

SITH THE NE SAITH

I drop down into my swivel chair, spin to face my desk, blow a small amount of overnight dust off of my headset, and rest the cushioned cups of this aforementioned headset over my ears. Mentally, when the cans go on, the world of mechanical tapping and light conversation is gone, and I feel myself aware of this tape station as though it is a living, thinking creature, all of its parts talking to each other within itself.

The intrastation comms come in the form of synthesized midi tones. On my own desk, I have a keyboard with the standard single octave to send messages, and a demodulator with my headphones plugged into it to receive messages. Station broadcasts come to me in deep tones; messages directed to my department—the archives department—come in middling tones; messages directed at me specifically are in the highest tones. Messages for me specifically are also printed onto musical notation ticker tape; a small pile of it sits on the back left corner of my desk.

As I passively listen in on the sounds of the station and the department, I break off the tape and begin reading what people have sent to me since yesterday. Spend long enough here and you become pretty good at translating the tones into meaning, until eventually you're fluent, and the tones themselves also carry the meaning and you only need to translate for the sake of others.

The first of the notes, translated of course, is as follows:

From R. Benson – Received request for secret secret clearance S.I.J. detained persons logs from dates Lununo First 1949 to Luntres Thirty 1949. Paperwork on my desk if needed. Deliver to Brian when able please.

I laugh incredulously to myself. *If* needed, he says. Secret secret clearance S.I.J. detained persons logs from the dark years, and he has the paperwork on the off chance I happen to feel like that might be something I should look at before touching this with a thirty nine and a half foot pole.

I rip that note from the rest of the ticker tape, pick up a thumbtack out of a dish of them, and pin it to my cube wall. The right side of my cube is to-do's, the left is general reference notes, and on the back wall I have some personal photos tacked up. One photo is an old guy with messy long red hair named Jeff with his arm around an equally old guy with short red hair named Kurt. One photo is a black mastiff named Thunder. One photo is a shot looking down a busy street in New Seattle, which I took a long time ago and I don't know, I just always liked how it turned out.

There are other photos, but anyways. I look away from the pictures, and move on to the rest of the notes:

From S. Diaz – Per meeting yesterday, Cecelia is approved for secret clearance archive retrieval and storage permissions, pending the usual. See Bethany for paperwork.

From K. Greene – Please see me this evening to discuss Vault B7 access combination.

From S. Diaz – Per meeting yesterday, sweep of Vault F2 is underway. Vault F2 will be unavailable for non-emergency use until approx Lundos 10th, effective immediately.

I pin each item to the left- and right-hand sides of my cube as is appropriate. So far the notes have all been spared the wrath or indifference of the small incinerator under my desk.

As I begin reading the next message, I hear the high tones of a direct message coming in through my headphones, and I stop reading to listen:

From F. Warner – See me for special retrieval request when you have a moment please.

I lay my hand on my keyboard and respond, beginning with the chords to preface an addressee, the notes to send the name, the chords to preface a message, and the notes to send said message. I tell Frederick I'll be right over. I play the chords to delimit the end of the message. I listen briefly for a response, and, hearing none, I take off my headphones and stand up.

I make my way through rooms of cubes, down beige halls and around beige corners, until I arrive at the door to Frederick Warner's office. I knock six times in a particular pattern.

I hear the heavy lock on his door release. I turn the handle and pull open the door. As I am stepping inside, he is already reaching for a tan folder. He flips it open, scribbles his signature on the page inside, and quotes "Make it so" before closing the folder and handing it up to me.

"Aye aye," I answer, and then flip the folder open and glance down into it. Request for a tape from Vault A2. Simple enough. Then I see why I am needed: I am to keep an eye out for any signs that the tape may have been tampered with or replaced. The reverse of the page contains the known history of the tape. I close the folder, give Frederick a salute, and step out of his office.

