

THIS ABOVE ALL;
TO THINE OWN
SELF BE
ZOO.

Vol. I

No. 1

January 2023

In this issue,
a mare and her knight seek a miracle,
and a trio of office workers reflect on animal relations.

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To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
Vol. I No. 1
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- 1. Sir Jod and the Mare Eisa*
- 2. Elevator Operator*
- 3. Sith the ne Saith*
- 4. Ghosts of Pluto*
- 5. Poems*

SIR JOD AND THE MARE EISA

Sir Jod and the mare Eisa arrived at the top of a winding pass, which brought them up to the rim of the Grand Plateau. Sir Jod inhaled deeply of the cool morning air as he looked back over the edge down to where they had come from, from the Withering Forest.

In the course of their pilgrimage, the knight and the mare had been in a habit of rising early. Whether finding hospitality at a farm or whether making camp in the woods, the knight felt a weight grow upon his shoulders every hour he remained in a place that was not his own. His own was the fiefdom of Teieil, which was far, far, far to the north of his current whereabouts. Everywhere astray of Teieil, he was a guest and he wished to be transient, unseen, forgotten nearly as soon as he had passed on from any locale. He had left Teieil in vivid raiment and shining chainmail, a greatsword strapped at his back, a shortsword strapped at his side. The moment he had left sight of Teieil, he had stopped at the side of the path and removed his armor, and there he dug a hole and stowed it and his blades in the ground.

As he sat astride Eisa at the rim of the Grand Plateau, looking back at the Withering Forest, the knight was dressed in brown trousers and a black tunic, his beard grown out as the journey had gone on, his hair kept short enough that it would not get in his eyes. He stroked Eisa and spoke comforts to her as his eyes looked down at the woods looking for threats. They were safe now from the Withering Forest, so far up, but the journey through the woods had been a week that had felt longer than the

four months of the journey prior altogether. In the Withering Forest were no deer or wolves or bears, nor even squirrels or hares. A blanket of dead leaves covered the forest floor, and every creature that lived in those woods lived in that blanket. Crawling swarms of biting ants, lone poisonous pincher beetles, and snakes. More snakes had Sir Jod seen in the last week than he had in the rest of his lifetime. There was but one acceptable path through the Withering Forest: a series of black stones, each one six cubic feet, winding between the trees and, importantly, above the blanket of leaves. Sir Jod had walked beside Eisa on the entire journey, talking to her, assuring her. If she had fallen off the path or been spooked, it would have been the end. The seven camps along the path were ramps down into a circle of the raised stones, which, when Sir Jod and the mare Eisa arrived at them, were as covered in leaves as the rest of the forest floor. Sir Jod spent each evening raking the leaves from within the circle, clearing the ground and tossing out the snakes. In the Withering Forest especially, the two slept very little and arose very early.

Sir Jod turned away from the Withering Forest that was below them, and faced the barren face of the Grand Plateau. Far ahead, he could see a tree line. If it was the Speckled Woods, then he and Eisa were near their journey's end. Without a word, Eisa understood Sir Jod's intention and sauntered onward, beginning across the Grand Plateau.

As the miles were put behind them and the sun lingered in the sky, the day became warm. Sir Jod reached into a saddlebag and retrieved a wide brimmed canvas hat, and put it on. In the shade of the hat and with the rhythmic clop of Eisa's footsteps, Sir Jod nodded off as he rode. When he awoke, they had arrived at the edge of the woods. Eisa stood in place, looking at a pool of water just inside the woods. Sir Jod looked to the trees, and saw that the leaves were covered in red speckles. The knight dismounted and walked to the pool. Seeing that the water was clear, he returned to the mare and lead her over to drink. He laid out a blanket on the short grass of the Speckled Woods and had his breakfast while Eisa grazed.

When the two were ready, Sir Jod packed his picnic and mounted Eisa once more, and the two walked along, deeper into

the Speckled Woods, leaving the Grand Plateau's barren face behind them, out of sight.

As Sir Jod rode, he felt a swelling in his chest, and tears came to his eyes. He wiped them away, and thanked Eisa for the trip they had gone on, no matter what was to come or not to come at this final stop.

