

THIS ABOVE ALL;
TO THINE OWN
SELF BE
ZOO.

January 1st, 2023 – December 21st, 2023,
the complete first volume.

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VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1;

JANUARY 2023.

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

*Featuring the stories: Sir Jod and the Mare Eisa,
Elevator Operator, Sith the ne Saith, and Ghosts of Pluto,
as well as a few poems.*

SIR JOD AND THE MARE EISA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He wishes for better yields on his harvests.”

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

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

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

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

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

Sir Jod bowed his head again, and nodded.

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

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

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

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

ELEVATOR OPERATOR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Calling it an early night, Boss?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mick gives a long, defeated exhale.

"Yup," I agree.

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

"Yup," I regret to inform him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Salad's good for you."

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

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

Mick goes to do some figuring on the chalk board.

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

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

"Us three. Me you and Michael."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They both hold for a little bit.

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

Mick nods, in response to Boss's revelation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I turn to face him fully, all ears.

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

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

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

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

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

I nod.

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

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

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

“Get out or I’ll kill you, Boss!”

He reaches for the lever.

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

Mick is still in shock, understandably.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shoot."

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

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

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

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

"Really?"

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

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

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

SITH THE NE SAITH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Any time. Whose prints?”

“Diane from last night.”

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

“How’s Thunder?” Frederick asks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We finish our cake.

“Thank you for the cake,” I tell him.

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

“Of course,” I tell him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I think so,” I tell him.

“Need anything?”

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

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

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

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

“Come give it here,” I insist.

Woof, he insists.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Misses."

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

"Zoosexual."

“Ah.” He clicks his pen closed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“To my understanding that is correct.”

“Can I schedule you for something?”

“Please.”

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

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

I give him a thumbs up.

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

“Tomorrow at two,” he confirms with me.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I swallow, and nod.

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

“Thank you,” I tell him again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh?" I inquire.

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

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

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

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

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

"Is it terminal?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

“Can it be removed?” I ask.

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

I nod.

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

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

“What is your directive?” the man asks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My life goes on, and the months go by.

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

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

GHOSTS OF PLUTO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was delighted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop that," the human said to me.

I froze, midway through setting down a bowl.

"Bring that here."

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

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

“Who told you to feed them?”

“Darius Jacobson.”

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

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

“The dogs only get fed at night.”

“They are fed in the morning and evening.”

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

“Why?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I lingered.

He glared back up at me.

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

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

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

I inquired as to what she meant by that statement.

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

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

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

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

I nodded. "Well, thank you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

POEMS

Let Them To Them

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

Dandelions

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

Dandelions 2

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

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2;

FEBRUARY 2023.

In this issue,
a magical dog is ritually summoned by smells,
and a lurid video tape is discovered.

*Featuring the stories: Scent Became Flesh, Dorian Gray,
The Tale of Erskine Faern, and Sister Shim and the
Priestess Om, as well as a few poems.*

SCENT BECAME FLESH

Else leaned forward, her cheek resting between Tsen's shoulder blades, her arms clasped around his waist, the couple rocking back and forth atop the stallion Rosh, who carried them onward through the windy chilled night. Clumps and ridges of snow remained on a ground that was otherwise composed of frozen mud, brown grass, frigid puddles. When they had set out in the late morning, Else and Tsen had been dressed in their lightest garments, and Else held a parasol over them as Rosh carried them on. Now they were bundled in jackets and caps, and Else nuzzled closer against Tsen's back.

Rosh came to a stop.

Tsen bristled, and Else sat upright, looking around with him. In the moonlight, vague darkness crispened piece by piece into the shapes of a field strewn with boulders.

"Oh!" Tsen remarked. "We're here. I had nodded off."

Else reached back and gave Rosh's flank a rub.

The partners dismounted. Else stretched. She looked up at the full moon, and inhaled deeply of the cold windy air. There were smells of freshly melted water, and also smells of freshly uncovered decay.

Else came up to Tsen, who was tending to Rosh's tackle. She made a gesture of rubbing her nose. "We should make this."

Tsen stepped back from Rosh for a moment, closed his eyes, and inhaled through his nose, slowly and deeply. He nodded. "I will remember it."

Else kissed her husband. When their lips separated, Tsen gave Else another peck on the cheek before returning to Rosh's tackle. Else walked down Rosh's side, keeping a gentle hand on him, and opened his saddle bag. Reaching inside, she retrieved an oakwood drum, its lid fastened by a wooden bolt.

She began wandering off into the field, holding the drum. Tsen called some words of encouragement after her, though Else was already mentally in another space. Guided by the joyful familiarity of a happy tradition, Else arrived at the center of the field, where there was a circle of grass that was free from rocks, into which the wind blew on this night from five directions. Else smelled deeply of the wind yet again, and then unlocked the drum. From it, she withdrew the first of five candles, and set it upon a boulder at the north of the clearing. With a spell word, her tongue set a spark which ignited the candle, and she inhaled deeply of the candle's scent:

Hair: the thick smell of it on the nape, and the thin smell of it on the belly, it is the most distinct of your form, the least comparable, the most exalted, and here, the most appreciated. Blessed be the smell of thine hair.

Else walked from the north of the circle eastwards, lighting each of the candles as she went in a clockwise fashion:

Breath: the essence of your life, the smell of your mouth. Blessed be the smell of thine breath.

Feet: the four paws upon which you walk, padded and clawed, the scent of all that you walk upon mingled with the scent that is thine own. Blessed be the smell of thine feet.

Anus: that which you smell of your own kind, that which speaks to your health as well as to your virility. Blessed be the smell of thine anus.

Urine: the scent you leave to be found from afar, and the scent you leave upon those to whom you come the closest. Blessed be the smell of thine urine.

After lighting the last of the five candles, Else sat back against a boulder, and withdrew the final item from the drum: a jar of thick slime. She removed her garments, and as she waited, she coated an arm with the slime, and began at herself. She had prepared earlier in the day, taking Rosh in full: it was not long

before she relaxed back against the rock, her hand and forearm fully encompassed.

As she made herself ready, the winds in the field grew stronger. The five candles flickered in the five winds, carrying the scents all towards the center of the field, where gradually, as a smell comes to a nose, the scent became flesh. There in the center of the field stood a dog the size of a horse, his coat the color and appearance of smoke from a candle.

Else removed her hand from herself, stood, and walked to the dog.

The enormous dog turned to her. Seeing it was her, he wagged his smokey tail. Already, he made a grabbing motion with his paw, ready to know her. When she arrived at him, he lowered his nose to her penis, and deeply inhaled the scent of her testicles. She stroked his warm head with her dry hand, and turned to face away from him, getting down onto her hands and knees. Teasing, she began walking forward on her hands and knees, away from him.

The enormous canine wrapped his left paw around the left side of her hip, then the right paw around the right side. All at once he was upon her, as large as a stallion, and she cried out from the overwhelming sensation. He moved rapidly for a short while, and then held her rump pressed firm against his warm underside. He pulsed inside of her.

When he was finished, he dismounted. The front of her hips was bloodied with yet another year's set of scratch marks. He licked the side of her head, and in the process of doing so, his smokey being dissipated into a greater plume, floating over the ground into the forest. Before Else's very sight, the brown of the dead grass gave way to green, to new life sprouting, to buds eager to flower.

Else collapsed flat onto the wet cold ground and sighed a sigh of relief, pleasure, happiness, fulfillment. She laid a long while in the afterglow, smelling the five candles of hair, breath, feet, anus, urine, happy that she was blessed to spend any time at all with the person spawned of the five.

DORIAN GRAY

or; The Picture of Dorian Gray But It's A Completely Different Story About Something Else

i

Agatha idled the car up the quiet dark driveway, eased on the brake to stop before the closed garage door, and then pressed down fully on the brake to come to a complete stop. There in front of the garage door she remained for a while, staring blankly ahead, until after some time she put the car in park and took her foot off of the brake. With the car in park, she took the key out of the ignition, and sighed in the quiet that followed now that the engine was turned off. Well, it was something of quiet. A relative silence that was at once the least and the most that one could hope for in a neighborhood as pleasant as hers and Harry's: crickets or frogs or something chirped and/or ribbited; somewhere a few streets away, a dog was barking at something; faintly, the noise of a TV show could be heard coming from some neighbor's house, the volume evidently turned up very high, but not so high that Agatha could hear what show was on while sitting out here in her car.

Though it was no fault of the new trainee, Sibyl had gotten on Agatha's nerves that day. "Miss Agatha, where can I find the size on these types of Wranglers? Miss Agatha, where do these coats go? Miss Agatha, I noticed this coat doesn't have a price tag, I

don't think—do we print a new one off somewhere or—oh, here it is—do you think we should move the tag to somewhere else more noticeable? If that's allowed? Miss Agatha, Miss Agatha, Miss Agatha...”

The new girl was just learning, of course. ‘Miss Agatha’ herself had asked a lot of those same questions, she was sure. Some of them probably more or less word for word, after replacing ‘Miss Agatha’ with ‘Mrs Narborough.’

As she sat in the car, her thoughts began to wander from the week at work passed to the weekend home ahead, and all of the free time she would get to spend with Harry—Hell, maybe if the weekend shook out to be nice enough she would quit on Monday, fuck it: Live Free Die Whenever, as she had once seen on a probably home-made bumper sticker, on the back of a mini van that was adorned with a truly masterful collage of various bumper stickers; she had followed that car around for about a minute reading as many as she could before she realized that if she kept at it she would soon be lost, and should get back to her course to the grocery store. They had been new to this place then. Now they were settled. Now, if she had had the opportunity to follow the mini van today instead of back then, she would not get lost anywhere here.

Agatha got out of the car, closed and locked the door behind herself, and went into the front door of the house. In the entryway, leaning back against the coat closet door, Harry stood in a tweed suit holding a bouquet of flowers, smiling at the Agatha who had finally stepped inside.

Agatha let out a sad, apologetic, drawn out noise, and asked, “Why do you think I’m mad at you?”

Harry gave a silent laugh, turning his head away into his armpit with a sharp exhale. He stood up from leaning against the coat closet door, and sauntered a few steps to stand face to face with his wife. “You, Mrs Wotton, are not mad at me: You are in fact quite pleased with me as we are going to stay in, smell these ridiculous flowers for a second each, and then watch one of the movies I rented for your consideration on this, our year and three quarters anniversary.”

Harry extended the flowers with both hands.

Agatha smiled as she snorted. “You’re such a *dork!*”

“Yeah well you chose to marry me, Mrs Dork, and this is what you get.”

Agatha took the indeed ridiculous flowers, stuck her nose into them, and breathed in. They smelled like flowers. It was a wholly unsurprising smell, and yet perhaps by way of this fact, they served their purpose well: they smelled lovely, and Agatha drew out her smelling of them for more than the instructed second, making the one inhale last as long as she could make it. When she was finished, she extended the bouquet out to Harry’s nose for his appraisal. He drew in a similar breath, and let it out with a smile that was trying very hard to be a serious, contemplative frown. “Flowers,” he asserted. “Quite,” Agatha concurred, and stepped forward and gave her dork husband a kiss.

She gave the flowers back to Harry as she sat down to take off her shoes. When she had done this and proceeded into the living room, she saw Harry fussing with getting the flowers into a vase on the dining room table. She called to him, “What movies did you get?”

“On the couch,” he called back, not looking up from his work.

Agatha went to the couch and picked up the four VHS tapes that sat in a neat stack on the leftmost cushion.

Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, Dirty Dancing, Groundhog Day, and Pulp Fiction—four movies straight from the top of Agatha and Harry’s shared ‘to watch’ list.

“What’s Pulp Fiction about?” Agatha called.

“I don’t know,” Harry said back at a rather regular volume and from nearer by than Agatha had expected, making her jump. “I think it’s kind of an action comedy thing,” he added.

She turned to him, and cursorily looked the Pulp Fiction tape over front and back. “Want to give it a try?”

“Absolutely,” Harry said. She extended the tape to him as he walked past. He took it, removed it from its case, and got everything set up as Agatha settled in on the couch.

With the tape placed inside of the VCR and playing from the start, Harry came over to the couch as well, and the two of them settled in together, and were soon watching Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta discussing quarter pounders with cheese.

The movie went on, with many gasps and laughs from the Wottons. Eventually, after John Travolta had jabbed an enormous syringe straight into the center of Uma Thurman's chest, Harry commented, "This movie is *amazing*."

"Do you have to pee?" Agatha asked. As rule, Harry did not comment on movies until he needed to get up for something—Though once this seal was broken, commentary on the remainder of the movie was usually fair game.

Harry gave Agatha a kiss on the side of the forehead and gently stood up from the couch. "Be right back."

"You can pause it," Agatha mentioned.

Harry did pause the movie, and went to the bathroom that was nearby to the drawing room to pee. When he returned and pressed play on the movie again, John Travolta and Uma Thurman stood in front of Uma's house, talking about everything that had happened with them that night. Harry and Agatha settled in together once more.

As the conversation with Uma and John was drawing to a close, Uma with dried tears streaked down her face recited a joke. "Three tomatos are walkin down the street: papa tomato, mama tomato, baby tomato. Baby tomato starts laggin behind, and papa tomato gets really angry, goes back and squishes him—says, 'ketchup'. ...'ketchup'."

John gave a pity laugh, and then John and Uma found themselves at least smiling a little for real, in spite of the terrible night.

"See you around," Uma said, and then turned and walked away towards her door, and the scene cut to a shot inside of the house, in a bedroom.

"Woah," Harry said.

Agatha took a second longer than Harry to realize what the scene had cut to: on a bed there was a woman in a black dress, and she was gently fingering the lady parts of a large female dog.

"Oh," Agatha agreed. "This movie does *not* stop surprising me."

"No kidding," Harry said, in agreement with that as well.

"Do we know her?" Agatha asked.

"I don't think so. She wasn't one of the drug dealer's friends was she?"

“No, unless I missed one. Have we seen the dog?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What breed is that?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” Harry said. “Maybe a mix. Seems Boxer-ish and also kind of Lab-ish.”

As Harry and Agatha talked, the movie went on, showing sweeping shots of the woman and the dog together, close ups of the dog’s lady parts being fingered by a hand that glistened with some type of lubricant, and A B shots of the dog’s face and the woman’s face, smiling and reacting to each other. A cover of Earth Angel performed by a female vocalist played in the background.

“Is she supposed to be Mia Wallace’s sister or something?” Agatha wondered.

“I could see it,” Harry said, nodding.

Earth Angel faded out, and the woman stopped fingering the canine. The human and dog shared a mouth to mouth kiss, and when they parted, the movie showed a close up of their nearby mouths, as she whispered to the dog, “*And mustard.*”

Agatha snorted in a laugh, head reeling back in confusion. “*Okay?*”

The movie cut away to the next title card—Prelude to “The Gold Watch”—and moved on to an entirely different scene, of a kid sitting in front of a TV in a living room in the daytime, watching cartoons.

In reference to the scene with the dog, Harry said, “Whether we do get an explanation for that scene or whether they never bring it up again, this movie is *kind of* genius.”

By the time the credits rolled, the movie did *not* give the Wottons an explanation for the fairly lengthy scene in Pulp Fiction of a dog being lovingly fingered; though the explanation did exist, and would in time be found out, and in fact made the beginnings of its appearance the next Monday while Agatha was at work.

“So anyways,” Mrs Narborough said, coming to the conclusion of the story of her own weekend, “how was your weekend, Ag?”

Agatha and Mrs Narborough were in one of the store rooms, doing something that was in essence a form of taking inventory, though the regional managers liked to give these things more unhelpful names when they could accomplish it.

“It was good,” Agatha said with a smile, and paused to do some figuring. After writing down a number at the bottom of a column on a table on the paper on her clipboard, she continued. “Harry and I stayed in most of the weekend and watched a couple of movies. Pulp Fiction, Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.”

“I, *love*, Pulp Fiction,” Mrs Narborough said. “It’s honestly my favorite thing ever made.”

“Ooh, really?”

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah it was great,” Agatha said honestly. “Can’t believe all the different things they tied together and made it still completely work.”

“I know! Which one was your favorite?”

“The gangster guy and the gangster guy’s boss’s girlfriend going on a date.”

“John Travolta and Uma Thurman. Yes. Same.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh.”

“And what was with that scene after that?” Agatha asked.

“After what?”

Agatha blushed slightly as she realized what she was bringing up with her boss, but in fairness Mrs Narborough *had* said the movie was her favorite thing ever made, and so Agatha continued on about the particular scene in the movie that she was talking about, while scanning the end of a pencil down the table on the paper on her clipboard. “After the two get back from after their date, after she tells him her joke, there’s that scene with the dog? Did that ever tie in to anything?”

“Dog? I... Are you talking about something in the background that I missed? I don’t remember any *dogs* in the entire movie.”

“You can *not* have missed this dog, she was *extremely* the focus of the entire scene.” As Agatha had to go on about it in specific terms, she could feel her cheeks absolutely burning up.

She lowered her clipboard, glanced all around to make sure they were alone in the store room, and said quietly, “The scene where the woman is... *fingering*, her pet dog, on the bed?”

Mrs Narborough let out a piercing shriek of a laugh, and then covered her face with her clipboard.

As she eventually lowered it, her face was red with choked, silent laughter. Letting out high pitched wheezes, she dropped her clipboard, gently grabbed Agatha by both wrists, and eventually composed herself enough to say, “Ag—honey—I’m sorry, I do *not* think the movie you watched was Pulp Fiction.”

That night Agatha went straight home, got straight out of the car, and burst in through the front door to report this news to her beloved husband. She marched inside down the hall, and Harry came marching towards her in exactly the same fashion from the living room.

“That dog fucking scene isn’t in Pulp Fiction,” Agatha asserted, as though making an argument of the point.

“That scene of a beautiful mixed breed dog having her weird animal vaginal parts lovingly touched by a beautiful human woman’s lubricated fingers to both of their enjoyment and pleasure is absolutely not in any way shape or form in the 1994 major blockbuster movie Pulp Fiction directed by Quentin Tarantino,” Harry agreed, taking Agatha’s side of this argument that was now apparently occurring against some unknown third party—the universe, maybe, or the movie rental place that had given the tape to them. Harry had returned the tape yesterday.

“I—” Agatha began, and then vaguely held up the tape of Pulp Fiction that Mrs Narborough had lent to her as a trustworthy copy, and then lowered the tape back to her side again, and then leaned over and set it on the counter, apparently not needing it anymore.

“How did you find out?” Harry asked.

“Pulp Fiction is Mrs Narborough’s favorite movie.” Agatha glanced at the tape. “She did not recall that scene of a dog’s pussy getting played around with.”

Harry winced his mouth into a small o shape.

“How did you find out?” Agatha asked.

“Towards the end of my shift I had what sounds like it may have been a similar conversation with my boss also.”

Agatha winced her mouth into a small o shape as well.

The two of them stood in silence for a moment, both of their eyes soon settling on the tape that was placed on the counter.

“Is that the same—”

“It’s Mrs Narborough’s copy, not the copy we got from the rental place.”

“Ah,” Harry said.

The two stared at it for another contemplative moment.

Agatha sighed. “Should we... *do* anything? Call them and let them know what’s on that tape that they’re giving out to people?”

“It... I mean, we *could* call them and let them know, yes. We could do that if you wanted to.”

“Go on.”

“I think it’s a better cut of the movie with the dog scene?” Harry said, employing quite some degree of played up uncertainty—Agatha could quite plainly tell that her husband was not uncertain of his opinion in the least, though he *was*, in kindness, ready to drop the topic and let it go if she gave the slightest hint that it would be wise of him to stop saying the things that he was presently and tentatively saying. “Not *better*, I take *that* back actually, but more *interesting*,” Harry clarified.

Agatha nodded. “I agree.”

“Oh do you now?”

“I do,” Agatha said, and smiled a little, and shrugged. “What if we just leave it? Let the next person see this ‘interesting’ cut of the movie too?”

Agatha and Harry shared a kiss, and the two of them went to go start on making dinner.

iii

For a time of approximately five months, three weeks, and some small additional number of days beyond that, nothing more came of the tape that the Wottons had watched. It was, by their estimation, the strangest thing that had come into their lives in that time, but it was not the most worthy to remark upon: They had seen it, yes, but aside from the occasional speculation about

whether the tape was still in circulation and whether some other unsuspecting couple was watching it right now and what, do you suppose, they think of it, there wasn't much more about the tape to discuss. Harry got a promotion from engineer to project architect. Agatha had Thursdays dropped from her schedule at work in order to pursue painting lessons and generally other creative endeavors. The Wottons around this time were discussing at length whether they wanted to start trying for a baby—they both did want to start trying eventually, but were in agreement as to their tepid uncertainty that now was the right time. Many Saturdays, the two went out on dates, to lunch or to a park. One muggy Saturday afternoon, Harry and Agatha were in the midst of an enjoyable and very sweaty walk down a trail at a state park, when they walked around a bend in the trail, and Agatha stopped in her tracks and barred her arm out in front of Harry, stopping him in his tracks as well.

Up ahead, a woman sat at a bench. There was also a dog lying down at her feet. The woman wore athletic clothing, and had her long black hair back in a ponytail. The dog was panting; the dog happened to be facing the Wottons, and wagged at them as the panting and lying continued.

"That's *her*," Agatha said.

"Do I know her?" Harry asked.

The Wottons were both catching their breath a bit.

"She's the woman from *Pulp Fiction*. *With the dog*."

Harry wheeled around to face away from the woman and the dog. "I think you're right."

"Wait, we *are* going to talk to her, aren't we?" Agatha asked.

"Yes, *I* want to," Harry agreed. "I'm just, actually nervous. I think we could have happened upon the entirety of the actual cast and it wouldn't be as big of a deal to me as this."

Agatha tugged at Harry's wrist. Harry turned back to facing forward on the trail, and the Wottons approached.

The sweaty woman gave a polite though rather indifferent wave as the sweaty Agatha and the sweaty Harry neared. The dog continued to pant and wag, and seemed to be smiling at the approaching couple.

Agatha and Harry, both smiling as well, stopped in front of the woman.

“Hi,” Agatha said, and Harry also threw in a “Hi” of his own.

“Heya,” the woman said, and gave her little wave once again. “Need any water or anything?” she asked.

“I think we recognize you from somewhere,” Agatha said.

The woman did then smile a little too, and glanced away. “Oh yeah? Where from?”

Seeing the woman’s face up this close, Agatha felt absolutely certain that this was indeed the woman from the movie. Harry felt much the same way as his wife did, though more from looking at the dog.

“*And mustard*,” Agatha whispered in her best impression.

The woman squirmed and gave a few little stomps as she smiled completely. “You’ve seen it!” she said. Looking down to the dog, she repeated, “Someone’s seen it!”

“Truly great performances,” Harry said. “Big fans. Always a pleasure to meet your heroes.”

“This is my husband Harry, my name is Agatha,” Agatha said, and extended her hand.

The woman shook the hands of each of the Wottons. “Dorian,” she said, introducing herself. Pointing down at the dog, she added, “And this comely young lady is Gray. Do you wanna say hi?”

The dog stood up and went to the Wottons. Harry crouched down and pet Gray, stroking down her back and rubbing at the front of her chest as she wagged. Agatha threw some approving headpats into the mix, and then turned her attention back to Dorian. “Do you mind if we sit down?”

“Please,” Dorian said, and made room.

Harry sat at one end of the bench, petting Gray who had come to sit in front of him. Agatha sat in the middle, with Dorian on the other far end.

“I suppose you’re wondering what the hell you watched on that tape,” Dorian said.

“We hadn’t seen it before, we legitimately thought it was part of the movie,” Harry mentioned.

Dorian fist pumped to herself.

“But yes,” Agatha went on, “after learning that was *not* part of the movie...” She looked back and forth between Gray and Dorian, and asked, “Is it a kink thing?”

“Art project,” Dorian said, and turned her head back to have a drink from her water bottle. “She and I *are* together—”

“Oh, alright.”

“—but if you’re asking about our apparently *seamless* appearance in Pulp Fiction, yeah, that was just an art project, not even my idea.”

“Oh, really?”

Dorian nodded. “Some friends of mine from New Mexico, going to art school there, they came up with this project to try to add in ridiculous scenes to movies but do it well enough to make it look like it was always supposed to be there. And apparently they thought of me and Gray.” She craned her head forward to look at Gray when she said the dog’s name. The dog wagged, and came over and laid down at her feet again. Dorian gave Gray a couple of pets down her back and then left her alone. “But yeah. Heh. It was fun to make for sure, and I’m sure my friends would love to talk with you sometime. As far as *I’m* aware you’re the first people ‘in the wild’ who have definitely seen any of these.”

“I *love* that idea,” Agatha said. She glanced both ways down the trail, and then asked, “Is it legal?”

“It is!” Dorian said. “A legal expert signed off on the project. Apparently as long as the movie you’re working with is labeled as rated R, you can show animal fun parts doing pretty much anything. It’s only human nudity that gets you in legal trouble.”

Harry chimed in to say, “Against store policy, surely.”

“Oh, yes,” Dorian nodded. “Fifty dollar fine for taping over any of the films, which my friends do have set aside and are more than happy to pay if the matter should come up.”

Agatha snickered, and shook her head.

Dorian looked both ways down the trail, and then leaned a bit closer, and said, “I also have an appearance in Reservoir Dogs if you want to see it.”

The Wottons looked to each other. As subtly as could be silently screamed, Harry’s eyes were pleading, as were Agatha’s.

Agatha turned to Dorian, and reported, “Absolutely we want to see.”

Arrangements were made to meet up at Dorian’s on next week’s Saturday. An address was written down and handed off,

phone numbers were exchanged, and the two couples got back to continuing their hikes in opposite directions down the trail.

“I think I *like* her,” Agatha commented, when they had gotten a very far distance away so as not to be overheard.

“You sound a little surprised to,” Harry noted.

“I mean I’d like to get to know her more, but yeah. I am *actually* looking forward to meeting this lady and her dog again next week.”

iv

Agatha and Harry pulled up the driveway to Dorian and Gray’s.

“Nice place,” Harry commented.

“Really nice place,” Agatha agreed, and the two of them got out of the car.

Agatha went to the trunk, took out a rolled up poster, and brought it with as she and Harry proceeded up the little path from the side of the driveway to the front door.

When they rang the doorbell Gray answered first, coming scampering and barking. Eventually Dorian arrived after, and actually opened the door for the visitors.

“Hiii,” Dorian said, keeping Gray held back.

Harry crouched down. Dorian let Gray go, and the dog shot forward and said hello to the man, and to his wife who stood beside him, holding a rolled up poster high over her head, away from the dog. The dog, incidentally, had very much noticed this, and seemed to be considering jumping up on Agatha to see what the visitor was keeping from her.

Harry reached up and took the poster from Agatha, and handed it over to Dorian.

“What’s this?” Dorian asked, holding it.

“Open it and see,” Agatha encouraged.

Dorian worked off the rubber band that was around the poster’s center, and unrolled the thing.

Dorian gasped.

The poster was the movie cover for Pulp Fiction, but instead of featuring Uma Thurman on the bed, it featured the actors from the added scene, the human woman in a black dress and

her canine counterpart. The human and the dog both laid on their chests beside each other and looked towards the viewer with a distant, disapproving but almost seductive gaze.

Dorian looked between Agatha and Harry. "Did you—"

Agatha raised her hand. "I paint. After I did that one I had it scanned and printed. I can give you the original too."

"Oh my *god*. Well, thank you. This is really impressive."

"Oh yeah and you only make movies."

Dorian snickered, and carefully rolled the poster back up. "Would you two have any interest in grabbing lunch before we watch the movie? I know of a couple places near here. Or we could order delivery."

Agatha and Harry looked to each other, and each made a face that said they were agreeable to that. "Yeah we could eat," Agatha said, turning back to Dorian.

"Want to walk?" Dorian asked Agatha, though Gray, also hearing this, gave a vehement 'yes' of a bark. Dorian smiled and shook her head, and added, "It's like half a mile. Dogs are allowed inside, but honestly the weather's nice enough we could sit outside anyways."

The Wottons agreed to this. Dorian clipped a leash onto Gray, and the four proceeded out of the house, and began away down the street on foot.

"I found this place when I first moved here a couple years ago," Dorian mentioned, in reference to the cafe that they were heading for. "I have no idea what they do differently to everywhere else, but they have kind of the best sandwiches I've had in my life. Like, consistently. I have not once had bad food here."

"No pressure, then," Harry said.

"Do you two live around here? I think you said you do."

"Other side of the city, but yes, not far in the scheme of things."

When the four had arrived at the cafe, Dorian cupped a hand over her eyes and pressed her face against the window to look inside past the reflective glare that the sun made on the rest of the window otherwise. Apparently catching someone's attention she gave a wave, and then a thumbs up. "We can sit down," she said to the Wottons.

The three humans took seats around a round wooden table, and the dog remained standing for the time being, nearby to the human who had hold of her leash.

“May I ask what it is you do?” Harry inquired.

Dorian planted her chin in her cupped hands. “What, like, job, hobbies, interests?”

“Anything notable that passes the time of modern living for you.”

Dorian leaned back in her chair, tipping it so it stood on just the back two legs. “For hobbies, tennis and running. For a job, computer programmer.”

“Oh *really*,” Harry said, and now he leaned forward. “I’m curious how similar our jobs are.”

“Yeah?”

“Architect.”

“Oh, interesting. I think mine is more boring than you would guess, actually, but it does pay the bills, that’s for sure.” Dorian looked to Agatha, and asked, “Painter, you said?”

“Well, not as a *job*.”

“What? Hey, why not?”

Agatha shrugged, and smiled down at the table.

Harry leaned in with his wife, and mentioned, “Really might be something to look into in the coming months, if it’s something you think you might be interested in.”

Agatha gave Harry a kiss on the cheek, and then, turning back to Dorian, explained, “We’re going to start trying for a baby.”

“Oh! That’s exciting. Do you have any kids already?”

“This would be the first,” Agatha said. She and Harry held hands, one over the other, on the tabletop.

Shortly after that moment, a waiter came out and handed out menus and took drink orders and gave Gray a pat on the head, then returned inside.

As the humans looked over their menus, Harry said, “So, do you and Gray have any puppies?”

Agatha elbowed Harry.

“As a matter of fact we do,” Dorian said, and set down her menu. “I am not their biological mother, though. We ‘borrowed’ a stud dog for a little while and, hey whadaya know, puppies.

They're grown now though, all off to other homes. Some of the families do still send us Christmas cards."

The waiter returned with drinks, took every human's orders, collected the menus, gave a treat to Gray who very clearly knew from past experiences that he would be giving her a treat, and departed again back into the building.

"Agatha has a mean serve, you know."

Agatha rolled her eyes. "I *had* an okay serve, back when we were in college. I haven't swung a tennis racket in about two years."

"Would you want to sometime?" Dorian asked.

"Honestly?" Agatha said. "Kinda."

"We should!" Dorian said. "Let me know when, I can make the time."

Agatha had a sip from her lemonade, and Harry had a sip from his soda.

Dorian, the Wottons then noticed, had two glasses of water in front of her, one with ice cubes and a straw, the other with just water and nothing besides. Dorian took a sip from the water with the straw, and as she did, Gray came and sat down beside her, looking actually rather polite. Gray picked up the unadorned glass of water and began pouring it out in front of Gray's face: Gray turned her head and began lapping at the stream, and finished off the glass of water in one go, albeit with half of the water ending up on the ground.

"Have either of you two ever had dogs?" Dorian asked, and took another sip of her own water.

"No, I never did," came Agatha's answer, while Harry said, "The family had a couple growing up."

Agatha then added, "I did have hamsters, if that counts for anything."

Dorian laughed a little. "I wasn't trying to keep score or anything, just curious. What were your hamsters like?"

"Cute," Agatha answered. "Digging holes, hiding things in their cheeks, running on their wheels. You know, hamster stuff."

The waiter emerged with a tray of food.

"Oh, that was fast," Harry commented.

Three plates were set down in front of the three humans, as well as a bowl of many various meat scraps set down in front of

Dorian to be given to Gray. The waiter also set down a new unadorned glass of water in front of Dorian, and again went back into the building.

Dorian set Gray's bowl down in front of her, and the dog began wolfing everything down. As Gray ate, Dorian looked to the Wottons expectantly. "After you," she said.

Harry bit into his sandwich. "Holy mackerel."

Dorian glanced to Agatha.

Agatha bit into her sandwich as well. "What the *fuck*, did they do to make this so good?"

"Right??"

Agatha did then cover her mouth with her hand, and, continuing to talk with her mouth full, added, "Pardon my language."

"What? Oh, yes, language. I was very offended, but apology accepted." She then began eating her sandwich as well, and the four of them made short work of their lunches.

When the meal was over and paid for—Dorian in the end managed to insist on the bill, leaving as a compromise that the Wottons could leave as generous a tip as they wanted—the four made the short return walk back to Dorian and Gray's house, and all proceeded inside, Gray being taken off the leash once all were in.

"In spite of being such a movie star," Dorian pretended to boast, "I don't actually watch many movies. So my theater set up is just, y'know, a TV in the living room if that's alright."

"Lead the way," Agatha encouraged.

Dorian did lead the way down the hall, and into a living room furnished all around with couches and chairs, a fire place against one wall, and the promised television set against an adjacent wall. Hung up on all four walls were many framed pictures of dogs, horses, goats, and various other animals as one might see on a farm. On the floor were an assortment of rugs that one might well not in the least mind taking a nap on.

One of the couches, comfortably big enough for three, was centered in front of the television set. Gray went and laid down in front of this couch, and Dorian invited the Wottons to have a seat.

"I already have it set up to just before our scene," Dorian mentioned, turning on the VCR.

Harry and Agatha glanced to each other. Harry mentioned to Dorian, "We actually haven't seen the original *Reservoir Dogs* at all."

"What!" Dorian exclaimed. "Okay, look away from the screen then, I'm rewinding it to the beginning. Unless you two need to be going actually, I wasn't trying to take up all of your time today—"

"No, not at all!" Agatha said, she and Harry both averting their eyes from the screen as instructed. "We'll stay if you'll have us."

"Awesome. This isss going to take a minute to rewind. Do you want anything? Popcorn, drinks?"

Harry and Agatha again looked to each other. "We're usually good without snacks when we watch movies at home," Harry said, "but we are in no way averse to the idea either. We'll have what you're having."

"Not exactly traditional movie food, but I was actually going to have some coffee I think," Dorian said.

"Oh, now that you mention it I could really go for a cup too," Harry said, and Agatha concurred with, "Same."

"And. The. Movie. Issss. Al. Most. Reeeree... *Wound*, done. Okay, I'll be right back out with coffee and then we'll start this."

Dorian departed from the living room, leaving the Wottons alone with their host's better half, who laid in front of the couch with her chin buried in the carpet, eyes closed.

Agatha curled up close beside Harry, and in her smallest whisper, asked, "Is this weird?"

Harry whispered back, "Existence? Yes."

"*This*," Agatha insisted. "I'm pretty sure we're about to watch that dog get fingered. Like, again. It seems weirder to watch knowing it's coming, and knowing it's not actually part of the movie."

"Should it?" Harry asked. "Seem weirder?"

"I don't know," Agatha whispered. "That's kind of my point, is that I don't know."

"Do you want to leave?" Harry asked. "Give me a signal and I will extract us as politely or expeditiously as you want."

Agatha leaned forward and looked down at the sleeping canine for a moment. Above all other things, the dog in that moment appeared to be, in Agatha's estimation, as contented as a creature of any sort at all in the world possibly could be.

Agatha leaned back in with Harry, and added in yet another whisper, "*She is a mother*, apparently."

"I think it's fine," Harry agreed. "At least going on what we saw in the last film, assuming this one goes along the same tracks. I remember when we were watching that scene and we still thought it was part of the movie, one of the things that struck me as the entire point of the scene was how caring the woman was to the dog, how loving, how empathetic she was to this creature who traditionally would be considered 'below' her. It seemed like everything was for the dog's—Gray's, as we now know—It seemed like everything was for Gray's enjoyment, and nothing else."

"Don't let me think it gets you *too* excited, dear," Agatha said, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. After a moment, she asked, "Actually, like completely for real now, would you do that? With a dog?"

"You're asking that question about two years and ninety five days too late for the answer to be anything other than an unqualified no, my love," Harry said, and kissed his wife on the cheek as she had kissed him. "But back before I found that lovely young woman at the tennis courts who would let me awkwardly try to flirt with her?" Harry gave a hum, and then a sigh, and then a head wobble as he considered it. "I really don't think *I* would ever be interested in an escapade with the tetra-legged. Maybe if one had ever begged me enough and made puppy dog eyes, I wouldn't have been able to say no just for her sake."

"Really really?" Agatha asked. "No joking, I want to know if you actually could have done that—say it was before you had ever met me. Swear, I'm not trying to make it a jealousy thing, I just want to know."

"I *do* think I could figure out the mechanics and perform some very robot-esque service if it seemed sufficiently demanded of me, yes. But you know I tend to be much happier with words than with actions. I wouldn't be happy for a minute

with a girlfriend who didn't appreciate my goings on, and who didn't have at least a fighting chance of talking my ear off as much as I talk off hers."

Agatha gave Harry another kiss. "I didn't realize I still had things to learn about you, Mr Wotton. I thought you had blabbered everything there could possibly be to blabber about."

"Just wait until you get me in the same room as a goat, Miss Agatha."

"Oh *stop*," Agatha said, and playfully pulled away from her husband who playfully continued to cling to her.

"Til death do us part, but some things—those things being goats, of course—a man can't be held responsible."

"You shut up, you're going to embarrass me in front of my new friend."

Harry did drop the subject of goats, and on the subject of dogs, only returned briefly to add, "I suppose the succinct version of my thoughts on the matter of sensuality au canine would be to say that I feel no attraction, but I also feel no revulsion either. Which is how it goes with most things, I like to think. They merely are, it merely is, I merely am, and other such materialist drivel."

"Quite," Agatha affirmed, in hopes of actually shutting her husband up about the topic before Dorian did make her return. Switching the topic and no longer whispering, she asked, "Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs—Wait, do I have that right? This one is Reservoir Dogs? Re-ser-voir?"

"Reservoir, yes. This movie is Reservoir Dogs."

"Aren't Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs written by the same guy?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Starring the same people?"

"Oh I'm not sure."

"Do you think that's part of the art project thing? That they're both from the same writer?"

"We could ask," Harry suggested.

Before much longer, Dorian did return with coffee for the humans, pressed play on the VCR, and settled in on her side of the couch—Gray scooped onto Dorian's toes as the human was

settling in. Dorian reached down and pet her partner a few times.

“Is this the same writer as Pulp Fiction?” Harry asked.

“It is,” Dorian affirmed.

“Was that part of the reasoning in choosing which films the two of you would make your appearances in?”

Dorian produced an amused contemplative face, and tilted her head. “I think it was kind of a coincidence actually, but you’d have to ask my friends. It really was them who set most of this up, we really did just play our roles as actors.”

Harry was prepared to raise another question, but as the dialogue of the opening scene began, he dropped the questioning and watched.

A while into the movie there were two men in a car: one of them had been shot and was panicking, and the other—the driver—was trying to calm the shot man down. At a certain point the scene cut to an exterior shot, and showed the car careening off the road and down into a dried up concrete river. The camera rotated to follow the car as it continued along down the concrete, but in rotating, the camera came to Dorian and Gray closer in the foreground—Dorian wore a sharp black suit, and was on her knees on the concrete fingering her partner who stood there and received the stimulation. The camera lingered on the two new characters, and allowed the car to continue driving out of the frame. Eventually, in a continuous shot, the camera came closer up to Gray’s sexual parts and Dorian’s fingers working their way in and out of them in an almost business-like fashion. Eventually Gray seemed to lose interest in the fingering, and she turned to kiss Dorian. The woman and the dog did begin making out—“improvised,” Dorian commented from the couch—until eventually, the sound of a car’s motor could be heard growing louder again, and then the same car as before returned into the frame, drove back up out of the dried up concrete river where it had gone in, and the camera rotated away from the woman and the dog to resume following the car. Suddenly there was a cut back to the car’s interior, and the dialogue between the shot man and the driver continued.

“Amazing,” Harry said.

Agatha gave a golf clap, and Harry joined in. Dorian did a small bow, inasmuch as she could without getting up from the couch.

“But yeah,” Dorian said. “Some copy of that *might* still be in rental circulation somewhere. Dunno. What do you think, Gray?”

Gray looked up at Dorian. Dorian bent forward, and Gray stuck her tongue out and the woman and the dog shared a little kiss before Gray then turned away and planted her chin on the soft rug again. Dorian gave her a few strokes down the back and then sat upright again.

The Wottons remained at Dorian and Gray’s a while longer, chatting on this and that, and Agatha arranged a tennis date with Dorian for the following Thursday evening.

V

A couple of months passed. It was a Sunday morning, and the Wottons were lounging in the living room, Harry reading a book on Kierkegaardian philosophy, Agatha reading a newspaper.

“Mets won their last game,” Agatha mentioned.

“Oh good,” Harry said.

“Harry I will clean every room of this house spotless right now if you can tell me what sport the Mets play.”

Harry lowered his book, and looked up at the ceiling. “Hockey?”

“No, dear.”

“Well.” He shrugged, and went back to his reading.

With a smile and a shake of the head, Agatha went back to her reading as well.

Shortly after that moment, the phone rang. Harry, being closer to the nearest receiver, answered the phone call. “Yellow.”

“Hi Harry,” came a friendly voice.

“Dorian, hello,” he said, and then looked over to his wife and mouthed the name ‘Dorian,’ which received an eye roll and a thumbs up.

“Is Agatha there? I wanted to talk to you both.”

Harry pressed a button. "Got you on speaker. Agatha, Dorian, Dorian, Agatha."

"Hi Dorian!"

"Hello! You two won't believe the enigmatic troupe of people who have just arrived in town."

The Wottons looked to each other. Agatha shrugged, and Harry shrugged as well. Harry asked into the receiver, "Who would that be?"

"Only my film friends."

Agatha made an excited noise. "When do we get to meet them?" she asked.

"*They* get to meet *you* at your soonest convenience at my house," Dorian answered. "If this arrangement is agreeable, of course."

Harry held down a mute button on the phone, and turned to Agatha. "Right now?"

"Right now," Agatha said with several nods.

Harry released the button on the phone. "How does immediately sound, Mrs Dorian and Mrs Gray?"

"Most agreeable, Mr Wotton. You are as always welcome any time. Take care."

With that, the line went dead, and Harry hung up their end as well.

"Was she making fun of me?" Harry asked.

"Making fun of you in what way?"

"Enigmatically, I just feel I was the butt of something."

"I'm sure it's all in good fun, dear," Agatha said, and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek.

The two of them made brief work of getting ready and getting into the car, and making the short drive across the city to the Dorian-Gray residence.

When they arrived, they found two vans parked outside, and several people in very cute or very ratty clothing standing in front of the garage smoking. Dorian and Gray stood outside with everyone, though neither of them held a cigarette at present.

The Wottons parked on the street, and stepped happily up to meet this new host of long spoken about strangers.

"Basil," one of them said as they walked up, making quite a coordinated shuffle of blowing out a plume of smoke to the side,

moving their cigarette to the other hand, and extending a hand out to shake with the Wottons. Basil introduced everyone who was there, and Harry and Agatha introduced themselves.

Many compliments were given and questions asked all around.

"We were about to do a shoot for a third movie pretty soon here if you wanted to join us," Basil offered.

"Oh?" Agatha inquired.

The impenetrably androgynous individual nodded, and then looked Harry up and down, and said after blowing smoke out of the side of their face, "You might not be a bad fit for one of the roles, actually."

"What film?" Harry asked.

"Army of Darkness—"

"I. am. *in*," Harry said, and stepped forward and shook Basil's free hand in both of his.

"Harry, you should ask what the scene is—"

Harry unhanded Basil, and said promptly, "I do demand to know what the scene is before agreeing to this."

Basil went to one of the vans, opened up the back, and returned with a rubber mask of a face that was comically stretched out vertically—the stretched out face of Bruce Campbell, the star of Army of Darkness.

"You know the part where he gets sucked into the book?"

"Off my heart."

"We're gonna add a scene that takes place inside of the book. Dude gathers his bearings, stands up, walks down a short hall, and sees Dorian fingerbanging Gray there."

At this Basil gave a high wave to Dorian and Gray, who had moved to the yard and were standing with a ring of people who were drinking. Dorian waved back, and Gray wagged, and came over.

Basil went on. Harry crouched and pet Gray as Basil did so go on: "We get a bunch of over the shoulder shots of him raising his hand like he's about to interrupt, but then he gives it up, walks back down the hall the way he came in, and jumps back out of the book. We were going to have James play the role, but *he's a bitch!*" The last part was said loudly over to the other group, apparently for James's interest.

One of the young men, probably James, lifted up a middle finger over his head without looking.

Harry stood up from petting Gray. He leaned in with Agatha, and said, "It is a bit risqué."

"He doesn't *join* at all?" Agatha asked Basil.

"Nah," Basil answered. "Mrs and Mrs wouldn't be into it."

"Oh you kids have fun," Agatha said, and shoved Harry lightly forward.

Basil received Harry by grabbing him by the wrist, and raising Mr Wotton's hand up high as though a wrestling match had just been won. "Mount up!" Basil shouted to everyone, "We have our Bruce!"

Cheers and claps came from all around. Harry met Dorian's eyes, though only briefly before Dorian blushed and put her head down in her hand.

"On set by eleven, rolling by noon!" Basil called to everyone, and at that point they lowered Harry's hand and went off to one of the two vans that awaited.

"This really is alright?" Harry asked Agatha discretely, as a river of art students poured around them.

"I know it's just fun between friends," Agatha said. "Really, don't touch them while they're literally in the act and I don't even care in the least."

"Gray is very friendly, I do need you to confirm there's no cooldown time between 'in the act' and me being permitted to pet her."

"I trust you, dear, I'm sure you'll do fine."

Dorian joined in with the conversation between the Wottons. "Mind if we catch a ride with you two?"

"Please," Agatha said, and the four proceeded to the Wottons' iron chariot.

"Crash course, what do I need to know about being an actor?" Harry asked from the driver's seat, as he pulled out onto the street to follow after the departing vans.

"You'll be more embarrassed if you don't go for it than if you do go for it."

"Wonderful, I feel possessed by the theatrical spirit already. Anything else?"

"The director is right."

“Perfect.”

A short while later, the two vans and the car pulled into the otherwise empty and weed-ridden parking lot of a vaguely industrial, corporate, brutalist cement building.

Everyone piled out of their vehicles. Basil lead a parade of actors and observers and people holding film equipment into the building—there were no front doors and there was in fact a lot of water damage and evidence of wild animals having at least passed through at some stage in the time since the doors had gone missing. The parade proceeded down a large stairwell, and at the bottom of this stairwell, they found a small concrete room wherein the stairs ended, a small concrete hallway, and a small room on the other side thereof.

Lighting and cameras and boom mics were arranged. Harry was given his wardrobe, and went around the corner with Agatha to change. She carefully pulled the rubber mask down over his face, made sure it was aligned correctly, stepped back, and then doubled over laughing.

“Was zo funny, doll?” Harry asked, doing his best Bruce.

“Stop!” Agatha squealed, unable to get up from the floor.

Harry did stop, and offered her a hand for when she was ready.

When she was, she accepted it, and Harry helped her to her feet. The two returned around the corner. Harry, aware of all the eyes on him, stopped and did a pose of shooting finger guns out to either side.

“Yes!” Basil said. “Ohhh my god yes. Places, everyone, we’re starting in two minutes. That means places *now*.”

Harry did take notice of the bed, or perhaps altar, that had been constructed in the non-stairwell room while he had been changing. Coming up to waist level was a platform draped in red cloth, and decorated on top with a careful arrangement of black and crimson pillows and blankets. Around the platform were poles from which red gauzy curtains hung, like an old-timey bed. In all, the platform was the most thoroughly lit thing on the set, sufficiently attention-grabbing for purpose.

As Basil had called places, Dorian lifted Gray onto the platform, and the two found their places on the platform’s center, Gray standing upright on all fours, Dorian in a red dress

lying on her side behind her, propped up on an elbow to have her face level with the mixed breed dog's sexual organs. Noticing the Wottons looking, Dorian gave a big smile and a friendly wave.

"Mr Campbell?" Basil called.

Harry wheeled around, and then followed the beckoning director. Agatha lingered back with the other observers, out of line of sight with the upcoming shots.

In the other room, vines had been hung from all the stair railings, including those far above, such that they hung down from overhead into the frame. Standing face to rubber face in this room-like area, Basil gave Harry the rundown. "We're here to get four shots, three starring you. The first one, you're sitting in the center of this room on your ass, legs straight out to either side, head rolling around a little. Camera's gonna do a tilting blurry thing and make it clear that your dizzy, you've just been dropped into this place, you don't know what's going on yet. Got it?"

"Got it."

Basil gave Harry a pat with both hands onto both shoulders, and then stepped back, calling, "Places!" one last time.

Harry took a seat on his ass, as instructed.

"Hands limp at your sides, wrists up!"

Harry adjusted his arms.

"Rolling? Action!"

Harry lolled his head around for what seemed like a long time, but, the director was right.

"Cut!" Basil called. "Look good on your end?"

Someone behind the camera nodded.

Basil came forward and knelt with Harry. "Okay, this next one is your main shot. We're cutting to a new angle, closer up on your face. You're going to stop rolling your head, touch your fingers to your face—just a little bit, you don't have to mug about it or anything, just kind of feel it and quickly accept it—and then stand up, walk down the hall with maybe a little stagger once or twice, and then stop at the threshold of the next room. Camera will be following behind you. Watch Dorian and Gray doing what they really do do such a good job of. Raise your hand every now and then like you're about to try to cut in and get their

attention, but never do. We'll be intercutting this with close ups of Dorian and Gray, so we'll leave it rolling here on your part for longer than we'll actually need to use, and we'll take the best parts. Eventually when I call it, do one last hand raise, visibly give up, and turn back down the hall."

Everyone got into their proper places, Basil called action, and the scene went smoothly as described: after staggering down the hall, Harry stood and watched his new human friend perform very thorough cunnilingus on his new dog friend; every so often, he raised his hand as if to stop them, and they went on as though they couldn't see him there. When they had as many takes as they wanted, Basil gave the call, and Harry gave one last hand-raise, lowered his hand and slumped forward for a brief moment, and then turned and went back down the hall.

Afterwards they quickly filmed Harry's last scene, which only involved setting up a new camera angle from the other corner and lower down, and then having Harry jump up as though he were jumping all the way back up the stairwell. He made it one, possibly two entire inches off of the ground—apparently with some very clever freezeframing, cutting, and audio design, this would be sufficient to make it seem like he had jumped all the way up the stairwell and back out of the book.

The final shot of the night was the close-ups of Dorian and Gray. Harry and Agatha stood side by side, hand in hand, alongside many others, watching as the woman made her partner's female dog parts look as appetizing as anything in the whole wide world.

When Basil called cut, a round of applause came. Gray wagged, and Dorian stood and gave a curtsy.

As everyone packed up, Harry disappeared around a corner to change back into his street clothes, and Agatha followed after him to make sure that he knew his anatomy was every bit appreciated by her as Gray's was by Dorian. During, Harry's mind wandered to the previously seen acts less than he expected—hardly at all, except for two brief times when he felt like it maybe should be on his mind and he tried to impose it on the present circumstances, but then it slipped from his thoughts without his even realizing it, as the present moment more strongly allured his facile and fickle attention. Agatha felt

similarly during, though had tried to impose thoughts of human on canine cunnilingus four times during, to still equal unsuccess, and also to less feelings of wanting to gag than she might have expected some time prior—having known Dorian and Gray for some while, and now having seen the act personally for some time, it was, in the most benevolent usage of the word, nothing. One private shoot and change of clothes later, and the Wottons returned up the stairwell, out of the building, and returned the cloak and mask back to Basil, who bowed as they accepted it.

As all of the art students were getting back into the vans, the Wottons, Dorian, and Gray began ambling back towards the car that they had arrived in.

“Well that was fun,” Dorian said, conspicuously looking forward off into the distance instead of looking at the Mr or the Mrs directly.

“That *looked* fun,” Agatha said, and then stooped down to give Gray a few pats as they walked. “How was it for you?” she asked the dog.

The dog did not answer, though in the moment, it had indeed seemed to look like fun from start to finish.

The four got into the car.

“What’s the turnaround time for these like?” Harry asked. “How many years before my debut on the—”

“Years!” Dorian interrupted, and shuddered as she put on her seatbelt. “We’ll probably be watching the tape a few hours after we get back and then we’ll drop it off later tonight.”

When all had arrived back at the house, large quantities of alcoholic beverages were put up for grabs in the kitchen as Basil and a select few others marched upstairs with the tapes.

“Care for anything?” Dorian offered the Wottons. Dorian herself held one of her water bottles. “White wine?” she offered Agatha. Looking to Harry, she noted, “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you drink, Mr Watton.”

“Well, perhaps I’ve earned a beer and a shot of whiskey.”

“Okay macho man,” Agatha said, and then gave Harry a kiss. “Let’s start you off with a beer and see if I’m not holding your hair back in an hour.”

“Wise,” Harry acknowledged, and grabbed a beer from off the counter. He twisted off the top, and had a long and shallow sip of the cold and revolting beverage. Agatha accepted the glass of white wine that Dorian offered, though then remembering that she and Harry were trying, she set the glass of wine down on the counter shortly after Dorian departed to go speak with someone elsewhere, and left it there as she and Harry made their leave of the kitchen as well.

Finding an unoccupied love seat in the living room, Harry and Agatha sat down together and eavesdropped on the gossip of all of these strangers who surrounded them.

Some hours later, Basil and their company marched back down the stairs with the copies of the tapes in hand, and applause resounded through the room. The rest of the night was marked with many occasions for applause—applause at the movie being placed into the VCR, applause at the movie starting, applause at Bruce Campbell’s many one-liners, uproarious applause when Bruce was sucked into the book, applause and whistling at Dorian and Gray, and applause when the credits began to roll.

Basil, Dorian, Gray, Agatha, and Harry all climbed into one of the vans, as well as a couple of the other art students, and the seven of them were deacclimated from the party with a final sparser round of applause from those who were outside as they drove off. Agatha and Harry held hands on the drive.

When they had arrived at their destination, it was dark out. Basil parked across the street from the movie rental place, and began walking across the street with the rented tape in hand. The other occupants of the van piled out, and lingered around the van, watching into the store windows as casually as they could manage while one of the art students somewhat casually filmed. Casually, Basil went into the store, set the tape on the counter, and returned the picture of Dorian/Gray.

THE TALE OF ERSKINE FAERN

A street in the Town of Terreh Thomas Faern is 14

The Faerns's cart, stacked tall with barrels of pine syrup, was drawn by a pair of mules. Thomas's Ma and Da rode on the seat at the front of the cart. Thomas walked alongside. They had come from their farm at the break of dawn that day. As they neared Terreh's riverport, it was getting into the evening. A woman in white robes with black holy symbols slowly moved from one side of the street to the other, lighting the streetlamps with a candle balanced atop a tall wooden rod. Thomas had a keen eye for the symbols. On the left shoulder of the robe was an intricate outline of a human heart, with a thick line stitched across it. On the right shoulder was the outline of a human brain, and a line stitched through it vertically. On the sleeves were stitched the corresponding arm bones that would be below them. On the body were stitched dozens of faces with the eyes made to look sewn shut. This light-bearer was an acolyte of the temple of the death queen.

Thomas realized that he had stopped walking to stare. He jogged to catch up with the wagon, coming up with an excuse along the way—he would say that he'd thought he'd seen something fall off the cart and was trying to retrieve it, but he must have been mistaken. When he caught up, it was of no matter. His parents had not realized he had gone. Thomas was the youngest of four, though for quite some time, he was more

or less an only child. His older siblings had each disappeared on trips to Terreh in years past, while Thomas had stayed at home. Jack had died in an inn collapse. Moira had run off into the woods and was never found. Danielle had fallen in love and run off with a strange man. Thomas had his doubts about all of these tales.

At the port, Thomas stood beside Ma while Da had a long conversation with a ferryman. After some time—many eons, by Thomas’s estimation—the ferryman counted out a sum of silver coins into a sack and handed it to Da. Thomas and Da got to work unloading the barrels onto the ferryman’s boat. When the work was finished, Da handed Thomas a silver coin. “Get your Ma and you a meal,” he instructed. “Bring me back the change.”

Thomas nodded, took the coin, and he and his Ma walked off.

After a short while, raindrops began to sprinkle. Thomas and Ma looked up at the dark night sky.

“I’ll get the umbrella,” Thomas offered, and jogged back to the cart.

There at the cart, Thomas grabbed the umbrella, but he also happened to overhear Da and the ferryman in conversation.

“The boy’s worth double that,” Da said.

“He ain’t,” said the ferryman, who had lit a cigar and held it in his mouth as he talked. “Scrawny. You did near all the work yourself with the barrels. Thirty silver.”

Da gave a contemplative groan, mulling the offer over.

All at once, the rain grew from sprinkles to downpour. Thomas opened the umbrella and walked away from Da, away from Ma, into parts unknown of Terreh. He wondered whether he was following in the footsteps of any of his older siblings, or if they had all been whisked away by the ferryman unawares. Thomas stomped through the forming puddles. Eventually he found an alley to sit in and cry in relative private, aside from a few others who had taken shelter in the alley to escape the rain.

One of the others, seemingly an older man though it was hard to tell in the dark, was drinking from a bottle and grumbling to himself. Thomas sat with his head down, ignoring him.

The grumbling grew louder, until eventually Thomas heard distinctly that the man was calling out, “Oi! Kid!”

Thomas pretended he couldn’t hear.

The man started insulting Thomas, calling him a bum, a starving no good no work orphan, a brat, a spoiled brat, anything to raise Thomas's ire.

From behind him, reverberating through the wall, Thomas could hear the rising of a steady clap, and then a hearty chorus of voices singing. Thomas got up. The man got up too. Thomas ran out of the alley, brushing past the others, and darted into the common room of the inn.

Just inside the door a meaty hand caught Thomas's chest, knocking the wind out of him.

"All booked up tonight," said a thickset man, seeming bored. He looked down at Thomas, and seemed to realize he might have been mistaken. "Are you that fishmonger's lad?"

Thomas nodded.

"Apologies, sir," the man said, still seeming bored, but he stepped aside.

Thomas walked briskly into the inn and disappeared among the dense crowd. He snickered as behind him, he heard the drunk man calling after him but being stopped at the door.

Standing on a table at the center of the room, there was a man dressed from head to toe in ribbons of red, green, and yellow. Strapped to his side was a drum, which he struck slowly in time to lead the beat of the clapping patrons. He was in the midst of leading them in a song, singing a line which the crowd then shouted atonally back. Feeling sufficiently anonymous in the crowd, Thomas joined in on the fun.

"Yoho diddle doe diddle dum diddle deer!"
YOHO diddle DOE diddle DUM diddle DEER!

"Our man Johnny bought the dancer two pints of beer!"
Our MAN Johnny BOUGHT the dancer TWO pints of BEER!

"Spilled half of each as he was ogling her rear!"
SPILED half of EACH as he was OGLING her REAR!

"Spilled the rest on her bosom and his heart filled with fear!"
Spilled the REST on her BOSOM and his HEART filled with FEAR!

“Yoho diddle doe diddle dum diddle daughter!”
YOHO diddle DOE diddle DUM diddle DAUGHTER!

“Just then down the stairs came the dancing girl’s father!”
*Just THEN down the STAIRS came the DANCING girl’s
FATHER!*

The song continued on a long time. Eventually the man in the ribbons stopped beating on the drum, but kept the crowd clapping in time by clapping his own hands high above his head for a few beats. As the crowd went on, the man unstrapped the drum, and then seemingly from nowhere, produced a slew of colorful balls which he began juggling. Members of the crowd whistled while others continued to clap, and Thomas just stared in awe, unable to even count the number of balls the man kept up. With his foot, the man began stomping in double time, and the crowd followed suit, doubling the pace of their clap. The man stopped juggling the balls in one big arc and instead juggled in two separate little circles, one with each hand. The crowd whistled as he crouched down low to the table, the backs of his hands nearly touching the surface, and then rose up and up to his tippy toes, the balls nearly hitting the ceiling. Coming back to center, the man juggled in a way that Thomas could not make heads or tails of: the balls danced in a variety of arcs from hand to hand, but always there came one to rest centered at the man’s chest, seeming to pause there impossibly for multiple seconds before resuming its arc and being replaced by a new ball of a different color. Thomas noticed as the man quickly crouched between tosses to grab something off of the table. Whatever it was, the man was now lighting the balls on fire one by one until they all were ablaze. The crowd cheered and cheered, although those nearest the man backed off a good distance, and many began eyeballing the exit. Thomas stepped forward to take the place of those who had left the front row.

Still juggling the flaming balls, the man in the ribbons looked down at Thomas, sweating and wearing a wide smile. “I like your bravery, son,” the man said, speaking over the crowd just loud enough for Thomas to hear. “Catch!”

From the whirling arcs, one lone flaming ball left the pattern in an easy lob towards Thomas. On reflex Thomas caught the ball, which went out in his hands.

The crowd roared for Thomas. Thomas, beaming, turned to them, holding the ball in a hand high above his head. Then remembering that he wished to remain relatively unnoticed in this place where he actually was not supposed to be, he dashed back into the crowd. Someone in the crowd handed him a pint. He had never drank before, but he was his own man now, so who could tell him no. He drank some and suppressed the urge to gag as he swallowed it down.

Later on that night, after the show had finished, Thomas still had well over half of the same pint left as he sat by himself at a booth in the corner of the common room.

Suddenly sitting beside him, there was the man in ribbons, though he had now changed into a drab shirt and trousers. Thomas had learned in the show that the man's name was David. "Havin a good night, are we?"

"Not..." Thomas considered, and then decided not to bother the performer with his troubles. He shrugged. "The show was amazin. I wish I could juggle like that."

"Ye wanna be a jester, eh?"

"Oh, I suppose." Thomas tried to take a bigger drink from his pint, regretted it, and put the immense glass back down after letting most of the mouthful fall back into the drink.

"I could show ye to juggle."

Thomas felt his eyes widen.

"Still have my ball?"

Thomas set the red ball on the table. It was not a light object, as he'd expected when he'd seen them in the air. In fact it was heavy as a stone, larger than Thomas's fist, perhaps about the same size as David's.

David picked the ball up, stood, and encouraged Thomas to stand up out of the booth too. There in the corner of the inn, David tossed the ball in an arc from one hand to the other.

"Easy as that," he said, and handed Thomas the ball.

Thomas tried, and threw the ball back onto the seat in the booth. He tried a second time, and it landed on the floor with a loud bang that drew the eyes of many who were still lingering

around the common room that night. Thomas cringed at the attention, and crouched to find where the ball had rolled to.

David knelt and picked it up for himself. Thomas hadn't even blinked and the ball disappeared from David's hands.

"Maybe we can give it another go in the morning. Outside on some grass, eh? I give lessons you know."

"Oh?"

"Five silver for a session."

Thomas deflated.

"Too steep? I'm often told I should charge more."

"I have a silver to me name," Thomas admitted.

David glanced around, determined that nobody was in earshot, and knelt slightly to speak into Thomas's ear. "One silver now, and I'll meet you in the morning for breakfast and a lesson."

Thomas reached into his pocket and pulled out his silver coin. He paused only to ask, "Meet me outside the front of this inn at daybreak?"

David nodded.

Thomas gave David the silver.

The jester pocketed the coin and then yawned. "I think that's it for me tonight, kid. I'm beat. See ye in the morning."

Thomas looked around. He saw the thickset guard at the door of the inn, standing and staring at him. He considered trying to retire up to one of the rooms, but recalled that there was no vacancy, and so it was unlikely he could find any place to hide away for the night unnoticed. Ashamed, he left past the guard, who tutted as he passed.

Thomas made his way to the river, and spent the night hidden away under a dock. He slept very little, his stomach growling in hunger.

Before sunrise, Thomas rose and returned to the inn. He sat outside of it, eagerly awaiting the jester. For breakfast, firstly, and because maybe this was the start of his new life.

The sun rose, and Thomas sat alone. Noon came, and Thomas had relocated to a nearby alleyway entrance, as it had started to dribble rain. He still watched the inn, but he knew that he'd been had. The jester was not coming out.

In the evening, Thomas saw the thickset guard come out of the inn to replace the thinner one who had stood there the day so far. Thomas walked through the rain to him.

The guard raised his hand to block Thomas, but Thomas was making no attempt to get in.

“Is David in?”

“The jester?”

“Yes.”

The guard furrowed his brow. “Don’t believe so. Wait ere a minute.” The guard turned and walked into the inn. Thomas watched him walk through the door into the kitchen, and then shortly thereafter, walk back. “He left this morning. Packed up his belongings onto his horse in the stable in the back and rode out. Didn’t seem to Hamish as though nothing was amiss.”

Thomas sniffled.

“What, are you *his* lad?”

Thomas shook his head. “I gave him me only silver. He was going to give me lessons this morning.”

The guard chuckled. “Gave ye a lesson alright.”

Thomas lost it and stomped away.

By the time he had gotten over his tears and gotten back to the hunger in his stomach, it was dark. The rain continued to fall at a dribble. Thomas stood around a darkened corner of a dockyard, staring at a riverside restaurant where patrons ate by decorative lanternlight beneath umbrellas. He watched, and watched, and when one of the couples left with a good amount of food left untouched on their plates, Thomas sprinted up, hopped the rope fence, grabbed the sandwich from one plate and threw it onto the other with the half eaten meat pie, and ran off with the pieced together meal. Nearby patrons had gasped and shouted at him, and he heard a great many more shouts behind him as he ran off down a dark street, but by the time he had gone a block it was clear that nobody was giving chase. He walked past a couple of alleys that were occupied before finding an especially narrow one that was clear: one of the buildings leaned as it went upwards, making the alley ideal for a kid such as him, and unideal for anyone taller.

Thomas shuffled deep into the alley and sat down.

Just as he was bringing the sandwich to his mouth, he froze at the sound of something else in the alley. Fear rippled down him. Quite nearby, there was a rapid sniffing. Thomas tensed, ready to lash out if something attacked him.

The creature in the alley with Thomas whined.

“Are you a dog, you are?”

Thomas heard another whine in response, and the dragging of the creature shuffling closer over the dirt ground.

Cautiously, Thomas reached out a hand.

The dog growled.

Thomas quickly pulled the hand back. “Well you mind yourself and I’ll mind myself, then.”

Thomas bit into his sandwich. He had been shaking with hunger, and immediately, he felt energy returning to himself. Not to mention that the food was delicious. Spiced meats he’d only had once before in his life, on another trip to Terreh with his sister Danielle. Thin cuts of vegetables and a good helping of condiments, on toasted bread. He tore through two more bites, and then paused to finish chewing so he could tear through some more.

The dog whined again.

Thomas sighed through his nose, his mouth being still overfull. He took the time to chew, and swallow.

The dog whined once more.

Thomas held his plate tight. “What, you here to rip me off too?”

The dog whined sadder.

Thomas gripped his sandwich for one more moment of defiant resilience, and then sighed, put the sandwich on the plate with the meat pie, and pushed the whole collection over to the dog.

The dog hopped up and began devouring the food as fast as it would fit into its mouth. When it was finished it spent a long time licking the plate, and then a while after licking its lips.

Upriver from the Town of Terreh

Thomas Faern is 14

Erskine Faern might be 1

In all, Thomas had ended up stealing very little from Terreh. He had found great big tangles of fishing line and lures by wading through the river banks. The knife blade—or sword end, or some such—he had found jutting out of a fence post, and had not waited around to see if anyone was coming back for it. The flint and steel, he had nabbed off the side of a traveler's backpack, and had been caught and walloped for it before Erskine had come barking and snarling to liberate the boy.

Thomas and Erskine sat now at a campfire beside the river, Thomas cooking the three fish he'd caught, Erskine supervising. It was noon and only partially overcast. Erskine, though still clearly quite young, was already just as large as Thomas. He was a great big mutt with long shaggy hair that was tangled and littered with odd bits of trash he'd picked up in gods-knew-how-long of going ungroomed. Though only on his own for a matter of days, Thomas was beginning to look quite the same.

When the fish were cooked, Thomas divided the bounty evenly for himself and Erskine. Both of them ate like animals and afterwards licked the flat rocks their meals had been served on.

Thomas went and rinsed off his hands and face in the river. As he did, a river stone caught his eye. It was more or less round as a ball, and a bit larger than his fist. He picked it up, bounced it up in the air a couple of times in his hand. It had a nice weight to it. He waded upriver until he had found three such stones in all, and then returned to the campfire, where Erskine had been standing, watching him.

Standing near the fire, Thomas tossed the ball from one hand to the other. He missed it completely, and the rock thumped to the ground. Erskine bolted towards it and tried to grab it in his mouth. Thomas laughed as the dog wagged and fussed with the stone.

"Go find me a stick and we'll play."

Erskine looked up at Thomas and barked. Whether or not the mutt was being playful or mean, the volume of the bark stung Thomas's ears, and he flinched.

Thomas left the stones on the ground near the campfire for the moment, and went to go find Erskine a stick.

As the day went on, Thomas threw the stick for Erskine, threw the stones to himself, and in the evening he set a lure in the water to get dinner started for the both of them.

A street in the Town of Merrom

Thomas Faern might be 15

Erskine Faern might be 2

Thomas stood on a street corner, juggling his river stones that he had gotten painted red, orange, and blue. They were not evenly weighted, but they were what he'd learned everything he knew on. On the one occasion he'd had to use evenly weighted stones, he was completely thrown by them.

A fair few people stopped to watch him juggle throughout the busiest market hours of the day, and most who stopped were kind enough to toss a few coins of change to the boy's straw basket—woven himself, which would likely be of little surprise to anyone.

When the day's performance was over, Thomas bowed, stowed the stones in the basket, wiped the sweat from his brow, and sat for a while on the market corner, petting the shaggy brown dog that had laid at his side throughout the show. Later on in the day, he bought a sandwich for himself and a meat pie for Erskine, the cost of both easily covered by a portion of the day's earnings.

A crowded beer hall in the City of Tinst

Thomas Faern might be 17

Erskine Faern might be 4

Thomas sat at a secluded table, idly running a hand over the well-groomed Erskine who sat close at his side. It was a cool night, the air smoky with the cookfires of nearby restaurants. Thomas stared daggers at a jester in ribbons of red, green, and yellow. It was David, unmistakably. Earlier he had done the same song from all those years ago, and a juggling routine with flaming balls. Thomas was a much more skilled juggler now than he was before. David's routine was certainly still

impressive, though Thomas could now put a name to all of the tricks.

At present, David had produced a lute—none of his trademark sleight of hand on drawing out that one, which Thomas did consider fair enough, given the instrument's size. As he strummed, he told a classical tale of Leigus and Tinira.

The widowed Leigus waded through the shallow waters of the land of death for fifty days and nights, the days waning duller and the nights waning greyer, until the two were a single thing, as fogged as the air and the water. Leigus's handsome complexion was wracked with mourning the fifty days and nights of his walk. At the end of his journey, in a mist of grey nothing, Leigus stood face to face with a figure whose white and black robes contained naught but whitened, faded, and now grey bones. "What will you trade?" the skeleton hissed. Leigus produced Tinira's garden sheers, and with them, cut off his nose. His fetching looks were nothing to a world without his beloved. His nose fell to the ground, and there it grew larger and larger, forming into a torso, arms, legs, a head, a face—Tinira. The new body gasped at life anew as Tinira's soul entered it.

David's rendition of the tale continued. Thomas waited patiently for the jester's show to end.

When the jester took his final bow and descended from the table, Thomas melded into the lingering crowd and followed the jester out of the beer hall and into the common room of a nearby inn. These days he looked respectable enough to usually get into such places uninterrogated. Near the common room's hearth, Thomas stopped to kneel face to face with Erskine.

"Wait for me here, if you would."

Erskine sat.

Thomas stood and followed David up the stairs, spied which room the jester went into, and then hid himself away around a corner until hearing the door open and close again a while later, followed by the opening and closing of the door to the bathing room. Thomas skulked down the hall, eased his way into the

jester's room, and took quick stock of the jester's equipment, which had been strewn on the floor near the foot of the bed.

There were the balls, though Thomas cared little. In addition to his favored river stones, Thomas had procured through legitimate means a set of twenty colorful weighted balls. There was the lute, and although he was tempted to steal it and learn to play, it was not what he had come for: he could get a lute in any city, if he saved his coins. What he had come for was the pair of devices that the jester had not tossed onto the floor, but had placed carefully on the room's little desk. Thomas hadn't seen them during the show all those years ago, but he had been watching keenly this time. In each of David's sleeves had been some type of apparatus that lit the balls on fire, only for a second as they left David's hand, and going out in time to be caught again safely.

Thomas nabbed the devices, fled the room, darted down the stairs, and walked briskly out of the inn, giving a *c'mere* wave to Erskine, who wagged, stood, shook as though flinging water from himself, and followed out at Thomas's side.

Early the next morning, Thomas awakened at his and Erskine's latest riverside camp. They'd found a secluded spot east out of Tinst, in a dried up divot of dirt where the river used to flow, but didn't anymore, finding an easier route just nearby. They hadn't need of a fire for that night. Thomas had spread out a blanket and laid on his back and Erskine had burrowed up against his side, and the two had slept warm enough.

First thing that day, Thomas beheld the new gadgets he'd stolen. He sat in the divot of dirt looking the things over. Each one had a cuff to hold the device to the wrist. Besides that, there were also a few little tubes connecting a few little opaque tanks. Thomas held the device up to his left ear, and shook it to hear if the tanks were filled with anything. As he shook it, his hand slipped on the device, pushed a toggle, and snapped one of the tubes—the next thing Thomas knew, the entire left side of his face was on fire, sizzling and smoking. Screaming, Thomas dashed to the river and leapt in.

Afterwards he laid on his back on the riverbank for a time, trying to take deep steady breaths, trying to push down the pain.

Erskine tried to lick him. He held the dog at bay, but thanked him all the same, and stroked him comfortingly.

When the burned Thomas felt ready enough to travel, he went and packed up the meager camp, kicked dirt over the pair of cuffs, and made the hike back towards Tinst. In the suburbs thereabout, he found an apothecary and purchased salves suitable for his burns. "A lesson indeed," the boy muttered as he counted out sixty silver and change for the witch.

Though not eager to stay in the city proper, where his thievery might quite well be deduced, Thomas decided to spend the time it took to heal camped near enough to the city, in case anything about his condition did take a turn. Thomas rented an inn room in the suburb of Wrelt. He and Erskine shared a bed and three square meals a day. They went on walks and played fetch in the field behind the inn. Each night by the hearth, Thomas picked the brambles out of Erskine's coat and brushed the good boy, while Erskine rested his chin on Thomas's knee, or in the crook of the young man's elbow.

A booked performance hall in the Capital City of Verruskt

Thomas Faern might be 25

Erskine Faern might be 12

Though far from the only act of the show that night, Thomas was more than eager to rise to the occasion of being chosen as the closer. He still enjoyed juggling the river stones in his idle time, but he had graduated from that in his public performances. Torches, axes, hammers, and swords were in his repertoire, to name a few. In among all of these, Thomas also juggled seven shoes that had been volunteered from seven members of the audience, and a hairpiece more-or-less volunteered that he had taped around one of the hammers to give it the needed weight to throw in the enormous arcs of this final routine. In closing as all of the items fell back to Thomas for one final time, the juggler threw each shoe back to its owner, threw each sword at a target behind himself, let each torch go and ignite a fuel-soaked pyre, let each axe fall and chop a log of wood, and let each hammer crash up through a colorful pane of

sugarglass suspended at the ceiling, making the glittering pieces come raining down over the stage. The audience erupted as the glass dust came down, and showed no signs of quieting as it settled. Thomas stood looking out at them, beaming, catching his breath. He beckoned the owner of the hairpiece to come on stage and collect it. The owner came up. Thomas guided him to face the audience, and together, the two of them bowed.

Thomas felt transcendent as he left the stage. And although coming down from the most exceptional performance of his life thus far, he felt a deeper happiness swelling in him as he neared his dressing room.

Pulling aside the curtain, he smiled down at Erskine, who was resting on a pile of folded blankets, wagging up at his friend. Thomas came and sat there on the floor with Erskine, back against the dressing room wall, staring blankly at the ceiling as he pet the old dog.

Eventually, Thomas's gaze lowered down to the full-body mirror that was across the dressing room. He looked at himself. His upper body was very muscular. Half of his face was disfigured and immobile from burn scars. The other half of his face, he had decorated in tattoos: a little star below the eye, the name *FAERN* spelled out in an arc above the eye but under the eyebrow, three imperfect circles in a triangle on the cheekbone, and a canine noseprint on the cheek proper.

Thomas lowered his head down to Erskine. Erskine licked the human's forehead with care. Thomas stroked the dog's scuff likewise.

A road north of the Capital City of Verruskt
Thomas Faern might be 25
Erskine Faern might be 12

Thomas and Erskine slept soundly, cuddled up in their little tent, which they had pitched to the side of the trade road.

Thomas awoke with a start when Erskine let out a loud bark.

Bleary-eyed, Thomas rested a hand on Erskine's back. "What do you hear out there?"

The hair on Erskine's back was raised. He released a string of barks, body tense, facing the tent door. At a pause in the barks, Thomas strained his ears, but could hear nothing outside.

Clearing the sleep out of his eyes, Thomas got to his knees at the tent door and began unfastening the little knots that held it shut. After pulling the last string free, Thomas moved the tent door aside, and found that his face was an inch away from a bear's face. The bear fully eclipsed the view of the world outside the tent, and was raising a paw to strike.

Erskine bolted past Thomas and latched onto the bear. Thomas gave a wordless, mourning shout. The bear roared and spun around away from the tent, swiping at the dog that was attacking it. Erskine yelped but did not stop. The bear and the dog's struggle brought them onto the road, well lit by the full moon on that clear night. Thomas ran to his pack that sat against a nearby tree, and retrieved an arsenal of swords. He hurled them one after the other, and then the axes, and then the hammers, until the bear was motionless. But the damage had been done. Thomas held his friend's lifeless body and wept.

The shallow waters of the land of death

Thomas Faern might be 30

Walking through the shallow waters for fifty days and nights was a balm, not a burden. For Leigus seeking Tinira, perhaps this had been the difficult part. They had lived quite near the land of death to begin with. Thomas had crossed an ocean and three continents. But it was worth it. He had arrived.

On the close of the fiftieth night, Thomas came face to face with a figure in the grey whose white robes were decorated with the black symbols of the death queen, whose face was a skull, whose hands were bones.

An ancient wind blew from behind the skeleton, passed through their bones, and brought their message hissing faintly to Thomas's ears: *"A life for a life. What will you sacrifice?"*

Thomas gave a sendoff to his life as a juggler with a final trick. He drew an axe from his belt. With his right hand he tossed the axe in the air, where it spun once as it rose, once again as it fell, and then chopped off the selfsame hand which

had thrown it. Then he drew a second axe, and in the same fashion, cut off his left hand as well.

The wounds on his forearms seared shut. In the shallow waters, his hands floated to one another, and formed together. They grew, and took the shape of a barrel of a canine chest. Four legs. A head. A tail. Long brown fur.

The servant of the death queen turned and floated away on the shallow waters, into the grey fog.

Erskine, anew with youth, barked playfully at Thomas, head down, haunches still in the air, tail wagging. In tears, Thomas dropped to his knees before Erskine in the waters, and rubbed the dog's coat up and down as the dog licked the scarred man's face. "I missed you, friend," Thomas said, and repeated it again and again as he and Erskine were reunited. "I missed you, friend."

SISTER SHIM AND THE PRIESTESS OM

We send our most holy to wreak miracles, and our best monsters to protect them on the long walk back.

I sit in the frontmost pew beside Brother Elia, sharing a bottle of wine with him. He is filling my second glass. The sleidr have been groomed and fed, and there is little else to do until dinner. It's an exceedingly pleasant Fall day. Orange and yellow leaves have blown in through the archway, and the smell of them fills the air. Brother Elia hands my glass back to me. I give it a little raise towards him before having a sip. The wine has an almondy taste, which I'm ordinarily not a fan of, but it seems to compliment the cool Fall breezes, the stirring of the little leaves that have made their way into our holy place. Not to mention, Brother Elia came a long way bringing this bottle back, and so even if I didn't care for it—though I do—I would likely not mention distaste aloud to him. Nobody is in the pews besides us. He leans back, head facing the ceiling, eyes closed.

"It's good to be home," he tells me. "The work abroad was worthy, but the day to day bolsters one's soul."

"You still haven't told me of the trouble you were attending to."

Still facing the ceiling, he swirls his wine glass. "I suppose I ought to, Sister Shim." He sighs. "Where to begin, where to begin..."

This was his third time being whisked away by a priest or a priestess for work abroad. He has a very conspicuous wound on

his forehead now: a slash, with many blisters great and small surrounding it.

It is a cool day, and I realize that his forehead is shining with sweat.

From my bandolier, I flick out a dagger and whirl it at the ceiling. The blade strikes one of the many colorful strings which hold things up there—broomsticks, dustpans, pitchforks, shears, unlit candles, bouquets of flowers. In this case, I have snapped the string holding up a clay vase filled with water. It falls towards my lap. When it arrives at me, I catch it. I hand it to Brother Elia.

“Al sai,” he says: *Thank you* in the holy tongue. He lifts the vase to his mouth and has a long drink.

He and I became followers at the same time. I have yet to be called away once. On most days I accompany the priests and priestesses on walks through the city.

Before Brother Elia has decided where to begin on the tale of his journey, and as if beckoned by my thoughts, I hear the clacking of a sleidr approaching over the ceramic floor, and I perk up in my seat and turn. Coming up the aisle is the priestess Om. She glides like a leaf on her six legs, two hind, four fore. The footprints she leaves behind glimmer just as her black, oily coat.

She comes and plants her chin on my knee.

I smile. “Shall we walk?”

As soon as I say walk, she lift her chin off of me and prances for the archway, black shimmering coat waving with each step.

“Tell me all when I return,” I ask, setting the remainder of my glass on the pew.

“Of course,” he says with a smile, eyes still closed, head still lolled back, facing the ceiling. He has another long drink of the water.

As I walk up the aisle after the priestess Om, I draw a length of red ribbon from a trouser pocket. The priestess Om waits for me under the archway, wagging as she faces the courtyard outside. I tie one end of the ribbon around my wrist. I tie the other end loosely around her neck. When I’m finished with the knot, I pat her side and she begins walking at a fast pace, and I walk quickly to keep up.

To the south there is a garden with a pond which she often likes to visit. To the north one would eventually arrive at the gate out to the countryside, where the priestess Om would be free to be untied and run to her heart's content. In an unusual choice, the priestess Om leads me straight away across the courtyard, towards the road leading east, towards the market district.

Distinct from the city's other districts, the market district has no tallstanding buildings, and few that are more permanent than a wooden stall. It is akin to a miles-across colosseum, stuffed with tents and tables. As we walk past a cloister of seafood stalls, the priestess Om keeps her nose to the ground, following the trail of a scent. She spends quite some time sniffing the side of one fish vendor's booth. The vendor eyes us disapprovingly, but soon has customers to attend to. Once the priestess Om is satisfied with her sniffing, she moves onwards, and I follow.

We proceed through an immense tunnel out of the marketplace and arrive at a road to the king's palace, and I realize that this actually might be what I had resigned myself to no longer hope for.

The palace stands atop a hill, the base of the hill fenced off, the slopes of the hill a multitude of hedges and gardens. The priestess Om leads us to a small, nongrandiose gate in the fence, manned by a guard with a well kept beard and an eye missing. He sees the priestess Om approaching and opens the gate for us. He nods and wishes us a good afternoon as we pass by, and closes the gate behind us.

The priestess Om stops. I come up to her and untie the ribbon from around her neck. She shakes and then darts forward, running up the hill to a patch of purple flowers. I follow after her, untying the ribbon from around my wrist as I go.

When I arrive, she is sniffing the purple flowers. She sniffs the underside of one for a time, intently, and slowly works her way around the petals until sniffing the upper side. With a final big inhale, she moves over to another flower, and smells it just as closely. When she is finished with this one she bites it off, chews it a bit, and swallows. She progresses slowly along the side of the flower patch, passing by many flowers, eating the

occasional one. When she has eaten five, she walks up the hill a little farther until arriving at a patch of long strands of grass. She eats this grass indiscriminately, and soon, she is heaving. She vomits, leaving a pile of yellow slime on the ground, which contains long blades of grass and purple flower petals. I go to the vomit, pick out the flower petals, and eat them.

When I have chewed and swallowed, I look at Om. She is panting, mouth drawn back in what looks like a smile, though she is nervous. I look around. The world is undulating. Parts of reality are slipping off of other parts. Things melt. I feel the priestess Om gently take my hand in her mouth. She pulls me. I follow. We walk down a hill into the melting world. When we arrive at a figure by a gate, I try to look at him to see if he is the same guard, but it is difficult to say. The world no longer looks like much, and he is no exception. A smudge of a human form. If I concentrate I can see his shining armor, his spear, but the idea of recognizably seeing his face is laughable. The wind blows, and I am nearly knocked back by the smell of him. He reeks of human sweat. The smell of the leather in his armor is overpowering, the smell of the copper and the steel mere afterthoughts. I am not even that near him, but I can smell his unwashed hair, his breath that is a mixture of onion and mint. I feel Om brush past my leg, continuing forward down the melting, blurry hill. I follow after her. The guard, whether or not he is the same guard, opens the gate for us. We proceed through melted canals of streets, her feet clicking on the ground with each step, my footsteps producing light thumps. I follow after her form, and after her scent. She had been beautiful before, with her sleek black coat, her expressive whiskers and long ears, her multitude of legs. I am delighted to find that she is beautiful again, with the scent of her fur drenched in the electric tingle of black magic, her breath smelling of the cooked rabbit that we feed the sleidr, but more deeply of the scent of her yellowed teeth, her gums, her tongue, her lungs, her throat, all healthy and well, all good, all sleidr, all Om. We find our way out of the city rivers and into the ocean world, and Om jumps in, and I follow after. I have seen her and many other priests and priestesses swim in a lake before, but had never known sleidr to put their heads under. She does, and I follow after, down into

the ocean, where I am surprised to find I can still smell, still breathe. I can no longer see, but I no longer feel I am missing much for it. I follow after the smell of Om's coat, and in time, I realize what we are following. Within me I hold the knowledge of the scents of five flowers, as distinct as five paintings by five masters, as distinct as the faces of my five closest friends, as distinct as five letters, as distinct as five numbers. We are following after the first one that Om ate to give to me. It was in the king's garden, but there is another, an entangled pair, somewhere far away, that we are swimming to.

When we arrive at it, we emerge from the world ocean. I lay heavy on the ground, splayed out, exhausted. Om walks to a flower bed and sniffs a patch of purple flowers. I look around, realize the current ineffectiveness of sight, and instead take big breaths in through my nose. Inhaling, we are surrounded by a multitude of grass, and there is corn growing here nearby. Exhale. Inhaling, there are chickens here, their waste so overpowering I'm surprised it hadn't come to me first, for now I can't ignore it, and everything else I smell is tinged with it. Exhale. Inhaling, there are horses as well, goats, sheep, and a small number of humans. Exhale. Inhaling, the scent of the humans is nearest, most present in the air, and we are in a flower garden just outside of their house on a farm. Exhale. Om lies down beside me. Nestled together, we sleep through the night.

In the morning, we resume our journey, diving back under. We continue on, five flowers, a day for each. We are not the only ones who swim. It is a populous ocean with schools of hares and termites. Above are the light thumps of millions of footsteps on the water's surface, packs of wolves, dens of foxes, colonies of mice. Each acre of forest, a city district. At the final flower, as I emerge from the ground, I feel a sadness, for my sense of smell has dulled to near uselessness, and my vision is restored, and the world is all solid again.

We are standing on a mountainside, somewhere cold. The sky is red with morning light. Down the mountain, there is an endless expanse of fir trees, broken up only by other mountains that rise too high for the firs to grow on. It feels a bit strange to me, remembering how crowded the forest was as we passed

under it, and now seeing not a soul from this vantage where we can see so far. A lone plant is nearby us, its single purple flower drooping. I look to my side, and find the priestess Om. She wags and barks at me. I kneel and hug her, rub her, bury my nose in her coat and take a big sniff. Up this close and with enough concentration, the scent it is at least an approximation of what it was before, at least enough to know that it had been real, the other world that the priestess had shown me.

“Lead the way,” I tell her.

She does.

We go around the mountainside, traveling down a ridge, then up another, my shoes crunching the snow underfoot. When we arrive at the crest of the ridge, I see the landscape beyond us and gasp. For miles and miles, as far as I can see from the mountainside, the world is charred black or in the process of burning. I look back at the expanse of forest, and forward at the expanse of inferno coming to claim it. The sky is not red with morning light. The sky is a reflection of a world engulfed.

Om continues forward down the next ridge. I follow after, but she turns and barks viciously at me, snarling. I am startled in the immediate moment, but I intuit that she is speaking practically, not emotionally: showing me a drop of venom so I will not dive into a sea of it. I stop where I am on the ridge. She continues on alone.

When she has reached the bottom of the next valley, she stops, sniffs the ground, and then raises her face to the sky and bellows out a howl. Even from afar I can feel my inner ears vibrating at the volume, and then underfoot, I can feel that the mountain is trembling. She howls and howls, and then all at once, lightning erupts from her and blankets the expanse of the mountaintop above us. She stops howling, the lightning goes away, and the mountaintop which once held snow now holds an immense conical lake, ready to flow outwards.

Om turns and sprints down the mountain valley, keeping just ahead of the flood that is rushing down after her. She makes it down to the forest and disappears into it, and the water follows after. I watch from the mountainside all day as a new river is carved through the forest, cutting off the burning land from the unburnt. By evening, Om has made it to the next mountain. I

faintly hear Om howl, and I see lightning flash over this mountaintop too, bringing water down its side, drawing a complete river to stand between the mountains, a barrier for the fire.

I set off down the mountainside, and follow the river all night.

As the morning sun is rising, I arrive at a clearing in the forest. In the center, there is a sleidr, splayed out on her side, asleep. Her coat is a patchwork of white and light browns, and has no gleam to it. I approach her. I bury my nose in her side, and inhale deeply. This is her. Her tail begins thumping against the ground as she wags. I nestle in beside Om, and we rest all through the day and night. The magic is drained from her coat, but she is still a swift hunter by her corporeal merits alone, and she presents me with rabbits throughout the day. I get a small fire going, and cook them for us. Aside from eating and sleeping, we pass the time sitting around, her sniffing the air, me petting her as I try to discern what the priestess smells. Sometime in the night, the inferno arrives at the river, and the river holds, and the fire burns through its remaining fuel and is gone, leaving an immense realm of charred ground behind it, but now finished, at least.

I tell the priestess Om that she has done well, and she appears pleased.

The next morning, we begin the long walk back.

POEMS

38 Haiku About Dogs

i

Summer: sniffing grass
Scent an unseen mystery
Winter: footprints shown

ii

The smell of dog feet
Beloved to more than pervers
It is transcendent

iii

Awakening warm
Happy, everything is good
Face in doggy fur

iv

Between desk and chair
Diligent companion's post
Head asleep on foot

v

New pleasure one night
Leaves much research to be done
With furred assistant

vi

Curious intent
A wagging tail is lifted
To sniff a dog's butt

vii

Human lies awake
Dog hops onto the bed too
Together they snore

viii

Green sprouts up from dirt
Esoteric dream from rest
Boyfriend from dog food

ix

Dog squats on the grass
Yesterday it was liquid
Glad to pick up shit

x

Crossroads on a walk
Dog insists on the long path
Dog lover obeys

xi

Dog lies smug on back
O ye of infinite chest
A belly is rubbed

xii

hghagh, auauau, oghhh
Interspecies sarcasm
Teasing words of love

xiii

Calm night in July
Suddenly exploding sky
Dogs justly displeased

xiv

A visitor knocks
Arrarrarrarrarrarrarr
Welcoming tail wags

xv

Dog spits out carrots
Empathy across species
Vegan cooks him steak

xvi

Under large blankets
Face buried in softest fur
Snuggling dog butts

xvii

Do you want some food?
Do you wanna mess around?
At last, tail says yes

xviii

Picture book on Danes
Repressed culture is revealed
Not one cookie shown

xix

Cross-species threesome
Film captures the friendship here
Dog smells sadly gone

xx

Dog relieves himself
Taste of yellow snow is learned
A worthy snow cone

xxi

Circle circle pause
Circle circle circle pause
Poop spot will be found

xxii

A pizza is watched
Six inch line of drool hangs
Slobber looks tasty

xxiii

Small vanilla cone
One soft taco, only meat
Sharing human's fries

xxiv

Human mad at screen
Dog asks human to drop it
Dog is right; they walk

xxv

Human walks with dog
Something in the dark woods stirs
All freeze and listen

xxvi

Dead thing found on road
Human sees it, but too late
Dog wins this time: *munch*.

xxvii

Human flops around
Inebriated kisses
Dog's tongue is the world

xxviii

Dog is up early
Grumpy human, needed, stirs
Pre-dawn sky serene

xxix

Walking down the hall
Dog puts nose to neighbor's door
Sniff. Sniff. Sniff. Okay

xxx

Juice, coffee, toothpaste
Sometimes dog kisses to kiss
Other times, to taste

xxxi

Anticipation
The tags are all taken off
New toy for the dog

xxxii

Mud rinsed down the drain
Dog leans into towel rubs
Dry and happy friend

xxxiii

Big dog passes gas
Non zoos roar about disgust
Zoo at first confused

xxxiv

Stomach makes noises
Salad of grass to puke out
Upset will settle

xxxv

Lickjob in mirror
All proportions stand naked
Contrast hides in rhyme

xxxvi

Hand on the sheath rubs
Hidden anatomy shown
Beautiful secret

xxxvii

At last the birds sing
The bright sun again does warm
Long walks can return

xxxviii

Trotting and halting
Dog teaches human patience
Do not yank the leash

Twilight Forest

There is, in the Land of Nod, a pleasant enough forest
where it is eternally twilight.

Warm, dim hues creep their fingers around the trees and across
the grass.

Come: let us go there,
away from cars and concrete,
away from the faintly screeching electrical pulses of
motherboards and gadgets,
away from screens,
away from bright lights and obligations to keep up with things
to the second,
away from here, away from time, let us go away.

Out in the twilight forest, there is a presentness of being.

You press your hand to the tall trunk of a tree,
pushing your palm as hard or as soft as you like against the
bark,

and the tree does not move, it does not break.

It is, and it will be, if you let it.

Lying on your belly and pressing your face to the ground, the
grass smells like grass.

The dirt smells like dirt.

You spot a weed and pull it up, root and all, out from among the
grass and dirt.

