



# MUSH ROOMS

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I woke up last night after only a few hours of sleep, sweaty and disoriented.

Maybe it was miasmatic vapors rising up from beneath South of Market streets. Maybe it was the widening gyre opening up under the world. Maybe it was nothing at all. I don't know.

It felt like the world had ended, but I was still there. And the lights of the city glimmered through the window, so, it was still there too.

I rose, dressed, and walked out the front door, into the hallway. For air, I guess. And movement. Try to walk it off.

I walked over immaculately carpeted floors and beside newly painted walls, past the elevator landing, and through the door with the emergency exit sign. I started down the unfinished throat of the building, through which it gasps for air. Down metal stairs. Past primer-painted walls.

I felt like the thirty flights would do me good, maybe shake loose the static fuzz that buzzed in my head.

My mind wandered. The fugue of interrupted sleep gave way to visions of a gossamer fabric, stretching off over the earth in all directions, a network of networks, with nodes like points of light shot through it, streams of data passing between them.

The stairs ended abruptly. I had passed the ground floor. The door ahead of me was marked B5. I tried the handle. It was unlocked. I opened it and walked through.

It was dark. Dim light streamed through from above. I imagined that it was from the lobby, shining from the light fixtures above the marble front desk, through the pile carpet, between cracks in the floor, and down into this subterranean space.

It was huge. A deep hollow between wide supporting columns of concrete. The air was cool and still, down here in the guts of the building.

The floor was covered with moist brown soil. It was carefully raked, and before me stretched neat rows of... something. Of dark shapes.

I walked forward and hunched over, squinting, trying to resolve out the shapes in the darkness.

They were rows of fat black mushrooms. The size of a man's fist. Oozing a sticky red treacle down their stems.

They smelled sweet. I imagined overripe mangos, cleft open to reveal insides not of fruit but of charred animal flesh.

Crouching on my heels, the odor washed over me. Memories that weren't mine came to me unbidden. From deep in my blood.

I saw my great uncle, who, according to whispers within the family was once a Zionist terrorist known as the Lion of Bethlehem. He was in his youth, not the old man that I knew from pictures. A pale-faced and red-haired Ashkenazi, he had a knife in his hand, but it cut the dark skin of an Arab neck. The knife was a shechita blade. Even though human meat is not kosher, no matter how it is cut.

I saw a Swede with green eyes like mine, butchering a snapphane in some muddy Scanian town square. It was a brutal show, to scare other rebels into submission.

I saw a Welsh bowman in a field wreathed with fog, nocking an arrow after the one before it had flown straight through an Anglo-Norman's chest. He squinted down the shaft, aiming to take a second life.

More violence committed by men in my line glinted before my eyes, further and further back. The last was a glimpse of a spry homo sapien bringing a huge rock down on a Neanderthal's skull, braining him. I started, and focused on the mushrooms in front of me.

I pawed at one, its sap like venous fluid, thick and red, sticking to my fingers.

It looked and smelled disgusting, but I wanted to eat it.

I started to bring my fingers to my mouth, to lick them clean. But there was a thump, off in the distance, past pairs of huge columns of concrete that shot into the darkness and the rows of mushrooms at their feet.

A shadow detached from the far wall and moved in my direction. Fear took me. The stench of the mushrooms was suddenly revolting. I stumbled backwards, wiping my hand on my jeans. I rushed towards door and the stairs beyond, up to the surface, back to the light.