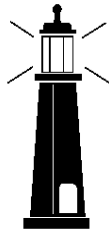


Memoir
of the
Masses:

A
Tale
of
Smoking Mirrors



Erie Harbor Productions
An American Entertainment
Company

Memoir of the Masses: A Tale of Smoking Mirrors
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Foreword

Please allow me a moment to clarify a few elements regarding Memoir of the Masses. The entire story is written from the first-person, present-tone perspective. The unique feature of this narration is that not all of the chapters are told by one particular character. To help readers, the name of the narrator of a certain chapter is posted on the side of each page.

All words that are *italic* pertain vampirism.

All CAPITALIZED WORDS are audible noises that occur during the course of the story.

Acknowledgement

At this time, I want to express my deepest appreciation toward the various nonfictional sources used in the formation of Memoir of the Masses.

Though definitely a fictional piece of literature, Memoir of the Masses utilizes facts and theories diligently gathered and formulated by various individuals. I will not even begin to humor the thought that the research done in the making Memoir of the Masses matches the decades of study that has taken place before me.

For those that seek these scholarly, nonfictional sources, please set your sights on gentlemen like George C. Valliant, Richard Townsend, Michael Coe, Rene Millon and Alfonso Caso. These are just to name a few.

The following are some of their works:

Aztecs of Mexico, George C. Vaillant, 1st edition

The Aztecs, Richard Townsend

The Aztecs: People of the Sun, Alfonso Caso

Aztecs: Reign of Blood & Splendor, Time-Life Books

By no means is it required to read these works, but it would deliver much insight on the elements shaping this story.

For example, the timeline of Memoir of the Masses is based on the two calendars developed by the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerican. They are the Xiuhpohualli, a 365-day solar count, and the Tonalpohualli, a 260-day count. These intricate systems of counting days came to light before the birth of Christ.

The dates listed for the Xiupohualli in Aztecs of Mexico, George C. Vaillant, correspond with those utilized in Memoir of the Masses.

The borders that line the pages of this story are based on the symbols used to determine a day in the Mesoamerican 52-year century. From bottom to top, the three symbols/gods represent the year, week and day of a particular chapter.

In addition, I would like to express my thanks toward Amy, Carolyn, Mary and Wanda. All of them provided much needed criticism and editorial services for this work.

And with my last words of gratitude, I would like to express them towards the people of Mexico.

Thanks. Thanks for everything.

Chapter 1

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: Samuel Hamilton

Sasha Beauna is here. Here, now. Of all the days, and after all of these years, she's sitting in my office, waiting. Waiting with her ever faithful servant, Joseph.

I can't believe it. What has it been? Nearly thirty years. Hah! And that time was also about a job.

In the early sixties, when we last spoke, she asked me to work for her friend, Dr. Capowski, in Philadelphia at the Wynn-Stark Institute. But after the polio vaccination fiasco in the Belgian Congo I distanced myself from all government-sponsored programs.

And now she wants me to take a large shipment of blood into the remote district of Kivu in Zaire. I am heading there, but I wasn't figuring on going in so deep. It's like she thinks I'm part blood merchant, part safari hunter.

Hah! The Madame never did have a problem asking for the impossible.

Boy! She looks horrible, though, like she could die any day. How old she is? She has to be at least seventy to eighty years old. She just looks so fragile. Her red and white spring dress shows more life than she does. She has no meat on her bones, only her leather, liver-spotted skin. Twig-thin forearms, cataract sunglasses, helplessly bound to her shiny fixed-arm Gendron.

I can't believe she has a chair made by that company. They've been out of business for several years, now. I wonder if she forces Joseph to polish that antique wheelchair; it still looks new. She treats him as if he is her house slave. Hah! She treats everyone in a condescending manner. She can be so damned demanding.

Samuel James Hamilton, that was not nice.

I shouldn't have come into work. I should be spending this time with Sean. Instead, I am trying to work out some last-minute details for my trip to Zaire.

I can't even think straight. I barely slept a wink last night. Sean's Aunt Lila kept talking; and every time I tried to end the conversation, she started crying. Crying like the victim she always thinks she is. Boy, how many times did she say that she was shortchanged somehow, some way?

For Heaven's sake, she has outlived my Helen by nearly twenty years and now their baby brother, Mitch. Boy, Mitch. I still can't believe you're gone.

And Sean. He's just so devastated. My son confided more in you than me. What should I expect, though? Mitch, you raised Sean. I was never around. Hell just like now. But Sean doesn't have anyone to turn to this time.

Sean's only real friend, Tony, moved to Manhattan a while back. Hah, Brian, Tony's father wasn't too thrilled about him accepting the Columbia basketball scholarship. Boy. Thompson acted offended that Tony had the slightest desire to be a basketball star. Like Brian and his doctorate of Law had brought the Thompson's family far beyond the shameful backwardness of his father's farm. Hah, it's funny that Tony admires his grandfather more than Brian.

Boy, that's a whole other story.

But what about my boy, Sean? What can I do? I have never really been there for him. And I am not going to start pretending that I am there now. He deserves more than that.

I need to do something, though. Maybe I could call Tony's mom and have her have Tony call Sean.

Oh Helen, I need help.

After this trip to Africa, I need to reevaluate everything between me, this job, my good son and this crazy world. I bet I have enough things going on in the market and mutual funds that I can seriously think about retiring maybe by the end of the year. A new beginning.



Chapter 2

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: Sasha Beauna

It has been several years since I last saw Samuel. Time hasn't been the kindest to him. Weight hangs heavy around his waist. His heart struggles along. His straggly gray hair recedes high on his forehead. Heartache and loneliness drag him down.

I wish I didn't need to trouble him, but I can trust him to handle this exactly as I foresee it. Samuel is spotless. Over the forty years that I've known him, I can think of no instance where he crossed or wronged anyone. He is the one to handle this huge shipment of tainted blood.

It's unfortunate that so much tragedy surrounds him, though. What a shame, lost your wife while you gained a son. It must be torture accepting such circumstances.

What is Joseph messing around with? Is it a picture frame? A picture of Samuel and someone. Possibly his son. Whoever it is, why is Joseph so intrigued by them? He handles the damn thing as if it were a photo of Jesus, himself. I've never seen him behave in such a manner.

Look, his hand trembles!

At times, he is still the rude field slave that I *changed* so long ago.

"Joseph! Put that picture back on Samuel's desk. He will be returning any moment."

He ignores me.

Joseph!

He looks at me angrily. Hah! He still hates answering to me, especially since I have taken to spending my public time in this mini-Cadillac. He hates pushing me around in this chair. He hates that I so easily fool so many.

Power, my boy! Power!

So don't test me, Joseph!
Sweat slithers from his wide smooth brow.
Yes! Feel my power. Know that I can do much worse.
My blood in you shall boil till you explode.

“Sasha, you need to see this,” he sharply remarks.
Joseph!

“Madame, please look at this,” he insists, “and you will understand the need.”

“Well, bring it here then. You know that I can't get out of this chair while we are here in Samuel's office,” I remind him.

“Yes, Madame.”

Within half of a breath, Joseph stands behind me holding the picture over my lap for me to see.

Such a good servant. He has been so faithful for so long. God, how long has it been?

Hah! Well, I *turned* him just before Lincoln freed the Negroes. Hah! How ironic. Joseph simply traded masters. From labor to blood. Maybe that's why Joseph has been so easily controlled. He has been a slave his whole life. He knows nothing else.

“See, Madame! See!” he declares.

“So what? It's a picture of Samuel and his son. So put it back.”

Now!

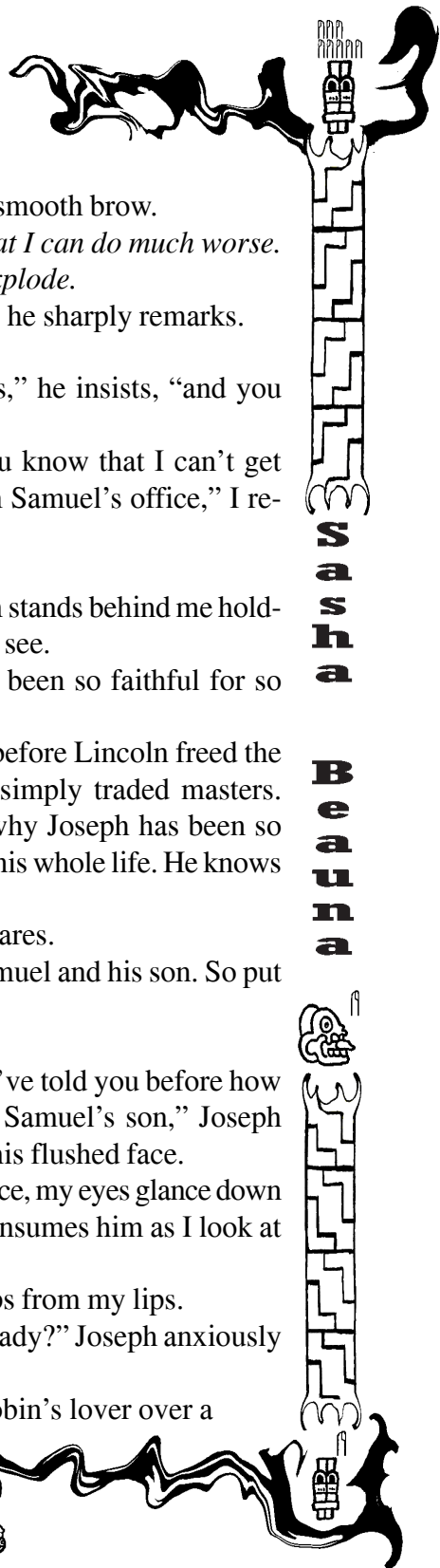
“Please, Madame, stop that. I've told you before how much that hurts. Please just look at Samuel's son,” Joseph declares as he wipes the sweat from his flushed face.

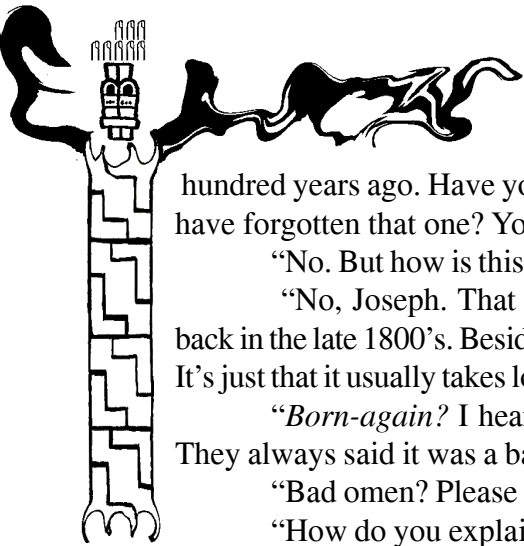
Though irritated by his insistence, my eyes glance down at the picture. Instantly, I see what consumes him as I look at Hamilton's son.

“It can't be. Not already,” slips from my lips.

“What do you mean? Not already?” Joseph anxiously asks. “Is it or is it not Alex?”

“Of course not. You killed Robin's lover over a





hundred years ago. Have you killed so many people that you have forgotten that one? Your first one?"

"No. But how is this possible then? That boy is Alex."

"No, Joseph. That is not Alex. You destroyed Alex back in the late 1800's. Besides, I have seen this happen before. It's just that it usually takes longer for a face to be *born-again*."

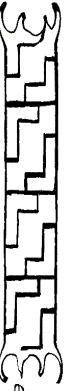
"*Born-again*? I heard *the others* mention that word. They always said it was a bad omen."

"Bad omen? Please spare me your superstitions."

"How do you explain it?" he questions.

"What is there to explain, Joseph? You pick pups from a particular pack, you're going to get duplicate-looking dogs. Besides, who cares? That boy is the least of our concerns. Stay focused! You're not staying focused. That's what got us here in the first place. Now put the picture back."

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Chapter 3

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: Maurice Joseph

Stay focused. My fault. Right. Every time there's some problem, it's of my making. Right.

I told you that your Johnny boy was going to be a problem. Now look at us. We are scrambling to get someone to cover the shipments.

Damn you, Sasha. If we had done things as I wanted, we wouldn't be in this mess. And now this. My first *born-again*. This picture is not a good sign. *The others* said it never was. I knew we shouldn't have come here. You haven't had contact with Samuel Hamilton in god knows how many years.

If I remember right, he refused the last job you offered him. Hell! Now you want him to move all of this bad blood. Damn you, woman. You make no sense at times.

I swear you are losing it, Sasha. You should have taken a new body over three years ago. The demon runs your body ragged. Your mind *suffers* under *the hunger*. And I have to deal with the fallout.

Hah! Sasha, my sweet little Chernobyl.

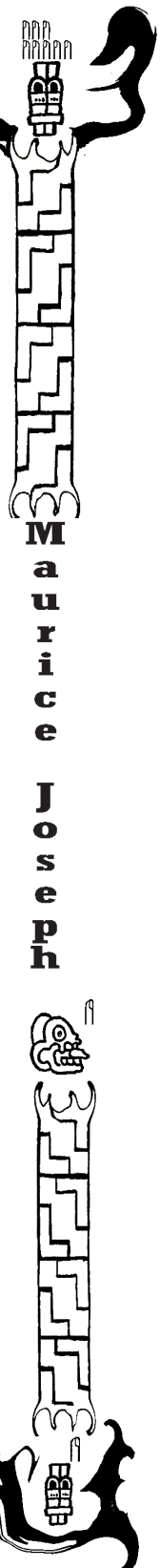
To hell with that! I just have to bide my time and bust free from you, witch, once and for all. When the time is right, I'll be ready and strong enough. And it shall be soon.

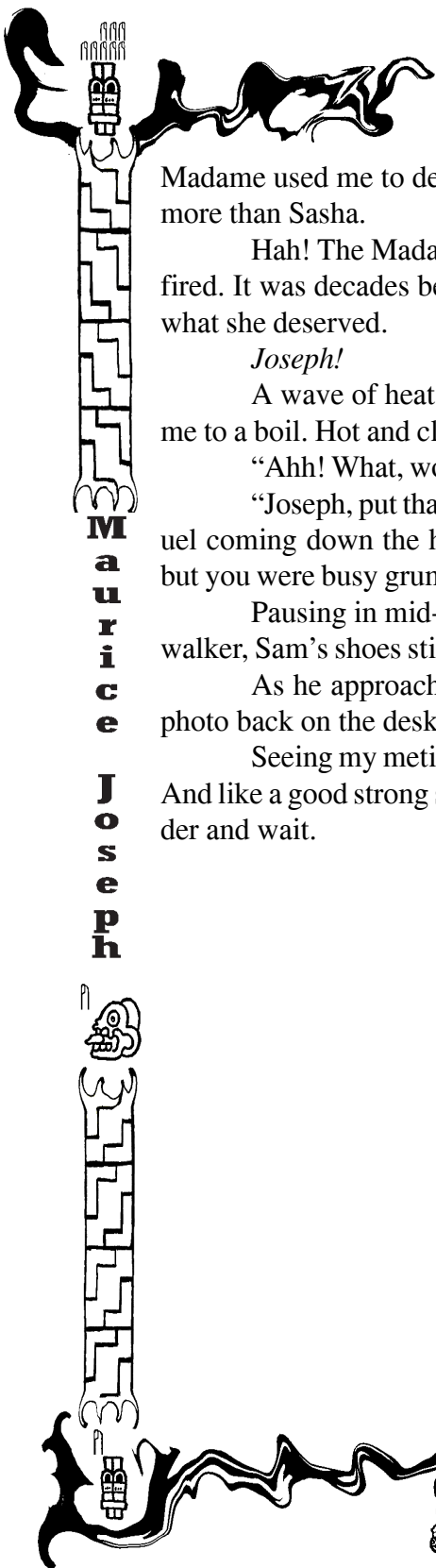
Still, that boy's face haunts me. All this started for me with him.

I don't need to be thinking about that boy right now. It's just difficult that he was the first and Robin loved him dearly. I never meant to hurt her.

She is the only person that I never meant any harm. It's just that the Madame had imprisoned me and I... I had just *changed*. I... I... I couldn't fight *the hunger*, any longer.

To this day, his emotions and memories linger. The





Madame used me to destroy the only thing that Robin loved more than Sasha.

Hah! The Madame's plan to draw Robin closer backfired. It was decades before Robin spoke with Sasha. That's what she deserved.

Joseph!

A wave of heat rolls over me. She turns her blood in me to a boil. Hot and clammy my skin becomes.

"Ahh! What, woman?"

"Joseph, put that picture back on the desk. I hear Samuel coming down the hall. You would have heard him, too, but you were busy grumbling."

Pausing in mid-thought, I listen. Though not a heavy walker, Sam's shoes still click clearly down the marble hall.

As he approaches the closed office door, I place the photo back on the desk, exactly over its dust outline.

Seeing my meticulous manner, the Madame smiles.

And like a good strong servant, I retreat behind her left shoulder and wait.



Chapter 4

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: JR Mansfield

Where the hell is Hamilton? He acts as though he can come and go as he wants. I wonder if he showed up to his other classes today.

He's lucky I didn't expel him last month when he broke the school's curfew. I know he was doing research in the lab after hours, but I can't have these boys running loose in the midnight hours. They could easily sabotage the labs after Sean finally goes to bed.

After seeing what he has achieved, he's crazy if he thinks I'm going to allow him to represent the Institute at the National Association of Sciences' annual convention in New York. There's no way he can go public right now. I don't need any more public attention than I already have. Quoting a Spanish Inquisitor, there's one too many rods in the fire.

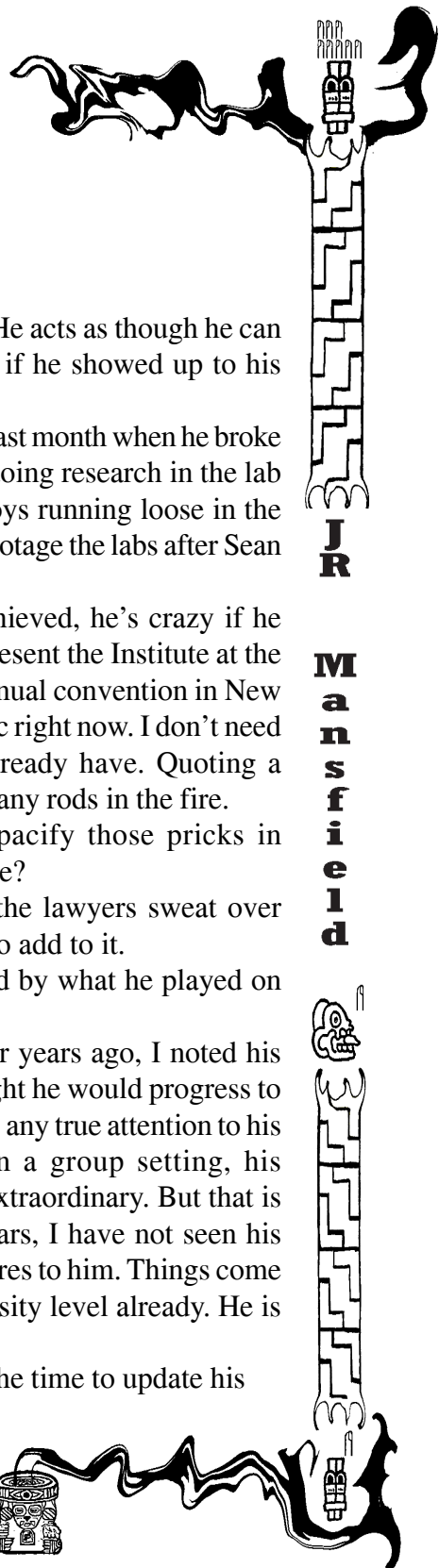
How much will it take to pacify those pricks in Pennsylvania? Will the dust ever settle?

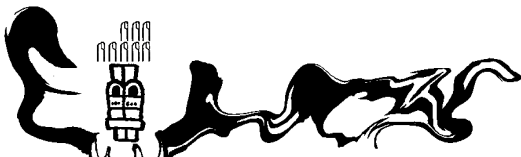
Whatever? Who cares? Let the lawyers sweat over that shit. The boy just doesn't need to add to it.

I must admit, I am astonished by what he played on that tape.

When Hamilton enrolled four years ago, I noted his potential in his file. But I never thought he would progress to this point, especially without drawing any true attention to his work before now. If he worked in a group setting, his accomplishment wouldn't seem so extraordinary. But that is definitely not the case. In all my years, I have not seen his equal. Not even Lance Tucker compares to him. Things come so easily for him. His work is university level already. He is beyond what is being offered here.

Ms. Thomas had better find the time to update his





file if she knows what is good for her. What little dark secrets lurk in his past?

After seeing Hamilton's little experiment, his empty file is unacceptable and Ms. Thomas needs to complete a thorough background check on him. That private eye over in Massachusetts should have forwarded his preliminary report to her by now. I need to know what I'm dealing with here. I need to know things to control Hamilton. That's how I'll silence him.

His strength is his weakness. From the few occasions when I met with Hamilton, I would say he is definitely a loner.

That's how he slipped under the radar. He didn't trigger any of the normal teenage trouble signs—well, except last month by breaking the curfew, which he did while doing his research. He's a diamond in the rough.

Nearly four years without trouble or a complaint from him. He's been a ghost to the people here at the Institute. But by reviewing the library and lab logs, a totally different picture is seen.

It's amazing what I've learned about Hamilton from the computerized records. Based on the books checked out from the library, it's evident that he had mastered all of the in-house science material by his first year and every year after the first one shows an increased flow of material being requested from prominent libraries.

Damn it! Where is that boy?

Hold on! I know where he is: the lab.

I think it's high time that Hamilton and I get a few things straight.

Grabbing the thick stack of research papers, I stuff them into my brown leather briefcase and stand up to leave my deserted classroom. Year after year, for decades, it has been this way. I have educated and groomed the elite families of New England. Yes, control from the shadows.

Echoing sounds of the students have faded from the

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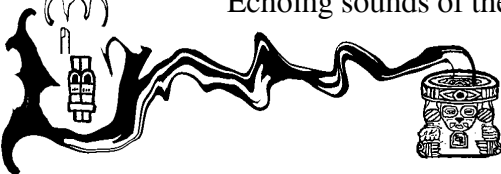
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hallways for the day. Slamming the case shut, my thumbs click the latches closed.

Hah! My secretary should have fun reading these damned things. They'll be like fifth-grade papers compared to what Hamilton has turned in.

Hey, wait a minute. Sean wasn't here to turn his paper in, whatever it was about. That means that little sonofabitch is mine. Hah! No New York convention for him. I'll personally see to that. Snatching the leather-covered handle, I pick up my briefcase and march toward the door.

My bearskin coat guards the door, draped over the tall coat stand. The long fur pelt looks more like a rug without the head than a coat.

Damn! I love this thing. Besides keeping out that damned winter wind, I intimidate the hell out of everyone I meet in it. Hah! They always appear the same eyes bulging, mouth gaping. It's so funny.

Yes, this is me. The Bear. I set down my briefcase and fish the coat off its hook. My left arm threads through its warmth. Up over my right shoulder, the coat engulfs me. Yes, comfort! Locking the door, picking up my briefcase and turning off the lights, I leave the bowl-shaped classroom.

The slam of the door echoes down the hall. My scuffling shoes follow the door's reverberations.

I bet Hamilton is working in the lab at this very moment. That sonofabitch. The nerve of him!

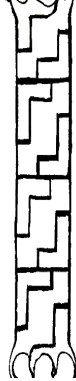
Leaving the students' halls, I cross the open courtyard. A late-winter gust bites at my cheeks. Its icy breath blows across the short drifts lining the shoveled sidewalks.

Damn, I hate having to walk to a separate building; but after Tucker's mishap in '57, I can't afford having the research labs connected to the main building any longer.

But those were interesting times. The start of the Cold War. The beginning of the Space Age with its cutting-edge achievements in rocketry and physics.

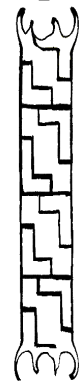


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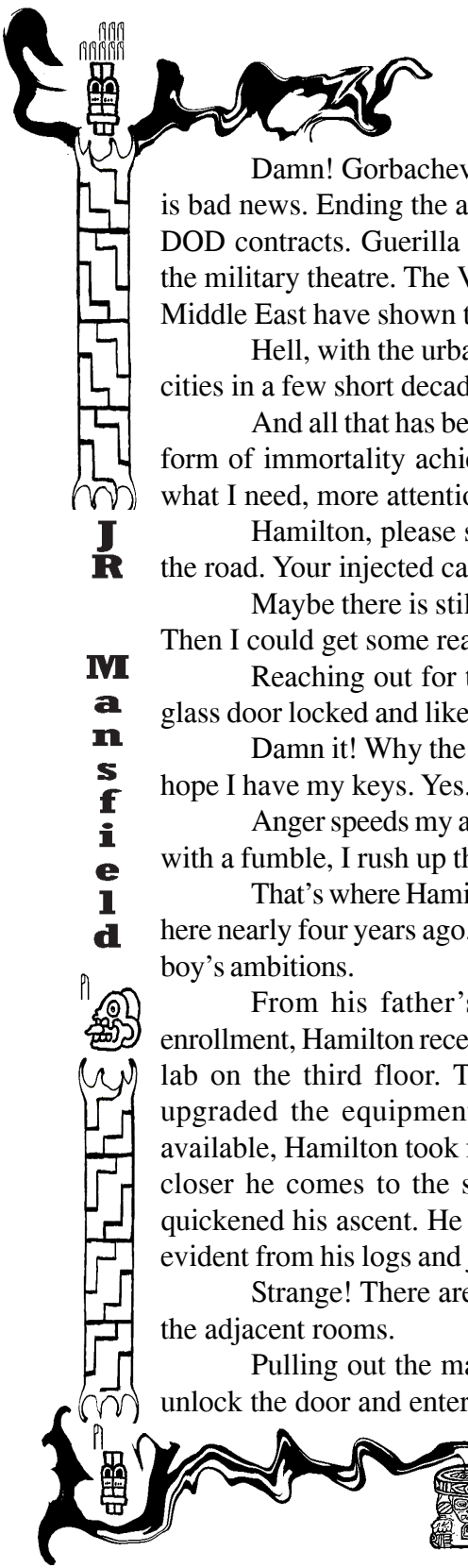
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Damn! Gorbachev is trying to fuck that up now. This is bad news. Ending the arms race will eliminate a lot of my DOD contracts. Guerilla and urban warfare is the future of the military theatre. The Vietnam War and the fanatics in the Middle East have shown that.