Holding the root to your face, soil pressing against your upper
lip and your chin,

you inhale, and the soil smells even more of soil this close up to
it.

Setting the weed down, you get up slowly onto your hands and
knees,

and then get up farther, and stand fully upright.

Your breathing is not rushed here:

You take deep, helpful breaths as slowly as you like to.

You take a step, and in the bones of your foot,
your ankle, your knee, your thigh,

you feel the endearing weight of your body against the weight of
the rest of the planet pushing back, holding you up:
steadiness beyond steadiness, it will never, ever drop you.
As you walk, you wear a blanket over your shoulders like a cape.
Whatever else you wear, or don't wear, is up to you.
No one will mind here.
As you walk, you walk in whatever shape of being you would like
to.
Maybe a dog, maybe a human, maybe an ant, maybe a rock,
maybe a bush.
Maybe something in between.
You are what you like to be, male, or female, or some of both, or
something of neither.

The air becomes pleasantly cooler as up ahead, there is a gently
trickling stream which you are approaching.
It is felt and heard a while before it is seen.
When you arrive, it is as though arriving at the side of a tunnel.
This tunnel is made of the gentle stream at foot,
dim tree trunks to each side,
and a meshwork blanket of branches and leaves overhead,
through which you can see the sky.
From where, and to what end, does this tunnel lead?
You walk along on the bank of the gentle stream, seeking to
know.

I Did Take Care Of Him After For The Record

The other day we had the air conditioning on
and so I missed
when my dog grunted and huffed
and rolled over
asking for a belly rub
but I did happen to turn around at some point
and see a gremlin on the bed
halfway between presenting his belly and lying down on his side
again,
his limbs bunched up but also splayed,
his jowls shown,
his eyes wild
and staring directly at me
me
who had missed his belly rub demands
in the noise.

In that moment still, he was beautiful.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 3;

MARCH 2023.

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

*Featuring the stories: Gradient, Aliyah, Madeline, Four
Candles, Five of Cups Covers Ten of Swords, and Stedl
and Dragons, as well as a few poems.*

GRADIENT

“...Four, A, nine, nine, two, C, two, F, F, F, F.”

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

“Acknowledged. Thank you kindly.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Val is fine,” I say, and extend a hand.

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

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

“Got the cargo?” she asks.

“I do.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I love it,” she says.

“*Thank you!*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blindness

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

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

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

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

Within one of these balls is nothing.

“Oh. Oh wow.”

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

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

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

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

“Please.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Holy *shit*."

I snicker.

"Are you a movie person?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh word?"

I snicker. "Yeah."

"What are your pronouns?"

"She-her."

"Whatcha packin'?"

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

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

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

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

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

"He won't mind waiting out here."

"Yeah okay."

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

"Can you feel this?"

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

"How long have you had them?"

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

"How much were they?"

I name the price.

She whistles. "Is that why you still have..."

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

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

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

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

I rest my head against hers. "Oh?"

In an even fainter whisper, she says, "I'm... I'm not entirely cis either."

"Oh! What are... would you tell me about it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Without a doubt I would, and I tell her so. "If they tell you no I'll kick their butts."

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

I pull a blanket over us.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“That sounds adorable.”

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

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

“Hey, works for me.”

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

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

“This isn’t a scheme to steal Aleksey’s ears, is it?”

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

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

Back in the reception area, Nina and I hug.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Please do,” she says.

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

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

“Sorry.”

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

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

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

“Aw.”

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

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

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

“Okay?”

“I saw you don’t have any dishes.”

She nods.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hormones.”

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

“I want the nose next,” she tells me.

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

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

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

"And the hormones help?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hm?"

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

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

"Oh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you know?” I ask.

She wags. “I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What did you have in mind?”

“I’m worried you’re not going to like it.”

I feel I know what’s coming. I kiss her dog mouth. “What is it?”

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

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

“I care. A lot.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How was it?" she asks.

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

She wags.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I am startled; it's been so long since I heard my name from her. "What's wrong?"

"I am a dog?"

"Yes."

She looks down at her hands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ALIYAH, MADELINE, FOUR CANDLES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Play something!"

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

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

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

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

"What, dear?"

"Let him do the show!"

"Does he know our songs?"

I look at him.

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

"That was really good though," I tell him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jess looks to him, and asks, "Screw?"

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

"Cheat?"

He pulls a cross necklace out from his shirt collar.

"Ugh."

He gets off at his floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“AH!” I say.

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

I stand frozen in the doorway.

Aliyah beckons me over.

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

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

I nod.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Just the dogs.”

“Dogs?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What happened to you?” I ask.

She frowns. “I got super murdered.”

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

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

“I’ll kill the bastard.”

“Yeah, so, like I said.”

I snarl.

We sit quiet for a little while.

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

Anything. “Go on.”

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

I am listening.

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

I look at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I apologize. We keep driving.

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

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

“Thank you,” she says.

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

“You too, when you do.”

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

FIVE OF CUPS COVERS TEN OF SWORDS

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

“Any twos, Hardigar?” Roan asked.

“Go fish, Roan.”

“Meh.” Roan drew.

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

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

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

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

“Got anyyy fours, Hardigar?”

Roan snickered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her nose twitched and her tail flicked agreeably.

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

"One more?" Syl asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Very slowly, he lowered her towards the table, saying, "Easy, almost there, almooost..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Syl looked down, pondered it, and then nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

"Something wrong?"

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

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

Roan growled. "No," he said.

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

Roan growled again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—

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

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

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

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

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

"I can smell them, can I not?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man sneered. "I've killed larger vermon than you, degenerate."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hardigar, you—"

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

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

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

“Howdy,” I said to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Easy enough,” I said, and then extended a hand.

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

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

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

“To where?” I wondered aloud.

Hardigar gave a big shrug.

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

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

I shrugged. “I don’t have anything.”

“Yeah, alright. Come along then.”

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

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

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

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

“Got any twos, Syl?” I asked.

“Go fish, Hermit,” she answered.

“Got any twos, Hermit?” Hardigar asked.

“Maybe,” I said, and then handed my twos over.

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

“Go fish, Hardigar.”

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

On Meesn’s turn, she asked, “Are you cheating, Meses?”

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

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

“Didn’t your mother teach you not to play with your food?”

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

“Yes.”

“And an agent of the crown, by the looks of it. Ledonia’s finest.”

“Yes.”

“Any good stories?”

“I don’t imagine you would appreciate the protagonist in them.”

“Try us.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meses looked at them with dead eyes.

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

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

All hands in the room shot up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hardigar turned to his clanmates, and asked, “Good?”

“Good,” they all responded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm getting the impression I won't be eating any mutton here."

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

Hardigar poked his head up from behind the mare. "What's the hurry?"

Roan gave his answer facing me: "I've learned who you are."

"What?" I asked. "How?"

"Meses, your captor, informed me."

"What, some document hidden on his person, or—"

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

"Oh. Oh I see."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Go on."

"Where to begin!"

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

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

"I do. Go on."

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

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

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

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

“I don’t imagine so.”

Hardigar groaned, and hung his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Tell her yourself,” came the felian’s response.

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

I called again to Hardigar. “Show me how to say hello.”

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

the ramp, Temperance began to turn away, but Hardigar gave her a shushing sound and kept his hands on her. She stood in place as I approached, and stood beside the cat.

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

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

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

"That is hurtful but fair."

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

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

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

"Ah."

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

"Can I say hi to Page?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

I believe I could see the mocking words assembling themselves on Hardigar's tongue, standing ready at a

milisecond's notice to be deployed, but if such words did in fact come to his mind, he did not say them. After a few seconds of looking into my eyes, he said, "It is not a foolish question, but it is a question which is trying to assert its existence in a framework that will not hold it. She is my love and my world and she is aggressively fond of me as well, but we do not live in a framework of contracts."

I nodded, and released the bottle of wine.

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

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

"Do you have no monogamous arrangement, prince?"

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

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

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

"Having fun?" I asked.

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

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

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

"So I would be taking advantage of you."

Hardigar squinted harder and asked louder, "WHAT?"

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

"Your judgment is impaired."

"My judgment is impaired on purpose!"

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

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

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

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

“I... don’t honestly know how to begin to consider that.”

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

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

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

I looked down at him. “What?”

“Maybe that’s Genevieve you’re eating.”

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

“She was a *friend*, prince.”

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

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

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

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

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

As the mural expanded outwards left and right, we saw depictions of scenes within Kon Kell, identifiable from the

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

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

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

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

“Goodbye, Roan,” Hardigar said.

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh. I see.”

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

Hardigar began marching off into the woods.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Lead the way, prince.”

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

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

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

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

After passing through one particular grate, the stonework became quite noticeably nicer, and as we went deeper from here, the offensive odor lessened. I paused at a particular door, opened it, and peered inside.

"This storage room may be a suitable place for the horses to stay while we attend to our business here."

"Are we near to our destination?" Hardigar asked.

"Yes, just a few more turns."

"Very well."

We brought the horses in. Before we departed, Hardigar gave Page a kiss and a hug. Then we shut the door behind us, and proceeded.

Shortly, we came upon a long passageway with an oakwood door at the end. "This is it," I said. "Princess Koreine awaits me behind that door."

With that, I felt Hardigar's cutlass pierce my back. I fumbled for my own dagger, but he reached forward and drew it from my sheath before I could, and I soon found the dagger planted into the side of my neck. I fell to the ground, and in a cold rush of wind, my spirit left my body.

As a ghost, I hovered behind Hardigar as he knelt over my murdered corpse, offering an explanation to its deaf ears.

"Rest assured, a sacrifice will still be made behind that door, prince. But as a matter of practicality for reasons you will soon see, I must ensure that I am the one who makes it. I, too, am descendant from the Orangetree Coronation, though I found myself a convert to Essera when I grew old enough to insist on having a mind of my own. I only narrowly escaped the battle in which she was killed. Since then, I have died of starvation once and old age twice. I spent some very formative years working in slaughterhouses, trying to find sustenance among those whose fates were already sealed anyways. But I could not last long there. The disrespect that I witnessed... what we saw in Roan's mural, what takes place above our very heads right now in Kon Kell, is a drop in the ocean of the cruelty that I have already seen committed in Hondland and Ledonia alike. I will save what of Ledonia I can, but I will not allow its people to return to inflicting the same heartless slaughter on my people that they

now find inflicted on themselves. I have lived a greedy life: this is the generous end I have lived it to, remaining gods willing.”

With that, he stood, and walked past my corpse to the oakwood door at the end of the hall. Ethereal and silent I followed after him, making sure that my final business was attended to, even if it was to take a different shape than I had imagined.

Hardigar opened the door into the hidden study below the castle. Princess Koreine, who had been sat reading a book, shot to her feet and poised a dagger ready to throw at the unexpected felian.

“Easy, princess,” Hardigar said, showing his empty hands. “I come belatedly to be sacrificed in Prince Auren’s stead.” He kicked the oakwood door shut behind himself.

Her brow furrowed. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Prince Gamund of Hondland, long and somewhat accurately thought to be dead. I stand here in hopes that my five remaining lives will be an adequate substitute for the one life that Prince Auren intended to sacrifice.”

“By Denirstis’s light, it really is you isn’t it?” Koreine lowered her dagger, and walked across the study to the felian. “May I?” she asked.

Hardigar held out his hand.

Koreine used her dagger to make a slight cut on his hand, and held a crystal under the drop of blood that first pooled together and fell. When the blood hit the crystal, the crystal let out a resonant hum, and then shattered and fell away into glistening shards and dust.

“You will indeed suffice,” Koreine said. “You may, in fact, be overpaying in your sacrifice by an amount that I’m not sure I can fathom.”

She took the felian by the wrist and lead him to the center of the study, where an immense pentagram was made on the floor in white flowers. Hardigar stopped outside of the circle, and would not budge.

“I must insist on seeing the spell,” he said.

Dismayed, the princess stopped pulling him but did not release his wrist. “Minutes wasted are lives lost.”

“So it goes.”

The princess scoffed, and released him to go retrieve a scroll. She handed it to him.

He unrolled it and read it over, line by line as a minute went by. When he reached the end, he shook his head and brought the scroll to the desk. He began preparing a pen to write with.

"Excuse me!" Koreine said, and marched after him. "By the gods, what *do* you think you're doing?"

"By the rules of the good magic you invoke here, I must agree to the spell for which I sacrifice myself. Yes?"

"Yes."

"I will not agree to this as written."

"How in the world could you not! It states nothing other than the freeing of Ledonia's people from the bondage of demons!"

"By Essera, may her name never be forgotten, I'm afraid the freeing of Ledonia's people is not the unqualified good that you think it is. May I, princess?" he asked, holding the pen poised over the page.

The princess tapped her foot anxiously, and then nodded. "Very well."

The felian spoke the words aloud as he wrote them down. "From hence forth among the human species, whenever one kills a member of the animal kingdom, whether by hand or by word, no matter how justified, that human shall witness one of their fingers turn to dust for each life that they take, until such a time as they have no fingers remaining, at which time they shall die."

The princess kept her reply brief. "No."

"Enjoy your slaughtered kingdom then." Hardigar knocked the crystalline inkwell off of the desk, shattering it on the floor, and stood and began towards the oakwood door.

"It's not that I object," Koreine said.

This caught Hardigar's attention, and he stopped before the door.

"It will not hold. A banishment I can do at great cost. You ask for the divine."

"You are in the presence of the divine, princess," he said, and then stepped up onto a pantomimed stepstool, and turned to face the princess while standing in the air. "Essera is killed, but her divinity lingers in a few of us yet."

Koreine bit her lip, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot. “Get onto the pentagram,” she said.

Hardigar did as asked. Koreine retrieved the scroll.

With words read and a dagger pierced five times through an old cat’s heart, the shape of the world was changed.

STEDL AND DRAGONS

Stedl stood and watched in sorrow as the parade of knights marched through the main street of Holmfast. Those around him cheered or stood in quiet awe, but if a single other soul shared his misgivings to the knights, they were out of his sight. Three knights—one at the head of the procession, one in the body, and one at the tail—carried ten foot tall poles, atop which were enormous meat hooks, skewered onto each of which was the green scaled head of a dragon. The eldest dragon that the knights had killed was still a youngling. The youngest, Stedl doubted it was older than three years.

Stedl steeled himself and approached one of the knights on the periphery. “Ho there.”

“Liven ye, fellow!” the knight encouraged, stopping to speak with the somber man.

“Tell me the tale,” Stedl asked, looking up to a dragon head to indicate he meant the murders.

The knight happily indulged with an animated speech, which drew a crowd around Stedl to listen and watch with him. “The accursed endassium mines of Herdra are accursed no longer! Under the blessing of Sah and with the wisdom of our Good King Hest, two score of we knights marched a fortnight and a day from Tellan to Herdra. There we saw that the legend was true: that the mines from which our grandfathers drew out endassium had fallen to the hold of monsters! All the buildings of the town, once homes and shops and churches, smashed to pieces under their wickedly stepping claws! We knights tarried

not, but advanced upon the foul beasts! With slash of blade and sting of arrow, we felled not just these three dragons you see today, but a dozen more which are now parading north and east and west of Herdra! Praise be to Sah! Glory be to the Good King Hest!”

The knight lifted his begauntleted fist into the air, and Stedl’s neighbors cheered. Stedl’s sorrow had only deepened as the knight had spoken, but the knight had long since moved on from speaking only at Stedl.

Without a word or gesture, Stedl turned and left. He could have said much: *They are not fearsome because they are evil. They are fearsome because you are evil, and they are powerful and good.* He could have gone on a long, long while, if he were still youthful, still under the impression that any such sentiment would not be falling on deaf ears.

He returned to his home at the outskirts of town, near the bank of a river, built there himself with the help of his then-new neighbors. He walked slowly, his aching knees fussing that they had long since served their purpose, let us rest now, we have served you a full life and then some.

When he arrived home, he sat in a rocking chair before his unlit fireplace, rocking and staring blankly at the dim stonework. His mind’s eye was racing. In his mind’s eye, he was climbing up into his attic, dusting off chain mail, restringing a bow, and buckling on his quiver. He was stalking after the knights, and one by one he was picking them off as they split from their formation to relieve themselves or to search for those who were mysteriously absent, until before they realized it, they were few in number, and then none.

But with his age and the life he had lived, he begrudgingly knew better.

Do not tempt revenge, he sat and thought. Do not create martyrs.

As the day was waning, Stedl lit his fireplace, lighted a lantern, and ventured up into the attic. He drew out his old equipment and laid it out before the fire, examining each piece. The pack, the tent, the boots, the tinderbox... On the whole, it had held up better than he had. He sorted his equipment, packed his pack, and then he went to sleep.

Before the sun had risen in the morning, Stedl was standing, his armor donned, his bow strung, his pack upon his shoulders and waist. He stepped out of his door and began on the road northward, toward Herdra.

Midday, while kneeling over a stream to drink, the man's reflection in the water caught him. Looking back at him was a face with wrinkles set into dark skin, and a short beard that was more grey than black. It was strange, bordering on inaccurate, to say that this was the same face as that of a man who had been taken by a dragon as a husband, long, long ago.

The old man took his drink from the stream. He then stood and continued marching on. It was three more days to Herdra. Perhaps four or five if his knees did not get on board with the idea of the journey.

Each night in his tent, before he could begin falling asleep, Stedl laid and stared at the tent's ceiling, casting his mind back thirty, forty years. Back to a young man who barely looked like him anymore. Back to the clifflands of Venderra, and a big red lizard. He couldn't keep the thoughts in any order, and even when he tried to recall the timelines of what had lead into what, it was as though there were no such conceit as causality, but rather that each fragment of memory was its own atomic existence. In one flash, the young man and the dragon were sitting in a canyon across a campfire from each other, the young man cooking, the dragon lying flat with her chin on the ground yet still looming over him. In one flash, he was helping unpack crates of clothing and food from off her back, delivering them to a camp of refugees from a flooded city, and then riding atop her back as the wind stung his face on the return journey to make the route yet another time. In one flash, he was kneeling on a hill aiming an arrow, when from the corner of his eye, he saw her struck by a mortar, and then watched her spiraling down, and by the time he could make it through the battlefield to her, she had been killed, and he felt at once in his heart that no creature deserved to die again as long as the world should turn, and also that no revenge would be great enough to make up for the loss of her. In one flash, she was humoring him in letting him examine the fractal complexity of the writing of dragons, not imagining that he would actually be the first human not to

dismiss it as impossible for humans to learn. In one flash, they were in a dark and safe place, falling asleep chest to chest, heart to heart, breath to breath.

It was five days' journey to Herdra. When he arrived, he found the town to be in more or less the condition that the knights had described. Every building was smashed down. Hardly anything in the township stood taller than the man's line of sight. The town was quiet save for the wind blowing against the ruins. There was not a soul up here except for Stedl.

He made his way through the town, past the fallen churches and shops and homes, and over to the mine entrances. There, he lit a lantern, and proceeded in.

It was a long and cold way down. As he marched, he wondered whether his magical talents had left him over the years. They had fallen into disuse, and he would not blame them for going away. He stopped, turned, and raised his free hand. With a tide of force, gravel on the ground began rolling up the tunnel slope. Stedl smiled a little, and resumed his journey downward. As if his talents had only needed a nudge to get started, he soon began to smell the sting of endessium. He followed the odor down and down, and as the tunnels branched out, he followed the smell of the magical rocks, until arriving at a dead end, a slope of loose rocks from ground to ceiling. Stedl picked up a rock, and saw with confidence that it was mined with teeth, not picks. He began casting the rocks aside, freeing up the passage. When he had cleared enough at the ceiling to crawl through, he did crawl so through, lantern first, into the dragon's hutch. Inside, atop a nest of endessium pebbles, was a green egg as tall as Stedl.

Stedl sat himself down on the slope that descended toward the egg, and looked at it by the lanternlight. All at once, he was relieved there was a survivor, and distraught for the loss that he or she had suffered before they had so much as committed the crime of hatching.

With the family of dragons murdered to make way for industry, the king's men would be back before much longer. Stedl crawled back out of the hutch and set about repairing a covered rickshaw from the town above, to bring the dragon to a safer home.

POEMS

Untitled Peradventure

And if, peradventure, Sodom was not so wicked after all.

The Black and the Irish made subhuman so those who enslaved
them were morally unscuffed.

Homophiles made pedophiles so those who felt their
institutions threatened could hunker down

And close their eyes and ears again

To the pain that their institutions

Whether blindly or pointedly

Had caused.

Peradventure the past is not made of monsters

It is made of cowards.

Peradventure there are cowards today.

Deference

You sniff the dumpsters when we walk by them
which is fair:
there's probably a lot
of interesting stuff in there to smell.

When we're walking
and you eat something off the ground
with a gross "crunch" sound
I do try to remind myself,
within reason,
that you know better than me
what it is
that made you want to snack on ground food.

If I found a black bean quesarito
sitting on the curb
still in its wrapping,
still warm,
I would at least be tempted.

And anyways,
realistically,
by the time I try to stop you,
you have usually already won,
started to swallow,
and all that's accomplished by my intervening
is that I seem like I'm being an asshole.

So you, this time,
whatever it is you see or smell,
enjoy.

Deference 2

it is fascinating and meaningful to me when you get to lead the
way
not just choosing at an intersection whether we go left, right, or
straight ahead
but when I fully follow
and you fully choose
going around and round a park over the same patch of space in
every conceivable fashion of diagonals
nose to the ground
following something (I don't know what, but I know that you do)
for as long as it takes
it is strangely easy these days to forget what is the real world
and what isn't
I would do well to remember always that that moment with you
is the real world

Reciprocal Amplification

We take care of each other, you and I.

I give you food

You give me a happy reason

to get out of bed every morning.

I give you water

You give me perspective

on the world

when we go outside to walk.

I give you a cool room to sleep in in the summer

and a cool room to sleep in in the winter

You give me a warm belly to snuggle up into

when I need that.

We also get each other off pretty often

And we share a sense of humor.

This morning when I woke up feeling like shit

It all turned around when I had a glass of water

and then I got down on the carpet with you

you wagging happy boy

and I shared wet kisses with the best person in my day to day

life

an awesome dog who likes to make out with me

and who I like to make out with him a lot too.

A gladness filled my entire being

pushing out all else

at getting to revel in your affections

and to give affections to you in the same measure.

Meditation

Sitting on the dock with my pal on this lakey night,
meditation occurs.

I am sitting on my ass
hunched over

my elbows resting on my knees
my hands clasped together before myself,
holding this compact bundle of self together tightly.

My weight bears down on my lower back
and on the backmost portion of my ass,
the part of flesh which I sit on.

It has rained earlier today
and the dock is wet.

The ass of my pants is wet.

My body weight and the planks of the dock hug one another.

In front of me is my dog,

my friend,

my boyfriend,

my mate,

my lover of countless designations.

I can tell just by looking at him how it would feel
to reach out and pet him;

exactly how it would feel, down to every intimate discernible
detail

texture, give, smoothity;

I gave him four handjobs in the last fifteen minutes,
one at each of his favorite places in these woods hereabout.

He was feeling eager tonight.

He sniffs the air;

I'm glad for him.

Soon enough I give in to his alluring aura

and lay down on my side alongside him—

who gives a damn if my shirt gets damp on the rain-moist
dock—

and I respectfully pet his back

and watch as he continues to sniff,

picking up scents that

as he slightly turns his head and faces his nose and eyes

I can at least pick up on the direction of
and try to guess what he's found,
unearthed as it were,
in the air around our post at the edge of this lake.
At some point something worries him—
some sound, some disturbance.
I ask if he wants to go back inside.
He licks his lips to say yes.
I stand up.
With stiff joints he stands too, and leads the way.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 4;

APRIL 2023.

In this issue,
the spirits of a man and a horse share the same body,
and a dog lover comes out to his estranged friend.

Featuring the stories: The Dethroning of Vermilion Von Scaldis, The Immortal of Loch Anneth, and Melvin, Lilly, Raspberry Whiskey, as well as Specifications for the Zoocosmologica Deck and a few poems.

THE DETHRONING OF VERMILION VON SCALDIS

Cahsn held their hand over the block of pitch crystal, feeling for any lingering heat. Finally, to all perception, it was an appreciable deal cooler than the rest of the stifling workshop. With something of a curtsy, Cahsn bent down and whispered the release word: All at once, the black crystalline prism fell to ashes, leaving in a nest of themselves a silvery implement with two tongs and a handle.

Delicately, Cahsn picked up the channeler from the heap of ashes. Walking over to the window, they brushed away the soot on a portion of the pane with a work cloth, and in the afternoon daylight inspected the device closely. No visible faults anywhere on the surface. A good sign so far.

They walked to a workbench, took a deep breath, and centered themselves. With hopeful intention, they struck the channeler against the edge of the bench: As the channeler hummed, they held their other hand beside it, making the old elven hand sign for listening. Across the fingernails of their little, ring, middle, and index fingers, written in obsidian mite wax, were the symbols for knowledge, love, wellness, and material, with the symbol for divinity added somewhat tokenistically on the thumb: None here had felt divinity resonate in over a century. The fact that it did not resonate now was no cause for surprise, and did not give a sinking feeling to Cahsn's stomach. What did was the complete lack of resonance in material. Still hopeful but no longer optimistic, Cahsn struck the channeler against the workbench again, and again made the

listening sign beside it with their other hand. Again, the fingernails of knowledge, love, and wellness hummed loudly, while again the fingernails of divinity and material stayed mute.

“Oh dear,” Cahsn said to themselves.

“I don’t like the sound of that!” Filra called.

Considering that the spectresmith was pumping a noisy bellows to feed a noisier furnace and that he was entirely across the room from his dispirited apprentice, Cahsn was impressed that the man had managed to hear the disappointing utterance at all.

After giving the bellows a few more pumps, Filra came over to see the problem. He took the offered channeler, struck it against the workbench, and held it beside his other hand.

“Oh dear indeed,” he said, after a moment. He glanced up at the portion of the window that had been cleaned of soot, and judged the time. “You’ll have to hurry and fetch whatever they’ve dug up so far. Take S’lel to—”

He caught his tongue: the stallion had been needed at the fields that day, and had been lent out.

The spectresmith muttered to himself, and then to Cahsn only repeated, “You’ll have to hurry.”

Cahsn nodded, replaced their apron for a satchel, and swiftly made their exit of the workshop—the air outside was rejuvenatingly crisp.

Fortunately, a strong wind that day was towards the mines. Cahsn held their arms out to either side, fell forward, and let a gust of wind catch them, with which they began sprinting along the wind’s currents, their feet as one with the air. To any who saw them pass by, they would likely only perceive a troupe of leaves blowing past, the same deep and pure hue of green as the spectresmith apprentice’s hair.

Ten obelisks surrounded the town. Each day, at the fields, an immense pit was filled with wheat harvest, or if there wasn’t enough harvest to fill the pit, then the equivalent value in blood was thrown in. With this sacrifice, the druid who lived on the castle on the hill outside of town would activate the protective obelisks that surrounded the town for another night. If activated, the obelisks kept out the malevolent forest spirits who lurked in these bleak woods. If not activated... Cahsn had seen

what happened when they were not activated only once. They would not see it again if anything in the world could be done to help it.

Cahsn stopped their run at the mouth of the mine, and pleasantly accosted T'nahk who happened to be standing just there.

The forewoman sputtered out an old curse that was unfamiliar to Cahsn, and then crossed her arms and squared her stance against the visiting eighth elf.

"Good tidings, I hope," she joked.

"Someday," they lied. "But on this day, I find myself in haste and must be curt: How fares the spectracite yield this morning?"

"Cahsn, no," T'nahk moaned.

"T'nahk, please: I don't ask it for the pleasure of asking."

T'nahk sighed. "Four ounces that've been processed."

"I'll need that entire yield."

T'nahk's fists balled up for a moment, but then the forewoman let them go limp again. "If you take it, we'll be here late into the night to make up our quota for tomorrow. Do you truly need all four ounces now?"

"Yes. Though none could have known until after the enchantment was attempted, the yield you delivered this morning was, unfortunately, a dud."

"Okay," T'nahk said, and nodded. "For the record, if I find out this is all because you messed up with perfectly good spectracite, I'll have your hands."

"I think we'd all be in a bad way if we found ourselves short anyone's hands these days."

"True. I mark you're right about that."

T'nahk turned and went down into the mines.

Cahsn stood outside, arms crossed, the breeze rustling their hair. On the wind, Cahsn could smell the scent of the fields nearby, hay and manure.

T'nahk emerged from the mines with a small wooden box in one hand, and a horse's lead in the other hand—the horse walking beside on the other end of that lead was a mare named Red.

"Take her, and speed ye merry."

Cahsn curtsied and kissed T'nahk's hand in the old way of thanks, and then fluttered onto Red, took the wooden box of spectracite from T'nahk, and began back towards the workshop as quickly as the mare would take them.

When they arrived, Cahsn lighted off the mare, wished her well in whatever further ventures the remainder of the day had in wait for her, gave an appreciative kiss to the side of her mouth, and then went into the workshop and opened up the box.

It was late into the evening by the time another channeler was completed. But when Cahsn struck it against the edge of the workbench, this one hummed on the fingernails of knowledge, love, wellness, and material in equal and resonant measure. It would work.

Filra stood looking out of the soot-free portion of the window. He muttered, "Gods there isn't much time left."

"Then I shant stay us further by talking about it," Cahsn said. On the workbench before them was the channeler that they had made, and six talismans that Filra had made over the same period of time. Cahsn packed the seven objects into their satchel, which, somewhat specialized for carrying these very things day after day after day, had seven pockets of appropriate size stitched in—the pockets had been stitched in by Meuric, their clandestine sweetheart who was better at the delicate crafts than most would have guessed by looking at him.

With their satchel, Cahsn departed the workshop once more, and was pleasantly surprised to see Red waiting outside: Red in turn was happy to see Cahsn, and approached gaily.

"It's like you like me or something," Cahsn said, giving the mare a few strokes in greeting before hopping onto her back. "You know the way?"

Red clicked her hooves on the ground a few times, and stood in place.

"It's alright. I'll show you," Cahsn said, and spurred the mare forward down the packed-dirt street.

One by one, Cahsn and Red made their way to the six obelisks around the perimeter of the town, each one marking the border between the town and the hazy woods beyond. In a recess in each stone's face, Cahsn placed one of the newly made

talismans, until each talisman had found his home in one of the obelisks.

The hour was drawing late as Cahsn and Red sped towards the fields to deliver the channeler. As they drew near to the farm, they saw that a collection of a dozen stood around the sacrificial pit with torches: The pit, a thirty foot by thirty foot by thirty foot cube in the ground, was already filled with wheat, and most of the farm hands who had filled it had already gone home. Among those who still stayed were Kohnahsk who was the head of the farm, and Meuric who was a farm hand and Cahsn's honey.

Cahsn wasted no time with pleasantries: they flew from Red's back before waiting for her to stop, dashed with the wind across the surface of the pit, stirring up blades of wheat on the way, and struck and dropped the channeler onto the center of the pit. When they came to the other side, they stood beside Meuric, and caught their breath.

The crackle of torches and the hum of the channeler filled the air. Then, a flash of lightning came so silent that it sucked the noise from all else: in a massive arc overhead, lightning connected a tower of the druid's distant castle to the spectracite of the channeler at hand. Before the eyes of Cahsn and the farmers, every blade of wheat in the pit vanished, and the lightning ceased. The charred sides of the pit smoldered and smoked. A moment later, the sound of the crackling of torches returned.

All eyes watched the druid's tower. For a while, nothing occurred, and Cahsn wondered if they could have done more, worked with unworkable metal, gone a hair faster than fastest, coerced T'nahk any more expeditiously than curtly.

But at last, six arcs of lightning blasted silently forth from the druid's tower, aimed at the six obelisks around the town. They were safe another night. Around the sacrificial pit, a collective exhalation was made.

Most of those who had still lingered began trudging away. Cahsn, Meuric, and Kohnahsk remained, as well as Red, who came trotting back up to Cahsn and stopped at the eighth elf's side. The eighth elf put a hand on the mare, to say that they were aware of her, and appreciative.

Kohnahsk approached the spectresmith apprentice and their company. “Cutting it rather close today, miss,” she said.

Cahsn did not bite, flagrant as the bait was. “Do you need anything else of me, miss?”

The widow flinched.

Cahsn *did* bite *somewhat*.

“The next time we need to throw a living person into the pit,” Kohnahsk began, and then gave a grim look to Cahsn, and turned and trudged away.

With all eyes off of them, Meuric entangled his fingers around Cahsn’s, and gave their hand a squeeze. The farm hand had a comeliness to him that not everyone seemed to see, but very often the man’s understated demeanor had the eighth elf feeling quite flustered. The man leaned his head against theirs and let out a whinny of dejecting Kohnahsk and appreciating Cahsn.

Cahsn felt tingles down their back, and gave a kiss to Meuric’s cheek. They then mounted onto Red, and offered their partner a hand up. Meuric took it, and sat behind Cahsn. The two of them rode at a slow walk back towards the workshop. Cahsn told Meuric of the day they had had; later into the ride, Meuric found his human spirit presenting, and stopped with the horse noises to talk about his day in turn. It had been an exhausting day for the both of them, and the partners were glad to have it behind them, and have the rest of the night to themselves.

—

Quite some years earlier, in a city well beyond the hazy woods, a man named Amadric, a cobbler’s assistant by trade, stood at a canvas, in a study that he did not belong at in the dead of night, on the seventeenth floor of a twenty floor tower. His means of entry had been that he looked rather like the nephew of the noble who owned the tower, and if he held himself right and proceeded as though he were at home, the guards would not stop him. He had come to this tower on winter nights when his own loft above the tiny stables behind the cobblery proved too cold, or on nights when his meager payment was put towards the care of his horse Mu, and he had to find dinner for himself by less honest means.

But as often as he could find the time for, he came here to paint. By lamplight on this night, he was putting the finishing touches on a painting of the hindquarters of a mare, her tail whipping off to the side in a splash of long black hairs, her sex revealing a crescent of the enrapturing pink flesh that dwelt inside. The painting was large, twice the dimensions of the real thing. Amadric stepped back and let the final brush strokes dry. It was done. It seemed as though he could reach out and touch it, and feel a good deal more than a canvas and some damp paint.

Behind him he heard the creak of the study door opening. The light of a much brighter lantern than his own cast its radiance into the room.

“Estahsh?” inquired the bearer of the brighter lantern.

Amadric turned, and stood tall with an heir of arrogance, even as his heart beat rapidly in his chest. “Yes. One would call the nightingale a lark,” he said, a haughty expression there to dismiss questions of why one was up so late at night.

“Have you had much to drink, dear nephew?” the woman with the brighter lantern asked—if she believed him her nephew, this made her one of the lord’s wives. She added, “There is something odd to your voice.”

Amadric coughed, and then nodded. “I have had a fair bit tonight.” He had had nothing, but it was a decent excuse she had given him.

“What have you painted?” she asked, and withdrew a pair of spectacles from a pouch on her dress. The moment she put them on, she got a better look at the imposter’s face, and gasped and drew back, out into the hall.

“Guards!” she called, running away. “Guaaaaards!”

Amadric fled out of the room as well and began to make a hasty departure, but was soon tackled to the ground, beaten, and outfitted with manacles on his wrists and ankles. On the way out, he saw the real Estahsh briefly—the young man was bleary eyed from his interrupted sleep, but seemed curious about his lookalike who was visiting at such a late hour.

In the city where Amadric lived, the punishment for most crimes was the same, if enough attention was aroused that official punishment was to occur. Amadric was marched through

the frost-covered streets to a jail, where he would remain locked in a cell until he starved or froze.

The next afternoon, he found himself visited by a well dressed lookalike of himself. The two stood across the bars from each other, face to face.

“You are quite the painter,” Estahsh said with a charming smile.

“And you were quite the patron, unwitting as it was,” Amadric said back. “I should thank you, for that.”

“My uncle wants the paintings destroyed by a priest. I stole them away, and have them hidden somewhere where they will remain safe.”

“You care for the subject matter that much?” Amadric asked, leaning casually forward onto the bars, head tilted a bit in curiosity. The subject matter of all of the paintings was horses, and the majority of them focused on the genitalia. There was a crate in the corner of the study where he left them when they were finished, throwing a paint-stained cloth over the top of the crate to keep them inconspicuously hidden.

“I will deny it if you tell anyone, but I think that you and I share an appreciation for beauty in the equine world, strongly enough so that I should treat you as a friend rather than a criminal. I have paid for your release.” With that, Estahsh produced a key from his garb, and unlocked Amadric’s cell.

“I—my surprised and eternal gratitude, truly, Lord Estahsh,” Amadric said.

Estahsh then produced a sack of coins, and placed it in Amadric’s hand. “For the purchase of your paintings. I think it should adequately cover the means of leaving here, which would be wise.”

Amadric looked his lookalike in the eyes, and nodded.

The two left the jail.

“Fare you well,” Estahsh said.

“And you in twice the measure,” Amadric said in turn, as was the haughty response to such a remark, though in this instance Amadric truly did mean it.

Amadric returned to the cobblery and snuck straight around to the back, not caring to get an earful from the cobbler, who would want to know where his assistant had gone off to for the

better part of the day. Instead, he went straight to the tiny stables in the back, and greeted his horse, Mu.

In short order, Amadric and Mu left quietly out of the stable, purchased some journeying supplies, and then were gone from the city.

When many days and scores of miles were put behind them, the painter and the horse found themselves crossing a shadowy swampland; a road crept through it, lit by the occasional luminescent stone in the cobbled path, though the road was in bad repair. At one stage, Amadric and Mu were crossing a bridge over an algae-covered pond, when all at once the bridge fell apart underneath them, and they were dropped in a startled flailing of limbs into the waters. As the two fought to keep at the surface, a flash of lightning struck across the swamp—some old magic, to deter those who would cause the road harm, but here quite unfortunately triggered.

Leaping around the magic of the lightning with swiftness and power, the spirit of Mu left the body that it had until then inhabited, and found footing on a new body.

Amadric came coughing to the shore of the pond, and there stayed a while on his hands and knees, catching his breath. Mu was with him, so something at least was well.

When he did have his breath, he stood, and turned around with a squelching of his soaked boots in the shore of the pond, and looked at the collapsed bridge.

The body of Mu laid stricken and unmoving atop the debris of the bridge that had fallen into the water.

But Amadric could still hear the horse's intonations, vividly. When another happy snort came, Amadric realized that his spirit now shared the same vessel as the spirit of his horse.

"I am Amadric," he said. "But I am forever now with Mu. We are Meuric, and this is good."

Meuric swam out to the equine corpse to salvage what could be salvaged from the saddle bags. The spirit of the horse spoke of no remorse at the dead body before him, and in fact was quite eager to get a move on again.

With what he could retrieve, Meuric did then continue onward, and soon thereafter left the swamp and entered the hazy woods, and found work in a town beset by an evil druid

who lived in a menacing castle—there he enjoyed the frequent social company of mares and stallions, which to both spirits in the body, was good.

Back at the workshop, Filra was just finishing cleaning up. He looked up from his broomwork to acknowledge Cahsn and Meuric as they entered, and to wave to them. “Looked like we made it, eh?” Filra said.

“Only just,” Cahsn said. “But yes. The sacrifice was sent, and the obelisks are activated.”

“Only just does seem to do the trick around here,” Filra said with a smile, and returned to his sweeping.

Cahsn lead the way lightfootedly up the stairs, while Meuric skulked after. The two went up past the second floor which was wholly Filra’s, and proceeded up to the smaller third floor which was, in essence, Cahsn’s. At the top of the stairs was a miniature foyer of sorts, with one door and a potted fern plant on either side. Cahsn opened the door and allowed Meuric in. Meuric began to disrobe as Cahsn left the door open. With a pitcher and with water from a small fountain fed by rather cunning pipework, Cahsn went and watered the ferns outside their door, then closed the door and locked themselves and their partner inside.

With this done, Cahsn promptly found repose on their living room’s rug. “Mah,” they said up to Meuric.

Meuric gave an equine huff of an exhale back, and then came and laid down with them.

The two both laid on their backs, with the tops of their heads touching, staring up at the slanted wooden ceiling, which was littered with oddly angled nails from the shingles on the ceiling’s opposite side.

“We stink,” Cahsn observed.

Meuric turned and play-nibbled on one of Cahsn’s ears with his lips.

“Bad,” Cahsn corrected. “Bath.”

Meuric gave a bemoaning exhale, and stood up and went over to the bathchambers, and turned a pipe to start the hot water flowing.

Remaining on the floor, Cahsn began disrobing, flinging all items of their apparel in whatever directions behooved them at that second. When it was done, they laid on the floor staring blankly at the ceiling again, but additionally they were now unclothed.

With some time left before the bath would be filled, Meuric trudged back in and laid down on the floor once again too, this time on his chest, between Cahsn's legs, staring at the space between their inner thighs.

Their crotch was a vague aura of softly billowing blue light, with distinct tiny blue moths fluttering around. Whatever had been there originally was a secret that only Cahsn truly knew the answer to—they had not told even Meuric, not that the young gentleman had ever pressed the question beyond a rare curiosity. As time had gone on in their relationship, Meuric was gladder and gladder to not know, and to let Cahsn exist as Cahsn.

When he sensed that the tub was near to filling, Meuric pried his gaze away from his partner's aura and stood. Cahsn stuck up their hands, and Meuric grabbed them, and helped them to their feet. Leading as though it was a dance, Meuric guided Cahsn hand in hand to the bath tub, turned off the faucet, and the two of them slid into the water. As they settled, Meuric found himself sitting on Cahsn's lap, getting his hair washed by his partner.

When many minutes and kisses had gone by, the two were both clean and dried and lying naked together on the couch, Meuric lying on his back, arms wrapped around Cahsn who laid face down on top of him, pecking kisses around his pecs and neck and jaw. Eventually Cahsn slinked higher up Meuric, and reached over him to the small table beside the couch, and retrieved a pair of necklaces. Cahsn smiled as Meuric reached around his neck, and fastened his necklace onto himself. With that done they fastened the clasp on theirs as well, and collapsed down onto his chest as the melding began.

With the necklaces on, each of them could feel everything that the other felt. Ordinarily these necklaces were used by physicians to diagnose, and by the likes of Meuric and Cahsn for hedonism. Today when they melded with Meuric, Cahsn felt like they had been struck by a swinging hammer: the man's muscles had been worked long past what Cahsn would have personally thought was the breaking point.

With care, Cahsn pulled Meuric up off of the couch, and lugged him over to the bed where he flopped down, playfully allowing himself to be manhandled. From a closet Cahsn retrieved a flask of calming oils. They poured a portion out onto Meuric's back and got to work, massaging the man's back and arms and legs, feeling their own fingers doing the work of rubbing and feeling Meuric's muscles receiving the relaxation and care. With the use of the necklaces, Cahsn could not help but be mindful of any tenderness, as well as anything that was enjoyable. They found themselves rubbing Meuric's right bicep quite a long time, to the point of flopping over onto their side beside him, and rubbing it from a comfortable sidelong repose.

Eventually, from this vantage, Cahsn reached down and gave Meuric's butt a squeeze, felt the jolt of it themselves, and slinked out of bed and skipped over to the liquor cabinet.

They returned with two bottles of musk wine, when they noticed that at the fountain in the corner, a message capsule was just floating up from the faucet. Meuric sat up on the edge of the bed and held the two bottles as Cahsn went to go see the message.

They picked the capsule up out of the basin, dried the outside against the bedsheets for convenience, and sat down beside Meuric and opened the capsule up, unrolled the little scroll inside, and read.

"It's from Darmf," Cahsn read.

Meuric tossed his head and stomped a foot, hoping to assert his disinterest strongly enough that it would bend the will of the universe and reshape the course of recent developments in reality into something more agreeable and less likely to include anyone other than themselves and Cahsn sharing the night together.

"He wants to know if we want to hang out," Cahsn went on.

Meuric again gave a stomp, and tossed his head for a pointedly longer duration of time.

“Why not?” Cahsn asked, and laid back across Meuric’s lap.

Meuric extended a finger on his hand, and hovered the fingertip over Cahsn, hovering it back and forth from head to toe over and over, until eventually picking up one of their legs and poking the eighth elf on the buttcheek.

Cahsn glanced again at the message. “He says he didn’t like your book recommendation.”

Meuric gasped. “That *bitch!*” he said, his human spirit rushing to the fore. “Okay. Darmf can come over and then we’re going to the library. Let’s try to sneak one in before he gets here though. Mu has been randy all day, you have no idea.”

Cahsn wrote a return message, and sent it in a capsule down a pipe adjacent to the pipe by which Darmf’s message had been delivered.

By the time Darmf arrived up the stairs, Cahsn and Meuric were clothed, if slightly catching up on their breath. Darmf opened the door. Cahsn and Meuric were sat together on one side of the couch, though Meuric quickly shot up and stomped forward to Darmf, and gave an assertive huff to the scrawny man.

“Hi, you,” Darmf said, cowering slightly.

Cahsn came forward as well, giving assuring shushes to Meuric on the way. When they arrived, they took Meuric’s hand, and gave it a few gentle strokes with their thumb.

“What was wrong with A Feast Of Leaves And Sugar?” Meuric demanded.

“It was barely *readable*,” Darmf asserted.

Meuric gasped and tossed his head. “I couldn’t set it down!”

“Nothing *happened!*”

“So!”

Cahsn interjected to ask, “What was this book about?”

Darmf answered, “Some nameless, faceless, characterless narrator eats dinner for five hundred pages.”

Cahsn noticed Meuric squaring up to punch Darmf; the eighth elf gave their partner a shove, and an assertive, “*Hey. Not* how we settle disagreements about books we don’t like, Amadric.”

Meuric knew that when he heard his human name from Cahsn, he was in trouble, regardless of whether it was his human spirit or his equine spirit that had gotten him there. He crossed his arms, and remained standing where he had been shoved to, further from Darmf, which was for the better anyways.

“Well *I* think it’s the best thing I’ve ever read,” Meuric said.

“That’s fine, but I thought it was sooo boring. There’s an entire chapter, twenty nine pages, where the narrator eats a carrot and that’s the *only* thing that’s described!”

“That was the *best* chapter. Life changing.”

“Okay, you two,” Cahsn said. “Meuric, can you agree that you might be biased towards liking a chapter about eating a carrot?”

“...Yes.”

“Can we agree to disagree and move on?”

Both men grumbled that yes, they could move on.

“Good. Meuric, you were saying you wanted to go to the library?”

Meuric nodded.

“Anything you were looking for?”

“I would like to see if that author has written anything else.”

“Okay. Darmf, would you care to come with us to the library?”

“Sure. I actually wanted to show you guys something I found down there, too. A little room that I don’t think any of us knew about.”

Cahsn, Meuric, and Darmf exited down the stairs, out of the workshop, and into the cool night. A dreadful silence hung around the air. The activated obelisks kept out noise from the hazy forest, and the townsfolk by and large went to sleep as soon as they were able, to be ready for the next day’s exhausting work.

The three friends made their way to the mines. As they were walking, they crossed paths with Red, who was milling about town. The mare was greeted warmly by Meuric. She continued along with the three, she and Meuric trailing back and flirting with each other as Cahsn and Darmf lead the way—whether or not Darmf knew that the two were flirting, Cahsn wasn’t sure. Most of the fully human folk were shockingly bad at picking up

on communication from any creature outside of their own species.

At the mouth of the mines, Meuric paused with Red, and said, "You two go on ahead, I'll catch up."

"Something wrong?" Darmf asked.

That was a no, then, on Darmf picking up on anything.

"Going to see if she needs anything before we head down," Meuric offered.

Cahsn quickly assisted by shuffling Darmf onward, into the cool mouth of the mine. Being that it was impossible to see in that kind of darkness, Cahsn made the old elven hand sign for light: a faint luminescent aura began to trail about their feet in the appearance of a low mist, dim in the scheme of things though brighter than the moonlight from which they had come, and as such it left the eighth elf and the oblivious human squinting for a moment.

The two of them made their way down gradual slopes, sticking to the main tunnel until arriving at a large metallic door embedded in the side of one wall. There they stopped, and the two of them took a seat on the ground, waiting for Meuric.

"Do you think he'll be long?" Darmf asked.

"Not too long," Cahsn assured—the melding necklaces were still on, and Cahsn was very aware that Meuric was close. Though Cahsn was aware that Meuric was no stranger to indulging frisky equines, this actually was their first time being party to it themselves, by way of the necklace. The palms of the hands on the smooth hair that covered enormous musculature, the soft wet flesh of the sex itself—they'd had no idea that Red was such an appealing creature in that capacity. They may not quite look at Red the same way ever again, though all for the better.

After not too much longer, Meuric's climax was reached, and he soon withdrew himself from the mare, no longer touching her hindquarters. Cahsn felt the soles of Meuric's feet as he walked around the horse, and then shivered as they felt Meuric's lips touch Red's.

Then after a couple of hearty pats, Meuric began walking down the slopes.

"He's done," Cahsn idly reported.

“He... who, Meuric?”

Immediately, Cahsn realized they had said too much. With a sigh, they lifted up the necklace that they wore.

“Oh. It’s uh, it’s a little weird when you two wear those.”

Cahsn and Darmf sat in the silence of the mine, in the shifting luminescent fog at the floor.

“What was he doing?” Darmf asked, probably just to fill the quiet.

“He can tell you if he wants,” they said. They wished that they could forewarn Meuric, but the necklaces only transferred physical sensations, not thoughts or speech.

“Wh... how bad could it have been that you won’t tell me?”

“Nothing bad, just, not trying to talk behind anyone’s back.”

“Oookay then,” Darmf said. Then quite quickly sensing that the silence would encroach again, he said, “Seriously though, that book was so boring. I kept reading expecting some kind of revelation about why any of it should have been interesting, and it just *never* came. It was an *entire* book about eating dinner.”

“That does sound pretty boring,” Cahsn admitted honestly. “I do think that that was his horse side that liked it so much. Maybe like, his human side getting to read his horse side a story.”

“I kinda figured, but it was *such* a bad recommendation that I did still have to give him shit over it.”

Cahsn smiled a little. “Yeah, fair.”

With that, they heard the sound of footsteps coming down the mine, matching in cadence with the sensation of Meuric’s soles touching the ground.

Cahsn and Darmf stood. Light from a lantern came around the corner, joining the light of Cahsn’s fog. Meuric, the lantern bearer, exchanged sneaky satisfied smiles with Cahsn.

“What did Red need?” Darmf asked.

“Nothin.”

“Then what took you so long?”

“Mating.”

“*Oh*. I see.”

“Jealous?”

“No but like, that makes sense for you, actually.”

Meuric went at a cantor to the door, and began turning the wheel that opened it.

“So does the human side of you close his eyes, or?”

“Nah, we’re both into it.”

“I’ll pretend to be surprised.”

With a final turn, the bolt of the metal door was fully released. Meuric pulled the door open, and invited Cahsn and Darmf to lead the way.

The three began into the ruins of the old city, creeping through brick passageways that by all rights should have fully collapsed long ago—a good amount of the place certainly already had.

It was not somewhere that one would want to get comfortable in. At some point most days, one would hear all of the old pipes begin to creak—as soon as the noise began, one would want to be leaving. Ten minutes from the creaking beginning, one’s eyes would begin to tear up, and their nose would begin to run, and their lips and throat would feel dry and irritated. Another ten minutes from the irritation beginning, and the yellow gas seeping through the old pipes would be accumulated enough to be visible across the old cobbled floors, and even the toughest would be reduced to a blinded coughing and rasping on the floor, and ultimately a death of suffocation.

The entrance to the library—a collapsed wall in a section on agriculture—was a thirteen minute walk into the city from the fortified entrance in the mines. This made an escape under ten minutes doable, if one could hoof it.

By lanternlight and luminescent fog, the three made it to the library.

“You wanted to show us something?” Cahsn prompted.

“Yes!” Darmf said. “Second basement. It’s in a section of the stacks that seems to be for books that are damaged or incompleated, I guess enough so that they couldn’t be categorized any other way.”

“Esoteric,” Cahsn noted.

“I think mostly a librarian would put something there and forget about it forever. Most of what I’ve poked through there is *really* dull.”

“Exciting,” Cahsn remarked.

“Lead the way,” Meuric said, and offered the lantern out.

Darmf took it, and did lead the way over to the stairs, down two floors, and into a cold, echoey recess of the library. Eventually, the three came upon a pile of books blocking their passage down the aisle—it was a common enough thing to see, unfortunate as it felt.

“This is it,” Darmf said, and took a step up onto the slope of books. Continuing to walk forward onto them, he said, “I was grabbing something out of here when the whole area came down. I was *terrified* at first, thinking, this is it, this gas is going to start right while I’m buried under here, and I’m not going to make it in time. But, I did get myself unburied, and I found this.”

Arriving at the crest of the pile, Darmf held the lantern down to light up the top of a rectangular opening in the wall.

“A door!” Meuric remarked. “We have those in town too, actually.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Darmf remarked. “Come on, *I* think it’s pretty interesting. This is the only door into here, hidden behind a wall of books.”

With that, Darmf slid down into the doorway, into the room beyond.

With a moment to themselves, Cahsn cupped a hand to Meuric’s ear, and whispered extremely quietly, “That felt like a good time, with Red.”

Meuric shivered, and nuzzled Cahsn’s forehead.

Cahsn added, “We should follow after Darmf.”

Meuric nodded, and led the way, stepping onto the pile of books and then crawling on his chest down the slope that had fallen into the room beyond; Cahsn followed closely after.

The room beyond was a study. Besides being notably free of cobwebs, the study had a desk, a private bookshelf, and plenty of space to pace around.

Cahsn commented, “If it weren’t for being in a place that I’m terrified of relaxing in, this would be a very nice place to sit down and read. Do you suppose they remodeled and just left the room inaccessible instead of bothering to destroy it?”

“I’m not sure,” Darmf said. Meandering over to the bookshelf, he said, “I haven’t had time to read any of them fully, obviously,

but a lot of these books are on the lower planes, and magic associated with that.”

Cahsn felt shivers down their spine. With some reluctance, they made the old elven hand sign for listening. The sensations that came about across their fingernails were all a mess speaking over each other: the symbol for knowledge hummed; the symbol for love seemed almost to recoil, as though the nail was grating against a chalk board; the symbol for divinity, written on Cahsn’s thumb, felt as though a red hot brand was being held to it, and Cahsn shouted profanity as they quickly dismissed the hand sign.

With the hand sign gone, all of the sensations subsided—examining their thumb, there was no actual damage done, it seemed. But they suddenly liked this place quite a good deal less.

“You okay?” Darmf asked.

“Fine,” Cahsn answered. “Do you know if this study belonged to anyone in particular?”

“No, I’m not sure. There’s a drawer in this desk that I was interested in, but there’s a lock on it.”

Meuric went over to the desk, squared up with it, and kicked the face off of the drawer. Reaching into the open mouth of the drawer, he retrieved a book and handed it to Darmf.

Cahsn quickly stole the book out of Darmf’s hands, before he could open it. “If I may, quickly,” Cahsn said, feeling a magical force from the book as soon as they had caught even a passing glance of it.

“Y-yeah. Please.”

Cahsn set the book on the desk, and placed a flat hand over the front cover of it. With their other hand, they made the sign for vision.

All sight of the room was put off to some vague periphery, and, without drawing open the covers, Cahsn saw the writing on the first page of the book.

Any child of man who bears witness to the words in this tome, in my name be struck blinded and mute. - Vermilion Von Scaldis.

Cahsn gasped, and raised their hands away from the book; sight of the room flooded back in. Two things had very urgently

struck them. Most alarming was the name: the druid who beset the town, demanding sacrifices of them from his solitary castle on the hill, bore the same name as the signer of the page. The second thing which struck them was that this inscription they had read was indeed highly charged with magic, and by all rights should have gone off when they read the inscription alone, even if it had been read by a proxy of magic rather than by direct sight.

“It belongs to the druid,” Cahsn reported.

“Cahsn,” Meuric said in a grave tone. “Step back. Let’s leave it alone.”

“He’s right,” Darmf added. “I don’t want to be here anymore either, anyways. We should go.”

The two were not wrong. To stick one’s nose any further into this was insanity. And yet. They could not help but recall quite a lot, even in the last day alone. The hardship of the miners, working all their waking hours today to extract the spectracite for the daily ritual required by Scaldis. Their own fear at what would become of them if the second channeler they made was also unsuitable, and the sacrifice could not be made that day, to Scaldis. The sensation of putting on the melding necklace, and feeling how deathly sore the day’s work at the farm had left Meuric, who was hardier than most who worked those fields.

“Let me look at one more thing,” Cahsn said, and placed their hand on the cover of the book once more.

“Cahsn,” Meuric tried again. “Whatever it is, isn’t worth it.”

Maybe not. But the way the town was being worked could not go on forever. If they were going to die, they would rather it was while risking liberation rather than being thrown into a pit in the ground and struck by silent lightning.

Cahsn made the hand sign for vision, and once more examined the first page. Being that the inscription was magically charged, and to quite an extreme degree for that matter, anyone who was not utterly blind to magic could sense that each word bore a meaning, each of which fed into the other words, to create the terms of the spell itself, chiefly the spell’s trigger and the spell’s effect. The effect, it seemed, was more than clear: whosoever effected by the spell would be struck

blinded and mute. Clearly, though, that had not happened to them, which made them very, very curious about the trigger.

Any child of man who bears witness to the words in this tome, in my name be struck blinded and mute. - Vermilion Von Scaldis.

They crept their way around each word, examining the corners and edges of each word's meaning.

Though it took some passes to spot it, the answer was found near to the start of the passage: when using the term "child of man," it seemed that Scaldis had only envisioned a human. It was beyond Cahsn how such a mistake could be made by a druid of all people, who were supposed to see the wisdom in the non-human world.

Cahsn was uncertain as to whether Meuric would be safe in reading the book. And, unfortunately, "bear witness" did include hearing of the words in the book, it seemed, and so they would not be safe to relay the book's contents to Meuric and Darmf. But after some long minutes of intensive focus, they were positive that they understood the scope of at least this inscription at the front, which was the only part of the book charged with magical energy. They were confident that they would be safe to proceed into the book for themselves.

They withdrew their hands from the book, and stood and hugged Meuric.

Meuric hugged them back.

Cahsn noticed, then, that he had taken off his necklace. A wise choice, and Cahsn themselves felt foolish for not having thought to mention it. They took their necklace off too, and stowed it in a pocket.

"Can we go now, please?" Darmf asked.

"I'd like to stay and read the book a while longer," Cahsn said. "There is a magical inscription at the front which would make the volume unsafe for human eyes, though it seems..."

They trailed off, as around them, the sounds of the pipes creaking began.

"Well, it seems we have no choice anyways." Cahsn stowed the book in their satchel.

"Is that wise to take?" Meuric asked.

“Perhaps so or perhaps not, but for a certainty it would now be unwise to stand around any longer deliberating on it.”

“Agreed,” Meuric conceded.

Without further discussion, the three of them began at once out of the secluded study, making a jog to the stairwell, up the stairs, out through the library’s collapsed wall; the eyes of all three of them were beginning to water as they progressed through the final passages; by the time they made it out into the mines and sealed the door shut behind themselves, there was a tickle in Cahsn’s throat, and they noticed Meuric and Darmf each had a bit of a cough.

“Too close,” Cahsn said with something of a relieved smile.

Meuric hugged Cahsn, and clung there for a while.

Eventually the three made their way up out of the mine. “See you two around,” Darmf said, and then gave a little wave, and headed off alone down a trail that more directly lead to his family’s dwelling.

Cahsn snuggled up against Meuric, standing there with their temple buried in the soft fabric of his shirt which covered his muscular chest. “Spend the night with me?” they asked.

Meuric locked his arms around them, and held them securely. “Of course.”

When they were ready to go, Meuric picked Cahsn up and gave them a piggy back ride back into town. Had they still had the melding necklaces on, Cahsn would have realized the man was still as sore as he was earlier and wouldn’t have allowed themselves to be carried by him, but as it was, he bore it nonchalantly enough to get away with it, and he was, in fact, happy to bear it.

Meuric set Cahsn down outside of Filra’s workshop, and the two climbed up the stairs to Cahsn’s quarters on the third floor.

“I gotta get to bed,” Meuric said.

Cahsn nodded. “I’ll be after you in a while.”

Meuric kissed Cahsn, and stole the druid’s book out of their hands while they were distracted. “Be careful,” he emphasized, and offered the book back to them.

They nodded. “I have no intention of doing otherwise.”

The two of them shared another kiss, and then Meuric did proceed to bed, and within the minute was snoring.

Cahsn sat down on the couch, took a deep, mindful breath, and then opened the druid's journal.

The eighth elf learned many things in their reading, but chief among them was that it was, in essence, all a charade. Many times they had to put the book down in tears as they learned that Vermilion Von Scaldis was nothing of a druid, and was, in fact, merely a lord among men who had made a pact with a lord among demons: Scaldis would supply the demon with regular sacrifice—the crop yields, the blood yields when crop was not enough—and in turn, the demon would allow a vein of the powers of the many hells to flow through Scaldis's gnarled fingers. The spirits which beset the town were conjured when a sacrifice wasn't made, not warded when a sacrifice did occur. The eighth elf's entire life's work was, more or less, a trick.

Every night, Meuric dreamt. They never knew until waking up that they had been dreaming, although there were a great many things that should have made it seem obvious, were one lucid to such things at the time. For Meuric, the most stark difference between dream and reality was that in reality his two spirits occupied one body, whereas in his dreams, almost without fail the two spirits were divided again. Curiously, Amadric was not always a human, and Mu was not always a horse: sometimes they were inverted, or both horses, or both men.

In their present dream, Amadric was his old human self, younger in years than he was now, and Mu was his old horse self. It was a pleasant day; Amadric had the day off from working in the cobblery, it was a holiday in the old city, and so he had all the hours he could want to tend to his horse. The man and the horse stood in the small stable behind the cobblery, though at present the stable was located in a wide open field, with mountains far off in the distance, and mountainous clouds overhead, and a strong wind blowing in the scents of diced apples and freshly baked bread.

"I am dreaming," Amadric and Mu both realized, and then Amadric stopped the work he was doing on Mu's saddle, Mu stopped sniffing curiously at the smell of apples in the air, and

the man and the horse both looked at one another. “We know that we are dreaming,” they said, and then said as well, “How do we know this? We never know this.”

From the mountains came a distant, echoing scream. Amadric and Mu both turned their heads to face it. The voice had called out but one word, which was the man and the horse’s shared name: “*Meuric!*”

That voice. That voice was not from here. It was from later. Somehow, it was from later, a time that had not yet come, there in the stables, Amadric and Mu living as two separate bodies.

The voice called again, “*Meuric! Help!*”

Mu realized first who the voice belonged to: “Cahsn.”

At the name, Amadric felt icy fingers creeping upon him, at knowing that they were calling for help, but that he was so very far away.

Mu continued, “We are dreaming. We must awaken and help them.”

With a hideous gasp, Meuric shot open his eyes and sat bolt upright on the bed.

What he awakened to seemed more like a dream than what he had awakened from. He sat upright in a cold sweat on Cahsn’s bed, in the dead of night. No sound was present anywhere at all: even when he had gasped when waking up, the sound of it was stolen, muted immediately by the very air around him. The bedsheets fluttered, and some papers blew about the room. In the living room, in place of the floor, there was a swirling red vortex: Cahsn clung to the doorway to the bedroom, staring pleadingly—no, apologetically—at Meuric.

“*I love you,*” they mouthed, and then the door frame broke apart, and Cahsn was sucked backwards into the vortex, and was swallowed by it.

Before it could have any chance to close, Meuric dove forward in after them, and was swallowed by the vortex as well.

Meuric tumbled out of the vortex into a long, dark, grand room. He found his balance and leapt to his feet. To his left and right, the walls were covered in bookshelves from floor to ceiling, and underfoot was a thick red carpet set over a stone floor. The hall was dark, and Meuric could not see through the darkness to the wall behind him or ahead of him. All light came

from five flames, each the size of a candle flame, though redder, and with no visible source; the five flames circled slowly around a snarling man in a crimson robe, whose gnarled hands were clutched around a staff, the top of the staff adorned with a human skull.

Cahsn found their footing as well, and stood up beside Meuric, the two partners facing the robed man. Meuric and Cahsn stood unclothed—the vortex, it seemed, had only transported their bodies.

The robed man spoke: “You fools shall regret stealing from your master.”

Cahsn retorted, “On my life, you’ll regret that you brought us here.” They seemed very aware of the accuracy of ‘on my life,’ and gave a small, helpless laugh.

“What magic is this about you?” Scaldis asked, looking down to the blue aura which hung in the place of Cahsn’s genitals. “A strange choice of perversion; I sense that you have elven blood within you, but I cannot sense whether you are man or woman. Do you think this gives you some form of protection from my hexes?”

“I might now that you’ve told me as much.”

“Fah. It protects you from nothing. But I will find you out all the same.”

Scaldis waved his staff through the circling flames, catching one flame on the staff’s skull; the skull became engulfed in the red fire. Scaldis muttered hexes, causing the fire to become a chromatic swirling of pink and blue. When the magic was prepared, Scaldis swung his staff, sending the ball of pink and blue lights racing towards the eighth elf. Meuric pushed the eighth elf out of the way, and took the blow himself.

The magic of the lights took an immediate hold of Meuric, and he found himself growing taller, and his stance growing more sure. The magic cast upon him by Scaldis was magic that would reveal the true form of any who was struck by the pink and blue lights; in short seconds, Meuric found himself with the head, arms, and chest of a man, and the four legged body of a stallion.

Wasting no time in the opportunity of this surprise, Meuric stampeded forward towards the wide-eyed Scaldis, toppled the

gnarled man over with fierce hooves, and wrestled from the warlock his staff; this he threw to Cahsn, who caught it and ran forward into the struggle. From the ground Scaldis snatched at another of his circling flames, made a gesture, and in his hands the flame grew into a flickering scimitar. Meuric reared at the sight of it, and Scaldis got to his feet. The warlock took a swing towards Meuric, but found the back of his head struck in by his very own staff.

Scaldis collapsed, and his ring of flames went out, leaving total darkness to reign over the quiet hall.

Cahsn made the old elven hand sign for light. Around their feet, a radiant fog began to sweep over the red carpeted floor.

For good measure, they made the old elven hand sign for axes, and with the conjured tool, beheaded Vermilion Von Scaldis where he lay, putting a definitive end to his reign over the town.

With this done, they picked up the warlock's staff once more, and with it in hand, turned to face their partner, whose body now reflected his spirits.

"You look amazing," Cahsn commented.

Meuric smiled, flicked his tail, and offered out a hand. Cahsn took it, and accepted the help up onto Meuric's back. Meuric walked them slowly forward, seeking an exit from this dark chamber.

"It would have done nothing to me, his magic," Cahsn mentioned. "The same magic he invoked to try to reveal my true form is the exact magic I used long ago to attain this very way that I appear now. All the same, I'm happy that you got in the way." They gave Meuric's equine body a hearty pat on the flank.

The eighth elf and the first centaur found their way back into town, and informed the people that they were free.

THE IMMORTAL OF LOCH ANNETH

I fling dirt over my shoulder. All of my muscles are sore. My palms are sore. The joints of my fingers are sore. I awoke last night from a dead sleep with a pang of a memory so intense and precise it felt as though I had been stabbed. It was fleeting as a dream: I knew that if I did not get up that instant and act, I may lose the thought forever.

It was a memory of burying something extremely precious. Upon waking and standing, I rummaged around for a shovel of mine, and then walked around the sandy beach of Loch Anneth by the silver light of the moon. As my footsteps crunched over the sand, I held tight to the memory of the burying, of the place where something was buried. Even the place has been changed by time, but I remember where it was if I don't overthink it. It was a clearing. Now it is overgrown, indistinct from the forest surrounding. By the silver moonlight, I uprooted a tree that was grown on the place of the burial, and pushed it aside. By the light of the morning, I dug where the roots have grown, cutting through them, reaching where they were reaching. Now by light of day, as I am drenched in sweat, I dig clay, until finally, my shovel strikes something else. I dig the hole wider, until I have uncovered the entire surface of a finished and stained wooden box, six feet tall and three feet wide, and I know that this is the thing I have come for. I dig the hole wider yet, so that I can have room enough to pry open the lid with my shovel. The lid does not give easily, but with a bellowing groan, the wood and the nails bend apart, and I lift the lid and heave it aside, and I look

into the box. There in the box, there are the remains of a deer, the legs crouched slightly to fit inside, as though the deer is laying down to nest. The flesh and all except the bones is decomposed. Only the skeleton remains. I sit against the side of the freshly dug hole, the dirt clinging to my drenched body, and I stare at them—it—them—her.

I loved her. As I sit against the side of the hole and stare, I begin to weep. I loved her. I have lost her. And I know nothing else, other than that it was a long time ago. I cannot remember what she was like. I cannot remember anything that we did, other than the almost forgotten fact that at the end, I buried her. I try to remember what she looked like in life, but every detail is imagined, not recalled. I loved her, and I lost her, and now there is nothing there but the dim memory of both, and the wrenching feeling that I ought not be able to do this, be able to mourn for something that I no longer know.

Some of my old loves are like ashes. There was once something alight here. Something dancing, nourishing, absorbing, burning. Now it is inert. I try to move it around again and feel heat, comfort, warmth, pain, scalding pain, anything, but it is not there anymore. Some of my old loves are like nettles in the pads of my fingers. I am doing something that has nothing to do with them, and then they sting me. I try to find them, and they hide. I cannot remove them. I know that someday they will sting me again, and then someday they will not, and I might not ever know. Some of my old loves are like a note: *I love you and I'm looking forward to spending more time with you tomorrow*. There is nothing alive, but when I happen upon them again, it is like they are still here to speak.

I stare at the doe. The sense of loss here is a monstrous shadow of the actual thing that is now so far behind me I will never see it again so long as I live.

Would that I could turn around and look back into the past, earlier, and earlier again, and know who this was, and how I loved her. Would that I were not cast into the ocean of time with an anchor upon my ankles and forced to forever wonder if there is a bottom, and suspect that there is not. There is no sun. There is no floor.

I secure the lid back atop the box, and I bury the doe for a second time. It helps. It takes away the momentous sting to know that this has happened a second time now, that this is not a monolith, but merely a thing which I did once, and I can do again. The pain is still pain, but it is dulled. I return the soil to where it was, and leave the tree fallen. I trudge to the lakeside, and sit on the sand, filthy and tear-streaked, staring out at the water that shines in the daytime. My wife Heleyne comes and finds me. She sits beside me a while. Then she takes me by the hand, pulls me upright, and leads me into the piercing cold water. When the sweat and dirt are cleansed from me, we return again to the beach, and begin walking back to our cabin, so that we can get a fire on and warm up.

We arrive at the cabin. We change into dry clothes. We start a fire in the hearth, and sit on the floor before it, wrapped together in one blanket, staring as the flames lick upwards from the logs.

“Thank you,” I tell Heleyne. In my head, I repeat the name. *Heleyne. Heleyne. Heleyne.* “I love you.”

“Tell me about her,” Heleyne says.

I tell her about the doe, though there is little to say. It really is as though I am telling her about the dream I had last night that I have already forgotten most of the details of.

Earlier

There is a stone tower standing on an island at the center of Loch Anneth. Many days, in periods when I am alone, I find myself atop the tower, wearing a wide brimmed hat to shade myself from the sun. I circle around and around, looking out at the lake, at the forests beyond. The lake is the pupil to the green forest’s iris. Loch Anneth, and the green forest surrounding, sit at the border of two landscapes which are far more immense.

To the south, stretching beyond sight, is the orange forest. It is a strange place. The trees there bear fruit, but the fruit cannot be picked no matter how hard one pulls, and if one pulls for more than a moment, it will sting the hand even through a steel gauntlet. Bushes are razor thorned, the vines drip with poison that will cause one a blistering rash. The soil appears good for

planting, but if one takes a trowel to it, fire will shoot forth from the earth. No flora in the orange forest has grown or been removed so long as I can remember. No fruit from any tree has fallen or replenished, but merely hangs perpetually. It is a place frozen in time, harshly resistant to being interfered with. Through it, there is a dirt road, leading from the greater world to Loch Anneth.

To the north, stretching beyond sight, is the tangled labyrinth. On the surface it appears as a landscape of mountains, some minor, some snow-capped, all formed into a heap of lines that resemble a floor covered wall to wall in discarded thread. There is one mountain here adjacent to the green forest. In it, if one traverses up a small valley, they will arrive at a door, the entrance to the labyrinth which spans beneath every mountain beyond, and reaches down to depths unknown. It is said that the world which we know was once the home of the gods, but that they have all moved on to a new world that is currently being weaved, and that our current world is discarded, fallen, rotting, finite, perilous, soon to be uninhabitable. It is said that if one traverses the tangled labyrinth, that on the other side will be the new home of the gods, a blossoming paradise in progress. Who is to say if anyone has made it?

I believe that a very long time ago, I began life in the world beyond the orange forest, and one day traveled up the road, to the lake and the green forest. I believe that I built the tower on which I now stand. It is never easy to say what is memory and what is fancy, but I recall great difficulty getting the large slabs of stone out here by boat. I remember—I think I remember—capsizing a number of times, losing weeks of work on the cut slabs. When I am up on the tower, I am looking for someone. I stand, and I pace, and I search the green forest. My gaze hangs on the road through the orange forest. My gaze hangs on the valley to the door of the labyrinth. I have an unreasonable hope that whoever it is I am looking for will stand out so strongly that it will not matter how many millennia it has been since I even knew who I am waiting for. A father? A mother? A sibling? A child? I haven't the faintest. So whenever I see someone from up here, I go to meet them, and I hope that something will stir.

Down the road through the orange forest, a lone figure approaches. I descend the tower, push my rowboat into the lake, and venture forth to meet this person. I bring a vase of water good for drinking or washing.

When I arrive, the figure is still on their way up the road through the orange forest. They move at a shamble. I stand at the border. As they come nearer, I can discern their trouble. She is burned, blistered, cut, and in her arms she cradles two children, one over top of the other. I set the vase down in the road, and go to get cloth, and a shovel.

When I return, she has arrived at the green forest, and has laid the two children beside each other on a patch of grass. She has used the water to wash them. Their faces, necks, and hands are free of dirt. They are dead. Girls. Twins. The mother kneels before them. She is in a bad way and needs to be attended to, but it is not a great stretch of empathy for me to understand that she first must attend to her mourning, however long or labored.

I set down the cloth and the shovel beside the empty vase, and I go to sit on a fallen tree away from her.

Later in the day, I hear digging. I return to find the mother digging the graves. She has wrapped each body in cloth.

"I would dig them, if you would let me. Rest would do you well."

"Allow me this," she answers.

"Of course." I linger. "If you would tell me their names, I would make them headstones."

"I wouldn't ask that of you. But I would tell you the names. Maigis. Bayach."

"And your name?"

"Heleyne. And your name?"

"Duncan."

"Thank you for the water, Duncan. And the veils, and the use of your spade."

I leave her to her work, and go to retrieve a meal for her, for when she is finished, and another vase of water to wash her own wounds with, and to drink. When night falls, she agrees to stay in a cabin I have nearby, all to herself, and I will return to the tower on the island.

Weeks pass as her health returns to her, and her wounds begin to heal.

One day, I am walking carefully through the forest, in the form of a deer. I have remembered something. With Heleyne beginning to be well again, there is an aspect of her character, a certain joy she takes in resolute stubbornness, which has reminded me of something long, long past, so vague that I don't know why it has reminded me of what it has. But nonetheless, I am going to retrieve something that I had until now forgotten about.

In the green forest surrounding Loch Anneth, there is far more than meets the eyes of men. To the man, each tree has a number of branches too numerous to easily count, but nonetheless very finite. To the squirrel, one can ascend the trunk and arrive at a tree with thousands of branches, nooks in which to sleep and run and play and hide things away, each birch its own manor, each yew its own castle. To the man, the ground underfoot is uniform and solid. To the shrew, the ground underfoot is as varied as the forest on the surface, spaces of loose dirt and hard, veins of rock, roots thin and thick stretching as wide below ground as the tree above reaches into the air. To the man, we see the odd deer trail. To the deer, the forest is a sprawling park, rich with trails and fields in which to dip into, away from men's sights.

As a deer, I am making my way, carefully, to one such hidden clearing. The walk has taken most of the day. I can be in no rush.

I come to the clearing of short grass, at the center of which is a grand yew tree. In my memory it was a sapling. Nonetheless, against the base of it leans a tall red bottle. I go to it, take it into my mouth, and leave, carrying it away. As I arrive back at the lake, I find myself a man again, bottle of wine in my hand, staring at the waters of Loch Anneth which shine in the evening sun. I go to Heleyne's cabin, and we share the wine together.

As the months go by, we are living in the cabin together. She would no longer like to venture into the tangled labyrinth. She would like to live here with me, for a time.

How many times has it started this way? Someone comes to me hurt, and when they are healed, we find that the process of healing has grafted me onto them.

I walk slowly through a graveyard at the most secluded edge of the green forest, bordering on the orange forest. I walk at a snail's pace, going a few feet to the hour, staring at the names on the headstones. *Gennat. Rowland. Joan.* Some of the names, I can vividly remember the person who is now buried in earth, unbreathing. *Marriory. Mede. Waltir.* Some of the names ring as faintly as the names of people I have never actually met, but only heard about secondhand. *Maybe Alesoun. Maybe Wilmot. Maybe Avis. Maybe Theresa. Maybe Myrina.* Most of the names are weatherworn from the stone beyond legibility. The headstones that I placed on the graves of Maigis and Bayach will last Heleyne's lifetime. I will watch them return to being just stones.

Earlier

My hooves crunch over the snow as I carefully walk. My bare nose is colder than ice, and my breath is a hearth's plume before me. It is the middle of the night, but with a full moon and snow to reflect it, it may as well be daytime aside from the temperature.

I carefully come around a tree, and then, seeing something move in a snowbank ahead, I freeze in place. I am ready to bolt away, into the hidden places.

The figure moves again. It is a man. He huddles hunched over, shivering, arms wrapped around his torso, face exposed. His face is bright red from the cold. He will die like this.

I dash away. I bound over bushes and fallen trees to a cache I only vaguely remember. In a hidden clearing of short grass, a pocket world untouched by the snow and cold, I see the sapling of a yew tree. On the ground beside it is a heavy winter coat, and beside that, a tall red bottle of wine. I take the coat in my mouth, and bound back towards the man.

I am making a great deal of noise this time, and this time when I approach, he is looking at me. I walk up to him and push the coat against him. He appears confused but grateful, and puts

the coat on. When it is on, I push myself against him as well, laying down on top of him, insisting upon him whatever warmth I can provide, even though in truth, I would be shocked if it is enough. Gently, he rests a hand on me. As the cold hours of the night stretch on, he has laid down beside me, huddling his hands and face between his chest and my back, creating a pocket of warmth.

When the sun rises, I am surprised he is still alive. The world becomes as bright as the lake, as the sun takes the place of the moon and the surface of the snow melts enough to glisten like diamonds.

The man remains huddled against me for some hours into the morning. Eventually, when I sense he is warmed enough to survive without me, I scramble slowly away from him, stand, and find myself as a human, which I have not been in a long, long time. The body feels awkward, squat, brutish. The man looks up at me agape.

“Duncan,” I offer in an agreeable tone, and extend my hand.

“Waltir,” the man returns through stiff lips and chattering teeth. He takes my hand, and I pull him up.

I help him to the beach, where he sits in the sun as I assemble a fire for us.

We make a camp. He is frostbitten, badly. I gather food and firewood for us and he tends the fire while I am away. Eventually when he is well enough and springtime has come, we go on walks around the lake, and through the green forest. He happens upon things that I can tell him about. A fallen and overgrown kiln, where I used to fire clay pots. A sundial carved from stone, the face now cracked in half, the needle broken away and missing completely—until he lead me here and reminded me, I had forgotten that I ever once cared about the time of day, though now I remember, there was a phase when I used to rather obsess over it, a long while back. A rowboat tucked away in a natural high shelf within a cave, which has held up better than I could have expected of it. We take it out to the lake and give it a try. It fills with water very quickly, and Waltir tries to salvage it, but I pull him up from the water, insisting that he leave it sink.

As we sit on the beach afterwards, staring at where the rowboat sank, Waltir asks me something. “The name of this lake. Loch Anneth. Do you know who Anneth was?”

“I suspect she was my first wife.”

“You suspect?”

“Do you remember the start of your life?”

“...No.”

“Nor I.”

He accepts this.

That night as we are sitting beside each other at the fire in our camp, he grabs me by the bicep and pulls me in to a kiss. This is new to me—I have never shared romance with a man before. But it does not feel wrong. In fact, it feels delightful: a thing that I am somehow confident I have *never* done before, and now I am. I kiss him in return, and then we are lying down before each other beside the campfire.

As the months go by, we begin work on building a cabin at our campsite.

Earlier

In defiance and in tears, I have built a tower. It is a far cry from my most aesthetically pleasing work—I truly do have a talent for working with stone—but what it lacks in looks, it makes up for in stubbornness. It will stand for my lifetime. I stand atop the tower, arms crossed, staring unblinking at the door at the end of the valley in the mountainside, waiting for her to emerge.

Five thousand years pass. Someone shoots an arrow at my head. I uncross my arms and catch it, and throw the damnable thing over the parapet to the ground. It falls. I hear it land on the grass below. I hear the waves of the lake lapping against the shore of the island. I blink. I blink repeatedly. I close my eyes hard. I bow my head, facing the floor, eyes shut tight, as the gravity of how much time I have spent unmoving catches up with me.

I open my eyes, and look to where the arrow was shot from. The scoundrel sees that I see him. He stops aiming his next shot and disappears into the green forest. I look back to the door at the end of the valley in the mountainside, as though seeing it

again for the first time. I am waiting for someone to come out of the door. Someone who I love. She is tall with handsome features, black hair straight and long, deadly with a short sword, stubborn as a stone, overflowingly generous to those she has found pity on, sharp tongued, quick witted, irreverent and righteous. My wife. I am waiting for my wife. Gods how I love her. Gods how long I will wait.

But as I fix my stance to resume staring at the valley again, I wonder whether I must wait and do nothing else. Perhaps I may take this time for my own edification, so that when she returns, she will find a man more worthy to be called her husband.

The man who shot an arrow at me is walking up the valley in the mountainside, towards the door. Good riddance to him. I watch him go in. Then I turn, and descend the stairs.

In the green forest, there is a hill. I build a house on top of it, such that it can't be missed as one passes through from the mountainside valley to the orange forest road. When she emerges, she will see this manor, an exact replica of the home she grew up in, and she will come to me.

When I drive the last nail into this house—this beacon—I feel, for the first time in many, many years, that a burden is lifted from me. My vigilance is no longer needed without rest. For the first time in thousands of years, I sleep.

As time goes on, I do still go out to the island, stand atop the tower, and stare at the valley. But I do other things too now. I start a garden. I start to farm. Eating for me is more of a pastime than a necessity. Most of the food goes to the wildlife. If they ravage my garden, I wish them well. If anything makes it to harvest, I leave it out for the birds and the rodents anyways.

A thousand years pass. One morning I row out to the island, my mind on the tomato vines that are sprouting, where I might want to put in a flower bed, what I might do for mulch. I enter the tower, place my foot on the first step, and pause there. I try to remember why I am here.

I do remember, eventually. I am expecting someone. Of course, yes, I am keeping a look out. I climb the stairs, and on the roof of the tower, I pace from one side to the other, looking at the valley for a time, and then looking at the road. I am expecting someone I care deeply about. Her. Her? It has been so

long. I am not even certain of how long it has been, by now. Lifetime after lifetime, a memory of a memory of a memory in perpetuity. I hope that when they come, they will be striking enough that I recognize them.

Seasons go by. I continue to tend to my crops. One spring day, when I am standing on the roof of the tower, facing the orange forest, I see a figure coming up the road. This happens sometimes. It is rare, though. An occasion to be appreciated.

This figure is quite different than most, I realize jovially. Not a human. For some unknowable reason, there is a doe coming to the green forest. She walks tall, her footsteps headstrong and precise.

It is actually some weeks before I see her next. I have been leaving grain out for the birds. I sit on a swinging bench on the porch in the shade, and I watch them peck and eat. And there, coming up out of the woods, is the doe. I hold my breath, not wanting to startle her. She is cautious as she approaches to join the rambunctious birds in eating the grain.

She lowers her head, eats a bit, and then bounds away. I breathe again.

She comes again the next day, and the next. Even into the winter, I leave grain out for her on the snow, and she comes, and she eats. I am not hidden to her. She often looks at me as I sit on the swinging bench, watching. One day, instead of waiting on the bench, I wait standing in front of the porch. She is cautious of this. I see her stand at the edge of the woods for some time before she decides I am still trustworthy, and comes to eat. The winter melts and gives way back to spring. I suppose that she trusts me quite a lot when she comes out to meet me as I toss out the grain for her and the birds, even if she does keep a distance between us still. One day, I am delighted when I am throwing out the grain and she walks straight up to me, and places her soft nose against me. I rest a hand on her side, look into her eyes, and without words, try to convey all of my gratitude to her for her gift of this moment.

The moment passes, and she lowers her head to eat some of the grain I have tossed out. I have a handful for myself as well.

One day, as I am walking through the woods, I happen upon her in the wild. We both freeze, surprised at each other. She

begins walking to me, and I to her, lightly, cautiously. I press my soft nose lightly against her side. I look down at myself, and realize jovially that I am quite different than before: a buck, antlers and all. She bounds away, and I bound after her, and we frolic through the green forest, and I see how much more to it there is than even I had known, lo these many years. That night we nest down together. I find myself spending most of my time with her, only occasionally seeing to my garden, and even in this, she stands beside me, watching with interest. We weather the winter together. More than once I lead us into the manor, and we nest down in a living room kept warm by the hearth fire. When springtime comes again, the world is living and we frolic through it. One day in a hidden clearing, she flags me, and I feel a tiny and precise pang of hurt, as though grabbing something and discovering that there is a nettle in my fingertip. I am unsettled, and I ignore her advances. The next day she flags me again, and although there is once again this pang, it feels distant, and there is much more presently her enrapturing scent, presence, heat, longing to care and be cared for. I go in unto her. The months go by, and she gives birth to the first of our fawns, a doe and a buck.

Earlier, at the start

Anneth and I walk along the road through the orange forest, hand in wicked hand. It is biting cold, though no snow falls on this place. When we arrive at the green forest, we have to climb over a snowbank.

We walk across the frozen lake, and sit together on the center of the island at the center of the lake in the center of the forest, two glints in a pupil in an iris.

“If we become separated in the labyrinth,” I say, “and it is hopeless for us to find each other, then let us return back, far as we may have come, and we will meet again at this lake.”

“Of course,” she tells me.

The winter wind howls across us.

“How long shall I wait for you?” she asks.

I consider this as the wind screeches. Eventually I answer, “As long as you feel I am worth. I will wait for you forever.”

Much later, nearing the end

After a fashion, I have decided I will never again be alone when another partner dies. We lounge around bonfires in the parched dirt, I and my concubines, women, men, doe, stag, squirrel, songbird, snake, wasp, anything that moves that I think might move me. I am fluid, sometimes in the form of one specie, but often caught somewhere between two or several. I know my partners' names occasionally, but much more viscerally I know their scents, their noises, their behavior. When I am anything mammalian or adjacent, I drink. No matter what I am, I am seldom without some manner of contact, nurture, stimulation. I am never alone.

But it never lasts forever. Loving as many as I do only multiplies how often I fall for someone deeply, and then they depart unto eternity. I try to fill the void left by them with a hundred others, but it is a fool's errand. The blot left by them hangs suspended over me as I fall through time, ever more out of reach, ever more unfillable, ever more doomed to acceptance or denial, then to vagueness, then to nothing.

After a fashion, I can endure no more, and I flee into Loch Anneth as a minnow, and spend a long, long, long, long, long time alone.

Later, at the end

I emerge from Loch Anneth immense, profoundly muscular, profoundly greedy, profoundly wise, scaled and clawed and frightening. My claws rake through the frost and sand as I circumnavigate the beach, taking deep breaths of the cold winter air. When I have done a full lap and have reacclimated to a life in air, I leap up, flap my immense wings, and take flight.

I am leaving Loch Anneth. As a dragon, I rocket past the valley and vault above the mountain range over the tangled labyrinth. I do not expect that there is an afterlife. I do not expect that there is an afterlife where everyone I've ever loved, from the first to the last, is waiting for me. But whether there is or there isn't, I will join them.

MELVIN, LILLY, RASPBERRY WHISKEY

1) Mel is 21 and on winter break from college

Last night I discovered that when I get severely drunk, I do not keep secrets. Previously this had never been a matter of consequence, as I had only ever been severely drunk alone.

Around noon yesterday, after a terrifyingly blizzardy two hour drive from Meriville to New Denton, I arrive at Ben's house with a backpack in one freezing hand and a 24 pack of tall cans in the other freezing hand, and I am literally shivering from just the walk from the car to Ben's front door. I am invited in by Ben and his Saint Bernard Toros, and after dropping everything to kneel down and rub Toros and absorb his warmth as he leans into me and wags, Ben and I head to the fridge to unpack the cans, finding space in the fridge among the deli meats and cheeses and condiments—my friend Ben is assertively not vegan. I am vegan, but I don't say a word about it to him. At this point in my life no world events have radicalized me enough to realize that immoral behaviors, even the most normalized ones, by definition, are more than personal choices. That doe eyed innocence won't last forever in me. Watch this space, I guess. But, in the meantime, back to pretending that I don't know what happens at the end, and that I am still writing as a linguistics undergrad—we overanalyze our own speech and talk unlike any native speaker, it's not charming, but it was realistically how I talked for a few years.

As Ben and I find space for the tall cans, he asks me a few questions about college life. “Learning much about languages? How many languages do you speak now? Lots of parties?” Yes, three fluently, no not really. By the time we’re done, half of the cans have fit into the fridge, and the other half are left to wait their turn in their box that is left on the kitchen counter.

“Still see many people from high school?” I ask Ben.

He shrugs. “I see them around, but I only really talk to the people at work.”

“Jason, Millie, Kylie?”

“Kylie moved away like a year back. But yeah, Jason and Millie.”

“Ah.”

“You still talk to anyone from around here?” Ben asks me.

I shake my head. As we’re standing there in the kitchen and I’m trying to think of how to explain how I’m bad at keeping in touch—as though Ben would be unaware—the power goes out. It’s oddly startling, every light going out at once. We stand around for a few seconds, wondering if it will just come back on.

After a bit, Ben takes out his phone and turns on the flashlight. He mutters something to the effect of, “Check out the breaker I guess.”

I come with him, and stand and watch as he flips some of the breaker switches back and forth to no effect. We step outside, and it appears that power is out for the entire neighborhood. No other lights on on the entire street.

In case of the event that the power will be out for a long time, Ben gets out a couple of coolers, and we bring them outside and pack icy snow into them. We bring them into the kitchen and put the remaining cans of beer into them, as well as some of the items from Ben’s fridge that he most wants to avoid going bad—those being the deli meats and cheeses and condiments, so, more or less every item that had been in the fridge, to the best of our cooler packing ability. Ben has also brought out an electric lantern, which sits on the kitchen counter, providing surprisingly good lighting to the entire kitchen, with dim light into the living room.

As Ben is assessing what he wants to do about the frozen meats in the freezer that he’s just remembered, the front door

flies open. Although he is a blur who never stops to say hello, I immediately recognize my best friend from growing up who I haven't seen in person since I was fourteen: Harry. Toros does not recognize him, and begins barking at this intruder into his house. Harry drops some paper grocery bags by the door—literally drops them—and flies to the kitchen sink and turns it on, and only when he stops there do I notice all the blood on him.

“Mel!” Harry yells, turning to me with a big smile on his face. It looks eerie, his smile lit only from the side by the light of the lantern, much of his face left in shadows. He winces as he puts his hand under the stream of water.

I take a second to kneel down by Toros, who is at Harry's leg, barking viciously. I tell the big hound that it's okay, and although he doesn't believe me right away, he eventually stops barking and walks off, keeping an eye on Harry from afar, beside Ben who is dumbfounded.

I stand up and look at Harry. He's wearing a black and grey long-sleeve shirt. The left sleeve has a line of blood all the way up to the shoulder, and the front of the shirt and his frayed jeans are wet with blood too. His left hand, which he is washing, has cuts on it. One cut goes across the side of his thumb, the back of his pointer finger, and the back of his index finger. The other cut goes across the back of his wrist.

“You need stitches,” I tell him.

Harry cranes his neck to look over me at Ben. “First aid kit?”

Ben stutters the beginning of a response, and then gives up on it and gets on his hands and knees between us, reaching around in the cupboard under the sink. He comes up with a dusty tin box, with a white circle and a red plus sign on the face.

Harry applies an ointment to his cuts and wraps a bandage around his injured hand, only allowing us to help by holding things for him.

As Harry is finishing up the bandage, Ben asks what happened.

“Slipped on some ice, somehow caught the edge of a fucking storm drain on the curb.”

Ben winces, believing Harry.

Harry goes to his grocery bags that he dropped by the door, and out of one of them, he pulls out a flask-shaped bottle of liquor. He yanks off the stopper which comes out with a *pop!*, holds the bottle up to us in a salute, and downs several gulps. When he's done, he smiles at me. "How have *you* been?"

After I ask again if he wants to go to the hospital and he insists that he does not, I tell him that I've been good, which is a lie and not a lie. In truth, I enjoy my studies, but I don't have any friends in Meriville who I see outside of class. I enjoy going on long walks through Meriville. I enjoy swimming in the lake near campus. I enjoy reading in the campus library and in the city library. I have not dated anyone in my three years there and I hate my nights and weekends job as a dish washer. My life is fine. I am depressed and think of suicide every day. Nothing is physically wrong with me and there is no threat to my safety. There is a hole in my life that was ripped out when I was seventeen and I have never been able to talk about it with anyone and the emptiness is killing me. I want nothing more in life than a dog but I'm too busy. I want nothing more in life than to drop out and live far away from everything but if I do I am a failure who does not deserve nice things.

I ask Harry what he's drinking.

Harry shows me the flask-shaped bottle. "Raspberry whiskey." On the label is a painted scene of a dog—a Jack Russell but mixed with a taller breed—standing in a raspberry patch, facing the left side of the label and pointing to something unseen.

I go to the coolers and get beers for myself and Ben. Ben goes with Harry to find him a change of clothes and show him to the shower. When they return, Ben grabs the lantern and brings it to the living room, and the three of us sit down to play cards. The night goes on. We talk about movies, mostly. Ben yawns about a hundred times before eventually deciding he will go to bed. Before he does, he shows Harry and I his brothers' bedrooms—his brothers are out of town visiting their parents' house downstate, and Harry and I are bumming the rooms for as long as we're staying here. After showing us the rooms Ben goes downstairs to his own bedroom, and Harry and I find ourselves standing out on the porch that leads out from one of

the second floor bedrooms, in spite of the horrific stinging cold that has me shivering immediately and wondering how Harry seems literally unphased by it. Harry lights up a cigarette. He can still hold it with his bandaged hand. I sip on my I-don't-knowth beer, and discover it is empty. I toss it back at the porch floor behind us, where it lands on a snow drift with the tiniest empty clang.