In the stairwell, the guard at Subbasement A lets me in on sight, a privilege which was earned after who-knows-how-many hundreds of times of showing him my identification and my assignment in order to visit. Even if the same guard were one level down on B, it would be back to the same old story, but anyways. I enter Subbasement A, interrogate the receptionist about any activity surrounding the tape in question, scrutinize his records for quite some time, and then proceed into the stacks to retrieve the requested tape.

When I arrive at the correct row, aisle, unit, and lockbox, I first examine the lock before touching it. Someone has been

here recently. There are fresh, greasy prints on the combination dials. I curse under my breath, and retrieve a little vial of fingerprinting dust from my coat jacket, and a small roll of sticky tape. I blow the dust onto the lock dials, stick the tape over it, and then pull it back and stick the tape onto the sheet of paper that Frederick gave me. With a pen below it, I also note the combination that the dials were left at.

Nothing else is amiss with the lockbox, at least as far as its exterior is concerned. I turn the dials to the combination I have been provided, pull up on the unlocked latch, and draw the lockbox open.

Inside, instead of a magnetic tape, there is a cake with candles stuck into the top. My head draws back in confusion, and my mouth comes slightly open. Then I leap out of my shoes as party blowers go off very near me, and about ten people come around the corner. My coworkers, the rightfully smug sons of bitches.

I hear “Happy birthday, Jay,” from all of them one by one, and other sentiments and handshakes and little hugs. They call me Jay here—it’s not much of an abbreviation from Jane, I’ll admit, but hey, I like it. It is Lundos Second: my birthday.

I lead us back up to the break room in our department, carrying the cake, which is red velvet. They have correctly placed thirty one candles on top of it, but I insist they not be lit in the event that my age is literally a fire hazard. We all enjoy the cake. Frederick himself comes out for a slice, and as everyone else filters out to get back to work, Frederick and I end up with the break room to ourselves, chatting.

“Good work on this, by the way,” he mentions, holding up the folder that I’ve handed back to him. “I didn’t expect anything less from you.”

“Any time. Whose prints?”

“Diane from last night.”

“Ooh.” Frederick’s nighttime equivalent. Very high-profile cake that we’re eating right now.

“How’s Thunder?” Frederick asks.

I smile down at my cake for a moment, thinking back to yesterday evening with Thunder, our hour or more of playing

fetch, all of his little insistences as to when and how he gives me back the ball. “Still a goof,” I answer. “But he’s good.”

“Good, good.” He nods for a moment. Then he says something to me that I didn’t know before. “My brother is a dog person. I always... wondered about that.”

‘Dog person’ is his workplace-appropriate euphemism for zoosexual. The word ‘zoosexual’ would also be entirely workplace appropriate, but I do understand why non-queer folks are hesitant when it comes to queer terminology, and I can’t say I don’t appreciate people erring on the side of caution there if they have to err one way or the other.

But in any case, I feel I trust Frederick well enough. If he seeks knowledge, I’m game. “What would you like to know?” I offer.

He ponders, and then gives a wave of the folder, dismissing the idea. “I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

I glance around to make sure we’re alone, and then more quietly insist, “If it’s something you’re willing to ask, it’s something I’m willing to answer.” I mean it, too: terminology, preferences, feelings, mechanics; I really can’t think of anything that would be off the table.

I can’t say that the question he asks is a question that I expected: “Is it enough?” he asks me. He thinks about it for a second longer, and then reframes it as, “Does your relationship with Thunder want for anything?”

I let a bite of red velvet cake sit in my mouth for a little moment as I think it over, tapping the fork lightly on my bottom lip. I really wrack my brain for anything lacking. I swallow the cake, and answer the question honestly. “What I have with Thunder is everything I ever wanted and more than I would have thought to ask for. I love him, he loves me, we have fun.”

He nods. “Good,” he says. “I always... My brother is a bit of a recluse. He has two dogs, a lab and a great dane. I could never get a read on whether he’s happy.”

