THIS ABOVE ALL;

TO THINE OWN SELF BE ZOO.

Vol. I No. 7

July 2023

In this issue,

a white dog plays fetch on a disused highway,
and a drunkard seeks a hands-on lesson in animal anatomy.

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To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
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PERSONAL GHOSTS

There's about a mile of now-unused highway where the course of the highway is now directed somewhere else, and where Forager now likes to lead me when we go out on walks so that we have a wide, clear, long open space to play fetch. He's a white lab, though only his height and the shape of his head give this away: his body and legs show off long white hair which always ripples backwards as though perpetually moving forward through water.

As we arrive today, it's getting to be evening time. Still plenty of light to see by, but the sky is an antivibrant shade of muted blue. Forager pulls me forward through the yellow grass, panting and wagging, eager to get to run.

Before offering to take him off the leash, I have a look around. Nobody else out here (there never is). No wildlife (there sometimes are deer, I'm sure Forager has only kind intentions when he sees them and wants to go say hi, but I feel bad about alarming them all the same). There is the distant sound of cars rushing by on the now-still-actually-used part of the highway, a good mile or more of forest between that and us. There is the more all-present sound of the wind sweeping over the long grass that surrounds us here, and the crickets who harmonize in an immense choir and who sometimes hop onto your arm, turn to face another way, and then hop off.

Yeah, we're all clear here. He's good to be off his leash. I give him a little whistle, and he stops pulling me forward and comes towards me instead, wagging and pressing himself against me as

we stand there in our little parted divot of the grass. I let the good boy off of his leash and he flies forward, out of sight into the grass ahead: I see the tops of the strands of grass ripple in a line as he speeds through, and then I see him emerge up onto the section of highway. There he stops and turns to face me, and gives a little leap and a bark.

I smile and have a little laugh under my breath at how eager and happy he is; it's infectious. I pick up my pace to a trot, and step up onto the section of highway with him.

This section doesn't join up with the rest of the road; they demolished most of it on both sides, but apparently couldn't be bothered with this middle part. What the deal is with that, I don't really know, but I'll certainly take it.

I shrug out of my backpack, and set it down at the edge of the road. Forager watches me intently. The backpack has a place to put a water bottle on each side, sort of an elastic ring at the top and then more of a mesh below it. One side does have a water bottle, and the other has a couple of tennis balls stuffed in there. As Forager is already so amped up right now, I don't waste any time messing with him and pretending I can't find where the tennis balls are: I take one out straight away, wind up, and throw the ball as far as I can out over the highway.

Forager bounds after it at full speed, his long white coat making him look like a lone wispy cloud on a windy day.

The ball bounces once, twice, and then before it hits the ground a third time he's caught up with it. He catches it as it falls to him, and then he turns around in a big proud galloping arc, and comes running back to me for me to throw it again.

I do 3D modeling for a living. I make scary monsters in really, *really* obsessive detail. Right now I'm working on a two headed raven with sharp teeth and piercing red eyes, an open gory chest cavity from which tendrils emerge, and a pattern of tangled snakes imposed subtly in the sheen of the feathers such that it only becomes visible if light catches it in just the right way. When it's done I'll post up screenshots on my site, and most likely someone will buy the model off of me to use in their indie game or movie. I also work part time at a grocery store keeping tabs on the self checkout, and if the modeling business is going slow, I'll sometimes pick up some extra hours. I've been offered

jobs from game and movie studios that would pay, no exaggeration, ten times what I'm currently making at the grocery store, but none of them will let me work remote, and I know too well how many hours and hours and hours go into what I do, and I can't do it: that's too long each day to leave Forager alone by himself. He's been good to me beyond words. The summer Edith died, I don't think I would have managed to not kill myself if not for his concern over me, his constant readiness to give himself unabashedly into happiness if there is occasion for canine happiness, and his need for me to be functional and still alive in order to take care of him. I owe everything to him, somewhat literally after that summer. So I do what I can to be even half as good to him as he's been to me.

Edith had a tattoo sleeve on her left arm of an abstract forest, and peeking around the trees were a rabbit, a fox, a wolf, a deer, and an owl. I had the same tattoo artist recreate the sleeve on my arm from photographs so that I can carry Edith (my older sister, my best friend) forward in the world. More recently, not for quite the same reason but just out of sincere ongoing gratitude, I got a tattoo of Forager standing in profile against my back, a film negative of the real Forager, a wispy black cloud rippling across my shoulder blades.

I take the slobbery ball that Forager offers me, wind up real big, and throw it again. Again and again, he chases, brings it back, and I throw it.

After a couple dozen or so, he comes galloping back, but does not give the ball to me: he goes and stands on the shoulder of the highway, slobbery ball still held in his mouth, head held high and facing back towards the city.

"Want some water?" I offer.

He drops the ball and wags, and licks his lips and tosses his head in what is practically a human nod.

We both walk towards the backpack. I take the water bottle out of its side pouch, unscrew the top, and begin pouring it down onto the highway in a gentle stream. Forager laps at the stream, drinking as much of the trickle as he can manage to. When that water bottle is empty I unzip the backpack and take out a second water bottle, and begin pouring out that one for him as well; he gets about halfway through the second one

before backing away, finished. I stop pouring, and drink the rest of that water bottle for myself.

As I'm screwing the top back on, the sight of Edith's tattoo sleeve catches me in a strange way, and I find myself then in a suddenly cognizant moment. I stand up straight. I look out at the field before me and the sunset that drapes over it, an astonishing distillment of orange and violet and in the clouds a type of grey which still in and of itself manages to feel like a full fledged color there. I flare my nostrils, and deeply take in the smell of the grass, and some sort of sweetness which is also in the air. As the wind picks up and then becomes still, I happen to catch a smell of Forager's breath, and it makes me smile, that reminder that he is here with me right now in this moment. He is panting.

I stop looking at the sky, give Forager a rub on the back, and then collect up the water bottles and slobbery tennis ball into my backpack. I clip Forager back onto the leash, and the two of us head back for the city.

On this edge of town, there is a strange mix of buildings which are still maintained and seem to be doing quite well, and buildings which are wholly abandoned. There is a bakery which has delicious cake-y smells coming out of it, which shares its wall with a derelict sandwich shop whose name can still be seen in the absence of grime over the door where the letters were. Past the sandwich shop is a derelict gym, all of the equipment gone from the inside except a few empty racks; one of the windows is cracked a bit. Past the gym is a derelict souvenir shop. Past the souvenir shop is an all night diner on the corner, and a dozen people sitting inside and having dinner while the sun outside is just finishing setting.

After the diner, Forager and I pass down an entire block of boarded up storefronts. The wind here whistles and our footsteps echo. Some street lamps begin turning on, one by one here and there in no particular order, no particular hurry. Being out here with Forager often at around this hour, I know that it will probably be fully five minutes before the last of the lamps goes on.

On the next block, both sides are dominated by fortress-esque parking garages, each six stories high, concrete and

mostly dark on the inside throughout, illuminated only here and there by lights which are going on at the same lazy cadence as the street lamps.

Leaning back against the railing of one parking garage's third floor is a guy with dark curly hair short and close to his head and a pair of headphones draped around his neck. I can't deny that he looks cool leaning there, silhouetted against the yellow orange light of the garage's interior. On this edge of town, there's a strange quirk that people leaning back in high up places like that are usually after one thing. You might find someone leaning back on an apartment balcony, on the roof of an abandoned store, on a pedestrian overpass, on a plastic crate positioned against a wall at the mouth of an alleyway. But it all means the same intent, and hey, a lot of times I'm interested. I don't have anyone I'm seeing too regularly.

I stop walking with Forager, bring my fingers to my mouth, and give the guy leaning against the railing an inquisitive bird call: "*twee twee?*"

He rolls against the railing, turning to face me. His elbows now perched on the railing, he has a look down at me, brings a hand to his mouth, and gives a negative bird call back to me: "*tewww.*"

I don't have any hard feelings; he probably isn't gay.

I point down at Forager, and offer, "*twee twee?*"

As I do, Forager looks up at me and then at the guy, wagging excitedly. He knows what I've just advocated for for him.

The guy leans a bit further over the railing, cups a hand around his mouth, and shouts, as casually as can be shouted, "Morph dog?"

I return an affirmative bird call: "*tew!*"

Forager is just as much male as I am, but with morph dogs, most people at least don't really care.

The guy looks away and goes back to leaning back against the railing, staring up at the concrete ceiling over his head, thinking about it.

After he's had a few seconds, I ask, "*twee twee?*"

He brings a hand to his mouth, and answers, "*tew!*"

With that he stands up and walks into the rest of the garage. "Cmon, this way Forager," I tell Forager, and he and I trot into

the garage, him wagging. We start up the ramp towards his hookup.

We meet up on the third floor: the guy is giving us a coy smile, leaning back against the wall beside this floor's restrooms. I've never seen him before, but whether this is his first time or whether we've just missed each other until now, he certainly knows the protocol of how these go down. Hell, he looks about my age but he might predate me, might have happened to be out of town for longer than I've been newly arrived. But I'm only speculating, I don't know any of that, and I likely won't. Part of the fun here is filling in the blanks with really whatever you'd like them to be. I suppose I can presume some things about him by the tattered jeans, the leather jacket, and the scratched up green and black and orange shirt which says *something* in a death metal font.

I glance around the garage. Just us here, and two cars so covered in dust that I doubt anyone is ever coming back for them. I lean down and let Forager off of his leash.

The long haired white lab bounds playfully towards the stranger. The stranger crouches down and meets Forager at dog level, embracing him and petting him and receiving all kinds of licks to the face, though eventually he turns his face away to avoid any further kissing for the moment—it is very apparent to me that he likes dogs, but doesn't like-like dogs, as such. Which I don't have any issue with; the first one, just liking dogs at all, is far and away the more important one.

The guy stands up; Forager paws politely at the guy's leg to mount him, but the guy seems not to notice. "What's his name?" the guy asks.

"Forager," I answer; Forager looks to me and tilts his head; "Good boy," I tell him, and he wags and returns his attention to guy, politely pawing at his jeans a second time.

"Forager," he says down to the dog; the dog wags, and the guy crouches down to pet him some more.

I'm still standing a bit of a distance away, and at this point I begin walking closer. I contribute to petting Forager by giving him a pet on the head, and then I ask the guy, "You got a name?"

"Jamie," he tells me. Some people tell the truth about that on these and some people don't, but I don't really mind either way. If he wants to be Jamie, he's Jamie.

I pet Forager again.

"You got a name?" Jamie asks, understandably sounding like an afterthought to getting my dog's name.

"Ivan," I tell him.

"Cool," he says, nodding. Still crouched there with Forager, Jamie looks up at me, nods his head back towards a restroom door, and says, "So uh."

I lead the way, and hold the door open for him. Forager trots in first, and Jamie slinks in after. I close the door behind us all, and lock it shut.

The restrooms in these garages (this is not my first time) are inexplicably well cleaned and spacious. In one corner is a toilet, in another a sink, and in another a urinal; otherwise we have about an apartment bedroom's worth of space here to ourselves.

Jamie rests a hand on the button of his jeans. "Mind if I…"

"Heh. Kind of the point, I thought," I tell him.

With a bashful smile, he shrugs, keeps his pants on all the same, and says, "Yeah. This is a little bit different than how I'm used to it going, wanted to make sure we were on the same page. Are you going to stick around in here?"

I nod. "You seem cool but I gotta make sure you're nice to him."

He nods.

"I'll keep my clothes on," I assure him, though I add, "Not that I wouldn't be interested, but, I *will* keep my clothes on."

"Yeah, hey, I'm not like homophobic at all or nothing—"

"I know."

"I just wasn't—"

"You're okay," I assure him, and lean down to pet Forager who has finished sniffing around the bathroom and has now come over to stand in front of me.

"So how does it work?" Jamie asks.

I give him the crash course: "Make eye contact with him, think of it kind of like a staring contest, focus really intently on his eyes, and then while doing that, in your head imagine the form that you want him to take on."

"Does he sound like them?"

I shake my head. "He just looks like them, but it's still him in there. He doesn't talk."

Jamie asks, "He can be anyone? Female, included?"

"Anyone you can imagine," I say with a nod.

"Celebrities?" he asks.

"I don't think he knows what a celebrity is, but sure."

"Damn. You must be pretty lucky, huh? Getting to have him be whoever you want, whenever you want? I bet you two are getting nasty all the time."

"To be honest, not really," I tell him, and I shrug as though the reason why is a mystery to me, but I know the reason why: my head is full of monsters and I worry what on Earth I'll turn Forager into if I happen to not be able to keep my mind off work. I do admit to Jamie, for his interest, "I give him handjobs if he asks for it, in his regular form."

"Oh. Heh. Hey if that's what you're into in the first place, yeah why bother with the transformation I guess." He gives Forager a pet on the head. "I wasn't going to do a celebrity though, I was just curious. Actually have in mind a uh, friend, if that's not weird to you."

"Not really. Even if it was, hey, your fantasy, not mine."

He nods. Then without putting it off any further, he sits down on the tiled restroom floor, cross-legged in his jeans. Forager, knowing what this is and wanting to play along, leaves my side and goes and sits in front of his hookup to be.

The two of them stare into each other's eyes. I hope it works for him. Some people aren't able to visualize things very well, and there's nothing that even the most talented of morph dogs can do for them in that case. But as I watch Jamie and Forager sitting there staring at each other, I do see that it's working: the image of Forager fades out, and in his place fades in a woman sitting cross-legged in a black and red skirt and top, black fingernails, pale makeup, piercings on the ears, nose, mouth, and eyebrow.

"Tris," he calls her, and reaches out a gentle hand to touch to her cheek. He looks her up and down. "Holy shit, Tris."

Tris leans forward and licks Jamie's face seductively. He opens his mouth and catches her tongue, and the two of them

are soon making out, him lying her back on the tiled floor. Both of them are *really* into it. Eventually Jamie breaks from the kissing and takes off his jeans and underwear, and reaches up under Tris's skirt and pulls her panties down off of her. He starts to finger her, and she lies on her back with her legs spread, grinding forward against his hand. It doesn't take much of that before there's no question that both of them are ready: he pulls up the front of her skirt and puts himself in, and they go at it there on the cool tiles of the restroom floor.

When they're all finished, they both lie on their backs looking blankly up at the ceiling, Jamie using one arm to provide a pillow for Tris and the other arm to provide a pillow for himself. Both of them are breathing heavily. Jamie gives Tris a kiss on the side of the mouth, and Tris returns a similar one back.

Still a little out of breath, Jamie says, "Thank you, Tris, Forager, whatever."

