SPINECOPY

(Formerly "The Courier")

by

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All revisions current as of
February 14, 2014

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EXT. WOODS - DAY

The serenity of woods. Birds CHIRP. WIND rustles through the trees, and MISTER FUNN, 30's, charges by, naked save for a leaf-covered thong, his body painted the colors of the forest, his hair tangled in leaves. Expression jubilant, he cackles wild-eyed as he plunges into a thicket and is gone. After a moment, the BIRDS resume.

CRASH BLACK.

FADE IN.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAWN

Pruned greenery, multiple rows of grey head-stones.

LYLE LEE, 30's, stands before an impressive monument. An inscription: "HERE LIES THE GENERAL NASH LEE, NOBLE DEFENDER OF GOD, COUNTRY AND FAMILY. MAY HIS BRAVE SOUL CONTINUE TO INSPIRE THE FUTURE OF THIS GREAT NATION. OUR FIGHT WAS HIS."

Lyle's in silent, painful reckoning. An AIR HORN shatters the silence.

EXT. SPINECOPY STOREFRONT - MORNING

Busy street. HORNS. SHOUTS. TIRES.

Lyle's dressed for business. He takes a steadying breath before entering SPINECOPY; the sign: "SPINECOPY. THE BACKBONE OF BRILLIANT BUSINESS."

INT. SPINECOPY - MORNING

A clean, highly efficient COPY CENTER. Happy WORKERS help CUSTOMERS, stock supplies, run documents; a well oiled machine at the peak of function.

Someone doesn't quite click with the scene: A man in a BLACK SUIT and BRIGHT GREEN TIE waters one of the NUMEROUS PLANTS throughout the shop: MISTER FUNN leans in close to a fern, staring intently into the fronds and almost imperceptibly moves his lips in hushed communion.

SPINE (O.S.)
Mister Lee?

EMERSON SPINE, proprietor of Spinecopy, emerges from a rear office--a stocky satyr of a man, eyes a-glimmer with a wide, disarming smile; arms raised in welcome.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LYLE
Yes, sir. Mister Spine?

Spine seizes him in a commanding, formal embrace.

SPINE
With great pride, I welcome you to the Spinecopy family. Everyone!?!

Spine puppets Lyle in beside him. The employees cease their duties and gawk at the newcomer.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Let me introduce you to Lyle Lee, our new courier! Introduce yourselves throughout the day. Let him know he's welcome.

WORKERS (ALL)
Welcome aboard, Lyle!

Everyone beams but VORACIA PETALS, her angelic face laced with hesitancy.

Spine pilots Lyle towards his office.

SPINE
Efficiency, Mr. Lee, is the cornerstone of our operation. Each employee serves an integral purpose in the achievement of excellence. I hired you because you have the potential to aid me in my ultimate goal.

Spine opens the door into

INT. SPINE'S OFFICE - SAME

An immaculate power chamber. A large photo/mural of Earth dominates the wall behind a massive oaken desk, upon which sits a large, glowing globe. A small "anatomical Earth" diagram, illustrating the crust-mantle-core makeup of the planet graces another wall, and a third is smattered with photos. A glass bookshelf contains volumes on history, on the Caesars, Napoleon, Alexander, Hitler. Works such as The Art of War, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich, The Roman Empire, The Bible, A Brief History of Time, Unlimited Power--many books covering the vast spectrums of psychology and business. Atop the shelf sits a perfect row of manicured plants. One corner boasts a human spine hanging from a chrome stand, accompanied by a cross-referencing chart on the wall.

CONTINUED:

Spine closes the door as Lyle eyes one of many framed photos, a man in triumph atop a formidable peak.

SPINE
K2, arguably the most dangerous peak on the planet. That's the second trip.

LYLE
You climbed it twice?

SPINE
Always let them know who's boss. Sit down, Mr. Lee.

Lyle takes a seat opposite Spine's desk. Spine retrieves a colossal binder from a drawer, "SPINECOPY" emblazoned across the cover. He hands it over, then reclines in his throne-like chair with a mighty CRINKLE OF LEATHER.

SPINE (CONT'D)
That's a brief overview of your duties as courier. Just review it before you begin your shift.

LYLE
...no problem.

SPINE
I always have extreme confidence in my decisions, Mr. Lee.

Spine disappears behind his desk, RUMMAGES through another drawer.

A blurred object bullets in a high arc over Lyle's head! Lyle leaps from his seat, dropping the binder to snatch the object from its trajectory towards the glass doors of the bookshelf. His catch: a CERAMIC BABY HEAD.

A CRINKLE as Spine rises, a man who's bet it all and won.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Trust, Mr. Lee. The vital bond promising successful business.

He ambles out to scoop the binder up.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I memorized your file, Mr. Lee. I trusted you've kept your reflexes keen, even though you made the decision years ago to discontinue your study of the arts.

CONTINUED: (2)

LYLE
...um...

Spine grins, sits on the edge of the desk.

SPINE
Shrewd men study the past, Mr. Lee. The passing present becomes future history. I can't just hire any Randy Andy desperately chasing the American Dream. I need a *tomorrow*.

The binder forgotten, Spine gazes about the room.

SPINE (CONT'D)
When a father lifts his fragile son in his arms and flings him into the sky, he promises to catch him when he descends. When a G.I. lies in a ditch in some Godforsaken jungle, his legs blown from his torso, his platoon promises to push through that bush to get to their man, knowing full well they could wind up staked out in the sun by Charlie. And when a boy and girl are alone for the first time, their breath sweeter than the fragrance of roses in the most intimate and revealing of moments only occurring once in the lives of so many mortal men and women who cringe at the thought of something better and would rather stick to their safe havens of compromise and mediocrity and defeat, what is that bond which draws them together, holding them fast? What does that bond promise?

LYLE
...trust?

Spine waggles the file in his hands.

SPINE
You don't need this, Mr. Lee. You understand. Trust me, as I trust you.

He places the manual on his desk. They regard each other for a moment. Lyle offers the grinning baby head.

CONTINUED: (3)

SPINE (CONT'D)
Ah, yes. It was mother's, before she and Dad burned up in the fire.

Spine takes the head, offers his hand. Lyle shakes it.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Welcome to Spinecopy, Mr. Lee.

Spine holds the head next to his face. In a tiny voice:

SPINE (CONT'D)
Ready to get started?

LYLE
Absolutely.

Spine whacks his shoulder hard enough to rock him.

INT. SPINECOPY - SAME

Lyle exits to find Mister Funn deep in thought. He pushes past Lyle without looking him in the eye and enters Spine's office, closes the door behind.

The employees swoon. JONATHAN, All-American buck of a floor manager, gives Lyle a double thumbs-up, then turns to check an order from MARTHA, who beams at Lyle before bringing her attention to the document Jonathan reads.

Lyle's eyes find Voracia, who exudes the same, silent caution. She breaks the connection and Lyle follows her gaze to a table labeled 'COURIER'. Upon it teeters a mountain of orders.

EXT. STREET - MORNING

QUICK SHOTS as Lyle does his job.

Lyle passes a man on a bench wearing dark shades, GOODMAN, who hides behind a Pro-Wrestling magazine.

EXT. STREET - LATER - MORNING

Lyle examines the storefronts, turns this way and that, his shirt wrinkled and blotched with sweat. He's in a panic--when an OLD WOMAN calls from a nearby bench:

OLD WOMAN
Do you need help, young man?

CONTINUED:

LYLE
--I can't find the Benevolent Brotherhood of Business building.

OLD WOMAN
Oh, just go right up that block there and hang a Louie! It's the one with all the scum trying to get a handout in front of it.

LYLE
Thank you very much!

Lyle takes off.

A good look at this hag: it’s GOODMAN in drag.

INT. SPINECOPY - MORNING

Lyle enters, distraught, carries a medium-sized package.

Spine makes rounds through the shop, stops at service stations to chat with the employees. At the collating station, Jonathan uses a paper cutter to trim laser prints, eyes his task carefully and deliberately.

SPINE
How are you today, Jonathan?

JONATHAN
A-OK, Mr. Spine!

Jonathan executes a precise cut; shavings flutter into the wastebasket below.

SPINE
Nice cut, Jonathan!

JONATHAN
Thank you, Mr. Spine!

Spine retrieves a shaving, holds it high.

SPINE
Attention, copy crew!

The shop goes silent. A few CUSTOMERS stare. Mr. Funn, potting a small fern, keeps a chilling gaze on Lyle.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Let this be a symbol of our mission. Jon's shaving is a pristine rectangle, all sides straight and even.
(MORE)

CONTINUED:

SPINE (CONT'D)
This means his prints are also perfect! When your project is done correctly, even the waste is professional!

Spine tacks the shaving to a nearby bulletin board for all to admire. SCATTERED APPLAUSE. Jonathan nods it off.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Please continue!

The shop is off and running again; Lyle stands in the entryway, handling his package as though it were a bomb.

Mr. Funn has positioned a small plant in the corner opposite his freshly soiled fern. He's coiled a sheet of paper into a crude funnel, positions it next to the small plant, 'aiming' it across the room towards the fern, his face knotted in concentration. As Lyle notices Mr. Funn, Spine greets him with a broad smile.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Mr. Lee! How’s our morning look?

The last two CUSTOMERS pass by and exit happily.

LYLE
...I think there's been a mistake.

Instant SILENCE. Jonathan, mid-chop, looks up.

SPINE
A...mistake?

LYLE
Yeah. Ah, this package, see? I delivered it to the right address, but they said it 'wouldn't fit' so they sent me back.

Lyle extends the package; Spine takes it oh-so gingerly.

SPINE
Did...did they *open* it? Did you see them open it?

LYLE
No! No, he took one look at it and said it wouldn't do, that it just wouldn't fit. He didn't even touch it. Just went like this--

Lyle waves his hand as though flicking away a bothersome insect.

CONTINUED: (2)

Spine weighs Lyle's words, shifts the package back and forth between hands. He gives it a series of small, detailed shakes, checks the sticker label.

SPINE
The McRory Group. Curious. We never ship this product to the McRory Group.

Spine picks at a corner of the label, then slowly peels it back to reveal another label underneath: "THE TALBOT NETWORK, 1813 BUTTLE PLACE, SUITE 4500"

Spine raises his eyes to the employees, scans their faces. No one blinks except BLAKE CORNELL, young and Emo, whose features waver like rippling water.

LYLE
I'm sorry. I tried to think of--

SPINE
No, no, no, you did just fine! You're not to blame here...

An audible SIGH OF RELIEF from the Workers.

WORKERS(OVERLAPPED)
That's good, but who, not me, I never, good Lord, let's see, was it today, but it must have, but didn't we--

SPINE
In fact...

SILENCE. A PIN DROPS. Jonathan eyes the CLUMSY WORKER, who hangs his head in shame. Spine moves behind Lyle, places his hands on his shoulders.

SPINE (CONT'D)
A courier's duty involves the prompt and efficient transport of a product from supplier to customer. This hearkens back to a time when carrier pigeons were given the auspicious task of saving entire countries from annihilation. Since then, a courier's duties have become more complex. One cannot simply tie a package to an animal's leg and expect customer satisfaction.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (3)

SPINE (CONT'D)
No, we must employ a facet of the company, a shining representation of quality projected outwards from our epicenter in a crystalline beam. Hence, our courier.

Spine moves on, across the room, examines his staff.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Without a courier, Spinecopy simply could not operate. Let me say that again. Without a courier, Spinecopy simply could. Not. Operate. Our courier did as we asked of him. He trusted. He fought his way to the McRory Group, eager to deliver our merchandise, thinking only of the whole, wanting to do the right thing and be rewarded simply: a nod for his efforts. He did his best, and he is recognized. He is commended. He is loved.

A few of the workers have tears in their eyes.

SPINE (CONT'D)
But our friend here--he was let down. The same way a child is let down when he discovers his brother is a thief, or his sister a whore. One of our family let him down.

Spine sighs, turns to lean heavily on a copier.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Someone mislabeled this package. They flushed the work ethic like so much spoor.

Several MUFFLED GASPS. Jonathan, livid, grips the cutter. Blake Cornell gasps a bit too enthusiastically.

SPINE (CONT'D)
What do we do when we're confused?

JONATHAN
We trust in you to help us through!

Spine spins, eyes wide. He nods. Jonathan mirrors him.

SPINE AND JONATHAN
Yes yes! That’s right! That’s what we do!

CONTINUED: (4)

He and Jonathan mirror one another's fervency before Spine once again addresses the flock.

SPINE
And that's why he's the floor manager. Yes. Our little friend should have come to me. Because what are we?

MARTHA
A team!

JONATHAN
A family!

SPINE
Yes, a thousand times yes! And what does that mean, Mr. Lee?

LYLE
...trust?

Spine the evangelist internalizes the word to his core for several charged moments...then, speaking soft, he hands the package to Lyle.

SPINE
And that is how a family should be. No heroes here. We just want to get by. So, take this on over to the Talbot Network. Give the McRory Group our sincerest apologies. Tell them we will compensate them for this ugly, unprofessional digression.

Lyle nods, heads for the door.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Oh, and Lyle?

Lyle turns. Spine gives him the thumbs up.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Good work, my boy.

Lyle smiles heads out. The DOOR CLOSES. Then:

SPINE (CONT'D)
Competition. The scalpel that severs the ties between pretender and champion. Quality is the whetstone. Without quality, our small business will succumb to the competition.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (5)

SPINE (CONT'D)
We will cease to exist. We will not succeed. My goal is success. Therefore, we must act as the scalpel does, and amputate any dragging, useless limb that would hold us back.

Jonathan SLAMS the blade home.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Trust me on this.

Mr. Funn kneels by his plant, mumbles an unbroken stream of monotone insanity, funnel positioned at his forehead.

Blake Cornell, saucer-eyed, nervously flips through his stock of labeling stickers.

Voracia Petals checks the clock, records the time on a label of her own, then places a purple envelope on the courier table near the bottom of the stack.

EXT. STREET - MID MORNING

Lyle runs amok. Awaiting a stoplight:

DRUNK VAGRANT
Hey, buddy, ya got ten bucks so's I can buy some holler points?

Lyle moves on, unaware that the vagrant is GOODMAN.

EXT. DIPLOMAT BLDG. - MID MORNING

Lyle totes a long tube into a tall stone building. A CLOWN jogs up to the glass doors before fleeing around the corner; Lyle exits, checks the numbers above the door, and re-enters. The clown returns.

INT. DIPLOMAT LOBBY - SAME

Lyle enters a dim lobby sporting three elevators, one of which SLIDES open as he reaches the center of the floor. As he disappears into the lift, the clown peers through the glass front doors: GOODMAN.

INT. DIPLOMAT HALLWAY - SAME

The elevator opens into a cold hallway with two doors, one glows 'EXIT' in green.

CONTINUED:

Lyle approaches the odd-door-out, searches for a name or number. Or a handle. Nothing. He checks the slip: "DIPLOMAT BUILDING: TOP FLOOR"

He RAPS lightly. A moment. KNOCKS louder. SILENCE. The hall ECHOES Lyle's SIGH.

LYLE
Bed without supper, Mr. Lee!

He raises a hand to knock once more and a HUGE VOICE on the INTERCOM fills the hall:

VOICE (V.O.)
WHO'S THERE?!?

LYLE
Lyle?!?

VOICE (V.O.)
WHO ARE YOU?!?

LYLE
Spinecopy! Spinecopy. Yes.

Silence. An electrical CLICK and the door eases open.

INT. DIPLOMAT OFFICE - SAME

It's a gray office. Gray walls. Gray floor, gray ceiling, gray desk occupied by a graying receptionist in a gray dress. She stares at Lyle through thick, distorted spectacles, stone-faced and nonchalantly imposing.