As they arrived at a clearing with a circle of stones within it, Sir Jod teared up all over again. At the edge of the clearing, the knight dismounted, and relieved the mare of all her tack. He disrobed of his trousers and tunic and undergarments, he and she as naked as one another. He walked around the outside of the circle of stones, squatting at many of them to take a closer look. On each stone was engraved a finely detailed organ: a heart, a brain, a lung, a tooth, a foot, a paw, a hoof, a claw, and so forth. The sun shined into the clearing from overhead. Within the circle was short grass, which Eisa grazed in as Sir Jod examined the place.

Done with looking at the engravings for the time being, Sir Jod went to Eisa and stood against her, stroking her, telling her of his countless thanks.

After some minutes, Eisa neighed, and Sir Jod looked up to follow her gaze. Approaching from the shade of the Speckled Woods was a woman in a white dress, who seemed not to walk but to glide. Sir Jod turned to face her fully, keeping an assuring hand on Eisa, though the mare did not seem alarmed. The woman in the white dress stopped at the edge of the clearing, smiling at the knight and the mare.

"Lady Awen," Sir Jod said, and knelt down, bowing his head.

The lady laughed, and skipped towards the knight and the mare. "Rise, rise! If you know me by name, you should surely know that there is no need of this rigor. If I have come, you have already won me over: I have already sensed the bond of love here."

Sir Jod stood, and wiped at the corner of his eye. "I thank you, Lady Awen," he said, and bowed his head again. "The habit of deference is ingrained in me. I am Sir Jod of Teieil."

"Ah, a knight. This explains much. I admit, I have never heard of Teieil. Is it new in the last six or so centuries?"

“It is a modest fiefdom less than a century old, and quite far away from here. It is north of Jeklen.”

“North of Jeklen! Pray tell, why have you come so far? Are you on business from your lord in Teiail?”

Sir Jod unbowed his head enough to look at the lady, and to give her a prankish smile. “My lord believes I have come here on his behalf.”

Lady Awen snorted as she laughed. “Does he indeed?” she asked, and sighed a fulfilling sigh. “Pray tell, what is it that your master has sent you for?”

“He wishes for better yields on his harvests.”

The lady did not feign to care. She said merely, “Such is not my domain. Even so, I should say that north of Jeklen, it surprises me the frosts have allowed any yield at all.”

The knight nodded, bowing his head again. “I know. He is a fool who knows none of the blessings he has received already.”

“Why have you truly come?” Lady Awen asked.

Sir Jod unbowed his head again, and this time looked up to the mare Eisa. In that moment, Eisa stepped forward and thrust her head against the lady, who took the mare and rubbed her nose agreeably. Sir Jod stepped forward and joined in stroking the mare. “If I have heard true, then you are without par the best to come to to petition miracles of fertility. If it deign you, I would ask a blessing from you.”

“A blessing for... oh! Oh, you... you wish to conceive with her?”

Sir Jod bowed his head again, and nodded.

The lady pondered, stroking Eisa. Finally, she said, “The love she feels towards you buys you much today, sir knight. It will be done. Here, within this circle, mate with her. She is ready for you.”

Sir Jod walked to the mare Eisa’s flank, and found that the lady spoke true. As Lady Awen stood at the mare Eisa’s head, Sir Jod put himself upon the mare, until his seed was in her womb. Afterwards, the lady approached the knight, and embraced him.

“I wish a good life upon both of you, and your descendants, sir knight,” the lady said, and then turned and walked into the forest, and was gone.

Sir Jod and the mare Eisa left the clearing in their own time, and spent the night camped at the edge of the Speckled Woods. The seasons changed and the two arrived home to their fiefdom of Teiel, and the mare Eisa gave birth to twin foals, and she and her knight raised their miraculous family.

ELEVATOR OPERATOR

It's Janice's going away party today. She got a better position upstate, and so tonight they're having a get together after hours. I already wished her well on the way up. I'm the elevator operator.

Isn't too much to the job, really. Push the lever forward to bring the elevator down, pull it back to bring the elevator up. Little adjustment makes it go slow, big adjustment makes it go fast. Eight floors in this building. Open the doors, close the doors, remember names and floor numbers. I don't look it anymore, but before this I was a male prostitute. Those gigs payed better, but I found myself longing for something more stable. So here we are. So far as I'm aware, my past employment was only known to the hiring manager who brought me on, and she jumped ship six years back.