"Want a sip?" Harry offers, and shows me the raspberry whiskey.

I take the bottle, have a sip, and feel a warmth in my chest that explains much. I take another, bigger drink, and although I'm sure the world is still icy and terrible, I feel immune and it is wonderful. My shivering stops as I lean forward against the railing, holding the raspberry whiskey bottle for a while. I find myself looking down at the label with the Jack Russell mix.

"The dog on that label is hot," I tell Harry, revealing apropos of nothing my biggest secret in life that I thought I would take to the grave.

Harry is quiet. I realize I've said a thing that I wish I hadn't said. Ice creeps back through my chest, and my hands begin to shake, but it is not cold, I still feel warm physically. It's one hundred percent nerves.

Harry eventually asks, in a tone of his that I know is cautious: "You into that? Bestiality?"

I've made a mistake. I want to lie to him and back out of this but I don't. "Me and Chester were soulmates and I've never gotten over him," is what I begin to say, but I don't make it through the end before my face is a mess of tears and snot and I can't take a breath without shaking. A wave of drunkenness pulses over me and I feel off balance, and I lean heavily on the railing as I cry, wishing I was a lot, lot more together than I am.

Harry takes the bottle of raspberry whiskey from me, drops his cigarette onto the snow and stomps it out. He wraps an arm around my shoulders and leans onto me. He rubs my bicep through my sweatshirt. I don't know if I want this—being this close with someone—but I know that I'm glad Harry hasn't called me a rapist and left to call the police to have me arrested.

"I didn't know," he tells me. "Sorry if I ever... I don't know, said anything wrong."

I shake my head.

He squeezes me with the arm he already has around me.

I compose myself a bit, and snort in the snot that's coming out of my nose.

"Let's go in," Harry suggests, and I follow him inside. We sit at the foot of one of Ben's brothers' beds, both facing the floor in the dark, side by side, passing the raspberry whiskey back and forth. I take very light sips whenever it comes back to me.

"I know Chester meant the world to you, and you meant the world to Chester." He has taken his arm off of me by this point. He has a sip of his whiskey.

"Thank you," I tell him, and I don't know if he understands how much him saying that means to me, that he could recognize the bond Chester and I had had growing up, that he could remember it now instead of assuming something different.

"So just dogs, or?"

"I don't know." My hands are still shaking. I am residually extremely nervous and cold, but now it is a nervousness of freedom, of being opened and allowed to spill myself forth, tangled up, unplanned, rolling with the punches as they come. I am afraid but hopeful. I try to focus on the matter at hand, and ignore the fact that I am actually still freezing from how fucking cold it was outside. "Dogs definitely," I tell Harry. "Horses and farm animals like that, I mean, I'm curious about them, but I don't really know much first-hand."

"Is there porn?"

I give a very upset sigh. "Some. I don't really... most of it seems nonconsensual."

"Oh."

I am quiet, and hope he will ask me more. There is a wellspring of knowledge in me that is being tapped for the first time.

"Any interest in humans?"

"Not much."

"Good, we suck. You just gay for animals, or?"

"Bisexual." It feels weird to say this out loud, as I don't ever really think of myself as bisexual. The zoophilia eclipses it. Not to mention, the LGBT community has been loudly not-welcoming of my kind.

Harry and I talk for a long time. I black out at some point so I'm not sure what all was said, but when I wake up I am in Ben's brother's bed with a hangover. Physically I have a pervading hunch that I am going to die of alcohol poisoning. Emotionally it has been a long time since I was happier. If Harry tells anyone my secret my life will be ruined. I swore to myself for the last four years I was permanently scarred and would never have sexual interest in another soul and yet here and now, somehow, against it all, I know that I want to find an excuse to be alone with Toros today.

2) Mel is 23 and living alone and there is a global pandemic

It feels like a decade ago that I graduated with a bachelor's degree, majoring in Linguistics and minoring in Art History. I work freelance as a transcriptionist. The pay is close to minimum and I work long hours to make up for it, because I am lucky to have a job where I can work from home, when so many others are jobless and are not going to be looked out for. Knowledge of linguistics makes this job less bearable, not more. I live alone in a single bedroom apartment. The weather is very hot this week, and my AC unit is not working, and maintenance is only handling emergency requests because of the global pandemic and this does not rise to their standard of an emergency.

Someone knocks at the door. I do not know who it would be, other than that I know it is not maintenance.

I grab a mask off of the kitchen table, and as I put it on, I look through the door's peep hole. Standing outside my door is a man with combed-back hair wearing a mask and carrying a paper grocery bag. I can hear panting through the door, and looking down farther through the peep hole, I can make out a white and tan Husky.

I open the door, and ask, "Harry?"

The dog is wagging their entire body and trying to come meet me, but Harry has them on a short leash. He is smiling behind his mask. I haven't seen him since that week at Ben's house in college a couple years ago. "Care if I come in?"

I do consider it for a second. For most people I wouldn't have even answered the door. I give him a nod in.

Harry unclips the leash, and the Husky rushes forward. I kneel down to rub them as they lick me and get their back pet and their sides rubbed.

"Not surprised she likes you," Harry says, walking around us. He sets the grocery bag on the kitchen table. He reaches inside it and pulls out a flask-shaped bottle of raspberry whiskey.

The door has closed, and I have sat down with the Husky, petting her and leaning away as she licks my face.

"So what's going on?" I ask Harry.

"Global pandemic. Police and feds committing war crimes against citizens on a nightly basis. President's a maniac." He takes the stopper off of the whiskey bottle and takes a drink. "Wanted to see if you were still alive."

I gather that he's not lying about wanting to check in. Last I knew of, neither of us are on social media and Harry does not have a phone.

"You got a dog?"

"Lilly," he says. Lilly looks up at him with her head tilted for a second. "Good girl," he tells her. She walks off to go sniff around the apartment.

"Good girl," I agree.

"Is it always a furnace in here?"

"Maintenance won't come in to fix the AC."

Harry takes another drink from the raspberry whiskey and then sets the bottle on the table. "Lemme at it."

The day goes on, and it has become clear that Harry is going to be spending the night on my couch, and I am glad to have him. As a friend, and as thanks for him fixing the AC, which probably didn't take him more than ten minutes, including all the times we stopped to chitchat.

It is the nighttime, and Harry and I are both drunk, sitting cross-legged on my living room floor, Lilly at my side. I don't know that Harry and I have ever talked about the news before, but in the world we're living in now, the noteworthy news seems endless. Broadly, Harry and I agree that masks are good, that black lives matter, and that the president should be impeached.

"You follow the protests much?" Harry asks me.

“Not closely. Lot of burning and looting.”

Harry shakes his head. “A little burning and looting. Lot of people just standing there and then getting tear gassed and bull rushed.”

I take his word for it.

“I appreciate the work that they’re doing,” he tells me. “I’m impressed by their restraint.”

I wonder if I should broach a subject with him, since it verges on the level of conspiracy theory, but I decide we are already at this point, and drunk as I am, the hurdle to me saying what’s on my mind is low. “Do you want a civil war?”

Harry sighs through his nose. “Do I *want* one? No. I think our government does a lot of evil—always has done. I think a lot of people are seeing it for the first time now en-masse.” He sighs again through his nose. “But I don’t think a civil war would be good. For a problem as big as the United States of America, I don’t think there’s a silver bullet. We’ve been metastasized for a pretty long time by now.”

“Do you think there *will* be a civil war?”

Harry smiles to himself, looking down at his lap, and then after a moment he shrugs. “I think we’re pretty well fucked some way or another. It’s already too late to stop climate disaster. But honestly, no. We’ll see how much the pandemic changes things, but I think as things stand, most people here are too comfortable to start a war any time soon.”

I nod, and then yawn. Before too much longer, Harry is lying on the couch with a blanket, Lilly is lying on the ground beside him on another blanket, and I have gone to my bed.

In the morning, I wake up happy, remembering that Harry has come to visit. I get out of bed, and find Lilly lying on the floor at the foot of my bed. She looks up at me. She seems nervous about something, but seems to think I may be of help. I walk out to the living room, and Harry is gone. Not on the couch, not in the bathroom, not hiding around a corner somewhere. No note as to where he’s gone. I am not concerned until I see three big bags of dog food leaning against the wall beside the front door. One is opened, and in front of the bags are two dog bowls. One is filled with food and the other is filled with water.

3) Mel is 23 and might have a dog now

Two days have passed. Harry is not coming back. I suspected that he was not coming back on the first day. Now I know it to be so. This morning I searched his name on the internet, and I discovered that my best friend Harry is wanted on suspicion of over a dozen murders. There are many articles breaking down his targets: almost entirely lawyers, one CEO, two philanthropic though relatively unknown multimillionaires. At least three and upwards of six of his targets have ties to oil. All of his targets have ties to the GOP. He does not steal, only kills. The leading theory is that he is an eco terrorist. There is a forum that has been active for three years whose aim is to thwart him, whether by providing actionable information against him to a three letter agency or by vigilantism. They have not had a credible location on him in eight months—Meriville, and the trail was a week old by the time they got to it, and he was gone. They know his full name and date of birth and every address he has stayed at on the record before he had been found out and had to continue on ephemerally. They know the full names and addresses of several people he has been seen in photographs with, though I am not one of them. To be fair, Harry and I have not been in a photograph together since we were children.

So I have a dog now. She likes me but I think she is hesitant to accept me as someone who will stick around with her. I don't know if Harry had her for years or hours before arriving at my door two days ago. I do think Lilly is her real name. I think she is fully grown but still young, possibly three or four years old. She is eating and she seems to be healthy, though I will be taking her to the vet.

4) Mel is 23 and Lilly is 3

We get up around 9 AM. We go for walks in the morning. We look out the window together, smelling the world through the screen mesh. We go for walks in the afternoon. We go to the store and she picks out a toy and I pick out meaty treats. We trade information for the treats: she knows the words sit, lay

down, shake, roll over, come, and stay, although she does not take them as commands, rather, she knows what they mean and may do what the word entails if she decides she would like to—she can often be bribed. We have her checked out: she is in excellent health, a good weight, her teeth and bloodwork look good, her nails should be trimmed shorter, she is likely three years old, we can get her spayed today (I decline). We go to the dog park, and she is friendly with the other dogs. We share a bed, and she sleeps at my feet. We get up around 9 AM, and if I am sleeping in, she will whine, and I will be up. We go for walks in the morning, the afternoon, the evening, and at night.

5) Mel is 23 and copes with chronic anxiety by supplementing it with chronic stress

I send off my last email of the day and shut off the computer. It is 8 PM, and I have been working since 9 AM. This is the shortest workday I have had in ten days.

When Harry left me Lilly, I probably didn't work more than 5 hours in the two weeks that followed. I am not rich, though. I have savings, but they are not inexhaustible and were not trivially earned. For the last month, my workdays have been getting longer and my weekends have been theoretical.

As I lean back in my chair and the computer finishes powering off, Lilly has gotten up and is standing looking at me, wagging her tail with metered excitement. I stand up, and she licks her lips and wags freely, and walks to the front door ahead of me. I meet her there, put on my shoes, grab some bags, put on her collar and leash, and we go out and walk, and I know how happy she is as she trots along the sidewalk, as she buries her nose into the grass and leaves and we take her time as she smells, and I realize, standing and watching her examine a leaf that has fallen onto a bush, that I too, here, am happy.

The following day at 9 AM, I snap awake with a start, as I often do. On the bed at my feet, Lilly wags her tail. I manage my way out of the covers and lay on the bed the opposite way so that I can lie and pet her for a while. When I get up and walk out of the bedroom, she stands up on the bed, shakes herself, and follows after me. She is happy. A thing I love about dogs: they

are intelligent, and emotionally intelligent, and if one is not astute with dogs then a dog can often be reserved about the fact that they are afraid or upset if they want to, but I have never known a dog to hide that they are happy. I put on my shoes, and Lilly is happy. I grab her collar and my car keys, and Lilly's happiness is overflowing, and she bays and trots in place. When we are out of the door she pulls me all the way to the car, and we get in. We are going somewhere we have not gone together before, and somewhere I have not been in a long time.

The drive is roughly twenty minutes. For the first while, Lilly stood and sat in the passenger seat, sticking her nose against the cracked window. After we are on the highway and I have rolled the window up, she has laid down. As we are arriving, she has gotten up again. We arrive at the parking lot of the state park in Meriville. I myself have only been a handful of times, as it was not in walking distance from campus, and my walks were typically more impromptu, but I have certainly been here enough that it is familiar, and pleasantly so. It is a cool day, and I realize all at once that it is no longer summer. In the air is a heavy scent of fallen leaves.

I clip on Lilly's leash, and she follows me out of the driver's side door, and we run together, around and around the lawn of the visitor's center, hurriedly sniffing along the edge between the lawn and the woods, constantly doubling back and back again, closely following trails of scents that I am overjoyed to know that she is overjoyed to follow.

When we get onto the trail we are still running at a jog, and we go on for a while like this, although eventually we settle down into a walk. All the way we go, we go at her pace. She is meticulous, stepping along with her beautiful paws at the edge of the path, nose to the ground.

Deep into the woods, we arrive at a clearing of long brown grass, rippling in the wind. I look around. We have not seen a soul out here, nor was there any other car in the parking lot when we arrived.

I kneel down beside her, and leaning my head against her head, I tell her, "Stay close to me," and unclip her leash. She turns and licks my forehead, and then trots away, walking through the long grass, letting it brush against her head as she

parts it. She explores, and I feel I am blessed to be here to watch.

When she has explored thoroughly and is getting farther out than I would like, I call her back. She stands still a while, looking outward in the direction she had been walking. I do not rush her. Eventually, she turns and comes back to me. She is panting, and I ask if she wants to lay down. She lays down on the trail, back legs out to her side, tongue lolled out as she breathes. I sit down on the trail beside her. We are in an autumn house with walls of rippling grass.

As we stay a while, she stops panting, and lays over on her side. I lay down in front of her on the trail, face to face, and am stricken by her beauty, and the light catching in the fur of her muzzle, white and tan, and her black whiskers, and her black and pink lips. I kiss her. I have kissed her before on the top of the head, or on the back as I am petting her, but until now I have not kissed her like this, lip to lip. It is quick, and warm and perfect, and my heart speeds up as we look into each other's eyes afterwards. She considers only briefly before leaning forward and licking at my lips, and then we are making out, man and dog in the autumn house, and something has changed and it is wonderful.

6) Mel is 23 and is readjusting to what love feels like

We get up at 9 AM. We go on walks. I work full time, but less, and with breaks to appreciate each other and life. We are like rabbits or teenagers. We share a bed, and sometimes she sleeps at my feet and sometimes we sleep side by side. We lay on the floor together. We lay with her on her side and me spooning against her back and petting her and then resting my hand on her. We lay with me on my back and her on her chest with my head or arm pinned down as she licks me. We kiss with unbridled expressions of joy for one another. We kiss as I pass by her from my desk to the kitchen, or the kitchen to the couch, or so on. We look out the window together, smelling the world through the screen mesh. I do not know what to label us as because I have previously sworn that I will never love again, but I do not fight what is here between me and Lilly. I take it as it

comes. We go on walks. We sleep well and wake up ensnared in one another, a snug satisfied pile of human limb and canine. Each morning she rolls onto her back and I rub her belly as her jowls flop back and I look at her teeth, and at her chest where I can see her pink and white skin through the areas where the fur is thinner. I am utterly in love with her.

7) Mel is 24 and is contacted

It is 1PM and I have just sat back down to work after Lilly and I have been on a walk. My phone's text tone goes off in my pocket, and I am surprised by it. I take the phone out of my pocket and look. It is a message from Ben and it contains no words. It is a picture of a bottle of raspberry whiskey on his kitchen counter.

I close what I'm doing and shut off the computer. A minute later, Lilly and I are driving to New Denton and I do not have the music on, I am riding in silence and allowing all of the words to exist in my head, rabid.

I park on the side of the street in front of Ben's house and leave Lilly in the car, and she barks after me as I walk up to Ben's door. I knock and wait. I hear the door being locked or unlocked, but nobody opens it. I open it myself and walk in, and there is Harry. He is smiling. "Ben's at work. Should be back around five."

I want to punch Harry and hug him. I want to accuse him of murdering Ben because I have not actually seen Ben yet, although I know it is unlikely that Harry has murdered Ben.

"You keep a secret better than I do," I tell the asshole in front of me.

"Great minds," he says to the asshole in front of him.

We hug, and I go out to get Lilly. When she comes in, she is friendly with Harry, though I am stricken by how she does not seem to really remember him. "Where did you get her?" I ask.

"Farm in Iowa," he says. "They had an ad out. Picked her up and brought her to yours." He grabs his bottle of raspberry whiskey and holds it up, showing off the dog on the label. "Looked kinda similar."

I breath in, and sigh out.

"You still have her," he says, cautious.

I nod.

He looks at her and at me.

“Head over heels in love,” I tell him, and can’t help but smile at the admission, even though somehow, I am mad at him right now. “Thank you. Why the fuck did you get me a dog?”

“I try to balance my evil good things with good good things.”

He goes to the living room where Lilly is sniffing around. She sniffs up at him, wagging, and he puts his hand out to her nose to let her smell. After she turns away from him to continue sniffing elsewhere, he sits down on the couch. Looking at me, he pats the spot next to him.

I steal a beer out of Ben’s fridge and then go and sit beside Harry.

“Did you really do it all?”

He tells me every name. He adds, “I’d do it again.”

“Reason?”

“Pretty on-the-face. They were tyrants and if it weren’t for me they would still be getting away with it.”

We sit in quiet for a moment, but it is not an uncomfortable quiet. I am nodding. Eventually, we are both leaning back.

Harry toys with the whiskey bottle, turning the stopper back and forth in the mouth. “I want to ask if I have your blessing on something.”

My throat closes up, and I cannot utter a response.

He goes on. “Meat and dairy industry. I won’t tell you the names but I’ve done my research. Say go and I’ll go.”

I have nothing to consider here and my answer arises effortlessly. “Kill every damn one of them.”

Ben comes home around 5:30. The three of us play cards and catch up, Lilly lying at my side.

8) Mel is 25 and has recently moved

Working remotely, my job actually does not require me to live anywhere all that urban. In truth, I can live in a place surrounded by farms, where some days I may see a horse passing more often than I see a car. I am embarrassed that it takes me so long to let go of things and seek betterness of my own accord, but I am here and she is here, and we have arrived.

Our things are still boxed up, aside from her food and water dishes. We are lying on the carpet of the new living room, sun shining in through the window, I on my back and her pinning my head down, licking me. Then she is kissing me, and I am kissing her back, and I am thankful for the brightness she is in my life.

SPECIFICATIONS FOR THE ZOOCOSMOLOGICA DECK

A missive reads:

Please find as follows the specifications for the Zoocosmologica Deck, with notes on the significant imagery and suggestions for stylistic direction.

1. Taxonomy

The Zoocosmologica Deck will consist of 74 cards in all. Of these total 74 cards, 56 will be of the Dasein, 16 will be of the Mythic, and 2 will be without category.

Of the 56 Dasein, 14 will be of the suit Flowers, 14 will be of the suit Stars, 14 will be of the suit Towers, and 14 will be of the suit Spheres. Each suit will consist of, in order, one Passion card, 9 Numeric cards whose count will begin at two and progress upwards by whole numbers until arriving at ten, and 4 Morendo cards of whom the first will be called Death, the second will be called Ripple, the third will be called Harmony, and the fourth will be called Finality.

The Mythic cards will be numbered from one to sixteen. In order, they are Hummingbird, Elephant, Black Widow, Beastman, Mantichore, Gryphon, Dragon, Great Bear, Pegasus, Unicorn, Sleipnir, Jörmungandr, Fenrir, Primordia, Cow, and Life.

Of the 2 uncategorized cards, 1 is The Egg, and 1 is The Seed.

2. Principle Designs

All 74 cards in the deck will be of a uniform width and height, approximately five lengths wide for every seven lengths tall. All 74 cards in the deck will feature a depicted scene, which must allow for directionality and should therefore not feature total symmetry when folded over the horizontal axis, save for the Stars Finality whose scene by happenstance is infinitely symmetrical. All scenes will be encompassed by a border, save for the two uncategorized cards whose scenes will extend fully to the edges of those cards; uniformly about the card, the border will leave some frame of white space between the scene and the edge of the card. Within this white space, in the top left corner and reversed in the bottom right corner, will be denoted the card's symbol and, in the case of the Dasein, the card's suit below it. The color of the border should be uniform across all cards, likely black, but certainly not green. In the case of the Flower cards and the Stars cards, the color used to depict the border should also be used to depict the card's symbol and suit: This color should also be used to denote the symbol in the case of the Mythic. In the case of the Towers cards and Spheres cards, the color green should be used to denote the card's symbol and suit. In the case of the two uncategorized cards, a reasonable choice of contrastive color may be used to depict each card's symbol against its scene.

The symbol of the Passion of Flowers and the Passion of Stars will be the planet symbol of Venus, while the symbol for the Passion of Towers and the Passion of Spheres will be the planet symbol of Mars. The symbol of the Numeric cards will be that card's number depicted in Arabic numerals. The symbol of the Death cards will be a sword whose design will remain uniform across each suit. The symbol of the Ripple cards will be a wave. The symbol of the Harmony cards will be four parallel lines uniformly spaced and of uniform width. The symbol of the Finality cards will be an unfilled square of approximately half the height as that seen of the numerals who serve as the symbols for the Numeric cards. The symbol of the Mythic cards will be that card's number depicted in Roman numerals. The symbol of

The Egg will be an ovum. The symbol of The Seed will be any plant seed whose shape reasonably distinguishes it as such.

The scenery found within the suit Flowers will tend to employ a pastel palette of light faded colors. The scenery found within the suit Stars will employ a palette of white design on black backgrounds and should employ no colors other than white and black. The scenery found within the suit Towers will tend to employ a palette centered around the color orange. Within the scenery of the Spheres suit and the Beastman card, each sphere will be depicted in a hue of blue which is uniform across Beastman and all Spheres cards, save the Spheres Ripple.

It is suggested that the design found on the card backs feature a horizontal line across the card's center, not near to touching either edge, with the Greek miniscule letter zeta depicted above and depicted in reverse below, such that the directionality of the card is not made known by the back. The colors employed and any additional design choices for the card backs may be chosen freely, though the color green is strongly encouraged to be prominently featured.

3. Significant Symbols in Scenery and Stylistic Suggestions

Passion of Flowers

The scene of the Passion of Flowers should primarily depict a female dog's genitalia: More of the scene than not should be composed of her vulva, which should be swollen with heat. She should be of a large breed suitable for vaginal penetration by a human penis. The vulva should appear that it has been smeared with body paint: Of the three sections seen of a canine vulva, the top and right sections should feature yellow paint, and the left section should feature green paint; The green paint should be of a lesser coverage than what is seen of the yellow paint on its equivalent section. The dog's anus and the base of her tail should be visible, but should not be the focus of the scene; the anus should appear clean, without presence of fecal matter. If possible, the perspective of the scene should be close enough

such that only the dog is depicted and nothing is seen beyond her.

Two of Flowers

The scene of the Two of Flowers should depict two dogs mating in the woods. Above them, hanging vines descend to produce an arched shape on the scene's upper half. Behind the dogs, trees should be spaced such that they alternate being planted distantly and closely in two rows, and nothing beyond the back row of trees can be seen. On the grass near to the dogs' heads, two plucked flowers should lie on the grass. The dogs may be of any breed and the flowers may be of any species.

Three of Flowers

The scene of the Three of Flowers should depict a dog, a fox, and a cat sleeping cuddled together in the forest beneath the shelter of a bush. The cat should be in the possession of three flowers, perhaps placed about her face.

Four of Flowers

The scene of the Four of Flowers should depict a sheep's leg below the knee, with four flowers of any species placed along the leg. The leg should be standing on the ground and the hoof should appear to be in good health. The ground should be light brown dirt, with no other background visible.

Five of Flowers

The scene of the Five of Flowers should depict five flowers arranged in a pentagon; the pentagon should be upright, such that a line drawn between the two bottom flowers would be parallel with the bottom border of the scene. Bees should be present here and there among the flowers, and should also be present in two distinct horizontal lines traveling left and right above the five flowers.

Six of Flowers

The scene of the Six of Flowers should depict two mermaids, one with the face of a fish, and the other with the face of a human. The mermaid with the face of a fish places six flowers in the hair of the mermaid with the face of a human.

Seven of Flowers

The scene of the Seven of Flowers should depict a dog lying within a cage in the woods. The perspective should look into the cage from the front; The bars of the cage should be overgrown, with the door of the cage missing. On the front side of the cage, around where the edges of the door would be, should be seven flowers, heavily skewed in quantity towards the top left corner, with only one flower near the bottom right.

Eight of Flowers

The scene of the Eight of Flowers should depict eight hatchling turtles walking across the sand, from the bottom of the scene towards the sea which is thinly visible at the top of the scene. Resting atop the shell of each turtle should be a flower.

Nine of Flowers

The scene of the Nine of Flowers should depict a soldier giving a bath to a dog. The soldier should have a green camouflaged uniform and an assault rifle on his person, and should be depicted without a face. On the bath tub and on the wall behind are seen nine flowers, none placed close together.

Ten of Flowers

The scene of the Ten of Flowers should depict a raccoon holding a flower, while standing in a clearing of grass where nine additional flowers grow nearby her.

Flowers Death

The scene of Flowers Death should depict a single rose, drooped, wilted, and visibly dead. The dead rose should be shown against a blue-purple background. No thorns should be visible on the rose's stem.

Flowers Ripple

The scene of Flowers Ripple should depict the same dead rose as the Flowers Death, though now the drooped rose is lifted by a dog's tongue. The dog's mouth should be around the end of the flower, teeth and tongue prominently visible, drool hanging from the corner of the dog's mouth. It should be clear that the dog is beginning to eat the flower. As little of the dog as possible should be shown beyond the muzzle, and the eyes in particular should be omitted.

Flowers Harmony

The scene of Flowers Harmony should depict the same dog as Flowers Ripple: The dog is now defecating in front of brown reeds near a lake. Through the reeds a farm can be seen across the lake, with fields of soil and a barn. The entirety of the dog should be visible in the scene, and should occupy as much of the scene as possible while allowing for the other elements described.

Flowers Finality

The scene of Flowers Finality should depict a flower pot viewed from an askewed angle above. The spout of a watering can should be pouring water into the soil. In the center of the flower pot, small green leaves are budding up from the soil.

Passion of Stars

The scene of the Passion of Stars should primarily depict a female horse's genitalia: The mare's vulva should be centered

within the scene, taking up as much of the scene as possible while allowing for the depiction of her anus and her tail. Her tail should generally be positioned in an arc going around the right side of the anus and the vulva; The tail should not be depicted in full, and should be cut off by the scene's right border, bottom border, and top border. On the line comprising the leftmost edge of the vulva, on the leftmost point of this line, there should be a shining star by which this constellation is known.

Two of Stars

The scene of the Two of Stars should depict a female horse and a male horse mating. A shining star should be depicted in the head of each horse.

Three of Stars

The scene of the Three of Stars should depict a great big tree, with three stars in a vertical line centered within the tree's trunk. The entirety of the tree may or may not be depicted, though as much of the trunk as possible should be contained within the scene.

Four of Stars

The scene of the Four of Stars should depict a snake diving towards a fleeing rabbit. Three stars should be contained within the snake, one at the head and two in the body, while one star is contained within the rabbit. The mouth of the snake should be open as though to eat the rabbit imminently.

Five of Stars

The scene of the Five of Stars should depict a thistle. Two stars should be in a flowering bud, one in the flower and one in the bud, while on a separate node a star is contained within a non-flowering bud, and a fourth star is contained at the fork between these two nodes, and a fifth star is contained at the base of the thistle.

Six of Stars

The scene of the Six of Stars should depict a camel. The stars of this constellation should be found one in the hind hooves, one in the hindquarters, one in each of the two humps, one in the head, and one in the forehooves.

Seven of Stars

The scene of the Seven of Stars will depict seven dolphins, with one star contained in each dolphin. Superimposed over the body of each dolphin should be a character from the Greek alphabet, namely, uppercase A, lowercase α, uppercase B, lowercase β, uppercase Ω, lowercase ω, and uppercase Z.

Eight of Stars

The scene of the Eight of Stars should depict the face of a reindeer looking directly at the viewer. Her antlers will contain eight total points, with a star contained within each of these.

Nine of Stars

The scene of the Nine of Stars should depict a human knight, riding atop a horse. The horse should stand on her hind legs, and the knight should have her sword drawn and raised tall.

Ten of Stars

The scene of the Ten of Stars should depict the same human and mare as seen on the Nine of Stars. In this scene, the human is visiting with the mare in a stable.

Stars Death

The scene of Stars Death should depict a gigantic human stabbing through a star with a sword, tearing the star apart with the piercing blow. The human should appear enraged; He

should have long hair and a long beard; He should appear very muscular; His closed hand should be approximately one fourth to one half the size of the star. In line with the Principle Designs outlined earlier, he should be depicted strictly in white and in black, with no other colors or greys present.

Stars Ripple

The scene of Stars Ripple should depict the partial orbital lines of planets circling around a no longer present sun; with the sun gone, these orbital lines will become straight lines exiting the scene in a variety of directions. Compared to the scenes of other cards, Stars Ripple should be among the most minimalist in design.

Stars Harmony

The scene of Stars Harmony should depict a galaxy. The Milky Way Galaxy may be an ideal choice to depict, though any galaxy should suit the purpose of this scene.

Stars Finality

The scene of Stars Finality should be uniformly black and should feature no further design, save that which should exist outside of the border of the scene.

Passion of Towers

The scene of the Passion of Towers should primarily depict a male horse's genitalia: The underside of a stallion should be seen in profile, with his penis fully dropped from his sheath. The entirety of the penis should be in the scene and should be the scene's focal point; The hind legs of the stallion should be partially within the scene on the left border, while the forelegs need not be depicted; The belly of the horse should be visible, while the horse's back should not be visible. The horse should stand at the edge of a cliff, below which can be seen a forest landscape, beyond which is a blue sky.

Two of Towers

The scene of the Two of Towers should depict a male donkey and a female donkey mating. The two donkeys stand in a field at sunset: the sun is not visible in the scene, though the shadows of the donkeys may suggest that the sun is to the left of the scene. The donkeys should be positioned near the bottom left of the scene. Near the top right, in the distance, two towers are visible.

Three of Towers

The scene of the Three of Towers should depict three horses sleeping while encompassed by three crude wooden watchtowers.

Four of Towers

The scene of the Four of Towers should depict four totem poles, the leftmost of which is not on fire, while the other three are engulfed in flames. At the foot of each totem pole should be a pile of kindling. Standing congregated near the three burning totem poles should be a collective of three werewolves bearing torches.

Five of Towers

The scene of the Five of Towers should depict three cats among five cat towers. The topmost cat should be walking, the middlemost cat should be in the midst of leaping, and the bottommost cat should be lying down.

Six of Towers

The scene of the Six of Towers should depict an interior view of an aquarium, with six prop towers of various heights and designs seen within. Swimming among the towers is a goldfish, who occupies a nontrivial amount of this scene.

Seven of Towers

The scene of the Seven of Towers should depict a cityscape with either seven smokestacks or seven skyscrapers distinctively in view. Somewhere in the scene, seven crows sit in a line.

Eight of Towers

The scene of the Eight of Towers should depict a lake, with eight towers in the background along the lake's perimeter. In the foreground, in the water of the lake, is an otter.

Nine of Towers

The scene of the Nine of Towers should depict an assortment of bugs smoking from nine hookahs. The bugs do not need to be to a realistic scale and may include a diversity of types of bugs, such as moths, grasshoppers, and ants. Not every hookah needs to have a bug presently at it, though at least a few hookahs should be in use.

Ten of Towers

The scene of the Ten of Towers should depict ten penises of various species shown within a display case. The penises should point towards the top of the scene, and while no cues need be given that the penises are explicitly still alive, no penis should be made to appear dead. Equine and canine penises may be avoided if possible, so as not to be conflated with other scenes.

Towers Death

The scene of Towers Death will depict a giant human woman pushing over a tower. Very close in the foreground, rubble from an already toppled tower can be seen. In the background can be seen a tower which is yet standing. The perspective should be such that a good amount of the ground surrounding the falling tower can be seen.

Towers Ripple

The scene of Towers Ripple should depict the same scene and perspective as Towers Death, though some time has passed. The tower in the background which was standing has now fallen as well, and now may be visible or not within the scene. In the rubble of the middle tower, using the rubble as part of the construction, a pleasant rustic house has been built. A human can be seen in front of the house using a scythe to cut a field of tall grassy plants. Smoke can be seen emerging from the house's chimney.

Towers Harmony

The scene of Towers Harmony should depict the same scene and perspective as Towers Ripple, though some additional time has passed. The house depicted before has been expanded upon, and is now one of multiple buildings which encompass a courtyard. Human figures can be seen in the courtyard, including one human pulling a cart, two humans talking, and one human juggling as two humans watch. Somewhere in the scene, a shepherd walks with a flock of sheep. On the rubble in the foreground, there now rests an empty glass bottle such as one may drink beer or soda from.

Towers Finality

The scene of Towers Finality should depict the same scene and perspective as Towers Harmony, though much time has passed. There is no longer any rubble or other structure standing in the scene. The landscape is now barren parched dirt. The sun hangs in the background, fully visible within the scene, not centered within the scene, not touching the horizon.

Passion of Spheres

The scene the Passion of Spheres should primarily depict a male dog's genitalia: A male dog should be seen from behind, with a human hand holding the base of the dog's penis behind the

bulbus glandis such that the penis is visible from this vantage. A blue circle should be superimposed around the bulbus glandis: This circle should be centered horizontally and vertically within the scene and should act to highlight the scene's focal point. A dimly lit stonework wall and floor should be visible beyond the dog, to the extent if any that the background is seen.

Two of Spheres

The scene of the Two of Spheres should depict an altar overgrown with creeping vegetation, where one orb can be seen resting on a pedestal while another orb can be seen hanging from a fine chain. The two orbs should be somewhat nearby one another, though not directly over or beneath each other. On the overgrown altar, not centered on the altar nor centered in the scene, two foxes can be seen mating.

Three of Spheres

The scene of the Three of Spheres should depict a human figure conducting a ritual with three spheres which stand on pedestals. The human reaches as though to touch a sphere, but a cat slinks in between the hands and the sphere, nuzzling the back of his head against the sphere. The human is partially costumed to resemble a dog of the breed husky, likely including a pair of faux ears and a faux tail.

Four of Spheres

The scene of the Four of Spheres should depict a flying squirrel leaping towards the ground, with a tree beside her. On the tree should be measuring marks as that seen on a ruler, though unlabeled. On the tree in a vertical row should be four spheres.

Five of Spheres

The scene of the Five of Spheres should depict a rat standing on her hind legs among wood shavings. Behind the rat should be walls composed of horizontal wooden slats, on which

mathematical formulas are written across many slats. Behind the rat, but visible to the viewer, in the corner formed by the two visible walls, should be stacked five spheres.

Six of Spheres

The scene of the Six of Spheres should depict a formal ball, where six couples dance hand in hand, facing one another; each of the six couples should be composed of one human and one dog, with each dog preferably being of a different breed. Above the head of each couple, a sphere should be depicted.

Seven of Spheres

The scene of the Seven of Spheres should depict the face of an underwater rock structure, with an octopus camouflaged over the top of the rock's surface, his skin colored to match that of the rocks. Among the octopus's tentacles are six spheres, which the tentacles should not obscure.

Eight of Spheres

The scene of the Eight of Spheres should depict coffee beans, with eight tiny spheres partially buried among the beans. The spheres should appear in a uniformly spaced grid of two across and four down. Crawling among the coffee beans should be two beetles, one appearing between the two uppermost orbs, and one appearing between the righthand side's lowest and second lowest orb.

Nine of Spheres

The scene of the Nine of Spheres should depict a discarded leg bone which appears to have been chewed on thoroughly by a canine. Embedded throughout the leg bone are nine spheres.

Ten of Spheres

The scene of the Ten of Spheres should depict two dogs sitting on a piano bench, playing a duet on the piano. On the sheet music which they read from, ten spheres are depicted with arcane geometric imagery connecting them; the sheet music does not need to look like any real-world musical notation.

Spheres Death

The scene of Spheres Death should depict a man of advanced age smashing a sphere by throwing it onto the ground in front of a stained glass window. The sphere should be depicted in the process of shattering, such that it is clear what the object is and what is happening to it. The entirety of the stained glass window behind the human need not be shown; the window should depict an abstract collection of colored panes with no distinct imagery. The man should be in the interior of the building to which the stained glass window belongs.

Spheres Ripple

The scene of Spheres Ripple should depict a book lying open upon a violet tablecloth. The visible pages of the book should feature text which is not rendered in such a way that it can be read in this scene; on the righthand page, with text above and below, should be an illustration of a sphere; the sphere and the text should be of the same color, likely black, though blue should be avoided.

Spheres Harmony

The scene of Spheres Harmony should depict the interior of a library: rows of book shelves can be seen on the left and right of the scene, and in the distance, a bookshelf forms the background of the scene as well. Superimposed upon the scene should be three concentric circles, uniformly spaced, centered both horizontally and vertically within the scene; these three

circles should all be rendered thinner than the circle superimposed upon the scene of the Passion of Spheres.

Spheres Finality

The scene of Spheres Finality should depict the ocean at night, with a mushroom cloud in the distance. The mushroom cloud should be the prominent feature of the scene, though it need not take up much of the scene: it should appear very far away. A thick horizontal blue line should be superimposed across the center of the scene, intersecting with the head of the mushroom cloud. Nothing in the scene should appear in front of the blue line, and the blue line should not be reflected in the water. Stars in this scene should be rendered sparingly, and if possible the ocean and the sky should bear a slight degree of color other than black, so as to avoid confusion with the suit Stars.

The Egg

The scene of The Egg should depict a brown chicken egg resting upright on a primate's open palm. The sky should be seen in the background: The weather and the time of day may be decided freely, though it should not be nighttime solely to avoid confusion with the Stars suit. On the egg will be positive holy symbols painted on with an artist's brush. The exact holy symbols may be decided freely, though one suggestion for a set would be a Cross, a Yin and Yang, an Om, and a Pentacle. The holy symbols may be painted with any color or with multiple colors, with black being an entirely acceptable option.

The Seed

The scene of The Seed should depict a collection of various plant seeds decoratively arranged in concentric circles: Each circle should be comprised of one type of seed. The outermost circle should be incomplete in a section at the bottom left, and a primate hand should be seen reaching into the scene and arranging the seeds to complete the circle. The surface on which the seeds rest may be decided freely, though some suggestions

would be on a wooden table, on a boulder with a moderately flat top, or on a plane of smooth sand. In a line across the circles traveling from near the bottom right of the scene and towards the top left should be a splatter of seminal fluid: Though the semen need not be of any specific species, it should be of a quantity such that it is enough to be visible but not so much that a human would be highly unlikely to have produced it in a single instance.

Hummingbird

The scene of Hummingbird should depict a stem along the left side of the scene, leading up to a flower from which a hummingbird drinks: The hummingbird should occupy a large share of the scene. Along the stem should be bunches of orange berries or buds, arranged into ten clusters, the farthest from the flower being a cluster of one, and increasing by whole numbers until arriving at a cluster of ten nearest the flower: the stem may need to go above the flower to near the top of the scene and then bend back downwards in order for this to be accomplished. Above the hummingbird's head, the image of a lemniscate should be superimposed.

Elephant

The scene of Elephant should depict a lone elephant walking towards the viewer. Each of the elephant's ears should be painted in the style of paintings created by elephants, and to the extent possible, neither painting should bear resemblance to symbology from any human culture.

Black Widow

The scene of Black Widow should depict a black widow spider on a background of layers of spider webs. Some or all of the spider's legs should be spread out to cover as much of the scene as possible while still keeping her within the scene in her entirety.

Beastman

The scene of Beastman should depict four humanoid figures who each possess the facial features and the fur, scales, or skin of a nonhuman animal. Each figure should bear the likeness of a different species of animal, though which four species are depicted may be chosen freely. Each figure should be of a particular gender and should be touching or by forced perspective have the appearance of touching a particular object: the figure with a male body and feminine clothing should be touching a flower; the figure with a female body and feminine clothing should be touching a star; the figure with a female body and masculine clothing should be touching a tower; the figure with a male body and masculine clothing should be touching a sphere. The placement of each figure and object in the scene may be chosen freely.

Mantichore

The scene of Mantichore should depict one mantichore on his back, swatting at a severed human hand which hangs from a string. The string should continue up until it is out of the scene, with its holder unknown. Part of the bone should be seen sticking out of the severed hand, and some blood should be visible around the wrist.

Gryphon

The scene of Gryphon should depict three gryphons standing in an abstract plane. One gryphon nuzzles the flank of another, while the third gryphon playfully drapes herself over the back of the gryphon whose flank is being nuzzled. All three gryphons appear agreeable to each other's actions. The entirety of each gryphon may or may not be depicted in the scene, so long as the preceding imagery is able to be conveyed.

Dragon

The scene of Dragon should depict a gargantuan dragon breathing fire in a barren landscape: the scene should be viewed from an angle overhead, and a mountainous landscape surrounding the dragon should indicate the dragon's immense size. In the moment in time depicted in the scene, the dragon should appear imposing and fearsome.

Great Bear

The scene of Great Bear should depict a gargantuan black bear standing over a city, with the moon haloed behind her head. While the great bear should appear entirely capable of crushing any portion of the city in a single step, the great bear should not be depicted as causing any destruction. The moon behind the great bear should feature additional coloration other than pure white, likely an orangeish yellow or a muted green.

Pegasus

The scene of Pegasus should depict a winged horse in flight, wings spread grandly. She appears to gallop on air towards the viewer. She should appear on a background of a bright blue sky. Wispy clouds may be seen about her legs and chest as she soars through them. The image of a lemniscate should appear superimposed over one wing, and superimposed over the other wing should appear a row of four images: from left to right, two instances of the planetary symbol of Mars and two instances of the planetary symbol of Venus; the four symbols should appear close to their neighbor or neighbors, but none touching.

Unicorn

The scene of Unicorn should depict a unicorn in a castle courtyard, standing on grass and flowers, with a stone wall behind which incorporates gold into the design, possibly as the mortar. In a horizontal row across the scene, partially superimposed over the body of the unicorn while still allowing

her to be clearly seen, are the symbols for the suits Flowers, Stars, Towers, and Spheres. Above the unicorn's head, not centered in the scene and not obscuring the unicorn's horn, is the image of a lemniscate.

Sleipnir

The scene of Sleipnir should depict a beautiful eight legged grey stallion mounting a male donkey and penetrating the donkey's anus: The donkey's penis should be fully dropped from his sheath, and he should be ejaculating. The two should be depicted inside of a cave, with instances of sourceless fire scattered about the cave floor lighting the scene. Superimposed over the side of Sleipnir's body, ideally centered in the scene, should be the image of a lemniscate. Superimposed in an arc over the darkness above Sleipnir and the donkey should be the four Morendo symbols, in order from left to right, Death, Ripple, Harmony, and Finality.

Jörmungandr

The scene of Jörmungandr should depict the world serpent biting his own tail: The head should come in from the left border of the scene, and the tail should come in from the right border of the scene. Below Jörmungandr is a roiling ocean, and above Jörmungandr is a yellow sky.

Fenrir

The scene of Fenrir should depict the gigantic black wolf Fenrir with the bloodied corpse of Odin in his mouth. The humanoid god should fit comfortably in the mouth of the legendary wolf.

Primordia

The scene of Primordia should depict the planet, the moon, the sun, and the void. This depiction may be literal or not, though personification into humanoid likenesses should be avoided. While this card should feature directionality, it is acceptable in

this specific card for it to be unclear on which orientation of the scene is the upright and which is the reverse.

Cow

The scene of Cow should depict a cow standing in a field of grass, facing the right border of the scene. The sky behind the cow should be blue, though this may not be made clear, as the sky should primarily feature dense radial patterns centered around the cow composed of overlapping lines of light green, light yellow, lavender, and pink. A human hermaphrodite should be depicted in the act of mating with the cow. Pine trees should be seen in the field some distance away.

Life

The scene of Life should depict a newborn wolf suckling on a human breast. Exact decisions on the framing may be made freely, though the scene should closely feature the wolf and should show little if any of the human beyond the breast.

4. A Note In Closing

Please do see that this matter is approached with sincerity and compassion, and while not avoiding gravitas, in twice as much measure or more do not avoid levity. Many will seek to use these cards for divination, and we hope that their path will be well guided: As with all things, whether it is real and helpful or surreal and helpful, it is helpful.

POEMS

Figurine Man

Jacob Bride sets his mug of coffee down on the side table, and sits himself down in the rocking chair on his back porch. He looks out at the open desert. Takes a big smell of the fine dirt in the air. From the side table, he picks up his sharpened knife and a block of basswood. He looks down at his hands as he works, though his mind's eye is jumping ahead. He whittles off the corners, molding the basswood block into a shape that is curved, organic, reminiscent of something living.

From out of the wood, Bride uncovers a mound. The figure is thick to begin with, and is coiled thicker. He carves out her muscular legs, muscular sides curved under her hunched muscular back, her short tail. Her face is turned down between all of her legs, licking herself. He carves out her short ears and the ridges of her wrinkled face. He carves her tongue, and leaves protruding the thin lines underneath. He carves her eyes closed in concentration.

With the rough shapes done, Bride retrieves his glasses from the side table. In doing so, he also remembers his coffee, and has a long drink of it now that it has gone from piping hot to warm.

Glasses on, Bride holds the wood closer to his eye level, and leans in and around the work as necessary. He touches up the detail of her nose buried in her vulva and her tongue pressing it further, pushing the soft sex. He carves out the toes on each of

the paws, some of the toes fanned out as she licks, splaying her little claws. He trims the claws each to a healthy length. Under her tail he carves her muscular rump and the pit of her anus, and carves out the details of the joints of the back legs, all just-so.

Bride sets the figurine on the side table. She sits licking without a wobble.

All The Happy Little Animals

Splashing around in a water park; running with high stomps through the shallow water until it's deep enough to swim and then splashing down and swimming; seeing your friend across the busy pool waving you over, and swimming around everybody to go meet them; putting your heads under together, each of you holding your breath, opening your eyes to look; your friend resurfaces and you follow, and they reach up to the poolside and show you they brought pool toys to dive for, and the two of you drop them and watch them all dart down to the bottom of the pool, and the two of you go down after them, seeing who can grab more; you go to the water slide, wait in line in the warm sun, which feels nice after the cold pool; you fly down the slide and make a huge splash when you hit the water at the bottom, and then swim out of the way to make way for the next person. The ducks get to have this as their life; they are nourished and livened by swimming around, shouting, diving and splashing, taking off and splashing, putting their heads under, play. When the seasons become too warm or too cold, they make a long trip over beautiful landscapes to a place that is more right for them; eat bread; lay an egg; stretch your wings; float and bob on a gentle wave for an hour, taking in all the goings on around your pond.

Awakening

Waking up,
sluggish surrealness,
I don't know
the time,
where I am,
who the president is,
what my name is,
or whether I am facing east.
I do know the warmth,
cozy heat,
of someone
in the blankets with me.
Eyes unopened,
I know nothing of
the world outside of
my sense of smell, and touch:
I am touching fur
which is ever slowly rising,
falling,
and rising,
and falling;
I am smelling dog,
his breath—
I breathe in when he breathes out
to take in the fullness of his breath,
and I breathe out when he breathes in
so that he can have mine.
We both stretch, and inch our nuzzling way
closer into one another's reacclimating bodies.
I breathe in the smell of his fur on his chest.
I know of the world I have woken into
that I am loved and love.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 5;

MAY 2023.

In this issue,
a cultist is on a pre-marriage road trip,
and an adult movie shoot takes a turn for the slobbery.

Featuring the stories: The Cult, By and By, True Thoughts, Shooting Stars, Steep and Dangerous, and Well 8, as well as a few poems.

THE CULT

South of Tucson, AZ

I step into the cafe, have a seat on a bar stool, set my helmet on the counter, and order coffee and the breakfast that the hostess recommends. As I sit and wait, I find myself staring down at the ring finger of my right hand. A week ago I managed to give it a not-small cut while opening a beer bottle. Today, there's only one red speck where it's still healing, and a faint scratch where the rest of the already-healed wound was. I marvel at how the body heals. It seems passive, unimpressive, like something that actually should work better than it does, but it's remarkable that we do this at all, and I find myself thankful. I wonder whether it would have been more interesting to get into biology. I glance to my left hand, where the fingers are limp on account of my now-ex stabbing me across all of my tendons. I give my left hand a nod to my right. "Catch up."

The hostess comes over and slides a collection of condiments across the counter to me.

I am confused and then embarrassed. "Sorry, I was—sorry. Talking to myself."

I hear a bell ring as the door opens behind me.

"Have a seat anywhere, hon," the hostess calls over me to the new patron, and turns to grab him a menu.

The only ones eating here are one other man at the opposite end of the bar and a trio in a booth. The newcomer takes a seat right beside me and thanks the hostess as he accepts the menu.

As he's reading it, I steal a glance at him. He is dressed like Obi Wan Kenobi in the prequels but his face is pudgier and a lot more sunburned.

"I'll have an order of hash browns and toast, with no butter on the toast if it comes that way. Thank you." The hostess takes his menu and leaves.

Now that she's gone, I stare at him as conspicuously as I can.

He gives me a grin back. "Your bike outside?"

"Do I know you?"

I think it was being stabbed that made me care less about being rude to people who are imposing on my life anyways.

He reaches and I lean back wondering if I'm about to try to kill someone. But he reaches past me to my helmet, and taps the pride sticker on the side. "I took us to have the same father." He sits back upright—I notice then that his posture is impeccable—and he taps on a wooden cross that hangs from a length of twine around his neck.

I relax a little even though this should not be a sign to me that things are about to be going better. "If you're trying to say God hates fags, this is a real roundabout setup."

My plate arrives, stacked with eggs, sausage, bacon, and hash browns. I thank the hostess and start on the sausage, keeping the corner of my eye focused on this stranger.

Something seems to have made him confused. "The rainbow. I took it as..."

I'm not from around here, but I'm surprised anyone wouldn't recognize the pride flag.

"I think I've misunderstood," he admits.

I nod, and I want to thank him for admitting as much, but I also want him to go away, but I also don't. "What's your name?"

"Joshua," he tells me.

"Marc," I offer, and extend my good hand. We shake.

"What do you do, Marc?"

"Professor most of the year," I answer, between bites of hash brown. "Mathematics. Decided to actually take summer vacation off though. Call it a rare sabbatical. What do you do?"

"Farm hand," he answers, in a way that leads me to believe he's lying but that the real answer is more complicated.

We get to chatting. His meal arrives and we keep chatting. When I've finished mine, I stick around. I have learned, in the course of our conversation, that he is a member of a cult. He doesn't call it that, but. It is one. He's on a sabbatical from his work too.

"Forgive me if it's too much of an imposition, but if you'd let me—I've always wanted to drive a motorcycle."

I snicker involuntarily. "You would die," I tell him frankly. "But if you want a ride, I'm northbound out of here."

He clasps his hands together and nods. We each pay and head outside.

North of Boulder, CO

Joshua and I sit beside each other at a camp fire. Behind us a ways is his tent, which I have learned to help assemble and disassemble. Nobody else is at the campsite.

"It's similar to Rumspringa," he is telling me.

My head is occupied, tilted back to drink from my whiskey bottle, so to stop him I reach out and put a limp hand on his face. When I'm done swallowing my sip, I tell him, "That doesn't help me. Back up a step."

He takes a few seconds to consider, and then begins again. "Before marriage, each partner is encouraged to go out and seek other lovers. This is a test to see, even if informed of what other relationships could be, whether a couple truly wishes to be wed."

I had started taking another sip, but I cut myself off for fear of spitting it out. "You're on this? Are you telling me you're engaged?"

He nods. "I am."

"And... what is her name?"

"His name. Levi. And if you have any interest... I would ask if you'd be part of our journey. I like you quite a lot, Marcus."

Words failing me, I grab him by the wrist and bring us back to his tent. Halfway there I fall over, and we settle on the grass.

North of Plano, TX

"Is he also a member of your cult?"

“It isn’t a cult.”

I kiss his thigh and amend my question. “Does he also subscribe to your religious beliefs?”

“He does not.”

I nod, and get back to it.

East of Iowa City, IA

Joshua orders the tomato soup and a salad. I am not vegan, but I also don’t want to suffer his judgment during the meal, so I order the same.

“I’m going to miss you,” I tell him honestly.

“You’re welcome to join us.”

I shake my head. “Even if I did, I’m going to miss *this*.”

He nods.

“I’m happy for you though,” I tell him honestly.

“Thank you,” he says. “I’ll miss this too, I imagine. But I miss him even now.”

I nod.

“Don’t feel obligated, but it would mean a lot if you would bear witness at our wedding.”

I nod, and smile—at first politely, but then honestly. “It would mean a lot to me too, actually. Thank you.”

North of Bangor, ME

Joshua and I walk up the miles-long wilderness driveway to his cult. I left my motorcycle in a wooden shack about a quarter mile in, confident that nobody will be out this far to bother stealing it.

“Are you ready to meet him?” Joshua asks.

I tell him I am.

Joshua brings a hand to his mouth. He blows into his fingers to produce a whistle so loud that I’m surprised it can be made by a human being.

Soon, I hear the thundering of footsteps coming from up the trail ahead of us. Bounding around the corner is a dalmatian. The giant dog bounds up to Joshua and the two of them collide with each other, falling over in a blur of petting and licking.

Joshua tells the dog how much he's missed them, how happy he is to be back. Eventually the dog looks at me, still pressed to Joshua's side, wagging. I am waiting for Levi to come following after his dog.

"Go on, boy," Joshua tells the dog.

The dog comes over to me and sniffs me up and down, and I give him a few pets, but the dog pretty quickly loses interest and heads back over to Joshua.

"This is Levi," Joshua says, looking up at me while crouched beside the standing dalmatian, an arm wrapped over the elated dog's back.

"I—" Shit. Oh, shit. "Joshua, I knew you liked doggy style, but this is ridiculous."

Joshua snorts, and then falls over laughing, mainly thanks to Levi coming to assist by slobbering ticklishly all over Joshua's face. Once he's gotten the dalmatian off of him and gathered himself, I help him stand, give him a hug, and the three of us proceed onward.

I meet Joshua's parents, his siblings, his friends and neighbors, and am surprised that they are not all that different to a lot of the other people I've met on this trip.

In the afternoon, under an acacia tree, the town is gathered. Nearest the tree is Levi, Levi's mother, Levi's father, Joshua, Joshua's mother, and a priest—Joshua's father. Levi sits at attention, and Joshua kneels in front of him, hands on his canine fiancée's shoulders, looking eye to eye. Joshua promises to have and to hold, for better or worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.

The priest speaks, "You have declared your consent before the Church. May the Lord in his goodness strengthen your consent and fill you both with his blessings. What God has joined, men must not divide. Amen."

Cheered on by the town and their visitor, Joshua and Levi kiss.

BY AND BY

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

19:03

Yarriel and Knife bursted in through the front doors of the black bilge tavern, hardly able to stand, the dwarf and the elf each doubling over in laughter, trying to use the other for support. “This wide!” Yarriel roared, holding his coarse hands up to demonstrate, his vision completely blurred by his tears. Knife then did fall over onto the tavern floor, trying to gasp in breath between her laughs but finding it impossible. Yarriel slammed himself down onto a table, tried to compose himself, but then caught a glimpse of his elven friend red-faced on the floor. He fell down onto the floor with her, likewise unable to breathe.

At the bar, Gustav blew out a puff of air, shook his head, and lifted his pint glass to his lips. “This new generation of assassins is certainly something different,” he said to the innkeeper, and then took a long sip from his drink.

The innkeeper, Hatchet, nodded. He stood drying a washed glass with a white cloth.

By and by, Yarriel and Knife got themselves together, stood, and made their way to the bar.

“A pint,” Yarriel ordered, and Knife ordered after him, “A cup of tea,” and then both fell into a giggling fit.

Hatchet got their drinks, set them on the counter, and kept his slender hands on each refreshment. “Is the Earl of Wimfast dead?”

Yarriel sat upright, eyes deadening from joyous to somber for but a moment long enough to utter the solitary word, “Aye.”

Hatchet released his hold on the drinks.

Knife snorted, which broke the brief somber hold that Hatchet’s question had put on Yarriel. Yarriel and Knife clinked their glasses together, and then the two each had a sip of their drink.

As the two settled in, the black bilge tavern became quiet again. Outside, the bustle of the city could be heard. A horse-drawn carriage rushed by outside. Knife’s pointed ears twitched as she listened to the cadence of the hooves, the deep airy nasal vocalizations of each horse’s breaths. Yarriel’s head bowed in thought as he listened to the clanking of the metal bits on the horses’ harnesses, and the creaking of the carriage.

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

13:30

Before sitting down to work, the Earl of Wimfast stood and looked out of his office’s large window. Below outside, his slaves moved through his orange fields, stooping down to the bushes and picking off the tiny rind-covered fruits. He watched the drivers making their patrols, shouting their orders, turning what would be a slow labor into an efficient machine-work. Satisfied, the earl turned, sat down at his desk, and began at a stack of parchments that needed his attention.

The door was kicked open. No sooner could the earl look up than was his neck struck with a dart, and he felt the strength drain from his every muscle; his body tingled as though every part of him had fallen asleep. At the open door stood two figures from the lesser races, a rock-eater and a knife-ear. The knife-ear lowered a blowgun from her mouth and stowed it in her black garb. The rock-eater retrieved a dagger from his black garb and stepped slowly towards the collapsed earl.

Graciously, the poisoned dart worked as something of a painkiller to dull the senses, and the earl could not entirely feel as his fingers were cut off, though he did have to watch as the dwarf and the elf then ate the digits one by one. As the last of his fingers was eaten, he lost consciousness. He came-to only

momentarily as the dwarf's dagger pierced his heart, and he felt every brief instant as his mortal term atop this spinning planet came to an end.

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

14:52

Yarriel and Knife sat atop a tall outcrop, watching ravens peck at the earl. By and by, wolves came, and the ravens fled. By and by, a bear neared, and the wolves fled. By and by, the bear lost interest, and lumbered away, and the ravens came back. Yarriel's stomach rumbled, and he felt want of a proper meal. The dwarf and the elf slid down the steep sloped side of the outcrop, and began making their way back to the city.

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

16:52

From the rooftop garden of their apartment, Knife picked potatoes out of the soil, as well as taking some herbs from a variety of flowering plants. As she picked these things from the places they had grown, Knife reflected on the journey they had been through, the culmination of matter from the soil composed of the dead of plants and animals and all sorts, imbued with energy to grow from the light of the suns shining down from the heavens; someday, more would grow yet from this same matter, imbued with energy from the light of the same suns; Knife was five hundred years old, Yarriel four hundred, and both were but newborns compared with the planet, and her layers of dead laid in the soil who would later be the dead composing that soil.

Returning inside with the small picked harvest, Knife found that Yarriel had gotten the wood-burning stove started. The two cooked their dinner, and ate.

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

20:03

Yarriel finished the last sip of his pint. He had been sober going on one hundred and seventy years, and as he sat there in the

black bilge tavern having finished his pint, he remained sober still; with his physiology, it took far more than a pint in an hour to have even the faintest of noticeable effects.

Outside, a drumbeat began, and a clapping crowd kept time as well. By and by, flutes and horns began to play a waltz.

Yarriel leaned over to Knife, and laid his head against her shoulder. "Would you give me the pleasure of a dance, dearest?"

"Of course, dearest mine," Knife said, and held out her hand.

Yarriel took the slender hand, and together the two embraced and began stepping to the time of the song outside. By and by, Yarriel led their waltzing steps out of the inn's doors, and into the street. There outside, the fluters and trumpeters and drummers stood atop a cart, playing their song. On the street, several couples stepped together in waltz. Yarriel and Knife joined the others, moving about here and there as the songs went by. By and by, Yarriel and Knife shared a kiss. By and by, Yarriel and Knife retired up to a room in the black bilge tavern and shared more intimacy, and Knife tried to stifle her laughter as Yarriel kept time to the rhythm of the waltz outside.

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

05:00

Knife stood in the forest, her head bowed, her palms pressed flat against the bark of the tree before her. Yarriel sat cross-legged in the grass nearby, chin planted in his hand, idly examining a rock. In time, the tree would become rock, and the rock would become tree.

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

06:45

Yarriel and Knife descended the stairs into the cellar of the black bilge tavern. There behind a counter stood the innkeeper Hatchet. To his left on the counter was a black candle, which lit the features of his elven face from below. To his right on the counter were three scrolls. As Yarriel and Knife arrived, Hatchet was handing one of these scrolls to Gustav. Gustav took the

scroll, opened it to see the name inside, bowed, and left, passing by Yarriel and Knife to ascend the cellar stairs.

Yarriel and Knife stepped forward to the counter. Without a word, Hatchet reached down to one of the scrolls, took it, and presented it to the couple. Knife accepted the scroll, opened it, and held it before herself and her partner. On the scroll was the name of the Earl of Wimfast.

On the first of each month, the assassins of black bilge were tasked to reap the three most egregiously cruel souls from the city and its environs. To Yarriel and to Knife, to see the Earl of Wimfast's name written on the scroll was only surprising in that it felt so long overdue; the fact that his harvests did bring nourishment and pleasure to many had likely bought him time, but not an eternal wealth of it. Yarriel and Knife bowed, turned, and ascended the cellar stairs to go about their undertaking.

1st of the Month of Orange Harvest, 601 K.D.

23:01

Yarriel and Knife sat in a meadow, still as a stone, still as a tree. By and by, a squirrel came and leapt onto Yarriel's head, then leapt off of Yarriel's head and scampered up Knife, and then leapt off of Knife and began scampering up the tall birch beside her. By and by, a hare came through, grazed on some grass between the dwarf and the elf, and then continued along once again. By and by, a herd of deer came to the meadow, and nested down around the rock and the tree for a spell.

TRUE THOUGHTS

Definitely John ***'s True Thoughts On Zoophilia, first in the series of partially redacted real life celebrities' true thoughts about romance, sex, and empathy between humans and nonhuman animals as informed by their life experiences.**

One day on August 7th, when John ***** was twenty years old, he and his friend (let's call him Leslie) were each drinking from their own bottle of Wild Turkey Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey as they sat below a birch tree at night, looking out at the shimmering moonlit waters of Lake Lester. Leslie had secretly poured his bottle into a pitcher and placed the pitcher in the fridge, and filled his Wild Turkey bottle with water for the night. Having been friends since they were kids, and having recently moved in together as roommates, Leslie was planning to tell something to John that he had only recently come to terms with about himself.

As laughter from a dirty limerick John had recited faded off, Leslie saw his window of opportunity. Leslie said, "John, I have to tell you something."

John responded with silence, listening attentively.

"I'm not attracted to people. To humans, I mean. I have sex with horses instead."

In front of the moonlit Lake Lester, John and Leslie hugged.

The next day, John did not remember this conversation or even that they had gone to the lake, as he had already been

blacked out for several hours. Over the course of the next few weeks, Leslie would often make observations about attractive horses on the TV, in paintings, in books, and in sculptures, and John would laugh these observations off as jokes. Sometimes Leslie did sort of mean them as jokes, and so he took it all in stride. Then one day, when John and Leslie were walking through a nature trail and happened to pass by a farmer's field where horses were grazing, Leslie hornily whistled.

"Okay, what is *with* you lately?" John finally asked.

Leslie was hurt by this. "I really thought you were cool about it man."

"Cool about *what*?" John asked.

As the conversation continued they both realized what had happened, and although in doing so Leslie had essentially outed himself anyways, he made a point of formally coming out once again: he was not attracted to humans; he was attracted to horses. On the nature trail by the field with the grazing horses, John and Leslie hugged, and John dared Leslie to climb over the fence and do one there in broad daylight for God and the world to see, which Leslie, feeling embiggened, did. John watched pridefully.

To this day, John endorses sexual relations between humans and horses. He does think dog zoos are weird. He thinks they're probably cool and all, he's just a bit weirded out by it, like, that's the family dog, how are you going to look at that and think sexy thoughts. Again, he thinks they're probably cool and he's happy to look the other way, he just personally doesn't get it.

SHOOTING STARS

The first time I met Blake Xavier-Schneider, he was 1) alive, and 2) attending the same Beverly Hills mansion party that I was.

I don't actually think that he's dead now, for the record, I just feel like it's becoming more and more like a good guess with the way he acts.

But at the time of the party, about a year ago, Blake was still a newly rising star in the adult industry, on about the same trajectory as I was really, though I could already predict that he had it in him to stay in the game longer than I would. He lived and breathed this stuff: It was the water to his fish. I was always an actor, and definitely always felt like I was acting. Even at that party, six strong mixed drinks deep and sitting in a hot tub with some twink cuddled up beside me, when Blake slipped into the hot tub opposite me I felt like he had caught me: like he was going to come across the water and pull a mask off of my head and reveal that this was not me, this party-goer fun-haver, and I should go slink away in shame back to the most boring section of the nearest library.

But if that was the impression that he had of me, he didn't show it. "At last we meet, Mr Johnson," said he with a faux wicked grin, and then laughed flamboyantly, and swam up and sat beside me, opposite the twink. "Blake XS," he said, offering a hand.

I reached out towards his hand, very thankful that drunk as I was, some recess of my muscle memory had held out well enough to shake his hand successfully. Watching our hands

shake legitimately felt like some alien operation occurring outside of my body or my input—it didn't help that the firebreathing dragon tattoo sleeve on my right arm was pretty new at the time.

"Sorry if I'm interrupting," he said, glancing at the twink.

"The more the merrier," is what I think I said, or something like it.

The translation of that was, "I do not know why I'm here, but with more of you around maybe you'll talk to each other instead of me."

By that point in the night, the details of what I remembered were pretty slapdash. I remember sitting in the hot tub with Blake, the two of us looking up at the night sky, and I remember that at some point he kissed me on the cheek before leaving.

All this to say, about a year later when I went on vacation to Mexico and was interrupted from my reading of *A Crown of Swords* by a call from my agent telling me that there was a shoot just down the street from my hotel, I was a centimeter away from hanging up on him before he managed to tell me that Blake Xavier-Schneider was the other star, and then just like that, I was suddenly interested.

My agent gave me the address. "The director's name is Vince," he mentioned. "Be there in the next thirty minutes if you want to make me look good, or at least the next hour if you want the job." I wrote all of it down on a slip of paper from the pad that was on the hotel bedside table.

As hotel rooms go, I was staying in a nicer place than I had expected to be staying. Queen bed, color TV, and a legitimate kitchenette, complete with an oven and a stovetop and all the regular pots and pans already stocked.

I hadn't come here expecting to work—or play—so I hadn't packed anything in the way of enemas, but I made do with a plastic water bottle, and then I showered, dressed in my nicest tank top, briefs, and gym shorts, and stepped out into the world, apparently summoned five buildings down to get fucked by someone I had lowkey had a crush on for a year. Quite the unexpected addition to my vacation itinerary, but welcome.

So here we are.

I walk up to the address with my slip of paper in hand, and apparently look sufficiently confused enough for someone standing outside the door to ask, “Tony? Johnson?”

“That’s me,” I answer.

“Juan,” he says, and we shake hands. “Director of photography.”

Usually that means he’ll be holding the camera, but, in this case I really don’t know what scale of thing I’m walking into.

He turns and punches a series of numbers into the keypad beside the door. The keypad lets off a high pitched beep, and then he holds the door open for me. As we walk inside, the air conditioning feels sublime.

We walk down the halls, and he leads the way into our set: it looks like its own apartment, with a bedroom, kitchen, living room, den, and faux hallway outside. Standing around the pool table in the den are three men, and on the pool table is an assortment of camera equipment. I can’t help but notice that Blake isn’t here.

One of the men is talking into a cell phone, and seems to have noticed the same thing as I have. “Are you shitting me?” he’s saying. “Are you shitting me ‘he’s asleep’? No, no. Name a volume of cocaine between a teaspoon and a cement mixer, we’ll fucking keep him awake. We’ll fucking—”

I get the impression he’s been hung up on, because he looks at the flip phone like it’s personally betrayed him, and then he throws it against a wall.

In doing so, he sees me.

“Tony,” I say, giving a little wave.

“Holy shit, a thing that went right today. We have *an* actor, hallelujah. Vince.”

I extend my hand to shake, but he gives a dismissive wave, and I put my hand back down.

“I had heard Blake—”

“Yeah, so had I,” he interrupts. With his arms crossed, he walks off into the living room set. He paces, head down.

After we watch him for a few laps, Juan follows after him into the living room, and says something quietly to the director.

Vince thinks about it, and then I overhear him ask, “How long before it gets here?”

Juan quietly gives an answer.

“Do it and we’ll figure *something* out,” Vince agrees.

Juan nods, and pulls out a flip phone to make a call. As the director of photography begins pacing in the living room on the phone, the director approaches me. “So, Tony,” he says, “tell me about yourself.”

I dread this kind of question. On-camera, I can at least put on a persona. Off camera, I don’t know what he wants. I’m sure he doesn’t want to know I have a bachelor’s in chemistry, or that my book club is currently reading *The Odyssey*, but that I’m trying to sneak in some other, more genre-y books for my own pleasure, while on my time off, and was pleased to get ahold of the latest *Wheel of Time* at a little bookstore in the airport that I arrived at a few days ago.

Yeah, no. I decide not to burden him. “Sagittarius.”

“Fascinating,” he says, and I’m glad to learn we’re on the same page in that he doesn’t actually want to know about me anyways. “How do you feel about dogs?”

“Um.” This is not the type of pointed question that I expected to hear just now, but I honestly can’t say that I have strong feelings one way or the other, as far as dogs are concerned.

When I don’t answer right away, Vince leans in closer with me. “Look, I won’t sugar coat it: would you do a few scenes with a dog today?”

“Oh! Sure,” I say.

I mean, I’ve done solo shoots before, just playing with toys for the camera. Not having another actor isn’t exactly what I signed up for today, but it isn’t exactly a first. Since I’m already here anyways, I don’t see a problem. “What breed?” I ask.

“Yellow lab.”

“Cute!” I say, kind of reflexively before the entire context catches up with my brain again. “What um... what would we be doing? Me and this yellow lab. Dog.”

“At this point I’m not trying to reinvent the wheel today. Scene of it fucking you, scene of you fucking it too. Probably something brief to go beforehand and afterwards in the way of plot if we have time.”

“Yeah,” I say. As I stand there and visualize the scenes—getting fucked by a dog, and fucking a dog in the ass—geez.

Yeah, I uh. I begin to realize that I'm a bit out of my league here. But, then again, that's kind of how I always feel during these. If they really want to pay me to put my cock in a dog's asshole, I mean, I'm not going to tell them no. A gig is a gig, even if the material isn't what you're into. "What's his name?" I ask.

"Ask Juan," Vince says with a shrug, and then moves past me to talk to the others around the pool table about the update.

I walk out to the living room just as Juan is getting off the phone.

"You like dogs?" he asks me, with a professionally faux-ingenuous smile.

"I don't have any strong feelings," I say honestly.

"Jake makes a good first impression," Juan tells me. "I bet you'll like him fine."

Juan takes a seat on the faux living room couch, and pats the spot beside himself. "We got a while before they get here. Twenty minutes at least. Relax a while. Tell me about yourself."

I take a seat, and have a sneaking suspicion that 'Sagittarius' isn't going to fill twenty minutes on its own.

"Honestly I mostly read," I tell him, and wonder if this is the first time I've admitted that truth while on a set.

"Ooh! Who do you like?"

We end up having a shockingly thorough conversation about different fantasy and sci-fi authors before he gets a call, and leaves the set.

Supposing we're about to start, I stand up and start doing a few stretches. The men who had been in the den start moving their equipment into the living room. Vince comes up beside me. "Ready?" he asks.

"Yeah," I tell him. "Wardrobe, or?"

He looks me up and down, and sighs through his nose. "Let's just get the main shots for now. Naked head to toe."

I nod, and start with my shirt.

As I'm sitting on the couch and getting my socks off, the 'front door' opens, and a yellow lab comes running into the room, with Juan pulled behind on the leash. As soon as he can, Juan unclips the dog's leash, and the dog trots around excitedly from room to room, sniffing around and wagging at everyone.

He comes up to me briefly, gives me a sniff as I say hi, and then trots off to go sniff around the bedroom.

"Jake," Juan reminds me, standing beside me.

"Jake!" I call to him.

He turns, stands at attention, and then bounds right for me. I kneel down and rub his shoulders. He leans into me, wagging. Friendly guy. I like him.

"Ready?" I hear Vince call. Looking up, I realize that the cameras have been positioned, and everyone besides me is standing out of view of them: Front and center in the living room in front of the couch is just me and the yellow lab.

"What uh," I begin, and then glance down at the wagging dog. "Ready, but what do I do?"

"Hands and knees," Vince says, and I hear him add the word 'brainiac' under his breath. "Rolling?"

"Rolling."

"Action!"

With the word Action, my head space is transported to some other realm, and I am a porno actor with a job to do. I stop petting the dog, and get on my hands and knees as instructed. Jake turns to me and sniffs me up and down, and I try—somewhat unsuccessfully—not to giggle at his wet doggy nose prodding me all over. Eventually he's sniffing at my ass, and begins licking me back there. He isn't at it for long before I feel his weight come down on top of me, his pointed claws digging pretty painfully into my flesh, and then just like that he's humping his furry mass of muscles and canine hair against my backside; I feel his tip prodding, but he doesn't get it in, and after a few tries he gets off of me, and goes and stands around by the cameras.

I look to Vince.

"Keep trying," he says, giving a 'go on' motion with his hand.

I look back to the dog, and he seems to get the idea too. Once again he hops onto me and rests his chest on top of my back, locks his paws around my hips, and starts to hump. He gives it a few tries again before again getting off of me and standing nearby.

"Lower," Juan calls.

"What?" I ask.

Juan sighs, and, gesturing in my direction, asks Vince, “May I?”

Vince gives him the go ahead. One of the other men on set gets the dog’s attention for a moment, and Juan walks into the shot. He puts his hand on my lower back, and pushes down until my stature on my hands and knees is considerably lower. “Like that,” he says. “You’re also going to want to angle yourself like... there, like that.”

“Do you... have personal experience with this?”

“I was the DP on *Whores Let The Dogs In* two through eight. Not exactly what I thought my expertise in life would be in but yes, we did figure some things out.”

I nod, and keep the position that Juan has put me in. He backs out of the shot again, and gives a signal to the man who has Jake held back out of shot. With the signal given, the man lets Jake go: the yellow lab runs straight up to me, hops onto me, and in one try is mounting me and fucking my asshole. I cry out with the sudden feeling of it, his dog cock getting inside of me, and I stay there in position and bear it as this yellow lab fucks me, pistoning his dog cock back and forth inside of my colon, all the way until his completion. It’s something kind of new, but also kind of not; it’s different and familiar; it’s weird, basically, but I don’t have a bad time. Afterwards me and the yellow lab are stuck ass to ass, as Juan had warned me about during our conversation: dogs have a part of their penis called the knot that swells up during sex, and holds them together with their partner afterwards, to make sure that the semen stays inside of the partner long enough to make puppies. I don’t predict that will be happening for us tonight, but Jake’s knot holds us together afterwards nonetheless, and who am I to speak against the optimism of that.

When he finally does slide out of me, he licks my fucked hole for a bit and then lies down on his side, lifts a leg, and begins licking himself. After a long while of that, his interesting red dog penis goes back inside of himself.

“Cut!” Vince yells.

I crawl up onto the couch and sprawl back, head lolled back facing the ceiling, arms out to either side on the back of the couch.

As I am recovering, I feel an energetic muzzle and tongue licking my asshole again. I flinch and spread my legs apart a bit more, then after the reflex wears off, I relax again and let it happen. “Hey Jake,” I say. “Yeah, hi there. I’m not gonna be your girlfriend, but I appreciate it.”

Opening my eyes to a squint, I see him wagging at that as he continues to lick.

Eventually he backs off, and then goes to see Juan. I can see him whining about something, but Juan, Vince, and the other men are locked in some type of heated discussion.

Eventually the dog’s whining is enough to break Juan from the conversation, and he turns to see what the yellow lab wants. With some brief back and forth, it is determined that the dog needs to be let outside. Juan confers briefly with Vince, nods, and then approaches me.

“How was it?” Juan asks, to break the ice again.

“No complaints,” I tell him. I’d never exactly considered bottoming for a dog before, but the experience was nothing to sneeze at. That yellow lab was a humping machine, and the time spent being tied together ass to ass was new to say the least, probably nothing I’ll be forgetting any time soon.

“Jake has to go outside,” Juan tells me. “If you could go walk him until he pisses and shits, we’d be ready for our next shot after that.”

I look over to the yellow lab, whose red canine penis was recently fucking my asshole, but who now is laying beside the faux front door, looking at me and Juan to help him because he can’t turn a doorknob.

What the hell. “Yeah,” I tell Juan, “I’m sure I could let him out.”

Juan goes to retrieve the leash, and soon enough, I am dressed again, poop bags are in my pocket, and the leash is in my hand.

“Don’t go too far, but, take as much time as he needs, I suppose,” Juan advises.

I nod, and proceed out of the faux apartment’s front door with the yellow lab taking the lead. He shows me the way to the actual front door, and then right in front of the studio, he lowers

himself down to take a leak. One job taken care of. I stand there as he goes. For like, a while.

When he's finished, he pulls me onwards. At the edge of the studio's lawn I pause, but Jake pulls forward insistently. I lock my stance and remain where I am, steadfast. I'm not trying to get too off track, here: my job is at this studio. Jake still tries to pull forward for a while, and then stops, and turns to me. He looks at me with big eyes.

I look him back. Again, not very long ago, this dog was fucking me in the ass—I can very much still feel it; the sensation of being penetrated sometimes has a way of lingering in the body, it's difficult to explain, but even as I look at him a leash's length away, it also feels as though he still has me bent over, and is doing the deed with my behind. So yes, just a few minutes ago he was fucking me, and now he looks at me with adorable eyes, asking if we could just but go down the sidewalk a ways. Jesus, how could anyone say no? I don't normally go for when guys from work try to act overly friendly with me outside of the shoots, but this actually does feel like the least I could do, now that he's made a point of making those eyes at me because I won't walk him—him, a dog, an animal that is supposed to get walked.

I let up on the leash, and he faces forward and walks happily onward, tail wagging as he trots, leading me along.

We go two more blocks before he stops, sniffs around, and then takes a squat. When I see the size of what he's dropped, all of my concerns about whether he can handle my size feel in hindsight comical. I pick up his shit as he kicks up the grass nearby, and then the two of us return to the studio, with me dropping the bag of shit into the garbage can outside.

By the door, Juan is waiting for us. He lets us in, and the three of us return to the faux apartment set. Inside, I find that the cameras are set up around the bed in the bedroom, and everyone is standing around waiting.

"Ready?" Vince asks.

"Ready," I say with a nod.

"Is *it* ready?" Vince also asks.

Realizing he means the dog, I look to Jake and shrug. "He did his business, I don't really know if more prep work is needed."

“Good enough for me. Get on the bed with it. Do it in the ass whatever way works, take at least ten minutes.”

I nod, and begin disrobing once more. When I hop up onto the bed, Jake hops up with me—I take it he’s done this before. Using some lube on the bedside table, I apply it to my fingertips and massage the lube against the outside of his hole for a minute, which he gives me no complaints over, no signs that he would rather I didn’t. He lies passive. Then after I’ve been massaging him for a while, getting the pooch warmed up—again, not a thing I thought through all the way when I agreed to this, but here we are—there is a moment where he shuffles his position on the bed closer to me and backs his ass against my fingers, and by holding my hand in place, one of my fingers slips into the slick, smooth flesh of his warm, lubed hole, and suddenly he’s more than passive, he’s all wags. He’s definitely done this before. He has all of the pleased yet casual anticipation of someone for whom it is not their first time taking anal, and for whom there is something or other enjoyable that is gotten out of it. His tail wags even more against the back of my hand as I start to work him. Once he seems plenty ready, I lube my own tool and then I do as Vince asked, and stick my cock into a yellow lab’s asshole. It feels pretty much like a dude’s. Pretty much exactly like a dude’s, as far as the insides are concerned. It is not difficult to close my eyes and treat this like it’s normal, pretend like I’m topping any other random actor who I had gotten paired up with, this one just happens to have fur, and four legs instead of two, and a neat tail right over the hole.

After a little over ten minutes, I finish inside of him. He knows as soon as I’m done, and gets himself off of my cock and spins around to lick his asshole and my cock, first the one, then the other. After he’s done addressing both of these matters I lay with him, wrap myself around his back, and pet him for a while.

When all of this is done, we also shoot a scene of me ordering a pizza and him coming to the door, and also a scene of him walking out of the bedroom, through the living room, and back out into the faux hallway.

“That’s a wrap,” Vince says, when we’ve gotten the last shot we need of Jake leaving the apartment. He gathers himself, me,

and Juan into a huddle. "Thank you both. We would've gotten nothing done today without you two."

"Of course," we both say, more or less.

As the equipment is being packed up, Jake whines to me.

"He has to go out again," Juan mentions, while working some strap on his bag.

"I got him," I say, and once more dress, grab the leash and collar, and step outside with this stud who I have now received a load from and blown a load back into. As he sniffs around outside, towards the edge of the studio lawn and then beyond, I follow him wherever he's going, confident that he knows the way around here better than I do. Eventually he lowers himself and pees once again. It seems different, all of the sudden: this time it seems different that someone is allowed to just pee out here. Just go, and be free, and not worry about it being like, a crime, it's just what it is, pissing on some grass out in the open where some buildings are nearby.

It's because he's a dog, I need to remind myself. But I do need to remind myself of it, because I think, all of the sudden, that this distinction between dog and person is still something that I know, but maybe—maybe—no longer something that I feel as much. Having known this dog—in the archaic sense of the word—just as I have known many other human people, I can't help but wonder what it really matters, what significance there really is in some of the distinctions. It seems, all of the sudden, like there is some obvious fundamental level on which whether someone is called a dog or whether someone is called a human, it doesn't actually even matter the slightest little bit. We are all corporeal. We are all squishy on our insides. We are all feeling, and I think, at least when we choose to show it, we are all even caring.

After the yellow lab pees—the bodily functions of a four-legged body that I am no longer entirely unfamiliar with—he leads the way back to the studio. I follow along after him, doing my best to keep up.

When we get there, nobody is waiting outside. I try the door, but no luck. It's locked. We sit outside for quite a while—probably an hour, if not longer. By that time, I'm sitting on the

doorstep, and Jake is laying down before me, panting in the heat.

“Well,” I tell him. I think about it before I say my next words—it *will* be a first for me, these types of words to someone who I did a scene with. But, yeah: I’m going for it. “Dinner at my place?” I ask the yellow lab.

He perks his head up to me, and seems interested.

We leave the studio, stop into a corner store to buy a few things that I suppose a dog might need or want—including a steak—, and then we continue up to my apartment. Inside, I go to the kitchenette, and cook him the steak that I bought him. He eats it with more enthusiasm than I’ve ever seen anyone eat my cooking with ever before. When it’s done, we lie together on the carpet, and play with the two stuffed toys that I got for him.

As we play, I look into his eyes, and at one moment, he looks back, and all at once I am even more sure than before that there is something different here, now. I don’t think that there will be much of a future with me and Jake. Already, even in this moment, I have a pervasive feeling that this is a fling. He belongs to somebody, which is something that doesn’t sit with me quite the same way it did this morning, but it is how it is. But I do have something new to explore. Whether with Jake or with someone else, my eyes have been opened today to a second world of people on this planet who were always here, but now, with a sudden and unexpected wholeheartedness, I can see them.

STEEP AND DANGEROUS

i

“Let it *go*, Johnny! We’ll go around, bring’er down from the top.”

“Go to hell,” Johnny rebuted in a grunt, still putting all of his strength into pulling down on the rope that turned the winch overhead.

Johnny and Stickshift hung from ropes off the side of a mesa cliff, drenched in sweat. It was evening. Hanging from another pair of ropes was a pickup truck loaded with sleeping bags, fishing rods, a cooler, and a grill. Johnny was braced fully upside down, pulling on a fifth rope which was attached to a winch that he and his brother had secured at the top of the cliff earlier that day. The winch was outfitted with a ratchet: every time Johnny managed to pull the truck up another notch, it would lock that notch in place, and the truck would not fall back below it until such a time as the lock at the top was disengaged. Normally the truck pulled itself up with a torque converter attached to the motor, but the bar on the converter had snapped off halfway up the climb.

“RRRRAAHHHHH!”

With a growl and a warrior shout, Johnny put his legs, core, and biceps into pulling down on the rope, and felt the reverberation of the *click!* that the ratchet made at the top. The truck was secured another six inches. Johnny dropped from his upside down stance and allowed his rope to catch him, flip him

upright, and swing him away from the cliff for a moment. As he swung back, he tried to raise his arms to brace for a gentle impact, but his arms remained limp at his sides, and he smacked into the rock wall. “*Mm!*” he winced; he hit the rock with his cheek. Raising his hand to his cheek, he looked at his fingers and saw they were bloodied.

“Niice goin, jackass,” Stickshift mocked.

Johnny limply swatted in Stickshift’s direction, and then began doing stretches on his arms as he hung, getting ready to hit the next notch.

The mesa that Johnny and Stickshift hung from the cliff of was situated in a gargantuan canyon. Above the canyon walls were the tulip swamps, whose waters perpetually trickled down the canyon walls in a vast series of purple waterfalls. At the floor of the canyon were bare rocks and a great many rivers, leading out to the white ocean. The tides at the great canyon were the stuff of legends: come sunset, the tide would rise five hundred feet in half an hour, flooding the canyon halfway with the white ocean’s poisonous waters. Johnny and Stickshift’s pickup truck hung a foot and a half below the water line that was visible on the mesa cliff’s rocks. They had about an hour before sunset.

“Pete’ll kill you if you sink this truck,” Stickshift said. Pete was their father. The truck had been borrowed from the family’s auto shop.

Johnny scoffed. “I’ll tell him I sank the truck and you show him a cheap bottle of rum and we’ll see who he pays more attention to.”

Stickshift nodded.

Johnny felt his muscles had recovered enough for another notch. He took hold of the rope that went up to the winch, positioned himself upside down again, and began pulling on the rope. In three successive pairs of growls and shouts, Johnny brought the truck up another foot and a half, bringing it above the water line. He sighed a satisfied sigh as he swung from his rope. Stickshift came over and gave Johnny a pat on the shoulder. “Nice goin,” he acknowledged.

Stickshift climbed up into the bed of the truck, and offered Johnny a hand to help him in. Johnny took it and climbed in after. The two of them set out their folding chairs, brought out

their fishing gear, and each took a can of light beer out of the cooler. The two clinked their cans together and watched the sunset. As the sun went down, the water came up, filling the canyon until the waveless surface came up just below the pickup's tires.

Johnny and Stickshift dropped their lines in.

After a while, Stickshift struck up conversation. "Heard that new Indignant Bastards CD?"

"One Dave's got with the red cover?"

"Ship that came in a couple days ago had a whole trunk of new bootlegs. Tony's kid snatched it up, we've all been listening at Jim's. I'll burn you a copy."

"Grazie." Johnny tipped his can towards Stickshift in acknowledgment, then felt a tug on his line, and flicked his rod to tug back. He chugged the rest of the can and then dropped it to the truck bed's floor, and used both hands to work the rod and the reel. A minute later he had something that resembled a fish dangling off the end of his line.

Stickshift commented, "Eesh. Ugly bastard."

The creature at the end of the line had rows of toothy mandibles going halfway down its body, and three pairs of appendages with pinching claws on the end. One pincher was clutching the line, but the line was special made for this type of nasty critter. They were known to eat dogs, cats, deer, anything that wandered too close to shore. Johnny was the oldest now and Stickshift was the youngest now, since their older brother Pete Jr. and their younger brother Lucas had been eaten by these ones.

Stickshift picked up the hunting rifle at his feet.

"Steady?" Stickshift asked.

"Steady," Johnny confirmed, holding the line still.

Stickshift aimed down the sights and shot the creature in the heart. It stopped moving, its claw that had been clutching the line now resting limp on it.

"Clean," Stickshift said.

Johnny brought the creature in, stood up from his folding chair, and got to work gutting and cooking. Stickshift caught one too; Johnny shot it, and then got to work cooking it as well.

When the food was ready, Johnny sat back down in his folding chair with two plates, and handed one to Stickshift.

“Cheers,” Stickshift said, handing Johnny another beer.

Johnny finished the one he was already drinking, took the one Stickshift offered, and then cracked it open and clinked with his brother. “Cheers.”

ii

Johnny and Stickshift and Tony’s kid and Dave and Skinny sat at their booth in the corner of Jim’s. Tony’s kid’s boombox sat at the center of the table, playing the new Indignant Bastards. Tony’s kid’s beard had gotten longer and uglier since Johnny had seen him last; Johnny hadn’t been into town hardly at all the last couple weeks, busy as he was at the auto shop with Pete’s injured hand. Pete had been blacked out when whatever’d happened to his hand had happened; still didn’t even know who had done the bandage, but they’d done a good job with it, at least, whoever they were. Pete sat at the bar holding his fourth glass of rum with his good hand.

On the floor beside Johnny, Skinny began to pant. Johnny leaned over and scratched at Skinny’s back; Skinny wagged, and then laid down and rolled over; Johnny rubbed his belly for a while, until Skinny got back upright as Sharry approached.

“Y’all doing alright?”

Johnny scanned over the table, saw nobody’s glass was empty, and nodded. “Yeah, we’re doing alright.”

Dave cut in, “You on the menu dear?”

“Har har,” Sharry said.

Johnny took a peanut out of the dish beside the CD player, lined up his shot, and flicked the nut at Dave.

“Ah! Bitch,” Dave said, and picked up a peanut and threw it overhand at Johnny, missing.

“I’m not working tonight if I’m in the waitress clothes, you know that,” Sharry went on. “Linda and Pat are upstairs, they ain’t busy yet.”

Dave sat up taller to look around the bar. “We’ll see how it goes down here first.”

“I’ll tell em you’ll be up later.”

Dave started to respond, then sighed, and clutched his glass. “Yeah you can tell em I’ll probably be up later. Pat tonight. But tell Linda I said hey.”

Johnny leaned over to Sharry, and said, “Another round, when you get a chance.”

“Sure, no problem,” she said, and then went off. After stopping at the bar to talk with Jim for a moment, she went up the stairs.

Johnny gave Skinny another few pets, and then leaned over to Dave. “Who you got in mind?”

Dave ran some fingers back and forth over his stubble. “Kim down there. Unless you were—”

“Kim’s mad at me,” Johnny said.

“Shit. And she saw me sitting here with you. Shit. Well, her sister’s with—”

“Kate’s mad at me too. It’s related.”

“Goddammit Johnny.”

Johnny sat upright and craned over the table to talk to Tony’s kid. “This is good shit,” he said, pointing to the CD player.

Tony’s kid smiled, and toyed with his glass.

Sharry, Linda, and Pat came down the stairs. Linda and Pat came to the booth; Pat climbed over Johnny to sit between Dave and Johnny, and Linda sat at the edge of the booth between Johnny and Skinny.

“Drinks?” Johnny offered, looking between Pat and Linda.

“Margarita,” Pat answered, and Linda answered, “Not tonight, thanks.”

Sharry came back over with a tray, and handed out the new round of beers. Johnny ordered a Margarita for Pat and a water for Linda.

After a few more tracks, the Indignant Bastards CD came to an end. Dave rooted through his box of jewel cases for a CD to replace it with. Pat and Dave sat snuggled up together, Dave nuzzling his stubble against her cheek and making her squeal with subdued laughter. Tony’s kid swapped out the Indignant Bastards for a calmer acoustic thing.

Johnny leaned over to Linda. “Hey Linda.”

She leaned over with him. “Yeah Johnny?”

“Pay you to give Skinny a ride.”

Linda deflated, closed her eyes, and sighed. “Goddammit Johnny.”

“What?”

“Can’t you just hire a prostitute for your own damn self like a normal person? Stick your dick in any girl but the ones whose job it is, I swear to god.”

“You still got those big socks I gave you for his claws?”

“Yes, Johnny, we still have those socks you gave us so you could hire us to screw Jim’s dog.”

“If you don’t like him, or he’s too rough or something—”

“The dog’s *fine*, Johnny,” Linda said, and then leaned in even closer with Johnny, and whispered, “I like *you*, is all.”

“Well, that’s complicated.” Johnny picked up his glass and had another sip.

“Would it help if *I* wore the socks, for you? Do *you* need to wear the socks? Do you need Skinny to watch?”

“Not interested.” Johnny took another sip.

“Swear to god, Johnny, I don’t even know what hill you’re trying to die on here.”

Johnny took a third sip.

“I’ll give Skinny a ride if that’s what you really want. It’s no trouble to me. I just don’t get it.”

On the floor, Skinny began to wag.

Johnny slipped Linda the cash.

Linda stood up out of the booth, and Skinny stood up with her, looking at her and wagging. “C’mon, Skinny,” she said, and began walking. Skinny wagged more enthusiastically, and followed her closely up the stairs, pawing at her to try to mount a few times along the way.

Once they had gone up, Johnny left cash for drinks and tips on the table and stood up too.

Dave looked up at Johnny. “What, not even gonna try tonight?”

“With who, Dave?” Johnny said, raising both hands to gesture around the bar. “Kim’s mad at me, Kate’s mad at me, Jenny’s mad at me, Lucy’s mad at me, Kitty’s mad at me, Lucille’s—Lucille! You still mad at me?”

Lucille spun around on her stool at the bar to face the one who had shouted her name. "Johnny? Johnny you got a lot of nerve thinking you—"

"Lucille's still mad at me," Johnny said to Dave, gesturing over at the woman who was getting up to come over and give him an earful. "I'm out." Johnny turned and made a beeline for the door.

"Johnny if you're thinking about those mermaids again," Dave said, and then disentangled himself from Pat to follow after his friend. "Are you thinking about those mermaids again?"

"I ain't thinking about shit," Johnny said, and pushed open the swinging doors and began walking off into the night.

"Perv!" Dave called after his friend, hanging from one of the swinging doors for balance. "You'll get your dick bit off! You'll catch crabs! It ain't right, Johnny!"

