

The Glass Womb

“Do you think what we’re doing here is wrong?”

Dr. Young’s question lingered in the laboratory’s cold air, unanswered. He waited anxiously for Dr. Abbatis to respond. Instead, he heard only the ever present sound of Abbatis’ diligent typing. A familiar tingling sensation brushed against his fingertips. He pulled his hand down from the swirl of black hair above his forehead and sighed. He hated that cowlick, how it refused to be controlled. But most of all, he hated how he always found himself touching it.

“It’s only a question.”

“I know exactly what it is.” Abbatis’ words were quick and sharp.

“There’s no reason to be rude.”

“Why not?” Abbatis’ eyes remained fixed on the computer monitor, unblinking. “You don’t like rude?”

“Well, of course not.”

“And I don’t like questions that are unrelated to work.”

The typing stopped. Abbatis turned his head and narrowed his thin eyebrows in scrutiny. The lambent glow of his monitor reflected onto the thick lenses of his spectacles, masking his eyes behind lines of digital code.

“We have precisely one week remaining until we submit our data for Project Phoenix. We don’t have the luxury--or the time--for questions.”

Project Phoenix.

Young’s eyes strayed to the center of the laboratory. An oblong cylinder made of thick

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glass and filled with a clear liquid levitated in midair. It appeared the same as it had the first time Young laid eyes on it, but it no longer *felt* the same.

The first day Young walked into the laboratory, he had marveled at the magical sight of the floating glass cylinder. Abbatis had made sure to dispel the cylinder's magical illusion by explaining that "opposing magnetic forces" were what kept it suspended.

An amorphous sack of organs and veins floated inside the cylinder. The veins all led back to a tiny heart that beat with a ceaseless rhythm. A second, smaller heart within a separate chamber inside the sack beat in unison with the first.

While the two hearts beat, Young's own heart froze. He knew all too well what tiny translucent life-form floated within that second chamber, what those fragile hands and feet belonged to, what that fleshy cord attached to its stomach was. Abbatis had named it Subject Thirteen, but Young knew what Shakespeare said about a name.

After that, Young forced himself in his work, running countless routine tests and observations on Subject Thirteen, collaborating and comparing data with Abbatis. The days ran into weeks, weeks into months. Time had almost been lost to Young altogether.

Now, he beheld the fruition of months of growth. The sack's organs churned and contracted, pumping nutrients through the winding umbilical cord, down to an almost fully developed infant girl. She twitched. Young wondered if she was dreaming.

Young knew the sight of her should have filled him with accomplishment and pride; his long work with Abbatis was coming to an end. Instead, he felt uneasy and fearful of all the unanswered questions haunting him.

But Subject Thirteen wasn't the only thing in the laboratory that filled Young with apprehension. His gaze drifted to the Sealed Door looming at the far end of the lab. It was a steel

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door, windowless and smooth with no way to access it other than a keycard slider on the adjacent wall. Even though he had never seen Abbatis go beyond the Sealed Door, Young was certain the card clipped on the older scientist's lab coat's breast pocket was the key. Young's eyes were fixed on the door. Curiosity burned inside him. Deep down, he knew all of the answers lay behind that barrier of steel.

"Dr. Young." Abbatis' raspy, yet stern voice tore Young's attention from the Sealed Door. He thrusted a long, bony finger at Young, and his voice became thick with solemnity.

"You'd be wise not to stare."

"I wasn't staring," Young lied. He suddenly realized that he was playing with his cowlick and jerked his hand down.

"I've seen that look before with my previous..." Abbatis pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose as he no doubt searched for the right word, "...assistant."

"Was Dr. Newman terminated for staring at the door?" Young asked, his words more bitter than he expected.

"No," replied Abbatis coolly. "He was terminated for asking questions." He turned back to his computer and resumed typing.

