

THIS ABOVE ALL;
TO THINE OWN
SELF BE
ZOO.

Vol. I No. 10

October 2023

In this issue,
a fox eats some pie,
and a magical item accurately reveals truest loves.

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To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
Vol. I No. 10
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HANSEL AND THE SECRET OF THE PRINCESSES

On top of a hill in the middle of the woods, there was a tree, and under that tree, Hansel and a fox were relaxing in the heat of the day. Hansel was very small, so small that you would be able to hold him up with one hand. He sat comfortably with his legs on the ground and his back against the fur under the fox's neck. The fur there was very soft.

Hansel said to the fox, "Nearby here there is a cottage, and living in it, there is only a husband who is gone in the woods throughout the day, and a wife who is gone throughout the day tending to a flock of sheep. We should sneak inside of their cottage, and find ourselves something to eat."

"But you are so small!" the fox said. The fox pointed his face down at Hansel, and gave the back of Hansel's head a lick: even with his small fox tongue, the lick caused all of the back of Hansel's neck to be wet, and messed up the small man's hair. "If I were to kill you a mouse," the fox said, "you would surely be fed for a month."

Hansel wiped the fox's slobber off the back of his neck using his hands, and then wiped his hands on the big blades of grass underneath him. Hansel then began to fix his hair, smoothing it down where the fox's lick had made it all stand up. Thinking that he could tempt the fox, Hansel remarked, "Yes, I could eat a mouse, but yesterday when I was nearby the cottage, I smelled that blueberry pies were being baked in the oven. I'm sure there would still be a pie left for each of us, if we hurry and sneak in before the husband and wife come back in for today."

The fox laughed to himself. “Ho ho ho! You could not eat a pie yourself, and neither could I. You are greedy, Hansel.”

“I am not greedy!” Hansel argued. “I simply like food that is tasty, and beds that are soft, and clothes that are splendid, and music that is sweet.”

The fox began to sing.

O warm is the day
On the fox and the thief
O warm is the sunlight
That falls on the leaf

As the fox was singing, the king appeared at the bottom of the hill, riding on a tall and white horse.

Hansel whispered to the fox, “The king! He is out hunting. Run! Run! Go hide in the bushes!”

The fox, heeding Hansel’s advice, fled away, down the hill on the opposite side from the king.

In those days, the king was distraught with worry concerning his daughters. The king had twelve daughters. All of the princesses slept in one big bedroom together, which had twelve comfy beds in it, one bed for each princess. All of the princesses were very beautiful and very charming, and had good manners and obeyed the rules that the king commanded them. However, every morning, the shoes of all twelve princesses were always found to be worn completely through, as though the girls had been dancing all night long.

The king, concerned at what might be occupying the princesses’ nights, offered a reward to his kingdom: any person who could find out what caused the princesses’ shoes to be worn through at night, would be rewarded with the choice to marry any one of the twelve princesses, and would become the next king when this king died. If, after three days, any person failed to find out the secret, then that person would be killed.

A prince from a nearby kingdom, thinking about how beautiful the princesses were, agreed to the challenge. When he arrived at the castle, the king was very happy, and ordered that a feast be made. All throughout the day, the prince and the king and the twelve princesses and the courtiers sat around a long

table in a dining hall, eating very tasty foods. When night had come and it was dark outside, the prince was shown to his guest room, which was the next door down the hall from the princesses' room, so that throughout the night he could spy on the princesses and find out their secret. Before the princesses went to bed, they came and visited the prince in his room, and offered him a glass of wine. The prince drank the wine, and the princesses all left, and went to their room, and all laid down in their beds. The prince laid down in his bed too, and soon he fell asleep, and he did not wake up again until the next morning. Already, the princesses shoes were all worn through, as though they had been dancing all night.

For two more nights, the prince fell asleep before being able to find out the secret of what caused the princesses' shoes to be worn through. On the third day, the king announced that the prince had failed the challenge, and the prince's head was cut off.

Many princes from nearby kingdoms came to the castle to try to figure out why the princesses' shoes were being worn through, but none of them could, and time after time, the princes were killed.

Hansel had heard about all this. Still sitting beneath the tree on the top of the hill, Hansel called down to the king, "Hello, king!"

The king looked up the hill, but could not see anyone. He called out in a loud voice, "Who is there?"

"Up here!" Hansel yelled. "I am up here, beneath the tree! Come, come and find me!"

The king rode his tall and white horse up the hill. From atop the horse's saddle, the king looked up in the branches of the tree, and down at the ground below, and called out, "Who is here?"

"Down here! Down here!" Hansel said. "Come down from your horse, and then you might see me!"

The king came down from his horse, and again looked down at the grass. Finally, he was able to see Hansel, who was jumping up and down and waving his arms at the king. The king said to the man, "Hello there!"

“Hello, king!” Hansel said. “I have heard that you are looking for someone who can find out what your princesses are doing at night, to cause their shoes to be worn through. As you can see, I am very small. I sleep as little as a fly, and I am very quick to hide. If you would let me try, I would find out the princesses’ secret.”

The king agreed, and Hansel promised to be at the castle the next morning. The king then rode off, and returned to his hunt. The fox, seeing that the king had gone, came out of hiding in the bushes, and ran up the hill to Hansel.

Hansel and the fox set off towards the castle, so that they would be there by tomorrow. On the way, they met an old woman beside a well, who told them, “Be sure that you do not drink the drink that the princesses offer to you. The drink they give to princes is mixed with secret drugs that will make the drinker fall fast asleep until the next morning. Act as though you have drunk it, so that they will think they have tricked you, and then you must pretend to go to sleep. Take this cape with you: while you are wearing it, you will be invisible, and no one will be able to see you. You will be able to spy on the princesses this way.”

The next morning, Hansel arrived at the castle with a fox draped around his shoulders, as though wearing a scarf made from a fox pelt. Really though, the fox was alive, and only pretending to be dead. Hansel walked confidently through the castle gate, standing perfectly upright. When he was standing up as straight as he could, he was as tall as any normal person. He was only so small when his back was hunched over or slouched, which was most of the time.

The king was happy to see Hansel, and ordered a feast. Hansel ate sugared strawberries, and cake, and pieces of blueberry pie, sneaking some forkfuls to the fox that was draped around his neck. The fox held the bites of tasty pie in his mouth, and swallowed when nobody was looking.

When night had come and it was dark outside, Hansel was taken to his room, which was beside the princesses’ room. As he was getting ready to go to bed, the twelve princesses came in, and offered him a glass of wine. Hansel secretly poured the glass out, and handed the empty glass back to the eldest princess,

who had given him the glass. He then yawned, and stretched, and laid down on his bed, and pretended to snore.

The princesses all left Hansel's room, and returned to their own bedroom, and they all laid down on their beds.

The fox crawled off of Hansel's neck, and whispered into his ear, "Now, we must go and see that the princesses are doing at night!"

Hansel stopped pretending to snore, and got up out of bed. He then slouched his back, and was smaller than the fox. The fox put on the cloak that they had gotten from the woman by the well, and he became invisible! The fox then picked up Hansel in his mouth. Hansel remained in the fox's mouth, sticking his head out of the front of the fox's lips, right under the fox's little black nose. The fox tip-toed on his four paws out into the hall, and then tip-toed into the princesses' room. There, unseen, the fox sat in the corner and watched, along with Hansel, who still poked his head out from the fox's mouth.

One by one, the princesses began to giggle, not knowing that they were being watched. Then, one by one, the princesses got out of bed, and put on their shoes, and all gathered around the eldest princess. The eldest princess clapped her hands, and as soon as she did, her bed sank into the floor: *Shoomp!* And where the bed was, there was now a trap door. The eldest princess bowed down, and opened the trap door, which had old and loud hinges: *Creeeek!* All of them giggling, the princesses lined up in a single file line, with the eldest princess at the front, and the youngest princess in the back, and then they went down through the trap door, going down a secret staircase.

"Quickly!" said Hansel. "We must follow them!"

The fox said, "Yef! We wiw fowwow vem at onf!"

The fox tiptoed quickly across the bedroom, and dove into the secret entrance before the last princess had closed the trap door behind herself.

Down and down the staircase went, and down and down the princesses walked.

"Ow!" said the youngest princess. "Someone has stepped on my dress! We are being followed!"

"Of course no one stepped on your dress," said the eldest princess. "You saw that we gave the man a potion with secret

drugs, and you saw how he fell asleep at once. Your dress was only snagged on a nail.”

The youngest princess did not think so, but could not argue. She continued to follow the other princesses down the staircase.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a forest with trees that were made of silver. All of the branches and leaves of the trees sparkled in the moonlight. The princesses skipped along a trail through the silver forest.

“Sister!” called the youngest princess. “I am sure I have heard someone’s footsteps behind, following us!”

“Of course you did not hear anyone’s footsteps,” said the eldest princess. “Do you see anyone behind us?”

The youngest princess did not see anyone at all, and could not argue.

Eventually the trail went through a golden forest. All of the branches and leaves of the trees sparkled in the moonlight. At the end of the golden forest, the princesses came to a lake. There at the shore, twelve boats were waiting to take them across. At one boat was a pig. The youngest princess skipped to that boat, kissed the pig on the cheek, and climbed into the boat. The pig oinked happily as he began to row. Before the boat had gone very far, the fox leapt up into that boat, and sat hidden in it with Hansel still in his mouth.

Beside each of the other boats was an animal too. There was a sheep, a pony, a bear, a chicken, a deer, a wolf, a python, a rat, a cat, and a monkey, and at the last boat was a dog, whose hair was long and golden like the hair of the eldest princess. The eldest princess climbed into the boat with the dog, and all the other princesses climbed into the boats with the other animals, and the animals all began rowing across the lake.

The pig stopped oinking for a moment to say, “Hm! Princess, this rowing is more work than usual! Here I am rowing as always, yet we move as slowly as if there were someone else in this boat!”

The fox and Hansel stayed very quiet.

Across the water, all of the boats arrived at the shore of an island. There on the island, the trees were made of diamonds, and there were many tables with food and drinks set out, and in the middle of the island there was a big round floor to dance on.

By the moonlight, the princesses began to dance with the animals.

Hiding in the diamond trees, Hansel climbed out of the fox's mouth. The two of them changed, so that Hansel was wearing the cloak instead of the fox. Hansel then stood upright, and picked up the fox, and Hansel and the fox danced in secret with the princesses and the animals all through the night. By the end of the dancing, all of the princesses' shoes were worn through.

Hansel carried the fox as they followed the princesses back over the lake and through the forests. On the way, Hansel took a branch from a diamond tree, a branch from a golden tree, and a branch from a silver tree. When they came to the stairs, Hansel ran up them quickly ahead of the princesses, and opened and closed the trap door at the top before the first princess had gotten close enough to hear the noise: *Creak-a-Creak!* Hansel hid the branches he had taken under his bed, and then he and the fox went to sleep.

The next day, Hansel and the fox sat in a garden in the castle. The sunlight was warm. Hansel sat with his legs on the ground and his back against the fur under the fox's neck.

The fox said to Hansel, "We have found out the secret of why the princesses' shoes are worn through. Do you mean to wait to tell the king, and have your head cut off on the third day because you have not told him?"

Hansel said, "I must first find out how the king will react to the answer, if I tell it to him."

"Oh, very well," said the fox, and then he began to sing.

O warm is the day
On the fox and the thief
O warm is the sunlight
That falls on the leaf

That night, Hansel and the fox again followed the princesses, and danced all night with them, and drank wine and ate food from the tables. When they came back, Hansel ran quickly to his bed and pretended to be asleep until the sun came out, so the princesses still would not know that their secret had been found out.

Later that day, Hansel went to the king, with the fox draped around his shoulders so that he could hear all that was said as well.

“Hello there!” the king said. “Have you found out what my daughters have been doing at night, that causes their shoes to all be worn through in the morning?”

“I have some idea of it,” Hansel said, “but I would like to make sure of it tonight, and tell you in the morning. If it were to turn out that the princesses were dancing each night with men from the town, surly sailors and gruff carpenters, what would you do?”

The king looked angry, and answered, “I would hang the men so that they died, and I would lock all of the princesses up, in dungeons and in towers.”

“And what if,” Hansel said, “it were to turn out that the princesses were dancing with chickens and sheep, and dogs and cats?”

The king became amused, and laughed, “Ha ha ha! If they are dancing with animals, they are only playing, as princesses should! If that is what they are doing each night, to cause their shoes to be worn through, I would be glad.”

“Thank you, O king,” Hansel said, and then saluted the king, and walked backwards out of the room.

That night, Hansel and the fox again danced with the princesses. As they were leaving the dance, Hansel took a golden cup from one of the tables, as more proof of this secret ball.

In the morning, Hansel and the fox and the princesses and the king and the courtiers all gathered together in the throne room.

“So,” the king said, “have you figured out what happens each night, that causes the princesses’ shoes to be worn through by each morning?”

“Yes, O king,” Hansel answered, and told the king the secret of the stairway under the eldest princess’s bed, and the silver forest at the bottom of the stairs. As proof, Hansel held up to the king the sparkling branch he had taken that was made of silver, and then the branch that was made of gold which sparkled even more, and finally the branch that was made of diamonds which sparkled the most. Hansel also showed the king the golden cup.