Johnny spun around, and while still walking backwards to make his exit, grabbed his crotch as a gesture for Dave, then turned again and resumed walking forward.

He lit up a cigarette on his way out of town. He realized, when the edge of the town's lamplight came into sight, that the sound of his footsteps crunching over the gravel road was a frantic tempo; normally he hung around at the edge of town for a couple minutes to finish his smoke and adjust his eyes to the dark, but tonight he had already sucked his down to the filter. He dropped the cigarette butt, stomped it out, and lit up another one. He proceeded the rest of the way to the edge of town at a deliberate trudge, and then stood and leaned against the brick wall on the dark side of Tony's old bar, boarded up a while now since Tony had passed.

By the time the second cigarette burned down to his fingers, Johnny felt sobriety creeping back up to him. He used to resent the feeling, but had come to appreciate it. It was like running a lap from the auto shop into town and back: forward and forward as fast as you can one way, then when you're there, about face, and forward and forward again, even if the way back don't feel as nice, unless you make it a point to think about the nice parts. Johnny dropped his cigarette butt onto the gravel. His eyes had adjusted to the dark, and he could see the boardwalk path

through the tulip swamp clear enough by the moonlight that came down through the foliage overhead. Johnny stomped his cigarette out and walked off onto the path through the swamp, his boots making a careful percussion along the planks.

The croaking of frogs masked a lot of other noise that went on in the swamp. The bubbling of the water also masked things; warm gasses bubbled up here and there, making the waters warm, and apparently making the swamp smell funny to folks who weren't used to it, though Johnny himself was well past used to it. Johnny walked along, keeping an ear out. He kept his eyes peeled for sudden turns or forks in the path, and kept his pace slow to not be tripped by broken planks, which became pretty common after a mile out of town; he'd have to come and patch them up one of these days, when he had the time during daylight.

After a while, Johnny heard the singing of mermaids; their familiar voices brought a jubilation to his mood. A lightness came to his steps, and he practically skipped the last leg of the boardwalk, rounding a bend and arriving at a cozy pink pond shimmering in the moonlight and bubbling with the warm gasses that came up here and there from underneath; atop a small rocky island in the pond's center, a mermaid sat, head raised and facing elsewhere into the tulip swamp, calling to the other maidens.

The boardwalk ended at the edge of the pond. Johnny deliberately pressed his boot down on a loose board, making the boardwalk creak.

The song of the mermaid before him halted, and her head snapped towards him.

He stood and looked at her with one hand in his pocket. He offered a wry smile and a shrug.

The mermaid slinked down into the pink water, disappeared below the surface, and reemerged at the edge of the boardwalk. She reached up and wrapped her fingers around his ankle, and looked up at him with big eyes.

Johnny sat down at the edge of the boardwalk, untied his boots, and kicked them off into the woods, then threw his other articles of clothing after them one by one. Once he was fully dressed in his birthday suit, he slinked down off the edge of the

boardwalk into the warm bubbling waters, and pressed himself chest to chest with the mermaid, looking down into her eyes. He snaked a hand around her and held her by the small of her back.

She gently reached up and touched his chin. In a hissing language, she said something to him.

"I missed you too, doll," he said in turn.

He didn't speak what she spoke, and she didn't speak what he did. He figured it might explain why his relationships with these girls lasted longer than those of his own type.

She rose up to kiss him, and he sunk down to meet her halfway. Soon they were on the shallow floor near the pond's edge, locked mouth to mouth, hands feeling below each other's waists. He'd heard from sailors that a mermaid's was like a dolphin's, but he'd never seen a dolphin, so he could only take their word for it. Whatever his was like to them, they were about it. He slid himself into her and the two of them splashed around for an hour or two, then he finished inside of her, and then clung to her for a while, as they floated gently across the pond. After another kiss, the two let go of each other. Johnny floated on his back on the bubbling water. The mermaid climbed back up the rocks, and resumed singing to the other mermaids.

Most fellas who came to have a try with the mermaids were met warmly the first time around, and then when they came back around again, no mermaid across the entire tulip swamp would come to meet them, and would bare their pointed teeth if the guy tried to get close. Folk legend was that they were only interested in virgins. Johnny very smugly knew the truth: that they just weren't interested in fellas whose performance had disappointed, and they sure as hell would let all the other mermaids know one way or the other.

Johnny fell asleep in the warm water, listening to the bubbles, the frogs, and the songs of the mermaids.

The next morning Johnny awoke with his head on the shore like a pillow and his body in the waters like a blanket. The mermaid laid atop the rock at the center of the pond, beautiful in her nocturnal slumber. Johnny got up, stood around on the boardwalk a while until he'd dried off, and then put his clothes and boots back on and walked back into town, keeping his

footsteps quiet the first while so as not to wake his companion of the night before.

iii

Johnny laid on his back under a truck, flashlight in his teeth, muttering curses about the fact that every single bolt and screw on this entire damn machine was stripped. He pressed a screwdriver into one stripped screw harder, and worked it until he found an angle. It'd turn a couple of degrees before the screwdriver would slip and he'd bang his knuckles against the undercarriage. It did not contribute positively to his headache and sore muscles. But if that was what it took. He turned the screwdriver again and again.

Just as he was finished banging his knuckles for a twentieth time, he felt a tap of someone gently kicking his boot to get his attention. "Y'alright under there?"

"Peachy," Johnny answered around the flashlight in his mouth, and then swore as he banged his knuckles for a twenty-first time.

"It's Sunday, Johnny," Stickshift said. "Come on into town with me, we'll sit and listen to Tony's kid's new CD's some more. Hell, stay here and have a drink, read a book, whatever you like. But leave these cars alone."

"We're behind."

"That's not our problem today, Johnny. Leave it alone."

"Go to hell."

The screw dropped out of the undercarriage and plinked Johnny on the nose before rattling to the ground. Johnny sighed with relief, put the screw in the dish with the other stripped ones, and then inched himself deeper under to work on the next screw.

Johnny heard Stickshift sigh too, and then heard the footsteps of Stickshift leaving.

With the day to himself, Johnny wrenched on cars without any interruption for chatting or rest. In the zone, he fixed up machine after machine, making each and every engine growl like a song. Hours went by, until he had the hood up on the

second to last car, running its engine and watching it work to see what in the hell was wrong with it. It seemed fine as far as he could see from here. He went to go shut the engine off, and as he came around the hood, he saw someone running up the path from town.

It was Dave. Looking at him fully, he didn't so much run as hurriedly shamble. Blood soaked his shirt and pants, and left red streaks across his face. His eyes were panicked. He looked at Johnny, and shouted something, but Johnny couldn't hear it over the engine.

Johnny sprinted forward to go meet Dave. As he made his way there, Dave collapsed. Johnny came to a skidding halt and knelt down at Dave's side. There was a bullet wound in Dave's shoulder and another one in his leg. Dave looked up at Johnny, clutched Johnny's hand, tried to repeat whatever he'd said earlier, but didn't have the breath before dying.

Johnny swore, tried to wake Dave up, took a pulse, looked at the wounds. It was over.

Johnny stood. Being away from the running engine now, and facing towards town, Johnny's heart sank as he realized the faint sound of distant gunfire, popping off again and again. Johnny ran back inside to get his hunting rifle, and then threw himself into one of the fixed trucks and floored it into town.

By the time he got there, the gunfire had stopped. Johnny got out of his truck at the edge of town, parked beside the town's main gravel road.

The slain were laid out on either side of the road. Johnny walked down the road slowly, bug-eyed, hands trembling, looking around and around at the corpses with slit throats and bullet wounds. Tony's kid was killed. Kim was killed. Kate was killed. Jenny was killed. Lucy was killed. Kitty was killed. Lucille was killed. Jim was killed. Sharry was killed. Pat was killed. Linda was killed. Skinny was killed. Stickshift was killed. Pete was killed. Johnny took the glass of rum out of Pete's dead hand, smashed it on the ground, turned his head to the sky, and screamed, again and again, long past the point when his throat hurt, long past the point where there was any catharsis to it, again and again, until when he tried to make even a whimper he

hacked and coughed, and his breathing for a long time after was ragged, wheezing, labored.

With his hunting rifle slung over his chest, Johnny staggered out of town, following after the tracks of the killers.

iv

Johnny crouched hunkered down on the side of a bluff, looking through the scope of his hunting rifle down at the parade of marauders. The marauders had arrived at the next town up the coast, and were massacring the folks here too. Johnny's finger rested heavy on the trigger, but even if he were the best shot in the world, he had ten bullets. He wasn't stopping much from up here.

Johnny stopped looking, reslung his rifle, and scrambled down the slope towards town. They wouldn't get away from him this time. He at least needed something to track them by. A country they were from. The name of their leader. All he knew about them presently was that they wore grey clothes, and most had a black and orange bandanna somewhere on their person as well.

As Johnny stalked through the spongy soil of this northern reach of the swamp, he kept his posture low, hiding in the long grass. The gunfire died down as he advanced. These marauders didn't seem to stick around long.

Off to his side, Johnny heard a canine yelp in pain. Johnny raised his sights and wheeled around to face that way. Stalking through the swamp, he came around a rocky outcropping to find two marauders in a small clearing with an injured dog, each of them taking turns striking the dog with their rifles. Johnny aimed, waited for one of them to stand still for a second, and then shot the marauder in the head, ending the sadist's life in a cloud of pink mist. Before the other marauder could orient himself to what had just happened, Johnny pulled off two shots on him too, and got him in the chest. He went down.

Johnny stalked away from the scene for a moment, laid low in a patch of long grass, and waited, listening to see if he had alerted anyone.

It seemed not. Johnny got up and stalked his way to the clearing, head on a swivel to keep aware of anyone else stalking around.

When he arrived, the two men and the dog were dead. Johnny knelt at one of the men, turned his body over onto his back, and began rummaging through his grey clothing. In a breast pocket, he found a medallion. The medallion was stamped with an image of a skull, and a phrase in an unknown language above the skull and below it. Rummaging through the other body, Johnny found an identical medallion in a trouser pocket.

Johnny perked up at the sound of grass rustling nearby. He stood and turned and began to raise his rifle, but the marauder got a shot off first. A bullet seared through Johnny's left hand and the side of his stomach, and Johnny was knocked onto his ass like he'd been clipped by a truck. He screamed, and fumbled to find a grip on his rifle with his good hand before the marauder could arrive.

Before that happened, another gunshot rang out.

Johnny's breath came in shaking stutters, but he tried to keep it quiet so he could hear what was happening.

"Johnny?" a new voice called, from the direction of where the latest shot had come from. "Johnny, was that you? Pete's kid?"

Johnny writhed in pain. "Yeah! Johnny! I'm shot pretty bad over here! Is that you Sylvester?"

"It is!"

Another mechanic. This town had a bigger port, and Pete bought parts from this guy every now and then.

Johnny stood up, hand off of his rifle. Standing in the grass was Sylvester, wearing a suit made of long strands of the same grass that he hid in. Sylvester stalked up to Johnny, and helped him to a safer place where they could go see his wound looked to.

In a few minutes they arrived at Sylvester's shop outside of town. Sylvester bandaged the wounds, the one on Johnny's hand and the one on Johnny's side. When the wounds were patched, Sylvester suggested Johnny lay down for a while, but Johnny insisted on standing. The two of them wandered over to

the garage. Johnny handed Sylvester one of the medallions. "You read this?"

Sylvester took the medallion. "Pirates' Cant. *We are the tide. Bleak Francis.*"

Johnny had heard legends of him. Wherever there was contentment in the world, Bleak Francis appeared and put an end to it. He slaughtered entire cities and made off with the ships. Many sailors had come to stock false ropes on deck as preemptive revenge: should Bleak Francis kill them and steal their ship, someday a rope would snap at the worst time and kill Bleak Francis, though this had never yet happened, of course. He appeared from nowhere and departed to nowhere, he was born nowhere and lived nowhere and would never die, and would always kill. That was what the legends said. Johnny had other ideas about whether or not Bleak Francis would die.

Johnny staggered out of the garage. As he went out into the sun, he looked down at his bandaged hand, and then turned back to face Sylvester. "Thank you, Sylvester."

"Where in the hell do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to kill Bleak Francis."

"Not without me you ain't."

Sylvester walked out into the sun with Johnny, and the two began towards town.

V

Sylvester's town was left the same way as Johnny's had been. Sylvester kept his eyes high, avoiding looking down at the bodies as much as possible. Johnny took them through town following the bulk of the marauders' tracks. The tracks brought them to port, where the ships were missing. On the horizon out at sea, Johnny could see Bleak Francis and his men getting away.

Johnny yelled slurs at them at the top of his ragged lungs, raised his rifle, and emptied his remaining rounds after them, but at such a range, landing any shot would be a miracle. Sylvester raised his rifle too, aimed, took a shot, waited, and then shook his head.

The ships continued on, over the horizon.

Johnny began towards the port, where there was still a rowboat left.

Sylvester remained where he stood, and called, "You wanna kill Bleak Francis or you wanna kill yourself?"

Johnny raised both arms in a shrug as he kept walking. "Right now I'm a little indifferent, to be honest."

"You wanna kill Bleak Francis," Sylvester said, calling Johnny's bluff.

It was true. Johnny did want to kill Bleak Francis.

Sylvester began walking after Johnny, just so he didn't have to shout any louder. "I'm going to see Kara."

Johnny stopped. Kara was Sylvester's granddaughter, and worked as a medium. Johnny turned to face Sylvester. He felt a sting of tears come to him as he considered his next words. "Kara's probably dead."

Sylvester nodded, and wiped a tear from his own eye. "Maybe she's still taking business calls."

Sylvester led the way back into town, still keeping his eyes up. Johnny saw Kara's corpse outside of her house, but thought better of mentioning it to Sylvester. The two men proceeded inside through the battered open front door. The home smelled of incense and flowers.

Sylvester went to a shelf, and picked up a pair of metal objects. "Dowsing rods," Sylvester said. As he held them loosely in his steady hands, the two rods began to point around and around, until both settled on pointing towards a stairway leading upwards. Sylvester and Johnny proceeded up the stairs, down a hall, around a corner, and up another stairway, which brought them into a room which took up the entirety of the third floor: a large window on one wall let in light, and a black carpet over the floor absorbed the light. Every inch of wall, besides that where the window was, had a bookshelf before it. The shelves held books, as well as crystals, vases, bones, and miscellany. At the center of the room was a grey stone basin. The dowsing rods pointed to the basin. Sylvester and Johnny went and stood by the basin. Once there, the dowsing rods began spinning independently of one another, no longer pointing to anything in particular. Sylvester lowered them.

The two men looked at the basin, and then at one another.

Johnny reached into a pocket, took out one of the medallions, and dropped it in. It landed with a clatter of metal on stone.

In front of them, one book flew off of its shelf and landed open on the floor, turned to a particular page. An extreme gust of wind blew off the roof of the house, shattered the window, and rustled Sylvester's hair. From the clear blue sky, a single raindrop fell and landed on a particular place in the open book.

Sylvester set down the dowsing rods, brought his hands together, and spoke into his clasped hands a brief prayer of thanks and farewell.

Johnny and Sylvester went to the book, and each took a knee before it. The raindrop had landed on the heading of a section entitled, *The Oracle of Ma'ir*.

There are the calm oceans of the world, and there are the roiling border seas; between the calm white and the calm red, the roiling pink fraught with whitecaps and whirlpools. If one's ship is taken into such a whirlpool at a border sea, and they have grave business unfinished, they will arrive at the Island of Yai, where the Oracle of Ma'ir resides.

Sylvester noted, "Not far from here to the black sea. Fancy a trip to the roiling grey?"

Johnny fancied a trip to the roiling grey very much.

Sylvester led the way to a smaller dock, in a reclusive inlet outside of town. There, they boarded a catamaran, swapped out the false ropes for good ones, and set sail towards the roiling grey.

vi

"It's getting hairy alright!" Sylvester said, eyes pinched nearly shut as the spray of grey saltwater became a constant force.

The deck rocked greatly back and forth, threatening to roll the boat over. Johnny worked the sail with a white-knuckled grip. His jaw chattered from the cold ocean water that had been spraying them the last two hours, as they'd gone deeper and deeper into the border sea. They were nearly at their

destination: ahead spun an immense whirlpool big enough to fit two towns in.

Sylvester cackled as he crouched at the very bow of the boat, leaning forward, willing himself ever closer to the whirlpool. "Take me away, Kara dear! Either your grandmother or your murderer has an appointment with me, and I dread being late!"

The catamaran rolled as it entered the raging whirlpool. Johnny lost his grip on the ropes, and was pulled down, down, down, into the dark cold sea.

vii

Back in Jim's, sometimes, back when Johnny would come in during the day to sit down for a while sometimes, if he was there at just the right time of day, the sunlight would shine in through the window and leave a little rainbow, a little collection of every color, on the bar counter in front of him.

Presently, Johnny awoke on a beach, and the ocean in front of him was like an entire landscape consisting of that rainbow, as though every rainbow little or large that had ever shone in the world had come here afterwards and been pooled together.

Sand clung to Johnny's naked body and his ears rang. He sat upright, worked his jaw around, rubbed his ears trying to clear the ringing. He could still hear, at least. He could hear the waves. And he could see. Lord could he see.

He looked to his left and right. Down the beach a ways to his right, he saw Sylvester, also sitting on the beach naked, also looking out at the ocean. Behind them, when the beach ended, was a green forest.

Johnny stood and began walking towards Sylvester. Sylvester noticed Johnny then, and with stiff joints, stood up as well.

"Your ears hurt?" Johnny asked loudly.

Sylvester spat out a tooth. "Everything hurts. Let's go."

Johnny and Sylvester proceeded up the beach, and marched over the short grass through the green forest, brushing the sand off of themselves as they went. Johnny was stricken by the silence of the place, compared to the tulip swamp. No frogs croaked, no crickets chirped, no insects buzzed. There was the

rushing of the wind through the leaves, and there was the ringing in his ears, and there was the sound of their footsteps.

After a mile or so, Johnny and Sylvester arrived at a clearing, which was kept in dapple shade by the large trees adjacent. At the center of the clearing were two figures. One was a dog: she was the size and build of a golden retriever, though her long hair was not gold, but rather was an ever-moving array of pure colors, the same as the ocean nearby. Behind the dog, her face buried in the fur at the dog's rump, was a woman: the woman kept one hand on the dog's flank, and the other hand reached up to stroke the dog's back, as she licked and kissed the dog's vulva.

Johnny and Sylvester stood at the edge of the clearing. "Oh lord," Sylvester muttered to Johnny. The dog looked at them, wagging, swishing the long hair of her tail back and forth over the woman's head. The woman seemed not to have noticed her visitors yet.

Sylvester gave a loud, pointed cough.

The woman continued about her business.

Johnny gave a whistle to the dog.

The dog stepped away from the woman's hold—her hands clung to the canine for a moment, but then fell away as the dog persisted in leaving. The woman looked around as though waking up from a nap. The dog bounded happily towards Johnny. Johnny crouched down and met the dog, petting her rainbow coat and receiving a lick on the cheek.

The woman came over, and Johnny stood to meet her. The dog sat down at the woman's side.

"Welcome," the woman said.

Johnny gave her a nod, and Sylvester said, "We come seeking the Oracle of Ma'ir. Are you her?"

The woman smiled. "What strange visitors, who come on such a difficult journey while knowing so little. My name is Carolyn. I may have learned much of the future lo these many years, but I am not the Oracle of Ma'ir. Do you wish to hear the tale of the one who you seek?"

Johnny gave a gesture to indicate she had the floor.

Carolyn brushed a few strands of hair out of her face, and began. "From the clay of void, Ma'ir created three beings: a mountain, a flame, and a dog. He made love to the mountain,

which brought forth every planet and moon. He made love to the flame, which brought forth every star. He made love to the dog—this dog—and from her womb spilled forth the fish who would fill the oceans; over time, the other gods would make love to the fish, bringing forth all the different creatures of the air and the land. In this dog is contained genesis, as well as echoes of all time and space. *She* is the Oracle of Ma'ir."

Johnny knelt, and bowed his head.

The Oracle of Ma'ir licked his forehead, and he smiled.

Sylvester crossed his arms, and asked, "Does she speak?"

"Does yours?" Carolyn countered.

Johnny stood back up. Loudly, he said, "I do speak, but I think my sense of volume is a little off right now." He rubbed one of his ringing ears. "Howdy."

Sylvester asked, "If she is an oracle, and she does not speak, then how might one consult with her?"

Carolyn leaned down and pet the oracle's head. "You observed me consulting with her as you arrived. Place your mouth on her sex, and you shall know what you wish to of anything which is descended of Ma'ir; all the universe, shown as an echo of his presence in her."

"Good lord, I might actually be sick."

Johnny leaned over to Sylvester, and loudly said, "We came this far. You got this. Like riding a bicycle."

Sylvester sighed, then shuddered. He knelt down on the grass. "Show us your bum then," he said to the oracle.

The oracle wagged, stood, and then faced away from Sylvester, tail turned aside, presenting.

Sylvester faced away, and dry heaved over the grass. "I can't," he gagged. "Even if I could bring myself to kiss its snatch—" he paused to dry-heave again—"how am I supposed to put my face that near a dog's arsehole?"

"Carolyn didn't seem to mind it."

"What would really be better about a human's anus?" Carolyn added.

Sylvester sighed, spoke a brief prayer, and then screwed his eyes shut and leaned forward, placing his lips on the pitch-black vulva of the Oracle of Ma'ir. He held his lips there for one

second, then two, three, four, five. After five he shot back as though from an electric shock, gasping, eyes wide.

“NOTHING!” he shrieked, and pointed at the dog. “I SAW—I SAW VOID, TRUE EMPTINESS, *NOTHING!*”

“Then she *felt* nothing,” Carolyn scolded, and crouched down to pet the oracle. Looking up at Johnny, she asked, “Do *you* wish to consult with her, or are we done here?”

“Uh, well ma’am, dogs aren’t exactly my type, but if you insist —”

“Fucking liar,” Sylvester spat from the ground. He still trembled, but he looked up at Johnny with contempt. “I didn’t suggest that *you* do it because I know *you’ll* actually get off on it. I know about what you used to pay Jim’s girls to do with his dog.”

“Dogs aren’t my type!” Johnny insisted. “I still *respect* them! I still want *them* to have a good time, I just don’t want to be part of it!”

“Go on and eat a dog’s cunt here then, fucking liar.”

“I will. But this is on *my* terms,” Johnny said, pointing an insistent finger down at Sylvester. “I’m doing this so we can find Bleak Francis and we can get our revenge and put an end to his marauding, and I’m going to do a good job since I’m doing it anyways. But this is a one-off thing for me. A *departure* from the usual. Go to hell.”

“Meet you there,” Sylvester moaned, and then turned and vomited in the grass.

Johnny made a noise with his lips, and the oracle came over, wagging. Johnny got on his knees, petting the oracle, and said gently, if loudly, “Turn around girl.”

The oracle did turn around, and presented to Johnny.

Johnny placed a hand on the oracle’s flank, a hand on the oracle’s back, tilted his head, wet his lips, put his mouth to the oracle’s vulva, and got to work, prodding and massaging with his lips and tongue. In a few seconds, Johnny’s field of vision was replaced with a sight of swirling rainbows, like the ocean, like the oracle’s coat. His hearing—the ringing—faded away to silence. All of his perception was on the feeling of pleasuring the oracle’s sex with his tongue and his lips, and the sight of rainbows. As he went on, bands of the rainbows grouped closer

together, and closer still, until forming into an image of a castle near a beach on the red sea. Bleak Francis and his men resided here. Johnny could reach out across all moments of time at once, and see the hundreds of times Bleak Francis and his marauders had come and gone from here. He could reach across all of space, and at once see the castle, and the medallions in every man's pocket, and the handsome scarred face of Bleak Francis, and the continent on which the castle resided. He shifted his focus away from Bleak Francis's castle, and towards the Island of Yai, in the near future: he saw himself and Sylvester marching off into the rainbow sea, accompanied by an army of faceless ghosts.

When he had seen all that he needed to, Johnny gave the oracle one last departing kiss, scratched her flank, and sat back. Wagging ecstatically, the oracle turned and lapped at Johnny's face. "Yeah, alright," Johnny said, and returned a few of her kisses, opening his mouth for her, their tongues playing off of each other. Then he leaned away, keeping her at bay with a firm hand on her shoulder. "Thank you," he said to her.

"Not your type?" Sylvester asked.

Johnny noticed the ringing had come back to his ears.

Carolyn sat down behind the oracle, kissed at her vulva for a few moments, and then backed away. "Wow. This... *actually* is his first time with a dog," Carolyn mentioned.

"Bullllshit."

"*Hours* at a time with the mermaids, you go man," she mentioned to Johnny, and then offered him knuckles.

He fist-bumped her, and then faced Sylvester. "I learned where Bleak Francis is, if you were wondering."

"Do we kill him?"

"It's a massacre."

Sylvester stood up, and Johnny and Carolyn stood up too.

Johnny turned to Carolyn. "Who are the ghosts of this island?"

"Souls lost to the whirlpools who did not have grave business left unfinished, but who are happy to help if someone else has a cause that they like."

Johnny nodded. To the oracle and to Carolyn, he said, "Thank you both."

“Any time,” Carolyn responded, and gave Johnny a nod back.

Johnny and Sylvester marched away through the woods. As they marched across the beach, their ghostly army formed up beside them, marching in step with their two leaders, who also, of course, were ghosts now. The rainbow sea ahead of them parted, and left in the gap a mist of pure red saltwater.

viii

Johnny, Sylvester, and their army emerged up out of the red sea before the castle of Bleak Francis. Grey-coated men met them in the yard and fired at them, but each bullet passed through the approaching ghosts: death had finally come to reap Bleak Francis and his men. The ghosts soared forward through the air, killing those who tried to fight and killing those who tried to flee: every marauder had chosen and sealed his fate long before this day.

Johnny and Sylvester arrived at the heavy castle gate and passed through as though it were a curtain. Bleak Francis’s men attacked with bullets and blades, and were shortly slaughtered by razor-sharp ghostly claws.

Johnny and Sylvester marched into the castle, and arrived at the throne room. Bleak Francis sat upon his throne, flanked by twenty guards who had their rifles trained on the approaching ghosts. Bleak Francis himself smiled, and held up two goblets of wine, besides the one resting on the arm of his throne.

“Perhaps we could talk this over?” he asked cordially.

Johnny scowled and quickened his march, thinking of his dead father, his dead brother, and his dead friends. Sylvester quickened his own pace beside him.

Bleak Francis’s expression dropped from ambassadorial optimism to frightened realization. He turned to his nearest guard. “Kill them.”

Every guard emptied the magazine of his fully automatic rifle at the ghosts, to no effect: the ghostly army soared forward, killing every gunman. Bleak Francis rose from his throne and attempted to flee: Sylvester and Johnny leapt forward and knocked the pirate captain onto his back, each ghost breaking

one of the captain's ankles. Bleak Francis shrieked in pain. Sylvester raked his claws against Bleak Francis's face, tearing apart that which was once unduly handsome. Johnny dug his claws against Bleak Francis's guts, opening several of his internal organs. Bleak Francis died a long, painful, well-earned death.

The ghostly army fanned out to sweep for stragglers. Johnny and Sylvester turned to face one another.

"I think that's about it for me," Sylvester said. "Look me up in the great beyond sometime, I'll buy you a beer."

"I might be a while," Johnny said. "I still got more business here."

"Heh. I think you always will, Johnny. Take care."

Sylvester and Johnny shook hands, until Sylvester's ghost faded, and passed on to the next place.

Johnny turned, walked out of the castle, back down the yard, and back into the red waters of the red ocean.

ix

Johnny returned to the Island of Yai, walked through the green forest, and sat at the edge of the clearing for a while, watching Carolyn consult with the oracle. The oracle saw Johnny and wagged, but remained with Carolyn. Eventually, Johnny brought his fingers to his mouth and gave a whistle, and the oracle came bounding over. Carolyn looked around, gathered her bearings, and then stood and came over too. Johnny sat petting the oracle. As Carolyn arrived, Johnny stood.

"You're back," she said.

Johnny nodded. "She's not my type, but I think you might be."

Carolyn crossed her arms. "I looked into you a lot while you were gone. Past and future."

"How's it look?"

Carolyn smirked. "We get along for a while."

Johnny stepped forward, brushed aside a strand of Carolyn's hair, and the two of them shared their first kiss.

On the Island of Yai, Carolyn consults with the Oracle of Ma'ir,
as Johnny consults with Carolyn.

WELL 8

The drainage differentials for each pump have been logged. The well and its command station have been inspected and passed without need for any spot repairs or notes. The entry room, the fitness room, the showers, the hangar, the yard, the stairwell, the basement latrine, the storage room, the crew quarters, the subbasement latrine, the break room, and the control room have been inspected and passed with no need for notes on integrity confirmation, and each of the aforementioned rooms has been made spotless. All of the lights that turn off are off. It is the middle of the closest thing this place has to night. Not a single thing in this station needs my attention right now. Nonetheless, I can't sleep. I lie in my bed with my eyes closed, and every minute feels like a wasted hour.

Down at the far end of the crew quarters, Oaae begins to snore. This station is made to accommodate up to fourteen crew members comfortably, which feels excessive to say the least: Oaae and I have managed just fine for the entire time I've been here, and before I had arrived, it sounds like Oaae managed just fine all by theirself. Even with Oaae's snoring to keep me company, I lie awake in a crew quarters that demands to be filled with more snores, sneaking footsteps, soft chatter, and the ambient awareness of things being done in the other chambers of this station's body. I can hardly imagine how empty the place was when it was Oaae alone.

With a sigh, I push the blankets off of myself and get up out of bed. I tiptoe out of the crew quarters by the soft purple light

of the emergency signage, and close the door behind myself. Out in the hall, I lean against the wall for a while, and stare blankly at the dimly purple walls and doors ahead. Door to the stairwell, door to the storage room.

Deciding that I'm going to be up for a while yet, I shuffle towards the storage room. Inside, I close the door behind myself, and continue to go along by the dim purple lights. I walk slowly around the rows of metal shelves and cabinets, peering at the dimly lit contents of this treasure trove that lies on the ocean floor.

I do marvel at that: I am on another planet, living at the bottom of this other planet's ocean, cohabitating with an alien—or cohabitating as an alien, to be realistic—and I am bored. I am the product of at least a dozen miracles, medical and logistical, and I have the gall to be snooping through equipment lockers looking for something to do.

As I am walking slowly along down the far back row of the storage room, I pause mid-step, and hold my breath: I can hear something. A sound that is faint, very very faint, is coming from something in this row. There is something that is making a humming. It gets louder and quieter in half second intervals, more resonant and less resonant—it sounds musical.

I move slowly in half steps and pauses, standing tall and crouching low, trying to listen for the sound to grow louder. Eventually I am lying flat on the floor looking at the bottom shelf midway down the row: under a blanket here there are a dozen mysterious lumps that are wordlessly humming to me. Gently, I lift the blanket up and roll it to one side, and see a dozen polished black stones of various sizes, ranging from about the size of an eyeball to about the size of a fist. The one the size of an eyeball is, very faintly, glowing with a yellow light, and it is the one that is humming.

I reach out, and hold my finger near it—it does not seem excessively hot, nor excessively cold, and I can't imagine there is much danger here: I touch the stone; the glow goes out and the hum ceases; I feel the last of the vibrations absorbed in my fingertip.

“Aw,” I breathe.

As soon as the sound comes out of me, all twelve stones shoot into light and begin singing, harmonizing with each other and growing louder and louder and brighter and brighter. I begin cursing, but the sound of my voice only spurs them to be louder and brighter yet.

Shutting myself up, I reach out and put my palm gently over each of them, one after another, making them go out one by one under the touches of my hands.

Carefully, as silently as I can, I back away from the now quiet stones and sit on the floor with my arms around my knees in the far back row of the storage room, trying to pretend to the universe like nothing happened.

I hear the hall lights snap on, and I sigh.

The door to the storage room is pulled open.

“Cel?” Oaae gently calls, over the shelves and lockers.

“Hi Oaae,” I call back. At my voice the stones start to hum again. I throw the blanket back over them and they stop. “I’m alright, everything’s fine. Sorry for the noise.”

“If you wanted to start a band, you could have said so. What do you play?”

I hang my head down to look at the covered stones. “I don’t know, what are these?”

“Far back row, bottom shelf?” they ask.

“Yeah,” I confirm.

“Rememberer rocks,” they answer.

“Well I certainly don’t play rememberer rocks,” I tell them, and they let out a tiny, quiet laugh that makes me smile because I don’t think I was actually supposed to hear it.

“Do you play?” I ask.

“Outside I do. In here with the air, most of the instruments don’t sound right.”

“Can we go out so you can show me?” I ask.

Oaae mutters obliquely blasphemous curses, and answers, “It’s the dead middle of the quiet cycle. Come to bed, Aiae’ae’aeoe’oe.”

It’s been a while since I heard them call me that—Aiae’ae’aeoe’oe. It’s a nickname that I earned early on for my apparently outrageous behavior within this very orderly station. The first time Oaae called me that was when I was trying to

make candles in the break room, and Oaae walked in at a rather messier part of the process—I think when they called me Aiae’ae’aeoe’oe that time it slipped out by mistake, because when I did ask its meaning later on, it turned out to be quite a harsh word that I wouldn’t have expected from them. But from them I find it endearing now, and it’s stuck.

As Oaae scolds me, I actually do feel drowsiness finally washing over me—maybe it’s only a survival mechanism to escape from this beratement, but if it works it works. I ask them, “Will you play for me tomorrow?”

“Yes,” they say. “If you would hear me.”

I get up and come follow after Oaae to bed.

—

The next day proves inopportune for musical performances, as duty has called Oaae and I away from the station nearly as soon as we had woken up. Riding passenger, I find myself zoning out on the long drive.

“Cel?” they say at one point, when my eyes have been resting on their hand for a while.

I snap up to looking sidelong at Oaae’s face. Then I remember myself a second time, and I look ahead as we ride along. They do not like to be looked at. This is an enigma, as they are naked and their skin is patterned with phosphorescent geometries that look like writing overlapping itself, a forest of glowing sentences. Oaae—which means green—glows green. When there is another Oaae with us, my maintenance assignment partner Oaae is frequently called Oaae Aioa’oa: Slim Green. Where I am from they would be a bodybuilder. Here, they are lithe.

“Sorry,” I tell them, and I am sorry. Nonetheless, it feels disingenuous—to me—to be apologizing while so conspicuously averting eye contact: I am telling them the truth while screaming with my body language that I am lying.

But that is not how they read it, of course. “I understand,” they tell me generously. More generously, they change the subject. “We’re almost there.”

The rover plows on slowly along the ocean floor. The road is lighted, though only in one area at a time. As we near the edge of

this radius of light, the next megaton lamp chunks on, illuminating about another quarter mile of the road. Fish scatter away into the dark. The lamp that had been guiding us previously shuts off shortly after we have left its radius.

Oaae and I live on planets that are in orbit with one another. Many of my people still consider Oaae's planet to be our moon, even though both planets are of similar mass, and theirs is of significantly greater volume. My people are amphibious, and live on coasts and in the shallow ocean shelves—though recent biomedical developments have expanded things. Oaae's people are strictly aquatic and live on the ocean floor: we did not know they existed until decades after we had arrived on their planet—this planet. At best, while down here, I am considered an alien. At worst, I am a demon. On my planet, myths portray the afterlife as being downward, because we see our dead sink. On their planet, myths portray the afterlife as being upward, because they see the dead of thousands of species falling out of the dark hell overhead down onto them—bodies which are husks that have already been harvested of their souls.

The next megaton lamp chunks on, and I groan exuberantly. At the end of our road, just beyond the tall lamppost, there is the corpse of a whale. Many fish scatter as the light is turned on, though the whale corpse continues to writhe with scavengers who are either blind to light or are undeterred by it. Oaae laughs at my continued wordless bemoaning of the situation. They then press a button on the rover and pull a receiver to their mouth.

“Arrived at Seven Two. Large carrion covering the grate.”

They park the rover just before the lamppost. The rushing of waters passing by us disappears, and it leaves an emptiness in my hearing for a moment, until gradually, the softer drone of the currents comes to fill it. The current here is slow. The ground is waves of silt littered with rocks, with the solitary line of the paved road flowing over it. The writhing whale corpse is the most massive feature that the megaton lamp illuminates.

We sit. Being that I can't look at Oaae, I look ahead, at the whale. I attempt to see the positives. One positive: the scavengers down here are living creatures too, and if the whale has passed on anyways, it is good that the whale pays their life

forward, however unwittingly. Another positive: I will get to say I touched a whale today.

There is a click before the radio comes back to us. The voice that comes through is free of any distortion, as though the radio operator is in the rover with us, and not miles and miles and miles away. "Copy. Clear them if you're able."

Oaae picks up the receiver again. "Copy." They set it down, and we get out of the rover.

We begin towards the trunk. We both walk, although now that we are free of the rover, Oaae is spreading their fins out: the fins originate from the shoulder blades, and extend out far above their head and far out to either side, and come near to touching the ground as they walk.

I open the trunk. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that Oaae is looking at the whale, gauging the situation. "Might be a three-cap job," they decide.

I agree. "Dibs on the tail," I call. I am regretting this enough as it is, and do not need to feel worse about myself by cutting into the creature's head. I reach into the trunk, take a two-foot long knife by the blade, and hand it handle-first to Oaae. I also presumptuously hand them a pair of capsules, while taking only one capsule and knife for myself. They accept the two capsules that I offer. I close the trunk.

The two of us push up off of the ground, and begin swimming for the whale—I for the tail, Oaae for the head. With webbed hands and feet, I am able to propel myself perfectly adequately. With webbed hands, webbed feet, fins, and muscles like a shark's, Oaae darts to the whale's head and is almost done planting the first capsule by the time I have even arrived at the tail.

When I do reach the tail, I attempt to work without any thought of sentiment or ceremony. I use the knife to cut through the fleshy matter down to the spine. I pull the long wire from the capsule, then thread the wire around the spine and fasten it back onto the capsule, forming a secure loop. I then yank on the apparatus to confirm it is in fact secured. It is indeed.

"Ready?" comes Oaae's voice.

"Ready."

"Deploy on zero. Three, two..."

I count the one and the zero in my head, and on zero, I press a button on the side of the capsule and swim away. I can hear the hiss of the capsule aggressively inflating against the will of the deep ocean's pressures. When I am away, I stand on the ground and look back at the whale. From the tail, mid-back, and head, three lumps are now growing. Soon, the balloons are lifting the whale off of the ground, up into the dark ocean overhead.

When carrion is clear and far beyond the highest light of the lamp, Oaae and I swim back up to where the whale had been. There, there is a grate, a mesh of thick wires reminiscent of the patterns on Oaae's skin, though the grate does not glow. We confirm that the whale was the only obstruction, and then we head back to the rover, put away our equipment, and sit back down.

Oaae speaks into the radio: "Obstruction cleared. Returning to Well 7 to reenable Seven Two."

We have returned past three of the lamps before the reply comes back: "Copy. Thank you."

Oaae leans back in the driver's seat, and keeps one hand under the steering wheel, while the other rests on the center console. I realize that I am staring at their hand again when they pull it out of my sight, to their side.

I sigh, and begin to speak, but they cut me off.

"I know," they say.

Rushing water drones on. We near the edge of the light, and a new light snaps on. We near the edge of that light, and a new light beyond that snaps on.

They suddenly ask me: "On your planet, are there people like me?"

I am paralyzed by just how many things they might mean when they say *like me*. People of her species? People who are polite? People who are beautiful? People who are nonbinary? People who are technicians? People who are good at board games? People who are green?

"Like you in what respect?" I inquire.

They consider how to phrase it. With careful wording, they say, "People who are born of one sex or the other, but choose not

to subscribe to the labels or gender roles that correspond in their society to a physical sex.”

Nonbinary. “No.”

Their hand twitches.

I realize I have been cruelly blunt, and seek to clarify why my answer came so readily. “At the moment, it is unclear whether or not my species has any males. None has been seen for over three hundred years. I can’t think of anything in our modern culture that you would call a gender role. So to have someone who does not subscribe to gender roles... in one respect you could say everyone in my society is nonbinary culturally, but by label, everyone so far as I know of is female. The only gender-neutral pronoun we have is for animals.”

There is quiet.

“I—”

“WHAT?” Oaae roars, and then we are both laughing so hard that they have to park the rover. I am doubled over with my head between my knees, crying, and they are trying to say something, but cannot get through the first word without cracking up again and again. Eventually when we have composed ourselves better, they give up on what they were going to say, and instead just ask, “HOW?” and I laugh again, and am about to speak again when they interrupt again to roar, “HOW TO ALL OF THAT.”

Thinking back, I personally have never spoken about this topic with anyone here. I had assumed that surely somebody at some time had. Perhaps not. Or perhaps so, but not in such a way that it became common knowledge.

Being that Oaae has parked us on the side of the road in all of the excitement, I get out of the rover, and tell Oaae to come over to the sand. “It’s okay if you look at me,” I mention to them. I am wearing clothes, anyways—leggings and a top that both hug my body tightly, but flow loosely in faux-frays at the ends of the cuffs. I merely mention it because I will be on my knees leaning over the sand to draw with my hand, and it will be difficult for them not to see me.

“For my species, this is a woman.” I make a basic drawing in the sand. Skinny compared to people of their species. Two arms, two legs, with long toes and fingers, and webbing between the

digits. As a finishing touch I draw a vertical line for a vagina, and Oaae hums to themselves in a way that seems pleased.

I move over on the sand to give myself more space.

"This is a man." In the sand, I make a basic drawing of a figure in profile with no arms or legs, only flippers, dorsal fins, and a tailfin. His face is elongated. I do not draw it, but I point at a place on his underside, and say, "The penis comes out from here."

"That..." Oaae is stunned. "That is... They are... dolphins?"

I snicker. "There are some differences that make them easy to distinguish. The men have these wavy ridges along their backs, and their tailfins are more pronounced into the two points..." I try to make these details more exaggerated in my drawing, but I am not an artist.

"I know it would be insensitive to accuse you of joking..."

I shake my head. "If I'm being perfectly honest: I had learned about your culture's genders before I came here, but I was shocked when I arrived and discovered all of you were serious about it."

They seem very amused by this.

"So, anyways. I can relate, I guess. But this is real."

"Are you three hundred years old, then? Older?"

"Hm?" I am baffled.

"You said there have been no men for—"

"Oh! No. Well." I think of how to explain. "If you want to count from when I was conceived, I am three hundred and fifty, or somewhere around that old. But we tend to start counting from when we hatched. I'm twenty nine. I know your mothers and fathers are very important to you, but I never knew mine. They were dead a very long time before my clutch was stirred up."

"How do—stop me if I'm probing, actually."

"Go ahead," I say, and sit cross-legged.

"What happened to all the men?"

"We don't know. My understanding is that they come and go in cycles. There are cycles of an individual, where he will be present one week and then not present the next, vacillating between the two. Then there are cycles of them all, where there will be no men anywhere for a matter of years—or in exceptional

cases, centuries. Apparently when one of them disappears it's quite startling. They just—they burst into a tangle of lights, and then they're just gone, suddenly."

"When they come back, do they not say where they've been?"

"They don't speak. Well. They don't speak in a language with words as the language of the women has, or as your language has. Their vocalizations are more meant just to convey emotions. I suppose I shouldn't say it's only *their* language. Women can speak it too, actually."

"Can I hear? Or is that rude to ask?"

"Gimme a sec," I say. I sit still and concentrate on flexing my neck. thin slits on the neck below the jawbone open up, and from them, a sound like a very high-pitched whale call comes out.

Oaae squeals. "What did that one mean?"

"Just means what I'm feeling. I'm having a lot of fun right now."

"Aw."

I shrug. "Can't really help what sound comes out. It's extremely difficult to lie with that voice."

"Awwww!"

I stand up from the sand, and the two of us make our way back into the rover. For the remainder of the drive I manage to keep my eyes forward and not feel weird about it.

When we arrive back at the base, Oaae parks the rover in the hangar, and then the two of us make our way into the transfer chamber. When the doors on both sides are securely locked and fastened, the water begins draining from the chamber, replaced with oxygenated air. Oaae begins applying a salve to their skin to help with the exposure to the air. While in this chamber, I always think that I can hear the nanobots in my bloodstream whirring extra hard to adjust for the changing pressure, though I usually come to the conclusion that it's just my imagination. Still, I frequently spend much of my time in this chamber trying to hear and dishear them.

After a while, we hear the lock disengage on the door to the interior of the base. Oaae turns the lever on the door, and then pauses. "Shoot, I think I left the rover's lights on."

I open the slits on my throat to speak my emotions, and what comes out is a tone of endearing amusement. There are, of course, no lights on the rover.

“What was that one?” Oaae asks, in reference to the vocalization.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I answer.

“Well I’m going to pretend it means you think I’m funny.”

“Uh huh.”

“Does it?”

I vocalize again, and the same tone emerges.

Oaae gives up and opens the door. Inside, I collect Oaae’s equipment from them and go to put everything in storage, while they go off to reenable pump Seven Two.

When our respective jobs are successfully done, the two of us find ourselves in the station’s break room, a place with calming brown walls that are not flat, but instead jut out and in in the shapes of rocks. At the center of the room are two sofas back to back, each facing an opposite wall of the break room. Oaae sits on one sofa and I sit on the other, each of us holding a game board and a dish full of pegs.

“C7,” Oaae calls to me.

I make a noise of disbelief, and hear Oaae snicker.

“Hit,” I tell them, and insert a peg into one of the game pieces on my board. I hear them insert a peg into their board as well.

“C7,” I guess back.

“Y’got me. Hit.”

“Wait really?”

They snicker again, but confirm that yes, that was, in fact, a hit.

—

A few weeks later, Oaae and I are driving out to pump Seven Two again to see why it stopped drawing water last night. We are both in agreement that it’s probably another whale, though we won’t know until we get there.

Oaae and I are cracking up as we discuss the oddities of their language’s verb tenses, when from the rover, the voice of the communications operator comes through. The message is hardly

a second long, and was clearly cut off almost immediately after it began. I did not catch any of what was said in the brief time that the message did come through. I ask Oaae if they caught anything, and they say that they did not. Oaae eases off the accelerator and picks up the receiver.

“Say again.”

We wait. There is a momentum to all of the smiling and laughing we have just done—it lingers in my body physically, and relaxes into somber professionalism as we wait for the operator to repeat.

The radio clicks. “Well 8 has gone dark. Signatures indicate the facility is completely non-operational. There is no indication they are receiving our communications. Drop all non-critical tasks from Well 7 and move to Well 8. A HomeOps team will meet you outside. More teams are moving in but will not arrive until tomorrow.”

“Copy. Moving.” Oaae slows down, does a U-turn, and then pushes down on the accelerator, and we are off.

I am terrified.

“Has this ever happened before?” I ask. I know it must not happen often. Not since I’ve been here.

Their answer is only comforting in the sense that we can clearly share in a sense of solidarity: they sound terrified too. “I have never heard of anything like this,” they say. They grab the receiver. “Requesting any additional information. What could have caused Well 8 to go dark?” This question is sent in desperation. If there was any additional information, it would have been shared in the first message.

We rumble along.

The radio clicks. “You will likely be the ones who will be able to tell us what might have happened, soon enough. Apologies.”

Oaae grabs the receiver. “No harm done. Thank you.”

Hours pass. We do not talk much. We go from lamp to lamp, scaring off fish, a periodically moving dot on the ocean floor.

Eventually when we are arriving at the edge of another lamp, the next lamp does not come on, and we are rocketing into sheer darkness. Oaae screams, I scream, and they brake. The other lamp goes off behind us, and we come to a stop, and the only thing in the world that I might be able to see is the glowing

patterns of Oaae's skin, which I am not allowed to look at. Something brushes against my face and I shriek. It goes away. It was likely a very harmless fish, but in any case, I do not like it.

Oaae swears. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that they are reaching for the transmission. Carefully they put the rover into reverse, and bring us back into the range of the last lamp. When the lamp chunks on and we are comfortably inside of its radius, they switch the rover back to drive.

"Well," they say. Then they add nothing more.

"Well," I agree.

The two of us wait in the rover, parked beside the lamp post.

Oaae grabs the receiver. "We believe we are near the base. The lamps are out. Waiting for HomeOps to accompany us farther unless you advise otherwise."

They set down the receiver, and as soon as they've set it down, a new voice comes in through the radio. "Copy. HomeOps to Crew Seven, we are thirty minutes out. Are you in light?"

Oaae picks the receiver back up. "Confirmed, we are in lamplight."

"Copy."

A short time later, the communications operator comes in. "Copy. Wait for—"

The radio is silent.

A minute later, the radio operator speaks again. "HomeOps, mind your band. I have not received so much as a request for permissions to the Crew band."

HomeOps quickly retorts, "Blame Aioa."

A second voice from HomeOps also chimes in, this one male: "Hey! Oo'oa'aa was the one who—"

I hear a clamor, and then the radio is silent.

"Think they'll be as fun in person?" Oaae asks.

"Hope so," I say, because sounding optimistic about anything feels like a good change of pace.

The ocean current slowly drones, and nothing in sight of the lamplight moves. Oaae turns the rover around, and they and I wait, facing the road that we came from, anticipating a distant light, that will grow less distant in intervals. What comes instead is a realization that there is the sound of something large moving above us. I try to look up, but the lamp overhead shines

into my eyes, and I swear in my own language. Oaae snickers. Then before we know it, there is a craft coming to ground in front of us, having apparently arrived from out of the darkness overhead. The craft has ten large wheels, three cannons that I can identify, and a glass dome on top in which two people sit. Aioa and Oo'oa'aa—Yellow and Purple.

I only glance directly at them for a fraction of a second before I catch myself and look down.

From the craft, I hear the groan and the current of a hatch opening. "Come aboard!" calls the voice of Aioa, the male who is yellow. "Leave your rover there!"

Oaae and I get out, and swim over to the craft. Inside, I follow the glow of Aioa's yellow light out of the corner of my eye, and find a seat up in the dome.

"Aioa!" Oo'oa'aa scolds. "You didn't tell them! I gave you one job!"

"Hey—OW, hey!"

Oo'oa'aa speaks to Oaae and I. "Hi, it's a pleasure to meet you, really. Now. Please look me in the eyes."

I do not. I gather that Oaae does not either.

Oo'oa'aa tries again. "If you're going to be working with us, it's for a very special reason: because politeness is out and survival is in. Look me in the eyes. I will not say please about it again."

I have known Oaae for almost a year now and have never made eye contact with them. To the customs of these people, which may be more ingrained in me now than I had realized, it is as though Oo'oa'aa is asking for my hand in marriage.

"Thank you," Oo'oa'aa says as my head is still bowed. I gather that Oaae has looked up. I do the same, and look Oo'oa'aa in her eyes. The eyes of these people are black. I think I had learned that once, but had thoroughly forgotten it. "Thank you," she says to me as well. Her tongue glows in the same hue of purple as the patterns on her skin.

From a control console, Aioa looks over at me and asks, "Is it true you're a spy?"

I get to watch as Oo'oa'aa punches him, not lightly.

"Better a spy than a demon," I tell him, and shrug.

Aioa says something under his breath that I do not catch.

Getting to look at Aioa and Oo'oa'aa without modesty, I can now fully appreciate why Oaae is described as slim. These two are as broad as they are tall. Each wears an X-shaped harness over their chest, onto which rifles, grenades, and blades are strapped. I have never before today seen true weaponry on this planet, and had seldom seen it on mine beyond that used for hunting.

Oo'oa'aa looks at me, and I again look her back in the eyes. A gesture that once felt natural on my planet now feels aggressive. "What shall we call you?" she asks.

"Cel," I tell her. My name is actually Stedl, but "Cel" is difficult enough for a species who does not ordinarily use consonants. From anyone other than Oaae, I prefer Cel to what many here are naturally inclined to call me, which is, in fact, Aiae'ae'aeoe'oe—demon.

"Cel," Oo'oa'aa says back, with difficulty.

I nod, and then I remember that this gesture likely means nothing to a people who don't look at each other, and I say out loud, "Yes."

Aioa keys something on the control panel, and the craft lurches forward. He keys another thing, and lights chunk on: the ground all around the circumference of the craft is illuminated, and suddenly we are now our own megaton lamp. It is not until this very moment that I appreciate what a power core this craft must boast.

We rumble forward. We pass ten dead lampposts, and then the front face of Well 8 comes into our light. Oo'oa'aa instructs us to wait with Aioa while she gets out and has a look at the station. She swims forth on her fins to the door, interacts with a panel beside it, and then swims back. "As expected," she reports. "Nothing."

"Caliber?"

"Mid."

"Aye aye," Aioa says, and then without ceremony, he presses a button on the console that causes a cannon to fire. The wall beside the front door has a hole blown into it, and I gasp as I realize that no water is rushing in to fill the facility: it is already filled.

The fact that these facilities are dry is the entire reason that I work at one. They are a rarity among a species who would ordinarily live the entirety of their lives submerged. These well stations are only dry because the technology harbored inside requires it. If the entire facility is flooded, then the well may be damaged to the point of requiring complete reconstruction.

Some 200 years ago, the species of this planet realized that the pressure on the ocean floor was growing, and that this would soon become a catastrophic problem. Inexplicably large volumes of extra water were appearing in the ocean, source unknown. The wells were made to remove the extra water to places unknown, and alleviate the growing pressure. It is a common folk theory that the water is being teleported around in time, and that they are causing their own problems, only putting off the increased pressures perpetually. Scientifically there is no consensus on whether the water is being destroyed from the wells, teleported, or moved temporally, but there is agreement that it is at least going away from the here and now.

Oo'oa'aa speaks to us: "We'll lead, you two follow. This station is similar to yours?"

I confirm, as I have visited a few times before: "The layout should be identical."

Oo'oa'aa and Aioa lead the way out of the craft, and I follow alongside Oaae. The two agents swim, darting forth into the hole in the wall that their craft has blasted. Each agent has a flashlight on their harness that lights the area ahead of them. From inside, the two of them call "Clear!" one after the other.

Oaae and I swim after them, and arrive inside. The layout is indeed the same as our station, though seeing it dark and flooded, it feels unreal.

Aioa speaks a command to me. "Point us to the well core."

I point towards a hall. "Last door at the end of the hall."

The agents lead, and we follow. At the door, they find that it is fastened shut, but they are able to blast it open. The stairwell beyond is already flooded as well.

Oo'oa'aa curses in her language, and I concur with her.

The agents take point. As we go, I give them directions down through the facility, to the well core. Soon, we are at the central control panel. There is a plate of glass that overlooks the well:

before the glass is the control panel, and beyond the glass is the well chamber. Both sides should be dry. Neither side is. The light of the agents' flashlights does not reach to the well core itself, but it reaches beyond the glass enough to know that the station is flooded all the way through. There has been a catastrophe here. I cannot help but note that we have yet to see the crew of Well 8, a perfectly charming duo usually referred to as Cyan and Short Green, husband and husband.

Aioa turns to me, not looking at me directly, but from the corner of his eye. "What is your assessment of the damage to this station? Is it recoverable?"

I grasp at anything I can give him other than bad news. "Other than the hole you blasted in the wall, I have yet to see anything that would cause total flooding. A flood of the surface floor... dangerous and unprecedented as far as I'm aware of, but plausible. Flooding to the control room, to the well chamber... I would suspect every piece of electronic equipment in this facility is fried, though I'm at a loss as to how—"

All of us are cut short as a something dashes into the light in the well chamber, and then dashes away again. Oo'oa'aa and Aioa draw their rifles, and I shout at them to put them down. They do not listen to me. I shout again. I can hardly believe that I have seen what I think I have, but if it is true, then I will not allow him to be shot.

"A male," I tell Oaae, getting nothing from the agents. "It's one of the men."

Oaae calls the agents motherless bastards and demands that they lower their rifles.

They do so, and look sideways at Oaae, and at me.

"I beg you, open the door for me."

The agents look to Oaae.

Oaae seconds what I have said: "It is of existential importance. Do as she asks."

The agents glide over to the door that leads into the well chamber. After a brief moment, they pull it open, and I swim through, into the dark. I flex my throat, and call out. *Intrigue*, my body says.

From the darkness, I hear back a call of lust.

I am electrified by it, tickled, and I echo the sound back to them in my own voice, albeit faintly.

I swim towards him. Out in the dark, among the pipes that feed into the well core from this station's many distant pumps, the man and I meet. He presses his nose against my chest, and I curl around him, stroking along his head and down his body. I can discern nothing of how he has come here, how his presence ties to the flooding of this facility, where he and his kind have been for the last three hundred odd years. I can only know that he is here now.

I hear a second call then, and my side is nudged by another man. I shift one of my hands to him, and stroke the both of them.

They each vocalize lust to me.

My vocalization in response is that of longing to know more, but also of unmetered willingness. I pull off my clothing, and both of them begin upon me immediately: I begin vocalizing pleasure and a feeling of newness much louder than I have ever voiced, while they are vocalizing pleasure and a sense of conclusion, though the conclusion to what, I cannot know the full of. I hold each of them afterwards, and the three of us settle to the bottom of the well chamber. I am elated, and I tell them as much.

Distantly, I can hear Oaae trying to justify this to the agents, and I smile, appreciative of them. With another stroke to each of the men's heads, I find my clothes and put them back on. By the time I have, the two men have swam off to a higher corner of the well chamber, and appear to be playing some game of swimming after each other and bumping into one another. Feeling I should not agitate the agents further by keeping them in suspense, I slowly begin returning towards the control room. I make my hands visible as I approach. When the agents do see me, they do not shoot, but their guns are drawn and pointed, and I am nervous.

"Have your men caused this?" Oo'oa'aa asks.

As I am trying to think of how to tell her that I can't know, I notice something. A rainbow of lights on the wall ahead. After a brief flash of these lights, they are gone. I am on the verge of tears. "They have just left, in any case," I tell her.

The agents usher me to the corner, and take turns watching me as the other makes radio contact with forces beyond this station. It is many hours before my story is understood to be the factual case of my species, and that although something of a tragedy has occurred here for them, something of a miracle has occurred here for me. I eventually find myself without a gun barrel pointed at me. Oaae hugs me, looking at me as they do, and I am shocked.

“I’m happy for you,” they tell me.

From my throat, I vocalize happiness in return.

—

I live on the surface now of Oaae’s planet. The surface of this planet is almost entirely ocean, but I have found a shelf in a warm enough region where the water has deep enough pockets to hide my clutch, and shallow enough regions to raise the young as they hatch, though I will almost certainly be dead before any of them do hatch. In that sense my task here feels pointless at times: I am raising eggs for some future creature’s breakfast to be had on the day after I die.

Nonetheless, I keep at it.

Much of the job of preparing the clutch is in smoothing the stones at the very pit of the pocket, while sharpening those at the mouth. One day, as I am using one stone to chip off fragments of another, I glance up and see that a shark is approaching me. Dread sinks through me, not because the shark is immense, but because he is only slightly larger than I am: If he has a mind to, he will fit through the mouth of the pocket with ease, and that will be the end of me after all of this.

I sink my way back into the depths of the pocket, hoping that he might lose interest and go find easier prey somewhere else, but still he approaches.

Then, in a rainbow burst of lights, the two men flash into being just ahead of the shark, and shriek at him in vocalizations I dare not repeat. The shark reels around, looking between the two of them and everywhere else as he tries to get a handle on what this is. In his confusion, the shark turns around and darts away.

As he goes, one of the men disappears too in a tangled rainbow of lights, but the other one stays. He comes to me. Stopping short of me in the water, at the entrance of the pocket, he voices appreciation and apology. I voice thankfulness back, and draw farther back into the pocket, inviting him in. He follows after me, and the two of us swim around and around in gentle circles in the small smooth pit, making voices at each other.

The other man must go attend to other business—I cannot ascertain the details—but this man is here to stay.

POEMS

Paws on my Butt

Today I woke up with your paws on my butt
I was the little spoon in our snuggle
I had a hangover, the good kind
The kind where you don't feel too bad really
The kind where beating up your insides feels like you got a deep
tissue massage
The kind where there are a few mysteries to solve
I turned around and inductively charged my soul by the smell of
your belly
After a few good long minutes of this, we made out

A Bad Hangover

This morning I woke up with a hangover
The bad kind
The kind where there's a headache
The kind where there's a dry mouth and throat
The kind where your stomach hurts a vaguely concerning
amount
I woke up an hour before my alarm
You woke up up too, after a moment
You stretched and dug your warm back into the side of my legs
I pet you and told you good morning, because suddenly it was

The Marked and Pleasant Absence of a Hangover This Morning

I woke up this morning with no hangover,
And well rested.
You laid reversed beside me
Like we were a Jack, or Queen, or King.
Your sleeping hind legs were atop my chest.
I stayed lying with my eyes closed, and breathed.
Eventually you had a dream that you were running,
And I was the ground.
Thank you.

Tender

Waking up hungover again,
sensitivity overtuned to accepting stimuli from the world,
I eventually roll towards you
and you, bless you, snuggle back into me
so we can spoon.
Overly sensitive,
tender,
I get to feel all of your dogness.
It is in the weight of your head on my arm
that you use as a pillow.
It is in the endearing way all of your bones move around inside
of you.
It is in the sound your paws make when they scratch
against the bedsheets
or when they tap against the wall.
It is in your look
when I open my eyes and look at you, and,
hi,
yes,
look at you, you are a dog here
snuggling with me
on a hungover morning—
I love that: that you are a dog.
It's good to see you.
It is in the smell of the top of your head
and it is in your big-tongued and wide-mouthed kiss.
I love you.
Good morning, my dog.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 6;

JUNE 2023.

In this issue,
Romeo's attractions lie not with maidens but with beasts,
and some walks are had in sonnet form.

*Featuring a novelization of Romeo & Juliet, as well as a
few sonnets.*

ROMEO & JULIET

A Fantasy Novelization

**With Quotation from The Tragicall Historie of Romeus
and Juliet, translated into English for the first time by
Arthur Brooke**

*There is beyond the Alps, a town of ancient fame,
Whose bright renown yet shineth clear: Verona men it name;
Built in a happy time, built on a fertile soil,
Maintained by the heavenly fates, and by the townish toil.
The fruitful hills above, the pleasant vales below,
The silver stream with channel deep, that thro' the town doth
flow,
The store of springs that serve for use, and eke for ease,
And other more commodities, which profit may and please,—
Eke many certain signs of things betid of old,
To fill the hungry eyes of those that curiously behold,
Do make this town to be preferred above the rest
Of Lombard towns, or at the least, comparéd with the best.*

Preceding the first act, the Prologue

TWAS a violent stormy night at the chapel. Friar Theodore knelt in prayer among candles, mumbling the words aloud. “Please O

Lord, may that our present sacrifice be enough." Outside, a crack of thunder sounded. "Poor Lucia, poor Cicilia, poor Marsilia, plucked up by the tornado yesternight. Their mother and father mourn greatly. You hear them. Let this be enough. Please. Please." Outside, another crack of thunder sounded. The church walls groaned under the pressure of the wind. Something that was caught in the wind rapped against the church wall, knocking, knocking. "Please, O Lord, let—"

Friar Theodore paused. With breath held, he listened, hearing past the pelting rain, past the groaning walls.

The rapping outside was not some wind-caught object knocking at the walls, but a visitor knocking at the door. Friar Theodore arose from his kneeling, his joints stiff from so long spent stooped as he had been. With haste, he took a candle onto a chamberstick and went up the aisle between the pews, exited to the antechamber, and went towards the knocking at the door. The door he opened, and outside in the dark of the stormy night, for a moment before the howling wind foisted its way in and blew out his candle, there outside by the candlelight Friar Theodore saw a woman as old as he was, dressed in soaked brown robes, hood drawn.

"Haste ye, inside, inside," Friar Theodore beckoned, holding the door open for the woman.

She shuffled quickly in, and Friar Theodore shut the door behind her. Gingerly, he put a hand to her cheek, and recoiled at her cold skin—cold as stone, nearly cold as metal.

"To the hearth, to the hearth," he encouraged, and offered her an arm, helping her along. In a cozy receiving chambers, Friar Theodore coaxed the fire in the hearth from embers to a blaze, and then went to find the woman a dry change of clothing. In his cell, from his trunk, he found a spare brown robes, quite like the ones he was already wearing—they were also quite like the ones she wore, except dry. He returned with them, offered them, and left her to her privacy to change.

"I am decent, brother," she called.

He entered the receiving room. She had changed into the dry clothes offered, and had also pulled up a pair of cushioned, high-backed chairs to the hearth. She sat in one of the chairs,

her pile of wet clothes on the hearthstones at her feet. "Please, come sit," she offered. "May I know your name, brother?"

He took the seat across from her. The heat of the hearth radiated over him comfortingly. "I am Friar Theodore."

"Well met. I am Friar Elizabeth."

"Ha! Indeed?"

"Quite so," Elizabeth affirmed, her tone quite less merry than that of her contemporary. "Male and female, created he them, no?"

Theodore sobered, and nodded. "Indeed. Yes, indeed, and apologies. This is not typical here, is all. Do you hail from afar?"

"Quite far." Within her closed mouth, Elizabeth ran a tongue around each of her two pointed fangs. "I come bearing a gift."

"Oh?"

"I shall but bestow the gift tonight and be gone tomorrow. You have read the scripture, yes?"

"Read it!"

"You are across the scripture, then."

"Across it in any direction you like, front and back."

"Recount for me the fate of Abel," Elizabeth requested.

"Slain by Cain, his brother, Adam's firstborn. The first murder." Theodore squinted. "What mean you by this?"

"You recount the death of Abel truly, but not the ultimate fate of Abel. Know ye no further?"

Friar Theodore's brow furrowed. "Abel was buried by Cain in a field."

"Slain, and then buried in the desert," Elizabeth said, leaning forward in her seat towards Theodore. "His blood soaked into the sand, seeping, crying out for the Lord to hear. His unmarked grave stepped on by a giant for the duration of the flood, the giant's head above the water to breathe, the giant's sole at the bottom of the waters to keep dry Abel's sandy grave."

"Miss Elizabeth, this is nowhere in the—"

"I assure you, tis. But I go on: the waters recede, generations pass, and Peter, apostle, saint, first pope, is building a cathedral. Abel's grave is exhumed, the bloodied sand collected into a vase and brought to Rome, where it becomes the blood for Christ's hands and feet on a stained glass rendition of the crucifixion—"

"Miss Elizabeth, you—"

“Allow me but another moment and I shall be done: this is not blasphemy, only truth you are not yet aware of.”

Friar Theodore’s eye twitched, but he allowed the visitor to go on.

“As I was saying: Abel’s blood in the sand, blown and formed to Jesus’s blood in Saint Peter’s cathedral. It was said that those who looked upon the stained glass window were stricken with horror—looking into the blood of Jesus Christ, they saw reflected every horrible thing in their life past, and every horrible thing to come. This lasted some centuries until, as windows are wont to do, one day the window broke, and the glass was swept away.”

“Finished?”

“But a breath more. The glass was swept away, but the pieces are since refound, and reformed into a new shape.”

Elizabeth reached down to the pile of her rainsoaked robes, and from among them, lifted out a spherical object, wrapped in cloth and tied with twine.

Theodore leaned back in his chair away from it.

The corner of Elizabeth’s mouth quirked into a smile. “The Scrying Glass of Abel’s Blood, once a window, is now an orb. Look into it, and it will first show you the death of your firstborn son, if you are to have one. After that, its eye will wander through place and date more freely.”

Theodore turned his head away, and crossed his arms. “T’would be no divining to show the death of my firstborn. Tis passed.”

“So you would know if I speak the truth?”

Theodore sneered. “Tempt me not to turn you back to the rain.”

The two sat unspeaking as the hearth crackled and the rain outside pelted down.

After some time, Theodore asked, “Why would you bring such a thing to me?”

“It is rather obsessed with these environs. Whenever idle, untasked, it shows Verona. If it wills itself here, I would it were put in good hands.”

Again, quiet.

Again, Theodore broke the quiet: "What symbolism is this, anyhow? Abel was the secondborn. Why should his blood show the firstborn's death?"

"If you wish me to interpret, I'll gladly guess. Though I must place emphasis, I come here first to report, then only to interpret if pressed."

"Go on and interpret."

"I would take it that Abel wanted to see the death of Cain, the firstborn who murdered him."

"Aye. The same is what I thought." Theodore sighed. "Show me the orb."

With both hands, Friar Elizabeth extended out the cloth-swaddled sphere. With both hands, Friar Theodore received it. He unknotted the twine and removed the cloth. Underneath was an orb of dark red glass, cloudy on the inside. Then, as a fog suddenly lifting, Friar Theodore was looking back ten years past, at a scene of himself at his ailing son's bedside, and the final words of them both, and then the final breath. The friar's son went limp, and the friar bowed his head in tearful, mourning prayer.

In the receiving room with the strange visitor, Friar Theodore wept again. He wrapped the sphere back in its cloth, and held it on his lap.

Marking the hour, Friar Theodore arose, and prepared a chamber for Friar Elizabeth to sleep in. In the morning, before Friar Theodore woke, Friar Elizabeth was departed, on her journey back far, far to the east, to a city on a coast, near Moscow. Friar Theodore, left in fair Verona with the Scrying Glass of Abel's Blood, stowed the orb in a hidden place under the cellar stairs. There would be much prayer and consulting to do over the legitimacy of the thing. In the meantime, the friar set out over the rain-wet grass to see whether his prayers for mercy from the storms of the night before had been answered.

As he set out from the church's yard, he happened by Friar Caleb, leading a flock of young boys from Verona to the abbey for their lessons that day. Lowering himself to a playful stoop, Friar Theodore locked eyes with the young boy of the house Montague, who stood halfway behind Friar Caleb, smiling as he hid. Friar Theodore darted around Friar Caleb with elderly

haste, and hoisted the young Montague boy up into the air, who squealed and laughed before being set down again.

Friar Theodore knelt before the boy, both of them dappled under the swaying shade of the many trees on the church's yard. "Which of the Lord's creatures have you brought for me today, Young Montague?"

From his sleeve, Young Montague produced a lumpy toad and held it out for the friar.

"My! Was he hard to catch?"

Young Montague shook his head vehemently.

"You're faster?"

Young Montague nodded.

"Let's leave him to his business now, and you go see how fast you can catch up with Friar Caleb."

Young Montague set the toad on the grass, and then ran to catch up with the other boys. Halfway there, Young Capulet leapt down from a tree branch hanging overhead and whacked Young Montague with a stick, breaking the stick in half on the impact.

"Ay, me!" Young Montague cried, and reached out and slapped Young Capulet. Young Capulet grabbed Young Montague by the wrist, and dragged him off to a bush, and there the two knelt in front of each other, Young Montague's side stinging from the impact of the stick, Young Capulet's cheek stinging from the impact of the slap.

"My father hates Montagues," Young Capulet said in a whisper as he caught his breath. "He said they don't have a wit between them. He said they'd wear their shoes on the wrong feet if not for their servants. He said the only good parts of their bloodline are from them bugging their horses."

"My father hates Capulets," Young Montague returned, also in a whisper. "He said their brains are as scrambled as their faces. He said their hands stink of sour wine and cheese. He said they're as dull as they are loud."

"My father said if I killed you I would get away with it."

"My father said if you lay a hand on me, the law would be on my side for any Capulets I killed for the next hour."

"I don't hate you though," Young Capulet said, as he said most days to Young Montague in this bush.

“Nor I you,” said Young Montague, likewise.

The two of them grabbed each other’s hands in a truce. Then they scrambled out and ran into the church for their lessons. In the mornings they learned scriptures, and in the afternoons they learned the natural sciences, with an hour in between for lunch and play. That morning’s lesson was on the birthright of Jacob and Esau. That noon the meal was stew, and the game was hide and seek. Searching for a spot to hide, Young Montague found his way under the cellar stairs. Tucked away and hidden, Young Montague found the hidden orb, swaddled in cloth. He unwrapped it and looked into its cloudy red depths, which parted to show a tomb, and a young man drinking from a flask; the man held another figure close to him, though the other was obscured in the periphery of the red clouds. With some final words spoken, the young man fell dead, embracing the figure of the other.

Certain that he had found something that he wished to study more closely, Young Montague stowed the object back under the cellar stairs for the time being, and then later that night, snuck into the church alone, and left with a swaddled orb stolen in secrecy.

All the hours of the next day, and the next, and so forth, Young Montague sat at the foot of his bed, craning down at the glass. He saw a gaunt old figure frequently, and realized, as the interim years were fleshed out, that the gaunt old figure was himself. He realized that the man whose death he had seen in the tomb, that that was his own son, not yet born, but eventually to be born and to grow and then to die, and already Young Montague, not yet a man himself, had seen it. Not for a certainty, so far as Young Montague could know, but still, he had seen it portrayed. The glass did not show the future only. At times it showed other rooms of the manor: maids cleaning, a servant tending the horses, his mother and father conversing in the receiving room, though the orb did not give volume to it.

Months went by, Young Montague alone most days in his room, skipping his lessons, learning instead from scrying, scrying, scrying, skipping his meals and becoming gaunt and hunched.

One day, the orb parted its red clouds to show someone Young Montague had not seen in some time. It was another young boy: Young Capulet. His friend held a fire poker, brandished it, swung it—it was not in play, no game. The boy screamed as he lashed out, tears streaking down his face, and then he turned and was running down a hall. Young Montague marked the time of day shown in the orb: it was night, just fallen. He looked up from the orb and marked the time out his own window: it was evening, falling.

Young Montague looked back down into the orb, seeking guidance. Three images were shown, one after the other. The first image was of his father's enchanted sword, hung on the wall behind the lord's chair in his office. The second image, his father's horse. The third image was the manor of the Capulets—twas an image from later in the day, as the sun was setting, and a short figure rode on horseback up to the gate, armed with an enchanted sword. Young Montague swallowed nervously, recalling all the terrible things Young Capulet's father had said about Montagues—and here he was going to be, riding up to his doorstep.

And yet, he felt almost no choice in his fate. Already, it seemed sealed. Up the steps he crept to his father's office, avoiding the spots on the stairs that creaked. He stood and stared at the sword for a moment. Around the guard, seven runes were engraved, with dots in between most runes. The wishing sword, it was called. It had a soul of its own. A kind soul.

Raising his voice barely loud enough for the sword to hear, Young Montague asked, "May I wield you?"

Three of the wishing sword's symbols glowed, and the blade vibrated in an agreeable, harmonic hum.

Young Montague stepped up onto his father's chair and lifted the sword off of its mount on the wall. It resonated briefly in his hand, and a shiver ran through him. He lifted off the scabbard as well, affixed it to his side, and stowed the wishing sword for now.

With this deed done, he crept back down the stairs and out to the stables. There in the waning glow of late evening, Young Montague went to one of the horses, gently approaching her.

After assuring her of who he was, he leapt up onto the mare—as a Montague, he had learned to ride at the same time he had learned to walk. With a click produced in the side of his mouth, the mare began to saunter forth, out of the stables, into the cobbled Verona streets, hooves tapping over the stones.

As the mare walked, Young Montague peered down into the orb, glancing up only occasionally to direct the mare. All throughout the Capulet manor, he was shown similar sights. In the foyer, a guardsman was collapsed on the ground, snoring, and a demon crouched over him, hands moving in strange motions over the sleeping guard's face—the guard occasionally let loose an immense twitch and a yelp, a glimpse of his nightmares. In the cellars a maid was entranced similarly, and in the kitchen a cook, and in the armory a servant, and in the master bedroom, both the lord and lady of the house Capulet writhed in nightmares, as a demon on each side of the bed held them captive. Guiding the mare onto the street on which the Capulet manor stood, the orb showed an image of the guardsman a short time ago, being accosted by the demon, struggling with it, and then being overpowered and entranced. The sleeping was not some general effect on the manor, at least, and needed to be induced. Lastly before arriving at the gate, the orb showed an image of a ritual being performed in some inner room of the manor, glowing circles made upon the floor, and a shimmering gate to Hell itself opened up. The caster in the center, the orb seemed to wish to show, but could not part the red clouds which obscured them.

Young Montague swallowed. He stowed the orb, dismounted from the mare, and hitched her to the gate.

He unsheathed the wishing sword, and lifted it up before himself to speak with it. "I wish that if I swing you, you will strike at the demons, but at no man or woman, not even a Capulet."

The wishing sword hummed in affirmation.

Keeping the sword in hand, Young Montague dashed forward over the Capulet yard. Knowing that the front door was no option with the demon perched over the guardsman beyond, Young Montague looked down into the orb and saw a side entrance, free of demonic presences. Young Montague skulked

around the manor, crouching under window sills and avoiding stepping on dead leaves, and arrived soundly at the minor entrance. With careful attention, Young Montague opened the door, and was inside.

The manor was dark. Every candle and lantern was extinguished, and yet Young Montague was not terribly bothered, as the orb's images glowed well enough to the observer's sight, and Young Montague found that he was shown himself when peering down into the orb: himself in the manor, peering down into an orb. In the image he stepped forward, and at the very same moment, Young Montague stepped forward in the exact same way. He fell into a trance of it, and in this strange way was led through the halls of the manor, around each threat of demon, until arriving at yet another room which to his own sight was black as pitch, but in the glow of the orb, was revealed to have two couches, a grand chair, a fireplace, a low table, thick carpeting, and some fine décor. In the orb, Young Montague spotted someone entering the room from the opposite side at the same time as he—this person lashed out, swinging a metal object wildly. Young Montague raised the wishing sword, while never breaking sight of the orb, knowing on well-ingrained instinct that the orb's sight far outclassed his own. The wishing sword and the weapon of the assailant clanged off of one another, the sword humming. The assailant swung again, and again the wishing sword blocked it. Young Montague thrust the wishing sword forward to strike, but the wishing sword moved askance in his hand, tumbling away from the intended target. The assailant wailed "Have at ye!" in the high voice of a young boy, and it was only then that Young Montague looked closer into the orb, and saw that the other figure here in the dark was Young Capulet.

"Peace!" Young Montague cried. "Peace, peace, tis I!"

Young Capulet was still and silent for a moment, before asking, "Truly?"

"Truly," Young Montague assured.

"I wondered if you had died," Young Capulet said, and was in tears. "You haven't been to lessons in months. How ill had you fallen?"

Young Montague teared a bit at his friend's emotions. "Twas no illness. I found..." Rather than attempting to explain, Young Montague held up the orb. "Look."

Young Capulet laughed. "At what? Tis dark in here. Mayhap I can look, in the most literal sense, but I assure you that whatsoever I look at, I cannot see."

Young Montague took Young Capulet's hand and laid it on the orb. "Look upon this."

Young Capulet felt the thing. "Tis a cold thing. I assure you, I take you at your word that it looks wonderful, but truly, I can see nothing."

The Scrying Glass of Abel's Blood, finding no firstborn son in Young Capulet's future, could not show the first image that it desired to, and so showed nothing at all to the boy, nor would it ever.

Far from offended, Young Montague was bolstered with wonder at what special trait had singled him out as the one with the ability to scry. "We are safe here at present. Sit with me here," Young Montague said. As they sat, he placed the orb on the ground between them. He peered into it, and shared with his friend what he was seeing: "The floor above us, farther on the east side of the manor, someone is performing a ritual. It has opened a gate to Hell. Demons patrol the halls, though they focus on the highest floor right now."

"What of my mother and father?"

"Entranced. They are alive though."

"Go on, where you were."

"The figure is done with the ritual. He's leaving the room with the gate. He is..." The image in the orb went away from the figure, and for a moment, showed nothing. As the red clouds gathered, the glow of the image faded from Young Montague's sight, and he was left to appreciate the true darkness of the room.

There in the dark, Young Montague and Young Capulet could hear footsteps above, of demon and whatever else.

The red clouds parted to show the mare hitched to the fence outside the Capulet manor. A number of Verona's watchmen were crowded around, closely observing the crest of the house Montague on the horse's saddle. A few seemed to be

investigating other things about the perimeter of the Capulet manor's fence, though they were shrouded away from Young Montague's sight.

"Listen—"

"One moment," Young Montague insisted, trying to focus the edges, to see what else the watchmen were examining.

"Fool, listen—"

"One *moment!*" Young Montague hissed.

Whatever else it was that the watchmen had found, it was sufficient that they began marching into the manor. The red clouds fell upon the orb, and it was dark.

At the door of the room, Young Montague heard heavy footsteps fast approaching, and a hissing, huffing breathing, too deep to be human. Left in the dark, Young Montague stood from sitting on the floor, leaving the orb on the ground. Trusting the wishing sword could see better than himself, he drew the blade and drove its point towards the oncoming opponent. The blade struck true, and Young Montague could not see, but felt as the sword pushed through the demon's body. The demon hissed as Young Montague withdrew the blade and then struck out again, this time striking at the creature's head. A sharp crack resounded through the room, and the creature thumped to the ground, hissing no more.

Young Montague sheathed his sword. Young Capulet reached out in the dark for his friend. There in the dark, the two held one another, catching their breath while also trying to keep quiet, to listen for anything else.

On the ground floor below, a clamor of footsteps and shouting voices could be heard. "Watchmen below," Young Montague mentioned, to which Young Capulet responded, "Aye. They've announced as much several times." "Oh." "No trouble. You were reasonably preoccupied."

Reminded of the orb, Young Montague removed himself from the lad of the other house, and felt at the floor for his relic. "Where is it?" he asked aloud, as he felt about farther and farther from where he had left it before. The floor was thickly carpeted, making the orb unlikely to have rolled.

"Do you know exactly where you left it?"

"Have you a light?"

“Aye, I’ll return with one.”

Young Capulet departed as Young Montague continued to search. When a lantern was brought in, it was clear to see that the orb was nowhere on the floor. Young Montague felt an aversion to looking at the demon’s body, though this sense of aversion also compelled him to look it over more than anything else in the room, to be sure that the orb wasn’t missed laid against it. The orb was nowhere, though.

All at once, Young Montague was stricken with realization as to why Young Capulet had so quickly volunteered to go away and fetch a light. “Thief!”

Young Capulet reeled as though smacked. “*Thief?* Stealing into a house you don’t belong to, spouting nonsense about a magic ball, and now accusing *me* of thievery! Ay me, a Montague indeed!” The footfalls of the watchmen were ascending the stairs.

“I wish that when my sword strikes towards thee, Capulet, it will strike any thieves dead!”

Immediately the wishing sword cacophonized disharmoniously and rattled with such violence that it fell from Young Montague’s recoiling hand.

With the clamor of footsteps nearing, Young Montague collected up his sword and dashed out of the room in one direction, and Young Capulet huffed out of the room in the direction opposite. A party of watchmen charged into the room, looking about for any of either house. Seeing no one, they examined the demon’s corpse briefly, and then charged onwards to continue the search. The room was still for a moment, with only muffled stomps and shouts from elsewhere, and the tittering of nightingales and insects outside. From behind the couch, the young prince Escalus quietly peeked his head out, and then emerged, the Scrying Glass of Abel’s Blood in hand.

Into the room skulked the prince’s father, glancing about over his shoulder and every which way. Seeing his son, the king flashed a smile, baring his fangs. The prince of scales flashed a smile back, showing fangs much the same. Having been instructed not to look at the orb himself, the prince averted his gaze as he handed the orb to his father.

Knowing of the relic and its properties, the king steeled himself, taking a good look at his firstborn son before him. When he was ready, he stared down into the scrying glass's depths, and after witnessing an image of an old man taking his final breaths, the orb showed the king an image of Young Capulet crying in the garden, and Young Montague crying as he rode through the dark Verona streets on horseback. Reaching years into the future, the orb showed two figures, one the fruit of Montague, the other the fruit of Capulet, dying together in a catacomb.

Act One **containing five scenes**

*There were two ancient stocks, which Fortune high did place
Above the rest, indued with wealth, and nobler of their race,
Loved of the common sort, loved of the prince alike,
And like unhappy were they both, when Fortune list to strike;
Whose praise, with equal blast, Fame in her trumpet blew;
The one was clepéd Capulet, and th'other Montague.*

Act I. **Scene I.**

BENVOLIO snapped awake, sitting bolt upright out of bed. He'd had no nightmare, just a sensation that he'd fallen and needed to catch himself, and now, as a result, he was certainly up. He took stock of his whereabouts. The sun was not yet risen: only the faint glow of night came in through his bedroom window. By the faint light from the window, and by the warmth and the sounds of snoring, he could discern that he was not alone in his bed: also here were Abraham and Balthasar, servants in the house Montague, though to this Montague, more friend than servant. A disorienting fog hung about Benvolio's thoughts. There was an empty bottle of wine pressed against his foot, and at a glance, there were three more strewn on the floor.

Benvolio settled back into the warm pocket of blankets that he had slept in beside Balthasar. He laid there and closed his

eyes and breathed and thought of sleep, but there was none more to be found for him, it seemed. He was up now.

Gingerly, Benvolio exited the bed, put on a robe, and left the bedroom, carefully closing the door behind himself. He made his way to the bathing room and drew a bath. As the water came in, Benvolio tried to recall how the night before had gone, but beyond a certain point his memory on the matter was absent. He had no doubt it had been merry, though. Perhaps one of the two others would be able to recount the details.

Benvolio smelled at his body before getting into the bath. Pressing his nose along his forearm, he came to a spot that smelled strongly of men. His hands appeared clean but were odorously filthy. He lifted a foot to his hand in order to feel it, and found the foot soft. Sitting on the floor and contorting himself to smell his sole, there was a distinct scent of flowery oils. It could be certain that he had indulged Abraham in his predilections then, though there was still no memory of it in Benvolio's bemused head.

Hopping into the frigid bath, Benvolio hissed out a breath through his gritted teeth. Once acclimated, he took to himself with soap and cloth, until his scent was becoming of an upstanding young man, the nephew to a lord no less.

Body cleaned and dried, hair and beard combed, Benvolio exited the bathing room and returned to his chamber to dress. He made quiet work of it, mindful of the other two still snoring, enwrapped peacefully together in a nest of cozy blankets and cozy scents. Benvolio himself had something of a headache, and the mental fog persisted. He dressed in attire that was various shades of brown cloth, well stitched, though not grandiose. Becoming, but anonymous. He put on a belt and a scabbard, and unsheathed the blade an inch or two to admire the thing in quiet respect. Seven runes were engraved about the guard, with dots in between most. The wishing sword, gifted to him by his uncle last Christmas. *This sword and I have never gotten along much*, the Lord Montague had said. With a glint of admiration breaking through his visage, the Lord Montague had added, *Tis a kind soul, this blade. I know it will resonate with you more favorably.*

As Benvolio quietly admired the blade, a few of its runes dimly lighted up, and the blade gave a faint, pleasant hum.

Benvolio ran his thumb over the handle appreciatively, and then returned the blade securely into its scabbard.

Quietly, Benvolio exited his chambers, went out to the stables to say good morning to the horses, and then left on his own feet into the streets of Verona. The sun had still not yet risen. Benvolio walked westwardly at an unhurried pace, occasionally passing by another early riser, listening to the tittering of the birds. Benvolio reminded himself that all of it was a lovely noise, even though at the moment, it made his head throb.

Passing through Verona, Benvolio found himself away from the city proper, into a quieter place. A grove of sycamores. The gentle noise of the wind passing through them did his mind well. On a winding trail in their midst, Benvolio stopped to listen, appreciate, eyes closed, head bowed.

Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh...

After some minutes, Benvolio noticed another noise in the sycamore grove. The gentle tap and crunch of footsteps, and a soft sniffing to accompany it. Benvolio opened his eyes, lifted his head, and in the distance, he beheld his cousin Romeo, walking and wiping away tears. Romeo, noticing Benvolio at the same time, suddenly stood more upright, lowered his hand away from his face, and hurried along.

Sensing wisdom in his crestfallen cousin's pace, Benvolio hurried along as well, towards the Calf and Crow, an inn nestled in the sycamore grove outside Verona. Opening the door and closing it behind himself was as though stepping into a pleasant memory.

"By the Lord's good grace, the sun not yet risen and already a friendly face," the innkeeper greeted.

Benvolio took the man's offered hand and curtsied to kiss it. He then smiled up at him warmly. "Your cooking could cure Loki of his enpoisoned rash and Sisyphus of his sore feet. I would be a fool to seek such a miracle elsewhere."

"Merry, but tis early. I've nothing started, but allow me to amend this tragedy."

"Bless you sir. Is there any labor needs doing here in the meantime?"

“Aye, but not for a lord’s nephew as yourself. You already pay me too much in compliment and in currency. Sit, sit.”

Benvolio took the innkeeper’s instructions, and had a seat in a cushioned chair in a cool, quiet corner. A fireplace on the other side of the room crackled. Occasional floorboard creaks and footsteps could be heard from the rooms above. By and by, a smell of God’s own food came creeping into the compact common room. Summoned by it, two patrons from the rooms above lighted down the creaking stairway, and sat themselves at the common room’s table. Benvolio greeted them, and all had a pleasant chat before the innkeeper emerged from the kitchen to set on the table pitchers of water and pitchers of juice. With a second trip, the innkeeper emerged from the kitchen holding a steaming platter of toasted bread, steamed vegetables, and fried potatoes, all doused in melted cheeses, oils, and herbs. Benvolio came to the table, and the four of them feasted.

At the end of the meal, the fog in Benvolio’s mind was cleared, his headache was gone, and his muscles were no longer sore. He leaned back in his chair, swimming in the intangible delights of his new wellness. “I am cured,” he announced to the innkeeper. “And I should be off. Thank you and bless you, sir.” Benvolio stood and made his departure, shaking the innkeeper’s hand and giving him his payment on the way.

Benvolio walked back into town with health anew, this time truly appreciating the birds’ tittering as he walked through the Verona streets, and the tittering of all the men, women, and children that were now about in the newly sun-blessed morning. As he rounded a corner into a public square, he spotted across the square Abraham and Balthasar, who were facing two figures in vibrantly colorful clothing. Capulets. His breath caught as he noticed all four men with their hands on their hilts. At that moment, Balthasar spotted Benvolio, then leaned over to Abraham and whispered of it. The next moment, all four swords were drawn, and a fight had begun.

From across the square, Benvolio began walking hurriedly forward to break it up. As he went he drew the wishing sword, and petitioned it, “I wish you would strike not at their flesh, but only at their steel.”

The wishing sword hummed its agreement with a shared urgency. Wish deigned, Benvolio broke into a sprint, and leapt into the fray of swords, the dizzying flashes of steel poking and riposting, swishing, spinning. “Part, fools!” Benvolio urged, swinging the wishing sword to beat down the blades of the Montagues and the Capulets alike. “Stow your swords! You know not what you do!”

In the midst of it, a heavy hand fell upon Benvolio’s shoulder, and spun him away from the fight. Benvolio found himself face to face with an imposing figure in colorful garb, near seven feet tall in his high-soled boots, near eight feet tall counting his hat. Tybalt, nephew of the Lady Capulet, as sharp in his fashion as in his bastardry.

Tybalt took a step back and drew his sabre. “What,” he began, “art thou drawn among these heartless hinds? Turn thee Benvolio, and look upon thy death!”

“I do but keep the peace,” Benvolio assured. “Put up thy sword, or manage it to part these men with me.”

“What, drawn and talk of peace! I hate the word, as I hate Hell, all Montagues, and thee. Have at thee, coward!”

On the sole of a boot Tybalt spun wildly in a circle, and with the momentum of the spin, hacked down with his sword towards Benvolio. Fearing his own kind blade might break from blocking such a strike, Benvolio leapt backwards. Tybalt did not slow for a moment, but carried his momentum to rush forward, continuing his pursuit with a lunge. Benvolio moved to knock the attack away, but such a parry would prove unneeded: before Tybalt’s lunge could land, a citizen leapt in and punched the tall nobleman into the side of the head, knocking him off balance. Benvolio winced, seeing the blow. All at once, the square was a frenzy of punches and kicks and grapples, shouting, jeering, shoving. As Benvolio made his way through the turmoil back towards Abraham and Balthasar, he spotted off at one edge of the square Lord and Lady Montague themselves, and at another edge of the square, Lord and Lady Capulet. Each lord was moving to join the foray, but each lady held him back. Shouted the Lord Montague, “Thou villain Capulet! Hold me not, let me go.” The lady in turn, “Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe!”

Muskets rang out. All in the square dropped to the ground covering their heads, or fled off down the streets away. Tybalt was first up to a knee, and then to standing. Benvolio rose likewise, and then the lords and ladies. Benvolio looked about, and saw that the muskets seemed not to have been aimed to kill, but rather aimed into the air to warn. From one side of the square, Prince Escalus marched into the center, flanked by a dozen musketeers.

“You men, you beasts!” the prince projected. “Rebellious subjects, enemies to the peace! On pain of torture, from those bloody hands, throw your illtempered weapons to the ground!”

The prince waited. Each carrying a sword set it upon the ground, Tybalt making a point of setting his down the last.

“Now, hear the sentence of your moved prince. Three civil brawls, bred of nothing but airy words, have been summoned by thee, Old Capulet, and Old Montague, and have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets.” Within his mouth, the prince ran his tongue over his fangs. “If ever you disturb our streets again, your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace. But for now, all of you, depart away.”

Cautiously, with many an eye cocked at the musketeers, the citizens rose from off the ground and shuffled away, back to their goings on from before the foray.

Prince Escalus approached Lord Capulet and Lord Montague. “You, Capulet, shall go along with me,” the prince commanded. “And Montague, come you this evening to discuss our future pleasure in this case. Once more, on pain of death, all men depart.”

In their separate directions, the nobles and servants all turned and stepped away.

As Benvolio walked back towards the Montague manor, he found himself flanked by Lord Montague on one side and Lady Montague on the other.

“Who set this ancient quarrel anew?” Lord Montague asked. “Speak, nephew; were you near when it began?”

“Aye. The servants of your adversary, and the servants of yourself, were close to fighting when I did approach. I drew to part them. In that instant came the fiery Tybalt with his sword prepared, which he swung at me as he spoke of his scorn. We

were interchanging thrusts and blows till the prince came, who parted either part."

"Was Romeo at this fray?" inquired Lady Montague.

"No, he was not here, Madam," Benvolio assured, to the lady's relief. "An hour before the worshipped sun peered forth in the golden window of the east, a troubled mind drove me to walk abroad, where—underneath the grove of sycamore that westward of the city grows—so early walking did I see your son. I made toward him, but he was aware of me, and stole into the cover of the woods. Being weary myself, I continued about pursuing my humor, not pursuing his, and gladly shunned he who gladly fled from me."

Lord Montague grumbled, and said, "Many a morning has he been seen there, with tears augmenting the fresh morning dew, adding to the clouds more clouds with his deep sighs. But as soon as the daylight comes, my son rushes to his chambers and locks himself up therein, shutting up his windows and locking the fair daylight out, making himself an artificial night. Dark and damning must his foul mood prove—unless with good counsel may its foul cause be removed."

