THIS ABOVE ALL;

TO THINE OWN SELF BE ZOO.

Vol. I No. 3

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In this issue,

a deliverywoman meets a friendly chocolate lab,
and a cat man goes hunting for hunters.

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To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
Vol. I No. 3
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GRADIENT

"...Four, A, nine, nine, two, C, two, F, F, F, F."

There is radio silence for a moment, and then the flight controller's voice responds: "Authorization code recognized. You are granted permission to approach, Grey Liger. Welcome to Nesoi 12."

"Acknowledged. Thank you kindly."

I ease the throttle forward, beginning my final approach to the scrappy water-covered moon. As we transition into the pull of the gravity, I put a steadying hand on Aleksey, who is lying down in the copilot's seat. He licks his lips, and remains lying down.

After consulting one of the sticky notes that line the top of the windshield, I punch in the coordinates of my drop-off location; on my compass indicator, a green vertical line begins to glow, showing me my direction. In the vastness of space I don't mind using the holos on the windshield, but as soon as I have gravity, something about the holos always unsettles me and I move to the more archaic systems.

I fly along under the clouds. It is daytime on this side of the moon right now. As we cruise, Aleksey gets down from the copilot's seat and walks a lap around the cockpit, sniffing here and there; he relieves himself into the holovent in the corner, and then lays down beside the hatch to the exterior.

When I hear a chime from the dash, I sit upright and squint out into the ocean below. When I spot my landing platform, I'm already on course to overshoot it by a mile. I curse and lay off

the throttle, apologize to Aleksey for the sudden adjustment, then start bringing it around for another easier approach. I punch the auto-hail. Seconds later, a sequence of digital tones comes through my radio that tells me the hail is acknowledged.

As I re-approach the platform—this time considerably slower—I key over a series of toggles, switching out Grey Liger's terrestrial flight apparatus for the hover apparatus. Even in the isolation of the cockpit, I can hear a hiss of wind that outside would be deafening. I lower the landing gear, make touch-down, and begin the sequence of keying off the engines. As I do, the platform begins to lower, and I am slowly taken down through a tube into a shipping bay in Nesoi 12's submerged colony.

When the platform I'm on stops moving, I run a check on the pressure differentials and air quality outside of the cockpit. Seeing nothing that would kill me or Aleksey outright, I pop the hatch on the cockpit. I clumsily step down onto the shipping bay's platform, finding my legs again after the long flight. Aleksey remains in the cockpit, standing and wagging his tail as he sticks his head out of the hatch and sniffs the air.

"Valorie Johannes?" asks a woman in a black pantsuit, her hair in a tight bun, her face looking down at a clipboard.

"Val is fine," I say, and extend a hand.

"Val-or-ie, Jo-hann-es," she says to herself, filling out fields on her clipboard, never looking up.

I lower my hand, suppressing my monumental level of disappointment: I have a tattoo of a fly on the webbing between my thumb and pointer finger and it usually gets people.

"Got the cargo?" she asks.

"I do."

I retrieve a remote from my grey jumpsuit and press a button. The rear cargo hatch of Grey Liger lowers, showing a crate inside, a cube in shape, about the same height as my chest.

She looks up at it, points a remote reader at it, hears the reader beep, and then presents me with a slip of paper representing enough credits to buy a small house on your average terrestrial body. If someone is going through me instead of a freighter, they want something fast or they want something hush-hush. I don't ask.

“Thank youuu,” she says, walking past me while her eyes remain on her clipboard, flipping to a new page and filling out more fields. She is joined by another woman—black hoodie and blue jeans, feathered hair down to about her shoulders. The two of them begin walking up the cargo ramp to retrieve the crate. I walk up with them and remove all of the straps keeping the crate secure.

Before they begin to move it, the woman with the clipboard stands at a corner of the small cargo hull, finishing her paperwork. The woman in the hoodie leans over the crate, resting her elbows on it, smiling up at me. She extends a hand out in my direction. “Nina.”

“Val,” I say, and we shake—instead of letting go of my hand afterwards, she keeps hold of it and stands up straight in front of me, holding my hand up close to her eyes, squinting at the details of my fly tattoo.

“I love it,” she says.

“*Thank* you!”

“Your dog is very well behaved. Can I meet them?”

“Yeah, c’mon around.” We exit the cargo hull, and come back around to the cockpit hatch. On the way over I mention that his name is Aleksey. Half German Shepherd, maybe half Labrador.

At the hatch, Aleksey wags and sniffs intently out towards Nina. Nina says hello to him in a high friendly voice, and shows him her hands. He sniffs them, and then licks. She comes in fully and hugs him, petting down his back, already fast friends, apparently.

From the cargo hull, the woman with the clipboard calls Nina’s name.

Nina turns and sits on the edge of the hatch, Aleksey poking his head over her shoulder, her wrapping an arm up around his neck to pet him. “Got any plans while you’re here?”

I shrug. “Maybe if there’s a bar you’d recommend.”

“I’ll try to do you one better,” she says, and takes a slip of paper out of her pocket. With a pen she jots something onto it and then hands it to me. Then she stands, gives Aleksey a final hug and a rub, and goes to help with the crate. “See you tonight maybe!”

I look down at the slip of paper. It is an invitation to something called The Cerberus Gallery. On it, in stunningly fancy handwriting, is written, *Val + Aleksey*.

Nina and the other woman have departed with the cargo before I can ask any questions. I go and set the invitation on the dash under a paper weight, then close the hatch, pet Aleksey, and sit back down in the pilot's seat. With the wheels of the landing gear and with light propulsion from the hover apparatus, I follow the directions of folks in neon vests with glowing batons, and park Grey Liger in a compact hangar.

With the ship settled, I clip Aleksey onto a leash, and the two of us go for a walk through the colony's tunnels; many of them are made of glass, and we can see all of the sea creatures outside. The sea creatures are not aliens—presumably, they were brought on the same ships that humans came over on—but I have not been to many submerged colonies, and neither has Aleksey, and so seeing all of the weird fish is still very neat to us.

When we've stretched our legs and done a good amount of exploring, we return back to the hangar. The next few hours are spent exhaustively checking the ship for anything that needs maintenance. Aleksey keeps me company. I don't have reason to think the ship is in disrepair, but the majority of time I spend inside of Grey Liger is spent in the vacuum of space, so it pays to be over-vigilant.

After finishing the search, all systems are green. I wipe the sweat from my brow, go into Grey Liger's small cabin suite, and take a long, pleasant shower.

When I'm finished, I glance at the local time, and then glance at the invitation to The Cerberus Gallery that is sitting on my dashboard. Whatever I've been invited to, it's starting in half an hour. I put on a black dress, do my makeup, grab my purse, and then Aleksey and I head out.

Thankfully, the invitation does contain an address, and this colony does make addresses easy enough to navigate to. We make our way into a district under a vast glass dome that's made to look like an archaic town square, with asphalt streets, brick buildings, and concrete statues of tall men with beards; it's a very thorough aesthetic.

Aleksey and I step into a doorway, make our way down a hall past a restaurant on either side, and proceed up a set of stairs. Coming to the second floor, Aleksey and I are met with a small waiting room. I present my invitation to the man behind the desk. He welcomes us, stands, and uses a key to unlock the door behind him and let us in.

Inside is an art gallery, and many folks milling about and looking at the pieces. A light hum of quiet conversations fills the air, as do the pleasant smells of the restaurants below. Classical music plays faintly through hidden speakers.

Even at a glance, the theme of the gallery seems clear enough: all of the paintings on the walls are of dogs. Some are more abstract, some are quite realistic, but I begin to amuse myself by wondering if Aleksey is a guest or an exhibit. The others do seem very interested in him, though they are polite and don't crowd around.

As I'm wandering through, I find myself looking at an exhibit that strikes me as out of place. On a rectangular plinth, atop five little supports, there are five opaque ping-pong balls.

Beside me, I hear a pleasant voice say, "You came!"

I turn to see Nina, and smile. "Much more interesting than a bar," I say in agreement with her.

She crouches down to greet Aleksey for a second, and then she and I stand beside each other, facing the exhibit with the ping-pong balls.

"I love this piece," she tells me. Then she asks, "Did you know this was the piece you delivered here today?"

"Oh!" I did not know that. I continue to look at it for a few seconds, and then tell her, "I admit, I don't get this one."

She stands with her hands clasped together, swaying slightly back and forth. "The plaque on this one helps, I think."

I glance down at the plinth, and indeed, there is a little plaque. I crouch down and give it a read, idly petting Aleksey while I'm down here.

Blindness

Within one of these balls is an explosive payload powerful enough to atomize this room and all of its occupants.

Within one of these balls is a film negative of a Husky named Kim.

Within one of these balls is a flash drive containing an encyclopedia on dogs.

Within one of these balls is a distal phalanx – a fingertip bone from a human hand – its donor unknown.

Within one of these balls is nothing.

"Oh. Oh wow."

Nina sways more intently. Glancing down at Aleksey, she says, "Guarantee you he knows which is which. Heck, he probably knew what you were shipping since you picked it up. Their noses are just..." She trails off, and then shakes her head, and stops swaying. "I'll leave you to wander some more! We're showing a movie in the theater across the hall in about ten minutes. Dogs are allowed in."

Without waiting for comment, she slips away and begins talking to someone else she knows, who is standing and looking at a minimalist painting of a Saint Bernard.

Aleksey and I look around the gallery a little longer, and then make our way over to the theater. There, an attendant greets us, saying, "Val and Aleksey, if I may presume?" I tell them that that presumption is correct, and they lead us to a pair of seats adjacent to the aisle, so that Aleksey can take a seat or lay on the floor, or I can let him off leash to wander around, even. I thank the attendant, and, given how friendly and polite everyone has been about having Aleksey around already, I do let him off the leash. Anyone he goes up to is happy to interact with him a bit before he wanders off to go see the next person.

The seats fill in, with each group seated in their own little cluster, and empty seats between. I am left alone, until I hear a voice beside me. "Mind if I sit here?"

"Please."

Nina takes the seat beside me, and sits on top of it with her legs crossed, hands in her lap.

The lights dim, and any folks who are talking quickly wrap up their conversations. When the theater is quiet, the movie begins.

It's a 2D-animated film, featuring a cast of primarily dogs, and some other animals, and no humans or words to be found. It is remarkably captivating.

Midway through the movie, Nina taps a button on the armrest between us, which causes a subtle holofield to appear around our two seats, blocking outgoing sound so that we can talk without bothering anyone. Leaning over to me, she says, "I need your thoughts on this next part. Do you know what rotoscoping is?"

"I do, actually." Creating a 2D animation by tracing over actual video, frame by frame.

"I can't tell if this next part is rotoscoped or just *really* lovingly faked."

I keep my eyes out. The scene in question shows a dog asleep. The dog begins to dream, barking under her breath, twitching her paws in a run. In abstract space around the dog, the same dog is shown bounding in a full sprint and barking at the top of her voice. I can see what Nina means: the paw-twitching of the sleeping dog is dead-on, yet at the same time, the view pans around and around the sleeping dog, sweeps fully under and over her, in a way that might be difficult to film with an actual sleeping dog and an actual camera, at least at the ancient time when this film was made. Then, as the camera swoops under her again, I catch a stylistic jump from one frame to the next.

"Rotoscoped," I say. "But not when it swoops under. Watch the hind legs: animated here, then it cuts back to rotoscoped... now."

"Holy *shit*."

I snicker.

"Are you a movie person?"

Using the holographics on top of the windshield, one can get a knack for when hyper-reality and actual reality don't quite line up perfectly. "Kind of a pilot thing. Difficult to explain."

Nina reaches over, runs her hand down my arm, and takes my hand in hers. I look over at her. She looks down at our hands, then up at me, and asks, "Is this alright?"

I give her hand a light squeeze, keep hold of it, and push the armrest between us up into the seat backs. We both scooch

towards each other, and sit leaning against each other for the rest of the movie.

As the credits begin, she plants a kiss on my neck. I nuzzle my cheek over the top of her head, but I know that at this point there's something I'm going to have to be up front about. Here in our own private holofield seems like the ideal place for it.

"I have to tell you now, I'm not entirely cis."

"Oh word?"

I snicker. "Yeah."

"What are your pronouns?"

"She-her."

"Whatcha packin?"

I make extra sure the holofield is still up around us. It is. "Penis that I was born with. Very convincing fake breasts."

"Wanna go up to my room and tell me more or maybe show me or give a demonstration?"

I nuzzle in with her again, and give her a kiss on the cheek. "Sure. You lead the way."

We stand, fizzling out the holofield. I clip Aleksey onto his leash, and the three of us exit the theater and head up another set of stairs. Nina unlocks the door to her apartment, lets us in, and locks the door behind us.

Nina interlocks her fingers behind my neck and hangs from me. "My bedroom is over there. Aleksey can like, I don't mind either way, whether he's out or in, or we could keep the door open if that's better for him, like—"

"He won't mind waiting out here."

"Yeah okay."

Nina and I head into her bedroom, and I close the door behind us. The two of us fool around on her bed, and afterwards, Nina is straddling my stomach, squeezing my left and right breasts back and forth.

"Can you feel this?"

"Yes." I might low-key be in love with this weirdo.

"How long have you had them?"

"I got them as soon as I could afford them. Had them... four years now."

"How much were they?"

I name the price.

She whistles. “Is that why you still have…”

I sit upright and she slides down my chest, so that the fronts of our hips are touching. “I don’t mind it.”

“Seriously, augmentations are a specialty of this moon. If the issue is the cost, name the price, I’ll get you the credits.”

“I like having it,” I tell her. “It’s fun. Deep voice, facial hair, flat chest, I was *very* happy to get rid of all those. This one…” I shrug. “I still like it.”

She gives me a tight hug. Up close in my ear, she whispers, “I’m jealous of you. You have no idea.”

I rest my head against hers. “Oh?”

In an even fainter whisper, she says, “I’m… I’m not entirely cis either.”

“Oh! What are… would you tell me about it?”