Young took another look at the baby girl that was Subject Thirteen. After a deep breath, Young poised his hands atop his keyboard and squinted his tired eyes into focus at the screen before him. In a week's time this job would be behind him; that much was certain.

And only that much.

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Young didn't mind a cold laboratory. In fact, every laboratory he worked in had been cold. However, there was something...*different*...about the lab he shared with Abbatis. There, the cold seeped into his bones and sent icy chills down his spine. Sometimes, his hands felt frozen and stiff, which made typing almost impossible. And Abbatis didn't like it when Young wasn't typing.

Luckily, Young never felt cold in the kitchen, and he liked that.

Abbatis turned from the stovetop with a tray of food in each hand. He placed the trays atop the table at the center of the room where Young sat.

"Lamb and rice," Young mumbled, unenthused. "It's *always* lamb and rice."

"Is it?" The white haired scientist's words dripped with sarcasm. He opened a nearby cabinet with a wrinkled hand, pulled out a bottle of wine and a single wineglass.

Abbatis uncorked the bottle, lifted the glass and tilted it slightly. His gleaming eyes savored every trickle of the blood-red libation as it filled his glass. Once satisfied, he corked the bottle and returned it to the cabinet, not to be touched until the next meal. Never before.

"Three days remain," Abbatis said, matter-of-fact. "After that, Project Phoenix will be behind us."

"Three days." Young echoed with surprise. "It's hard to keep track of time in here." He swallowed a mouthful of bland-tasting rice.

"Have you ever thought of letting me cook?"

Abbatis sipped the wine, then tasted the lamb. After a long moment of chewing, he swallowed and finally said, "You should be grateful someone cooks for you."

"It isn't that I'm not grateful. Wouldn't you like to have something other than lamb and rice for a while? We eat this same food, day after day and--" Young pointed his fork toward

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Abbatis' tray.

“What is that?”

The scientist pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose as he looked over his food with confusion.

“What is what?”

“That.” Young pointed again, this time directly at the red apple beside the older doctor’s tray.

Abbatis picked the apple up, balancing it on the tips of his fingers. “This?” he asked, puzzled. “It’s an apple.”

“I know it’s an apple. Where did you get it?”

Abbatis narrowed his thin, white eyebrows. “I’ve always had an apple with my meals, just as I’ve always had a glass of wine.” He lifted his glass and sloshed the wine around inside, as if to show him.

“I remember the wine, not the apple.”

Abbatis chuckled softly, sounding amused. “I assure you, I’ve always had an apple.”

Young gazed at the fruit. A heavy sense of doubt twisted his stomach. Abbatis could not have been telling the truth. Never had Young seen an apple at the table, or anywhere in the entire facility for that matter. Young’s gaze drifted from the apple to the keycard clipped over Abbatis’ heart.

“You’re thinking too hard, aren’t you?” Abbatis fixed his beady eyes on him. “I can always tell by that cowlick, the way you touch it, like right now.”

A pang of embarrassment shot through Young as he realized it was the truth. He placed his hands atop the cool tabletop, determined to keep them there.

“Have you ever heard of a man--a philosopher to be exact--by the name of Plato.” The graveness in Abbatis’ voice surprised Young.

“I’m a scientist,” he answered, “not a philosopher.”

“There was once a man, Dr. Young, who dwelled in a cave.” The scientist’s face turned to stone as he spoke. His words, heavy and deliberate. “And he was bound in such a way that he could neither turn his body, nor his head. All he could do since the day he was born was stare at a wall. On this wall were shadows--of people, animals, and countless other things--and the sounds of their travels echoed inside the cave. This was his reality. But the cave-dweller was not alone, you see, for there were others bound in the same way, compelled to gaze at that wall. Now, suppose our particular cave-dweller is freed from his bonds. How doesn’t matter. The point is that he is able to turn around, and what he sees upends his reality.”