RECEPTIONIST
Where's the other one?

LYLE
I...I'm sorry?

RECEPTIONIST
The other young man. The one with the bruises?

LYLE
Oh. I'm the new courier. Lyle.

Lyle moves forward and is halted by her upraised hand.

RECEPTIONIST
Place the package on the floor and kick it over to me.

CONTINUED:

A minute gesture proves her sincerity. Lyle does as he's told. The tube slides under the desk and disappears.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
Now bring me the invoice. Slowly.

Lyle moves to the desk, the invoice in one hand and a 'Spinecopy' pen in the other.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
Now place it on the desk.

He does--she slams a gargantuan stamp to sign, tears her copy and thrusts the remainder at him, never taking her eyes off his.

LYLE
Thank you!

RECEPTIONIST
Back away slowly.

He does so, reaches the door.

RECEPTIONIST (CONT'D)
Good day.

LYLE
Good day!

He turns tail and heads out.

INT. DIPLOMAT HALLWAY - SAME

He glances back to close the door--the receptionist is immediately before him and yanks the door shut!

Lyle eyes the stamp: “UNSEEN, LTD.”

Lyle heads for the elevator, punches the 'DOWN' button, as he peruses the slip. He glances up and notices the yellow ribbon stretched across the bank of elevators: 'TEMPORARILY OUT OF SERVICE PLEASE USE STAIRS'

Disbelief. Lyle turns and heads off in the direction of the 'EXIT' sign at the end of the hall.

He reaches the door, glances back at the now-defunct elevators--the door flies open for a man in coveralls, several rolls of tape on a length of twine around his waist. Moustache, glasses, baseball cap--GOODMAN.

LYLE
Ah!

CONTINUED:

GOODMAN
Whoa there, fella! Slow down, life's a short ride!

LYLE
I'm very sorry.

GOODMAN
S'allright, sailor. Take it easy, catch a few. In a hurry?

LYLE
...I have to make a delivery.

GOODMAN
Oh, delivery, huh? You a doctor?

LYLE
...what happened to the elevators?

GOODMAN
Pardon?

LYLE
What's wrong with the elevators?

GOODMAN
Oh, them. Nothing at all. Cool down. You know, so many pounds versus hours versus up and down, gotta rest sometimes. Natcherly.

Lyle considers as Goodman sizes him up.

LYLE
What floor are we on?

GOODMAN
Thirty-seven.

LYLE
Thirty-seven.

GOODMAN
Ayup.

LYLE
You think you could take me down?

Goodman seizes Lyle in a precarious hold: were he to let go, Lyle would drop to the floor. He chortles as he yanks Lyle upright.

CONTINUED: (2)

GOODMAN
HAAAAA! See, gotcher there! Gotta be prepared. 'Take ya down?' Sure, they'll take ya down! Take ya down like THAT, you don't expect it! Gotta be ready!

LYLE
...might it be possible for you to please transport me to the lobby in one of your fine elevator cars?

GOODMAN
...Sure. I gotcher.

Goodman brushes past Lyle, breaks the ribbon, wads it up, hits the button. The DOOR OPENS. Goodman steps in.

LYLE
Actually, if you've got stuff to do I could--

GOODMAN
Nonono! Gotta go down too. Hop in!

Lyle sees no alternative and steps in.

INT. DIPLOMAT ELEVATOR - SAME

Goodman pokes the 'L' button, the DOOR CLOSES. He doesn't say a word for the ride, just sizes Lyle up and down, nods to the PING of the passing floors.

The elevator lands, the DOOR OPENS, Lyle moves to step out when Goodman grasps his arm.

GOODMAN
Be ready. At all times, be ready.

The DOOR CLOSES on a nodding Goodman, leaving Lyle in the

INT. DIPLOMAT LOBBY - SAME

Lobby. Lyle moves to the front doors, pushes into

INT. SPINECOPY - LATE MORNING

Ordered chaos, the Workers in their usual routine. Lyle moves to his table and the mountain. As he debates what will go next, Blake Cornell approaches with an envelope. He doesn't meet Lyle's eyes, slaps the envelope down, causes a tremor through the stack. Lyle steadies it.

CONTINUED:

BLAKE
Won't do any good. It's all coming down anyway now that you're here.

Blake slumps away; Lyle receives a tap on the opposite shoulder. He spins and is face to face with Mr. Funn, who holds a spider-plant high, shoots dangling at eye level.

MISTER FUNN
Please excuse me, Lyle.

Funn steps up on the table, reaches high to hang the plant from a small hook. Lyle stares, potential avalanche forgotten. Funn mumbles into the plant, turns it slowly, and steps down.

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
Thank you. She needed sphagnum.

SPINE (O.S.)
Mr. Lee!

Lyle spins. Spine beams.

SPINE (CONT'D)
It's been two-and-a-half hours since you began your shift. The Better Business Bureau requires that all full time employees be granted one fifteen minute break for every two hours of work, and one half-hour meal period for every four hours clocked. So, Lyle, for the next fifteen minutes, your time is your own!

Lyle smiles, one hand on the pile.

LYLE
Thank you, Mr. Spine!

SPINE
Certainly! The restroom is out that door, back and to the left. Back, and to the left. There are sundries half a block due east. See you at 10:45!

Spine turns. Lyle takes his hand from the pile.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Oh, and Lyle?

Lyle starts. The pile defies gravity.

CONTINUED: (2)

SPINE (CONT'D)
(Quietly)
That 'little matter' is about to be resolved. Thanks to your keen eye for detail, a weak pillar will be shored up. I am grateful.

MARTHA (O.S.)
Mr. Spine! My ten thousandth staple!

Spine turns to Martha, who proudly displays a perfect stack of stapled copies.

INT. RESTROOM ACCESS HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Lyle heads down a hallway, a beeline for the

INT. MEN'S RESTROOM - CONTINUOUS

Bathroom. Many stalls, a few sinks, a single potted FICUS plant on the sink shelf. Lyle splashes water on his face, reckons with himself in the mirror.

He stares himself down, breathes deep until a smile finally comes.

LYLE
First day.

Satisfied, Lyle eases into a stall, pulls down the works and settles in for a moment alone. He shuts his eyes, relishes his break from an already confounding day.

A SLIGHT NOISE from the neighboring stall. Lyle opens his eyes and notices a well-worn work boot through the space below the divider.

VOICE (O.S.)
He's not what he seems.

Lyle jolts, steadies himself on the seat with both hands. The work boot taps. Silent, charged moments pass.

VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
He's not what he seems.

Louder now. The boot is still.

VOICE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
LYLE!!!

CONTINUED:

The voice booms directly overhead! Lyle snaps up to find GOODMAN as he leans bodily over the divider; he gropes for balance, gets a piece of Lyle's shirt. Lyle SCREAMS.

GOODMAN
Ssshhh! Lyle! Hey! Emerson Spine's not the man you think he is!

Lyle lashes out, knocks away Goodman's hands, who loses balance and slips back into his stall.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Lyle! Listen, Lyle!

LYLE
Stay away from me!

Lyle yanks out a length of toilet paper.

Goodman is in boxer shorts. Upon his toilet rests his jeans, stuffed with handfuls of paper towels. Goodman clambers onto the toilet again, peers over the partition; Lyle swings his shoulder bag at him.

GOODMAN
I need to talk to you! It's vital!

Lyle shoves him over the divider; Goodman crashes down on his faux appendages as Lyle struggles to get dressed.

LYLE
What do you want?!?

GOODMAN
It's your job!

LYLE
You can't have it!

Goodman is on the floor, tangled in the pants, one hand jammed in the bowl.

GOODMAN
No! I don't want it! It's Spine!

Lyle FLUSHES.

LYLE
I know you! The elevator guy!

GOODMAN
Just give me five minutes!

CONTINUED: (2)

LYLE
My break is over! I'm coming out now! Don't try to stop me!

Lyle yanks the stall door open, expects the worst.

Goodman still wrestles with hand, bowl and pants.

GOODMAN
Listen! Don't tell a soul--you're in danger, Lyle! If you talk about me you'll wind up like the others! I'll find you! We'll talk!

Lyle bolts for the door, Goodman yells after him.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Be ready!

Goodman slumps inside the stall, hand blue, exhales as he hears the DOOR CLOSE behind Lyle, who bursts into the

INT. RESTROOM ACCESS HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Hallway. Lyle slows to a nervous walk. Tucking his shirt in, he doesn't Mr. Funn, who passes with a watering can. He looks after Lyle, then continues...

INT. MEN'S RESTROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Mr. Funn stands in the center, brow furrowed. Water on the floor, an abundance of paper towels in the wastebin.

Funn turns to the plant on the sink shelf. He sets the can aside, reaches toward leaves that begin to tremble...

EXT. MARKET FISH - LATE MORNING

Lyle's on the street, shaken. Package in hand, he arrives at his new destination. The label: "MARKET FISH: OLDTOWN"

The market's a bustling freeway of activity. TOURISTS crowd, snapping pictures of the varieties of slain marine life. YOUNG BOYS giggle as a FISHMONGER lops off heads on a butcher's block. GULLS strut nearby for guts and fins.

FISHMONGER
What're you havin' there, friend?

LYLE
I've got a delivery for Market Fish. From Spinecopy?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

FISHMONGER
Ah!!!

The fishmonger grins, wipes his hands with gusto upon his gore-smeared apron, seizes the package from Lyle.

FISHMONGER (CONT'D)
You tried it?

LYLE
...I'm sorry?

FISHMONGER
Naw, 'course you haven't. Not on duty anyway, right?

He belts a hearty laugh. Lyle returns a shallow chuckle.

LYLE
Right, ha ha ha.

Lyle offers the invoice. The fishmonger scribbles a signature and forks a slimy slip back. Lyle carefully folds the invoice as the larger man eyes him.

FISHMONGER
Say, you wouldn't be Lyle?

LYLE
...that's right.

FISHMONGER
Well, it's your lucky day, friend! Somebody bought you the best salmon in the shop!

He pulls from the ice shelf a huge Coho salmon, partially wrapped in newspaper. It stares at Lyle.

LYLE
There must be some mistake.

FISHMONGER
Nope. Said to give it to Lyle, Spinecopy courier. No mistake.

He thrusts the fish into Lyle's arms, pats its head.

LYLE
...who?

FISHMONGER
Didn't ask.

He smiles, then leans across the block, inches from Lyle.

CONTINUED: (2)

FISHMONGER (CONT'D)
The insides taste best.

He winks, then wields his knife again, wipes his nose on the back of a tacky hand. A SHOPPER steps up.

FISHMONGER (CONT'D)
BBQ. Butter. Garlic. Bliss. Next!

The shopper steps up; Lyle turns to go, fish under arm.

EXT. OLDTOWN SHOPS - MOMENTS LATER

Lyle'S at a bench, the fish in his lap.

LYLE
"The insides taste best."

He unwraps a portion of the paper: a bit of plastic juts from an incision in the belly...

A gull SHRIEKS in Lyle's ear from the back of the bench; Lyle's surrounded by the hungry birds.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Alright! Fine!

Lyle strips the wrapping, pulling at the plastic; he rips out the fish's belly, chucking the flesh at the gulls.

LYLE (CONT'D)
You want this? Hunh?

TODDLER (O.C.)
Mommy, look!

A TODDLER points Lyle out to its disgusted MOTHER, who swiftly ushers it away.

Lyle rips a plastic bag free with a SUCKING SOUND, flicks off the remains. Inside is a protected ROLL OF DOCUMENTS.

He unrolls them carefully:

- SPINE, LAUGHING AT A CRYING CHILD.

- SPINE RAISING A WIRE GARROTE OVER AN OLD WOMAN'S HEAD.

- SPINE FIRING A RIFLE AT A LINEUP OF HELPLESS VICTIMS.

- SPINE AND JONATHAN HOLDING A HOODED MAN OVER THE EDGE OF A BRIDGE.

Lyle flips rapidly through the photos, mortified:

CONTINUED:

- SPINE IN A LAB COAT, CONDUCTING AN EXPERIMENT ON A STRAPPED VICTIM, JONATHAN HOLDING THE HEAD STILL.

- SPINE GRINNING AT A HANGING.

- SPINE SURROUNDED BY SCANTILY CLAD HOOKERS.

- SPINE CHASING A KITTEN WITH A MALLET.

A seagull SHRIEKS! Lyle leaps from his bench! He stuffs the photos in his shirt, staggers into the mid-day crowd and away as the abandoned salmon is shredded by gulls.

INT. SPINECOPY - LATE MORNING

Spine and Jonathan quietly confer in a corner. Lyle enters and makes for his table, tries to remain unseen.

MARTHA
Phew! Someone had *fish* for lunch!

Lyle nabs a package and heads for the door.

SPINE
Mister Lee!

Spine and Jonathan nod solemnly, then grin brightly at Lyle as he returns to the floor.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Well, you're just movin' right along, aren't you?

Before Lyle can respond Spine heads him off, places a hand on his shoulder.

SPINE (CONT'D)
What's wrong?

LYLE
Nothing!

SPINE
Oh, Mr. Lee, you don't have to protect me!

A slow, conspiratorial nod, he massages Lyle’s shoulders.

LYLE
Just...getting used to things. I’m good. Really. I’m really good.

Spine seizes Lyle to guide him.

CONTINUED:

SPINE
Come here. Over here.

He leads him to a door: "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY."

They stop before the door, speak *sotto voce*.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I was hoping we wouldn't have this conversation.

None of the workers seem to notice.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I've watched you, my boy. Something's happening I'm not sure I like. In fact, I *don't* like it.

Lyle waits for it, prey before the cobra.

SPINE (CONT'D)
In the past, there have been employees who've rejected our standards. Disgracing themselves with gross work habits, slovenliness, thievery...every deadly sin you can think of.

Lyle nods: how horrible.

SPINE (CONT'D)
In fact, there was one in particular, a real malcontent. A *slacker*. He did his very best to spit right in the face of our dream. You would have been disgusted by him, Mr. Lee. So I dismissed him, clear and clean, don't come back, Jack. But he was bitter. He couldn't simply move on. No. He decided instead to conduct a reign of terror against my business. Defacing property, tampering with customer projects, dealing in lies--oh yes! He even started a high-tech digital smear campaign against me! One of my employees had a stroke!

LYLE
Really.

SPINE
Hit me right where I live. The heart, Mr. Lee. The heart.

CONTINUED: (2)

SILENCE. Spine bows his head, eyes closed. He abruptly places sorrowful hands on each of Lyle's cheeks.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I don't like what I see here, Mr. Lee. You're trying too hard. Your ambition to be the best is getting to you. I don't want you to turn out like this man did--a paranoid, malice-driven hatemonger.

LYLE
...I had no idea.

SPINE
Of course. You couldn't have.

Spine straightens, pulls Lyle with.

SPINE (CONT'D)
You can be the best by *knowing* you're the best, Mr. Lee. By knowing you're the best.

Spine breathes, clearly moved. Lyle breathes. Spine smiles. Lyle smiles. Spine laughs aloud. As does Lyle.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Just relax, Mr. Lee. You'll run into wackos all the time down here. You're *downtown*!

LYLE
Right!

They share another chuckle.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Thank you, Mr. Spine.

SPINE
No, thank *you*, Mr. Lee.

They both nod; Lyle turns, takes another package and new relief as he heads out the door.

Spine looks to Jonathan, who looks to Mr. Funn, who tends the ferns. Spine sighs.

EXT. STREET - LATE MORNING

Lyle has a bounce in his step; maybe it was all in his head. He walks in time with some ANONYMOUS TUNE until

CONTINUED:

LYLE
...invoice.

He checks his package, pockets--realizes he's forgotten the invoice. An abrupt about-face and he bullets back...