Hell, with the urban sprawl, there will be nothing but cities in a few short decades.

And all that has been gained leads to what? A mutated form of immortality achieved by a boy Frankenstein? Just what I need, more attention.

Hamilton, please spare me your cancerous bumps in the road. Your injected cancer of life I can do without.

Maybe there is still time to put some sense in the kid. Then I could get some real use out of him.

Reaching out for the horizontal metal bar, I find the glass door locked and likewise for the ones on each side of it.

Damn it! Why the hell did the kid re-lock the door? I hope I have my keys. Yes. They're here in my coat.

Anger speeds my ascent. Quick as a defensive lineman with a fumble, I rush up the flights of stairs to the third floor.

That's where Hamilton has hidden out since he enrolled here nearly four years ago. His father has known it and fed the boy's ambitions.

From his father's monetary contributions during enrollment, Hamilton received unlimited access to this private lab on the third floor. Two years ago, Hamilton's father upgraded the equipment to match that at MIT. Readily available, Hamilton took full advantage of the situation. The closer he comes to the scientific unknown, the more he quickened his ascent. He is a true trailblazer. That is clearly evident from his logs and journals.

Strange! There are no lights in the hallway or any of the adjacent rooms.

Pulling out the master key for the school grounds, I unlock the door and enter.

No Hamilton. What is the deal? Where else could he be? There doesn't appear to be any signs of a struggle.

Maybe he is in the freezer, doing inventory or something tedious like that.

Silent, I approach the walk-in cooler at the back of the room. The pin for the handle is out. He could be inside.

Yanking it open, cool air swirls and coils around me as I stare in looking for Hamilton. Instead, I only find a row of five cadavers lying on tall stainless-steel gurneys with a clothed sixth body stretched across the other five naked bodies.

Damn it! Walker never took care of Kettering's body.

I ridded myself of this nuisance an hour before first bell this morning. And now with it well past four in the afternoon, Kettering still lies here like a murdered archaeologist instead of just another nameless cadaver. If Hamilton should see Kettering like this, he'd have questions.

Must I always do everything myself? If I want it done right, I do.

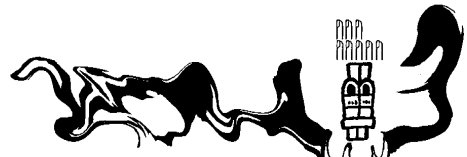
I guess it isn't really that big of a deal. Mansfield Institute is over a hundred miles north of Albany. My private academy is located on a flattened promontory in the Adirondacks. Winter's snow still grips the back roads. What is there really to worry about? The research labs aren't even part of the main building. Anyone approaching on the solitary road to the Institute is spotted, anyway.

Still, though, this isn't the time to become sloppy. I'll just take care of this and be done with it.

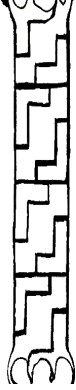
Quickly, I strip the body of the dead scientist. From one of the closed cupboards, I find a bio-red plastic bag and throw the man's soiled clothes into it.

One step closer to being rid of a leeching problem.

I should have known Kettering couldn't provide the Skull of Smoking Mirrors when he couldn't tell me the location of it. He was convinced that his partner could, though.

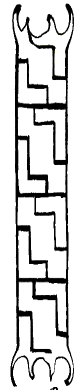


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There is just too much at stake to dismiss it as coincidence.

Hopefully, for his sake, Victor Koupka isn't as demanding and useless as Kettering.

And with a tag slipped over Kettering's big toe, he becomes just another derelict donating his body for the greater good of science.

All of this and more is being provided by the Mansfield Institute.

Hah! How humane am I? Yes, someone tell me.

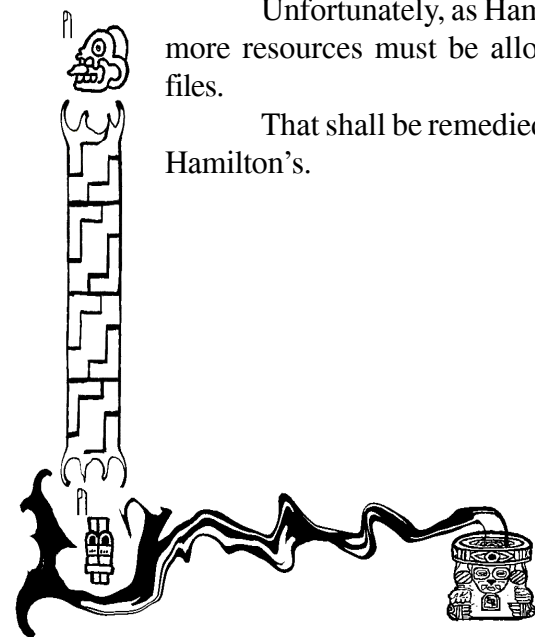
With the shutting of the thick steel freezer door, I bring closure to a loudmouth problem. But this still leaves me with the nagging question: where is Hamilton?

Exiting the research building, I lumber back to the main building. Most of the prints I made coming out lie partially covered by snow dust. My heels lead back to the students' halls. Located at the center of the school grounds, this building is the heart of the Mansfield Institute, housing both the classrooms and administration offices.

Here I have my records, my records on every person who has ever attended the Institute, even if it were only for a day. Not a single student file has ever been destroyed.

Unfortunately, as Hamilton's file has recently proved, more resources must be allocated to improve the outdated files.

That shall be remedied one file at a time, starting with Hamilton's.



Chapter 5

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: Heather Thomas

“Ms. Thomas!”

I’m so startled that my pen rolls out of my hand as I sit facing away from the front lobby. It’s Mansfield. I know it is without even looking. He’s always doing that. It’s surprising how silent he is for such a big man. God, he’s got to be over six-and-a-half feet tall and nearly three hundred pounds. And when he’s wearing that damned fur coat of his, I would say he’s a Russian bear if he weren’t such a capitalistic pig.

“Ms. Thomas!”

“Yes, Mr. Mansfield. I heard you the first time.”

“Then acknowledge my presence, woman!” the towering man commands.

A glance at my desk clock comforts me. Four twenty. I am almost out of this nine-to -five grind.

“Hah! Don’t bother looking at that clock, Ms. Thomas. If I don’t have Sean Hamilton and his file in my office by five, guess who’s not going home on time?”

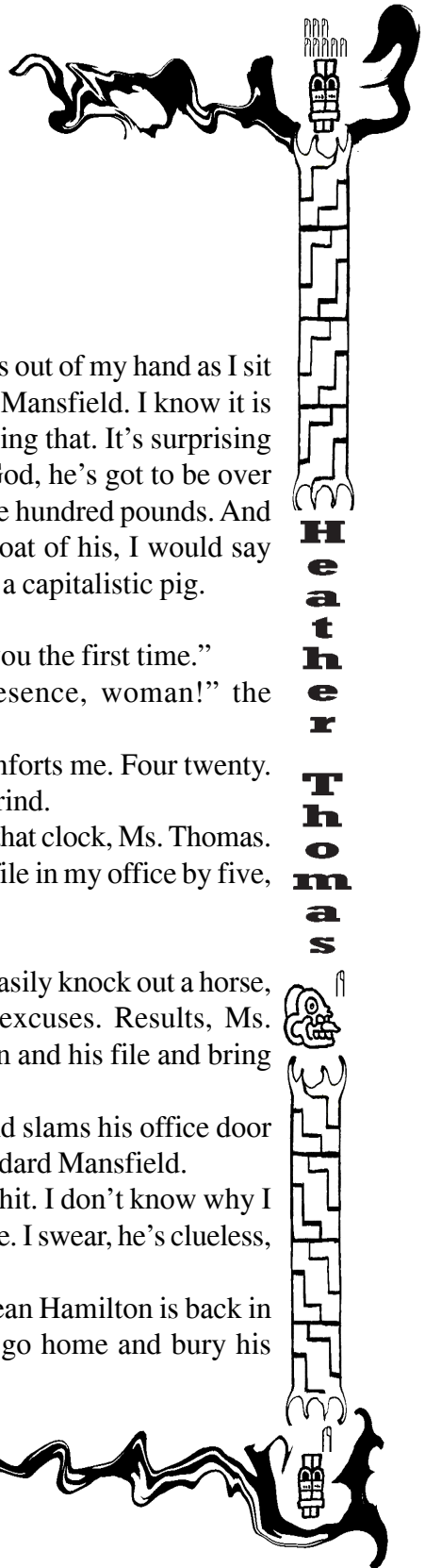
“But...”

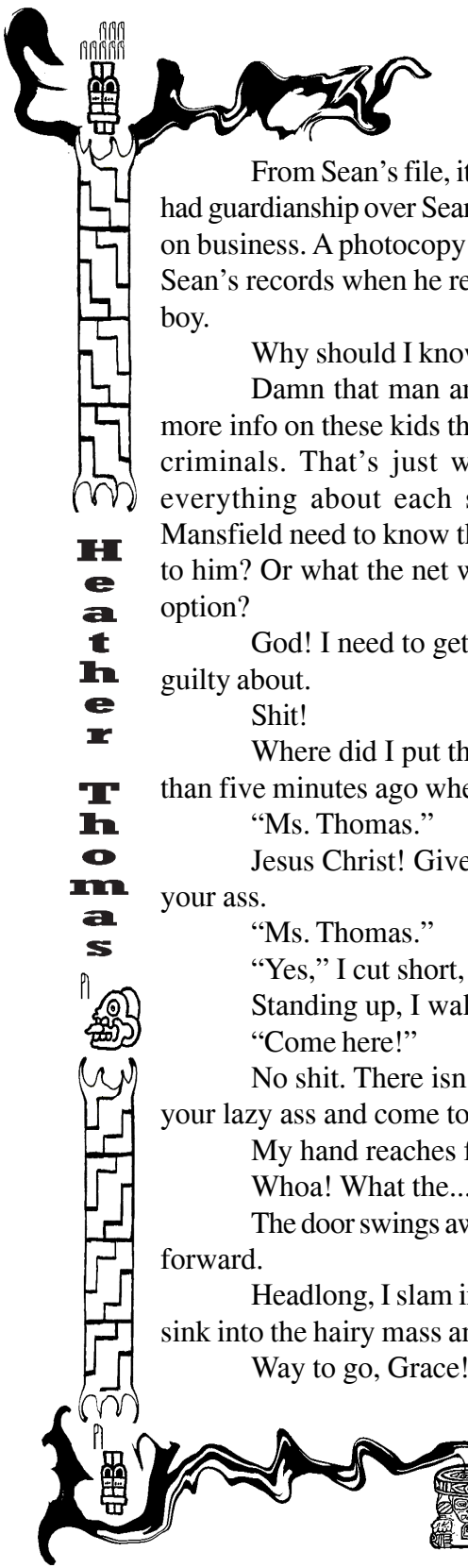
With a raised hand that could easily knock out a horse, he silences me and grumbles, “No excuses. Results, Ms. Thomas, I want results. Find Hamilton and his file and bring them both to me now!”

Breezing past me, he opens and slams his office door shut in a single swinging motion. Standard Mansfield.

Screw you, prick. This is bullshit. I don’t know why I put up with his shit. It’s always the same. I swear, he’s clueless, on drugs, or both.

He knows damned well that Sean Hamilton is back in Massachusetts. The poor boy had to go home and bury his uncle.





From Sean's file, it appears that this Mitchell Coleman had guardianship over Sean while Samuel, his father, was away on business. A photocopy of this written consent appeared in Sean's records when he received stitches in his forehead as a boy.

Why should I know this? Why should he?

Damn that man and his files. I swear Mansfield has more info on these kids than the CIA or the FBI has on some criminals. That's just wrong. He doesn't need to know everything about each student like he does. Why does Mansfield need to know that Sean's mother died giving birth to him? Or what the net worth of Samuel is as if it's a stock option?

God! I need to get a new job. One that I don't feel so guilty about.

Shit!

Where did I put the file? I just had the thing no more than five minutes ago when I...

"Ms. Thomas."

Jesus Christ! Give me a second to pull the file out of your ass.

"Ms. Thomas."

"Yes," I cut short, bleeding my anger.

Standing up, I walk toward his office door.

"Come here!"

No shit. There isn't any way you're gonna get up off your lazy ass and come to my desk.

My hand reaches for the doorknob.

Whoa! What the...

The door swings away from my gasping hand. I stumble forward.

Headlong, I slam into a wall of fur. Quickly, my hands sink into the hairy mass and push off Mansfield's coat.

Way to go, Grace! I nearly snapped my ankle.

Damned pumps. I don't know why I even bother wearing these things here. There's no one here to impress anyway.

Strands of long fur glue to my rosy red lipstick. I need a tissue. More fur clings to my red dress. His damned coat is shedding.

"Well, Ms. Thomas, I like your charge-ahead attitude, but I don't believe it's right for this situation. Hah, Hah!"

"Hah! Yes sir, you're right, as always," I force.

Asshole! You're not funny. God, is it five o'clock, yet?

"By the way," he grunts. "Have I received any calls from an associate of Dr. Kettering?"

"Yes. An older man called several times. I told him that I would go and get you but he insisted that it wasn't important and that you could call him back at your convenience."

"Where are..."

"By the phone. Next to the..."

The Hamilton file. Yes, the Hamilton file. The Hamilton file is on Mansfield's desk already.

My eyes dart to his desk behind him. They confirm that the thin but growing file lies next to the stack of pink slips by the phone.

"What was that, Ms. Thomas? You trailed off once again. Recently, I've noticed that has been becoming a habit. You know, Ms. Thomas, if..."

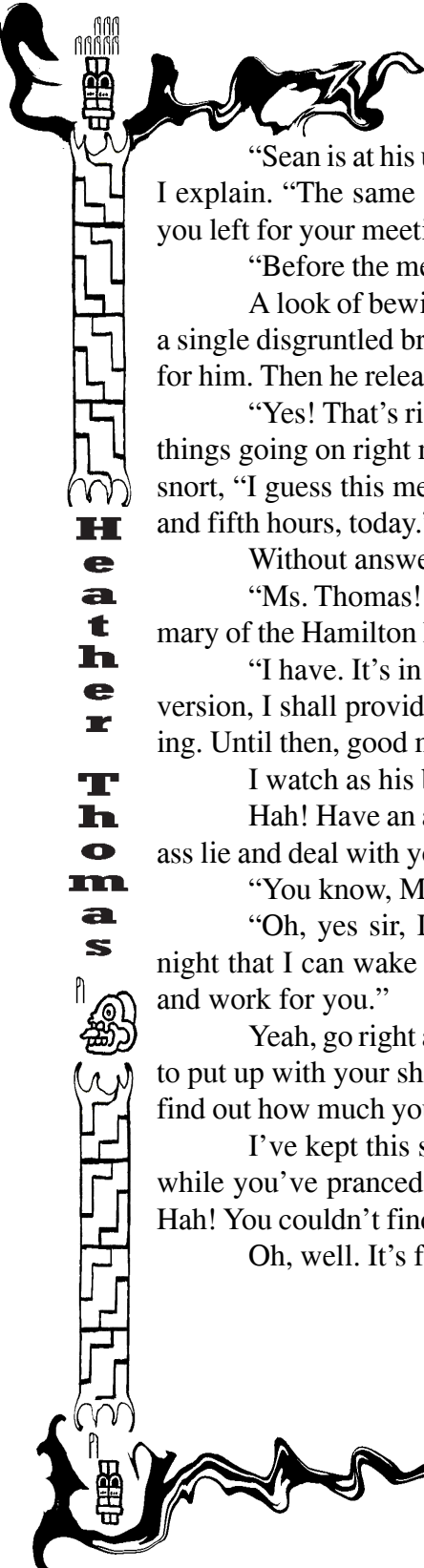
"Your messages are on your desk," I cut in. "Right next to the Hamilton file. In addition, Sean Hamilton is unavailable."

"Bullshit!" Mansfield orders. "I want to talk to Hamilton..."

"Oh, okay. So are you flying the jet or the copter to Logan's Airport in Boston?"

"Logan's Airport? Boston?" Mansfield asks.





“Sean is at his uncle’s funeral over in Massachusetts,” I explain. “The same one that he told you about just before you left for your meeting with Dr. Kettering this morning.”

“Before the meeting with Kettering? I...”

A look of bewilderment rolls across his face, forming a single disgruntled brow. The wheels of thought turn slowly for him. Then he releases his distrust.

“Yes! That’s right. It just slipped my mind. Too many things going on right now,” he declares and then adds with a snort, “I guess this means I can’t expel him for missing first and fifth hours, today.”

Without answering, I turn to leave.

“Ms. Thomas! Where are you going? Give me a summary of the Hamilton kid.”

“I have. It’s in the file. If you’re looking for an audio version, I shall provide one at nine o’clock tomorrow morning. Until then, good night, sir.”

I watch as his blood races to his face.

Hah! Have an aneurysm! See if I care. I’ll let your fat ass lie and deal with you in the morning.

“You know, Ms. Thomas, you can be replaced.”

“Oh, yes sir, I know. And I pray to the Lord every night that I can wake up the next morning so I can come in and work for you.”

Yeah, go right ahead and fire me. See who you can get to put up with your shit and still be able to do the job. You’ll find out how much you really need me.

I’ve kept this school running for the last seven years while you’ve pranced around here like you were some god. Hah! You couldn’t find your office without finding me first.

Oh, well. It’s five o’clock. I’m out of here.

Chapter 6

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: JR Mansfield

Damn that girl. She overestimates her true worth to me. Unfortunately, she's not the only one. It's a growing trend not only here at the Institute but throughout Mansfield Enterprises and its many divisions and subsidiaries. This newer generation is full of blow-hards, yes-men, and the status quo.

It's time to clean out the corporate house.

But to do it right will take too much of my attention—attention that I can't afford to take away from the ultimate prize at hand.

The Crystal Skull of Smoking Mirrors.

I place the receiver on my left shoulder. My cheek holds it there. After sliding the stack of slips below my eyes, my fingers dial the Manhattan number.

"Hello," answers an older voice in a thick European accent.

"Mansfield."

"Yes. I have been expecting your call," the man replies.

"And you are?"

"An associate of Kettering."

God damn it! Don't play games with me. Kettering tried and you don't want to end up like him. Dead! Do you really think I don't know who I am talking to on the other end of this phone? You want to play? I'll show you how to play.

"Ah, yes, Kettering," I start. "How is the old chap? You and he have me just a little worried."

"Why? Why do you say that? He's not with you?" the man asks.

"Kettering never showed up this morning," I declare.

"What?" trembles the man's voice.





“Yes, I’m a little surprised myself,” I reply. “I thought we had an arrangement.”

“Yes, we do.” He declares.

Fool!

“Correct me if I am wrong,” I remark, “but it was my understanding that the two of you would try to obtain and deliver the object. And if successful, I would make the second of two payments. The first one will be transferred into your possession before the trip to cover expenses and excesses. This one will be yours even if the Skull cannot be retrieved after several attempts. The second larger payment will be received only after this item of interest has been delivered to me and me only.”

“Right! This was the same understanding that Dr. Kettering and I had. But... But... I haven’t seen him since yesterday at Sunday brunch. I just thought he might have gotten a little sidetracked.”

“Well, this is not good,” I say. “Does he have any immediate family? Would they know?”

“Yes and no to your questions,” the man replies. “I received a call from his wife. She has definitely become concerned. Though Kettering isn’t the most faithful father, he speaks with his wife daily. I usually call her to find out where he is, not the other way around. Frankly, I am worried now.”

“It’s probably a good idea to contact the authorities. We’ve had snow these last few days. I hope he didn’t go off the road or something of that nature. I would hate to think the worst,” I remark. “His wife should file a missing person report within the next couple of days.”

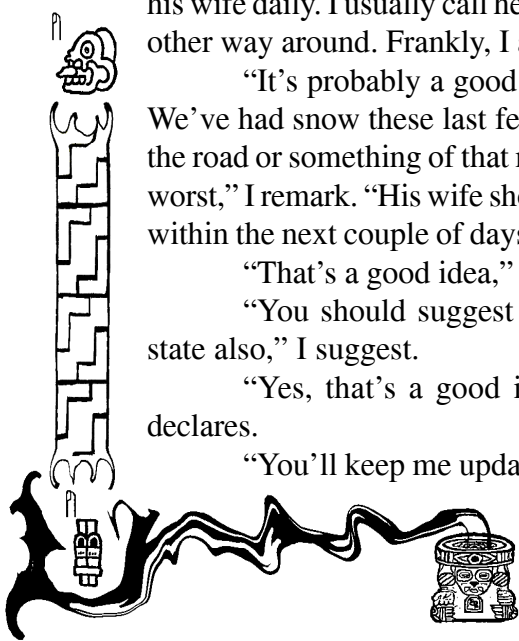
“That’s a good idea,” the man remarks.

“You should suggest that she have them check up-state also,” I suggest.

“Yes, that’s a good idea. I will call her back,” he declares.

“You’ll keep me updated, won’t you? And if I hear

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from him, I will contact you. Okay?" I reassure.

"Right."

"Then I shall let you go, associate of Kettering," I announce.

"Hah, Hah! It's Victor. Dr. Victor Koupka."

"Hah! You're joking, right?"

"No, sir. It's a Polish name. I brought it from the Old World. Many people switched their names once in America. Not I. My father instilled in me the desire to always honor and preserve my heritage. Maybe, that's where my love for archaeology grew from," the man remarks.

Please spare me your story.

"Though it's unfortunate that we have met on these terms, it makes me feel more comfortable knowing who I am dealing with," I comment.

"There aren't too many people out there that you can really trust," he declares.

"Right, I understand."

Silence follows.

Good. He's ready.

"Victor?"

"Yes."

"I know this isn't the nicest thing to ask," I start, "but do you think it's possible that there is another buyer and Kettering is cutting us both out?"

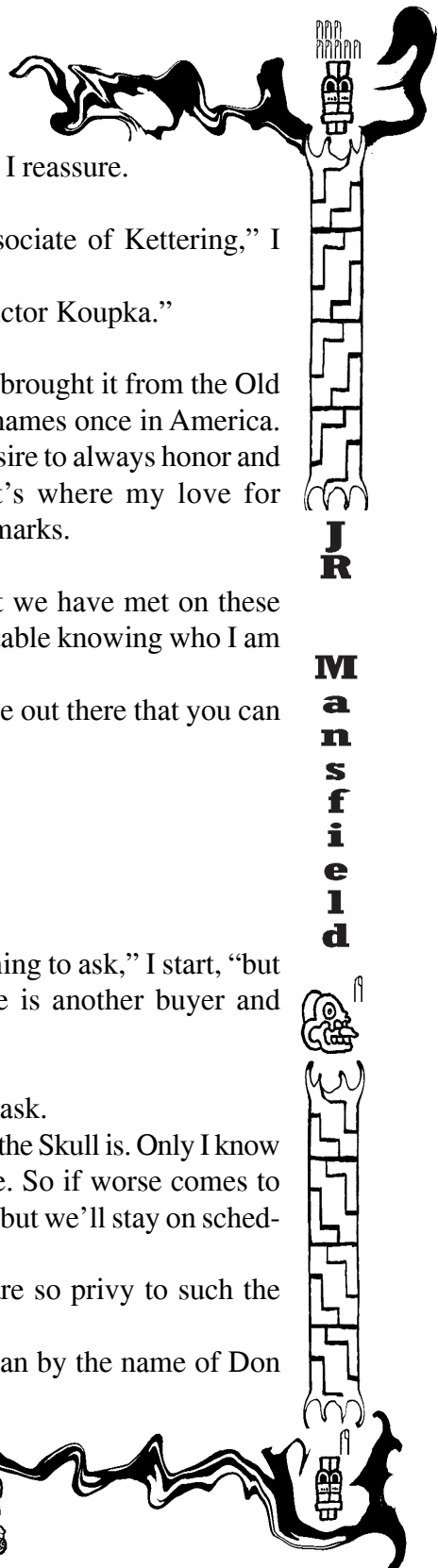
"Hah! Inconceivable."


"How can you be so sure?" I ask.

