BOOK ONE

IT'S RAINING IN WASHINGTON TONIGHT.

HE'LL BE POUNDING ON THE GLASS RIGHT ABOUT NOW...

OR MAYBE NOT NOW.

MAYBE IN A WHILE.

DOWNTOWN, ELDERLY LADIES CARRY THEIR HOUSEPLANTS OUT TO SET THEM ON THE FIRE ESCAPES, AS IF THEY WERE INFANT RELATIVES OR BUTT KNEES.

I LIKE THAT.

MY NAME IS JASON WOODRUE, DOCTOR JASON WOODRUE.

I'M HERE IN MY APARTMENT, I'M WATCHING THE RAIN...

...AND I'M THINKING ABOUT THE OLD MAN.

BUT HE'LL BE POUNDING, AND... AND WILL THERE BE BLOOD? I LIKE TO IMAGINE SO. YES, I RATHER THINK THERE WILL BE BLOOD.

LOTS OF BLOOD.

BLOOD IN EXTRAORDINARY QUANTITIES.

THE ANATOMY LESSON
I REMEMBER THE OLD MAN SHOWING ME AROUND HIS BUILDING.

HE WAS SO PROUD OF IT, LIKE A CHILD WITH THE BIGGEST DOLL HOUSE IN THE WORLD.

OF COURSE THIS WAS AFTER HIS CORPORATION HAD SECURED MY RELEASE FROM JAIL.

WELL?

IT'S VERY... EMPTY.

I'D EXPECTED A HIGHER SECURITY PROFILE.

IT'S ALL ELECTRONIC, DR. WOODRUE. SILICONE SENTRIES WITH DIGITAL DOGS....

AND I CONTROL EVERYTHING FROM A CONSOLE NO BIGGER THAN A CHESSBOARD. SPARES ME A LOT OF GRIEF WITH LABOR RELATIONS.

THROUGH HERE....

HE'S IN HERE? HOW LONG HAS HE... ?

ABOUT TWO WEEKS. HE'S BEEN HERE SINCE WE SHOT HIM.

WELL, DR. WOODRUE, DON'T BE AFRAID. OPEN IT UP.
THERE...

...GRAY, BRITTLE,
TATTOOED BY FROST,
QUITE DEAD...

THIS WAS MY FIRST GLIMPSE
OF THE...

SWAMP THING
AND... THIS... WAS ONCE A HUMAN BEING?

HIS NAME WAS ALEC HOLLAND. HE WAS A DOCTOR, LIKE YOURSELF.

HE WAS DOING GOVERNMENT WORK, DEVELOPING SOMETHING CALLED A BIO-RESTORATIVE FORMULA, WHICH WAS INTENDED TO PROMOTE CROP GROWTH.

THE EXPERIMENT WAS SABOTAGED. THERE WAS AN EXPLOSION...

HOLLAND AND HIS CHEMICAL SOUP WENT INTO THE SWAMP WHERE THE PROJECT WAS LOCATED.

THIS IS WHAT CAME OUT.

YOU MENTIONED A LINDA HOLLAND...

HIS WIFE AND CO-WORKER. YOU KNOW THESE PEOPLE... LIBERAL, EQUAL RELATIONSHIPS, CARING AND SHARING.

HIS WIFE WAS SHOT AND KILLED SHORTLY AFTER HOLLAND VANISHED IN THE EXPLOSION. SHE'S THE REASON YOU'RE HERE, WOODRUE.

YOU SEE, WE GOT INTERESTED IN THIS FORMULA THAT HOLLAND HAD BEEN WORKING ON. WE HAD HER EXHUMED.

"IT MADE SENSE AFTER ALL, APART FROM HER HUSBAND, SHE WAS THE ONLY HUMAN WHO'D BEEN CHOSSED TO THE FORMULA. SHE'D BEEN WORKING WITH THE STUFF FOR MONTHS.

WE FIGURED IT MAY HAVE PERMEATED HER CELULAR STRUCTURE, JUST THROUGH THE REPEATED SKIN CONTACT.