Tris gives him another lick on the mouth, and the two of them fall back into kissing again, before eventually Jamie gives one final deep smooch and then sits up, and reaches for his discarded pants.

With the pants still in hand, he looks up at his casual observer who has been trying not to be in the way. "Thank you, for that," he says to me.

"Happy to serve," I say with a quick little mock salute. "And hey, it's not like you're half bad: my friend got plenty out of that too."

He glances away bashfully, and then stands up and puts on his underwear and his pants. I kneel down with Tris, indulge her in a quick kiss when she cranes her neck towards me, and then I slide her panties back on, and make sure they're on comfortably. I also put her collar back on. Even looking like a human, I still want to make sure she has it in case somehow, though I don't imagine it happening, we get separated.

Tris's stomach growls loudly.

"Is she alright?" Jamie asks.

"Hungry," I tell Jamie, although Tris also recognizes this word, and gives an affirmative lick of her lips. "Most morph dogs do love to show off their services, but it does also take a lot out of them to make the switch. Probably keep her like this until

I can get her some food, just to make sure the morph back to dog goes alright."

"What does she eat?" Jamie asks, and I can hear him slightly hesitate on the word she, now that we're talking about getting back to Forager's original form. I won't deny that there is a weird grammar to it sometimes.

The answer to his question is that she'll eat damn near anything, although meat is certainly a strong favorite whether looking like a human or like a dog. I have high nutrient snacks stowed in my backpack for this type of occasion, although admittedly they're a bit pricey, so if I can manage it it's certainly preferable to save them for more of an emergency situation and just go and get her some regular human food for now.

Answering his question out loud though, I say, "We'll probably head to the gas station up the street, pick up some hot dogs and beef jerky."

"I'll buy," Jamie offers.

"Nah, really, it's no big deal."

"Yes, it was," he insists. "You have no idea. But, anyways, I'm not trying to cling if you don't want me around, but if you'd let me buy, I'd like to."

I think about it, and then answer, "Yeah. Thank you."

We all slink out of the restroom. Jamie goes and stomps on a skateboard to make it jump up to his hand, and he catches it, and we all begin walking down the ramps. Tris and I hold hands, which is always a much nicer alternative to needing to use the leash.

"What band is that on your shirt?" I ask. We chat about metal on the short walk to the gas station. I'm more into weird croaking black metal, he's more into glam metal actually, which is also cool.

The three of us head into the gas station. As Tris and I are making our way to the beef jerky, hand in hand, the clerk behind the counter calls to me, "Hey fella!"

Tris and I turn to look at him.

"No dogs inside," he says, and then gestures around his neck —he has noticed Tris's collar.

I'm about to lie and pretend to be insulted he accused my friend of being a dog, but Tris's mouth opens, and she begins panting nervously.

"We'll be in and out, man," I try.

"Out," he insists, pointing over at the door. "I won't sell you nothing."

"Tch, fuckin people," I mutter.

"What was that?"

I give him the finger as we pass by.

Tris and I stand outside, holding hands near a tall ashtray that's out here. She smells nice, I realize. Orange-y. Jamie really did have Tris pretty strongly in mind when he visualized her, whoever she is.

A couple minutes later Jamie emerges with six hot dogs stacked in his arms and four long sticks of beef jerky sticking out of a pocket of his leather jacket. "*Asshole*," he says about the clerk, and I nod. He goes on, "I didn't know how much she needed, and I figure if there's extra we could eat the difference."

Hell yeah, sounds good to me. Some hot dogs are passed around and the three of us dig in, Jamie and I each taking our time, Tris eating as fast as she can manage to swallow. She ends up eating four while Jamie and I each finished one.

When we're all finished with our hot dogs, I stand in front of Tris and press a palm to her forehead so she closes her eyes. When they're closed, I give her the command, "Return."

The image of Tris fades away, and sitting in her place, wagging, is Forager.

Jamie suddenly steps in close beside me, says, "For your trouble," and then turns my chin with his finger and gives me a kiss on the lips.

I am shocked but pleasantly shocked, and I press my lips against his in turn, but he breaks it off pretty quick.

I feel dumb, but I can't help but smiling. "You didn't have to do that."

"Maybe I wanted to. I'm not not a little bicurious." With that he hops onto his skateboard, hands me the sticks of beef jerky, and says, "I'll be around," and then glides off around the corner. I listen to him go for a while, until the sound of the little wheels rumbling on the road is too faint to be heard.

Forager and I stand outside of the gas station a while longer. I stare blankly, pleasantly blankly, ahead at nothing, as I think back on the kiss. I can still feel the press of his lips on mine. Eventually my mind wanders back to the little kiss I shared with Tris too, as we were getting her dressed again—Tris, who was actually of course Forager, who politely sits here outside a gas station beside me, happy to be patient and sniff the air as his weird human friend stands there staring at nothing.

I give him the sticks of beef jerky, and then the two of us leave this post by the gas station wall, and continue our way back towards home.

ΤΎΧΩΝ

My dreams have been getting so goddamn vivid lately and I hate it. I was in the town I grew up in, up on the surface; it was nighttime, everything was lit by moonlight or street lamps, and me and my friend Lin were walking around out front of his apartment, drunk and each smoking a cigarette, and then he broke away from me and just started running towards the road; and I don't think at all that he was trying to kill himself, but he couldn't see the bus that was coming and I could, and I shouted after him "LIN!" but it was too late; I watched him and the bus hit and I watched his head get knocked off of his body in a wave of dark blood and then I snapped awake, sitting bolt upright out of the blankets that were restricting me in my sleep. And I'm really sure that when I shouted Lin in my dream I also shouted it out loud, because there is a person who was in the blankets next to me who is now giving an extremely annoyed groan and pulling the blankets away from me so that they can bunch them over their head and retreat into the corner crevasse between the carpet and the wall.

Even having just woken up, this moment feels wrong, frozen. I realize that besides feeling like I just watched my friend get killed by a bus, I also feel like while my ethereal mind was dreaming, my corporeal body has been suffocating, forgetting to take in oxygen while asleep and unsupervised. I tell my body to breathe. But it doesn't. I am frozen there, sitting upright, unsure if I have a heartbeat, sure that I don't have breath.

Thankfully, the frozen moment, however long it lasted, passes. I take in a gasp of the room's air. After I get the air into me I hold it for a moment, cherish it in a way, and then breathe it out again. With the breath taken I feel better, like I actually am awake now, and can deal with the fact that I was only dreaming when I watched my friend die. I still hate it, but, I can deal with it.

"Sorry," I say to the person who I've woken up with. I don't get a response from her—or him, I can't see much of them under the blankets, other than long blonde hair which pours out from the tangle of blankets here and there. It looks like red hair in the technical lights—here in this station, every room that someone could conceivably find the space to stand in needs to be outfitted with lights. The folk etymology is that they're called technical lights because technically you can see in the dim orange attempt at illumination that they shed. Whether that's actually why they're called that, I don't know. Take it or leave it.

I look around and gather my bearings. I am in a very tiny room; if I leaned and stretched a little bit, I could probably touch all four walls without getting up from where I'm sitting. There are no windows, one door. Looking up at where the technical light is fixed in the ceiling, I realize that above my head are railings from which to hang clothes hangers. So I seem to be in a walk-in closet. Or rather, someone and I seem to be in a walk-in closet together. On one of the wire shelves above the hangers, I spot my bundle of clothing, folded in the way that I usually fold it—I'm very particular about what I tuck into what, so that I can tell if someone's been going through my shit. At a glance it looks like nobody has.

I stand up. As I stand, I realize firstly that my joints are sore as fuck from basically sleeping on the floor last night, probably all twisted up on my side cuddling with ostensibly another stranger. When I have fully stood up and am making sure of my balance, I also feel a swirl of lubricant pool down to the bottom of my colon, and I feel a lot more confident that the person I am sharing a walk-in closet with is probably a he. Maybe a she or a they or a xi or an it who learned that I like it in the butt and had the equipment or toys to accommodate, but, if I were betting, my money would be on he.

I grab my clothes, and get dressed in the cramped space while making an effort to disturb the other person as little as possible. Long sleeved black shirt with a few holes in the sleeve cuffs; black underwear with a couple tiny holes in the ass of them; black cargo pants with the knees shredded to hell and the cuffs having seen better days; black bandanna with white floral decorative lines; the bandanna is already tied in a loop of the correct size to fit comfortably onto my head and keep my long hair out of my eyes.

I pat down my pockets. butterfly knife; toothbrush; resealable plastic bag with laundry tablets; some small but probably accurate amount of dollar bills and coins. I take the bills and change out and count them. Five dollars, eighty five cents. Yup. Nothing missing at all. I glance around the floor of the closet in hopes of spotting a whiskey bottle in among the blankets with at least a splash of something left in it, but, either I did drink all of it last night, or I have lost the bottle. It's probably for the better, because my stomach already feels like shit as is.

I open the door and step out of the closet. The creak of the closet door must be louder than I realize, because as I step out into the adjoining bedroom, there is a sheep man on the bed out here who bleats at me, his eyes screwed up into an annoyed squint. As he bleats, a woman in bed with him reaches over him and wraps an arm around him, and pulls him back down flush with the bed. He continues to let out annoyed bleats, but they are quieter as she shushes him and pats his wool.

I tiptoe out of the room, aware every single time that the floor creaks and the sheep man's next bleat at me comes out a little louder before settling again.

When I have made my way out of the bedroom, I find myself in a hall that smells overwhelmingly like cat piss. I open a door on my left, see that it's a hall closet, close it. I try the next door on my left as well, just looking for a bathroom. This time it is a bathroom, but the light is on and I see that I've walked in on someone: out on the bathroom counter are laid out the implements of someone getting ready to inject themselves with something; the 'someone' in question is visible to me in the bathroom mirror, standing in front of the counter shirtless; a sheep man with curly horns, a little square shaved into the white

wool on his left arm over a vein, flinching back from the opening door.

"Sorry," I say, and close the door to just a crack, and stand at it sideways so I'm not trying to peek in. I ask him, "You gonna be long?"

"Yes."

I sigh, but I'll give him some credit that he's honest.

"There's another bathroom on the next floor," he offers.

"Oh. Thanks. Have fun." With that I close the door and continue down the hall, leaving him to his business.

I find myself in a living room. A rat man is sitting in a big cushy chair, reading a newspaper. Another rat man and a black-wooled sheep man are both conked out on the couch drooling on each other as they snore, and at their feet, a cat woman is sitting and watching the TV, which is playing without volume. I glance at the tube. Sports game from the surface is on. "Bulls are up," she tells me.

I give an acknowledging nod and a thumbs up, look around and see a beat-up spiral staircase, and slowly make my way up it, not even touching the railing out of distrust, and taking each step slow so that if a plank seems certain to break under my feet I can backtrack.

None do break; two four-legged cats chase each other down the stairs, dashing swiftly around my ankles as I make my way up. On the next floor up, I find a white-wooled sheep man huddled up in a hill of blankets in the corner, smoking from a bong. He exhales a big cloud of smoke and then jerks his head back in a nod. I give him a tiny wave, and ask, "Bathroom?"

He looks over to a hallway beside him, and says, "Third... wait... yeah, third door on your right."

I make my way there, and am very relieved to find a bathroom that is unoccupied.

There in the bathroom, I turn on the fan so that the muffling noise offers some semblance of privacy, and then I get to work mending myself. I turn on the sink faucet, stick my mouth under, and take long gulps until my hungover dry mouth is, if not perfectly reanimated, at least wet. I empty the contents of my pockets out onto the counter. I stopper the sink drain, drop a detergent tablet into the basin, and then turn on the water as

hot as it goes. Once there's an appreciable amount of suds available, I take off my clothes and drop them in, and let them soak in the detergent as the water continues to fill. I make use of the can in the meantime, and am amused to myself once again that without a doubt the me of last night got nailed, even though the me of the present has no memory of it, only post-hoc evidence in the form of the present feeling of the consistency of what comes out of me and a feeling of having been stretched and internally mushed around. The bathroom tissue comes back mostly clean, and with no pink traces of blood. I flush it all down.

When the sink is full, I stop the water, and go hop into the shower for myself. I borrow the bar of soap that's already in here. When I'm done, I dry off with one of the two towels hanging from the rack, and then I stick that towel into the sink with my clothes and give the whole collection a wash. When it's all been washed and rinsed thoroughly enough, I take out a dryer tablet from the plastic bag, and drop that in. Before my eyes, the water in the sink goes up into a shortlived smoke like watching dry ice evaporate, and in half a minute, I have a bathroom sink filled with dry, clean clothing. I put the towel back on the rack, dress myself again, and leave two quarters out on the counter for the use of the facilities—whether the fifty cents will actually make it to the person whose things I'm using, I'm not actually optimistic, but for my own sake I have to be able to say that I made the effort in case it comes up.

I brush my teeth, borrowing some toothpaste from a tube of it that's sitting out. I spot a nail clippers and make use of those too. I give myself a final tidy in the mirror, check my pockets to make sure I haven't left anything that I didn't mean to, and then I step out of the bathroom, down the spiral stairs, out of the door, and onto a thoroughly unfamiliar street. Glancing up at the rock ceiling overhead, it's at least clear I haven't left the station, which is a relief.

I sigh, and smile to myself a little bit. Another exit successfully made. Part of me knows I should stop doing this shit literally every day of my life, but, another part of me knows I'm still going to. What else is the point of taking a next breath, if not moving towards a next caress?

I walk down the street until arriving at the nearest dirt cheap fast food joint. There I buy coffee and an egg and cheese sandwich, and have fifteen cents left over. I sit down at a table in the corner and eat. I chew my first bite very, very thoroughly, until it's the most pre-digested, unassuming, nonvolatile, bland slur of mush that it can be, and then I swallow. I wait for a jostling pain to shoot out from inside of me, as the bite of the sandwich hits the stomach whose lining I rinsed a sizable bottle of whiskey against yesterday. Lucky enough, the first bite of the sandwich settles itself inside of me without any kicking. I work my way through the rest of the sandwich, taking my time.

I have a sip of the coffee but quickly feel nauseous about it. My stomach grumbles, protesting at the idea that I would have the gall to give it black coffee right after it had treated me so nicely by not raising a fuss over the egg and cheese. The stomach does have a point. Black coffee might not be the move right now, as much as the brain hates to waste it.

To call a human being a living organism is a misnomer. The brain enlists the throat to attack itself with liquor, and the throat burns, does its job, coughs, and then will seethe and tell the brain that it has been harmed, but will obey the brain a second time all the same if given the order to swallow once more. The stomach shoots out stinging needles and demands blandness for the sake of its own wellbeing, while at that same moment the liver looming above the stomach radiates warmth in a contrary demand for something to work on, something to process, whether that be whiskey at night or coffee in the morning. The fingers tap nervously on the tabletop while the brain has told them to do no such thing. A human being is not, in effect, a singular discrete living organism, but rather is a seared together collective of organisms who are each currently evidencing various degrees of being living.