"Kettering hasn't a clue where the Skull is. Only I know that. That's where I fit in this picture. So if worse comes to worst, you'll be dealing just with me, but we'll stay on schedule. I'll make sure of that."

"And so how is it that you are so privy to such the knowledge?"

"Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Don Carlos Següenza y Góngora?"





“Allegedly, the first man to excavate the Pyramid of Sun northeast of Mexico City.”

“Right.”

“The only references come from Don Lorenzo Boturini. It’s said that no records remain from Don Carlos’s expedition.”

“Wrong,” the old man answers. “As we speak, I hold in my hand the diary of Don Carlos. I have gone to the trouble of proving the journal’s authenticity. I first saw it back in 1969. And that was before the tunnel under the Pyramid was even discovered. Don Carlos tells how he and his men bricked the twenty-nine wall in the tunnel.”

He has it! He has the diary of Don Carlos Següenza y Góngora. The Skull shall be mine.

“This is incredible news. Excellent! My confidence level in this deal has just gone up ten-fold.”

“Good! I shall call late tomorrow to update you on the situation,” he states. “At that time we can arrange the details of our meeting. It will be down in the city.”

“All right. Until then, good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

Yes! He knows where the Skull is. Yes! All is not lost. I wonder how this Victor Koupka came across the diary?

“Ms. Thomas.”

Silence.

“Ms. Thomas!”

More silence.

What the hell! Has that girl already left? I’m not running a bank here.

5:03 shows on the desk clock as I look out of my office door into an empty lobby.

She is gone already.

Not to worry, I have other ways of finding out what I need to know.



Chapter 7

Date: Monday, February 9, 1987

Narrated by: Sean Hamilton

A strange but almost soothing hum fills the desolate cemetery. The pelting rain muffles the engines of the lined-up vehicles. Cold wetness soaks through my overcoat and clothing.

God, Uncle Mitch! You're gone! You're really gone.

Slowly, friends and family gather under the wind-whipping, white-canvas canopy.

Trying to rush the ceremony, the black-haired hearse driver pulls Uncle Mitch's coffin halfway out before the arrival of most of the mourners. Reluctantly, I follow the impatient man's lead. The freezing rain runs down the back of my neck. Grabbing the icy-cold metal handrail of the coffin sends a chill through my arm.

Thinking I have a good grip, though, the driver pulls the casket out the rest of the way. The smoky-gray coffin nose-dives for the black asphalt beneath my feet.

"No!" I scream.

"Sean, it's all right. I'm right by your side," remarks a woman next to me.

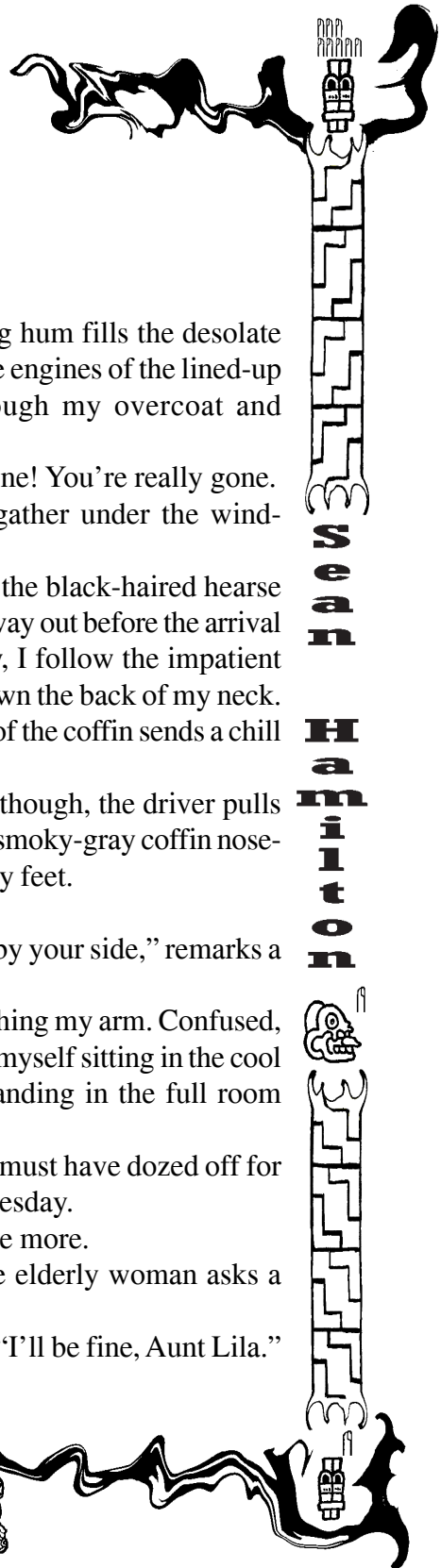
Turning, I find Aunt Lila touching my arm. Confused, my eyes blink. I look around and find myself sitting in the cool funeral parlor. People sitting and standing in the full room cast sympathetic stares at me.

Jesus! What just happened? I must have dozed off for a moment. The funeral isn't till Wednesday.

Aunt Lila tugs at my arm once more.

"Sean, are you all right?" the elderly woman asks a little bit louder.

Nodding my head yes, I add, "I'll be fine, Aunt Lila."



“I’m sorry, Aunt Lila. I don’t mean to sound so cynical,” I reply.

“It’s all right, Sean,” she replies with a smile, “that’s just my spoiled little sister coming out in you.”

Seeing bitterness brewing in my eyes, she adds, “I’m sorry, dear. I shouldn’t say such things about your mother. God rest her soul.”

I say nothing. I let Aunt Lila stew in my silence. With an awkward smile, she pats my arm, stands up, and walks away. She goes straight to Uncle Mitch’s open casket. She places her hand on his arm.

I can’t believe that Father took that last job.

Hah! Would he even bother to show up for my own funeral if he got a job offer? Hell, I guess it wouldn’t really matter anyway. I’d be dead. Right?

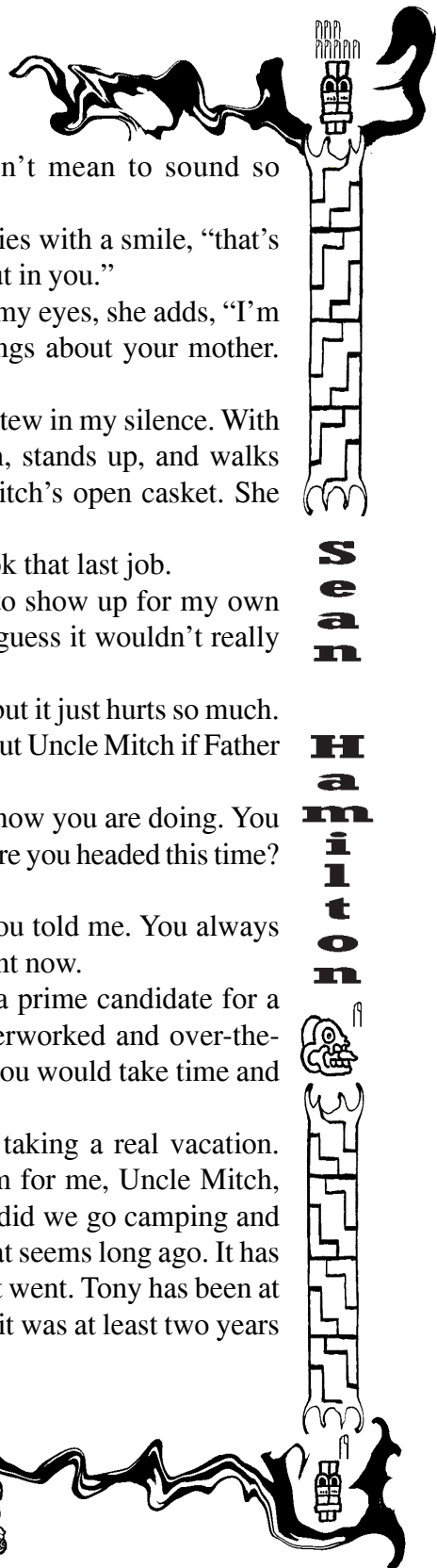
God, I shouldn’t be so bitter, but it just hurts so much. Hah, I wouldn’t even have known about Uncle Mitch if Father hadn’t called.

Father. Oh, Father, I wonder how you are doing. You should be in Africa by now. Where were you headed this time? Was it Congo or Zaire?

That’s bad because I know you told me. You always tell me. I... I just don’t remember right now.

God, you worry me. You’re a prime candidate for a heart attack. You’re overweight, overworked and over-the-hill. I love you so much. I just wish you would take time and enjoy life.

I don’t ever remember your taking a real vacation. You always covered the cost of them for me, Uncle Mitch, and Tony, though. How many times did we go camping and canoeing? God, it was great. Even that seems long ago. It has to be at least a few years since we last went. Tony has been at Columbia for almost a year now and it was at least two years before that.





“All of this happens independent of external influences,” I told Mansfield. “Watch, Watch! The closing of the laboratory door triggers the IV machine and Mendel’s Miracle begins to drip into the rat. During the course of the night, Mendel’s Miracle reveals potential.”

Arm jerking and tail whipping got Mansfield’s attention more than my words.

“What did you call your serum?”

“Mendel’s Miracle.”

“You should have called it what it really is. Liquid Frankenstein. This is just Hollywood smoke and mirrors, Hamilton. This is bullshit. Any Tom, Dick, or Harry can pull this off. I’ve seen this ninth-grade biology experiment with a dead frog and an electrical current,” Mansfield barked.

“The experiment is not over,” I remarked.

Within moments, Mansfield witnessed the unbelievable. Mendel’s Miracle reactivated the cells of a dead rat to the point that it stumbled about as if drunk. The look on his face was priceless. He just didn’t know what to believe. Immediately, he sought to discredit it.

“There are wires.”

“No.”

“The floor of the cage has a high current passing through it and the IV needles intensify the reaction.”

“No.”

“The rat wasn’t completely dead in the first place.”

“No.”

Hah! Mansfield was so funny! He was bound and determined to guess the trick.

And now this morning, I got the impression that he wasn’t going to allow me to represent the Institute next week at the science convention in New York City. Shit, I was counting on it.

I figured on using the exposure to help get some independent backing or a position at some research center



here in the States. When I first started attending Mansfield Institute, he personally said I could continue to do research there after I graduated but I'm not figuring much on that now.

I just need to start looking elsewhere. Hell, even Roslin is looking better, the more I think about it. I just wish I could find some place where I had free reign. No Big Brother standing over my shoulder. That's what I really need. I'm not going to find that at Roslin and surely not in the National Cancer Institute. Those facilities are simply fronts for covert research conducted by the Crown and the Feds. For god's sake, the National Cancer Institute's Frederick facility once was Fort Detrick, the elite biochemical lab for the army under Nixon.

Damn it! Enough with the conspiracy theories. I could go on and on about the US government. Hell, it looks like the damned government has some involvement with the AIDS epidemic. Just a little shy of three years ago, a man by the name of Darrell Steelwell showed compelling evidence that AIDS was developed as a biological and psychological weapon. The Feds are trying to either control or eliminate certain parts of the population.

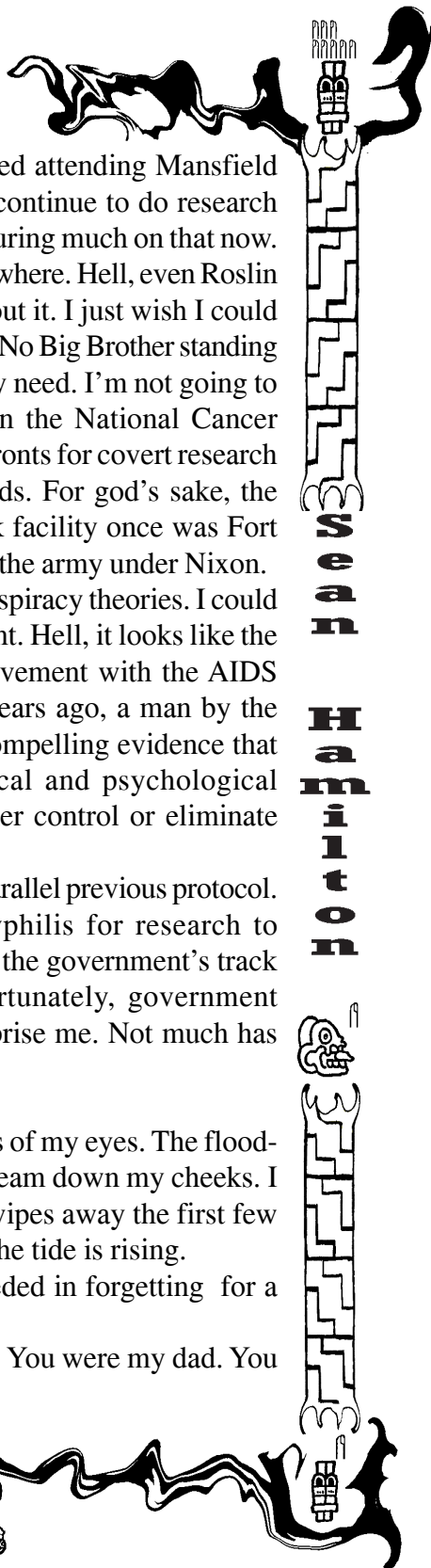
Unfortunately, this seems to parallel previous protocol. From infecting black men with syphilis for research to castrating the mentally handicapped, the government's track record isn't the greatest. So, unfortunately, government involvement with AIDS doesn't surprise me. Not much has surprised me lately, well except...

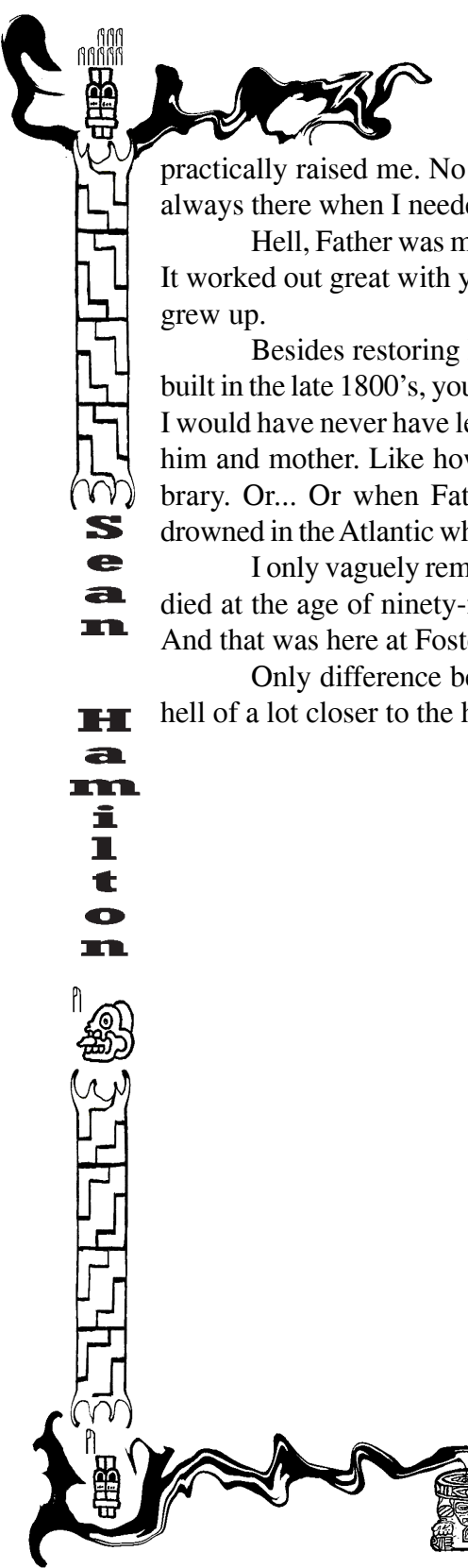
Uncle Mitch.

Pain rolls out from the corners of my eyes. The flood-gate ruptures. Loss and loneliness stream down my cheeks. I fight to stop the tears. My left hand wipes away the first few waves, but the current is steady and the tide is rising.

Damn it! I had almost succeeded in forgetting for a moment.

For God's sake, Uncle Mitch! You were my dad. You





practically raised me. No disrespect to Father, but you were always there when I needed you the most.

Hell, Father was more like the rich uncle than my dad. It worked out great with you living at Father's house while I grew up.

Besides restoring Father's house that Grandpa Jonas built in the late 1800's, you revealed a lot about Father. Things I would have never have learned from him. So much between him and mother. Like how they met and fell in love in a library. Or... Or when Father was a young boy and nearly drowned in the Atlantic while net-fishing with Grandpa Jonas.

I only vaguely remember Grandpa Jonas's funeral. He died at the age of ninety-five when I was five going on six. And that was here at Foster's Funeral Parlor in Erie Harbor.

Only difference between then and now, this one is a hell of a lot closer to the heart.

Chapter 8

Date: Friday, February 13th, 1987

Narrated by: Victor Koupka

The sun pours over Central Park but does little to melt away the afternoon chill. Winter still gnaws at the Big Apple.

Walking east on 79th Street, I enter the Park looking for Mansfield. I see no one resembling Kettering's description. With my hands jammed deep into my slate-gray overcoat, I fight to stay warm. Losing, I shutter with each gust of wind.

"Sweet Judas, it's freezing. I couldn't have left the taxi less than two minutes ago. Already, the cold cripples me. Mansfield needs to hurry up," I grumble.

"If I make it to 5th Avenue and there is still no sign of this man, I'm out of here. And it will be his loss. I know that I can find a buyer for this piece," I threaten.

Still no sign of him.

Hell, can this man even be trusted? Has he done something with Kettering?

Maybe.

But why would he suggest contacting the authorities?

To deflect his guilt.

Possibly.

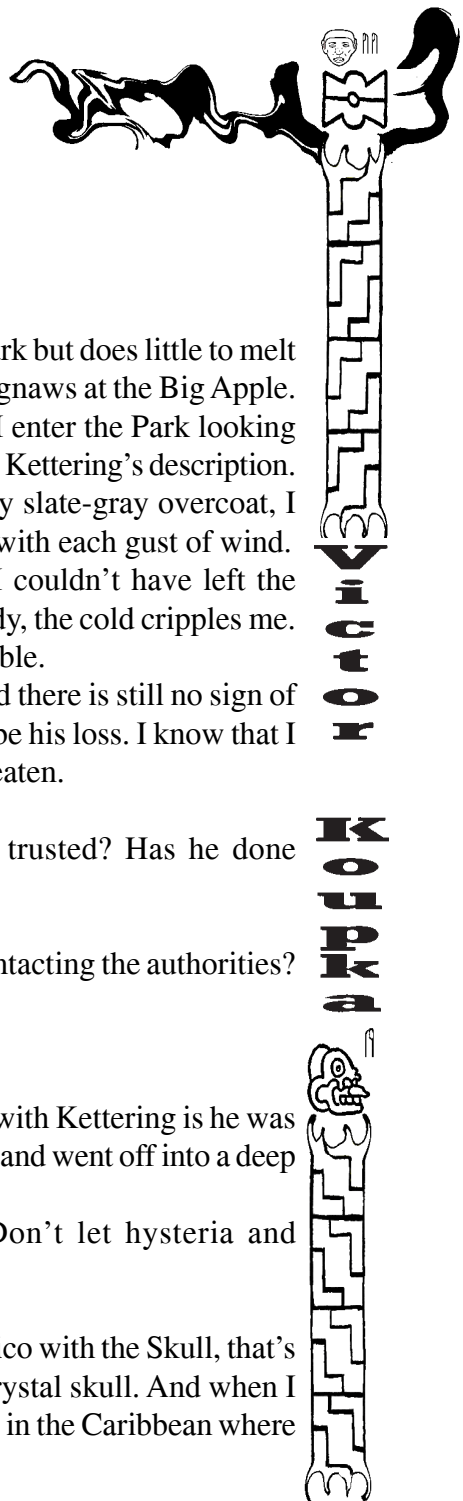
Probable?

No. The most likely scenario with Kettering is he was drinking while he was driving upstate and went off into a deep snow bank.

Think pleasant thoughts. Don't let hysteria and hyperthermia twist my thoughts.

Hah! Easier said than done.

But after I get back from Mexico with the Skull, that's all going to change. I'll cash in the crystal skull. And when I do that, I'm moving to some hacienda in the Caribbean where I'll live like a king.



out before it's said. I don't trust him.

"Yes," I lie.

Stopping, he turns and faces me.

He didn't expect that answer.

"His wife spoke with him a few hours ago," I reply with my best poker face.

Silent as a stone statue, he stares at me.

Playing his game of wills, I walk past him to the bench and sit down. Mansfield does the same. I feel the weight of him as he sits. His large hand releases the straps on the black bag lying on the bench between us.

"It's like you said," I start. "Kettering hit a patch of ice on the way up to meet you. He's pretty banged up but he'll be okay. I guess he's in some hospital between here and Albany."

"Well, it's good that someone heard from him," he remarks. "It's better than the alternative. Once you're gone, there's not much that can be done then."

"True."

"Can you handle this task alone? Are you going to need help getting it out of Mexico?"

"No, I have it under control. The fewer people involved the better."

"Agree."

"I shall contact you upon returning. Is that the quarter of a million in the bag?"

"Yes."

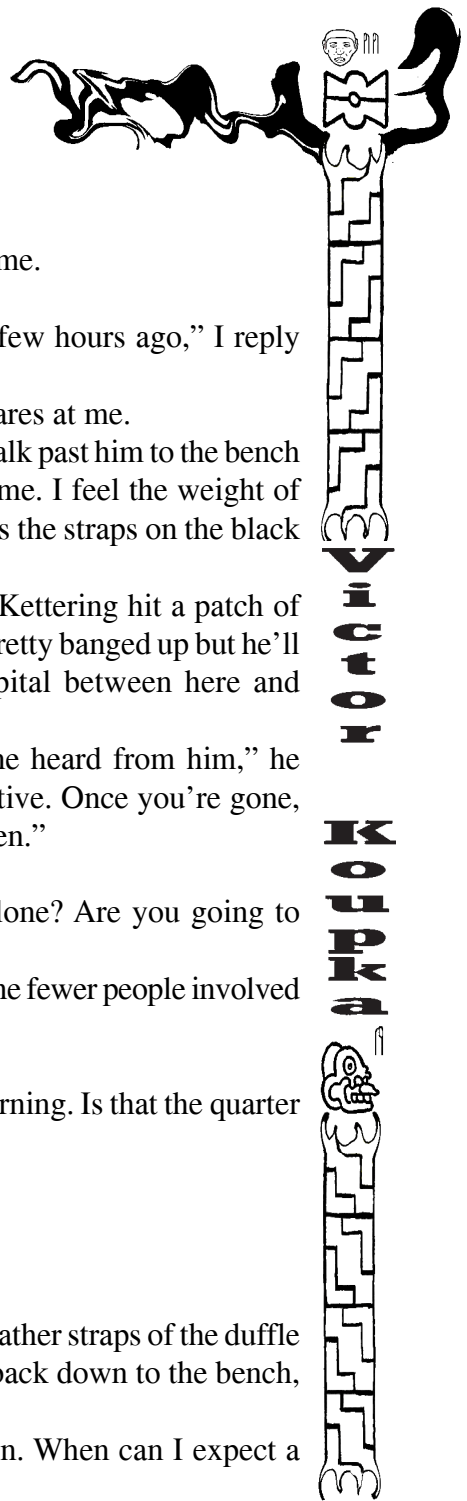
"Any questions?"

"No."

"Good."

Snatching hold of the black leather straps of the duffle bag, I start to stand but am yanked back down to the bench, Mansfield still holds an end of it.

"Well, there was one question. When can I expect a call?"



Chapter 9

Date: Friday, February 13th, 1987

Narrated by: Sean Hamilton

My lips freeze together from the bitter wind. I stand on the edge of the forest that surrounds the Mansfield Institute where I have nearly completed four years of hard research.

For what? To have some fat pompous ass tell me that I can't present it this coming Saturday because it would be bad PR for the Institute? Or because I turned a paper in late. To hell with that. I'll never hold back my research for anyone.

Hell! What Mansfield needs is a distraction. Hah! Like his little secretary, Heather Thomas. God, the woman is incredible. She reminds me of the girl from that TV series The Fall Guy. Blonde, big breasts, and beautiful.

I would think that working for Mansfield, she would be a real bitch, but she's not. I'm really surprised that she has been here since I've been going here. That's saying a lot. I could never work for that man. No way.

So here I am preparing to give Mansfield a well-warranted distraction.

God, have I lost my mind? I can get arrested for this.