She continues to hug me, but stays silent on that question. She seems very focused on forcing her breathing to remain steady, taking strong, timed inhales and exhales.

I give her a gentle, understanding squeeze as we sit there, hugging. “It’s alright if you don’t.”

Her tight hug on me tightens even more. She constricts me as though actually trying to suffocate me. Finally, she whispers as faint as could be, hardly more than a breath, one word of an answer. “…Dog.”

Huh. I continue to hug her, to hold her. With one of my hands, I begin petting down her back. She begins to sob, still holding me. I stop petting, but she insists, “Keep doing that. Please.” and so I do keep petting her. I lie back, she lays on top of me, and I pet her.

After a while, she is no longer crying, and instead rests with her forehead buried against my chest. After a while longer, she tells me, “You can stop now. Thank you.”

I lock my hands together behind her, still holding her as she lays on top of me.

“If I went to get augmented with dog ears, would you come with me and hold my hand?”

Without a doubt I would, and I tell her so. “If they tell you no I’ll kick their butts.”

She smiles at that. “Augmentations are this moon’s specialty, like I said. It’s why I moved here. I just haven’t been brave enough to…”

I pull a blanket over us.

The next morning, Nina insists on taking us out to breakfast. She knows places that are dog friendly, where Aleksey can sit and even get something to eat too. It’s a lovely cafe, with a window across an entire wall showing the ocean outside.

When the waiter leaves after giving Aleksey his dish, we watch Aleksey begin to eat, and then I ask Nina, “Why don’t you have a dog?”

She glances out of the window and shrugs. “I feel weird about the whole ‘ownership’ thing. I get that it doesn’t have to be like that, but, it’s just weird to me.”

I give an approving hm, and have some of my toast.

“Is it weird to you that I fully identify as a dog?” she asks.

I shrug, and finish chewing. “To be honest, not really. Should it be weird to me?”

She shrugs. “What if I started eating out of a bowl and barking at things? Like really?”

“That sounds adorable.”

Satisfied with this answer, she begins eating her fish. “It’s just like… I feel like you *don’t* feel the same way about me that you feel about Aleksey.”

I give a contemplative hm, and think about that, looking out of the window. She’s not wrong at all. I do not think of Aleksey that way. Eventually I tell her, “You’re right, and I don’t have a perfectly good answer to that, other than that when I met Aleksey I was looking for a friend, a companion for the long flights, and I met you as a cute so-and-so who was coming onto me pretty hard. So, I don’t feel the same way about you and Aleksey, but I don’t feel the same way about all humans categorically either.”

“Hey, works for me.”

We finish our meals. As we’re getting ready to head out, I ask Nina where these famous augmentation experts are at, and she tells me that they are in the next district over. I tell her to lead the way. We take a walk through one of the tubes connecting the

two domes. I hold her hand as we go. She has nervous jitters, but she is happy.

"This isn't a scheme to steal Aleksey's ears, is it?"

She blows a raspberry at me. "Everything they make is all synthetic. No harvesting required."

We proceed through tunnels and white halls, talk to a receptionist, wait a while, proceed through more white halls, and then Nina and I and Aleksey are in a small office, speaking with a doctor, who is pleased and fascinated; he has heard that The Cerberus Gallery is lovely. Nina gives him an invitation to the gallery, and the doctor gives us an appointment to come back tomorrow for the procedure. In the meantime he takes blood samples, measurements, and scans, goes over Nina's preferences for the augmentation, and then sends us on our way.

Back in the reception area, Nina and I hug.

"Where to now?" I ask. "Got any other plans today?"

"Another showing tonight. Nothing until then. Can I see your spaceship?"

I lead the way. When we arrive, I give her the tour. When we arrive at the bed, she is insistent on taking it for a test drive; I am persuaded, and tell Aleksey to go wait in the cockpit for a bit. As we have our fun this time, I think about this apparent dog in front of me; it has not changed that she is perfectly adorable; I kiss her, and she licks my face from mouth to eyeball, and shortly thereafter I finish; we cuddle on the bed afterwards for a while, and then I take advantage of being back in my abode by taking a shower and changing back into my usual terrestrial wear—cargo pants, members only jacket.

I move from the cabin to the cockpit and find Nina and Aleksey sitting together on the floor, her petting him, him contented. I reach down and give Aleksey a rub on the head. "Good boy." I also give Nina a rub on the head. "Good girl."

The next day, Aleksey and I accompany Nina, and sit in a waiting room as her procedure is done. I make a solid dent in the waiting room's months and months of accumulated magazines. As I'm reading an article about honey bees, I hear a voice right behind me say, "Woof."

I wheel around, see Nina, and gasp. “They’re beautiful.” Nina now has dog ears, the kind that flop down. They come down to about her jaw line, and match her feathered hair. The fur on them is brown. “Can I touch them?”

“Please do,” she says.

I reach out, cup her head in both of my hands, and run my hands along the soft fur on the outside of each ear. Gently, I turn her head and lift one ear up. Peering inside, it looks just like the inside of a dog’s ear. “Woah.”

She flinches back at that, and I let go of her. She snickers. “That was loud, coming directly into the ear.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re good.” She hugs me. “You’re great. Thank you.”

I hug her back, and as we hug, I stroke one of the ears.

“I need a tail next for all of the times I want to wag around you.”

“Aw.”

We get lunch, and then she shows me around some more. That night, there is another showing at the gallery. I stand beside Nina as she goes from excited conversation to excited conversation, everyone fascinated by her augmentation, happy for her, telling her it looks great, which it does. That night as she and I are going at it on her bed, she asks me to stroke her ears; she doesn’t have to ask me twice—they feel nice.

In the morning I happen to wake up early, and decide to take advantage of it by making breakfast for us instead of us going out yet again, and this is when I learn that all of Nina’s cupboards are literally empty. I leave Aleksey in Nina’s good care, get my ship moved from the hangar to long-term storage, and go grocery shopping. Nina and I talk as I’m cooking breakfast—fish—and I learn that she always goes out to eat because she is lazy—her words—and also because she is fabulously rich due to her fabulously rich parents, who would consider life on this moon to be slumming it.

I finish cooking our breakfast. I gather myself for a moment, and then I reach a hand into one of the shopping bags from my expedition earlier. Holding my hand inside the bag, I warn Nina, “I’m not trying to be weird about this.”

“Okay?”

"I saw you don't have any dishes."

She nods.

From the bag, I pull out some human plates with one hand, and then with the other hand I pull out a dog bowl. "Preference?"

She snatches the dog bowl and holds it to her chest. "I kind of love you a lot. This one."

We sit across from each other at her dining room table, her eating from her dog bowl, me eating from my plate—both of us do use forks. I also mix some of the fish in with Aleksey's food, and set his bowl on the ground beside the table, and he eats with us too.

A week passes. Nina does get a tail next. I don't even know she's arranged to have it done until she's missing for most of a day, and then she comes into the apartment wagging. I scratch her butt through her jeans, and she wags; I kiss her and she wags; I talk to her, and sometimes if I say the right thing she wags, and her ears move a bit depending on what I'm saying and how she feels about it. I get her a collar, and I hardly ever see her without it from then on.

The next week, she enters the apartment and slams a pill bottle on the dining room table. She looks at me expectantly—I can tell she is looking at me expectantly by the way her tail wags back and forth, but only slightly, very metered; almost always, I look to her tail and ears to gauge her feelings before I'll look at her face.

In reference to the pills, I ask, "Whatcha got there?"

"Hormones."

"*Oh*. Are those a thing for this?" I realize it's a stupid question, seeing as she has them.

"I want the nose next," she tells me.

I am actually disappointed, but I try not to show it—her face as-is is utterly perfect; I adore her; it feels strange to see someone want to improve on what looks like perfection, but as someone who has made changes to her own body as well that would seem counterintuitive to some, I remind myself to practice empathy.

Nina goes on, about wanting the dog nose next: "And a dog's nose, it's… well, first of all, it's remarkable. But second, it's not

something that you can just slap on and expect all the wires to connect properly with a human brain. And that's—I resent this, but—I *do have* a human brain."

"And the hormones help?"

"Well. They are a little feistier than just hormones, apparently." She gives the bottle a shake. "Even as someone who's ostensibly fully developed, these will stimulate development in the regions of the brain that are more developed in dogs than humans. So, after a few months of this, when they put on a nose, it would be a heck of a lot more than just cosmetic. It would be... I've heard it described as a religious experience, to know the world by scent for the first time."

I nod for a moment. I ask, "Any side effects?"

She quickly twists off the top of the bottle and takes a pill, then smiles mischievously at me, and says, "There are effects-effects. A lot of the canine behavior that I've had inhibitions about expressing before will probably start to manifest: barking at noises outside, communicating with body language over talking, humping the furniture, y'know."

"As long as you don't make a mess on the floor."

She sticks her tongue out. "It's okay, I think I'm house trained." We do have a holovent in the corner for Aleksey, and I have caught Nina using it a handful of times already—one day when I caught her and made it known that I could see her, she only became more flagrant about it afterwards.

That night in the afterglow, as Nina and I lie together snuggled up under a blanket, I ask her, "Nina?"

"Hm?"

"Honest question: with the nose, is that a full snout? Will you be able to talk afterwards?"

She licks my forehead a few times, and then answers, "If the hormones have taken well enough, I'm getting the whole face done."

"*Oh*."

She gives me another lick. "I'll still be able to talk. They're modeling my voice; when they do the face, part of that will include implanting a pair of micro speakers kinda in the cheeks, which I'll be able to talk through as though it was my old human mouth. Apparently it's not even weird-feeling."

I kiss the top of one of her ears, where it meets the head. We make out a long while, and I do my best to appreciate her lovely face while it's here, but I really am happy for her, if she decides she'd rather have something else.

A few weeks pass. One morning we visit a shop that specializes in antiques, and then that afternoon I order delivery for us; Nina and I are sitting on the couch, me reading an archaic book about vampires, her fidgeting around with a hacky sack, squishing it between her fingers, tossing it up and catching it; when the delivery man knocks, Aleksey and Nina roar out a string of barks at the exact same moment, and both of them shoot up to their feet; Aleksey walks to the door wagging, and sniffs around the door to smell through and know who is outside; Nina stands stock still in front of the couch, staring blankly forward.

"Y'okay?" I ask. She tells me, "That was *really* satisfying? Like... maybe how like a good sneeze is satisfying? Natural? Understated but also a lot?"

I stand, kiss her on an ear, and go pay the delivery man and retrieve our food; we sit at the dining room table, and she puts her food into her bowl, and I love this goofy dog across from me. After dinner, I figure out the archaic CD speaker box that we got, and put on one of the records; the two of us listen, Nina with her head tilted, one ear raised; one of the CD's has soothing music, and we make love to it on the couch; from across the room Aleksey watches, always curious about the two of us.

On the morning of, I give her one last kiss on her human lips before she goes in for her augmentation. They are doing the full face, and she will have to stay overnight. She would also like time the next day to herself at first, to process everything.

Aleksey and I go to a dog park. We go to The Cerberus Gallery in the off hours, and I admire all of the pieces; many of them are the same pieces that were here the first time I visited, though the gallery makes sure to keep new ones coming in here and there; I spend a long while at *Blindness*, the one with the five ping-pong balls; I spend a long while staring at a ten-foot-tall portrait painting of a Beagle's face. I go down into long term storage, where Grey Liger sits derelict, and I sit in the cockpit, and Aleksey hops up onto the copilot's seat beside me like old

times, and we reminisce, and I thank him for all of the time he's kept me company, and how intelligent and polite he is around others, and how I would never be here without him; I tell him that I love him, which is utterly true in the platonic sense of the word, and I don't say it to him often enough.

The next night is the first time I will see Nina's new face: she is revealing it at the gallery. Aleksey and I mill about that night, discussing the pieces here and there with others, until it is time; everyone makes their way across the hall, into the theater. The lights are on as people find their seats. There on the stage at the front stands Nina, wearing a brown dress, with a pale green veil over her head; the veil is supported with wires internally, such that it looks like a cube suspended around her head, so as not to reveal the shape or dimensions of her augmentation. I sit front and center, and Aleksey sits at my feet, and I pet him. As the others in the theater settle, he lies down.

When everyone has found their seats, the lights in the theater fade off. Then, a spotlight shines down on Nina. With no further ceremony, she lifts off her veil like a fighter pilot taking off her helmet; underneath, above the human body of Nina, framed in Nina's familiar feathered hair and soft brown ears, is the face of a Chocolate Lab. The audience begins clapping; Nina turns her face slowly to the left and to the right, showing the augmentation off, and the audience gives her a standing ovation. She curtsies. She has changed her appearance, and against my expectations, the change is a lateral move: she is still exactly as beautiful as before; this new face fits her perfectly; in some sense, looking at her now, maybe it fits her even more perfectly, as I see better and better how she feels on the inside and tries to manifest it on the outside.

When the applause has quieted, Nina takes in a breath and then barks. Aleksey perks up, and then stands, and bounds up to the stage. Nina kneels down and pets him; he begins to wrestle with her, and she wrestles back, the two of them swiping hand and paw at each other, until Nina comes in and holds him in a hug, rubbing his back, both of them wagging. "That's a good guy," I hear her voice say through her speakers, though her canine mouth doesn't move as she says it.

She stands, curtsies again, and then exits the stage behind the curtain, Aleksey following after her. As the screen is lowering to project tonight's movie onto, I stand up and sneak off backstage after my dogs.

There in the back, Nina is sitting cross-legged in front of Aleksey, who is sitting on his haunches facing her. She has her hands on his shoulders, and is speaking to him with her human voice, alternating between a boring tone of voice and a playful tone of voice, letting him figure it out; he puts his nose against her muzzle where the speaker must be and sniffs, and barks at her; she keeps talking to him, letting him know it's still her.

I come up and join this meeting, sitting cross-legged as well. As I join, both dogs wag wildly. Nina asks me, "What do you think?"