“Well, I think there’s a lot to happiness. But that sounds like a pretty good start.”

We finish our cake.

“Thank you for the cake,” I tell him.

“Of course.” He pointedly looks me in the eyes, and adds, “And thank you.”

“Of course,” I tell him.

I make my way back to my desk, idly playing back our conversation in my mind. I believe it went very well. I sit down at my chair, and spin towards my desk.

Then when I open my eyes, I am outside and it is nighttime. I am cold and I am on the ground and I am in the dark somewhere, I can see the distant lights of buildings, but my vision is blurry, and I can’t get any kind of a meaningful read on my whereabouts whatsoever. My teeth chatter.

I sit upright on the sand. Sand. There is sand here. I can hear waves. I am on a beach. I sit and breathe warm breath into my cupped hands, and rub my hands over my arms, breathe into my hands again, and so on, repeating, warming myself. After a while I rub my eyes and look around again, and I discern that I am on the beach of the small satellite island on which this city’s lighthouse is built.

There is someone else living in this body whose name I do not know and whose memories I cannot see. Some days I wake up, make coffee, prepare a cold breakfast, walk to work at the comms waystation, and the weekend manager regards me strangely and I realize I need to check the date, because clearly I have missed some unknown chunk of time and I am not when I think I am. Some days I wake up and try to recall the previous day and realize that halfway through I have no more memories, and I know that someone, but not me, piloted this body to bed. Some days I am at work and then I wake up with my cheek pressed into the thin carpet, and I am looking at the dusty cables under my desk, and I don’t seem to have gone far or even lost more than a few seconds, and I have to live the rest of the day doubting whether I am myself.

As for my current whereabouts, I have never been to this lighthouse before, at least not as far as I can remember. It does look cool from afar and there have been many times when I *thought* about going to this lighthouse, but now, even though I have found myself here, I’m just not really in the mood for tourism at the moment, given the cold and sudden and frankly scary circumstances of my arrival. I walk the beach until I find a

dock. I talk to a man there, and learn that he is waiting for the ferry to get a ride back to the main island. I check my pockets, and confirm that I do have my wallet on me, and that it contains money and my identification, if that should be necessary.

The man's name is Ricardo. He tells me about his tour of the lighthouse as we wait. When the ferry arrives, the ferryman regards me strangely, no doubt curious as to how I arrived at the lighthouse without his transport, but he accepts my payment and does not ask for my ID. I ask him the date as casually as I can. He tells me that it is Lundos Tenth. We begin the journey back.

I tell Ricardo I would like to look at the ocean by myself, if that's alright. He understands completely, and we take seats at opposite ends of the ferry.

I look out at the black nighttime waters of the ocean, and contemplate the date that the ferryman has told me. Last I remembered, it was my birthday, Lundos Second, and I was in the office where I work, and everything was so familiar and normal. Now it is a week later, and whoever stole my body dropped me off at what literally may have been the farthest away point from home that is possible without getting on one of the big ships and heading out to the open sea.

When the ferry makes land on the main island, Ricardo and I wish each other well, and then I catch a trolley back to the suburbs, where my uncle Jeff with the messy long red hair lives, and also my cousin May, who is much younger than me, still a teenager, fourteen I think. Also living here is Thunder. It was painful to give him to them, but for obvious reasons, I am not a reliable person to take care of him by myself. I visit every evening after work, if I am myself, which apparently I have not been for a while now.

From my wallet I retrieve a little key, and unlock the front door. I hear a deep woof, and hopeful nails ticking over the hardwood towards me. Around the corner comes Thunder, the black mastiff with whom I am completely in love. He wags and bounds towards me, and I fall to my knees and we embrace there in the entryway for a long time, me rubbing and petting and hugging him, him licking me and leaning into me and breathing heavy excited breaths.

Jeff shambles around the corner, eyes screwed up into a sleepy squint. It is late. He asks me, “Hey Jane. Are you alright?”

“I think so,” I tell him.