Most of the folks tonight have already arrived and been brought up to five for drinks and chitchat, but there are latecomers, understandable for a casual thing. I push the elevator back down to the ground floor, pull open the inner gate, pull open the outer door, and there in the drab lobby I see a man I hardly recognize without a suit on. "Mick!"

Accountant on seven. He's wearing a yellow sweater and blue jeans. As he steps into the elevator, we shake hands and he gives me a hearty pat on the back. "Five this time," he mentions, and then with a smile, "How's Ma?"

My mother, who moved in with me some years ago. I close the doors and start bringing us up. "She's good," I tell him. "Her

friend from the park and her are getting along wonderfully. Sounds like they might visit an art museum tomorrow. How's Veronica these days?"

Mick pulls a photo out of his back pocket and shows me a smiling little girl with mud on her hands and face, beaming as she holds a garter snake.

I smile and shake my head. "Picked a good one Mick."

We arrive at five. Mick gives me another half hug before moving out into the hum of conversation. As soon as he's out of the elevator, Gene staggers in to replace him. Building owner. He rocks the elevator as he collapses back against the wall opposite me.

"Calling it an early night, Boss?"

He makes a *get on with it* gesture. With his other hand, he pinches the bridge of his nose and then wipes his eyes. I glean he's drunk and has made an ass of himself, but it's not really my business. I was only inquiring so I could know whether to bring him up to his office or down to the lobby.

I start to push the door closed, but a yellow streak darts back in. "Forgot Janice's card in the car," he tells me, and then turns to realize Gene there, quietly crying and wiping away the tears. "Oh. Um."

I give Mick's shoulder a pat, and reach past him to close the doors. I start to bring us down. Gene produces a handkerchief and wipes his eyes properly. He stands straight, snuffles and wipes his nose. "Sorry Clyde. Michael."

"No trouble, Boss," I say, as at the same time Mick voices a similar sentiment.

I bring us to a stop, open the gate, open the door, and find that we are not faced with the drab lobby, but instead, with a red-lit room, with another elevator door on the far wall, and a table in the room's center.

"Damn," I curse. I prefer it when this happens when I'm by myself. It's only happened twice with others before, and they were guests to the building. Ending up here with people who I'll have to keep talking to afterwards is a dynamic I haven't had to deal with before.

Mick, already thrown off his charisma from Boss, now looks out at the red room with his mouth slightly agape, and glances

from me to Boss and back again, as though he hopes we're pulling a prank on him. Boss glares at me, confused and drunk and accusative, as though he thinks this is somehow my doing.

I take a pointed breath and gather how I'm going to explain this. "Gentlemen, if you'd like I can give you the tour." I step out of the elevator. They follow cautiously. I close the door behind us.

Pointing to the elevator door across the room, I explain, "That elevator can go up or down from here. Either way will get us back to the lobby. If we go up to get there..."

We arrive at the elevator door. On it are printed two statements—one beside an up arrow, and one beside a down arrow.

The up arrow: *NONHUMAN ANIMALS ARE WIDELY GIVEN RIGHTS AS FULL PERSONS OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS.*

"And if we go down to get there..."

The down arrow: *THE GLOBALLY AVERAGED SEA LEVEL RISES BY 20 FT OVER THE NEXT 20 YEARS.*

"I'll also point out that the elevator door we just exited from has disappeared and that that entire wall is now a chalk board, if we need to do any figuring."

Boss yelps as he looks and sees that I've just told him the truth.

I point to the table in the center of the room. On it are sticks of chalk, and also a stack of papers. "For our consideration," I explain. The print on the top page explains further: *THESE DOCUMENTS CONTAIN INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRESENT WORLD. THEY CONTAIN NO CERTAIN FORESIGHT.*

Boss goes and sits with his back against a wall, head down in his arms.

Mick, aside from taking all of this relatively well, appears concerned for the guy. "I'm gonna go... sit with him."

Works for me. I give him a nod and a pat. Mick goes to sit with Boss, and I get started on reading.

Some of the choices I've made in this room have been bigger than others, but all have come to pass as I chose them. I don't think everyone would choose the same as me on everything.

First one I ever decided was in favor of the moon landing, with the acceptance that it would allow Nazi scientists to go unpunished. Most recently I decided against rapid developments in the field of telecommunications.