Young listened, envisioning everything Abbatis said. No longer was he sitting on a chair in the kitchen. He felt as if he were in the cave, too. Suddenly, Abbatis’ stone face came to life. His eyes burned with passion, conviction thickened his voice.

“There is a living light, brighter than anything the cave-man could possibly imagine. For a moment, he wants to return to the shadows, for the light is too blinding. But something else drives him forward...a burning desire to know. Instead of returning to the safety and ignorance of the shadows, the cave-dweller returns his eyes toward the light. It rises and falls, flickers and dances. Lives and breathes. The flames consume unknown objects, turning them into colors the cave-dweller has never seen before. He notices some sort of walkway between the fire and himself. What he sees there confuses him. There are people walking freely across the walkway, some carrying things, all of which he has never seen the likes of before. Or has he? Why does the cave-dweller feel the air of familiarity when he looks upon them? Then it happens. Suddenly, he

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realizes why they seem familiar. Because he *has* seen them before. On the wall. Except they had only been shadows, pieces of a greater whole he never knew had existed. Until now. The world he had known--the one he had accepted as reality--had not been the real world at all. The sights and sounds on the wall had all been a mere illusion, and now he sees them for what they truly are. Knowing now that the real world waits outside the cave, his thirst for knowledge compels him to try and make the long, arduous climb out. Let's say the climb is not too much for our caveman, that he somehow finds the cave's entrance, and steps out into the sunlight. It is here he sees the world as it truly is for the first time. Imagine, Dr. Young, a man who goes from seeing shadows to rainbows. What do you think he would do with such profound knowledge?"

"He would go back into the cave and free the others," responded Young. "Enlighten them."

"Would he?" Abbatis paused for a moment, his fiery gaze fixed on Young. "Let's say he returns to the darkness, as you said. He tries to '*enlighten*' the other cave-dwellers by telling them of the things he's seen. What do you suppose would happen then? Would they believe him, or look upon him with corrupted eyes? And even if for some outlandish reason they did believe him, do you think they would survive the climb out of the cave? Would the world outside be too much? Would they return to the darkness?"

"I don't know," Young answered honestly.

"Precisely. You don't know." Abbatis placed the apple back onto the table. "So I suggest you keep your questions regarding the integrity of our work--and of my apples--unspoken."

Abbatis fell silent, and sipped his wine. Young knew what that silence meant, so he kept quiet. He did his best to push his questions to the back of his mind and focus on his own meal, but an unnerving chill crept down his spine.

And, suddenly, the kitchen grew cold.

Young tried keeping himself busy over the next three days, but a familiar, unnerving voice plagued his mind. It spoke of caves and shadows. He had hoped on the third day his fear would be overwhelmed by a sense of great accomplishment. After all, years of hard work were coming to an end. But on that final day, no such relief came.

Young gazed emptily at the untouched tray of lamb and rice before him, then turned his eyes on Abbatis. The white-haired scientist sat slumped over his own tray, eating methodically. As usual, his glass of wine rested on one side of his tray. A red apple on the other.

Every person kept secrets; Young was not so naive to believe otherwise. But there was something different with Abbatis. He *felt* it. And locked away behind the Sealed Door were all of the old scientist's darkest secrets.

“You’re touching it again.”

Young became uncomfortably aware of the hair brushing his fingertips. He made a fist and lowered it onto his lap.

“You’re always thinking too hard, but now is not the time for thinking.” Abbatis reared his head back and drank the remainder of his wine in a single swallow. “Now is the time for *drinking*.”

“Drinking?” The word caught Young off-guard.

Abbatis rose from the table and ceremoniously retrieved the bottle of crimson wine. He turned the bottle up and drank deeply, heedless of the red trickle escaping the corner of his

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mouth. Disbelief filled Young when Abbatis extended the bottle to him.

“Care to join me?” Abbatis wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Young’s gaze drifted beyond the bottle, past the stained white sleeve, and stopped on the keycard clipped to the breast pocket of Abbatis’ lab-coat.