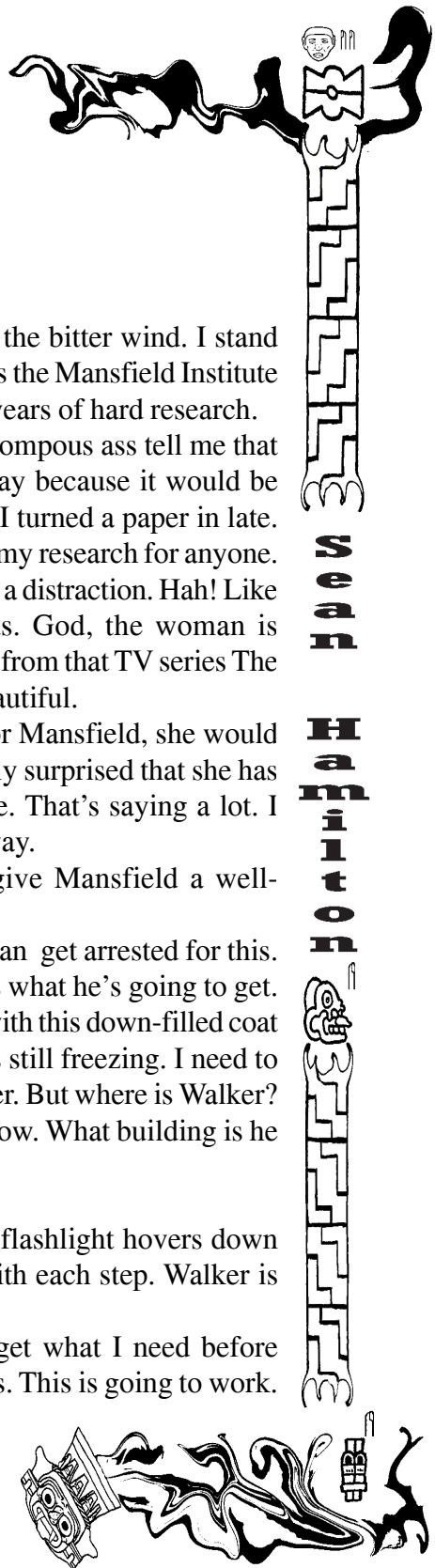
To hell with that. He deserves what he's going to get.

Shit! It's cold out here. Even with this down-filled coat and my insulated gloves, my blood is still freezing. I need to get out of here and somewhere warmer. But where is Walker? He should be making his rounds by now. What building is he in?

There!

The glow of the watchman's flashlight hovers down the hallway. It swipes side to side with each step. Walker is still in the main building.

I can get up to the lab and get what I need before Walker even leaves the students' halls. This is going to work.





Leaving the shelter of the tall evergreens, I run toward the research building. Howling wind blows blinding snow into my face. I struggle across the moonlit lawn to the double doors located at the rear of the science building.

Slowly opening the door, I step inside. Instantly, the loud hum of the Wix boiler down in the basement fills the background. Staring down the hallway, I see no one. The reddish glow from the exit sign casts an eerie feeling over me, though.

There's no need to dwell on that or it will just make it worse. I just need to focus on the task at hand.

I head for the staircase and climb.

Reaching the landing to the third floor, I am slightly winded. When I open the door, a creak announces my arrival.

"Jesus Christ, Sean!" I mumble, "Even if old man Walker doesn't have his hearing aid in, he surely heard that. I guess I'd never make it as a cat burglar."

Squeak, squawk sound my soles as I walk.

Damn these shoes! I should just take them off and walk down the silver and gold speckled hallway in my socks. It would make less noise, that's for sure. To hell with it, let's just get this taken care of and fast.

I jog to the lab door.

Locked.

My key doesn't work anymore. Mansfield must have had the locks changed this week. Hopefully I can break in.

I pull out my black leather wallet. From it I take out the Platinum Visa card Father gave me for an emergency. I've never used it.

Father, this is definitely an emergency.

I slip the plastic card into the crack between the door and the jamb. Carefully I work it in and out trying to depress the latch bolt in the doorknob. To my surprise, a slight tug on the handle and the door comes ajar.

"I'll be damned! It worked!"

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Slithering into the classroom, I close the door. Rows of lab tables with built-in sinks and natural gas outlets take up the center of the classroom. Weaving in between these workstations, I make my way to the back of the lab. Quickly, I open what appears to be a closet door. I turn on the light switch on the wall to the right of the door.

Instead of being a small storage room, I enter the well-lit, white-tiled lab. It's nearly twice the size of the attached classroom. Numerous shelves mounted on the walls form the home for a vast assortment of chemicals. Scientific equipment has found its place on the stainless steel countertops and in the corners of the rectangular room. A large shiny silver door stands at the far end.

Father must have paid a fortune upgrading this lab. I doubt that Mansfield paid for much of this. It's more likely that he didn't cover any of it. God, I'll always owe Father for something. There is no way I can ever really repay him for all he has done for me.

Walking over to the stainless steel door, I pull out the pin from the door handle. Letting it drop, metallic chimes echo as the chained pin bounces off the door. Yanking on the handle, I swing it open. Swirling cold air rushes out, surrounding me like fog. Swishing my hands in midair, I clear away the chilled air and step into the lit walk-in refrigerator. A row of five cadavers on gurneys greet me, with a sixth placed on top of them.

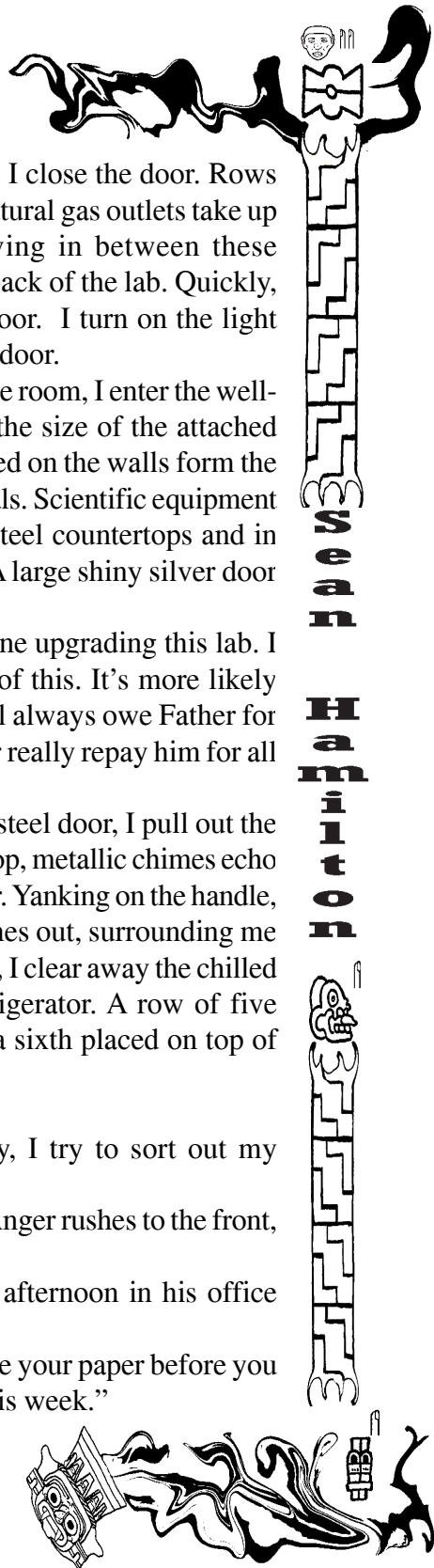
Jesus, what am I doing here?

Leaning against the doorway, I try to sort out my emotions.

Bitter thoughts fill my mind. Anger rushes to the front, pushing restraint to the side.

Mansfield's words from this afternoon in his office mock me still.

"Mr. Hamilton, I didn't receive your paper before you went on your little vacation earlier this week."





“I forgot to turn it in before I left. I have it right here.”
 “Mister, you are lucky I am an understanding teacher.”
 “Thank you, sir.”

“But understand that I have to automatically knock your paper down two whole grades for turning it in late.”

“What? You’re kidding, right? You do remember that my uncle was killed in a car accident and I just got back from his funeral yesterday?”

“Yes, I’m quite aware of your loss, Mr. Hamilton. And I extend my condolences, but you do remember that I am running a school? I must be fair to the other students. They were all required to turn in their papers Monday. Do you really think it is fair that you get a whole week before you turn yours in?”

“I had your paper finished last Friday! I forgot about it until this morning when I was gathering my books!”

“Don’t raise your voice with me. I can hear you just fine. Moreover, do you really expect me to believe that? I really find it hard to believe that you did not use the extra time to your advantage.”

“Do you know what you can do with that paper? You can jam it up your ass as far as I am concerned!”

“Get the hell out of my presence, you little sonofabitch. I don’t want you taking up any more of my time than you already have. I have more pressing issue than a temper tantrum by some spoiled rich kid. I’ll deal with you later.”

“Whatever!”

To hell with Mansfield.

I snatch hold of the arm of the man lying across the rest of the bodies and pull.

“You’re coming with me.”

The bloated overweight corpse rolls off the gurney. His dead weight throws me off balance.

“Ah, shit!”

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The dead man slams me into a steel table. Tipping, it slams hard on the snow-white, small-tiled floor behind me.

“Damn! I told you no, so get off me.”

I roll the dead man onto his back and stand up. Grabbing his arm, I drag the derelict out of the cooler and slam the door shut. Straight out the lab I go.

Standing in the classroom, I look around.

“Shit! What’s going to be the easiest way to get this guy out of here?”

The tall, wide windows catch my attention.

“Yeah! He’ll fit through one of those.”

I yank up on the handle of one of the windows.

Frozen! Running down the row of them, I find them all the same.

Going back to the first one, I yank and yank on it. Finally, I wrestle the locked handle from winter’s grip. Swinging the window to the right, I pull the dead man up to the windowsill. The cold winter wind blows snow in my face. Determined, I push the body out of the third story window. Falling fast head first, the body lands with a sickening snap as his skull cracks open on the snowy sidewalk.

I move to close the window and my eyes catch movement in the corners of them. A low yellow glow of a flashlight outside the door shines through.

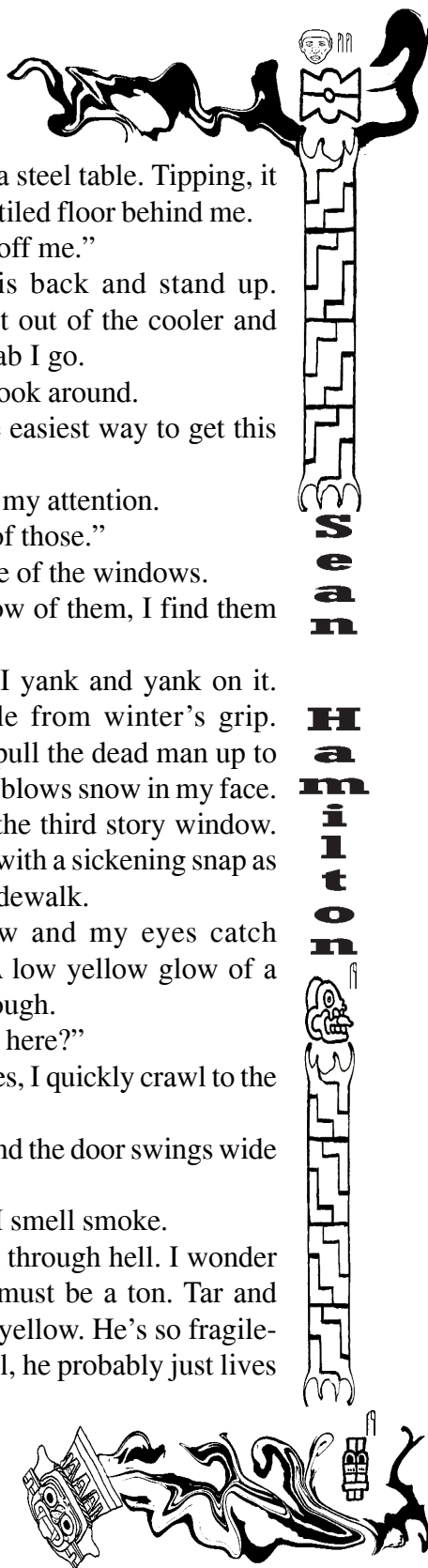
“Jesus! It’s Walker. Why is he here?”

Dropping down on my hands and knees, I quickly crawl to the back of the room.

Instantly, the lights come on and the door swings wide open.

It’s old man Walker for sure. I smell smoke.

That guy looks like he’s been through hell. I wonder how many cigarettes he smokes. It must be a ton. Tar and nicotine stain parts of his gray beard yellow. He’s so fragile-looking. He’s drunk himself thin. Hell, he probably just lives on beer and nicotine.





“Damn, damn, damn! I nearly forgot,” the old man grumbles.

He walks to the door to the lab and opens it.

“Damn, damn, damn! Mansfield would have my hide,” he adds.

His words fade as he heads for the cooler.

I move closer to make my escape.

The window slams shut with a bang.

“What the hell? Who’s out there?” Walker barks.

Charging into the classroom, Walker holds a short-nosed revolver in his raised right hand.

Walker carries a piece! That’s dangerous.

BOOM.

My heart stops. I stare blank-eyed like a dead rabbit at Walker.

“What the hell?”

Walker jerks toward the window. The window bangs, again.

“Jesus H Christ. This place is going to give me a heart attack. Retirement ain’t coming soon enough.”

He holsters the small revolver on the left-side of his chest and goes to the window.

Don’t see it! Don’t see it! Don’t see it!

“What the hell is this?”

Damn it! Walker spotted the bum in the bushes.

I feel sick like someone kneed me in the sac.

“No wonder this damned window blew open. That latch is bent all to hell. Maintenance will have to come up here and fix it tomorrow.”

Without a second thought, Walker goes back into the other room.

I crawl along to a point where I can watch the old man. He heads for the cooler. Opening the door, the old man swishes away the chilled air.

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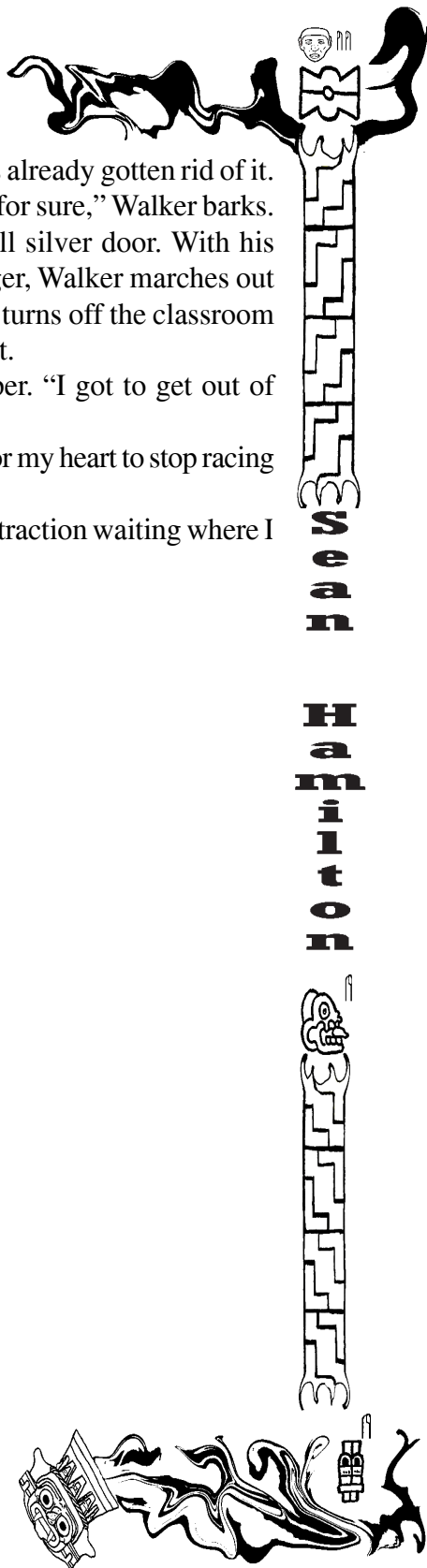
“Shit, shit, shit! Mansfield has already gotten rid of it. Shit, shit, shit! It’s going to be my ass for sure,” Walker barks.

Stepping out, he slams the tall silver door. With his head down and grumbling like a badger, Walker marches out of the lab. The door slams closed. He turns off the classroom lights and slams the hallway door shut.

“Jesus, this is crazy,” I whisper. “I got to get out of here.”

After waiting fifteen minutes for my heart to stop racing around the room, I leave.

Outside, I find Mansfield’s distraction waiting where I dropped it.





Chapter 10

Date: Monday, February 15, 1987

Narrated by: Officer Frank Fellows

The signed search warrant sits on the passenger seat of my cruiser. I stare at it as if it's not real. I had placed my request early Saturday morning, in response to someone finding a missing man's vehicle in the Great Sacandaga Lake and an anonymous call. At first, I had thought the call was a prank. The caller had sounded like a young teenage boy.

I figured that my request would fall on deaf ears. Especially with its being the beginning of a holiday weekend. The best I was expecting was having it looked at on Tuesday when the courts opened after President's Day.

Judge Hawthorne of Hamilton County, personally, called. He hadn't heard about the warrant until last night. Considering the circumstances, Judge Hawthorne stopped by his chambers to read over my request.

Now late Sunday morning, it waits for me to execute it to the best of my ability.

Judge Hawthorne has granted me complete access to the Mansfield Complex, not just the requested search of a particular pole barn by the Estate.

Hah! This is something that everyone in this county wishes they could do at one time or another.

Just southwest of Hope on a high crag off Wallace Mountain, the Estate overlooks the Institute. Though there are numerous roads throughout the complex, a lone wooded road leads to it from Highway 30. The complex can't be seen from the road.

At the front gate to the Institute, roads branch off, one going east and the other west. The latter one splits in two as the side entrance comes into view. Stretching past the west gate, the road leads to the Estate, I am told.

I have lived twenty years of my life within twenty miles of this complex, but I have never been closer than the west gate. Many locals haven't been in here since the late '50's. Before then, this place was a major employer in the area. The complex is a little city within itself. There's even a power house to generate electricity and heat.

Like all entrances at the complex, a rolling steel door serves as a gate on the west road leading inside the walled campus. In '57, this door withstood a blast that leveled a nearby lab building and killed five people. Instead of replacing the steel door, Mansfield kept it. Ever since then when high beams from a vehicle's lights hit the door, a crucifix appears.

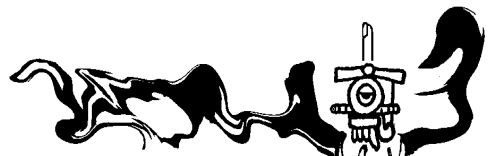
The first summer I got my driver's permit, I remember driving over to the west gate with a bunch of friends. We all had to check it out. I thought it was all bullshit but it sure freaked out Paul Stable. Personally, I think it was whatever chemical influence he was under at the time. Others have sworn that they have seen something that couldn't be explained.

Anyway it's looked at, that explosion caused a division in the county. If Mansfield had handled things differently, it wouldn't have been so bad. To this day, some people remain loyal to Mansfield.

It was Mansfield's high-handedness and unwillingness to show any remorse for the victims that fueled the mob frenzy decades ago. The numerous complaints and countersuits filed in Hamilton County achieved nothing. In the end, after Mansfield's Manhattan lawyers swooped in, the courts gave him what he wanted.

So now a heavy hesitation sits in my stomach. It's a modern-day David and Goliath. Sure.

Alone, I drive down the chalky-white mountain road. Everyone is either sleeping, at church, or somewhere other than this road. Highway 30 rolls through the Adirondacks for



while the other has a small covered car in it.

Continuing, I cross the crusty snow. Breaking through with each step, I labor toward the sheet-metal building. Circling around it, I see no visible footprints near it. Still, I test the doorknob.

It turns.

My hand reaches for my belt. Damn it! I don't have my flashlight.

Cracking open the door, I wait for a moment. Nothing. Slowly, I reach into the darkness for a light switch and flick it on. Warming up, the lights grow brighter to a steady hum. Pausing, I hear nothing except the hiss of the fluorescent bulbs. Behind the door, though, one of the lights flickers like a strobe light. My hand slips down to the hilt of my gun.

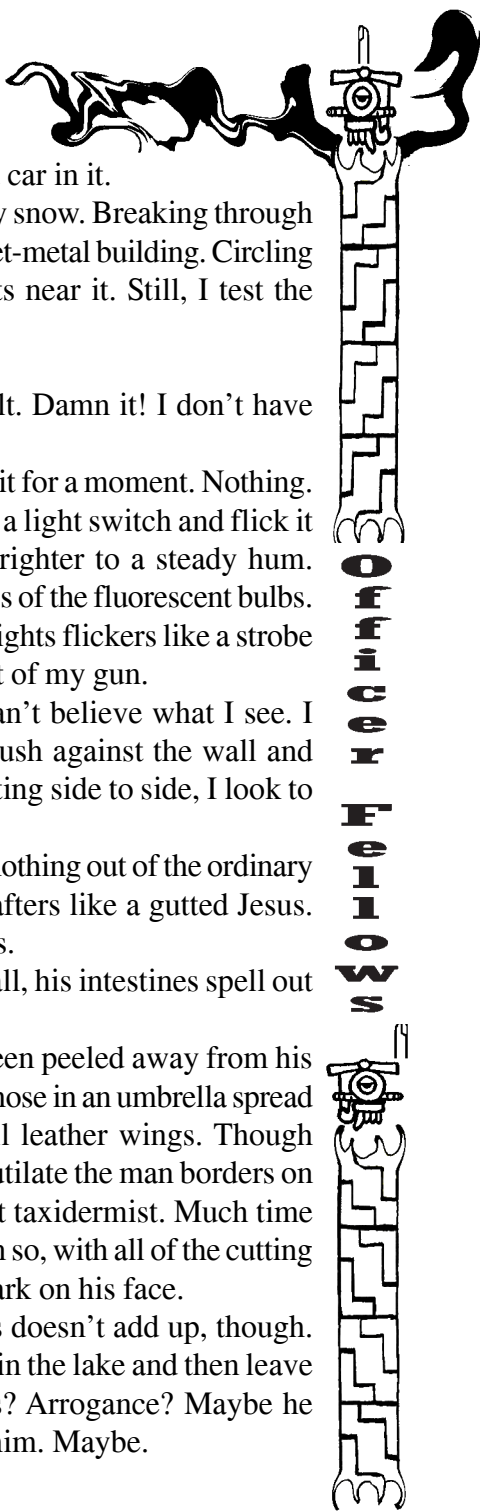
I step back as I look in. I can't believe what I see. I pull out my gun. I push the door flush against the wall and then step in with my gun drawn. Tilting side to side, I look to the corners of the shed.

I scan the large barn and see nothing out of the ordinary except the man hanging from the rafters like a gutted Jesus. Chains loop around the man's wrists.

Behind him pinned to the wall, his intestines spell out I AM GOD.

The naked man's skin has been peeled away from his sides and back. Thin metal rods like those in an umbrella spread apart the flap of skin to form small leather wings. Though grizzly in nature, the skill used to mutilate the man borders on the brilliance of a surgeon or a great taxidermist. Much time was spent preparing this corpse. Even so, with all of the cutting done to him, there is not a single mark on his face.

He looks like the MIA. This doesn't add up, though. Why would Mansfield ditch the car in the lake and then leave the body out in plain sight like this? Arrogance? Maybe he assumed that no one would bother him. Maybe.





I leave the pole barn and head back to the squad car to call it in.

On the passenger floorboard sits my clipboard holding all news wires and bulletins. Right on top sits a happier version of the man hanging in the pole barn.

The man's name is Dr. Harvey Kettering. He holds a doctorate in archaeology. Doesn't seem a likely candidate for being murdered.

What the hell should I do? There's nobody here to arrest. I need to gather all of this evidence. I don't have the equipment in this car to handle the scene properly. I don't want to call in outside help. There would be a leak to the media and they would have a field day with this.

I'll set up surveillance on the house and the school. I'll let him come back home not suspecting a thing. And then he's mine.

It's nearly 8 am Monday morning and still no sign of Mansfield. I wonder what has happened. He couldn't have been tipped off, could he? How? No one has been arrested or even questioned about the body of Dr. Kettering. Hell, no one even knows that he's been found.

Maybe the school's observing President's Day.

Don't give up! I'm just going to have to be patient and wait for him. He'll show. Hopefully sooner than later. I'm parked on Highway 30, so it appears that I'm just trying to catch speeders. This way I can spot anyone coming or going.

Hey! Hey! What's that? It's a limo. It's got to be Mansfield.

Coming north toward me, the limo slows down. Forty feet away, the left turn signal blinks on and off. I stare through the tinted window. I see a large man staring back. It's Mansfield.

The shiny black limo rolls up the drive with no more than a low hum. Once out of sight, I shift the squad car into drive.



Faced with an oncoming tractor trailer, I wait to cross the road. Hauling past me, the semi's momentum shudders the car.

Damn, I'd hate to be hit by one of them.

I proceed up Mansfield Drive with no sirens, no lights.

Trailing far behind the limo, I spot it driving through the front gate. As the long car draws up, the solid door rolls back across the road.

Damn it! It's going to take some talking to get inside this place.

How should I handle this? It seems like he's just going straight to his first class. I might have to confront him in his classroom. It could become a scene with all of his kids present. He's not leaving me much choice, though.

Pulling up to the gate house, I roll down my window.

An unarmed uniformed guard steps out the side door.

"Morning officer. Can I help you?"

"I need to meet with JR Mansfield. There has been an incident involving him. By this court order, I am able to enter."

His mouth opens to say something. I hand over the order for his inspection.

Satisfied, the guard waves off my offering. Stepping back, he reaches inside the small shanty and hits the button to open the gate.

"Thanks."