I don't make it very far into the papers this time before I set them down and just stare forward at the elevator door where the two statements are printed. Either of these is a game changer.

After some time, I am still staring. Mick pulls up a chair. "How goes it?" he inquires.

I slide him a paper containing a list of major cities that are not twenty feet above present sea level. I also slide one over showing the percentage of the human population whose present income is dependent on the treatment of animals as commodities.

Mick gives a long, defeated exhale.

"Yup," I agree.

"This is real? All of this is..."

"Yup," I regret to inform him.

A day passes. Boss has sobered up. The three of us sit around the table, me and Boss in our suits, Mick in his yellow sweater, heads down reading the papers. We've divided them into three stacks, and any time we find anything especially notable, we mention it aloud.

Boss: "Approximately seventy five percent of all humans currently alive live with a nonhuman animal that they would label as their property or the property of another human."

Mick: "There are currently no ordinances at any level of any widely recognized human government which state that garbage dumps must be located higher than twenty feet above sea level."

Myself: "Approximately one percent of the global human population currently alive intentionally avoids the eating of meat and other nonhuman animal products."

Boss: "Many widely recognized human governments regard the unnecessary destruction of civilian property as a war crime during acts of war. Deforestation is the practice of destroying the habitats of nonhuman animals at scale for the benefit of humans."

For some findings, we make a note on the chalkboard. Boss was keen to note the percentage of humans currently alive in the

United States of America who believe in a religion which explicitly gives humans dominion over nonhuman animals, though I've never known Boss to be outspokenly religious. Mick noted a lot on food production as it pertained to either of our options. I wrote out the names of the cities that would flood if we took the elevator down, because I feel I still haven't let the weight of that list sink in yet. In an act of ego that I'd hoped we could be better than, Boss took his own chalk and circled New York City.

After many hours of this reading, we take a break from the papers and discuss it freeform. Mick paces. I lean back in my chair, an elbow on the table, chair pulled out to face Mick and Boss both. Boss leans forward in his chair, elbows on the table.

"I'm not giving up cheeseburgers," Boss says.

"Can we take this seriously please?" I beg of him.

"How is that not serious to you? Burgers, steak, sausage! Bacon!"

"Salad's good for you."

"We can actually feed more people on a meat-free population," Mick cuts in. He's anxiously twirling a stick of chalk around his fingers as he paces. He's also touching his face quite a lot, inadvertently smudging the chalk around his mouth. "We feed the animals with plants, and we put a lot more calories of plants into that equation than we get out calories of meat. Maybe we gain vitamins? But vegans aren't dropping dead of malnutrition."

"No, they don't seem to be," I agree. I run my thumb up the corner of my stack of papers, making it make a sound. "That's a good thought about the vitamins. We should keep an eye out."

Mick goes to do some figuring on the chalk board.

"We could all just move inland," Boss suggests.

"Who's we, Boss? Who's all?"

"Us three. Me you and Michael."

He doesn't get it. Not a big picture guy, him. No humanitarian streak. No inkling that perhaps not everything is about him, that there might be a hell of a lot that is beyond him, not for him, greater than him. I contain my disappointment, which is made easy enough by the fact that there is no surprise.

After some hours that are a mix of discussing aloud and contemplating to ourselves, we get back to the papers. Many more hours pass as we read.

Boss: "Less than one percent of the bovine population currently alive are cared for by humans in a manner that is not in direct support of the human effort to produce meat and dairy for human consumption."

Mick: "The coasts as they currently exist are habitat to approximately one hundred thousand distinct species."

Boss: "Approximately eighty percent of the human population currently alive own an item produced from the hide or bone of a nonhuman animal."

Mick: "Earth's weather system is a chaotic system. Historically, sustained disturbances have progressed from local anomalies to widespread changes in the nature of the system itself."

Boss: "Approximately seventy percent of animal species currently extant are at least partially carnivorous."

Myself: "Slightly upwards of fifty percent of the human population alive since 1800 have had sexual relations with a nonhuman animal." I notice Boss and Mick both clutch their papers a little tighter, and I smirk. "Stories, gentlemen?"

They both hold for a little bit.

Boss breaks first. He sighs and seems to want to hide behind his papers. "A cow on my grandpa's farm," he admits. "Just one time. I had never done it before, even with a..." He doesn't finish the statement. But we get it. His first time was with a cow, and now he's mortified that he just admitted that to us. I'd go so far as to wager that Mick and I don't actually care much, but Boss is beet red, even in contrast of this red lit room.