I figure to myself that I might as well sit there in the corner of this fast food joint and wait it out, see if the disparate parts that constitute this amalgam known as "me" will come into alignment on the matter of the black coffee, if given some more time here to sit around and hash through the issue. If the management tells me to beat it I'll beat it, but if not, fuck em, my corner.

Looking through the corner window out to the intersection, although I don't think I've been to this specific part of the station before, it's really not a far cry from the parts that I do frequent. Big lights embedded in the teal rock overhead, doing an almost convincing job of imitating daylight if you don't look up. Shops and apartments stacked on top of one another all the way from the rocks at foot to the rocks above, usually about five layers thick, but it wasn't all built in one go by one company, so the heights of each floor aren't exactly homogeneous. And then of course the people. It looks like an old zombie apocalypse movie—those are actually really funny to watch nowadays, because the relatable ones are the gaunt scabby creatures who make labored steps and flail their arms, while the creatures in flattering makeup with their hair done up seem alien. People in raggy clothing shamble down the street in their various directions; they aren't truly undead, of course, but much like me, most of them have some part or another of living that's been heavily damaged that they're deciding to carry on without. Me, at least organ failure is only an inevitability, not a present state of being. All the same, the presence of some memories can be as much a death as the absence of some organs. In among the people, industrial vehicles slowly tread forward with their flashing orange lights and their warning beeps, taking up most of the height of the tunnel and about half the width of the street, though they drive down the center as most of the tunnels are one ways.

I sip on my coffee.

It sits alright.

I have a bigger sip.

I catch my own reflection in the glass. I grimace.

My name... well, the name of the amalgamate aberration in the mirror, is Trevor. In spite of the fact that I am apparently actively trying to induce liver failure in myself every night, I would all the same consider myself to have my shit together a lot better than most of the people who are down here leading a similar lifestyle. For one thing I have bathed and washed my clothes *today*, let alone in the last month. For another thing, I don't inject any drugs, ever, unless you would count reboosting my vaccinations against STD's every year, which is another

thing I do that a lot of people here don't, because it is something that one has to save up for; usually I take one of the more dangerous jobs and work it with as much overtime as I can deal with for about a week, and then feel happy in my armor that that affords me for the rest of the year to be as promiscuous as I damn well like. I'm also snipped, so, no scares of pregnancy, and the scar usually helps convince people that I actually am forward thinking enough to be vaxxed and that they wouldn't catch anything from me.

I have another drink of my coffee.

I glance out at the street again: I observe that this actually is a pretty heavy amount of foot traffic, passing through here. I turn and glance at this fast food joint's kitchen, more so observing with my ears than with my eyes: They are absolutely short staffed today. The line for food is now out the door, and it sounds like there is all of one child back there in the kitchen while one adult stands at the counter and deals with the customers.

So, here's the play. Every day, wake up and count myself lucky if I have woken up somewhere that has a private bathroom I can use: if there is a private bathroom, wash myself up as I did this morning; if there is not a private bathroom, wander the streets until arriving at a public operation with coin-operated showers, less ideal but it works. Once presentable, find work for the day flipping burgers, washing dishes, sweeping and mopping, whatever seems to have a demand as long as it's in a place that serves food; these types of jobs will always be minimum wage and will never allow overtime to happen, so all I can count on is eight hours of work which after automatically subtracted taxes leaves me with forty four dollars and eighty cents spending money, a lunch break with a free lunch from the place, and dinner to go afterwards as long as I make it quick myself before punching out and have made a really positive impression on the management while I've been there. After dinner, use the spending money to buy a bottle of whiskey and a packet of lube and hit a bar with my outside drink, and try to save enough during the night to have breakfast for tomorrow, if possible.

That's about it. It's not perfect but it's gotten me through so far.

Moving this play along for today, I slam the rest of my coffee, throw my trash in the garbage, and approach the counter.

The woman behind the register glares at me, and says in a tone like she's reprimanding a child's bad behavior, "*Back* of the line."

All the same, I stay where I am, and offer, "Need a hand in the kitchen?"

Immediately her tone shifts—not to anything friendly, but she swats the other unmanned register, and says, "Bring up your profile."

I walk around the counter to come use the register's computer screen. It takes a minute to boot up. The woman continues taking orders, and the kid comes and sets them out on the counter as he finishes them.

When the register comes online, I punch in my citizen ID. My public information, including my work history, comes up.

The woman finishes with a customer, and then comes over to quickly assess if I am acceptable. "Jesus," she says, punching the button to go to the next page of my work history again and again, and again, and again. If she intends to get to the end of it we're going to be here for a while. "Punch in. Spare apron is in the break room."

Without commentary I do as she says, re-entering my ID for the punch-in. My name is added to the page of currently clocked-in employees, which is indeed now three people long counting me. The woman's name is Casey May, the kid's name is Leo May. Even though I know that it doesn't matter, I do smile at seeing the kid's pronouns are they them; it's legitimately becoming pervasive, and I think the world is not the worse for it.

Anyways, I break myself away from the monitor and don't dilly dally at getting the apron on, washing my hands, and stepping into the kitchen. "Saw, brah," I say, and offer the kid a handshake, hoping they take brah as gender neutral-ly as I mean it.

The kid does shake my hand.

"Trevor, he him," I mention.

The kid smiles at me bringing it up, and introduces themself as Leo they them or it it.

"Right on. Whatcha need back here, Leo?"

They list off the things that need to be restocked on the line, and I speed off to go get all of that. Kid is professional as hell and I love it. I normally have no inclination to work the same place two days in a row, just not how I do things, but honestly I might find my way back here again if they seem like they still need the extra hand tomorrow.

For my ten minute lunch break—ten is what they have to offer me, but I know better than to actually take the full ten—I make myself a hamburger with no salt and all the vegetable fixings, medium fries with no salt, and a cola. I get it all down in four minutes and get back into the kitchen.

When the workday is over for me and I've made my dinner to go, I punch out and Casey counts out my payment in cash from her register. Forty four dollars and eighty cents on the nose. I thank her, shout goodbye to Leo over the noise of the kitchen, and then walk down the street until arriving at the nearest liquor store. There I buy the night's bottle of whiskey and packet of lube, and then I find a park to sit down in and eat my dinner. I've made a salad inasmuch as one can make a salad at a burger joint. Basically it's the same meal as lunch was, but more of the vegetables and all jumbled together with the burger patty split up around the veggies inside of a styrofoam to-go box. As I eat I get started on becoming shitfaced.

The parks down here still seem kinda bizarre to me. No trees and no sky. Essentially they are rock gardens with moody lighting. The park I'm drinking in right now has a big boulder at the center, surrounded by sand, and blue light shining down from above.

I lean back on my bench and stare at the rock for a while as I drink, trying to appreciate some kind of artiness that the rock is supposed to have.

By the time I'm feeling the drunkenness particles swimming around in my blood—or however it works—I still really don't get the appeal of the moody rock whatsoever, but on the plus side at least I am shitfaced.

I think about getting up for a while. Then eventually I do get up and begin walking. I don't really have any part of the station that I need to make my way towards. I tend to hang out in region 6, one of the more eastern regions of the station, because that's where the bespoke gay bars are at, and I'm down with that and frankly it's usually easier. But there are gays outside of region 6—myself right now, for example—and again, I'm also down with women or nonbinaries, so whatever. Anyone warm. Based on the signage that I'm seeing as I walk around, I seem to have blackoutedly made my way all the way to region 29, a region way down on one of the station's southern arms.

Walking along the street and looking around, I pass by the open double doors of a bar, glance inside as I keep walking, then I backpedal and look in again as I realize that everyone inside is dressed goth. Beaming, I squeal out a happy little noise and step inside. If I'd have known this was here I would have come to region 29 sooner.

I sit down at the bar. One of the two bartenders sees me, and with a smile shouts, "Trevor!"

Well then. Apparently I did come here already. Zero memory of it though.

Anyways, I give the bartender a big friendly over the head wave, matching his energy.

Coming over, he asks, "Can I get you anything?"

I make a low key gesture of glancing down at my bottle of whiskey and giving it a little swirl.

He gives a polite chuckle, and tells me to enjoy my stay before going and tidying up some empties that people have left further down the bar.

I'm not here for long before two sheep men and a rat man all sit down to my left. "Hey sleeping beauty," says the sheep man who has sat down on the stool right next to me.

I don't *entirely* understand the context of his jab, but I piece together that all three of them were in the apartment I woke up in this morning.

I give a little smile, and admit, "Imma be honest, I *do not* remember last night pretty much at all."

The three of them laugh, and the sheep man next to me bleats, “Whaaaat, noooo,” with a huge amount of sarcasm. He then informs me, “You owe me.”

I don’t think I like the sound of that, and I’m conscious of watching for him to pull a knife as I mentally confirm which pocket my own butterfly knife is in. He’s acting friendly but that can often be a front. “What do I owe you?” I ask.

“Last night you were gonna join in with me and my wife, but then your gay drunk ass saw how hung Lloyd is and you *immediately* started shyly flirting with him instead.”

I snicker, shake my head, and take a drink. After I exhale a sour cloud of whiskey breath, I admit, “Yeah that sounds about right. Sorry not sorry.”

“To be honest it was really cute,” he tells me. “You were seriously acting like you had a secret embarrassing crush on him. Traci and I had a fun enough time just watching you try to get with him.”

I give an agreeable shrug, not really being able to add much since, again, I do not remember any of this. I still don’t even really know how I ended up here from region 6.

“You do still owe me though,” he reminds me.

Hell yeah: makes the rest of my night way easier if somebody is not only already interested but is actually insisting on it. “Trevor,” I offer, extending over my hand.

“Shaun,” he says, and gives my hand a shake. He also introduces the others, and I do piece back where I saw each of them this morning. Shaun was the one in bed who I woke up when tiptoeing out of the walk-in closet, and I now presume the human woman with him was his wife Traci. The other sheep here at the bar is Shaun’s brother, the one who was shooting up in the bathroom—I can still see the square of shaved wool on his arm, though it’s not too noticeable in this bar’s dim lighting. The rat man is the one who was conked out on the couch.

We all chat. Shaun is into blacksmithing which is fucking rad and he tells me a ton about it as I continue to sip on my whiskey. Apparently there’s a workshop in this region which he has a membership at. At some point I ask if we can go there, but he tells me he does not want to handle searing hot sharp metal while drunk which I tell him is lame but also not unfair. From a

coat pocket he takes out some metal trinkets he's made to show off. One is a twisty little bell-shaped cage kind of a deal, the other one looks kind of like a throwing star but isn't sharp, it just has fancy decorative rounded edges. He can get inside of my asshole at any point he likes to. As he's going on about some technical detail of how he did the metalworking on the throwing star I give him a kiss. He perks up into a smile and then kisses me back, and we make out at the bar for a little bit before he says, "Maybe back to my place?"

It feels a little early for me to be moving towards putting a cap on the night, but I *am* horny as shit to rub bits with this guy and feel his wool against my horny drunk tingly skin, so I tell him yeah getting back to his place sounds good. I take another gulp of my whiskey, take his hand, and walk along as he leads the way back to his place—his brother and his friend say they'll catch up later.

As we're walking he whispers in my ear, "Hey Trevor, what did the sheep say to the human?"

I try to think of an answer, but nothing jumps into my head so I ask him what did the sheep say to the human.

He makes a sex noise.

I laugh *way* too hard at this but I legitimately cannot help it, and he actually has to hold me upright so I don't fall over on the ground laughing in the middle of the street. When I'm over it enough to keep walking at least—I still have the giggles—he gives me a kiss on the cheek and then keeps walking me back to his apartment. When we get there, Traci and the sheep man who had the bong are intensely focused on a video game—they seem to be versus each other, but I'm not too familiar. The cat woman is standing in front of an open fridge trying to decide what to eat—she glances up at me and Shaun, and mentions, "Bulls won." I give her a thumbs up.

Shaun brings us over to stand by the couch, and says, "Traci, look who—"

"Sec," she interrupts, and mashes the buttons in a way that's so fast and specific that it seems like she's making it up. She leans forward, and after a few more seconds, she and the sheep man both throw their controllers. Traci shoots her hands up in

the air victoriously, sheep man grabs his bong from beside the couch and does a big hit.

Now noticing me, Traci says, "Oh! Hi you!"

"Heyyy," I say with a big dumb smile, and rub my thumb over her husband's hand which I have been needily holding ever since we left the bar.

"Lloyd says we missed out," she informs me.

I make a gay happy noise.

Shaun lets go of my hand and moves behind me, and starts rubbing my shoulders erotically and I melt while standing there in the still-cat-piss-smelling living room. As Shaun rubs my shoulders, he informs Traci, "We missed out on Trevor *last night*, but he has agreed to amend this today."

"First on the bed gets the handcuffs!" Traci shouts, and then throws a couch cushion at Shaun's face and darts down the hall.

He shouts and chases after her.

I take another gulp of whiskey, stand there for a few seconds as it ripples through me and settles, and then jauntily walk down the hall after the two.

On the bed, Traci and Shaun are play-wrestling for the handcuffs—Traci has them behind her back, and quickly clicks them on while fending off Shaun with her feet. Both of them are already shirtless.

I set my whiskey down on a desk in here and come join them on the bed. We all have a fun snuggly time undressing each other, and I find myself caressing my body against Shaun's as much as I possibly can: he is *so* soft and lovely. Traci is a really lovely kisser and she is extremely pretty. Rubbing and playing happily with both of them there on the bed, I figure I am probably the luckiest drunk motherfucker in this entire station right now, and that is *not* a list without competition. When we've ramped up to actually taking care of business, I end up being in the middle and I would be happy for this to last literally for the rest of my life, but we do all eventually finish, getting our various fluids in or around each other's parts.

We all snuggle after. I am split on whether I want to fall asleep right now or get up and have another sip of my drink and try to angle towards a round two with one or both of them.

Eventually though they settle the question for me as they both get up to go have a cigarette outside.

Well, "outside," but. Out on the doorsteps. I grab my whiskey and follow after them, having a few sips along the way. I don't smoke but I like these people a lot and I want to hang out.