"SOME DUG HER UP AND WE HAD SOME PEOPLE PEEK AROUND A LITTLE..."

"KNOW WHAT WE FOUND?"

"NOTHING."
OH, THE FORMULA HAD COLLECTED IN HER BODY. IT JUST HADN'T DONE ANYTHING.

NO REASON WHY IT SHOULD, OF COURSE. THE FORMULA WASN'T DESIGNED TO AFFECT HUMAN TISSUE.

JUST PLANTS...

WE' D ASSUMED THAT THE FORMULA HAD SOMEHOW TURNED HOLLAND INTO A PLANT. IF IT DOESN'T AFFECT HUMAN TISSUE, THAT IS PATENTLY IMPOSSIBLE.

YOU BEGIN TO SEE WHY WE ARRANGED YOUR RELEASE FROM JAIL, DR. WOODRUE?

SPEAKING OF WHICH...

...I BELIEVE IT'S TIME THAT I SAW YOUR CREDENTIALS.

THAT ISN'T YOUR SKIN, IS IT? MY FILES SAY IT'S ARTIFICIAL. YOU CAN DISSOLVE IT.

YOUR FILES ARE VERY ACCURATE, GENERAL. THERE.

SATISFIED?

PERFECTLY. YOU'RE WOODRUE. YOU'RE THE FLYING MAN. WHEN CAN YOU START?
I STARTED THE NEXT DAY.

THE OLD REPTILE KNEW I'D START THE NEXT DAY. HE KNEW I'D DO ANY DARN THING HE PLEASSED IF IT KEPT ME OUT OF PRISON.

THE OLD REPTILE.

I WONDER IF HE'S POUNDING YET?

Pounding on the glass, his fists like withered little apples...

ANYWAY

I STARTED THE NEXT DAY.

WITH THE AUTOPSY.

I REMEMBER CLEARLY THE MOMENT BEFORE I BEGAN TO CUT.

I WAS VERY... EXCITED.

Since the bio-chemical fluke that had transformed me, I had longed for a chance to examine another human-vegetable hybrid. I could learn so much.

SO MUCH ABOUT MYSELF.

I'D HEARD OF THE LEGENDARY SWAMP MAN, OF COURSE. THERE WAS THAT AWFUL BOOK BY... WHO'S HER NAME... Tremaine?... Tremaine?

I'D OFTEN FANTASIZED ABOUT THE CHANCE TO EXAMINE SUCH AN ORGANISM UP CLOSE.

AND THIS WAS AS CLOSE AS ONE WAS LIKELY TO GET.

I OPENED HIM UP. HE HAD THINGS INSIDE HIM.
There were two large, pod-like structures within the chest cavity...

What are they? His lungs or something?

No, they look like lungs...

But human lungs have tiny capillary tubes that let oxygen pass through into the blood. That's what lungs are for.

These are vegetable fiber. Vegetable fibers are too coarse to allow molecules of oxygen through in that way. These things suck and blow...

...and they don't do anything else. They don't work, they're not lungs.

I wonder what they are?

I wondered the same thing about the sponge-like vegetable brain that we found inside the leathery skull.

I wondered about the bullet hole. It couldn't possibly work; it had no vascular caps.

I wondered about the useless, dead.

I wondered how long I could go on drawing blanks before the old man sent me back to jail.

I wondered.
Those were long weeks. Long and fruitless.

I saw a lot more of the old man. My distaste ripening toward loathing with each encounter.

In the evenings, when the minimal staff had gone home, he would stroll proudly around the house and empty tomb of a building.

Sometimes he'd insist that I accompany him.

We'd talk about the electronic security, about how all the doors were controlled from his office...

Jail was mentioned.

And I stood there. And I took it.

And every night I came back to these special apartments that he'd rented for me.

And every morning I set to work mailing organs that couldn't work out of a body that had never needed them.

The bio-restorative formula had turned Holland into a plant... except that it couldn't have. It didn't work on human tissue.