"My noble uncle, do you know the cause of Romeo's foul mood?"

"I neither know it nor can learn it from him. Could we but learn from whence his sorrows grow, we would as willingly give cure as know." The three Montagues stepped past the manor gates.

"Merry, peace," Benvolio said. "I will learn of his trouble."

The lady took Benvolio's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you, nephew."

Benvolio bowed his head in return. As the three neared the front door, it went swinging open, opened by a bloodied Abraham. Balthasar sat on the stairs behind, head hung near his knees, holding a wet cloth to his forehead. The lord and lady hurried past and disappeared into the manor. Abraham shut the door behind Benvolio, who lingered with the two.

"Why?" Benvolio asked. "I worried for you."

Abraham went and sat on the stairs beside Balthasar. "Mark my word, we'll not be the Capulets' rug to be stepped on," Abraham remarked.

Balthasar gave a small chuckle to himself. "No, stepped on as rugs, certainly not. Though we are quite rugged."

"I trust you will mind one another's wounds," Benvolio implored.

"Aye," said each of the two servants.

"See to that, then. And perhaps after, we may sit down all together, and if either of you have a better memory of last night than I, recount it for me to the minute."

The three men smiled. Benvolio proceeded past Abraham and Balthasar, up the stairs, to check on the elusive Romeo, entombed so in his chambers. Up to the third floor Benvolio marched, and then on Romeo's chamber door, he knocked.

Benvolio heard movement within. Then, the door swung open. Romeo stood in his green underpants and pink undershirt, a thick black blanket draped over the shoulders of his fair skinny frame. The curtains of Romeo's chamber were drawn shut, and no light was lit within. Benvolio smiled, pleased the knock had even been answered. "Good morning, cousin."

"Is the day so young?"

"But newly struck nine."

"Ay, me! Sad hours seem so long." There was a croak to Romeo's voice, though Benvolio could make neither heads nor tails of whether it was that of a slumbering man just awakened, or a tired man late to sleep.

"Come, sit with me by the window," Benvolio encouraged, and walked optimistically away from his cousin's endarkened catacomb.

Mercifully, Romeo followed. The two sat down in the cushioned chairs at the window, both facing the sunny day outside. Romeo's eyes screwed up into a squint at the sunlight.

"What sadness lengthens Romeo's hours?" Benvolio inquired.

Romeo huffed, and looked away.

"In love?" Benvolio teased.

"Out—"

"Of love?"

"Out of her favor, she who I am in love with."

Benvolio huffed.

Concern struck Romeo's face. "Good heart, what troubles you?"

“Thy good heart’s oppression.”

“Why, such is love’s transgression. Woes of my own lie heavy in my soul, which grows only heavier with your sorrow piled on. Love is a smoke raised with fumes of sighs: if requited, a sparkling in lovers’ eyes; but if vexed, a sea nourished with lovers’ tears.” Romeo rose from his chair, shedding the blanket and leaving it there. “Farewell, my cousin.”

“Soft! Where you go, I will go along. And if you leave me so, you do me wrong.” Benvolio got himself up. “Tell me, who is it that you love?”

“Shall I weep and tell thee?”

“Weep! Why, no. But sadly as you like, tell me who.”

“Bid a sick man in sadness pen his will—ah, word ill urged to one so ill. In sadness, cousin, I do love a woman.”

“I had aimed so near, when I supposed you loved.”

“A right good marksman! Alas, she is fair. Oh beautiful recluse, oh lustful chastity, oh frigid heat! From Cupid’s loving bow, she lives unharmed. She will not mark the siege of loving terms, nor bide the encounter of assailing eyes, nor open her lap to saint-seducing gold. Oh, she is rich in beauty, only poor that when she dies, with beauty dies her store.”

“She hath utterly sworn that she will live chaste?”

“She hath, and in that swearing makes huge waste. She hath forsworn to love, and in that vow I live dead.”

“Bah. Forget her—”

“Oh, teach me how to forget!”

“*This* I can help you with! I am entirely certain of it,” Benvolio said emphatically, and chuckled. “Give drink to thine lips, and freedom to thine eyes. Other fair beauties are abound in this fair city.”

“You discredit her beauty and my sorrow both, though I take it you mean both well.”

“Merry,” Benvolio said, and clasped an arm around Romeo’s shoulders, walking him towards the stairs, past return to his darkened cavern. “Take my heed tonight and you shall forget; I bet it, and if betting wrong, I’ll die in your debt.”

As Romeo’s foot touched the top step, he froze in place, an unbudgeable stone to Benvolio’s nudging. “Ay!” he exclaimed,

and ducked under Benvolio's arm, back towards his room. "Shall I meet these beauties you tell tale of in my pajamas?"

"You've the comeliness and witting charm to compensate," Benvolio assured. "But tis true: t'would be an easier job to get done if you dressed for it."

"Come then, I'll take but another moment."

Romeo stole back into his chambers, and Benvolio followed in after. Benvolio traversed the room, stepping around a landscape of dirty clothing and used dishware on the floor, and drew the shades a crescent open, to give his cousin some light to dress by. At his wardrobe, Romeo shed his undergarments and retrieved a pair of black leggings from a drawer. He paused with them in hand. "I must bathe first."

Benvolio made his way over, drew in a breath, and gave a dismissive wave. "You smell fine as a horse."

Romeo quirked his head. "I can honestly say, tis not a compliment I've heard before, if a compliment it was meant to be."

"I recall you once found a mare's scent to be perfectly befitting of a lover."

Romeo's face flushed red. "You tease the predilections of the younger Romeo. Alas, he's dead, and a newer, handsomer man stands here now. Twas a long time ago."

"Twas, twas. Though as I recall, it was more than just one time alone. To think you spurned by love now, when before you seduced a new lover—however many legs, however horse-haired or sheep-wooled—week to week, day to day, minute to minute, two at once—"

Romeo gave Benvolio a shove. Red from head to neck, he said, "Turn and let me dress. Alas, you exaggerate when you tease me so."

"If I do exaggerate tis only a little, and if I do tease tis well meaning. You made happy lovers of them all, as I recall it."

"I am dressed," Romeo announced. Benvolio turned, and saw his cousin dressed in black leggings, a black skirt, a black longsleeved top which stopped short of the navel of his skinny stomach, and a black cloak—with grey stitchwork—which draped from about his shoulders to near the floor. He had also applied white makeup to move his face from fair to pale,

accompanied with a pale pink shade of lipstick, and he had applied black eyeshadow, and he had dyed his hair black, and he had painted his trimmed fingernails black. He wore black boots with black socks to match.

“Tsk, Romeo, tis no way to go out! The women shall scarcely see you when night falls!”

“I am well dressed then, and will be saved for Rosaline yet.”

“Bah.”

“The darkness without compliments the darkness within, I find.”

“Bah again,” Benvolio said, and again draped an arm around his cousin’s shoulders, and began walking him out of the chambers. “Come, come. The day is but young, but there’s much for you ahead.”

Act I.

Scene II.

LADY Capulet sat upright upon a couch in the manor’s eastern sitting room, hands in her lap, legs pressed together. A servant—she knew not his name—ran a feather duster along the shelf above the fireplace. Lady Capulet feared there would be no end to his dusting: the landscape paintings and the exotic wall-hung masks, the candlesticks and the chandelier, the colorfully stained goddess busts and the symbol-dense vases, to say nothing of how many dustable surfaces were evidently on the tables on which the busts and the vases stood. And somehow he seemed nowhere close to halfway done.

Lady Capulet steeled herself, reminding herself that she was his master, not the other way round. “I say.”

The servant continued about his dusting.

Lady Capulet gripped the upholstery in a fist, and then let it go and smoothed it back before trying again. “*I say*, servant.”

The servant’s dusting hand paused, and then his head swung to face the lady. “Oh! Pardon, madam. I scarce remembered you were here. Still as a—”

“Would you fetch me a pitcher of water?”

The servant looked back to his dusting hand, which still hovered over the shelf above the fireplace, and the knickknacks

thereon. Dejected, he pulled his hand away from the work. Facing the lady, and bowed himself. "Of course, madam. And a glass too I should assume?"

"Yes."

"Would you like ice as well?"

"Certainly."

"On second thought, I'm not sure we have any at the moment, though I could run and fetch—"

"No ice then."

"Well just but a moment ago you were certain—"

"Forget the ice. The water, please, with haste."

The servant, quite infuriatingly, mulled it over. Then he bowed himself again, sputtered another useless, "Of course, madam," and then went off, out of the sitting room to fetch the water.

Lady Capulet continued to sit still, waiting for the sound of his footsteps to be sufficiently departed. When she heard the sound of his footsteps beginning down the stairs, Lady Capulet arose, walked briskly to the bust of Athena, placed a thumb over each of the goddess's eyes, and firmly pressed them in. With a stony grating and then a mechanical *click!*, a secret hatch in the wall opened. Lady Capulet stooped into the short entrance, pulled the panel shut behind herself, and then stood upright in the tall, narrow passage between the walls.

With quiet footsteps the lady made her way through the in-between space, digging fingernails into the side of her neck, into her wrists, into her stomach, scratching, scratching, scratching. She proceeded to a narrow staircase and ascended it into a hidden room on the third floor—hidden because on the third floor itself, this room had no door, and was only accessible from the hidden stairway which the lady climbed. Though the room had no door, it did possess a stained glass window to the outside, depicting an owl perched in an olive tree. From the window, soft brown and green light shone dimly in, keeping the room from total darkness. At the center of the room stood a plinth. Atop the plinth was a stone bowl, centered in the window's light.

Lady Capulet went to the bowl. In times past, when the bowl had been overbrimmingly full, she had often stood a moment

and admired the objects within before taking one. They were the size and shape of toothpicks, but were made of strange grey materials infinitely more precious and potent than pinewood. A spitball to a musket round, a rock to a beating heart, a firefly to the sun—such was the contrast of a toothpick to one of Athena’s Tears. The bowl was more than half empty.

On this day, the Lady Capulet did not stop to admire them before grabbing one—that damnable servant had kept her waiting far longer than she had deserved. Picking a rod from out of the bowl, the lady brought it under her nose and broke it in half. Snapped in twain, the rod fell away from being a solid and also fell away from the mortal laws of gravitation: as two globs of liquid, Athena’s Tear fell upwards into each of Lady Capulet’s nostrils, slipped through her sinuses in a way that still made the lady shudder violently, and then it was in her, working its strange and needed magic immediately. Where there had been worry, there was now resolve. Where there had been hands that wanted to tremble and skin that cried out to be itched, there was now a skilled, calm, obedient strength.

It would last an hour at most, and then she would be shaking and itching worse than if she hadn’t sought the comfort of these relics today to begin with, but in this hour was a needed reprieve.

The lady heard the laughter of her husband coming from the floor below. She descended back down the narrow stair, through a set of hidden passages, and arrived at a one-way mirror, showing her the receiving room, in which stood her husband and Paris, a young nobleman, kinsman to the prince.

“...But Montague is bound as well as I, in penalty alike,” Lord Capulet was saying, “and tis not hard, I think, for men so old as we to keep the peace.”

“There is honor living yet within you both,” Paris said. Such a way those of his family had of smiling with their mouths pinched shut. “And a pity it is that your houses have lived at odds for so long. But now, my lord, what say you to my proposal?”

“I say again what I have thrice repeated already: my girl is still naught but a lass, not fourteen of her kind’s years yet

passed. Let two more summers wither in their pride, 'fore we may think her ripe to be a bride."

"Younger than she are happy mothers made."

"And too soon spent are those so early made." The Lord Capulet dug his foot in, crossed his arms, lowered his bearded chin. "In the earth are buried all my hopes but she. But! Tis not as though this issue must sit idle in the meantime. Woo her, gentle Paris, earn place in her heart; my will to her consent is but a part."

"Merry, I will begin at this task at once," Paris assured with his thin smile.

"And no better timing could there be: this night, we hold our annual masquerade feast!"

"Annual? I've never heard mention of it. Is it so secret a masquerade?"

"Well." Lord Capulet glanced away, and rubbed the back of his neck. "Twas annual once, though for many years now forgotten. But tonight it is remembered! I have invited many a beloved guest to enter this door, and you, most welcome, makes my number more. I say, servant!"

From the hall, after a moment, walked in the servant from above, feather duster in his back pocket, glass and pitcher in his hands, uncertainty in his gate. "Yes, sir?"

Lord Capulet flourished a sheet of paper, and then held it forward to the servant. "Go, sir, trudge about through fair Verona; find those persons whose names are written here, and invite them to tonight's masquerade feast."

The servant set the glass and pitcher down on the floor, took the paper, and without an utterance, turned and exited the manor, walked out to the street, and looked down at the paper.

"Find those persons whose names are written here... oh dear, oh dear. It is written... blasts. I am sent to find those persons whose names here are writ, though I'd wish such a task given to a soul literate. I must go to the learned."

The servant looked up and saw two gentlemen passing by.

"...wrapped ice in a cloth will be excellent for that," the pale and darkly-dressed gentleman was saying.

"For what, I pray thee?" asked the gentleman who was bearded and brown-clothed.

“For when I break your shins.”

“Why, Romeo! Art thou mad?”

“Not mad, but locked up more than a madman is. Shut up in a prison without my food, whipped and tormented and—good day, good fellow,” Romeo said, turning to face the servant who had begun following at their heels.

“Good fellow, good day,” the servant echoed. “I pray sir, can you read?”

“Aye, I have read my own fortune many a times. Tis misery without fail. You will want a more positive diviner than I.”

“Ah, well.” The servant regathered his thoughts. “I pray, can you read any writing you see on a page?”

“Aye, if I know the letters and the language.”

“Ah, well. Rest you merry!”

The servant turned to leave, but Romeo grasped him by the shoulder, and bid him come back. “Stay, fellow, I can read. Let’s see, this page here? It reads: Signor Martino and his wife and daughters; County Anselme and his beauteous sisters; the lady widow of Vitruvio; Signor Placentio and his lovely nieces; Mercutio and his brother Valentine; mine uncle, his wife, and daughters; my fair niece Rosaline; Livia; Signor Valentio and his cousin Tybalt; Lucio and the lively Helena.” Romeo handed back the paper. “A fair assembly. Where are they beckoned?”

“Up.”

“Up where?”

“Up to supper at our house.”

“Whose house?”

“Well, my master’s house technically, if you’re going to be sniffy about it.”

“Indeed, I should have begun there,” Romeo said, going along.

Without need for Romeo to twist it out of him any further, the servant answered, “My master is the great rich Capulet; and if you be not of the house of Montagues, I pray, come and lift a cup of wine. Rest you merry!”

“Good day, good fellow!” Benvolio wished, waving a hand high in farewell as the servant departed. Once the servant was gone, Benvolio rested his hand on Romeo’s shoulder. “At this same ancient feast of the Capulets will be the fair Rosaline

whom thou so love. Yet also in attendance, Lord Capulet has invited the fairest maidens in all of Verona. Let us go there, and compare her beauty to the rest. You shall hardly notice her whom to you now seems the best.”

“I’ll come along with you,” Romeo said, and shrugged away from his cousin’s shoulder-resting hand. “But I assure you, I go for the promised wine, not the promised company.”

Act I.

Scene III.

LADY Capulet, having been about the house a while and now feeling Athena’s Tears losing their effect, returned to the sitting room, which—when the servant wasn’t in it—was quite a nice room, a quiet place, warm, secluded. She fell to the couch and reclined, and rubbed at her bicep, which felt to be losing strength by the second, leaving sore and itching muscles in their trail as they left. Lady Capulet stomped a foot on the cushioned couch, which muffled her writhing fit.

She would need something to hold and to fret over when it was all gone, lest she go mad and fret and tear at herself again.

“Angelica!” she cried. The Angelica who she summoned was once the wet nurse, when she and the lord of the house had had living daughters.

From elsewhere in the manor, the sound of hurried footsteps began. A moment later, Angelica arrived beside the couch, where Lady Capulet now sat upright, proper. “You called, my lady?” Angelica asked.

Lady Capulet found it difficult to look Angelica in the eyes when speaking to her, as the former nurse bared a great many distracting features. First there was a sleeve of red rose tattoos covering the length of each arm, with a rather realistic rendering of a snake winding over the roses on the right arm. If the lady’s eyes weren’t caught by the snake, then they would nearly always catch on the former nurse’s mouth—in particular the old woman’s teeth, or general lack thereof.

“Angelica, where’s my Juliet? Call her forth to me.”

“Call her! Why, I scant seconds ago bid her stay put while I attended thee, and she’d had none of it, so the issue was needs

be forced, and she's blockaded in the chambers wherein she shant be able to come no matter how loudly called. But another scant few seconds though, and I will go fetch her." Angelica departed back out of the sitting room, back to the room from whence she'd come, calling, "Juliet! Juliet! The lady bids you come!"

From the room, Angelica heard scratching at the door.

Angelica opened the door, and out bounded a beautiful hound. Juliet sniffed the air in the hall, and looked to Angelica for a sign of which way they were heading. Standing, the Great Dane's back was level with Angelica's hips, and the top of the hound's head was level with the former nurse's breasts.

Angelica began back down the hall towards the sitting room, and Juliet bounded ahead, meeting Lady Capulet on the couch, sniffing thoroughly at the lady's offered hand, and giving it a lick or two in addition.

Lady Capulet allowed the dog to lick as she waited for Angelica to catch up. When Juliet was finished with the hand, the lady patted the couch beside herself, and Juliet hopped up, turned about a few times, and laid down beside the woman of the house. Lady Capulet began petting the hound, though more picked at the hound, raked, bothered. Athena's Tears were gone from her completely now, and the sobriety was wracking.

Angelica arrived again at the room. "Need you anything more, my lady?"

"Yes. There's a matter which concerns me, and this is the matter—no, in fact, go Angelica, tis between Juliet and I. No! Angelica, return. I have remembered myself. You should hear our council. You would know my girl is of a pretty age."

"Faith, I can tell her age to the hour."

"She's but one full year old, soon to turn two."

"Aye. I'll bet fourteen of my teeth—though, let it be known, I have but four—that she's not fourteen in dog years, and just shy of two years old as men are concerned. Born the same day as my own daughter, she was. Susan would be near two now, and so in faith, I say Juliet is thirteen of her kind. Just coming into her second heat, I mark. God mark thee though, regal and grand Juliet: in the time since I've tended the children of men, you're the most beautiful creature I've tended to yet. And I might live

to see thee carry on thy lonely breed some day, if I have my wish.”

“Merry, that breeding is the very theme I came to talk of. Tell me, my dear Juliet, how stands your disposition to be bred?”

Juliet lifted a hindpaw to her mouth, and began chewing at a claw.

“You think so highly of it, I see,” Lady Capulet bemoaned. She took Juliet’s paw and moved it back to where it had been, stopping the hound from ruining her nails.

“A terrible shame it would be, should her breed end with her,” Angelica offered. “Hound of the Danes, bred to be great and greater yet by your good husband Capulet; but alas, her brothers and sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles, mother and father and all, passed with no more pups borne, and now, just her is left.”

“Though not yet two, mothers to pups are younger made,” Lady Capulet mentioned, echoing what she had heard County Paris say earlier. She began scratching with a heavy hand along Juliet’s scruff. “The valiant Paris is a competent breeder. Though there’s none left to keep your line pure, perhaps with his touch some echo could endure. And you yourself would not be the lesser for it.”

“Nay, more!” Angelica added. “The bitch grows bigger by the stud.”

In agreement with Angelica, Lady Capulet rubbed deeper at Juliet’s scruff. “Speak briefly: can you take to Paris’s interest?”

Juliet inched in closer with the lady on the couch and rested her slobbery chin on the lady’s leg.

From the entrance of the chamber, there came a pointed cough. Lady Capulet, Angelica, and Juliet turned to see the servant standing at the sitting room’s entrance. “Madam, the guests have arrived,” he said, in his slow-witted way. “Supper is served up, and the lord bid me fetch you, if you would follow me.”

Lady Capulet gave Juliet’s scruff a final rub, and answered, “We follow thee. Come Juliet, come Angelica.”

Act I. Scene IV.

BENVOLIO and Romeo, jaunty and trudging respectively, walked through a corner of Verona where the cobbled streets were missing half their stones and the rest were uneven, where patchwork boards were the exterior décor of the houses, where the smell of sewage was rank and unmissable in the air. They approached a house from which sounded drumbeats and a great many merry shouting voices.

Coming up to the doorstep, Benvolio knocked, and Romeo stood beside.

The door was yanked open from within—yanked open so forcefully that the figure who'd opened it stumbled back and fell to their buttocks on the floor. Far from injured in the body or in the ego, Mercutio laughed and rolled on the floor a moment, their mouth wide open in a smile, showing for the world to see that all of their top teeth, save the molars, were missing. It was said they had smashed the top row out themselves, deliberately. Twas around the same time they ceased living with Escalus, and moved to this dingier abode where presently they rolled on the floor. In the other room two men beat drums wildly together, while others stood around and had conversations at a shout to be heard.

Mercutio clumsily got up to their feet, then was struck with another laughing fit, and staggered and nearly fell again, but was caught by Benvolio, he and his cousin having entered.

Suspended in Benvolio's arms, Mercutio relaxed. With a smile they turned their head up to kiss their bearded rescuer. Benvolio lowered his head and kissed the slumly royal who had likely not spent a continuous waking hour sober for the last year. Standing on their feet properly this time, Mercutio leaned in to kiss Romeo as well, but the dark-dressed man leaned back. Mercutio leaned ever forward, eyes closed and lips puckered, then began laughing at themselves as they yet still tried for Romeo's affection.

Romeo drew his sword halfway from its scabbard, not to make use of the blade, but to jab Mercutio in the sternum with the pommel.

Mercutio shrieked and leapt back, no longer keen on a kiss from this attacker.

Romeo dropped the blade back into its resting place. 'Twas Benvolio's council that lead Romeo to carry his sabre about. Since the scuffle that morning, Benvolio would much like to see Romeo protected, and 'twas no better protector for Romeo than Romeo, for a mighty skilled fencer Romeo was.

"Dear friend, why do you injure me so?" Mercutio asked, sidling up against Benvolio. Benvolio wrapped an arm around them, keeping them steady upright. "Tis known you seek love, yet when love comes offered enthusiastically, you smite me back as though my lips were poisoned. It should be no wonder you are not loved, if lovers this way you treat."

"I fancy women, dear friend," Romeo said, far from the first time he had said as much to his present company.

"Tut, you know I am no man."

"Tis true, but nonetheless, you are not a woman either."

"I am neither and both, and will obey no rule forbearing me any privilege."

"Hence the pommel."

"You strike cruel and thoughtless," Mercutio chided, and rolled away from Benvolio. From a step on the nearby staircase, Mercutio took a cup and drank from it, looked down into it, drank the rest of it, and then set it back.

"We came wondering if you might like to accompany us to the Capulets' masquerade feast," Benvolio divulged.

"No. I would sooner—"

"There will be wine."

"Yes! Onward! Guests, gather torches! Make them of a bedpost and my lantern oil, if it suits you! To the Capulet manor we go!"

The two drummers exited and lead the march, drumming as they made their way. Benvolio and Romeo walked beside each other in the midst of the troupe, and Mercutio danced about with a torch.

"It truly will light itself on fire," Benvolio noted.

"Deliberately, or?"

"That much, I know not."

"I say, Mercutio!" Romeo called, flagging the fire-dancing royal.

“What confession of realized love here beckons?” Mercutio asked, skipping over. Arrived, they walked in a dancing cadence beside Romeo.

“Give me the torch,” Romeo requested. “My soul being heavy, I will bear the light.”

“Nay. Come, lift your feet from the ground as you go! A dance! A skip! Even a solemn march would seem merrier than your foot-scraping.”

“You shant see me dance, believe me. You have dancing shoes with nimble soles; I have a soul of lead, which stakes me to the ground such that I cannot move.”

“You are a lover.” Mercutio twirled the torch in a couple of idle circles. “Borrow Cupid’s wings and soar with them.”

“I am too sore enpierced with his arrow to soar with his light wings.”

“If love be so rough with you, be rough with love. Prick love for pricking, beat love down—Is that the Capulet manor ahead?”

“Tis.”

“If you’ve spoke true that this is a masquerade, I should hope you’ve brought me a case to put my visage in.”

From his pockets, Benvolio began producing several black masks, made to cover the top half of the face and leave the mouth and jaw free for speaking and feasting. He put one on himself, and distributed the rest to all of the troupe, firstly to his cousin and secondly to Mercutio, who dawned the masks as well.

“Ah ha!” Mercutio remarked as they pulled shut the knot on the fastening string behind their head. “A face atop a face! What have I to cover, anyways? What care I if the curious eye notes deformities? If my hideous eyebrows cause terror, then I still am who I am, eyebrows and all that come with them. But come, let us hurry to the manor: we burn daylight.”

Romeo quirked his head. “Nay, that’s not so.” He looked up and beheld the pitch and starry nighttime sky.

“I mean, *sir*, that in our trudging delay we waste our torchlights in vain, like lamps by day. Take our good meaning, for I’ve five wits to your one. If ever you think, mistakenly, that my wits have erred, know that my utterance was said with the employ of a wit beyond your skill to judge.”

“We mean no offense,” Romeo said. “Though since you speak of wit, I must tell you, I feel it is unwise to attend this masquerade.”

“Why, may one ask?”

“I dreamt a dream last night.”

“And so did I.”

“Well, what was yours?”

“That dreamers often lie,” Mercutio said, the end of their torch waving in a figure eight.

“Lie in bed where they sleep, dreaming things that are true.”

“Oh, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you. She is the fairies’ midwife, and she comes in shape no bigger than an agate-stone on the fore-finger of an alderman, drawn with a team of little atomies athwart men’s noses as they lie asleep. Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners’ legs; the cover, the wings of a grasshopper; the traces, of the smallest spider’s web; the collars, of the moonshine’s watery beams; her whip, of cricket’s bone; the lash, of film; her wagoner, a small grey-coated gnat, not half so big as a round little worm, prickt from the lazy finger of a maid; her chariot is an empty hazel nut, made by the joiner squirrel or the old grub, time out o mind the fairies’ coachmakers. And in this state she gallops night by night through lovers’ brains, and then they dream of love; o’er courtiers’ knees, that dream on court’sies, o’er lawyers’ fingers, who straight dream on fees; o’er ladies’ lips, who straight on kisses dream—which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues, because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are; sometimes she gallops o’er a courtier’s nose, and then dreams he of smelling out a suit; and sometimes comes she with a tithe-pig’s tail tickling a parson’s nose as he lies asleep, then dreams he of another benefice; sometimes she driveth o’er a soldier’s neck, and then dreams he of cutting foreign throats, of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades, of healths five-fathom deep, and then anon drums in his ear, at which he starts, and wakes, and, being thus frightened, swears a prayer or two, and sleeps again. This is that very Mab that plats the manes of horses in the night, and bakes elf-locks in foul sluttish hairs, which once untangled, much misfortune bodes; this is the hag, when maids lie on their

backs, that presses them, and learns them first to bear, making them women of good carriage; this is she—”

“Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace!” Romeo pleaded, having endured as much as he could. “You talk of nothing.”

“True: I talk of dreams. Dreams which are the children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy, thin of substance as the air, and more inconstant than the wind, who woos even now the frozen bosom of the north, and, being angered, puffs away from thence, turning his face to the dew-dropping south.”

Benvolio interjected, “This wind you both expel blows us off our course. Come, we’ve nearly arrived. I smell that supper is done, and if we dally any further, we shall come too late.”

“Too early, I fear,” Romeo countered. He still recalled his dream from the night before: “My mind misgives some consequence, yet hanging in the stars, shall bitterly begin his fearful course with this night’s revels, and expire the term of a despised life, closed in my breast, by some vile forfeit of untimely death. Alas. Benvolio, ye that hath steerage of my course tonight, direct my sail.”

Benvolio gave a rousing shout: “On, lusty gentlemen! Strike, drum!”

Act I. Scene V.

HAPPY music played in three-four time, and serving men moved about the hall, providing food and drink from off their held trays. The old Lord Capulet glided drunkenly and merrily about among his masked guests, shouting good cheer to all those near to him and far from him. Seeing a troupe led by two drummers arrive at the other side of the receiving hall, he shouted as he approached, “Welcome, gentlemen! Ladies that have their toes unplagued by corns will have a dance with you!”

Benvolio leaned to Romeo, and mentioned, “We should have brought Abraham.”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“Ah ha, my mistresses!” the Lord Capulet went on, “which of you all will deny these gentlemen a waltz? She that won’t dance,

by my rule already declared, I'll swear she hath corns!" Lord Capulet arrived at the newcome troupe, and shook Mercutio's hand in both of his. Mercutio returned the enthusiasm, adding their other hand to the shaking, making four in all. "Ha ha!" Lord Capulet went on, "Welcome, welcome, welcome gentlemen! Drummers, go to my musicians, tell them they shall have your accompaniment. Girls, dance!" Lord Capulet turned from the troupe and returned to the general hum of guests, shouting over them, "More light, servants! Let us see the beautiful chins of these enmasked guests! Ha ha! And quench the fire, the room is grown too hot!"

Spotting his cousin—all were quite recognizable, even in their masks—Lord Capulet made his way over. The two of them sat down at a bench in a corner of the hall, Lord Capulet catching his breath.

Lord Capulet asked his cousin, "How long has it been since you and I were in masks?"

"By our lady, thirty years," responded the cousin.

"What! Tis not so long ago, no, surely tis not so long ago. Tis since the marriage of Lucentio. Twas just after the birth of his firstborn son, some five-and-twenty years ago, that we last held this masquerade."

"Tis more, tis more. His son is elder, sir: his son is thirty."

Across the grand hall, Romeo stood alone with a cup of wine in hand, Mercutio having skipped away taking Benvolio in tow. Alone, Romeo milled about the crowded hall, searching out Rosaline, his beloved. As he searched, though, he humored Benvolio's purpose for the visit—to spy out other beauties, and see if any caught his eye. They were all dirt in his sight, piles of refuse and dung in dresses. All the beauties of Verona, Benvolio had promised. If that was so, then Verona was in a bad way.

Rosaline was nowhere among this crowd in the great hall. The Capulet manor was quite grander than a single hall, however, and the festivities had overflowed into other, cozier rooms. Romeo finished his cup of wine, stopped a servant to grab a second, drank all of it in one backwards tilt of his head, and grabbed a third cup to continue about with.

He wandered about each passage and sitting room on the first floor, sometimes hovering to listen in on some conversation,

then continuing about when it seemed his presence was bothersome. Certainly Rosaline had been invited, as he had read the page inviting her, though perhaps the message hadn't finished its transit to her, or else, perhaps this gathering was beneath her.

Romeo arrived at the final chamber on the first floor: another hall, cozier than the great hall, but a hall no less, in fact somewhat large given its secluded placement. Some few hung about, the din of conversation softer here. In the center of the room there was a fountain and a small garden, with a glass roof above to let in the light, when it was daytime. The trickling of water was the ambiance, rather than the humming of strings and the beating of drums.

Wandering into the room, Romeo spied, in the back corner, a creature more beautiful than he had seen in years.

He tapped the shoulder of a servant, who was dusting at a bust of Ares. Of him he inquired, "Who is that lady, who doth sit beside yonder gentleman?"

The servant—the same who had borne the letter of invitation, Romeo realized—turned to Romeo, then turned to where Romeo was facing, then answered, "She was the wet nurse, when she began here."

"I should doubt—oh, no, sir, the other lady. Not the lady with the rose tattoos. She who sits on the floor, between the lady with the tattoos and the gentleman with the thin smile."

"Oh. I know not sir."

In another corner of the secluded hall, the Lord Capulet, who had ambled in, sat down on a bench beside his nephew Tybalt. "How fare you tonight, good sir?" the Lord Capulet asked.

"I fare foul since a moment ago, when this man entered," Tybalt said, nodding towards Romeo. "By his voice, he is a Montague. What, dares the slovenly urchin come here to scorn our feast, thinking a mask shall hide his rank odor? Now, by the stock and honor of my kin, to strike him dead I hold it not a sin."

"Be calm, gentle kinsman. Why storm you so?"

"Uncle, this is a Montague, our foe. A villain, that is hither come in spite, to scorn at our solemnity this night."

"Young Romeo, is it?"

"Tis he, that villain Romeo."

“Be calm, gentle nephew. Leave him alone. Though dressed in a solemn skirt, he stands like a merry gentleman. And, to say the truth, Verona brags of him. He is a well-mannered youth. Deadly with a sword, though one would never know it, and twice as good with a horse—better with the latter than many are comfortable speaking of, in polite company.” The Lord Capulet hummed a chuckle to himself at that. Craning his neck to see past the fountain, Lord Capulet asked, “Who does he look at with those smitten eyes of his?”

Tybalt stood, looked over the fountain, and sat back down. “The hound.”

“Ha! How looks the hound, and Paris?”

Tybalt once again stood and sat. “Bored. They are both bored.”

“Well, there’s no sense in allowing that. Go, seek company you find more suitable in the great hall, or in any other place, but not here. I shall go and find an excuse for Romeo and my girl to mingle.”

“Uncle!”

“He is an upstanding young man, as I’ve already told you. A better judge of her disposition than even I. She needs be bred someday, lest her breed should with her die. If any shall open her, I wit it should be him. If she be not ready he would not proceed, and if she is ready indeed, he would proceed with her well, and leave a good impression of the act.”

“I care not. He is a villain who craftily makes himself a guest here. I will not endure him.”

“He’ll be endured or you shall go. I’ll not have a mutiny among my guests.”

Tybalt stood, hand resting on his sword, staring at Romeo, who had come to sit by himself on a bench near the servant, who dusted behind the ear of the bust of Ares. Tybalt’s hand flexed on his hilt once, twice, and then he begrudgingly let it go. “I will withdraw. But his intrusion, now seeming sweet, will turn to bitter gall.” He turned and marched out of the secluded hall.

With drunkenly jaunty footsteps, Lord Capulet tiptoed merrily across the room. “Angelica, Paris! Oh, and of course Juliet.” He crouched and took Juliet’s head in his hands, then rubbed at her back. Standing again, he said, “I’ve someone for

you both to meet. She waits on the second floor, I will lead the way. Oh! Terribly frightened of dogs, I'm afraid. Juliet shall have to stay."

Angelica began, "I can stay with Juliet while—"

"Nay, perish the thought, this guest I bring you to shant be spurned. Juliet may stay here. A well behaved creature, she is, and pleasant company she'll make to any pleasant company around her. In such a pleasant room as this, I worry not."

Angelica gave a look to Juliet. Then to Lord Capulet, she said, "Aye. As you wish, my lord."

Angelica and Paris arose and followed after Lord Capulet, who feigned never to notice the young Montague man in the other corner, never once casting a curious eye in that direction, never once intoning any motive ulterior to bringing Angelica and Paris to a guest who, once arrived at the second floor, would be decided.

Juliet rose to follow Lord Capulet and his company.

"Stay here, Juliet," Angelica bid, turning back to face her.

She considered it, and then reluctantly, sat back down. After another moment, she laid down on the floor before the bench on which Angelica and Paris had sat.

Angelica turned, and followed Lord Capulet away.

Romeo, the moment Angelica and Paris had left his eyesight, arose from his bench, and swiftly made his way across the calm secluded hall, over to the hound, whose name he had overheard.

Romeo offered out his hand to Juliet.

Juliet lifted her head up, and stretched herself forward to sniff his hand. Her tail gave a couple of small wags, and she licked his hand once.

Beside Juliet, Romeo sat himself on the floor, leaning back, elbows resting up on the bench seat. He then began to pet her, gently. Juliet laid her chin on her paws, contentedly.

In a few minutes' time, Juliet was laid on her side, and Romeo on his side behind her, stroking her as they laid together. As they laid in one another's cozy warmth, Romeo eventually spoke, "If I profane, with my unworthiest hand, this holy shrine, the gentle fine is this: my lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand, to smooth that rough touch with a gentle kiss."

Romeo got up, continuing to have a gentle hand on her as he did, and moved from laying at her back to laying at her front. Lying so, face to face, hand on her strong and houndly shoulder, Romeo moved in and kissed Juliet on the front of her canine lips.

Juliet's tail thumped against the ground. She thought a second, and then moved in unto Romeo in turn, lapping at his face. He gladly indulged her as she left slobbering licks on his closed eyes and his forehead, and when she moved to licking at his mouth, he returned the kisses, the two of them at once as practiced as longstanding lovers and as newly met as strangers; they both were naturals, befitting of their natural love.

Romeo leaned back away from her kisses, only to ask her, "Would you come with me to a more private chamber?"

Juliet's tail thumped at the ground enthusiastically.

Romeo got up, and Juliet got up with him. He led the way, she eagerly following beside him. Catching that others in the secluded hall gave him disapproving looks, Romeo could only snicker at their poor understanding of the love which had unfolded before their very eyes. He scampered away from the secluded chamber and up a set of stairs, which Juliet scampered up with him alongside. Together, they stole away into an unoccupied bedchamber. Inside, after bolting the door, Romeo drew the curtains open to allow the faint nighttime light inside. The night that followed was Juliet's first two times, and Romeo's first two times in quite a while. Through the darkest hours of the night, Juliet slept, while Romeo laid awake elated, nose buried in her coat, enmeshed with her seductive animal scent. As the two laid entwined on the cozy bed and the sunlight shone in through the open window, Romeo recalled his whereabouts, and the family unfriendly to his own which dwelt here.

By the new morning light, he got himself dressed, pulling on his leggings, fitting on his skirt, fastening his cape. When he was all dressed, Juliet petitioned him for one more go, which he with every gladness granted. Afterwards, he knelt beside the bed on which Juliet laid contented. "With sorrow, I leave thee," Romeo said, and gave her a kiss atop her head. "Faith, I shall return."

With his mask dawned, Romeo made a quick exit of the bedchambers, leaving the door open.

Juliet, in the mood for more sleep, nestled back down into the blankets and pillows, on all of which was the scent of herself and of he who had accompanied her throughout the exhilarating night. Within the cozy warmth of these sheets, she fell quickly into sleep.

When she awoke, she found that Angelica was knelt before her, hand on her shoulder, looking curiously at her.

“God deign ye a good morning, Juliet,” Angelica said.

Juliet wagged, and then stretched, arching her back and lengthening out her paws.

Angelica hovered, knelt at the bedside. “Dear Juliet, I smell a scent on your breath that I scarce believe.” Angelica moved in, and sniffed at Juliet’s mouth more closely. With due care paid, Angelica laid a hand on Juliet’s rump, and inserted a finger into the hound’s sex. She hooked the finger slightly and withdrew it, drawing out traces of a viscous slime. “Tis seed,” she remarked. Angelica gave her finger a thorough smell, and then inserted the digit into her mouth, and pondered the taste. “Tis human,” she added. “Fie! Tis that Montague lad, I bet my breast on it!”

Juliet adjusted to lie upright, and laid her ears back at Angelica’s outburst.

Seeing this, Angelica sighed, and ran an assuring hand—her clean hand—down Juliet’s back. “The festivities of the night before are done, dear girl. Get ye your rest. Worry not, worry not. I’ll sit with ye as you sleep.”

Act Two

containing five scenes

*Lo, here the lucky lot that sold true lovers find,
Each takes away the other’s heart, and leaves the own behind.
A happy life is love, if God grant from above,
That heart with heart by even weight do make exchange of
love.*

Act II.

Scene I.

SEVEN days passed since the Capulets' masquerade feast. Prince Escalus walked beside the king through the passageways of his castle, their footsteps dampened by the grey carpet underfoot. As he had promised to do, the king led them into his scrying chamber. 'Twas a place Prince Escalus had only been a handful of times, but where the king could get lost in for days, weeks, or longer. 'Twas a black and hexagonal room. Black felt lined the six walls, the ceiling, the floor, and the back of the door through which the prince and the king entered, and the door's door handle. At the center of the room was a plinth covered with black felt on which the Scrying Glass of Abel's Blood was rested. Before the plinth was a small cubic black felt lined seat. The king also carried in his hands a wooden stool for his son. The prince closed the door behind them. By the red light of the orb, Prince Escalus went and sat down on the offered stool, beside his father, and into the glass they looked.

The red fog parted, and within the glass, there was shown a scene from a week ago. The Montague lad, Romeo, adorned with a skirt and a mask, laid on the floor of a hall in the Capulet manor, stroking the Capulets' sole remaining Great Dane hound, Juliet. The two seemed quite peaceful. After a time, the two kissed, which garnered a few disapproving looks, and then they stole away from the hall and into a bedchambers, the orb's sight following them all the while. What ensued, Prince Escalus had half a mind to look away from, but also half a mind to take notes on: the young man's technique was extraordinary, exquisite, even if its target strangely chosen.

Prince Escalus gave a small breath of a faux laugh out through his nose. "Tis as rumor said, then."

"Aye, that it is, that it is," the king said in a quiet voice. He had somewhat nearly lost his voice entirely, from a lifetime of loud speech. "Now old desire doth in his death-bed lie, and young affection gapes to be his heir; she fair, for which love groaned for, and would die, with tender Juliet matched, is now not fair. Now Romeo is beloved, and loves again, alike bewitched by the charm of looks; but to his foe supposed he must complain, and she steal love's sweet bait from fearful hooks. Being held a foe, he may not have access to breathe such vows as lovers use to swear; and she as much in love, her means

much less to meet her new-beloved anywhere. But passion lends them power, time means, to meet, tempering extremities with extreme sweet.”

“Is this what you’ve summoned me all this way to show me, father?”

The king leaned back on his seat, and crossed his arms low over his stomach, looking idly at the orb as the red fog returned. “More or less, more or less,” he quietly answered. “Humph. I know my motivations: that lord Capulet has bred a fine breed, and I should see it continued, as I’d like some for the castle. Yet even if I felt some other way, it is a certainty my same actions would come to pass, for already I have seen my actions, and their consequences, and the consequences of those unto decades, all interbalanced, impossible to change one thing lest the whole world tumble down. Before there was ever motivation for it, I have seen the hounds wandering about this castle in the background of other scenes. For decades I have known they will be here, and now I have arrived at the reason why, flimsy as a reason feels with the outcome already fated. My son, you will want no use of this orb. I know nothing of what happens after my own death: that, it will not show me. But when I am dead, I beg you destroy it, or at the least hide it away from yourself. With the future known, it seems I am but an actor these days.”

Prince Escalus bowed his head solemnly. He was unsure of how to respond, other than to assure the king, “I will follow your command to the letter, father. Perhaps it does not show you further because once you have passed, I have destroyed the orb so swiftly afterwards, and it has no tether to anything beyond then.”

“Aye,” the king said, and smiled a smile that overcame him more genuinely than any smile had in quite a long time. “Aye, I had never considered it that way, and perhaps you are right. Now, the matter of the hounds.”

“I was about to ask. What have you seen pertaining to this? Is she not the last of her breed?”

“Yes, the last in the world, presently. Nonetheless, I think she will be enough.”

From a pocket, the king produced a vial. In this blackened room, the vial shone, if dimly, as another point of light. There

were no contents inside, solid or liquid, and so the prince discerned that it was some gas inside which produced the faint blue glow.

“A vial of Loki’s Breath,” the king said. Seeing his son’s startled expression, the king smiled, fangs and all. Prince Escalus, long fascinated with reading on pagan relics, already knew the possible implications of handling anything pertaining to the trickster god. The king asked his son, “Have you knowledge of Loki’s Breath specifically?”

Prince Escalus nodded. “It will serve perfect for this occasion. Though, I must emphasize, I worry at what other unforeseen occasion it might give service to in conjuncture.”

“Tis not unforeseen,” the king said, his gaze returned to staring at the orb’s red fog. “Indeed, a sad consequence is to come of this, eventually, but it is not sad for us, and it cannot be changed, anyhow.”

“Be that as it may, I would ask you for more particulars on the matter.”

The king shook his head.

“Shall I deliver Romeo the vial then?” the prince asked.

“I think you shall,” the king said, and offered the vial over.

“You *know* I shall,” the prince muttered, and took the vial.

The king chuckled, and wished the prince a safe journey. When the prince stood and left, the king remained, looking down into the orb. The red fog parted. The king settled in. In real time, the orb showed the prince walking to the library, locating a book, flipping to the needed section, consulting some pages, and then returning the book to the shelf. Though nighttime had fallen, the prince went next to the stables, mounted his white steed, and made off back to Verona. The king had already seen before that his son would ride a long way into this night, stay at an inn along the way, and early in the morning arrive safely in Verona. The red fog swirled as the scene was changed away from the prince riding away from the castle. The king continued to look, to see whatever was shown to him next.

Twos back in Verona, in the present time, where night had come even earlier—the spherical nature of the planet was felt by the king quite viscerally when jumps like this were made. In the night-clad Verona, Benvolio and Mercutio walked slowly along a

narrow road behind the Capulet manor's backyard, heads swiveling to look all about them. They walked along a road that was sandwiched in by the Capulets' orchard wall on one side and a hedge on the other, accented by trees on either side.

Benvolio called, "Romeo! My cousin Romeo!"

"He is wise: on my life, he has stolen home, back to bed." Mercutio yawned.

They had been sober since the morning after the Capulets' masquerade feast. They had awakened with their breath smelling of vomit and their chin encrusted in vomit, which in and of itself was not an atypical awakening. Benvolio was also present when Mercutio had awoken, which also had happened a fair few times. This time, though, the place of awakening was not Mercutio's chambers nor Benvolio's, but a rustic bedchambers coated in dust on every surface but the bed. Mercutio reached around for a bottle, and, finding none at all, shot a concerned look to Benvolio.

"Where are we?" they asked.

"A stable house of the Montagues, quite some distance out of Verona. There is not a drop of alcohol in ten miles of here, and the horse we rode in on has returned home by himself."

Mercutio made to draw their sword, but found their scabbard empty. They reached forward and drew Benvolio's sword instead. They pressed the sword's handle into Benvolio's hand. "Kill me. I beg you, do it swift, however painful, so long as it's done."

The sword rattled, some symbols on its guard giving off a shining light.

Benvolio rattled similarly, and put his blade back in its scabbard.

After painful and difficult discussion, Mercutio had agreed to return to Verona under Benvolio's care, for at least a time. Presently, the two of them milled around and around the Capulet manor looking for Romeo, who had given them the slip just earlier.

"He is not gone to bed," Benvolio assured. "For a certainty, he's jumped this orchard wall again. Call him, good Mercutio."

"Nay, I'll conjure him as though he were a ghost: for as he would say it himself, 'The old Romeo you knew a week ago is

dead,' just as the Romeo before that was borne of a dead Romeo, and so I should only assume that the Romeo with us today shall be dead as a doornail in but a few minutes here." Mercutio turned to face the Capulets' orchard wall, cupped their hands to their mouth, and shouted, "Romeo! Buggerer! Madman! Passion! Lover! Appear thou in the likeness of a sigh! Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied! Cry but 'Ay me!' and pronounce but 'love' and 'dove!' I conjure thee by Rosaline's bright eyes, by her high forehead and her scarlet lip, by her fine foot, straight leg, and quivering thigh, and the lands that there adjacent lie! I conjure thee, appear before us!"

"If he hears you, you will anger him."

"Nothing I've said could do anything of the sort. Tis true and honest. As for his mistress's name, I conjure it only to conjure him."

"Come, he hath hid himself among these trees, to go consort by the cover of night. Blind is his love, befitting of the dark."

"If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark. Oh Romeo, that she were... oh, that she were a..." Mercutio shook their head. "Tis troubling, this sobriety. Too many thoughts come to me, and block each other's exit. I must stupefy myself to allow a steady ray of my brilliant wits out through the single passage from which my soul is corporeally bound to flowing."

"Let us retire to bed, then," Benvolio offered, wrapping an arm around his tired friend. "Tis good to rest, and tis in vain to seek him here that means not to be found."

Mercutio nestled into Benvolio for a moment, and then after a few deep, mindful breaths, the two made their exit, bound for Benvolio's bedchamber.

When all was quiet, Romeo emerged from the hedge in which he'd hid. He crossed the road, climbed the Capulets' orchard wall, and stole across the yard, arriving near to the manor, crouched behind a shrub. Above at a window, the room within unlit, the stately head of Juliet looked out from behind the glass.

"But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?" Romeo whispered to himself, enraptured. "It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. It is my lady. Oh, it is my love. She speaks even when not a word she utters: her eyes are discourses. Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven do entreat her eyes to twinkle in their

spheres til they return. Her eyes in heaven would stream so bright that the birds would sing, and think it were not night. See how she rests her chin upon the sill! Oh, that I were a paint upon that sill, that I might touch that cheek!”

Juliet, lifting her head from resting on the sill, noticed the noise in the yard and gave a bark.

“Oh, speak again bright angel! For thou art as glorious to this night, being over my head, as is a winged messenger of Heaven unto the white-upturned wondering eyes of mortals that fall back to gaze on him when he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds and sails upon the bosom of the air.”

Juliet left the window. A moment later, Romeo heard a scratching at the back door. Moving swiftly, he tiptoed up to the door and opened it. Juliet bounded out and leapt at Romeo, who met her embrace, held her, rubbed her, kissed her along the side, met those of her kisses that were aimed at his mouth and gladly received the rest of her kisses graciously, on his ear, on his neck, on his hands. Their initial greeting completed, Romeo strode away from the back door as swiftly as he'd come to it. Juliet followed closely. He led the way to a secluded garden, walled in with creeping vines growing along the upright meshes and on the mesh overhead, a room as living as the night without and the love within.

Romeo sat there on the grass in the room with Juliet, and the two of them kissed a long while. When she flagged him, still being in her heat, he quite happily met her demands. Afterwards as she licked at herself, Romeo sighed, lost in the beauty of this hound, her coat glinting in the moonlight. He whispered softly to her, “Oh Juliet, Juliet, why must you be Capulet? Deny thy owner, and refuse thy name. Or, if thou will not, be but sworn by my love, and I'll no longer be a Montague. Tis thy name that is my enemy. Thou art thyself though, not a Capulet. What's a Capulet? It is not paw, nor claw, nor leg, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a dog.” He sighed again. As she finished licking herself she began licking him, and when she was finished with that, they kissed a while more, and then laid together relaxed, him petting her, whispering to her yet again. “Oh, if you could be some other name. What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet—and you

would know about that far better than I.” He said the last in a tone more playful to her, and she gave a wag, turning her head to look at him face to face. He scratched at her back. She arched her back and stretched as he went, and then rolled onto her back, showing her belly for him to rub. As he rubbed her belly in the soft moonlight, he went on, voice still a bit playful, and made more so by the repetitive punctuation caused by his rubbing. “So Juliet would, were she not Juliet called, retain that dear perfection which she owns without that title. Juliet, doff thy name, and for that name, which is no part of thee, take all of myself.”

Juliet rolled off of her back towards Romeo, and assaulted his face with yet more slobbering kisses. Her youthful excitement made Romeo’s heart flutter each time she went in unto him for this—her tongue, a more succinct poet than his could ever dream.

If Juliet wished for more words, then a codex a day he could recite to her. But in truth, the contents of his words were not the height of meaning. Not meaningless, but still, most syllables containing less meaning than each moan, most words containing less meaning than each kiss, most sentences containing less meaning than each nuzzle, most stanzas containing less meaning than each scratch on her lower back, most epics containing less meaning than each sniff. Indeed, the increase in words was the inverse of meaning, while the increase in gesture stood meaning’s corollary.

The two lovers heard the back door open, and both stopped their kissing to lift their heads to face in that direction.

“Juliet?” called Angelica, out into the yard. Somewhat louder, she called again, “Juliet?”

Juliet looked to Romeo.

“I will return,” Romeo assured. “Nay, that is not strong enough: I vow, we will live together happily, and not have to go about under cover of night as though rogues. Tomorrow I shall arrange it. But for now, to Angelica go.”

Juliet stood, and walked out of the garden at a trot to Angelica.

“Madam!” Angelica said, intoning relief entwined within her disapproval. “Out so late?”

With Juliet in, the door shut. Romeo waited a while, allowing any lingering suspicions to die down and their owners to fall asleep before he made his exit. When a yawn struck him, this struck him as a mark that it was time. He withdrew from the Capulets' yard, climbed over the orchard wall, and returned through the nighttime Verona streets to the manor of the Montagues. Therein he crawled into his bed, at once contented at the time he had gotten to spend with his beloved earlier on this night, yet saddened she was not here presently to share this lonely bed with him.

Act II.

Scene II.

ROMEO arose in the morning, bathed, and went to his wardrobe. He dressed in sky blue leggings and a blue floral tunic, the cloth belt about his waist studded as it were with large cloth replicas of deep blue sunflowers. He had a cup of tea in the back garden, listening to the happy birds. When he was finished with it, he went to the stables, checked in with each of the horses and wished them a good morning, and then mounted a bay stallion. Romeo encouraged him on at a walk. The two were headed out to see Friar Lawrence, in business pertaining to Romeo's promise to Juliet the night prior. Romeo and the stallion made their way out to the Verona streets.

There, on the street before the Montague manor, stood a white steed, large and gorgeous. Romeo urged the stallion to halt and looked admiringly at the tall mare in the path. Her physique was dense with elegant muscle, her snow white coat shone in the morning light, her frost-blond mane hanging as frame to her confident black eyes. After some moments, Romeo realized the rider atop her as well: the prince of scales, Prince Escalus. Romeo glanced here and there for the prince's guardsmen, his musketeers, his courtiers, but there appeared to be none. Romeo considered if he had misidentified the man. He was unsure if he had ever seen the prince about town unaccompanied before.

Prince Escalus gave his steed's sides a light spurring. As she came out of her standing and into a trot, he steered her reigns

towards Romeo. With their horses beside one another, Romeo and Escalus brought face to face, the prince halted his horse. Were either the sort, the two men could have leaned forward and hugged one another at this distance. Romeo's stallion suggested to him that they should move, but Romeo encouraged the stallion to stay.

"Good morning, handsome prince," Romeo wished.

"And a good morning to you in turn, good sir," the prince returned. "Though as to my handsomeness, I must admit, I don't believe your appraising eyes were cast squarely at me just now."

"Well." Romeo flushed just slightly, but did indulge his eyes in looking back down to the white mare, now able to see her beautiful face all the more closely. "What is her name?"

"Hel," the prince said, not a word of a lie.

"Oh, dear. A grand enough name, at least."

"Will you ride beside me a while, Romeo?" the prince asked. "My business is not urgent, I suppose. Important, but nothing needs be done this hour."

Romeo considered, and answered, "My business this morning is much the same, my prince. Yes, set the path and we will ride alongside."

The hoofsteps of the two horses clicked through the tittering sounds of the city waking up. Prince Escalus lead the way westwardly out of the city proper, into a sycamore grove, where the wind passed through the trees in steady waves. Escalus brought his mare to a stop on a secluded path, and Romeo bid his stallion to stop matched beside her. The four listened to the wind a while.

Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh... Wshhhhhh...

"I come to offer you a gift," the prince said.

"Oh? Forgive my prodding at the very notion, but what is the occasion?"

"Tis no secret you fancy beasts. The odd woman now and again, yes, but it is the four-legged that are most readily enwrapped in your romantic soul, and while there, given all the commodities that one would dare hope the most generous human love should afford."

Romeo glanced away, unable to help smiling. "I would call your tongue nothing of a liar at those words."

"Tis also no secret which beast has earned your affections recently."

Now fear-stricken, Romeo remained silent.

"The Capulets' Great Dane hound, Juliet. This is correct, yes? I should hope your love shall prove stronger than any notion of polite cowardice that would urge you to deny it."

"Yes. A second time, your words speak the truth. Her heart and mine beat as one. My business this morning was to the abbey, to arrange a marriage."

If the prince was surprised, he did not show a hint of it. "A wedding gift, then," he said, and reached into a pocket of his regal attire. With a gloved hand, he offered Romeo the vial, glowing faintly blue, though as much was not easily visible in the light of day. "I urge you, do not open it here. But do take it."

Romeo took the offered vial and examined it.

The prince gave Romeo its story. "The Norse say that their god Loki is father to three, and mother to one: all together, his children are Hel, Fenrir, Jörmungandr, and Sleipnir. Respectively, they are a woman, a wolf, a snake, and a horse. What I have given you today is a vial which holds bound inside of it one of the Norse god Loki's breaths. When next you go in unto Juliet, open this vial and take in its breath before you lay your seed inside of her. With this relic's help, the two of you may bear children, even though you are man and beast."

Astonished, Romeo held the vial with a new echelon of care, suddenly finding himself steward to a sacred blessing in wait.

With a thin smile, the prince added, "In truth, the relics of more deities than not will produce such an effect. But I hope that Loki's brand of it will be befitting of your lively soul and hers."

"Prior to this gift, you had not spoken a word of a lie yet," Romeo said, finding the words. "If yet again you speak the truth in telling me what this is, I cannot begin to imagine the repayment that I would owe to you."

The prince chuckled. "Tis a gift, truly, and as such it expects no repayment. Though I will confess that in convenient happenstance, the repayment is contained within the gift itself:

your wit, charm, manners, looks, humor, skill, and all over well rounded dashing demeanor are the pride of Verona; Juliet, handsome, strong, keen-nosed, swift-legged, and a hundred other features I'm sure you would know better than I, is the pride of the houndly race, and a good fruit of the Capulets' work that will be to waste should her breed end with her. And so, if it brings forth offspring to you and to her, for a household and for a pack, then for as much as this vial is a gift to you, it is twice as much a gift to Verona."

"Merry, now you do tell lie in your overzealous praising, and I may weep."

"I will leave you, then," Prince Escalus said, and gathered Hel's reigns. "God deign you a good day, and I wish you well on your business at the abbey."

Without awaiting a response, the prince spurred Hel forward, and she carried him away at a trot.

Romeo stowed the vial carefully within an inner breast pocket of his tunic. He did weep then, as he had done many a time in this sycamore grove. When the tears were done with him and he was able to wipe the last of them from his face, he leaned down and gave his stallion a few appreciative strokes, feeling a residual need to continue thanking anyone at all. He then encouraged the stallion on, and to the abbey they went, to see a mentor Romeo had spurned for some months, since the worst of his tumult for the near-forgotten Rosaline.

As they arrived, Romeo inhaled the scent of the abbey deeply. It was a miraculous range of herbs that were coaxed to grow throughout the yard here. Indeed, the yard within the open-gated abbey walls was more shrub than grass, more row than path. From the threshold of the open gate, Romeo spied Friar Lawrence, the man he had come to see. The friar was stooped over with a basket, rubbing a short plant's leaf between his thumb and forefinger. Apparently deeming the leaf fitting—for what, Romeo did not know—the friar plucked the leaf off, put it in his basket, and continued on to the next plant to be examined.

Romeo dismounted. He hitched the stallion at the open gate with a knot that was made to come apart immediately if the stallion gave the slightest insistence. After taking a small

moment to tell the horse of his appreciation, Romeo made his approach to the friar.

The friar was speaking merrily to himself—more, to the plants—as Romeo arrived. The young Montague man stood a while and listened.

“The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night, checkering the eastern clouds with streaks of light; and flecked darkness like a drunkard reels from forth day’s path and Titan’s fiery wheels; now, ere the sun advance his burning eye, the day to cheer, and night’s dank dew to dry, I must up-fill this osier-cage of ours with baleful weeds and precious-juiced flow’rs. The earth, that’s nature’s mother, is her tomb; what is her burying grave, that is her womb; and from her womb children of diverse kind, we sucking on her natural bosom find; many for many virtues excellent; none but for some, and yet all different. Oh, mickle is the powerful grace that lies in herbs, plants, stones, and their true qualities; for naught so vile that on the earth doth live, but to the earth some special good doth give; nor aught so good, but, strained from that fair use, revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse; virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied; and vice sometimes by action dignified. Within the infant rind of this small flower, poison hath residence, and medicine power; for this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part; being tasted, slays all senses with the heart. Two such opposed kings encamp them still: in man as well as herbs—grace and rude will; and where the worser is predominant, full soon the canker death eats up that plant.”

“Good morrow, father.”

“*Benedicite!*” the friar shouted, flinching and nearly dropping his basket. “What early tongue so sweet saluteth me?”

The friar looked up, and beheld the young Montague man. Seeing who came visiting, the friar could scant be anything but happy.

“The young prodigy returns,” the friar said warmly, “and he returns quite early in the morning, at that.”

“Tis not so early.”

“If that’s not so, then here I hit it right: our Romeo hath not been in bed last night.”

“Nay, nay, you miss. Faith, I went to bed last night. Beds, rather, the latter being my own.”

“God pardon sin! Wast thou with Rosaline?”

“With Rosaline?” Romeo echoed the question ponderously. He scarce understood what the friar was asking. It seemed such a strange thing to ask, now. “My ghostly father, no. I have forgotten that name, and that name’s woe.”

“That’s good, my son. But where hast thou been, then?”

“I have been feasting with my enemy. My heart’s dear love is set on the beautiful girl of rich Capulet.”

“Being he has none of his daughters left alive, I worry at what you mean by this. Speak plainly, son, and be forward in thy admittance; riddling confession finds but riddling forgiveness.”

“Then plainly: my love is for Juliet.”

“I know her not.”

“The Capulets’ hound.”

Friar Lawrence leaned back as he let out a sigh of relief both long and loud. Returning to his picking at the plants, he said, “Back to the critters, then.”

“Not back to them, but finally arrived at one.”

“I don’t know if I understand your distinction.”

“I mean only that I wish for you to combine this critter and myself in holy marriage.”

Friar Lawrence stopped with the plants again, and once more wheeled to Romeo, exclaiming, “*Holy Saint Francis!* What a change is here! Is Rosaline, whom thou didst love so dear, so soon forsaken? Young men’s love, then, lies not truly in their hearts, but in their eyes. *Jesu Maria*, what a deal of salty brine hath washed thy sycamore cheeks in the name of Rosaline! Look, here upon thy cheek, the stain doth sit of an old tear that is not washed off yet. If ever thy wast thyself, and these woes thine, thou and these woes were all for Rosaline. And art thou changed?”

Romeo’s arms found their way to becoming crossed, and his stance shifted. “You often made fun of me for loving Rosaline.”

“For doting, not for loving, pupil mine.”

“You told me to bury love.”

“Not in a grave! I wished only that you would put one down, and take another out to have.”

“I have done just that,” Romeo assured. “I pray thee, chide not: she whom I love now doth grace for grace and love for love allow. The other did not so.”

Friar Lawrence muttered something, and then sighed. “Oh, Romeo. In truth, you stand more righteous on this matter than do we who seek out but human loves.”

The friar had told this to Romeo many times in the past, to the point it seemed to Romeo that the friar spoke most of it from wrought, even though he seemed each time to speak as though divulging it for the first time.

“God made the land and the sea and the fish and the beasts,” Friar Lawrence began. “He blessed the fish before ever blessing mankind, if you would believe it from the way other sects speak as though humans are atop the natural world, and not a mere part of it, a servant to it if anything. Fie! When God made the human race, He made but one man, and no human else. And, deciding that it was not good that Man should be alone, God sought to find him a partner. Every animal that walked the land, He brought forth to the man. The man found none suitable, and so God created a woman. This scripture was written by the prophet Moses, who interprets this to be the reason why man and woman should be wed. Pah! Phoo! A powerful prophet indeed, but ultimately proven imperfect in the eyes of the Lord, and, I think, imperfect in his interpretation on the lesson here. For when else, pray tell, do Man and God disagree on what is good, and we are to take Man’s side of it? God created, in a world yet untouched by sin, a perfect garden, in which one Man would tend it, and with each beast he would be matched until finding one that was suitable for him, and once having found a partner, being that beast’s partner thereafter. Thus I do believe, dear Romeo, that you walk closer to God’s vision of what Man was to be than anyone else whom I have ever known. *Certainly*, you have given a great many critters a fair try. And now, I speak true when I tell you how it warms my heart you have found yourself a partner you would like to stay with. Come, in this respect I’ll thy assistant be. For this alliance may so happy prove, to turn your households’ rancor into pure love.”

Romeo's heart brimmed with joy at the friar's approval. "Oh, let me go hence and contrive to have her find her way here for the ceremony. I stand on sudden haste."

"Wisely, and slow; they stumble that run fast."

Act II.

Scene III.

BENVOLIO sat on the ledge of a square fountain in a Verona square, with Mercutio laying out on the ledge on their back, one knee up, head resting on Benvolio's lap. One of Mercutio's hands idly splashed and swished around in the water. One of Benvolio's hands idly toyed at Mercutio's hair.

"Why, where the devil can this Romeo be?" Mercutio wondered. "Was he not home last night?"

"He was, but not for long," Benvolio answered. "Though I never saw him, a horse from the stable was gone this morning."

"Ah, he rides to that pale-hearted wench, that Rosaline, who torments him so that he will surely run mad. That, of course, or he rides to a secluded place for him and the horse."

"I would doubt the latter," Benvolio said. "Firstly because the stable itself has served quite a fine place for him in the past, as I have witnessed—more than once and every time quite unintentionally—with mine own eyes. But also, twas a stallion missing, not a mare."

"Who should tell the difference, when they cannot speak to say what they believe themselves to be?"

Benvolio raked his fingers through the royal's hair lovingly without response for a bit. Eventually he answered, "You are not wrong—"

"Nor ever have I been—"

"Nonetheless, perhaps we all, you and I and Romeo alike, proscribe things to the four-legged that do not apply to them as they do to us."

"Aye. Romeo and I have talked about as much at length," Mercutio said. They then stretched, lengthening themselves out on the fountain ledge, nuzzling their head back into Benvolio's lap.

“On the subject of Romeo, I spoke with his father this morning at breakfast, as you remained in bed,” Benvolio said.

“I maintain I made the wiser choice.”

“In either case, some foreboding knowledge came of it.”

“Oh, do go on.”

“Tybalt, the kinsman to Old Capulet, hath sent a letter to the Montague house.”

“A challenge, I bet my life on it.”

Benvolio, twirling a lock of Mercutio’s hair, said, “Indeed, twas that exact thing. If Romeo learns of it, he will not be able to help but answer it.”

“Any man that can write may answer a letter.”

“Nay, he will answer the letter’s master, how he dares, being dared.”

“Then alas, poor Romeo is already dead!” Mercutio proclaimed, and threw both arms into the air in a display of melodrama, before letting them fall limply back to where they were, one arm hanging off towards the ground, the other swishing about in the fountain’s water.

“You were once as close as a brother—a sibling, a sibling—to Tybalt.”

“Yes, the latter and the latter’s latter I was. And in truth, at least at that time, perhaps the first is accurate enough as well.”

“What do you make of Tybalt now?” Benvolio asked.

Mercutio answered, “As though he were a fourth child of the king, brother to the prince of scales and to the prince myself and to the lovely prince Valentine, he himself we called the prince of cats when we were closer, though he is more than prince of cats, I can tell you. Oh, he is the courageous captain of compliments. He fights in the same way you sing a nursery rhyme: keeps time, distance, and proportion; rests one, two, and the third strike rests in your bosom. A butcher, a duelist; a duelist, a gentleman dressed more audaciously than any gentlelady in her modesty dare; fiend with the immortal passado, the punto reverso, the hay—”

“The what?”

“The pox of such antic,” Mercutio went on, perhaps in answer or perhaps ignoring the interruption entirely. “By Jesu, a very good blade!; a very tall man!; a very good whore! Why, is not...”

Mercutio stopped, noting that Benvolio had ceased listening and had craned his head to face elsewhere.

"Here comes Romeo," Benvolio informed.

Mercutio sat upright beside Benvolio and looked in the same direction to behold the lover atop a stallion, who made his way into the square at a walk. From atop the stallion, Romeo looked this way and that, though his eyes passed over Benvolio and Mercutio entirely.

Mercutio, having none of that, raised a hand tall in the air towards the Montague, and shouted, "Signor Romeo!"

His attention drawn finally to the two at the fountain, Romeo gave some signal to the horse, and the horse began his way over.

"*Bon jour!*" Mercutio greeted as the young man arrived. "There's a French salutation for your French slop. You gave us the counterfeit fairly last night."

Romeo tilted his head. "Good morning to you both. What counterfeit did I give you?"

"The slip, sir, the slip," Mercutio answered.

"Pardon, good Mercutio, but my business last night was great —"

"—Dane—"

"—was great, and my business today all the greater. Good day, good gentlepersons."

Romeo produced a clicking sound from his mouth and made a slight change to his posture, and the stallion resumed his walk.

Atop the stallion, Romeo made his way down street after street. From atop his tall vantage, he searched out a woman with sleeves of rose tattoos. Twas likely she would be somewhere abouts the Capulet manor, which he rode the perimeter of back and back again, and again, and again.

As the morning gave way to noonday, he spotted the rose-tattooed woman walking back from the market, a parasol in her hands, and a large bag in each hand of the man who walked beside her. Angelica, spotting Romeo at the same time as he had spotted her, switch directions to walk straight for him.

"God deign ye good day, gentleman," she said, arriving beside his steed, who he had encouraged to a halt. Her face remained in the shade of the parasol, though she tilted it up enough that she could regard him, and he her.

“And to you, gentlewoman,” Romeo wished in return.

“Gentleman, can you tell me where I may find the young Romeo?”

“Aye, I can tell you—but young Romeo will be older when you have found him than he was when you sought him; at this second, I am the youngest of that name.”

“If you be he, sir, I desire some confidence with you; step down from thy horse.”

In a flash Romeo was dismounted, his hand rested comfortingly on his stallion’s side. From this lower vantage, he was only a head taller than Angelica, more or less at eye level with the man accompanying her, and was all the more aware of the sword strapped to the man’s side, though the man’s hands remained clasped on the handles of the bags he held. Romeo nor the tattooed woman had to speak at a raised volume to speak with one another. Indeed, they could speak at something only faintly louder than a whisper.

Beholding Romeo, the woman took a shaky breath, and said, “Now, before God, I am so vexed that every part of me quivers. Ye scurvy knave Montague! Pray you, sir, a word, for I have waited to happen upon you for quite some days now. Through her wantings this week, staring out the back window for a visitor, flagging any who pass, wagging at thy very name, it is clear that the girl of my lady has bade me inquire you out. What she bids me say, you should know better than I, though I am sure I know enough of it. But first let me tell you, if you should lead her into a fool’s paradise, as they say, it would be a very gross kind of behavior, as they say; for the gentlewoman is young; and therefor, if you should deal double with her, twould be a weak way to deal with any gentlewoman.”

“My every intention is aimed at her benefit—her wellness, her joy, her fulfillment; I aspire to raise my decorum to meet this angel who has deigned to reach down to me,” Romeo assured.

“Good heart, and, i’faith, I will tell her as much.”

“If you do believe my intentions, and you do believe her love of me, I would ask that you devise some means to take her out on a walk this afternoon. And, bringing her to Friar Lawrence’s cell, she shall be married.”

Angelica nodded. "There is a nobleman in town, one Paris, that would have her to breed. I upset her sometimes, speaking to her and telling her that Paris is the proper man. She cares not for him. But when I speak to her of you, there is life in her. I would see her sent to you rather than him."

From a pocket of his tunic, Romeo produced a sack heavy with coins, and held it out to Angelica. "Here is for the trouble. And, though I reject the premise of my next words on many grounds, it would cover more than the reasonable price of a hound, even one as magnificent as her."

"No, truly sir, not a penny."

Romeo tossed her the sack. The man beside her dropped one of his bags and shot his arm out, catching the sack before it arrived at Angelica. He stowed the sack in the dropped bag before picking it back up.

"This afternoon, sir?" Angelica reiterated. "Well, she shall be there."

"Thank you. And for now, farewell, gentlewoman."

"God in Heaven bless thee, sir," Angelica wished.

In a flash, as fluid as though merely turning to face the other way, Romeo was atop his stallion once more, and rode off at a happy walk.

Act II.

Scene IV.

JULIET laid atop the back of a couch beside a window. Her head was faced looking out of the window to the front yard. Her man from the back yard came only at night; here, she awaited Angelica's return. The day was yet new when Angelica and Peter had went out, promising to return soon. Still Angelica was not back. Would that love's heralds were thoughts, which would ten times faster glide than the sun's beams, driving back shadows over louring hills; would that love were drawn by nimble-pinioned doves, as the wind-swift wings of Cupid, as swift in motion as a ball. The sun stood upon the height of its daily transit, and yet still, Juliet was home by herself—somewhat. The servants ignored her for the most part, would not play, would not listen to her in any capacity, as though they were deaf to her.

The lord and the lady at least minded her, and Angelica certainly had ears to listen and care to give. Her newfound Romeo listened and loved more than she'd thought those of his humanly race were able.

The front gate of the manor's fence swung open. Juliet shot up and stood on the couch's back, tail thumping against the window's glass as she wagged. In through the gate came Angelica and Peter. Barking boisterous greetings all the way, Juliet leapt down off the couch and bounded out of the room, down a passageway, down the stairs, and arrived at the manor's front door.

When the door came open, Juliet leapt up on Angelica, standing to greet the woman.

Angelica smiled, though was out of breath. "Let me rest a moment, oh Juliet," she said, putting a hand on Juliet's chest and gently pushing her back, easing her back to having her forelegs placed on the ground.

Juliet pressed her side close against Angelica and looked at Peter. She wanted to smell into the bags he was carrying, but knew she should not. This man had struck her before, for nothing more than drawing too close. He had received an earful when Angelica had caught him once, and he had not struck her since, but he would again, if given the slightest reason and while not under Angelica's eyes.

Angelica, noticing Juliet's nervous looking, said, "Peter, go put away the produce."

Peter stepped forward into the manor towards the kitchen, leaving Juliet and Angelica alone.

Angelica moved at a slow limping shuffle to the nearest couch and fell back into it. "Fie, how my bones ache!" she proclaimed. "What a jaunt I have had!"

Juliet came over, rested her chin on a couch cushion beside Angelica, and looked up at her.

"I am a-weary, give me leave a while—"

Juliet groaned disapproval, a low vocalization shaped like the beginnings of a bark, made without raising her voice much.

"Jesu, what haste?" Angelica moaned. "Can you not stay a while? I've only just been back from my walk, and now you demand yours?"

From the word 'walk' forward, Juliet began to wag.

"Lord how my head aches! What a head have I! It beats as it would fall in twenty pieces!"

Juliet stepped back and barked at Angelica, still wagging.

"Oh beshrew your heart for sending me about, to catch my death with jaunting up and down." Angelica closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingertips a moment. When the pounding of the headache subsided just a little, she said, "I have finally spoken with your man Romeo. If you will come, at Friar Lawrence's cell there stays a husband to make you a wife."

Angelica began to get up, and Juliet turned and went ahead to the door, eagerly waiting for the woman to catch up.

Act II.

Scene V.

FRIAR Lawrence and Romeo sat in tall chairs before the fireplace in the abbey's receiving room, looking at the burning logs, as they awaited the arrival of the bride. Romeo sat in a light green gown, with faint floral patterns stitched in. He wore the vial containing Loki's Breath as a pendant, which glowed blue in the dim room. He beamed at his thoughts of his bride-to-be, only vaguely hearing the words of the friar.

"...so will smile the heavens upon this holy act," Friar Lawrence said. "Even after hours as it may be."

"Amen, amen," Romeo said. "Come what sorrow ever may, it cannot countervail the exchange of joy that one short minute gives me in her sight. Do thou but close our hands with holy words, and then after that, love-devouring death may do what he dare; it is enough that I may have ever but called her my wife."

"Dear son, you worry me when you speak at such extremes. These violent delights have violent ends, and in their triumph die; like fire and powder, which, as they kiss, consume. Therefor, love moderately; long love doth so."

From their chairs the two men heard the abbey door open, a shouting of "Fie!," and the excited clicking of nails on the foyer's stonework floor.

Romeo bolted upwards to his feet and shouted, "Juliet!"

Instantly the tapping came bounding for the receiving room. Romeo and Juliet met halfway, in the chapel room, falling into a hug which led the way to many kisses, before the Friar arrived to break it up. Yanking Romeo up by the back of his dress, the friar chided, "Come, come with me, and we will make short work; for, by your leaves, you shall not stay alone till holy church incorporate two as one. Angelica, please, come join, and bear witness."

The friar led the small procession up the aisle, and bid Juliet to sit, and Romeo to kneel before her, face to face. The friar spoke on the divinity of love, and recited much of his thoughts on Adam and the beasts of the field. Lastly he spoke vows: to Romeo to love and to serve Juliet above all others, especially above himself; to Angelica and to the friar himself, to watch over this marriage, and to ensure Romeo kept his vow; to all three humans, to attest tonight Juliet's love of her husband-to-be. With all of these vows spoken and agreed to, Friar Lawrence lifted Romeo's hand and Juliet's forepaw, placed the paw in the hand, and pronounced them married. The husband and the wife kissed, and then embraced, Romeo shedding tears of joy, Juliet carefully licking them off. The friar brought out a bottle of wine from the cellar, and a quiet, happy night was had before Angelica and the friar each fell asleep in their chairs. Quietly so as not to wake the sleeping elders, Romeo and Juliet exited the abbey and pranced through the Verona streets, towards the house of one who once called themselves a prince, though now would sooner deny it. Romeo knocked at the door.

There was silence from within for a bit, until a bleary-eyed Mercutio opened the door, with Benvolio standing close behind them. Seeing that their guest was friendly company, Benvolio stepped forward and wrapped himself sleepily around Mercutio, facing his cousin while his chin found perch on the former prince's shoulder.

"Romeo? Tis late," Mercutio said. "Are you drunk? Stolen the Capulets' dog, I see, good work."

"I have had but a little wine. Primarily I am drunk off of happiness. I am wed, the Capulets' dog my bride."

Mercutio's mouth hung open a small bit as they sought words, and found either none at all or too many at once.

Benvolio removed himself from Mercutio and stepped around them to warmly embrace the newly wed Romeo. "On my life, a great couple you'll be."

Romeo hugged his cousin back.

"Is this the very spot for a honeymoon?" Mercutio asked.

"I felt it unwise for either of us to dwell about the house of the other's father tonight. I was hoping this may prove a neutral haven."

"Yes," Mercutio said, and turned to walk back inside, leaving the door open for their guests. Romeo and Juliet entered, and Benvolio closed door. "Take any room you'd like," Mercutio said, and then yawned. "In that offer, I include the master bed to which I and your cousin retire, should you change your mind about anything."

"A great many things I'd have to change my mind a great deal on," Romeo returned.

"Not so great many, and not so greatly drastic either, I promise you as someone who has seen all sides of it. To bed, though. 'Tis late, and I may fall asleep as the very words come from my mouth. *Adieu*."

"Tell me more in the morning," Benvolio said, leaning in to speak quietly to his cousin. "Until then, I wish you both a good night."

Mercutio and Benvolio ascended the stairs, headed towards the master bedroom. Romeo led the way to a cozy bedroom on the first floor, in the opposite corner to the master bed. There in their secluded chambers, the newly wed husband and wife found their way onto the bed, and a passionate interchange began: nearing the height of it, Romeo opened the vial containing Loki's Breath, inhaled its contents, and but short moments later was his seed received by his bride.

In the morning, Romeo awakened well rested and well accompanied, the warm and soft-haired Juliet tucked in against him, he on his back, her with her back pressed firmly against his side down the length of both of their bodies. A soft breeze came in through the window, but the air around the bed was the breath of Juliet and the breath of himself, together—together for more than a spurious moment, but for a night, for a lifetime; he looked forward to a lifetime of mornings like this one. He laid a

long time like this, until eventually, some stirring he made awakened Juliet, and she stretched out, extending her paws forward and digging her shoulder blades back into Romeo. He rolled onto his side to face her. Face buried in her fur, he began petting the hound down her body in long strokes. He scratched at her lower back, encouraging her to roll over onto her back. With her on her back, Romeo rubbed the dog's belly a long while until she was satisfied, and then concluded it with a kiss to the front of her mouth before arising from bed. Picking out garments from the wardrobe in the room, Romeo dressed in a white shirt and a pair of brown trousers, and then left to go make breakfast for himself, his wife, and their hosts.

With the smell of the cooking, Benvolio was summoned down the stairs. They ate at the dining room table, and afterwards moved to the living room to continue their conversation, Romeo and Juliet on a couch, Benvolio in a cushioned chair. The cousins sipped tea as they spoke.

Mercutio came down the stairs some time later, dished themselves up a plate, and with the dish in hand came and weaseled their way in beside Benvolio on the chair.

Romeo pointed out the living room's window to a house across the street. "What can you tell me of who owns that house there?"

Mercutio swallowed the food they'd been chewing, and then answered, "Tis owned by the rats, and what a lovely home they've made of it. The grandrats have portraits hung up in the foyer of all the little—nay, I will not even joke of rats owning property with you, as you'd take it as earnestly as if I'd said that the house was owned by Queen Elizabeth. But as to the deed to the property as concerns we silly human creatures, I believe such a deed is long since lost, forgotten, burned up, crumbled to dust, pulped in the sea, used as a tissue for a rich man's nose and then screwed up into a ball and tossed in the rubbish. In short, the house is derelict."

"Then perhaps if the rats would accept co-ownership with a silly human creature such as this one and the best of the hounds to match, I would seek ownership of the place."

"You would be welcome neighbors," Mercutio said, and went in unto their food once more.

By and by, Romeo and Juliet did move in to the house, doing a great deal of fixing-up, making the place theirs. Guests came often, Mercutio and Benvolio, Angelica and Friar Lawrence, sitting about and making merry chat, checking in, telling tales. As the weeks went on, Juliet became heavy with child, and Romeo tended to her with all the more devout of care. Two months and a week after the night of the wedding, Angelica and Romeo assisted Juliet as she gave birth to a litter of twelve Great Dane puppies.

Act Three containing five scenes

*The prince could never cause those households so agree,
But that some sparkles of their wrath as yet remaining be;
Which lie this while raked up in ashes pale and dead
Till time do serve that they again in wasting flame may
spread.*

Act III. Scene I.

BENVOLIO and Mercutio sat on a bench at the edge of a public square. One year and some months had passed since the marriage of Romeo and Juliet. Paige, a family friend whose company Mercutio had not been blessed with since the former prince had forsaken their family and left the castle, sat beside Mercutio on the bench. She was turned to face them, and with careful attention, was stenciling a drawing of an enormous spider on Mercutio's bicep. Though she gave her artistic talent into it in earnest, she made the drawing to convince Mercutio out of the tattoo, rather than into it.

Beside Mercutio and Paige, Benvolio finished reading from the letter that Romeo had passed on earlier in the day: "...thou lowest thief, thou most unnatural sinner, thou wretched villain, thy days be short. Signed, Tybalt."

"His letters grow longer by the day," Mercutio observed.

“Aye. I pray thee, good Mercutio, good Paige, let’s retire. The day is hot, the Capulets abroad, and if we meet, we shall not scape a brawl; for now, these hot days, is the mad blood stirring.”

“Pah! Thou art like one of those fellows that, when he enters the confines of a tavern, claps me his sword upon the table, and says, ‘God send me no need of thee!’ and, by the operation of the second cup, draws it on the drawer, when, indeed, there is no need.”

Benvolio snorted in a laugh. “Am I indeed like such a fellow?”

“Come, come, thou art as hot a Jack in thy mood as any in Italy,” Mercutio went on. “And as soon moved to be moody, and as soon moody to be moved.”

“Moved to what, pray tell?”

“Come, hast thou not bound across half the city to enter a quarrel?”

“To break that quarrel up, and nothing more.”

“So you say, so you say.”

“Indeed, so I do,” Benvolio said, and clapped his hand on Mercutio’s thigh, giving them a couple of caring pats.

Patronized, Mercutio turned their head to Benvolio and snapped their teeth shut threateningly, producing a discomfiting *click!* beside the kindly man’s ear.

Benvolio flinched away from this, shuddered, and then, turning back to face the square, saw a man enter the square in a flashy red garb, two heads taller than any else, hand clenched on his sword’s hilt as he scanned over the square’s occupants. Tybalt.

“By my head, here come the Capulets,” Benvolio warned.

“By my heel, I care not.”

Spotting Benvolio and Mercutio, Tybalt made his approach. Benvolio and Mercutio stood to meet him. At a whispered word of advice from Mercutio, Paige stood and backed far away from the imminent exchange.

“Gentlemen, good day,” Tybalt said, coming to a halt before Benvolio and Mercutio. “A word with one of you.”

“But one word with one of us?” Mercutio asked. “Couple it with something: make it a word and a blow.”

Tybalt's eye twitched. "You shall find me apt enough for that, sir, if you will give me occasion."

"Are you not the manliest of men, as you so pretend? Could you not take some occasion without having to be given it?"

"Mercutio, thou consort'st with Romeo—"

"Consorted notes, matching harmony!" Mercutio interrupted. "Dost thou make us minstrels? If thou make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords." Placing a hand on their hilt, Mercutio added, "Here's my fiddlestick; here's that shall make you dance. Zounds, consort!"

Benvolio hovered a hand over the handle of the wishing sword. As calming as he could, he interjected, "We talk here in the public haunt of men; either withdraw unto some private place, and reason coldly of your grievances, or else depart; here all eyes gaze on us."

Mercutio turned their head away from both men and spat. "Men's eyes were made to look, and let them gaze; I will not budge for no man's pleasure, I."

Benvolio spotted, behind the imposing Tybalt, Romeo passing alone through the square on his own business. Romeo, spotting Benvolio, began marching swiftly over at once. Tybalt, seeing Benvolio's gaze, turned and saw Romeo as well.

"Well, here comes my man. Peace be with you, sirs," Tybalt said, and turned to regard Romeo.

At sirs, Mercutio snarled. They opened their mouth to cast mockery at the tall villain once more, but then felt their hand taken in Benvolio's, the fingers interlocked, the grip tight. Mercutio staved their tongue, if but only for the moment.

Romeo came and stood before Tybalt, turning his neck upwards to look the Capulet in the eyes.

"Romeo," Tybalt uttered, "the hate I bear thee can afford no better term than this: thou art a villain."

"Tybalt," Romeo said in return, "the reason that I have to love thee doth much excuse the rage one might ordinarily associate with such a greeting as yours. Villain I am none: therefore, farewell; I see thou know'st me not."

As Romeo turned to leave, Tybalt shouted, "Boy, this shall not excuse the injuries that thou hast done to me; therefor turn back, and draw!"

Romeo did turn back, though left his hands off of his sabre. “I do protest I never injured thee, but love thee better than thou canst devise; for, I’m sure from your letters that you are aware of my marriage, which among many other happy consequences, has made you and I kinsman, my cousin Tybalt. And so, good Capulet, which name I tender as dearly as my own, be satisfied not with my steel which you sought, but with my loving words which I offer.”

Behind Tybalt, Mercutio lifted their head and screamed into the air. All turned to face them. After expelling the whole contents of their lungs and then drawing in another breath, Mercutio shouted to Tybalt and Romeo, “Oh calm, dishonorable, vile submission! *Alla stoccata* carries it away!” With that, Mercutio drew. “Tybalt, you rat catcher! Will you walk?”

“What wouldst thou have with me?”

“Good king of cats, nothing but one of your nine lives; of that, I mean to make bold withdrawal; and, as you shall see thereafter, I will dry-beat the rest of the eight. Will you pluck your sword out of his pilcher by the ears? Make haste, lest mine be about your ears before it be out.”

“I am for you,” Tybalt said, and drew.

Between the two erupted a lightshow of glinting steel, as Romeo and Benvolio drew their swords to break up the brawl. Dashing forth, Romeo swung his sword down in the midst of the combatants’ strikes to knock their swords off their mark; and as it happened, a mark of Tybalt’s which Mercutio had deflected upwards, Romeo deflected back down, causing Tybalt’s steel to strike through Mercutio’s chest.

Tybalt turned to Romeo. Sensing the appraising look, Romeo threw down his blade, showing the antithesis of provocation. Mercutio fell. Tybalt turned and sped away.

“I am hurt,” came a faint voice from the ground.

Romeo and Benvolio—Benvolio in tears—knelt on either side of Mercutio.

“A plague o’ both your houses!” Mercutio shouted after Tybalt, tilting their head to where the Capulet had run, then also leveling their gaze on the two Montague cousins before them. Mercutio began to sit up, and then in pain collapsed back to the

ground. "Tis lovely, this ground. I think I shall make my new home here."

"Art thou so badly hurt?" Benvolio asked.

"Aye, aye, a scratch, a scratch. Merry, tis enough. Where is that Tybalt? Is he gone, and hath nothing? Where is my Paige? Go, villain, fetch a surgeon."

Paige, who hovered nearby, ran off.

"Have courage, wonderful Mercutio," Romeo said. "The hurt cannot be much."

"No, tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door, but tis enough, twill serve: ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave host. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses! Zounds, a dog, a rat, a mouse, a cat, to scratch a star to death! A braggart, a rogue, a villain, that fights by the book of arithmetic! Romeo, why the devil came you between us? I was hurt under your arm."

"I thought all for the best."

Mercutio put a grasp around Benvolio's forearm. "Help me into some house, Benvolio, or I shall..."

Words unfinished, Mercutio fainted, and died.

After some silent moments, Benvolio spoke. "That gallant spirit hath aspired the clouds, which too untimely here did scorn the earth."

Marching footsteps approached. The Montague cousins raised their heads, and saw Tybalt returning, sabre in hand. Romeo stood, drew, and marched forward to meet him. As they neared, Romeo scolded, "Alive, in triumph! And Mercutio slain!" The two stood at a lunge's length from one another. "Fire-eyed fury be my conduct now! Now, Tybalt, take that 'villain' back again that thou gavest me; for Mercutio's soul is but a little way above our heads, staying for thine to keep it company: either thou or I, or both, must go with."

Tybalt's hand flexed around his drawn sword, holding the instrument more as a club than as a sabre. "Thou, wretched boy, that didst consort him here, shalt with him hence."

Romeo flourished his blade. "This shall determine that."

Tybalt whipped around in a complete circle, to strike Romeo with the heavy blow of all his whirling momentum: the first half of the circle, he completed on his feet; halfway, as he faced away

from Romeo, Romeo stepped forward and stabbed the tip of his sword into the back of Tybalt's neck, severing his brain from his body; the second half of the circle, Tybalt completed on momentum alone as he fell to the ground dead.

Benvolio came up and stood beside Romeo. "How such a devout lover and a deadly surgeon came to live in you together, I know not."

"One needs defend love, at times."

"Perhaps. Perhaps."

Around Romeo and Benvolio, a crowd of citizens was beginning to form.

Leaning to Romeo, Benvolio advised, "Stand not amazed. No matter the circumstances leading up to it, here before us a royal and a Capulet lay slain. The prince will doom thee to death if thou art taken. Hence, be gone, away."

As more and more realization sunk in, tears came anew to Romeo's eyes. "Oh. Oh, I am fortune's fool."

"Why dost thou stay?" Benvolio prodded, and pushed Romeo, forcing the first of his cousin's footsteps.

In haste, Romeo made off.

Benvolio remained at the scene until by and by arrived Prince Escalus, his musketeers, Lord and Lady Capulet, and Lord and Lady Montague.

The musketeers encircled the scene of Benvolio and the bodies.

Prince Escalus beheld Mercutio, his own sibling, for a wounded moment, before his eyes fixed on Benvolio. "Where are the vile beginners of this fray?"

"Oh noble prince, I can enlighten all of the unlucky unfolding of this fatal brawl. There lies the man, slain by young Romeo, that slew thy kinsperson, brave Mercutio."

"Tybalt!" Lady Capulet cried, as she arrived at the perimeter of the scene. She pushed past the musketeers, and knelt at her slain kinsman's head. Rapidly she muttered things to the corpse. Then, looking up at Escalus, she said, "Prince, as thou art true, for blood of ours shed blood of Montague."

The prince looked again to Benvolio. "Who began this bloody fray?"

“Tybalt,” Benvolio answered in short, and then at length explained what had preceded.

“He is kinsman to the Montague,” Lady Capulet said when he was done. “Affection makes him false. He speaks not true. If Tybalt is struck down, then there needs have been twenty of them against him in this black strife, and all those twenty could but kill one life. I beg for justice, which thou, prince, must give: Romeo slew Tybalt, Romeo must not live.”

The prince considered. “Romeo merely slew him that slew Mercutio. Who shall carry the price of my kin’s blood?”

“Not Romeo, Prince,” Old Montague said, stepping forward. “He was Mercutio’s friend. He but concluded what the law should end: the life of Tybalt.”

Escalus again beheld the slain body of his Mercutio. In Benvolio, he knew, not a hostile bone could be found. But if there was fault left to be found for his kinsperson’s death, he would execute it. The prince gave his ruling: “This strife never would have had wind to breathe if not for that Romeo.” As he spoke, his mind flashed back to a year and some months prior, speaking with his father before the scrying glass, inquiring of the sad fate that would befall Romeo. As the prince went on, he trembled in a helpless and immense power, sadness, inevitability, betrayal of none and all, unavoidable fate; on the subject of Romeo, the prince in regretted intensity resumed: “And for that offense, immediately we do exile him hence. I have an interest in your hate’s proceeding: my blood for your rude brawls doth lie a-bleeding; but I’ll amerce you with so strong a fine, that you shall all repent the death of mine. I will be deaf to pleading and excuses; nor tears nor prayers shall purchase out abuses.” The prince spoke his final verdict: “From hence forth, Romeo is banished from Verona: if he should be found here, that hour should be his last. What’s more, his property is forfeit to the crown: the hound Juliet shall be returned to the Capulets, but even her pups, as payment for blood here spilt, shall henceforth be the king’s.”

Act III.

Scene II.

JULIET laid in front of the couch, watching all of her pups at play.

At the sound of the front door's knob being turned, Juliet wagged her tail and turned her head to see who was home. In through the door bursted Angelica, sobbing. The woman threw herself on the floor beside Juliet, and patted her while speaking Romeo's name in concerned sentence after sentence. Juliet inched closer to Angelica and laid a paw and her chin over the woman, protecting her.

After a time, Angelica stood. She went and found a lead, and attached it to Juliet. The woman pulled Juliet towards the door. Juliet resisted, and when Angelica insisted, Juliet growled. Angelica let up for a moment. Juliet looked around at all of her pups.

Angelica sighed, and knelt with Juliet. "I know, dear. Believe me, I know."

With a surprising strength that caught Juliet off guard, Angelica picked the hound up off of her feet, and carried her out the door. Placed down, even outside, Juliet resisted, lingering at the door, facing to get back in. Angelica sighed again, manipulated the lead to be tight around Juliet's neck, and with more insistent pulling, Angelica forced the issue, dragging Juliet away.

When they were inside the Capulet manor and the door closed behind them, Angelica let Juliet off the lead. She began to offer an apology, but the hound walked off, nails tapping on the floor as she went.

Angelica sat on a couch for a time and sobbed. In another room, she could hear the lord and lady sobbing as well for their lost Tybalt.

After some hours, night fell. Angelica rose up from the couch and went to find the hound. It was not a difficult search: on the second floor, Juliet laid on a bed looking out a window at the moonlit back yard.