“Need anything?”

“I’m okay,” I tell him. “Sorry to wake you up.”

He mumbles that it’s fine, and shambles off back to bed.

Thunder and I make our way to the fenced-in back yard, and I ask him to bring me a ball. He goes and finds one in the grass, brings it back to me, drops it at my feet, then backs up a few steps, looking up and down between me and the ball and wagging his tail.

I pick up the ball and hurl it across the yard. He bounds after it. It lands: he pounces on it and shakes his head around a few times before he trots back to me. This time he doesn’t come all the way to me, but instead comes only halfway back, and drops the ball in the middle of the yard.

“Come give it here,” I insist.

Woof, he insists.

I give a faux sigh, and walk into the yard to come get the ball from him.

When I arrive at him he grabs me with a paw, and with the sharpness of a claw digging into my leg, I collapse onto my knees, trying not to get gouged. He eagerly attempts to mount me, and I back away from him at first. “Already?” I ask in a playful voice. He responds with a very vocal huff of a breath, and paws at me again. “Alright,” I tell him. I bring a hand up between our mouths, and we both slobber over it for a while. He paws at me again, and I let him take my slobbery hand to his sheath. There in the back yard, he mounts my arm, and I help him out.

When he’s finished and satisfied, he lays down with his back legs out to the side. I sit and admire him—his anatomy and just him in general.

We retire to our bed, and I sleep pressed close against his back, my face buried in his long fur, happy to be home with him.

I wake up around noon the next day—fortunately, it is a day that I’m supposed to have off from work anyways. My coworkers are aware that I have a condition, though they have been lead to

believe that it is an unfortunate combination of epilepsy and sleepwalking; hell, for all I know, I may have literally told them the truth unwittingly.

A week is longer than I have missed before, and there might be questions, but I don't think there will be much in the way of a full-scale inquisition. My medical conditions are protected from scrutiny. As office workers specialized in handling sensitive data, we're pretty adept with these kinds of dos and don'ts.

I spend the day with Thunder and Jeff and May. Here, at least, it feels as though I haven't missed anything, that no time at all has passed. When evening comes, Thunder and I play fetch until he's worn out, and then I give him a kiss goodbye and walk back to my own apartment.

The next morning when I arrive at work, there is a considerable hill of ticker tape on my desk. I begin where I left off, sorting out what still needs my attention and what has been taken care of without me. The incinerator under my desk is my friend.

Believe me when I say I have thought of how to trap the other person who is inside of me. I could sleep every night in a cage, and have a trusted party on the outside only let me out if I recite a certain password. I could leave a note telling them to knock it off. I could kill myself, though I don't feel *that* strongly about it yet.

I have tried various versions of the first two ideas, the cage and the note. According to Jeff, the other me isn't very talkative. She tends to appear frightened moreso than anything. So I don't always feel great putting my foot down, though I also resent her for taking away my ability to live with Thunder. The notes I leave for her are never responded to. It is what it is.

I get to work on the archive retrievals that are still my responsibility. Sometimes this consists of retrieving an entire tape for some party or another. Other times this consists of loading the tape into one of our machines, writing down some piece of information stored on the tape, putting the tape back, and sending the one bit of information off. Very thrilling stuff, all around.

Cecelia and I grab sushi for lunch, as we do frequently; her partners are a bay horse named Sky and a beagle named Hank,

so we tend to have plenty to talk about, as far as our goings on outside of work are concerned; I went to the stable with her to visit Sky once, and Cecelia was not lying about what a gentleman he is. We went out on a ride, she and I and him. It was a lovely day, something I think back to a lot.

I run into Frederick at some point. He gives me a pleasant smile and says it's good to see me around, but it's clear that he is on his way to something or other and he doesn't stop to chat. Apparently this was the extent of the questioning this time around, as the rest of the workday goes by without incident, so that's nice.