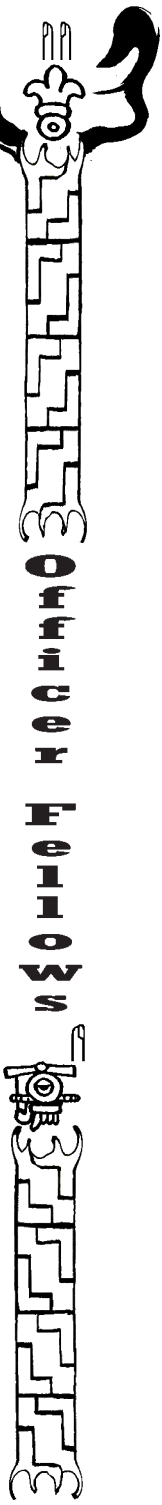
"Have a good day, sir," the guard remarks with a nod.

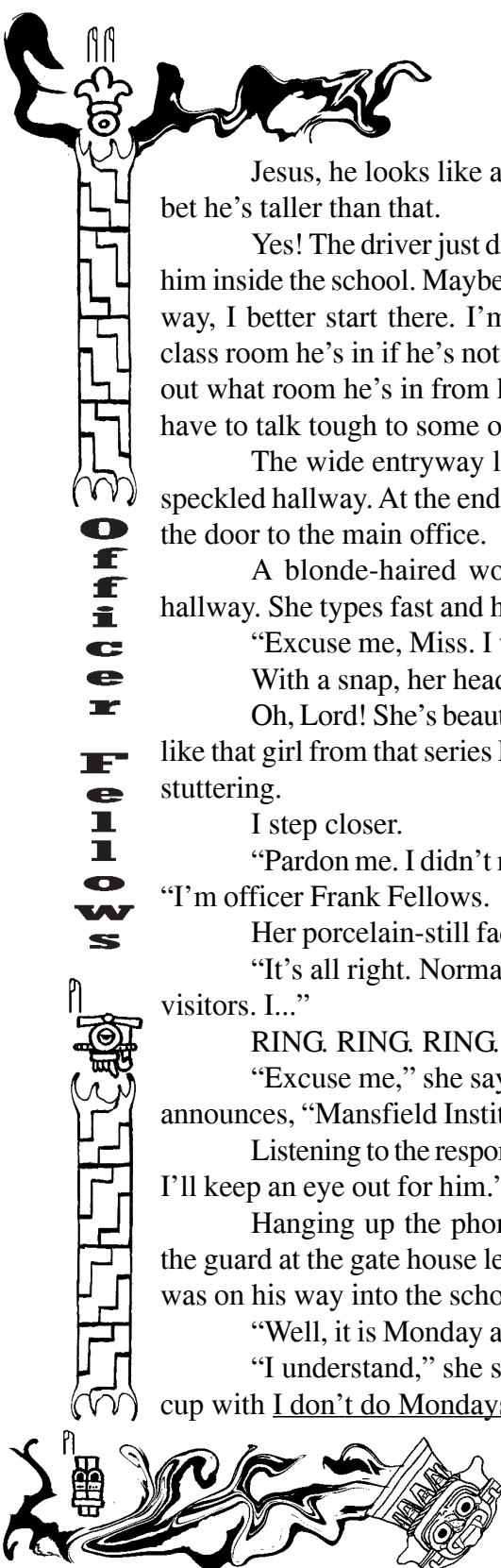
"Same to you."

I drive through. Immediately, the road forks into three directions. Luckily, I see the limo a distance ahead, perpendicular to me. It's idling in front of a tan four-story brick building. As I approach, though, the brake lights come on and the driver shifts out of park.

Damn! Is he trying to make a run for it?

Far beyond the limo, nearly inside the building, a large man in a fur coat reaches for the door.





Jesus, he looks like a walking bear. I'm six two and I bet he's taller than that.

Yes! The driver just dropped him off. I'll catch up with him inside the school. Maybe he'll go to the office first. Either way, I better start there. I'm going to need to know which class room he's in if he's not in the office. I'm sure I can find out what room he's in from his secretary. Hopefully, I won't have to talk tough to some old lady.

The wide entryway leads to a white, gold, and silver speckled hallway. At the end of the hundred-foot walk stands the door to the main office.

A blonde-haired woman sits with her back to the hallway. She types fast and hard. Approaching her, I call out.

"Excuse me, Miss. I was hoping you could help me."

With a snap, her head jerks up and turns towards me.

Oh, Lord! She's beautiful! Hah! She... She... She looks like that girl from that series Fall Guy. Damn. I better not start stuttering.

I step closer.

"Pardon me. I didn't mean to startle you," I announce. "I'm officer Frank Fellows. I'm here to see JR Mansfield."

Her porcelain-still face melts to a light smile.

"It's all right. Normally, we don't have unannounced visitors. I..."

RING. RING. RING.

"Excuse me," she says, picks up the receiver, and announces, "Mansfield Institute. Can I help you?"

Listening to the response, she smiles and replies, "Sure. I'll keep an eye out for him."

Hanging up the phone, she remarks, "That was just the guard at the gate house letting me know that some officer was on his way into the school. Just a little late."

"Well, it is Monday and a holiday."

"I understand," she smiles as she picks up her coffee cup with I don't do Mondays printed on it.

Laughing, I reply, "I see."

"So what brings you here?" she remarks. "If you want to speak with Mansfield regarding the job opening, you're going to have to come back after four when classes are over."

"I need to speak with him but it's not in regards to the open position."

"Well, either way, you're going to have to come back after his classes are through."

"No. I don't think you completely understand. I need to know what room Mansfield is in at this moment."

With a sour look, she declares, "Mister, I can't tell you that. It would cost me my job."

Reaching into my long winter patrol coat, I pull out the arrest warrant and hand it over to her.

With a suspicious squint, she looks at it but doesn't take it.

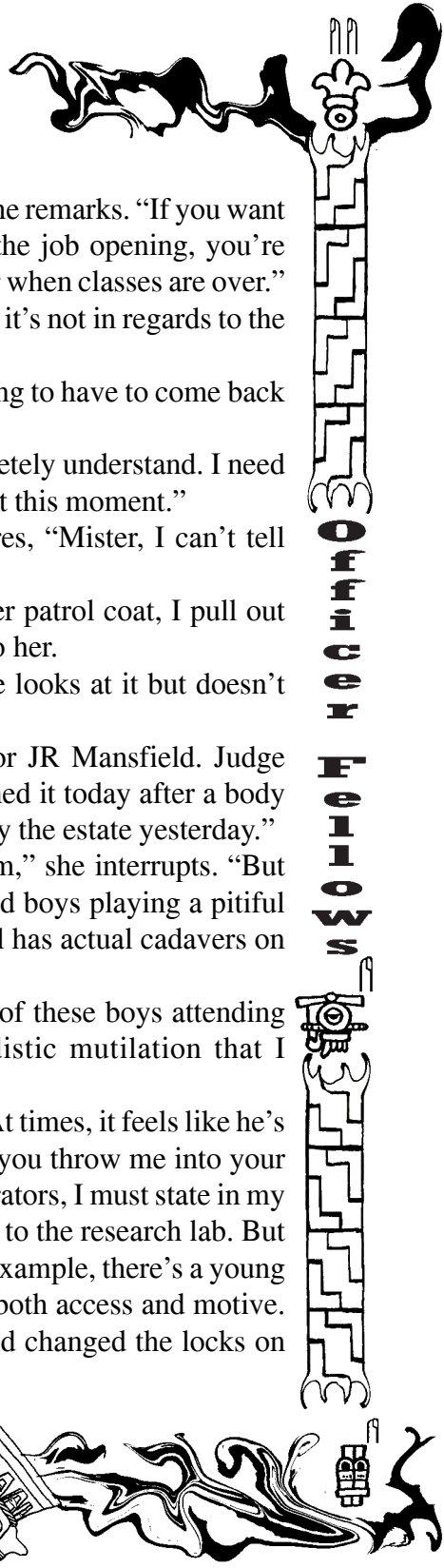
"This is an arrest warrant for JR Mansfield. Judge Hawthorne of Hamilton County signed it today after a body was discovered in the pole barn up by the estate yesterday."

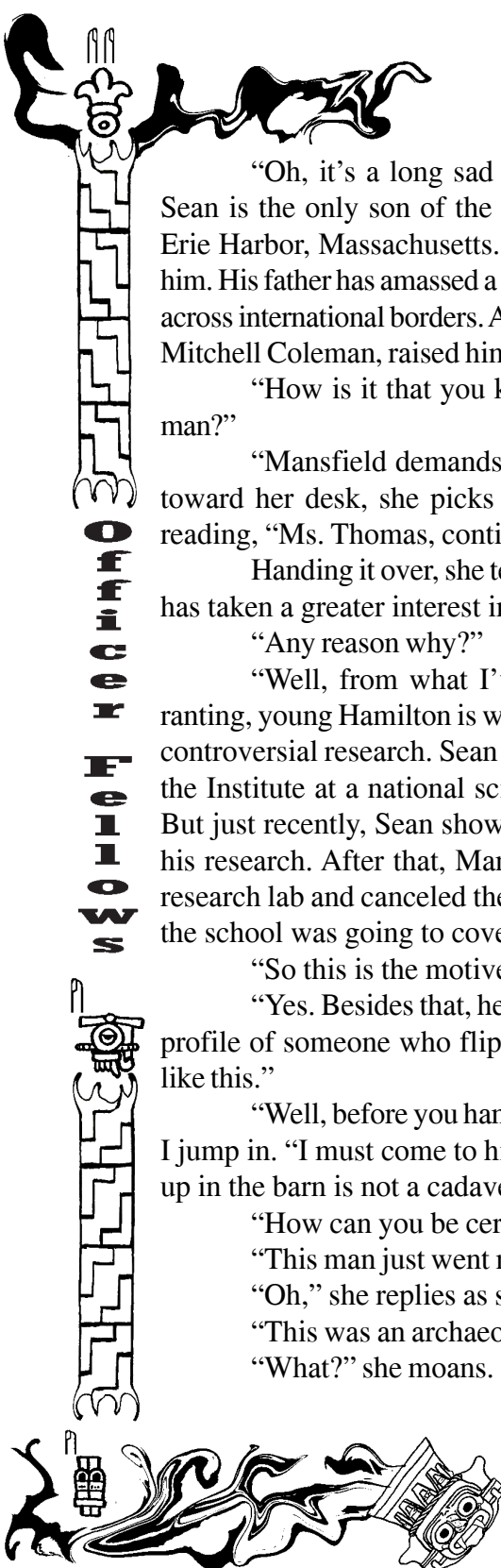
"I'm not trying to defend him," she interrupts. "But don't you think it might just be bored boys playing a pitiful prank. You are aware that this school has actual cadavers on campus, right?"

"So do you really think any of these boys attending the Institute is capable of the sadistic mutilation that I discovered in Mansfield's barn?"

With a laugh, she remarks, "At times, it feels like he's driving me to that point. But before you throw me into your growing pool of suspects and conspirators, I must state in my own defense that I do not have a key to the research lab. But there are some students that do. For example, there's a young man named Sean Hamilton. He has both access and motive. Well, he had access before Mansfield changed the locks on him."

"What?"





“Oh, it’s a long sad story but this is the short of it: Sean is the only son of the prominent Samuel Hamilton of Erie Harbor, Massachusetts. His mother died giving birth to him. His father has amassed a fortune carrying medical supplies across international borders. All the while, his mother’s brother, Mitchell Coleman, raised him.”

“How is it that you know so much about this young man?”

“Mansfield demands it,” she explains. Turning back toward her desk, she picks up Hamilton’s file with a note reading, “Ms. Thomas, continue workup on his file.”

Handing it over, she tells me, “Just recently, Mansfield has taken a greater interest in the young man.”

“Any reason why?”

“Well, from what I’ve picked up from Mansfield’s ranting, young Hamilton is working on some cutting-edge but controversial research. Sean had been scheduled to represent the Institute at a national science convention in Manhattan. But just recently, Sean showed Mansfield documentation of his research. After that, Mansfield changed the locks in the research lab and canceled the transportation and lodging that the school was going to cover for Hamilton.”

“So this is the motive that you spoke of?”

“Yes. Besides that, he’s a loner and that always fits the profile of someone who flips out and does something crazy like this.”

“Well, before you hang this Sean Hamilton out to dry,” I jump in. “I must come to his defense. The body discovered up in the barn is not a cadaver.”

“How can you be certain?”

“This man just went missing last Monday.”

“Oh,” she replies as she sips at her coffee.

“This was an archaeologist. A Dr. Harvey Kettering.”

“What?” she moans.

Her cup falls hard to the tiled floor. Coffee and chips of porcelain spray across her nylon-covered leg.

Looking down first and then up at me, her face is pallid. The hand that held the cup trembles in midair.

“You’ve heard of this man, haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“This Dr. Kettering and Mansfield have been working on some kind of deal. Honestly, I don’t know what it all involves, though. I’m usually aware of all he’s involved with but not this. For some reason, he has intentionally left me in the dark.

“There might be another man involved in this deal, though,” she adds. “Just within the last week, this man has been calling Mansfield. Mansfield seems to handle his calls the same way he did Kettering’s.”

Walking over to the secretary’s desk, I grab her box of tissues. I pull out a handful and give them to her. Kneeling down, I gather the broken pieces of her cup and pitch them in the nearby basket.

“So what do you mean by handling their calls the same way?” I inquire.

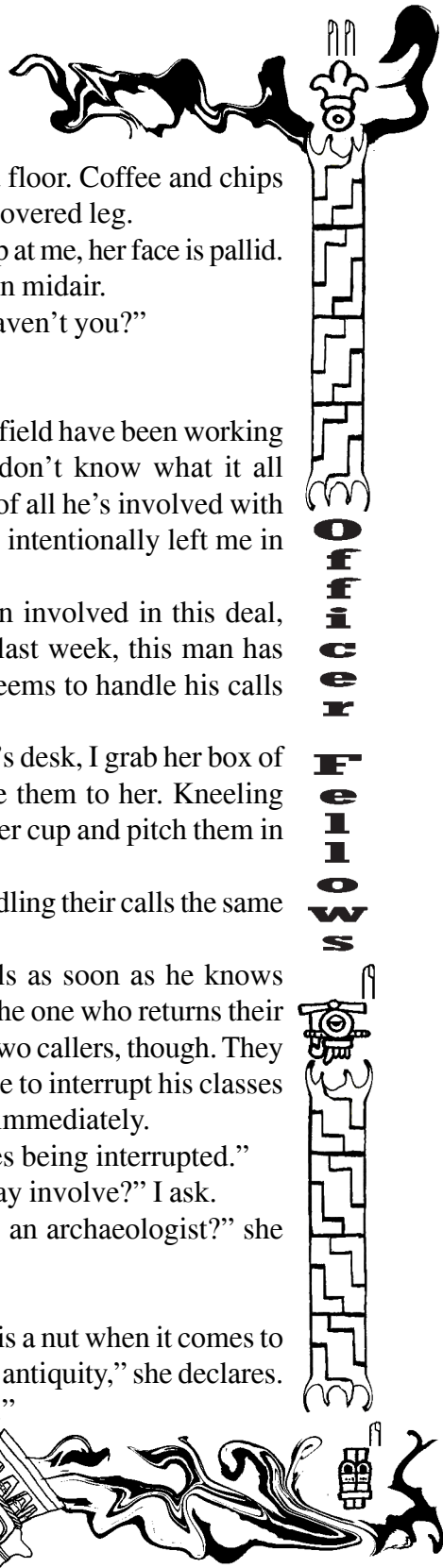
“He always returns their calls as soon as he knows about them. For everyone else, I am the one who returns their calls with his answer. Not with these two callers, though. They even have the elite status of being able to interrupt his classes if they need to speak with Mansfield immediately. No one has that right. Mansfield hates being interrupted.”

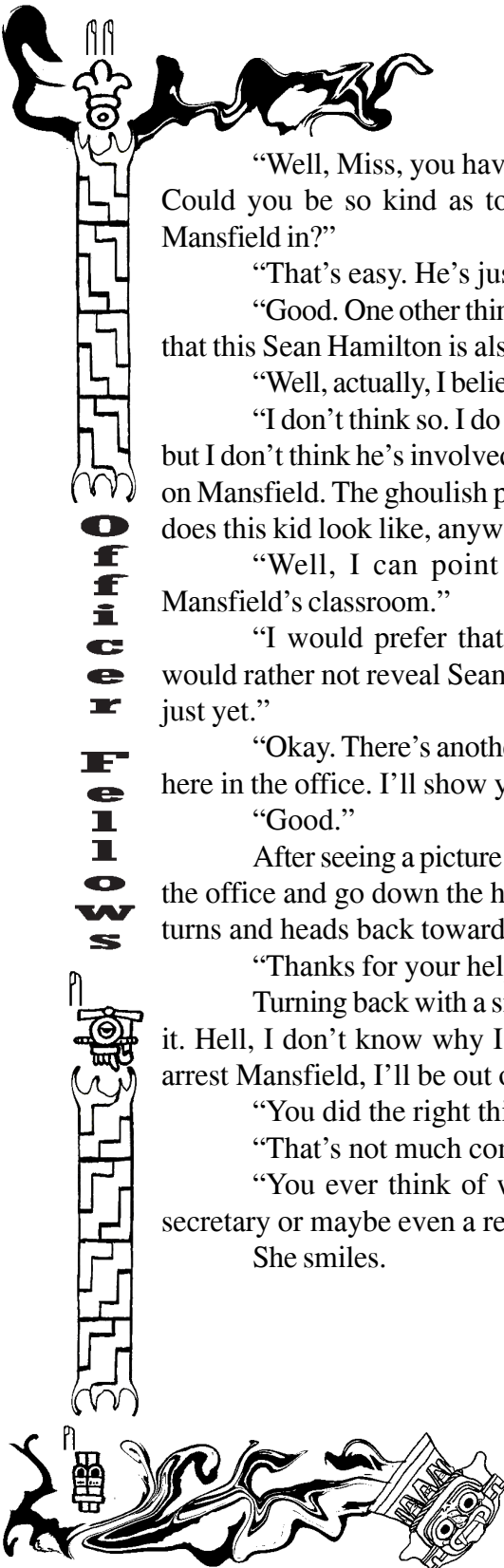
“Any guesses on what this may involve?” I ask.

“You said that Kettering was an archaeologist?” she remarks.

“Yes.”

“Well, I know that Mansfield is a nut when it comes to anything dealing with Mesoamerican antiquity,” she declares. “Maybe Kettering welshed on a deal.”





“Well, Miss, you have been a tremendous help so far. Could you be so kind as to tell me what room I can find Mansfield in?”

“That’s easy. He’s just down the hall. I’ll show you.”

“Good. One other thing, though. Is there a good chance that this Sean Hamilton is also in Mansfield’s class?”

“Well, actually, I believe he is. Coincidence?” she adds.

“I don’t think so. I do think you pegged Hamilton right but I don’t think he’s involved with Kettering’s murder. That’s on Mansfield. The ghoulish prank is from Sean, though. What does this kid look like, anyway?”

“Well, I can point him out when I take you to Mansfield’s classroom.”

“I would prefer that we don’t handle it that way. I would rather not reveal Sean’s suspected involvement in this just yet.”

“Okay. There’s another way. I have a current yearbook here in the office. I’ll show you a picture.”

“Good.”

After seeing a picture of the sandy-haired kid, we leave the office and go down the hall. She points out the room and turns and heads back toward the office.

“Thanks for your help, lady,” I remark.

Turning back with a smile, she replies, “Don’t mention it. Hell, I don’t know why I helped you, anyway. After you arrest Mansfield, I’ll be out of a job.”

“You did the right thing,” I respond.

“That’s not much comfort to a single mom.”

“You ever think of working at a police station as a secretary or maybe even a receptionist?” I ask.

She smiles.

Chapter II

Date: Monday, February 16th, 1987

Narrated by: Sean Hamilton

What the hell is going on? Why is Mansfield still here? The authorities had to find the cadaver by now. What the hell is going on? I am forced once again to stomach another one of Mansfield's boring lectures.

"Yes, the world that you exist in is ever-changing, never-ending," the large man bellows from his podium. "You must adapt or die. Life and death is that simple, that black and white."

If there was a humane god, I would be spared this philosophical bull...

"Mr. Hamilton," chides Mansfield, "does the topic fail to hold your attention and that's why you stare mindlessly off into space? Even if you do not care to learn, please refrain from being a distraction."

"Hah!" I lightly laugh. "For once your lecture inspires me to think of God and the hope of salvation."

"Hamilton, I'll..." Mansfield stops as he spots the cop standing silently in the doorway.

Holy shit! It's on. The shit is about to hit the fan.

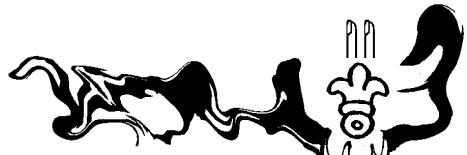
"Excuse me. JR Mansfield, I am officer Frank Fellows from the Hope city police department. I need to discuss a matter with you."

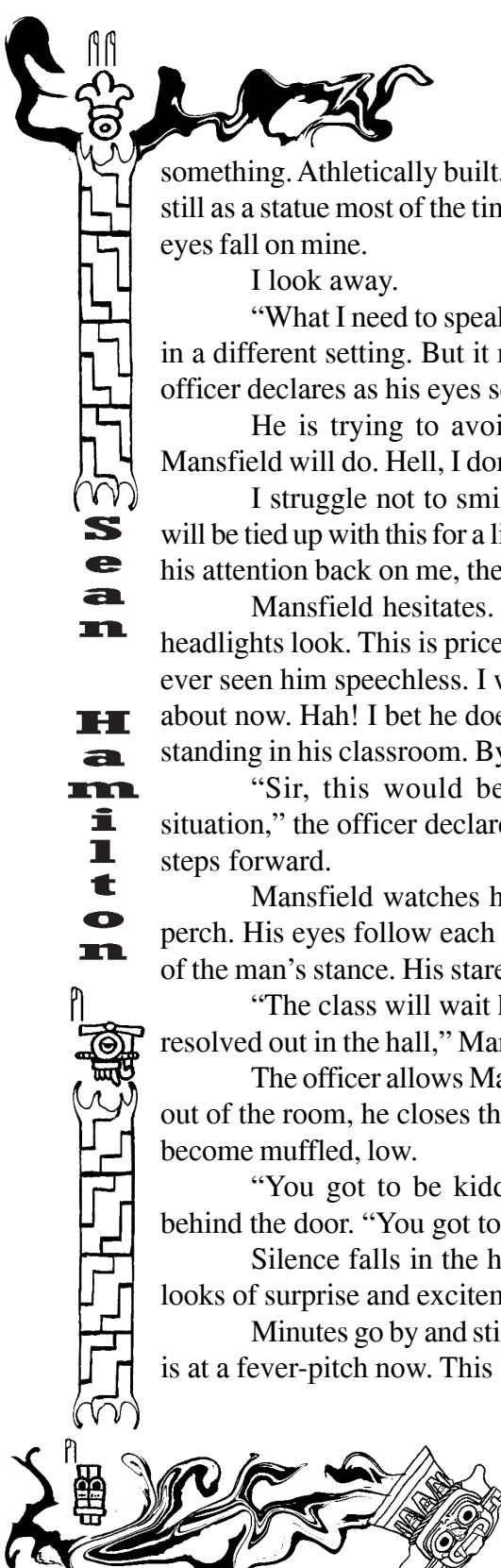
"Well, if you haven't noticed, I'm in the middle of teaching the principles of life to the next generation. It would be better if you would go to the office and arrange a more convenient meeting time with my secretary, Ms. Thomas."

"This matter will not wait."

"I..." Mansfield falls silent as he studies the officer.

The cop is a tall young man, probably thirty-





something. Athletically built, he moves deliberately, standing still as a statue most of the time. Watching things develop. His eyes fall on mine.

I look away.

“What I need to speak to you about I would rather say in a different setting. But it needs to be addressed now,” the officer declares as his eyes scan the rest of the students.

He is trying to avoid a scene. He’s not sure what Mansfield will do. Hell, I don’t know myself.

I struggle not to smile. This is too sweet. Mansfield will be tied up with this for a little while. By the time he focuses his attention back on me, the convention will be long over.

Mansfield hesitates. He has that deer-caught-in-the-headlights look. This is priceless. This is the only time I have ever seen him speechless. I wonder what he is thinking right about now. Hah! I bet he doesn’t have a clue why this cop is standing in his classroom. Bye, bye, Sonofabitch.

“Sir, this would be the best way to handle this situation,” the officer declares as he takes a couple of casual steps forward.

Mansfield watches him like a hawk from a wooden perch. His eyes follow each foot and then gauge the manner of the man’s stance. His stare intensifies.

“The class will wait here while this matter is quickly resolved out in the hall,” Mansfield declares.

The officer allows Mansfield to lead the way. Stepping out of the room, he closes the door behind him. Their voices become muffled, low.

“You got to be kidding,” Mansfield bellows from behind the door. “You got to be kidding. This is absurd.”

Silence falls in the hall while the students exchange looks of surprise and excitement.

Minutes go by and still no sign of Mansfield. The class is at a fever-pitch now. This is great!

“Attention all students, attention all students,” calls out a female voice over the school PA.

The room falls silent.