I bite the bullet and lean in and kiss her on the front of her dog mouth, holding my breath; I gently cup her head in my hands, my palms on her soft ears, and I continue to kiss her, pressing human lip against canine, sliding my tongue over her pointy teeth; she lets me explore this for some seconds before she kisses back, and her immense tongue fills my mouth, and I let her explore me anew for all of a few seconds before I reel back, catching my breath and also laughing and coughing. I tell her in a croaking voice, "I need to get used to that, I don't know what I was expecting; I love you; I'm happy for you; I'm glad that you got to do this, and I'm glad to get to figure it out with you."

Sensing a game, Aleksey licks my mouth. I turn my head up away from him, petting him but letting him know that I'm not interested in that from most dogs, thank you.

Nina and I hug. As the movie plays in the theater, Nina and Aleksey and I sit around with each other in a faux living room of prop furniture backstage, and she tells me all about the day she's had, just walking through the districts under her veil and smelling, lifting the veil to press her nose against something now and then and smell it like she was looking at it under an in-built microscope; it is like having super powers; it is like having super powers that you have always felt should have belonged to you. The three of us leave the backstage through a back door, and sneak around back into the gallery. We go to *Blindness*, and

Nina presses her nose right against each of the five ping-pong balls, inhaling deeply at each one, sometimes taking a few sniffs, other times perfectly satisfied with just the one.

"Do you know?" I ask.

She wags. "I know."

That night Nina is a freak in bed with her new mouth, and my only complaint is that I cannot get it back up as fast as both of us are keen on each time, though we do kiss whenever we have to wait, either that or she presses her nose against every square inch of my body, exploring me as though for the first time, under a microscope, with super powers. Apparently I am satisfying to her scrutiny. We sleep cuddled up together, and we invite Aleksey in to sleep on the foot of the bed with us, as he usually does, as he usually did back with just me and him in the ship.

A few weeks go by. Very often, I see Nina standing at the window in the living room, sticking her nose out and smelling, wagging; Aleksey stands beside her sometimes, smelling too. Nina will sometimes bark if another dog walks by outside; Aleksey will get excited, but is better behaved, and does not bark at the other dogs. I often see Nina and Aleksey having what I can only describe as conversations. They play with toys together, and she appears to be learning things from him, though I cannot always discern what the lesson is. She often takes him on walks; I often take him on walks; I often take her on walks. She eats out of her dog bowl without silverware now, now that she has the snout.

One day the three of us are in the theater by ourselves, watching an archaic wildlife documentary. Nina and I are cuddled up together. We are talking over the movie, chatting about how well her nose is working out.

I ask her, "Were you thinking about any more augmentations?"

She licks her lips, which in some contexts means Yes.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I'm worried you're not going to like it."

I feel I know what's coming. I kiss her dog mouth. "What is it?"

She sighs, which flaps her jowls. “With the hormones—they’re amazing, but lately the dysphoria in… certain areas… has been getting pretty bad. I don’t feel right. Just like, all of this—” She gestures around her chest, her stomach, her genitals. “It just feels wrong, and I’d like to change it.”

This did seem inevitable. I take her hand, rub a thumb along the back of her hand. “First of all, who cares what I think.”

“I care. A lot.”

I kiss the side of her snout, then I go on. “It’s your body, not mine. I’m sure we’ll always find something to do. I like you outside of the sex too, you know; you’re a good dog.”

She licks my mouth, and I kiss her back and pet her head once, then leave my arm around her shoulders.

“Do you know what a dog pussy looks like?” she asks.

Before meeting Nina, the answer would have been no, not really; after meeting Nina, I have called up images of them every now and then, looking at them and wondering if I could. “I have seen pictures.”

She curls up with me conspiratorially, and whispers, “I could show you videos.”

I rub her shoulder idly, thinking about it. What the hell; why not. “Let’s see.”

She picks up a laser pointer off of the seat beside her, and shines it up at the ceiling. A holodisplay appears. She navigates through it with the laser pointer, calls up a video, and selects it for projection.

A moment later, Nina and I are curled up together in a theater, watching on the big screen as a veterinarian wearing a pair of blue gloves inserts his lubed fingers into a dog’s vagina, runs his fingers along the outside of the vulva, explains to the viewer what’s what. Nina watches and is extremely aroused; I watch with fascination, but more a fascination like I’m looking at a close up high definition video of some alien creature being shown off.

She calls up another video, which is a male dog mounting and having sex with a female dog; the dogs are shown at a regular angle, then the same act is shown again from the perspective of a different camera, this one zoomed in and focused on the

genitals, and recording in slow motion. I still don't entirely get it, but I also don't entirely not get it.

She calls up a pornographic video starring a male human, a female human, and a female dog; he goes back and forth between the two again and again. I get it. I nuzzle and pinch Nina, and seconds later she is straddling me, and we are going at it as I look at the video of the human penis going back and forth between a human's vagina and a dog's, interchangeably.

She arranges it the next day, and the operation is done a week after. When I see her next, I am coming home from grocery shopping; Aleksey greets me at the door; I go into the bedroom, and see Nina splayed on her back, looking at me and wagging; she has nipples down her pink chest instead of her previous human breasts, and her genitals have been replaced as well; I close the door behind myself, undress, and crawl up onto bed, and give this a try.

Afterwards we lay on our backs, side by side, catching our breath. I lay with my legs straight and flat against the bed; she lays with her knees bent and her legs apart, like a dog on her back.

"How was it?" she asks.

"I don't know why I was worried. You're still amazing."

She wags.

She does the fur next; the procedure involves running a particular machine slowly over the skin as a specialist minds the settings that would cause appropriate fur to grow in that area, and to change the feel of the skin itself somewhat; it is like getting a full-body tattoo; the procedure does not create the fur itself, but begins the process of the fur being able to grow. It looks odd as it's growing in, until one day it doesn't: she has a beautiful paint-brown coat. Hugging her truly does feel like hugging a dog now. Often as I'm going about my day, I find a stray hair of hers on my clothing, and pick it off and look at it, and think warmly of her.

She talks less these days—less with human words, anyways. She and Aleksey play with their toys, go on walks together smelling the air; I play with them, and walk with them. I realize, one day as we're eating dinner, that it's been so long since I

heard her talk at length about anything in the world of art. I ask her, “Do you still like art?”

She looks up from her bowl. She thinks for a moment, and then only answers, “I think I’m moving on. Dull. Meaningless. More art in the scents of a droplet of paint on the head of a pin than in the sights of a full gallery of paintings.”

I am surprised. I feel she is leaving a beautiful body of knowledge behind, and I am taken aback by the waste of it; at the same time, I believe her when she says she moves on; I believe she has shed an excess of knowledge and now lives free with an excess of wisdom.

One day soon after, she goes in for a checkup. After some scans, she is taken off of her hormones; she is done. Her brain is indistinguishable from a dog’s, as is most of the rest of her physiology, save for her bone structure and the fact she’s wired to the speakers implanted in her muzzle. Apparently dogs have a better grasp on human language than I appreciated; if Aleksey had been hooked up to speakers similarly from a young enough age, and had therefore grown up practicing, he would have been able to talk too, apparently.

In the course of knowing Nina, there have been times when I have more strongly felt I am making love to a human who likes dogs, and times when I have more strongly felt I am making love to a dog who was assigned human at birth. The night after her scans show she has the mind of a dog is a night when I feel the latter way; I make love to one dog on the couch, and nudge away another dog with my foot when he comes up to look; I finish with the one dog, and lay with her and pet her, and then after a shower, I lay with the other dog and pet him; I don’t think he has any misgivings towards the fact I treat the other dog differently, but I do think that he knows there are two dogs in this pack, and a human who does treat the two of them differently.

One day, I am sitting on the couch reading a book on sheep, and Nina and Aleksey are playing with a rope on the ground, tugging it gently back and forth with their mouths. Aleksey gets up at some point, and walks off to go lay on the bed. Nina gets up, and lays down at my feet. I lean down and pet her a bit, and

then go back to reading. Eventually she sits down beside me, and says, “Val.”

I am startled; it’s been so long since I heard my name from her. “What’s wrong?”

“I am a dog?”

“Yes.”

She looks down at her hands.

I pet her, and tell her it’s alright. I learn she is scared of the next one—the augmentation to change the bones. It is extensive. She will require physical training afterwards, to learn how to control a body that has had everything rearranged. I tell her she is loved as she is, and also that I would not abandon her if the next one is difficult, or if something goes wrong. She is my partner until one of us dies.

She arranges the surgery, with my help when all of the human droning on exhausts her. When I visit her in the hospital afterwards, there is a Chocolate Lab in a hospital bed; Nina; Nina who I yet again am seeing for the first time, and this time, I think, I am seeing her again for the first time for the last time; she is done; this is her. She wags when she sees me.

I kneel at her bedside. She licks my face, and I tell her again and again that I love her.

In a week, she can walk. In a month, she can run. We go to a dog park that has obstacles; Aleksey is indifferent to them, and plays with the other dogs; Nina plays with Aleksey and the other dogs too, but also plays with me on the obstacles, sprinting over and around and through, and I am sometimes beside myself with how impressed and smitten I am with this Chocolate Lab. Most nights she has no interest in making love, and is happy to snuggle up with me and go straight to sleep; some nights she is demanding, and I am happy to please. One night I ask her if she needs anything before we go to sleep; she looks at me and does not answer. “Nina girl?” I ask. She looks at me still, and eventually says, “Val.” I ask her what’s wrong. She answers, “There is one thing left. This voice blesses; other dogs would like to have it; they are jealous I can speak to the tall ones. This voice curses; by the gift of speaking, I am cursed to be treated as human above dogs, and not as their equal, as the equal of

everything and a part of my canine kind." It is the most I've heard her say at once in months.

We go to arrange to have the speakers removed; the doctor can disable them there in his office. Nina leaps up onto the medical bed, and stands before the doctor, who holds a syringe. He holds it poised to her snout, and he asks if Nina would like to say any final words.

She looks at me. "Val. You have been my best friend always. I love you always. Thank you always."

With two pokes of the syringe, Nina is no longer able to speak in human words. I hug her. We go home, and I make dinner for us. Nina and Aleksey eat from bowls, and I sit at the table, eating from a plate and watching them. She clings to me that night, assuring me that not much has changed; she still loves me; she is still happy; I tell her aloud that the feelings are mutual, and I still love her. On this night she is demanding, and as always, I am happy to please this dog.

ALIYAH, MADELINE, FOUR CANDLES

The crowd hadn't even gotten there yet. It was merely the act of setting up to play Radio City Music Hall that made me realize we were not just a successful band—already a miracle—but that we were a big-dick famous band.

At first I had wondered whether the stage crew may have already had a long day prior to our arrival, or whether they really were just weirdly inexperienced for such a large venue, because as we worked, they seemed almost perplexed by our fairly normal desire to be a part of arranging the instruments on stage, and doubly perplexed by our fairly normal selection of instruments, and had very mixed reactions on Aliyah's great dane, Lion, who was bounding around the stage and sniffing things. Some crew would offer out a hand to him as he neared, and give him a rub if they got the chance. More than one of them would run away—Lion would chase briefly, then bound off somewhere else. But I realized, as far as the setting up goes, that it was because they were starstruck by us. I had known for a while now that fans can be weirdos, obsessives, awkward types, but seeing someone trip over themselves professionally on our account was, I guess, an interesting first, and it made me appreciate that we weren't at such a big venue by mistake. We were here because we really had made it.

We had never played a room half this large—most of our lives we could play shows without microphones. But that wouldn't swing here. A technician was helping me figure out the mics that would best facilitate my piano, accordion, saxophone, and

acoustic guitar. Aliyah, up front of course, was having an easier time with her two guitars (electric and acoustic) and her microphones. The bass guitar (Steve) was to be on a stand halfway between us, so that either of us could have him depending on the song.

Jess, after getting help putting up the platform for the drums, had told the stage hands to go away. She would set up her drum world, thank you very much, yes if I need anything I'll ask.

"Any backing band?" the stage hand helping me asks, as he is managing a cable.

I'm sure Jess, Aliyah, and myself are each keeping our own count of how many times we've been asked this, so that we can compare later. In fairness, this particular stage hand has not asked me the question yet.

"Just the three of us, start to finish," I inform him. "Why, do you play anything?"

He smiles a little. "Most of what you've got on stage. Just rusty on the drums, but otherwise…" He shrugs, and pretends that his full attention is needed on the cable that seems to already be sorted out.

I skip over to the stool with my accordion on it, grab the accordion (it makes a silly noise), and turn to face the stage hand. "Catch!"

His head snaps up and there is amazing panic in his eyes as I am tossing him my accordion. Everything drops from his hands and he catches it.

"Play something!"

Jess adds from the drums, "Play Piano Man!"

He is trying to remain bashful, but his smiling betrays his eagerness. He had fantasized about this outcome, but had not expected it. He straps on the accordion.

After dancing up and down a scale, he is playing Piano Man just as well as I could. Jess whistles and cheers. He sings the words, complete with the La-Dadada-Dadadada's, and lets the final note fade out a long time.

I point at him and shout to Aliyah. "Aliyah!"

"What, dear?"

"Let him do the show!"

"Does he know our songs?"

I look at him.

He is already taking off the accordion. “Sorry,” he says, still much happier than he was when he was fiddling with the cable. He hands off the accordion.

“That was really good though,” I tell him.