He said to the king, “Each night, the youngest princess dances with a pig, and the other princesses dance with animals as well: there is a sheep, a pony, a bear, a chicken, a deer, a wolf, a python, a rat, a cat, and a monkey, and lastly, the eldest princess dances each night with a dog, whose hair is long and golden, just like hers.”

Seeing the branches and the cup that Hansel had shown him, the king asked the eldest princess, “Is all of this true?”

Knowing they had been found out, the eldest princess nodded her head, and confessed, “Yes, king.”

The king laughed, “Ha ha ha! Wonderful! Thank you for telling me this secret! Now, you may choose one of the princesses to be your wife, and someday you will wear my crown!”

Hansel chose the eldest princess to marry. He and she went on a walk outside of the castle together, and as they walked, he said to her, “I will marry you, and someday, I will be king, and you will be queen. But you may keep dancing with the dog, whose long and golden hair is like your hair, and I will keep dancing with the fox, because he is already my dearest friend, and I already love him more than any other, and I can see that you already love the dog as well.”

The princess thought that all of that was wonderful, and she and Hansel got married, and they continued to dance every night, her with the dog, and him with the fox.

A LETTER OF COMPLAINTS

The model 21-21 is, with the stark exception of three enormous flaws, utterly astounding. When one pets it, it feels exactly like petting a real yellow lab: the smoothness of the fur, and the subtle heat of the skin underneath if you dig in your hand against the grain and press your fingertips in to the skin at the base of the hairs. Every whisker is of perfect placement and length, the eyes are like living gems, the pawpads are at once soft and yet terse and a slight bit ragged around the edges, and when locked around your hips, one has never felt so securely held. The improvement in battery life to three hours of continuous active use deserves a standing ovation. Make no mistake: I write to your team as a long time customer and enjoyer of your business's creations. If a day has passed when I have not made use of some 21- model, then a day has passed that was wasted.

We must come, though, to the reason of this letter, which is, unfortunately, to highlight the 21-21's blatant flaws. Not one of these flaws is new, but they are reaching a pattern of being ignored by you that is becoming impossible to forgive. If you cannot write me back with a signed promise that every one of these flaws will be addressed in the next model, then I can promise you now that the release of the 21-22 will see one fewer customer.

Now. To give brief preface to the first flaw. If I were to hold the engorged penis of a live dog in one hand, and the engorged penis of a 21-21 in the other, I would not be able to tell you which one was which. Except, of course, for the one dead

giveaway, which is the horrid CLUNK that occurs when the 21-21's penis is bent backwards! A dog's penis can move to face backwards with ease! It is an essential aspect of their mating behavior, that the male, after penetrating the female while facing one way, will dismount and remain penetrating the female while facing the other way. It does not pain the male, unless done exceptionally poorly, and the pivoting of the penis from forward-facing to backward-facing occurs as one brief and smooth motion! It does not *clunk* halfway through like my grandmother's jalopy shifting gears! It can be easily understood that designs may begin imperfectly, and improve over time. But your team has had years. YEARS. to address this key flaw which has existed since the Sirius alpha. Every other joint of the 21-21 moves as fluidly as purified water. I have seen topic after topic raised in community forums, FOR YEARS, of your customers asking if their 21- is defective, or whether there are plans to fix this shudder-inducing failure of engineering in the next version. Years, people. You have made it clear that you have no such plans to fix this. The anus of the 21-21 morphs itself perfectly to being kissed as though it is kissing the user back, and pulses in perfect harmony with the 21-21's simulated penile orgasms. And yet, STILL, there is that *clunk* when turning its penis back. What the technical hurdle is, I cannot imagine, but it will not stand, if you hope for your valued customers to continue to back your products. I have made my point there. On to flaw number two.

What, do you suppose, customers *wanted* out of the 21-21? I can assure you, in spite of what your marketing propagandists put forth, it was not the addition of human voice options. BOLD of you, by the way, to make that the DEFAULT option, when every beta tester of this product I have spoken to turned that feature off as the very first thing they did, and switched it back to the panting and happy barking of a dog. Of the very few who ever wanted a 21- model to speak in human words, they had installed their own modifications already, I assure you. The human voice was an unwanted solution to a manufactured problem: it was never the selling point of the 21-21. If I wanted a human model, I would go to some other company and get a human model! What do you think I want next, for the 21-22 to make my pancakes in the morning? I will make my own damn

pancakes! “To be a companion more real than ever before,” your marketing said. To be clear, and this is not empty flattery, but the utmost truth: as a multiple-times-daily user of the 21-20 model, that model was in very few ways lesser than a live bedroom playmate, and in many ways improved. The ability to call for an emergency deflation of the knot. The ability for them to go for longer than just a handful of eager thrusts. The rounded-off claws that can sensibly retract rather than injuring the submissive’s skin, my hips thank you for. We all, of course, remember how the 21-14 at launch was in fact *too* realistic in its mounting behavior, and video sharing boards were plagued with disinteresting media of actresses boredly assuming the position for upwards of twenty minutes waiting for the 21- to hit the mark, but this was fixed quickly in a patch which allowed user control of the 21-’s technique, with “realistic” still an option, but “dream fuck” being an instant smash success in the community. “To be a companion more real than ever before...” And yet, we come now to the second key flaw of the 21-21: it has no behavior at all outside of the bedroom. It can flirt, it can dominate, it can submit, it can respond to feedback and improve every aspect of its sex techniques, and yet, it cannot go for a *walk*, for it has no instinct to walk in front of its leash-holder. It cannot catch a *ball!* It doesn’t even LOOK at the ball when it’s thrown! When a customer seeks a product as sophisticated as the 21- is, they are looking for more than a dildo machine. How many of us have gone to sleep snuggling their 21-, and been distressed to find it stiff and unresponsive in the morning, battery dead? We know that these things are not alive, not really, but we do think of them as though they were all the same: that is the fantasy. That is the POINT, of YOUR product. I understand it may take some iterations before a 21- and I can blend in seamlessly at the dog park as a pre-sex date. But the fact that I cannot even toss a treat to it afterwards without it plinking off the dumb thing’s head makes it no wonder that so many would-be customers say a 21- couldn’t replace the real thing for them.

For the first two complaints, I was able to lead in with some positive preamble. The 21-21’s penis is truly very good, it merely has one noteworthy defect. The 21-21’s behavioral programming is everything a first-time customer would think to ask for, it

merely has an area that is underdeveloped for more devoted appreciators. With this third flaw though, I cannot lead in with anything kind. I can only say it as plainly as the sun is bright in the hopes that it sinks in through the skull of whoever may read this on the design team. How, in the name of GOD, THE LORD, THE CREATOR, THE HOLY GHOST, YAHWEY, I AM THAT I AM, CHRIST THE SAVIOR, and ANY other name you can think to call him by, HOW, does the 21-21 STILL NOT FEATURE ANY SMELLS? You pat its head, and it is warm and soft: you bury your nose in its head, and it's like burying your nose in a dollar store broom! Its pawpads smell like NOTHING! Its sheath has NO musk! Eating its ass is like tonguing at a piece of hairy gum that you had already chewed all the flavor out of a week ago! I do understand completely that not all smells are for everyone, and some customers may even be turned off by dog smells that were in any way accurate. LET THOSE COWARDS SUFFER. Or, as a compromise, MAKE SMELLS AN OPTIONAL FEATURE. The fact that smells have not even been *attempted*, for a creature as perfectly scented as the dog, is disgraceful, and you will never regain favor in my sight or in my wallet until an earnest step has been made towards remedying this error.

THE AFTERNOON THAT DAY

While walking on a trail through the woods, Prince Bright paused before a bridge to admire everything. It was no wonder the kingdom's painters were so renown: if they only captured a hundredth of this, they had made something worthwhile. In the beacons of sunlight which came down in the places between the oaks, a thick blanket of red flowers grew, scarlet petals alike to rings in a suit of chain mail or heads in a crowd. A songbird practiced nearby, piping her call time and again, at times more brief, and at times a more protracted longing, the briefer the more sweet. Ahead, a familiar and sturdy bridge over a wide stream that seemed mirthful in its trickling voice, and the Malamute Courtly whom Prince Bright had ventured out with on this walk. The very large and very thickly coated grey-and-white hound stood at the start of the bridge, looking back at Bright, tail high and wagging in reserved measure.

Bright took in a big breath of the cool air, and began onward, towards the bridge.

Courtly barked, and stepped into Bright's path, wagging more quickly.

Bright gave a put-on scoff to the dog, put his hands on his hips, and asked as though it were an imposition, "Here?"

Courtly's wagging still rapid, the large dog came forward in quick happy steps, and forced his nose against the prince's left hand, prying it off from the prince's hip with eager nudges and sniffs.

“Oh, very well,” the prince said gladly, and lowered himself onto his knees.

What a perfect operation the two of them had it down to. With his left hand, Bright pet the dog along the back a few times, as the two of them nuzzled their heads against each other, pressing their weights into one another. Then, hand never leaving touch with the dog, Bright slid his fingers down the side of the dog’s lush coat, and placed his hand lifting along the dog’s belly, the wisps of fur there all so soft, though in possession of some fragments of some dead leaves. After a few rubs of the standing hound’s soft and warm belly, Bright then wrapped his fingers around the hound’s bulky sheath, feeling through it the hound’s erect and ready phallus. With the prince’s hand in place, Courtly mounted onto the prince’s arm, grabbing it by the forearm, fuzzy chin pressing down and subduing human shoulder. While the dog began mounting, the prince slid his hand forward, so that the thumb and pointer finger formed a loose hold over the front of the delightful sheath: when the hound began humping, the sheath was slid back from the penis by the thumb and forefinger, and the red and slick penis itself, hot and throbbing, pushed forward into the prince’s awaiting hand. There before the bridge, the dog continued to hump, while the prince continued to bear the dog’s weight pressing down upon him and give the dog a pleasurably shaped hand to thrust his penis into.

When the humping was finished, Courtly well satisfied, the prince released the dog’s phallus. Briefly, Bright and Courtly shared a kiss, canine tongue gracing human lips, human lips smooching canine muzzle. The prince then gently, carefully, positioned himself onto his back underneath the standing hound, and fellated the animal while the red penis was still engorged out of its sheath, and would otherwise be exposed to the open air, if not for the human care given.

Quite some time later, Courtly’s penis became limp enough that it slipped back into its sheath, slithering backwards from off of Bright’s tongue and out from between his lips.

Bright got up off of the ground, he and Courtly kissed once more, and then, this time, when Bright attempted to continue

on along the trail, over the bridge, Courtly allowed it, and walked along a small ways ahead of the human.

The two of them went on, around some hills of blue flowers, and down and up a green valley with a small stream at the bottom. Across the stream were cut stones, and the prince and the hound jumped from one to the next until they were over. Cresting the valley, the last stretch of the trail came into view. At the end was a pavilion which was set in a small clearing in the woods. A figured moved about there. As the prince and the hound drew nearer, the sound of a harp being plucked could be heard.

Courtly ran galloping ahead, and approached the man at the harp. The man gave a loud and warm greeting to the hound, stopping his playing to bend over and pet the animal's thick coat.

Prince Bright, on arriving, said, "Greetings, harper."

He knew well that this minstrel's name was Daniel, though it was a bit of good humored ribbing between them that Bright often called him by whatever instrument he was in possession of. Greetings flautist, greetings trumpeter, greetings drummer, at times with a wand in the minstrel's hand even greetings conductor was apt. And here, harper.

"Greetings, Prince Bright," the harper said, sitting facing away from his instrument, hands on his knees.

Courtly came back to Bright, and Bright bent and ran a hand over the hound's coat some times.

The harper went on, "I had not anticipated an audience, and I imagine—though I will be flattered if wrong—that you had not anticipated your servant Daniel. A pair of lovebirds wandering out alone into the woods I should think seld seeks company. If you would like the pavilion, I can pack up and be gone in the minute."

Prince Bright laughed warmly, and said, "Stay, harper, if it suits you. Sides the harp, have you brought anything other to play?"

"This lute, my lord," Daniel said, reaching into a large soft pack and withdrawing it.

"I would delight in playing a bit with you, if you would allow."

Daniel chuckled, and said, "You are more talented than your pretense suggests, my lord. Please, have it and play."

Daniel handed over the instrument. Under the pavilion were two tables, each with its own two benches. The harper and the prince seated themselves on the inward benches, each facing the other, with the hound finding a spot to lay down between the two, on the ends of the prince's feet. The prince also unshouldered the satchel he had brought, and from inside of it set out on the table behind him a bottle of wine, and some cheeses wrapped in wax paper.

The prince plucked a few preliminary scales and chords, to test the instrument was correctly tuned. As he did, he said to the harper, "In truth, I practice so much for him. If I play well, it relaxes him. If I play poorly, he worries." The prince found with satisfaction that Daniel's lute was tuned perfectly.

The two played. It was nothing like one would be bored by in a formal court. The prince, nodding vigorously, produced a rhythm on the lute that was lively, fit for folk to dance joyously to. The harper expertly picked out accompanying accents, nodding along himself after a time, falling into that which resembled choruses and verses, repeated motifs and varied melodies.