"Shame come to Romeo," Angelica cursed.

Juliet growled.

"What, will you speak well of him that killed your cousin?"

Juliet made a disapproving vocalization, and replanted her chin on the bed, waiting for her man.

Angelica could find no fault with the wife and mother so suddenly stolen away from both parts of herself. "Wait in this chamber: I'll find Romeo to comfort you. I know well where he is. Hark ye, your Romeo will be here this night: I'll go to him. He is hid at Lawrence's cell."

Juliet pointedly ignored Angelica, and remained vigilant in her watch out the back window.

Angelica departed, and began on her way to the abbey to make well on her promise.

Act III.

Scene III.

ROMEO sat at a small table in the abbey's cellar. On the table was a glass of water. Romeo tried to pick it up, but as he held it, the water shook about too tumultuously to drink, and he shakily set the glass back down.

Hearing footsteps above, Romeo went and hid behind stacked furniture stored in the cellar.

The visitor, reaching the bottom of the stairs, called out, and from the voice it was Friar Lawrence: "Romeo, come forth; come forth, thou fearful man. By Jesu, affliction is enamored of thy parts, and thou art wed to calamity."

Romeo emerged from his hiding place and met the friar. "Father, what news? What is the prince's doom? What sorrow craves my acquaintance?"

"Not death," the friar said, "but body's banishment: the prince has banished you from Verona, and claimed all your possessions forfeit."

Romeo let out a sigh of relief and sat back onto his chair. His hands still shook, but he made himself able to drink the water. "The world is broad and wide. If Juliet and I are condemned to be sojourners, I mind not," Romeo said. Then, "Father, why do you look at me with such pity?"

"The world is broad and wide; that much, you hath stolen from my very lips. But alas, tis the latter punishment you miss. Your possessions are taken: to the king go the pups, and back to the Capulets goes Juliet."

Romeo stood, knocking his chair back as he went up. From his scabbard he drew out his sabre, grabbed it by the blade, and held the point to his neck. "If Romeo is banished, then tell me, friar, tell me, in what vile part of this anatomy doth my name lodge? Tell me, that I may cut out the hateful—"

The friar snatched away Romeo's sword. "Art thou a madman?"

Romeo craned over the friar. "There is no world outside Verona walls, but Purgatory, Torture, Hell itself. Hence, 'banished' is banished from the world, and the world's exile is death: thus, calling death merely 'banished,' you cutt'st my head off with a golden axe, and smilest upon the stroke that murders me."

The friar shot back, "Oh deadly sin! Oh rude unthankfulness! For thy crime the sentence is death; but the kind prince, taking thy side, hath brushed aside the law, and turned that black word death to banishment: this is dear mercy, and thou seest it not."

"Tis torture, and not mercy: heaven is here, where Juliet lives; and every butcher, and baker, and chemical-stained leather worker, every unworthy thing, lives here in Heaven, and may look on her; but Romeo may not. More validity, more honorable company, more courtship can now be found in Verona's flies than in Romeo: the flies may seize on the soft wonder of Juliet's paw, and steal immortal blessing from her jowls; but Romeo may not; he is banished; all this may the flies do, when I from this must fly. And say'st thou yet, that exile is not death? Hadst thou no poison prepared, no knife sharpened, no sudden means of death other than the proclamation of the word 'banished' to kill me? Oh friar, the damned use that word in hell; howling accompanies it. How hast thou the heart, being a divine, a ghostly confessor, a sin-absolver, and my friend professed, to mangle me with that word 'banished?'"

"Thou fond madman, hear me a little speak."

"Oh, thou wilt speak again of banishment!" Romeo moaned, and turned away to pace the cellar.

"I'll give thee armor to keep off that word," the friar promised.

"Unless that armor can reverse a prince's doom, it helps not: talk no more."

“Oh, so I see that madmen have no ears.”

“How should they, when that wise men have no eyes.”

Above, the abbey’s door opened.

“Wait ye here,” Friar Lawrence bid, and turned and ascended the stairs, keeping possession of Romeo’s sabre. Halfway up, he paused, turned, and marched back down to whisper harshly, “Make no doubt that I have remembered my vow, even if you have forgotten yours: though banished, you will serve your wife yet. In time, dear son, all things in time.”

A tremble wracked Romeo. “Spoken as one whose lovers’ lives may last as many years as his own.”

The friar opened his mouth to speak, paused at the first half-formed sound, and then bowed his head. “Indeed. Though madman I have called you, you have hit the mark exactly on at least one point: perhaps I am blind indeed.”

Romeo shook his head. “I assure you, father: though my darkness has never made it easy, you have seen through me better than most.”

The friar’s dour face gave way to at least the beginnings of an enwarmed smile. The friar turned and ascended the stairs once more. At the top, he called, “Angelica? Indeed, he is over here, with his own tears made drunk.”

“Oh, her case is much the same, much the same,” Angelica said, following the friar down the steps.

“Oh, woeful sympathy,” the friar said, shaking his head. “Piteous predicament.”

The three stood regarding each other in the cellar.

“Where is she?” Romeo asked Angelica. “Is she well? And what says she, my concealed lady, of our cancelled love?”

“Oh, she says nothing sir, but lays on a bed and faces away from me. She won’t lift her chin to say a word or cast a glance.”

Though on instinct Romeo’s mind flashed to calamity, he caught himself before he could speak, and looked to the friar.

“Look lively, son,” the friar encouraged. “Thy Juliet is alive, for whose dear sake thou wast just lately self-proclaimed dead; there lies happy fortune. Tybalt would kill thee, but thou slew’st Tybalt; there lies happy fortune too. The law, that threatened death, becomes thy friend and turns it into exile; there lies happy fortune again. A pack of blessings sits upon thee;

happiness courts thee; and yet, misbehaved and sullen, you pout upon thy fortune and thy love. I mean not to dwell, but only to warn you: take heed, for such die miserable.”

“I have lived miserable, and lived happy, and at this rate I may die as either unsurprised.”

The friar sighed, and went on. “Angelica, could’st thou keep a watch while our man Romeo makes a visit to our dear Juliet, to assure her he is yet alive?”

“A thousand times, yes. She shall spot you, Romeo, the moment you enter the back yard. I’m sure you’re still plenty able to steal across, and let her out the back to the hedges. I’ll shine a light from her back window when the way is clear. If I learn that the lord or lady or any else have occasion to seek Juliet, I shall ring the dinner bell, and you would be wise to flee.”

“Indeed, foolish not to,” the friar affirmed. “For if caught, you shall not be able to journey to Mantua, where thou shalt live—alone, for a time—till we can find a time to reunite your marriage, reconcile your friends, beg pardon of the prince, and call thee back to twenty hundred thousand times more joy than in thine lamentation you had left with. Angelica, get thee to the Capulet manor ahead of Romeo, and keep watch.”

“I could have stayed here all the night to hear your good counsel; but indeed, I shall go ahead.”

“And you, Romeo,” the friar said, as Angelica made her way up the stairs. “Go hence; good night; be gone before the watch be set. Sojourn in Mantua, and be no stranger to the abbeys there; I shall find a brother to relay to you, from time to time, every good thing that happens here.” Friar Lawrence tossed Romeo’s sabre away behind the stacked furniture, stepped forward, and hugged the young man. Once stepping back, the friar concluded: “Tis late. Farewell; good night.”

“But that a joy past joy calls out on me, it were a grief so brief to part with thee: farewell.”

Act III. Scene IV.

LORD Capulet, Lady Capulet, and County Paris sat about in a room in the Capulet manor.

“This has all happened so suddenly,” the lord was saying, “that we have had no time to check in on Juliet. I tell you, she loved...” the lord hesitated a moment, before saying Romeo. He stole a sidelong glance at his wife, whose tears still stained her makeup, shed for Tybalt, who at Romeo’s hand was slain. The lord feigned a cough, and then reiterated, “I tell you, she loved Tybalt dearly, and so did I. Ah, well, we were born to die. In any case, in any case. For now, I would leave her to her solitude to get her rest. Tis late: I promise you, if not for your company, I would have been to bed an hour ago.”

Paris waved his hand about. “These times of woe afford no time to woo,” he said, as though capable of wooing any man woman or dog. “Sir, Madam, good night. As we made these plans a year ago you worried she was but young, but alas, she has been a mother now already, and so there must be no doubt it can be done. Now that she is free of that Montague, she shall be bred again for your benefit.”

The lady shuddered as she imagined the mechanics of the murderer of her nephew also being the sire of her hound’s first litter. What a wretched miracle it was to her, what an abject offensive waste. “I will bid her think well of you as soon as tomorrow morning,” the lady said, and truly was keen to move on from the terrible interlude of the last year, and go back to a time before that Montague had stolen her girl. “Tonight, though, she is adjusting to all of the sudden change.”

Lord Capulet stood, and came over to encourage County Paris to stand, so that he could begin walking the noble out. As they went, the lord said, “Sir Paris, I will make an earnest proposal of you to Juliet. I think she will be obedient to it—nay, I shall say it even stronger: I have not a single doubt. Wife, in the morning, go to her and acquaint her of this here Paris’s good care; and bid her, mark you me, that next Wednesday—oh, hold on just a moment. What day is today?”

“Monday, my lord,” Paris answered, still being pushed along towards the door by the lord’s arm draped firmly about his shoulders.

“Monday! Ha ha! Well, Wednesday is too soon. Oh, let’s say Thursday: bid Juliet, tell her, on Thursday, we shall have a feast as we celebrate giving her unto the care of this noble earl. Will

you be ready? Do you like the haste? We'll keep no great ado; a friend or two. For, I'm sure you understand, Tybalt being slain so recently, it may be thought that we cared quite little of him, if we revel much. Therefore we'll have some half a dozen friends, and there no more. But alas, what say you to Thursday?"

"My lord, I wish that Thursday were tomorrow," Paris answered, as they arrived at the door.

Lord Capulet opened the door, walked County Paris a few firm steps out, and then retreated back indoors. From a door left only a slit open, Lord Capulet concluded, "Well, get you gone; on Thursday it will be, then; afore me, it is so very late that we may call it early by and by." With that, he closed the door.

With Paris dealt with, Lord Capulet made his relieved way to his awaiting bed, and fell deep into a sleep beside the lady who had retired as well.

With still breath, Angelica's head peeked into the room, observed the lord and lady asleep, and finally went to light a light to shine from Juliet's window.

Act III. Scene V.

ROMEO and Juliet laid curled up close together upon the dew of the grass in the Capulets' garden. Dried tears stuck on Romeo's face as he held his wife close, knowing this would be the last time in some while that he would be able to hold her. The sky was showing the beginnings of lightening from the morning sun. If he was ever to hold his wife henceforth, he needed to be gone.

As he sat up, Juliet sat up with him. She pressed herself against him, leaning on him.

Romeo gave pause, and pet her a moment. Would that the morning lark who chirped was the nightingale, who nightly perched on the pomegranate tree. Would that yond light overhead was not daylight, but some meteor that the sun had exhaled, to be Romeo's torch-bearer on his way to Mantua, eventually, but not yet.

And yet it was the lark, who strained harsh discords and unpleasing sharps, and it was the sun, who burnt out night's heavenly candles, and it was time that Romeo was hence gone

away. He stood. Juliet stood with him. He walked, and then ran, and then climbed over the Capulets' orchard wall, Juliet bounding after him until the wall, and barking after him when he had gone.

At the wall she laid down, and stayed a long while, hoping.

By and by, as the sun crested the horizon and then climbed higher, Lady Capulet came to Juliet's post. "*There* you are," the lady said, and sat down on the grass, no longer wet with dew, beside Juliet.

The lady pet the hound for a moment, in her mechanical, raking way. Juliet did not feign to enjoy the petting, nor the company, and in fact wished for both to go away.

"Evermore weeping for your Tybalt's death? What, wilt thou wash him from his grave with tears? An if thou could'st, thou could'st not make him live. Therefore be done: some grief shows much of love, but much grief shows one stupid."

Juliet stood, walked away to the other corner of the back wall, and laid down away from Lady Capulet.

Lady Capulet scoffed, and looked across the yard at the hound incredulously.

A moment later, as the scorned lady still sat, the lord and Angelica arrived. The lady rose, brushed herself off, and all three humans convened around Juliet, who looked up at them nervously.

"What, still in tears?" Lord Capulet asked. "Evermore showering? Wife, have you delivered to her our decree regarding the county?"

"Aye," the lady lied, "but she has no interest in his name, Paris. Likely she does not remember him at all, the stupid mutt."

Juliet stood and began to leave again, but the lady bent over and barred her exit, holding the hound in place.

"What, somewhere else to be?" the lord asked, and in a flash, found himself angered. "How many years have we spent spoiling this dog, bringing her breed into the world to begin with, but to have that Montague brat quite literally steal her, have her for but half the time we did, and now she is too good for the company of those who had brought her up? Has she no interest in Paris at all? No interest in more pups, not halfblooded abominations spawned of a man, a Montague no less—bah, a

Montague, no wonder the pups still looked like dogs. Has she no interest in a litter of true fullblooded canine kind? Does she not give us thanks? Is she not proud? Does she not count herself blessed, unworthy as she is, that we have wrought so worthy a breeder to be her handler?"

Juliet whined, and tried to struggle past Lady Capulet, but the woman held her.

The lord continued, "Brace yourself against next Thursday, for then you shall be sent off with Paris, or I shall drag thee to his estate on a stretcher. Out, you green-sickness carrion! Out, you baggage!"

Juliet looked to Lord Capulet and began to make a pleading sound, but the lord interrupted and ranted on.

"Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wretch! I tell thee what—go with Paris on Thursday, or never after look me in the face. Whine not, bark not, do not beg a thing of me. We thought ourselves blessed that God had given us this remaining Great Dane, but now I see that this one is one too many. We are cursed to have her. Out! Out!"

Juliet barked as she went in and bit the hand of Lady Capulet, who shrieked as she reeled away. Freed, Juliet turned and barked at Lord Capulet to threaten him with the same or worse, and then ran away into the manor's open back door.

"Angelica," Lord Capulet said, "fetch a surgeon. Hush, hush: the bleeding is not so bad, wife, but we must have it seen to."

Angelica snorted, hocked, and then spit on Lord Capulet. "You are to blame, my lord, to rate her so."

Lord Capulet reeled as though bit himself, but found his angered footing capably: "Had I my longsword, I wouldn't know which of these dogs to put down first. Out! Out, you mumbling fool!"

"I speak no treason—"

"Out!"

Angelica turned and went into the manor after Juliet, looking back over her shoulder at the lord and lady many times on the journey.

Inside, she sought out Juliet, but found her not. After some time of this, she happened upon a servant dusting, and asked, "Have you seen Juliet?"

The servant paused his dusting. "What?"

"The dog, sir."

"Oh, yes, the dog."

"Have you seen the dog, sir?"

"Oh, yes, let it out the front a bit ago. Right mood it was in, I tell you."

Act Four **containing five scenes**

*Whither shall he, alas, poor banished man, now fly?
What place of succour shall he seek beneath the starry sky?
Since she pursueth him, and him defames by wrong,
That in distress should be his fort, and only rampire strong.*

Act IV. **Scene I.**

IN the abbey's receiving room, with daylight shining in through the window, Friar Lawrence stood with County Paris discussing whether the friar would be free to perform a blessing at the Capulet manor when Juliet was given into the county's care.

"On Thursday, sir? The time is very short."

"The lord Capulet will have it so," Paris answered, "and I am nothing slow to slack his haste."

"What says the lady to this?"

"The lady? Why, she agrees with her husband: the hound should be—"

"Pardon," the friar interrupted, waving a hand, "in invoking the title of Lady, I was referring to the hound. What says Juliet?"

"Oh. I do not know *that* lady's mind."

"Uneven is the course; I like it not."

Paris appeared to take this as an indication that the friar did not understand the request. He tried again at explaining the situation to the man. "Immoderately she weeps for Tybalt's death, and therefore have I spent little time with her; for Venus smiles not in—"

"Did she know Tybalt?"

Interrupted a second time, a cross look flashed onto County Paris's face. "What?"

"Lady Juliet: did she know Tybalt?"

"I... believe they had met."

"Does she know that he's died?"

"I..."

"What do you mean she *weeps*, sir? I worry whether you speak in metaphor to describe what you have seen, or whether you have merely heard a report containing metaphor and taken it as the real thing."

In quick speech, Paris responded, "Lord Capulet hastes her breeding in hopes it may cheer her, hence my haste in this matter."

To himself, the friar slowly pondered an excuse to slow the matter, without offending lord or royal with unjustified refusal. "If I may, when was the last time you yourself saw the lady?"

"The *dog*, friar; the hound; the bitch. If we mustn't speak in metaphors, I should think 'Lady' is right out, and furthermore of great insult."

"Fie! Insult indeed! What is a Lady?"

"I—" The County Paris looked to each side as though he expected some hidden audience, to whom he was the butt of the friar's unreason. "*What is a Lady?*"

"Yes. Define it, please."

"The... Well, a Lady is but the female counterpart of a Lord."

"And what is a Lord?"

"A man of wealth, of clout, well renowned, well esteemed."

"Tis known that Juliet is the female counterpart of Lord Romeo in every imaginable respect, and so yes, I do indeed find her to be a Lady, and no, I do not find such a thing *insulting* to Ladyship, rather I find insult in quite the opposite in your—" The friar cut himself off, made an aggravated curling of his fingers, and turned away to look through the window a moment. "I tell you outright, though I have no power to stop this transfer, I will not bless it. I see nothing here which deserves blessing."

Wroth, County Paris made his exit.

Friar Lawrence found his way to the cellar, poured himself a glass of wine, and returned up to the chapel. He sat in a pew as he turned the altercation over and over in his mind. The fiery

Lord Romeo had had some influence on him, it seemed: he had handled the situation rashly, thinking only seconds ahead instead of decades. He sat in regret long after the glass of wine was finished.

At the door, the friar heard a scratching. Bolting up from the pew, the friar went and opened the door. In came Juliet. She pressed herself sidelong against the friar's leg, nearly knocking him over with her size and strength. The friar bent over and rubbed her sides, and spoke praises to the fact that she was visiting, though her reason for it remained at least somewhat of a mystery. "Come to make confession?" the friar asked, continuing to rub Juliet. "If but you could, t'would resolve much, I think. Alas, alas."

The friar closed the door. With this done, Juliet began to mill about the abbey, sniffing intently all along on every unassuming surface which by her skilled nose could be reached. As the Lady went over the space, the friar watched her, and pondered to himself. God had joined the hearts of Romeo and Juliet; here in the chapel, the friar himself had joined their hands. By his hand they would not remain separated, though he strained the limits of his wits in conjuring up how to go about such a task wisely.

Juliet sniffed at the friar's discarded wine glass which sat on the pew, and at that, Friar Lawrence had it. Using herbs collected from the garden, the friar began at work on concocting a vial, the likes of which, when drunk, would cause a cold and drowsy humor to run through the veins; no pulse would keep its time, but cease; no warmth, no breath, would testify to life; for two days, the drinker of the vial would appear dead; and then afterwards, the drinker would awaken as though from a pleasant sleep. The friar would return Juliet to the Capulets' household, and insist upon remaining present, to prepare the blessing for the Thursday next. In the night he would administer the drink to Lady Juliet, who, being found deceased in the morning, the friar would advocate she be not buried in the dirt, but with the respect she deserved of: placed in the same ancient vault where all the kindred Capulets lie. In the meantime, by letters sent to Mantua, Romeo would know of the plot, and come to be present when Juliet awoke in the vault. From there, with Juliet known to be dead and therefore sought after no longer, Romeo would

be free to steal her away to Mantua unpursued, and there, in peace again at last, could they live.

Twas imperfect: twas underhanded; twas riddled with risk; twas not yet accounting for the humanly lord and houndly lady's confiscated pups; but in the rashness of all else, the friar entertained the idea that perhaps, in the spirit of those he aided here, it may be better to go fast and stumble than to stand still and be knocked dead.

Act IV. Scene II.

ANGELICA sat in a rocking chair on the second floor of the Capulet manor, looking out at the front yard and the street beyond. There was an unpleasant mood in the manor. Even as Angelica was alone, she felt eyes on her, condemning her from this place for condemning its lord the day before.

Coming up the street, Angelica spied the handsome profile of Juliet, walking about this way and that with her nose to the ground, as Friar Lawrence held her lead and tried to keep up. Angelica quite nearly called for the lord and lady of the house, but caught herself before the noise escaped her. She would see for herself first what this was about. She arose from the chair, hurried down the stairs, and met the friar at the door before he had chance to knock.

Juliet timidly approached. Angelica held out her hand for the hound. The hound sniffed, wagged, and pressed herself against the woman. Angelica rubbed at her side, saying, "Look who returns from confession with such a merry look." Looking up to the friar, she added, "She bit Lady Capulet yesterday, and ran out."

The friar was genuinely taken aback. "Did she?"

Angelica looked back over her shoulder, and, seeing no one else present, leaned in close to the friar's ear. "Twas very deserved. She should have bitten the lord too." Stepping back from whispering, she asked, "Is Juliet truly back of her own will?"

"Yes, I could scarcely keep up with her. I spoke with County Paris and her earlier in the day. She appears keen on him."

Angelica, now, was taken aback. “A right change of heart that is. What of Romeo?”

The friar braced before giving misguidance: “Romeo has sworn to serve Juliet, and we have sworn to make him, and we have attested Juliet’s love of Romeo. But never did we make Juliet vow a vow. Could you imagine? If she is agreeable to Paris, as I have now seen, then I will bless her transfer to his stewardship. If the lord would be so kind as to alert the county to this, I would appreciate it greatly, as I feel my own conversation with the county was mired in misunderstanding when we spoke before.”

“Well! If it suits Juliet, it suits me perfectly well, perfectly well. Lord! Lady!” Angelica called, turning and walking into the manor, leaving the way open for the hound and the friar. “Juliet has returned, and with changed heart!”

By and by, Lord Capulet came to the front door to meet with the friar and the hound. “Friar Lawrence! Has Angelica told me true of Juliet’s newfound devotion?”

“Indeed, indeed. She has met the county at my abbey, and though she is modest about it, she takes quite a liking to Paris. If it would please you, I might ask to stay with her these days until her transfer, to assure her it’s all quite alright.”

“Why, I am gladdened to hear it. This is well. Yes, please, you are our guest. For now though, if you’ll pardon,” Lord Capulet said, and then turned into the manor, and began calling to each of his servants: “You there! Fetch the County Paris! The transfer is on once more! You there! Fetch me twenty cooks! You! Seek out this list of guests, and invite them hither! Ah, my heart is wondrous light, since this same wayward girl is so reclaimed!”

Act IV.

Scene III.

IN the Capulets’ bathing room, Friar Lawrence and Angelica ran buckets of water over Juliet, washing the soap from her coat. When the water no longer ran with suds, the man and the woman took to the hound with towels, drying her as she leaned into the rubbing, kicking one of her hind legs as she stood. With Juliet dried, the friar declared, “There’s a clean lady, ready for

tomorrow. But, gentle Angelica, I pray thee, leave me to ward over Juliet tonight; I can tell she has many a regret over her actions with the Lady Capulet, and I feel it may be better if she were with someone who is a stranger to this house.”

“Tis well,” Angelica conceded, though, knowing Juliet would soon be gone from her life, she did miss the opportunity to spend any remaining time with her. To Juliet, Angelica said, “Get thee to bed, and rest; for thou hast need of it.”

As Friar Lawrence and Angelica exited the washing room and made their way in separate directions down the hall, the friar called, “Come this way, Juliet!”

Juliet looked between the two, and then agreeably followed after the friar.

There in the bedchambers, as Juliet laid on the bed awaiting the friar to join so they could sleep, the friar produced the vial he had prepared. He sat at the foot of the bed, peering into the contents inside. Placing a gentle hand on the houndly lady’s back, he said, “Farewell, Juliet—God knows if we shall meet again. I have a faint cold fear that thrills through my veins, that almost freezes up the heat of life.” The friar shook his head. “By my vow, great lady, you and your man shall be reunited.”

Friar Lawrence removed the top of the vial. With gentle insistence, he held open Juliet’s maw with one hand—she tried to keep her mouth closed, but would not bite the friar, and so reluctantly allowed him to do as he did. With his other hand, he poured the vial’s contents onto her tongue. The hound reeled, but the friar held her, forcing her to face up, for the slow liquid to fall down into her throat and take to its work.

In but a few seconds, there was no longer struggle. Juliet fell limp on the bed, dead to the world, as she would remain for two days’ time.

Act IV.

Scene IV.

LORD and Lady Capulet, Angelica, and several servants stirred about, preparing a great feast, making decorations ready for the approaching day.

“Come, stir, stir, stir!” Lord Capulet instructed, walking past the cook at the pots. “Angelica, go to market and fetch more baked meats; spare not for cost.”

“The sun is not yet risen, my lord: tis too early to find anyone at the market. And for you, tis too late at night: get ye to bed, or you’ll be sick tomorrow for having stayed up all night at this work.”

“Bah! I have stayed at a watch all night for a lesser cause, and it has never caused me to be ill.”

“Aye,” Lady Capulet interjected, “you have been on errands at all hours of the night, in your time. But I, having slept and risen already, will take the remainder of this night’s watch.”

Lord Capulet bowed his head. “Tis well. Thank you, wife.” He made his exit towards the bedchambers, but on the way stopped to speak with some servants carrying logs and spits. “Now, fellow, what’s all this?”

“Things for the cook, sir, but I know not what.”

“Make haste, make haste. You, fellow, fetch drier logs. Peter may show you where they are, if you haven’t a head to find them out yourself. For if—good faith, tis day! The county will arrive any moment, in his eagerness at this occasion.”

From outside, the blasting of royal trumpets sounded, signaling the County Paris’s formal approach.

“Angelica!” Lord Capulet called, turning back to the kitchen. “Angelica! Go waken Juliet, go and make sure she is groomed and prim. I’ll go and chat with Paris. Make haste, make haste, the county is at the door already; make haste, I say.”

Act IV. Scene V.

IN a sweet tone, Angelica called through the closed door to the bedchamber. “Friar Lawrence! Juliet!”

There came no answer from within.

Lightly she rapped at the door, expecting a great barking from the other side in response. Still, no answer from within came. She knocked louder, and again, nothing.

“Juliet?”

Gently, Angelica opened the door to the bedchamber. Standing at the doorway, she sweetly called, "Friar Lawrence, the hour is early, but tis time to wake."

Friar Lawrence, feigning he had slept a moment the night before, rubbed his eyes and sat up in bed. "Good morning, Angelica."

"Aye, a happy morning for a happy day. Juliet, come, you slug-a-bed!" Angelica stepped into the room, calling on her way, "What, not a word? Tis good you get your sleep now, for I warrant you'll soon want to sleep for a week. Madam." Angelica pushed at the unmoving hound. "Madam! I must needs wake—help! Help! Help! Alas, alas!" Angelica turned and exited down the hall, shouting, "Juliet is dead! Oh well-a-day that ever I was born! My lord! My lady!"

Friar Lawrence rose out of bed. He laid a gentle hand on Juliet. He remained close at her side. Angelica returned, leading along the Lord and Lady Capulet, saying, "Look, look! Oh heavy day!"

Lady Capulet gasped, and Lord Capulet stood with his mouth agape. Friar Lawrence, with no need of acting, stood somber.

In tears, Lady Capulet approached Juliet, and raked her rigid fingers up and down through her coat. "Revive. Look up. Look up, Juliet!"

Lord Capulet approached, knelt at the bedside, and laid his hands gently on the hound, lifting her limbs, prodding her tongue. "She's cold; her blood is settled; her joints are stiff. Life and these lips have long been separated." The lord wiped at his tears. "Death lies on her like an untimely frost upon the sweetest flower of all the field."

As the Capulets mourned in quiet sniffles, Friar Lawrence heard the sound of slow footsteps approaching up the passageway outside. Into the doorway appeared the County Paris.

The county asked, "Is the hound ready to depart?"

Lord Capulet looked up at the oblivious man. "Ready to depart, but never to return." He let out a shaking sigh. "The night before the ceremony, hath Death lain with thy bitch. See here she lies, flower as she was, deflowered by him. Death is

now my only heir; my last hound hath he inherited; I will die and leave him all; life, living, all is Death's."

The county was dumbstruck. "After all this, after as long as I have waited to see this morning's face, and it doth give me such a sight as this?"

Lady Capulet stood and briskly exited the room, knocking past the county on her way through.

"Ay me! Lady, what—"

Lady Capulet spun about and stood on her toes to look him level in the eyes. "Be gone when I return or I shall make thee gone, beginning with thy tongue."

The county found no response, and the lady turned and left. Elsewhere, it began to sound as though one was stomping through the walls themselves.

The county looked to Lord Capulet and Friar Lawrence.

"I would listen to the lady," Lord Capulet advised.

The county sputtered, cursed, and left.

Friar Lawrence knelt down beside Lord Capulet, facing the unmoving hound with him. Gently, the friar intoned, "Heaven and yourself had part in this Great Dane; now Heaven hath all, and all the better it is for the Dane. Your part in her you could not keep from death; but Heaven keeps his part in eternal life. The most you sought was her promotion; weep ye now, seeing she is advanced above the clouds, as high as Heaven itself? She is well. Come, lay rosemary on this corpse—she is your last of a great breed, and I shall insist she be treated with all the custom of your family. Bear her to church, and in the Capulets' vault shall she be placed."

Act Five **containing three scenes**

*When he doth hear abroad the praise of ladies blown,
Within his thought he scorneth them, and doth prefer his own.
When pleasant songs he hears, while others do rejoice,
The melody of music doth stir up his mourning voice.
But if in secret place he walk somewhere alone,
The place itself and secretness redoubleth all his moan.*

*Then speaks he to the beasts, to feathered fowls and trees,
Unto the earth, the clouds, and to whatso beside he sees.
To them he shew’th his smart, as though they reason had.
Each thing may cause his heaviness, but nought may make him
glad.*

*And, weary of the day, again he calleth night,
The sun he curseth, and the hour when first his eyes saw light.
And as the night and day their course do interchange,
So doth our Romeus’ nightly cares for cares of day exchange.*

**Act V.
Scene I.**

ROMEO sat at a pavilion on a riverbank, staring at the rippling ridges of the water. Rivers encompassed the city of Mantua, marking the bounds of his prison here. The rippling water seemed to be the only thing close to life within this dull city, and even this water was likely only lively as it fought to keep the greater world at bay, isolated from interest, sheltering its own monotony. A faint rain fell. The same faint rain had fallen since Romeo had arrived in the city. Never a storm, never something so solid as a raindrop, but a constant purgatory mist descending on the lands. One could never face in the direction of the sun without spotting a rainbow hanging about.

Romeo had had a dream the night before. He spoke to himself regarding the dream as he thought it over; he spoke to the river as he had so often seen Friar Lawrence speak to the plants.

“If I may trust the faltering eye of sleep, my dreams presage some joyful news at hand. My bosom’s lord sits lightly on his throne; and all this day an unaccustomed spirit lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts. I dreamed my lady came and found me dead—strange dream, that gives a dead man leave to think!—and breathed such life with kisses in my lips, that I revived, and was an emperor. Ah me! How sweet is love itself possessed, when but love’s shadows are rich in joy!”

“Romeo?”

Romeo turned around at the sound of his name. Standing across the pavilion was Balthasar, a servant from the Montague

manor. "How now, Balthasar!" Romeo called, and stood to go meet the man. The two shook hands at the pavilion's center. "Do you bring me news from Verona? Letters from the friar? How fares Juliet? Is my father well? How fares Juliet?; this I ask again, for nothing can be ill, if she be well."

The mist which hung about Mantua congregated at the two glimmering points of Balthasar's eyes. "I saw her laid low in her kindred's vault. Her body sleeps in the monument, and her immortal part now lives with the angels." Balthasar knelt. "A thousand apologies for bringing such ill news."

Romeo staggered back, feeling as though pierced by a dagger. As he spoke, he felt as though he manipulated rubbery lips with his fingers, rattled another body's teeth, pumped a bellows to make wind that was only appearing in the guise of his breath, for at this moment, he was already dead, his spirit merely lingering to puppet the corpse of Romeo for as much time as it would take to secure his grave: "Did you ride here?"

"I did, my lord."

"Did you take one of our steeds?"

"I did."

"Good, there are none swifter. You know of where my lodgings are in this city; get me ink and paper and meet me there. Once I have writ something, we will ride back to Verona."

"I do beseech you sir, have patience. Your looks are pale and wild, and do import some misadventure."

Romeo shook his head. "Leave me, and do the thing I bid thee do. Hast thou no letters to me from the friar?"

"No, my good lord."

Already slain, Romeo felt no pain at someone telling him that the killing dagger had indeed been sharp. "No matter. Get thee gone. I'll be with thee at my lodgings shortly."

Balthasar bowed his head deeply towards Romeo, and then exited into Mantua's perpetual misty rain.

Looking again into the rippling waters, Romeo mused, "Well, Juliet, I will lie with thee tonight. Oh mischief, thou art swift to enter in the thoughts of desperate men. I do remember an apothecary—and hereabouts he dwells."

Romeo turned from the waters and left the pavilion, crossed a park's misty lawn, and began down a decrepit street, the

dwellings all packed together, most merely shacks which could be seen over if one stood on their toes. By the door of one such shack, hung up on a string by his tail, was a mummified tortoise. On the ground beneath it, a stuffed alligator, missing both of its eyes and near half of its hide, the stuffing inside damp and illpreserved. Romeo pushed open the door, and stooped to stand in the apothecary's cramped hut.

From across a lopsided counter, the apothecary looked up. He was gaunt and unshaven, a visage of sharp misery. If a man needed poison, this was the man who would sell it.

Nearing the end of his need for currency along with all other earthly possessions, Romeo emptied his pockets of coins, placing them all on the counter. "I see that thou art poor. There's forty ducats: let me have a dram of poison, of such strength that it will disperse itself through all the veins, that the life-weary taker may fall dead, and that the chest may be discharged of breath as violently as hasty powder doth hurry from the fatal cannon's womb."

The apothecary made no motion to take Romeo's payment. Instead he glared, such that Romeo might think that the man wanted him dead; but alas.

"Such mortal drugs I have," the apothecary said, "but Mantua's law is death to any he that utters them."

"Famine is in thy cheeks; need and oppression starves in thine eyes; contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back. The world is not thy friend, nor the world's law, for the world affords no law to make thee rich. So break this law, and be not poor: take what I offer."

With still no hint of joy, the apothecary slid the coins off of the counter towards himself, into his palm, and stowed the payment below the counter. "My poverty, but not my will, consents."

"I pay thy poverty, and not thy will."

The apothecary went to a back room, and returned with a wooden flask. "When it be your time to depart, drink even a sip of this; and, if you had the strength of twenty men, it would dispatch you in the span of a breath."

From a hidden pocket on his garb, Romeo produced a coin worth all that together which he had already given, and set it on

the counter before the apothecary. "There again is thy gold; worse poison to men's souls, doing more murders in this loathsome world, than these poor compounds that thou art forbidden to sell. I sell thee poison: thou hast sold me none. Buy food, get thee well. Come cordial, and not poison: go with me to Juliet's grave; for there must I use thee."

Act V. Scene II.

FRIAR Lawrence embraced Friar John in the doorway of the abbey, proclaiming, "Holy Franciscan friar! Brother, ho there! It is very welcome to have you visit from Mantua. What says Romeo? Or, if his mind be writ, give me his letter."

Friar John sighed, and turned to walk about outside of the abbey, with Friar Lawrence beside. As they walked through the winding rows amidst the garden, Friar John explained, "When I was here last, after you gave me Romeo's letter, I went to seek out another brother here before returning to Mantua. He was visiting the sick. The watch, suspecting that we were both in a house where the infectious pestilence did reign, sealed up the doors, and would not let us forth; so that my speed to Mantua there was stayed. In truth, I have been in Verona and nowhere else since last we spoke. Indeed, you were likely more of a traveler than I was in that time."

"Who bare my letter then, to Romeo?"

"I could not send it—here it is again—nor get a messenger to bring it thee, so fearful were they of infection."

Friar Lawrence clutched at the letter returned to him, staring at it, wishing he could disbelieve that it was here with him, undelivered. "Unhappy fortune! By my brotherhood, the letter was not nice, but full of charge of dear import; and the neglecting of it may do much danger. Friar John, go hence; get me a crow bar, and bring it straight to my cell."

Friar John nodded. "Brother, I'll go and bring it thee."

As Friar John went, Friar Lawrence paced back and forth over a portion of the garden path. "Now must I go to the monument alone; within this three hours will good Juliet wake: she will beshrew me much that Romeo hath had no notice of

these accidents; but I will write again to Mantua, and keep her at my cell till Romeo come; poor living corpse, closed in a dead man's tomb!"

Act V.

Scene III.

COUNTY Paris and his younger sister Paige walked beside one another, boots crunching over the gravel path through the graveyard. Paige held a torch, which cut through the dark of the night. County Paris held a bouquet of flowers of a species grown only at the king's castle; black and violet and shaped like a bell, with the mouth coming out to eight waving points like a decorative compass rose. There would be no mistaking who had left them.

"Give me thy torch, Paige."

"I should like to accompany you to pay respects. I met the pup while visiting Mercutio on the day they died."

"Is that so? Well. You may come along, though I mean to be brief tonight. If it please you though, put out your torch so we may be able to keep a watch through the dark night, and not have the near light blind us."

"Very well," Paige said, and paused to snuff out the torch.

When it was out, she and Paris resumed their walk through the graveyard, until arriving at the Capulets' monument, a grand stonework head to the vault below, the heavy stone door recently opened to place Juliet inside, but now since closed.

Paris knelt at the ledge surrounding the monument, and began arranging the flowers along it as Paige stood silently behind, her thoughts for the loving mother and happy spirit whom she had not known long at all, but whom had made a nice impression.

As he arranged the flowers, Paris spoke, "Sweet flower, with flowers thy bed I strew; oh woe, thy canopy is dust and stones—"

Paige gripped Paris's shoulder. "Someone approaches."

Stopping his speech to listen, the County Paris could indeed hear footsteps walking over the gravel. He turned in the direction of the sound. In the distance, coming around a copse

of yew trees, a pair of figures lit by torchlight approached, much the same as had he and Paige.

Paris muttered, "What cursed foot wanders this way tonight? Come, Paige, let the night muffle us a while."

Together, the two stole away to hide behind a nearby yew tree, and spy out these other late night visitors from behind its trunks.

The two figures arrived at the Capulets' monument.

"Give me that mattock and the wrenching-iron," Romeo said to Balthasar.

Balthasar did as asked.

Romeo continued, "Hold, take this letter; early in the morning see thou deliver it to my lord and father. Give me the light. Upon thy life, I charge thee, whatever thou hear'st or see'st, keep away and do not interrupt me in my work. Go, be gone; if you do return to pry in what I do here, by heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint, and strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs. The time and my intents are more fierce than empty tigers or the roaring sea."

By the light of the torch which Romeo now held, Balthasar's face was lit in an expression of grave concern, but he said only, "I will be gone, sir, and not trouble you."

"So shalt thou show me friendship. Take thou that: live, and be prosperous; and farewell, good fellow."

Balthasar departed from the torchlight into the darkness, back up the gravel path. When he was well gone from the light, he turned off the path and went to hide near a hedge, to watch the young lord. To himself, he said, "For all this same, I'll hide me hereabout: his looks I fear, and his intentions I doubt."

Romeo stood at the stone door of the Capulets' monument. "Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death, gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth; with this, I enforce thy rotten jaws to open, and, in despite, I'll cram thee with more food."

With the tools Balthasar had given, Romeo pried open the stone door, stepped into the monument, and went down the cold stairway to the vault in the earth.

From the yew tree, Paris spoke: "This is that banished haughty Montague that murdered that Capulet Tybalt—with which grief, it is supposed, the good Juliet died. And here this

Montague comes to do some villainous shame to the dead bodies: I will apprehend him.”

“He is her husband, Paris,” Paige said, holding her brother back by the arm. “By blessing bestowed by Escalus, he is the father of her litter. I assure you, he only comes to pay respects as we have.”

“You add to his abominations by the syllable,” Paris said, and disengaged from Paige’s hand, and marched forth.

Left by herself, Paige sighed nervously.

“Vile Montague!” Paris called, as he marched into the monument and down the stone steps. At the bottom of the stairs was a long chamber, halfway into which stood Romeo with a torch, who turned to face the approaching royal.

“County Paris?”

“Can vengeance be pursued further than death? Condemned villain, I do apprehend thee: obey, and go with me, for thou must die.”

“I must indeed,” Romeo wholeheartedly agreed. “And therefor I came hither. Good gentle youth, tempt not a desperate man; fly hence, and leave me: think upon these departed souls and let them frighten thee. I beseech thee, please, put not another sin upon my head by urging me to fury so close to my mortal journey’s end. By heaven, I love thee better than myself, for I come hither armed only against myself. Stay not, be gone; live, and hereafter say, a madman’s mercy bid thee run away.”

Paris drew his sabre. “I do defy thy ramblings, and apprehend thee for a criminal here.”

Romeo gnarled his hands. “If thou wilt provoke me, toss me thy dagger so that I am armed, and the law be on your side in this scrap.”

Paris unsheathed his dagger, knelt, and slid it across the stone floor to the young Montague lord. The lord stood with the dagger as he had stood before, torch still in his off hand, employing no fighting stance, no light footwork.

Standing at a narrow-profiled fencing stance, Paris advanced, retreated, advanced, and made a lunge. Romeo knocked aside the county’s blade with the torch and took a step forward to stab the county into the front of the throat with the dagger, such that it went through and severed the county’s spine. The royal

collapsed, instantly dead. Romeo sighed, and turned again to face deeper into the vault. At the end of the long hall, atop a stone bed, lay the body of Juliet, mother of all Great Danes, wife of the widowed lord who now approached.

Romeo knelt before her, and laid a gentle hand on her still side.

“Oh my love; oh my wife. Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath no power yet upon thy beauty: thou art not conquered.” Romeo gently brushed back one of her ears, and ran a careful thumb over the skin, yet flush instead of pale, even though Juliet did not breathe. “Death’s pale flag has not advanced on thee. Shall I believe that Death is amorous? That that lean abhorred monster keeps thee here in the dark to be his paramour? For fear of that, I still will stay with thee, and never from this palace of dim night depart again; here will I remain with worms that are thy chamber-maids; oh, here will I set up my everlasting rest, and shake the yoke of inauspicious fate from this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last! Arms, take your last embrace! And lips, oh you the doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss this eternal slumber; let it be as good as the morning you and I first awoke as husband and wife, our breath as one, ourselves never to part.” Romeo opened the apothecary’s flask, tilted back his head, and drank. Immediately, a cold and tingling drowsiness spread to every inch of his body, head to toe, fingertip to fingertip. Laying himself to rest face to face with Juliet, Romeo spoke his last: “Oh, true apothecary. Thy drugs are quick. Thus, with a kiss, I die.”

Romeo pressed his lips to his wife’s. Face to face, lip to lip, hand resting on her side, paw resting on his neck, as so often they were found together in life, Romeo in his wife’s embrace died.

From her slumber of impersonated death, Juliet awoke entwined with Romeo. Without so much as lifting her head, Juliet kissed her husband, licking the poison from inside of his mouth, and followed swiftly after him unto eternity.

SONNETS

1.

Whiteish greyish greenish pond water lies
On this warm winter day in which we stand
Two loves, not seen as such to others' eyes
One holds the other's leash with gentle hand
I breathe the air and I enjoy the smells
Though I know that you know them all the more
Each sniff, your nose discerns where scent's source dwells
And further goods thereby you'd find in store
You look to me and ask if we can stay
There in the dirt and leaves we take repose
We wait and smell and see and hear the day
Ears tilt to bounding squirrels and noisy crows
These are the hours that fill our lucky bond
As man and dog, observing by the pond

2.

Such love is in the snuggles when we wake
Our body heat defeating winter cold
The moaning breaths my rubbing has you make
This sleepy lump of fur I may behold
The way that after one endearing yawn
You snort and then roll over on your back
And over your soft belly I may fawn
As that thin fur I rub and flank I scratch
Contented now you roll back to your side
And then we lie as one a while more
I breathe your paws and butt and breath and hide
The scents of you that I do so adore
And all these loves redouble in your kiss
How could I ever want for more than this?

3.

And there's the mailbox that you like to smell
And there's the house that has the flick'ring light
And there's a sign which must have lately fell
And there's the stream we drank from yesternight
Exploring suburb streets I would not know
If not for all these nightly walks of ours
Familiar routes initially we go
Then grow our mental map beneath these stars
As every night a farther venture calls
A cul de sac, a street, a forest trail
A breaking down of anxious lus'ry walls
A pause to chat, a faintly wagging tail
I thank you for this groundedness I've felt
This place was ne'er a place without your help

4.

There was a time when I would not forget
The countless joys you brought me day to day
The sniffing out of treats hid 'round the house
The drives out to the park to run and play
The beauty of the sunlight on your face
The scattered piles of leaves in crisp new Fall
The kisses that you gave to my pinned hand
The world's delight inside a tennis ball
So early on you made that boy complete
Rightfully took him with you when you went
The emptiness of better half removed
The pain of growing back from what was left
Always, his love for you will still be strong
After the good boys of summer have gone

5.

To heal of course seems such a pleasant thing
It takes a second's time to say the term
But having healed and having healing seen
A healed up wound is not so quickly earned
The growth they took from off your lovely paw
Is for your later good, but nonetheless
I'm sorry that you have to wear the cone
I'm sorry these short walks do not impress
In some weeks' time we'll venture out again
And long miles walk along your favorite route
Act will in joy find compliment within
Joy will in act find compliment without
This wound you heal forebears wound on my life
I love you though someday you'll be a knife

6.

A certain stance, a smile, a coy wag
I drop what I'm doing and come to you
Down on my hands and knees, head below yours
You lean in and give a cursory kiss
I kiss your shoulder and nuzzle your butt
You trot playfully off to the bedroom
I follow you and bend over the bed
I unbuckle my pants and show my butt
You give it thorough licks between the cheeks
And then you jab your claws against my thigh
I spin to face you and you grab again
You pull my hand beneath you and hump it
Your penis slides around inside my grip
I hold onto your knot and feel you pulse

7.

A oneness while I read a yellow book
And at my side you dream of some grand chase
Paws scratching bedsheets softly as they twitch
Some gentle barks, a wildly twitching face
I lie ensnared in blankets round my legs
And likewise wrapped in words on pulpy page
And also I lay snuggled in your scruff
My temple buried in your shoulder blades
Here now, I follow two stories at once
In one, thirteen dwarves and a hobbit walk
The other you whisper in sleepy barks
Telling me of a fantastical run
This old book's tale is good, but not the best:
Your doggy dream gives wholeness to this nest

8.

A storm is brewing in the people's minds
The type which makes the powers that be sweat cold
As we proclaim love comes in many kinds
And righteously demand what we are owed
No pseudoscience paper or debate
Can disillusion what one knows first hand
We aren't the monsters that you so create
Our love does not deserve your fiery brand
What else but love in handjob for pooches
What else but hate in the threats to expose
What else but love in mutual smooches
What else but hate in the laws you impose
For far too long we veiled our zooey pride
But now we see a changing of the tide

9.

A silly thing it is to watch a dog
Attempt to bury bone in human hole
He pokes the tip around and round and round
And never quite can seem to score his goal
He humps and humps and humps and humps and humps
He mounts, dismounts, and mounts, dismounts again
Between the thighs his eager penis pumps
While trying to put pups in dog's best friend
He barks to say it is the human's fault
For of his own prowess there is no doubt
Their stature is the root of this result
Too tall for doggie legs which are more stout
But if the human shows their hole just right
The knot will soon be in the human tight

10.

If when I try to kiss, you turn your head
If when I touch your sheath you do not care
Then if you'd like we can go walk instead
There's joys in life that can be found elsewhere
If when I kiss, you deeply lick my eyes
If when I touch your sheath you hump my hand
Then I'll infer what humping does imply
Some signals are not hard to understand
There are so many ways to tell me no
And just as many ways to tell me yes
Whichever choice with which you choose to go
Is with no doubt a choice that I'll respect
A fundamental part of being zoo:
For us, the beast must have a good time too

11.

Wisteria vines and pineapple stems
Little black claws and a spotted blue tongue
Cold river pebbles and grey sweater hems
Lithe little legs and soft fur thereamong
Tall granite rock faces washed in the rain
Straight little chompers that like to squeak toys
Folded up napkins with strawberry stains
Tugging on ropes with a play growling noise
Warm pumpkin pie topped with fluffy whipped cream
Top 40 music and sweet honey wines
Bubble gum pieces and puppy dog dreams
Kissing the human who visits sometimes
I bask in this new slobber on my face
A smaller breed's a happy change of pace

12.

Two feet of snow have melted into mud
Four snow-white feet have snow-black feet become
The icy seal on scents today undone
Six footfalls amble on with squelch and thud
Cold cases in this park are now back on
Unburied branch is sniffed from every side
A mother with a stroller passes by
Investigation of the branch goes on
And when this branch has been sniffed all throughout
Six footfalls will inch forward to the next
And that next branch, to one distinct from last
Will in its own time too be figured out
Two old men, each the elder in some way
Skulk in the shadowy seconds today

13.

Ten thousand traps will tempt me from this zen
Ten thousand arguments flaunt easy hooks
Those trolls assuming privilege of a friend
We all should go and read a fucking book
A better life you show me every day
Though tempt me not to look to left nor right
Where countless quibbles wait one step astray
When we in fact may stay above each fight
A shared disinterest in the social apps
A shared engagement with the woods outside
Us both bemoaning when a camera snaps
Us both delighted to go for a drive
A day in airplane mode will do one fine
The most part of the world is still offline

14.

Do not humor them, they with no interest:
They who would not know love if it licked them;
They who feign they cannot see no or yes;
They who see an animal as an “it”;
They who have turned the word science to faith
And strike down curiosity—science—
If it makes them feel they may have been wrong
Or if the truth might be too arousing.
They must not ponder a dog has a knot,
Horses slap, and dolphins will make sex toys.
They must feel they have quite an ownership—
Dragon hoard-esque—over others’ pleasures.
Instead, humor a dog with a long walk,
A cat with string, and horses with carrots.

15.

Mosquitoes buzz and sting this evening warm
Here in this clearing where we often sit
I slump upon a log, bark years now shorn
As you engage in chewing on a stick
It feels like summer long at last is here
The clinging winter’s spiteful cold drove off
The snarling ice at foot now cool earth
This late orange sun still clinging up aloft
So many others crowd the paths today
A frank departure from when winter held
When we, and only we, made bold foray
Through warding frosts, in winter jackets shelled
Our ventures take us through not space alone
But time as well, each season staked our own

16.

An errand often is a mundane chore
A boring thing which needs be done again
Though quite the opposite becomes the case
When I have chance to bring four legged friend
An overbrimming joy at coming with
Excitement to be riding in a car
A friendly polite wag to the cashier
Rewarded with a dog treat from their jar
Would that the world were more a friendly place
To those whose bodies thick with fur are clad
An hour with a canine at my side
Will always be an hour better had
Were costumes so advanced no dog would show
I'd take you with me everywhere I go

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 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.

*Featuring the stories: Personal Ghosts, Τύχων, This One
Shall Breathe Somewhere Else, and Empathy Farm, as
well as a few poems.*

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 handjob jobs 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 she morphs 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.

T'YXΩN

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 themselves 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 pleased 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 prisoner 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 needing 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

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 8;

AUGUST 2023.

In this issue,
a human and a hound snuggle in a cabin,
and a blue guitar with faded fox stickers on it is purchased.

Featuring the stories: Two Knights, Blue Guitar, and The Scraps, as well as a few poems.

TWO KNIGHTS

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

What is that man doing? one had asked in pre-dawn, and another had asked in the morning's bright hours.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

The answer, both times, had been more or less the same bitterly passive information accompanied with the same joke.

These are not the actions of a man. He is a child who will get himself killed by his petulance. Eaten by wild wolves because he goes out to the woods thinking himself one of them.

This is not a man, but a boy who would starve himself in protest because he cannot accept the death of his hamster.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

The long, slow walk from the forge temple to the bluff slope was often a noisy, raucous affair. A celebration. A parade. As Faer'yün made the walk, his ring in his hands and alone, only a few made remarks among themselves, and most politely averted their gaze. Most knew why he made this walk alone. Most knew that his husband was his dog. Most had met the tall and personable hound on Faer'yün and Mish's visits on market days.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

He had brought his ring into creation in the dead hours of the night prior, stepping alone into the forge temple with his pound of iron, his ten pounds of holy fuelwood, and a skin of his husband's urine, enough to douse into the white flames now and then and make the spirits hiss and pause and consider him. When the ring was made he picked it up. Had the ring been

forged by normal means he would have felt only the pound of weight again that he had walked in with, some climbers' tackle that he might barely squeeze his hand through. Instead, the ring forged as it was, though indeed still the same mortal weight, was also pressed down upon heavily by the locked-away spirits whom he had pestered all through the night. Upon picking up the ring, Faer'yün quickly had need to hold the cumbersome object in both hands rather than one, and would be hurrying if he trudged with it at a pace of one mile to the hour.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

So, ring in his hands, in the pre-dawn morning, Faer'yün had left the mouth of the forge temple on a straight and slow shot towards the base of the bluffs that loomed over the thatched-roofed dwellings, the bluffs that at that hour blocked out a region of the stars.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

Most, thankfully, had not made remarks on the fact of his mannish formal garb of a black tunic and grey trousers. His eldest uncle, though the grey man had not said a word while looking at him, rudely remarked to his own company that morning, I knew we were wrong to ever tell her that her meddling was cute. Later, a young boy to his mother had asked in what he thought was a whisper, Will the spirits be angered that he used to be a girl? The mother, in some of the best kindness Faer'yün had been given in town that day, said in an equally loud whisper to the boy, I don't think so Dea'yan, and then she began shuffling the boy away along a side street. Will they care that he's alone? No, I don't think so Dea'yan. Why is he alone? Sometimes people go to the other side for reasons besides weddings, Dea'yan.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

The best kindness in town that day came from his boyhood friend Silna'yan, now Silna'yün, who walked beside him. Briefly, but the only one to do so. He hadn't said much, but the words that were said, Faer'yün had hoped to hear some version of for so many years. We don't chat much these days, eh? Both of us such recluses. Such woodsmen. As one to another, and you the greater than I, Faer'yün, not a drop of the profundity of what

you do today is lost on me. Not a drop. My every blessing goes with you.

And with that said, Silna'yün had parted away, and left Faer'yün to his business.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

In what was all in all a relative lack of ceremony, Faer'yün arrived at the base of the bluff in the afternoon, and ascended up a slight grassy slope into the mouth of the through-cave, into its dark, into its cold breath. Once inside, the spirits of his ring stopped pushing down on him. Indeed, as though arriving at a different current in a riptide, the spirits instead began pulling on Faer'yün, taking him lightly and swiftly through the tunnel away from his planet, through his sun, and onto a planet in facing rotation to his.

It was the way of all planets here. Opposite the fire planet, called by some the big star, the little sun, or the candle, was the ice planet, whose surface was so reflective that she was often mistaken for her brother and called the same names. Opposite the dwarf, the giant. Opposite the oil dot, the grey dot. Many dozen others. And opposite the planet of deeds, which Faer'yün had left on an afternoon with an iron ring in both hands, was the planet of records, on which he had arrived with an iron ring in both hands for to place it.

Though alike in rotation, the planet of records was not like the planet of deeds in geography. Rather than emerge from the mouth of another cave, Faer'yün had emerged from between two trees as though stepping around a doorway. He stood in a grove of trees, a vast grove, which grew atop a shelf along a mountain. Up and down this mountain, at intervals, were more shelves, some bearing groves, some only beginnings of groves, and a number of shelves were yet blank. From his vantage a good way up the mountain he had arrived on, Faer'yün could look out into the distance and see that mountains dotted this planet too densely to count, with thick jungle in between the bases. As Faer'yün had looked out at all of this, he had made sure to keep one hand on his iron ring, and with his other hand, he idly felt at an iron nail that rested along the length of his sternum, hung there from a necklace of twine.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

As he had wandered through the grove, he had seen many trees with totems fastened to them, and many trees without.

Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.

He had known when he had arrived at his own tree, because it was the only one that, when contemplating over it, he did not get the impression that he would be immediately expelled back to his own planet for tampering with it. And, though he was no great spiritualist to read the details, the tree in fact looked like him in some ways that were obvious enough, even to the layman. A scar along one branch that looked like the scar on his left bicep, from when a pissy horse had bitten him as a child. A thinner, symmetrical, more purposeful pair of scars midway up the tree's pale trunk. And, when he had approached from a distance, the leaves had been a rough though remarkably true sketch portrait of his face. The face of an infant as the wind stirred, then nothing in the stillness, then in a building gust had been the face of a small girl, then a small boy, then a teenager, and then the man. The wind then died down, and did not presage what his face might look like in its old age. Given his business there that day, he had known that the wind was right not to.

Now, Faer'yün stood before his tree of records, held to its trunk a ring forged of the essence of his husband, and was nailing in a big iron spike from which to forever hang it. The wood did not give way to this intrusion easily, and he stood working at the tree for quite some time, every beat of the hammer another year of his own life he was transferring to his husband. He drove in the final taps: *Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk. Thnk.*

Then he stepped back, let the ring hang, and admired it for a while.

With him done with his work, the spirits did not tolerate his being there for very much longer. He politely closed his eyes, took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, he was again in the dark and cold of the through-cave, a white veil of daylight visible some distance ahead across the sandy tunnel floor. He smiled, and took his first returning breath of the cold air into his chest. Holding himself upright and proud with no great effort, he walked forward to greet the remainder of the day.

On the trail approaching his cabin, Faer'yün eyed a dry branch on the trail ahead. When he arrived at it, he stepped on it.

A moment later, an ink-black creature erupted out of the woods onto the trail farther ahead, turned to Faer'yün, and sprinted straight for him. In three seconds Faer'yün was felled by the beast, and with counter-swipes of his hands he for a short while fended off the harshest of the scratches and play-bites from his husband Mish. The transfer of life had worked for a surety: this love and familiarity with one another, Mish had blessed Faer'yün's life with for the last five years and some, but this rabid energy, Faer'yün had not seen in Mish since two autumns ago. The two wrestled on the trail there, and Faer'yün intermittently tossed pieces of the broken stick, which Mish snatched up in his jaws and crushed to wet splinters before leaping back into it with Faer'yün to take another swipe.

After a few repetitions of this, Mish leapt into a position of standing a pace away from his human husband, panting, but his eyes still gleaming with energy, daring Faer'yün to make a move. Mish's tail still wagged so quickly that Faer'yün knew an attempt at lowering himself in for a hug would only result in further swipes from the imposingly clawed dog, and an attempt to go in for a kiss would risk loosened teeth. So Faer'yün stepped forward matter-of-factly, posture heavy and unplayful, and merely gave the black dog's scruff a loving rub in passing as he got back to walking along the trail to their cabin. Mish joined in the walk, making galloping loops ahead and back to his husband, ahead and back to his husband, always back to his husband.

As they came upon the small clearing of their cabin, Mish walked beside Faer'yün. Then, the dog's tall ears turned towards something in the clearing, and he blasted forth as though he were shot from a cannon and his legs were trying to keep up with the run. The squirrel began to flee at once, but made towards the stream, encountered the water, turned left to scrambled over the pebbles, and from that point the dog was upon him, and the squirrel was made quick work of, pinned and

then given a precise and powerful bite. Mish stared down at the kill briefly to be sure the swift thing would not run away again or bite him back. Then, satisfied, Mish looked up across the clearing at Faer'yün, tail wagging, expression proud.

In a deepened voice of mature praise, Faer'yün called to the dog, Good Mish, o, so fast Mish! Good squirrel. Good kill.

As he continued to talk of praise, Faer'yün proceeded through the clearing towards where the dog stood.

To one side of the clearing, where Mish stood, was a stream which usually had running through it gentle clear waters that were good for drinking, and smooth pebbles along the banks. Amid the clearing, a campfire ring. And across the clearing, atop quite a small hill that was a runt to the hills surrounding and a dwarf to the hills nearby, was built a simple cabin. Small such that the hearth could warm the room mightily in the winter. Homely with its tufts of shed black fur forming little groups here and there around the perimeter of the floor.

Faer'yün knelt at the dead squirrel, and turned it over in thorough appraisals under Mish's eyes. Good, he finally said to Mish, and reached over and gave the dog a couple of pats on the side of the shoulder. Then Faer'yün took off his boots, picked the squirrel up, and waded across the stream with it, Mish splashing through the stream too alongside. They stepped through the woods around trees and bushes until arriving at a grassy hillside, a pocket in which to do messy work, away from the center of their grounds.

Faer'yün dressed the squirrel while Mish observed with diligent fascination. When the work was done, the small creature was separated into a fur for Faer'yün, cuts of meat for Mish, and what remained of the innards they left to the woods there on the hillside.

The two made their way back to their clearing. Faer'yün got a fire going, cooked the squirrel's flesh, and handed the pieces to Mish as they were ready. The dog ate gently and gladly out of his human husband's hand.

The two then walked a couple of laps around the clearing, not a long task, as there wasn't much to it, but the men had an appreciation for minding that no things were amiss in such spaces as concerned them. Mish lifted a leg at a tree beside the

trailhead back to town and relieved himself for quite some time. As he did, the husbands variously looked into each other's eyes or off into the woods. On the second lap around the clearing, Mish lapped up a great deal of water.

The two came back to the campfire. They sat at it side by side. Faer'yün wrapped an arm over his man, and pet the dog as they sat, Faer'yün's eyes to the flames, Mish's ears and nose to the woods. Then, with just a slightly slower stroke to the scruff, the husbands turned to each other, appraised each other's eyes, and gave themselves over to each other's kissing, which shortly led to a more intimate display there beside the fire.

In all, the two had a raucous night of abandon with one another, chasing and feinting around their clearing, intermittent carnal givings, splashing and swimming in the stream, feasting from their stores of preserves, and ultimately falling into deep slumber flesh to fur beside the burning fire.

In the morning, Faer'yün woke on the grass with his nose buried in the scents of the thick fluff of fur at Mish's chest, and a feeling of drool at the corner of his mouth. The warmth along the front of his body connecting to the heat of the thinner-furred underside of the dog was a sort of paradise. Faer'yün pulled himself in closer with the dog. The dog, awakened, stretched against Faer'yün, and then craned his head down to point his warm muzzle to the human. As the birds chirped in the cool morning around them and the smell of last night's fire ambled past, Mish and Faer'yün shared some soft morning kisses, and then Faer'yün cradled the dog for a while, the dog's breathing nose resting in the pocket under the human's chin, as the human pet him.

Mish eventually stretched again and yawned, and with that, the two men disentangled from one another and stood up. Mish trotted a brief distance away to relieve himself and mark a middling section of the clearing. Faer'yün stood in place, finding his joints unusually sore that morning, and he did some stretches beside the faintly smoking remains of the fire while Mish did some appraising laps around the clearing.

There were easy enough days ahead of the two, for a time. Always there was work to do, but for the moment, not so much of great excitement. Faer'yün went to the cabin and dressed in

his usual attire for cool autumn days such as this. A coarse and undyed tunic, brown trousers, thick wool socks, and boots. Mish came trotting in through the doorway as Faer'yün was seated atop a chest, bent over forward and tying the boot laces. The dog came straight over and kissed the human briefly, then continued forward and hopped onto the bed, and laid down to watch for the human to be done with the knotwork.

When Faer'yün stood up, Mish stood up as well, wagging. The two set out, Faer'yün closing the cabin door behind them. With a hand axe in tow, Faer'yün went with Mish into the woods to add to their stores of firewood.

There was no hurry to it. Faer'yün took to the work more lightly than he normally might, in fact, as his joints still held on to the soreness of that morning. He sighed a bit as he thought about it, while carrying a few logs back to the clearing. He had certainly heard no shortage of old men feigning horror at his propensity to sleep on the ground. He had not gotten the joke, and had more or less considered the old men weak of will, not made of the same hardness as himself. But, with Mish's age decreased and his own increased, he was now perhaps getting his first true impressions of the latter half of the balancing.

Faer'yün glanced up to see a black streak crashing around through the brush, and he smiled. If the price of renewed youth in the dog was that the human might now prefer to spend more of his nights in his bed than on the grass, then he supposed he could own up to some small ignorant folly from his youth, and join the ranks of grumbling old men. He had already been a homebody. A curmudgeon was not so great a step.

Faer'yün saw the edge of the clearing ahead.

Mish, tromping and sniffing, advanced far ahead of the human up to the clearing's edge. There, the dog's posture shifted, hairs on his back raised, and he shot forward into the clearing, barking of enormous offense at some transgression.

Faer'yün ran forward to catch up, burden of logs still in his arms.

When he arrived upon the edge of the clearing himself, he saw Silna'yün, his friend, standing near the campfire ring. Mish walked in fast circles around the intruder, all hair still raised, though flying tail and lack of barks or growls gave away a

happiness that this abhorrent egregious intruder was a friend. Silna'yün, though not daring to take a step, raised a hand in a wave as he saw Faer'yün exiting from the woods.

Good guard, Faer'yün called to Mish, in a voice of deep praise, a voice he so often had occasion to use with the man. Good find, good spot, good friend, good help. Mish, in the midst of these called praises, stopped his circling of the visitor, and crossed the clearing back to his husband. Faer'yün dropped the logs aside and met Mish in a crouch, so he could rub and pet the dog fully as the dog walked back and forth against him and wagged.

Faer'yün then stood, and he and Mish came together to meet the visitor.

What youth in him! Silna'yün remarked to Faer'yün, looking at the lively dog. He's your same Mish? Not a wilder pup of his you'd never mentioned?

Faer'yün, playing along, gave assurances that this was in spite of appearances the very same dog.

Good, yes, wonderful, then if he is he and you are you then my presents are all labeled rightly.

With that, Silna'yün unshouldered his pack. He set the immense thing standing up at his feet, loosened a pair of fasteners holding the top shut, and began withdrawing parcel after parcel and setting the colorful packages around himself on the grass. Mish took big sniffs of them all, nose pressed close against the sides of them as he did.

Still rummaging and setting things out, Silna'yün went on and said, I'll spoil his presents to your human ears, it's mostly things from the butcher, and a little from the tailor. I even paid visit to the cobbler, on rumor that some folks are having dog shoes made for the winter, but in the course of our conversation I came to realize, rather on my own, that of course if Mish had need of such a thing, his master would have already got him it. The offer stands that if you would like a two-pair of shoes for him I can arrange it, but as it was I left the cobbler's shop with exchange only of pleasantries.

By the time he was done and stood upright from his pack, there was a score and then some of colorfully papered parcels laid out around him.

Faer'yün stepped over to where Mish stood sniffing eagerly at a package wrapped in bright green paper. The human knelt at the dog, and pet him slowly as he looked around at the gifts.

This is so much, Faer'yün said, knowing that to say it was too much would cause insult in how true of a hit it would be.

I did become carried away, perhaps, Silna'yün said with a warm, put-on ruefulness. He stood behind his pack, hands resting over the top of it, as though it were a soldier's tall shield. He did not go on to offer any apology over the presents.

Still petting Mish, who had sat down and was watching and listening upon noticing the pauses in the air between the humans, Faer'yün offered, I take it these are in good tidings over yesterday's doings. Why so many, is all that I ask.

Still standing with his hands resting on his pack before him, and with a tightly guarded mask of joviality, Silna'yün sniffled, and said, Making up for lost time. I was already far enough behind, eh? Now, I worry you've set me back even farther.

Faer'yün tried to speak, and found nothing.

Already now both made sorely vulnerable, the two humans each stepped cautiously aside from their shields, and hugged one another.

The gifts were all very strongly to Mish's liking. Quite a number of bones and smoked meats, much of which Faer'yün put away to parcel out later, though certainly too with no shortage given now. There was also a blanket for the husbands to share, a stuffed rabbit toy and a stuffed deer toy for Mish which he gladly took guardship of alongside whichever bone he was chewing, and a new knife for Faer'yün excellently made.

Silna'yün remarked, I would have liked to get you something more, in the line of spirits, ale, wine, tobacco, but when inquiring out your tastes among the merchants, I've come to the impression that you've become quite the abstainer.

Amused, Faer'yün pondered on that. Abstainer, no. I think I have just tended to find my revels elsewhere. I haven't had a cup of ale since we were last at the pub, the one bloody halfway up the bluff face.

Faer'yün! Ye madman! That was four, five summers ago!

Faer'yün contemplated on that, and indeed, so it was.

Silna'yün, on invitation, stayed the evening and sat around a fire with Faer'yün and Mish as the larger raw cuts of beef were cooked. Silna'yün did in fact produce four skins of wine from his pack, the very last of the pack's contents he assured, and the humans drank as they chatted the night away. Mish was offered a portion of wine as well, but refused it and gladly resumed work on a pig femur. Faer'yün agreed, at one point, to visit the pub on the bluff face some evening in the coming days. Late in the night, with an empty pack, a full stomach, and good spirits, Silna'yün sauntered away back up the trail towards town, loudly bellowing a drinking song to the night frogs and crickets. Faer'yün made his stumbling way to the cabin up the short hill, not helped by the lively dog who took the stumbling as a game and made playful barks and swipes. The two did engage in their usual revelry of sorts on the doorstep, before then finally making their way inside onto the bed together. There, they fell into a good sleep befitting of their good night.

The following afternoon, Faer'yün packed a day bag, holding in it some small furs to trade, a water skin, and some coinage, among a few items of miscellany. The flint, for one, was more a woodsman's totem of comfort than it was a likely necessity on a trip into town. Mish laid at the edge of the bed, chin on his paws, watching his husband pack. He then, with all the same interest, watched his husband change into his formal wear, the black tunic and grey trousers.

Late afternoon, Mish was ever the popular personality around town, flocked to by children who crowded to pet the friendly, handsome, large dog whose owner was occupied making small chat at the stalls of long acquainted local barterers. He was given a fair deal on the furs he sold. The most of them were from game that he had not taken for the fur, being long since furnished enough in those, but rather for the meat to smoke and be kept in stores for his husband for the coming winter. For his own stock he had been at work making preserves of wild berries and stores of wild veg and nuts that, while some of the varieties were likely to survive the winter, were also all certainly easier found before snowfall.

When his business at the market was done, Faer'yün was tempted by the road out of town, back to home, where he could

continue squaring things away, sharing in Mish's good company and in Mish's good company alone, as had more or less served him beyond adequately in the preceding seasons. But a promise was his business in town, and as he was an honest enough man and the promise made to a wonderful fellow, Faer'yün turned instead up the road towards the bluff. Mish came closely alongside.

Together, as the evening fell upon them, Mish and Faer'yün stepped into the pub that was halfway up the bluff beside town. A din of merry voices filled the air. Mish stalked hastily in and began at making the rounds immediately, approaching groups at all tables and booths to sniff at the humans and their foods. Some ignored the dog, others delighted in his visit and offered praise and pets and some portions of fried potato wedges, which seemed to be the predominant dish that night. One man, upon being nosed at by the dog, roared a curse and arose ready to kick the animal, only to get a better look at which animal it was, and lift his gaze to indeed find the animal's other half standing in the pub's doorway, watching.

The man retook his seat, and glowered down at his potatoes.

Faer'yün continued to glare.

A moment later, the man glanced over to see if he was still being watched, and then shuddered. Embarrassed, caught out, the man called to Faer'yün, Well I didn't, did I?

Faer'yün raised his eyebrows, a show of incredulity that that was all the man had for himself.

Mish glanced alertly between the belligerent and Faer'yün, waiting for a verdict.

Faer'yün let out a puff of air, and turned towards the bar. Mish came trotting over to join him. When Faer'yün sat at a stool, Mish sat on the floor beside him, facing the belligerent man who kept cautiously glancing back, until eventually finishing his drink and making an exit.

Later into the evening, Faer'yün heard his name called, and spun around on his stool to see Silna'yün entering, alongside a small troupe of other friends whom Faer'yün hadn't spoken with for longer time than he could properly place.

The night was merry, and in the years that followed, Faer'yün and Mish became fixtures of the town's pubs, or at least, so it

felt when an excited rise would come over the din at the arrival of the black dog. Twenty nine days out of thirty, the human and hound husbands still kept to themselves in their pocket of the woods. But when they did have occasion to go into town for trade and the like, the two gladly made an evening of it as well, and the town made no fuss at all of welcoming the stiff human and the lively dog.

On a night over five winters after Faer'yün had given half of his years to Mish, the two men walked through town from one pub to another. Faer'yün had hoped to find Silna'yün or one of his sisters, Mera'gan or Nes'gan, as he had brought with him into town a small gift that he had wished to impart. An agate stone, near the size of his fist, found as he and Mish had been on a hike through the bluffs. Orange, the color of Silna'yün's birth month, not Faer'yün's, which was a fine enough pretense to be rid of the thing.

Silna'yün had not been found though, at the pub in the town's center that night, and so the husbands, after waiting it out for a pint, now made the trek to the pub on the edge of town by the river. With them was Chim'gan, a friend who had been at the pub who the husbands had sat with for the pint. Sober, she was a quiet, modest woman. Drunk, she was a font of bold advice and ravenous to pry at sensitive matters. This night, she had been at the pub for some time before the husbands had arrived, and was drunk.

As they walked, she said loudly to Faer'yün, The next time a farmer around here kicks it, you need to jump on that opportunity.

Pardon? Faer'yün asked, trying to keep a serious composure.

You are going to buy a farm by this time next spring. You are so good with animals.

Indeed, Chim'gan.

So good, Chim'gan repeated, and then went on, As a start, maybe some breeding work, ah? Get Mish a little lady friend to suit him? Would you like that Mish? Hm? Mish?

Mish looked uncomfortably up at Faer'yün regarding the way he was being condescended to.

Faer'yün stooped for a few steps to give Mish a few assuring pats to the side.

Chim'gan continued, Feh, maybe after this many years he wouldn't even know what to do with a bitch, so used to his husband accommodating. Arrarrarr, you want me to mount that flee-ridden mongrel, that hairy beast? You want me, me! the great Mish! to copulate with an animal? I think not! Down here at once, Faer'gan! Let me show you what this studhood is deserving of!

Tears of laughter augmented Chim'gan's cheeks as she shrieked out the last lines. Faer'yün felt he could do little other than blush and bear it, and hope that more friends might provide the woman other topics when the next pub was reached.

Eventually through getting the most of her laughs out, Chim'gan wiped at her eyes, and said, I misspoke in there. Even with the joke, even speaking as Mish, I should have called you Faer'yün, not Faer'gan.

I was not so greatly pained by it, in the context, but thank you.

Does he think of you as his husband, though? Not as his wife? That was what I stumbled over.

As she said it she stumbled over an uneven stone in the street, and then caught her balance again on Faer'yün's offered arm. They continued on like that, Faer'yün's arm weighed down as they went.

Faer'yün admitted, By scent, and by the pleasures of the flesh, he likely does indeed think he has a wife. In all other matters of living, he has a husband. Either way, my care as concerns him is only that he think well of me.

Chim'gan gave a thoughtful hum as she walked along, eyes closed, leaning on Faer'yün's arm.

Any strangers looking at us would think you were my father, Chim'gan said.

Faer'yün thought on that, and then said, I suppose so.

How many years are left for you? Chim'gan asked sleepily.

Faer'yün answered, Some, but perhaps little more than five. As a natural consequence of balancing our number of years left, I have fettered the pace at which the years age him, and, in balance, spurred on the pace at which the years age me.

The two friends and Mish arrived at the pub by the river.

More seasons went by. Faer'yün and Mish spent the springs on long hikes, the summers splashing and lolling about in the streams and lakes, the autumns in foraging and hunts, and the winters snuggled together in their cabin on their bed.

On a night nearing nine autumns after Faer'yün had given half his years to Mish, the two men sat at a bench outside of the pub in the town center. Faer'yün, a bit drunk, sat with a pint from inside in one hand, and his other hand rested on Mish, who had climbed up onto the bench too and sat beside him. The both of them had the startings of grey in their hair, Mish in the muzzle, Faer'yün in some streaks at the temples. It was past midnight, and much of the merriment from inside had died down, their friends gone home, and last call now held in Faer'yün's hand. He took a drink.

Mish turned his head over, and kissed his human husband on the side of the mouth. The human, on lazy reflex, parted his mouth for the dog, and turned in as well so the two of them could exchange careful loving licks at each other's tongues.

Faer'yün leaned down and gave a parting smooch to the side of Mish's neck, planting the kiss deep within the fluff, and then sat upright again, and had another sip from his ale.

The two looked around the square. Across the way from them, a man slowly walked across their view, some burden of wooden beams balanced at his side. For a time, his were the only footsteps, and the rest of the town was quiet.

The man paused. He set his burden down.

From behind him, another man quickly walked up, and struck him with a staff. The stricken man collapsed. The man with the staff turned, and began walking away as quickly as he had approached.

Mish, seeing what had unfolded just as well as Faer'yün, gave an irate bark, followed by a concerned growl.

Faer'yün looked around the square once more. Barring some person lurking in shadows or peering out from within some shuttered window, none had seen this deed besides himself and Mish.

The retreating figure was nearly around a corner, off to some minor street.

Faer'yün did hesitate. What he had just seen, he had seen other versions of quite a number of times. A squirrel crushed in Mish's jaws. A deer taking a fall struck by an arrow that he himself had sent flying to it. And here, a human. A thought settled in Faer'yün that, in his heart of hearts, he felt no affinity for humans greater than any else. To see a man struck dead was a surprise. Whether it was anything more than that, he wasn't quite certain.

It was Mish's reaction that brought Faer'yün around. There was a concern in the dog at what he saw. And indeed, now so directed, Faer'yün saw it too, in two parts. The first was waste. The retreating man took nothing from the fallen man before fleeing. The second, true even if unpoetic, was threat. So often, the husbands made laps around their clearing, searching into the nearby woods for anything amiss, anything that might pose to them a danger. Here in town now was such a danger, retreating such that it might hide until able to later strike again.

Careful, follow, Faer'yün commanded.

The dog hurried down from the bench, and ran after the attacker who was just leaving sight around a corner. Faer'yün ran after his husband. The attacker did not so much run, even after glancing over his shoulder and seeing that he was being pursued, but he had gotten a head start, and evaded Faer'yün around several corners and narrow streets. Mish, though no doubt able to close the distance at a moment's notice, did not get ahead of the sight of his human husband, and would stand at the mouths of alleys barking the next way. In this manner the husbands pursued the attacker to an edge of town bordered by the woods, which he quickly stepped into. To one who did not realize he was being pursued by woodsmen, it may have seemed like a tidy escape.

Faer'yün picked up his run to a sprint, crashing through the brush alongside Mish after this man.

Shortly, they broke through out of the brush, into a small, even, circular clearing, where long grass moved like the waves of a lake on that night. In the center of the clearing, no longer fleeing and indeed facing the men, was the one they had been after. Faer'yün came to a kneel, sliding over the wet grass briefly, to wrap an arm around the dog's neck, palm firmly

holding him back at the chest. At this asking, Mish did indeed come to a stop, standing growling, hair raised, within five strides of his violent desires. But, at his human husband's asking, he did stand still, rather than close such a meager distance. Faer'yün, satisfied the dog would indeed stay, gently took his hand off the dog's chest, and stood to face and appraise who they had gotten.

The man stood in place, there among the grass, in the light of a waning gibbous. He wore formal attire, a black tunic and grey trousers, much like Faer'yün's very own which he wore that very night. The man was, in fact, one whom Faer'yün had seen about town now and then, though his name, he knew not. One hand rested on his staff, which stood beside him, his very same height. Now seeing it better, Faer'yün saw that it was not a staff in strict terms, but a farmer's scythe. Faer'yün scoffed upon seeing the gleam of the blade, given the man would look a fool in a wheat field harvesting while dressed in his finest as he was. The man's face was cleanshaven. The man's brow was pinched together and his upper lip raised in something of a snarl. Confusion. The man regarded the husbands who had pursued him with confusion.

What have you done? Faer'yün barked.

What have you done? the man asked back, though with none of the same aggression, none of the same haste. His voice was both more rasping and more highly pitched than Faer'yün had expected. It sounded like the croaking voice one would give to a frog when telling a make-believe story to a child.

In his same slow, frog-like voice, the man went on, You should not have seen me. My calculations are without error.

The man looked down at something, which he lifted up to breast height. A codex, open to some middle page. He then looked up at Faer'yün, down at Mish, and then up at Faer'yün again, and said, with his visage moved from confusion to warm amusement,

O, how interesting. Though my calculations remain as errorless as the rotations of the planets, it seems I had not accounted for your amendment to my data. Faer'yün, I presume, and beside you where all those years disappeared to. Well met. I am Death.

Mish's posture recoiled suddenly, and he turned in to his husband with a whine.

Faer'yün took a moment to realize what worried the dog. Not the name. It was not a name he would have occasion to know, himself. Kill, catch, and even the dead object of prey, certainly. The name itself, Death, was in some ways too abstract. The night frogs and crickets had utterly stopped singing. The wind did not blow, yet it did not leave a calm stillness, but in fact a rather tempestuous stillness. The grass stood in choppy waves frozen. The trees craned all to one way, but quivered not a hair. The passage of time had been halted.

Death went on, I am impressed, in truth. Ordinarily, I only cross paths like this with those who have cheated me.

Faer'yün, his words alone Mish's all too airy shield, spoke, You must be very busy. Would that we had known it was you, we would not have slowed your haste.

Death laughed, the sound of it more frog-like than ever.

O, do not worry yourself. As the words seem to flick constantly across my tongue now and here, rest assured that I have come and gone from this conversation many times, and my hands have been very busy elsewhere, in woods and in towns. As I have said, and as many besides myself have repeated, my calculations are, more or less, without error. Only anomalies such as yourself can muddle things.

Faer'yün countered, Strew my brain thread from thread across this yard, and nowhere in it will you find I ever had intention to cheat you.

Death's ribbiting laugh came even more enthusiastically.

O, indeed, indeed! You misunderstand. We meet here with no malice, none at all. You still have time left, good Faer'yün. Well.

Death vanished his scyth, and in its place held a pen. He made a small mark in his codex.

Some time.

Be that you tell me it is fleeting, we may like to leave here and be back to it.

Are you one for bartering, sir? Death asked.

Faer'yün, though in this moment wishing he had a more leery head about him, was one for bartering indeed. He said to Death, You have my ear.

Anomalies who cheat my calculations are easiest addressed by anomalies alike. A keeper of the law transgresses the very law he keeps that he may apprehend the ill-meaning transgressors. A keeper of the law who never scrapped nor swindled would be a dullard. If you both would become my knights, and end those whose years have overstepped their course, then in fair payment I would give the amount of half of those overstepped years to you, and the other half to the very one whose ring is hung by a nail driven through your tree. I would give you such powers as you would need for the job. The freedom to move as spirits yourselves through the planet of records, to find out your marks. The magic to kill without my being there.

Death disappeared his codex and pen, and in each hand, held forth a black apple.

In his mind's eye, Faer'yün saw the grey that was peppered among Mish's black chin.

Faer'yün took an apple, bit it, and then took the other, and held it down to Mish.

The dog took a bite of the apple offered.

Death stepped forward, and kissed the cheek of each of the two husbands before him, one and then the other.

Good hunting, Faer'fey, and Mish'fey.

—

Hollow cheeks. A missing ear. An interrupted halo of thin hair remaining. A poor audience of teeth in the theater of his mouth. Faer'fey had stood, arms crossed, looking at this tree of records for some time, as Mish'fey sniffed up and down the trunk. Eight years, the man had lived past his mortal term, and he did not look otherwise. The leaves of the tree in a gentle wind showed the face of an ordinary enough boy. In a stronger wind, the leaves shifted to show an ugly enough elder. And in a wind that howled was shown that the man's extra years had not been kind to him. Stepping closer, Faer'fey examined the grooves in the bark of the tree. The man had attended school as a youth. His first kiss had been with another boy at his school. On two occasions, he tortured rats to death. He enjoyed helping the cook-maid in the kitchen but was scolded if caught mingling

with the help. When he married, his marriage lasted fifty and one years, until the death of his wife to ailments of the lungs. They had three sons early in their marriage, and one daughter some years later. He was a devoted husband and loved nothing more than attending social functions with her at his side, particularly delighting in the gossip the two of them would share during the carriage ride home. For a career, he was a brilliant mathematician, and had broken open theorems that seemed to be becoming the bases for new branches of mathematics entirely. He spent the years after his wife's death secluded in his manor. He was to die of heart failure having attained the age of eighty and one years, but had hired a powerful witch to detach his mortal body from all conception of any of his deeds, and hired a physician to remove his heart and replace it with a pig's. The play had given him eight more years to stew about in his manor. Perhaps in his writings, there were conjectures on mathematics that would turn the world on its head. A grey man and a black dog came in through an unlocked door one day and cut out the pig's heart, putting the mathematician's extended term to rest.

A tightly curled beard. The bones of once-brilliant birds now piercings in his ears, nose, and lips. The tree of records for this man was littered from trunk to twig with scars that spoke of broken bones, gaping cuts, strong poisonings, searing burns. The man was a high leader of a holy order of conquerors, his writhing proclamations gospel. He had never known any life but torment, branded on each heel before he had fully left his mother's dead womb. He was to live zero minutes, but had in all his hours lived among such a miasma of death, a quota of animals slaughtered and their blood never not upon him, that he had become a part of an undetectable blot within Death's formulas, and he lived twenty and one years before a black-hooded assassin stole matter-of-factly across his camp, and with a simple knife ended what Death's grandeur had not been able to sting.

The beak and eyes of an eagle. The antlers of a great stag. A scar along the back of his neck where a guillotine had once malfunctioned. This man was a king who on fifty occasions had eluded Death under the protection of another god-spirit. He was

eight hundred and ninety and eight. On the day the last of his protections expired, the castle's corridors were abuzz with Death's knights, and Faer'fey and Mish'fey were not the ones to secure the kill on him, though they had seen it.

Such were the records of Faer'fey and Mish'fey's service as knights under Death.

One day, some decades after a then-Faer'yün had given half of his years to a then-Mish, the husbands were exiting the mouth of the through-cave at the base of the bluff. As Faer'fey's eyes readjusted to full daylight, he all at once noticed the presence of a figure standing beside him, and he wheeled to face them, taking a hop back, hand reaching to hover at the hilt of his knife. Mish'fey wheeled around likewise and barked, bared his teeth.

Peace, Faer'fey, the man said. He was dressed in a dark blue robe of fine materials, hood drawn up upon his head. He wore a goatee, and smiled as though the husbands before him were about to be his playthings.

The robed man continued, Would that we had more time for introductions, but alas, you will have to take a stranger at his word. I am a defected knight of Death, come to warn you that Death has gone to your tree of records and had you marked.

And Mish'fey's tree as well?

Yes, the robed man said.

His calculations are indeed as predictable as he has always bragged, then, Faer'yün said, and resumed walking away from the mouth of the cave, towards town. Mish came along beside, ears attuned to hear if the stranger took any steps to follow.

The stranger, now rather more alarmed than gleeful, called after the husbands, If your next mark be in this town, killing him will no longer earn you any favors.

Faer'yün stopped, and looked over his shoulder at the man to say, Indeed. We are no longer killers. Our bargain with Death never included the word eternity. And even so it was generous. We have seen many more good seasons come and go in our woods than I should have once though possible. But I am a woodsman. I have known, from the hare whose flesh feeds my husband to the riverbed whose water has run dry, that eternity is not the way of things here.

With that, Faer'yün and Mish continued down towards the town, passed through it with no great ceremony, and proceeded on to the path to their clearing.

There in their woods, Faer'yün and Mish splashed through their stream, and Mish was given a feast of the last of the stores of dried meat. Lastly, the husbands went on a walk together. Faer'yün was struck down midway through taking a step, and at the same instant, Mish was struck down midway through taking a curious sniff of his husband's hand.

BLUE GUITAR

August 1st, 2023

Mrs Michaels stepped into the pawn shop off the highway, and was greeted by a rush of air conditioning and the chime of a digital bell sounding over the door. Looking around the brightly-lit space, there were rows of DVDs, a bunch of power tools in the back, a wall of various VCRs and other TV accoutrements, and, hanging on the wall behind the glass counter full of jewelry, there was what she had come here for: a selection of electric guitars.

As Mrs Michaels began making her way there, a clerk poked his head up from one of the DVD aisles. "Help you find anything?"

"Well, maybe! I wanted to get a guitar for my son."

"Everything we have is up behind the counter there! See if anything catches your eye, I'll be right over."

The clerk looked blankly down at the stack of DVD cases he held, and then at the shelf of other DVDs in front of him, and then resubmerged into the aisle.

Mrs Michaels went over to the guitars and had a look. Some of them looked a bit ridiculous: one was pancake flat, and another only had the neck where the strings went and no body at all. Two of them were pink which was an immediate big fat N-O.

The clerk came around behind the counter. Polishing a moose-themed novelty coffee mug, he asked, "Anything catch your interest?"

Wearing her consternation on her sleeve, Mrs Michaels informed the clerk, "I don't really know what I'm looking for here. Do all of the electric guitars for boys work?"

The clerk moved past the idea that guitars were gendered like a kangaroo past a speed bump, and turned to face the guitars with Mrs Michaels. Still polishing the mug, he said, "Well, I'll be the first to admit I can't make any of them play The Rolling Stones, but let's see. This one has... two. Two strings. Should have six. This one has, four. We're getting closer." Going down the line, he did ask, "Your son doesn't like pink?"

"It's a birthday present, I'm not trying to *punish* him."

The clerk gave a customer service laugh, did nothing to call attention to his pink hair, and arrived at the last guitar that was hung up. It was a blue electric guitar, with several faded stickers on it of foxes.

"Six strings! Promising!" the clerk announced. He set the mug down on a foam-padded section of the glass counter, and reached up to take down the guitar. Flashing a little grin, the clerk said, "Now, refrain from being too impressed, but I did learn ONE chord to be able to test these."

"Ooh, further along than me."

The both of them chuckled. "Let's see here..."

The clerk laboriously positioned his fingers around the neck of the guitar. Then, once the hand was in place, he again flashed a smirk at the customer, looked down at the guitar, and used the end of his thumb to give the strings a strum.

All at once the fluorescent lights overhead flashed bright and then shattered. Mrs Michaels covered her head, while the clerk hit the ground behind the counter shouting "TAKE THE MONEY I DON'T CARE!"

For a little bit there was silence in the shop, as Mrs Michaels stood there and the clerk laid there.

Curtly, the clerk then got up, and set the guitar out on the foam padding on the glass counter beside the novelty moose mug.

"Wowza," he said, "wonder what did that."

24 years earlier

Gretchen was in her attic hangout in July with the window closed wearing her fursuit and hotboxing the fursuit head while jumping around and playing her guitar. The guitar was blue and had stickers of foxes on it, matching her fox fursuit.

When the heatstroke began to set in, Gretchen, or Poisonberry as she was called in the suit, fell into a series of only striking the D5 power chord on the guitar, sluggishly. Again and again, slower, and then slower, and then, done.

If anyone ever played an open G on her guitar she would blow up all of their light bulbs.

back to present

“Maybe some kind of power surge?” Mrs Michaels offered.

The clerk took in a deep breath and gave a big, well-this-sucks sigh, looking around at all of the broken light bulb glass around the pawn shop. The glass’s shimmering was, in some ways, kind of pretty as it caught the sunlight that came in from the windows.

“Yeah, maybe some kind of power surge.”

The glass had, fortunately, not fallen within a perfect 6.66ft radius circle from the shop’s two occupants, or, more specifically, the glass had not fallen in a perfect 6.66ft radius circle from the blue guitar with the faded fox stickers that was on the counter.

“Um, tell you what,” the clerk said. He ran a hand back through his hair. It wasn’t really on his mind or Mrs Michaels’s that it was pink. “I got a lot of glass to sweep and probably a few light bulbs to order. Price tag on this guitar says two hundred bucks. I’ll knock that down to five dollars and throw in a case and some picks and an amp and all of the cables too, and if any of it doesn’t work you can come back and return it tomorr... well, whenever we can re-open.”

Mrs Michaels reached into her purse, took out a five, and slapped it on the counter. “Deal.”

a few hours later

Mrs Michaels's son Jackie was getting a ride home with his friends.

"Shut up, shut the fuck up!" Jackie said faintly through gasping breaths, tears in his eyes, stomach muscles hurting from laughter. Bent forward onto the passenger dash, he choked out, "I can't fuckin breathe!"

"Okay," Hank said from the back seat, voice flat, dropping the bit he had been doing. "All done. No more joking."

"Ohhh I don't trust you," Jackie said, and had a few lingering fits of giggles, then he sat upright, straight, trying not to think of the gay furry voice Hank had been doing. It had been *too* good.

"Hey Jackie?" Hank asked from the back, deadpan.

"What, fuckface?" Jackie asked back, trying to equal Hank's flat delivery, but the voice came out lilted with a smile and an almost laugh.

Hank went on, "No, hey, turn around and face me for a sec, I'm serious. You got something on you, I'm gonna get it."

Jackie steeled himself, and twisted around in the passenger seat, getting tangled up in his seatbelt, and contorted himself around over the center console to face the back seat.

Hank looked worried, and leaned to see the side of Jackie's face. "Yeah, you got... hold still. Hey. You got something behind your ear—hold STILL." Hank reached behind Jackie's ear. Keeping his hand there, his face scrunched up in confused worry. Under his breath, he said, "owo what's this?"

Jackie almost ruptured something laughing so suddenly while twisted around like that. He tried to slap Hank, but could barely lift his arm in his giggles, and Hank, giggling evilly himself, had got up off his seat and huddled back up into the corner out of slapping range of the passenger he had enfeebled.

"Alright, alright!" came the voice of Dianna, the annoyed driver. "Children! Driving! I will kill us!"

"Older than you," Hank countered, scampering to the other side of the back seat to get farther from Jackie, who had caught his breath again.

"I'm eighteen now," Jackie added, and shot a hand out to grab Hank, but was repelled back by a karate chop from the

fucker. It was dumb but actually a really solid hit. Jackie turned and faced forward in his seat again. He rubbed at his wrist with his other hand. It was for sure going to bruise.

Hank settled in in his new place in the back seat on the driver's side.

"When's your birthday?" Dianna asked.

Jackie shrugged. "Today."

"oh my god, happy birthday!"

"Yeah."

"Hank say happy birthday!"

Hank gave a deadpan echo of "happy birthday."

"Thaaaaanks," Jackie droned.

Dianna slammed the brakes. Jackie's seatbelt locked and caught him. Hank got body checked by the back of Dianna's seat, his breath leaving him in an unflattering wheeze. A groaning "ow" came from the back seat. Jackie and Dianna snickered, looking at each other.