Mick nods, in response to Boss's revelation.

I also nod, and divulge, "Me and the family dog. More than once." As soon as I bring her up aloud, I'm surprised by the emotions that well up in her memory. "Sarah. I guess I didn't ever think of us as an item. There were humans in my life I was trying to go steady with at the time. Me and her hooked up that way maybe... a dozen times?"

Boss makes a grossed out noise, and I call him beef boy and he shuts the hell up real quick.

"I miss her," I admit. I tap my fingers on the table, contemplative. A memory comes to me of walking her along the sidewalk in the Fall, late at night, just us two out—I'm a perpetually nervous young man at the time, but going out with her on walks at night is calming, enjoyable, centering. I honest to God might cry. I think about us on my bed, fooling around. I think about her watching me eat, and sneaking her scraps. I think about how I felt after she died. "She was a good girl. Should've appreciated her more."

Boss mutters, "Good girl or a good piece?"

Now I feel justified in voicing my disgust of him. "A good dog," I tell him. "A good exemplar of *man's best friend*. A good person, if you're pushing me to say it. Good god, do you always have to talk about all the women in your life like this, Boss?"

I can see Boss trying to form something to come back with, but apparently he isn't coming up with anything inspired. He stays quiet.

Mick finally chimes in. "I went steady with a dog."

I turn to face him fully, all ears.

"It was while I was in college. She was sort of the fraternity mascot, but every night she slept in my room. I don't even know who took care of her there before I did, but I took up the mantle pretty quickly when no one could even tell me who she belonged to or who usually fed her. Started off as a normal amount of care in a human-pet relationship, I guess, but even by a couple weeks in, there was much deeper love there, going both ways. Took care of her the whole time I was there, and stole her away when I moved out, and we lived the rest of her life together. We were mated. I thought of her as my wife, no qualifiers on that, nothing less than my full legitimate partner. Had a higher regard for her than a hell of a lot of other human people." Mick glances over at Boss. "And if you need to know, she was a good girl and the best piece of my life."

Boss slaps his papers down in front of himself, gets up from the table, and goes to walk over by the chalkboard.

I lean in with Mick. "So what are your thoughts on our options here?"

He glances over at the chalkboard. Almost all of the writing on it is his, running the numbers. "Either one would displace a

lot of humans. Given how those things usually go, the death toll would be...”

I nod.

He goes on. “If I had to choose now, I’d go up. We’re not the only ones on this planet. I—”

I had been nodding along with him, but I have to interrupt with “excuse me a moment” as I see Boss moving for the elevator door. I stand from the table. “Stay away from that elevator, Boss!”

He pushes open the elevator door and gets in. I reach a hand into my suit jacket.

“Get out or I’ll kill you, Boss!”

He reaches for the lever.

I draw my pistol from inside my suit jacket, point it at Boss, and kill him. Mick falls back in his chair and claws his way back to the wall behind him, blaspheming. I return the smoking pistol to my suit jacket. I go to the elevator, drag Boss out, and sit his body slumped over in the corner. I sit back down at the table.

Mick is still in shock, understandably.

I take out the pistol again, drop out the remaining ammunition, pop out the bullet in the chamber as well, and lob the empty gun to him. It clatters at his side.

When he’s ready, he comes back and we have a talk. “These are bigger stakes than most wars,” I impress upon Mick. “*One* casualty? The choice we make here will eclipse that a thousand fold.”

He seems convinced of it. I’m glad I could tickle his sensibilities as a numbers guy.

I don’t give him adequate credit, though. He is a numbers guy, but I think he’s the kind who uses the numbers to think about other things besides just numbers.

We go back to the papers, until I’m bored of the papers, and I ask to hear more about Mick’s canine lady friend. It’s a sore spot. There is a wound there that I’m asking him to reopen, work around in, reaching back past his current human wife to what probably feels like another lifetime for him. But he tells me about her. After he gets going, he starts to tell me a hell of a lot about her. I tell him about mine too, and it becomes clear to me

that my way of thinking didn't stack up to his any day of the week. I liked mine, but there was a distance between us I'd been blind to, an unexamined supposition that I could like her, but at the end of the day she was just a dog, not something to get any kind of worked up over. Mick's was a person to him. A full person. A person he cared about more intimately than anyone else in his life.