As we're hanging out out there, standing around and shooting the shit, I suddenly lose all focus on what Shaun is saying as I see someone walking up the other side of the street. A man with long black hair similar to mine, and a tattoo on his face of a snake that comes up from the neck, bends at his right cheekbone, slithers over the bridge of his nose, and then ends at his left cheekbone with its tongue flicking out. I blink hard, and I try to disbelieve that this is my friend Lin, because I can't imagine what in the hell he'd be doing walking around down in a station like this when he was always doing so well with his life up on the surface. But sure as shit, it's my old best friend walking around down here. He has a black eye, which means I very well might have a son of a bitch to stab if he knows who gave the shiner to him. I haven't been a murderer up until this point in my life—I only do tricks with the butterfly knife to impress people—but Lin is a person I would start for.

I leave Shaun and Traci's doorstep and make my way across the street, shouting and waving, "LIN!"

Lin looks in my direction. When I get to him he asks, "Holy shit, *Trevor?* How the fuck you been, dog?"

"Shit man, better than any fucking person has a right to be down here."

I step forward and hug him, which, after I've already committed to it I do realize is a lot, we were never huggers back when I knew him before. But he takes it in stride, hugging me back.

I ask him, "What are you doing down here?"

He huffs out a sigh. "Heard Tommy got hurt on the job, been trying to find him and bring him back up to stay at my place for a while."

"Oh, shit."

He nods.

"What happened with the black eye?" I ask.

"Fuck, is it that noticeable?"

“Bro I saw it from across the street.”

“Fuuuuuuuuuuuuck that’s unfortunate.”

“What happened?” I ask again.

He glances off to the side and smiles a tiny bit as he says, “I was talkin out the side of my neck.”

“Oh god what did you say?”

“Some kind of emu lady was hitting on me last night.”

“Sure.” I have partaken. It wasn’t not fun for me, but, I acknowledge it isn’t for everyone.

“And—oh you wouldn’t know, me and Janie got hitched.” He holds up his hand which has a gold ring on it.

I gasp. “Congrats, man! You two are awesome. Happy for you.”

“Yeah! But uh, the emu lady was hitting on me, even though I told her I’m married—”

“That doesn’t mean quite the same thing down here,” I tell him.

“Yeah, I got that impression. But anyways, I tell her I am *not* interested, many, many times, but she’s not letting it go. So. I make a *really* loud point of ordering some chicken wings.”

I snort laugh, and say, “You did *not*.”

He giggles a little to himself, and nods, and says, “I did. And so she bamfs, thank god. But then I don’t know if he knew her or just overheard part of it, but a dog dude comes over and just fucking *pounds* his fist into my fucking face. And then he left, before I could really get my bearings again. So. Yeah. My fault. I’m a dumbass.”

“I fuckin missed you man,” I tell him. “Tell me, *specifically*, what the dog man looked like.”

“Cmon, man.”

“I will straight up commit murder with a knife.”

“No, don’t. I told you, I deserved it.”

I consider, and then offer, “Assault with a lame flabby punch?”

“Oh, sure! I think he was more of—” he begins, and then stops talking and glances around. I realize he is double checking the dog man doesn’t actually happen to be present to overhear this. I giggle to myself. Not seeing any dog men around, Lin continues, “I think he was more of a mutt than any specific

breed, *I* didn't recognize him as anything, anyways. Longish brown fur, tall pointed ears."

"German shepherd?"

"Ehh coloration wasn't right, it was more of a uniform light brown than a brown and black."

"Hm. Anyways."

"Yeah. Besides that, I don't know. But if you see him leave him alone man."

I take a sip of my whiskey, and offer the bottle to Lin—he is the first person I have ever made this offer to.

He does accept the bottle, has a sip, and then coughs and wheezes and looks down at the bottle. "Jesus dude. Are you *actually* drinking gasoline?"

"Hundred and ten proof," I say smugly.

He gags, and hands the bottle back.

I take it, have another sip, and then ask, "So what are you up to now?"

"Pretty much barhopping looking for Tommy."

I gasp. "Onward!" I say, and then Lin reaches out and on reflex I reciprocate our handshake. I'm surprised I still have the muscle memory for all of the steps.

Lin leads the way, and at the bar he buys me a beer, and for the rest of the night from there forward I pretty much don't remember anything else.

Usually with my dreams I actually do end up remembering them—like part of my brain wakes up sooner than it's supposed to, and my memory is recording while the last parts of the dream are still playing.

I dream that I am in an alleyway lit only by the technical lights, chewing on an invisible granola bar. I can feel the crunch of it every time I bite down. It feels like chewing on a regular granola bar, I just know that it's invisible. Sometimes it disappears for a bite and I chomp my teeth together uncomfortably hard, but then it comes back and I keep chewing again. Then without ceremony, a man steps in front of me and shoots me in the forehead with a pistol causing a bang and a bright flash.

I snap awake, screaming. The snake lady who was sleeping beside me also snaps awake at me screaming, and she bites me in the neck.

I feel all of my muscles lock up, and involuntarily, I slowly recline back onto the ground: I gather my bearings and see that we were sleeping on a pile of garbage in a dim alley. There is *almost* relief in the fact that my lung muscles are as paralyzed as the rest of my body, and so I can't breathe or smell right now.

The snake lady gasps, and scoots backwards away from me, fingertips anxiously pressed to her mouth. "I am *so* sorry!" she says, and then reaches out a hand towards me, but then pulls it back and puts it back to her mouth. "Ohhh my god, I never do that, I am so sorry, I didn't mean to!"

Not that I know her, but I actually don't doubt that she's telling me the truth. That said, I am not much comfort anyways, as I cannot breathe or move my tongue or lips or give a thumbs up, so my capacity to tell her not to worry about it is unfortunately limited.

"You'll be fine in a minute, I promise," she tells me.

Again, I believe her. It's not my speed but there's actually a market for people getting bit intentionally for the high of it. The venom causes full body paralysis for about a minute, and then for some people there's a deep euphoria afterwards. I guess we'll see how I take it.

The snake lady glances around, reaches over me to grab her purse from our garbage pile, and then without any other commentary gets up and walks quickly out of the alleyway.

I hope that last-night me had fun with her, because it certainly did lead to one hell of a way to wake up. I don't think I'll be needing coffee today.

When I'm finally able to breathe again, the smell is about as bad as I figured. I have to have been *obliterated* last night for the smell of garbage juice to be an acceptable perfume to sleep in.

When I can crudely move my arms and legs, I jerkily slap my way forward off of the garbage pile, and have a seat sitting back against the alley's opposite wall. I take in deep breaths. I realize how much my heart is racing and it's really uncomfortable. Probably to be expected, but still, uncomfortable. I don't want to

die. Sometimes—sometimes like now—it feels like I know a heart attack is coming. I am not a healthy, well maintained body—I beat up my insides every day of my life and then the different parts of my body have to work together to fight to correct the consequences of their earlier bad decisions, and someday some part of my body will give up that fight.

I guess it's not today though. As I sit there breathing, my heart rate does settle down a little. My lips are still tingly, and I try to say something to myself and am unsurprised when my words come out a slurred mess. I look down at my hands, wiggle my fingers, make fists a couple of times. She told the truth: the paralysis passes, and soon enough I'm just a garbage juice scented dude sitting in an alley. No rush of euphoria from the venom comes to me. Which is honestly good. I don't need to add "try to get bit by a snake" to my daily agenda.

I pat myself down, checking my pockets for everything. Butterfly knife, tooth brush, laundry tablets, all present where they should be. I feel something in one of my cargo pockets that *cannot* be what it feels like, because it feels like a wad of cash. I pull open the pocket, reach in, and take out the wad of cash which it does indeed turn out to be. My eyes go wide as I thumb through the bills: five hundred dollars in twenties.

I stuff the bills back into my pocket before anyone can see them—not that I have any company here in the garbage alley, but that is a *lot* of money to be handling out in the open. And I'm not completely sure of what to make of the fact that I have it. I don't think I would have gotten it by dishonest means, but the fact that I don't know where it came from at all still makes it concerning.

But as I think about the fact that I basically get to take a vacation from the eight hour grind for a while, a weight feels like it's lifted off of me. It's gonna be a *really* good week or two.

I look around for my bandanna. Eventually I do spot it, tied up around a cowboy hat which is sitting on the garbage pile. I say to myself Jesus fucking Christ, and then beam at the way the words came out so articulately. Once the paralysis goes away it really does go away, no lingering effects at all, it seems.

I pick the cowboy hat up off of the garbage pile, take my bandanna off of it, put on the bandanna, and set the hat back down. I leave the alley and go find a place to shower.

At the nearest shower house, I use the change machine—it accepts a twenty, fortunately—and after feeding some coins into the machines for the soap, the shampoo, and then the shower itself, I do an even more thorough job than usual of cleaning myself. I wash my clothes in the farthest sink down. I never feel more homeless than when I have to wash my clothes in the public sinks, standing there naked while I do so, but on the other hand fuck everyone, I am not going to go about the rest of my day literally smelling like garbage. Luckily I'm done with the process quickly enough that only a handful of people happened to come within sight of me. I give my teeth a courtesy brush even though I don't have toothpaste on hand to do the job entirely properly. Always seemed like a weird omission that these places vend soap and shampoo but not toothpaste, but whatever. All in all, I have put myself together acceptably well by the time I step out onto the street again.

I glance both ways, spot a diner, and go in and splurge on an omelet with my newfound mysterious wad of money. I almost order a long island iced tea, but I catch myself.

Here's the thing, is I've come into money before down here. It's easy to get stupid with it. Last time I had two hundred to my name it was gone that night, between getting fancy drinks and cocaine. With five hundred here, I'm sitting on a very good thing, but to be honest I'd pass on the very good night if it means a very needed break. So instead of the long island iced tea, I leave the diner after paying, then step into a liquor store, and get the usual bottle of whiskey and packet of lube.

I go sit in a rock park, fail to appreciate the moody magenta rock, and sip my whiskey. When I'm good and morning drunk, I step out onto the street and begin wandering, feeling a friendly amicability towards really just the world right now, and everyone else walking around in it.

At some point a short ways into my walk as I'm feeling like getting to know someone, I happen to pass by a sports bar. My usual repulsion towards sports bars tells me that I probably never would have entered the place before ever in my entire life,

which means I probably won't encounter anyone I know, which seems ideal right about now because I am having a really strange day and I don't want to tell anyone about it.

I step inside. Glancing around, I don't recognize anyone, and nobody seems to recognize me. It seems surprisingly busy for this hour of the morning, but I gather that some important game is on. Again, not my world, but whatever.

"Getcha anything, boss?" the barkeeper asks.

I hold up my whiskey.

I don't think he likes it, but he doesn't make a stink of it. He just turns his head back down to the puzzle he's doing from the newspaper, leaning back against a post behind the bar.

At the far end of the bar, I see a glass of beer rise and fall with nobody holding it. I screw my eyes shut, open them, and look harder. The glass is now sitting there on the bar, its contents waving back and forth as though it was only just set down.

You know, fuck it. I go sit down at the barstool beside the drink.

"Saw, brah?" I ask.

Only silence greets me. I glance down at the drink, which has now basically settled—sometimes this deep down there are tremors that could easily account for a slightly wiggly glass of beer. Shit, that and I'm probably hallucinating from the snake venom from earlier.

I take a swig from my whiskey, exhale, and say, "Ghost or just a glass of beer, you're a friend of mine dude."

A squeaky laugh comes from the air beside me, and I laugh a little back at how unintentional of a laugh it sounded like.

"That's such a friendly thing to say to someone invisible," the voice tells me. "Usually it's all 'ah what the hell!' and 'get out of the lady's room, perv!'"

I snort laugh at that, not having expected to be hearing invisible man humor today. The voice does *sound* masculine at least, if a bit on the soprano side.

"Trevor, he him," I offer, and hold my hand over.

"Oh," he says.

After a brief pause, I sense that my handshake is unwanted—no big deal—and I retract my hand.

After I do, the voice stammers out, “Sorry, uh, just. Anyways, hi. Rex. He him.”

“Pleasure, Rex,” I say, and nod. I have another sip of my whiskey.

“*Right*, you cannot see I was holding my hand out to shake when I said that.”

“Are you always invisible?” I ask.

“Not strictly. Put this on.”

With that I hear a weighty tap on the bar counter, and look down to see a black ring. I pick it up. It’s heavier than I expected, almost like it was a part that fell off of one of the machines instead of a piece of jewelry. I slip the ring on.

Beside me I can now see a dog man, wagging his tail and smiling at me.

At first I have extremely mixed reactions, because on the one hand he is adorable, but on the other hand I’ve been on the lookout for a dog man who punched my friend. This dog man here with me is the wrong breed though, some kind of long furred, white with patches of other color.

“Well ain’t you handsome,” I tell him, and he wags harder. “What breed?” I ask.

“Australian shepherd. You?”

It takes me a second to realize that what he’s saying is a dig on me for asking his breed, but taking it in stride I do answer him. “Oh, Chinese. I will say for an Australian shepherd you sure don’t have the accent.”

“I can summon it if needed,” he says. Watching him talk, I realize that it’s not strictly that his voice is high pitched, but more the tone of a happy, excited dog.

“You need the ring back just ask, by the way.”

“Nah,” he says, and then he snaps his fingers and the ring is back on his finger, and off of mine. Within a second I’m again sitting next to what would look like an empty barstool.

“You watching the game?” I ask.

“No, not at all. Just needed a breather, thought I’d grab a beer somewhere.”

“You wanna see me do tricks like you do?” I ask.

“Ooh. Please, go ahead.”

“Ay, Barman!” I call to the bartender. He looks up and raises an eyebrow at me. “Knife trick!” I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows harder, and then just says, “No liability. Don’t hurt yourself,” and turns back down to his newspaper.

Nine times out of ten they *do not* care, but it is usually for the best to declare it, instead of waving a surprise knife around.

“Stay away,” I mention to Rex, and wave a hand over in his direction, feeling my hand brushing against dog hair.

He giggles, and insists that he’s away, he won’t get cut.

I take out my butterfly knife, give it a few safe basic moves to make sure it’s not sticking or anything like that, and then I go into a routine that apparently looks *very* impressive and dangerous, because it’s gotten me in the door with people more times than I can remember, though to tell the truth it is the same routine I’ve done every night and every day since I’ve been down here, and the muscle memory is so tight that it is literally impossible for me to mess this trick up. I actually find it easier when tipsy. Sober I realize I’m about to overthink it, and I throw the knife away from myself before I do overthink it and cut myself.

Here with Rex though, the trick is of course going off without a hitch. The final move is to toss the knife up in a ballerina spin, where it seems to hang in the air for a moment, and then reach up and snatch it out of the air and flip the knife closed. I know well before I do it that what I’m about to do is really dumb, but I already made up my mind to do it while my mind was wandering during the routine course of the trick. As the knife is spinning in the air, I add a snap to the routine, clicking my fingers together like he did when he called the ring back to himself. *Then* I catch the knife, flip it closed, and count myself lucky that deviating from wrought memory didn’t just cost me a finger.