"Your house, almost missed it," Dianna said, eyes flitting briefly past Jackie to his house that was visible out the window behind him.

Jackie's eyes hung on Dianna's eyes for a second. Thoughts raced through his head daring himself to ask her for a kiss. Or to be crazy and just start leaning in for one without asking. He could say it was a joke after. Or something about it being his birthday present.

But when her eyes came back and looked straight back into his, he chickened out immediately, looked away, unclicked his seatbelt, and got out of the car.

"Thanks for the ride," he said as he got out, not even able to look back at her.

The car drove off as Jackie walked up his driveway. His mom's car wasn't parked there.

Taped to the front door, there was a note:

Forgot some groceries! Home soon. Your present is in your room.

—Mom

Jackie yanked the note off of the door and crumpled it up. He really, really did not like his mom going in his room.

He opened the door. On the other side, a poofy poodle overdue for a haircut was there to greet him. He leaned down to pet her as her tail thumped against the walls. While petting her, waiting for it to have been long enough for her to settle down, he repeated, "Hey Bonny, yeah, hey Bonny..."

Jackie closed the front door behind himself. He stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a soda and threw away the crumpled up note. Seeing he was followed by Bonny, he also grabbed a treat out of her treat jar.

She sat down politely, staring at the treat in his hand, wagging.

"Want it?"

Bonny barked loudly.

"Lay down. Sit. Lay down. Sit. Shake."

Bonny did all asked, lastly offering her paw to be shook.

Jackie did shake her paw, and then gave her the dog biscuit.

Bonny crunched up the dry treat in her teeth, wagging.

With his soda, Jackie made his way over to the stairs and went down into the basement. There, there was an unfinished part of the basement that had the boiler or whatever, and a bunch of plastic boxes that were filled with Christmas decorations, off-season clothes, old papers and stuff. And, after walking through a valley of that stuff, was the door into Jackie's room. Jackie and Bonny arrived there, turned the doorknob, and pushed the door open.

He flipped his light switch on, illuminating his blue walls with gaming posters taped up, his flat screen, his couch, his computer desk, his bed. His wastebasket beside his bed that he cringed at the idea of his mom going through, and the box of tissues on the bedside table. And, in the space between the couch and the TV, next to an amplifier, on a guitar stand, was a guitar!

"Woah, Bonny, look at this!" he said, coming around the couch to go look at the instrument. Bonny came with, wagging, although the poodle did not care about the guitar whatsoever, and hopped up into the bed, grabbed a pillow with her teeth, set the pillow down at the foot of the bed, and laid there at the foot of the bed with her chin on the pillow.

The guitar was blue, and had a bunch of faded fox stickers all over it.

Jackie got his phone out of his pocket, and texted his mom, *Thanks mom!*

He saw the indication that she was typing, and then a second later he received a heart emoji. Then more typing, and then, *At the checkout line. Looking forward to getting home.*

Jackie also took a picture of the guitar, and sent the pic to Dianna, Hank, and his other friend John J.

“Does it work, Bonny?” Jackie asked.

Bonny just looked at him, not really caring at the moment about whatever his question was, as long as it didn’t involve her having to get off the bed or have her comfy pillow taken.

Jackie found a place among his outlet strips to plug in the amp, and then plugged the amp into the guitar. He slung the guitar on with its black strap, grabbed a pick out of the baggie of them that sat there, and finally, flipped the amp’s power switch to ON.

The speaker came to life with a pop and an awaiting fuzz. Jackie got excited shivers up his body. He played John J.’s dad’s guitars on sleepovers pretty often, and had gotten some pointers from the old hippie. He hadn’t learned to shred or anything, but between the pointers from John J.’s dad and from being forced to play clarinet in band class, Jackie knew a little bit about notes and could proudly play power chords all the way up the neck.

He started with the lowest, E.

BWAAAAAAAAAMMM...

Pens rattled on his desk. Bonny sat up and barked. Jackie giggled in pleasure to himself as the sound washed over him.

He went up the power chords one by one, not to any scale at all, just loving the volume of it reverberating deep in his ears.

When he got to D5, a flash exploded out of the amp, and then one second later some chick was standing there in front of it.

“AH WHAT THE FUCK” Jackie yelled, flinching so hard at her arrival that he had ended up all the way back at his door, hanging on for balance by the frame. Bonny darted past him and ran away across the basement and up the stairs.

“Woah,” the woman said to herself, looking down at her hands, wiggling her fingers around.

Jackie didn't realize until then that the woman was see-through, kind of, and had a chromatic glowing tint to her that slowly faded between green and blue, back and forth. Her clothes, a tank top and baggy cargo pants, seemed to be of one piece with the rest of her body, having the same ethereal qualities.

She took her eyes off of her hands and looked up at Jackie. "Ohhh, far out," she said. "I actually died that time, I think. And now... this. Sorry to crash your digs."

"Th-that's fine," Jackie said with a stutter. He stood upright. He thought about following Bonny's lead and running, but this ghost—it definitely seemed to be a ghost—wasn't attacking him or anything, and he didn't want to make a rude impression. He looked down at the guitar he had. "Is this yours?"

"Oh, yeah. Don't worry about it. Wow."

"Are you a ghost?"

The probably ghost snorted in a laugh. "Yeah. What's that all about, right? I think I was kind of high and had weird ideas about haunting people if I died and it... worked? Or did you summon me?"

"No I don't think so."

"Yeah probably the first thing then." Putting a ghost hand on her ghost chest, she mentioned, "Gretchen."

"H-hi, Gretchen. Jackie."

"Isn't that a girl's name?"

"IT'S—" Jackie started, and then gave a defeated flail with his arms. "It's really Jonathan but my schools have all had like fifty Jonathans so I staked out Jackie, okay?"

Speaking quickly and trying not to laugh, the ghost said, "No I like it I was just asking. Here. Handshake. Truce."

Gretchen offered out her hand.

Jackie came back to the center of the room, and shook.

Upstairs, a door opened, and the two could hear a call of, "Jackie I'm home! Come get cake!"

Gretchen and Jackie looked to each other. Then realizing they were still holding hands, Jackie quickly pulled his hand back, and took off the guitar, and set it on the couch for the time being. "That's my mom," he mentioned. "There's cake if you..."

“Normally I would say yes to that so fast but I’m kind of um, having a moment.”

“Well I do have to head up, at least for a sec.”

“Please, don’t let me stop you.”

“I’m probably not going to mention you.”

Gretchen laughed a little to herself. “Yeah that’s probably not a bad idea, huh? Oh, what’s the occasion? Or do you just get cake sometimes?”

“Birthday.”

“Yours?”

“yeah.”

“How old?”

“Eighteen.”

“Right on. Anyways, go! I’ll be here, I think. Don’t let me hold you back from cake.”

Jackie nodded, and then did turn and head upstairs.

Upstairs, Jackie’s mom was setting out a big chocolate cake on the dining room table. After shouting happy birthday at him, she asked, “Talking to your friends on your games?”

“Hm? Oh. Yes.”

“Does the guitar all work?” she asked.

“Yeah! Yeah it sounds uh... really cool, actually.”

A while later, Jackie returned back down the stairs with a piece of cake for the ghost from his new haunted guitar. They sat side by side on the couch, her eating the cake, him toying at the guitar, and they chatted the evening away.

about a week later

Jackie’s ass was falling asleep in his plastic desk as he sat through the bullshittiest class of the day. To begin with, it was the middle of summer, but his school did more frequent breaks year round, meaning that the end of the school year was still yet to come. Besides that, it was final period study hall. Most of the time, at Jackie’s school, if you had a first period study hall or a final period study hall, you were fully allowed to skip. But that was at the discretion of the teacher, and Jackie’s teacher, even after he had become a legal adult, still took attendance. Jackie spent most of the period on his phone.

Lately, he had been following a lot of cringe tags. He had secured a back corner desk where nobody could look over his shoulder and see his screen, so for this period he didn't even have to be conscious of only dipping into the light stuff. As the last five minutes of the hour were ticking down, and some people around the classroom were starting to pack up, Jackie came across a callout post on some brainlet who ran an entire account posting about how much he liked shitting in diapers. He had entire brand reviews, live commentating sessions of days he spent doing this, even posted actual filthy pictures of his fat body from the waist down in his fetish clothes.

Kill yourself, Jackie typed into the comment box, and hit send.

Very quickly, it got a few hearts.

He spent the remaining couple of minutes of class scrolling back through each of his comments from that day to see how well each of them had done.

One in particular was getting a lot of likes and shares. Jackie quietly giggled to himself in pleasure at seeing how big the numbers were getting. A furry had posted that they missed colored pencil art of old cartoons. Jackie, under his anonymous alt account with the profile picture of Sasuke, had pointed out that colored pencil drawings could be found by children going through someone's desk drawers and that this degenerate should be glad it was all digital now if he wasn't trying to groom children into his sexualized furry shit, and told him to get help and that he was the reason nobody took LGBTQIA+ issues seriously anymore, when they made a whole social justice movement out of jerking off to cartoons and demanding everyone else watch them do it.

On that day, he caught a ride home with Hank. He was glad it was just the two of them, just the guys, so he could talk all about what he had seen. "It's so fucked up," Jackie said at one point, after explaining the diaper guy thing, and someone else he had seen who liked it/it pronouns like that was anything that humans were ever actually called. "Like, just look up boobs and beat your meat to boobs, what the hell is so complicated about that?"

“They’re weird,” Hank agreed, and then slammed on the brakes. “Your stop.”

Jackie unclicked his seatbelt. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Have fun beating your meat to boobs,” Hank returned, and then blasted the radio volume to max and peeled out before Jackie could muster a witty comeback.

Jackie saw in the driveway that his mom’s car was gone. And it was a late workday for her. House to himself. He had a full hard-on trying to raise its way out of his pants before he even got to the door.

He opened the door, and there was Bonny, wagging to greet him. His heart raced as he pet her, knowing to himself already what he was about to trick her into doing while he was home all alone with her.

He shrugged off his book bag by the door and then went straight to the kitchen. Bonny followed after, clueless of what the horny human had in mind.

There in the kitchen, he dug around in the cupboards, and pulled out a jar of peanut butter. He let out a nervous, shuddering sigh, and then turned around to face the poodle who stood in the kitchen with him. She met his eyes with not much of any emotion at all, probably just waiting to see whether any snacks were on offer. And, there kind of were.

Jackie unbuttoned his pants, and then zipped them down. Then, with another deep, shaky breath, he pulled his pants and drawers down to around his knees, letting his dick and balls out to the exposed air in the middle of the kitchen, right in front of his dog.

Bonny looked at his package briefly, and then back up at his eyes, with the same non-expression. She didn’t see his hard-on and immediately come over wanting it, curious what it was about. She also didn’t run away or anything. It—and what they were about to do—was nothing to her.

Jackie opened up the top of the peanut butter, stuck his finger in, and scraped some out. With a trembling hand, he spread it from his finger onto the underside of his erect penis. Bonny craned her head forward to try and lick his finger, but he held his hand up away from her, and waved his thing in front of her face instead.

Taking the alternative, she started giving it licks. Having actual mouth on his thing was unlike anything else in his life. Unlike talking on social media, unlike playing video games. *Definitely* unlike doing it with his dry hand. It was like porn videos had come to life. It was exciting, it felt straight-up pleasurable, it felt like a load off after a long week.

When she stopped licking, he put on more peanut butter. She got back into it and he couldn't be happier for her to do so.

Someone snickered.

Jackie leapt away from the dog giving him a blowjob like she was a hot stove, and pulled up his pants as he looked around. By the short time later that the pants were zipped and buttoned, he still hadn't seen anyone, and he began to halfway wonder whether he had been paranoid enough to imagine it.

He stood stock still for a bit, holding his breath so he could hear better if there was any other noise.

Nothing.

"Hello?" he called out.

Gretchen stuck her head out from around the corner, cheeks raised in a just-been-laughing face.

Bonny, at the arrival of the ghost, scampered off to be somewhere else.

"Oh hey um, I didn't um, I didn't know you could leave the basement," Jackie said. He had also kind of just completely forgotten she was around now.

"I didn't know you were into bestiality," Gretchen returned.

"I'M NOT—I'm not 'into bestiality,' what the fuck," Jackie tried, avoiding eye contact super hard.

"Okay, well, you're an adult getting a dog to lick peanut butter off your dick, WHICH I SAW, so whatever you want to call that."

Jackie felt his cheeks burning up. He muttered, "Just blowing off steam."

"How many times have you 'blown off steam' with her? Ten, twenty, a hundred—"

"Four!"

"Four!" Gretchen echoed back in a squeal of laughter. "Is she your first?"

"She—it doesn't count!"

“Hey, THAT’S fucked up, kinda,” Gretchen said. “I don’t actually care, to be clear. Just asking.”

“I just... I’m bad at talking to girls.”

“She’s a girl.”

“You know that’s different!”

“True, I don’t think your girlfriend from school would fall for the peanut butter as easily.”

Jackie, still avoiding eye contact, kind of shrugged. “Dianna and I aren’t together.”

“Wait, Dianna? That’s her name?”

“Yeah?”

“Oh my god, little story bout Jackie and Dianna?”

“What?”

“What do you mean what! Jack and Diane!”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Wait, what year is it?”

“2023?”

“Whaaaat the fuck, I thought it was like, 2002 or something. How long was my guitar in that pawn shop? Anyways, off topic. Look. I wasn’t even trying to interrupt, I was about to turn around and go back downstairs when I saw what was going on, it just surprised me, you didn’t seem like the type.”

“I’m not.”

“Mmmmmmm.”

“I was just trying it out.”

“Foood for the fourth time.”

“It is kinda nice,” Jackie admitted. “But I’m not ‘into bestiality,’ it’s just, she’s the only one available.”

“Who cares if you are?” Gretchen asked.

“Are what?”

“Into bestiality,” Gretchen said.

“Everyone would care?”

“Noooo, try like, *maybe* your pastor or your principal. Look, you’re not even hurting her, which is why *I* don’t care. If you were, I might be like, blowing up light bulbs and shattering windows and stuff. But from what I saw? I would definitely say you’re being weird, and like, pervy, but there’s no shame in that. Anyways. I’m going back downstairs. I got you to level 72 in your army guys game by the way.”

“Oh um, cool.”

“Have fun,” Gretchen said with a smirk, and then scampered away back around the corner, towards the stairs to the basement.

After letting a few seconds pass, Jackie punched his fist into his palm a few times, let out a silent mock-scream into the crook of his arm. Then he took his phone out of his pocket, opened one of his socials, and typed *dog peanut butter* into the search bar. After scrolling past a number of results that were people just posting about treats they had baked for their dog, he got to one post of someone actually saying, *Just got my dog to lick peanut butter off me :3*

Jackie went to the comments, typed *I hope you die, rapist*, and hit send.

Bonny came trotting back around the corner, and looked at him.

Jackie came over to her, and gave her a pet on the head as he peeked around the corner for Gretchen.

Nobody.

“Little more,” he whispered to Bonny, and then pulled his pants back down and went to the peanut butter again.

It took him a sec, though really not that long, to get back in the mood again. Gripping the edge of the counter, he finished into her mouth, the cum disappearing in her licks as soon as it came out.

“Good girl,” he said breathlessly. He leaned down and gave her a few pets. Then he grabbed three treats out of her jar, and gave all three of them to her, one after the other as she wagged. He then washed his hands, and dick, and pulled his pants back up.

Jackie then sighed, grabbed a soda out of the fridge, and headed for the basement. Bonny stayed upstairs on the couch, knowing there was a ghost down there.

Jackie entered his room, and closed the door behind himself. Gretchen sat on the couch, leaning towards the TV, rocking left and right along with the shooter game she was playing. She let out a loud “FUCK” as her guy got blown up. “Why is that in the game? Why is that fun for anyone?”

Jackie came over, turned on the amp, and sat down on the other side of the couch with the guitar and his soda. He strummed a few power chords, and then sat practicing scales.

"Did you finish?" Gretchen asked, gaze still dead locked on the flat screen ahead of her.

"Yeah." Jackie continued to play up the scale he was on, until fucking up one of the notes. He started over again, and fucked up earlier. He shook his head. "Hey um, I know you were like, a furry."

"Yes," Gretchen said, "and if you were wondering, *very* pissed off my ghost form is me instead of Poisonberry. That was my character. Vixen whose claws would poison you. FUCK. THAT. ROCKET LAUNCHER. OH MY GOD."

"Wait, like, poison-poison claws? You would kill other people?"

"Pff, yeah, a lot of people were actually pretty into that role play."

"That's... a little fucked up."

"It was *role play*."

"Still—"

"No, not 'still,' it literally never happened."

Gretchen continued to play the game. Jackie sat with his arms limply hanging over the guitar for a bit, watching the game, and then he leaned back, and strummed a few non-chords, leaving his left hand completely off the instrument.

Gretchen asked, "If Dianna wanted to date you, would you say yes?"

"Yeah, I would love that."

"You'd get head from her instead of getting lickjobs from your dog?"

"Of course." Jackie also blushed at that. He hadn't thought of that name for them.

"But do you *dislike* getting licked by dogs?" Gretchen asked.

Jackie sat watching the game, and didn't answer.

Gretchen tried again, "Put it this way: If you had a girlfriend, but she wasn't available 24/7, would you be disgusted by the idea of filling in the gaps with a poodle if she said that she was really turned on by the idea of you using her dog like that?"

"I um... if the poodle didn't mind I don't see why not."

“I think you’re a *little* attracted to animals,” Gretchen said. “Which is like, normal, a ton of people are. You just seem really in your head about it.”

Jackie gave a few more non-chord strums. “Maybe. Yeah.”

“Who told you it was bad?”

“Internet.”

“What! Oh that’s so sad. The internet used to be cool. Does it suck now?”

“No, it...”

Jackie had an epiphany.

“Yes. It does, actually.”

Jackie took out his phone and deleted his social apps, making the taps with all the power of killing the final boss in a really tough video game.

He texted Hank, *Sorry if I’ve sounded like an asshole lately. I think I’m bi and was kind of lashing out.*

THE SCRAPS

We should have done more. More of us should have voted better. More of us should have gotten informed about more things, and realized that the problems were deeper than voting better. More of us should have protested. More of us should have realized that protesting was never enough and taken direct action. More of us should have engaged in mutual aid. More of us should have established a parallel system of power to show the existing one that we weren't beholden to a machine that was killing us. More of us should have a lot of things. Not enough of us did. Now I'm out here with Ash, picking up a few of the scraps of should have.

We aren't in a rush, too much. Ash saunters along the dirt beside the long blacktop road, and I don't hurry him. We got off the 94 a few miles back, after I'd stopped us to check the map and to let Ash graze in a not-as-common-as-before patch of greenery. I also gave him an apple from our supplies. Now we ride towards a line of dead trees, and a couple that are still green. The fields around us that likely once grew soy beans or corn now grow nothing. They are dirt parched in the sun, and I am grateful that there is an uncanny lack of wind today, because even a breeze would make this pleasant saunter into an ordeal.

We come up to the trees. Now that we're at them, I can see the farm up the road amidst another dead field. A mile longer. "Almost there, bud," I tell him. We go past the sign warning TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT. If there's anyone here to shoot me, I'll be surprised and then relieved before I die.

I am not shot. Drawing closer, it looks like the area immediately around the buildings has done better than the area not. Grass grows in the shade of the big red barn. I stand in the shade and look out at the vast fields. A river winds through in the distance. I can't see the water, but I can see the line of not-death snaking through the dirt.

I wander around until finding a manual water pump. It screeches at me as I work it, but it ain't broken. Eventually, a trickle of water comes up. I pump until it's run a little while, and then from a pocket of my cargo pants, I take out a test strip and run it under the stream. Ash is watching me. "We'll know soon, bud." We aren't in a rush, but if we can save time and effort by drinking here instead of going to the river, it'd be nice.

I wander around the outskirts of the buildings, idly holding the strip, whistling an old patriotic tune. When I come around the house, I snort in a laugh. In the field of dirt, there is the door of the missile silo that we're here about. It's painted to be camouflaged among grass. Swing and a miss.

Ash bumps me with his nose, and I reach over and pet him. I look down at the strip. I gladly let him know it looks good.

We go and get him some water. Once that's taken care of, I make camp, taking off Ash's saddle bags and pitching a one-woman tent near the grass by the barn. I have dinner—pickled eggs, venison jerky, and iron-flavored water. I give Ash a few carrots. It's getting to be late around this time. I wish Ash a good night, crawl into the tent, and conk out in my sleeping bag.

In the morning, I exit the tent to find a light breeze. The breeze carries the dirt, which pecks at me as soon as I leave the shield of the side of the barn. I take a paper out from one of the saddlebags sitting on the ground, and I sit with my back against the barn wall, studying the paper. I hardly need to, at this point. I've been to a copy-paste of this barn four previous times. But a little double-checking now could save me a lot of redundant work.

In the basement of this farmhouse, past a booby-trapped basement door, there is a steel wall with a steel hatch embedded in it, with lead lining on the inside and six feet of concrete behind that. Outside on the surface, comically disguised to look like grass, is a similarly impenetrable entrance. Ventilation, you

might have been able to make a drone that could breach through there, back when there were global supply chains connecting slave-mined minerals to tax-funded weapons manufacturers. But at a certain spot, nearer the silo than the basement entrance, is a point where the septic tank is only guarded by a few inches of concrete, and it's the best I've got here and now. I study the paper, a floor plan of this cookie cutter missile bunker, and then I go find my spot, squinting against the dirt on the wind.

I start digging.

It's getting late into the evening by the time my shovel hits the concrete.

I take the rest of the day to rest. We aren't in a rush. I'd rather do the next part unweary and in full daylight. I sit on the front porch, eating pickled eggs, still drenched in sweat. Beside me, I hear a meow. I gasp and scoot away. There on the porch beside me, a cat with long grey hair is walking back and forth over a little spot. I want to cry I want to pet her so much, but I'm also cognizant that touching the cat might not be wise. The cat's fur is tangled and dirty, and she is missing an eye, lost to a wound that does not look fresh nor well-healed. She seems old enough that she damn well might be pre-collapse.

I get up slowly, trying not to scare the cat away. I jaunt over to the saddlebags and take out a ring of keys, and bring it back to the porch. I unlock the house's front door. The cat follows me in, very vocal. I go to the kitchen, into the pantry, and hold my nose at the proliferation of mold. Stacked across one of the shelves are dozens of tins of cat food. I pick one up, check the expiration date, and marvel at how many years this tin would still be good for.

As I'm reading, she walks against my leg back and forth, meowing. She is definitely socialized. Almost definitely pre-collapse. I open the tin for her and set it down. She devours it. When she's finished, she comes and walks against my leg again.

What the hell, anyways. I crouch down and pet her. She begins to purr. I'm doing this for them, more-so than my own kind, anyhow. I want to get her to a vet, but I don't think she'd be willing to make the journey with me and Ash, and what few

professionals are left in the world are certainly not making house calls. Not this far out. I open some more tins for her.

The next day, she is waiting for me on the porch. I pick her up, put her in my tent, and zip her up in there. She is angry as I'm leaving but it's for her own good. From a saddlebag, I retrieve a large quantity of homemade explosives. I put them down in the hole I dug yesterday, make sure me Ash and the cat are far away, and cover my ears when the explosives go boom. Ash rears and goes running. I watch him to make sure he's alright, but he eventually comes around back to the farm. I give him some reassuring strokes, let the cat out of the tent, and then go to see the damage.

The septic tank was unused and I feel very blessed. I crawl in with a crowbar, bust out the toilet overhead, and emerge into the lavatory. I exit that into a narrow hall, a bunk room to my right, an office across, and to the left, the command bay. I take a narrow set of stairs down from the bay, unlock the door with a key from my ring of keys that I borrowed from far elsewhere, and enter the silo. With a screwdriver, I open up a panel on the missile head, and take out the payload, along with a few other necessary bits. I bring them outside, go far out into the field, and dig a new hole. I bury the scraps.

I leave the cat a feast of opened tins before me and Ash head off.

POEMS

Slippers and Observations

I wore slippers out today
instead of socks and shoes.

Perving on the reflection in the glass door as my dog and I
return from a walk

I can see why there was a time when ankles were considered
indecent.

Some things are just too bombastically sexy for general interest.

In the reflection of the glass door, and with the same reasoning,

I can also observe why bestiality is so taboo

in the handsome, roguish, and charming image of the dog who
here in this hot, youthful, summer moment struts beside me.

Untitled Anything And This

Sometimes it's hard to put into words how much it can mean to kiss someone on top of a few items of dirty laundry on the floor. Being alone together with your best friend, anything in the world to do that day, laundry, making food, writing, reading, playing a game, watching a show, literally whatever, and deciding to carve out time indefinite to lie down together and make out with your best friend, yes he is a dog, to make out with your best friend, goddamn he loves you, to make out with your best friend on the floor on the carpet on some pants and the underwear that you wore yesterday and have since showered and changed into a cleaner set of pants and underwear and also a clean shirt, to take hold of a moment to make out for an amount of time that says I don't care about the time, I care about you, I care about you more than time, to make out with your best friend and tell each other by the kissing and the intaking pauses in the kissing just how much you care about each other as the outside air seeps in through the open window and the closed curtains, into the room where you and your best friend who is a beautiful dog make out on top of some laundry on the carpet on the floor beside the bed that you both sleep on every night. These words are forthcoming and this is the way they are falling, I will not put them into verse because the slab of them deserves to be an unadulterated block. Sometimes it can be hard to put into words how much it can mean to make out with your friend on top of some laundry on a day, but the point at least in that moment is not any words or any lack thereof, the point is that my god, my dog, I love you.

Blackout Or Just Slipped My Mind

last night
I don't remember
if I nutted at any point
but I definitely do
remember that
you used my hand
to get your doggie self
off quite
a number of times
and you seemed to
really enjoy
it, mounting my upper
body again and again to
grip my elbow in
your doggie claws and arms
and plant your sweet chin on
my shoulder and
use all that for
leverage and pleasure to
fuck my veterinarian lube coated hand
with your awesome doggie penis
again and again
coming back for more
and so for that
reason
alone I
know that it
was a good, good night.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 9;

SEPTEMBER 2023.

In this issue,
connectedness is felt in an alley,
and a dog lover actualizes his enlightenment.

*Featuring the stories: Sons of Belial, Fallow, Cheer's
Journey, and Tiberius, as well as a haiku.*

SONS OF BELIAL

Azure licked their partner's anus, taking in nostril-flared sniffs as they did, creating as wide a cavity inside of their nose as possible for smell particles to land on. Smells were important to them. The hyper-flowery smell of Bluegreen's deodorant. The sweaty, musky, intestiney smell of Bluegreen's anal sphincter. It was no matter of "good" smells or "bad." The compelling thing was if a smell was strong. Azure and Bluegreen had met at a family Christmas gathering, after they had been excised from overly-delicate conversation for their chosen identities. They had gone on a walk together at a nature trail nearby their grandparents' house, gotten to talking, within the hour gotten up to things that would get them uninvited from future Christmas gatherings if they became known, and by February they were sharing a studio apartment together.

Eventually contented, Azure gave Bluegreen's anus a last deep puckered smooch, and then both of them stood up. Azure pulled up Bluegreen's pants and redid their belt, and they both stepped out of the alley and resumed their late night walk.

"That was really good. Thank you."

"Keh. No problem."

"You are the best kind of asexual."

"Keh. Thank you. I try."

"It's like if I was a vampire and you let me eat you, but like, 'eat you.'"

"Keh. Ass licker."

"You were the one who offered."

“Keh. Hey. I offered this time. You were the one who suggested it the last twenty times we walked by that alley. I figure it is hot as God’s tits out tonight, we’re already sweating like hell, I know that that’s a big thing for you, and the sweat adds to it for me too, I might as well offer. Give you a little bit of a treat.”

“The sweat adds to it?”

“Keh. Yeah. A lot.”

“I thought you just put up with me.”

“Keh. No. It’s just not sexual.”

“I need you to elaborate so much on how getting a sweaty rimjob is nonsexual. Is it something I could be doing better?”

“Keh. No. Keep it up.”

“But what is nonsexual about it? What is nonsexually good?”

“Keh. I imagine that I’m a newborn dog, and you’re the parent licking the slime off me.”

“No way.”

“Keh. Why not?”

“They don’t just lick the puppy’s buttthole! There’s no way that’s what they do.”

“Keh. No, I don’t think so either. I mean I assume not. But I think it’s like. The way I imagine it, the way you’re licking my sensitive stuff is like a proxy for how it would feel for all of my body to be new. So like, I’m extrapolating, but that really works for me. You’re just licking the one part, but I feel it across everything.”

“That’s awesome, what the fuck.”

“Keh. Yeah. I really like it. So, you weren’t worrying about me not getting anything out of it, but still, if you do think of it in the future, it’s good.”

“I can still smell your ass smell so much on my upper lip.”

“Keh, yeah wow! You just had your whole face in my ass recently, and now your face smells like your cousin’s ass! Wow. Unprecedented. Call a scientist. Let’s figure out the answer to this mystery.”

“I was just saying. Saying true things. I can still smell you so much.”

“Keh. Happy about that?”

“Not complaining.”

“Keh. Wanna circle back to the alley again?”

“No. Kinda. I really do but I think we were already pushing our luck how long we were just there. We can just resume when we get home later.”

“Keh. Yeah I’m not against that.”

“Love you.”

“Keh. You too. For real.”

“Watch these stairs, that one is uneven.”

“Oh thanks.”

“Use my hand. I believe in you. Yeah, we did it.”

“So pumped.”

“I can tell.”

“Keh. Hey, I wasn’t being mean.”

“I swear I am going to write a song about how my upper lip smells after eating your ass.”

“Keh. What kind of words would that be?”

“No, instrumental.”

“Keh. What? What would convey, ‘my cousin’s ass on my face?’”

“It’s... hard to explain, I guess. It would sound like it smells. I don’t know how else... Nirvana. It would sound like Nirvana.”

“Keh. It would smell like Teen Spirit?”

“Oh my god no. No that’s not what I meant at all stop.”

“Keh. Did you know that was their partner’s deodorant?”

“What?”

“Keh. Teen Spirit. That was the brand name of the deodorant their partner used.”

“Oh. I’ve never heard of that one.”

“Keh. Yeah I don’t know if that was like, more known at the time, or. I don’t know.”

“I can still smell you so much on my upper lip, it’s kind of driving me crazy. In a good way.”

“Keh. Gimme a kiss.”

“Mm.”

“Keh. Thanks.”

“Does anyone still make Teen Spirit?”

“Keh. I think so. Krista—my wombmate, your cousin—they wear it.”

“Oh.”

“Perv.”

“What!”

“You totally remember just immediately what everyone you meet smells like, huh?”

“Maybe! Also you cannot say wombmate, you’re not twins!”

“Keh. Well, sibling sounds way too, I don’t know, medical, so that’s what we decided on at some point. Do you like how they smell?”

“I plead the fifth. But yes.”

“Keh. So yes, that’s what Teen Spirit smells like. They’re eccentric though. I don’t know if they buy it at the store or if they bought a thirty pack that’s been sealed since nineteen ninety. So I don’t know if anyone still makes it.”

“Are you otherkin?”

“Keh. What? Why?”

“The being a puppy getting licked by your parent thing.”

“Keh. Oh, yeah. Therian. I. Kind of identify as a lot of things. Age regression. Connectedness. The universe sort of, bridging, together parts of itself, across itself, through itself, in me. Animals are part of that. Why not, right?”

“Yeah, why not totally. Want me to call you anything different?”

“They is still good.”

“They is basically overpowered.”

“Keh. Honestly.”

“Want me to lick your forehead like a dog?”

“Please.”

“Mmlm.”

“Keh. Thanks.”

“Happy to help. Love you.”

“Keh. You too. Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm. Keh. Mm. Okay yeah I can taste what you’re talking about with the lip. Keh.”

“It’s really good.”

“Keh. Not complaining, I guess.”

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmm-m.”

“Sexual.”

“Mhm. Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

“Mm.”

FALLOW

What do I even do anymore? Anneth thought. She rocked slowly in her rocking chair, really trying to answer that question. *Kim does real estate, gets to show people around to new and different homes, peek a little bit into other homeowners' lives, and she still goes out drinking with some of the old gang. Howard rock climbs, out on real rocks with real ropes by himself, which is insane of him, man with one hand, but I get it, and it is a thing he does. He actually does things, in his life. I'm... what? Some woman who makes sure office supplies are on the shelves each day? And then comes home, and sits in front of a computer, playing computer games. Not even liking when there's an update to the computer games. I grind levels on the same dungeons that have been in the games for the last, what, five years, longer for some of them. Actually. Actually longer than that for all of them: most are older than ten years, of doing the same dungeons, just grinding. Why? I don't think about anything, at all, while I'm playing. Is that why? So that I can not think? Or is that a side effect that I haven't realized and unpacked until just now? Here's another question: When is the last time anything new happened? Prior to last Friday, of course. Before that, when was the last time there was novelty in my life? When was the last time I noticed anything? Literally anything. A... a nice sunset, or, an interesting smell. When was the last time I had a witty observation, even to myself? I don't think I could if I tried. When was the last time I had an actual conversation? Not telling someone what to do at*

work or being told what to do at work. Not direct messaging other players in the games I play, telling them things they might not have known about the games. When was the last time I talked to a friend? Do I have friends? Or, do I only have friends who I used to have? Fuck, when was the last time I was happy? I'm not unhappy. Well. I'm... What do I even do anymore? It's since Myrtle died. What have I done since Myrtle died, twenty years ago?

She let that thought hang for a while, sat with it. Even the most precious memories of time spent with the palomino were so simplified now. Some flat notion of standing at the mare's head, and the mare leaning her head against her. Some note to self that she was supposed to remember all of the moments of brushing the mare, and both of them liking that. The weight that those things had had on her then was sincere. The most sincere things Anneth had felt in her life. But the other life in that equation had come to a natural end.

I didn't die too, Anneth told herself. I very specifically did not kill myself, and that was really on the table, and I didn't. Shit, I transitioned, that was quite an accomplishment. I got help for anxiety. I've been surviving. Maybe I'm not happy. Maybe I am post happiness, now. But I am surviving. Even if it's not that interesting to tell someone about. Even if the day to day is one-note.

She was putting it off.

Anneth knocked her open palm against the arm of her rocking chair about twenty times, and then hit the speed dial button for her boss. As the line rang, she rocked in the chair. She looked out at her back yard, the back yard of her townhouse, and tried to force some observation about it. Something nice. She saw the wind shaking the neighbor's trees, and the birds and squirrels hopping around in the branches. That was a nice image on its own, she supposed. It did not need any deep addition on her part. It was just nice to see the pretty critters running around and flying. It was a nice thing in front of her.

The line was answered. "What's up Anneth?"

No delaying it with small talk then. Anneth jumped right into it. "Jane, hey. I'm going to have an absence coming up."

With no pause at all, Jane shot back, "How soon?"

“Like, now,” Anneth stammered out, before a more tactful way of saying it came to mind. She rocked back and forth quickly in the rocking chair, though, nothing about that should have been audible through the line at least, which was good enough. She figured she looked like a crazy person. She quickly explained, “I got a summons. I can’t be in starting tomorrow, and I’d count me out for a full week after that too.”

“It is *December!*” Jane said, the harshness of it causing the audio on the line to peak out on the word ‘December.’ In a more modulated whisper into the receiver, Jane added, “We are good enough to get by on seasonal shifts we’ve been able to get on board, but I cannot be out a floor manager and you know that.”

“Jane,” Anneth shot back. Standing her ground wasn’t common for Anneth, but she knew the fuck how to do it. “I don’t have a choice. You know I’ve called in *two days* the entire five years I’ve worked here, and I even wish I wouldn’t have had to do those. I do not get *joy* in telling you I can’t come in, but like I said, I have a summons, it is frankly not my choice right now.”

“Wait,” Jane said, “like a...” She trailed off, and then sighed as the words escaped her. “What kind?”

“Chronuous,” Anneth answered. “It’s the real thing.”

“I thought you were...” Jane began, and then cut herself off before she said something very rude. Discriminatory, someone from HR might be willing to describe it as if backed into the right corner. Anneth metaphorically patted herself on the back for calling Jane by the company line, instead of the bitch’s mobile.

“You thought I was what?” Anneth drilled in sweetly, not willing to waive Jane’s partial statement away if this was going to be part of a record.

Jane quickly backtracked, no doubt picking up on all of the same implications. “I just haven’t had to do the forms for anyone getting any kind of summons in a long time.”

“Understandable,” Anneth said, seeing no harm to herself in conceding whether or not that particular information seemed true.

After a little pause, Jane said, “What day is the summons for?”

Anneth saw through it instantly, and really wasn't willing to concede the ground. Answering that question was heading straight into give an inch, take a mile territory. Instead, Anneth said, "No um, I really have to call in a disability privilege. I really can't be in for the week, and, I'm telling you now that I don't hope to extend that but I am reserving the possibility of it. My anxiety hasn't been... out of control... in years... but this did it. I'm going to be in and out of therapy, and..."

Thankfully, really surprisingly, Jane actually did say the line that she was, in theory, required to: "Take the time you have to. We'll figure it all out here."

And that was about the end of it. Anneth considered asking if she was already fired, but knew that the answer wouldn't be honest either way. If she was fired, she would figure something out after the fact. If she wasn't fired, well, that was easier, her schedule would return to normal in a couple of weeks, probably. For the next week, what mattered was that she was free.

It was a Sunday afternoon as she had made the call to Jane. She had seen the letter on the previous Friday evening, and had, admittedly, avoided opening it for a large amount of the weekend. Purple envelope, and a black stamp on the face of it of an hourglass. Correspondences from the gods were a suicidal kind of thing to fake. It was almost assuredly real, and yet, it was so unexpected to Anneth that she still grappled with the reality of it.

What Anneth's boss had just barely stopped herself from saying out loud, the thing that would have been very rude to point out, was that some people were never contacted by the gods. 'Untouchables' was among the more polite names for them. And it had, in fairness, seemed to Anneth and everyone who knew her that she was one of those people. She was approaching forty and had never been summoned before, even by the more accessible gods. Hermes, Cupid. It was common enough for someone to be summoned by Chronos at one point sometime in their life, to be called away to some point in the past. But it was also common enough for someone to never be called.

Others seemed to be personal favorites of the god of time. Some lived lives in a very confused order, always backward and

forward, even intersecting with themselves as a regularity. The second most of the same person in the same place as himself was a filmed porno, where seven of the same man, Luke T., engaged in an orgy together. The importance of it or the lack thereof was studied and debated at length among religious scholars. The first most of the same person in the same place as himself was 9/11, where videos placed at least 45 of the same man, Jeremy Lucas, at the scene, helping to rescue survivors. Going forward in time was exceptionally rare: four people were documented to have done it, and each of those instances had been of a duration that did not exceed five seconds.

Anneth did not assume she was being summoned to be a part of anything so notable. The surprise, for her, was that it was happening at all. The letter from Chronos contained very little, as was usually the case. It had the time and date she was to show up at the temple, which was noon on the Wednesday that followed the Friday she had received the letter on. It had a brief, standardized statement saying that the nature of the visit was to have her be translocated in time, and that her participation was not compulsory but strongly encouraged.

Anneth had to scroll through her texting history for some time to find the number of the reception for her old therapist. It had been eight, nine years since she had last talked to him. Doctor Holland. He had helped her overcome a lot, back then, but there had come a point where there hadn't really been anything left to talk about between them. She was better, so to speak. She was done. They were done. But now, they were back on at his next availability. At first the receptionist had texted back saying that the doctor was booked up for the next three weeks, but within two minutes, she had sent a follow-up text saying that something had freed up, and the doctor could make an appointment with her tomorrow, Monday, 2:20 PM, preferably nothing that would go over into the doctor's three o'clock. Anneth confirmed the appointment, avoiding commenting to the receptionist how just-so all of that seemed, or, more honestly, how inconsiderate it was to lie about the doctor's scheduling to someone who was seeking mental health help, only to find out that the doctor would be willing to make time, and so have to make up a pretense as to why the

unworkable situation had suddenly become workable. She decided to move beyond looking a gift horse in the mouth, there.

The following Monday at 2:23 PM, she was sitting in a couch in an office that smelled like cinnamon candles. The walls were lined with bookshelves full of nonfiction textbooks and fiction novels. She faced a bookshelf mostly full of sci-fi novels, as Doctor Holland sat on a chair side-by-side with her couch, facing the bookshelf alongside her.

In some ways, she had worried the conversation would have to begin with why she hadn't kept in touch over the last near-decade. She had come in ready to admit she had assumed it would be inconsiderate to take up his time and act like a friend when their relationship had been formed on a more professional basis. But when she had come in, he had opened with such a sincere expression of happiness, and a very warm, "It's so good to see you again!" It had made her realize very quickly that there was no animosity, he was not mad at her. They caught up. Both of them had overall been doing very good since the last time they had talked. Anneth then divulged that the reason she had come in was because of the purple letter she had received, with the image of the hourglass on it, marked for two days from then, the following Wednesday.

The doctor began to ask questions about that. In some ways, Anneth always wanted to criticize his questions for being cliché, obvious, even though the questions were exactly fit to purpose, exactly what they were supposed to be.

"How do you feel about getting the summons?" the doctor asked.

"Nervous. Extremely nervous. I don't even... I can barely talk. I don't know what to..." She tried to put a cap on the thought, and couldn't. In many ways she did hope to wrap this up quickly, and not take up the doctor's time waffling about her feelings. She did want to get to the root of it. But evidently she was not there herself yet. Hence the visit. But she did want to get to the root of it quickly, if possible.

The doctor asked, "Do you think you'll go to the summons?"

"Yes. Oh gods, you think I would miss it? I'm worried... I'm worried I might mess it up, I think? But I know that doesn't make sense."

In a friendly tone, the doctor agreed, "It is comforting that these things are preordained, isn't it? But we don't always worry about things that make sense. Sometimes we can worry anyways."

"Sure. But then what am I worried about?"

"Well. Do you have any ideas?"

Anneth sighed through her nose.

The doctor suggested it another way. "What do you worry will happen?"

"I..." Anneth thought about it. "I guess I'm not worried I'll, I don't know, create some problem in time itself. That doesn't... well, I couldn't, I think, even if I wanted to for some reason, which I don't. I'm not worried I'll screw it up *that* bad. I'm just worried I won't live up to what I'm supposed to be for this."

"Mm," the doctor intoned. He thought for a moment himself, it seemed, and then asked, "Where do you think the summons will take you? What time, who will you meet, what will you do?"

"I have a guess," Anneth said. She felt her cheeks start to burn up a little, and presaged an awkwardness at even being able to say it out loud. She had told this doctor about her past relationship. She had been very open with talking about it. At one point she had been open about it with a lot of people. But she did not currently make a habit of talking about it with anyone. It had, incidentally, been a long time now since it had ever come up. Without intending to, she talked around it at first. "I know it won't be myself."

"Never met yourself?" the doctor asked.

"No," Anneth answered. She then asked, as it had actually never come up before, "Have you?"

"Myself and I have had a couple of very nice dinners, but I have to admit, I wouldn't stop going on about music trivia," the doctor said, and then laughed at himself. "You know what's the worst? One of those dinners, I've now been on both ends of, and I could feel myself doing it, but it couldn't be helped."

Anneth laughed at that herself, not faking it. She was very amused at the idea of the doctor being awkward. "I didn't even know you liked music that much."

"I really don't, but I know that I'm going to talk my own ear off at least three more times about it anyways."

“Oh no,” Anneth said, lightheartedly.

“There was some other good advice to myself in there too, to be fair. Stuff that sent me on what I would like to call a good life path. It was all very specific to things I needed to hear at the time, nothing that’s not a life skill you don’t already have. But that was peppered in among quite, quite a lot of rock band trivia. The one of those I can say I have delivered now, I believe I was phrasing it the way I did to attempt to make the metaphors stick to a less wise self who needed the help.” Doctor Holland cleared his throat. “So, you’ve never met yourself,” he said, circling back. “But you have some idea of who it might be that you’re meeting in the summons?”

“Yes.”

“If you write it down on a paper first, can I take a guess?” the doctor asked.

That caught Anneth by surprise, the idea of that. “Oh. Sure. Do you have...”

The doctor ripped a page out of a spiral bound notebook, and handed it to Anneth along with a pen.

Anneth wrote down the name, glancing over to make sure the doctor wasn’t peeking. The doctor had indeed turned his head away to face the wall.

“I wrote it,” Anneth said, having already folded the paper a few times as well, to obscure the name farther.

“Myrtle?” the doctor asked.

Anneth unfolded the paper and showed it to the doctor, revealing the name *Myrtle* freshly written in her handwriting. “I’m surprised you remembered,” she said, and then added, cutting the doctor off slightly, “I don’t mean anything by that, I just, I’m bad with names, I’m surprised you could remember the name this long after.”

“We talked about her a lot,” the doctor said. “I might not remember every story, I’m sorry, but yes, I remember her name, absolutely. You think you’re going to see her?”

“Nothing else would be as important as that,” Anneth answered. “And it’s not myself. So.”

The doctor let a silence hang.

Anneth finished, “So yes, I think I’m going to see Myrtle.”

The doctor asked, “And you’re worried about that?”

“Yes,” Anneth answered. “Oh gods, I can barely... yes, I’m more nervous than I’ve been in... I’ve never been this nervous as an adult. I’m serious. It’s not a *bad* thing that I would get to see her again, not at all, obviously. But how can... how can she be dead, and then I get to see her alive again for what, a few minutes? How is that supposed to happen and it won’t fuck me up? How could I make enough of that? That’s impossible. I...”

Anneth began to tear up, not even having suspected she was going to, herself.

The doctor handed her a box of tissues, and set a waste basket beside her.

Anneth took out a tissue to wipe her eyes with, and then balled it up when she was done and put it in the waste basket.

“I’m sorry,” she choked out.

“It’s okay,” he said.

A silence hung in the air.

Anneth broke the silence by saying openly, “I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s difficult,” the doctor said. “What would you want to say to her, if you had the chance?”

“Don’t—” Anneth began with a tone, and then cut herself off. She started again, still harshly, but not overly combative, “Don’t talk down to me about what me and her shared.”

“Of course,” the doctor said. “I’m sorry. My impression of your relationship with her is very high. I understand that your feelings towards her are very loving.”

Anneth laughed bitchily to herself.

Sounding surprised himself, the doctor asked, “Was there something other than loving in that relationship?”

“No. I mean, we annoyed each other sometimes, but, who doesn’t? No. At the time it was... she was the center of my world. Getting her out to run each day, bringing her new things to try, going on our rides. I didn’t listen to what anyone else said for more hours in a day than with her. That was... we loved each other. But that was then. That was... a really long time ago. About twenty years.”

“Oh. Your feelings have changed since?”

“Not changed, just...” Anneth felt herself becoming choked up. She readied another tissue, but more tears didn’t come. She

held the tissue in a tight fist. “The part of my life where I loved her, was...” Anneth couldn’t finish it other than to repeat herself: “a really long time ago.”

The doctor adjusted in his chair, and then said, delicately, but firmly, “The reason I wanted to ask what you would say to her wasn’t because I wanted to hear a platitude from you, like ‘I would say to her I love you,’ or ‘I would say to her I’ve missed her.’ I think, and you can let me know if I’m wrong, but I think I do understand how heartfelt your position on her is, and I’m not trying to step over that like it isn’t a big deal. I only wanted to ask what you would say to her because if you’re anxious about meeting her again, and you think that you are going to meet her again, then that’s an obstacle that might be troubling you.”

Anneth nodded. “Sure. I think I would just tell her I love her though.”

“Okay,” the doctor said. “Anything else?”

Anneth threw up her arms. “Play it by ear, I guess. If she wants to run circles, we’ll run circles. If she wants to go on a ride, we’ll go on a ride.”

“Is there anything you would like to do with her?”

Anneth covered her sudden smile with the tissue she was still holding. “I don’t have the equipment for that anymore.”

The doctor chuckled along, and said, “Ah, fair enough. It sounds like whatever comes, you’re planning to make the best of it.”

“Yeah,” Anneth said.

“I think that’s all anyone should expect from someone,” the doctor offered.

Anneth nodded. “Maybe. Gods. This is still just...”

The conversation went on, but mostly consisted of circling back to the same topics, finding other ways of saying the same things. Anneth worried that she had moved on from the palomino so completely that she had forgotten her, that the feelings had become too distant, that meeting her again would not live up to the miraculous nature of such a thing getting to happen. By the time she thanked the doctor and they agreed that it was a good place to put an end to the session, Anneth had not gotten as far as no longer being nervous, but she did believe she was ready to appear at the appointment at the temple of

Chronos without being a complete wreck. And as for what would happen on the other side, it was like she had said. She would play it by ear.

That Wednesday, in the morning, she dressed in comfortable jeans and a flannel top, and packed a satchel with two pears. Bringing items back and forth through time was only prohibited if deemed exploitative, and the priests were guided to be permissive in their judgment. She made the drive to the temple much earlier than she was scheduled to arrive, and parked in the lot outside. In a nearby courtyard there was a fountain. She sat on a bench and looked idly at the water, it flying up and splashing down. She wanted to reflect on dear memories of time with her soulmate, as she looked at the fountain. But nothing more substantial came to her than the dim memories she always had. She sat staring at the fountain, and only that. She had to force herself to not zone even that out. When it was time, she entered the sliding doors of the temple.

Standing inside, there was a priest in a white robe. He smiled at her. “Anneth Williams. Thank you for coming.”

She nodded. “Of course. Is there um... where do we do this?”

“Follow me,” he invited, and turned and walked deeper into the temple. The halls had white walls, and at intervals were hung framed works of art, quite a lot of the art depicting architecture or weather.

Anneth and the priest arrived at a room that made Anneth think of a classroom. There were no desks, or lectern. It was likely only the size of the room that made her think of it. She tried to think of other rooms that were that size. There were probably plenty. But she couldn’t think of any others at that moment. This room, the room in the temple, was a room of grey bricks, and no other features. The fluorescent lights in the hall outside cast the only light into the dim room.

The priest led her to the room’s center. “Stand here. Face the doorway. Close your eyes. Okay. Keep your eyes closed as I depart. It will happen shortly.”

She heard the priest walking away, and then the sound of the door closing.

Immediately after the door had closed, the sound of cicadas buzzing filled the air, and the world smelled of grass and dirt

and water. Anneth opened her eyes. She was outside, in the nighttime, standing on a little grassy finger of land that jutted out to encroach meagerly on a large lake. A crescent moon hung overhead. Anneth turned around, and around, and didn't see a palomino anywhere.

From the edge of the water, past a bush that was farther out on the finger of land, a deep voice called to all who might hear it, "Is someone there?"

"Oh," Anneth said, realization causing her spirits to sink. "You have got to be fucking kidding me."

"Excuse me?" the punk said. 'Man' wasn't the right word. Maybe for two reasons, but at the very least, for the reason that the person with the deep voice was still an insolent shit, not fully matured, still didn't know enough about the very basics of the world for 'man' to not at least come with some footnotes. This was herself.

"Hey Nick," Anneth called past the bush.

"Who the fuck," the punk said to himself, but still loudly, and then stood up, emerging from the incidental cover.

The dude wasn't bad looking. She had to give that much to her past self. He had some things working against him, most notably a black pencil moustache, but his features around it were handsome, very Dean-esque. It looked like he still had the black leather jacket at that point, because, well, he was wearing it. She didn't know where that had ever ended up.

"I don't know where to begin," she said to her other self. To him. To Nick. Thinking about what she wanted, in light of the fact that this was not who she had been hoping to see, she supposed that, now, all she wanted to do was impart whatever lesson, whatever information, it was that her past self needed now, at this moment. Get it over with, whatever it was that she was here to do for him. She supposed she would start with the basics. "I'm from 2023."

"Oh," he said. The information seemed to have a softening effect on him, taken the edge off of his rather hostile demeanor that had been present until that point. "Are you someone I know already, yet?"

"I'm you, loser."

“Pffff!” Nick said, and then turned and paced alongside the water, laughing to himself. “I don’t know who you *actually* are but that’s funny.”

“Why’s that, Nick?”

“Easy, I’m a dude,” Nick said, pointing to himself with both pointer fingers. “I’m a dude on the outside and I’m not not a dude on the inside. Being a dude is the fucking best. Why would anyone *want* to be a woman?”

“You’d be surprised. But you know what, part of that is true, you’re not transgender. Not yet.”

“Wuzzat?” Nick asked.

“Wuzz what?” Anneth mocked.

“Transgender.”

“Oh gods I was a moron.”

“Hey! Even if I don’t believe you that is not very nice!”

“Look,” Anneth said, “we can prove this.”

“Oh yeah, how?”

“You’re...” Anneth looked Nick up and down, trying to gauge it. She was surprised she wasn’t even good at placing herself in terms of age, but she took a shot at it. “You are at least seventeen.”

Nick looked at her like she was an idiot. “Twenty two,” he said, pretty bitterly.

“Oh,” Anneth said. Well, damn. That changed things quite a lot, from where she thought this was at. “I’m sorry.”

“Why?”

Because that put him, currently, in a very dark place he had been in, in the few years after Myrtle had died. She hesitated to even bring that up, though. What did she have to say to him about it? It clearly wasn’t anything that had helped, if she didn’t even remember having had this meeting with a stranger at night by a lake. And at this particular moment, the guy seemed to be in what would have been a better than usual mood, overall.

“If you’re twenty two, I know who you lost a couple years ago,” she said.

“It wasn’t a secret, that doesn’t make you special.”

“No, I know. That isn’t what I was going to bring up, I just didn’t know that had happened yet, and, I’m sorry. I really know how it is right now.”

“Yeah, well.” Nick shrugged.

“But, my point,” Anneth brought back up, “is that you’re older than fifteen, when you got Howard to give you a tramp stamp of Bender the robot lying seductively and burping fire.”

Nick suddenly snorted, and doubled over, wheezing out laughter, barely able to breathe. In the breaths he could get out, he mocked, “There’s no way... you...”

His words trailed off as Anneth loosened her belt, turned around, and lifted up the back of her flannel, showing the exact tattoo that Nick assuredly had. Well. She had actually gotten it touched up, since, but it was the same lines Howard had done, in the parlor they’d broken into that night.

“Nooooo fucking way,” Nick muttered.

“Fraid so,” Anneth said, and then hiked her pants back up again, and faced herself once more.

Nick’s eyes darted all over her, seeming to take her in for real now. He seemed afraid of her, actually. All the implications. Really the one main implication, but, that one was nothing that had started to be on Nick’s mind yet, not for a couple more years, at least. Anneth let out a little huff of a laugh, actually. She really was such a fucking dude back then, back now. She, he, had taken masculinity by the horns. First to jump to the challenge at any implication that he wasn’t the best at something: the number of times arm wrestling had happened at lunch tables well into high school was stupid as fuck, but she remembered the fun he had had in that, because he was really good at it, really strong, and almost always won. The feeling of winning, of impressing people, he sought that out so much. He and Myrtle had been insatiable in riding competitions. She was a competitor type too. He and she, they got each other on that. He had been asked in literal interviews how he pushed the palomino so hard when he seemed to be doing nothing. It was because she wanted to give things her all too, and her all was very, very, very impressive without him needing to act for an audience like he was the one pulling that spirit out of her. The way they would fuck after a victory, her thing giving rapture to his thing, his thing giving rapture to hers, celebrating in their winning, they were champions, the most incredible soulmates in the world.

Nick, twenty two and with that kind of fire dying from him quickly, asked, "So what do you want? Cause I've kinda been feeling done with things, and I'm surprised to see I live more than another year."

"I don't know, dude. You get through things? It gets better than this right here?"

"Does it?" Nick asked. "What do you do now?"

Anneth let out a long puff of air that flapped her lips. "Yeah not much. Shit."

Nick made a pointedly unimpressed hum, and then took a flask out of his jacket, and had a drink.

"Tch! Oh, come on!" Anneth said, only just realizing what should have been a given, given that Nick was at that point in his life. "You're drunk!"

"Guilty."

"You are actually blacked out right now!"

"That is a possibility, random crazy woman who is apparently me."

"Wow, so that's... huh," Anneth said, and then laughed once to herself. "That does explain some things. But then... what could possibly be the point of this? You're not going to remember this, at all, I can tell you that already. Come tomorrow this is just *gone*, from your perspective. Huh." Anneth thought on that. "So I guess this is for me? That seems wrong."

"Maybe this is the gods' last ditch effort to remind you of your old ways and save you from cutting your schlong off."

"Oh that ship has sailed."

"What!"

"Can I wear that jacket?"

"Does something happen to the jacket too!"

"Maybe. But come on. I actually like *part* of that idea that you said, about reminding me of old things. I wanna wear the jacket again."

"It is the best," Nick said. He took another sip from the flask, set it down on the grass, and then did begin taking the jacket off.

Anneth unshouldered the satchel she had packed, with the two pears. She suppressed letting out a sigh of sadness at something about that.

“What’s that?” Nick asked, looking down at the satchel. He handed the jacket out to his later self.

“Oh, it’s a couple of pears I brought. If you want one—”

“I bet I can throw one farther than you.”

Anneth let out a sharp laugh. “Ohhh wow, you are so what you are.”

“Hundred percent. Well, I’m drinking Fireball right now which is actually weak as shit, it’s like, thirty percent, but I was drinking other stuff earlier.”

Anneth took the jacket, and put it on. It had been big on Nick, so it still fit her, actually pretty perfectly, even with breasts in lieu of abs, arms that were all around a lot less less muscle, a bit more cushion. It took her back. She wore it pretty damn often. It was what enshelled her, him, in the crisp mornings in the stable, as his breath and an assertive palomino’s both produced clouds in front of themselves. So often, they came close enough, stayed close enough, to where their clouds were one combined effort, breathing in each other’s vapor, having each other’s breath.

Nick rummaged clumsily through the satchel and grabbed out the pears, and handed one to Anneth.

“You’re really serious about throwing them,” Anneth said. She had meant it to be a question, but the answer was so apparent that she couldn’t maintain the interrogative tone for the entirety of the sentence, and it fell out as a somewhat defeated statement, which wasn’t entirely what she had meant for it to be either, she was amused by him, her old self, more than any other feeling, but the words had come out a little bit wrongly.

“You can stand ten steps farther ahead than me,” Nick offered.

“Fuck no, we’re gonna do this even, let’s go,” Anneth said, and walked with her pear to the edge of the water, at the end of the finger of land. The vast open lake laid before them, black water barely perceptible in the light of the crescent moon. Nick came up to stand beside her. The both of them scooted their feet, looking down at them in the dark, to make sure that each of them had the frontmost part of the frontmost toe even with each other’s.

Anneth tossed her pear up and down in her hand a couple of times, feeling the weight of it, and then hurled it out into the water, where it made a splash.

“Oh damn,” she said. “I actually didn’t think I would still be able to throw that far.”

“That was honestly respectable,” Nick agreed.

Nick then hurled his pear out into the water. It went far enough out that Anneth lost sight of it, and only heard the splash.

“You win, good job,” Anneth said.

Nick gave a weird laugh, some kind of half snarling gloat, Anneth wasn’t even sure what her old self was going for with it.

“I like this,” Anneth said. Her old jacket. Hanging out with, well, a more animated self, even if it was from a place of him doing very badly. “Kiss me,” she said.

“Um,” he said back. Slowly, he said, “I have never kissed a human before.”

Anneth shrugged. “Yeah I know. Neither have I. But I know what this is now. I’m getting reignited. So spread the fire.”

“I ain’t got no fire left, since Myrtle’s gone.”

“Well, you’re drinking Fireball, so you’re more on fire than I am.”

Nick gave that snarling laugh again, and then said, “Sure,” and wrapped an arm around the back of her neck, and went in for a big, long kiss. It felt silly, kissing a human, but she gave herself over to it, let his lips peck and suck on her lips, let his tongue slide in and run between her upper lip and her teeth. It seemed like he might have just been getting started when suddenly, he was gone, and she was in a dark room.

She walked through the dark towards the door, and opened it to see the priest standing outside in the hall.

She said to him, in an excited whisper, because the place seemed so quiet, compared to all the buzzing of cicadas, “It happened!”

“I can see,” the priest said with an amused smile, looking down at her chest.

Anneth followed his gaze down at herself, and realized, after a moment, that she had come back wearing the leather jacket.

“Oh. OH.”

The priest chuckled. He did not pry on details as they walked back out, though Anneth did volunteer some of it, saying she had met herself, and it had gone well, it had been good. The priest seemed glad to hear it, and wished her a nice day at the front door.

Anneth stood outside in the sun for a moment, giving her eyes a sec to adjust to the bright glare reflecting off of everything on that cloudless noon. As she stood she thrust her hands into her jacket pockets, and it was then that she discovered the phone resting in the left pocket, with a screen that was cracked in one corner. Her breath stopped. Leaving a hand on the phone in the pocket, she walked quickly to her car, and got in. Only there, where she wouldn't have a chance of dropping it on the concrete, did she take Nick's phone out of the jacket pocket, and press the unlock button. She tapped in the passcode. It was one she no longer used, too obvious. Six digits. And then she was in. Seeing the home screen background alone caused tears to strike her. It was a selfie of Nick and Myrtle, taken by Nick of course, with Myrtle nosing over his shoulder, nuzzling against the side of his head. It called back to mind the closeness of the mare, the weight of a mare pressing her head against her human.

She went into the photos, and looked through them, every one that had that palomino. It was like getting to say goodbye. No. It was like getting to say I loved you. No. It was like getting to say I loved you then, and I love you now, and you have shaped me and the result of you on me will never leave me, and goodbye. When she had looked at everything, she pressed the lock button on the phone, and wondered if she might not ever choose to look at it again, since she had gotten what she had needed to, less or more.

The following day in Doctor Holland's office, after they had talked about some of the other things, she told him, "I'm gonna start dating again. Maybe humans. Maybe not even looking for love, but just to meet people. I'm just gonna go to things. Bars, live music, the state fair. I'm just gonna get out and do things again."

CHEER'S JOURNEY

My part in this matter began on a day that was all around miserable, and I wish, oh I wish, I could say that it did not go on to progress miserably in every instant from then until today, as I sit and reflect on these doings now at the end. For the beginning though, I must start it with the context that the office I had then recently been placed in bore all of the same homely comforts as a burial crypt. In the chamber were four desks, one after the other in a single file from the door to the tall and narrow window. The chamber had a very high ceiling, and the wooden walls high up featured a great many gaps, which caused a cold draft to circulate through the room constantly—a blessing in the summer, were the assurances made to me, but as it stood it was the time in the summer at which the days were their longest, and yet, with the cloudy and raining days, a constant chill hung about the lands, and I had yet to find myself grateful for the wind that came constantly across my desk—my desk was third from the door, separated by one from the window. It was such a cold wind to cause one to shiver even in long sleeves, and to cause one's nose to run, such that one needed to take a moment every few seconds to wipe away the nose's thin discharge, even while sniffing, or else allow the substance to accumulate slowly at the end of one's nose, sorely growing and growing, until a substantial enough drop was formed to fall forth from the nose, and then have the next drop sorely begin where the last one left off. A small hearth was tucked in the wall beside the two middle

desks. Any heat that it did emit was swiftly carried away by the draft.

A year prior, I had had an office to myself, one that was aptly cool in the heat or warm in the cold. Alas, such simple comforts came to an end when Percival said to me, in a bored conversation in the meeting hall, “It seems like you aren’t able to secure the Jaishi peninsula after all.”

The Jaishi peninsula was an impossible task. Lush and grand jungles of tall and exotic timbers, oh yes, a mouth-watering spoil that tempted starry-eyed merchant lords such as Percival from the Amber Sea to the Granite Isles. But it was, all the same, impossible. The natives were a vicious sort, deaf to trade, and meeting the least entrance onto their land with nightmarish violence. Though armed with no more than spears and stone knives, they frequently attacked camps by night or in other manners of unfair ambush. As well, the sea surrounding the Jaishi peninsula in all directions was host to four consecutive miles of tumultuous rocky straits. There was but a single route through the straits which, principally, although winding and none too comfortable, was wide enough to navigate a small trade ship through. This route was aptly called Suicide. Any crew skilled enough to navigate it would be intelligent enough not to bother. To enter the peninsula by land would be to go through the nation of Gom, and immediately lose nine tenths of any timbers to that nation’s governors and guilds and inspectors.

To solve any one of the problems of the Jaishi peninsula—the natives, the sea route, or the land route—would no doubt gain the solver a reputation in legend as one of humanity’s great engineers. But Percival had known from the start that it was a highly speculative sort of thing, putting any man on that task. And, over time, he did come to accept that the speculation had not been fruitful, and so it came to that sentence, that day in the meeting hall. “It seems like you aren’t able to secure the Jaishi peninsula after all.”

I nodded. I told him, “I don’t believe it can be done at all, my lord. I’ve been wondering if the white forests to the far south wouldn’t be a more fruitful undertaking. It’s a longer journey, and the climate there is very harsh, but for all that, the native

population is sparse and skittish, and entry to the continent is no trouble, save for the distance from here.”

Percival frowned.

The two of us sat there, as a gust of wind outside caused the walls of the offices to groan.

His black beard was uncharacteristically unkempt that day. Behind his spectacles, his eyes showed none of the curious and delighted sparks that I had become accustomed to seeing from him.

He sighed.

I clarified to him, at the time worrying that he'd believed I was only making conversation, “If you would like, I can refocus my efforts away from Jaishi, and towards the white forests.”

“Surveyor work, then?” he responded.

He may as well have smote my stomach with a hammer, for the blunt and nauseating effect that those words had on me. Surveyors were two layers of reports below my high office. And yet, he had uttered no error that I could raise objection to. To find out a route as free of obstacles as the white forests was indeed no longer work that required an engineer.

My mouth dry, and my words faint, I did answer, “I could do surveyor work for a time.”

“If you would like,” he said. Then with that, he stood, and exited the meeting room. I remained there for some time, staring at the wall, reflecting on my accomplishments. Nothing. I had accomplished nothing.

So it was that I found myself placed into the surveyors' office, with the four desks in a line, and the horrible chilling draft. Moreover, I found myself there alone. Or, in a sense, I found myself there with the ghosts of my colleagues, who each appeared in various likenesses.

Mahn, whose desk was first closest to the door, had been out on expedition for nearing two years. His likeness was hollow silence, cold vacancy, empty space. I had no notion of him.

Tenk, whose desk was behind mine, closest to the window, had been sent one year ago to seek out any changes to the waters surrounding Jaishi, to see if any more favorable route had appeared. His likeness was bitter embarrassment, weak vengeance, a feeling upon me as I sat at my desk of being

watched and disapproved of. I believe I am the one who ordered him there to Jaishi, but I have not looked back through the records to find out. I believe I am the one who ordered him to his death to keep up my own appearance as an engineer who was still trying.

Carson, whose desk was second closest to the door, had been out on expedition for nearing two years, and had in fact set out on the very same ship as Mahn had, but at the start, Carson, unlike his colleague, had managed to send back reports with some frequency, at first one each week, and then one each month or so. For six months no word had come from him, and it had, apparently, begun to seem that he may have met some untimely fate, but a package arrived on my desk that was marked as a report of his, some seven hundred pages. His likeness was obligation. I was to read the report, and summarize its nature in a more brief report to be given to his supervisor.

There though, at the beginning of this matter on which I reflect over today, I had not progressed through more than the first three sheets of the report before the draft in the room was too much. The breeze nipped at the papers, caused my nose to run, and caused my very fingers to shiver as I sat there at my desk. It was no possible condition to make meaningful progress in reading under. And so, I had repackaged Carson's report, and as for myself, I sat huddled directly before the hearth, holding my shivering fingers to its small fire. It was while I was seated thusly that the door to the office opened, and Percival stepped in and took a seat against the corner of Mahn's vacant desk.

"Cheer, old dog!" he said to me, cheeks high and eyes scrunched in shining praise.

Though I may have been demoted to the office of a happy imbecile, I was not one myself. Doubtless, he believed that with his winning smile, he could send a man to risk life and limb, and the man would do so vigilantly, worrying not for his own wellbeing, but chiefly concerned that he not cause the delighted merchant lord to be disappointed. But such an imbecile I was not, and his manipulating wiles effected no charm over me.

I should add, as well, that 'Cheer' was not an imperative on his part, but merely my name being mispronounced. Though indeed my name did sound similar to the word for good spirits,

merriment, and joy, it was not. Pronounced correctly, it would be in two stresses, chee-ur, and it would have no meaning grander or smaller than whatever was the grandness or smallness of my name. As Percival pronounced it though, a passerby overhearing the conversation could be forgiven for thinking he was commanding me to jubilation.

I stood up from where I was seated before the hearth fire, and I went and sat on the corner of my own desk, facing the delighted merchant lord. Carson's desk laid between us. The draft blew over me, and sapped any heat I had gained from sitting before the small hearth. A cold and unimpressed vessel, I sat facing Percival.

He said, still smiling, "When the weather heats up, this is known to be the best chambers in the building for cooling off. You'll be up to your nose in folks stopping in to chitter chatter."

As if he were a witch ordaining it, my nose began to drain a cold discharge once more. I sniffled, and then withdrew a handkerchief from a trouser pocket, and dabbed some of the discharge away.

While returning the handkerchief to my pocket, I asked the merchant lord, "Do you still wish to stay my departure to the white forests until autumn?"

He responded, "I had the most interesting conversation at the pub in Fairspring last night."

I was neither surprised he had ignored my question about the white forests nor surprised he had indeed had a most interesting conversation in a pub in Fairspring. For the former, the white forests bored him as much as they bored me. For the latter, Percival sought every opportunity to leave the office and rub elbows. I had attended luncheons and masquerades alongside him, and witnessed him speak with minor members of royalty and with minor house servants with equal delighted interest. Indeed, I think he liked the sound of his own voice, and so the ear he spoke in the direction of mattered not.

I indulged him, "Who did you speak with at the pub?"

"Wild man by the name of Gongogast, as muscular as a Mershi statuette, and damn proud of it, clearly, because he wasn't wearing anything but a thong and a sash."

Percival paused there, eyes still twisted up in a pantomime of joy, waiting for me to show some amusement at the nakedness of a man I had never been aware of until now.

"You had to be there, I suppose," he said, saying with a slight squint of his happy eyes that he would forgive me, just this once, for insulting him by not playing into his humor.

Hoping to usher the story forward to its conclusion, I prompted Percival, saying, "And you spoke with him?"

"With Gongogast, yes. Say that once."

"Gongogast."

"Ha ha! Gongogast. You like that name? I love something about it. Gongogast. Anyways. Of course, first thing I do when I walk in and see a man damn near naked and proud of it is buy that man a drink, because I need to know more, you understand the inquisitive spirit, the call of the unexplored. So I sit with him, and—well, it was a fascinating conversation, but you had to be there."

Again, his eyes, though on one level jolly, on a deeper level squinted at me in a pointed hate, alike to a lavish pillow pierced through with a sewing needle.

"I suppose I had to be there," I echoed back to him.

"Are you familiar with the Heaven's Basin cluster, Cheer?" Percival then asked me.

A droplet of discharge fell from my nose. I answered Percival by utterance of the word, "Passingly," as I retrieved my handkerchief once more. With it in hand, I turned to the side and blew my nose, and then returned the handkerchief to my pocket again.

"East of here, innit?" Percival asked.

"Quite east, yes. Notably little in that region of sea." I stood from sitting on the corner of my desk, and walked over to a large map of the known world that hung on the wall opposite the small hearth. "We are here, of course," I began, pointing to the southern end of a sizable island that was indeed called Percival. In all directions surrounding, the seas were populous enough with islands on which civilized folk had settled. In search of Heaven's Basin, I scanned my finger eastward from Percival, moving slightly southward as well to come around the lowermost horn of the Tenia continent, then straight east past

the distant twin islands of Kess and Veritch, through a vast empty region that was three times as far as the distance to the horn of Tenia had been, past a lone island called Shrew's Hill, farther east again through empty sea, and finally my finger arrived at three small dots labeled Heaven's Basin. "Here, my lord. Quite far east."

"Yes, I see, quite far east indeed," he said, stroking his black beard. "Gongogast had been through there in his travels."

Still observing the three isolated dots on the map, I responded, "By the accounts I have heard, it is very eye-catching. No substantial vegetation to speak of on any of the three islands, and the exposed rock has a high content of reflective minerals. Hence the name, for its appearance of a heavenly bright spot upon the sea. Once there though, there is nothing of value to the place. It makes for a useful landmark, perhaps."

"Nothing of value?" Percival asked. "Have a look at this here."

I turned to see what he had produced. Both of us standing beside Carson's vacant desk, Percival handed me a small jar. I held it up to my eyes, and beheld that inside, suspended in some manner of liquid, there was the carrion of a juvenile sea creature. Prominent pectoral fins, three pronounced dorsal fins, and sharp teeth within its mouth which hung loosely open.

"Something I purchased off of Gongogast," Percival said. He took it back, and set it down on Carson's desk, then sauntered past me, deeper into the office, towards the window. He laughed to himself, and said, "I should clarify, he had a variety of trinkets hanging from his sash, he didn't pull that out from anywhere untoward."

I shook my head to myself, and went to stand nearby the hearth.

Looking out the window, Percival asked, in a full voice which echoed easily through the room, "You ever see a creature quite like that before?"

I had another glance down at it. "No, my lord."

"Of course not. That there is a hatchling barther shark. Absolutely unheard of kind of thing to recover. They spend their juvenile period at the ocean floor, and only venture up near the

surface in adulthood. Gongogast received the specimen as a gift from the natives on Heaven's Basin."

"Skilled fishermen reside there, then?" I asked. Dreading that he seemed to be angling towards something in among this rambling having to do with me, I wished for him to at least come forth with it.

He answered, "Ha! A skilled fisherman—a very skilled fisherman—could catch an adult barther shark. To fish up a hatchling, no, they don't make fishing line that's long enough. Actually I hear that in the north, there might be developments on that, but anyways, no, no one on Heaven's Basin has access to line that long. That specimen didn't come from skilled fishermen, not at all. That there is the work of mystics. The natives there have mastered the art of telekinesis, teleportation, they change the weather and part the sea, they walk on water and hover above the ground. According to Gongogast's account of it, anyways. Do you suppose it has merit, Cheer? Or do you suppose he was just making up a tale as it came to him?"

Again, a discharge had gathered at the tip of my nose. I dabbed at it with my handkerchief. Then I answered him, telling him, "Garl, one of my surveyor overseers on the Jaishi project, brought up mystics with some frequency, convinced that their talents would be needed to overcome the water route. I was willing to explore it. Certainly in history, we have record of acts that could be described only as supernatural. My skepticism, though, was as to whether any persons of such talents exist currently. Garl was never able to produce any such person as to overcome my skepticism. This man you spoke to in the pub was more than likely only telling you a tale, my lord."

"And yet," he said, more quietly, almost as if to himself, "there is the specimen."

He continued to look out of the window at the drizzling rain.

A gust of wind caused the building to groan.

Again, I tried to let him down lightly, careful not to directly contradict him. "It is possible, my lord, yes, that the specimen here was fished up by mystical means. Be it also possible, perhaps, that it was taken out of the belly of some other fish? Washed up on the shore?—by unlikely happenstance, yes, but not of any lesser likelihood than successful voodoo. May it be,

even, that this is some other specie of aquatic creature entirely, one from far away and unfamiliar to us, that so happens to resemble a barther shark?”

Percival laughed, slapped his leg, and turned to face me. “Cheer! Cheer, old dog, this is exactly why I came to you about this. You would find out the truth of the matter. If it is just a tale, and you found out for a surety that it was, ultimately, just a tale, then you would tell me. And if there was something here...”

I felt a lump gathering in my throat.

He went on, “If there was something here... something that would let us float timbers over land as though down a river, allow us to levitate ships in the air, grant us teleportation, telekinesis, changing of weather, parting of seas... Cheer, old dog, I would like you to go to Heaven’s Basin and figure it out.”

The lump in my throat swelled such that at first, I could not speak at all. Already, my career had been driven back from that of an engineer to that of a mere surveyor. But even as a surveyor, there had been promise of reestablishing myself, securing small but surefire gains in the white forests and the like, reproving to all that I was not incompetent in my work, I had simply been saddled with an impossible task, back when I had been given Jaishi. Now though. Now, Percival wished to send me straight out onto another impossible errand. A goose chase even more cruel than the last.

Faintly, I croaked out but a few words, enough to be candid of my worry. “If there is nothing here...”

With a delighted smile still spread across his face, he assured to me, “I would not hold it against you. When you come back, if there is nothing to it, you can get back to work on this white forests survey.”

It was the delighted, assuring smile that he almost always wore. He did not mean a word of his promise one way or the other. When I returned, I likely would be able to return to the white forests survey, but not due to his promise of it. I would likely be able to return to the white forests survey only because I was once again far enough below him that it was a waste of his time to oversee my activities one way or the other, once they were no longer of interest to him.

Another gust came through the office, causing my very jaw to chatter. And that was what resigned me to it, I think. Visions of the comfortable captain's quarters aboard Adelia crowded my thoughts.

I said to Percival, even in the face of his empty promise, "Very well. Ha. It will be good to set foot on Adelia again, get out onto the sea."

"Hm?" he responded. "Oh, Cheer. Adelia has been reallocated."

"What?" I shot, far more harshly than was wise.

He again shot me a look of scornful forgiveness, still couching all in the folds of a smile. Passing by me to exit the office, he said, "Leaving a ship at harbor the year round, just wasteful. I don't recall who has it. When you speak to Ahns over the funding of this trip, perhaps she would be able to tell you its current whereabouts, if you have an interest in knowing."

"She, my lord," I said quietly, as he was on the doorway.

He turned back, and asked, "What's that?"

"Mountains and ships are she, not it, my lord."

"Yes, well, good sailing," he wished, smiling his same smile, and then he departed from my presence.

I faced the empty doorway for a time, reflecting on what had just been given to me.

Then, I turned towards the hearth, and looked down at the burning wood. The fresher of the logs burned hotly. Under it, smoldering remains of its cousins. I watched, for quite some passage of time, as the hotly burning log became black and cold.

The draft blew through the room, and I drew in a sharp staccato breath through suddenly chattering teeth. With a hideous grimace, I turned towards the door, casting no further glance back towards the hearth, no further glance towards Carson's report, and I made exit of the surveyor's office. In the passages of the building, I marched quickly, making no pause, taking no curious peek into the offices of any others. My station so upheaved, I had found that there was no longer pleasant conversation here to be found for me. Not among anyone. My former equals, I had come to be below. My former underlings, I was now below as well, or equal with, or less distantly above; all cases were to a similar effect. They pitied me too sorely. I passed

through the passages unmolested, up a flight of stairs to the next floor above, and entered the budgetary department. There, the secretary, Anka, looked up from a chart she had been poring over, and frowned at me.

“I was told you aren’t permitted here anymore,” she said.

To my own self, I scoffed at that. It was the usage of her word ‘anymore’ which caused the greatest undue insult. I had not frequented this office even before, while on the Jaishi project. I had been above it, my own secretary handling the most of the intercourse between this department and my office.

Outwardly, I maintained an upright posture, and told Anka, “Percival has sent me to confer with Ahns.”

Anka continued to frown. “What matters will I tell her you come on?” she asked.

I began to speak, and then felt some horrid speck of phlegm seize my throat, and I turned aside and coughed, at first quietly, though that did no good to clear it, and so I coughed more violently some few times until I could once more feel my throat clear to speak. I took a breath, turned my sight to the secretary once again, and said, “Percival sends me to confer with Ahns. My matter is with her.”

Anka stared at me dumbly for a moment, and then stood from her seat, and departed down a narrow passage towards Ahns’s office.

I stood there in the empty reception room in wait for an egregious interval of time. Near to a full hour had passed, I believe, when Anka returned from the passage, carrying in both hands before her a small drum of unfinished maple.

She set it on her desk, sat down at her seat, and from a drawer retrieved a stack of twenty and some papers.

She said to me, “The funding has been allocated, we must go over a few simple points of policy before transfer of it can be made.”

I asked her, “How much is the funding?”

Her answer was only a small utterance of, “We will come to that.”

“Is Ahns in?” I demanded.

She responded in a small manner, “The department is not at liberty to divulge more than is relevant to any matter.”

In that moment, the fact that I stood still for a time and did nothing was due only to the fact that I was pulled equally in opposite directions. One pull, towards the passage Anka had gone down, towards Ahns's office, to demand the respect I knew she had not forgotten, to be well reasoned professionals and discuss, as intelligent minds alike, what the demands of the voyage were, which ship I might procure in Adelia's stead, what amount of crew and provisions would suffice, and any further margin considered in the face of the likelihood of unexpected circumstances and costs on such a lengthy journey. For all to be set without my input was a grave insult. The other pull, the one opposite Ahns, was towards the exit. I did consider, then, whether I was done with this work.

As my passions on the insult cooled, I found that, while my own heat had made the prospect of leaving seem hot, the cold facts of it set in to a sad reality. Here, I had once had much, and now had lesser. Leaving this work, I would have nothing at all. I would find myself a pauper in want of food within the year, if not within weeks.

I stepped forward to Anka's desk. I was made to put my signature on several of the papers she had produced, all vowing that I would use the funding towards the assignment, and other various contractual points all more or less to that effect. In the midst of the signings, the amount that was contained in the drum did come up: three measures of gold, five measures of silver, and some assorted coinage amounting to another forty measures of silver. While not lavish, it was an amount that would suffice me to get by becomingly at any stops along the way. As Anka and I progressed through the pages, I awaited the indication of what my ship was to be, and how much would be the crew manning her. When I had signed the very last page, Anka slid all of the pages to herself and deposited them in a drawer, and then slid the maple drum in my direction.

"Safe traveling," she said, a sad and pitying tone in her voice.

Again holding myself upright, I asked her, exceedingly reasonably even in the face of all of her dispoliteness, "Has Ahns allocated a ship already, or is the timetable of the departure still being worked on?"

Anka shied back in her chair, not a lot, but enough to where I noticed.

I demanded, having just then grown quite tired of these cat and mouse games, "What devilry now?"

"You've just been given the funding with which to secure passage on a ship."

Her words at first had the appearance of being so disconnected with any form of reality that I could only matter-of-factly respond with the word, "No."

She shied back yet farther, and said, "Yes."

I told her, "Then there has been an error. Three measures of gold wouldn't purchase a ship capable of arriving at the next island, much less all that distance east to Heaven's Basin."

And then, dry on lies and misdirections, she came forth with it outright: "The funding is not to secure a ship. It is to secure passage aboard a ship. Passage."

For what happened next, I should hope that she still reflects often on how blessed she was by the fates, for I was so moved to fury by her words that the sharpness of what stood on my tongue could have pierced a suit of iron armor were it not for the circumstance that then followed. Indeed, by wit or by force, it was my intent then to have an audience with Ahns. However. Oh, however. As I drew in the very beginning of a deep breath to give myself air to speak with, phlegm once again strangled me, doubled me over, left me hacking and wheezing for such a time that tears wracked the corners of my cheeks and I was beginning to feel very faint, and even still the cough could not be dispelled. It went on to a point where it was apparent I would be capable of gaining nothing further there without retreating and regathering myself. Feebly, I made staggering steps forward towards Anka's desk, still wracked by coughs. There I seized the maple drum, took it, and departed from the room.

I proceeded down the flights of stairs. I passed by the surveyor's office without a glance, desiring nothing from that place. In possession of the maple drum, I made exit of the building, and stood at the grey brick plaza outside in the drizzling rain.

There, as my clothes became damp, I reflected on my circumstances. I had been dealt a foul hand. An engineer,

though, is a man of solutions, a man of overcoming, a man of triumph. The task I had been saddled with was lowly. A pointless errand over a great distance with insulting funds. But it was possible. No matter how unfruitful, no matter how much of a waste, I would, in a year's time, be able to return to Percival, and say that I had done it, and reclaim some favor in his eyes and delight in his tone.

A cab entered the plaza through the rain, drawn by a black horse. I waved the driver over. He turned the horse, and caused the cab to swing in my direction and come to a stop nearby me. Seeing the netting which hung from the brim of his hat, a prickly discomfort ran through me, as I realized I had left my own netting in the surveyor's office. I would not go to get it though. On principle. Additionally, the need of it would be behind me after this transit regardless. I approached the cab driver, handed him some small coinage from out of the maple drum, and stepped up into the cabin.

"To the port," I told him, and then I added, "I have much to think over on the way."

His tongue stayed by that, we began off towards port in no sound more than that of the knocking of hooves over the road. Flies began to buzz about the cabin before we had cleared the plaza. Though they annoyed, I made no effort to brush them off when they landed on my hands, my neck, or my face, as they would soon be in such numbers that there was no point to fighting them.

In not much time, we were out from the cluster of buildings that surrounded Percival's high offices, and we began our journey through the fields of mud which surrounded. The forests of this island had been harvested down to every root many years earlier. It was a testament to the spirit of dedication how wholly the landscape had been changed. All thick greenery, gay songbirds, and elusive foxes had been given over to an open expanse and a heavy pestilence. At points in the journey, I could look out through the cabin window beside me and see over the mud for miles, the grounds feeling as enormous and empty as the sea itself, a psychotic artifice of land that nature alone in her temperance and fits could never have achieved here. At other points in the journey, when the wind was more still and we were

over a wider body of standing water, such a blanket of flies and mosquitoes hung upon us that I could not see the cab driver through the window ahead of me. During those stretches, I did what I could to cover my head with my waistcoat, though this left only the thinner material of my shirt as armor for my torso, and so the overall effect was that all I achieved was a more even coverage of pestering and bites.

When we arrived in the port town, dusk was beginning to come about. I itched at a bump that had formed on my side, one among dozens, though that one proved the most nettling. The cab driver deposited me by the docks and wished me happy fortune. I trudged forth to the sand. The maple drum in hand, I looked out to the sea. Most ships, unless directly in the process of loading or unloading, stayed at an appreciable distance out into the waters. I squinted out at them for some time, and then sighed. Adelia was not among them, nor was she stayed at the docks, nor grounded up or down the shore at any place I could see.

I turned from the shore, and passed back up through the main thoroughfare of the town. The rain had been on and off that day, and quickly picked up again as I made my way under the gaudy awnings of the port town's storefronts. In the central square, there walked about many women and men in colorful rags, collecting up various props into carts, the most notable items among the props being swords and shields and spears that were all two to three times larger than would be practical, and made of painted wood with no sharp edges. Performers of some sort. Comics, one could hope, though dramatists making use of such exaggerated items had become tiringly common as of late as well. I could not recollect if the day was a holiday noted by any tradition, or if these performers were more likely merely passing through. Two men about the group shouted directions now and then to the others, as I happened to be walking by. I could not mark the language which they shouted in, lending to the likelihood that they were merely passing through here from afar.

I continued past the square, and went up a road which climbed over a steep hill. Through this ascent there were no awnings along the sides of the road, and the rain had indeed

been growing stronger, such that by the time I stepped into a doorway near the top of the hill, my clothing was fully drenched, and my shoes were swamped in water as well.

Nonetheless, I had at least arrived at my lodging for the night. A clubhouse in the port town for those on official business under Percival.

I saw, upon entering, that the place had changed in some ways since my last visit. The walls, once wood paneling, had been plastered over and painted blue. There had previously been quite a number of wood carvings in the place: elaborate masks hanging from the walls, gargoyles perched on counters and mantles. I had not noticed them much, when they had been there, though I certainly noted their absence as something of a disappointment. If it was not for the same keeper as before glancing up from his sweeping to look at me, I would have believed I had entered the wrong place. I recognized him quite readily though, by the swirling patterned tattoo that marked one of his cheeks, and by his spectacles, which caught the glow of the hearth that was in the center of the room. Two men and a panting dog sat nearby the hearth.

The keeper came over, and stood with the broom across his shoulders, arms hanging from either side of it as though he were a scarecrow. "We have some rooms free tonight," he said. "Dinner will be on in an hour." He then seemed about to relay some third matter, but instead grunted and turned away, and lowered the broom back to the floor, returning to his business.

I proceeded across the common room, past the two men and the dog, none of which I gave much thought towards in that moment, as all of them were quite silent. The two men looked into the fire. The dog had rested its chin by the foot of one of the men, and closed its eyes.

At the far side of the common room was a steep stairway, which parted halfway up, the right continuation of the stairs leading up to the second floor, the left continuation leading up to the third. I went first to the right, up to the second floor, and found that all three rooms bore a red card on the floor before their doors, marking them as claimed. Muttering, I went back down the stairs on that side, and climbed the opposing stairs up to the third floor, quite drained of breath by the time I had

reached the top. There, indeed, there were three of the rooms free, and only one claimed. I entered the nearest, first making sure to remove the red card that laid on the bed and place it before the doorway. I stowed the maple drum beneath the bed. I shook my head. Even the walls in the rooms had been plastered over, and the homely decorations removed. In any case, I then undressed from my soaked clothing, and laid it out evenly upon the floor in hopes it might dry some. To wear in the meantime, I retrieved a robe that was available in the closet. I had worn the robes of this clubhouse before, and did not look forward to doing so once again, but I was, in that instance, pressed for alternatives. In all my times staying at that clubhouse, neither I nor any other guest could ever determine what material the robes were made from. They seemed to be of a textile made out of some horrid mistake, such as a barber's sweepings being spilled onto a shipment of wool peeled off of leprous sheep. My intention was to attend that night's dinner though, and so I did put on the robe. Wearing it felt like wearing a blanket of sand and gravel. By this point in the day I had had though, I was verging on too exhausted to care. In the scratchy attire I descended back down the stairs to await the meal, and to sit and warm myself by the clubhouse's hearth in the meantime.

As I approached a free chair nearby the two men, I was perhaps rather more silent in my footsteps than I had intended, walking slowly from my exhaustion of the climbs up the stairs and down. Additionally, the rain by this point pelted the building rather harshly, further disguising the sound of my approach. I fully believe, looking back, that they in genuine did not know I was approaching. But my ears burned at what I heard the two men uttering.

The one with long black hair, smiling, said under his breath, "Seppa cherra, kolvidi den deykordey." We are exceedingly foolish, we will be thrown from here before we have seen morning arrive.

The one with the short red hair, in a tone as likewise warm as it was likewise conspiratorial, responded, "Kolch kordeyna. Cheya chersil av seppa cherra arro, ah." We will not be thrown out. They are the fools who believe that we of exceeding foolishness belong here.

I interjected, “Yiraicheel veda komeritz eer galr. Kor orra, sinich.” There are beds and plates in abundance. Worry not, gentlemen.

The red haired gasped and whirled back towards my direction. Now smiling even bigger than before, he shouted, “Hingri!” Assassin!

He, his friend, and even the dog all looked ready to jump up and flee for the door.

I gave a warm and relaxed laugh, and said, “No, no. I will be candid with you in full, I am only a man, and not so greatly invested in politics these days that I would assassinate any other.” I was surprised by myself at how easily I was slipping back at once into my emissarial ways of speaking. It had been a function of my engineering work, at many times, to converse with others, negotiate, make impression, gain information, come to understandings. Hearing my mother language from two men who were, apparently, not supposed to be in the clubhouse in which they sat, I was indeed curious to know more. I took a seat in the vacant chair that was beside the red haired man, and I leaned towards the hearth fire, holding my hands up before it. The skin of my hands was riddled with bumps and red spots, after the cab ride.

The red haired man remarked, “Rare is the man who speaks the tongue of the Galwur.”

I answered cordially, “I am yet rarer: I am Galwur.”

“No,” said the red haired man with a laugh, “you are not.”

“More by birth than by upbringing,” I said, which was truthful.

He squinted at me for a moment, and eventually conceded, “Yes, that much you may be. You will throw us out for sure now, though: we are Nessayk.”

“Nessayk!” I echoed, my surprise genuine though my outburst about it put on for effect. I then settled in again, and said, “No, that sours nothing of my opinion. You speak in Galwur because it is lesser known here abroad?”

“Exactly.”

“What is your business here in Percival?”

“Sightseeing,” the red haired man answered. “Not for just this island, but for the world across.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you destined from here?” I asked.

“We were more or less finished with this region, yeah?” he said, and turned to the man with long black hair.

That man gave a simple affirmative “yeah,” and slumped back in his chair, and pet the dog.

The red haired man went on, “After this, Death’s Coast, The Green Towers, The Ursa Sea...”

“Alice,” added the other man.

“Alice on the southern horn of Tenia,” the red haired man agreed, and went on, “Heaven’s Basin, Davin well beyond that, and by then we will likely be circling back westward again, though the exact landmarks we hope to hit on the return, we are undecided.”

I did not speak at first, as I was still trying to work out, before giving anything away, how they had pulled off such a trick on me. For them to ‘happen’ to have stepped in to the clubhouse to which I had access. To ‘happen’ to be speaking the first language I had ever learned, and which hardly any others in this region were even aware existed. To ‘happen’ to be making a circular transit which, through not directly there and directly back, did include Heaven’s Basin, where I had come to town that very day to seek passage to. I did not know, then, that it had been accomplished because the trick had not been played by them at all, but by the fates. In that moment, I was the fool enough to believe that because I had not spoken the words “Heaven’s Basin” in the port town that day, this was finally the beginning of my dealt hands making up for lost luck.

“How do you get about to all of these places?” I asked. “Stowaways? Crewmen?”

I chose not to insult them by suggesting they may be men of any importance, only to cause them to have to tell me that they were not.

The two of them looked to each other. I could not discern their cypher. There was no nod, wink of the eye, twitch of the ear, tapping of the nose or rubbing of the stubble from either of them. They seemed to do nothing other than look into each

other's eyes for a few moments, and then the red haired turned to me again.

"We are crewmen, yes," he said. He was lying, in the manner where someone considers himself too important to falsify information without being pressed to, and so he speaks in riddles and details. It is a very careful kind of speech and very easy to notice.

So, somehow, when looking at each other, they had agreed not to tell me the true nature of their travel arrangements. My best guess at the signal they had used is that it was done in a lack of signal: if there had been a nod, a wink, or so on, that would have indicated to the other to be forthright. It was the fact there was not a signal that caused them to default to deception. That is how I believe they did it. That they did it at all is incidental to these events, but there were times, later on from then, I would reflect on it. So that is what I believe they did.

Although I was being lied to, I also did not believe that all was lost. They did not seem bent on harm. As well, for all the lie that was said in "We are crewmen, yes," they had nonetheless been truthful with me until that moment, in telling me their planned travels. They were destined to Heaven's Basin, and securing passage alongside the two of them was a more direct arrangement than I was likely to get from anything else: even were I to independently arrive at the southern horn of Tenia with no difficulty, I had no ship of my own and no funds great enough to command one temporarily, and so I would be left to wait, perhaps for months, before a ship already happened to be going that way and would take me. It would all be easier, I believed at that time, were I to secure passage with these two.

The red haired asked me, "What of you, sinich?"

"Please, call me Cheer."