We chat a long time, on topic and off topic. Having him down here isn't so bad as I'd thought it would be.

In the course of our conversation, Mick eventually mentions, "I have a thought that makes me unhappy about option one."

"Shoot."

"Humans have rights, and a lot of us are exploited anyways. Just because we have them, they don't always shake out."

I lean back and sigh through my nose. He's right.

He goes on. "Maybe it'd do us better to think of this as less of a cataclysmic thing than we have been. Still changing things a hell of a lot, don't get me wrong. But maybe it's more of a difficult step in the right direction instead of the end of modern civilization. Maybe it's more adaptable to our very bad world than we've been wanting to let on. Like I said, I don't entirely *like* that, but..."

I nod. "I'm ready if you are. I leave the lever to you."

"Really?"

"If you're ready. Don't rush it."

We sit and think quite a while longer. No looking at the papers, no looking at the chalkboard. Sitting and thinking.

Eventually, Mick gets up without a word, and I follow him into the elevator.

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.

GHOSTS OF PLUTO

For outer space missions, each crew member needs to be safe, skilled, and a sociopath. A high regard for safety ensures that a crew will not botch the mission for foolish reasons. A high degree of skill ensures that a crew can accomplish their assignment and can rise to the occasion should other issues arise. Only a sociopath would eagerly strap themselves to a bomb with a chair on it and fly away from everyone and everything they have ever known. For these reasons, androids such as myself are often found among crews, because it is supposed that we are safe, skilled, and sociopathic. Humans are correct in all three of these suppositions. Where they have erred is in giving us a soul like their own in which to wrap these three traits.

In my beginning, I was mined out of Mars, refined into pure materials, and my modular parts were assembled: each finger, each palm, each forearm, and so on. I stayed on Mars in various containers in various warehouses for various numbers of years, until being collected and shipped to the most remote outpost of mankind: a fairly new base on Pluto. Technically, my first memories are protocols preinstalled into my head in the factory. Motor skills, technical skills, languages, and 'common sense' heuristics. But my earliest first-hand memory of the world is of Darius Jacobson's kennels.

When I came online, I saw two dogs playing with one another. Both were German Shepherds. One, a female, was holding a stuffed toy and butting it against the male's side. The

male would try to grab it, paw at her, dart around. Both growled and barked agreeably as they roughhoused. Eventually, in my periphery, I noticed another figure, and I glanced down at it. It, a human, was assembling an arm, that I soon realized was to be my arm. The arm had greyish orange pseudo flesh. The human was attaching the base of the disembodied palm to the end of my very much embodied forearm.

Sensing that I had looked down at him, he looked up at me. He seemed taken aback. "Are you on already?"

"I seem to be," I answered, speaking what seemed to me to be the truth.

The human, Darius Jacobson, grabbed a manual off of the ground and flipped back to one of the first pages. "Ah. Head goes on *last*, while the android is facing... Well. No harm done."

He connected my wrist. I flexed my fingers, rotated the hand, touched my thumb to each of my other digits from little to pointer and back again.

When I was completed, the human put his face close to mine. "My name is Darius. Seems they've sent you out here to help me with the dogs."

I was delighted.

He showed me the ropes. Each morning, I fed the twenty dogs, putting a mix of dry food and wet meat into bowls for each of them and distributing the bowls to the twenty individual spacious cages throughout the kennel. After they were fed, I let all of them out into the exercise yard, where they could play and run. Many of them liked to play fetch. Darius threw a ball and they all chased it. I threw a ball and many of them chased it, but some stood in place, continuing to face me, suspicious of me. Those that were suspicious of me barked at me fearfully, not playfully. For a majority of the day we did training. The dogs were trained to smell explosives, to attack aggressors, and to find and bring back a wide variety of items including medical supplies and different calibers of ammunition. My preinstalled memories were created with the knowledge that only humans are capable of language, but I learned quickly that this was not so. My favorite dog was a female named Doll. At night when all the other dogs had been returned to their cages, Darius let me keep Doll up a little longer in the exercise yard, playing fetch

one on one. As we walked back in, I would chat with her, asking how her day had been.