After work I walk to Jeff's. After I've hugged Thunder and we've exchanged rubs and kisses, he and I go to the back yard, and we play fetch. I love this time, this time where I get to observe true happiness, play, exercise, sport, chase, purpose. He is a dog playing fetch; he is exactly as he should be, and all things are right in the world, or at least in this back yard, for this time.

When we go in, I go to the treat jar in the living room, take one out, and toss it to him, and he leaps up to catch it.

I wake up on the floor; most of the house is equipped with thick cushy rugs, a gift from Jeff who worries a lot about me hurting myself one of these times. Thunder is laying over me, chin resting on the side of my head. On the ground in front of us, I see the slobber-covered treat that he apparently did not eat after seeing me drop. I could not love him more. "Hey guy," I say, to let him know I'm awake. His tail thumps lightly on the cushy carpet. I roll over to face him, and we kiss.

The next day I visit a doctor; this is not the first time I have marched into a hospital in indignant insistence that they fix me. I feel I owe it to Thunder to try again.

The doctor that they send me to at least seems interested, which is a step above the last couple. I am less convinced of his aptitude when after looking at my papers, he takes on a consolatory tone. "Miss Gale—"

"Misses."

"Oh, recently married?" He clicks his pen and hovers over a page, ready to add it to my record.

"Zoosexual."

“Ah.” He clicks his pen closed.

“You were about to tell me that I’ve already had brain scans that turned up nothing, but we can try another one?”

He twirls his pen, and tries poorly not to sound annoyed. “More or less.”

I level with him: “You are a doctor and I am a sick person: try harder.”

He turns back to my papers, and looks through them again, contemplative. I can only hope that I have represented myself adequately as an interesting enough puzzle.

Suddenly he squints, and then flips back through all of the papers. “Why the hell...”

“I kind of like the sound of that,” I admit.

“Have you *only* had brain scans? Never a full body?”

“To my understanding that is correct.”

“Can I schedule you for something?”

“Please.”

He puts on a pair of headphones and slides a keyboard over to himself. I observe the notes he presses, but it is a foreign language to me: their encoding is something different here, likely an entirely different grammar and lexicon.

He lifts up one of the ear cups and looks over at me. “Does tomorrow at two in the afternoon work?”

I give him a thumbs up.

He turns back to his keyboard, hammers out another message, and then waits for a response. After a quick sendoff, he takes off the headphones and pushes the keyboard back to its corner.

“Tomorrow at two,” he confirms with me.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

I shake his hand, stand up, exit his office, and then I am sitting on a couch in an unfamiliar living room; lukewarm coffee soaks my shirt and pants. I look down, and the cup is sitting on its side on the couch. I pick it up, and place the empty mug on the side table. Then I notice the dog here, a dalmatian, lying on the floor, looking up at me with their head tilted. As I make eye contact with them, they begin to wag. “Hey there,” I tell them.

I look all around, and listen. Besides the dalmatian, I appear to be alone here. I have never seen this place before. There is a

fireplace—I suspect a faux fireplace—with a mantle above it, and framed pictures. I stand up and go look at the pictures. Featured are adults and children of many different racial backgrounds, and in the corner of each picture, the marketing copy is still present: these are the display pictures that came with the frames. The price tag is still stuck onto the corner of each frame, no visible attempt to remove it from any of them.

I look around the rest of the room. There are thick carpets. The furniture is not the exact same furniture as at Jeff's, but it looks close, and it's arranged the same way down to the treat jar on the counter and the vase on the strangely tall and narrow table in the corner. I explore the other rooms: three bed, two bath. I peek out of the front door: it leads into a hallway, and tells me that I am in an apartment. I look out the window: the apartment overlooks the sea. The sea is light blue, with some patches of red here and there. The red patches are a type of aquatic fungus, parasitic to small fish, harmless to humans; knowledge moss, it is called. It gets into the fishes' spines and brains, and seems to behave similarly to pressing putty onto a newspaper, and pulling it back to reveal the print transferred over to the putty; when eventually the fish dies, if the moss makes it back to the collective, it is almost as though the moss is the fish's ghost, going to join some of its ancestors in an echo of past motor functions and experiences.