Before Young realized what he had done, the bottle was at his lips and the bitter-sweet wetness was fresh on his tongue, as if he was tasting it for the first time.

The kitchen fell silent. The two men passed the bottle back and forth across the table. Each time the bottle came to him, Abbatis held the wine in his mouth, savoring the taste before swallowing. But Young drank very little. He was in no mood to celebrate. After more than a few turns--when Abbatis’ cheeks were flushed red as the apple on the table--Young finally broke the silence.

“You never answered my question from before.”

“Which question was it?” Abbatis gave a rueful chuckle and drank again. “You have so many. It’s hard to keep track of them all.”

“Do you think what we’re doing here is wrong?”

“Wrong?” Abbatis spoke like he had never heard the word before. “Wrong?” His face contorted in displeasure, as if the word itself tasted foul. He raised the bottle to his lips, no doubt in an effort to wash the word away, only to find it empty. “Do you think it’s *wrong* that I’m out of wine, Dr. Young?”

“Is that supposed to be some kind of answer?”

“Oh, but it is,” Abbatis replied. “Beauty isn’t the only thing in the eye of the beholder. If I were to ask two people--a drunk, and a priest, for example--the same question I just asked you, what do you suppose they would say? So step down from your self-righteous soapbox before you

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embarrass yourself any more than you already have.”

“It’s only a--

“Question,” Abbatis interjected bitterly. He leaned over the table, the smell of wine thick on his breath. “Answer something for me, Dr. Young. If I were to place a pair of woman’s legs around that...*glass womb*...would that make you feel better about our work? Hmm?”

“Look,” Young said just above a whisper, “all I want to know is that, in the end, am I going to feel proud of what I’ve done here?”

A change overcame Abbatis. His eyes widened into blood-shot saucers; the redness in his cheeks drained into a pale white. But it was the way he looked upon Young that startled him the most. He felt the dark-eyed gaze piercing him.

“Dr. Newman asked me that same question once.” His voice wavered--but only for a moment--before his usual snide tone returned along with his cheeks’ color. “What do you think I told him?”

“I think Dr. Newman found out himself.”

Abbatis slammed his eyes shut and ran his hands through his white hair. “I need to lie down,” he said. He left the bottle on the table and tried to stand, but his legs buckled and he crashed back onto his chair. “Would you mind helping me back to my room, Dr. Young?”

“Of course not.” And he meant it.

Taking the older scientist’s wrinkled hand into his own, Young helped the drunken Abbatis to his feet. Abbatis staggered for a moment before securing his arm safely around Young’s shoulders. Young half-carried Abbatis out of the kitchen, down a short hall, and into his room.

Young helped Abbatis across the room, and laid him carefully onto the bed. As Young

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backed away he noticed a flash of red in Abbatis' hand.

"You grabbed the apple?" He couldn't remember Abbatis grabbing it when they left the kitchen. He would have noticed for sure. But...

"Here." Abbatis mumbled. He stretched his arm outward. "Something to reach for."

The fruit hovered before Young, red and wonderful. And--just for the shortest of moments--a familiar sense of wonderment overwhelmed him, as when he looked upon the glass cylinder for the first time.

Magic.

But when Young took the apple, the magic died in his hands. Fear returned to swallow him. Or perhaps it had never left.

"Thank you," said Young. And he meant that, too.

"No." Abbatis' eyes were too heavy to open. His voice was dying off into a whisper, his mind no doubt caught between dream and reality. "Thank you, Dr. Newman." He fell silent, lips sealed.

Young knew Abbatis was no longer in the room. He was dreaming of the past, of the days before their work on Project Phoenix. Young thought of the Sealed Door; his eyes found the keycard still clipped to the sleeping doctor's lab-coat.

And he took it.

Abbatis didn't move. The wine made sure of that. Young found himself walking down the hallway, unsure if he had closed the bedroom door behind him. But it was too late for that now. Before he knew what he was doing, he broke into a full run.