INT. SPINECOPY - LATE MORNING

Martha cheerily staples newsletters. She examines one of her products, stops: empty stapler.

MARTHA
Rats!

Abandoning her task, she finds a box of staples and attempts to pry open the stubborn stapler.

Lyle opens the door, pauses to let a CUSTOMER exit.

Martha emits a horrible SCREECH! Her finger gushes blood, torn open with the jaw of the stapler.

Lyle halts, alarmed. Unnoticed, he watches Spine rush to Martha's side; tears well up and spill down her cheeks.

MARTHA (CONT'D)
It hu-hu-hurrrrrrts!

SPINE
Let me see. Let Daddy see.

He coaxes her hand away from the gash. It's superficial, but the blood is copious. She sobs.

MARTHA
I didn't mean to!

Spine holds her hand, bloodies his fingers and winces.

SPINE
You'll be fine, dear...ah, don't bleed on the documents.

Blood dots a few of the newsletters. He guides her away.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Go to the first-aid station. A peroxide wash and a clean bandage and you'll be staple-proof!

She giggles. He smiles, kisses her forehead. She grins, trots off to the back of the shop as the workers resume their business, disaster averted.

CONTINUED:

Lyle, charmed, prepares to go about his own business when Spine raises his bloodied hand high. Lyle freezes.

Spine, a faraway expression, lowers his hand before his face. No one else seems to notice as he regards his fingers--then pops them into his mouth, sucking hungrily.

The deed finished, Spine regains his composure, resumes his paces through the shop. Martha re-renters, skips back to her position. Jonathan opens the stapler for her, a helpful smile as Spine beams.

The front door drifts closed. Seconds later it swings open as Lyle enters woodenly, moves to his table, snatches his invoice, and exits without incident.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - NOON

Lyle slumps at a table in a coffee shop as PEOPLE stroll by in the sun. The pictures lie before him beside an untouched sandwich. Holding a half-empty cup of coffee, he doesn't register the passers-by.

GOODMAN passes several times in obvious guises. Then SPINE and MR. FUNN, who toss the ceramic baby-head back and forth. JONATHAN saunters by, paper-cutter tacky with blood under one arm. BLAKE CORNELL shuffles by, pale and anguished, a label on his forehead reads "CANCEL."

Lyle's apron-frocked mother, CAROLINE LEE, and uniformed father, NASH LEE, stroll by arm in arm. At the halfway point Caroline continues, arm still cocked as if linked with Nash, and passes out of sight. Nash remains, turns to Lyle, smiles faintly. He raises an imaginary camera to his face, squints, and takes Lyle's picture.

Lyle startles, blinks away the visage to an ordinary lunch crowd. Lyle raises the cup to his lips--Ugh! Cold! Shocked, he checks the cup, his pager, crams the sandwich in his mouth, scoops the photos into his bag and bolts.

INT. SPINE STOREROOM

DARKNESS. A RUSTLE of canvas and labored BREATHING.

SPINE (O.S.)
Ready?

JONATHAN (O.S.)
All good.

A hooded figure under a self-tying trash bag, duct-taped to a chair. His name tag: BLAKE CORNELL.

CONTINUED:

Nearby is Funn, who tends a variety of tiny, delicate plants under a bar of incandescent light, its milky GLOW bathes the space--including Spine and Jonathan, who flank the figure.

A COUGH, then a shaky voice seeps through the hood.

BLAKE
What's going on?

JONATHAN
Who you to ask questions, boy?!?

Spine raises a hand; Jonathan backs off as he removes the trash bag. Blake gasps, his face slick with sweat.

SPINE
You have a modicum of intelligence, Mr. Cornell. I think you can glean why you're here.

Blake balks at Jonathan's crazed, bloodshot stare.

SPINE (CONT'D)
What are the merits of discipline, Mr. Cornell?

BLAKE
I...what?

SPINE
Do you believe discipline serves a purpose?

Jonathan hypnotically nods his head.

BLAKE
...yeah.

SPINE
Good! It's important that you understand what's about to happen. You need to know the purpose you serve. That purpose is an example.

BLAKE
Listen, I am so sorry about that labeling business--

SPINE
People follow examples, Mr. Cornell. Families, companies, nations, it makes little difference. Let's say your father is a miserable alcoholic.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (2)

SPINE (CONT'D)
If you watch dear old Dad empty bottle after bottle, year after year, will you be more or less likely to follow his example if you are never shown alternate patterns of behavior? Or suppose you're a country - let's say, Germany - and you're impoverished, devoid of spirit. Suddenly someone comes along and gives you a taste of power...even if he turns out to be a madman, do you think you'll be more or less likely to overlook that little 'detail' if you've never been shown what healthy reform is?

BLAKE
...I

SPINE
Even in our small company, examples are important. And as proprietor it is my responsibility to provide the proper guideposts to lead my country to greatness.

Jonathan produces a stack of papers and a box of labels.

SPINE (CONT'D)
You, Mr. Cornell, offered a poor example. You were given the chance to make good. You refused. If I don't provide an alternative, my employees might accept your slipshod work ethic as their own.

JONATHAN
And that's not gonna happen!

SPINE
No, Jonathan. That isn't going to happen. This dough accepts no yeast in its rising.

Funn glances at the scene; he shields his babies with his hands as it unfolds.

Spine removes a sheet of paper from Jonathan's stack and raises it before Blake.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Paper. Made from trees.

Funn turns again, now very interested.

CONTINUED: (3)

Spine shakes it with a MOCK THUNDER sound.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Blank, white sheet of nothingness. But without it, our business wouldn't exist. It’s a tool, Mr. Cornell. An opportunity. You can unleash your imagination upon it. You can print money, send out wedding invitations. You can write a constitution, declare war on it. Paper is the great enabler. Soon, the world will understand this.

Spine leans in close.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Paper is the canvas upon which we paint the world.

Lightning-like he paper-cuts Blake vertically on the lip. Blake winces, startled as blood trickles down his chin.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Standard white, 50 percent recycled, 25 percent post consumer. The thinnest we use.

He trades with Jonathan for another sheet. Spine nods, then executes another slash across Blake's forehead.

BLAKE
Wait! God! I'm sorry! It won't happen again!

SPINE
Acid-free, 90 pound card-stock. 100 percent cotton. High quality.

A slash across an eyelid.

BLAKE
Aigh! Please!!!

SPINE
There's a fine line between grades of paper very few can appreciate.

Jonathan can't stand by anymore.

JONATHAN
Oh, what a mess! I think I'll just cover it up with some labels!!!

Jonathan slaps labels over Blake's wounds.

CONTINUED: (4)

JONATHAN (CONT'D)
This is what you're supposed to do, right? Blake? Just cover 'em on up! All better! Right?!?

Funn erects walls for his plants using reams of paper.

JONATHAN (CONT'D)
Know the worst place? Hunh?

Jonathan pries open Blake's fingers as Spine gives the webbing a good, slow slash. Blake shrieks. Spine inserts and whips the paper across the corners of his mouth.

JONATHAN (CONT'D)
Yup! You got it!

Spine, the red-streaked paper held aloft.

SPINE
Observe, Mr. Cornell. Before, a blank space. Now, a statement. Art. Power.

BLAKE
I understand! Please, I understand! Let me go! I've learned my lesson!

Jonathan disappears from the scene. Spine chuckles, another shake of the head.

SPINE
No, Mr. Cornell. You don't understand. You're obsolete. Far worse, you're a liability.

Funn exits as Jonathan enters with a massive sheet of butcher paper.

Spine stands, takes the baby-head from his pocket, shows it to Blake; he sets the head on a shelf, takes up one end of the butcher paper and smiles.

INT. SPINECOPY MAIN ROOM - EARLY AFTERNOON

Lyle stands before his table, slowly thumbs through his stack. He selects four pieces, then adds Voracia's purple envelope to the bag. He snaps the clasp, turns, and is face to face with Spine.

SPINE
Mr. Lee! How goes the war?

CONTINUED:

LYLE
Oh, just fine, Mr. Spine. How goes it with you?

SPINE
Never better!

Spine takes Lyle's shoulders, walks him through the shop.

SPINE (CONT'D)
That problem we had earlier?

LYLE
Which...right, mm-hm?

SPINE
Resolved. Once and for all.

LYLE
...good.

SPINE
He confessed.

LYLE
Did he?

SPINE
Can you believe it? He admitted being jealous of the job you were doing so far and wanted to have you fired.

LYLE
...wow.

SPINE
I had no recourse but to dismiss him. I hope you're not too discouraged.

LYLE
Why would I be discouraged?

SPINE
Well, we don't have a large turnover here at Spinecopy. Most of our family has been here since the beginning of time.

LYLE
That's reassuring.

CONTINUED: (2)

SPINE
I'd like it to be. You'll always have a place to turn. Always.

LYLE
Yes. Thank you.

SPINE
You're welcome.

Awkward moment. The shop rumbles on.

LYLE
Mr. Spine?

SPINE
Yes, Mr. Lee?

LYLE
Has anyone ever quit?

The activity drones on; Spine’s frozen.

LYLE (CONT'D)
I mean, I'm not thinking about it--

SPINE
No, no, of course you're not. Why would you? There's no reason!

LYLE
Right. Right. I was just wondering-

SPINE
As I've said, everyone you see has been here since the beginning.

LYLE
...yes.

SPINE
So there you have it! See? Nothing to worry about, right?

LYLE
...right.

Everything SLOWS: they stare at each other, the hum of the machines grows LOUDER. A stapler CRASHES. The cutter SLAMS. A register BELL sounds--Lyle's head snaps in that direction, tracked by Spine's. They stare at VORACIA PETALS, who places a CUSTOMER’S money in the drawer then walks away. They turn to each other; after a silent reckoning, Spine slaps Lyle's shoulder.

CONTINUED: (3)

SPINE
Well, you've got a full load, Mr. Lee. Do what you have to. Quickly.

Lyle keeps his stare, hefts his bag, nods. He breaks away from Spine's gaze and out the door.

Spine finds Mr. Funn directly behind him with a cordless phone. Spine takes it, nods, presses a button. Listens.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Send the Brothers.

EXT. STREET - EARLY AFTERNOON

Lyle pounds the streets. Everyone seems to eye him in some way. He breaks into a jog, then a run.

He screeches to a halt in front of a large, gothic building capped with a spire. Consulting the purple envelope, he enters with a final glance behind.

INT. GOTHIC BUILDING / LOBBY - SAME

A cavernous, gloomy lobby; Lyle approaches a bank of elevators with iron gates and glass doors, one of which regurgitates an emaciated BELLHOP with milky cataracts.

BELLHOP
Yes sir. Which floor, sir?

LYLE
Uh...

Back to reality, he squints at the envelope.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Penthouse, please.

BELLHOP
I apologize, sir. No one is permitted to enter the penthouse.

LYLE
Oh. Well, I'm from Spineco--

BELLHOP
Please step right in, sir. Mind the step.

INT. GOTHIC BUILDING / GLASS ELEVATOR - MOMENTS LATER

As they rise, the glass doors offer glimpses into other floors. The bellhop remains stoic, silent and efficient. He pulls a lever, the car eases to a stop. A button pushed, a bony hand pulls the gate and Lyle has arrived.

BELLHOP
Penthouse floor. Please mind the step, sir.

Lyle steps out.

INT. GOTHIC BUILDING / PENTHOUSE HALLWAY - SAME

A luxurious hallway. A single, ornate oaken door fills the end of the long corridor, lit at intervals by recessed lamps at ceiling level. Lyle advances, idly fans the envelope back and forth. A small sign in elegant script hangs from the brass knob: "COURIER ENTRANCE"

Taking a deep breath, Lyle turns the knob and enters.

INT. GOTHIC BUILDING / VORACIA'S SUITE - SAME

Lyle's stunned.

A completely white room, accented by an intense beam of sunlight from a central skylight. At center sits a white plush couch, a white marble coffee table, and a single white chair. The couch is flanked by a high white cat-tree, occupied by two white Persians, and an equally high bird-stand, adorned with a white-as-snow cockatiel.

A single door at the far end opens silently and in steps VORACIA, draped in white folds of silk and gossamer.

She crosses under the beam of light, epitome of an angel. Her hair down, the bland worker's garb discarded, she's shed the aura of blue-collar worker and donned the air of royalty.

She sinks into the couch, indicates the envelope.

VORACIA
You can throw that away.

He drops it into his satchel without blinking.

VORACIA (CONT'D)
I thought you might think I was crazy...you wanna sit down?

CONTINUED:

He crosses in a daze to the chair, sinks deep on impact. He averts his gaze to the animals, who return his stare.

LYLE
...fanks. Thanks.

Voracia nods. SILENCE.

VORACIA
Takes some getting used to.

LYLE
...which?

VORACIA
This room.

LYLE
No! It's fine! Great! Nice!

Voracia leans over her knees.

VORACIA
You're not safe, Lyle.

LYLE
Why?

VORACIA
Oh, God...I don't know where to start. I've thought about this so many times, all the time, what to say if somebody ever, if anybody-- what to do...sorry.

Valiant effort at composure. The cats stare.

COCKATIEL
PWARK! SPINE! WHIRRRP!

Lyle jumps. Voracia bursts into a short, loud laugh. Lyle eyes the bird, abashed.

VORACIA
I guess I should start there, shouldn't I?

COCKATIEL
SCREECH! KILLER! REEEP!

Voracia arrests Lyle's focus with a deep, painful stare.

CONTINUED: (2)

VORACIA
Please believe me. I know you've only been here a day and you like him but...he's not what he seems.

She struggles, reassures herself. He nods: it's okay.

VORACIA (CONT'D)
I used to think he was sweet. He promoted me three times in the first few months. Always looking out for me, always there...but then he wanted me to call him 'Daddy.' He wanted me to come to his house and I went, Lyle, oh I went to his house and it was so nice there, out there in the woods and Mr. Funn was so wonderful, and he still is don't get me wrong, he is, but...it turned rotten. Emerson wanted to know everything. Where I was, what I was doing, my favorite foods and 'Who's the bastard who took you to dinner, honey?' People following me home, everywhere, all the time and they probably still do but I doubt it. Emerson doesn't find me as appealing as he used to. I'm not the fresh little chippie because I learned some things about him spending all that time at his house. I know things. But I can't quit. No one ever quits.

Lyle watches the roller coaster dip and rise in awe.

VORACIA (CONT'D)
No, they think about quitting he takes them into his office and pretty soon they come out smiling and they never talk about it again. He's never fired anyone, Lyle. Ever. But they go, don't they? Oh yes, they go but it's amazing because nobody ever sees THOSE people again! It's like everyone keeps their mouth shut and eventually they think they've got it good, but you know what Lyle? You know why they stay?
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (3)

VORACIA (CONT'D)
Because they're too much of a risk so Emerson finds the things they care about and gets his hands on it, or them, and he's got us right where he wants us!

LYLE
What?

VORACIA
He makes sure that everyone is faithful and loyal to the end...

LYLE
I don't under-

VORACIA
...Blake's gone, Lyle. The one who put the label on wrong? They took him out to lunch and he didn't come back. They killed him.

LYLE
Well, waitaminute. How do you know they didn't just--

VORACIA
Lyle, I've been around a while. It's not the first time, and it won't--it might not be the last. That's how Emerson works. Trust.

LYLE
Trust.

VORACIA
Exactly. If that trust is betrayed, he won't forgive you...or me.

LYLE
What do you mean?

VORACIA
...he has my mom, Lyle.

LYLE
...Spine has your mom.

VORACIA
He knows where she lives, where she works, where she likes to eat...he 'drops in' to tell her what an exceptional worker I am and she absolutely adores him.

(MORE)

CONTINUED: (4)

VORACIA (CONT'D)
She has him over for dinner and he tells me if I ever open my mouth he'll tear her heart out.