When the two of them slowed, and then eventually faded to a stop, Courtly was lying heavily on the prince's feet between them, snoring.

Softly, Prince Bright said to the harper, "Thank you. I do think I will leave off there, however, before I too much repeat the limited things I know."

With a wry slime, as though he were sharing something that he should not, the harper told the prince, "More than half the skill of an entertainer is in repeating yourself shamelessly."

Daniel accepted the lute when Bright offered it out. The minstrel tucked the lute back into his pack.

The prince asked, "Would you play for us a while? I don't think we will be long, but a song as we rest here would make the afternoon all the more wonderful."

"Please, my lord," the harper said, "of all I have occasion to play for, you have the most generous ear of them all. Of course I will play."

“What mean you by that?” the prince asked.

“Please, my lord, even having said it, I ask you think nothing of it.”

“I compel you,” the prince said. “If my ear is generous, then whose is not?”

The harper shook his head, and then said, “In truth, it is your brother. If I will play slow, he will say, ‘Faster, faster!’ If I then play faster, he then says, ‘Slowly, slowly! One cannot think in that noise!’ Be that as it may, I do not mean to be complaining too loudly. It is my office, after all, to... Oh, here he comes now.”

Prince Bright turned around on his seat, and observed his brother, Prince Stand, coming forth along the last small stretch of the trail approaching the pavilion.

Prince Stand was the king’s firstborn, and his being the firstborn was related to the reason why Prince Bright had been called Bright. After the birth of Stand, the king took more wives, and Stand’s mother worried that she would never bear another child again, as the king’s heart turned to the other women. In fact, Bright was later born before the other wives had yet conceived any daughters or sons, and so she named the newborn Bright, because he was a brightness upon her days. Prince Stand was called such because it was rumored that at his birth, his feet had emerged first, and he had stood and beat away the physician who had been delivering him. As of yet, Prince Stand and Prince Bright were the only two children of the king.

Though next in line for the throne, it was rumored that Prince Stand was severely ill. A year prior, when the rumors were first being whispered about, it had been quite easy to put the whisperings out of mind as thin scandal or rotten politics, as at that time, Prince Stand continued to have some glow to his appearance. As he neared the pavilion though, he seemed grey compared to the green surrounding. His steps, both with the left foot and the right, were slow, and though the prince did not appear crippled, the labor of walking was all the same heavy upon him. Dark bruise-like semicircles hung under his eyes. Though the day was indeed cool, and a thick garment with long sleeves would not be amiss, the approaching Prince wore over his thick autumn clothing a thicker winter cloak, dark green in

color, fastened shut to keep in any heat, and a scarf about his face, which he lowered only as he came up the pavilion steps.

Courtly wagged, and got up and greeted Prince Stand, offering himself to be petted. Stand did indeed run his hand over and over again along the large hound's back, remarking, "Yes, so good to see you, good Courtly. I hope your mate has dealt kindly with you. I'm sure that he has."

Stand came forth to the tables and set down his own satchel beside Bright's emptied satchel, and then took a seat beside Bright, both princes looking out at the trees. A pair of cardinals flew about, landing up on this branch and then that. Courtly came over and laid down once again on Bright's feet. Behind them, the harper began to play.

Prince Bright mentioned, "The new bell tower in the northern abbey is coming along nicely."

"Yes, I've heard them ringing the bells."

"Oh, is it that far along already?"

"I've heard them just this morning," Prince Stand said, rocking slightly in a way of nodding. Within his cloak, he crossed his arms one over the other, holding them tight to his body. "It must have been the northern abbey, I think. None of the other towers have bells that strike that high, and the sound did come from the north as I was leaving, anyways."

"Yes, it must have been, then," Bright agreed.

"Is this music to your liking?" Stand asked.

"Oh it is. I love this piece. Bonetti's 7th. Begun at the second movement. Yes, this piece is very good."

"Very good," Stand said, and ruminated on that, then asked, "Is there a favorite you would rather hear, though?"

"On this afternoon, no, the harper has made a superb choice," Bright said, quite truthfully. Courtly was nearly asleep again. "For this lively bracing day, Bonetti's 7th is an excellent sound. It seems to converse with the songbirds themselves, in a way."

"Hm. So it does."

The princes looked out at the flitting cardinals.

Stand inquired, "How do the days treat you?"

"This day, or all of them?" Bright asked.

Stand smiled slightly at that in a way of laughing, and said, "All of them."

Bright thought about it, and then answered, "I'll admit, all days are perfect lately. Though as a rude child I remember bemoaning all the pomp of attending functions, there was a complete switch at some stage, and I delight in all the conversation and speech, and I have absolutely found most gatherings of people to be beautiful to the eye with everyone's elegant dress and a room's gay decorations. My studies, lately, bring me to topics I've found new passions in: where I once might have thought pouring over written poems was an exercise in monotony, I've recently found it to be a rather pleasantly engaging endeavor, seeing a greater journey towards a realization by way of a great many petty wits; I find sounds in a poem alike to steps on a stroll; I say 'stroll' and not another word because one asleep on my feet will hear it, even in his rest, and be keen on venturing again, even though we venture already. And, speaking of him, he is my truest love. That is not easy to say, because I do remember very strongly the love of some who have left us. But the days out and around with him, his charm, his playfulness in spirit and yet his patience to wait on dull human things, his beauty, bluntly his lovemaking, and falling asleep face nestled within his thick coat, completely taken in his tickly hairs and his smell that is him." Bright rubbed his chin briefly, and then said, "I have been doing some writings on him, so some of my thoughts there may have come out already more articulately just-so than you should credit me for. But I have been writing, and now saying, very true things on how I love him."

"That is beautifully put, O Bright," Stand said. "I know full well, I like to think, of the type of love you speak of, for I have felt many of the same ways with Jester, and you have articulated something in that better than I might have."

Jester was of the very same parentage as Courtly, though from an earlier litter. It was well known of both princes, Bright and Stand, that at any function they were present at, a Malamute stud was most likely to be seen accompanying.

It was the way of princes to be given mares and bitches, stallions and studs, whatever it was that most suited their desires, so that they may exercise their young lustful passions to the fullest, while saving themselves for matrimony.

Stand went on, "I am glad the days have been so kind to you."

The cardinals flitted off to elsewhere in the woods. The harper played alone, though still as sweetly.

Stand bent around and took his satchel off of the table. Facing forward towards the empty woods again, he reached inside of the satchel's mouth, and drew out an ornate box, dark and polished wood accented with silver. He set the empty satchel back behind himself, and then lifted open the box, showing a pistol inside, lying atop the velvet cushions in the box's interior.

Stand said, looking into the box with Bright, "You are not much for guns, I know."

"I was once impartial, but the noise frightens Courtly greatly. So yes, I have picked up an aversion."

Stand patted the side of the box, not so harshly that it made a sound, a gentle pair of taps. He said to Bright, "You may find this one interesting as a curiosity. The bullet comes forth from this mechanism, here, and in the pulling of the trigger rotates the entire mechanism to another bullet, without need for the marksman to reload. Six missiles may be issued without need to fiddle with powder."

With a little smile, Bright said, "I think, then, that I should like this particular gun six times less."

Stand took the pistol up out of the box, and examined each side of it. He remarked, "You truly are blameless of anything, greatly kind, and have indeed been a brightness upon all whom have had the pleasure of sharing your company. Think of that."

Prince Stand gave a moment for him to do so, and then shot Prince Bright, Courtly, and the harper.

With aching joints, he stood up, returned the pistol to its box and the box to its satchel, and then departed from the pavilion to be at the king's bedchambers in the night, leaving Prince Bright's wine where it was on the table.

THE RENEGADE JACK OF HEARTS

Oh it had been good at first. It had seemed like something out of a story book, or a bad movie. They had met by singing together, for Christ's sake. In their college dorm. He had brought his guitar down into the laundry room because he felt awkward about practicing in front of his roommate, and thought he would try his luck in the laundry room at some middle-of-the-night hour when no one else was supposed to be around. So there he was, sitting on a little wobbly chair behind the table that was for folding clothes on, when in she came.

He was trying so hard to be cool. He would admit that fully, looking back afterwards. He didn't look up at her. It took every ounce of maturity he could hope to grasp for at that age not to immediately start into one of the two solos he had learned, but instead to keep going with the simple little back-and-forth strumming he was doing. Nice, and easy.

And she came in, and walked across to the other side of the little room, and started loading her laundry into one of the machines. And as she did, she started singing. And her voice was beautiful.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see*

He looked up at her, and she wasn't facing him at all, she was still loading in her laundry, one piece at a time, no rush, swaying back and forth. She had bright orange frizzy hair that hung down a little past her shoulders.

He didn't know the next verse of Amazing Grace. He could have convinced himself then that there wasn't one, because he would have heard about it, a song everyone knew like that. So, not knowing quite what else to do, he sang the very first verse again in his own voice, which was unpracticed, not good sounding, no sir. But midway through the very first line, she started singing it with him, and so the both of them sang it, and it felt unreal to him that it was happening.

She started her washing machine, and came over, and sat down across from him. She had a mask of freckles, and in addition to that, she had a scar on her face, a real noticeable one kind of to the side of her nose, going to her cheek bone, and the scar was raised very prominently in that moment with her big dimples, from how hard she was smiling. He didn't mention her scar to her. Once he had seen it, he tried very very hard not to stare at it at all, and so he looked into her eyes. It would turn out, her scar was from when she was little, her friend had actually stabbed her but not to kill her, they were playing a pretend game where they threatened each other to see who could make the other the most scared, and the friend had meant to just make her flinch with a big knife from the kitchen but had actually made contact. And in genuine, it wasn't anything more nefarious than that, she and the other person were still on friendly terms and the other person hadn't gone on to be a serial killer or anything, it had just been a really dumb, unfortunate mistake.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Oh um," he said, and stopped playing, and kind of hung his arms over the guitar. Nice and cool, he thought. And it was, but not because it looked all casual. It was because he looked like a dork, and chicks were starting to dig that, some of them. For him, it did him the favor of showing, more than he knew it did, that he was trying, which wasn't something to be ashamed of like he'd have thought if someone had pointed it out to him.

Anyways, she had asked him a question, “What’s your name?” And he stammered and actually forgot for a sec, but then it came to him in a rush, and he answered, “Lory. How about you?”

“Sandra,” she said.

And they got to talking. Really got to talking, a lot more than he had talked with anyone at all yet since coming here, even his roommate, even the couple of people here who had come from his same high school, Lory and Sandra really hit it off. So long after the fact, Lory wouldn’t have been able to say word for word what all of the conversation that night had been, Sandra probably could have, but he chiefly remembered how damn nice it was just to *talk*. He remembered complaining about some of his classes, and her listening, and saying she could relate, there was some BS she had to put up with in her own classes too, and she told him about it. They talked clear through until her laundry was done in the washer, and then clear through until it was done in the drier, and by that point the both of them really ought to have been getting to bed, there were classes the next day for the both of them, not early, but, it was an ungodly hour in the middle of the night, almost morning really, by then.

As she was leaving, he called to her, and asked her, hey. Do you wanna play pool tomorrow, after your classes? He had never been, but it was something that had come up in the conversation, as something they’d both like to do sometime here. And she smiled, and said yes, and they agreed to a time. And that was the beginning of it.

Lory stayed up all that night elated, but anxious that he was getting away with something. He had a sordid past. Not really, but that was what he thought he had at the time. He had seen in the woods a dying bird once, really dying, bloody and not able to get off its side and swarmed with flies and flapping its wings feebly, and Lory had tried to pet it to comfort it, he was just a little kid at the time, and the bird cried out in pain and flapped around and he pulled his hand back and ran away, and he thought afterwards he should have killed it, put it out of its misery with a big rock, he could have found one, but instead he’d let it go on having the worst last moments of life you could imagine, and he had pained it even more. It was stuff like that

that haunted him in the nights. Stuff that he had made worse because he was a bumbling, cruel idiot.

That was what he thought. In truth he got As and Bs all throughout high school, and he didn't have a mean bone in his body. He had entirely healthy interests, maybe aside from the fact they were all just rather personal in a way, solitary: he kept his nose down in books; he liked to go outside and find bugs, turn up rocks and see what scuttled or pulsated underneath, stare at moths, handle grasshoppers and wasps, catch snakes just to look at them close. He'd never had a girlfriend until junior year in high school, and she had broken up with him, he was not "boyfriend material." She got bored by him. Summer. Her name was Summer, and he'd had a crush on her for her name alone since he was eight, he always thought it was the prettiest name a girl could ever have, and she gave him a real chance, two months, before she broke it off, and that made his dating resume pretty rough. Besides that, all he had to speak of in the sex and dating department wasn't really something he did speak about, to anyone: he made out a lot with the family's Border Collie, Casidy, and did, well, other stuff with her, too. Some boys looked at porno. Others got straight into getting their classmates pregnant before they were eighteen. Others had alone time with dogs. His kick was dogs. He'd been with his own, mostly, but had taken it where he could get it when left alone with friends' dogs too, if the dog clearly liked him. He figured that if anyone knew he had done stuff like that, and since he didn't have anything else going for him that made that stuff with Casidy just a drop in the bucket, and since he actually liked it, if a chick could read his mind and see everything in it before agreeing to go on a date, he'd never see a date as long as he lived. So after that fate-guided meeting in the laundry room, as he tried to get to sleep, awaiting his date for the next day, he couldn't believe how lucky he was to have pulled something so slick.

