, I wish she had the ability to understand the fine differences in theology I hold. I believe you exist, I just don't believe that you are gods. This technology, this tachyonic communication, sends electronic signals to the past. The people of my society know that, and they believe that you are our ancestors, which is technically true... but they elevate you as gods in the nebulous and mythical past. I have studied physics and time and history. I know that you are simply monumental lords of technology, lords who, at many points, mastered the entire world, and even visited other worlds, called 'Moons' and 'Mar' in the ancient tongue. Or is the 's' switched? I can't remember. I'm sure you can understand me.

[distant male voice]... You ready for that food yet, Dalton?

In a minute, Belby.

Today we breached the sealed staircase door on two hundred and eleven, the fourth and highest floor of our civilization. Twelve members of the upper hierarchy were there to bring us supplies, see us off, and to seal the door behind us. Myths tell of the terrors on other floors, so they had no choice but to weld it shut again. We have three months to return, before the guard posted to listen for our knock will no longer stand watch. For all their intent to be rid of me, they did equip us rather nicely, with food, ropes, and leather air-suits in case we encounter places with damaged air systems.

Belby and Rowina were terrified, but followed me with some coaxing, especially at the promise that I would protect them. In some ways, even though people fear me, they regard me almost as a hero. I have saved many lives and improved many inefficient jobs and machines, a fact which many conveniently forget when I later become a disruption to the status quo. Belby trusts me to protect him, while I feel that Rowina would walk into certain death simply to follow me. Her 'love' would inspire me, if it didn't feel like the dogged and dumb affection of a pet rat-dog, constantly returning to its master even when kicked.

For my part, I was immediately filled with apprehension at ascending to find the staircase was emblazoned with rusted metal numbers at the next floor that denoted, not two hundred and ten as I expected, but two hundred and twelve. How or why the floor numbers go up instead of down is perplexing, but I don't pretend to understand your logic, Those Who Came Before. Perhaps 'one' or 'zero' is the deepest floor, and 'two hundred and fifty' the shallowest. At least, I hope that's as far as we have to travel. If the floor numbers go up to some arbitrary number, there is no limit to the number of floors we might have to traverse to reach the surface. As of this broadcast, we are on floor two hundred and twenty-one.

Furthermore, the glass walls that house the energy mists continue to exist on each floor, providing power and subdued light to the strange and numerous plants that we have encountered on the ten floors that we have traversed today. I can't yet discount the myths of the horrific and bizarre dangers of the fabled 'other floors,' but, so far, we have stayed quiet and stuck to the rubble-strewn stone staircase, which has its own upward well. For each floor, a door leads from the staircase into the main open areas. We have merely peeked inside each of the nine before, until our safe well abruptly ended, not at a cave-in or collapse, but at a natural or artificed design point. At floor two hundred and twenty-one, the staircase simply... stopped. We are camping on the inner side of the heavy metal door, saving the true beginning of our adventure until after a period of rest.

We haven't gone far, but I need to give Belby and Rowina time to adjust. They are visibly agitated at having walked up ten floors – already two and a half times the extent of our entire society. There are no energy mist containers in the walls here, it is dark enough to sleep well if we turn off our electric torches. I'm too excited to sleep. The fire in me has been fanned irreversibly by the prospect of exploring the true unknown for the first time in my life. I'll let them sleep, and I'll keep watch, and then our adventure!

[static]...

[male voice screaming]...

Please, Those Who Came Before, I need your help! I need... bandages, surgical instruments, stitching material! I'm  
I'm...

[female crying]...

[male voice screaming]...

... in the central shaft on floor two hundred and twenty-one! We're on a small ledge next to the open air pit! Please  
help us! He's going to bleed to death!

Received Broadcast #0470631 (DALTON)

[static]...

... thank you so much... I got the kit... he's stopped bleeding...

[distant ragged breathing sounds]

Received Broadcast #0470635 (DALTON)

[static]...

... again, thank you! He's going to live! He's going to live...

[relieved sigh]

That thing... some horrific thing... it *bit* him! It was slimy, tentacled, disgusting in appearance and smell... I've never  
seen or even conceptualized anything so horrifying... it came out of nowhere and laid ten jagged teeth right in his calf. We couldn't  
get it off, Rowina was screaming... I took the power cell out of my electric torch and burnt the thing's eye. It abruptly released a  
disappeared into the thick undergrowth. I couldn't see it by the dim light of the energy mist walls, and the lights overhead were long  
since destroyed... it's still on this floor somewhere, and there are probably more of them all over these levels...

These floors have a unique ecosystem all their own. I believe that at least ten levels must be interconnected with  
decayed openings or broken air-system controls. A creature like that could not have survived and adapted down here without a  
significant food chain. We have seen several crawling meaty bugs that may be the bottom of the ecosystem that has developed here  
over the centuries. The strange plants here seem to efficiently live off of the energy mist containers' life-giving light, get eaten by the  
bugs, and then unknown varied animals must live off of those... and then that horrific predator must feed on those animals. It would  
be amazing to research if we had the time or instruments... or if our first encounter with this new mini-world had not been so violent.

That disgusting predator creature is probably the source of our fearful myths about the other floors. When we go

back, I should recommend their destruction. A minor alteration of the air-system balance should wipe out the plant life on the floors, and eventually eliminate all the offending alien life through starvation. The upper hierarchy members may actually listen, such a minor effort could result in the expansion of our society into many more floors.