He tells me his name is Chuck. I tell him my name is Willow, and he seems amused, and says that he had heard what my name was before. I have lied to him anyways, as my birth certificate and driver’s license say Madeline. Setting up the cables with Chuck is a lot of fun, and my mind is taken off of how big this big-dick theater is, and how many people will be fit into it in a few hours. I find out that he has also lied to me, and he can play one of our songs. He plays it in my place, complete with Jess on the drums and Aliyah on electric and vocals, as I run from the front of the hall to the back, stopping for a while at various seats to make sure that I can hear everything well. (There is also someone whose job it is to do this, but they are waiting for me to stop playing and go on stage so that he can hear it with the correct band and each of the instruments as I would play them, since the band is here anyways)

With everything set up, Aliyah, Jess, and myself play a rehearsal. (We are a punk rock band but literally everyone besides the three of us disagrees with this. We are called Ring Fingernail)

During the actual show (like in front of people) my eyes are closed from start to finish (They open to a narrow squint only when I need to change instruments, particularly when going for Steve)

After the show, we all run outside. Aliyah gets into the driver’s seat of her car after letting Lion into the passenger side. Jess and I climb into the back (Jess shows me that she has a bottle of rum) and Aliyah drives us all to our hotel and parks (Jess and I are intoxicated)

Security stops us for being drunk and having an accordion and an enormous dog with us, but after a moment they are informed that we are big-dick famous and we are escorted to the elevator, where Aliyah then informs the security that we are fine thank you, and hits the button for the top floor, and the elevator

closes with Aliyah, Jess, myself, and Lion inside, and also a man with a beard who seems to be unrelated to any of this.

Jess looks to him, and asks, “Screw?”

He appears uncomfortable. He holds up his hand, and with his other hand points to his wedding ring.

“Cheat?”

He pulls a cross necklace out from his shirt collar.

“Ugh.”

He gets off at his floor.

Jess passes Aliyah the bottle of rum. Aliyah drinks. Jess drinks again. I drink again. Jess drinks again. The elevator doors open, and we maneuver our way through the short hall and into the penthouse suite.

As soon as I have heard the door close behind us, I look over and Jess is naked (Drunk Jess has Opinions about clothes) and Aliyah has taken her own bottle of rum for herself from the minibar (she salutes me with it before tilting it back and drinking)

I go and close the curtains that overlook New York City and also grab my own bottle of rum from the minibar and then I sit on the couch. I fiddle on the accordion as I replay the night’s events in my head (although my eyes were not open for the show, I can vividly recall the presence of the crowd. Their sound was a physical force. Reprocessing it now while drunk, the crowd has only gone up in physicality. I rethink of moments of songs again and again, and how all of those people screamed at us or were silent and held their breath for us)

When I am finished, I set the accordion aside. I am drunk and sleepy. I look around. Jess is in a bubbling hot tub in the corner of the room. She raises an arm and waves at me. I wave back.

I stand, and become immediately aware that walking is going to be an ordeal and I will probably fall over a lot. I begin walking towards Jess, and amazingly I continue walking towards Jess until I am at the edge of the hot tub. “I’m going to bed,” I inform her.

She tells me that she’s scoped out the bedrooms and this penthouse has one guest bed and one master bed and that she is willing to take the guest bed if me and Aliyah want to share the

master bed. I have not processed any of what she has said when I nod and walk off towards the master bedroom, where the door is open.

I walk through the open door, and there I see Aliyah lying on her back with her legs hanging off the edge of the bed. Lion is standing at her spread legs, and is doing a thorough job of licking her vagina.

"AH!" I say.

Aliyah flinches, and then she and Lion look to me. When she sees that it is me, she raises a finger to her lips, and says, "Shhhh."

I stand frozen in the doorway.

Aliyah beckons me over.

I mechanically walk forward and stand at the corner of the bed. Lion has sat down, and is looking at me, though he keeps glancing back to Aliyah's vagina, which she still has spread out in front of his face.

She slinks down the bed and onto the floor, crouching beside Lion, rubbing the length of her body against his sitting body. "Lion and I are more than friends," she tells me. She is at least as drunk as I am. As she rubs him, I can hear the scratching of the hairs of his fur all rubbing together.

I nod.

"Do you mind if he and I get back to where we left off?" Aliyah asks.

I can't think of a reason to be bothered. Correction: I can't think of a reason to be bothered that I actually believe. Jess having sex while we're in the room is a normality. Aliyah I have never seen in the act before, and it is now plain to see why. I tell her that she and Lion can get back to it.

Aliyah kisses Lion on the front of his dog lips, and his mouth opens and begins licking at her, and soon they are making out, Lion lapping into her mouth and all over her face. I crawl up and sit at the head of the bed, huddled up in comfy blankets, watching my best friend fuck a dog. I fall asleep at some point. When I wake up, I am lying on one side of the bed, and next to me is Lion, and big-spooning Lion is Aliyah.

Over breakfast, while Jess is in the other room, Aliyah and I are talking at regular volume about the concert, and at a quieter volume about the fact that she fucks her dog.

"I trust you to keep it a secret," she tells me.

"Of course," I tell her. "Does anyone else know?"

"Just the dogs."

"Dogs?"

She takes a breath in to talk again, and then her breath catches before she can say anything. She pauses a while, and then tries again. "Missie growing up, and Victor after that. Definitely Daisy too, even if…" Tears have not fallen yet, but she has started to cry. "Even if that one didn't last long."

I get up and go and get on my knees next to her chair and hug her. She lets it out, hugging back. Lion comes and sits at her side opposite me, and rests his nose against her, looking sad. She pets him. She thanks us both. We eventually get on with breakfast and the rest of the day. We are doing a much smaller acoustic show tonight, and I am looking forward to it.

Months go by. We take a break from touring to work on new material for our next album and to have a vacation. Aliyah, Jess, and myself all live in Portland and see each other often. Jess moves away from Portland to Los Angeles. Aliyah moves away from Portland to a farm in rural Colorado, near a town called Kohath. It is rarer that any of us see each other. About three years after that night we played Radio City Music Hall, Aliyah, Jess, and myself meet up in Kohath for a month to rehearse the new material, iron it out, and record the new album. I love being with them again. I know that this band is no longer the thing it was before when we were touring, but nonetheless, I am grateful for it to still be here, still be the three of us playing music, with Lion lumbering around the recording studio. He walks with a limp now. I pet him. Aliyah pets him. When we are finished recording the album, Jess returns to Los Angeles, and I return to Portland, although I am wondering whether I might like Kohath better. I do not pursue this idea, as I do not want to impose on Aliyah's seclusion. The band is not what it was before. The river is shallower, still enough to turn a turbine, but less. I will not overexpect of it. I still talk on the phone with Aliyah and Jess every now and then. Sometimes I play small

shows as a solo artist, and Jess tells me that sometimes she does the same in Los Angeles. One day, after I have not been able to get in touch with Aliyah for months (I thought we had been missing each other's calls, but in fact, she was avoiding me) I learn that Lion has died. Aliyah wants to go on tour. Jess is agreeable to this. We meet up in Los Angeles for a few shows as a test-run, and when it goes well, we begin arranging the cross-country route. It is similar to last time—it is good—even if we are all damaged goods even more so than we were the last time. The tour is a lot of fun and I love Aliyah and Jess and I also love that there are still a lot of people in the world who are fans of us, apparently, which is affirming that we must be doing something right, probably. When we have gone from one side of the country to the other and back again and the tour is over, we all return to our homes. Aliyah and I talk on the phone every day for a few days, and then, I can no longer get ahold of her. When I have not been able to reach her for a week I ask around, and learn that nobody has been able to get ahold of her. I travel to Kohath and break and enter into her farmhouse, and go through every room, and she is not there. I call around. Nobody knows if she went somewhere. She is declared a missing person. I am helping with the searches. The searches yield nothing—we do not find her, alive or otherwise. Two months pass. Jess comes to Kohath and we cry and she tells me there's nothing more I can do here, and I should get back to my own life. I return to Portland. I play music in my living room, but nowhere else. Often I sit back on the couch fiddling with my accordion, mentally playing back shows we'd played, conversations we'd had, moments we'd lived. I miss my friend.

A year goes by. Sitting on the couch and playing the accordion so often, I have ended up with a lot of new workable material. I fiddle with the other instruments, and figure out the arrangements. I have never been much of a lyricist, but I come up with some stuff. I begin recording in my living room, recording the different tracks of the different instruments all myself. Eventually, I have a demo for a new album. I send it to Jess. Jess calls me in tears and thanks me for showing it to her, and she says I should get it produced, it sounds really nice, that it shows so much of how much of the band's sound had been

Willow sound. I thank her and I mean it, but I also mean it when I tell her that the band's sound was all because of Aliyah. She disagrees. She says the band's face was all Aliyah, but it would be lost in genericism without the Willow parts. I appreciate that we are talking about this but I also feel uncomfortable whenever I have to speak about Aliyah as though she is dead. She almost certainly is dead. Whether she is alive or dead, she almost certainly would enjoy that we are talking about her. I thank Jess again, and get off the phone with her.

After finding the phone number and gathering the courage, I call up the recording studio in Kohath. I explain who I am (they remember me) and I tell them that I have an album to record if they might be interested, and I can send them the demo. They insist that sending the demo will be unnecessary and I can come down to record at my soonest convenience. I pack up my instruments and go (I leave Steve behind in my living room and buy a new bass guitar on the drive)

I arrive at the studio a couple days later, early in the morning. I am greeted warmly by the owner. We sit down and listen to my demo. By eleven AM we have begun recording. By nine PM I can't stop. The studio owner asks if I will lock the front door when I leave if he gives me the keys. I agree to this. He hands me the keys and goes.

At the stroke of midnight, I am recording an acoustic guitar solo. I finish it, open my eyes, and standing behind the glass in the tech room is Aliyah. I scream for joy and drop my guitar and rush to the door to meet her, but I halt as I actually near the door. She looks different. I am certain of it. I had thought it was just the reflection of the glass playing tricks, but I can now see that her black skin is no longer skin, her black hair is no longer hair, and her dress (she rarely wore dresses) is no longer anything earthly either. From head to toe, I can see through her. She is made of something smoke-like, but also glass-like, but it is certainly in the shape of Aliyah, or at least close enough that I could recognize it.

She does not wait around for me to open the door. She walks forward, and she moves through the studio window as though it wasn't there. I step forward to hug her, but she shakes her head, and I step back.

“That song is coming together beautifully,” she tells me. She is smiling at me, but she is not happy.

“What happened to you?” I ask.

She frowns. “I got super murdered.”

Tears hit me. Aliyah and I sit down next to each other on the couch in the tech room. I ask, “Who killed you?”

“Not gonna say. Don’t need you getting involved too.”

“I’ll kill the bastard.”

“Yeah, so, like I said.”

I snarl.

We sit quiet for a little while.

“I want you to do something else for me besides killing,” she says.

Anything. “Go on.”

“Well, first off I should tell you I’m not in a major rush about it. I want you to finish recording your album before you go and do my thing. Okay?”

I am listening.

“Okay,” she says. “Okay. First, finish your thing here. Then… then I’ll tell you where my body is buried, and I’d like you to dig me up, and bring me to Crater Lake National Park, and rebury me there, near the water.”

I look at her.

Now it is her turn to be in tears, although it appears she cannot actually cry. “Missie and Victor—Crater Lake is where my family scattered their ashes when they died. It’s where I scattered the ashes of Daisy and Lion too. And I don’t want to spend the rest of eternity away from them.”

I nod. “I can do it now. We can leave right now.”

She smiles. Again, she is not happy, but nonetheless I don’t think that the smile is meaningless. “I want to hear your album finished before I go. C’mon. Let’s get back to it, if you’re still staying up tonight.”

I agree to this, and step back into the recording booth. I retune the guitar and put down another take of the solo.

In three days I have finished all of the recordings, and in four days I have finished editing everything together exactly as I want it and recording some touch-ups, with guidance from the studio owner and from Aliyah. I have bullied Aliyah into writing

the lyrics of a song for me. A song about love and empathy and fucking dogs. It is by far the best song on the album. I hope that everyone who thinks it's a joke becomes more tolerant without realizing it. I hope that everyone who gets mad about it gets it stuck in their head forever.

I pay the studio owner generously for letting me take complete control over his studio for the week. After packing up my things from the bed and breakfast I've been staying at, I sit on the edge of the bed with Aliyah, and the two of us listen to the album, start to finish. She thanks me, and I thank her. She tells me that she is buried in the dirt cellar of an abandoned farmhouse five miles out of town.

I pack up my van, buy a tarp and a shovel and a big flashlight from the farm supply store in town, and drive out to the house. I break into the cellar. During the initial searches after Aliyah went missing, the police searched this building and a few other abandoned ones, and I should not be surprised that they did a shit job of it. Sweeping the flashlight across the floor, I don't even have to ask Aliyah where exactly she is buried. There is a raised mound of discolored dirt the size and shape of a grave. It is so conspicuous that I am stricken with certainty that a cop killed Aliyah and covered it up during the search, but I do not bring it up, because I know she still won't tell me who did it (I already asked a lot more times as we were doing the recordings)

I dig her up. I am careful not to damage her body, although she insists that this actually does not matter in the slightest. When she is unearthed, I lift her body out of the grave, and place her onto the tarp. I wrap her up and carry her out of the cellar and into my van. I go back into the cellar and fill the grave back in. I drive north out of Kohath, bound for Crater Lake National Park.

On the way, as Aliyah and I are talking, I make a comment about how unfair it is that she died so young.

"I did not die young," she tells me.

I shrug. "Okay, maybe not *young*, but you weren't exactly elderly."

"I was ancient and sick of life anyways," Aliyah tells me, and I am shocked. "You're not thinking about life the way that I lived it, dear. You're thinking in human years. Human lifetimes. I

lived four lifetimes with people whose candles burned short but brighter than anyone else in the world. With each and every one of them, I was right there burning with them."

I apologize. We keep driving.

When we arrive at the lake, I make my way down a gravel road and eventually I park the van. I grab my shovel. I dig Aliyah a new grave. In the time it takes me to do this, nobody has come by. I take Aliyah's body out of the van, lay her to rest in the woods near the lake, and bury her properly.

She stands atop her grave, facing me. I am covered in dirt and sweat and death germs. I am smiling at her. She is smiling at me. She is still not happy. Not yet. But she is smiling, and she is optimistic.

"Thank you," she says.

"Thank you," I say. "For everything. Have a good afterlife."

"You too, when you do."