Lory and Sandra. Their first date, playing pool, was fun. They laughed at themselves. They laughed every time Lory whiffed it, wasn't even in the ballpark of making a shot that would improve his standing on the board. They laughed every time Sandra mixed up what the goal was: "Sandra! Stripes!" "What? Oh come

on.” He had walked away from that date with his sides aching, from all of the laughing. It was sealed. They were an item. And there was no shortage of things for them to attend on or around a college campus, oh no, there were dances and sporting events and house parties, even a lot of creative events put on, arts and crafts or painting things they could attend as a couple, they could pack a date into every hour of the day and night if they wanted to, and they more or less did exactly that, so that by the time a couple of weeks had passed, they felt like they ought to have been celebrating their one year anniversary already.

It so happened that Sandra hadn't been stuck with a roommate, odd number of female students in the dorms, fate, and so she wasn't beholden to anyone about having guests over, and there was no one to complain that her boyfriend started hanging around every day and night. He practically lived there, and he was a swell enough guy, the other women on the floor liked him, they thought he was gay because he was usually soft spoken and never hit on anyone, didn't even seem particularly flirtatious with his own so-called girlfriend. And it was true enough that he wasn't trying to rush things with her as far as sex went. He didn't want to ruin a good thing. In mind of all the things that usually haunted him, all his mistakes, he didn't want to be the one to push and ruin it. But one night she had gotten to reaching down inside of his jeans and touching him, and that was that, and they started having sex most nights too. Even their idle time spent in her dorm room was filled with little happy moments, things to laugh at. Her freaking out big time over a daddy long legs, and him not even having to get a jar, he just goaded the little critter to walk onto his hand and then walked it outside, and let it go out there. Neither of them being able to open a jar of pickles if heaven and hell depended on it. Him practicing on guitar, her sometimes singing along, and he was actually getting better faster than he had been before by her pointers, not that she played, herself, but she had more of an ear for music overall. One day Lory had been making a sandwich, peanut butter and jelly, butter on the jelly side before the jelly went on, and one of the slices of bread out of the bag was way thicker than it should have been, almost like they had missed making a slice, but it wasn't quite twice as thick as a normal slice

either, just shy of that. “Check it out, Sandra,” he said, and showed it to her, compared to the other slices, and she said, “Oh that’s so weird, how do you think that happened?” and the two of them guessed on it for maybe an hour on and off, as they played games of checkers, and Lory ate the sandwich, sharing a lot of it with Sandra.

Over Thanksgiving, when a lot of students were going home to visit family for the holiday, Lory and Sandra and a couple of their friends all drove out to a cabin on a lake. There was beer and swimming and bug bites and poker and the raunchiest jokes Lory or Sandra had ever heard in their lives, yes indeed. One night they were all sitting around the dining room table playing a card game, not poker, something without betting, just a game to pass the time. Lory and Sandra had each had a couple but the others were *drunk*, real drunk, and he and she were in their own corner of the table secretly giggling to themselves at the others, like secret agents spying together on a party they were attending undercover. A loud woman, friend of a friend, started telling all about how men didn’t know how to please a woman, how to get in there and do what a body needed, and she was not shy to speak about it from experience. Piercing laughs filled the room as people’s facades broke over how right she was, even the guys were wiping their eyes as their fists pounded on the table, doubled over laughing. And Lory and Sandra tried to stay unseen, but it wasn’t going to happen, there was comedy to be mined out of them by the others. In a lull in the shouting and laughing, a guy across the table said to Lory, so everyone could hear it loud and clear, “So what’s your technique?” And Lory reached for his beer and had a long, slow drink, hoping everyone would move on to something else before he was done, but it had the wrong effect completely, everyone quieted down, you could hear a pin drop, and they waited for him to say. And when there wasn’t any beer left he quietly set it down, and leaned on his elbows on the table, looked down at his hand of cards, and said, “So whose turn is it?” And there was booing and thumbs-downs, someone said, “You got nothing, damn.” And then the eyes all turned to Sandra. And she laughed, broke the ice for herself a little by it, and she put a hand over Lory’s hand and said, “He’s fine, everyone. He’s not a Kryptonian sex idol like you all think

you are, but he gets it done. Jake it's your turn." Lory felt like he had probably never blushed harder in his life as Sandra was talking, but the ravens were satisfied with that answer, they had picked all the meat off that topic they were clearly going to get, and they moved on, laughing and ribbing about other things.

A few more rounds of the card game were played, and by then it was getting to be time for bed, Lory and Sandra both were yawning. The others were still planning to be up for a while, one guy came in and said he'd gotten a fire started outside, and as everyone else started making their way outside, or went to use the bathroom or refresh their drink, Lory and Sandra held hands, and made their way off to their room. They undressed down to their underwear and climbed into bed together, and shared a blanket, and both of them were pretty ready to get to sleep, but there was something Lory wanted to bring up, before that.

"Babe," he said, "I'm not as boring as you think, when it comes to being kinky, I just didn't think you wanted to know."

"I'm not worried about that babe," she said back, and nestled in in the bed even more. "I just wanted them to shut up."

He gave a quiet little under-his-breath laugh, in agreement. And then he told her, thinking he was cool as can be, "You weren't my first time."

"Hold on, what?" she said, in an angry tone, quicker anger than he had ever seen in her before. But he didn't know better yet how to handle that, because as of then, things had been good. Their conversations weren't yet careful bomb diffusals, wartime negotiations. He just thought she was a little surprised, maybe embarrassed that she hadn't given him enough credit at dinner and would have to apologize to him. He really thought that's where it stood.

So he went on, and said, "Yeah, I never brought it up, but I've been into more than you'd guess. I didn't think you'd want to know."

"You said you and Summer never did anything but kiss. You said you and her *barely even* kissed."

Now he heard the anger, now it was unmistakable, but he still thought it was savable. So easily savable that he said the next thing like he was revealing the answer to a joke. "I never did

anything with Summer. That was true, we barely even kissed, promise. It wasn't her I was talking about. You didn't know this, but I've always been into animals."

"Like *dogs*?" she asked.

The way she said that one was what finally made him realize this wasn't about to be a simple miscommunication that got patched up once they were on the same page, caught up to the same point in each other's scripts. They disagreed about this. They disagreed completely, by the sound of it. She said "dogs" as though he had said he'd like to go jump down into an outhouse to take a bath. He knew fooling around with dogs was a little risqué of a thing to admit to, maybe, but he thought they were past the point of that being a problem to talk about, in their relationship. Apparently not.

"Well," he said, "yeah. All of this started before *we* met, but yeah. Casidy."

He had told her about Casidy. She had seen pictures of Casidy, and some other pictures from home, tacked up on his dorm wall. Although, she certainly had not known that he had masturbated to one of the pictures of the Border Collie a few times, actually, both before and after he and Sandra had started going out. It was one of her holding a stick in the front yard, proud as could be, sunlight in her long hair. It may not have been known to Sandra how much he was fond of that picture, or how much he had considered going back home over the Thanksgiving break to see Sandra specifically, and get up to some of their old routines, as it were. He hadn't shown his hand on every last detail of that. But, he had shown enough. He had told her about the dog, Casidy, and she had seen the picture even if she didn't know the details, and so she knew, when he said he had been with Casidy, exactly who he meant he had been with.

She said crossly, "Well that had *better* be something that stops now that *we're* together."

"Yeah," he agreed, before he thought about it.

As soon as the word had left his mouth, he was imagining how was he going to bring the idea back up again and convince her back into letting him, with Casidy still, or another dog, at some point. Because he wasn't going to stay away from dogs

forever. He had come to realize, in the time he and Sandra had been going at it, that humans weren't all that exciting to him. He really preferred a well-placed Border Collie tongue to putting it in a woman. He wouldn't have guessed he would have felt that way, beforehand, but it was true. And the sooner he could try to bring it up again, the better it would be for her, for both of them, he thought. But there it was, he had already flown the white flag on the topic, and that, it turned out, was going to be an impossible thing to retract, because they were fighting now. He didn't know it completely. He didn't know that things had changed. But he got the idea pretty quick. The next morning, she came back to the cabin from a grocery run and was unpacking while he happened to be making himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with butter on the jelly side before the jelly. The others were all outside on a floating dock, drinking tequila, complete college alcoholics with nobody at the cabin present to be the voice of temperance. And as Lory was taking out the bread for the sandwich, one of the slices was a thick slice again. And he pointed it out to Sandra, "Hey, look babe. Another thick slice." And she turned and looked for a second, and then turned back to stacking cans in the cupboard, and she said, "Who cares." Wowza. "Not you, I guess," he said, and started spreading the peanut butter. "What was that?" she asked him, and stopped stacking cans and turned to him. He kept spreading the peanut butter. "You said who cares, so, I assumed you don't care, and I said so." "But was does that *mean*?" she asked. He set the knife down, where it clattered on the countertop, and he folded the two sides of his sandwich together. "It doesn't mean anything," he said. She made a doubtful hmmmmmmmm, and turned back to stacking the cans, slamming them onto the cupboard so hard that Lory halfway wanted to tell her to be careful she didn't break something, but, he didn't. He put his knife in the sink and left the kitchen with his sandwich, and ate it in the living room. Sandra walked from the kitchen to the front door and stepped outside, walking past him without saying anything. He finished his sandwich, went to the fridge, poured himself a glass of lemonade from a pitcher, and sat back down in the living room with the glass, sipping on it, and thinking. It

was pretty clear to him what it was about. It wouldn't be about anything else.

The door opened, and Sandra leaned inside, sunlight haloing her figure, making her frizzy orange hair seem like some kind of exotic luminescent jellyfish. She said to him, as though nothing in the world had happened, "Doofuses are playing volleyball, wanna come?"

It was her way of apologizing, he thought, because he didn't know better yet. So he said, "Yeah," and stood up, finished off his lemonade, and went outside with Sandra, and they played volleyball with everyone and laughed with each other about how much of an edge they had, being the only ones sober.

And that was how things went on with them. Plenty of fun, especially when they were out and around friends, but in private where no one was looking she was cruel to him. One day back at the dorm she told him his guitar playing sounded like shit, actually said the words, "That sounds like shit," and he stopped. Didn't play much at all from then on. Any time he brought something up, like an interesting turn of phrase in a book he was reading or something funny that had happened that day in class, she was sarcastic with him, said, "Wow, that's really interesting thanks for sharing" with all the venom that could be imagined, and sometimes she didn't even do that much, she just rolled her eyes at what he said and then ignored him. If he spent time in his own dorm, the phone always starting ringing pretty quick, and it was her, asking why he didn't want to be over. And then sometimes there would be the times when she wasn't like that. The times like that time she had leaned inside through the doorway and asked if he wanted to play volleyball. Sometimes she *would* say "Oh that's so interesting" and still sound like she meant it. Sometimes she would bring up to him something that had happened in one of her classes, something ridiculous that some classmate had said in a workshop, and they would laugh. But it wasn't good anymore. Even when things looked like they were good, he always had a feeling like he was on thin ice, and it was only a matter of time before he made the wrong step, said the slightest thing that caught her the wrong way, and it was back to her being cruel again, her saying that whatever had just been fun was stupid, and that he was stupid. Over winter break

he wanted to go home and visit family, give the relationship some space, but she said, "You're going to get your dick wet with that *fucking* dog if you go back there, aren't you?" And in all truth he did want to see Casidy, he missed petting her and giving her food and going on walks out in the woods with her, and in better circumstances sure he would have liked to kiss her and do more with her too, but he had already agreed, that night in the cabin, that he was done with dogs in that way while he and Sandra were dating, and so he actually had made up his mind that when he did see the Border Collie over winter break, there would be no fooling around, not even any kissing at all, she would be like an ex to him. But there was no convincing Sandra of that. He tried, but she kept talking over him before he could get a sentence out. It was pointless. So he agreed to come with her to visit her family instead, for the entire three weeks. Her parents were very polite, and he didn't have a bad word to say about them, and Sandra was actually mostly really friendly those three weeks.

When they got back to school, he started working at a gas station, part time. They had each gone into college with savings from jobs they'd had in high school, him working at a gas station then too, her a fast food joint, and neither of them was near broke. but she had been getting on him about money, saying how more of a buffer never hurt, and he didn't disagree, he thought that was a fair point. It wasn't long, of course, before she started getting on him about his hours, saying he was working too much, asking why his hours never seemed to overlap with her classes and if he was trying to find an excuse to spend time away from her. Christ, he wasn't, but he realized what a good idea that was, and he started to arrange it that way as much as he could. No matter what they still saw each other every night though. And still, there were those times she was nice to him, that made him stay.