LYLE
Open your mouth?

She looks to the beam, inner battle mirrors Lyle's graveside vigils. At last she returns his stare: electric currents of empathy ignite between them: loss, ordeal, pain...hope. Need. Lyle opens his mouth, Voracia shakes her head--intensity passes through desire and beyond into intimacy. The animals stare as Voracia places her palms out; Lyle mirrors her, a hair's breadth from contact. Their hands linger, hover, the smallest of spaces between until she clasps his trembling fingers softly, breath catching, tension slipping away into yearning--

LYLE (CONT'D)
I want to help you.

She laughs that short laugh again, then tears up again.

VORACIA
Oh, God, I hate this. I want it to just end, you know? I want my life back! I want I want I want--

Lyle moves to her, startles the animals as he embraces her awkwardly, overwhelmed. She's stiff, unsure--looks to his face, inhales his breath... closer...silence...Lyle's PAGER goes off! They leap to their feet--

COCKATIEL
EEEEK! DOOM! RAAGK! SPINE!

Lyle rips the pager from his belt. The text: "<u>WHERE ARE YOU MISTER LEE? RETURN TO SPINECOPY. NOW.</u>"

Lyle hooks it to his belt. Voracia stares at the bird.

LYLE
Where did it learn those words?

VORACIA
Mr. Funn gave it to me for when I'm feeling blue. You'd better go.

Lyle moves to the door without a word. She stands in the beam as he turns.

LYLE
What's your name?

CONTINUED: (5)

VORACIA
Voracia.

She smiles faintly and he goes. The cockatiel CACKLES.

INT. GOTHIC BUILDING / PENTHOUSE HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Lyle's at the elevators, mind blown. He stabs the button, stares into space. The car rises to stop beside him.

BROTHER#5 (O.S.)
Going down?

Lyle nods absently as he steps into the

INT. GOTHIC BUILDING / GLASS ELEVATOR - SAME

Elevator car, choked with FIVE large men. These are the BROTHERS, one of whom wears bellhop garb several sizes too small. Why they're called the Brothers, nobody knows; they're of mixed race, no resemblance to one another. It's doubtful anyone has ever disputed their affiliation; they're huge. Dressed smartly in black slacks and black turtlenecks they're quite the sharp heavies.

Lyle has just enough room to step into their midst. The gate RATTLES shut and the elevator descends.

BROTHER#5
You a delivery guy?

Lyle finally notices the new bellhop. And friends.

LYLE
Uh, yeah. Spinecopy.

BROTHER#5
Oh, yeah, Spinecopy. Nice place. Owner's a helluva guy.

BROTHER#4
I been there. Great customer service.

BROTHER#3
They make me feel like I'm doing them a favor.

BROTHER#2
Fast, efficient service. Got a great team there.

CONTINUED:

BROTHER#1
People oriented business.

BROTHER#5
Love that place.

Lyle watches the floors rise out of sight.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
Yessir, must be nice working for a business like that. Busy, too.

LYLE
Yeah, pretty busy.

The elevator slams to a halt between floors, the interior of the car visible at foot-and-head levels.

BROTHER#5
Whoops. Sorry about that. First day. Hang on a sec.

Lyle observes his co-riders. Each Brother grins widely in turn as he takes them in.

LYLE
...That's all right. Mine too.

BROTHER#5
No kiddin'? Wow. Yeah. This is actually my first mistake of the day. I was doing great work...good thing the boss isn't here. I dunno if he'd be nice enough to give me a warning, know what I mean?

LYLE
...I guess so.

BROTHER#5
How about your boss? Think he'd give you a warning? If you screwed up?

The elevator remains still.

LYLE
Well, if I made a mistake, I hope he'd understand. After all, it's only my first day.

BROTHER#5
Sure. You wouldn't make the same mistake more than once, right?

CONTINUED: (2)

LYLE
Right.

BROTHER#5
That's what warnings are for. Not because the boss wants to slap you down or he doesn't like you. He just wants to make sure you learn the right way so you don't do it again. So you can set an example.

LYLE
Yeah.

BROTHER#5
Sure.

A lurch. The car resumes its downward journey, passes a few PEOPLE waiting for the elevator.

WAITING MAN
Down! Hey, down!

Lyle exchanges a look with the bellhop.

BROTHER#5
Too full.

LYLE
Right.

The car slows, reaches the first floor--and passes it.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Ah, I needed the lobby.

BROTHER#5
Really? Oh, gosh, I'm sorry.

The car stops behind a steel door.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
One sec...gotta figure this out.

He fumbles with the controls as the Brothers watch Lyle intently; each smiles for the duration of eye contact. One button rings a BELL.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
Nope, not that one.

Another button. GRINDING.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
No...

CONTINUED: (3)

The other Brothers shift glances. Another button and the steel gate and door open to reveal a dingy hallway.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
Oh, hey, look at-

Lyle bursts from the car!

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
HEY!!!

INT. GOTHIC BUILDING / BASEMENT HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Over crates, around garbage bins, Lyle surges on as the Brothers pile after, a wall of muscle.

Left, right, another hallway! Another! The catacombs are confusing, low ceiling corridors of semi-darkness, doors every so often, piles of various debris, scattered boxes, rodent droppings and dead bugs. Lyle races on.

BROTHER#5 (O.S.)
Down here!

BROTHER#4 (O.S.)
Over here!

BROTHER#3 (O.S.)
Turn here!

Doors with peepholes, obscene graffiti, piles of discarded clothing. Lyle halts at an intersection in front of a crude cave-mural of condoms and soiled diapers before he plunges down another hallway, swallowed in darkness until all that remains are RUNNING FOOTSTEPS.

BROTHER#2 (O.S.)
Which way now, smarty?!?

BROTHER#1 (O.S.)
Shut up and go!

The FOOTSTEPS continue through inky black. Brief flashes of light, of Lyle, then a THUD and a GRUNT.

FUMBLING, then a minute glow from Lyle's pager, bright enough to illuminate the crystal face and a tiny radius. It floats in darkness as Lyle gathers his bearings.

BROTHER#2 (O.S.)
You hear that?

The pager hesitates next to some sort of box.

CONTINUED:

LYLE (V.O.)
...oh...

A CLICK, a MECHANICAL WHINE and a fluorescent FLICKERS weakly on Lyle, a nosebleed and small cut on his forehead from his collision with the wall of the

INT. FREIGHT ELEVATOR - CONTINUOUS

Freight elevator, a cage walled with wooden slats.

BROTHER#1 (O.S.)
There he is! Down there!

Lyle peers into the darkness of the hallway. He punches the 'UP' button. Nothing. Again! Nothing!

BROTHER#2 (O.S.)
We got you now, Courier!

Lyle notices a small sign: "DOORS MUST BE FULLY CLOSED FOR ELEVATOR OPERATION."

A small canvas loop hangs a foot or so above; he yanks it hard. Steel doors RUMBLE shut from above and below. A huge WHUMP as Brother#2 smacks against them, his face plastering the small window set in the center, SCREAMING. Lyle pulls a slatted gate down, punches the UP button.

The car WHINES and ascends. Brother#1 and #2 hammer on the door. Lyle slumps against the button.

BROTHER#2 (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Come back here!

BROTHER#1 (O.S.)
Let's go!

BROTHER#2 (O.S.)
Chicken!!!

BROTHER#1 (O.S.)
Come ON!

The elevator continues; Lyle has time to catch his breath before it GRINDS to a halt. He peers out the small window into a well-lit corridor. He pulls the doors, steps into

INT. SERVICE CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

A service corridor. Lyle walks ten feet or so to another metal door. Listens. Opens it onto

INT. BUS TUNNEL / LOWER PLATFORM - CONTINUOUS

The lower platform of a subterranean bus station. The door, labeled "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY." closes behind and CLICKS.

Lyle steps out, looks down the tunnels at opposite ends of the platform, observes the escalators leading up and down on both sides. He ascends the nearest set to

INT. BUS TUNNEL / UPPER PLATFORM - CONTINUOUS

As he clears the deck, two figures break into a run at the opposite end; they pass a few COMMUTERS, newspapers in front of their faces.

Lyle makes a choked sound and bursts out across the floor; the newspapers are discarded revealing Brothers #3 and #4, and the pursuit continues.

Lyle bolts up a bank of escalators at the far end of the platform; at the top appear Brothers #1 and #2! Lyle turns to find #3 and #4 mounting the rising steps...

BROTHER#3
Easy boys. Take your time.

BROTHER#4
Yo, dead boy!

Lyle steps down a few times to maintain his position. Brother#1 hops on the parallel 'DOWN' escalator, bloody-lipped Brother#2 remaining at the top. Brothers #3 and #4 rush Lyle simultaneously!

BROTHER#4 (CONT'D)
C'mere!

BROTHER#1
Wait, don't--

Too late; Lyle leaps onto the smooth ramp between escalators, slides on his back through the groping hands of the Brothers and is dumped roughly on the tiles below.

BROTHER#2
Hey!!!

The Brothers descend as Lyle takes off across the platform and up the opposite escalators. He emerges onto

EXT. BUSY STREET - EARLY AFTERNOON - MOMENTS LATER

The busy street. Lyle rounds a corner, glances over his shoulder as Brothers #3 and #4 exit the tunnel, looking at faces in the CROWD. Expressions indicate Lyle's trajectory, and they make tracks. Lyle pours it on.

Red light! Traffic! Lyle bobs and weaves, then slams to a halt barely avoiding destruction by a small orange pickup truck blaring "THE WILLIAM TELL OVERTURE."

Lyle blazes on, then executes an abrupt change of direction, dodging an Oldsmobile and careens into

EXT. ALLEY - SAME

The alley: a classic one-vehicle, no-hope gutter soiled by people who fall through the cracks. A cat here, a rat there, all scatter as Lyle tears in. Puddles scatter underfoot, Lyle dares another glance behind, then double takes: The opposite end of the alley is occupied!

Brothers #1 and #2 straighten their garments as they slow to a strut. Lyle spins, more bad news: #3 and #4.

A CLANG, above, as #5 makes his way down a fire escape!

LYLE
Really?!?

They close the gap, roll their sleeves in unison. Lyle shoots glances right, left, down...nothing...wait.

The courier snatches up a bloated garbage bag, bottles CLINKING as he hefts it in both hands.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Don't make me do this!

The Brothers are at twenty paces, #5 descending-

SCREECH! The orange pickup slides into the alley behind Brothers #1 and #2. Brother#5 speeds his descent.

The vehicle approaches at a leisurely pace, Mozart's "DIES IRAE" booms from within. The driver lays on the HORN as he reaches the two Brothers, window rolling down.

GOODMAN
One way alley, guys.

He guns the engine. Brother #1 heads for his door as the truck lurches forward, knocking #2 sideways to the wall. #1 can't take hold as the vehicle arrows at Lyle.

CONTINUED:

LYLE
Awww...

The point of impact: Lyle leaps! His feet skip over the hood, off the windshield to deposit him in the bed of the rescue vehicle.

He sits up, amazed, and Brother#5 drops with a BANG into the bed! He swings a meaty fist at Lyle's head, who ducks it. Another swing, Lyle jumps to land with his back on the roof. He kicks out--the big guy grabs his legs.

BROTHER#5
C'mon boy, let's take a ride!

LYLE
HELLLLLLLP!

BROTHER#5
No chance, boy. It's time to--

The truck bounds out of the alley. Centrifugal force and gravity prove the stronger tag team and Brother#5 is thrown into a pile of refuse.

Lyle slips down into the bed of the truck, dazed. The pickup tools away, MOZART filling the air.

INT. SPINECOPY - MID-AFTERNOON

The workers assemble in the center of the shop. SILENCE.

Spine holds a cell phone, flanked by Jonathan and Mr. Funn, who cradles a bottle labeled "NEURAL FERTILIZIQUE"

Spine takes a deep breath, composes himself. The workers stand stock-still, Voracia Petals among them again.

The silence lasts a long time, long enough to view each Worker's anticipation. Spine exhales and speaks softly.

SPINE
White in.

JONATHAN
WHITE IN!!!

Funn exits. The Workers return to work, all except an ashen Voracia. Her eyes meet Spine's, who regards her with resignation.

She breaks away from his cool gaze, returns to her station; he crosses to his office, shuts the door.

INT. GOODMAN'S HEADQUARTERS

BLACK. A rectangle door of LIGHT silhouettes two figures.

GOODMAN
Follow me.

The door closes. BLACK.

LYLE
I can't SEE you...

FEET SHUFFLE. THUD. CRASH.

GOODMAN
To your right.

Another THUD.

LYLE
Thanks.

More SHUFFLING. Silence.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Goodman?

Lyle is silhouetted by the bright beam of a slide projector. Goodman sits in a folding chair looking into its innards.

Outside the beam the room looks like a bomb shelter. Another folding chair, a folding table laden with reams of paper, writing utensils, crumpled things and bric-a-brac. The floor is cluttered with boxes, a threadbare cot surrounded by reading material including government manuals, True Crime paperbacks and popular mags like Guns and Ammo and Soldier of Fortune. Food containers festoon every available space save the walls, which are plastered with a massive collage of photographs.

GOODMAN
Have a seat.

He loads slides, looks to Lyle, who scrutinizes the photos. One in particular: a commercial head-shot of Spine with a circle-and-slash stamped on it.

LYLE
Are these other...assignments?

GOODMAN
Some. Have a seat.

CONTINUED:

Lyle picks his way to the opposite chair, reaches to the table to steady himself as he steps over a pile of boxes.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
NO! Don't touch those!!!

Lyle, startled, retracts his arm as if from a pit viper.

LYLE
Why?!?

GOODMAN
They're not safe. Sit.

Glaring, Lyle finds the chair. Sits, and the chair gives way--Lyle catches himself, barely.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Oh, yeah, you gotta lean it against the wall. Back legs are messed up.

Lyle hesitantly does so, sits gingerly. The chair CREAKS.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
I'd offer a drink, but I eat out...

LYLE
You live here?

GOODMAN
Sometimes.

He forwards a slide. A photo of a treeline, upside-down.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Dang. Hold on.

He starts flipping slides.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Chances are, Spine already knows you'll be receiving this info, the bastard, and he's preparing for you. No, don't interrupt. If you have any questions wait until I finish my train of thought so I don't mess up my stream of consciousness. You're a bright guy, so I won't worry about speaking slowly. Questions?

LYLE
Yeah--

CONTINUED: (2)

SLIDE: A vast, dense jungle.

GOODMAN
The Noyanok Jungle, right after the KimChi uprising. The most Godforsaken chunk of renegade real estate on the face of the earth, so agriculturally alien that even the insurgents said be our guest--no reason to defend something that defends itself. The U.S. sends covert ops to do a postwar rush and flush for POWs and the entire platoon goes no-show 21 hours in. Uncle Sam assumes the worst, but since it's hush-hush they don't want to risk losing more public opinion--we cut our losses and cut out. After two years out comes this guy,

SLIDE: Emerson Spine, younger, in tattered, grungy uniform like the survivor he is. He's been in the wilds for a while, unshaven, abraded, and dirty.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Emerson Spine. The only survivor of the Noyanok fiasco. Not only is he alive, he comes crawling out with a handful of children. Yeah, kids. They're all older than two so they can't be his. After a couple weeks in the hospital he's able to tell his story: Claims the platoon was fine until dark, and all of a sudden there's this sucking sound. The ground opens up, swallows half the unit. According to Spine, the rest of 'em freak out, run off into the jungle, start killing each other, blahblahblah. Spine says he hid in a tree, then wandered around trying to find his way out til he got so sick he couldn't walk. Says he might've been delirious for days, and he thought he was dead because he found himself in a village full of kids.