I snicker, and I wish I could hug her, but she is gone. I go to the lake and get into the freezing water to wash off, and then I return to my van, dry off, and return home. I call up a local venue and they book me to play an acoustic show. I play our old songs that were Aliyah's favorites, even though I know that she is not listening, that she is somewhere else where she, by now, is probably burning with the happiness of four lifetimes rediscovered at once.

FIVE OF CUPS COVERS TEN OF SWORDS

Three so-and-sos from the cursed races—a canian, a felian, and a rodentian—sat around an upturned washbucket in the front yard of a dilapidated farmhouse, playing cards with the minor arcana.

"Any twos, Hardigar?" Roan asked.

"Go fish, Roan."

"Meh." Roan drew.

"Got any knights, Hardigar?" Syl asked through a barely contained grin.

Hardigar hissed down at his cards, and handed three knights over to the rodentian girl.

She added a complete set of knights to her collection of completed sets sitting on the washbucket table. After setting the set down she tapped the cards together neatly, and then looked back to her hand. "Got any aces, Hardigar?" she went on.

Hardigar opened his mouth fully and hissed even meaner, and handed over three aces.

"Got anyyy fours, Hardigar?"

Roan snickered.

Hardigar reached over with his claws extended and swatted Roan's cards out of his hand: they went flying onto the grass.

"Ah! Hey! Ass," Roan said, and quickly collected them up. He also looked to Syl, and mentioned, "That's a bad word, don't say that in front of Meesn."

Hardigar took a deep breath in, and out. He reminded himself that he played these hideously monotonous social

brainiac games with these two because he loved them, and *they* enjoyed it. He handed Syl three fours.

She set down her complete set of fours, and asked, "Got any nines, Hardigar?"

Hardigar handed Syl card after card, until his hand was down to just two cards, the five of cups and the ten of swords. Good ones, them. He stared at the pictures as Syl extracted Roan's hand from him too.

"I think you won, Syl," Roan said, looking at Syl's extensive field of completed sets laid out neatly on the table.

Her nose twitched and her tail flicked agreeably.

"Good game, Syl," Hardigar congratulated. He set down his hand. He had completed zero sets, Roan had gotten one.

"One more?" Syl asked.

"C'mon now, that *was* one more," Roan said, as he began to collect up all of the cards. "*Clearly* you can remember that." He handed her the deck. "Want to go see if Meesn needs help with anything in the house?"

She took the deck, but did not go scampering off towards the house. She looked at Hardigar. "Make me fly?"

"Wellll," he said, and with faux-reluctance, stood up. "Hand me a card?"

Syl scanned through the deck, and then picked out a card to hand to him. Four of pentacles. Her favorite. "Mm, lovely," he commented.

He walked across the yard, spinning the single card atop his fingertip, being followed closely by Syl. He stopped at a patch of dirt. There, over the patch of dirt, he envisioned a sturdy table, considered the texture of the wood as he ran a hand over it, what its weight would be if one tried to lift it. He tossed the card onto the envisioned table: the card landed on the air as though striking the table's surface. The card slid briefly and then settled.

Though he was part of a cursed race, this contained weal as well as woe. One gift to Hardigar was the cliche one: in the black fur on his left forearm, in two rows, were the numerals one through nine depicted in white fur. The numerals nine, eight, and seven were crossed through with a line of crimson fur,

which looked as though it was white fur matted with dried blood.

His other gift was an adeptness in the particularly rare magic of pantomime. He made the imagined real, though the physicality of the imagined had to be truly believed by the one who would be most effected by it in the immediate future. As he tossed the card onto the imagined table, his immense ego was on the line, and so his belief made it physical.

Hardigar crouched, wriggled, and then leapt up onto the floating card, making a show of standing on it upon one tiptoe, hands out to the sides for balance. After staying that way for a few seconds, he hopped off.

He came around the table to Syl, lifted her up, and held her atop the table, over the card. “Don’t look down,” he instructed. “Look forward, out into the woods. The card is still there. You’ll be able to stand on it.”

She looked up and faced forward, into the woods as he had said.

Very slowly, he lowered her towards the table, saying, “Easy, almost there, almooost…”

Her foot settled on the imagined table, several inches away from being atop the card at all. He set her fully on the table, made sure she had her balance, and then let go of her, leaving her to stand on one foot, believing she stood on the floating card, and, incidentally, therefore believing in Hardigar’s pantomime, making it real. She squeaked with delight as she kept her balance, facing the woods diligently.

Silently, Hardigar grabbed the card, held it behind his back, and walked around to the front of Syl. He smiled at her joy in this, and then held up the four of pentacles for her to see. He watched as she processed what he was showing her. She held on to the belief for a couple more seconds, and then dropped to the ground.

He picked her up and began carrying her to the farmhouse. “You were off the card the entire time,” he told her, “and you still floated.”

Hardigar took a few steps up an imagined staircase and onto an imagined platform, about three feet off the ground. From the

felian's arms, the rodentian girl peered down at the ground, and at the seeming nothingness which the man stood on.

"If I set you down, will you float?"

Syl looked down, pondered it, and then nodded.

Carefully, Hardigar began setting Syl down. "Almost... almooost..."

Syl's feet found the platform, and she stood level with Hardigar. She squeaked up at him, and he flicked his tail and purred down at her. He offered his hand, and she took it.

"Follow me down," he said, and led the way down the stairs. She followed him down after each one, and the two arrived safely back on the grass.

"Thanks Hardigar," she squeaked, and then skipped off into the house to go see if her grandmother needed help with anything.

Hardigar purred and flicked his tail as he watched her go. Smiling, he turned towards Roan. The canian still sat at the washbucket table, head bowed and posture stooped over. Hardigar's good mood turned to concern, and he walked over to his clanmate.

"Something wrong?"

Roan looked up to Hardigar. The canian's eyes were reddened and wide.

Hardigar's demeanor doured further at seeing the canian distressed. "Roan, if you need to eat—"

Roan growled. "No," he said.

"It's not our fault that we're like this."

Roan growled again.

Two hundred years ago, a wizard of great power and true evil cast a curse upon the followers of Essera, the goddess of animal empathy. The curse gave each follower the likeness of an animal, and ordained that the only food which would bear sustenance for the cursed races was the blood of a freshly killed animal to whom one had formed an emotional bond.

Most from the cursed races starved, or were killed before they had the opportunity to starve. Essera herself, in the last fortress where she and her followers made a stand, was killed in a raid which lasted forty grueling days. In the days before her impending death, the goddess broke off pieces of her own

divinity, and gave them as blessings to her people who would soon be the orphaned followers of a dead religion. Cats with nine lives. Dogs with sight of ghosts. Rats with the ability to bestow bad luck.

Hardigar, Roan, Meesn, and Syl were the descendants of an almost totally successful genocide. They were among the last from the cursed races in the world.

Roan stood up, and began walking around to the back of the house, towards the barn and the pasture. Hardigar followed beside him. The canian and the felian entered the barn, where Page and Temperance, two mares, stood in their stalls.

Roan went to Temperance, and held the mare's head in his arms. He stroked down the mare's neck and buried his canian nose against her coat, taking in deep, long sniffs.

Hardigar went to Page, set down an invisible step-stool behind her, stepped up onto it, and mated with her to pass the time. He tried to focus on the physical pleasure of it, to block out the invasive thoughts about death, about eating other living beings, about the profound selfishness of his very existence in this world. It was not an easy thing for him to forget about. It was even worse for Roan. As a canian, Roan still saw the ghosts: not exactly living creatures anymore, but the echoes of a living creature's soul, cracked motors still blindly lurching on to turn machines that are no longer there. He saw the ghosts of sheep walking alongside the rest of the flock, never again to taste the grass or smell the breeze, always bleating at him and running if he neared, for he was their murderer. He saw the ghost of the mare who had been named Queen, standing in the stall right beside Temperance, staring daggers at the canian who had killed her to feed himself and a rat.

Roan managed not to eat for the remainder of the day. When his stomach growled, he growled back.

–

The next day, Hardigar and Roan sat near the edge of a cliff, with Page and Temperance standing around behind them. Hardigar played solitaire while Roan looked down at the fields of the valley before them. A road cut through the valley. Roan's

wet nose pulsated as he monitored the scents in the air. The stomach of the felian and the stomach of the canian had a conversation in growls.

On the day of her death, the goddess Essera gave one final gift to her people: they would be able to smell a rank odor upon any human who killed for pleasure. Being that a human was an animal, this proved to be quite useful to the cursed races in expanding their diet.

A gentle breeze came by. Roan's nose twitched, and then he shot up to his feet and barked at a grove of birch trees a ways down the valley. "Hunters," Roan said, jowls raised.

Hardigar did not yet get up. He continued to ponder his game, tail flicking back and forth. "Survivalists or sportsmen?" he asked.

"I can smell them, can I not?"

Hardigar smirked. "Teasing, Roan. To imagine I would doubt you."

Hardigar collected up his cards, and stood up as well. The two of them mounted the mares and set off, galloping over a path that led down into the valley. The nose of the felian and the nose of the canian twitched the entire way, a foul scent guiding them to their targets. As the scent grew stronger, Hardigar and Roan slowed their mares to a trot, and then dismounted, and tied the mares' leads to a couple of birch trees. The two men proceeded on foot, stalking silently through the forest. Hardigar's left hand rested on his cutlass, and he felt the weight of the sets of manacles stashed around the rest of his hip. Roan had his bow drawn and an arrow knocked.

As the two neared the road, they could hear the sound of the hunters' wagon coming through, drawn by a horse. Hardigar and Roan both bared their teeth reflexively at the overwhelming scent: these hunters had killed many for no reason other than sport, perhaps even no other reason than habit.

The felian and the canian peeked out to the road from behind the trees. The covered wagon had one driver, a bearded man boredly holding the horse's reins.

Roan pulled back his arrow and trained a shot on the driver. Once the wagon was near to passing, Roan released the arrow and sent it on its way: the arrow flew, and landed in the throat

of the driver, signing the end of this life that had taken the lives of so many others. The driver lived long enough to know that this was his death. He put his hands to his throat, mouth open and grimacing in pain and discomfort, and then he slumped over in his seat. The horse continued on walking, pulling the wagon.

Roan gave Hardigar a pat on the shoulder, implicitly saying, "Your turn."

Silently, Hardigar dashed up to the road, leapt into the driver's seat of the wagon, and tossed out the bearded body, which fell to the road with a hefty thump. He then crouched in the driver's seat with his cutlass drawn, and waited for the riders in the back of the wagon to see their compatriot on the road behind them with an arrow in his throat.

Shortly, he heard an uproar from inside the wagon: "What in the twenty nine hells!"

Hardigar snickered. As soon as he heard boots hit the road, he leapt out to the side of the wagon to confront the alerted men.

Two men were running at him, one with a crossbow and one with a shortsword. The man with the crossbow came to a skidding halt and fired his shot: Hardigar raised a pantomimed shield, and the bolt embedded in the air before it could strike him. He forgot about the shield, and the bolt fell to the ground.

The man with the shortsword still charged. Hardigar crouched, leapt up into the air, and then landed on an imagined trampoline. He sailed comfortably over both men's heads, doing a flip on the way, and landed behind the crossbowman. With deft hands, Hardigar clamped manacles onto the man's hands and ankles, and then kicked out the man's footing from under him, sending him sailing down to the road which he hit with a thump much like his compatriot had made earlier.

The swordsman wheeled around to face the felian assailant. This time he did not charge, but stood—cowered—in a cautious, frightened stance.

Hardigar drew his foot back and kicked the crossbowman in the ribs for effect, and then stood tall and gave the swordsman a smile. "Stand down, and you will live the rest of your limited days in comfort!"

The man sneered. “I’ve killed larger vermin than you, degenerate.”

Hardigar hissed, and held his forearm out to the side for the man to see the numbering in the fur. “I warn you, you’ll have to kill me six times for it to stick. Which is more than fair, I would say, given your genocide of my people.”

“There was no genocide. There was a war, and you lost it.”

Hardigar kicked the crossbowman in the ribs once again. The felian noticed, then, that neither of these humans was dressed as a hunter. They each wore black leather with metal studs, and their boots bore pointed metal tips which glinted in the sun. Hardigar squinted at the swordsman’s hand: a tattoo of a cross overlayed by a three-headed lion confirmed it; these were agents of the crown. It was entirely possible that the killing which had caused their rank odor was not restricted to the traditional animal kingdom alone.

“Tell me, how fares the king? I pray he is sick.”

The man drew a dagger from a sheath Hardigar hadn’t noticed. The man hurled it at the felian, quicker than the cat could conjure up an image of something with which to block it. Hardigar let out a surprised breath as the dagger pierced his stomach. He removed it and let it fall to the ground as an arrow came and pierced the swordsman’s throat, in much the same way as an arrow had pierced his compatriot’s.

Hardigar felt a tingling sensation spreading from his stomach outward. He screwed his eyes shut, and bowed his head in disappointed resignation. Poison. The dagger had been poisoned.

Roan came running up. He peeked into the back of the wagon for any more adversaries, and then went to Hardigar.

Hardigar forced a smile, and said, “Not our best work.”

“Hardigar, you—”

Hardigar put a firm hand on Roan’s shoulder, and nodded. “This will kill me, I think, but what else is new? Kick him in the ribs for me, would you?”

Roan did as asked. Hardigar beamed at the odorous man’s yelp.

Hardigar staggered over to the back of the wagon, and had a look inside.

“Howdy,” I said to him.

So, this is where I come into the story. At the time I didn’t know what my real name was, though Hardigar would soon give me the nickname Hermit. I stood in a cage in the back of the covered wagon, clothed in a ratty grey cloak, having heard my captors dispatched one by one. Then up comes a man who looks like a cat, his stomach and hands soaked with his own blood, and he tilts his head curiously at me like I’m the weird one. I guess we both are.

“Be it animal or mineral, insect gas or vegetable; who are you?” he asked. His tongue was sluggish as he recited the singsongy children’s rhyme—because of the poison, as I would later learn.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I remember nothing from before this morning, when I awoke in this cage.”