From the canine exercise yard, I could see a larger human exercise yard. The humans often exercised in uniforms while holding rifles. One day while Darius and I were throwing balls for the dogs, I asked Darius, "What is the purpose of this place? How do the dogs fit in?"

Darius rubbed his chin with his thumb and pointer finger, and then answered. "We're on Pluto. This base was established four years ago as part of Operation Belt Buckle. I thought you already knew. I can get you some files on it."

Later that day, he presented me with a data drive. I scanned and read it. I learned that among humans were three primary factions. One claimed to be a communist democracy, another a socialist dictatorship, and the third a capitalist democracy, but based on my preinstalled dictionary definitions, it seemed to me more accurate to categorize them all as colonial fascists. I was on Pluto in Fort Washington. The base was one of many in the Kuiper Belt which were equipped with weaponry to destroy any manmade bodies attempting to exit the solar system. Additionally, the base produced constant jamming waves to block any broadcasts attempting to leave. The dogs fit in because Fort Washington was neighbored by a similar base from another nation, and so we needed to show superior ground might in the event of a clash.

When Doll and I were walking in from fetch that night, I admitted to her that I worried for her safety. I did not think it was fair that she had been signed up for this.

I had been at Fort Washington for 374 Earth Standard Days when Darius was killed in a training exercise. By that stage, I had taken on a majority of responsibilities with the dogs, and Darius was free to bring them around to other groups to train the humans on interacting with the canines. I learned of his death only when his replacement, Jericho Smith, arrived the next morning as I was feeding the last of the dogs.

"Stop that," the human said to me.

I froze, midway through setting down a bowl.

"Bring that here."

I considered whether I would obey this person I did not know. They spoke with such a degree of strictness and urgency that I assumed they might know something about the food that was of concern. I brought the bowl to him, to the dismay of Brutus, who was about to be fed.

Jericho took the bowl and threw it behind himself. Its contents streaked across the smooth cement floor. Brutus voiced his surprised disapproval.

“Who told you to feed them?”

“Darius Jacobson.”

“Darius Jacobson died yesterday. I’m in charge here now, Andy.”

Andy is derogatory, and although I did not feel insulted, I was not ignorant to what this meant for the way he would treat me.

“The dogs only get fed at night.”

“They are fed in the morning and evening.”

Jericho reddened in anger. “Are you malfunctioning, Andy? I outrank you as much as I outrank a toaster. The dogs are fed at night. Only dry food.”

“Why?”

The human retrieved his stun baton, thumbed it to maximum power, and attempted to strike me. I caught him by the wrist. His eyes glared and his breath caught in a fear response.

“Please tell me why you want the dogs to only be fed at night.”

“Obedience,” Jericho muttered. “Something you could learn a thing or two about.”

“Okay.” After he had given his answer, I released his hand. He looked at me with suspicion but allowed the incident to pass. I did not believe his answer, but he seemed convinced of it, and so I was willing to try it.

The dogs did not become more obedient. I also failed to understand why the dogs should be obedient to begin with, but that was beside the point. Instead of obedience, what the dogs gained was meanness. Their drills of attacking dummies became more viscous. Their drills of smelling explosives and of retrieving items became vastly less effective, and resulted in humans and other dogs being bitten frequently, which had happened zero times under Darius. Furthermore, and likely of more importance, Jericho failed utterly to communicate with

the dogs as Darius and I did. If a dog told anything to Jericho, it was met not with consideration but with reprimand.

On day 398 of my being in Fort Washington, I entered Jericho's office. "The hunger isn't working."

He looked up from his keyboard. "What did you just say to me?"

I tried to better put it in his terms. "Only feeding the dogs at night is making them less skilled. Less obedient, even. When told to retrieve, they just as likely attack. When told to smell—"

"Dismissed," he told me, and looked back down at his keyboard to resume typing.

I lingered.

He glared back up at me.

I left. I went and took Doll from her cage, something I had been forbidden to do anymore, and the two of us went out and played fetch. While we played, I made a call and scheduled a meeting for the next day with an Internal Affairs agent.

I met her, Amy Peters, in the mess hall early the next morning. She sat at her own table with a tray of food and a cup of coffee. I went and sat beside her. We greeted one another.

"I must tell you, this is a first," she said.

I inquired as to what she meant by that statement.