“All classes have been cancelled until further notice. I repeat,” the PA announces, “all classes have been cancelled until further notice. When more information is available, it will be announced. I repeat. All classes have been cancelled until further notice. When more information is available, it will be announced. Until then, all students are to return to their dorms and await instruction.”

I’m out of here.

Students sit around, stunned by what just happened. The only thing I can’t believe is how it all went off without a hitch. Mansfield didn’t have a clue what hit him.

Moving past those just standing up from their chairs, I go out and down the hall.

I’m not hanging around here.

Outside, I shiver as the cold air blankets me. I watch the squad car cruise away. Its lights are not flashing.

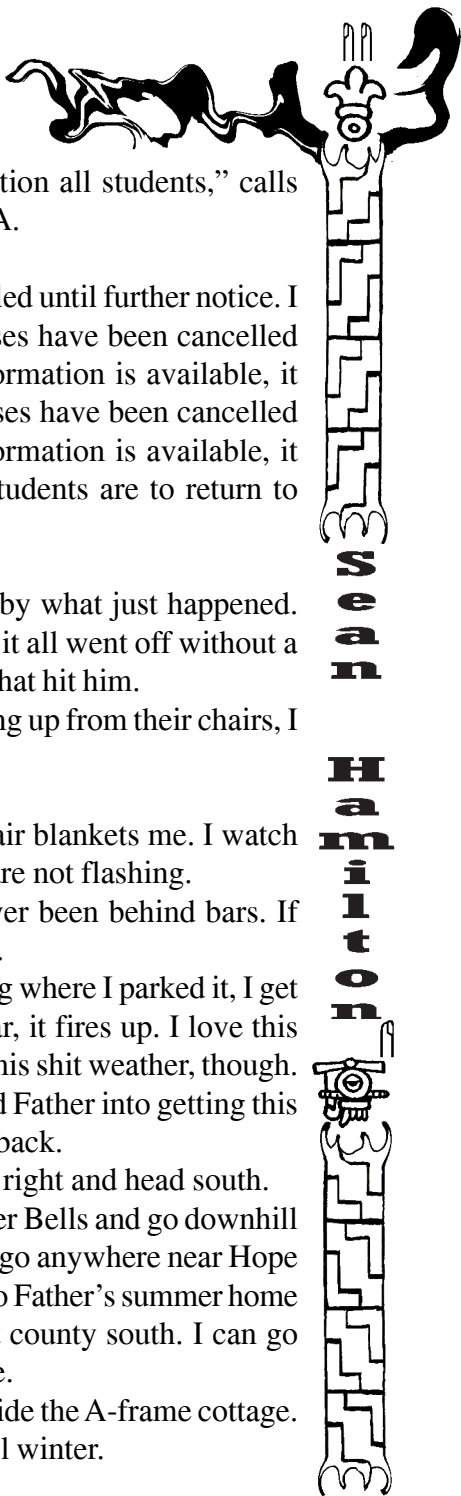
I wonder if Mansfield has ever been behind bars. If not there’s a first time for everything.

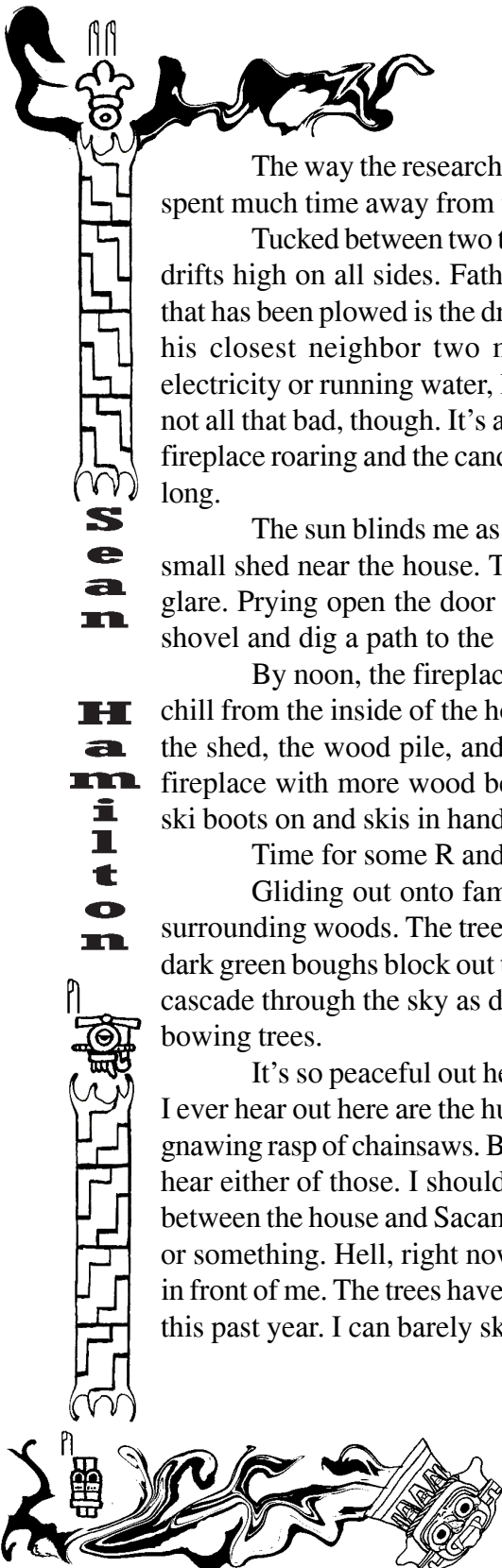
Finding my silver ‘84 Mustang where I parked it, I get in and turn the engine on. With a roar, it fires up. I love this car. I wish I didn’t have to drive it in this shit weather, though. I still wonder how Uncle Mitch talked Father into getting this for my 16th birthday, a couple years back.

Reaching Highway 30, I turn right and head south.

I should head north up to Silver Bells and go downhill skiing for the day, but I don’t want to go anywhere near Hope right now. Instead, I’ll just head over to Father’s summer home near Northampton Beach in the next county south. I can go cross-country skiing there by the lake.

In no time, I am standing outside the A-frame cottage. This is the first time I’ve been here all winter.





The way the research has been progressing, I have not spent much time away from that lab.

Tucked between two tall pine trees, the house has snow drifts high on all sides. Father neglects it, and the only area that has been plowed is the driveway. And that's been done by his closest neighbor two miles down the road. With no electricity or running water, living is very rustic out here. It's not all that bad, though. It's a good place to think. Getting the fireplace roaring and the candles burning, I can study all night long.

The sun blinds me as I dig out the snow in front of the small shed near the house. The white powder intensifies the glare. Prying open the door of the shed, I pull out the snow shovel and dig a path to the front door.

By noon, the fireplace has thawed most of the winter chill from the inside of the house. Paths have been cleared to the shed, the wood pile, and the nearby creek. I load up the fireplace with more wood before I leave the house with my ski boots on and skis in hand.

Time for some R and R.

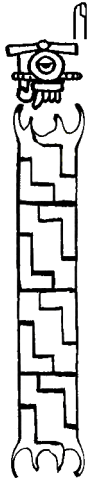
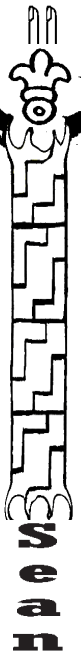
Gliding out onto familiar trails, I head deep into the surrounding woods. The treetops whip back and forth but the dark green boughs block out the bitter wind. A trillion crystals cascade through the sky as drifts of snow burst free from the bowing trees.

It's so peaceful out here. The only sounds of man that I ever hear out here are the hum of racing snowmobiles or the gnawing rasp of chainsaws. But with this wind howling, I can't hear either of those. I should be nearing that one small pond between the house and Sacandaga Lake. Maybe I'll see a deer or something. Hell, right now I would like to see fifteen feet in front of me. The trees have definitely grown closer together this past year. I can barely ski through here anymore.

Damn, listen to that wind howl! It sounds like it is rolling towards me. I'm nearing a clearing. At the edge of the woods, I fight through the branches as they try to hold me back. I break through only to find a charging snowmobile heading straight for me.

Too late to move.

Pain strikes me; weightlessness holds me while darkness consumes me all within a moment.





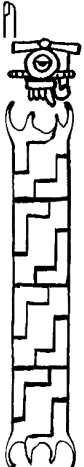
Chapter 12

Date: Monday, February 16th, 1987

Narrated by: Robin O'Leary



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“Oh no! I hit that skier.”

My ski-doo jerks wildly side to side. I hang on.

“Oh great! The one ski is damaged. I can't steer...”

Suddenly, end over end, my snowmobile flips. Like shrapnel, parts fly off the machine.

Snapped free from it but still clutching the handlebars, I slam hard into a nearby tree.

Pain shoots through my shoulder. Opening my eyes, I find the world upside down. A broken branch sticks out through my right breast. I have been impaled by the tree limb, and blood runs from the tip of the stick as I hang there upside down with my helmet in the snow.

Curling up my legs, my black biker boots push off hard from the tree. Tearing the flesh free, I fall forward into the snow. Pain for a moment. I lie there in the snow. My heart pounds. The blood surges out of me and onto the snow. I feel faint.

Breathe, Robin! Don't worry. It's not through the heart. It's just another scratch that's healing at this very moment.

Hah! It just feels so weird, though. Too bad the skier won't be so lucky. Shit! The skier.

Sitting up and pulling off my helmet, I assess the damage.

Fatal? Yes. Fatal for someone that hasn't *changed*.

To me? A mere nuisance needing only minor attention.

The red blackish veins slither like worms curling and churning inside my wound. Already the blood has reversed its flow. It covers it and hardens to a scab. With a little more effort, the crusty red fades to a fleshy pink. Only my black snowmobile suit and the sweater underneath it remain torn.





sandy brown bangs.

“It’ll be all right, Alex.”

His slate-blue eyes roll open. Pain tears up in the corners of them. He struggles to make sense of his surroundings. His eyes slowly shift side to side.

“Where am I?”

“You’re safe!” I add, “You’re safe, Alex. You’re with me, my love.”

“I... I... I wish I knew you,” he stutters. “But... But... I don’t. I’m Sean.”

“No! No! You’re Alex. Alex Hamilton.”

“Like the guy on the ten dollar bill? Hah! Ohh... Don’t make me laugh. It hurts. It hurts to laugh.”

“No. No, you are Alex Hamilton from Virginia near the Tennessee border,” I explain.

“Hah! Ohh... No, I can’t say I’m related to that Hamilton either,” he struggles.

“My love, save your strength. There’s no need to talk. We can sort out everything later.”

“Sure.”

“Where can I take you, my dear?”

“Hah! Ohh... Maybe a hospital? I feel pretty broken up inside.”

“There’s no need for that now. I will take care of you. Where do you live? I’ll take you home.”

“My home is in Erie Harbor, Massachusetts. That’s near Salem.”

“I know where that is,” I answer, “but you’re in upstate New York.”

“Father’s cottage... Father’s cottage is just...”

“Relax, Alex. Take your time. Let me help you remember.”

“Help me remember? How do you figure?”

“Relax. Just let me kiss you and everything will be fine.”

“Kiss me? What? What are you talking about? I’m delusional. You’re...”

“Relax, Alex. Let me help you,” I coo.

My fingers hunger to touch him. To run them through his hair.

“Do what it takes to get me out of here. I’m so cold,” he cries.

Tilting him up, my lips drop to his neck.

“What...”

“Relax.”

“But...”

With needle sharp teeth, I pierce his salty neck. Lightly, I draw in his blood, not enough to *feed on* or *change* him, just enough to *know* him.

With a heartbeat, his blood flows through my mind.

Ohh... Ohh... So much pain. So much pain. Not just from this accident. It’s... It’s... Loneliness.

For me?

No.

For whom, then? Where... Where... Where is his mother? Who is she? There’s... There’s... only pictures of her. No... No... No physical things tied with maternal emotions. Is... Is... Is he an orphan? No. There’s his father, Samuel. A frail old man and... and... and his uncle, Mitchell Coleman...

Oh, Jesus! His favorite uncle just died.

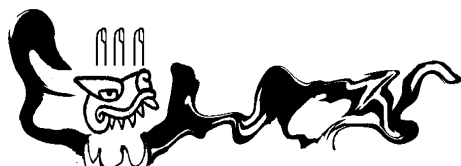
What... What drives him? The research.

My word! Who is this kid? Why... Why... Why is he out in the middle of nowhere? Why isn’t he at some university?

Jesus! He hasn’t even graduated from high school. He attends some nearby prep school called Mansfield Institute.

His father’s summer cottage is even closer. I’ll take him there.





Chapter 13

Date: Tuesday, February 17th, 1987

Narrated by: Sean Hamilton

What’s wrong? How long have I been lying here? Can’t think straight. Foreign thoughts somehow seem familiar.

The hot hand of the summer sun covers my mouth. I struggle to breathe. Today is not what I thought it would be. I don’t think anyone expected this. It is the Reckoning. The Reckoning for the arrogance... the pride... the self-righteousness on both sides of Bull Run.

Cannons drum out the rhythm for the War March. Rifle fire sounds out like buglers. So much blood, so much death, so little resolved.

In answer to our suicidal infantry charge, Griffen & Ricketts artilleries have blown off a few rounds of their own. And with it goes my lower left leg. Here I lie about to become one more dead soldier too proud to retreat.

My blood feeds my Virginia homeland. This is my only comfort. And what comfort is that?

“Alex! Alex!”

Through the chaos of battle and bloodshed, a face appears. It’s a wingless angel. Tears stream down her cheeks. Her hand is soft and cool against my burning skin.

“Ohh... Save me!”

“Of course, my love. Of course.”

Picking me up as if I were a feather, she carries me toward her nearby wagon. She steps on and over dead and moaning men. She smiles at me. Alone, she comforts me.

“Alex, everything is going to be just fine. I promise.”

She sets me in the back of her horse-drawn wagon. Hopping up on the driver’s bench, she whips the horses into a hell-bent gallop.

As if we were a running target, a series of hammering

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“Oh, my love, the only way I know I can truly save you is by forever *changing* you.”

“No. That’s not living. That’s just surviving. I... I... I love you, Amber... I love you more than life itself, but... but I could never exist as a... a *feeder*.”

“Oh, Amber... I... I... I wish I could live just a little while longer. You and I could escape. We could catch the train at Manassas Junction and head west. Ohh... Don’t you see? If we just had a little more time...”

“Alex, we do! We do! Don’t give up, my love. I shall think of something. Don’t I always?”

Comfort. Peace of mind within this painful chaos.

“Yes,” I smile.

“That’s right. Stay strong. Fight, my love,” she replies.

“I will, my sweet bird,” I answer.

I will until I bleed to death in this dark damp tomb. There is nothing that can be done. I am beyond all science, all industry. I cannot be saved. My lower leg lies to the left of me waiting to be refastened like... like... like boot straps... so... so I can walk. Never again will it be that way.

“Where am I?”

“You’re safe, my love.”

“Where am I?”

“Relax.”

A crackling fire wakes me. My eyes roll open. I don’t smell the damp earth any longer. Instead, it’s the rising smell of burnt wood topped off with the musty odor of a closed cabin.

“Where am I?”

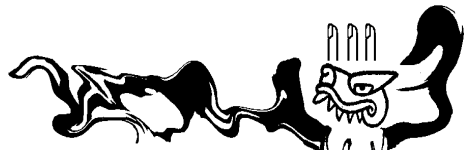
“At your father’s cottage.”

Her voice.

I scan the room. In the low light of the flickering fire, I see her. She stands near the kitchen in Father’s cottage. The partial moon reveals nothing of her features as the moonlight shines through the large corner windows.

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“Come closer. I can’t see you. Do I know you?” I ask.

“No,” she answers.

“Why are you here, then?”

“You had a bad collision or something. I found you out in the snow.”

“Bleeding everywhere?”

“I wouldn’t say that. You were bleeding from the bump on your head but other than that, nothing.”

“What... What... What about my leg?”

“What about it? Is there something wrong with it?”

“Yes! It’s... It’s...”

Pulling back the down comforter, I reveal both of my naked feet attached and working fine.

Was I dreaming? Am I still?

“Hah! What’s wrong with them besides needing a pedicure?”

“No, I thought...”

“Easy, Sean. You shouldn’t do too much moving around until the morning. Tomorrow, you should go get checked out by a doctor.”

“What’s today?”

“Tuesday night.”

“What? I...”

“I found you late Monday evening. You’ve been in and out of it ever since.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“But how did you...?”

“Don’t trouble yourself.”

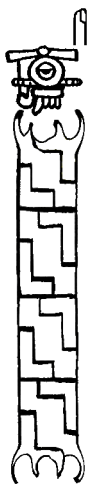
“But...”

“Relax.”

Hypnotized, I fall deep asleep.

Piercing like pain, the morning sun wakes me. Lying on a hard, cool floor, I look around. The chill nags at me like a sickly child. The fire has long since died and the embers

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Chapter 14

Date: Wednesday, February 18th, 1987

Narrated by: Mariah Amargo

Bound from Queens, I exit the subway and head for ground level.

Though morning, the sun has done little to the winter chill. I head up toward Tompkins Square from the station at 2nd Avenue. The waking metropolis stretches its legs for the morning commute. I move down the crowded sidewalks. Going out around the slow folk, I hustle.

The first contact regarding this story in months and I'm running late. Great!

Damn Tony! He shuts off my alarm and doesn't even make sure I'm awake. What kind of shit is that? I won't tolerate it. I have deadlines and commitments.

He should know...

HONK!

"Watch it, lady," screams a cabbie rushing past me.

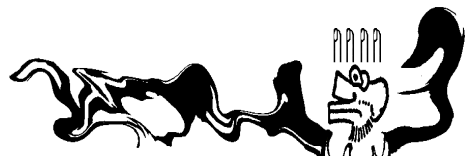
I freeze in mid-step. The red-light-running taxi melts into the traffic crossing over on East 6th Street.

Let it go. Let it all go. Breathe. Breathe and move on.

Leading the pack of pedestrians crossing the street, I pick up my pace. I clutch my camera against my chest. It has been my unbiased friend, witnessing and recording my every view even before I started at the Underground.

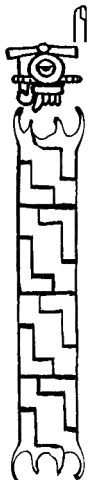
Living in the City has had its moments. Especially with my loco boyfriends. There's been too many of them. And Mama doesn't help matters much by misleading detective Santiago's mother and him. She shouldn't have said that I needed checking up on.

I'm hoping Tony is different from the others. But after Valentine's Day last Saturday and today, I'm having my doubts.



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listed on the file's cover sheet. The paper trails of these holding companies, both foreign and domestic, boggle the mind. I still have the copied records at home and leads that need to be followed up. From them, I drafted a preliminary report on the file and submitted it to Mr. Elliott at the end of my first month.

After reviewing my opinion of the file, Mr. Elliott told me that my work reminded him of Peter's. The report was thorough and documented. And though he agreed with my findings, he informed me that the La Famille file would remain open.

At the time, his compliment meant nothing. Now, after seeing the endless work Peter submitted, it's overwhelming flattery.

Slowing as I approach another intersection, I gather my bearings.

Reaching the corner of 2nd Avenue and St. Mark's Place, I stop and take a deep breath.

Awh, God! What's that smell? Turning in all directions, I look for the source. The wind brings it westward; unfortunately, I must go east on St. Mark's Place.

Halfway down the block, an old black man in a green army coat and faded black pants lies across a bed of refuge spilled out of an overturned garbage can. He uses the first step of a stoop as a pillow.

With his long white wiry hair, he looks like a down-and-out Don King after he hocked his only pair of glasses. I inch closer to him.

"Jesus, old man. Are you dead, wanting to be alive or just alive wanting to be dead?" I mutter.

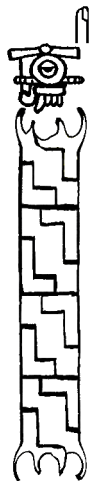
Drawing closer, I look to see if he's breathing. If he's dead, that would explain the stench.

Sheets of newspaper cover much of him. As I study the ones on his chest, they rise and lower shallowly. I notice my horoscope.



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Dark shadows loom over today's events.
Unseen forces heavily influence your life.
You must fight a long hard battle for only
a moment's rest.

“Hah, I hope...”

“Dontcha be laffin’ at me,” the old man groans. One of his eyes suddenly cracks open.

I stumble back as his bloodshot eyes stare at me. My heart pounds.

“Jesus, old man,” I bark, “are you trying to scare the crap out of me? I wasn’t laughing at you. I was reading my horoscope on your chest.”

“Huh?” questions the old man.

Glancing down at the newspaper covering him, a toothless smile forms on his face.

After a laugh through thick mucous, he declares, “I just thought ya were laffin’ at me. So if you ain’t here to make fun of me, whatcha doin’ down here then?”

“Working a story,” I declare as I hold up my camera.

“So you’re here fur me,” he smiles. “Ya wanna take my picture for da cover story?”

Even before an answer, he licks his hands and runs them over his strung-out bangs. Thick and greasy, his hair parts and flattens to his forehead.

“I’m ready,” he smiles with his toothless grin.

Disarmed, I laugh and snap off a few shots of the old fellow as I circle out around him. Amusingly, he shifts his pose with each shot. He’s harmless.

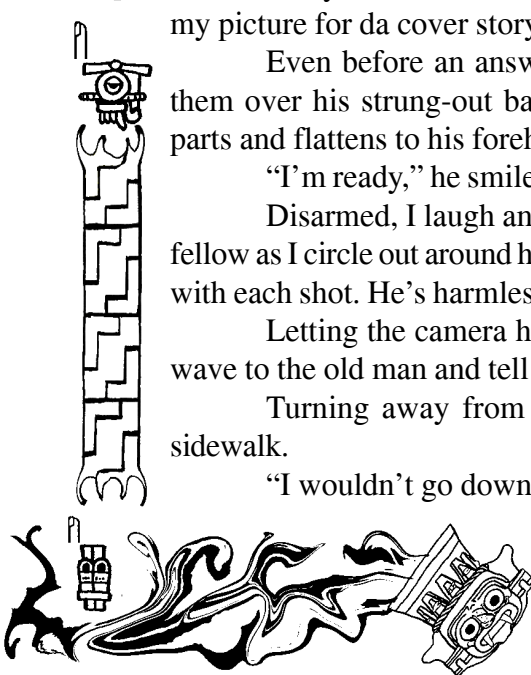
Letting the camera hang once more from my neck, I wave to the old man and tell him, “Take care, sir.”

Turning away from him, I move farther down the sidewalk.

“I wouldn’t go down there, lady.”

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“Huh? What do you mean by that? I’m meeting someone down this road.”

“Jesus, girl. Dontcha smell dat? Dat’z death. Dat ain’t me. Yah thought dat was me, didntcha?”

“Well, maybe I thought it was the garbage you’re lying in.”

“You pity me, dontcha? Ya think of me aza victum of society. But diz is who I am willingly. Just like you’re gonna go down dat way willingly,” he declares.

“But before you’re gone,” he adds. “I amma gonna tell you sumtum. Darz thangz dat don’t belong but day do. So if ya knew what’s good fur ya, you’d leave dis story alone, lady.”

“People have a right to know the truth, more so if it’s bad news and directly affects them,” I declare.

“You’re just like da rest of dem,” he scoffs. “Stickin’ your nose in shit just to say, ‘Yep, dat stanks.’”

“Huh?”

“Go ahead den. I tries ta warn ya. But before ya go, erz some more advice. Free of charge, dat iz unless you feel obligated to pay me,” he adds with a thick laugh. “Only you can save ya from yourself. Ya know what I amma sayin’?”

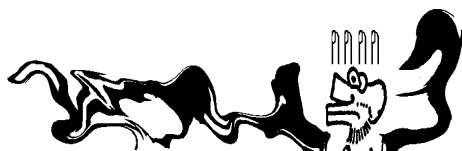
Waiting for more but hearing nothing, I reply, “Yeah, I see. Thanks for that bit of advice.”

Turning from him, I press on.

“Suitcha self, girl.”

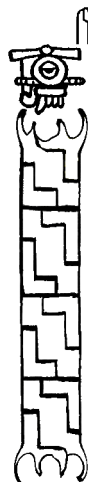
Coming to the first alley on St. Mark’s Place, I turn in. As I head in, though, the decaying waste hits me harder. My eyes tear up and my nose runs. The smell is so rank it causes dry heaves. I struggle to stomach each breath. A foul film forms on my tongue. I cuff my mouth trying to block out the stench.

Reaching the L-shaped corner, though, the smell intensifies tenfold.



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HAWK. HAWK. HAWK.
BLAAH. SPLOOSH. BLAAH. SPLOOSH.

I'm unable to stop it, and the contents of my stomach spew out onto the alleyway. Several times, I wrench uncontrollably. My head spins. Hunched over, my hands rest on my knees. I stand upright, wipe away the tears, and look forward.

"Ahhh! Ahhh! Ahhh!" I scream.

Tilting out from the wall like a crucified Christ, a dead, naked, white man hangs from the mouth of a stone gargoyle halfway up the building. Thin cables bind the man's wrists separately and his ankles are wired together. His abdomen has been savagely torn open, and his entrails stream down from his belly.

As the initial shock wears off, I reach into my coat pocket and pull out a hand-held recorder and speak into it.