And then, the clincher. It was the spring, not long out before spring break. She was nice to him all day, that day, which was offputting enough by itself, and the two of them went out on a walk through town, and they came to a bridge over a river, and they stopped halfway over to stand at the railing and look over together, out at the big river crashing along, and the cars going

over another busier bridge that was farther upstream. And as they were standing there looking out at the river, side by side, she said it, "I'm pregnant."

He thought about pushing her over the railing. Not seriously, but it was the first idea that flashed across his mind when he heard what she said.

He knew what he was supposed to say back. And, he did. Not romantically though. He had been burned too much to really express much of any genuine feeling to her, because it was easier if the pleasant thing she turned and trampled on hadn't been real to him anyways. But, he knew what he had to say some version of, and he did. "I suppose we should get married then."

That did not land well, and he wasn't surprised. "I hate you," she said flatly, and then turned and started marching away over the bridge.

He called after her, "Well do you want to or not?"

She didn't answer him, kept marching away. He walked alongside her back to campus, trying now and again to say something, but she marched on, ignored him, wiped tears out of her eyes, and when they got to her dorm room she went in without him and slammed the door.

He didn't know what to do. He went back to his room, told his roommate he might actually be spending the night for once, and then the phone rang, and Lory answered it, and her voice came through and said, "Yes."

"Okay," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. She wasn't sorry. It was the same thing as always. It was her way of not giving him enough steam to achieve escape. Worked like a charm. Every, damn, time. She said to him, "Come over."

And he came over. They got married the next day at city hall. They both signed the papers. They booked a room at a restaurant for a week from then, and had their families over, and Lory's parents met their daughter in law for the first time, and hit it off well enough.

Lory and his dad stood outside at one point as his dad smoked a cigarette.

"She pregnant?" his dad had asked.

Lory nodded. "Yeah."

“Need any advice?”

“Got any?”

His dad smiled ruefully, and said, “Nope,” and then sucked in another drag.

Lory and Sandra got an apartment together. Lory picked up more hours at the gas station, that buffer of savings now feeling a lot more tangible than before, Sandra had been right about that one if nothing else. Lory came home each day to a nice looking place. Sandra had really taken to decorating. The baby’s room, especially, looked like something out of a magazine. She even threw him a bone in the decorating, and put up some of his pictures in frames on different shelves among her own family pictures, although none of his pictures she had put up had a certain Border Collie in them. She had seized those from him a long while back. He kind of hoped she’d held onto them, and the first time he came home to see framed pictures around, he went from one to one, hoping one might be the one of Casidy, with the stick in the front yard. But no. He never saw that one again. More than likely she’d ripped it up. Casidy was an ex, anyways, a bygone time, and she hadn’t even come up in the context of arguments in quite a while. Because all of Sandra’s vitriol, it didn’t stem *from* the fact of Lory and Casidy’s horny adolescent deeds. That was just what had broken the honeymoon phase. Sandra cared a lot that things were just-so. When he’d picked up one of the framed pictures of her and her mother to hold it up and compliment it, she scolded him and told him to put it back, and then told him *how* to put it back for minutes on end of arguing, and her making him do it since he’d been the one to ruin it and now she wanted him to fix it, until eventually she did put it back at just the right placement herself. And so when she had first learned that she wasn’t his first time, and that he’d been with a dog of all things before he’d been with her, that was what had made her realize that their relationship wasn’t something perfectly out of a story book or a bad movie. But she had already been mean. It didn’t have to have been knowledge of Casidy that sent her back to it. If he had failed to compliment her haircut at some point, or if he had said he wasn’t up for going out some night, it would have broken her spell just as much, brought them to the exact same outcome. Nice as she was

for as long as she was at the start, she must have been chomping at the bit for something to get set off by, so that she could get back to being her mean, mean self.

The baby was stillborn. “Something’s wrong,” Sandra had said, before the delivery had begun. She had stepped out of the baby’s room and into the living room where Lory was sitting watching TV, and she looked really, really scared. She kept repeating, “Something’s wrong, something’s wrong, something’s wrong, something’s wrong,” on and off all the way to the hospital.

When they were able to get home, Sandra trashed the baby’s room, ripping everything off the walls and knocking over furniture, and at some point she took to all of it with a hammer. Lory slipped out as it was escalating, went for a walk by himself, a few laps around the block.

At some point in the middle of a lap she came marching up to him, he saw her from a ways off, saw she was furious. She said to him, “You hate me!”

“Sandra,” he said, and really gently, because now of all times he didn’t want it to be an argument, he wanted to tell her it was alright.

She shouted over him though, “You’re going to leave me!”

He shrugged. “I’m not.”

The idea had crossed his mind, no doubt about that at all. But a day ago he had been prepared to spend eighteen years with her, if that was the decent thing to do. And right then, she needed him to tell her he wasn’t leaving, even as she yelled at him for hours that he was going to, and all he could do was quietly say that he wasn’t.

One day, later that week, when Sandra was out being consoled by her mother, Lory took the opportunity to go into the baby’s room, and bring all of the debris out to the dumpsters. They lived on the first floor, so there were no stairs to contend with. He took the bag out of their kitchen garbage bin, and used the bin to move out load after load. The room was completely bare when Sandra came back. He left the door to that room open, wanting her to see it, get it over with. Oh she yelled, and he thought she might actually kill him that time, it was in her eyes like she was really thinking about it. The police came and

knocked on the door. There was a noise complaint. Sandra became really quiet and apologetic. The police had heard her through the door as they'd been approaching, there was no doubt that the noise had been coming from her. The police left with no citations issued and no particularly well-done marriage counseling, but they didn't have to come back. Sandra did stop yelling after that. She still berated him, but she did it at a normal voice, like she'd used to. It was back to the same old, same old.

Both of them had stopped going to school. Lory was working more than full time, and Sandra stayed at home, or was out with her mother. Mostly, he and her crossed paths as little as they could arrange it, but they slept in the same apartment, same bed, so there was only so much avoiding each other. And sometimes she was nice to him. Usually not. But sometimes she was.

One day, in the spring, after they'd been married for a year and some, Lory had decided to take a walk in a nearby woods, by himself. It was a day off for him, Sandra was out with her mother, he had nothing to explain to anybody if he decided to just go do something. So, he walked. Passing by a picnic table that was beside the trail at one point, he had an old impulse to look under it, and there, hanging on the side of one of the crossed wooden slats that held the table up, there was a daddy long legs. He felt some flit of joy cross over him, unexpectedly. Brief, but, it was something.

He made another decision on the way back. He stopped into a pet store and he got a goldfish, with a big rectangular tank and a filter and colorful pebbles and decorations and everything, and when he got home he set it on the kitchen table. When Sandra got home, he was sitting leaning back in a chair, hands behind his head, looking at the goldfish that was still in its own bag floating in the water, acclimating the one water's temp to the other.

Oh there was no surprise what she thought of seeing that. Right away, not even through the door, she froze, and asked, "How much did that cost?"

"Hundred and thirty," he said.

"Did you even think to *ask* if you could get that?"

He continued to face the fish, continued to wear a blissful smile, and he closed his eyes as though he was relaxing on a beach towel out in the sun, and he said, "Thought about it."

"So you just *decided* to get this enormous fish tank that doesn't go with anything in the apartment?"

"Yup."

She scoffed. "Unbelievable! Is the store still open?"

"Oughta be."

"You are getting up and returning that right now."

"Threw away the receipt."

They went on arguing about that the entire day, until eventually Sandra went into the bedroom and locked Lory out. He slept on the couch and was glad to do it.

The next morning he let the fish out of the bag into the tank's water, gave it some food, and watched it as he ate his bowl of cereal. It was another day off for him, a rare actual two-days-off-in-a-row weekend, and he more or less intended to sit around all day long and look at a goldfish and be happy. After he was finished eating, he stood at the kitchen sink, rinsing his bowl, and the smell of the garbage caught him, the bag was getting to be full. He turned off the water, set the bowl down, and turned and tied off the top of the garbage bag, and carried it out. When he came back in, the fish tank was gone. He looked around. The door to the bedroom was closed, and when he tried it it was locked. He opened the door to the other room and looked in, and saw that it was still as it had been when last he'd looked in, just some packed up boxes, off-season clothes and the like, but no fish tank. Then, wandering back into the living room, he saw the window was open. Stepping up to it, and looking out, he saw the fish tank glass smashed on the ground outside, and all that had been in it spilled out onto the grass in a soaked run. The goldfish was there atop the colorful pebbles, its scales brightly reflecting the sunlight, its body severed almost completely in two by a shard of glass. It didn't move. It was dead.

Lory turned away from the window, walked across the living room, put on his shoes, grabbed his car keys, and left.

He called her from a motel that night.

“Hey Sandra,” he said, and didn’t even bother with more than that, because he knew he’d get talked over if he tried, and he didn’t want to give her that.

“Where are you?” she asked, angry.

He waited for her to say more, and she didn’t, so he then said one of the things that he had called to tell her. “I bought a van.”

Her yelling in response to that wasn’t even understandable through the phone, it came through all broken, garbled. At some point she asked a question, he didn’t catch it.

He said, “I traded in the car, so it didn’t cost too much after that.”

Again, fury. And he actually thought that her feeling that way was fair enough, because he hadn’t told her yet that they were over.

He knew it himself. He was done. He was free again. He was going to drive to Casidy, and borrow her, take her on the road trip of her dreams, and she and him were going to make out all they wanted, human and dog like he always liked better, snuggle naked, take care of themselves, take care of each other, he was going to feed her snacks and go on walks and play fetch again, and they were going to love it. They were going to love it. For the time being, though, he hung up the phone, went out to the van, and just sat in the back, sipping on a margarita out of a water bottle, and looking forward to it.

A WIZARD'S HOOKAH

With an extra big snore, Travin startled himself awake.

He gathered his bearings. Daylight. He was sitting in a big wooden chair on a porch that looked out over a lawn, beyond which was the woods, with many white birch trees at the fore.

He checked for any dangers. Holding his breath, he listened carefully. Birds chirped. The wind whistled through the trees. There were no footsteps, tapping over wood or shuffling through foliage. No snorts, growls, hisses, or whisperings.

He double checked it was all real—fool him three times, and all that. He smacked his arm up and down against the arm of the wooden chair he sat in. He could feel the arm smacking, and even more importantly, he could feel full control over the arm's movement, no paralysis, no forced inaction. He looked at the nearest tree in the woods, a skinny birch, and willed himself to teleport to it. He did not. He stayed put in his chair. He reached for the deck of cards in his left pocket to give the cards a shuffle. There was no deck, nor did he ever carry one. It all seemed to check out, so far.

He counted his friends. Lief. Anda. Rin. Jerritz. Kee. Tegg. Lohss. Loh. Dellia. Lyle.

There. Done. He was here. He was safe. It was real. His friends were all counted.

He turned his head and looked around. He sat on his own front porch, at his house in the woods. Indeed, he had woken up similarly enough for two, nearing three years. He looked down at his feet, saw a half finished pint glass, and leaned down and

picked it up. Settling back in his chair again, he chugged the remaining half of the pint, the taste of it a delightful and refreshing resumption to his day, the nap he had just awoken from a good rest. He ran his fingers through his scraggly beard, and scratched at the chin underneath.

He stood, stretched, yawned, and walked to the other side of his porch, where there was the bar. His hip was a little bit stiff, from sleeping on the chair again. He so rarely slept in the master bedroom. The bed in there was very comfortable, but with it being up on the fifth floor, it was quite a lot of stairs to bother with. The couches inside on the first floor's sitting room often proved a good middle ground, for convenience and comfort. And the gloves which hovered through the rooms, carrying brooms and feather dusters and neatly re-straightening the furniture, well, they had no mind to comment on it if he slept here or there.

Stepping behind the counter, Travin refreshed his pint glass, had a few big gulps from the new drink, and then wandered off of the porch, down the steps, and around the house to his open air workshop. He sauntered up to his work table, had another sip of his pint, set it aside, and looked at where he had left off.

On the table was a wooden race car, resting upside down. If upright, it would be a sleek black specimen, the hood all coming to a sharp wedge, and ripples going back along the body that resembled a flag caught in the wind. Into the hood, on the upper surface of the wedge, were shallow carvings of two big eyes and a linear mouth, also painted over with same coat of black as the rest of the body. Blackest Trout, he had named this one.

In spite of Blackest Trout's grand appearances, this one had not done very well on debut, and so Travin had brought it back for more work. The car was presently upended, and showing a hole he had bored in the underside. The hole, cutting through the paint and into the pale wood inside, was not so deep as to come all the way out through the top of the car, yet was still wide enough to get some appreciable weighting in there. Travin picked the car up, held it up to his eyes, and looked at it at an angle in the sunlight, gauging the circumference and, more particularly, the depth of the hole he had made.

He nodded, set the car down, had another sip of his pint, and then walked across the workshop to a wooden crate. He picked the crate up in one hand and began rooting through its contents. Inside it there were bits and bobs of iron—bent nails, scuffed spoons, found buttons. Sifting the contents around and brushing things to one side and the other, the muscular man gave a triumphant cheer at finding a thick iron filling, cylindrical. It looked to be the exact circumference needed—he had bored the hole with this discarded part in mind—and, on holding the filling up in the sunlight, he gauged that it would fill the depth of the bored hole very neatly, as hoped.