“Fascinating,” the cat man said, and then turned and puked blood onto the road.

Once he was finished doing that, he grabbed one of the chests in the back of the wagon and slid it over to himself. He pressed in on the latching mechanism, lifted up the lid, and set off what turned out to be a booby trap: an explosion flashed and filled all of my senses, leaving me blinded and deafened and smelling gunpowder and aching from the shockwave that had picked me up off of my feet and slammed me against the back of my cage. I sat on the floor, rattled, looking out at the back half of the wagon that had been exploded off. The cat man laid on the road, dead.

A dog man approached, crouched down at the body of the cat man, and examined the forearm. He whined, and then stood and approached me. His nose moved around as he examined me from a distance. Apparently I did not bear the same foul odor as my captors, but at the same time, the dog man was not ready to let me out of my cage just yet.

The cat man, dead just a moment ago, sat up. He looked around, particularly up at the exploded wagon, and then looked down to his forearm. “Ah shit.”

The dog man came over and gave him a hand up. I saw the dog man show the cat man a large key, and then both of them looked in my direction. With a smile and a flick of the tail, the

cat man snatched the key and leapt up into the wagon, standing face to face with me. I stood back from the bars with my hands at my sides; he came and leaned forward against the bars, pressing as much of his face through as he could while his tail flicked back and forth behind him.

"My name is Hardigar," he said. "I have five lives left, and if you promise to keep it that way, I'll unlock you."

"Easy enough," I said, and then extended a hand.

He reached through the bars, and we shook. Next, he unlocked the cage and held open the door for me, and I was free.

Free to do what or go where, I wasn't sure of. I followed the cat man out of the wagon, and then stood and observed as the two of them made the remaining agent stand up; this agent's hands were bound behind his back and his ankles were chained together; the canian stood behind him, keeping a hold on him.

Hardigar looked over to me, and mentioned, "You can go. Perhaps the horse would give you a ride."

"To where?" I wondered aloud.

Hardigar gave a big shrug.

"I may wish to come with you, if you would have me."

The felian and the canian turned and whispered to one another. Hardigar then said to me, "We don't have much."

I shrugged. "I don't have anything."

"Yeah, alright. Come along then."

Hardigar removed the horse from the cart. He then produced a deck of cards and looked through them, glancing up at the horse once in a while. Eventually he held one card up to look at it and the horse side by side, and then nodded. "Magician," he said to the canian, who gave an approving thumbs up. He then came over to me, held a card up to look at me and it side by side, and then nodded again. "Hermit." He flipped the card around for me to see. I could see where he was coming from with the grey cloak, at least.

The five of us—myself, the agent, the canian and the felian, and the horse—proceeded through the woods. Hardigar rode atop the horse in the back of the procession, likely keeping a suspicious eye on me. We stopped at a clearing and gathered two more horses, then proceeded on, up the side of the valley, and through the woods a ways, eventually arriving at what I first

thought to be an abandoned mansion, before realizing that it was not abandoned, and was not a mansion per-se, though it was a sizeable house to find in the middle of nowhere.

Later on in the day, I found myself sitting at a table in the cellar, playing cards with Hardigar, Roan, Syl, Meesn, and Meses—the agent—who played from inside of a cage.

"Got any twos, Syl?" I asked.

"Go fish, Hermit," she answered.

"Got any twos, Hermit?" Hardigar asked.

"Maybe," I said, and then handed my twos over.

The felian smugly put down a completed set. "Got any sixes, Meses?"

"Go fish, Hardigar."

Hardigar drew. As Roan went, I noticed Syl tug on Meesn's arm. The older rodentian woman leaned down to her granddaughter, and listened to her whispering. The grandmother nodded, and then sat upright again.

On Meesn's turn, she asked, "Are you cheating, Meses?"

Meses made a fart noise with his mouth, tossed a six onto the table, and then tossed the rest of the cards behind himself in his cage.

"Is there a game *you* would rather play?" Meesn asked.

"Didn't your mother teach you not to play with your food?"

"Ohh, quite the opposite." Meesn set down her cards and leaned forward on the table, cupping her chin in both of her palms. "Tell us about yourself. Are you a hunter?"

"Yes."

"And an agent of the crown, by the looks of it. Ledonia's finest."

"Yes."

"Any good stories?"

"I don't imagine you would appreciate the protagonist in them."

"Try us."

Meses huffed, and crossed his arms. He stared up at the ceiling for a moment, and then began. "There was this one time I was stationed in Verodia, and I had some down time to go hunting. Miserable place most of the time, I hear, but when I was there it was all warm, dry, and partly cloudy. I go out to this

hunting stand, and I'm out there for hours, I mean hours, wondering if there are even animals living here, when suddenly I spot this buck, and I swear to you as I live and breathe, it had a black coat and a thirty two point rack. I draw back my bowstring, take my shot, and miss, but I don't miss: I end up hitting his mate who was behind him and I hadn't even seen her. Later when I dressed her, I found out she was pretty far along in her pregnancy, and it was the first time I knowingly ate fetal venison—pretty good if you ever get the chance. Bagged the buck the next day, had him mounted—the guy charged by the point so I threw the doe's meat into the deal to get it done with less out of my pocket, since I was planning to throw it out anyways, I'd already thrown out the other fetus—and then I caught my ride back home. Buck's still mounted on my den wall to this day."

The story left a vacuum of silence in the lanternlit cellar. Meses sat with his arms crossed, his body language screaming I told you so.

Hardigar broke the silence: "Do you have any stories that *aren't* terrible?"

Meses rolled his eyes. "Yes, one time I was out skipping through the woods and I saw a really pretty flower." He reached down to the floor of his cage, picked up a few of the cards he'd thrown, neatly stacked them together, and then ripped them all in half.

Hardigar and Roan shot up, hissing and barking at their prisoner.

Meses looked at them with dead eyes.

Hardigar pantomimed a club, knocking it against the table a few times to show that it made a wooden sound which rang out through the room, and then he reached into the cage and bonked Meses on the head with it. Meses yelped and cursed; all outside the cage had a giggle, admittedly including me.

"Would anyone else care for some wine while I'm up?" Hardigar asked.

All hands in the room shot up.

Hardigar looked bemusedly at Syl's raised hand. "Only a little for you. Tiny, tiny amount. You probably won't like it anyways."

The felian went off to a corner of the cellar, opened a cabinet, and looked inside for a moment. Roan also went off, and came back with glasses which he passed around, including a shot glass for Syl and a tin cup for Meses. Hardigar returned with two bottles of wine, and began pouring for everyone.

Meses watched closely as Hardigar poured wine into the tin cup. Seeing no form of poison dropped inside, he downed his cup in one draft and passed it back out of the cage for a refill, which Hardigar provided with a purr and a flick of the tail. Syl took droplet-sized sips out of her shot glass, managing to make the tiny quantity last.

After much conversation and many more cups of wine, Meses conjured up another story. He swirled around the contents of his cup contemplatively as he told it.

"There was... there was one time when I did let a deer go. I don't know what came over me exactly, but I think I was just... happy that day. Yeah. It was a day when I was happy. I woke up well rested, so well rested that it felt uncanny, like I had taken something. Heh. My wife Hetra was making breakfast when I came downstairs—eggs—and I came over and helped her—more got in her way, really, but we had fun. Spent all morning just cleaning up the place with her, which sounds dull when I say it, but tidying up turned up all kinds of little flashes from the past, little mementos that had been forgotten about in piles of old clutter. The place was immaculate when we were done. That afternoon when I went out with my bow, the birds were singing. They always sing, I know, but, that time I was listening. Sitting up in my stand, only about a half hour went by before a doe came walking by. I don't think she saw me. She stopped dead in the middle of my line of sight, and just stood there like she was waiting for it. And I couldn't. I don't know what it was, but I had to let her go and live the rest of her day. So I put down my bow and I waited. And she went."

After he had finished telling his story, Meses leaned back and looked up at the ceiling.

Hardigar turned to his clanmates, and asked, "Good?"

"Good," they all responded.

Hardigar drew a throwing dagger and hurled it into the cage, striking Meses in the throat. The four of the cursed races dashed

to the cage and waited impatiently as Roan unlocked it. When the cage door swung open, all four clambered in and I watched them feast.

I wish I could say that I was fraught with worry for my own life that night, tossing and turning and thinking up my escape, but in all honesty, it had been quite a long day and the straw mattress in the guest room felt like the height of luxury. I slept like a rock.

The next morning I made a lap around the house, looking around at the woods and the small pasture and the flock of sheep, and found myself wandering into the barn. I was some ways into the barn before my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, and I realized that Hardigar was in here too, sharing the close company of one of the horses. I averted my eyes and began to apologize, but the felian spoke over me as he continued with the mare.

"There's a lovely apple tree that's just a short walk into the woods from here," he mentioned. "I can bring you to it if you'd like."

"I would look forward to that," I responded.

"This is Page," Hardigar added after a moment. I looked up to see him gesturing to the horse he was copulating with. Pointing to the other horses, he added, "That's Temperance, and that's Magician. Since you and her came here together, I wouldn't stop you from leaving with Magician if she's agreeable to you. But if you're inclined towards it, I wouldn't stop you from staying either. It's been a long time since the clan had a new speaking member."

"I have to admit, I do feel it would be wise of me to leave before any of you get hungry again."

Hardigar closed his eyes, and sighed an unhappy sigh. Closing his eyes tighter, he began going at Page faster for a moment, and then returned to a regular pace and looked at me again. "You have about a month before that will be of concern again. We've gotten very good at fasting."

"Are you planning to eat me in a month then?"

"I'd eat you before I ate Page."

"What about the sheep? How do I stack up against them?"

The sound of Hardigar slapping against Page filled the air as he thought about it. As he continued with Page, he answered, “I don’t *like* to eat the sheep, just so you know. I wouldn’t *like* to eat you either.”

“I’m getting the impression I won’t be eating any mutton here.”

Hardigar made a hissing face at me, and then turned his full attention to Page. When he finished, he stepped down from his pantomimed stepstool, brushed aside her tail, and began licking at her. He wasn’t at it for too long before I heard footsteps from behind, running towards the barn. I turned to see who was coming in such a hurry. It was Roan. The canian stopped before me to catch his breath.

Hardigar poked his head up from behind the mare. “What’s the hurry?”

Roan gave his answer facing me: “I’ve learned who you are.”

“What?” I asked. “How?”

“Meses, your captor, informed me.”

“What, some document hidden on his person, or—”

“No. I grant he was secretive, but his ghost has been more forthcoming.”

“Oh. Oh I see.”

Roan clasped his hands onto my shoulders, looked me eye to eye, and said, “I speak your name to return knowledge to body: reform into one again, Prince Auren.”

The name reverberated through my ears, and in an instant knocked a lifetime of memories back into my beck and call. No sooner had I remembered myself than did a dread crawl through me. I asked Roan, “What day is it? How far are we from Kon Kell? I must get to Princess Koreine: my business with her is of the most extreme urgency.”

Hardigar cooed as he pranced over. Purring, he asked, “Am I hearing that you’re late for a date with a lady friend?”

Roan interjected to answer my earlier questions, saying, “By my reckoning it is the tenth morning since the Autumn equinox. If you left on horseback now you would reach Kon Kell by nightfall.”

“I am too late,” I said blankly, aloud but to no one. “Even if I were already inside the city walls of Kon Kell, I would be too late.” I turned and walked swiftly towards Magician.

“Is Princess Koreine pretty?” Hardigar called after me. “Would the two of you happen to want a third? Is she allergic to cats?”

I entered Magician’s stall, hopped up onto her back, and rode her at a walk towards the open barn door. As I passed by Hardigar, I informed him, “She was to ritually sacrifice me this morning to prevent a horrible fate from befalling Ledonia. In short hours I think we will all regret that—”

I was cut off as the ground began to shake, the warm temperature dropped to freezing, and the sky outside darkened. Distantly I heard a roll of thunder, and then another volley far off elsewhere, and then in a dazzling flash and deafening bang, a third volley of lightning struck the farm, blasting apart the walls of the barn and the house, setting fire to the woods, and putting the fear of the gods into every living creature hereabouts. I was thrown off of Magician and she sprinted away. Hardigar and Roan huddled over one another. I sat dazed on the floor, smelling a strange, lively smell in the wake of the lightning.

The sky outside was grey, as though a uniform fog domed the world. From the fog, meteors began to fall here and there, as well as enormous grey centipede-like creatures called grabbers. Three of them fell onto the farmhouse, and by their masses together, were comparable to the house in size. Two of them tore the lightning-struck farmhouse into further pieces, while the third ambled with its hundred legs over to the barn. I watched in a stupor as it picked up Roan and then continued walking, tearing a hole through the back of the barn to exit, and then continued away into the woods holding the canian: Hardigar had scratched at the creature and tried to hold onto it to get back his friend, but a few of its many legs reached up and kicked him off, spraying up an irritating cloud of ash in the process. The other two grabbers left holding Meesn and Syl.

A meteor struck through the roof of the barn and landed in Magician’s empty stall. Shakily, I got to my feet, went to Hardigar, and dragged him towards the house—he staggered along with me for a few steps, then yowled and gouged my arm

with his claws. I snarled and he hissed. He went to the stalls of Page and Temperance and took them both out on leads. With both of them in tow, he was now willing to follow me. I brought us all down into the cellar. Hardigar sat down at the table and wrapped a blanket around himself. He reached out to the cards laid out on the table, looked through them, and singled out the four of pentacles. He clutched it in his hand, bug-eyed, as he sat there and shook and stammered to himself. I found myself pacing back and forth across the cellar as I listened to the crashing thunder and sailing meteors outside.

Hardigar eventually shot up from his chair and marched straight towards me, claws extended. "What is this?" he asked.

Not having forgotten about the wound his claws had made on my arm but an hour ago, I balled my hands into fists as I answered him. "A localized apocalypse," I said with a sneer. "What we have just witnessed is the end of life in Ledonia."

"Go on."

"Where to begin!"