“*Wow*,” he says, which is a relief to hear because I couldn’t see him during the entire routine. Hard to gauge the reaction of an invisible guy.

I put the knife away, and have another swig of whiskey. He has another sip of his beer, or at least, I see the glass levitate and then go back down to the bar.

"You want the ring back, or is it more fun to you if I'm invisible?" he asks in a little bit of a tongue-sticking-out-y-face tone.

I point over towards him with the index finger of my whiskey hand, lean in closer with him, and say, "Can I actually be candid about something?"

"Heh, I guess. If it's too terrible I'll just like, leave, so, yknow."

"When dogs have sex they get stuck ass to ass afterwards."

Amused, he answers, "That is a fact of the world, yes. I am so here for this question please go on."

"Does your... junk... situation... do that too? Why does *theirs* do that?"

"Bro you never seen dog cock?"

"No! There are like almost zero dog men down here, I was always curious!"

With another loud tap, I see that he's put the ring on the bar again. I back off—I realize I have been leaning on him—and I grab the ring and put it on. He sips his beer with a little smile and a sideways glance towards me. "Wanna go back to my place and see?" he offers.

"Oh my god yes," I tell him. "Chug your beer let's go."

He actually does, which I didn't expect. As he chugs I notice his wardrobe isn't wildly dissimilar to mine: he is also a fan of black. Black button up shirt, black cargo pants, black bandanna but he wears his as an accessory around his neck that goes down as a triangle over the top of his chest. His long light hair really is beautiful. I wonder if he combs it or if it's just like that.

When he's finished chugging, I mention, "So eager to get down to it."

"Yeah it's such a weird departure for me, because as a dog I normally haaate humping things," he says with coy sarcasm. I want to give him a handjob right there at the bar but I think the bartender is already fairly grumpy with me, so even if Rex is invisible to all but the person wearing the ring, we'd probably be better off actually just getting back to his place.

"You lead the way," I tell him, and then take his hand and take a swig of my whiskey.

As we walk, I ask "Why are you invisible" even though I'm pretty sure I know the gist of it.

"Treasure hunter. Down spelunking in a deep system underneath Region 22—son of a bitch of a system, all ups and downs—I found a bottle of gem wine and a ring. I'd already met my minimum of treasure to sell off from that trip, so I thought I'd roll the dice on drinking the wine for myself."

So yeah, about what I figured. I stop in my tracks, still holding his hand, and he comes to a surprised halt along with me. I drag us over to a little alley, press his back against the brick wall, and plant a deep kiss on his dog man mouth. He lets out a moan—I know it's not a big deal but I love the little vibrating feeling of someone moaning, in this case the little vibrations of the mmm as I press my lips against his wet fuzzy muzzle. After a moment he kisses me back, muzzle effortlessly opening bigger than any human mouth ever could, and he sticks his tongue into my mouth. Our tongues slide over each other like competing tentacles, his tongue trying to explore every bit of my mouth from the lips to the back of my throat, and my tongue trying lick his tongue wherever it is that it goes to.

Eventually we step back from each other and catch our breath a little. I give him a smile. "Anyways. You were bringing us somewhere. Your place? Actually is this alley fine?"

"Heh. My place is like another block. And it smells better."

"*That* is fair, you lead the way," I tell him, and have another swig of my whiskey.

We keep down the street and then head around a corner, and find ourselves on a stretch of this region where it's not all stacked shops and apartments, but actual bespoke houses, with little sand lawns in between them. I actually find myself a little thrown by the spaciousness of it all.

He leads the way up to a home that has a pink exterior. I tell him that pink is pretty gay, he tells me that I'm pretty gay, I tell him he's not wrong, and then he places his hand on a scanner beside the door. After a moment the deadbolt shunks open, and he holds the door open for me. I skip into the living room, and take a big deep sniff of the air. It smells like scented candles, pumpkin-y and cinnamon-y. All along the walls, above the couches and chairs and all that, are shelves on which rest

crystals. There have to be a hundred in the living room alone. I wander away from Rex for a sec to look at some of them. Pyramids, spheres on little stands, cubes, prisms, shapes I wouldn't quite know the names of, and a good number that are more chaotic fractal kind of things.

"What does this one do?" I ask, looking at a sphere of some kind of very pure blue stone.

"Makes my living room look pretty," he answers, and sidles up beside me and licks the side of my face. I snort in a little laugh, and turn and kiss him on the side of the fluffy neck.

He grabs each of my wrists, and brings my hands—and my whiskey bottle—up to his eye level, turning them around and around and examining them. "Yeah your nails are good," he says.

I am internally glad for whenever the last time I used a nail clipper was, because apparently it had to have been fairly recently but I'm blanking on when exactly I would have had the chance. I take a swig of my whiskey.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asks. "Do you need food? Can I make you food?"

I take another tiny sip of whiskey, and then admit, "Food would be good but let's do that after."

He gauges me for a second, and then nods, and says, "If that's what you want."

With that, he takes my hand again, and leads me through the living room to a flight of stairs leading upwards. We go up to the second floor, down a hall a ways, and he opens the door into what I presume is a guest bedroom, though it's very well decorated, with paintings of farm life—four legged farm animals mostly, although one painting is a barn, and there is another wide painting of a field of wheat.

"Are you from the surface?" I ask as I flop backwards onto the bed and start taking my pants off.

"Yeah," he says with a smile at me. He begins unbuttoning his shirt. "Paintings of the farm I grew up on, actually. Good read on your part."

In another moment we're both naked and making out on the bed, and I get to stroke his beautiful long coat from his shoulders all the way down his back and down to his butt. I

eventually break it off and look at his package, which he is happy to accommodate, sitting sort of cross-legged leaned back, propped up back on his hands.

Balls, very familiar, they are basically the same as how human balls hang. Sheath, also familiar: a lot of beast men's penises don't hang out all the time like a human's; instead what's on the outside is like a sort of elongated pouch of skin that the flaccid penis rests inside of, with an opening at the end, comparable to how a retractable pen works, or a tube of lipstick. Speaking of lipstick: there is the tip of a somewhat aroused red shiny penis sticking out of his sheath, which is, in my past experience with beast men, also also a familiar sight. But I do need to find out if there's more here that I need to keep in mind. A lot of beast men and women are *generally* what you would expect, but *do* have their own particulars that you should really know about before getting all gung ho about it and assuming everything will work out.

"Sexy boy," I tell him, and he wags. "How do I... I don't want to say 'use it,' but, for lack of access to more sober vocabulary, how do I use it?"

"Heh. I mean it sounded like you're into being on bottom—"

"I *really* am, thank you for picking up on that."

His junk does a little excited twitch, and he says, "If you assume the position I'll kinda do the rest."

I feel a moment of dizziness, and then when it passes, I tell him, "That sounds awesome but since this is new I wanna just... see it, first. Maybe a handjob?"

Again he wags, and nods. He gets up onto his hands and knees, and crawls forwards and nuzzles against me. "Go for it," he says.

Weird-ass position to assume for a handjob, but I'm not doubting that he knows what he needs. I hang out on my knees beside him, and fish out the packet of lube from my pocket. The packet has two sections to it: one containing powdered lube, and the other containing a liquid solution that mixes with the powder to produce the most effective slimy lubricant in the entire world. I twist the packet to break the seal between the two sections, squish the packet around for a sec to make sure it's all mixed, and then rip open the top. I press the lube out onto my

hand, rub it around for coverage around my palm and fingers, and then reach under him and touch his sheath.

He pretty much takes over from there. He pushes his temple down against my shoulder, grabs my hand in both of his, and more or less starts using my hand as a sex toy, humping my hand like a dog-dog would hump another dog-dog's ass. Right away his cock pokes all the way out of his sheath, and its full length begins sliding back and forth against my hand. I'm not in a position to be able to see it, but for a few seconds, it feels pretty much the same as what most sheathed red-penis-having beast men are working with. Suddenly though—and I wish I could look—I feel his penis growing outwards. Every thrust, the base of it swells bigger and bigger, while the rest of the shaft stays the same size and continues to do its business. I wonder if it's going to *stop*, because the base part keeps growing, and growing, and growing. I think it's finally stopped when it feels like something the size of a tennis ball, maybe even bigger, and my entire hand is wrapped around it.

He starts letting out adorable "ah!"s as he keeps humping, making my hand slide back and forth around the slimy bulb. I feel his warm loads hitting the side of my body. He keeps going for a pretty good while, but eventually settles to a stop, continuing to hold my hand on his junk. The bulb pulses inside of my grasp, about a beat per second. He's stopped with his cute noises, and he's just quiet, holding my hand really firmly on his crotch. I let him have the afterglow, let him have my hand for as long as he needs, let him have his own internal euphoric state that he's having without interrupting.

After maybe a minute, he lets go of my hand and flops over onto his side, facing me, big smile on his dog face, tail wagging, cock very much still out of its sheath.

And goddamn, I haven't seen anything quite like it before. At the base of the red slimy shaft is this enormous bulb—the part that was growing. It's all veiny and throbbing.

I ask him, "Is that what goes *in* the other dog? That's what makes them get stuck ass to ass?"

"Yeah," he tells me, and then pets my head, and his tail thumps a few times behind him. Mine would too if I had one.

"How long does it last?" I ask.

“Depends, but, for me usually forty minutes—”

“Forty minutes?!”

He snickers. “Yeah. But that’s if I’m actually tied in someone. Since I’m not it’ll probably be less—”

“Can I suck it?”

I see a shiver go up his body. “I already finished so I can’t promise to be like, the *most* into it, but yeah just be gentle.”

It’s a fair warning on his part, although again, that much is territory I am familiar with already. If it’s red skin that comes out of a sheath, it’s going to tend to be pretty delicate, and it’s important to be gentle with it in the interest of not hurting anyone.

I take the end into my mouth, and we pass the time this way as his bulb goes back down and I get to really familiarize myself with this new corner in the realm of genitalia. Sometimes I stop sucking head-on to approach it from the side and slob on the bulb directly. As promised, he seems agreeable to all of it but more like he’s just getting a casual massage than anything else. He keeps a hand on my shoulder as I go, petting and stroking me.

Eventually, the bulb goes down enough that it no longer holds the cock outside of its sheath, and the red member slips out of my mouth and retracts back into Rex.

“Round two?” I ask.

“Oh my *god*, give me *one* second maybe,” he says with faux exasperation.

I lick his balls.

“Gay,” he tells me.

I give them a longer, more meticulous lick, and suck some of the scrotum into my mouth for a second and then let it fall back out.

He shivers, and then answers, “No but really, it’s usually like, one per night for me. Sorry.”

I snuggle up against him and fall asleep.

I have a dream that I’m an eagle, soaring above the surface in the daytime, looking down at the green flora-claimed landscape that glimmers in the sunlight. The wind is cool on my breast and warm on my back. Without transition, I’m a rabbit in a dirt tunnel dug into the ground, and a wolf is pushing his muzzle

into the mouth of the tunnel: soon he breaks through, and chomps down on me and kills me.

I awake with a scream, snapping upright. I look around, and recognize the room with all the farm paintings—I think it's the first time in a while that I've woken up in a room that I actually fully remember going into. Woken up by my scream, another person on the bed stirs—Rex. I remember him too. He had apparently fallen asleep right on the edge of the bed, facing away from me. Not a cuddler I guess. As he sits up, his sleepy face gives me a concerned look.

I wipe drool off of my cheek. He does the same, running a hand under his jowls to get his.

"Nightmares," I tell him. "Sorry."

He scooches towards me, makes himself higher than me on the bed, and gives me a hug, cradling my head in his arms, pressing my face against his soft fluffy chest. I let him cocoon me, happy to exist in this warm pocket that smells like the fur of a caring stranger.

After a while, he asks, "You want breakfast?"

I nod, and say, "Yeah. Please."

"I think it's like 5 PM," he mentions.

Well that doesn't seem quite right. "When did we go to bed?"

"Like, eleven. AM."

"Oh." I did get a very early start on yesterday. So yeah, I guess that tracks.

"I can make breakfast food or dinner food," he tells me.

"Chicken?" I ask.

"No," he tells me. "It's... look, I told you I grew up on a farm, and there's a reason I'm not on a farm anymore. I really just, can't, with taking life like that."

"I just meant because it would be good for the whole hangover situation—"

"No I know, it's just, a sensitive topic for me."

"Okay," I tell him, and then I snuggle my way up him until we're lying on our sides face to face. I give him a peck on the front of the muzzle. He gives me a polite lick on my lips. "I didn't mean anything by it," I tell him again.

"I know," he says again.

"Eggs?" I ask.

"I have eggs," he confirms.

"Cheesy eggs?" I ask.

"It's fake cheese," he admits. "Not for lack of wanting real cheese, on the surface I know ethical sources, but it's difficult to get that shipped down here."

"Oh I'm sure I haven't had real cheese once since I've been down here. Eggs and fake cheese sounds perfect."

He leans in for another kiss, and I kiss him back, and we do that for a while before he eventually slinks away from me and prances out of the room, naked, to go start on the food.

I gather up my clothes. Checking all of my pockets, I still have all of my shit, including hundreds of dollars in mostly twenties. I also still have the dog man's black ring on my finger. I fidget with it, twisting it back and forth over my finger. Lying on the floor with the cap screwed on is my whiskey bottle with half of the whiskey left. I really did conk out early. I pick the bottle up, open it, and take a gulp. After wheezing and coughing at the high-proof liquor hitting my throat, I muscle down a second sip and then screw the cap back on.

Dressed, I step out of the room and begin down the hall towards the stairs. As I shamble across the carpet of this very nice home, I kinda don't know what to do with myself. Normally I would wake up in the morning and get back out onto the street as soon as possible. This time it's... not morning, I guess. And I have also been promised food. And I still feel I have unfinished business with Rex's dog man junk. It feels like I'm going against the natural order of things to be hanging around after being up and ready to go. But, when I get to the bottom of the stairs, I go shamble around looking for the kitchen instead of escaping out of the front door.

On a side table next to a couch, I see a stack of unopened mail. I stoop over, and although I don't touch, I peek at the address. Besides having the address of this house, these letters are addressed to Trevor Rex. Hungover—and very slightly drunk—I have to squint at it for a pretty good while, trying to get the blurry words to make sense. I can't conceive of why these would be addressed to me, Trevor, if I just got here. When I realize *his* name is Trevor too, I shake my head rapidly back and forth, trying to get my stupid self a little more awake.

I wander into the kitchen and lean against the doorway as the Australian shepherd man is getting all of his ingredients out onto the counter. “Is your name T-Rex?” I ask.