I approach the dalmatian, and crouch down in front of them. They wag and then roll over onto their back, and I no longer have to wonder whether this is a he or a she: this is a he. I reach out and give him a belly rub, which he receives agreeably for quite a while, until we hear a key being used in the front door—it is unlocked, but I suppose the person on the other side wouldn't know as much until they tried. The dalmatian and I both stand and turn to face the visitor; the dog goes to the door barking, though his tail wags greatly.

The door slowly opens, gently nudging the large dog back, and a head pokes into the apartment: the head of a woman with long dark braids. "Oh!" she remarks, "you're home! I can feed Thunder quick or just be out of your hair."

I open my mouth, and choke on the number of things I need to ask this person. I try to think of how I might ask her what my

own name is. Before I can settle on the wording, I am suddenly back in my own apartment, in my own bed, and it is nighttime and I am alone, and I have changed into a dry set of clothes. I crumple my blanket together and scream into it.

I check the date. It is the night of the same day on which I spoke to the doctor, so as it stands, I will still be able to make my appointment tomorrow. I try to get some sleep, but my mind is racing.

The next day at work I am zombie-like. Mentally, my mind is not here in the office: it is back in the unknown apartment, with the thick carpets and the dalmatian named Thunder. With a gun to my head I would not be able to place that apartment's location in the city. As Cecelia and I eat sushi and chat, she asks if I had a rough night, and I nod. Like everyone, she is vaguely aware that I have a condition, but even she doesn't know the half of it, especially this time.

After lunch, I take care of one more retrieval: a request from S.I.J. to retrieve a tape on something that is simply numbered 00140686; there is an agent here to collect it personally. I retrieve the tape from the stygian bowels of Subbasement E, march up to a lobby on the ground floor, and hand the tape off to a woman with a buzzcut who wears a suit and sunglasses. She thanks me for my time and departs.

I depart shortly thereafter as well, off to the hospital to get scanned, again, but maybe in a more productive way, this time.

I am given an injection and put through a large machine. Afterwards I sit in the doctor's office, waiting. As soon as he comes in, I can tell from his professional frown that he has bad news. He sits down at his desk in a huff and shows me the scan of my spine. We both lean over the glossy picture. He points all along it.

"There's a plaque-like buildup of something, especially visible here, here, and here. It appears to coat the entire spine."

As he talks, I feel the strange sensation of my backbone feeling like a foreign entity in my own body. My fingers press against my lips as he goes on.

"As one silver lining here, the structural integrity of the spinal column seems to be completely healthy. But I think we've found our culprit. As to what it actually is, I don't know yet."

“Thank you,” I tell him. I wipe a tear from my eye. I could hug him, though I get the impression he wouldn’t like that.

He offers a box of tissues. I take a couple, blow my nose and wipe my eyes, and then sit up straight again in my chair.

“How likely do you think it is that you can identify this?” I ask.

He leans back and knocks his pen against the edge of his desk a few times. “I can’t say. If we can’t get an answer based on this, it may be prudent to explore whether a direct examination and collecting samples would be appropriate.”

I swallow, and nod.

“I’ll get back to you when I have more concrete information to give you.”

“Thank you,” I tell him again.

I go visit with Thunder and Jeff and May. I play fetch with Thunder—my Thunder—for quite a long time. I hug him, and I tell him that I might have found out what’s wrong with me, and maybe we will get to live together again, someday soon. Inside, I sit down with Jeff, and tell him the news as well, and he gives me a hug and tells me he’s glad to hear it, even if it does scare him.

A few days go by. I work, I go to Jeff’s to play with Thunder, I go home, I get good quality sleep, I go to work again. All the trappings of a normal life.