Hardigar bared his needle-like carnivorous teeth, and asked, "What hand have you had in this?"

"My hand was supposed to be in stopping it!" I shouted, and then marched to the table where the empty wine bottles still stood from the night before. I picked one up, hurled it at the far wall, and watched it smash. I picked up the other one and did the same, and felt better, if only very slightly. "It was my father's hand who started it," I said to the waiting felian. "Does news of the world reach you here? Do you know the tensions between Ledonia and Hondland?"

"I do. Go on."

"My father, Xortahsh, King of Hondland, made a pact with the god of the lowest hell, may I never speak his name, that the god might open a hole between that plane and this one at Kon Kell and make a demon's feast of every soul in Ledonia. *I* was on my way to *stop* this wickedness. Retract your claws: I know of the cursed races, and therefore I know that you can surely smell for yourself that I am no murderer."

Hardigar's nose twitched, and then his claws retracted back into his fingers.

In a huff, I sat down at the table, and hung my head. “My father knew I had learned of his plans, and that I was conspiring to stop him. I was in communication with Koreine, Princess of Ledonia, who would be able to cast a spell to countermand the opening of the rift. The cost of the spell was one soul descended of the Orangetree Coronation—the coronation which made my great great great great grandfather the first king of Hondland. I was only too happy to give my own life to this noble cause. Princess Koreine arranged for Ledonia’s agents to kidnap me away and bring me to her. Alas. Here we are. If it means anything to you, I imagine they had already encountered quite a deal of trouble before your intervention if they were cutting it this close with my arrival.”

Hardigar sat down at the table beside me, picked up a wine glass, and hurled it at the wall where I had hurled the wine bottles. “Is there anything that can be done now?”

“I don’t imagine so.”

Hardigar groaned, and hung his head.

The two of us sat and listened to the meteors and the thunder.

Later in the day, my stomach began to growl. I ascended the cellar stairs and went out to the pasture, where the flock of sheep laid dead from all of the earlier tumult. As I went about dressing and smoking all of the mutton that I could manage to, I saw Hardigar glaring at me as he moved hay and oats from the barn to the cellar. When he was finished, he stayed in the cellar with Page and Temperance. I sat alone outside, eating a feast of mutton and looking up at a falling sky. That night I did worry he would kill me, and I sat up all night in the corner, dozing off and snapping awake. At some point my weariness got the better of me, and I fell asleep for real.

I awoke relieved to find that Hardigar had more pressing plans than killing me: he stood naked with a bottle of wine in hand, other arm wrapped around Page’s neck, kissing the side of her mouth. When he heard my shuffling footsteps approaching, he turned to face me, and I saw that his fur all over was ruffled from face to chest, and he was covered in brambles and ash. “You look like shit,” he told me. He took a long drink from the wine bottle, and then added, “Magician is dead. I went out to

find her this morning. She made it a good way from the farm, but."

I sighed, and shrugged. Then I opened my stupid mouth to say, "At this point we didn't have much of a use for three anyways."

Hardigar snarled and muttered a string of curses in a language I was not familiar with. "Idiot," he ended with, and then finished his bottle and went to set it on the table beside two others. Then he fetched another wine bottle, opened it with some difficulty, and resumed his prior business of kissing a horse.

I went and sat at the top of the ramp that led down into the cellar, wedged between the cellar ramp and the cellar door. I sat waiting to hear thunder or meteors. Neither sound came. Outside there was no sound of wind, no sound of birds, no sound of insects. The sound that eventually did come was the now familiar slapping of a cat man behind his horse.

Eventually, the horse that Hardigar was not occupied with came walking up with a tapping of hooves, and stood at the base of the cellar ramp, peering up at me.

From around the corner, Hardigar called, "Temperance is saying hello."

"Tell her I said hi back," I called to Hardigar, as she continued to stare at me.

"Tell her yourself," came the felian's response.

I looked at her eyes. Though I had been no stranger to riding, it occurred to me then, only then, in the cellar with a man piss drunk and coping with his mourning with a horse's company, that there was more going on behind equine eyes than a direction and a speed. There was some social motivation, some reason why she had come over to me. It was beyond curiosity—she had already seen me, she knew I was there. There was something more to her. But the shape and dimensions of what more there was, I had no skill whatsoever to discern.

I called again to Hardigar. "Show me how to say hello."

The sound of Hardigar slapping behind Page stopped. A moment later, he came walking into my sight with questionable balance and an erection. He set the bottle of wine down and walked up to Temperance. He laid his hands on her neck, and a

moment later, he beckoned me over. As I began my way down the ramp, Temperance began to turn away, but Hardigar gave her a shushing sound and kept his hands on her. She stood in place as I approached, and stood beside the cat.

"Just pet her," he said, demonstrating, running a hand down the side of her neck a few times.

I did as he did. "I *have* pet a horse before," I mentioned to him.

"The fact that that surprises me means we're still starting here."

"That is hurtful but fair."

Hardigar began petting her along the side as I continued. "Not so rigid, prince. Relax. Do it with feeling. This is how you tell her things."

"Okay." I slowed down my petting, and made a point of relaxing my hand some. "You don't have to call me prince, by the way. Auren is fine."

"Prince was not a form of address, it was an insult."

"Ah."

Temperance swung her head to me and started walking into me; Hardigar took me by the arm and pulled me aside. She walked past and began eating from the hay that Hardigar had piled against one of the walls.

"Can I say hi to Page?"

"I don't imagine she'd mind."

Hardigar led the way over. He gave her a kiss and nuzzled his head against her neck, smiling as her mane tickled his face.

"I... that might be rather advanced for me."

"Suit yourself," he cooed. He then looked around himself.

I knelt down and picked up the wine bottle he had set on the floor a moment ago. I walked forward to him and Page, and extended the bottle to him. He put his hand on it, but didn't take it, and I didn't let it go: we both stood holding the bottle of wine, looking one another up and down. Then each of our eyes caught on the eyes of the other, and we looked nowhere else. There was a strange and exotic beauty in the eyes of a cat.

"Forgive me if this question betrays some foolishness on my part, but I must ask it: Is Page your wife?"

I believe I could see the mocking words assembling themselves on Hardigar's tongue, standing ready at a millisecond's notice to be deployed, but if such words did in fact come to his mind, he did not say them. After a few seconds of looking into my eyes, he said, "It is not a foolish question, but it is a question which is trying to assert its existence in a framework that will not hold it. She is my love and my world and she is aggressively fond of me as well, but we do not live in a framework of contracts."

I nodded, and released the bottle of wine.

He brought it to his mouth and drank from it, and then smiled at me. "She and I do not have a monogamous arrangement, if that's what you were angling towards."

I smiled at him saying as much, and glanced away as I said, "I did wonder, yes."

"Do you have no monogamous arrangement, prince?"

"Someday, gods willing. But I have been no stranger to concubines."

He stepped forward, I stepped forward to meet him, and the two of us tilted our heads and kissed; his tickly furry lips made me giggle, and I had to step back.

He took my hand gently, and guided my hand until I was cupping his testicles. He closed his eyes and began to purr.

"Having fun?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered, vocalizing it within the purr.

"I'm glad. But maybe we should revisit this another time," I said, and took my hand away from the felian. "You are *very* drunk."

Hardigar's face scrunched up as though he had just been given a riddle. "What? So?"

"So I would be taking advantage of you."

Hardigar squinted harder and asked louder, "WHAT?"

Page took a step towards me, but Hardigar put an arm against her chest, and she stopped.

"Your judgment is impaired."

"My judgment is impaired on purpose!"

"Nonetheless, this is not a choice you're equipped to make right now."

"You have a *very* pessimistic perspective on mutual pleasure."

"You have a very big mouth for a cat."

Hardigar gave a brief hiss—a playful one, for a first—and then he asked me, "Do you feel I'm well equipped enough for Page?"

"I... don't honestly know how to begin to consider that."

The felian turned and gave the horse another kiss, and went back to nuzzling her.

I went back up the cellar ramp, and opened it just a crack to look outside. There was a pointed greyness outside, a kind of brighter nighttime or dimmer daytime: staring into it, I lost confidence in which of the two I should believe it was. Ashes fell like snow. I watched it for a while. I wept.

Later on in the day, I sat at the table eating smoked mutton. Hardigar laid passed out in the cage, snoring. When he awoke, he looked around, glanced at his forearm once to check he still had his five lives—he did—and then sat up. From the cage floor, he said to me, "Genevieve."

I looked down at him. "What?"

"Maybe that's Genevieve you're eating."

I sighed, and set the mutton down on the table. "Was she your favorite?"

"She was a *friend*, prince."

"What would you have me do differently? I did no slaughter, only scavenging."

Hardigar nodded. To my surprise he asked for forgiveness, and said, "My anger is misguided, pointed towards you, but I have had a very rough day. A lot of friends I had hoped would enjoy very long lives are now dead."

At that very moment, the cellar door went bursting open, flying off its hinges and out into the grey pasture. A gust of wind blew a flute of ash into the cellar, knocked a full bottle of wine off the table, and shattered it on the floor. There on the floor the ash and the wine seeped together, and rivulets of it began creeping towards the wall, and then up the wall in bends and loops that were forming a mural. Hardigar and I shot to our feet and looked at the forming scene.

First, a wall, with ramparts and tall buildings visible behind, a castle with a distinct conical shape the tallest of them all.

“The city of Kon Kell,” I said, and Hardigar nodded.

As the mural expanded outwards left and right, we saw depictions of scenes within Kon Kell, identifiable from the circle-obsessed architecture. In a round plaza, a banquet was held—all looked well as the painting filled in the tables and chairs and cups, until the further details crept forth: sitting at the table were demons, and on the table were dismembered human beings, heads and arms and legs and all sorts. In a gladiatorial arena, the figure of person after person was filled in, each detail of each beaten and dirtied face, all packed shoulder to shoulder together—the scene in the arena expanded outwards into the next scene, where humans were led in a line out of the arena to be slaughtered and hung up on hooks.

In the final scene, we saw a dungeon depicted below the conical castle, and in the dungeon sat a woman at a table reading a scroll by candlelight. As the details of her long curly hair were realized, I became certain of who this was meant to be.

“Princess Koreine,” I said. “She still waits.”

I looked to Hardigar, and saw that his mind was elsewhere—tears hung in his eyes.

“Goodbye, Roan,” Hardigar said.

The gust of wind blew past Hardigar and I on its way back out, and on the wind, even with my unimpressive human nose, I could smell the scent of a dog.

Hardigar sniffled, wiped his eyes, and generally composed himself before saying, “We should set out at once.”

“It’s a pleasant surprise to hear you’re so keen on coming with.”

Hardigar turned to the mural and pointed to the scene of the people packed into the arena. I came over and squinted at where he pointed.

Two rodentians, one young and one old, stood huddled together.

“Oh. I see.”

Hardigar and I went up out of the cellar, and scavenged through the wreckage of the house until we had found his cutlass, as well as a dagger for me. We each filled a water skin at a pump in the pasture, and I packed a satchel full of mutton and apples.

Hardigar began marching off into the woods.

I called after him, “Surely you don’t mean for us to walk.”

He wheeled around to give me an earful, but paused when he spotted something behind me. I turned, and saw Page and Temperance bolting towards us. Both came to a halt at Hardigar, both in a tumultuous mood by the looks of it.

“Are you sure?” I heard Hardigar ask Page.

Apparently she said something that meant yes, because the next moment, he was riding atop Page and leading Temperance back to me.

The four of us rode off, made our way down the valley, and then rode along the road towards Kon Kell.

I could see my breath along portions of the ride, but only barely; grey on grey on grey.

As we rode I anticipated nightfall, but none came. We arrived outside the walls of Kon Kell under the same grey sky which we had departed from the farm under.

I brought Temperance to a halt. Hardigar slowed Page, and then circled her back around to stand beside me, the four of us facing the city.

“I don’t suppose you know of a secret way in through the sewers,” Hardigar suggested.

“As a matter of fact, I was just about to bring up that very thing.”

“Lead the way, prince.”

I spurred Temperance onwards, and we rode off into the woods to the right of the path. We came, eventually, upon a rank lake, fed by runoff from a sizeable pipe that led under the city wall. The pipe was covered by a grate that reeked of magic. I dismounted and approached the grate on foot, and placed my hands flat against the metal surface.

“By any light of Denirstis that still shines through in Ledonia, be gone.”

The grate disappeared and I stumbled forward in its sudden absence.

Temperance came and stood beside me. I walked onward, side by side with the horse, into the sewers. Hardigar and Page followed after. I don’t imagine any of us cared for the smell of the place all too much. More grates blocked our passage as we

went deeper and deeper under the city, but each disappeared as we neared it.

After passing through one particular grate, the stonework became quite noticeably nicer, and as we went deeper from here, the offensive odor lessened. I paused at a particular door, opened it, and peered inside.

"This storage room may be a suitable place for the horses to stay while we attend to our business here."

"Are we near to our destination?" Hardigar asked.

"Yes, just a few more turns."

"Very well."

We brought the horses in. Before we departed, Hardigar gave Page a kiss and a hug. Then we shut the door behind us, and proceeded.

Shortly, we came upon a long passageway with an oakwood door at the end. "This is it," I said. "Princess Koreine awaits me behind that door."

With that, I felt Hardigar's cutlass pierce my back. I fumbled for my own dagger, but he reached forward and drew it from my sheath before I could, and I soon found the dagger planted into the side of my neck. I fell to the ground, and in a cold rush of wind, my spirit left my body.

As a ghost, I hovered behind Hardigar as he knelt over my murdered corpse, offering an explanation to its deaf ears.