The swamp things had organs like those of any living creature... except that they did not, could not, and had not been designed to function.

It was more than a human mind could ever be expected to unravel.

I had the answer within six weeks.
It was as if the clouds were suddenly blown away.

I was working late. I was tired. I opened a reference book at the wrong page and began to read...

It was an essay on Planarian worms.

Not what I wanted at all...

And then, suddenly...

...there it was,

as plain as the nose on your face.

The answer.

My skin is dry.

Outside it is raining.

I am thinking of liver-spotted fingers clawing at unbreakable glass.

I am thinking about the old man, there in his office when I went to tell him of my discovery, late this afternoon.

I am thinking about melting frost, and trickling water...

And something strong and soft and green, thrusting through the dead and petrified crunchiness.
THE OLD MAN HAS NO ONE BUT HIMSELF TO BLAME. HE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND, EVEN WHEN I EXPLAINED IT TO HIM. HE DIDN'T LISTEN...

WELL, DR. WOODRUE? I'M LISTENING.

PLANARIAN
WORMS, GENERAL!
THEY'RE THE KEY TO EVERYTHING!
OM MY GOD, IT'S SO OBVIOUS!

YOU SEE, A WHILE AGO, SOME PEOPLE DID AN EXPERIMENT. THEY TAUGHT A PLANARIAN WORM TO RUN A SIMPLE MAZE. THEY EDUCATED IT.

THEN THEY CHOPPED IT UP AND FED ITS REMAINS TO A BATCH OF PLANARIAN WORMS THAT COULDN'T RUN THE MAZE...

...EXCEPT THAT AFTER DIGESTING THEIR EDUCATED COMRADE, THE WORKS COULD RUN THE MAZE PERFECTLY! DON'T YOU SEE, GENERAL? THE IMPLICATION IS THAT CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTELLIGENCE CAN BE PASSED ON AS FOODSTUFFS!

THAT MAYBE EXPLAINS THE CUSTOM AMONG CANNIBAL TRIBES OF EATING THE WISE MAN AFTER HIS DEATH IN ORDER TO RECEIVE HIS WISDOM.

GENERAL, YOU COULD GO INTO A RELUCTANCE AND ORDER EINSTEIN ON PANZERWICKEL...

...I AM BECOMING ANGRY.

YOU TALK ABOUT WORMS, YOU TALK ABOUT CANNIBALS... NONE OF THIS HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH HOLLAND.

NONE OF THIS HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH THE JOB I'M PAYING YOU FOR.

ALL RIGHT, GENERAL.
ALL RIGHT.
LET'S TALK ABOUT HOLLAND. LET'S TALK ABOUT HIS ACCIDENT...
"Imagine him regaining consciousness there in his cabin that night...

"There's something taped to the underside of his workbench. With mounting apprehension he scrambles toward it...

"It's dynamite. Five sticks of it.
And he's maybe eighteen inches away from it when it explodes.

Tic-Tic-Crack!

"The combined effects of the blast and the reflex muscles in his legs propel him through the door and into the swamp...

"...but Alec Holland is already dead.

"His body goes into the swamp alone with the formula that it is saturated with.

And, once there...

...it decomposes.

"A patch of swamp land like that would be teeming with microorganisms. It wouldn't take long, General.

"But what about the plants in the swamp? The plants that have been altered by the bio-restorative formula?

"The plants whose hungry root systems are busy digesting the mortal remains of Alec Holland?

"Those plants eat him. They eat him as if he were a planktonic worm, or a carnivorous wise man, or a genius on rye!

"They eat him... and they become infected by a powerful consciousness that does not realize it is no longer alive!
"Imagine that cloudy, confused intelligence, possibly with only the vaguest notion of self, trying to make sense of its new environment."

"Gradually shaping the plant's green that it now inhabits into a shape that it's more comfortable with."

"It remembers having bones, and so it builds itself a skeleton of wood. It remembers having muscle and constructs muscles from supple plant fiber..."

"You see, we were wrong, General."