SLIDE: Handful of disheveled kids.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
They crowd around him like he's some kinda God.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (3)

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Kinda like 'Lord of the Flies' meets, I dunno, screwed up Ewok kids. They take care of him and he learns that they're products of some village that believes children are evil 'til they grow up, so they're dumped into the jungle so they can find monkeys or cheetahs or something, who knows. Spine's the first adult they've seen in years.

LYLE
No way.

GOODMAN
Way. Spine says he took it upon himself to get the kids outta the jungle and into the arms of Mother America. Says he's trying to get 'em out when alla sudden BOOM! Neverland gets shelled. Outta 30 or so kids he can only save five.

LYLE
Shelled.

GOODMAN
Who knows. Remember, this is all Spine's junk. He manages to get to a village under sweep and clear, our guys realize he's speaking English and bango, Spine's a hero. Case closed, locked and filed.

SLIDE: A teary Mr. Funn picks lettuce off a burger.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Mr. Funn. One of the two jungle kids still around. Two suicides, a delivery truck hit and run--life in the jungle was easier I guess. Other kid started some religious cult in L.A...but this Mr. Funn guy--kid hits the shore and is promptly inserted into the system. He ends up dividing his time between freaking out and meeting new foster parents every few months. Finally gets popped into juvie and spends the remainder of his adolescent years running the admins ragged.

CONTINUED: (4)

LYLE
Juvie?

GOODMAN
Didn't know how to handle him. Every now and then they let him escape and nobody bothers looking for him. After a few years of this he's resting one day in a psych ward when who pops in but Emerson Spine the First. Spine springs him and from then on he's the only one who 'understands' him.

LYLE
Psych ward.

GOODMAN
Kid's a little strange. Reports alternate between aloof, delusional, catatonic and manic.

LYLE
So he's nuts.

SLIDE: Funn, watering a plant.

GOODMAN
Nah. Funn takes care of Spine's plants. All of 'em. Spine doesn't touch 'em because he'd probly kill them. Now, why is this important: Spine's got plants, Funn handles them, Spine handles Funn.

LYLE
...got me.

GOODMAN
Darn right I gotcha. Go ahead, just TRY to figure it out. I spent years putting it all together. Give it a shot. Bring it.

LYLE
No, no, that's okay.

GOODMAN
No, it isn't. Ready?

LYLE
...sure.

GOODMAN
Funn talks to plants, right?

CONTINUED: (5)

LYLE
Mm-hmm.

GOODMAN
Yes or no.

LYLE
Sure.

GOODMAN
The plants talk back.

Lyle stares at the slide. Goodman stares at Lyle. Lyle stands and makes as if to leave and Goodman jumps up.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
No! you still don't get it! Listen! Everything I've told you so far is true, right?

LYLE
Oh, absolutely.

GOODMAN
There's more.

LYLE
No doubt.

GOODMAN
He talks to plants.

LYLE
And they talk back to him.

GOODMAN
Yes!

LYLE
And whatta the little buggers say?

GOODMAN
That isn't the point! Whatever! He understands them! He does something no one else can do!

LYLE
Is there a POINT to all of this--

GOODMAN
This means something more than just distributing paper laced with high grade hallucinogens!
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (6)

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
It means there's more than supplying major drug cartels with a seemingly inexhaustible legal resource for drug trafficking!

Lyle balks.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Oh shyeah! Stuff you nearly planted your sweaty hand on is evidence, evidence that messed me up for a WEEK when I finally got my hands on one sheet of a delivery he'd sent to a stuffed animal importer!

LYLE
...um...

GOODMAN
Drugs, my boy, drugs! And that's not all! Munitions, weapons, information-what, you think everyone in the store is tight because he pays them a decent wage? No, he's got POWER. He's got a following! They'll do anything he asks because they SERVE HIM.

SLIDE: A WORKER, soiled, restrained by officers, a stuffed monkey clenched between his teeth.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Anything he wants! You've seen them! They're family, a well-oiled machine! Everything for the good of the whole, Hitler's ideal for the SS Vaffen!

LYLE
...but--

GOODMAN
That's why nobody makes mistakes! A mistake is a fatal flaw, a weakness! But now there's something else, something I haven't figured out until recently, and only the tip of the iceberg. Funn talks to plants and gleans information from them. I've tested it and it's true.

LYLE
How?

CONTINUED: (7)

GOODMAN
The bathroom?

LYLE
...um, yeah, and?

GOODMAN
When did Spine tell you about me?

LYLE
About you?

GOODMAN
The slacker/heart speech.

LYLE
How did you--

GOODMAN
I've had that shop bugged for almost a year. He told you about me AFTER I met you in the restroom, right?

LYLE
Maybe he saw you leave--

GOODMAN
He sees hundreds of people a day. I never worked there, he has no idea what I look like.

LYLE
Maybe he has the bathroom bugged, the hell am I SAYING--

GOODMAN
No, debugged. He's got something better than a bug.

SLIDE: Photo of the ficus in the bathroom.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
The ficus on the sink shelf!

LYLE
Aw, come on now!

GOODMAN
Think about it! We left the bathroom at different times. He doesn't know me. If he'd known who I was beforehand don't you think he'd have done something? He's a careful man!

CONTINUED: (8)

LYLE
But listen to what you're saying!

GOODMAN
You saw the pictures! You met the Brothers!

LYLE
Yes, okay, right, but if what you're saying is true, IF, why don't you go to the CIA or something?!?

GOODMAN
Nobody has been tracking Spine. No one has a clue. And I don't wanna go in the nutball file.

SLIDE: Spine and Jonathan at work. Charming!

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
I see the madman, everyone else sees a businessman. A decorated, tax-paying apple-pie eating Mom-loving capitalist out for the American dream. I'm the only one.

LYLE
And you've done nothing about it.

GOODMAN
I can't do it alone. He's too good.

LYLE
Ah, I see. Enter the newbie.

GOODMAN
I need someone on the inside.

LYLE
Inside? It's my first day!

GOODMAN
Someone who has a reason to help.

LYLE
Reason? Let's look at that word for a second--

SLIDE: Nash Lee, in military glory. Lyle balks.

GOODMAN
Nash Lee, circa 1974, end of his final tour in the 'Nam.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (9)

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
A decorated soldier who always gave his you know all this.

SLIDE: Nash and Spine in a buddy picture.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Your dad didn't believe Spine's story. He looked deeper, tried to find out what really happened in there. My guess is he found out Spine wasn't the hero everyone thought he was.

SLIDE: A blurred picture of the leering, demented Spine, at a skewed angle as though someone wasn't looking through the viewfinder.

A SUCCESSION of SLIDES: Spine in various LOW POV's, wielding instruments of torture, holding up bloodied fists, holding up a mirror, all held to the photographer, not yet seen. Some of the photos are obscured by fingers over the lens, others startlingly clear. Then, the tortured photographer himself, a bloodied and battered Nash Lee, looking away at his assailant. He's beaten, semi-conscious, a travesty of a man in his last seconds of life. The next and final SLIDE is a GROUND POV, through the cracks of fingers, a slavering, triumphant Spine holds a bizarre device, spattered with blood.

Lyle sinks into the chair, which collapses, which he does not notice. Goodman advances the frame to a white square of blank wall. Silence, save for the projector HUM.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
I grew up with my uncle. He was a good man, a kind man. I looked up to him and he was a mile high. He knew your dad. They were looking into some of Spine's business ventures--my uncle was in market research. Connected, y'know... Somehow Spine figured out what your dad was doing, had him followed one night--these were taken in my uncle's garage...

The white space holds Lyle's attention.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
They disappeared. I found the camera couple years later in the sump drain--that's what got me started on this whole thing.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (10)

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
When they finally found your dad, out under that oil rig, the cause of death was indeterminable. None of these pictures show Spine and your dad in the same frame. There's no real proof. I'm sorry.

Lyle shows no sign of recognition.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
I know it. You know it. But there's no proof other than my photos of his involvement in a single criminal act, and in this day and age photos mean squat. No witnesses, not one scrap of evidence. Nothing. So many of his victims have been involved somehow in huge political or economic ventures but not a single one can be linked to him--the guy plays his chess nine moves ahead.

Lyle is shattered. Goodman retrieves a box from beneath a cluttered table. He returns--and dumps it at Lyle's feet. It is full of martial arts trophies.

LYLE
...gotta be kidding me...

GOODMAN
No joke.

LYLE
Where did--

GOODMAN
Doesn't matter. It's here, you're here, it's yours, and that's destiny for you. The past becomes the future, but in the moments of its passing history is made...

Goodman offers a hand. Lyle eyes it, brow furrowed. Without taking it he shakes his head slightly.

LYLE
...hallucinogens.

Goodman smiles.

GOODMAN
No, man. Drugs got nothing on my reality. Come on, you can't hide forever man.

CONTINUED: (11)

LYLE
Who's hiding?

GOODMAN
The thritysomething son of a four star general working as a copy shop errand boy. You tell me.

LYLE
That's a cheap shot.

GOODMAN
Whatever scores, man. You're out there trying to convince yourself it's part of the grieving process. You're not grieving. You're angry. You're a George C. Scott who’s afraid to yell at the world but you know what? The world needs yelling at. If you don't do it, Emerson Spine's gonna give you company out there on the street, millions--yeah, *millions* of people just like you, trying to crawl back into a past that he's taken away and replaced with a slab of rock with a name on it. It's your choice, man. You can be history--or make it.

Lyle stares at the blank screen, the cooling fan on the projector WHIRS in the silence...

On the SCREEN, a grainy thread of film passes in the familiar 3-2-1 COUNTDOWN sequence before a SILENT, first-person look at Lyle's memories:

INT. KITCHEN - DAY - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Caroline Lee stands in a kitchen, rays of sunlight shower her through an open window; as she wipes her hands on her apron, a DOORBELL RINGS like a CHURCH BELL.

INSERT - KITCHEN TABLE - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Two pairs of hands on a table, adult and child, making paper airplanes.

INT. KITCHEN - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Caroline beams with love of mother for child.

INT. LIVING ROOM - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Nash Lee tosses an airplane to camera, another readied in his other hand. A plane is flung back, curves away from the grinning man. CHURCH BELL.

INT. FRONT HALL - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Front door opens to TWO MEN IN SUITS on the front porch. One pulls his sunglasses, crouches, and speaks to camera.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - PRESENT DAY

A paper airplane soars against a blue sky.

INT. BATHROOM - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Nash shaves, undershirt and trousers, suspenders hanging. Glancing to camera in his reflection, he turns with a maniacal grin; he advances, brandishes the foamy shaving brush. He bursts into laughter as we back away.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - PRESENT DAY

Paper airplane descends against a backdrop of trees. DOORBELL.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - DAY - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Caroline bawls, screams and hammers on a SUIT's chest as the other tries to block the view, mouthing reassurances.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - PRESENT DAY

Airplane comes to rest at the base of a gravestone, where Lyle stands at the foot of his father’s grave.

EXT. GRAVEYARD - DAY - LYLE'S MEMORY POV

Caroline Lee sits at Nash's gravesite, sodden with rain, black mascara streaks her slack face.

INSERT - NASH'S GRAVESTONE

The inscription: "HERE LIES GENERAL NASH LEE, ANOTHER TIRED GRUNT WHO DIED FOR NOTHING. HIS IDEALISM WILL LEAD THOUSANDS LIKE HIM TO THEIR SLAUGHTER. SO MUCH FOR HOPE."

EXT. GRAVEYARD - PRESENT DAY

Lyle closes his eyes.

The gravestone is blank. A GRAINY FILM begins: NASH LEE appears, speaks conversationally. Midway through Nash's monologue, MUSIC rises...

NASH
Sure, I lied. In my mind it was over. But there are only so many ways to deny your true calling before you run out of lies and you call or fold. You look yourself in the eye, and there it is, wondering where you thought you were going.

Lyle scans the headstone, deep in thought.

NASH (CONT'D)
A conflict more devastating than any battlefield--a conflict of spirit. And that conflict is the seed germinating in every single war ever fought for any reason, and every name on every memorial has come to face this Beast on their own terms. Ultimately, the decision to fight has been the determining factor in securing freedom not only for the whole, but for the individual who would rather forfeit his earthly life than deny his spirit its due.

Lyle looks to the sky. Squints.

NASH (CONT'D)
The only piece of real advice I ever gave was *lead by example*. They'd ask all kinds of questions when the bullets started flying and the screaming and crying kept them up at night, but it all came down to that one imperative: *Lead by example*. In the face of the Beast, play every card like an ace. Fear? Sure, there's fear. Fear's healthy, fear's a vitamin. When you're confronted with insanity, you pop some fear and pretty soon you're on top. You're surviving. And survival is the first step toward victory.

CONTINUED:

Lyle's at a short distance, heading for the gate. Nash continues until he's out of sight.

NASH (V.O.) (CONT'D)
And what is victory? Comes right down to it, to the brass tacks and the kisses on the boardwalk and the medals and mom and apple pie, really, what is it that finally sticks gently in the craw to flavor all of our tastes with the sweet succulence of satisfaction? What's the recipe? I can assure you, it's not simply a matter of winning the fight. No, in order to sleep at night, to know you've done your best, there's still one thing you gotta do-

CUT TO BLACK

NASH (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Let them know Who's Boss.

INT. SPINECOPY - AFTERNOON

Lyle enters as an ELDERLY COUPLE exit. As he advances, the Workers cease their activity. They stand in silence as the last machine dies with a cyclic WHINE. SILENCE.

LYLE
...where's Spine?

Behind Lyle, Jonathan stands boldly upon his counter.

JONATHAN
Mister Spine.

LYLE
Mister Spine. Fine.

JONATHAN
You don't need to see Mister Spine.

LYLE
I don't want any trouble, I just want to talk--

JONATHAN
Well you've GOT trouble, boy!

CONTINUED:

LYLE
--and since there's more of you than there are of me, and I can see you're all pretty much on the same side--

JONATHAN
We don't care, Lee! You blew it! You dropped the baby. It's up to me to see that there are no flaws in the system, and you are most definitely a big flamin' flaw. It's my duty to this operation to see that you're corrected. *Crew.*

The Workers close in.

LYLE
Why don't you just fire me?

Jonathan nods toward the door behind Lyle.

JONATHAN
We got him, boss.

Lyle turns--empty lobby! His head whips back as Jonathan swings the cutter blade in a high arc toward his head!

EXT. SPINE'S LAIR - DECK - AFTERNOON

Spine's in a huge wicker chair on a deck above the woods, with a copy of Seuss' The Lorax.

Paper slips through a FAX machine on the table beside. After it BEEPS, Spine pulls the sheet without taking his eyes from the book, then studies the image. His eyes flick to the woods before him.

Abandoning the book, he picks up the phone from the FAX, punches a button and listens. FUNN enters, waits behind Spine's chair. Spine becomes aware of Funn's presence and holds the paper aloft, which Funn takes. He smirks:

- A strikingly clear image of Jonathan's face; his head's been shoved through the glass of the photocopier and copied at very close range. A HORN sounds and we're on

EXT. PASSENGER FERRY - AFTERNOON

A large passenger ferry floats at a loading dock as

INT. PASSENGER FERRY - AFTERNOON

PASSENGERS mill about, CHILDREN run and scream, JANITORS trundle buckets and mops. A disheveled but intact LYLE wends his way to an open booth, slides in and stares out at the water.

The HORN sounds and the boat pulls out with a rhythmic THRUM. Lyle closes his eyes, exhales, then opens them to find himself flanked, wedged in by the Brothers on both sides and above. Two Brothers flank Spine, who faces him in the opposing seat. Spine has the baby head in his hand with a picture of Lyle's face taped to it.

SPINE
That's right, Lyle. Trust.