He stops, freezes, and then deflates with a sigh. “Yeah my name is T-Rex.”

“That sounds amazing,” I tell him honestly.

He shrugs. “It’s a little grandiose.” He gets back to preparing to cook, flourishing a pan and setting it on a stove, then setting the burner and turning back towards the ingredients. He has a pink apron on and nothing else. His butt is cute.

“Well, Trevor Rex, if we ever need to differentiate between ourselves, I’m Trevor Wong. And if you need a hand, I mostly work in kitchens.”

He does look around, but then says, “I think it’s all ready, actually, but thank you. If you want to wait in the dining room it’s just down the hall, I’ll bring this out when it’s done. Shouldn’t be long.”

I raise my whiskey bottle and tip it towards him in a salute, then saunter off down the hall he pointed to. I have a sip as I go. The dining room is actually cozier than I expected—a little round table with four chairs around it, light fixture overhead, paintings and shelving around the walls, the paintings mostly of natural landscapes, the shelving mostly occupied by plush woodland critters and wood carvings of dogs. Another hall leads out at the opposite end of the small room.

Feeling nature calling, I actually do sneak my way down the farther hall, and try a couple doors before one does turn out to be a bathroom.

I wash my hands after. When I come back out and get back to the dining room, there is a steaming platter of eggs at the center of the table, a plate of tortillas beside it, a couple glasses of orange juice, and a long haired dog man sitting at one of the chairs, chin planted on his hand like The Thinker, wagging at my arrival. He has taken off the apron.

I slide a chair over to be right beside his, and sit down.

He turns and gives the side of my face a lick, then says, “I was thinking of going a breakfast burritos route with this, but I’m not really great at folding them. Everything comes out of the

bottom. So, you can roll yours if you want to, but if you want me to do it, accept it at your own peril."

I reach forward and grab a tortilla, lay it over the table, scoop a bunch of eggs into it, fold the burrito in one second, and offer it to Rex.

"Wh—really? That easy?" he asks.

"I worked a lot of kinds of fast food," I offer.

He takes the burrito, and bites into it. I make one for myself too, and eat it with intermittent sips of whiskey and orange juice. The eggs are great, very cheesy as requested, but also mixed in with tomatoes and onions and that sort of thing. When we've each finished our first burrito, I roll up another for each of us.

"You're naked," I mention to Rex.

"My house," he counters. "And I'm a dog."

"Fair."

"You're welcome to join me," he offers.

I start with my shirt, and within a few seconds he and I are both naked on the floor, him on top of me, the two of us making out again. I drape my arms around his back, hugging his fur-covered athletic frame. His mouth tastes like the cheesy eggs we're eating, which is not a bad thing.

"Round two?" I ask.

He presses his fuzzy muzzle against my lips, and we kiss a little. "Are you ready like, right now?" he asks.

I reach down and pat a pocket. "Oh. Already used the lube on the handjob."

"Oh I got us covered there. I just mean are you ready to bottom."

"Always."

"*Always?*" he asks incredulously. "You never have a bad butt day?"

"Literally never I don't even understand what people mean when they say they have problems with that, like eat two vegetables in a day, Jesus."

"Low key you have no idea how jealous I am of that."

"*Basically* a super power," I agree. "You said you have lube?"

"Yeah! One sec," he says, and gets up and leaves back down the hall towards the kitchen.

I stand up, wolf down the remainder of my second amazing delicious burrito, and sip on whiskey until he returns.

When he does get back, he throws a little cardboard box onto the table—it's the display box that the packets of lube come in in the liquor stores, but he just has the entire box of them here, and like thirty packets scatter out onto the table.

"Okay dude I wasn't planning on *that* many rounds but that is pretty great."

"We should probably get back up to a bedroom," he suggests. "More comfortable to snuggle after."

I snatch a handful of packets and begin running out of the dining room on a path for the stairs—Rex chases after me, shouting after me that I am so gay and to wait for him to catch up. I make it back into the farm-painting-decorated room on the second floor, and fling myself onto the bed. Rex comes in after me, and the two of us are soon making out on the bed once more.

When I am *more* than ready, I open one of the packets and start preparing myself, making sure my insides are slimy and receptively aligned. We keep kissing as I do. His huge tongue is really amazing, as is getting to pet his long sleek hair with my free hand. When I'm definitely ready, I roll away from him, and get on my hands and knees.

He's on me in the next second, crouched behind me and laying his whole body weight onto my back, his hands hooked around me and gripping my hips. The tip of his dick pokes me a couple times, then finds the target and he's in, and I am getting my world rocked, thinking of how rad it is that that big red thing I saw earlier is sliding around in my ass now, getting the dog man off. He makes cute huffing noises just like last time, and I stay there on my hands and knees and bear it, swimming in euphoria from the fucking and from having been drinking and even a little bit from the oniony taste of the breakfast burritos that lingers in my mouth. I start to feel an extra pressure around my hole as he keeps thrusting, and I make pleasured gay noises as I realize that it's his bulb thing growing inside of me, and I tell him not to pull out.

By the time he's finished, that thing is *huge*, but it manages to sit fairly comfortably inside of me anyways, being that it's

actually deeper inside the wider colon, rather than stretching the tighter anus itself—the very base of his penis, which is the part of him that my anus actually settles around, the part *before* it expands into the bulb, is pretty comfortably narrow, at least, for me anyways.

Rex grabs me tight in his arms, and very carefully rolls us over so that he's lying on his back on the bed, and I'm lying on my back on his chest. He continues to hug me.

"Are you gonna be alright?" he asks, sounding kind of sleepy, but also a little nervous.

I nuzzle the back of my head into him, and answer, "I'm great, thanks. You?"

"Awesome," he says, and gives my cheek a lick. "You said you'd never been with a dog man before? Because you're taking it really well."

"Why shouldn't I be, it's stupid crazy fun. Also if you mean the size I have been with donkey men, so."

"Ah, I see. Bit of a thing for beast men?"

"I mean, all the same, but I am a bit of a beast man."

I can't see his face since he's behind me, but the second of silence is telling as to his perplexion. "How so?" he asks.

I tell him, "My grandmother was a rabbit woman. I had my genes profiled once, back when I lived on the surface. Turns out I still have the recessive traits for rabbit. So, if I ever got unvasectomied and had kids with a fully human woman, or, one who seemed like it but also had the recessive trait too, twenty five percent odds that the kids would come out as rabbits. But, in my day-to-day life it doesn't really mean jack, other than that it's easier to feel a sense of kinship with hairy people."

He licks my cheek again, and I turn my head and we manage to share a little moment of kissing.

As the kissing settles down, he's about to say something else when a piercing loud noise goes off, and we both flinch.

Outside, there is a loud digital alarm siren going off. There are no words, but the sequences of tones all mean unique things—most of them mean different reasons why a region is being immediately evacuated.

"Is that HVAC?" I ask Rex.

“Yeah, uh, that’s the oxygen in this region about to be gone,” he affirms.

I wiggle my butt around on his bulb, and tentatively try to pull my ass off of him—he gives a small yip, and I stop, settling back down on him.

I mention, “If we’re about to *die*, I could get you out of me at this point, if that wouldn’t too seriously hurt you.”

He grabs me by the hips, and moves me up and down on him a couple times. He could do it a couple more for all I care. But after he’s assessed the situation, he says, “I think I would also be fine at this point, but, I have a way crazier idea.”

“Oh my god I live by those what’s up?”

“This house has its own HVAC, all separate from the station’s. Treasure hunter thing, we have some paranoias about redundancy when it comes to survival. We *could* stay here and wait it out by ourselves while everyone else is evacuated. Worst case, we put on the spelunking gear and leave that way if we have to.”

In spite of my guiding instinct to flee, I kind of love this. A multi day sleepover with this dog man sounds actually pretty amazing.

I ask him, “If it goes on longer than today can we rob a liquor store?”

“I will invisibly walk into a liquor store and get us drinks and leave money on the counter,” he offers.

“Perfect,” I tell him, and with a smile, I relax back onto his soft muscular chest and his big throbbing dog man penis.

THIS ONE SHALL BREATHE SOMEWHERE ELSE

Eleanor and I sit on a bench in the park. Our engagement rings touch as we hold hands. A city guard stands a little ways off. In the distance, over the city walls, we can hear the blasting of grand horns from the lunar monastery, celebrating the coming of a full moon. Eleanor and I look up at the moon, green and blue and pink, cloud-streaked, shimmering, a world unto itself.

The details of what happens next don't entirely matter. Suffice it to say, a beggar is accosted, the guard does nothing but watch, I call him an asshole and tell him to do his job, the guard breaks both my legs, and Eleanor leaves one day pretty soon after. I fall to drink, heavily. One day while at the bar, a baldheaded and cleanshaven man in a white robe sits down beside me and orders a water.

"How fare you?" the man asks.

"Fah," I half-laugh, and drink.

"I have seen what happened on the night your legs were broken," he says.

He has my interest.

He tells the tale, exactly as it happened. "The guard has been removed from duty," he concludes. He pantomimes reaching down to his feet and hefting something off of the ground. "Feel," he offers, nodding to the thing he pretends to hold.

I reach out, and my hand collides with a warm body, invisible.

I yank the guard's invisible dead body out of the man's hands and push it to the ground, then give it a kick, and another, and a

third before my legs remind me that just because this is cathartic does not mean they have ceased to be mangled.

"Would you like to come see how I knew about this?" the man offers.

"Please," I agree.

"Tony," he says, offering his hand.

"Atomizer," I tell him, and we shake.

He picks up the body, and we go. He tells me he is a monk from the lunar monastery, which I had indeed guessed. We exit the city walls through a minor gate that takes us directly into the wilderness in which the city is hidden. Out in the woods, Tony sets down the body, and runs a hand across some part of it. The guard pops back into view. It is certainly the same one who beat me, and he is certainly dead now. It appears that Tony just smudged a symbol that had been drawn on the guard's forehead.

From his robes Tony withdraws a charcoal pencil and makes the same mark again on the body, this time on the neck. When the last stroke is made, the body vanishes.

"Put your hand over the rune," Tony tells me.

I do so. Even though the rune is invisible, I feel the meaning of it as though I am reading a written phrase in my mother tongue. The rune reads, *This corpse shall be hidden.*

"Handy one, that," Tony tells me. Only one instance of a rune can be made in the world at a time. How to draw one is difficult to divine, though easy to remember once one has been given it. Tony smudges off both instances of the rune on the corpse thoroughly, leaves the body behind, and we continue to the monastery.

Waiting for night, we pass the day in the gardens and in the library. At night he takes me to an observatory, finds something in the lens, and invites me over to look. I see the moon's pink ocean, swirling.

"The moon sea reflects our world back to us," Tony says. "But it does not always do so right away. Sometimes it holds things, roils them around in its swirling whirlpools, and dredges them back up to reveal to us after they have happened. The founder of this monastery, Gertrude, on what would become the first day of the calendar we use now, looked into the moon sea, and it

showed her the formation of the planet on which we stand, and it showed the forging of our sun overhead. Compared to the moon, all else is young and new. On the last day of her life, Gertrude was shown a reflection in the moon sea of where the moon had come from before, another solar system on which giants lived, where one giant plucked up a small giant, placed her on the moon, and hurled the moon out into space."

In the whirlpool in the pink sea, I see a reflection of my legs being broken by the guard who is now dead.

"Would you like to join us?" Tony offers.

"Please," I affirm.

—

It is the first day of the 17,984th lunar cycle. The other monks and I sit in a circle, legs crossed, knees touching, hands holding the hands of our neighbors, stark still, the air vibrating with our droning hum. We are at the spacious outdoor altar in the center of the monastery's innermost courtyard. There are one hundred and ten of us in the circle, and one standing in the center. The one in the center wears robes while the rest of us are unclothed and cleanshaven from head to toe.

The one at the center sways with our humming, her head craned to face the full moon overhead. Her eyes are open as wide as the eyelids will allow, staring. In her hand, she holds the marking blade.

The instrument is quite like a sabre, but that the blade is only an inch long. It vibrates with our humming, and glows silvery pink in the light of the full moon. Pressed to the skin, the blade will leave a tattoo rather than a traditional scar. More importantly, during this ceremony, somebody will be given a rune.

I have one rune tattooed on myself already. At the top of my neck, near the back of my right ear, there is tattooed a symbol. When one presses their hand to it, they can feel its meaning as though reading from text in a familiar language. My rune reads something to the effect of, *This one shall breathe somewhere else*, with a connotation that somewhere else in the world, there is a rune which reads, *That one shall breathe from here*. I do not

know where it is that I breathe from. When it is winter here the breath that I draw in is warm, and when it is summer here the breath that I draw in is cold, so I suspect that the other rune is somewhere in the hemisphere opposite myself. Sometimes the air I breathe smells faintly of oranges. My body here in the monastery does not need to be in air to breathe. I have spent days on end submerged in a pond in the monastery's garden, when I have the spare time to do so.

The one at the center of the circle shudders, and then shrieks a name: "ATOMIZER!"

I feel the same shudder vibrate through myself. I am chosen a second time. I stand, keeping my hands locked with the person to my left and the person to my right. I call to the one at the center, "Here am I!"

She turns to me, her eyes just as wide as before and never blinking. She stomps towards me, brandishing the marking blade with clear intent to stab me.

When she arrives, she pries my left arm upwards as I strain to keep holding the hand of the one to the left of me. She begins marking the skin over the left side of my ribcage. Rarely—perhaps one in forty times—when the rune is complete, the one who drew it will see what it reads, and for the good of the world, will stab the recipient with the marking blade and kill them. It is rare, but this is a longstanding tradition. The blade with which I am drawn on has killed many.

I grit my teeth and continue to hum with the rest of the circle. As she drags the sharp instrument across my skin, I can feel the shape of the forming symbol, and I can read the rune as it comes into existence. It is intricate, and for a long time, it seems to be reading, *This one shall move as a shark through the water*. The pain of the marking seems trivial: I am giddy at the thought of the possibilities of this, given the rune that is already drawn on me.

At the last moment, she makes a mark that is profoundly unexpected, and changes the meaning completely. Finished, she yanks the blade away, and puts her hand over the new rune to read it. Still feeling it resonating over myself, I read it again and again as well. *This one shall move through the air as a shark moves through water*.

She stares at me, blade poised, considering.

If she will kill me, it will be a good death. They are lucky, those who glimpse greatness and then are gone before the cruel realities of carrying it out.

She turns to face the center of the circle and shrieks wordlessly.

At once, the humming stops. She stows the blade. We let go of each other's hands. One by one, we stand.

Some have their clothes lying on the grass nearby the altar, and go promptly to retrieve them. Others have come here from their quarters bare, and will spend the night exposed.