I've cauterized Belby's wounds and wrapped his leg. We're going to rest here, sealed behind the metal doors to the central shaft, until he recovers. This shaft makes me nervous. I don't understand what the purpose of an empty shaft is, especially not one that disappears ominously into darkness above and below us with no discernible function. There's a completely separate system, so what could this shaft possibly be for? The narrow ledge that we are resting on is nerve-wracking.

Rowina calmed down a bit ago, and is sleeping quietly against my side. I hope I don't wake her up with this conversation, but you helped me save Belby's life, so I feel a debt of gratitude toward you, Those Who Came Before. If it had been anyone else but me there with him, that thing would have killed him outright. Intelligence is an amazing weapon... but I'm sure you know that. As jarring as that first encounter with new beings was, the fire in me is only growing hotter. I can't wait to see what's above. Belby and Rowina both want to go home – I can sense it – but we can't stop now. I told them that it's too dangerous to go back right now with that thing out there, and they uneasily accepted my reasoning.

Ah! I see a ladder across the shaft from us, leading both up and down. It'll be difficult climbing for Belby, with his wounded leg, but perhaps I'll tie us together with some rope that we brought in our supplies, for added safety.

Received Broadcast #0470935 (DALTON)

[static]...

Awhile since my last broadcast. I apologize. Once Belby was well enough, we climbed the ancient ladder. At many points it was broken or missing rungs, so the going was exceedingly difficult. We are now holding on tightly to the end of the ladder and indeed the end of the entire shaft. I estimate that we have traveled up at least thirty floors, and I am anxious to leave this nightmarish ascent... although I am equally hesitant to open the shaft's metal doors and encounter a new floor. The last one we had to traverse ended up in Belby nearly dying. This one is over ten times higher than the height of our entire civilization. What terror will we find here? We might as well do it, for there is no way I am turning back...

Received Broadcast #0470939 (DALTON)

Those Who Came Before, do you know what these machines on floor two hundred and thirty-five do? I am standing here now, wandering around with Rowina. Belby is resting by the shaft. There is no danger here – no plants, no creatures. I almost wish that there were. This floor is disconcerting and sublimely terrible in its efficient design.

Everything is white, and bright. The lights overhead are penetrating and absolute. Every tile of the ceiling emits a powerful glow. Great white walls, massive clean metal boxes, and skirts of glass create a maze almost maddening in its simplicity. There is no attempt to entrap us with complicated pathways – in fact, I can easily find my way to the outer energy mist walls from any point – but that only makes the purpose of the floor that much more mysterious. Who, if anyone, lives here? Why and how is it so clean? What is its purpose?

A vast portion of this place's undercurrent of unease is related to its similarity to the description of Heaven given in our holy text. All of the details are here – bright light, whiteness, purity and cleanliness... and, most of all, exacting order. None of the rust, decay, and chaos of the lower levels exists here. I am not a believer in our holy text, but that almost makes this worse. I don't know how to process this place. Belby and Rowina simply stare around at things with a suffusing happiness, smiling at the sheer purity of everything around us, with no thought as to its physical function or actual meaning. I, too, feel a stark contrast here between our dirty and cramped existence, but I also know that appearances can be deceiving.

Come on, let's look for another staircase or shaft up.

[distant female voice]... are you sure we should leave, Dalton?

Yes, we can't stay here indefinitely...

[distant male voice]... why not, Dalton? Do you know what this place could be, Dalton? If we just stay here forever...

what happens, Dalton?

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If we stay here forever, we'll starve to death. Besides, if this is the place you think it is, then we're surrounded by ghosts, spirits, and dead people. They're probably touching you all over right now, causing the hair on the back of your neck to raise or making you shiver.

[distant female voice]... I'm scared, Dalton. Can we go, Dalton?

I thought you might not like that idea. Hey, there's a staircase over here! But... it's sealed off by strange glass and metal walls... how do we get inside? There's some kind of interface with nine squares, and one digit on each.

[male voice]... it's a password device, Dalton!

Very good, Belby! Very perceptive. But what's the password? Let me try one...

[four varied tones]...

[abrupt beep]...

I guess that's not it. It took four tones before it beeped. There are so many combinations, we could be here forever. Those Who Came Before, I hate to ask you yet another favor, but can you somehow help us get through this? I'm going to try 5, 6, 2 next in the mean time...

[four varied tones]...

[slow beep, and sliding sound]...

It worked! Did you do that, Those Who Came Before...? I find it hard to believe that I simply got lucky. But wait, you can change the combination on this door, that means you really are the builders of this whole underground facility! The holy text is actually right in that regard! This is amazing!

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[static]...

The facility is getting smaller the closer to the surface we get. I firmly believe that we are almost there. We follow the staircase up another fifty floors. At intermittent periods we opened the door to the main area of a floor, and found many strange and varied habitats within. Many floors were empty. Many were filled with strange growing things, each floor highly distinct from the others. One floor had no air at all; probably due to a serious air-system malfunction. Poor Belby almost got sucked right in, for which surely would have been a most horrible death. Rowina and I managed to pull him back and shut the thankfully air-tight door.

By far my favorite was the last floor we peeked in upon – neon blue moss covered the hard cement floor, apparently growing purely by the light of the energy mist containers and the natural moisture in the air. For what reason this moss was neon blue, we could not discern, but we dared not touch it to investigate. Rather, we stared out of the door at the extent of the entire floor, which was now down to a roughly square area approximately two hundred feet wide. I was almost driven to distraction by excitement at this point, realizing that our entire underground complex must terminate at the surface very soon if the floors continued to shrink in size.

Currently, we are resting in an empty floor, oddly devoid of absolutely everything except the omnipresent lifeless...



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