He dropped the crate back to the ground and returned to his workbench.

Taking Blackest Trout up in one hand, he used a little mallet to tap the filling into the hole. It fit perfectly snugly. The extra weight would be good, give the car a fighting chance on the track—a newcomer, it was to be expected that Blackest Trout had been unequipped to go toe to toe with the likes of Firesteed VI and Mordecai. It was more-so the fact that Blackest Trout had only barely beat out Driftfeather that gave tell to real need for improvements. Travin smiled to himself. With this extra weight alone, unless something very interesting occurred, like a wheel malfunction or an act of the gods upon the track, Blackest Trout would leave Driftfeather in the dust, and would stand a chance to place among the rest. He would have to see it though, to know it all fully.

With the extra weight slotted in, Travin picked up Blackest Trout, and wandered around to the back yard. There, running down one side of the yard, was a big wooden track. The side nearest him was raised twenty feet off the ground, with a stairway up to a platform where he could walk back and forth up there and arrange the cars in their starting stalls. From there, the track sloped downward, each car having its own walled off lane, each lane having its own unique descents and rises, straightways and plunges, until all eventually came to a stop at the end, the bottom of the slope.

Travin climbed up the stairs and walked to the far end of the platform, where he placed Blackest Trout in the last stall. The competition in the other seven stalls already waited, with a red

and white awning overhead to keep them in the shade. There was Firesteed VI in the champion's slot, the first track, and the solid iron body of Mordecai, a car of Lyle's construction, in the second. Then in an order determined by random lot, Twilight Torchbearer, Swift Hart, Good Messenger, Driftfeather, Firesteed V, and of course now in the newcomer slot, Blackest Trout. Other cars, not in play for this current race, sat in their own cubbies at one end of the platform, a sheet over all of them to protect them from the elements. Some were more or less retired, others, only resting.

Hand in his beard, fingers combing the wiry hair, Travin paced the platform back and forth. He paused behind Good Messenger, a race car that was carved out into the shape of a ship, masts and all, though with ribbons instead of sails—the cannons aboard, and the cargo of tiny gold bars, gave the whole thing a mean weight to throw around. Getting his eyes down low with the car, he examined the track beyond from the car's level, pictured how it would go, and then nodded. He walked a little more, picked up Swift Hart, and rubbed the wheels so they spun back and forth. The front left wheel squeaked a bit. Foreboding. He set it back down.

With the race cars all in place, Travin went back down the steps to the ground, and wandered up to his back porch. There, eleven treasure chests stood on a long table. He went to the first chest, marked "Travin," and opened it up. From inside, he counted out eighty golden coins, a pearl necklace, and a jewel-encrusted silver crown. He brought those items over, a few pieces at a time, to a round table out in the back yard, where there were eleven seats. The table at each seat was marked for betting. At his chair, he placed sixty golden coins, the pearl necklace, and the silver crown on Firesteed VI. He placed nineteen golden coins on Mordecai. And, in the spirit of taking a gamble, he placed the last one golden coin on Blackest Trout.

He then went up to the next chest, marked "Jerritz," and took a stack of ten golden coins out from inside. Travin chuckled to himself as he walked the coins to the table, shaking his head. If all the currency to buy them a needed night's stay at an inn were on the line, Jerritz would have insisted on betting it on Swift Hart. "It screams to us its sign, and you would ignore it!" he

would say, even teasing himself in the dramatic delivery, but all the same entirely intent on what he was saying. Travin could hear it as he walked. “The underdog! Aren’t you the least curious about its call?” No one would have been able to talk him out of it, short of holding his or her own coins tight, and only allowing Jerritz to risk just his. At Jerritz’s seat, Travin placed ten coins on Swift Hart.

One by one down the line—Anda, Rin, Lief, Lyle, Kee, Lohss, Loh, Tegg, Dellia—Travin carried the bets over and set them down.

Then, he went back to the head of the track. There on one of the struts, there was a lever that lowered all the gates above, and sent the cars going.

Travin took a slow, deep breath, smiled at the precarious about-to-happen nature of the moment. He looked over at the betting table with all of the gold and silver and jewels shining in the sunlight. And then he pulled the lever, and quick as he could ran along down the track, until he could see the cars racing down.

By the time he even got in a position to see anything, Firesteed VI was nearly at the end and Mordecai was fast behind: indeed, the two of them slammed into their respective finishing plates and then rolled up the curved slope beyond. The two of them came rolled back down from the steep slope, and managed to each backtrack over the finishing line in a sort of victory lap, before third place, Good Messenger, came over. Fourth was Firesteed V, then fifth Blackest Trout. Travin, seeing Blackest Trout place fifth, clapped heartily at the improvement. Torchbearer and Swift Hart crossed at nearly the same time, and Travin was entirely pleased that he would have to check the official recording mechanism. Last, Driftfeather rolled across.

Down at the end of the track, Travin knelt down, and opened up a chest that was tucked away underneath the course. From inside he pulled out the logbook, which was a very large tome, and a pencil. With those items in hand, he turned, and looked at the recording mechanism.

It was, he felt, maybe the cleverest thing he had ever come up with. In some ways a shame that such an accomplishment wasn’t made until recently, but in other ways even that was a

victory. New days in his life, new leaves to be turned. Lyle himself had complimented it, and not just in a way where he was being nice, he had gotten down into the mechanism and looked around at it from all sides, and said, “By the gods, what a perfect solution to this.”

Below the track, near to the finish line, there was an octagonal glass prism. Inside of it presently, now that the race was finished, were stacked eight spheric gems: a red ruby from the first lane was at the bottom, then on top of it a purple amethyst from another lane, then a blue sapphire from another, and so forth, each gem corresponding to a lane, stacked in the order of first place at the bottom, first to fall into the prism, and last place at the top, last to fall into the prism. At the top of the prism were eight gates, one on each of the prism’s eight sides, all equally high. Behind each gate was a steep slope in which each lane’s gem had rested, waiting for its gate to come open so it could fall in and mark its lane as finished. The gate mechanisms at the top of the prism where each connected with wire to plates at the end of each lane, such that when a car hit the plate in its lane, the wire was released, and the gate was instantly opened, and the gem could fall in.

The original idea for the mechanism had been to produce eight slopes below the track, one below each lane, and have the gates open and allow the spheric gems to fall from below each lane, down their own slopes, and into the prism. There was no way to arrange it though, where each gem would be certain to take the same time to get to the prism: if the prism was placed at the center, the center lanes would take very little time while the outer lanes had to roll some ways; if the prism was placed at the far left side, that left lane would have its gem in in no time at all while the right lane would be sure to be marked as a loser, even if the right lane had won by a mile. The wires made any lane quick as a flash to drop its marble, regardless of whether some wires were shorter or longer.

Lyle, when he had been looking at it, had even asked, “Do I have it correct, that it was you who came up with this?”

Travin had given a pleased laugh at that. “I was bouncing the ideas off of Rin, but yes, the ideas were mine.”

Lyle had again remarked that it was very good work.

Looking at the results of this latest race, Travin marked the competitors and victory order all down in the logbook. First a table for which race car was on each track, and then a table for which race car had taken which place.

The victory order, as marked definitively by the recording device, was Firesteed VI, Mordecai, Good Messenger, Firesteed V, Blackest Trout, Swift Hart and then Torchbearer, and Driftfeather in last.

Travin put away the logbook and the pencil, closed the chest, and reset the mechanism, reattaching the wire loops to their hooks and sliding out the bottom of the prism to collect up the gems, replacing the bottom of the prism, and putting the gems each back into their stalls.

He stood at the finish line for a moment, and looked at the cars, hands on his hips. He let them stay there for now, glad to let them revel in their achievement at getting to the finish line, even Driftfeather.

Leaving them there at the end, he returned back to the betting table, collected all of the lost bets into the center, and redistributed the pot according to the winning bets. He himself had put the most up, betting sixty gold and some accessories on Firesteed VI, and so he regained the most for himself—though he did make sure not to give himself back the specific coin that he had lost on Blackest Trout. That, he distributed to Lyle, who had bet on Firesteed VI as well: even though Mordecai was Lyle's own creation, Lyle was not someone to be prideful. Knowing race after race that Firesteed VI in track 1 beat out Mordecai in track 2, Lyle was not one to think, "Oh, but mine will surely win next, because it is mine." Maybe he had once been. But after the march across the dread woods, Lyle became such a person to abandon all follies, and fit hard wisdoms into their place. Even after Lyle had more or less singlehandedly gotten them across those woods by his brilliance and leadership, the man had remained a changed person. He took no joy at all in failings.

Travin brought the won treasures back to their appropriate chests. He had made out very well indeed on this round, and Lyle had as well. Rin, though her bets were often very small, all

the same very often did come out profitably on them, and her treasure chest's content was nearly level with its top.

With that all done, Travin walked down to the end of the track, grabbed up each of the race cars, and began walking with them in his arms up to the head of the track again.

As he was halfway back, he saw Lyle coming around the house, to the back yard. The robed man waved.

Travin, his arms full, called ahead, "Good to see you!"

Lyle gave a bow, and waited at the head of the track.

Travin, once he was standing before Lyle, informed the robed man, "You did well in this last race."

"Did I?"

"Firesteed VI has been the one to finally beat out Mordecai. You have been very wise to notice, and bet as things are, not as you may hope them to be."

Lyle's cheeks raised up in a smile.

Travin went up the stairs, and put the race cars away in their cubbies.

Coming back down the stairs, Travin asked, "Would you like a pint?"

"I brought you yours," Lyle said, and from behind his back produced the partially finished pint glass.

Travin gave a pleased laugh, took the glass, and had another sip of it.

"Today marks the start of the month of second salt," Lyle said.

"Ah," Travin said, and nodded. "I've lost the particular count of the days, my apologies."

As part of Lyle's devotions, the man did not drink on certain months. Had it occurred to Travin that the month of second salt had begun, he certainly would not have offered anything. In fact, he finished his own drink quickly, and hurled the glass off into the woods.

Lyle, holding his hands behind his back once again, asked, "Have you your sword, Travin?"

"Inside, yes. Why?"

Lyle answered, "One of Farmer Jen's boys was out playing and says that he came upon a hydra, guarding the entrance to a

small fort. Other townsfolk went to investigate, and confirmed that they have seen it too.”

Travin asked, bewildered, “A *tame* hydra?”

“One guarding the entrance to a small fort, that is what they say.”

“And they say it is a hydra, oh...” Travin trailed off, and scratched his head as he gathered some estimation. “What do you suppose, nearly a thousand miles from the nearest ocean?”

“One thousand and twenty three, I think. I did some reckoning off of Brother Fenis’s atlas on that very matter before coming here.”

“So the hydra is illusory.”

“Yes, I think.”

Travin laughed, and said, “Sure, I’ll fetch my sword. Come in, come in.”

The two of them proceeded up the steps of the back porch, and into the beaded curtains that lead into the house this way. As they walked through the house towards the front door, Lyle mentioned, “From what I could gather, according to the reports of the townsfolk, the fort is very interestingly tucked away in the hills. I could believe that no enchantments disguise its location, but that it simply has good obfuscation through the leafy trees on the hills surrounding, and is among a network of valleys that could make one think, ‘Oh, but I have explored that one, already,’ even when one has not. Do you think that makes any sense?”

“Very much so, yes,” Travin said, nodding. “It reminds me of that time with Kee, around Yellow Lake. Or that time with Lohss and Loh in the western goblins’ quarry. Or that time with Rin on the side of Heaven Scar.”

Hands behind his back, cheeks raised in a smile, Lyle added, “Or that time with Tegg by Locke’s River.”

“Yes!” Travin agreed. “In the caves.”

“Were they caves, or trenches?” Lyle asked. “I had mixed impressions from the stories I heard. I was with Dellia and Jerritz in Fall Keep at the time, remember.”

“They were caves,” Travin assured. “Dug caves. They began as trenches, at first, but burrowed down into the ground, it was very cold and you would need a light to see by.”

“Were they tunnels?” Lyle asked.

“Tunnels! Yes, maybe you would call them tunnels. I will call them that from now on, in fact.”

The two arrived at the front door. There, resting against the wall beside the front door, was Travin’s rucksack. He had set it down there two, nearing three years ago, the same with his sword that was in its scabbard on the ground beside it.

“Are we going far?” Travin asked.

“No, not too far,” Lyle answered. “If it suits you, I hope we will rest at Farmer Jen’s house tonight and go forth to the fort in the morning.”

With that information, Travin picked up just the sword, and strapped the scabbard about his hip. He held the front door open for Lyle, closed it behind the both of them, and the two set out on the road through the woods, that led from Travin’s house to town.

Along the walk, Lyle spoke about the fort. “I have an inkling as to how an illusory hydra could have come to be there. Brother Fenis, when he was just a boy—he is old now—heard a wizard of the temple muttering about an enchantment. Apparently, the wizard had enchanted a hookah, such that the smoke would show an image of your truest love—very powerful divination, if it indeed worked. And perhaps it did, for all young Fenis heard from the wizard at the time was the wizard’s incessant complaining about the item. ‘People won’t like what it says,’ the wizard muttered, time and time again, as he was going about his day. And then one day, while Fenis was minding his chores, sweeping I think he said he was doing, he overheard the wizard saying to another member of the temple that he had locked something up. Young Fenis had not caught what the wizard was referring to, but did realize that from then forward, the wizard never muttered of the magical hookah again.”