I am one such person who has opted to leave their clothes in their quarters. I have long found the occasion amusing, the night where the odd person is unclothed among the rest who are robed.

I turn to face the mess hall, where a feast is had each cycle on this night. As I turn to go, I do not step to face the other way, but rather, my feet swish above the ground, and I am turned.

I look down. Neither foot touches the ground.

I make a movement that feels as though I am underwater and giving a stroke upwards. In the span of a second, I rise ten feet above the ground, and there I remain, floating as though suspended in water. This soon draws the attention of all.

I look down at them, and then, quite naturally, up at the moon.

It is hardly a decision. I look back down once to give a gesture of thanks, true gratitude for all that has been here, and then I dart upwards, away from the planet, rocketing towards the moon.

It is a long journey, and delightful. When I feel the moon's gravity pulling me towards it, it feels like a long lost friend beckoning me to embrace. I plant my feet on the moon, then fall to my hands and knees, and kiss the soil. I spend a long time in thankful prayer.

When I am ready, I stand, and walk about the grove that I've arrived in. The trees here are enormous: it would take ten monks to link their arms around one of the trunks, and as they go up and branch apart, they hardly narrow, and in some branches become wider than the trunk had been. The bases are

greyer in color, the thick trunk-like branches bluegreen, and the actual twigs and leaves a familiar green. Fruit grows high up on these trees. I stroke up to a fruit, and hover looking at it. Its shape resembles a bell pepper, its color is swirls of blue and purple. Because I breathe somewhere else, I cannot inspect it by smell. I pluck it off the branch and eat. It tastes well. It tastes of the smell of rain.

I swim about through the vast forest, sometimes upright, sometimes on a backstroke. The day passes, and I spend the night asleep, drifting slowly over a lake.

In the morning, I know that I have had my fun here, and it is now time to fulfill something greater. I go high above the forests, into the sky, to gather my bearings, to see the moon as though I were looking at it through a telescope from the planet.

Far east of me, a country-sized peninsula juts out into the pink ocean. I begin my journey towards it.

—

I arrive. At the end of this peninsula, just a mile inland, there is a ziggurat made of gold, tall as a castle. We have known of it a long time, but of course could only observe that it existed, unmoving, nobody coming or going. From the revelation of Gertrude's last day, we suspect that this is the prison of Lunelle, the small giantess.

I float through an entrance that exists halfway up the ziggurat's slope. Even on the interior, the golden walls all glow. The passage inside takes me around and around the circumference of the ziggurat, descending slowly with each lap, until with a final turn, I am faced with a woman chained to a wall. Her body is covered in runes from head to toe. She stares at me, blinking.

Just out of her reach, a nail is driven into the wall, and from the nail hangs a key. I clasp my hands together, bow my head, and tell Lunelle, "Every apology we could not free you sooner." I go to the key and take it. I go to Lunelle. Gently, I take hold of the cuff at one of her wrists, and unlock it. As soon as the cuff falls, she takes the key from my hand and unlocks her remaining bounds herself. Then she hurls the key away, and embraces me

tightly. I embrace her back, and together, we exit the ziggurat. Her footsteps are clumsy, unpracticed, though she does not look unhealthy physically.

Outside, in tears, she falls to her hands and knees on the ground and kisses the soil. In the low gravity of the moon she easily bounds up a tree, plucks a fruit from a high up twig, and eats it. She runs through the forests, and elated noises escape her mouth.

That night, the two of us sit on the beach of the pink sea. We each sit on a comfortable rock, side by side, facing a flaming vent that has come up out of the ground here—they are dotted all up and down the beach, and some can faintly be seen underwater. They are quite like a natural campfire.

"Can you speak?" I finally ask her. I have been speaking to her all evening, telling her all about the planet, pleasantries of the monastery, a brief overview of major historical events she may have missed.

She does not answer me, though she seems to have at least gleaned I have asked her a question.

I stop speaking to her. We sit quietly and watch the fire.

Gently, she takes my wrist. She bring my hand to her neck, and places my fingertips on the underside of her jaw. I lay my hand flat against the rune there. *This one shall not speak.* She opens her mouth, and I suppress the urge to recoil. Her tongue has been divided into hundreds of narrow tendrils, writhing about independently of one another.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

She takes my hand again, and this time places my fingertips to her wrist. I lay my hand flat there to read the rune she has guided me to. I am taken aback to realize it is not one rune here, but two overlapping: *This one shall not write* and *This one shall not make gestures.* In the same way that an *S* and a *Z* may overlap to nearly form an *8*, the two runes on her wrist overlap to nearly form *This one shall not make symbols*.

I tell her again I am sorry. She looks back to the fire.

Gently, I take her wrist in my hand. She looks back to me, head tilted. I place her fingertips to my ribs. She lays her hand flat against the newer of my runes. *This one shall move through the air as a shark moves through water.* As soon as she has

read it, she breaks into a laugh. It is contagious, and I laugh along with her.

That night, when I drift through the air to fall asleep, Lunelle grabs me, and holds me to the ground, and we sleep together.

The next day, she begins working on something. I wish to help, though am resigned to only float around, knowing not what she is making. If I see her gathering branches, I help her gather branches. If I see her collecting up sea shells, I collect sea shells. She is building something much taller than herself—it seems to be a sculpture. In the low gravity, she jumps up to the higher parts when she needs to, and perches on what is already made to build it up higher and higher. Eventually, I realize it is a person. Eventually, I realize it is an effigy. As soon as it is done, she looks up at it in tears, screams wordlessly at it, and then with fire from a vent, lights the giantess's foot. We stay up through the night, I floating quietly, her sitting with her knees huddled up to her chin, crying, watching her imprisoner burn. When it is all ashes and a few smoldering cores, she wades into the ashes, lies down, and goes to sleep. I float, a watchful spirit above her.

The next day, she washes the ashes from herself in the pink sea, and when she emerges, she takes me by the hand, and carries me like a balloon into the forest. We wander a ways until finding a sunny clearing. At the center, she stands us face to face, and she places my hand on the top of her bald head, where a rune is placed. *This one shall not forget the happiness felt in her first home.* One by one, she guides me through all of the runes on her body. To name a few: *This one shall not find her first home ever again; This one shall not starve; This one shall not grow hair; This one shall not wax weak; This one shall not wax strong; This one shall not bear fruit; This one shall not be blinded while she blinks; This one shall not have dreams.* On the sole of her foot, *This one shall not leave her planet*. I take this to mean the moon, as we would call it by. She takes my hand off of the sole of her foot and places it on her sex. I tilt my head—there is no rune here, certainly. She presses my hand against herself more insistently, and I realize with a smile that this is no longer about the runes. I am pleasantly surprised, and certainly not unwilling to be warmed up to this, though I suspect

strongly that I'm being used, and that a statue would serve exactly as well as I. In the afterglow she lies draped over my chest as we drift, I on my back, through the forest.

The next day, and several more after that, we spend walking. Her walking, I paddling alongside. There are so many things that I want to ask her that she cannot tell me. Is this planet the same as it was when you were forced into the ziggurat? What was the old solar system, your first home, like? I know you cannot find home again, but do you think there would be anyone out looking for you? In some sense, I suppose these are none of my business. If they become my business, then I will know the answer at that time anyways. We have breaks from traveling to eat and to nap. One day, as I am scratching my short beard, we crest a hill and I see what we have been traveling to. A city, every rooftop covered by a tree's branches, only a forest when viewed from the sky. We walk into the city gates which hang open. We walk through deserted streets. We walk up to the castle gate, over the castle grounds, into the royal antechamber, through ornate hall after hall, until we arrive at the throne room, where there is one throne with two backs and a seat wide enough for a couple. Lunelle sits on the left side of the throne. She looks at me, and then at the empty space beside her. I sit, and we lock hands.

EMPATHY FARM

I can tell that this voyage has reached a critical mass of fuckedness (*fuck•ID•niss, archaic, n.*) because I have a meeting with Boreas Ground Control in two minutes to discuss our spike in incident reports, and instead of getting prepared for this meeting, I am on comms with Gomez, and he is telling me that a maintenance issue is now my urgent problem. For six years, I have been blessed with his ability to get handed a problem in any department and make it go away. No longer so.

"We'll need you here so we can begin acting as soon as possible," he tells me. "Central cargo hull, entrance Celtic."

"Deescalate this to priority Axon and you could begin right away," I try.

Aboard U.F.S. craft, there are two categories of maintenance issues: priorities and emergencies, also called A-B's and 1-2's. Priority Axon, priority Bartholomew, priority Celtic, emergency 1, and emergency 2 can all be acted on without notifying the on-board mission commander—me. Emergency 0 requires the notification of the commander but can be acted on immediately, because inaction could cause catastrophic failure. Priority Serpentine requires approval from the commander before action is taken, because action could cause catastrophic failure.

"Palmer entered this as priority Axon, sir. I escalated this to priority Serpentine, sir. You need to see this sooner rather than later."

I rap my knuckles against my desk, then escalate it to a final bang of my fist on the oak wood. I key my comms over to my second in command. “Jason.”

“Sir.”

“Can you handle Boreas Ground Control solo?”

He considers very briefly. “I don’t think it’s a good look, but yes, send me your notes and I’ll handle it.”

I key back to Gomez. “I’ll be down in two.”

My name is James Alexander Bachman, Colonel, on-board commanding officer of *Starwell II*.

When I arrive at central cargo, Acting Specialist Gomez is holding out a tablet for me. I grab it and look at the screen. What I see is a light grey square on a dark grey background. Cutting halfway through the light grey square is a line.

I look up at the support pillar, which even in this very tall room is thick enough to be a cube. The sides are all plastered. I look back down at the tablet, then the support again, then at Gomez. “This pillar?”

“All ten of the pillars, sir.”

My guts twist. I ask, “What’s our time frame?”

Gomez cracks a knuckle, wobbles his head. “We’re lucky in that we found this during the smoothest part of our journey. If we have a problem, it shouldn’t be until we get to turbulence nearer Boreas. Forty one days until then, sir.”

“How long to fix these?”

Gomez is silent.

I look to the other personnel standing nearby him who are not eager to chime in or make eye contact. I single one out.

“You. How long?”

He gives a dispirited laugh. “On-planet, it could take a week to fix one in the best case.”

“Report to your superior for a lashing and two weeks solitary.”

“I—”

“Five lashings.”

He leaves.

“You. How long to fix one of these, here in space where we currently find ourselves?”

The man's voice rasps but he does not hesitate to answer because he has some sort of a brain in him. "With the tools we have aboard, we estimate we could fix the supports at a rate of two every twenty days, commander sir."

"One hundred days."

"Yes, sir."

"Odds of failure on this project?"

"It's never been done before, sir."

"Give me a number."

He begins thinking aloud which is not what I asked of him, but I worry it's the best I'll get at the moment. "Collapse of any one support would result in catastrophic mission failure. It would be a race against time for any rescue crews to arrive soon enough to save anyone who happened to be on a portion of the ship that could remain sealed. As I said, we've never done this before—"

"Report to your superior. One week solitary."

He nods and dashes away, well aware of how lightly he's gotten off.

"Gomez?"

"If we stop in the water and dedicate all hands to this, ninety five percent odds we can do the entire project without failure. If we don't act and hit the turbulence as we currently are, I'd give us south of fifty getting to Boreas."

He is bullshitting the numbers, but I take his point about the importance of acting on this.

I take a deep breath, in, out, staring up at the beam. "Who let it get to this? Are these fractures spontaneous or did we leave port this way? Have we left port like this more than once?"

Gomez: "The layers of plastering suggest we've left port with at least some fracturing for the last four years."

"Specialist Gomez, I want you to put anyone who might be responsible in cryo until we sort this out, on grounds of treason."

"It will be done, sir."

I step up and whisper into his ear. "*Anyone* responsible. Ganymede Contingency." This means I've approved the use of his real rank instead of playing U.F.S. Specialist. "Throw your weight around liberally."

He nods.

I step back. “Get prepared to begin on repairs, but don’t lower our sails quite yet.”

Gomez: “Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed, all of you.”

They flee.

I reach up to my comms and key the head of surveillance. “Katherine.”

“Commander Bachman.”

“Can you pull video of anyone performing inspection or maintenance of the support pillar located in central cargo over the last four years?”

I hear typing, and then, “Done.”

“I’ll be up in two.”

As I walk, I key Jason. “How did the meeting go?”

“Not well, sir. Commander Nguyen wasn’t interested in a word that wasn’t from you.”

“Well, it’s about to get worse when they hear the latest.”

“Sir?”

“Deep fractures in all ten supports aboard the ship.”

Silence.

“Yeah. We’re going to play it safe and glide in the water for a bit. I’ll have more details to come.”

“Understood, sir.”

When I am arriving at the door to surveillance HQ, the ship’s emergency lights come on. I have only seen this before in drills. I enter into Katherine’s realm and count myself lucky to be somewhere that might be able to provide answers and resolution as to who is being executed.

Surveillance HQ is arranged similarly to mission control on-planet. Katherine sits at the back center, typing furiously and glancing between her quad monitors. “Commander,” she says in greeting as I approach from behind.

“What happened?”

She grabs one of the monitors and pushes it up on its arm to face me. On it are eight stills of work being done on the support. “These people knew about the fractures as they were developing and submitted false reports. Likely more personnel involved from the other supports. Working on a full list of names.”

"Send that to me when you have it."

"Yes, sir."

"What happened to set off the emergency lights?"

Her typing becomes even more furious, and then comes to a dead stop. She pushes up another monitor for me and then leans back in her chair. "We've been boarded."

"WHAT?"

She sneers and shrugs at the same time, then gestures helplessly at the monitor.

There are two feeds being shown, both appearing to be live camera footage. The first shows the exterior of *Starwell II*, and a leech-like object clinging to the side of it, hardly visible against the blackness of space. The second shows an interior hallway, where two non-human creatures stand near a circular hole in a wall. The creatures are in the vicinity of eight feet tall, and have slimy yellow skin. We—humans—have observed alien life from lightyears afar, but never conceived of contact being possible. FTL has only been achieved between stellar bodies where a station has already been established on each side. The two aliens in the hall are both holding rifles. I look down at Katherine's other monitors and realize that there are many more breaches than just the one that she's highlighted for me.

"They haven't broken the airlock," Katherine mentions. She reaches across her desk, grabs a microphone by the cord, pulls it over, and offers it to me. "Do you want to make first contact?"

I shake my head and faint.