A moment later, he stood in the lab, breathing hard. His chest rose and fell. He felt like the caveman. Nothing stood between himself and the answers.

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Young couldn't remember crossing the room to the Sealed Door, yet he stood before it all the same. There, beyond the barrier, were all of Abbatis' secrets. He clutched the keycard in his hand. His fear deepened. In one determined motion, he swiped the card.

The door opened.

Young stumbled back, confused and frightened. Beyond the door, where all of the answers should have been...was a smooth, concrete wall. He touched it, to confirm its existence. It felt solid, thick. Real.

"Why?" Young asked, still grasping for an answer.

"Does it matter?" A voice called from behind, echoing off the lab's walls.

Somehow, the voice didn't surprise Young.

Abbatis stood, leaning against his desk on the opposite side of the room. His cheeks were still flushed, but his eyes were no longer heavy and shut. Now they were wide open, burning as they had when he spoke of caves.

"What is this?" Young's voice wavered with fear. His mind whirled. His head spun. Only questions. No answers.

"It's our work," Abbatis replied. "Only *you've* ended it. And we were so close this time. So very, very, close. Why do you insist on doing this again and again."

"What are you talking about?" Young couldn't have heard him correctly. The old man was still drunk, still caught between dream and reality. It was just babble.

Abbatis sighed and pushed his glasses back up his nose. "Is it really so hard?" The fire in his eyes now burned in his voice. "Watching shadows?"

"Shadows? I don't understand."

"Of course you don't," Abbatis snapped. "You never have. You've always disappointed

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me, you always have to open that door!”

“You’re drunk.”

“Why can’t you ever just listen? Follow orders? Stop with the questions?”

“Is this what Dr. Newman was terminated for? Is this what he found?”

“You still don’t get it, do you?” Abbatis reached down and began carefully pressing buttons on his keyboard. “Do you want to see the true face of Project Phoenix?”

Young’s heart pounded so hard he felt it might explode.

Abbatis brought his finger down on the keyboard one last time. He pointed toward the center of the room where Subject Thirteen still floated in the amniotic fluid. “Behold, Dr. Young, the answer to all your questions!”

At first, Young was confused. Nothing happened. Then he saw something only the eyes of a madman could behold. Subject Thirteen flickered in and out of sight for a second, then vanished altogether. She faded away like a mirage. She had been an illusion. A shadow cast away by light.

Revealing the truth.

A grown man floated where the fetus had once been. He was curled up and bare, his face hidden behind his hands. The only discernible feature was a tiny swirl of black hair growing above his forehead.

“You are Dr. Young.” Abbatis’ voice resonated throughout the lab. “Just as you were Dr. Newman.”

“This can’t be real,” Young cried. “This can’t be real.”

“Oh, but it is,” Abbatis assured him. “And from the moment you opened that door, your consciousness began transferring into its new form.” He gestured toward the floating Young.

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“However, certain details will be omitted from your memory--like our little chat at the dinner table, for example.”

“That’s impossible.” Young shook his head madly. “You’re lying!”

“Am I?” Abbatis fell silent, and the room suddenly felt cold--the coldest it had ever been.

“Then, tell me, what are you holding in your hand?”

Young looked down. He had almost forgotten about the apple. “It’s an apple,” he countered. Those words made him feel better...warmer.

“Fruit or vegetable?” asked Abbatis.

Young opened his mouth to speak, to answer the question as quickly as he had the previous one, but...

He knew the answer. He was certain. But why couldn’t he say it? The apple was a...was a....

Young gritted his teeth in frustration and, suddenly, the thing in his hand felt alien, and round...yes, that was the shape. But what was the color?

His eyes drifted to the magical thing in the center of the room. There was a man inside it. He looked familiar, but Young couldn’t place him. The man’s hand moved. Going upward, slowly. Toward a black swirl.

Toward the light.