His other hand wields an Exact-O-Knife, and as Lyle notices it lashes out at his throat!

Lyle gasps, struggles to his feet; the Brothers and Spine are gone, his throat intact.

EXT. PASSENGER FERRY / DECK - MOMENTS LATER

Lyle bursts onto the deck, drinks in the fresh air. He heads to the prow, braces himself in the wind. Chuckles.

LYLE
Afraid you've gone insane, Mr. Lee!

An ISLAND draws near; for the first time Lyle seems free.

EXT. ISLAND / HILL - AFTERNOON

From a high vantage point, FUNN crouches by a small shrub, murmurs and strokes it gently as the ferry approaches the dock in the town below.

A short giggle and he leaps up, rushes off down the hill, barely maintaining his balance with suicidal speed.

EXT. ISLAND / TOWN - AFTERNOON

Lyle walks the streets, eyes various stores...

The TOWNSPEOPLE pay no interest; TOURISTS wander about taking pictures.

CONTINUED:

Lyle enters a small country store - only to exit moments later, furrowed brow and indecision. He moves on, enters another. Same story.

Lyle notices an orange vested COP at a school crossing, waving an oversized STOP sign at the flow of traffic.

LYLE
Excuse me!

The cop turns, cordial and friendly.

COP
Yessir!

LYLE
I was wondering if you might be able to help me out?

COP
Well, I can sure try!

LYLE
Great! I'm looking for a house, but I don't know the exact address. My boss lives there.

COP
Well, shoot!

LYLE
Okay, it belongs to this guy-

Lyle removes a folded paper from his pocket. It is Goodman's headshot of Spine, circle, slash. Lyle grins.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Heh, this was a joke. His name's--

COP
A joke, huh? Well, I don't think it's very funny. Get off my street before I shoot your guts out.

LYLE
...I'm sorry?

COP
Not as sorry as you'll be in about five seconds. Four. Three.

He unsnaps the strap on his sidearm; Lyle splits.

EXT. ISLAND / TOWN - AFTERNOON

RANDOM PEOPLE eye the photo:

CLERK
Nope.

BUSINESSMAN
(Deep laugh)
HEEEEEE-heee-heee-heeeeeee!

MECHANIC
Hunh-unh.

LAWYER
(Hands out a card)
In case you require an attorney...

YOUNG MAN
Why's he got a circle around him?

OLD WOMAN
Never seen him in all my born days.

CHILD
MOMMEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!

BIKER
Kinda bike's he ride?

DOCTOR
(Offers card)
In case you require medical attention.

VAGRANT
Yeah, I seen 'im alla time. He's RIGHT THERE! OOO! AH! OOOO!

The last is a burly LOGGER, who seethes with silent rage.

LYLE
Thank you for your time.

Lyle, frustrated, clutches the photo, passes a row of windows, not noticing one of the mannequins is the alluring VORACIA PETALS!

He continues along, until

EXT. WORLD OF WONDER! - AFTERNOON

Lyle double takes at the "WORLD OF WONDER!" sign above his head: The painted logo is a smiling baby-head!

Lyle slowly opens the ornate wooden door. There is an all-too-familiar BELL as he steps across the threshold.

INT. WORLD OF WONDER! - SAME

The "World of Wonder!" is a hole-in-the-wall curio shop of bizarre knickknacks, statues, taxidermy, charms, dolls, etc. Incense smoke congests the aisles. Ornate banners and eclectic mobiles dangle. A family of stuffed animals occupy a dark corner. Fertility sculptures mug from dusty shelves--Lyle's in a reservoir of the world's forgotten cultures.

LYLE
Hello?

Lyle moves to the counter; a skull grins from a black pedestal.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Anyone here?

A curtain billows from a doorway behind the counter. Lyle takes a step--then spins!

A shriveled prune of an OLD MAN with pale, blind eyes and a long pipe stands directly behind! His garb, a mishmash of Chinese peasant and Arabian immigrant.

CURATOR
I knew you would come.

LYLE
What?

CURATOR
It is the way of the wind. The mist, the fog, the dew on the morning vine. All journeys remain unseen but true.

LYLE
Ok good, I'm looking for someone--

The old man cackles, moves to a previously unnoticed mobile: a human spine! He drags on his pipe.

CONTINUED:

CURATOR
Cradle and grave the journey remains, looking across the shifting grains.

Lyle sighs, fed up.

LYLE
Mainly on the plains, right? In the rain in Spain and everyone's insane. Forget this.

Lyle starts for the exit when the old man runs his finger over the spine with a TINKLE.

CURATOR
Your journey has brought you far from where you once were in less time. You walk out that door to where? The past? You cannot. But the end--it lies constant. Here, in the labyrinth of the spine...

Lyle turns as the curator's strokes the vertebrae.

CURATOR (CONT'D)
It keeps us upright and true.

Lyle approaches.

LYLE
Where is he?

The curator produces a worn paper from the folds of his robe. Opens it upon the counter. A map of a wooded area.

CURATOR
It is here. The snakes, the flies, they thrive within the outer gates. The danger to strangers and twisting of fates. Walk lightly in the mind, the feet follow with invisible wings.

A hand traces over the paper.

CURATOR (CONT'D)
All around the lair, high cunning and low intention. But--

He pulls a handful of powder from the skull, sprinkles it on the page. He blows, and a path wends through the woods defined in ash. WINDCHIMES.

CONTINUED: (2)

CURATOR (CONT'D)
Here is the way for you. They tell me of this way.

He fishes in his pockets, produces something that could be a rodent head or a ball of dark meat. Pop, CRUNCH, swallow. He closes his eyes, savors it, then continues.

CURATOR (CONT'D)
They have shown me, they show you, broken teeth and spine in two.

Another food-thing pulled. He offers it, Lyle declines politely. Pop. CRUNCH. Chew. Map folded, he hands it to Lyle, then swallows.

LYLE
...thanks.

CURATOR
Gratitude is for the kinkajou in the dying light of winter; he calls forth his sex and is answered. You will need the speed of ancients. Go!

Lyle nods, cockeyed, then exits the "World of Wonder!"

The old man turns to the curtain behind the counter; FUNN emerges with a tray of moss. The curator smiles, pulls his wig and loses his accent, rubs his hands together.

CURATOR (CONT'D)
All yours. Allll yours.

Funn presents him with the moss, crosses to the door, looks after Lyle. The "old man" is delighted, lets out a whoop, strokes the moss like a new lover--

EXT. DIRT ROAD - MID-AFTERNOON

At the end of a dirt road Lyle examines his map as a TAXI pulls away. The road ends at a wall of dense foliage, broken only by two trees meeting in an arch. Lyle looks after the cab, back to the map, sighs, and steps through.

EXT. WOODS - MID-AFTERNOON

Lyle begins an arduous trek along a rabbit-run trail. Over and under fallen logs, through dense foliage, here and there consulting his map. As he folds it for the umteenth time he notices a length of twine stretched at ankle level before him! He stops, listens. BIRDS.

CONTINUED:

He steps over the twine, smirks, and turns to find BROTHER#1 in camouflage, swinging an axe at his head!

Lyle sidesteps, the axe sinks into the dirt; he fires a nasty blow to the Brother's face, who staggers backward. #1 swings again, misses--Lyle steps inside, knocks the arms in the direction of the momentum as they pass. #1 turns full circle with the force, and as the axe comes around Lyle drops low, thrusts a kick to #1's groin.

#1 grunts, the axes flies into the woods. Lyle kicks both knees from his position on the ground, buckling #1 forward--and using the forest floor as leverage, Lyle diverts his weight into a rising kick to #1's falling chin. #1 flips onto his back, out cold.

Lyle stands, brushes himself off. He turns to head down a side path, trips, catches himself, then throws himself onto his back as a large flyswatter-device SWISHES through the air, parallel to the ground, and slams into the bole of a large tree!

The 'swatter is adorned with fifty or so pointed stakes, each large enough to gut a good sized deer, bound on a flat screen, which in turn is bound to a bent tree. Leaves drop lazily from above...

Lyel rises, consults his map. He moves slower, jittery at each small sound...

EXT. WOODS - SAME

FUNN stares from a limb a few feet above Lyle, naked save for a leaf-covered thong, his body painted the colors of the forest, his hair tangled in leaves and twigs.

EXT. WOODS - A BIT LATER

Lyle faces a sharp incline from the forest floor; at the base is a babbling brook. He fjords the latter, regards the climb, and begins.

Brother#2 waits at the top, a huge rock poised above his head, for the proper moment. Lyle glances up--

BROTHER#2
Heads!

He hurls the rock; Lyle dodges. Unfortunately, #2 is prepared--he hefts another from a large pile at his feet, each stone no smaller than his head. Lyle makes his way up the hill, dodging each obstacle as it comes.

CONTINUED:

LYLE
You're the brave one, arentcha?!?

BROTHER#2
You're the *dead* one!

Lyle launches into a run, achieving the top--and #2 dives on him. They roll back down, into the creek; #2 straddles Lyle, holds his head under, giggling.

The creek BABBLES louder underneath as Lyle gropes for #2's face. Arms aren't long enough. Tries to use his legs. Pinned. #2 yanks him up, chuckles, submerges him again. Repeatedly.

BROTHER#2 (CONT'D)
Tough guy, tough guy, gonna die,
gonna die, apple pie, apple p--

Lyle spits water in #2's face, who startles long enough for Lyle to crack him upside the head with a stone from the creek bed. #2's head erupts in blood--

BROTHER#2 (CONT'D)
--pig meat on my football trucks
big chicks and my dog!

He topples into the creek. Lyle staggers up, steadies himself. He yanks #2's face up and out of the water, drags him to the creek bank and collapses...

MISTER FUNN (O.S.)
"I went to the woods to live
deliberately. I wanted to live
deep and suck out the marrow of
life. To put to route all that was
not life, and not, when I came to
die, discover I had not lived."

Mister Funn stands proud at the crest of the hill, fire in his eyes, fervor in his voice.

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
Henry David Thoreau, my friend.
Ever read him?

Lyle struggles to his feet.

LYLE
I was more of a...Walt Whitman
fan, myself...

CONTINUED: (2)

MISTER FUNN
Ah, yes! "You, road, I enter upon you and look around. I believe you are not all that is here."

Lyle regards the strange man, gets himself together.

LYLE
"I believe much unseen is also here."

MISTER FUNN
My friend...I root for you!

He springs out of sight. Lyle bolts up the hill, reaches the top and looks about.

EXT. WOODS / DENSE THICKET - SAME

The dense trees create a premature dusk with patches of sunlight. Lyle HEARS Funn's retreat down the sloping path and bolts after, gathering speed--

At the base of the slope two arms join together from behind two trees to clothesline him: Brothers #3 and #4!

Lyle soars, lands on his back, the wind knocked from him. #3 and #4 hustle over, drag him to his feet.

BROTHER#3
That hurt?

BROTHER#4
Sure looked nasty.

BROTHER#3
Was it nasty?

BROTHER#4
Sure looked like it.

BROTHER#3
Ouch!

Brother#5 steps out, adjusting gloves, and effortlessly hefts Lyle by his shirt.

BROTHER#5
Where'd you think you were going?

Lyle grunts. #5 shakes him hard enough to rattle teeth.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
Hey? Tough guy? Is tough guy home?

CONTINUED:

BROTHER#3
Where'd he go?

BROTHER#4
I don't see him!

BROTHER#3
Lights are on, nobody home!

BROTHER#4
Flying on instruments!

BROTHER#3
Left his groceries at the supermarket!

BROTHER#5
Hey, Lee, loserboy: where's tough--

Lyle plants both legs against #5's chest, boxes his ears and kicks out and away. As #5 stumbles back into #3, Lyle sweeps #4 and leaps to his feet. #3 rushes him; Lyle sidesteps and helps #3 with a firm shove into a nearby trunk. Dry needles rain down as #4 leaps up. Lyle screams at him; #4 flinches and Lyle strikes him twice on the nose. #4 shakes his head, his nose springing a leak as he growls. Lyle feints a kick to #4's head, which is ducked; #4 rushes in and meets Lyle's follow-up kick to the hip joint--#4 staggers. #5 charges from behind, encircles Lyle about the waist and carries him toward a tree. Lyle cocks both legs, braces for the impact; they slam into the bole, Lyle bends his legs--the counter-thrust breaks #5's hold. Lyle shoots back in the opposite direction and #4 catches him in a bear-hug. Lyle's spine POPS.

BROTHER#4
You might as well lie down, 'cause-

Lyle snaps his head back into #4's smitten nose. Howling, #4 releases Lyle, who steps behind and sweeps #4's knee into the air as he plants a solid elbow in #4's sternum. #4 lands roughly. Lyle spins to find #5's fist; he slips it, drops a knee on #4's stomach, then pops up to step forcibly on #4 to kick #5, who blocks with a punch to Lyle's knee. Lyle switches his stance, shakes it out.

BROTHER#5
Problem?

LYLE
Hmm-mmph.

Brother#5 dances in with a series of jabs and hooks which Lyle slips or slaps away. Lyle kicks to the groin. #5 blocks with a knee, Lyle diverts to kick his head.

CONTINUED: (2)

#5 catches the leg, Lyle fires punches to the face; #5 throws the leg off. Lyle spins as #5 kicks his back, sends him sprawling. Without waiting, #5 rushes forward, kicking. Lyle uses his elbows to protect his face, rolls backward to spring up against #3, who's coming around from his stupor. #3 secures a headlock before Lyle twists, steps behind, places his hand under #3's nose and shoves backward to buckle #3 into the oncoming kick from #5, which spins him bodily. Lyle and #5 square off.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Good job.

BROTHER#5
You like that?

LYLE
Absolutely.

BROTHER#5
That was nothing.

He feints right, jabs hard with the left. It connects with Lyle's cheek, who spins with the momentum and backfists #5's face in return. They square off again.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
Nice.

Lyle throws a kick to knock aside #5's guard hands and lunges in for a punch to the body. #5 grabs the back of Lyle's head, folds him into a rising knee. Lyle blocks with his forearms, slips #5's hand. #5 gets the grab again and does the same thing; this time Lyle knocks the knee sideways and off-line, jumps up with a shoulder beneath the cocked leg. #5 wraps an arm around Lyle's neck. Lyle holds him aloft for a split second before they crash backward to the dirt. Lyle is stunned long enough for #5 to wrestle him into a nasty lock. Lyle screams.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
I can't hear you!

Lyle screams.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
There you go!

Lyle is in a bad way. More POPS.

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
Any last words?

Lyle sucks it up.

CONTINUED: (3)

BROTHER#5 (CONT'D)
Say goodbye, courier.

Lyle drives a thumb into an exposed eye. It's #5's turn to wail. He releases Lyle, cups a hand over the socket. Lyle scrambles up and around. Using #5's back as a springboard, he leaps to an overhanging branch, pulling himself higher. #5 flails at his legs. Lyle locks his legs around #5's neck, squeezes for all he's worth--then drops with all his weight to land upon him. CRUNCH.

Lyle hits the dirt, winded. Stands. Turns circles. Nobody moves. He drunkenly removes the map, looks around...

EXT. WOODS - LATE AFTERNOON

Lyle stumbles along, wary of any sound. He halts at a fork in the trail, debates...and two hands shove him from behind! He hits the dirt--and passes through!

INT. PIT - SAME

Lyle lies unmoving in a thick bed of moss. He gazes up at the treetops from the bottom of a ten foot pit.

Mister Funn pops his leafy head into view; he hunkers down to sit cross-legged at the edge of the pit.

MISTER FUNN
How do you feel?

LYLE
...little disappointed.

MISTER FUNN
Been quite a day for you.

Lyle regards the leafy man, who breaks into a giggle. After a moment, Lyle can't help but reciprocate.