When I awaken I find that Jason and Gomez are also here in surveillance. Katherine briefs me on how much further the situation has deteriorated. Peaceful speech was attempted but the aliens advanced and fired their rifles, which by some yet-undetermined means render the target unconscious. We retaliated with less-than-lethals which had some effect, but their weaponry proved superior, and we have escalated to using lethals and sectioning off all divisions of the ship. They are currently outside the door to several HQ's, including surveillance, though they seem to be holding for the moment. I see that Jason, Gomez, and Katherine are all in the possession of shotguns, and I request one as well. Gomez hands me his and

walks off to retrieve another for himself. Before he's gone five steps, the HQ door is blasted open.

I have no memory of this incident resolving. I strongly believe I was hit with one of their rifles.

When I awaken this time, I am not aboard *Starwell II*. I am also not in the Christian afterlife of Hell, nor am I in Valhalla, unless one of the two was very poorly described to me. I wonder whether I am dead at all. I do not care to be scientific about it and try to kill myself. On the marginal chance that I am not dead already, then I don't wish to become so.

I am lying in a field of grass. The sky above is blue. It is broad daylight and lightly cloudy. I can see stars, one of which is a sun, but I *can* see other stars besides the locally relevant one. I have not set foot on a planet, moon, asteroid, or similar since graduating from basic ten years ago. One could imagine it a comfort to be back on solid ground, but I am terrified. I feel as though I am an aeroplane without an engine. A sailboat with a sawed off mast. I am stranded, grounded, all but immobile.

I sit up. Look around. There are trees here, but I do not know the type of them. They have hanging flexible branches like weeping willows, but they connect from tree to tree, like an immense bird's nest, or else a spider web. The branches billow in the breeze.

I am wearing clothes, but I do not recognize them. They are loose-fitting light-blue pants and an oversized light-brown t-shirt.

I stand. There is a singular trail leading out of this clearing. A dirt path with no hanging branches in the way. I bite.

I have been walking for about an hour in this place when it occurs to me that there are no birds, no chirping insects. There are trees, there is the grass, and there is a wind that causes the flora to make a rustling sound when it picks up.

When I arrive at something, what I arrive at is an idyllic farm. I stand at one side of a large paddock, and across the way, I can squint and see a pair of silos, four barns, and a water tower. I walk around the paddock fence. It is the afternoon, and it is occurring to me that I am hungry.

When I near the farm, I hear a sheep baa, and chickens cluck.

I wander around. There is a brown horse in one barn, three white sheep in another, many chickens in the next, and the last barn is filled with machinery and tools. I am dumbfounded. There is no house here, no office, no pavilion, no chairs or benches, and no road or path that leads away from this farm besides the footpath that I arrived by. I know that this is strange. I have never set foot on a farm before, if this is a farm. But I know that this is strange.

There is no food, anyways. I scour the barns bottom to top looking for a pantry or a refrigerator. The animals make their sounds at me. In the barn of tools, I do find a lighter, and with it, a plan comes to me as though the plan and the lighter were attached. I will make a campfire. I will wait until night for anyone to come. And when night falls, if no one has arrived, I am eating one of the chickens.

After procuring a saw and an axe, I head off only a short ways into the woods before I am able to find an already-fallen tree. From it, by evening, I have a very respectable pile of firewood. There is no fire pit on the farm, but there is a patch of dirt, about ten feet in diameter, in the otherwise grassy paddock. With the logs and some dry hay from the silo, I manage to get something started before it has gotten dark.

I sit on one of the logs and stare at the fire. Occasionally I glance up at the barns. Occasionally I glance down at my hands. They are worn red and raw in some places from the work of turning the fallen tree into logs. I rub the raw parts of my palm with my thumb, but I cannot feel it. I am strongly preoccupied with hunger.

I give it an hour into the night, and have resolved with certainty that if nobody is visiting this farm, then nobody will miss one of the chickens. I stand and walk to the chicken barn. As I walk, I look around. I have grown more skeptical of this place, not less. I know exceedingly little about farms, and so I find this farm trying, because it seems incorrect, but not in any way that I could put a name to. It feels made up. It feels made up by me.

I enter the chicken barn and am struck with anxiety like I have not felt since I was a teenager. I press on, hands shaking from hunger. The chickens run from me, but I am able to corner

one and grab it by the neck. As soon as I grab it, someone is choking me, and my anxiety ascends to panic at being caught here. I point an elbow as I whirl around to push off my assailant, but when I turn, there is nobody else in the barn. I look around skeptically. There are the chickens. There is no one here who could have grabbed me. The only door is on the far side of the barn, and I do not believe anyone could have cleared the distance in the time it took me to whirl around. I am delirious from hunger, I tell myself.

I chase after the chickens again. Again, I chase one into a corner and grab it, this time by the body. As I do I can feel, physically, like someone is choking me, but I turn, still holding the chicken, and there is nobody. Perhaps the hunger is more severe than I had realized. I don't know how long I was asleep for, out in the clearing in the woods. I carry the chicken out of the barn, feeling like invisible giants are jabbing me with their fingers as I walk, making me stumble, making me double over in pain. I am terrified, but I am committed to resolving one thing, by making food for myself.

I come back to the fire. I grab the axe, but cannot coordinate holding the chicken down and chopping its head off, possibly an effect of my fatigue conspiring with my inexperience. I toss the axe aside, grab the chicken by the head and body, and snap its neck. I scream and collapse to the ground as I feel the utter void of my life being ended: in one second was hunger and anxiety and phantom pains, and in the next, there is no hunger, no anxiety, no pain, no thought, no presence. I am gone. Some aspect of me has gone, anyways, forever. But also I am still here, on my side on the ground, screaming at the top of my lungs as I stare blankly past the fire.

I spend the night shaking and crying and staring at nothing. There is only a brief break from this where I look at the dead body of the chicken, whose death I felt as my death, whose hunger and pain and fear was my hunger and pain and fear.

As morning comes, my body fills again with sensations of hunger and thirst, though there is still a corner that is void, a corner of my own self that is there, but that I can no longer go to.

I try vainly to sleep, and am unsurprised when I cannot.

I sit up. I sit staring at the fire for a while longer, shaking. Eventually I stand and go to get water from the faucet at the base of the water tower. When I turn the water on, the water flows. I drink for a long time. I return to the campfire. I pick up the chicken, almost hopeful to feel pain as I do, but there is no sensation. Not from it, not from myself. I pluck its feathers and cook the bird with the fire. Its meat looks like roasted chicken when it is done, but although I recognize it, I do not feel I am looking at food, at something that my body would accept. I eat anyways, greedily, grease falling down my chin and soaking my fingers. When I am done, I wipe the grease off on my shirt, and go to take a walk around the paddock.

As I walk, I can still feel my body trembling. Worse, I can still feel hunger and thirst exactly as strongly as I felt it before I ate and drank. Even after coming all the way around the paddock back to the barns, I am starving.

I take off my greasy shirt, and wash my hands and face more thoroughly under the water faucet. I set the shirt inside the tool barn, planning to search for detergent or spare clothes later. In the meantime, I retrieve a bucket and go to the silos. In one silo is grain, tiny yellow pellets. I fill the bucket. I walk to the chicken barn. I toss the grain around to them, and they peck it off the ground. I can feel my hunger easing already. I curse this cruel godforsaken place under my breath. I go to the hay silo and grab armfuls of the stuff, hugging it against my bare chest. If it is pricking me, I cannot feel anything. I put hay into a long trough for the sheep and a round basin for the horse. When they have all been fed, I am no longer hungry.

I carry water to troughs for each of them by the bucketful, and my thirst is soon sated. I ask God to damn this place and rescue me, return me to my life aboard *Starwell II*, deliver me back to my role as commander.

I walk back around the outside of the paddock, back up the forest trail, back to the clearing where I first arrived. I stand with my hands clasped behind my back, staring up at the starry daytime sky, longing.

My longing is not answered, and I eventually head back to the farm. On the walk back, I rub my knuckles against my ribs, against my sternum. I do not feel pain from it. I stop on the trail,

pull down my pants, and toy with myself. I am able to become erect, though it seems perfunctory, as I do not feel pleasure either. I pull up my pants and keep walking.

I feel utterly trapped in this place. I have been all around the farm now, and have still seen no sign of a road to an outside world. Coming up to the barns, I look at the water tower, and see that there is indeed a ladder to the top. I climb up, above the barns, and then above the strange spiderweb of willows. On my hands and knees atop the water tower, I look around and around, and it is nothing different to what I had expected. The willows continue to the horizon in every direction at a basically uniform height. There is not a single structure or landmark as far as the eye can see. I climb back down.

I have a longing to run. I have been cooped up here.

I take off my pants, electing to run in my underwear if no one else is around to give a damn. I do a lap around the outside of the paddock, knowing that my physical training has laxed since basic, and it will be an accomplishment if I can get around the entire fence without slowing to a walk.

When I have made it all the way around, a dread hangs over my head. I am not tired out by the run, and I still feel trapped, claustrophobic, like I have been in solitary confinement. I do another lap at a sprint. Another. Another ten. I become certain that I am dead, before remembering that I now have firsthand knowledge of death's void, and so I cannot give this experience the name of death exactly.

I go put on my pants. As I am putting them on, my eyes wander to the horse barn, and I realize my idiocy.

I open the paddock fence, and then I open the door to the horse's stall. The horse trots out of the stall, and once it has cleared the barn door, it breaks into a gallop into the paddock. There it sprints around and around the field, and my feelings of confinement ebb, and in their place comes a feeling of contentment, relief. I see the horse urinate, and feel another relief from a discomfort that I had not consciously realized was needling me.

I rub my knuckles across my ribs, and still feel nothing.

I look at the horse, and accept that although I, James Alexander Bachman, am not dead, I am also not alive in the

same way that I was before. I am now another phylum of being. I am now an angel, or a ghost, or a ghoul, or some unnamed category of steward, or slave.

I do not go eagerly into my new life, but I do not cut off my nose to spite my face. When I feel hunger, I feed the animals. When I feel thirst, I water them. I learn their longings, sometimes a longing to roam the paddock, other times a longing to return to the shelter of the barn. One day, one of the chickens falls sick, and I do not know what I can do to help it. By sunrise the next day, there is a second void spot in my consciousness. I had sat in the chicken coop all night, watching the bird whose dying pains I could feel every pang of. The chicken at no point disbelieved its sudden terminal illness, from the onset to the terminal breath. When it died, I went over and sat beside it, mourning the loss of the life, by way of the new void torn through myself.

After that day, I no longer trudge through my duties, but attempt to excel at them. When I give the horse a friendly rub, I feel its—her—appreciation, as though I am scratching my own itch.

One day, while I and the horse and the sheep are milling about in the paddock, I feel something new from the horse. I look to her to see what might be causing it, and find that she is looking at me. She walks over, and the nearer she comes, the stronger the feeling grows, and I cannot deny that it is lust, surprised as I am to be feeling it. I ignore her, but her feelings remain, and so they remain with me, and I last a pitifully short time before caving to them, and going behind her, and using my arm to simulate the company of a stallion until she is satisfied, making me satisfied.

As the days go on our sexual engagements continue, and I realize another, parallel feeling within her, and within myself, which is love. This barn is our home, and all of us family.

It is the night of the day when I realized this feeling. I stand in the doorway of the horse barn, my partner having just gone in for the night. Out in the paddock, lit by moonlight, is a tall creature with yellow slime-covered skin.

What the hell, I think: why not. I stand up from leaning against the barn door and walk into the paddock to meet the alien.

We stand face to face. The alien opens its mouth and speaks to me: “What do you think of this way of being?”

“I would never give it up,” I tell it.

It shakes its head. “I feel that even now, it has not yet fully sunk in for you. The skill of empathy is hard-earned among your species, it seems. But you are learning.”

“Yes.”

“You have learned that others feel hurt, and love, and suffering, and elation, that every life is a world unto itself. You had heard all of this before, but now you have learned it.”

I nod. Then I realize that even still, I am not considering this alien a life.

They let out a pleased, musical vocalization. “The skill of empathy is hard-earned among your species,” they reiterate, “but not impossible.”

“Thank you,” I tell them earnestly. I lower my posture. “I want to ask what this place is, but I fear that I know, and that it is coming to an end.”

The alien nods. “It is not real. But hearten: neither is it real, nor is it impossible. When you awaken, destroy your ship’s cargo of weapons, and help us lift your people to the next age of their civilization. An age where weaponry and hate are relics and apocrypha.”

I extend a hand. The alien and I shake.

“Would you like more time here? To say goodbye?”

I shake my head. “Thank you, but no. Let’s get started on making it real.”

POEMS

Bathroom

I sit down and pee
and you come and drink from the bathtub faucet
and I pet you.

You drink from the bathtub faucet
and I drink from the sink faucet.

I drink from the bathtub faucet
feeling happy to do like you.

I stand in front of the mirror and brush my teeth
and you come in and lie down with me
so we can keep each other's company
even in this.

I enjoy when we have chance to share our bathroom together.
I'm happy that you seem to enjoy it too.

Factual Dog Status Awareness

Sometimes I am very aware that I'm dating a dog.
That the person I'm kissing,
Whose tongue is exploring the depths and corners of my mouth,
Is a dog.
That the person I'm spooning with,
Holding and embracing their soft furry weight
Against my naked stomach and arms and legs and balls and
hard on,
Is a dog.
That the person I'm cooking food for,
That the person I take ticks off of,
That the person I let outside to pee and poop,
Is the person I'm dating
And that person is a dog.
Every time I think of it,
I am reminded of how lucky I am.

Ambiguously Grammatical

“Pet a dog with a boner.”
A misplaced modifier
that, to be fair,
sounds like a good time either way.

Not All The Time Of Course But Sometimes

Dogs have sex sometimes,
They totally do.
Don’t believe it,
Research where puppies come from.

Couplet

Suck a dick, bust a nut
Have a fun night with your mutt

Yet Another New And Happy Morning

Today I woke up in a white dress I had bought and worn the night before (I have a penis)
and I snuggled a dog (he has a penis).
We hung out
and then when I had to pee I went to the bathroom and did that
and cupped both of my hands together towards the end
and caught some of the last of it
and had a sip, as much as I had caught.
I had taken off the dress at some point,
probably right before the piss thing.
I washed my hands with soap and water twice
and then me and my dog went on a walk
after I changed into jeans and a girl shirt
with a zipped up, comfortable, nice looking grey sweatshirt over the top.
We took the route that my dog decided he wanted to go on that morning
while I had piss on my breath (my dog drank some water before we left).
When my dog took a shit I picked up what he had dropped
because it keeps the parks a nicer place.
I dropped the disposable bag of dog crap into a trash bin that I found before we went back inside.
Inside I drank a glass of water and my dog ate a bowl of dry dog food and wet dog food mixed together for breakfast.
New days, new combinations of old things.
Live well and live free.

Claws

Lookin at your claws
They’re fucking awesome dude