"I'm in the first alley east of Second Avenue off of St. Mark's Place in the East Village. This was the scheduled meeting point with an informant regarding La Famille.

"The black-haired, middle-aged male hangs about fifteen to twenty feet from the ground. A cable holds him as a T at a forty-five degree angle to the dark brick wall.

"Still attached, his intestines dangle down to the ground. Oddly, the end of his guts lie loosely in what appears to be a large pile of ash. There's no sign of a fire. There's...

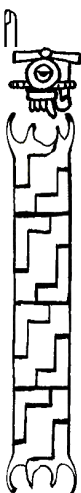
"Hold on. That's not possible"

My eyes scan the scene. That's just not possible.

"There's no blood," I continue. "There should be blood everywhere. Unless... Unless this murder didn't happen here. It must have happened somewhere else. There are no marks on the walls. Someone went to a lot of effort to put that man up there like that. The person had to have access to a lift of some sort. Like that on a telephone truck. I assume this based on the fact that there are no fire escapes close enough to accomplish the task any other way. With no drag marks down

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the bricks, it does not appear that the body was lowered from the roof of the building.”

Shutting it off, I put the recorder back into my pocket.

Lifting up my camera, I snap off several shots from various angles. The wind blows the man’s black hair from his face. I stop.

“Oh my god! That man looks familiar. He looks like... like... Oh my god! He looks like Peter, Peter Mallahki. It is. It is Peter Mallahki.”

I snap off several close-ups of the man’s face.

Has Peter been working on the La Famille file all of this time? What did he find out that compelled him to come out of hiding now after nearly two years? What could it be?

I take a step back and something catches my eyes. In between the mouth of the gargoyle and Peter’s head, there’s a spray-painted message. It reads.

The Tlamatini has no place in
the City. You’ve been warned!

“Tlamatini? What is the Tlamatini? What does this... Ahhh!”

The old man lays his hand on my shoulder, and I jump from his sudden touch.

“Why the hell do you insist on spooking me? I’m starting to think you’re doing it on purpose.”

“Hah, hah, hah! I amma sorry about dat. I was figuring ya might be needin’ my help after I heardja scream.”

“I’m all right. Just appalled by it all.”

“I tried ta tell ya.”

“I know. I know.”

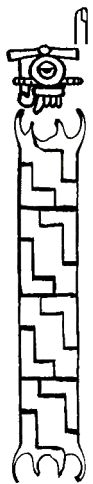
“So whatcha gonna do now?”

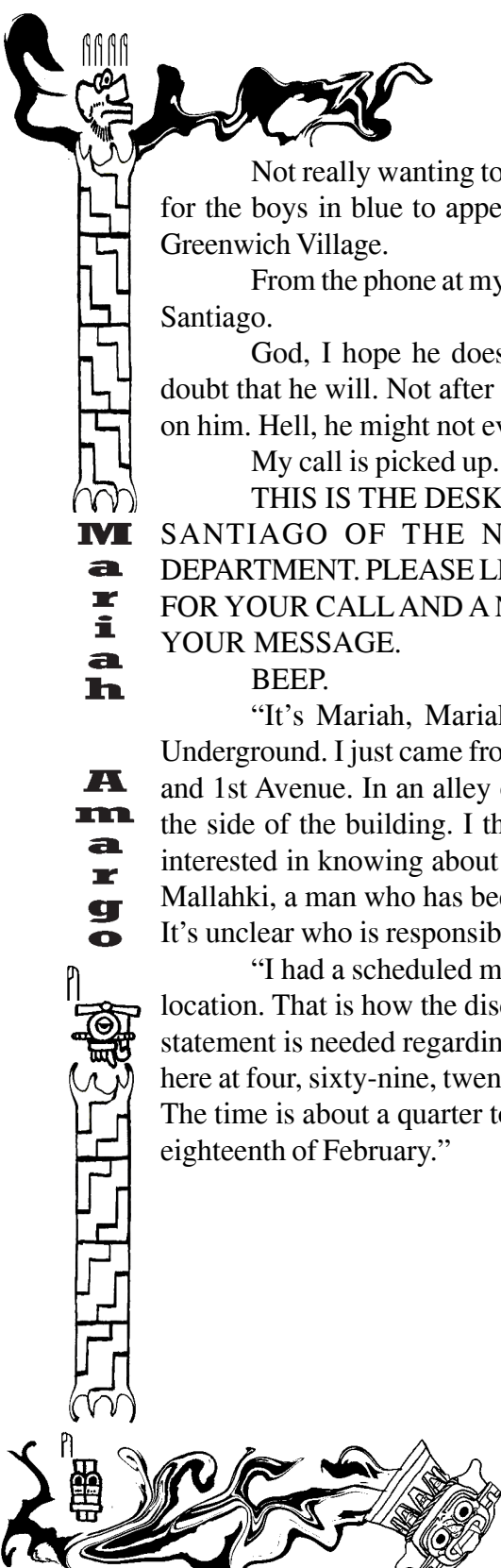
“Call the police.”

With a raised eyebrow and shrug of his shoulders, the old man turns and walks away without another word.

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Not really wanting to stick around in the cold waiting for the boys in blue to appear, I head for the office over in Greenwich Village.

From the phone at my desk, I reluctantly call detective Santiago.

God, I hope he doesn't get the wrong idea. Hah! I doubt that he will. Not after our last conversation. I went off on him. Hell, he might not even talk with me.

My call is picked up.

M THIS IS THE DESK OF DETECTIVE RICCARDO SANTIAGO OF THE NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT. PLEASE LEAVE YOUR NAME, REASON FOR YOUR CALL AND A NUMBER SO I MAY RETURN YOUR MESSAGE.

a BEEP.

r "It's Mariah, Mariah Amargo from the New York Underground. I just came from St. Mark's Place between 2nd and 1st Avenue. In an alley over there, a corpse hangs from the side of the building. I thought that the NYPD might be interested in knowing about it. The man appears to be Peter Mallahki, a man who has been missing for nearly two years. It's unclear who is responsible for the grizzly murder.

i "I had a scheduled meeting with an informant at that location. That is how the discovery was made. If a statement is needed regarding this matter, please contact me here at four, sixty-nine, twenty-six, sixty-five. Thank you. The time is about a quarter to nine Thursday morning the eighteenth of February."

Chapter 15

Date: Wednesday, February 18th, 1987

Narrated by: Detective Riccardo Santiago

“Hello, this is Mariah Amargo,” she answers.

“Yes, Mariah. This is detective Santiago,” I reply. “I had a chance to go over to East Village to investigate the alleged murder of Peter Mallahki.”

“Alleged murder? What do you mean?” she barks.

“I found no body,” I declare.

“Huh? It’s hanging in plain view. What...”

“All I found was a large pile of ashes underneath the gargyle you spoke of.”

“Impossible. I’ll show you.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d say that. I’ll pick you up and we can drive over there together.”

“Fine. Do you remember where my office is?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I’ll see you in a little while.”

“Okay.”

Hanging up the phone, I walk out of the police station and head for my car.

It’s been a little while since I’ve seen Mariah. I haven’t seen her since I made a fool of myself. God, I couldn’t help it. She’s one fine señorita. She sure let me know what she thought of my advances, though. Such a strong grip. Hah! She nearly snapped my fingers when I touched her knee.

Man, I wonder if she’s reconsidering. Fat chance, amigo. That was six months ago. She’s calling because of this Peter Mallahki.

Whatever her reason for contacting me, it’s welcomed.

Reaching the New York Underground off West Houston Street in Greenwich Village, I find her standing outside in front of the entrance. She is beautiful. She wears





her brown hair up in a bunch. Her plump lips beg to be kissed. Wearing a long tan coat, her hands are tucked into the side pockets. She smiles as I pull over in my unmarked car.

I open the door for her.

“Hello.”

“How’s it going, Detective?”

“Fine. Fine, Mariah,” I smile. “Please get in.”

“Thanks.”

Once in, she closes the door with a thud and reaches for the seat belt, looks forward, and then glances at me with a warm, red-lipped smile.

“It’s best to head back to Houston and take that over to 1st Avenue,” she remarks.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m gonna do.”

Traffic is slow and an uneasy silence sets in.

“So how have you been, Mariah?”

“Pretty good,” she instantly responds, “I’ve been dating a basketball player from Columbia for a while.”

Catching her underlining meaning, I reply, “That’s good.”

As if surprised by the tone of my comment, she turns and looks at me while I turn left onto Houston. She doesn’t trust me or more likely the lines said by guys like me to women like her.

Hah! I don’t blame her. She must get hit on by every Tom, Dick, and Harry.

“What’s so funny, Detective? You’re smiling like a cat after he ate his master’s canary.”

“I was just thinking of you and me, Ms. Amargo,” I start.

“And this is funny?”

“Please, let me finish. It’s a struggle just to say it.”

“Ah, Detective, I don’t believe this is the time to...”

“Please, Mariah, let me finish,” I cut her off.

She falls silent.

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“I’m sorry for how I behaved the last time we met. It was unprofessional.”

“Rick, there’s no need...”

“Yes, there is, Mariah. I do apologize. Though irresistibly beautiful, you do not deserve unwanted advances,” I finish with a slight smile.

“Rick, there’s no need for you to apologize. If anyone should, it should be Mama. Trying to protect me, she misled you,” she replies.

The edge of my nerves dull. My stomach settles.

I turn left onto 1st Avenue. Without looking directly at her, I continue on. From the corner of my vision, though, I see her watching me, gauging my manner. She’s a hawk. Something catches her attention on the side of the road.

“Hey! Hey! Hey! You went by the road.”

“I know. I’m circling around on 9th Street so we can come in the exact same way you did this morning. I don’t want to leave anything to chance.”

“Good,” she says with a smile.

Going left onto 2nd Avenue, I turn another left at the next corner. It’s St. Mark’s Place. At the first alley, I make a right. Slowly, we roll on down it.

“He hasn’t returned,” she mumbles as she stares back at a pile of garbage and refuge.

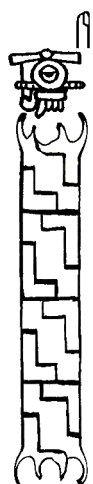
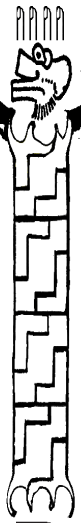
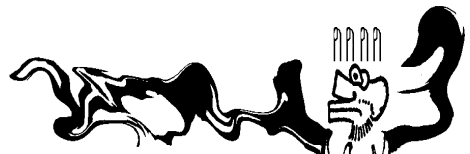
“What was that?” I ask.

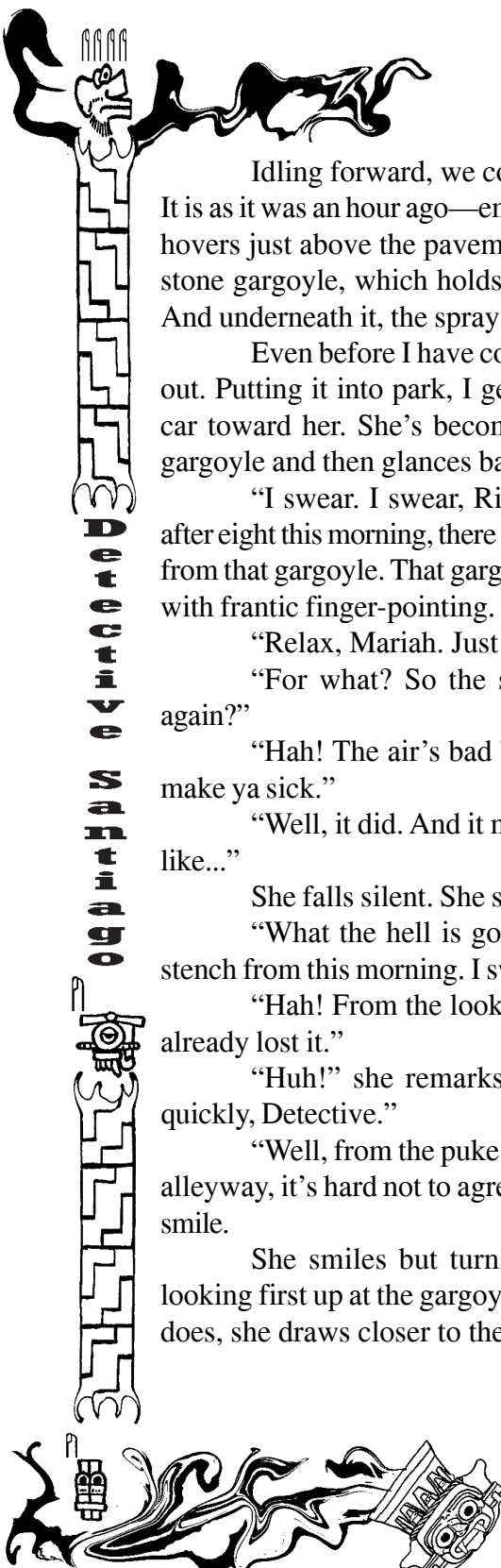
“Oh, nothing really. This morning, there was an old homeless man lying in that pile of garbage back behind us.”

“Oh,” I remark as I halt the car with a tap of the brake.

“No, no. The dead body was up around the bend. The homeless man was alive but when I informed him that I was going to contact the authorities, he left the scene.”

As I hold the car’s brake down, I remark, “Mariah, I went up ahead and to the left. There’s nothing. Watch, I’ll show you.”





Idling forward, we come to the corner and I turn left. It is as it was an hour ago—empty. A small whirlpool of papers hovers just above the pavement. Looking up, we stare at the stone gargoyle, which holds a group of cables in its mouth. And underneath it, the spray paint declares its warning.

Even before I have completely halted the car, she gets out. Putting it into park, I get out and circle the front of the car toward her. She's become frantic. She points up at the gargoyle and then glances back at me.

"I swear. I swear, Rick. I swear that about a quarter after eight this morning, there was a body. A naked man hanging from that gargoyle. That gargoyle right up there," she declares with frantic finger-pointing. "You've got to believe me."

"Relax, Mariah. Just take a deep breath."

"For what? So the stench can make me throw up again?"

"Hah! The air's bad but I wouldn't say that it would make ya sick."

"Well, it did. And it might still. Just take a deep whiff like..."

She falls silent. She shakes her head.

"What the hell is going on? Now I don't smell that stench from this morning. I swear I'm losing it," she declares.

"Hah! From the looks of it from over here, you have already lost it."

"Huh!" she remarks. "You don't have to agree so quickly, Detective."

"Well, from the puke you left back at the corner of the alleyway, it's hard not to agree with you," I finish with a light smile.

She smiles but turns away. She studies the scene, looking first up at the gargoyle and then at the ground. As she does, she draws closer to the wall.

“What’s this?” she inquires.

“It’s the pile of ash that you mentioned.”

“I know what it is but it is much larger than it was this morning.”

As the sun shines down into the alleyway, I try to make sense of the situation. Both from her manner and Mariah herself, I know to take her serious. But none of this is making sense. Where has all of this ash come from? There’s been no fire. And the graffiti.

“What is the Tlamatini?”

“I don’t know,” she replies. “I had never seen the word before this morning.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, she walks in small circles looking for something that is not there.

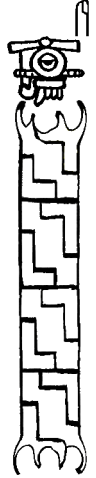
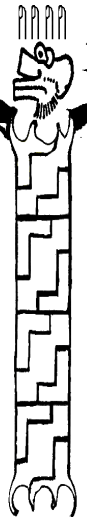
“Damn it! I can’t believe this. You must think I am insane.”

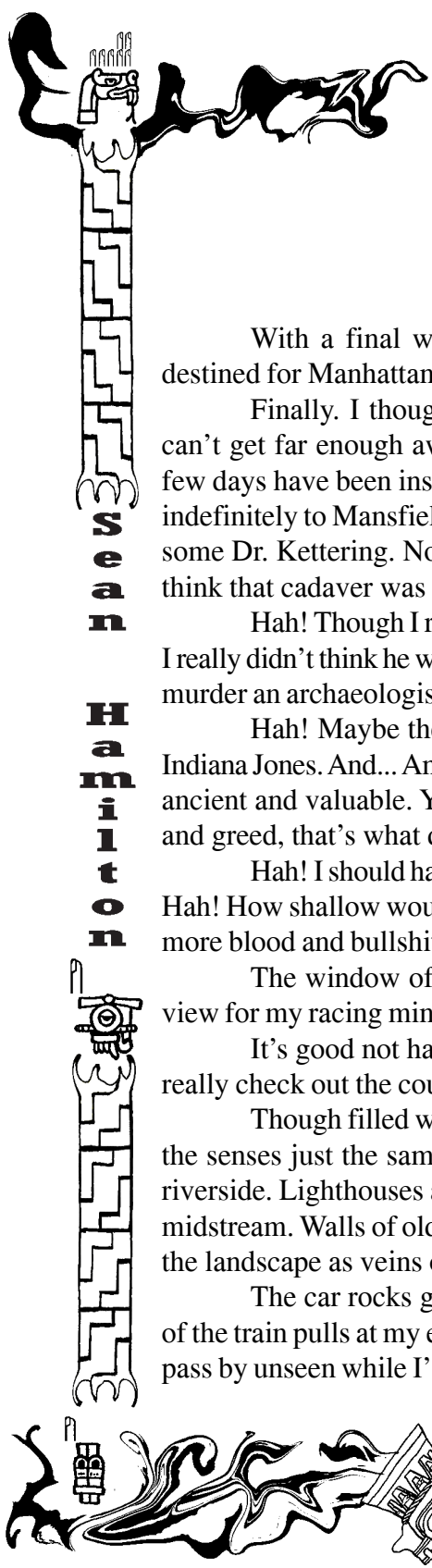
“Hah! Maybe a little odd but not loco.”

Though amused by the comment, her smile quickly fades as she continues looking around.

“Detective, please take me back to the office. There’s no need for me to waste any more of your time.”

“As you wish.”





Chapter 16

Date: Saturday, February 21st, 1987

Narrated by: Sean Hamilton

With a final whistle, the train rolls out of Albany destined for Manhattan.

Finally. I thought I was never getting out of here. I can't get far enough away from Hope right now. These last few days have been insane. From the Institute's being closed indefinitely to Mansfield's being charged with the murder for some Dr. Kettering. No way did I foresee this. No way did I think that cadaver was a true murder victim.

Hah! Though I reported that Mansfield was homicidal, I really didn't think he was. Man, why the hell would Mansfield murder an archaeologist anyway?

Hah! Maybe the good doctor was like a modern-day Indiana Jones. And... And he had found something... something ancient and valuable. Yeah, yeah. That's got to be it. Money and greed, that's what drives the evil of today.

Hah! I should have been a writer instead of a geneticist. Hah! How shallow would that be? Just what this world needs, more blood and bullshit.

The window of my empty coach offers a distracting view for my racing mind.

It's good not having to drive. For the first time, I can really check out the countryside.

Though filled with murky water, the Hudson enchants the senses just the same. Many miles of track run along the riverside. Lighthouses and homes stand on various islands in midstream. Walls of old worn stones forge the rough edges of the landscape as veins of ice course through it.

The car rocks gently along the way. The heavy hum of the train pulls at my eyelids, though. Towns and landmarks pass by unseen while I'm napping.

Oh! It's been a long time since I've been on a train. I think... I think the last time I was on a train was when I was down... down south?

Hold on! That can't be...

KNOCK. KNOCK.

Someone stands outside the door.

Reluctant, I remark. "Yes?"

The door slides open. It's the woman in my dream from the other night at the cottage. She stands in the narrow doorway wearing a white southern-belle's dress.

"How did you find me? Jesus! I doubted that you were even real."

"Alex, what are you talking about? It was your idea to meet on this train."

"My name is Sean not Alex."

"Oh, right! An alias. Good thinking, Alex. That might throw them off our trail."

"Them? Who's them?"

SHRIEK. SHRIEK. SHRIEK. SHRIEK.

The stopping train jerks me forward. My hands stop me from colliding with the wall in front of me. Leaning back in the bench seat, I look out the window to see that the train has pulled into a station.

"Shit! I was dreaming," I mutter.

"Ladies and gentlemen," a voice calls out over the compartment's intercom. "We have arrived in Manhattan. Please gather all belongings and make your way to the exits in an orderly manner. We would like to thank you once again for traveling with us."

People walk, run, and jog past me heading in every direction. The station is alive. I make my way to the outside. Madison Square Gardens greets my arrival.

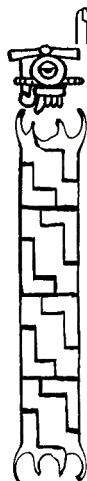
With cabbies waiting curbside, I have one take me to the Southgate Tower.

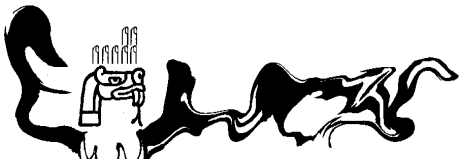
I check into my room and put away my few things.



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Drained, I drop onto the bed and stare up at the ceiling.

After dozing off a couple of times, I get up and go into the bathroom to get ready. After showering, I call to have a taxi waiting in fifteen minutes. Then I finish dressing.

Thank God Father insisted that I have a tux for my graduation. Hah! A graduation that may never come.

Jesus, how is Father? I haven't heard from him since he left. That's not like him. He usually calls no matter where he is in the world at least just to say that his plane landed safely.

Well, he might have tried to reach me at the dorm. And if that's the case, I haven't been there since Monday morning. I hope he's doing well.

After grabbing my presentation, I head out of the room carrying it and wearing my long black winter coat.

When I leave the hotel, my taxi is waiting at curbside. "To the Javits Convention Center."

"Sure thing, kid."

Jerking into traffic, the cabbie races down 34th Street toward Jersey.

Closing my eyes, I try to relax.

A short while later, I hear, "We're here."

I reach the main entrance and look in on its grand splendor. Hesitation impedes my step. The ceremonies have begun. I don't want to walk across the room while someone is speaking at the podium.

For a while I stand near the entrance listening.

Behind me, I hear a woman call out, "Young man, young man."

Turning, I find an old woman sitting in a wheelchair and wearing dark cataract glasses looking up at me.

"Yes, you," she says. "Could you be a dear and wheel me over to my table? Unfortunately, I'm running late and just arrived."



Looking around and seeing no one else to help her, I walk over to her.

“Thank you, young man. This world needs a few more people like you.”

“It’s no problem, Madame.”

“Please honor me with your presence at my table. There will be more than enough room for you.”

“Okay” falls from my mouth.

I guide her down the wide aisle.

“My table is in front of the podium.”

The woman’s bony fingers slither across my forearm and she remarks, “Oh, by the way, young man, my name is Sasha, Sasha Beauna.”

“Oh, yes! Mine is Sean, Sean Hamilton.”

“Ah, yes. I see. And what’s it that you have here, young Sean?”

“I have the honorable distinction of doing one of tonight’s presentations.”

“Really? On what topic?”

“Genetic engineering.”

“Outstanding. We must talk...”

“Madame,” hisses a man behind us.

Turning, I find a towering black man in formal wear standing near the old woman’s left side. Pulling out the empty seat next to her, the man sits down.

“How did you get down here?” he questions her discreetly.

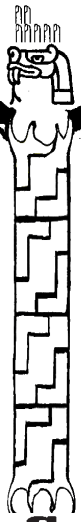
“Is it not obvious, Joseph? This nice young man kindly took care of me,” the old woman comments.

The black man’s eyes stare through me.

“Joseph, this young man is Sean Hamilton. And Sean, this is Maurice Joseph. As you may have noticed, I simply call him Joseph.”

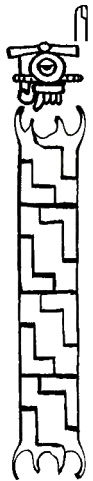
“Hello.”

The man simply nods his head.



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Applause breaks his cold stare. Slowly scanning the room, I realize the speaker has just finished.

“Very good, Dr. Prescott,” the lean, British-sounding, host remarks. “Thank you for your opinion. Now, we shall hear a voice of the next generation of scientists, Sean Hamilton. Mr. Sean Hamilton from the Mansfield Institute, please stand up. Please stand up.”

The clapping around me gets louder as I start to rise. “Mansfield Institute?” the black man stutters and then glances at the old woman.

“Yes,” I declare. “Have you heard of it?”

“Yes,” the man confirms.

Breaking his stare, I look down, pick up the leather binder and circle around the tables to the podium. Shaking the announcer’s hand, I nod to him and turn to face the crowd. I realize that there must be over two hundred people here. Setting the binder down and opening it, I adjust the microphone.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we stand at a point in time never before realized by humanity. Our own wills shape the world we live in. Less than half of a century ago, a chain-reaction of thoughts and actions resulted in the splitting of the atom. Today, this is the magnitude of genetic engineering. For better or for worse, this is the truth of science. Knowing this, collectively as a society, we must address the issues as they surface or as they are foreseen. A blank, ignorant ban on this divine science will solve nothing and complicate things only further. We, alone, are the guardians of our destiny.