They share a moment, each in their own lunacy. Then:

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
Have you ever spent time in the forest, Lyle? I mean, serious *time*. Childhood. Adolescence. Our nature *stems* from our *nature*. It influences our behavior more than most people care to think about. One becomes a Sensitive Plant, shrinking from touch, folding to protect against pain.
(MORE)

CONTINUED:

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
Or an Evergreen, strong and tall, weathering the ages, laying down a soft bed for weary passers by. There's Kudzu, the creeping vine suffocating everything it covers, smothering life from the light of the sun. And, of course, the carnivorous plants. Tropical Sundew, the Pitcher Plant, the infamous flytrap...we grant these plants the attractive reputation because they are the most like us--or we're the most like them. We have *roots*, Lyle. Roots.

LYLE
...and?

MISTER FUNN
And, Lyle, those roots bind us to the Earth. They ground us. Security and immobility. The freedom to grow and the ties that bind...when I first returned to the United States, I--

LYLE
This from the Noyanok jungle?

MISTER FUNN
Yes! You know about it, then!

LYLE
You were abandoned as a child.

MISTER FUNN
Abandoned? I suppose. Our plane was blown out of the sky when I was three. I was one of a small group of children heading for Japan to attend an internationally subsidized research facility.

LYLE
...uh...

MISTER FUNN
A handful of children exhibiting symptoms of telekinesis, extra-sensory perception, various degrees of precognition, a few pyrokinetics, et cetera blah blah psychobabble blah. About thirty in all, culled from thousands of test subjects all over the world.

CONTINUED: (2)

LYLE
So Spine *did* find you.

MISTER FUNN
Most of us. There were a few who didn't appreciate the crash, but quite a few of us did fairly well. The foliage was very helpful in breaking our fall...

LYLE
So why are you doing this?

MISTER FUNN
Hm? Oh, you mean all of *this*?

LYLE
You don't seem the type.

MISTER FUNN
Oh, yes, well, Emson is a megalomaniacal genius with the capacity to compromise the human race. I don't have any plans as grandiose as that.

LYLE
But you're helping him.

MISTER FUNN
Well, I'm not, really. I mean, yes, I cultivate biologically superior paper, but my goal is simply to establish a medium for breaching the ignorance between the human and floral kingdoms.

LYLE
...sorry?

MISTER FUNN
As Emson has plans, so do I. His plans stem from base human instinct and the sociological foibles of the quote superior race endquote that most adults adopt if their parents failed to nurture them. Emson fails to recognize the vehicle he's utilizing to achieve his end. He discounts the tool for the wielder.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (3)

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
I, however, am full aware of the value of the tools themselves, for if tools are not cared for, they wear down, deteriorating over time...sorry, I sound like Emson.

LYLE
A little.

MISTER FUNN
He wears on you...but look around you, my friend. From there, all you can see are trees and sky. What do you think the earliest animals, the first couple saw when they gazed up from the Garden?

LYLE
Trees and sky?

MISTER FUNN
Trees and sky. Please understand, Lyle; I am not a Druid. I do not worship trees. I'm full aware that trees are incapable of the sublime works of the human spirit. But it is fact, when a tree is felled, surrounding trees feel every blow of the axe; the stricken tree transmits pain and its neighbors react to their fallen counterpart. Botanists compare this to the way humans react when witnessing violence. Granted, they don't display the emotional stigma we attach to death or loss, the quote five stages of grief endquote, but the initial reaction remains simple...I won't bore you with a diatribe about the rain forests, Lyle. The information we're fed every day by political and social idols is rudimentary at best; you and I both know that our resources will continue to be stripped even after people are hacking up blackened chunks of their lungs because they have no oxygen, and then they'll wonder why, why us? You asked me why, Lyle? I'll tell you. Because I feel their pain.

Lyle is speechless.

CONTINUED: (4)

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
A tree falling in the forest will always make a sound, Lyle. One tree is felt by another and another, growing and spreading until there is someone to hear and that someone is me. As we sit and chat, right here, right now, I hear them. And you know something? They hear us. Oh yes, believe it. Synchronicity. Unity. The roots grow as a whole. They communicate simply; the roots of communication lie in intentions, Lyle. Language is a mere drop in the barrel. You yourself can feel it, if you clear your head of all the distractions, anxieties, fears and stimuli the world heaps upon you. You can feel the simplicity to life being overlooked...and these trees understand that. They communicate by sensing life all around them. They feel. And they feel you are just. So...I cannot harm you.

Funn tosses down a rope. Lyle, abashed, takes it and with Funn's help is soon clear.

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
Sorry about that. I had to figure out what to do with you.

LYLE
...no problem.

Funn smiles, tosses the rope into the pit. He extends a hand, which Lyle takes slowly and shakes.

MISTER FUNN
The house is to the north. Continue, but I must warn you; I cannot harm you, but others...I won't stop them.

LYLE
I understand. Thanks.

Funn leans in close.

MISTER FUNN
Watch your back. Really.

Lyle nods.

CONTINUED: (5)

Funn heads into the foliage. Lyle turns as well, where Spine wields a large branch and knocks him into DARKNESS.

INT. SPINELAIR / COMMAND CENTER - EARLY EVENING

Lyle comes to, tied to a chair. The ropes are sturdy.

He's in a spacious living room with a massive bay window overlooking the forest. A large, glossy desk dominates one end of the room, a huge executive workstation. Modern art and several harsh metallic sculptures reflect Spine's steely creativity; a large glass globe stands prominently by. SPINE himself stands outside on the deck, puffs an ornate German ceramic pipe, surveying the land.

Lyle struggles and Spine casually turns, sets down the pipe on a stand and enters through a sliding glass door.

SPINE
Mister Lee!

He crosses to Lyle, pulls up a large black leather chair on metal casters and sits. CRINKLE.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I'm impressed, Mr. Lee. I admire persistence, and dispatching both my workers and the Brothers like you have shows a real choice effort. I'd like to think I had something to do with it, that maybe during your short tenure at Spinecopy I bolstered your commitment to doing a quality job.

He pats Lyle's knee with genuine pride.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I'm glad you've made it this far. I really am. I finally get to share the motivation behind my own persistent pursuit of the dream.

Spine stands, beads of sweat belie his excitement as he swaggers to the mega-desk and produces a flat, wide container, akin to a safety deposit box. He hustles back to Lyle, the case ominous in his hands.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Within this box, Mr. Lee, is the secret that will forever change the face of our world. Behold:

Spine slides the lid off...and holds up sheet of paper.

CONTINUED:

SPINE (CONT'D)
The Sentient Sheet.

Lyle opens his eyes fully and has a look.

SPINE (CONT'D)
What do you see there, Mr. Lee? What do you see, flickering there in the emptiness?

LYLE
You...in a strait-jacket...

SPINE
Now isn't the time for jest, Mr. Lee. Now is the time for visions!

He pushes the sheet onto Lyle's face, a blind mask.

SPINE (CONT'D)
You see emptiness. I see a world. And what I see, I will control.

Spine removes the sheet, sets it at Lyle's feet. He opens the box, removes another; this sheet has an exact likeness of Lyle's face of moments before, scrunched beneath the mask, photograph quality. He flips the sheet--the other side displays the likeness of Spine's hand.

SPINE (CONT'D)
My grand vision, Mr. Lee.

Lyle doesn't get it. Spine retrieves the first page.

SPINE (CONT'D)
This is the Seer sheet.

He rattles the Lyle page.

SPINE (CONT'D)
This is the Receptor sheet. It's very simple, really. One sees, one receives. The technology is complex, yes, but the basic relationship is simple and elegant, don't you think?

Reality dawns on Lyle.

LYLE
No way.

SPINE
The ultimate communication, Mr. Lee!

(MORE)

CONTINUED: (2)

SPINE (CONT'D)
The unseen connection from page to page, mind to mind! People believe what they put to paper is theirs and theirs alone, private domain until they see fit to share. But the trees, Mr. Lee, they can see! The trees can talk and they're shouting right now but we can't hear them, we don't realize the power we can take from them but I do, I DO!

Spine's professional mask cracks; he takes a deep breath.

SPINE (CONT'D)
No, you're justified; I never would have believed it myself. But that was before the Noyanok. The Noyanok changed everything. Not an ordinary jungle out there, Mr. Lee. The Noyanok has powers! Strange, wonderful powers! It showed me things, the power that could be mine someday--oh, they all thought the Noyanok was an accursed place, that everyone must go mad among the screaming vines, chattering roots--but on the contrary...I don't expect you to hear the gospel, Mr. Lee. The scheme is so vast it will take generations even to suspect it.

Spine lifts the seer sheet again.

SPINE (CONT'D)
This is a bold new beginning. The first sheet of Sentient Stock!

Lyle sits dumbfounded.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Mr. Funn has worked tirelessly to develop this property in every tiny plant he raises. Out there in the Noyanok he'd talk for hours upon hours, his skills inherent! I conducted my first tests there, tests that have since led to the brink of my ultimate design. When these plants are harvested and specially processed into paper they lose none of their telepathic potency. It actually intensifies through the processing!
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (3)

SPINE (CONT'D)
The plants yield a virtual transmitter that communicates tactile impressions to others of its kind. We utilize the necessary technology to fully capture and process the floral information into sharp, detailed copies of what our Seer sheets pick up, just like your face here! Isn't it wonderful, Mr. Lee? Spinecopy saturates the market with this glorious stock, undercutting the competition with high-quality paper for pennies a ream! Sentient Sheets will be the paper of choice across the globe! The world's greatest corporations will dictate technological advances on it. Covert military operations will be carried out upon it. Lawyers, stockbrokers, the CIA will use it. Every President, every Czar, every Emperor will decree their highest orders on these intelligent, spying fibers! And do you know what that means, Mr. Lee?

Spine is in tears.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I will see it all! I will own it all! I will have eyes in every chamber of power from here to the Imperial Palace! Every letter of the most important, secretive, compromising information in the world will be broadcast directly to me! Imagine it! Endless knowledge, soaring into my network, a ceaseless stream of information from every corridor of power! I will have the ultimate monopoly on information! And with that information comes POWER.

Spine, exhausted, replaces the sheets in their box and tucks them safely under the desk.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Well, you know the drill. Plan revealed, you have to die. Sorry.

Spine exits to the deck and resumes his peaceful smoke.

INT. SPINELAIR / BASEMENT - LATER

The basement of the complex is in stark contrast to the sleek, antiseptic feel of the command center; brick walls slick with mold, a floor of rusty iron panels laid together over cracked earth below. Yellow steam rises from between the panels to drift below the low ceiling, and sickly lighting completes the dungeonesque scene.

An iron door GROANS open at one end and in comes Funn, wheeling Lyle, bound, on a rack-like hand cart; the wheels CLATTER and SQUEAK. Now a massive Frankensteinian lab table comes into view. Standing beside is a bizarre contraption of clear plastic hoses and tubes connected by steel joints that plug into a huge stainless-steel syringe with a capacity of several gallons; at one end of this, a hose with a rubber mouthpiece.

Lyle's wheeled to the table and positioned upright on the cart; he eyes the contraption, then Funn, who shrugs.

MISTER FUNN
I'm not supposed to tell.

A MOAN and Spine enters in an oversized red rain slicker, pulling on a pair of industrial rubber gloves.

SPINE
Mister Lee!

Gloves on, he works his fingers around, a maestro preparing to tickle the ivories.

SPINE (CONT'D)
If you please...

Funn lifts Lyle onto the table as Spine ambles over.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Well, you've really shot the works today, haven't you? New job, self-actualization, a secret lair and a plan to take over the world! Now that, Mister Lee, is something to be proud of. I'm tempted to go all the way and offer you a chance to join me--

He yanks a lever, releasing bellows with a HISS of steam.

SPINE (CONT'D)
But why convince you when I can control you?

CONTINUED:

He motions to Funn, busy extracting grime from his fingernails.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Mister Funn?

Funn snaps out of it and exits. MOAN.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Can't showcase without an assistant!

MOAN. Funn returns, VORACIA in tow. She lugs a large jug labeled "WHITE-IN." Funn leads her to Spine's side and returns to a stubborn clot beneath his index finger.

VORACIA
This is lame.

Lyle strains at his bonds.

SPINE
Okay, everybody's here! Excellent! Now, as you can see, my setup here is crude at best. Frankly, I've been busy and haven't had the time to whip it into shape the way I'd like, but that's what today is for! I need to work the kinks out before mass production can begin.

He nudges Voracia softly in the ribs.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Hold it up there, honey...

She hefts the container, a reluctant gameshow hostess.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Quick layman's synopsis: the objective here is to flush your system with this concoction, replacing your blood with correction fluid.

Spine whacks the container. Fluid sloshes, GLOOSH GLOOSH.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Your blood is expunged and you die a slow, agonizing death epic in misery--but what happens next is quite curious.
(MORE)

CONTINUED: (2)

SPINE (CONT'D)
The plant properties within this fluid, straight from the Noyanok, seize control of dying cells and actively work to rejuvenate life-- not a conventional form of life, you understand. Your life becomes much like the life of the Receptor sheet, a blank palette upon which the will of another can be projected. A human sheet of paper, Mr. Lee, with the flaws 'whited out' like a typographical error.

GLOOSH GLOOSH.

SPINE
Blake Cornell proved an able volunteer, and the results are encouraging. I wasn't sure of the effects in an already deceased host...but now I have you!

Spine takes the container from Voracia, unscrews the cap and pours the thick, milky liquid into the huge syringe.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I could've stopped with the Sentient Sheets and reaped the obvious benefits of such a product. But if there's one word that sums up the essence of a dominant business, it's *diversify*. You simply cannot content yourself with being a one-trick pony. A successful business provides the customer *choices* in the marketplace, a wide range of quality products to fit the vast needs of today's consumer. And you-

Spine seals the syringe, thrusts the jug at Voracia.

SPINE (CONT'D)
You are now part of that philosophy, a contributing factor to our lasting legacy, Mr. Lee! You should feel some degree of pride; when this product is perfected it will become part of our global distribution manifesto.

Spine depresses the stopper. The fluid slowly crawls through the network of tubing.

CONTINUED:

VORACIA
Emerson--

SPINE
Daddy.

Spine slugs Lyle's stomach, shoves the mouthpiece in as he gasps for air.

VORACIA
...*Daddy*, don't do this.

Lyle's watery eyes follow the tubing.

SPINE
Hush dear. I'm watching.

Funn looks to Lyle, to Voracia, to Spine and back again.

Spine leans in, inches from Lyle's face.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Can you feel it?

Voracia reaches to disconnect the tube. Spine, lightning quick, backhands her across the room without turning.

SPINE (CONT'D)
That's *progress*, Mr. Lee.

The fluid moments away, Funn helps Voracia to her feet.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Welcome to big business, my boy.
Welcome to power. MY power...

The power goes out, plunges the room into darkness!

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
--has gone out.

CLUNKING. A RATTLE. The MOAN of the door. HISSING.

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
No worries at all! Contingencies
are a part of life--

Minimal EMERGENCY LIGHTS FLICKER, Spine stands at a fusebox with a large red button. Before him stands Goodman, wearing night goggles!

SPINE (CONT'D)
Oh.

CONTINUED: (2)

He smacks the goggles off Goodman's face and elbows the button. DARKNESS.

VORACIA (V.O.)
Lyle!

A CRASH. RUNNING FOOTSTEPS, a THUD, a STRUGGLE. EMERGENCY LIGHTS FLICKER, Voracia stands at the box. Goodman blinks rapidly, spies Lyle, and kicks him firmly in the stomach, ejecting the now-full mouthpiece and much fluid. He moves to release Lyle--Spine launches a fire extinguisher at his head from the door; Goodman ducks, the extinguisher hits the button and DARKNESS accompanied by a RELEASE from the EXTINGUISHER. FOOTSTEPS. The MOAN of the door. Lyle CHOKES out the last of the fluid.