One day I wake up, get out of bed, go to make coffee, and only realize when a dalmatian comes padding around the corner that I am not in my own home, but in the other one. “Hey Thunder,” I greet with enthusiasm, and crouch down to pet him as he stands there and wags. “Your coat’s a lot thinner than my guy’s. Yeah. You’re both big strong studs though, huh?”

Zoosexuality, incidentally, does not often come with a strong sense of monogamy.

As glad as I am to meet this mysterious second Thunder, there is something that I must urgently check on. I grab a marker from a cup of writing implements on the counter and I exit the apartment. I look back at the door and write down the unit number on my forearm. I walk briskly down the hall, down a flight of stairs, and exit the building. Looking at the building

and the nearby signage, I write down the street address. I repeat it aloud to myself as I walk back in, committing it to memory.

Back inside, Thunder is happy to see me again. Apparently this copycat version of me has left a good enough impression. The two of us lay down in the living room, and I pet him. Eventually he gets up, leaves the living room, and then returns with a rope toy. He holds it and looks at me and wags. I get on all fours with him, and the two of us play tug; I do not have to pretend to lose. Whenever he gets the toy free from my grip, he whips it around and I back off for fear of getting whacked with it, and I laugh along with him in his enthusiasm.

Eventually he drops the toy and walks over to look out of the window. I go over, still on all fours, and look out with him. We look at the ocean with its red spots, and at the people down on the beach.

I look over and give him a kiss on the side of the mouth. He appears mildly taken aback by this, but mostly indifferent.

Gently, I reach up under him, and place a curious hand on his sheath.

I am responded to in the form of an extremely loud bark directly into my ear, and I take my hand away and back off. I hold my hands up to show him I'm not touching anything anymore. "Okay," I say, "we don't do that. Gotcha."

The two of us go back to looking out the window. I pet him some more, and he wags. I stand up to go actually make the coffee I had forgotten about, and then I am back in my own actual bed, and it is the next morning.

I check my arm. The address is still written there. I pump my fist and go write it down on a scrap of paper.

At work, during a lull in requests, I do something highly forbidden: I go and make a personal inquiry. From Subbasement A, I retrieve a city registry of addresses and citizens for the district in which this mysterious apartment is located. I load the tape into a machine, and read through until I get to the building, the floor, and the unit.

There on the monitor, I see an ID photo of myself, along with my actual name, Jane Gale, and several actual pieces of personal identifying information. Even the photograph of my signature on the lease seems essentially like my own signing. Part of me

wants to stare at all of this for a very long time. Another part of me does not want to get caught snooping, even if I am snooping on myself. I unload the tape and return it to where I retrieved it from.

I am in an extremely good mood for the rest of the day: I may not know why or what she is, but I know her name: her name is also Jane Gale.

A few more days go by. One day as I return home to my apartment, I find a courier note slipped under my front door, from the doctor asking me to come at my soonest convenience. I visit the next day, and this time, I sit down in the office with him and another doctor, who is not a medical doctor, but a marine biologist.

They look at each other, gauging which one of them would like to start. The medical doctor takes the lead: "So. This is... potentially unexplored medical territory."

"Oh?" I inquire.

He nods. "Are you aware of knowledge moss?"

I swallow. A chill passes over me, and I feel myself beginning to break into a cold sweat. "I've heard of it," my voice creaks out.

"According to my colleague, it has been observed, albeit in rare cases, in dolphins. The psychological results, and the physical presence of the fungus accumulating along the spine, is all characteristically very similar to your case."

My body is a petri dish. I stare blankly ahead, processing everything.

"My colleague may be better suited to answer questions about this than I would be."

"Is it terminal?" I ask.

"In dolphins, no," the marine biologist answers.

Well, that's one thing that's a relief.

"What does it do?" I ask. "What does it want?"