"We thought that the Swamp Thing was Alec Holland. Somehow transformed into a plant. It wasn't."

"It was a plant that thought it was Alec Holland."

"...and that pathetic, misshapen parody downstairs in the crown chest was the closest that it could get."

"But there's something else. Something very important."

"You see, if that's a plant that we have down there..."

"Dr. Woodru..."

"...I think I've heard enough."
ENOUGH? BUT YOU CAN'T POSSIBLY HAVE GRASPED ALL THE RAMIFICATIONS OF WHAT I'VE BEEN SAYING! YOU DON'T HAVE THE CORRECT BACKGROUND!

AND BESIDES, IF THAT IS A PLANT DOWN THERE...

WOODRUE!

I AM NOT, IN YOUR TERMS, AN INTELLIGENT MAN. I AM MERELY SHRUNK.

BEING "MERELY SHRUNK" HAS SECURED ME A VAST FINANCIAL EMPIRE AND HAS ENABLED ME TO WATCH WHILE CLEVERER MEN WENT PENNILESS TO THEIR GRAVES.

TRUE, I MAY HAVE MISSED SOME OF THE "RAMIFICATIONS" OF YOUR RATHER MUDDLED LITTLE SPEECH, BUT I GRASPED THE BASIC PRINCIPLE WELL ENOUGH.

THAT PRINCIPLE, THAT BREAKTHROUGH, WAS ALL THAT WAS NEEDED. THERE ARE OTHERS WHO CAN BE PAID TO SEE THE WORK THROUGH TO ITS CONCLUSION.

YOU SEE, I AM VERY RICH. I DO NOT NEED TO BE AN INTELLECTUAL.

I DO NOT NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW THIS COMPUTER WORKS TO KNOW THAT IF I PUSH THAT LITTLE BUTTON, ALL THE SPRINKLERS START UP, OR THE DOORS OPEN AND CLOSE.

I DO NOT NEED THE RAMIFICATIONS. I DO NOT NEED THE "CORRECT BACKGROUND."

AND YOU, DR. WOODRUE, NOW THAT YOU'VE PROVIDED ME WITH MY BREAKTHROUGH...

...I NEED YOU LEAST OF ALL.

I HAVE A PHONE CALL TO MAKE IN THE OUTER OFFICE.

WE'LL SORT OUT THE TERMINATION PAPERS WHEN I GET BACK.
...AND THAT'S HOW THE OLD MAN FIRED ME.
JUST LIKE THAT.

...AND THEN HE SAUNTERED OUT OF HIS OFFICE:
A SELF-MADE MAN...A COMMON MAN, BY GOD...
WHO'D JUST PUT ONE OVER ON AN UPSTAIR
INTELLECTUAL.

HE WAS CHUCKLING TO HIMSELF.

SO WAS I.

HE'D LEFT ME ALONE WITH HIS
COMPUTER...

...AND I UNDERSTOOD EXACTLY
HOW IT WORKED.

SUNDERLAND HADN'T BEEN BRAGGING
FROM THAT CONSOLE
YOU CONTROLLED THE
WHOLE BUILDING.
YOU CONTROLLED
THE ELEVATORS, THE
LIGHTS, THE
SWITCHBOARD...

...AND THE THERMOSTATS IN THE FREEZER UNITS...

...AND

THE DOORS.
I am sitting in my apartment outside, it is raining.

I am laughing, laughing very loudly.

Friends have told me it is not a sound conducive to tranquility.

I am thinking about the old man.

He'll stay late, when everyone has gone. Perhaps he'll read through the notes he wouldn't permit me to keep...

Skipping the big words...

...and then maybe he'll want to take a stroll, like every other night. A stroll around the biggest doll house in the world.

He'll punch one of his little buttons to switch the door mechanisms to manual, so that he can control them while he's away from his checkerboard.

And then he'll strut proudly down the hall and think how lucky he is to have all this.

He should have let me finish. He should have listened.

Then I'd have been able to explain the most important thing of all to him.