GOODMAN (V.O.)
Get back here!

BREAKING GLASS.

VORACIA (V.O.)
Lyle!

LYLE (V.O.)
Guhawk!

COUGHING. HISSING. A CLANG. EMERGENCY LIGHTS FLICKER. A cloudy haze obscures everything, Goodman covered in extinguisher residue at the button.

Funn appears out of the cloud. The two regard each other, Funn removes his glasses, wipes them on the hem of his jacket. Goodman takes a ready stance.

Voracia has released Lyle from the restraints, who now dry-heaves on the floor.

VORACIA
Someone has to--

GOODMAN
Lyle.

MISTER FUNN
Lyle.

They stare each other down. Voracia takes Lyle's face in her hands.

VORACIA (CONT'D)
You can do it. You have to.

He stands...she leads him to the door. MOAN.

CONTINUED:

VORACIA (CONT'D)
Follow me up to the split, then go right. I'll get the power online for the house and grounds...okay?

Lyle shrugs, nods. She moves to kiss him--and wipes powder, saliva from his lips without much success--

VORACIA (CONT'D)
...later, alright?

She bolts. Lyle nods to himself, blinks, moves to follow--

GOODMAN
LYLE!

Lyle stops; Goodman, facing Funn, draws an envelope from an inner pocket.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Take this.

Lyle does. Goodman nods, still fixed on Funn.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Go!

Lyle does. MOAN. A moment more--and they embrace.

MISTER FUNN
Dude.

GOODMAN
Been a long time.

MISTER FUNN
Yes it has. Yes it has.

GOODMAN
Howya doing, man?!?

MISTER FUNN
Oh, y'know, hanging in there. To be expected.

GOODMAN
No joke, no joke.

MISTER FUNN
Beer?

GOODMAN
Absolutely.

They move off toward the door.

CONTINUED: (2)

MISTER FUNN
Whattaya think?

GOODMAN
All in, bro. Anyone's game.

MISTER FUNN
True that.

They exit. MOAN.

EXT. WOODS - EVENING

Lyle rushes the thick, dark forest. No trace of Spine.

LYLE
Spine!

A BIRD complains. The ECHOES garble among the trees.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Face me!

DEAD SILENCE. Then, a low, drum-beat CHUCKLE.

SPINE (V.O.)
Mister Lee! After this valiant pursuit you expect me to simply hand myself over to you? Oh, nonono. You must come and get me!

Spine takes on a singsong tone.

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
'Come-and-get-me, come-and-get-me, nanny-nanny-naa-naa!'

It's impossible to tell where the voice comes from.

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
You're the only man alive who knows, Mister Lee. I'll kill you for that alone. But there is another reason...

LYLE
To 'let me know who's boss?'

SPINE (V.O.)
Something like that.

A sudden bright LIGHT--Lyle spins! Grounds lights throw long shadows through the treeline: Voracia's found the circuit breaker.

CONTINUED:

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
For all the dashing heroics you still lack the vital element of success, Mr. Lee. I still hold that simple edge over you.

Lyle vaults a large stump! Nothing.

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Yes, *yes*! So eager for the kill! Little Lyle's finally ready to take on the world, in a hurry to make up for lost, wasted time.

Lyle pounces behind a wall of shrubbery! Nope.

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
You're too late, my boy. The world is mine. I have conquered the peaks, I have deepened the valleys. I have created a masterwork from the air. I've inspired employees as loyal as kamikaze pilots. And Lyle? Ohhh, he's spent his life running away.

Lyle flushes something from its hole with a RUSTLE.

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Eternally fleeing his father's shadow, scrabbling after a life he could call his own.

LYLE
Don't talk about my dad!

SPINE (V.O.)
I knew him well. The esteemed, decorated countryman, willing to sacrifice all for God and country. He sacrificed YOU, didn't he?

Lyle freezes, snaps his head toward a large pine.

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Your precious father died a whining, miserable coward! In the end he was just like all the rest, a powerless buffoon! I controlled him, just as I control you. Just as I will control every soul upon this planet.

Lyle's locked in; he swats away branches and brush with grim vigor, Spine's voice feeding him, goading him on.

CONTINUED: (2)

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Your destiny is sealed, Mr. Lee! Your blood will run in a river beside your father's, twin streams of failure and weakness! You are my final obstacle, and you will be no more!

At the base of the massive tree, Lyle prepares--

SPINE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
You're finished.

Lyle leaps! Only to find a loudspeaker mounted in the bole of the tree. BOOMING LAUGHTER.

Lyle backs away, drops to the dirt, crushed.

A hand explodes from the ground beneath to seize Lyle's leg! Another emerges, braces itself on the edge of the hole, a wireless microphone in hand! Lyle, shocked and terrified, struggles against the iron grip. The ground beneath shifts, pours into the hole around the emerging form of SPINE, who uses Lyle for leverage--Lyle, screaming, finally kicks the hand free, stumbles back.

Spine, caked in moist earth and roots, naked but for a pair of biking shorts, rises from the sinkhole like a hellspawn unleashed. He looses a guttural yowl, tosses the microphone aside and dramatically claws the air with gnarled, gruesome fingers. After gauging Lyle's reaction:

SPINE (CONT'D)
Mister Lee! Good evening!

Lyle staggers backward, at a complete loss.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Well, now, what were you expecting?

LYLE
Hahhhhh...

SPINE
The most powerful state, Mr. Lee, is a man in his element. Of course, I can’t go running about the office like this. It wouldn't be prudent business.

Lyle, in total disbelief, tries to clear his head.

CONTINUED: (3)

SPINE (CONT'D)
Out here I do my real work. This is where my inspiration lies! I strip down and open myself to the powers of the forest. Can you feel it, Mr. Lee? Surging through you, fueling you...

Spine raises his arms in reverence, closes his eyes; his face apes the baby-head on a beaded cord about his neck.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I feel it! It possesses my soul--

Lyle plants a leaping side-kick in Spine's abdomen. Spine barely flinches. Lowering his arms, he opens his eyes.

SPINE (CONT'D)
When I snapped your father's neck he made the funniest noise. I wonder if you'll make it too.

Lyle responds with a firm punch to the face. Spine grins. He advances on Lyle, who backpedals in tandem.

SPINE (CONT'D)
I'll take and take, Mr. Lee. Everything you have. I'll take your life, then I'll take that pretty young colt you'd like to think was yours. Such a sweet little treat she is. To taste, and to eat...

LYLE
No!!!

Spine cackles as Lyle fires off a volley of furious punches; he jumps, spins, and kicks Spine with a blow that might remove a man's head from his shoulders. Spine mock groan-and-winces, chuckles as he backhands Lyle with such force as to send him sprawling in the dirt.

Spine pounces and pins him there, giggling, his smile becoming so huge it cracks away most of the dirt on his cheeks; it crumbles onto Lyle's face.

SPINE
I do love to play, but it's time to erase your life.

He delivers a blow that embeds Lyle's head in the earth. Standing, he yanks Lyle up and tosses him across the clearing. Lyle piles against the huge pine, senseless.

CONTINUED: (4)

Spine takes him again, dances a few waltz steps and launches him straight up. Lyle lands with a THUMP. Spine crouches, fingers about his throat, hums, and squeezes.

Lyle weakly claws at Spine's fingers, his face. Nothing.

The smiling baby-head bumps Lyle's nose. As consciousness wanes, Lyle tears it from the necklace, beads flying, and flings it away. Spine's expression turns to horror.

SPINE (CONT'D)
NO!!!

Spine, frantic, still grips Lyle's neck as he leaps to his feet. The head bounces and rolls into a crack at the base of the enormous tree.

Spine tosses Lyle away and runs after the keepsake. Lyle strikes a tree, delirious, his view similar to his father's as the final seconds of his life were captured on film. And then, reality becomes an alien concept.

EXT. WOODS / LYLE'S POV

A LOW, RESONANT THRUM RISES through the following, like a CHORUS of voices joined in mourning.

- Spine, on hands and knees at the base of the tree, digs at the crevice FASTER AND FASTER until he's BLURRED.

SPINE
No, no, no, no, no no no no no
nonononononono--

- Spine throttles Lyle.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Your *fault*, your *fault*, your *fault*, your *fault*, your *fault*, your *fault*--

INT. GARAGE / NASH POV

- Spine in the garage at the murder of Nash, a CAMERA CLICKS as he menaces and foams. The last bars of the NATIONAL ANTHEM CRACKLE from an unseen radio.

SPINE
God and country?!? I am God!! I am country!! I am rock and roll!!

EXT. WOODS / LYLE'S POV

- Spine stands in the diffused grounds lights, stares up as the beams grow into blinding shafts through the trees.

SPINE
No! Oh no! Oh, no!!!

- Spine careens about the small clearing, runs to each tree; he pleads, shouts, but it's not his VOICE we hear--

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
SPINE!!!

- Spine rages, uproots small trees, hurls them.

SPINE
Yes! I am a bad man! I have an evil soul!

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
EMERSON SPINE! ANSWER ME!

SPINE
I did it for you!!!

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
YOU DID NOTHING FOR ANY SAVE YOURSELF!

SPINE
They're weak! Stupid! Useless! Cattle!

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
YOU OFFER PERVERSION! YOU DEFILE THE SACRED TO SERVE YOURSELF--

SPINE
We rule them! They BEG for it!

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
--A LUST FOR WHAT YOU CALL POWER!

- Spine on hands and knees, very close, WHISPERS QUICKLY.

SPINE
Let them know who's boss. Your understanding should be clear and undiluted. I always have extreme confidence in my decisions.

- Spine stands, feet planted, fists balled, grits his teeth, GROWLING.

CONTINUED:

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
WHAT HAVE YOU PAID CREATION,
EMERSON SPINE?

- Spine on hands and knees next to Lyle.

SPINE
Everyone you see here has been
here since the beginning.

- Spine, in the center of the clearing, teeth clenched, eyes rolled back in his head, his entire body quivers with an unseen internal surge of power. The THRUM is joined by HOWLING over Spine's GROWL/GURGLING.

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
WHAT HAVE YOU PURCHASED!?!

- Spine on hands and knees next to Lyle.

SPINE
You'll always have a place, Lyle.
Always.

- Spine shakes violently, a blur in the clearing. He unleashes a high SCREAM, spittle flies, arms straight out from his torso, hands claw at air, every muscle rigid.

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
SPEAK!!!

SPINE
AAAAAAAAIIIIIIIIIIIIIIGGGGGGGGH!

The SCREAM RISES, LOUDER and LOUDER, to join the tumultuous chorus. Spine hangs in the clearing for an eternity--then his eyes snap wide open. SILENCE.

- Spine stands calmly in the clearing, dressed as the warm, welcoming businessman Lyle first encountered.

SPINE (CONT'D)
Power, Mr. Lee.

- Spine drops from his rigid position in the clearing, first to his knees, then his face upon the earth.

EXT. WOODS - SAME

Lyle lies on his side. Tentatively, CRICKETS chirp. A WIND passes through the trees. Then:

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.)
LYLE!

CONTINUED:

Lyle doesn't move.

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
LYLE!

Lyle closes his eyes. Upon opening them, a shadowy figure steps into the clearing, holds an object to its face.

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
LYLE LEE!

Another figure follows, and another. One of the newcomers moves to Spine and squats.

BOOMING VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
HE SHOULD BE...WAIT...

The figure lowers the object.

MISTER FUNN
He should be right around here.

VORACIA
Is that--

GOODMAN
No, don't look. It's not Lyle.

VORACIA
Is it--

GOODMAN
Yeah.

VORACIA
Is he--

GOODMAN
Yeah.

The shadowy figure with the object, Mister Funn, spots Lyle and rushes forward.

MISTER FUNN
He's here. Are you alive, Lyle?

A GRUNT as the others approach. Goodman turns a powerful flashlight on him; Lyle looks worse in full color.

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
You had that all along?

GOODMAN
It's low on batteries. Lyle, can you hear me?

CONTINUED: (2)

LYLE
Mm-hm.

VORACIA
Can you walk?

LYLE
Mmm.

GOODMAN
Let's get him in.

Goodman and Voracia scoop Lyle up amid protests and head into the shadows.

Mister Funn lingers in the clearing. He steps forward into a beam of light over Spine's body, crouches, and gently strokes his bald head, weeping silently.

MISTER FUNN
I heard you fall.

He brushes away a tear with the back of the hand holding the same microphone Spine used earlier to coax Lyle out.

MISTER FUNN (CONT'D)
I heard.

EXT. SPINELAIR / DECK - MORNING

Lyle, wrapped in a thick blanket, sits in Spine's chair on the deck with a steaming cup of tea. He opens the envelope Goodman gave him; it’s a beautiful sunrise, the sun just above the tops of the trees.

GOODMAN (V.O.)
Lyle, if you're reading this, then all is well. If not, you're probably Spine, and if this is Spine, you're going down, man. But if you’re Lyle--I cannot express my gratitude enough. I can tell you the complete truth now, all the things I kept from you before; I didn't want to mess with your head. You needed to do what you had to with a clear vision.

Drifting away from Lyle, off the deck and down below is VORACIA, through a window laughing on the phone, tears on her cheeks. Faintly, UNDERNEATH GOODMAN:

CONTINUED:

VORACIA
...okay...I love you too. No, I'm fine. Good! Yes! No, I'm not-- Mom, gimme a break...

The treeline is reflected in the window, becomes clearer.

GOODMAN (V.O.)
I'm very grateful for your friend-- she could be the girl of your dreams, y'know? From the first moment you set foot in Spinecopy she's been instrumental--in fact, she built up your resume and covered you'd been axed from your last three temp jobs. And I should probably tell you now that I was the one responsible for those-- sorry, but we needed you here.

Across the lawn, at the edge of the treeline is FUNN, who's plants a small tree, whispering to it.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
I apologize for leading you on, man--but hey, look what you've accomplished. You've done more for this world than you can imagine, and you should be proud of that...

Mister Funn places a charred baby-head on the mound next to the small sapling.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
I must tell you that I also survived the Noyanok jungle. I was one of the few who made it back with Spine, and this is the other reason I've had such a vested interest in these proceedings. Not only because Mister Funn is my brother, but because yes, it's true my uncle disappeared the day your day was murdered. Lyle, I was there. I saw it. And that day my uncle disappeared because it was he who committed the crime.

Funn picks up a shovel, stands, closes his eyes. Behind, SMOKE rises.

Past him, back around the corner of the place, GOODMAN stands at a large bonfire, tosses on reams of paper.

CONTINUED: (2)

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
Spine was a good man, Lyle. But every man is tested. Ultimately, *his* nature fought to conquer rather than understand the nature he destroyed every day. He failed to realize that just as his mind became a vessel of corruption, nature is a vessel for something far greater than can ever be explained. Or controlled.

Goodman hurls another stack of papers into the fire.

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
But this was your proving ground, Lyle. You've passed your test, and I salute you, man. The world has its freedom, I got my brother, and you have your father. You were the only person who might have believed me, and you've done it. You've stopped my uncle Emerson Spine.

Away from Goodman, through the open front door, through the command center and onto the deck where Lyle reads:

GOODMAN (CONT'D)
This should clear up all the loose ends, man. I admit, there might be one more question kind of poking around there in your brain: How? How did I know you'd believe me? How did she know you'd take the job, and then the cause? How did we know all of this would come to pass and fall into place like it did, with you, the last puzzle piece perfectly placed? But I think you know the answer to that--

Lyle's eyes flick up, over the page: the joke’s on him.

GOODMAN (V.O.) (CONT’D)
--Trust.

CRASH BLACK.

END CREDITS