"It may be off to say that it 'wants' anything, in the same sense that you and I may want things. But what it seems to do is learn the impulses of its host and replicate them. In some cases, it proves advantageous: the host dolphin can get in very good sleep in both halves of its brain at once while the fungus takes over and hunts. From what we've seen, in dolphins at least, it is a symbiotic relationship rather than a strictly parasitic one."

“Can it be removed?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “In theory, I expect such a treatment could be developed, years down the line after much research. But at present, no such treatment exists.”

I nod.

Days go by. The next time I wake up somewhere unfamiliar, it is another apartment with thick carpeting, and there is another dog, but they are a shepherd rather than a dalmatian. I am only here briefly, and when I wake up in my own bed again, I am halfway convinced that I was dreaming. But I don’t think I was. I think that in my spine, there is a fungus who thinks its job is to replicate Jane Gale across this city. And apparently, it’s not half bad at it.

I go about my days, until one day when I wake up, I am sitting upright somewhere and my hands are bound behind my back; I am handcuffed to a metal chair in a white nondescript room; in front of me in their own chairs, not handcuffed, sit a man and a woman with buzzcuts, suits, and dark sunglasses. “Oh no,” I say out loud. This is actually among my worst nightmares.

“What is your directive?” the man asks.

“It’s not what you think,” I try to insist.

“Uh huh. Okay. We’re doing it that way then, huh.”

He stands up, forms a fist, and cracks me across the jaw so hard that I go out again, but I am still myself when I awaken, my jaw throbbing, my mouth bleeding.

“What is your directive?” the man asks again. “Who do you work for?”

I give him the name of my doctor, and tell them to talk to him. The man walks off to pursue this. The woman sticks around, sitting and staring at me, seeming to be looking out for any reason to stand up and strike me as the man did.

“Why did you access address records pertaining to yourself without a corresponding request?” she asks.

“Complicated,” I say, and bloody spittle accompanies the word.

“How many residencies do you own?” she asks. “Before you lowball it, I’ll give you a hint: we know of four, and are just waiting to hear back on leads for the rest.”

I lean back in my metal chair, wince up at the ceiling, and stomp my foot again and again in helplessness. “I know of two. I thought there might be a third.”

“Who gives you the funds to support all of these residencies?” she asks.

“I don’t *know*,” I tell her. “I pay for my own apartment with income from my job.”

She does not believe me, and why should she? If I were in her position, I wouldn’t believe this story either. This line of questioning stretches on for another hour until the man returns.

When he does return, he sits back down in his chair and whispers to the woman. Then he faces me. “Jane Gale. Here forward, your clearance to all privileged data is revoked, and you are forbidden to enjoy government employment for the remainder of your natural life. You will be fitted with an ankle bracelet, and must seek government approval if you wish to travel beyond this island. If you attempt to leave without approval or if you attempt to tamper with the bracelet, you will be considered a terrorist and wanted dead. You must submit to regular medical examinations to monitor your condition, for such a time as will be deemed appropriate based on the results of these examinations and the determined character of your condition. Besides that—pending a scan of your spine here and now to verify your doctor’s outlandish claim—you are free to go.”

The scan is done, I am given an ankle bracelet, and with that I am turned onto the street as a citizen once more, ordinary and extraordinary all rolled up into one. I stagger to Jeff’s, shivering, and lay cuddled up with Thunder—my Thunder—for a long time.

My life goes on, and the months go by.

I wake up in a bed. It is the bed in the apartment where the dalmatian lives. I go out to the living room, and he is lying on the couch, looking at me and wagging, having just woken up himself. I sit down with him, and pet him. Later on that morning, we find ourselves looking out the window together, at the sea with the red spots. Moreso than most of my fellow humans, I have always felt myself a part of nature, in tune with the nonhuman world. Now I know, I am more a part of this

nonhuman world than ever. Someday I will die and my body will be put out into the ocean, and the imprint of me and all of my experiences of living a human life will be added to the knowledge of the world that I myself will have only scraped the surface of, and it, mutually, will have only scraped the surface of us.