“The cloning aspect of genetic engineering has been stressed up to now. Though a noteworthy feature, I believe it overshadows other potentially more practical applications. For example, instead of generating living clones to harvest organs from, diseased or dead organs could be re-conditioned into healthy ones. The process would be much like modern-day chemotherapy. In the future, personal gene maps will be



more important than social security numbers and fingerprints.

“There are no limits within science, only the lack of applied theories and documented research.”

The crowd grows loud as I pause for a brief moment; many openly question my comments. Faces twist and contort with contempt and surprise.

I continue.

“Though in the preliminary stages, the results revealed have been compelling...”

Cutting into my speech, some man shouts, “Who is chaperoning these unethical experiments?”

The floodgate breaks.

Loud disdain erupts from the formal gathering. No longer does polite restraint quiet their comments and questions. My final summary fails to reach much of the audience.

“Before ending,” I loudly add, “I would again like to express my thanks to the National Association of Sciences for providing the opportunity to talk about the future of genetic engineering, and science in general. Thanks and good night.”

As I finish, the host speaker steps up to the podium.

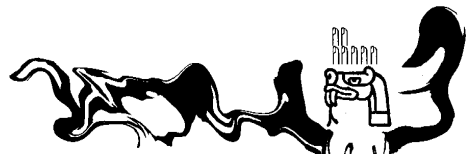
“Thank you, Mr. Hamilton. Your presentation has been thoroughly impressive. Hopefully, you will be able to complete your research before my time is up on earth,” he laughs.

“Next up,” he continues, “Dr. James Easton. Please, let’s have a nice round of applause for Dr. James Easton.”

Claps follow but all the while the conversations bubble over like a champagne-filled room. The nearby tables whisper and muffle their comments. Sasha smiles brightly while Joseph sits next to her like a mute manservant.

“Mr. Hamilton,” she starts. “That was quite the presentation. You almost incited a riot.”

“Please, Madame. Spare the boy or at least me,” Joseph chimes in with a bitter look.





“Hush, Joseph. Control your jealousy. Look around this room. People haven’t a clue what the current speaker is saying. They’re still discussing Sean’s speech. Look, Joseph. Look.”

Not really believing her myself, I look. Still a roomful of eyes are upon me.

“See, I was right,” she smiles.

“Thank you, Ms. Beauna. That is truly flattering.”

“So where do things stand for you?” she questions.

“Well, to be quite honest with you, it has ground to a halt. My schoolmaster has deemed my work unethical just like some of the people here. So right now I’m looking for a new facility where I can continue my research, one that’s a little more liberal.”

“Hah! That’s understandable. Dick is quite the right-winger.”

“How well do you know JR Mansfield?”

“I’ve know that man for a long time. The longer I know him the more I grow to dislike him, though.”

I smile.

Though bound to a wheelchair and over sixty years old, an inner strength lies within her.

“I’m already beginning to like you, Ms. Beauna,” I joke.

“Please, young man, call me Sasha,” she declares. “Ms. Beauna sounds too formal. We’re all friends here.”

“Okay.”

“Well, Sean, if you are unhappy with where you are, may I tempt you with an offer, then?” Sasha remarks as she pats my arm.

Glancing at her and then at Joseph, I see a mirrored look of surprise reflected on his face. He seems annoyed by her offer even before she gives it.

Looking at her, I ask, “What is it that you are actually offering?”

SEAN

HEATHER



JOSEPH



“Sean, let’s go for a little ride so I can better explain myself,” she replies.

“All right.”

“Do you mind leaving now? Or do you want to stay for the rest of the speakers?” She asks.

“We can leave now. That’s fine with me.”

Joseph pulls her away from the table and guides her down the wide aisle toward the exit. Close behind them, I follow.

Reaching the outside, Joseph leaves Sasha under the portico and runs toward the parking lot.

“Why is Joseph...” I stop as I glance at the old woman sitting in the chair.

A dark gray tints her skin. She’s sickly pale. Sweat beads on her wrinkled forehead. Worried, I kneel down by her wheelchair.

With my hand resting on her shoulder, I ask, “Are you all right, Ms. Beauna?”

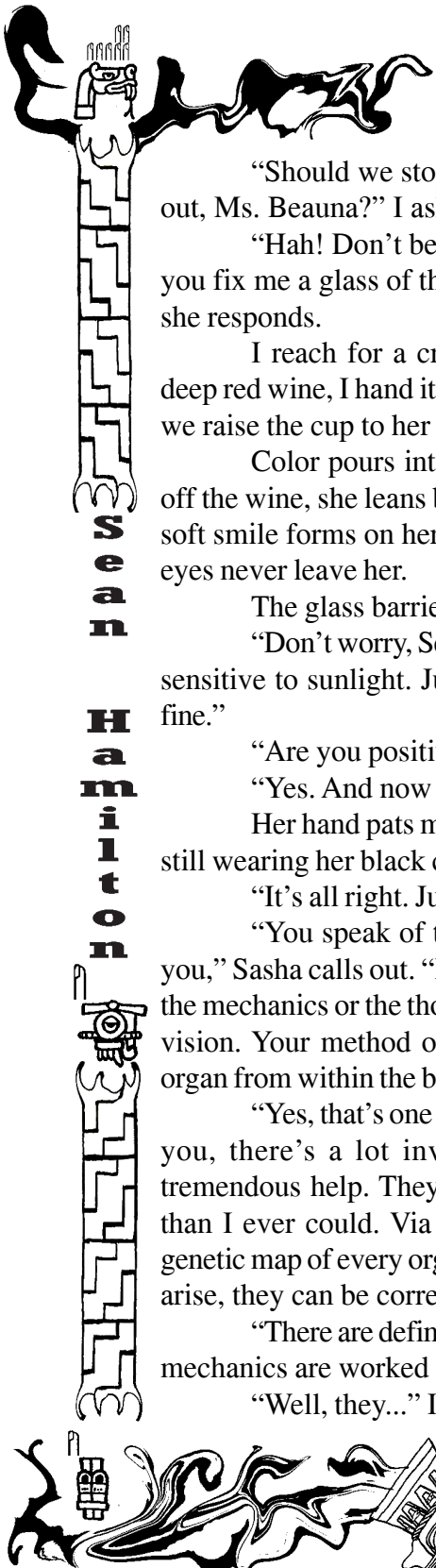
“Don’t worry Sean,” she mutters. “Joseph will be here in a moment.”

As if conjuring him up with her words, a black Mercedes Benz with gold trim rolls up with Joseph behind the wheel. It jerks to a halt, the door swings open, and Joseph gets out of the car. Before I straighten up, he has the rear door open and helps Sasha to stand up. Slowly, she steps into the car. He handles her as if she’s a sheet of glass. She slides to the middle of the bench-style seat.

Quickly, I climb in and sit back against the soft cushion. A small complete bar and fridge sits underneath the black glass divider that blocks my view of Joseph.

My eyes fall back on the old woman. She is still pale. Sweat streams from her now. Pulling my handkerchief from my chest pocket, I dab Ms. Beauna’s forehead as she sits there mute and lifeless.





“Should we stop at the hospital to have you checked out, Ms. Beauna?” I ask.

“Hah! Don’t be so silly, Sean. I will be just fine after you fix me a glass of that red wine in that bottle over there,” she responds.

I reach for a crystal goblet. Pouring a half glass of deep red wine, I hand it to her with both hands. I help her, and we raise the cup to her badly cracked lips.

Color pours into her cheeks as she drinks. Finishing off the wine, she leans back in the seat and closes her eyes. A soft smile forms on her face. I worry for her well-being. My eyes never leave her.

The glass barrier lowers.

“Don’t worry, Sean,” Joseph announces. “Sasha is very sensitive to sunlight. Just give her a second and she will be fine.”

“Are you positive?” I ask, looking into his eyes.

“Yes. And now you can relax.”

Her hand pats my knee. I glance at her and she smiles, still wearing her black cataract glasses.

“It’s all right. Just give me a few moments,” she adds.

“You speak of things as if they are in midstream for you,” Sasha calls out. “I would love to hear more about either the mechanics or the thought process required to achieve your vision. Your method of treatment has merit. By curing the organ from within the body, recovery time would be lessened.

“Yes, that’s one of the bigger pluses,” I jump in. “Mind you, there’s a lot involved with this. Computers are a tremendous help. They tabulate my results more efficiently than I ever could. Via databases, computer codes trace the genetic map of every organ in a person’s body. And as ailments arise, they can be corrected or reconditioned.”

“There are definite possibilities. That is, once the actual mechanics are worked out,” she replies.

“Well, they...” I hesitate.

At that moment, their eyes fall upon me. Nothing escapes their attention.

I pause and look up at Joseph in the rearview mirror. He stares back, waiting for me to continue, just as Sasha does, her bony hand squeezing my knee softly.

“It’s all right, Sean,” she starts. “You can say anything in front of Joseph. He’s not just a chauffeur or an escort, for that matter. Joseph and I have been through thick and thin. He is my strength.”

“Oh, dear lady,” I interject, “you have me wrong. My eyes were not questioning Joseph’s loyalty. Instead I wondered if he would laugh when I say that I have.”

“What?” they say in unison.

“Impossible,” she adds.

“Hah! Impossible?” I taunt. “You just said it was possible.”

“Yes,” she adds, “after certain things are in place.”

“They are. Though rudimentary, the first treatments on a lab rat have shown positive effects.”

“Where were these experiments carried out?”

“At Mansfield Institute.”

“I didn’t know Mansfield offered his students access to such equipment,” she adds.

“He doesn’t, but anyone can create such access for a price,” I add.

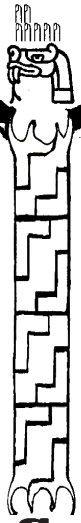
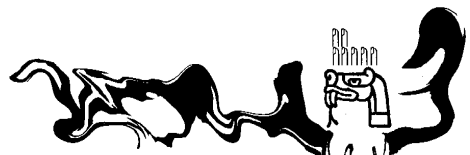
Laughing lightly, the old woman pats my knee once more.

“My father,” I explain, “donated some advanced equipment to the school.”

“Oh, I see,” she replies.

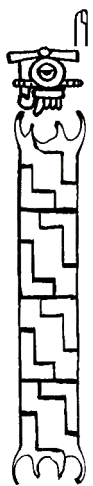
Pausing for a moment, she reaches up and removes her glasses. Wrinkles ripple out from her eyes as she looks at me. She reminds me of my mother’s mother, petite but resilient. Father said that Mom mirrored her spirit.

Silence fills the car as it moves through the traffic.



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“So where are we going?”

“We’re headed for 6th Avenue between West 20th and 21st Street in Greenwich Village. I own a blood bank located there. I’m quite sure that you will find both the people and work quite interesting.”

“I don’t mean to sound uninterested before seeing what you have to offer,” I start, “but what makes you think that drawing blood from donors would interest me?”

With a little smile, the woman tips up the bottom of the glass. I watch as she waits for the last drop to slither down to her tongue. She lowers it and hands me the glass.

“Could you be a dear and pour me a tall glass of wine?” she asks.

Without a word, I take the glass from her and pour it three quarters full. I hand it back. She drinks it nearly empty and hands it back before I can set the bottle back in its place. I pour just about the rest of the bottle in the glass and hand it back. With two quick drinks, she finishes off the glass and hands it back again.

“Could you be a dear and put this glass over there?” she requests, pointing to the bar.

“If drawing blood from donors,” she starts, “was all that the Center had to offer, then I would say that I am wasting your time. But what I want you to be involved with is researching ways of preserving the useful components of blood.

“Maybe through your work, massive quantities of blood can be synthesized or reconditioned, as you called it,” she pronounces.

This could be something.

“What kind of facilities do you have?”

“You will soon find out,” Joseph chimes in.

“Well, here it is, Mr. Hamilton,” she announces. “The New York Plasma Center. Or as we simply call it around here, the Center.”

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The outside of the dingy brick building holds little appeal. The garage door stands closed.

Approaching the door, I cannot help but laugh. My eyes catch the street number on the main entrance to the Center, left of the bay door.

“What’s so funny, young man,” she bristles. “Sorry if the outside has little appeal.”

“No, it’s not that, Madame. I’m sorry. I just couldn’t help myself. I noticed the building number. The Center is located at 666 6th Avenue. Where have you guys taken me? To hell?” I try to joke.

“Hah! It feels that way sometimes,” Joseph rejoins.

“What? Watch your tongue,” she crows.

“Oh relax, woman. I’m just having a little fun at your expense,” the black man adds.

She smiles.

“I’m sorry. My eyes catch things like that. Too many late-night horror movies.”

We laugh.

Joseph walks over to the key pad and punches in a code. In seconds, the metal door rolls upward.

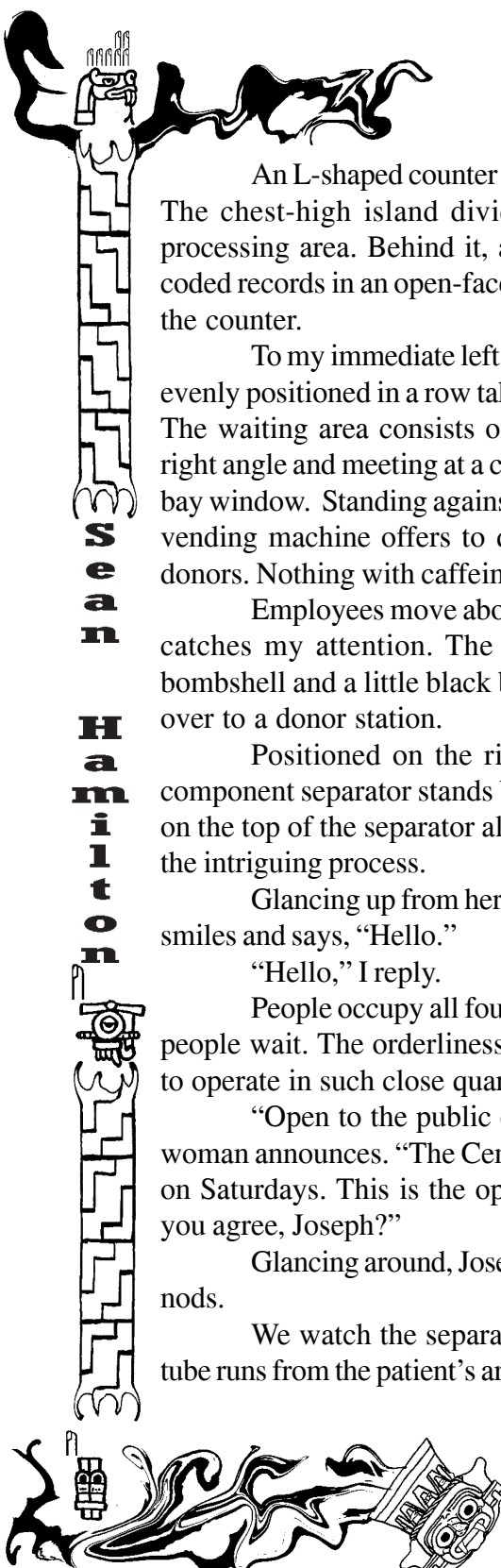
Two white Dodge Ram vans are parked nose to tail in the narrow garage. An aisle runs along them with tool chests lining the opposite north wall. In front of the vehicles stands an elevator door with a metal fire-door next to it. Up past the tools, there’s a door.

As we come in, Joseph closes the garage door. With a low hum, exhaust fans kick on.

We head for the side door. A small ramp makes the door wheelchair accessible.

I walk into the room. To my right, the wall dividing this room from the garage forms a long hallway. At the end stands a door with stairs to the right of it. A long rectangular mirror covers over half of the wall perpendicular to the hall.





An L-shaped counter runs in front of the looking glass. The chest-high island divider forms the Center's record processing area. Behind it, against the wall, rows of color-coded records in an open-faced filing system run the length of the counter.

To my immediate left, four individual draining stations evenly positioned in a row take up the front half of the Center. The waiting area consists of two rows of chairs forming a right angle and meeting at a corner end table in front of a large bay window. Standing against the wall, also to my left, a juice vending machine offers to quench the thirst of sucked dry donors. Nothing with caffeine chills in it, though.

Employees move about their daily tasks. Their beauty catches my attention. The staff consists of a tall blonde bombshell and a little black beauty. Madame Beauna wheels over to a donor station.

Positioned on the right side of the bed, the blood component separator stands bedside level. A clear glass plate on the top of the separator allows for curious donors to view the intriguing process.

Glancing up from her work, the shorthaired black lady smiles and says, "Hello."

"Hello," I reply.

People occupy all four draining beds while a couple of people wait. The orderliness of the Center allows the group to operate in such close quarters.

"Open to the public every day of the week," the old woman announces. "The Center still sees most of its business on Saturdays. This is the operation in full swing. Wouldn't you agree, Joseph?"

Glancing around, Joseph surveys the situation and then nods.

We watch the separator unit at close range. A single tube runs from the patient's arm to the white compact machine.

“Though all of this is interesting,” the old woman adds, “this is not why I want you to come to the Center. Down that hall behind you, a staircase leads to the second floor. That’s where I’ll convince you to work for me.”

With a radiant smile, she adds, “Joseph, show him the way.”

“Yes, Madame.”

I follow him down the hallway. Three furnished offices line the north side of the hall. Glancing back into the first office, I notice that the front lobby’s mirror is actually a two-way mirror.

At the end of the hall, a wide staircase heads right, up to the second floor platform. A single steel door stands at the end of the steps.

“Where’s the rest of the stairs? I thought this was a three-story building,” I remark.

“It is,” Joseph answers. “You can only access the third floor by using the freight elevator.”

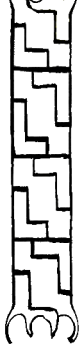
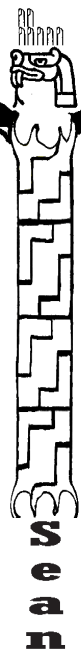
“Isn’t that...”

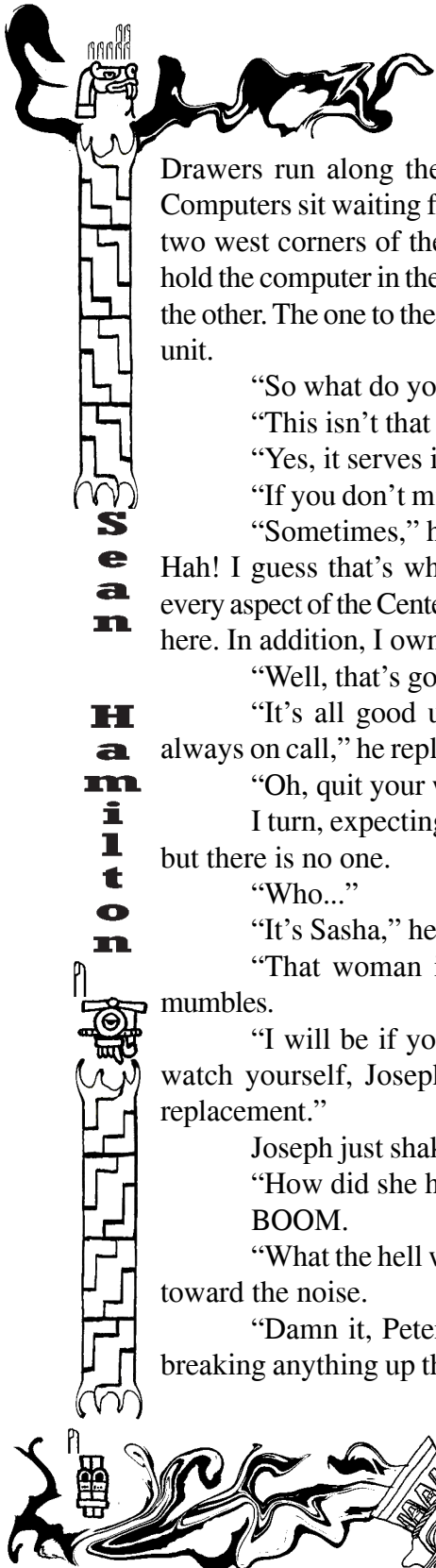
“Yes.”

With a short stern glance from the tall black man, I question no further the potential fire hazards. Instead, I take note of it and score it in the pros and cons of this deal.

Walking up to the silver door, Joseph taps in a four-digit code and the door slides to the left. Stepping closer, my mouth drops open.

White tiles cover the entire room including the walls and the ceiling. Mounted in the north wall, a string of fridges runs from the ends of the long counter. Tall cupboards hang above the long, black, shiny counter. A chrome long-neck faucet hooks over a deep sink in the middle. A stainless steel examining table takes a forty-five degree position to the northeast corner of the room. On both sides of it are blacktopped tables. A sink sits in the middle of each of them. Each is equipped with its own gas, water, and electrical outlets.





Drawers run along the fronts of the square-shaped tables. Computers sit waiting for electricity to bring them alive in the two west corners of the room. A desk by the front windows hold the computer in the north while a podium-like stand holds the other. The one to the south appears to be part of a centrifuge unit.

“So what do you think, Mr. Hamilton?” Joseph asks.

“This isn’t that bad of a setup,” I reply.

“Yes, it serves its purpose.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what do you do here?”

“Sometimes,” he starts, “it feels like I do everything.

Hah! I guess that’s what I get for knowing how to operate every aspect of the Center. Officially, I am the business manager here. In addition, I own a share of the business.”

“Well, that’s good, being partly your own boss.”

“It’s all good until there’s a problem and then I’m always on call,” he replies.

“Oh, quit your whining, Joseph, and get down here.”

I turn, expecting to find someone standing behind us, but there is no one.

“Who...”

“It’s Sasha,” he groans as he shakes his head.

“That woman is going to be the death of me,” he mumbles.

“I will be if you don’t hurry and get down here. So watch yourself, Joseph. Mr. Hamilton might just be your replacement.”

Joseph just shakes his head.

“How did she hear...” I start.

BOOM.

“What the hell was that?” I remark as we both look up toward the noise.

“Damn it, Peter,” Joseph shouts, “you better not be breaking anything up there in storage.”

Looking at me, he remarks, “We better go up and check on him. Peter already screwed up a shipment last week. I don’t want to deal with another one. Besides, I want to see if he broke anything.”

Taking the elevator up, the doors open to a room full of stacked boxes. In the center, though, a toppled stack lies scattered on the floor. As we move closer, a thin, pale man begins to restack them.

“It sounds like you broke something.” Joseph declares. “Huh?”

Startled, the man jerks his head up. His eyes sink into his drawn face. Dark circles hang from the bottom of his eyes like numerous earrings. His pupils bleed. He looks like he might pass out at any time.

Rough night, I would say.

Stepping toward us, the man stumbles.

“Careful, Mr. Blauer. No need to break anything else. I don’t want to have to write up an accident report.”

“Joseph, why would you ever have to...” he stops as he glances at me.

“You know what I mean, Peter,” Joseph asserts. “What are you doing here, anyway? I don’t believe the Madame has okayed your return to work, has she?”

A sour stare forms on the young man’s face. His gaze falls before Joseph’s strong stare.

“I’m sorry, Joseph. I’m just going stir crazy at home.”

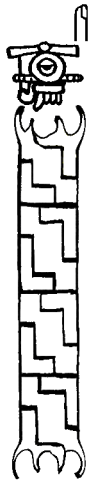
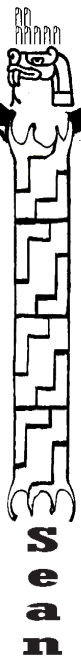
Raising his head and glancing at me and then back at Joseph, he asks, “Who’s your quiet friend?”

Silent, Joseph just stares at the man for a moment.

Cutting me off before I can break the silence, Joseph remarks, “This is Sean Hamilton. He might take an R & D job here at the Center. He specializes in genetic engineering.”

“How lovely,” the man replies with a wry smile.

He reaches out to shake my hand. I hesitate before I extend my hand. He clasps my hand with both of his. They



“Sean, go ahead and get in. I’ll take you back to your hotel,” Joseph remarks.

“I’d definitely appreciate that. It’s the Southgate Hotel. That’s over...”

“I know where it’s at, kid,” Joseph remarks as he pulls the chair over to the trunk.

“Okay,” I reply, stepping in and closing the door.

The ride runs short as my mind races over all that has happen today.

“Well, Sean,” he announces, “we’re here. It’s been a pleasure to meet you. You show great potential and I hope you bring it to the Center.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, young man, I have shown you my cards. It’s up to you to play or not,” she replies with a crooked smile.

Stepping out and turning around, I lean in and say, “Take care, Madame. I will let you know within a day or so.”

With a smile, she replies, “Okay. Take care, Sean.”

I close the door and smile. The black car disappears into the evening traffic.

In the solitude of my hotel room, I eat room-service.

“I need someone to talk to. I wonder what Uncle...” I stop.

Uncle Mitch is dead. Remember, idiot? Loneliness hits hard. Tears run.

Going to the phone, I pick it up and call home.

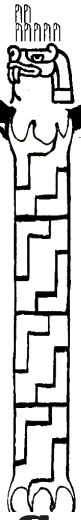
RING. RING. RING. RING.

HELLO. YOU HAVE REACHED THE HAMILTON’S HOME. SEAN AND I ARE NOT HERE AT THE MOMENT. PLEASE LEAVE YOUR NAME AND NUMBER. WE WILL CALL YOU BACK.

BEEP.

Damn! The machine. Father must not be home from his trip yet.

I hang up without leaving a message.



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