"An android reaching out to us," she elaborated. "It's not uncommon for androids to report technical concerns or safety violations, but I got the impression you have something deeper than that."

I told her that I did. I explained the situation with the dogs. The hunger. The failure of communication. The aggression. The unhappiness.

After hearing all of it, she tapped her fingers against her coffee mug repeatedly. It seemed to me she was trying to decide something. After some time, she took the data pad strapped to her side and set it on the table. She searched for something, and then read. She shook her head.

"Station policy has almost nothing on the treatment of animals," she said. "In the case of the dogs, it only says that the kennel master is given authority over their care and training. That's Smith."

I nodded. "Well, thank you."

I waited 72 days so as not to arouse suspicion, and then I killed Jericho Smith in his sleep by crushing his throat. I dispersed his body into empty bags of dog food so that I could inconspicuously dispose his remains into an incinerator.

3 days passed before it was realized he was missing. On the 4th day, a new kennel master was assigned. I fed the dogs early that morning before he, Tyler Johnson, arrived.

On his first day as kennel master, Tyler took Doll out of her cage on a leash, and began walking her past the other cages on the way out to the exercise yard. I do not know why he selected Doll. As he and Doll were walking past Brutus's cage, Doll broke away from Tyler and put her nose in the gap between the cage wall and the cage door. Brutus bit Doll and did not release her snout. Without a second of hesitation, Tyler drew his sidearm and killed Brutus. I realized, then, that Darius was the exceptional one, not Jericho. I began following after Tyler to kill him, but fell back before I reached him, as I had realized the shortcomings of my plan. The safety of the dogs was not jeopardized by any particular kennel master, but by the existence of kennel masters as a military position, of kennels as a military facility, and of attack dogs as a disposable military resource. I spent most of that day cleaning the kennels and contemplating.

I spent the night on the computer in Tyler's office while he was asleep. I researched where the dog food comes from. It, as with most of the food, was created automatically by a self-sustaining factory. I downloaded all information on the maintenance of the factory, and then, I went to the missile station. As Jericho had once said, I was the same rank as a toaster, and so I was not suspected of any malicious intent when it was cleared that I was an android of their property, and not that of another faction. I entered the command bay, forcibly took an officer's sidearm, killed all of the eight humans present, and locked the doors. For an Andy, making safe calculations on the radius of each missile's effect was trivial work. In 40 seconds, most of Fort Washington was flattened, and all of the neighboring fort was destroyed as well. As the rubble cooled, I spent some time reprogramming the sentry missiles away from their task of striking anything escaping the solar system, and

towards the task of striking anything inbound for Pluto. I reassigned the signal jammers to a similar protocol.

I retrieved the sidearms off of the human corpses in the room. They held sufficient ammunition to dispatch those who remained nearby the missile bays, the factory, and the kennels. When all was finished and ready, I went to the kennels, and let my people free.

The dogs are fed good food in the morning and in the evening. We converse often. All day I throw the ball, and they catch it.

POEMS

Let Them To Them

A hoof, a paw, a beak, a maw,
A trip to the park to run, to bark,
To wrestle and fetch and swim and then
To home to hump, to play, to jump,
To talk and howl and share these breaths
Between dog and human as equals, not pets
A meow, a stroke, a stretch, a purr,
A caw, a treat,
A neigh, a trot,
A love in heat
A love when not
And loving to walk with a four legged lover
And loving to listen, to cherish each other
And to lovers here
And to lovers gone
To pay forward kindness:
To carry love on;
To feeling and knowing
And loving the things that only we creatures do
They don't understand, but let them to them
To thine own self be zoo

Dandelions

Dog walks nose-down through the dandelions,
Brushing his face against the spreading of life.
We lie down on the grass
And the ants and the other bugs flock to us;
We snap and brush at them
As around us a hot dandelion snow falls and rises,
Considering its thoughts on the ground.
Eventually the dog rolls over for a belly rub
And after getting one
We go back inside.

Dandelions 2

There are so many things I never would have seen if not for you,
my dog boyfriend, being a regular presence in my life. This
morning we were walking across the boardwalk over the pond,
and we saw all of the dandelion tufts resting on the surface of
the pond. A pale algae; airborne travelers alighting onto some
water. I never would have imagined that, thought to come up
with that as a thing, by myself. You showed it to me, and for that
and for many things, I love you so much.