I'd have been able to explain that you can't kill a vegetable by shooting it through the head.
OH, YOU COULD GIVE IT SUCH A SHOCK THAT IT WOULD PLUNGE INTO A CELLULAR COMA. YOU COULD KEEP IT IN THAT STATE BY PLACING IT IN A FREEZER UNIT...

BUT YOU COULDN’T KILL IT.

REALLY, THE OLD MAN COULD HAVE WORKED THAT OUT FOR HIMSELF.

HE JUST DIDN’T HAVE THE CORRECT BACKGROUND.

I WONDER WHAT HE’S DOING NOW?

I WONDER HOW LONG HE’LL BE ABLE TO RESIST GOING DOWN THERE AND TAKING A LOOK?

PERHAPS HE’LL BE IN TIME TO SEE IT... THE GRAY HUSK SPLINTERING AND TEARING... THE RAW, WET, INERADICABLE GREENNESS BENEATH.

PERHAPS HE’LL REACH THE BASEMENT IN TIME TO ACTUALLY SEE IT.

OR PERHAPS NOT.
And if the body has already gone...

...What will he do then, I wonder?

What will the old man do?

Why, I guess he'll go back to the office. He'll want to phone a Sunderland SWAT team to come and bail him out.

And a walking pile of mold and lichen and clotted weeds that thinks it's a rational man?

I guess it would do pretty much the same thing.

I wonder what it will look like, so new and raw and green...
...AND I WONDER HOW MUCH IT WILL HAVE SEEN?

YOU... UH...

ARE YOU. UH, STILL... INTELLIGENT?

CAN YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING?

UH... THE FILE ON YOU...

UH... LOOK, I DON'T KNOW IF YOU'VE READ THAT FILE THERE, BUT...

YES... I HAVE READ... THE FILE.

LIKE IT?
I am thinking about the old man.

I am thinking about the cracking of his joints as he runs.

I am thinking of the terror in his ancient, atrophied heart.
This is his building, you see.

This is the place where he was safe.

Now the blind glass and the despassionate metal mocks him with his own reflection, frightened and small and scurrying...

...like a worm in a maze.

Like a beetle in a box.

Of course, there's never been any real evidence of the swamp thing intentionally hurting or killing anyone.

The old man shouldn't be in any real danger at all...

...as long as the creature hasn't read my notes.
But if he was read my notes...

You see, throughout his miserable existence, the only thing that could have kept him sane was the hope that he might one day regain his humanity...

...the knowledge that under all that slime he was still Alec Holland.

...but if he's read my notes he'll know that just isn't true. He isn't Alec Holland.

He never will be Alec Holland.

He was Alec Holland.

He never was Alec Holland.

He's just a ghost.

A ghost dressed in weeds.

I wonder how he'll take it?

Identification unconfirmed

And I wonder how the old man will take it...

No exit.

...when the doors won't open?
HE'LL POUND.
HE'LL HAMMER.
HE'LL WHEEZE AND HE'LL SCREAM
AND HE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO
COMPREHEND HOW THIS COULD BE
HAPPENING TO HIM...

THE OLD REPTILE.

AND WILL THERE BE BLOOD?
I DON'T KNOW. I DON'T KNOW IF THERE WILL BE BLOOD.

IT ISN'T IMPORTANT.
IT WON'T SHOW THINGS IF THERE IS NO BLOOD.
THE BLOOD DOESN'T MATTER.

JUST THE DYING.

THE DYING'S ALL THAT MATTERS.
And what then? Where would the creature go then?

I have to know. I have to follow him. There's so much to learn, so much to know...

WHERE WOULD I GO IF I WERE THE SWAMP THING?

I'd go back to Louisiana. Back to the mud and the steam and the flies...

BACK TO THE BAYOU!

It's dark. It's late.

I have a lot to do tomorrow. No matter.

FOR THE MOMENT I AM CONTENT SIMPLY TO THINK, AND TO PLAN...

...AND TO LISTEN.

IT'S RAINING IN WASHINGTON TONIGHT.