Travin absorbed all of the information, nodding.

When Lyle had said his piece on the wizard and the fort and the possible nature of the fort’s contents, Travin asked, “When we face the hydra, will we use all of our same signals?”

“Yes, I think that would do wonderfully,” Lyle agreed.

The friends, at times before, had faced all number of challenges, including the liberation of a town that had been

beset by an illusionist. The tricky thing about that had been that for the townsfolk, it was best for them if they still saw the illusioned threats to be defeated, even after the source of them had been stopped. And so the friends had some systems, for telling each other things that they marked about illusions, without saying anything so obviously out loud.

Likely, for this hydra, Travin would step forth with his sword and stand there, pretending to muse on the upcoming battle himself, while Lyle, who had a far better knack for discerning magic, would be behind, finding out if the hydra or the circumstances posed any real threat at all—sometimes, besides the illusions, there were booby traps. If Lyle came up to stand to Travin’s left, the hydra actually did pose some danger or complication, and Travin was to step back. If Lyle came up to stand on Travin’s right, then Lyle had in fact assumed control of the illusion, and Travin could step forward and put on a show of fighting it, for the townsfolk.

Travin and Lyle walked through the forests and hills.

In the evening, they came upon Jen’s farm. A number of men and women from town had gathered there, congregating in the yard with tents and a fire. As Travin and Lyle neared, many townsfolk raised their hands and applauded. “They’re back!” one man shouted, and another man whooped at that. Another commented, as Travin and Lyle were walking past, “It’s the non-swordsman you’ve to look out for with this sort.”

Travin was glad on the inside at hearing all of this, but he and Lyle kept a stern and skeptical demeanor as they walked up to the farmer’s front porch. Travin knocked at the door. The farmer inside swung the door open, and, seeing who it was, stepped aside to let the two in. Travin and Lyle spoke with the farmer, and with the boy who had found the hydra, and it was agreed that the two would spend the night in one of the bedrooms, and in the morning go out and see the fort.

In the bedroom, Travin put his finger in his left ear as though to take out earwax, and twisted the hand three times, then rubbed at his forehead with his thumb as though getting an itch.

Lyle smiled at that, and said in a very quiet voice, “No, I don’t think that will be necessary at all. If there is danger, it should yet be far from us.”

Travin had asked, in their codes, if they ought to sleep in shifts, and had offered to take a longer shift awake, keeping guard. Being told by Lyle it was fine, though, he tucked himself into one of the beds, and slept through the night very soundly.

In the morning they all ate eggs, and then, Travin and Lyle and the gathered townsfolk set out into the hills. “Just this way, now,” said one man, and then later another, “Just through this valley,” and then, “Now is it this way, or that a’one?” and “That a’one, that a’one, the stump at the mouth marks it,” and “Ah, right you are, right you are indeed miss,” and “Are you ready, sirs? The hydra will be down a hill a little, but it will see us before much farther, and it’s likely heard us from miles off.”

Lyle answered, “We are prepared, I think.”

Travin, as they walked, began doing stretches for his arms.

Travin and Lyle and the townsfolk all came to a bend in the valley, and indeed, farther ahead, down a long slope, at the deepest part of the valley floor, there was a stone fort, a boxy main building and a round tower above it, and in front of the fort, on a stone brick plaza, there appeared to stand a scaly green creature with five heads. Each head snarled, showing pointed teeth. Lyle took in a sharp inhale, and pursed his lips tightly; Travin’s reaction was even stronger, he needed to turn back and face away from the townsfolk to keep from visibly laughing.

The hydra’s heads all moved on the same pivot, all left, and then all right, scanning back and forth, and not even observing anything in particular. It was lost on the townsfolk, but extremely funny to the two who had dealt with true hydras before, heads moving about independently, trading off jobs from one to the other, one body yet many minds, and hyper keen perceptions intent on staring at the objects of their fixations.

When Lyle had composed himself, he asked, “Be you ready, O Travin?”

Travin steeled himself with a solemn exhale, thumped his fist against his chest a few times to ground himself, and then drew his sword, and turned and marched forward. As soon as he came forward to a certain threshold, the five heads stopped rotating left and right, and all fixated on him. He did grant that if the

illusion weren't so apparent, it likely would be *very* frightening to see five toothy heads eyeballing him.

After a few seconds, the two left heads turned away and began looking off into the trees, the rightmost head looked up into the sky, and the second rightmost head turned down towards the stone brick plaza. Only the center head continued to stare. Lyle stepped up on Travin's right side.

Travin smirked, and then charged down the hill with his sword. With his first swing, the hydra's center head reeled back, and the leftmost head came over. Travin took a slash at that one, and a burst of smoke exploded forth from the wound—Travin laughed out loud at Lyle's absurd effect, but was able to save it and make the laugh sound like the beginning of a victorious battle cry.

Continuing to yell and taunt, Travin defeated each head as it came to him, each one bursting out smoke as it was struck with his blade—the blade cut through the illusion like air, as that was, in fact, all that was present. By the end, Travin realized the cleverness of the smoke—as he defeated more and more of the hydra, more and more pieces of it went away into dissipating clouds, until he cleaved again and again at the body, and the illusion was gone. Lyle would not have to maintain it in any way after this showing was over. Clever.

With a final shout and strike, the last of the illusory hydra went away in smoke. The townsfolk roared and whistled and clapped. Travin turned, and bowed.

Lyle, facing the townsfolk, instructed, "I request that all of you stay back, for now. Travin and I will try to venture in and neutralize any danger."

The townsfolk did stay back as Lyle went down the hill, nearly slipping on the wet grass.

As the two went in, Travin briefly clasped an arm around Lyle's shoulders, and gave the robed man a firm jostle. "It's good to be at it again," Travin said.

Lyle smiled.

Travin took his arm off of the robed man's shoulders, and stepped ahead to venture forth into the mouth of the fort first. Lyle followed behind closely. Just inside, the hall turned and descended in a winding staircase—the fort as visible from

outside seemed to be nothing more than a vacant room, to serve as a daunting cap to this tunnel down. Down and down Travin and Lyle ventured, until the floor leveled out into a passage that was straight, not bending or descending.

Lyle conjured up a flame, which hovered above his cupped right hand.

By the flame's light, Travin continued forward at the lead, Lyle close behind. The tunnel's walls were of stone bricks, and came to an arched ceiling, with a level floor of stone bricks underfoot. It seemed that nothing much had disturbed this place since its construction, as every brick overhead and underfoot was perfectly in place, untouched, and there was no detritus to indicate anyone coming or going.

"I ask that you stay a moment, Travin," Lyle said.

Travin did stop, and kept a watch glancing ahead and behind as Lyle knelt down, and put his free left hand to the ground, then stood up and placed the hand flat against the ceiling.

"By my best discernment, there is a faint enchantment at work in these stones," Lyle reported. "I think it shouldn't be anything that concerns us too much, only a mild subduement of life, to keep mold or moss from growing here. I imagine that water from the valley does flow down through this passage regularly, if the fort is at the lowest point."

"That would make sense to me," Travin agreed, imagining his race cars.

"I ask that we resume, if it suits you, Travin," Lyle said.

Travin, sword in hand, continued forward deeper into the tunnel, by the light from Lyle's conjured fire. At the end of the straight section, the entire passage took a curve to the left. As they were just nearing the start of the curve, Lyle shrieked, "FREEZE, I DEMAND."

Travin froze exactly in place—when someone as attuned to magic as Lyle said to freeze, that did not mean "Finish your step and then stop walking" or "First let me ask why we are halting, and then I will stop when I have heard the answer." It meant "Do not move your body an inch from where it is right this second, or you may trigger something that will disintegrate all of us."

On the walls of the tunnel, Travin saw lights of many colors illuminate the stones, as Lyle behind him coursed through different schools of magic. Finally, it was back to the firelight, and Lyle said, "I release my demand that you freeze, and I thank you for having done so. We have just gone somewhere."

"Oh, I think I agree. Is that how I smell the salt of the ocean, and hear the crashing of waves?"

Travin and Lyle inched forward around the corner in the hall. Just around the curve, the hall opened to a sheer cliff face over the ocean, such that one walking thoughtlessly through the hall would step right over and fall to their death.

Lyle looked out to the sea, stepped back, looked at the hall they had just come down, and then stepped towards the opening to the sea again, and stuck his arm through the mouth of the opening to be sure. "I am astounded," the robed man said. "This magic may prove more lucrative than the hookah the wizard seemed so obsessed by. The town will be quite interested, I think."

Travin agreed, "Yes. Let's go back though, and find the hidden entrance."

Lyle smiled. "I would like to find that. I do not object to that plan at all, sir."

The two of them stepped back into the straight passage, and began feeling and prodding at the bricks.

"Here," Travin called, finding one brick that was loose. He pressed it into the wall, heard a latch click, and then a section of the bricks swung forward as a loose doorway.

"Well, that was quite normal, in my opinion, after all of the eccentricity of the rest of it."

"The secret brick door is a classic," Travin said fondly.

"Oh, please be assured, I did not mean to imply that I faulted the man for it."

The two proceeded into the hidden room. In was about as big inside as a chapel, though rather than two rows of pews, there were numerous crates of quite meager treasures. Brass coins, lumps of copper, and the majority of the crates filled with rather mundane rocks such as granite and limestone.

"Among other interests, he was an alchemist," Lyle noted. "Perhaps not a very good one."

At the end of the room, there was an iron box shaped much like a coffin. Lyle's eyes glowed green for a moment, and then he said, "That iron holds the item. Aside from the item contained in the iron, there are no enchantments in this room. I would feel safe in allowing the townsfolk to come in, with the stipulation that we be the only ones to handle the item for the time being."

"Very good," Travin said, and then clapped Lyle on the shoulder. "Another verse for our grand song of accomplishments. I wonder what treatment Lief will give it."

Lyle patted Travin's hand that was on his shoulder.

Travin took the hand off. By Lyle's firelight, they returned out into the straight passage, up the winding stairs, and stood at the mouth of the fort. Travin waved to the townsfolk who looked cautiously down from higher up the valley floor's slope. "You may come in!" Travin called. "It is safe!"

The townsfolk came nearer. Lyle explained the geography of the fort's depths, and warned against investigating the way to the ocean for the time being. He told that there were items of a little value for the taking, and that he and Travin, for their part, wished only to claim the item inside of the iron coffin—this garnered no protest at all. With all matters at hand covered, Travin and Lyle led the way back down, with the townsfolk following—some lit torches of their own, freeing Lyle to go back to holding his hands together behind his back, conjuring no magic.

The group moved down the winding stairs, and through half of the straight passage until arriving at the door in the bricks, which they all shuffled through in a line. Inside, the townsfolk got to dividing up what there was. Perhaps aided by the watchful eye of a brother from the temple, the townsfolk did act fairly among themselves in dividing up the spoils, even paying mind to others from the town who had not been able to spare the time to come along. They divided claims to the crates of stones as well, if any man should want to come back later, equipped to haul them away, though even to themselves they joked that it was unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble.

Travin, standing beside Lyle in the corner, said very quietly, while there was enough chatter for the remark not to be the sole

echo off of the stone walls, “Should we investigate the item in their company?”

Lyle answered, “I would prefer to be very open about the item’s function. I worry at what mistruths might spread otherwise.”

Travin and Lyle stepped forth from the corner, and both came to the iron coffin.

“It is safe?” Travin asked, no longer at a whisper, aware that they were now well in the eyes of the townsfolk.

“To the utmost of my abilities to discern, you will not be harmed by opening this.”

“You never say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ anymore,” Travin noted.

“I have become very interested in accuracy.”

“Huh.”

The townsfolk had stopped talking among themselves, and were all watching the swordsman and the robed man from a cautious distance.

Travin lifted open the coffin’s door. It made not the slightest squeal. Inside, there was a hookah, as they anticipated. Travin lifted the item out, and held it up. It did have a rather fancy look to it, and showed curvy thin writing engraved down the entire body of it, the line of text spiraling down and down.

Lyle turned, and asked, “Would anyone lend us a light?”

One townsman stepped forward, and held out a torch.

“I thank you,” Lyle said, taking the torch.

The townsman nodded, bowed himself to make himself scarce, and stepped back.

Holding the light near the hookah, Lyle squinted, and placed a finger to the lettering. Travin rotated the object as needed while the robed man slowly spoke. “I read the writing as this: Behold, The Hookah of Superlative Matrimony! Smoke may be drawn from it until the day it is cracked! When breathing out its smoke, identify by speaking any person whose company is present, and in the smoke, all present shall see who loves that person the most in all the world! Love, of course, comes in many forms, but this device casts aside familial and friendly, and cares only of romance!”

Travin commented, “It doesn’t rhyme.”

“Well, many enchantments do not.”

“I like the ones that rhyme.”