"Rest assured, a sacrifice will still be made behind that door, prince. But as a matter of practicality for reasons you will soon see, I must ensure that I am the one who makes it. I, too, am descendant from the Orangetree Coronation, though I found myself a convert to Essera when I grew old enough to insist on having a mind of my own. I only narrowly escaped the battle in which she was killed. Since then, I have died of starvation once and old age twice. I spent some very formative years working in slaughterhouses, trying to find sustenance among those whose fates were already sealed anyways. But I could not last long there. The disrespect that I witnessed... what we saw in Roan's mural, what takes place above our very heads right now in Kon Kell, is a drop in the ocean of the cruelty that I have already seen committed in Hondland and Ledonia alike. I will save what of Ledonia I can, but I will not allow its people to return to

inflicting the same heartless slaughter on my people that they now find inflicted on themselves. I have lived a greedy life: this is the generous end I have lived it to, remaining gods willing."

With that, he stood, and walked past my corpse to the oakwood door at the end of the hall. Ethereal and silent I followed after him, making sure that my final business was attended to, even if it was to take a different shape than I had imagined.

Hardigar opened the door into the hidden study below the castle. Princess Koreine, who had been sat reading a book, shot to her feet and poised a dagger ready to throw at the unexpected felian.

"Easy, princess," Hardigar said, showing his empty hands. "I come belatedly to be sacrificed in Prince Auren's stead." He kicked the oakwood door shut behind himself.

Her brow furrowed. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Prince Gamund of Hondland, long and somewhat accurately thought to be dead. I stand here in hopes that my five remaining lives will be an adequate substitute for the one life that Prince Auren intended to sacrifice."

"By Denirstis's light, it really is you isn't it?" Koreine lowered her dagger, and walked across the study to the felian. "May I?" she asked.

Hardigar held out his hand.

Koreine used her dagger to make a slight cut on his hand, and held a crystal under the drop of blood that first pooled together and fell. When the blood hit the crystal, the crystal let out a resonant hum, and then shattered and fell away into glistening shards and dust.

"You will indeed suffice," Koreine said. "You may, in fact, be overpaying in your sacrifice by an amount that I'm not sure I can fathom."

She took the felian by the wrist and led him to the center of the study, where an immense pentagram was made on the floor in white flowers. Hardigar stopped outside of the circle, and would not budge.

"I must insist on seeing the spell," he said.

Dismayed, the princess stopped pulling him but did not release his wrist. "Minutes wasted are lives lost."

“So it goes.”

The princess scoffed, and released him to go retrieve a scroll. She handed it to him.

He unrolled it and read it over, line by line as a minute went by. When he reached the end, he shook his head and brought the scroll to the desk. He began preparing a pen to write with.

“Excuse me!” Koreine said, and marched after him. “By the gods, what *do* you think you’re doing?”

“By the rules of the good magic you invoke here, I must agree to the spell for which I sacrifice myself. Yes?”

“Yes.”

“I will not agree to this as written.”

“How in the world could you not! It states nothing other than the freeing of Ledonia’s people from the bondage of demons!”

“By Essera, may her name never be forgotten, I’m afraid the freeing of Ledonia’s people is not the unqualified good that you think it is. May I, princess?” he asked, holding the pen poised over the page.

The princess tapped her foot anxiously, and then nodded. “Very well.”

The felian spoke the words aloud as he wrote them down. “From hence forth among the human species, whenever one kills a member of the animal kingdom, whether by hand or by word, no matter how justified, that human shall witness one of their fingers turn to dust for each life that they take, until such a time as they have no fingers remaining, at which time they shall die.”

The princess kept her reply brief. “No.”

“Enjoy your slaughtered kingdom then.” Hardigar knocked the crystalline inkwell off of the desk, shattering it on the floor, and stood and began towards the oakwood door.

“It’s not that I object,” Koreine said.

This caught Hardigar’s attention, and he stopped before the door.

“It will not hold. A banishment I can do at great cost. You ask for the divine.”

“You are in the presence of the divine, princess,” he said, and then stepped up onto a pantomimed stepstool, and turned to

face the princess while standing in the air. “Essera is killed, but her divinity lingers in a few of us yet.”

Koreine bit her lip, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot. “Get onto the pentagram,” she said.

Hardigar did as asked. Koreine retrieved the scroll.

With words read and a dagger pierced five times through an old cat’s heart, the shape of the world was changed.

STEDL AND DRAGONS

Stedl stood and watched in sorrow as the parade of knights marched through the main street of Holmfast. Those around him cheered or stood in quiet awe, but if a single other soul shared his misgivings to the knights, they were out of his sight. Three knights—one at the head of the procession, one in the body, and one at the tail—carried ten foot tall poles, atop which were enormous meat hooks, skewered onto each of which was the green scaled head of a dragon. The eldest dragon that the knights had killed was still a youngling. The youngest, Stedl doubted it was older than three years.

Stedl steeled himself and approached one of the knights on the periphery. “Ho there.”

“Liven ye, fellow!” the knight encouraged, stopping to speak with the somber man.

“Tell me the tale,” Stedl asked, looking up to a dragon head to indicate he meant the murders.

The knight happily indulged with an animated speech, which drew a crowd around Stedl to listen and watch with him. “The accursed endessium mines of Herdra are accursed no longer! Under the blessing of Sah and with the wisdom of our Good King Hest, two score of we knights marched a fortnight and a day from Tellan to Herdra. There we saw that the legend was true: that the mines from which our grandfathers drew out endessium had fallen to the hold of monsters! All the buildings of the town, once homes and shops and churches, smashed to pieces under their wickedly stepping claws! We knights tarried

not, but advanced upon the foul beasts! With slash of blade and sting of arrow, we felled not just these three dragons you see today, but a dozen more which are now parading north and east and west of Herdra! Praise be to Sah! Glory be to the Good King Hest!"

The knight lifted his begauntleted fist into the air, and Stedl's neighbors cheered. Stedl's sorrow had only deepened as the knight had spoken, but the knight had long since moved on from speaking only at Stedl.

Without a word or gesture, Stedl turned and left. He could have said much: *They are not fearsome because they are evil. They are fearsome because you are evil, and they are powerful and good.* He could have gone on a long, long while, if he were still youthful, still under the impression that any such sentiment would not be falling on deaf ears.

He returned to his home at the outskirts of town, near the bank of a river, built there himself with the help of his then-new neighbors. He walked slowly, his aching knees fussing that they had long since served their purpose, let us rest now, we have served you a full life and then some.

When he arrived home, he sat in a rocking chair before his unlit fireplace, rocking and staring blankly at the dim stonework. His mind's eye was racing. In his mind's eye, he was climbing up into his attic, dusting off chain mail, restringing a bow, and buckling on his quiver. He was stalking after the knights, and one by one he was picking them off as they split from their formation to relieve themselves or to search for those who were mysteriously absent, until before they realized it, they were few in number, and then none.

But with his age and the life he had lived, he begrudgingly knew better.

Do not tempt revenge, he sat and thought. *Do not create martyrs*.

As the day was waning, Stedl lit his fireplace, lighted a lantern, and ventured up into the attic. He drew out his old equipment and laid it out before the fire, examining each piece. The pack, the tent, the boots, the tinderbox... On the whole, it had held up better than he had. He sorted his equipment, packed his pack, and then he went to sleep.

Before the sun had risen in the morning, Stedl was standing, his armor donned, his bow strung, his pack upon his shoulders and waist. He stepped out of his door and began on the road northward, toward Herdra.

Midday, while kneeling over a stream to drink, the man's reflection in the water caught him. Looking back at him was a face with wrinkles set into dark skin, and a short beard that was more grey than black. It was strange, bordering on inaccurate, to say that this was the same face as that of a man who had been taken by a dragon as a husband, long, long ago.

The old man took his drink from the stream. He then stood and continued marching on. It was three more days to Herdra. Perhaps four or five if his knees did not get on board with the idea of the journey.

Each night in his tent, before he could begin falling asleep, Stedl laid and stared at the tent's ceiling, casting his mind back thirty, forty years. Back to a young man who barely looked like him anymore. Back to the clifflands of Venderra, and a big red lizard. He couldn't keep the thoughts in any order, and even when he tried to recall the timelines of what had led into what, it was as though there were no such conceit as causality, but rather that each fragment of memory was its own atomic existence. In one flash, the young man and the dragon were sitting in a canyon across a campfire from each other, the young man cooking, the dragon lying flat with her chin on the ground yet still looming over him. In one flash, he was helping unpack crates of clothing and food from off her back, delivering them to a camp of refugees from a flooded city, and then riding atop her back as the wind stung his face on the return journey to make the route yet another time. In one flash, he was kneeling on a hill aiming an arrow, when from the corner of his eye, he saw her struck by a mortar, and then watched her spiraling down, and by the time he could make it through the battlefield to her, she had been killed, and he felt at once in his heart that no creature deserved to die again as long as the world should turn, and also that no revenge would be great enough to make up for the loss of her. In one flash, she was humoring him in letting him examine the fractal complexity of the writing of dragons, not imagining that he would actually be the first human not to

dismiss it as impossible for humans to learn. In one flash, they were in a dark and safe place, falling asleep chest to chest, heart to heart, breath to breath.

It was five days' journey to Herdra. When he arrived, he found the town to be in more or less the condition that the knights had described. Every building was smashed down. Hardly anything in the township stood taller than the man's line of sight. The town was quiet save for the wind blowing against the ruins. There was not a soul up here except for Stedl.

He made his way through the town, past the fallen churches and shops and homes, and over to the mine entrances. There, he lit a lantern, and proceeded in.

It was a long and cold way down. As he marched, he wondered whether his magical talents had left him over the years. They had fallen into disuse, and he would not blame them for going away. He stopped, turned, and raised his free hand. With a tide of force, gravel on the ground began rolling up the tunnel slope. Stedl smiled a little, and resumed his journey downward. As if his talents had only needed a nudge to get started, he soon began to smell the sting of endessium. He followed the odor down and down, and as the tunnels branched out, he followed the smell of the magical rocks, until arriving at a dead end, a slope of loose rocks from ground to ceiling. Stedl picked up a rock, and saw with confidence that it was mined with teeth, not picks. He began casting the rocks aside, freeing up the passage. When he had cleared enough at the ceiling to crawl through, he did crawl so through, lantern first, into the dragon's hutch. Inside, atop a nest of endessium pebbles, was a green egg as tall as Stedl.

Stedl sat himself down on the slope that descended toward the egg, and looked at it by the lanternlight. All at once, he was relieved there was a survivor, and distraught for the loss that he or she had suffered before they had so much as committed the crime of hatching.

With the family of dragons murdered to make way for industry, the king's men would be back before much longer. Stedl crawled back out of the hutch and set about repairing a covered rickshaw from the town above, to bring the dragon to a safer home.

POEMS

Untitled Peradventure

And if, peradventure, Sodom was not so wicked after all.

The Black and the Irish made subhuman so those who enslaved
    them were morally unscuffed.
Homophiles made pedophiles so those who felt their
    institutions threatened could hunker down
And close their eyes and ears again
To the pain that their institutions
Whether blindly or pointedly
Had caused.

Peradventure the past is not made of monsters
It is made of cowards.

Peradventure there are cowards today.

Deference

You sniff the dumpsters when we walk by them
which is fair:
there's probably a lot
of interesting stuff in there to smell.

When we're walking
and you eat something off the ground
with a gross "crunch" sound
I do try to remind myself,
within reason,
that you know better than me
what it is
that made you want to snack on ground food.

If I found a black bean quesarito
sitting on the curb
still in its wrapping,
still warm,
I would at least be tempted.

And anyways,
realistically,
by the time I try to stop you,
you have usually already won,
started to swallow,
and all that's accomplished by my intervening
is that I seem like I'm being an asshole.

So you, this time,
whatever it is you see or smell,
enjoy.

Deference 2

it is fascinating and meaningful to me when you get to lead the way
not just choosing at an intersection whether we go left, right, or straight ahead
but when I fully follow
and you fully choose
going around and round a park over the same patch of space in every conceivable fashion of diagonals
nose to the ground
following something (I don't know what, but I know that you do) for as long as it takes
it is strangely easy these days to forget what is the real world and what isn't
I would do well to remember always that that moment with you is the real world

Reciprocal Amplification

We take care of each other, you and I.
I give you food
You give me a happy reason
to get out of bed every morning.
I give you water
You give me perspective
on the world
when we go outside to walk.
I give you a cool room to sleep in in the summer
and a cool room to sleep in in the winter
You give me a warm belly to snuggle up into
when I need that.
We also get each other off pretty often
And we share a sense of humor.
This morning when I woke up feeling like shit
It all turned around when I had a glass of water
and then I got down on the carpet with you
you wagging happy boy
and I shared wet kisses with the best person in my day to day life
an awesome dog who likes to make out with me
and who I like to make out with him a lot too.
A gladness filled my entire being
pushing out all else
at getting to revel in your affections
and to give affections to you in the same measure.

Meditation

Sitting on the dock with my pal on this lakey night,
meditation occurs.
I am sitting on my ass
hunched over
my elbows resting on my knees
my hands clasped together before myself,
holding this compact bundle of self together tightly.
My weight bears down on my lower back
and on the backmost portion of my ass,
the part of flesh which I sit on.
It has rained earlier today
and the dock is wet.
The ass of my pants is wet.
My body weight and the planks of the dock hug one another.
In front of me is my dog,
my friend,
my boyfriend,
my mate,
my lover of countless designations.
I can tell just by looking at him how it would feel
to reach out and pet him;
exactly how it would feel, down to every intimate discernible
detail
texture, give, smoothity;
I gave him four handjobs in the last fifteen minutes,
one at each of his favorite places in these woods hereabout.
He was feeling eager tonight.
He sniffs the air;
I'm glad for him.
Soon enough I give in to his alluring aura
and lay down on my side alongside him—
who gives a damn if my shirt gets damp on the rain-moist
dock—
and I respectfully pet his back
and watch as he continues to sniff,
picking up scents that
as he slightly turns his head and faces his nose and eyes

I can at least pick up on the direction of
and try to guess what he's found,
unearthed as it were,
in the air around our post at the edge of this lake.
At some point something worries him—
some sound, some disturbance.
I ask if he wants to go back inside.
He licks his lips to say yes.
I stand up.
With stiff joints he stands too, and leads the way.