Lyle smiled without comment, walked back to the townspeople and returned the torch, and then came again to stand near Travin.

Travin asked, hookah in his hands, “Should we see if it works?”

Lyle answered, “I think we should. Do you know how to use it? From what was written on it, I think it is ready.”

Travin held the stem in one hand and the mouth piece in the other, and drew in a big breath from the item. He held the breath in for a moment, and then began exhaling a stream of smoke, which came forth in a huge cloud, bigger than when they had been in frozen wastes well below zero, and he and Lief had taken turns lowering their warmth-enchanted scarves to breathe out into the frigid air as they walked. As Travin exhaled the smoke, midway through the exhale, he whispered the word, “Myself.”

The smoke swirled around in the form of a dust devil which reached from floor to ceiling, and then flung itself against one of the walls: there the smoke all spread out flat, and among the smoke on the wall, there came to be an image as though looking through a window. In the image, there was a Golden Retriever. She laid in the shade of a tree in an otherwise brightly sunny scene, panting as she kept her head up, glancing around left and right at the goings-on in the field around her.

“Um, well that,” Lyle began, and then had nothing. “She is gorgeous, sir.”

“Did I use it right?”

“As best as I can tell. Would you show me it again? Oh, and if we could have the light once more—thank you, hold it just like that. As I read it, once again: and in the smoke, all present shall see who loves that person the most in all the world! Love, of course, comes in many forms, but this device casts aside familial and friendly, and cares only of romance! Yes, sir—oh, I thank you for the light, that was all I had request of it for—Yes, sir, this image would then be... as described.”

Travin began drawing in another big breath from the hookah.

Lyle noted, “I don’t believe there was any stipulation at all that doing it a second time would change the results, but please,

do not take that as me stopping you from investigating the device's consistency for yourself."

Travin exhaled, and whispered, "My friend Lyle."

Lyle gasped, and shot a glare at Travin.

The smoke swirled around and around, and then flung itself at another wall, and in that image stood a horse in a stall, tail flicking at flies who were pestering him—the 'him' of it was very apparent, as the stallion's endowment hung out down under himself.

Travin, and many of the townsfolk, began to snicker.

"I think," Lyle said, "that I am beginning to understand what the wizard had in mind, when he said that people would not like what this item showed them."

Travin asked, "How long have you and him been seeing each other?"

"I could ask you just about the very same, you know."

Travin looked again to the image of the Golden Retriever, which still lingered on a wall in smoke. "I do remember her," he said. "When we were coming here, we stayed at a farm for a month, so that if anything from our travels was still tracking us, it would not befall all of the townsfolk—we payed the farmer more handsomely than I would have ever thought to for lodging, even for such an extended time. This dog belonged to that farmer. Her name is Acorn. She slept in my bed, she wasn't allowed to sleep on the beds with anyone else, but I didn't mind, it reminded me of sharing a tent with Rin, or with Lief when he still camped with us."

Lyle interjected, "Are you about to tell us that one thing led to another with the dog too?"

Travin gave an amused laugh, and said, "No, no, no. If her feelings for me really were *that* strong, I suppose I missed it. All I can say is that I let her sleep on the bed. Was that all it took?"

"I would not know," Lyle responded.

"More of a horse person," Travin said, nodding.

Lyle rolled his eyes, and said, "By my brotherhood, if I speak a lie then the fires of Chthuth will forsake me." The robed man brought his hands forth, and conjured a small fire in a cupped hand. "I do not know that stallion."

The fire remained strong.

Travin prodded, “Are you fond of horses generally?”

“I am not *averse* to providing for them, or to making practical use of a beast of burden, but only in intrusive boyhood thoughts long ago did that ever extend into lust, and even then those thoughts were only briefly held, and never acted upon.”

The fire, again, remained strong.

“In truth,” Lyle went on, “I think very little of lust or romance anyways. They often feel more to me like devices that other people have, but not I. They are alike to another man’s religion: real to him, a passingly interesting fiction to me.”

The fire held as true as ever.

Travin said, a bit shyly, “I do not have any fire to prove it like you did, but I too have never cared much about lust or romance in the same way others seem to. All that ever happened with Lief, or Rin, to them I think was something deeper, to me, I don’t know, it was a bit of fun to have with a friend. I didn’t mind it, but it’s nothing I’ve sought out on my own.”

With piercing sincerity in his eyes, Lyle said to the swordsman, “I believe you, and I thank you for sharing.”

“Happy to. Anything that helps.”

Lyle dismissed the fire, and put his hands behind his back once again.

Turning to the townsfolk, the robed man asked, “Would anyone else care to see what the item says about them?”

There was brief silence. Then one townsman, the miller, said, “There uh, what was it now, how did the smoky thing say exactly it eh, functioned? Shows you who you are the most in love with, or—”

“No, Miller Mardo,” Lyle interrupted. “The hookah, irrespective of any of your own thoughts, shows who in the world holds the strongest romantic love *towards you*.”

“Right uh, yeah, huh.” The miller shrugged. “Yeah why not, give my name a whirl there. Can’t hurt to know.”

Travin drew in a breath, spoke “The miller Mardo,” and the smoke spun away and hit another part of a wall. There, a donkey was shown, grazing in a field.

Many townsfolk laughed openly, especially the miller’s drinking buddies.

The miller though, without even feigning an inkling of surprise, said, “Yeah I told every last one of you laughing now, didn’t I, how much that jenny loves me, yes I did.”

Lyle, interest piqued, asked, “Is it then true that you do know this jenny?”

“Yes sir,” the miller said. “She stays by the mill, I see her about every day rain or shine, mind her, feed her, and yes I didn’t need this item to tell me she feels powerful urges towards me, if it gets to about that time of day again she can’t be ignored on the topic, and I help her plenty gladly, I feel the same way towards her.”

The miller’s wife shrugged, and said, “It’s all true.”

The townsfolk roared, and then another townsfolk called out, “Me next!”

Travin on that breath spoke “The farmhand Ishek,” and the smoke blew to a wall. In it was shown an image of another townsfolk present, Lui.

Ishek gasped, and looked to Lui.

Throwing up his arms in faux drama, Lui proclaimed, “It’s true!”

Ishek asked, “Okay but is it though?”

Voice then entirely straight, Lui said, “Yeah I mean, I do love you man, so probably.”

“*Right* back at you.”

“For really real?”

As the two had been speaking they had been inching cautiously closer together, and by that point were face to face. Rather than any further words, the two cautiously shared their first kiss. The other townsfolk and Travin and Lyle all clapped.

Looking into his new love’s eyes, Ishek suggested, “Wanna get out of here?”

Lui nodded. The two men scampered off, each snatching up their sack of meager treasures they had been allocated, and disappeared out of the brick door, and ran up the stairs and off into the woods.

Travin pointed out, “It can show humans.”

Lyle added, “And it seems to be accurate, at least in cases we have more knowledge on.”

“Why did the wizard not like this?” Travin asked. “I think it’s rather sweet, to know that the creatures of the world care about us so much.”

“Amen, sir,” chimed the miller.

Lyle asked the group, “Would anyone else like to try it?”

The room very suddenly became silent.

“Hm,” Lyle intoned. “I thank you all for coming. Before you all go, does anyone, ah...” The robed man gave a quick bashful glance at the image of the stallion.

The miller’s wife offered, “I don’t know the horse, but that looks to be Farmer Yenet’s land, out of town southeast a little.”

“I thank you. Hm. He and I likely have crossed paths then.”

The townsfolk all began to chatter among themselves again, as they all moved and collected up their treasures. Travin and Lyle turned to one another.

Travin asked, “Are you thinking of going to see him?”

“I am thinking of it,” Lyle affirmed. “I do not recall any time that horse could have met me, long enough to garner any strong impression. To the best of my memory, I might have only seen a horse from that farm in passing on the road now and then.”

“Maybe you are very beautiful to horses.”

Lyle smiled.

“I mean it!” Travin said. “How many love stories begin with one lover seeing the other’s beauty at a distance, and falling in love instantly?”

Lyle considered it, and then answered, “I can think of quite a lot, now that you mention it. How about you? Do you even like dogs?”

“Of course!” Travin bellowed. “What kind of question is that? Dogs are wonderful.”

“Have you any plans with this, then?”

“I have some ideas,” Travin answered.

A month later, Travin stood at the top of his new track. Ten times the size of the old one, this one ran all the way down the length of an enormous hill, down towards the farm below. Travin had a hand on the lever, and stood at a slight crouch, prepared to begin running.

“Are you ready Acorn?” he asked.

The Golden Retriever wagged and lowered her front half playfully.

“Are you sure? We can walk back down, take our time—”

Acorn barked and hopped, her wagging betraying that her intent could only be friendly.

“Alright. Go!”

Travin pulled the lever, released the race cars, and he and Acorn sprinted down the hill, wagging and laughing.

PROSE POEMS

A Lad Insane.txt

I often sleep in the nude these days, or close to it. Last night the window was open a crack, and it is winter here. The heat had been on, as I like it, but the dog, my partner, was over hot, and so the heat was turned off, the window cracked open, and clad in a blanket I braved the nippy breeze and settled in to snooze the night away, him on his side of the bed, me on mine.

I had a dream, of course I thought it was real while it was happening, that I was in outer space, alongside numerous other people, each of us in our own pill-shaped personal space capsule, alone in the cold. I was looking over someone's shoulder as they were deciding, from a list of icons of people's faces, who to pair up. When two were selected, their capsules floated to one another, and the two people inside were able to reach out through openings and touch one another. I realized, as I was beginning to awaken from the dream, that the touching of each other through the coldness of space was a metaphor for how we show nurture to one another, two fursuiters breaking the magic to hold hands, a skater boyfriend and goth gf nuzzling each other's noses on a park bench, a rider kissing her horse on the mouth through the tiny bubbles of froth.

Through the cold of the winter bedroom, I opened the capsule of my comfy blanket, and let in the dog. He snuggled back in against me immediately, digging his back in against my chest and then exhaling and settling back down into the mattress,

thankful for the gesture, as both of us had become chilly this far into the dark hours. There in our shell of warmth against the cold we were yin and yang, fur clad dog and shaven human, imposing claws and trimmed fingernails, teeth and teeth, heartbeat and beating heart, each in want of nurture and providing it, the end and the way. We snuggled in various positions for hours, I often with my nose buried fully into his fur to not miss his nirvana inducing atmosphere for even a portion of a breath.

When the morning light came in through the slits in the window shutters, he and I bent and stretched towards it like two flowers, our soil our dashed together souls. We stayed in bed a while longer. Then, life's duties calling, we did get up and start going about our day, accomplishing our breakfasts and our morning pees and our donning of clothes, dress and collar. Before too much of the day had gone by, I made sure to lay down again with him where he was, on the carpet in the living room, and watch closely as his tongue glided in a few business like successions over the hair on his forearm.

A Lad Insane 2.txt or Cyndi Lauper

The act of breathing can be done alone, and often times is done alone. And yet somehow, occupying the same personal space as another body and breathing there together is a transcendental experience.

I remember when I was younger, reading kissy-kissy furry comics and feeling a burning envy at seeing two male bodied people get to snuggle. It was a sort of happy jealousy, a deeply glad and deeply spurned state of being. Getting to touch the shadow of the object that is love, but never having touched the object itself. Marcus and Reis. Joel and Matt. They had found each other: they had found somebody to lie in a bed with and breathe together.

It's easy to forget, these days, that I have had the same thing.

He begins running in his sleep. I kiss his fur, and bless his journey.

In, out. Woof woof woof woof woof. In, out. In, out. In, out.

In,

out.

A Lad Insane 3

It's been a little bit of a different morning. Not anything that an impartial observer would mark as all too different, I guess, and yet I felt it the time again to remark, and complete a sort of triptych.

I spent the night drinking wine and playing with a knotted toy, filling up my insides in terms of depth and with an especial circumference right inside past the butthole, and pleasuring myself to furry porn. I think it might be a secret knowledge, unique to those who play with knots or plugs or other bulbous things in their poop chute, to know that there are different sensations depending on how the ring of the anus is approached. To feel a knot entering and to feel a knot leaving are two different things. Similar, both fun, but not identical sensations. To feel a tongue licking the closed outside is a different thing to feeling an inserted finger do a business-like press and rub against one side to test the looseness. So as I was looking at the furry porn, there were a combination of pleasures in the drunkenness, the massaging of my very lubed hand over my female-identifying penis, and the variety of ways I would loosen and push the knot in, loosen and let the knot slide out, or do myself with the floppy smooth shaft for a while.

Usually after such a nightcap, I shower to clean the lube off of myself and pass out for a long sleep. This time though I went to bed luby and sticky, and probably didn't get more than a brief nap in before waking up at dawn and feeling ready to start the day.

I moved a forgotten load of laundry from the washer to the dryer, I did take my shower with some reluctance but it was nice afterwards to be clean, and then me and my dog husband who smells wonderful laid side by side on our bed together, pressed caringly against each other, and I had one arm draped over him as he snored and slept in, and with the other hand I held a touch screen phone and read through some of a piece of yiffy smut that a friend had sent to me, and I enjoyed reading it, it was a good read.