"Cheer," he echoed back, using the correct pronunciation, saying it in two parts, chee-ur. It was no wonder he should say it correctly, as he then told me his name: "I am Cheek." It was pronounced by the same principle: chee-uk. He was not making up that similar name to ingratiate himself to me in some way either, as that is the name I observed him to be referred to by at all times later.

Cheek turned towards the man with long black hair.

That man turned down to look at his dog, smiled, and told me, "She is Checha."

He then looked to me with some kind of pleased finality, as though his part of the introductions had, in all sincerity, been completed. From that moment, even having not known him very long, I found his manners to be very strange. At first, though, my assumption of the most likely truth on the matter was that he was simply not as well spoken as his friend, hence why Cheek had done the most part of the talking with me until that point.

"And what may I call you by, sinich?" I asked him.

His expression dropped. What manner of slight he imagined me to have given him, I do not know. I only know that he appeared, suddenly and for no reason, displeased with me. "I am Solok," he told me.

"Steeg, Cheek eer Solok," I told the men. Pleased to meet you, Cheek and Solok.

Solok said nothing, and looked at me with open contempt, as though my pleasant greeting had been some grave insult. I wondered then, and to this day I still have no good answer, whether he wielded as full a command as he seemed to over either of the languages which we had in common. It may have been, when hearing me call him a gentleman, sinich, his untrained ear for Galwur had guessed at some other less flattering term, though what that would be, I cannot make a reasonable guess of, as it would be something predicated on incorrect information, and could therefor be anything. All I can say in confidence is that in that moment Solok very quickly detested me, and his opinion of me as time went on did not rise in leaps and bounds. Whatever slight he had conceived of right then was not one that he ever forgot.

Cheek had noticed his friend's cold response to my pleasant remark, and, to his credit, at least attempted to cover for his friend's poor manners. The red haired laughed a little under his breath, leaned back in his seat, and lifted an imaginary glass into the air. "Had I wine I would lift all of our names in a toast," he said.

At other times I may not have been moved to playing along with a gesture as childish as that one. Being quite glad to move

the conversation along from there, though, I raised an imaginary glass as well, and clinked with him.

“As for my business,” I said, and then I itched at one of the insect bites on my shin. As I shifted, the material of the robe then seemed to constrict, and nettled at me from neck to ankle. I sat upright again. I made a show of looking at the arms of the robe. “This material is awful.” I had also begun to sweat, sitting by the heat of the fire, and my sweat now held the prickly material against my skin no matter which way I sat. I adjusted in my seat a few times, and eventually I resigned to discomfort, and I continued, “I am a surveyor. Percival sends me to Heaven’s Basin.”

At those words, Solok muttered something under his breath that I took to be an oath. He stared into the fire and said nothing else in my presence for the rest of the night.

Cheek glanced at his friend. He seemed to want to play ambassador, bridge the gap between, but he evidently could not form a plan to do such. He continued to speak with just me. “What business could you possibly be sent to Heaven’s Basin on?” he asked.

Nothing of my business necessitated being deceitful. Them knowing I was on a fool’s errand would not impede the errand, in any way I could see it. I told the red haired, while also still able to be heard by the black haired if he was listening, “There are rumored to be mystics living on those islands. My lord would like me to find out whether it is true, and report back anything of use.”

The red haired asked, “Do you believe there are mystics?”

I shook my head. “No. Not of the caliber my lord hopes for.”

He then asked, with a mischievous smile teasing the corners of his lips upwards, “Why not lay low for a few months, and come back saying you went and that there was nothing?”

I was speechless. He spoke of insubordination as though it was a thing to find glee in. Of misuse of a lord’s resources as though Percival were a surly tribal chief. The answer to his question, “Why not,” was because such idiotic betrayal could never have occurred to me.

With a laugh, Cheek reached out and put a hand on my shoulder, and said, “Cher pech.” We are joking.

I do not think that he was. I think he truly wanted to know why I wouldn't hide from my responsibilities in some manner akin to what he had suggested.

He went on, "Come with us tomorrow morning to see our ship."

"I would like to," I said.

Shortly thereafter, the keeper came to tell us that dinner was prepared.

We all gathered to a side of the common room which had a long table, and many chairs down the line, the extra chairs not removed in spite of the fact that only the four of us ate that night. The keeper had done correctly, according to custom: Every spot was to remain ready, such that a passing man of need or an unanticipated extra guest would not feel he was inconveniencing his host. The keeper had, in fact, set up in fullness one more place than would be necessary: Solok dished stew into his bowl, fished and strained extra pieces of beef from the broth to drop into his bowl as well, grabbed two cuts of the thickly sliced bread on offer, and then turned and went up the stairs to eat in his room alone. His dog followed after him, its nose towards his food.

I inquired with the keeper if any others from above would be joining us. He said that there were others staying the night, but they were each taking their meals privately. I could guess, then, at some of the men who might be present. Garl, perhaps. In any case, I did not dwell on it. I was ready enough by then to finish the meal and retire to my room, and be prepared to get on with the next day.

The meal bordered on inedible. Something about the stew was off. The potatoes or the carrots might have gone bad. I wondered if they might have been intended for a stew the night before or even earlier, been cooked partially, then left to sit and spoil until added to that night's broth. The beef, what few parts were left, was passable if bland. The bread was stale. In dipping it in the broth, whatever taste was off about the stew transferred onto the bread as well. By the time my bowl was empty, I certainly felt that I could have eaten more if the food were any good. I was unsure enough, though, whether I would even keep down what I had eaten already.

Without dishing myself up seconds, I wished the keeper and Cheek a good night, and retired up the stairs. My thoughts reeling over the day I had had, I went up the wrong branch of the staircase at first, realized it halfway up the wrong path, turned, climbed back down, and climbed up the correct side, and retired into my room. There inside, I stripped off my robe and climbed into the bed. Though I was thoroughly exhausted, I was also riddled with insect bites and had been sweating in the common room's heat, and I remained awake for quite some time, wishing for sleep, but kept up by itching spots on my hands, torso, brow, ankles, right shin, and left thigh.

Hours into the night, at a moment when sleep had not been upon me for more than a few minutes, I distantly heard the howling of dogs on the streets outside. I covered my head with my arms, blocking out the sound. It worked, and I thought, for a moment, that I would be falling back to sleep hardly having noticed the interruption. Then, though, the howling seemed as though the dogs were in the room with me. I shot upright in my bed, frantically trying to come up with what the nearest weapon to me was to strike a dog away with.

Looking around my dim room though, there was nothing.

I listened again.

The howling was coming from the next room down the hall, howling back at the dogs outside. I shouted vile things at the wall, telling the cur to stop their ruckus or I would go in and stop them myself. For I had believed, at that moment, not thinking of things fully in my half awakened state, that in the room next to mine, there were only two dogs who were dedicated to ruining my sleep. I do realize now that it was one dog, and Solok.

The howling did cease, and I was, after some further itching to my shin, able to fall asleep again.

In the morning, I picked up my clothing from off the floor. It had still not dried fully. I wrestled my way into the damp things though, and put on my boots, which squelched and squealed with every step as I went down the stairs.

There in the common room, at the breakfast table, was a platter of eggs and pitchers of water. I had always been made nauseous by the smell of eggs. They reminded me of mildew, or

milk gone bad. I do not see how chicken droppings ever came to be such a staple food among civilized peoples who could afford anything better.

Seated towards the far end of the breakfast table were Cheek and Solok. Cheek waved me over. Solok ignored me, and offered down a morsel of his eggs to his dog. It ate straight off of his fork. If I were already upon them, seated at their side, I think I would not have been able to help myself from snatching away the fork, kicking the dog, and telling this rudely disrespectful band of intruders to be gone. As I made my walk towards them across the common room though, I had time to calm, and approach things in a more peaceable fashion.

Standing beside the table, I said to the black haired, "That was very disrespectful."

He turned and looked at me. His eyes were not friendly, nor were they impassioned. He was unimpressed by me. I continued to stand upright all the same, looking down at him severely.

As I did, something else caught my eye. On the floor behind him, against the wall, there stood a bowl. I glanced from the bowl to Solok, and then to the dog, and then turned and looked at the platter of eggs, and then looked to the keeper who sat at the other far end of the table, and looked back at me with an expression as bored as Solok's.

I put it all together, of course. The dog had not just eaten a morsel then off of the fork, but had in fact already had even more from out of the bowl, and what's worse, it had happened with the blessing, or at least the permission, of the keeper. As such, I could not, in the manner of civility, stand and call to task the rudeness I had seen. I was not the host, and I was no longer a man of such a high station as to supersede the host either. Without scolding Solok further, but also without stepping back from what I had said already, I took a seat. I consoled myself by my belief that eggs were filth. The dog, Solok, the keeper, all of them ate filth. I ate nothing.

The red haired tapped his fingernails against a slate that was laid out on the table, calling my attention to it. On the slate was chalk writing. Looking it over, it appeared to be a manifest, detailing the crew and provisions of the ship they were traveling by. Fourteen bodies were the crew, with two additional bodies

who were both called navigators, neither captain. I inquired if these 'navigators' were Cheek and Solok. They were not: Cheek and Solok counted themselves among the crew. The navigators were called Damick and Nir.

We discussed accommodations. Tucked into the stern of the ship were six quarters, three at port and three at starboard: I considered how small every one of the quarters would be, given that the entirety of the ship could not be so large with a crew of less than twenty. There was a quarters to the navigator Damick, one to the navigator Nir, one shared by Cheek and Solok, and the other three were to six further crew members who I did not yet have any notion of, with the remainder of the crew sleeping on hammocks among the provisions. We came to an agreement that for the three measures of gold in my drum, Cheek would give up his bed to me, and he would go sleep among the provisions as well. I would not be made to labor unless all hands were called to deck. I would have access to the provisions evenly with any other man aboard the ship. It all seemed agreeable to me. As agreeable as I could hope for, at least. We brought the keeper over as a witness to the agreement, and I had him attest, in the presence of the red haired and the black haired, that if any mischief befell a surveyor of Percival, that mischief maker would be marked a severe criminal in all lands and waters which Percival touched.

With all settled, we all returned to our rooms, gathered our things, and proceeded out of the door, down the hill, and towards the sea. In the shops near the port I purchased some commodities for the travels, based on my knowledge of what may bring comforts during the long days at sea. Spare clothing was quite an important thing I had been neglected, much of my attire gone with wherever Adelia had gone to, and the trunks in her captain's quarters. Though as to materials with which to pass the time at sea, my chief purchase was a journal and writing implements. Cheek and Solok made no purchases of their own, and stood about outside any shop I went into, bickering between themselves, Cheek cursing the morning's hot sun, Solok cooing and preening over his panting dog. When I had gathered enough to suffice me, we continued the last of the walk to the sea. There at the port, the ship awaited us.

The ship was called Sorry Ester. I will not speak poorly of her. She was not a vessel of grandeur, but in her meek way she was built like an iron chariot to weather the harshness of the sea. She did not sink. She continued to sail at all times she was tasked to.

When we arrived, a gangplank was across the gap between dock and deck. At the top, two women were conversing. In short time I learned them to be Damick and Nir. Damick wore a slim sword at her hip. Nir wore a greatsword at her back, so large that I was surprised a woman could have the strength to walk about with it, let alone lift it in battle, though I would later see her do just that. Upon our arrival, the two navigators looked down at us, and then to one another. Damick, the woman with the slim sword, smirked, and did what I could only describe as letting go of herself: she fell off of the side of the ship, gave herself over to the whims of weight and the natural laws. I believed she was about to break her neck, split her head open on the dock's planks. Upon coming to the dock though, she rolled and in one motion stood to bring her face an inch from mine. She was not the slightest out of breath. I did not realize, until afterwards, until now, even, how much that struck me. By her fall, she had exerted almost nothing, felt no peril. With a nonchalant smile she stared at me eye to eye as though she had turned in place to face me.

"This is him," she said, speaking of me as a subject, speaking to Cheek and Solok as her audience.

Cheek responded, "We believed so."

"Good," she said. And then she turned, and walked back up the gangplank, and she and Nir walked off farther aboard the vessel.

Cheek turned to me, and said, under his breath, "Prophecy followers, both of them." Then he stepped back a pace, and at a more ordinary volume, said, "Shall we go to see your accommodations?"

"Please," I said.

Solok's dog went up first, followed by Cheek, and then myself, and then Solok behind. At the deck, Solok went off to speak with some others. Cheek led me astern, towards the open portal into the quarters. The portal itself was a round door, two feet in

diameter if that much, with stiff hinges that left the door standing open as we were there at port. The portal led into a narrow passage which had three tall and narrow doors to the left and three tall and narrow doors to the right. Cheek led the way to the second door on the right, and held it open for me, standing back in the small space further down the passage. I looked inside. The room was about six feet across and six feet deep. The majority of the floor was occupied by two beds, side by side, a narrow aisle between the two. All else was tucked away in secured cabinets upon the walls.

"It will do," I said, fool that I was.

I stepped inside. From my drum, I removed the three measures of gold, and handed them to Cheek. The red haired took them, mentioned some pleasantries, removed his few items from the cabinets on the left side of the quarters, and then he departed out of the portal again, leaving me to the room he had condemned me to.

I tucked away my things in the cabinets he had just cleared. I then went and paced about the deck of Sorry Ester, standing variously near stern and bow, making small introductions to crew members as I encountered them. Provisions were carried aboard in no great hurry, and ropes and sails were made ready.

At some moment Solok's dog came up to deck from the hold and ran squarely in my direction. Had I not happened to have been facing it to be ready to fend it off, I may have been bitten and clawed to death then and there. But, facing the approaching dog, I shouted, "Back! Scram! Back!" This gave the dog some brief cause for hesitation in its bloodlust, enough for me to turn and flee up towards the helm. With a bark it pursued after me, struggling enough with the steep portside stairs up to the helm that I had a moment to look about and figure where to flee to next: the mast, of course. Just as the dog was coming to the top of the portside stairs, I fled down the starboard stairs, sprinted for the mast, and began climbing up the ladder pegs, making it nearly to the top before I dared to look down.

When I did look down, I saw that the crewmen who were on deck had all paused in their work and were invariably staring up at me. Directly below me, at the foot of the mast, was that

aggressing dog, and standing beside it was Solok. The dog and Solok both stared up at me.

Solok called up to me, "Is the crow's nest to your satisfaction, sinich?"

One crewman, Yansed was his name, laughed loudly at that.

I shouted down to Solok, "Call off your villainous hound!"

The black haired thought about it for quite some while, and then I heard his shout back up to me: "Very well."

He turned down to the dog and said some command to it. Oh, how I wish I knew its command that turned it away from me, but alas, he was too far for me to hear it, and he never repeated it at any later time either, such that I could hear. With the command said though, he walked away to return to whatever his business was in the hold, and the dog followed him back down below as well. I stayed upon the mast until some time later when a crewman, Teetri was his name, called up and asked if I needed any assistance down. Bashfully I made the descent down myself, and retreated into my quarters.

Sitting on my own bed, my feet over the edge of it and resting down in the narrow aisle between my bed and Solok's, I felt myself grimacing at the accumulation of dog hair upon his bedding. I wondered how a man could sleep, pricked so by the hairs of an animal, lying among a dog's stench.

Some time passed as I sat there alone. I felt, in that moment, one longing. I longed to be at sea, and feel the ship rocking under me. That was a simple comfort I had not had in too long.

I felt a small hunger, which caused my stomach to turn as I sat there. I had not eaten much the day before, and I had eaten nothing at all on that day, and the time was coming to late afternoon. I arose to inquire out how meals were organized aboard the ship. As I was stepping out of the narrow door of my new quarters, a crewman, Vish was his name, stuck his head into the open portal out to the deck. He seemed about to shout some announcement into that section of the ship, but paused when realizing he was about to shout it at me squarely. Rather than shout, he simply offered a smile, and said, "Setting off now, sir. You are coming with us?"

I nodded. "Indeed. Do not let me stay the departure."

Again smiling, he said, "Very good." He then turned away, and joined the buzz of activity that had begun all aboard the deck, men shouting and moving.

I remained in my quarters, and laid down for a spell. I did indeed fall asleep soundly to the sounds of a ship's men at work, and the rocking of waves as we got out to sea.

I was startled awake by a harsh rapping of knuckles on wood. Sitting upright on my bed, I attempted to gather my bearings.

Beyond the closed door to my quarters, I heard a woman, who I now know to have been Nir, speaking at a raised volume as she knocked on the door to another of the quarters tucked into the stern, which I now know to have been Damick's door. The two of them seemed at all times to speak in vaguery. What Nir said exactly then, I cannot recall, though it would have been to the effect of, "We are needed! Fortune calls! Fortune will not wait, navigator! Come, let us fulfill today's step in the great play!" Whatever set of grand compulsions Nir had used that day, it did cause Damick to rise, and the two of them departed out to the deck. My ears following, so to speak, in their direction, I marked then that the sounds out on deck had changed. No longer was there the shouting and bustle, but instead, conversation, and occasional laughter.

I exited my quarters, and found, on the deck, that a dinner was being had. Men stood about in little groups, conversing as they sipped intermittently from the bowls that they held. Nearby to the mast was a cauldron, and some empty bowls remaining beside. I ladled myself one bowlful, rueful to find that it was fish. Not a full day out, and fish already. I should have realized, a vessel as tight on space as Sorry Ester, that fish was to be a staple. Bringing much of other substance would not be feasible, if she was not planning to stop to restock with frequency. I stood a few paces back from the starboard railing, and faced out to sea as I ate my dinner of fish soup.

When I was done, I placed the bowl among a stack of dirtied ones that were by the cauldron, and returned to my quarters again. I began penning the first entry of my journal, chronicling the day thus far, while there was yet daylight through the room's small window to write by.

As I was nearing the end of the day's log, Solok entered the quarters, and his unruly dog, which was so bold as to push even its master aside to run into the quarters first, leaping up onto Solok's bed and then over to mine. It nosed at me very rudely, and then laid down on Solok's bed and looked up to its master. Solok came in, and laid down on his bed as well, and settled in on his back with the dog pressed against his side.

I told him, "Your dog is to leave this quarters at once."

By the dim light of day that yet came in through the room's window, I saw Solok lift his head and look in my direction. He then rubbed the side of his head against his dog as though he laid in bed with a woman. And he said to me, and I quote him exactly, "I would throw you overboard before I would make her feel uncared for."

The words he said cannot have hung in his own head for too long, as within half a minute after him saying it, the sound of his deep snoring came from his side of the quarters.

Let me be clear about one thing: I hate dogs. I have hated dogs in all my youth and all my adulthood. I have hated dogs at all times before this journey began. As I sit here now and reflect, I continue to hate dogs in all of the same ways that I always have hated them. They are a miserable and lowly species without redemption. I hate the high pitch of a dog's whining and barking. I hate a dog's two-facedness, its instinct to beg and plead and then claw and bite if it isn't granted what it had feigned a humble asking for. I hate a dog's lesser intellect, capable of only the world's evil things such as cruelty and predation, incapable of the world's good things such as reasoning and dignity. I hate the way a dog will eat its own sick. I hate dogs grilled or boiled. And I hate the armor that some idiotic and gullible men give to dogs, when we have otherwise agreed that all the world's things are a man's to subdue, because such men have been so completely fooled by a dog's basic deceits towards feigning kindness and loyalty. I hate that a dog is all the pest a mosquito is, yet because someone has taken the mosquito to be their own child, I may not destroy it. To say it one further time, to make the point apparent and without caveats or exceptions: I hate dogs.

That first night, I wondered whether I would get a night's sleep during the entire duration of the voyage. I do not fault a man his odor. I have spent too much time aboard a ship to. It is true, that when Solok entered the quarters, the once neutral air was overwhelmed by a hanging steam of sweat. But a man's unpleasantries, while unpleasant, are nothing that he can be held to shame over. To add the dog, though, was shameful of him. Its breath filled every cubic inch of the air in that room that the smell of sweat had not claimed already, such that I was surprised for every minute that I did not lose consciousness due to suffocation in the resulting miasma.

How can I summarize the way in which that dog made all my days and nights of that voyage into agony? It cannot be summarized. I noted every transgression in my journal throughout the voyage, and to recite the journal in full would take too long, such that the point of reciting it would be lost in the process of the recitation. I can only select out for you a great many examples of how that dog was nearly my ruination, and then at the end tell you that for all those examples I have recited, I could recite twenty more.

Day of first dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest, I have decided to call it. Dog is not poor enough a word. Dog does indeed encompass everything wrong with the wretch itself, but pest is needed to also encompass Solok's insistence that it not be barred from our already confined quarters. He cannot be argued with. I do not know if he is dull, or even finds some enjoyment in forcing the pest upon me. It is true that in the exchange we had agreed upon, I had purchased stay in Cheek's side of the quarters, and little had been said of Solok's. Solok refuses to revisit that aspect of the deal and clarify it so as to put reasonable restrictions on his behavior. He will not leave the pest outside. He has suggested that I find some other place aboard Sorry Ester to sleep, if I am so bothered. He said, and I had not even offered, but he said that he would not remove the pest even for all the rest of the contents of my maple drum. Again, I do not know if he is an idiot, or if his pleasure at my suffering simply does exceed that which he could purchase with such a quantity of silver and coins. In either case, he continues to preen over and protect the pest as a man ought protect his

children. I could not sleep much last night for the smell of the pest alone, even putting aside my fear that it would become aggressive again at the slightest movement from myself, and seize upon me with its jaws as I flailed back against it helplessly in the dark. But he is not bothered by it in any of these ways. He shares none of my observations or concerns. Far from it. I have seen something which I regret I can only describe as kissing between them. I revile at even the suggestion that that is what it was, but I do not know what else it would be: he had picked the pest up as they were crossing the deck, so as to carefully step over some ropework that was being done, and not have the ropes be tangled and scattered by the animal which he continues to keep aboard the ship. I note, there, by the way, that he does have some concept of not allowing the pest to bother other men aboard the ship, hence a growing belief on my part that his cruelty with the pest is in some way specific towards me, for what transgression, I do not know. But returning to the point, as he was carrying it across the deck in his arms, it faced him and jabbed its unruly tongue at his mouth. Rather than scold or beat the cur, he opened his mouth to its intrusion, and it prodded its tongue further and licked upon his teeth, as he made no protest, and seemed, even, to angle his head to help the pest reach into his mouth farther. Whatever the practical reason for it was, I do not know. But it seemed to me, and of course I cannot confirm it, but it did seem to me that whatever the reason was he allowed the pest to lick the inside of his mouth, he found some pleasure as well in the fact that the act was occurring. Again, I do not say that he found pleasure in it for a surety. That would be a very grave accusation to make without full knowledge, which I have not. He was at some distance across the deck from where I was observing. Perhaps that which seemed to be the face a man might make when kissing a woman was in fact a grimace. The expressions are, oddly, close enough to one another. Under other circumstances, I would likely assume that it was the grimace. The way he regards that pest though. He is like a native in possession of a clay idol of a devil. He holds evil, worthless evil, and cannot be convinced by any reasoning that it is not holy. I do not think I will sleep much tonight either.

Day of second dawn at sea after leaving Percival: I did not sleep much last night. This is again due to the pest. It may have begun barking in its sleep.

Day of eighth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest has definitively begun barking in its sleep. I believed I had noted it before, but was often half or a quarter asleep myself, and so was lead to some uncertainty, previously. But last night, while fully awake, I heard the pest bark as though sent to chase after a burglar. I thought it might have finally made up its mind to assault me regardless of its master's command, but as it remained in place on its side, I realized that it was the nocturnal barking I had believed I had heard before, only it was occurring at the pest's full voice, as though it were not asleep at all.

Day of thirteenth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The barking at night has continued. The men in the other cabins are nearly as deaf to it as Solok, and seem too dull to understand that such a nightly bother demands outrage. Alas. The others still pet the pest when it nears them. They attempt to get along with the pest out of fear, of course: keep the pest on their good side. I do not believe in such grovelish solutions. I will continue to make the pest know it may not approach me. On the day it does tear a gouge in a man of this ship, sinew from bone, we will see whether it will be a man who has attempted to appeal to a higher cause than the pest has any concept of, such as friendship, or whether it will be the man who has kept everything quite simple and to the beast's level, making it know, always, it may not approach me.

Day of fourteenth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest has left a dead fish on my bed. I have placed it on Solok's bed.

Day of fifteenth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: The pest chewed on the dead fish for much of last night and then fell asleep among the viscera. The smell, at least, covered the smell of dog at times.

Day of twentieth dawn at sea after leaving Percival: Someone or something has left a chewed branch upon my bed. The branch is of pine, and sap from it has made a layer of wet gum across my bedsheets. Upon the wet and adhesive surface that had formerly been quite suitable for sleeping on were pieces of the bark and splinters from the meat of the branch. Due to the

adhesion, of course, all of these small pieces will be quite a task to remove. I have thrown what remained of the bulk of the branch overboard.

Day of twenty second dawn at sea after leaving Percival: From all of the sleep that has been stolen from me all these nights, I have been drowsy on and off throughout the daytimes, and suffering headaches as well, worse and more consistently than has ever been typical for me. The pest approached me on the deck today with a branch in its mouth, and dropped it before me. I continued on my way, not stopping to pick the branch up. I later found it on my bed, not chewed to shreds as the last one had been, though this one did have notable marks of gnawing on it. I went and dropped it overboard, and came back to my quarters, and will stop writing shortly and attempt to get some sleep now, before night comes and Solok and the pest come in again.

For all those examples I have recited, I could recite twenty more. You understand the point.

I have heard a saying now and again, often spoken by womanly men. The saying goes something like this: "What matters is not the destination, but the journey." If that is true, then the point of all this has been to tell you of the unceasing misery I faced these last months, and that has now been accomplished. If the inverse of the saying is true, then the point of all this will be to tell you of a much briefer disappointment. I will get to that now.

The day we arrived at Heaven's Basin was heavily overcast, and raining on and off. As such, the island renowned for so brilliantly reflecting the sunlight, for being a beacon upon a flat and vast sea, could hardly be seen. We could have sailed right past it, if the rain had been much heavier, or if Damick had not been as attentive as she was in the crow's nest. We stayed the ship some distance from the islands, as it was clear there was no good place to put in among them: all the surface of the island was rocks. The most it could boast for vegetation was some manner of slime at certain positions upon the shores, and a few lines of seaweed that had washed up here and there. There were three islands. One a bit larger and overall in the shape of a hill, certainly not a mile across any way you measured. One was

smaller, perhaps thirty feet across, and not entirely flat, but closer to flat than its larger neighbor. The third island was more of a tall pillar, about a mile out from the other two islands, with a flat top that I doubted was ten feet across, if it was even five.

On the shore of the large island, standing all side by side to face us, were four men and nine women in grey tunics. I would later come to learn the tunics were all made from the skins of sharks.

On Sorry Ester, a rope was cast over the starboard railing. Damick, Cheek, Solok, and myself all climbed down it, into the water, which was chilling and choppy. Solok's dog jumped after us, and at points in the swim towards land I wondered if that dog might drown its owner, swimming so closely against him along the way, paws striking down over and over against the water's surface.

When we arrived at the island, the natives all crowded around the damned dog. I do not know what they said, as it was all in a language I was unfamiliar with, but the tone of it was praising, and the tone is all that the dog would have been able to understand, in any case. They ran their hands over the dog's back, and many then afterwards had to strike their hands against each other some number of times in order to remove the wet hair that had come off from the pest.

Of the thirteen natives on the island, only one had a language in common with the rest of us. He had a smile as though he was drunk. His name was Mirlo. As the other natives of the island wandered away in one direction, we and Mirlo wandered off in the other, and we talked as we went. He asked us if our journey had been good thus far, and Damick, who was at the fore of the conversation on our side, said that it indeed had been good. I did not weigh in to contradict her.

Damick did eventually say to him, "We have come because we have heard that the people of Heaven's Basin command magic."

The man gave a hearty laugh, as though Damick had just recited a joke that he had never heard before. "I assure you," he said, "we do no such thing. But it is understood what you speak about."

He then stopped walking, and gathered us all together in a circle. He outstretched both hands, and held his empty palms in

the center for us all to see. For some seconds, nothing occurred. I had been subjected to supposed mystics before, and I suspected that in short order, this man would be tediously attempting to convince us that we should all be able to feel some unseen force. That is not what occurred though. I had not even been blinking when a stone appeared in the man's hands. It was a stone the size of a man's head, and water poured off of it as it first appeared, splattering down onto the ground. Mirlo laughed proudly at the summoned rock, and then offered it to each of us to touch and know that it was real. It was indeed real, and of quite a dire weight. When we had all had a chance to observe the rock, Mirlo turned away from us, and threw the rock into the ocean, where it produced a tall and mighty splash.

I do not know why he had said that he did not command magic. It was very clear that he did. The effect of his magic was not causation of faint feelings, but indeed everything that Percival had heard rumor about, and sent me to find out. Telekinesis. Teleportation. Walking on water. Mirlo and the other natives could do all of these things with ease. I was astounded at every demonstration of it. There was no mechanism for it to be trickery. There were not hidden lines strung up from trees: the islands had no trees. There were not tricks of forced perspective: Mirlo and the other natives performed their talents openly, inviting others to check their work, as he had invited us to hold the rock.

I asked him, after he had thrown the rock back into the water, and caused that tall splash, "How is it done?"

His response was the brief disappointment, the ending of my journey: "Most men see, but he who is a master painter sees truly. Most women walk, but she who is a master dancer moves truly. Most creatures exist." He then gave some sort of sweeping gesture towards me with both hands, as though he had explained everything.

In the course of our days on that island, I could elicit nothing from them of the actual mechanism by which their mysticism worked. Damick and Solok spoke the most with Mirlo. I often listened in when the circumstances were opportune to, though Mirlo was often in conversations with Solok while playing with the dog, and I would not subject myself to its presence when

there was room to avoid it. Mirlo had summoned up a branch of some manner of aquatic vegetation, and he and Solok spoke for hour on end while playing fetch with the dog, throwing the stick into the water for it to dumbly bring back again and again.

Mirlo spoke at length of the sea, its currents, its creatures. For food and other materials, he and the other natives summoned up sharks from the water's depths, and smote them with sharp stones to kill them quickly when they were brought up. Mirlo made some claim that the sharks which were selected were ones which were even more aggressive and harmful than usual to the other creatures, and that a great amount of time was invested in observing the seas with their mystic abilities, and selecting those sharks out. That is not all of the exact language he used: his own wording was always quite passive, and I do not think he ever made claim to possess magic or mysticism in any way. Yet day after day, he continued to demonstrate the talent.

On the fifth day, I was sitting at some distance away from Mirlo and Solok, observing them throwing the stick into the water for the dog. And then, I saw it. Solok, as he was raising the stick to throw it again, hesitated. And then he disappeared. The dog barked, agitated over the occurrence. Mirlo raised his hands high over his head and clapped and shouted praises: I spotted, following his direction, that Solok had teleported to the small island, that was as a tall pillar out at sea. Solok raised his arms to the air in an expression of victory, and then teleported back to the main island again, and threw the stick for the dog.

Even from Solok, I could learn nothing. He spoke of the moment he figured it out as though it was the dog that had taught him. He said things to the effect of it being like allowing a dog to chase him, rather than chasing the dog. He kept coming back to that way of describing it. It was apparent to me, from his utter failure to describe the talent in a way that crystallized it, that the talent was not something that could be taught or learned by intelligent thought. If it were, Solok and Mirlo would not be the men to learn it. Perhaps it is some innate ability passed down by bloodline, or even something akin to a disease, spreading from man to man with some more prone to receiving it. I do not know. The only ones among us who were able to

learn it were Solok and Damick. Both of them, and, thankfully, the dog, left the island cluster by teleportation, alleging to be going ahead to the continent we were destined for next, though, I suppose that will not be known for a surety until we arrive to see. I could offer no payment to any man or woman on the island to come back to Percival and perform their talents for his use. All of their desires were to the ocean. Currency did not sway them. I have known many natives so dull, and understood that pursuing the issue farther was a moot point until such a time as their own resources could be destroyed, making the supplantation of Percival's resources a new necessity to them. But I would not be able to do that on this present journey. It would take a fleet to suppress the ocean, and a mighty army to do it in the face of men who could effortlessly summon great rocks and sharks up into the air.

So now, there is the journey back. I will be able to confirm to Percival the rumors of powerful mystics, who can do everything that he asked me to find out. I will tell him these talents can move great items over long distances. I will tell him these talents can be spread to others. I will tell him I have gained him nothing.

TIBERIUS

Meg Pittman leaned back in her swivel chair, holding her steaming cup of coffee in both hands under her nose. It was hazelnut, and the smell was always cozy to her. It reminded her of log cabins, antique furniture, overcast drizzling days. She blew across the surface of the coffee, ostensibly to cool it, but in actuality, in her secretest heart of hearts, she was amusing herself creating the little waves across the coffee's surface and imagining that this was also causing the ocean waves she looked down on. She had spun her chair around to face her office's window, which overlooked the Indian Ocean from a fifteen floor vantage.

Chance, who stood beside Meg, also looking out at the ocean, took a sip of her smoothie. Meg could smell the mixed berries, but could also smell in equal measure or more all of the additives. She didn't comment on it.

Instead, she, Meg, asked, "Have you ever gone surfing?"

"No," Chance said with a warm smile, a self-deprecating 'Heaven forbid' tone of voice. "I loved water parks as a girl. Sometimes I'd try to stand on those floating boards, what do you call them... But surfing, no, I never tried. Have you?"

"I tried," Meg said. "The first week I was out here I started lessons. I had never learned in Florida, and in Fort Worth, I mean, you couldn't. So I figured, new leaf, let's give it a try right away."

"And?"

"Fuuuck thaaat."

Chance let out a sharp laugh, and covered her mouth.

Meg smiled to herself, and had a tiny, tiny sip of her coffee.

"How do you think Pearson's presentation will go?" Meg asked.

Chance didn't answer right away. She took a moment to settle from her laughing outburst, and took a long, thoughtful sip from her mixed berry smoothie. Then she glanced over her shoulder for a moment, and then said in a hushed tone, "The board already made up their mind what they're doing."

"Yes," Meg said. She nodded. "I still want her to sell it though. Make it glaringly apparent it was already decided."

"Cheers."

The two of them gently clinked plastic cup and coffee mug.

Chance looked down at her wrist watch. She sputtered out a sigh. "Scrum meeting in three, I should give myself time to look at my notes."

"Scrum it up. Eugh that's such an awful name."

"You're telling me," Chance said, and then toasted Meg briefly with her cup, and took a drink as she turned to leave.

She closed the door on her way out.

Meg settled in her chair again, smelling the hazelnut, watching the waves out on the ocean. When the coffee was cool enough to take more than just a tiny sip, she downed the cup in one go, feeling the heat all down her throat and settling behind her ribcage.

As she was spinning the chair back around to actually get back to work, she was saved by the phone on her desk ringing.

"Desk of Meg Pittman."

"Hey Meg, Stefan here."

"G'day g'day."

"Getting better!" Stefan remarked. "Pitch perfect, in fact, but it still sounds a little canned. You can practice the phrases in the mirror all day long, but you really have to feel the Aussie spirit brimming up from the depths of your heart to fully capture it."

Meg, not having to fake an endeared amusement at least, said, in her normal American accent, "I'll take that under advisement. What's going on?"

“Nothing dire, I think. You know that, oh what is it, fulfillment, logistics, something like that, position we’ve been looking to create? I don’t have the exact title of it in front of me.”

Meg twirled the line around her finger. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, well. Job open, need someone good with numbers, statistics, not going to be the lead on anything, doesn’t have to be Archimedes, but they should have a head on their shoulders. One... gentleman... who applied, put you down as a reference.”

“Oh. What’s the name?”

“That would be one James T. Kirk.”

Meg’s eyes shot wide open. She slapped her palm down on her desk. “Get out!”

Stefan gave a laugh, and said, “Yeah! Yeah yeah yeah. You know him?”

“Yeah, I know Tiberius.”

“This is real, then? I’m not hiring the captain of the Voyager?”

“Enterprise.”

“What’s that?”

“Kirk was captain of the USS Enterprise. Voyager was a different series.”

“Ah right.”

“I only know from knowing him, I never watched any of them,” Meg clarified. She then cleared her throat, sat up straight in her chair, and continued, “Yes, I do know a James Tiberius Kirk. His parents are big sci-fi dorks. But he is real, that is his real legal name.”

“How do you know him?” Stefan asked.

“We attended Athens together. High school.”

“Yeah, that’s the one he has down! Huh. His application seemed fit for the role. Experience as a CPA in California, extensive volunteer work for some kind of dog charity, helped with inventory management besides the hands-on work. I’m not really calling to grill you on him. I mainly just wanted to make sure the whole thing wasn’t fake.”

“Huh,” Meg said. She spun back to face out the window again, and again leaned back in her chair. “I didn’t know he went on to do accounting.”

“Got his certification and started work in 2017.”

“Right, that was after I knew him, yeah. Huh. Good to hear. Good for him.”

“Application form might say something about... yes, asks for all references to be from someone who’s known you for more than ten years, suppose no one at his current employment fits the bill.”

“Oh, that’d do it,” Meg agreed.

“Easy guy to get along with?” Stefan asked.

“Yeah, he was a great friend.”

“Any reason I shouldn’t hire him?” Stefan asked.

“Umm...”

2015

“Fuuuck me, there is already no way you’re going to be good to drive tomorrow, there is no fucking way you’re busting out three more bottles of vodka right now,” Tiberius said. His chin was augmented with red streaks from wine he had missed the mark on drinking. His dress that night, a white lacey thing, did no favors at all in obscuring the spills either.

“Not just any three bottles of vodka,” Meg said. One by one, she placed them down onto the little table between the couch and the TV: “Chocolate. Marshmallows. Graham crackers.”

“Nooo,” Tiberius bemoaned. “Goddammit, I can’t say no to that.”

“You in?” Meg asked Ron. Ron’s boyfriend, Terry, was asleep on Ron’s shoulder.

Ron said quietly, “One shot of the graham crackers. Curious about that one.”

Meg collected up used shot glasses from everyone, minding the same glasses would be going back to the same people. Between the bottles, she poured seven shots.

All three graham cracker shots were grabbed first. “Cheers,” she said, and they all drank.

“Oh that’s good, actually,” Ron said.

Meg agreed, but she and Tiberius were too busy grabbing their next shots to comment. Back to back, she and Tiberius did the marshmallow and the chocolate shots too.

Upon finishing his chocolate shot, Tiberius laid limply back in the couch, letting the shot glass fall out of his hand onto the carpet. "Fuck me that's good," he said.

"Three more?"

"Go. Fuck yourself," Tiberius said drowsily. "Fight me with your main first."

"Toad!" Meg said, a nickname Tiberius had. "You can't hold a shot glass right now, you're going to puke if you try to play another round."

Tiberius, not attempting in the slightest to get up or look around, felt around blindly with his hands, saying, "Where's my controller."

Meg grabbed it off the floor and handed it to him.

Tiberius held it with all the confidence in the world, head lolled back, facing the ceiling, mouth hanging open.

"Toad. Are you going to look at the screen when we play?"

"When it starts."

Meg brought them to the character select screen of the fighting game that was in.

Still facing the ceiling, Toad selected his main on muscle memory.

Meg groaned. "This is going to be so embarrassing."

"Yes," Toad said.

Meg selected her main, and confirmed the start of the fight.

As the timer was counting down, Tiberius was still facing the ceiling.

As soon as it began, the sounds of both of them manipulating their controllers filled the air, clicking and mashing and sliding. Toad slammed Meg's guy into the ground repeatedly until it was over.

Mouth agape, Meg turned to Toad, who was still laying back on the couch, facing the ceiling. "Tiberius!"

"You were right, I really can't deal with the movement on the screen right now, I couldn't look."

"Toad," Meg said.

"Meg."

"Toad," Meg repeated, and slumped over onto him, putting her hands on his shoulders.

"Meg. What?"

“Fuck. You,” she said, and then weakly headbutted his chest. Basically just got the dampness of the wine on his dress onto her forehead. “Fighting games are about highly, highly honed reflexes.”

“Yeah.”

“You are so drunk I’m shocked your not puking.”

“Yeah. Same. I might be able to deal with another shot of that marshmallow though.”

“You weren’t even looking at the screen.”

“I was listening.”

“Oh my fucking god.”

Over on the other side of the couch, Ron was getting up, keeping Terry’s arm around his shoulders. “Gonna get us home,” Ron said.

“Walk safe,” Meg said. Then to Toad, she said, “We should both get to bed.”

“Yeah,” Toad agreed.

They both continued to lay there, Toad laid back on the couch, Meg sprawled over Toad.

Toad began snoring.

Meg rolled her eyes, and figured she would get up in a sec and get to bed in her room. Instead, Tiberius’s rising and falling stomach was comfy enough that she settled in and gave up on not falling asleep before she had realized it.

In the morning, she got up off of Tiberius, who was still snoring. She sat on the couch looking around the living room. Empty hard cider bottles stood on the little table, and several were piled unceremoniously to either side of the couch. Three bottles of flavored vodka stood centerpiece on the little table. The TV was still on, playing the gameplay demo of the fighting game.

Meg found the remote and turned the TV off, then stood and walked to the kitchen for a glass of water. She did have the tiniest headache, but she was usually fine at bouncing back the morning after a night of drinking, and that held true for that morning too. By the time she took a shower and got into a new change of clothes, she was ready go get on the road like they’d planned.

As she returned to the living room, she saw Toad sitting hunched over at the center of the couch, bottle of marshmallow vodka clutched in his hands. He had changed out of his white dress, and into a black t-shirt with orange gym shorts. He glanced up at her. "Hey," he said, and then took a drink of the vodka.

"You ready?" Meg asked.

Tiberius nodded. "I guess so. We're really doing this?"

"I will basically call you a pussy if you back out at this point."

"Sexist."

"You watch your cis drag wearing mouth."

Tiberius giggled, and then took another drink.

Meg, as much as she loved ribbing him, pointedly restrained herself from ribbing him about getting drunk immediately that morning. It was in line with the plan.

Tiberius set the bottle down on the table, where it made an empty thump.

"You ready?" he asked.

Meg took her car keys out of her pocket, and spun them around on her finger. "Bags are in the car, phone is charged, I'm ready to hit the road."

Tiberius groaned as he stood up. He grabbed the two remaining vodka bottles, one in each hand, and followed Meg out the apartment's front door.

It was a cloudy day. The blacktop parking lot of the apartment showed damp regions, signs that it had already rained some earlier in the morning or sometime the previous night. On the way to the car, the two glanced around. Nobody else in the parking lot. Nobody passing by on the sidewalk adjacent. Meg unlocked the driver's side door with her key, got in, and leaned over to unlock the passenger door. Toad got in, and they both slammed their doors closed.

"Are we really doing this?" Toad asked.

"I mean, we don't have to, but with that said yes we absolutely are."

"Yeah, but like... this part?"

"Don't be shy," Meg encouraged. "You said you would love to go on a road trip, but have trauma of worrying you'd ruin it by having to stop for a bathroom every ten minutes—"

Tiberius protested, "I don't think I used the word *trauma*."

"Well it sounded like that's what you were getting at," Meg said, half teasing.

Tiberius sighed. He set the two vodka bottles in the car's cup holders. "Yeah. I still don't know what it is, if it's the seatbelt or the bumping road or just worry at being confined, but I swear it's like, the second I get in a car I have to go."

"Yeah. I thought we had a fun time outlining all of the ways we could make it work for you."

"It was fun *talking* about it," Tiberius said. "When I thought we were *joking*."

"And what did we come up with?"

"Basically two things. Number one, I get to be drunk the whole time."

"Number two, put on one of those diapers already and pee yourself to your heart's content, no one on the road would possibly be able to see you below the waist while we're driving."

And they weren't even going anywhere in particular. Just getting on the highway north until she spotted a motel that struck her as somewhere they could stay the night at.

Tiberius took a drink of the graham cracker vodka, and then said, "Alright. Keep a lookout for me?"

"Nah no one's around I'm going to look at your dick and balls to alleviate your modesty."

Tiberius reached down to the pack of adult diapers that sat on the passenger's side floor. He tore the packaging open, grabbed one out, and tossed the rest of the pack into the back seat. He took some time finding which way was forward and back on the grey diaper, and then he quickly stripped his gym shorts off, and replaced them with the crinkling material.

"Comfy?" Meg asked.

"I feel naked," Toad said.

"You were for a sec, I did see your dick and balls."

"Yeah. Oh my god. So, I peed in the sink while you were in the shower—"

"Woow, thanks for respecting my living space."

"—and I know we haven't even left the parking lot, but I do already have to go again actually, so since we haven't even left yet I might as well go back in for a second—"

Meg started the car, threw it in reverse, backed out of their spot, and began through the residential streets that would eventually take them to the highway.

"This is cruel," Tiberius said.

"Freeing," Meg countered. "The wide open road before you. The ability to pee or not to pee at any time you like. I say give it a test drive before we get on the highway."

"I..." Tiberius sat there for a bit. "I don't think I could if I wanted to."

"Just imagine you're at a urinal and someone is standing there beside you waiting for you to start going."

"Meg."

"Toad."

"That is the opposite of helpful."

"You're a nervous peeer?"

"Yes! How is that surprising!"

"It sounded like your peeing is out of control! It sounded like you can't *stop* peeing!"

Toad took a drink from the chocolate vodka, and then a drink from the graham cracker vodka, and then another drink from the chocolate vodka, and then said, "I think the anxiety is kind of self-defeating in either direction."

"Well, I'm sure you'll get there. Because you have no choice."

Toad took another drink from the chocolate vodka. "Can we turn on the radio?"

"Yeah. Do you want the radio or my phone?"

"Ehh, phone."

Meg took her phone out of her pocket, unlocked it, and handed it to Tiberius. Tiberius plugged it in to the aux cord. As he was going through Meg's music to choose something, the car went down the on-ramp and onto the highway.

Tiberius put on some Simple Plan.

"Oh shit, throwback," Meg commented.

The highway wasn't all too busy on that cloudy late-morning. Meg drummed along to the songs with her fingers on the steering wheel. Toad sat slumped back in his seat, staring spaced-out through the windshield at the sky ahead.

A few songs had passed before he said, "Oh that feels so weird."

“Did you pee!”

“Yes.”

“How is it!”

“It’s like. Aaaa. It isn’t like having wet clothes like from the rain. It’s like. A damp pillow inflating around my balls?”

“Oh, that sounds weirder than I expected.”

Toad took a long drink of the graham cracker vodka and finished it off.

“I don’t hate it,” he reported.

“Good. Think this is going to work?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Simple Plan continued to play on the radio.

Meg giggled, and commented, “I can hear you peeing this time.”

Tiberius didn’t stop. “Get used to it.”

“Fuck yeah, own this.”

Meg flicked the turn signal to get into the other lane to pass someone.

As the miles went by, Meg eventually noted the signs telling them they were crossing up into Oklahoma. Tiberius gave a surfer “tubular” hand sign.

He said, “I forgot what letter we were supposed to be on for the alphabet game.”

“Oh, I forgot we were playing, yeah. Oh well. Oooh, how about never have I ever?”

“Nooo I’m too drunk, I’ll tell you secrets,” Toad said, and then flopped an arm around in search of a bottle. In the cup holder, his hand found a bottle of peppermint schnapps that he’d taken out of the glove box. He drank some, and then set it back down in the cup holder again.

“You are actively peeing in a diaper right this second,” Meg pointed out.

“Yeah?”

“So I feel like it would be fair to say we trust each other,” Meg continued.

“Yeah.”

“So what secrets do you have?”

“Ugh. I don’t wanna say. You can know, but I don’t wanna say. We can do never have I ever. Remind me how it works.”

“Hold up ten fingers,” Meg said.

Toad did. Meg did too, driving with her palms.

“Now we take turns. I say a thing I’ve never done. If you’ve done it, you—”

“Bestiality,” Toad blurted.

“Wait, what?”

“I’m only into bestiality, that was my secret,” Toad said. “I didn’t really understand the game, sounds like a lot of double negatives, hard to follow, I thought I’d just say it and get it over with.”

“Huh.” Meg lowered her fingers, taking hold of the wheel again.

Meg heard the muted patter of Tiberius letting out another squirt.

A second after he was done, he asked, “Have I ruined everything?”

“How the fuck did this never come up before?” Meg asked.

Tiberius reached for the peppermint schnapps. Meg swatted his hand, and he drew the hand back, empty.

“No, seriously, how did you never say anything about that until now?” Meg asked. “How did I never say anything about it to you?”

“What?”

“Zoophile,” Meg said. “That’s the word for it. You’re a zoophile, right?”

“I’ve heard that and bestialist, yeah.”

“I’m only into bestiality too,” Meg said.

“What?” Toad said. He sat up straight in his seat, his diaper making a squishing and wheezing noise. “Meg what the fuck.”

“You what the fuck!”

“This is insane,” Toad said. He grabbed the peppermint schnapps quick and had a drink, then sat holding the bottle, arms limp laid over his legs. He flexed his entire upper body, and a loud fart smacked its way out of him.

“Good push,” Meg commented.

“I really thought I could sneak that one out,” Toad said, turning a little red. “Thought it would like, mute the sound, but this situation is actually more like an amplifier.”

“Apparently. I mean, do do what—”

Toad snickered.

“Oh my god. No I’m sticking with that, you can giggle if you want: do do what you have to do. It was part of the understanding that all bodily functions within that garment are free from judgment.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to go that far.”

“Can we get back to this bestiality thing though!”

“Please,” Toad said.

“Have you done it!”

“Yeah. A lot. I work summers on my aunt’s farm for a reason. Basically why I never dated anyone in school. I was like, all good, didn’t have any further questions about what it was like that I didn’t get through with cows.”

“Funnnnnnn, that’s such a cool opportunity.”

“Yeah, it really is,” Toad said, nodding. “You?”

“Neighbor’s dog Garth. He’s so old now, but he’s still so friendly when he sees I’m back on a visit.”

Toad’s voice cracked as he said, “Oh.”

“What?” Meg asked.

Toad sniffled.

Meg glanced over, and saw that he was crying. “Hey,” she said. “Toad.”

Toad sniffled again. His face was contorted into a sudden sorrow, and tears made his cheeks glisten.

“Toad.”

Toad shook his head.

“Toad.”

Toad clenched his fists, and stared forward.

“Toad.”

“You can’t fuckin do that, Meg,” Toad said, his voice high, choking it out.

“What?” she asked. “With a dog? It’s really fine, I promise he’s not hurt by it at all.”

“That dog’s name. How immediately casually perfect you are about, about goddamn bestiality of all things, right when I though, right when, right when I thought I found someone like me, genuinely fucked up like I am. And now already, two seconds later, I don’t know again,” he said. “The cows don’t have names.”

“Oh. Oh sweetheart.” Meg put a hand on his shoulder, and rubbed it gently as she continued to drive. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve thought about burning that place down so it can’t hurt any calves ever again. I’ve thought about poisoning the corpses before they go out.” He sniffled. He shook his head. “I keep working there.”

Meg took her hand off Tiberius’s shoulder as she steered over into the other lane to pass a semi.

As they were passing, she said, “You don’t have to stay there.”

Tiberius nodded. “I was scared there wasn’t anything else.” He screwed the cap onto the peppermint schnapps and let it fall to the passenger side floor. “Take what I’m saying with a grain of salt, I am gone. I’m not making any sense.”

“I think I follow,” Meg said. “There are other jobs, dude. You could find something else.”

Tiberius sniffled, and shook his head. “I was scared there wasn’t anything else for a, for a monster like me, who would put so much blood and sweat and sleepless nights and shit into helping cows live through a place I knew was going to kill them. To treat them with love, genuine, heartfelt, nuzzling, caring, listening, devoted love, all while knowing this place was going to kill them. Not when they’re ready to go, or when, ooh, times are tough now so we have no choice. Never even, pretending, that that’s what that place is. That place just kills them. That’s what it’s for. That’s all it does. And I keep working there.”

“But that’s not you killing—”

“I do the slaughters.”

“Oh.”

Tiberius shuddered, and then went on, “I was, what... eight? The first time I helped. I was excited to, too, what little boy doesn’t want to see blood and guts? I knew what it was like to kill them and take them apart a long time before I ever realized there were lights on behind those eyes.”

“Jesus, Tiberius.”

Toad bent down and fished up the bottle of peppermint schnapps, and had a drink.

Neither of them knew what else to say, for the rest of the Guns N Roses song that was playing.

Portugal. The Man came on next.

Tiberius started to say something, and then stopped to gather his words, and then tried again. “Maybe I’m glad to know there’s a better version of someone who’s only into bestiality. A happy version. A non-monster version.”

“Well, thank you.” Meg sighed. “I’m sorry that’s what your experience has been.”

The car crested the top of a large hill. Looking forward through the windshield, there was a wide open grassy field below them, shimmering in the sunlight from recent rain. A rainbow stretched across the horizon ahead of them.

Tiberius shat himself aggressively.

Meg doubled over in the driver’s seat, screaming out one defeated laugh and not able to get the breath back in to keep laughing. Toad, a smug look overcoming his face, reached over and took hold of the steering wheel, doing his best to keep them from veering off the road as Meg recovered. He held off from taking another drink while his hand was on the wheel.

Present

“Hello?” Stefan said. “Meg?”

Meg snapped upright in her swivel chair again. She turned away from the window and the ocean, and back to her desk. “Sorry, just got handed something, one second.” She put the phone to her chest, and said, to her empty office, “Looks good at a glance, I’ll compare it with my figures and get back to you by, woof, by two at the latest, if nothing else comes up. Okay. Thank you.”

She leaned back in her chair, slid some papers from one side of her desk to the other, and then returned the phone to her ear again. “Sorry again about that.”

“No, no worries at all, sorry to keep you from your work,” Stefan said.

“Remind me of your question?”

“Any reason I shouldn’t hire this James fellow?”

Meg thought back on what Stefan had said Tiberius had been up to in the years since she’d known him. “No, no reason at all comes to mind.”

“Wonderful. Alright, thank you Meg.”

“Cheers.”

Meg hung up the phone, and went through the motions of getting back to work.

A HAIKU

Small dog talking shit
Throw big dog over the fence?
Maybe someday, punk.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 10;

OCTOBER 2023.

In this issue,
a fox eats some pie,
and a magical item accurately reveals truest loves.

Featuring the stories: Hansel And The Secret Of The Princesses, A Letter of Complaints, The Afternoon That Day, The Renegade Jack of Hearts, and A Wizard's Hookah, as well as a few prose poems.

HANSEL AND THE SECRET OF THE PRINCESSES

On top of a hill in the middle of the woods, there was a tree, and under that tree, Hansel and a fox were relaxing in the heat of the day. Hansel was very small, so small that you would be able to hold him up with one hand. He sat comfortably with his legs on the ground and his back against the fur under the fox's neck. The fur there was very soft.

Hansel said to the fox, "Nearby here there is a cottage, and living in it, there is only a husband who is gone in the woods throughout the day, and a wife who is gone throughout the day tending to a flock of sheep. We should sneak inside of their cottage, and find ourselves something to eat."

"But you are so small!" the fox said. The fox pointed his face down at Hansel, and gave the back of Hansel's head a lick: even with his small fox tongue, the lick caused all of the back of Hansel's neck to be wet, and messed up the small man's hair. "If I were to kill you a mouse," the fox said, "you would surely be fed for a month."

Hansel wiped the fox's slobber off the back of his neck using his hands, and then wiped his hands on the big blades of grass underneath him. Hansel then began to fix his hair, smoothing it down where the fox's lick had made it all stand up. Thinking that he could tempt the fox, Hansel remarked, "Yes, I could eat a mouse, but yesterday when I was nearby the cottage, I smelled that blueberry pies were being baked in the oven. I'm sure there would still be a pie left for each of us, if we hurry and sneak in before the husband and wife come back in for today."

The fox laughed to himself. "Ho ho ho! You could not eat a pie yourself, and neither could I. You are greedy, Hansel."

"I am not greedy!" Hansel argued. "I simply like food that is tasty, and beds that are soft, and clothes that are splendid, and music that is sweet."

The fox began to sing.

O warm is the day
On the fox and the thief
O warm is the sunlight
That falls on the leaf

As the fox was singing, the king appeared at the bottom of the hill, riding on a tall and white horse.

Hansel whispered to the fox, "The king! He is out hunting. Run! Run! Go hide in the bushes!"

The fox, heeding Hansel's advice, fled away, down the hill on the opposite side from the king.

In those days, the king was distraught with worry concerning his daughters. The king had twelve daughters. All of the princesses slept in one big bedroom together, which had twelve comfy beds in it, one bed for each princess. All of the princesses were very beautiful and very charming, and had good manners and obeyed the rules that the king commanded them. However, every morning, the shoes of all twelve princesses were always found to be worn completely through, as though the girls had been dancing all night long.

The king, concerned at what might be occupying the princesses' nights, offered a reward to his kingdom: any person who could find out what caused the princesses' shoes to be worn through at night, would be rewarded with the choice to marry any one of the twelve princesses, and would become the next king when this king died. If, after three days, any person failed to find out the secret, then that person would be killed.

A prince from a nearby kingdom, thinking about how beautiful the princesses were, agreed to the challenge. When he arrived at the castle, the king was very happy, and ordered that a feast be made. All throughout the day, the prince and the king and the twelve princesses and the courtiers sat around a long

table in a dining hall, eating very tasty foods. When night had come and it was dark outside, the prince was shown to his guest room, which was the next door down the hall from the princesses' room, so that throughout the night he could spy on the princesses and find out their secret. Before the princesses went to bed, they came and visited the prince in his room, and offered him a glass of wine. The prince drank the wine, and the princesses all left, and went to their room, and all laid down in their beds. The prince laid down in his bed too, and soon he fell asleep, and he did not wake up again until the next morning. Already, the princesses' shoes were all worn through, as though they had been dancing all night.

For two more nights, the prince fell asleep before being able to find out the secret of what caused the princesses' shoes to be worn through. On the third day, the king announced that the prince had failed the challenge, and the prince's head was cut off.

Many princes from nearby kingdoms came to the castle to try to figure out why the princesses' shoes were being worn through, but none of them could, and time after time, the princes were killed.

Hansel had heard about all this. Still sitting beneath the tree on the top of the hill, Hansel called down to the king, "Hello, king!"

The king looked up the hill, but could not see anyone. He called out in a loud voice, "Who is there?"

"Up here!" Hansel yelled. "I am up here, beneath the tree! Come, come and find me!"

The king rode his tall and white horse up the hill. From atop the horse's saddle, the king looked up in the branches of the tree, and down at the ground below, and called out, "Who is here?"

"Down here! Down here!" Hansel said. "Come down from your horse, and then you might see me!"

The king came down from his horse, and again looked down at the grass. Finally, he was able to see Hansel, who was jumping up and down and waving his arms at the king. The king said to the man, "Hello there!"

“Hello, king!” Hansel said. “I have heard that you are looking for someone who can find out what your princesses are doing at night, to cause their shoes to be worn through. As you can see, I am very small. I sleep as little as a fly, and I am very quick to hide. If you would let me try, I would find out the princesses’ secret.”

The king agreed, and Hansel promised to be at the castle the next morning. The king then rode off, and returned to his hunt. The fox, seeing that the king had gone, came out of hiding in the bushes, and ran up the hill to Hansel.

Hansel and the fox set off towards the castle, so that they would be there by tomorrow. On the way, they met an old woman beside a well, who told them, “Be sure that you do not drink the drink that the princesses offer to you. The drink they give to princes is mixed with secret drugs that will make the drinker fall fast asleep until the next morning. Act as though you have drank it, so that they will think they have tricked you, and then you must pretend to go to sleep. Take this cape with you: while you are wearing it, you will be invisible, and no one will be able to see you. You will be able to spy on the princesses this way.”

The next morning, Hansel arrived at the castle with a fox draped around his shoulders, as though wearing a scarf made from a fox pelt. Really though, the fox was alive, and only pretending to be dead. Hansel walked confidently through the castle gate, standing perfectly upright. When he was standing up as straight as he could, he was as tall as any normal person. He was only so small when his back was hunched over or slouched, which was most of the time.

The king was happy to see Hansel, and ordered a feast. Hansel ate sugared strawberries, and cake, and pieces of blueberry pie, sneaking some forkfuls to the fox that was draped around his neck. The fox held the bites of tasty pie in his mouth, and swallowed when nobody was looking.

When night had come and it was dark outside, Hansel was taken to his room, which was beside the princesses’ room. As he was getting ready to go to bed, the twelve princesses came in, and offered him a glass of wine. Hansel secretly poured the glass out, and handed the empty glass back to the eldest princess,

who had given him the glass. He then yawned, and stretched, and laid down on his bed, and pretended to snore.

The princesses all left Hansel's room, and returned to their own bedroom, and they all laid down on their beds.

The fox crawled off of Hansel's neck, and whispered into his ear, "Now, we must go and see that the princesses are doing at night!"

Hansel stopped pretending to snore, and got up out of bed. He then slouched his back, and was smaller than the fox. The fox put on the cloak that they had gotten from the woman by the well, and he became invisible! The fox then picked up Hansel in his mouth. Hansel remained in the fox's mouth, sticking his head out of the front of the fox's lips, right under the fox's little black nose. The fox tip-toed on his four paws out into the hall, and then tip-toed into the princesses' room. There, unseen, the fox sat in the corner and watched, along with Hansel, who still poked his head out from the fox's mouth.

One by one, the princesses began to giggle, not knowing that they were being watched. Then, one by one, the princesses got out of bed, and put on their shoes, and all gathered around the eldest princess. The eldest princess clapped her hands, and as soon as she did, her bed sank into the floor: *Shoomp!* And where the bed was, there was now a trap door. The eldest princess bowed down, and opened the trap door, which had old and loud hinges: *Creeeeak!* All of them giggling, the princesses lined up in a single file line, with the eldest princess at the front, and the youngest princess in the back, and then they went down through the trap door, going down a secret staircase.

"Quickly!" said Hansel. "We must follow them!"

The fox said, "Yef! We wiw fowwow vem at onf!"

The fox tiptoed quickly across the bedroom, and dove into the secret entrance before the last princess had closed the trap door behind herself.

Down and down the staircase went, and down and down the princesses walked.

"Ow!" said the youngest princess. "Someone has stepped on my dress! We are being followed!"

"Of course no one stepped on your dress," said the eldest princess. "You saw that we gave the man a potion with secret

drugs, and you saw how he fell asleep at once. Your dress was only snagged on a nail.”

The youngest princess did not think so, but could not argue. She continued to follow the other princesses down the staircase.

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a forest with trees that were made of silver. All of the branches and leaves of the trees sparkled in the moonlight. The princesses skipped along a trail through the silver forest.

“Sister!” called the youngest princess. “I am sure I have heard someone’s footsteps behind, following us!”

“Of course you did not hear anyone’s footsteps,” said the eldest princess. “Do you see anyone behind us?”

The youngest princess did not see anyone at all, and could not argue.

Eventually the trail went through a golden forest. All of the branches and leaves of the trees sparkled in the moonlight. At the end of the golden forest, the princesses came to a lake. There at the shore, twelve boats were waiting to take them across. At one boat was a pig. The youngest princess skipped to that boat, kissed the pig on the cheek, and climbed into the boat. The pig oinked happily as he began to row. Before the boat had gone very far, the fox leapt up into that boat, and sat hidden in it with Hansel still in his mouth.

Beside each of the other boats was an animal too. There was a sheep, a pony, a bear, a chicken, a deer, a wolf, a python, a rat, a cat, and a monkey, and at the last boat was a dog, whose hair was long and golden like the hair of the eldest princess. The eldest princess climbed into the boat with the dog, and all the other princesses climbed into the boats with the other animals, and the animals all began rowing across the lake.

The pig stopped oinking for a moment to say, “Hm! Princess, this rowing is more work than usual! Here I am rowing as always, yet we move as slowly as if there were someone else in this boat!”

The fox and Hansel stayed very quiet.

Across the water, all of the boats arrived at the shore of an island. There on the island, the trees were made of diamonds, and there were many tables with food and drinks set out, and in the middle of the island there was a big round floor to dance on.

By the moonlight, the princesses began to dance with the animals.

Hiding in the diamond trees, Hansel climbed out of the fox's mouth. The two of them changed, so that Hansel was wearing the cloak instead of the fox. Hansel then stood upright, and picked up the fox, and Hansel and the fox danced in secret with the princesses and the animals all through the night. By the end of the dancing, all of the princesses' shoes were worn through.

Hansel carried the fox as they followed the princesses back over the lake and through the forests. On the way, Hansel took a branch from a diamond tree, a branch from a golden tree, and a branch from a silver tree. When they came to the stairs, Hansel ran up them quickly ahead of the princesses, and opened and closed the trap door at the top before the first princess had gotten close enough to hear the noise: *Creak-a-Creak!* Hansel hid the branches he had taken under his bed, and then he and the fox went to sleep.

The next day, Hansel and the fox sat in a garden in the castle. The sunlight was warm. Hansel sat with his legs on the ground and his back against the fur under the fox's neck.

The fox said to Hansel, "We have found out the secret of why the princesses' shoes are worn through. Do you mean to wait to tell the king, and have your head cut off on the third day because you have not told him?"

Hansel said, "I must first find out how the king will react to the answer, if I tell it to him."

"Oh, very well," said the fox, and then he began to sing.

O warm is the day
On the fox and the thief
O warm is the sunlight
That falls on the leaf

That night, Hansel and the fox again followed the princesses, and danced all night with them, and drank wine and ate food from the tables. When they came back, Hansel ran quickly to his bed and pretended to be asleep until the sun came out, so the princesses still would not know that their secret had been found out.

Later that day, Hansel went to the king, with the fox draped around his shoulders so that he could hear all that was said as well.

“Hello there!” the king said. “Have you found out what my daughters have been doing at night, that causes their shoes to all be worn through in the morning?”

“I have some idea of it,” Hansel said, “but I would like to make sure of it tonight, and tell you in the morning. If it were to turn out that the princesses were dancing each night with men from the town, surly sailors and gruff carpenters, what would you do?”

The king looked angry, and answered, “I would hang the men so that they died, and I would lock all of the princesses up, in dungeons and in towers.”

“And what if,” Hansel said, “it were to turn out that the princesses were dancing with chickens and sheep, and dogs and cats?”

The king became amused, and laughed, “Ha ha ha! If they are dancing with animals, they are only playing, as princesses should! If that is what they are doing each night, to cause their shoes to be worn through, I would be glad.”

“Thank you, O king,” Hansel said, and then saluted the king, and walked backwards out of the room.

That night, Hansel and the fox again danced with the princesses. As they were leaving the dance, Hansel took a golden cup from one of the tables, as more proof of this secret ball.

In the morning, Hansel and the fox and the princesses and the king and the courtiers all gathered together in the throne room.

“So,” the king said, “have you figured out what happens each night, that causes the princesses’ shoes to be worn through by each morning?”

“Yes, O king,” Hansel answered, and told the king the secret of the stairway under the eldest princess’s bed, and the silver forest at the bottom of the stairs. As proof, Hansel held up to the king the sparkling branch he had taken that was made of silver, and then the branch that was made of gold which sparkled even more, and finally the branch that was made of diamonds which sparkled the most. Hansel also showed the king the golden cup.

He said to the king, "Each night, the youngest princess dances with a pig, and the other princesses dance with animals as well: there is a sheep, a pony, a bear, a chicken, a deer, a wolf, a python, a rat, a cat, and a monkey, and lastly, the eldest princess dances each night with a dog, whose hair is long and golden, just like hers."

Seeing the branches and the cup that Hansel had shown him, the king asked the eldest princess, "Is all of this true?"

Knowing they had been found out, the eldest princess nodded her head, and confessed, "Yes, king."

The king laughed, "Ha ha ha! Wonderful! Thank you for telling me this secret! Now, you may choose one of the princesses to be your wife, and someday you will wear my crown!"

Hansel chose the eldest princess to marry. He and she went on a walk outside of the castle together, and as they walked, he said to her, "I will marry you, and someday, I will be king, and you will be queen. But you may keep dancing with the dog, whose long and golden hair is like your hair, and I will keep dancing with the fox, because he is already my dearest friend, and I already love him more than any other, and I can see that you already love the dog as well."

The princess thought that all of that was wonderful, and she and Hansel got married, and they continued to dance every night, her with the dog, and him with the fox.

A LETTER OF COMPLAINTS

The model 21-21 is, with the stark exception of three enormous flaws, utterly astounding. When one pets it, it feels exactly like petting a real yellow lab: the smoothity of the fur, and the subtle heat of the skin underneath if you dig in your hand against the grain and press your fingertips in to the skin at the base of the hairs. Every whisker is of perfect placement and length, the eyes are like living gems, the pawpads are at once soft and yet terse and a slight bit ragged around the edges, and when locked around your hips, one has never felt so securely held. The improvement in battery life to three hours of continuous active use deserves a standing ovation. Make no mistake: I write to your team as a long time customer and enjoyer of your business's creations. If a day has passed when I have not made use of some 21- model, then a day has passed that was wasted.

We must come, though, to the reason of this letter, which is, unfortunately, to highlight the 21-21's blatant flaws. Not one of these flaws is new, but they are reaching a pattern of being ignored by you that is becoming impossible to forgive. If you cannot write me back with a signed promise that every one of these flaws will be addressed in the next model, then I can promise you now that the release of the 21-22 will see one fewer customer.

Now. To give brief preface to the first flaw. If I were to hold the engorged penis of a live dog in one hand, and the engorged penis of a 21-21 in the other, I would not be able to tell you which one was which. Except, of course, for the one dead

giveaway, which is the horrid CLUNK that occurs when the 21-21's penis is bent backwards! A dog's penis can move to face backwards with ease! It is an essential aspect of their mating behavior, that the male, after penetrating the female while facing one way, will dismount and remain penetrating the female while facing the other way. It does not pain the male, unless done exceptionally poorly, and the pivoting of the penis from forward-facing to backward-facing occurs as one brief and smooth motion! It does not *clunk* halfway through like my grandmother's jalopy shifting gears! It can be easily understood that designs may begin imperfectly, and improve over time. But your team has had years. YEARS. to address this key flaw which has existed since the Sirius alpha. Every other joint of the 21-21 moves as fluidly as purified water. I have seen topic after topic raised in community forums, FOR YEARS, of your customers asking if their 21- is defective, or whether there are plans to fix this shudder-inducing failure of engineering in the next version. Years, people. You have made it clear that you have no such plans to fix this. The anus of the 21-21 morphs itself perfectly to being kissed as though it is kissing the user back, and pulses in perfect harmony with the 21-21's simulated penile orgasms. And yet, STILL, there is that *clunk* when turning its penis back. What the technical hurdle is, I cannot imagine, but it will not stand, if you hope for your valued customers to continue to back your products. I have made my point there. On to flaw number two.

What, do you suppose, customers *wanted* out of the 21-21? I can assure you, in spite of what your marketing propagandists put forth, it was not the addition of human voice options. BOLD of you, by the way, to make that the DEFAULT option, when every beta tester of this product I have spoken to turned that feature off as the very first thing they did, and switched it back to the panting and happy barking of a dog. Of the very few who ever wanted a 21- model to speak in human words, they had installed their own modifications already, I assure you. The human voice was an unwanted solution to a manufactured problem: it was never the selling point of the 21-21. If I wanted a human model, I would go to some other company and get a human model! What do you think I want next, for the 21-22 to make my pancakes in the morning? I will make my own damn

pancakes! “To be a companion more real than ever before,” your marketing said. To be clear, and this is not empty flattery, but the utmost truth: as a multiple-times-daily user of the 21-20 model, that model was in very few ways lesser than a live bedroom playmate, and in many ways improved. The ability to call for an emergency deflation of the knot. The ability for them to go for longer than just a handful of eager thrusts. The rounded-off claws that can sensibly retract rather than injuring the submissive’s skin, my hips thank you for. We all, of course, remember how the 21-14 at launch was in fact *too* realistic in its mounting behavior, and video sharing boards were plagued with disinteresting media of actresses boredly assuming the position for upwards of twenty minutes waiting for the 21- to hit the mark, but this was fixed quickly in a patch which allowed user control of the 21-’s technique, with “realistic” still an option, but “dream fuck” being an instant smash success in the community. “To be a companion more real than ever before...” And yet, we come now to the second key flaw of the 21-21: it has no behavior at all outside of the bedroom. It can flirt, it can dominate, it can submit, it can respond to feedback and improve every aspect of its sex techniques, and yet, it cannot go for a *walk*, for it has no instinct to walk in front of its leash-holder. It cannot catch a *ball*! It doesn’t even LOOK at the ball when it’s thrown! When a customer seeks a product as sophisticated as the 21- is, they are looking for more than a dildo machine. How many of us have gone to sleep snuggling their 21-, and been distressed to find it stiff and unresponsive in the morning, battery dead? We know that these things are not alive, not really, but we do think of them as though they were all the same: that is the fantasy. That is the POINT, of YOUR product. I understand it may take some iterations before a 21- and I can blend in seamlessly at the dog park as a pre-sex date. But the fact that I cannot even toss a treat to it afterwards without it plinking off the dumb thing’s head makes it no wonder that so many would-be customers say a 21- couldn’t replace the real thing for them.

For the first two complaints, I was able to lead in with some positive preamble. The 21-21’s penis is truly very good, it merely has one noteworthy defect. The 21-21’s behavioral programming is everything a first-time customer would think to ask for, it

merely has an area that is underdeveloped for more devoted appreciators. With this third flaw though, I cannot lead in with anything kind. I can only say it as plainly as the sun is bright in the hopes that it sinks in through the skull of whoever may read this on the design team. How, in the name of GOD, THE LORD, THE CREATOR, THE HOLY GHOST, YAHWEY, I AM THAT I AM, CHRIST THE SAVIOR, and ANY other name you can think to call him by, HOW, does the 21-21 STILL NOT FEATURE ANY SMELLS? You pat its head, and it is warm and soft: you bury your nose in its head, and it's like burying your nose in a dollar store broom! Its pawpads smell like NOTHING! Its sheath has NO musk! Eating its ass is like tonguing at a piece of hairy gum that you had already chewed all the flavor out of a week ago! I do understand completely that not all smells are for everyone, and some customers may even be turned off by dog smells that were in any way accurate. LET THOSE COWARDS SUFFER. Or, as a compromise, MAKE SMELLS AN OPTIONAL FEATURE. The fact that smells have not even been *attempted*, for a creature as perfectly scented as the dog, is disgraceful, and you will never regain favor in my sight or in my wallet until an earnest step has been made towards remedying this error.

THE AFTERNOON THAT DAY

While walking on a trail through the woods, Prince Bright paused before a bridge to admire everything. It was no wonder the kingdom's painters were so renown: if they only captured a hundredth of this, they had made something worthwhile. In the beacons of sunlight which came down in the places between the oaks, a thick blanket of red flowers grew, scarlet petals alike to rings in a suit of chain mail or heads in a crowd. A songbird practiced nearby, piping her call time and again, at times more brief, and at times a more protracted longing, the briefer the more sweet. Ahead, a familiar and sturdy bridge over a wide stream that seemed mirthful in its trickling voice, and the Malamute Courtly whom Prince Bright had ventured out with on this walk. The very large and very thickly coated grey-and-white hound stood at the start of the bridge, looking back at Bright, tail high and wagging in reserved measure.

Bright took in a big breath of the cool air, and began onward, towards the bridge.

Courtly barked, and stepped into Bright's path, wagging more quickly.

Bright gave a put-on scoff to the dog, put his hands on his hips, and asked as though it were an imposition, "Here?"

Courtly's wagging still rapid, the large dog came forward in quick happy steps, and forced his nose against the prince's left hand, prying it off from the prince's hip with eager nudges and sniffs.

“Oh, very well,” the prince said gladly, and lowered himself onto his knees.

What a perfect operation the two of them had it down to. With his left hand, Bright pet the dog along the back a few times, as the two of them nuzzled their heads against each other, pressing their weights into one another. Then, hand never leaving touch with the dog, Bright slid his fingers down the side of the dog’s lush coat, and placed his hand lifting along the dog’s belly, the wisps of fur there all so soft, though in possession of some fragments of some dead leaves. After a few rubs of the standing hound’s soft and warm belly, Bright then wrapped his fingers around the hound’s bulky sheath, feeling through it the hound’s erect and ready phallus. With the prince’s hand in place, Courtly mounted onto the prince’s arm, grabbing it by the forearm, fuzzy chin pressing down and subduing human shoulder. While the dog began mounting, the prince slid his hand forward, so that the thumb and pointer finger formed a loose hold over the front of the delightful sheath: when the hound began humping, the sheath was slid back from the penis by the thumb and forefinger, and the red and slick penis itself, hot and throbbing, pushed forward into the prince’s awaiting hand. There before the bridge, the dog continued to hump, while the prince continued to bear the dog’s weight pressing down upon him and give the dog a pleurably shaped hand to thrust his penis into.

When the humping was finished, Courtly well satisfied, the prince released the dog’s phallus. Briefly, Bright and Courtly shared a kiss, canine tongue gracing human lips, human lips smooching canine muzzle. The prince then gently, carefully, positioned himself onto his back underneath the standing hound, and fellated the animal while the red penis was still engorged out of its sheath, and would otherwise be exposed to the open air, if not for the human care given.

Quite some time later, Courtly’s penis became limp enough that it slipped back into its sheath, slithering backwards from off of Bright’s tongue and out from between his lips.

Bright got up off of the ground, he and Courtly kissed once more, and then, this time, when Bright attempted to continue

on along the trail, over the bridge, Courtly allowed it, and walked along a small ways ahead of the human.

The two of them went on, around some hills of blue flowers, and down and up a green valley with a small stream at the bottom. Across the stream were cut stones, and the prince and the hound jumped from one to the next until they were over. Cresting the valley, the last stretch of the trail came into view. At the end was a pavilion which was set in a small clearing in the woods. A figured moved about there. As the prince and the hound drew nearer, the sound of a harp being plucked could be heard.

Courtly ran galloping ahead, and approached the man at the harp. The man gave a loud and warm greeting to the hound, stopping his playing to bend over and pet the animal's thick coat.

Prince Bright, on arriving, said, "Greetings, harper."

He knew well that this minstrel's name was Daniel, though it was a bit of good humored ribbing between them that Bright often called him by whatever instrument he was in possession of. Greetings flautist, greetings trumpeter, greetings drummer, at times with a wand in the minstrel's hand even greetings conductor was apt. And here, harper.

"Greetings, Prince Bright," the harper said, sitting facing away from his instrument, hands on his knees.

Courtly came back to Bright, and Bright bent and ran a hand over the hound's coat some times.

The harper went on, "I had not anticipated an audience, and I imagine—though I will be flattered if wrong—that you had not anticipated your servant Daniel. A pair of lovebirds wandering out alone into the woods I should think seld seeks company. If you would like the pavilion, I can pack up and be gone in the minute."

Prince Bright laughed warmly, and said, "Stay, harper, if it suits you. Sides the harp, have you brought anything other to play?"

"This lute, my lord," Daniel said, reaching into a large soft pack and withdrawing it.

"I would delight in playing a bit with you, if you would allow."

Daniel chuckled, and said, "You are more talented than your pretense suggests, my lord. Please, have it and play."

Daniel handed over the instrument. Under the pavilion were two tables, each with its own two benches. The harper and the prince seated themselves on the inward benches, each facing the other, with the hound finding a spot to lay down between the two, on the ends of the prince's feet. The prince also unshouldered the satchel he had brought, and from inside of it set out on the table behind him a bottle of wine, and some cheeses wrapped in wax paper.

The prince plucked a few preliminary scales and chords, to test the instrument was correctly tuned. As he did, he said to the harper, "In truth, I practice so much for him. If I play well, it relaxes him. If I play poorly, he worries." The prince found with satisfaction that Daniel's lute was tuned perfectly.

The two played. It was nothing like one would be bored by in a formal court. The prince, nodding vigorously, produced a rhythm on the lute that was lively, fit for folk to dance joyously to. The harper expertly picked out accompanying accents, nodding along himself after a time, falling into that which resembled choruses and verses, repeated motifs and varied melodies.

When the two of them slowed, and then eventually faded to a stop, Courtly was lying heavily on the prince's feet between them, snoring.

Softly, Prince Bright said to the harper, "Thank you. I do think I will leave off there, however, before I too much repeat the limited things I know."

With a wry smile, as though he were sharing something that he should not, the harper told the prince, "More than half the skill of an entertainer is in repeating yourself shamelessly."

Daniel accepted the lute when Bright offered it out. The minstrel tucked the lute back into his pack.

The prince asked, "Would you play for us a while? I don't think we will be long, but a song as we rest here would make the afternoon all the more wonderful."

"Please, my lord," the harper said, "of all I have occasion to play for, you have the most generous ear of them all. Of course I will play."

“What mean you by that?” the prince asked.

“Please, my lord, even having said it, I ask you think nothing of it.”

“I compel you,” the prince said. “If my ear is generous, then whose is not?”

The harper shook his head, and then said, “In truth, it is your brother. If I will play slow, he will say, ‘Faster, faster!’ If I then play faster, he then says, ‘Slowly, slowly! One cannot think in that noise!’ Be that as it may, I do not mean to be complaining too loudly. It is my office, after all, to... Oh, here he comes now.”

Prince Bright turned around on his seat, and observed his brother, Prince Stand, coming forth along the last small stretch of the trail approaching the pavilion.

Prince Stand was the king’s firstborn, and his being the firstborn was related to the reason why Prince Bright had been called Bright. After the birth of Stand, the king took more wives, and Stand’s mother worried that she would never bear another child again, as the king’s heart turned to the other women. In fact, Bright was later born before the other wives had yet conceived any daughters or sons, and so she named the newborn Bright, because he was a brightness upon her days. Prince Stand was called such because it was rumored that at his birth, his feet had emerged first, and he had stood and beat away the physician who had been delivering him. As of yet, Prince Stand and Prince Bright were the only two children of the king.

Though next in line for the throne, it was rumored that Prince Stand was severely ill. A year prior, when the rumors were first being whispered about, it had been quite easy to put the whisperings out of mind as thin scandal or rotten politics, as at that time, Prince Stand continued to have some glow to his appearance. As he neared the pavilion though, he seemed grey compared to the green surrounding. His steps, both with the left foot and the right, were slow, and though the prince did not appear crippled, the labor of walking was all the same heavy upon him. Dark bruise-like semicircles hung under his eyes. Though the day was indeed cool, and a thick garment with long sleeves would not be amiss, the approaching Prince wore over his thick autumn clothing a thicker winter cloak, dark green in

color, fastened shut to keep in any heat, and a scarf about his face, which he lowered only as he came up the pavilion steps.

Courtly wagged, and got up and greeted Prince Stand, offering himself to be petted. Stand did indeed run his hand over and over again along the large hound's back, remarking, "Yes, so good to see you, good Courtly. I hope your mate has dealt kindly with you. I'm sure that he has."

Stand came forth to the tables and set down his own satchel beside Bright's emptied satchel, and then took a seat beside Bright, both princes looking out at the trees. A pair of cardinals flew about, landing up on this branch and then that. Courtly came over and laid down once again on Bright's feet. Behind them, the harper began to play.

Prince Bright mentioned, "The new bell tower in the northern abbey is coming along nicely."

"Yes, I've heard them ringing the bells."

"Oh, is it that far along already?"

"I've heard them just this morning," Prince Stand said, rocking slightly in a way of nodding. Within his cloak, he crossed his arms one over the other, holding them tight to his body. "It must have been the northern abbey, I think. None of the other towers have bells that strike that high, and the sound did come from the north as I was leaving, anyways."

"Yes, it must have been, then," Bright agreed.

"Is this music to your liking?" Stand asked.

"Oh it is. I love this piece. Bonetti's 7th. Begun at the second movement. Yes, this piece is very good."

"Very good," Stand said, and ruminated on that, then asked, "Is there a favorite you would rather hear, though?"

"On this afternoon, no, the harper has made a superb choice," Bright said, quite truthfully. Courtly was nearly asleep again. "For this lively bracing day, Bonetti's 7th is an excellent sound. It seems to converse with the songbirds themselves, in a way."

"Hm. So it does."

The princes looked out at the flitting cardinals.

Stand inquired, "How do the days treat you?"

"This day, or all of them?" Bright asked.

Stand smiled slightly at that in a way of laughing, and said, "All of them."

Bright thought about it, and then answered, "I'll admit, all days are perfect lately. Though as a rude child I remember bemoaning all the pomp of attending functions, there was a complete switch at some stage, and I delight in all the conversation and speech, and I have absolutely found most gatherings of people to be beautiful to the eye with everyone's elegant dress and a room's gay decorations. My studies, lately, bring me to topics I've found new passions in: where I once might have thought pouring over written poems was an exercise in monotony, I've recently found it to be a rather pleasantly engaging endeavor, seeing a greater journey towards a realization by way of a great many petty wits; I find sounds in a poem alike to steps on a stroll; I say 'stroll' and not another word because one asleep on my feet will hear it, even in his rest, and be keen on venturing again, even though we venture already. And, speaking of him, he is my truest love. That is not easy to say, because I do remember very strongly the love of some who have left us. But the days out and around with him, his charm, his playfulness in spirit and yet his patience to wait on dull human things, his beauty, bluntly his lovemaking, and falling asleep face nestled within his thick coat, completely taken in his tickly hairs and his smell that is him." Bright rubbed his chin briefly, and then said, "I have been doing some writings on him, so some of my thoughts there may have come out already more articulately just-so than you should credit me for. But I have been writing, and now saying, very true things on how I love him."

"That is beautifully put, O Bright," Stand said. "I know full well, I like to think, of the type of love you speak of, for I have felt many of the same ways with Jester, and you have articulated something in that better than I might have."

Jester was of the very same parentage as Courtly, though from an earlier litter. It was well known of both princes, Bright and Stand, that at any function they were present at, a Malamute stud was most likely to be seen accompanying.

It was the way of princes to be given mares and bitches, stallions and studs, whatever it was that most suited their desires, so that they may exercise their young lustful passions to the fullest, while saving themselves for matrimony.

Stand went on, "I am glad the days have been so kind to you."

The cardinals flitted off to elsewhere in the woods. The harper played alone, though still as sweetly.

Stand bent around and took his satchel off of the table. Facing forward towards the empty woods again, he reached inside of the satchel's mouth, and drew out an ornate box, dark and polished wood accented with silver. He set the empty satchel back behind himself, and then lifted open the box, showing a pistol inside, lying atop the velvet cushions in the box's interior.

Stand said, looking into the box with Bright, "You are not much for guns, I know."

"I was once impartial, but the noise frightens Courtly greatly. So yes, I have picked up an aversion."

Stand patted the side of the box, not so harshly that it made a sound, a gentle pair of taps. He said to Bright, "You may find this one interesting as a curiosity. The bullet comes forth from this mechanism, here, and in the pulling of the trigger rotates the entire mechanism to another bullet, without need for the marksman to reload. Six missiles may be issued without need to fiddle with powder."

With a little smile, Bright said, "I think, then, that I should like this particular gun six times less."

Stand took the pistol up out of the box, and examined each side of it. He remarked, "You truly are blameless of anything, greatly kind, and have indeed been a brightness upon all whom have had the pleasure of sharing your company. Think of that."

Prince Stand gave a moment for him to do so, and then shot Prince Bright, Courtly, and the harper.

With aching joints, he stood up, returned the pistol to its box and the box to its satchel, and then departed from the pavilion to be at the king's bedchambers in the night, leaving Prince Bright's wine where it was on the table.

THE RENEGADE JACK OF HEARTS

Oh it had been good at first. It had seemed like something out of a story book, or a bad movie. They had met by singing together, for Christ's sake. In their college dorm. He had brought his guitar down into the laundry room because he felt awkward about practicing in front of his roommate, and thought he would try his luck in the laundry room at some middle-of-the-night hour when no one else was supposed to be around. So there he was, sitting on a little wobbly chair behind the table that was for folding clothes on, when in she came.

He was trying so hard to be cool. He would admit that fully, looking back afterwards. He didn't look up at her. It took every ounce of maturity he could hope to grasp for at that age not to immediately start into one of the two solos he had learned, but instead to keep going with the simple little back-and-forth strumming he was doing. Nice, and easy.

And she came in, and walked across to the other side of the little room, and started loading her laundry into one of the machines. And as she did, she started singing. And her voice was beautiful.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see*

He looked up at her, and she wasn't facing him at all, she was still loading in her laundry, one piece at a time, no rush, swaying back and forth. She had bright orange frizzy hair that hung down a little past her shoulders.

He didn't know the next verse of Amazing Grace. He could have convinced himself then that there wasn't one, because he would have heard about it, a song everyone knew like that. So, not knowing quite what else to do, he sang the very first verse again in his own voice, which was unpracticed, not good sounding, no sir. But midway through the very first line, she started singing it with him, and so the both of them sang it, and it felt unreal to him that it was happening.

She started her washing machine, and came over, and sat down across from him. She had a mask of freckles, and in addition to that, she had a scar on her face, a real noticeable one kind of to the side of her nose, going to her cheek bone, and the scar was raised very prominently in that moment with her big dimples, from how hard she was smiling. He didn't mention her scar to her. Once he had seen it, he tried very very hard not to stare at it at all, and so he looked into her eyes. It would turn out, her scar was from when she was little, her friend had actually stabbed her but not to kill her, they were playing a pretend game where they threatened each other to see who could make the other the most scared, and the friend had meant to just make her flinch with a big knife from the kitchen but had actually made contact. And in genuine, it wasn't anything more nefarious than that, she and the other person were still on friendly terms and the other person hadn't gone on to be a serial killer or anything, it had just been a really dumb, unfortunate mistake.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Oh um," he said, and stopped playing, and kind of hung his arms over the guitar. Nice and cool, he thought. And it was, but not because it looked all casual. It was because he looked like a dork, and chicks were starting to dig that, some of them. For him, it did him the favor of showing, more than he knew it did, that he was trying, which wasn't something to be ashamed of like he'd have thought if someone had pointed it out to him.

Anyways, she had asked him a question, "What's your name?" And he stammered and actually forgot for a sec, but then it came to him in a rush, and he answered, "Lory. How about you?"

"Sandra," she said.

And they got to talking. Really got to talking, a lot more than he had talked with anyone at all yet since coming here, even his roommate, even the couple of people here who had come from his same high school, Lory and Sandra really hit it off. So long after the fact, Lory wouldn't have been able to say word for word what all of the conversation that night had been, Sandra probably could have, but he chiefly remembered how damn nice it was just to *talk*. He remembered complaining about some of his classes, and her listening, and saying she could relate, there was some BS she had to put up with in her own classes too, and she told him about it. They talked clear through until her laundry was done in the washer, and then clear through until it was done in the drier, and by that point the both of them really ought to have been getting to bed, there were classes the next day for the both of them, not early, but, it was an ungodly hour in the middle of the night, almost morning really, by then.

As she was leaving, he called to her, and asked her, hey. Do you wanna play pool tomorrow, after your classes? He had never been, but it was something that had come up in the conversation, as something they'd both like to do sometime here. And she smiled, and said yes, and they agreed to a time. And that was the beginning of it.

Lory stayed up all that night elated, but anxious that he was getting away with something. He had a sordid past. Not really, but that was what he thought he had at the time. He had seen in the woods a dying bird once, really dying, bloody and not able to get off its side and swarmed with flies and flapping its wings feebly, and Lory had tried to pet it to comfort it, he was just a little kid at the time, and the bird cried out in pain and flapped around and he pulled his hand back and ran away, and he thought afterwards he should have killed it, put it out of its misery with a big rock, he could have found one, but instead he'd let it go on having the worst last moments of life you could imagine, and he had pained it even more. It was stuff like that

that haunted him in the nights. Stuff that he had made worse because he was a bumbling, cruel idiot.

That was what he thought. In truth he got As and Bs all throughout high school, and he didn't have a mean bone in his body. He had entirely healthy interests, maybe aside from the fact they were all just rather personal in a way, solitary: he kept his nose down in books; he liked to go outside and find bugs, turn up rocks and see what scuttled or pulsated underneath, stare at moths, handle grasshoppers and wasps, catch snakes just to look at them close. He'd never had a girlfriend until junior year in high school, and she had broken up with him, he was not "boyfriend material." She got bored by him. Summer. Her name was Summer, and he'd had a crush on her for her name alone since he was eight, he always thought it was the prettiest name a girl could ever have, and she gave him a real chance, two months, before she broke it off, and that made his dating resume pretty rough. Besides that, all he had to speak of in the sex and dating department wasn't really something he did speak about, to anyone: he made out a lot with the family's Border Collie, Casidy, and did, well, other stuff with her, too. Some boys looked at porno. Others got straight into getting their classmates pregnant before they were eighteen. Others had alone time with dogs. His kick was dogs. He'd been with his own, mostly, but had taken it where he could get it when left alone with friends' dogs too, if the dog clearly liked him. He figured that if anyone knew he had done stuff like that, and since he didn't have anything else going for him that made that stuff with Casidy just a drop in the bucket, and since he actually liked it, if a chick could read his mind and see everything in it before agreeing to go on a date, he'd never see a date as long as he lived. So after that fate-guided meeting in the laundry room, as he tried to get to sleep, awaiting his date for the next day, he couldn't believe how lucky he was to have pulled something so slick.

Lory and Sandra. Their first date, playing pool, was fun. They laughed at themselves. They laughed every time Lory whiffed it, wasn't even in the ballpark of making a shot that would improve his standing on the board. They laughed every time Sandra mixed up what the goal was: "Sandra! Stripes!" "What? Oh come

on.” He had walked away from that date with his sides aching, from all of the laughing. It was sealed. They were an item. And there was no shortage of things for them to attend on or around a college campus, oh no, there were dances and sporting events and house parties, even a lot of creative events put on, arts and crafts or painting things they could attend as a couple, they could pack a date into every hour of the day and night if they wanted to, and they more or less did exactly that, so that by the time a couple of weeks had passed, they felt like they ought to have been celebrating their one year anniversary already.

It so happened that Sandra hadn’t been stuck with a roommate, odd number of female students in the dorms, fate, and so she wasn’t beholden to anyone about having guests over, and there was no one to complain that her boyfriend started hanging around every day and night. He practically lived there, and he was a swell enough guy, the other women on the floor liked him, they thought he was gay because he was usually soft spoken and never hit on anyone, didn’t even seem particularly flirtatious with his own so-called girlfriend. And it was true enough that he wasn’t trying to rush things with her as far as sex went. He didn’t want to ruin a good thing. In mind of all the things that usually haunted him, all his mistakes, he didn’t want to be the one to push and ruin it. But one night she had gotten to reaching down inside of his jeans and touching him, and that was that, and they started having sex most nights too. Even their idle time spent in her dorm room was filled with little happy moments, things to laugh at. Her freaking out big time over a daddy long legs, and him not even having to get a jar, he just goaded the little critter to walk onto his hand and then walked it outside, and let it go out there. Neither of them being able to open a jar of pickles if heaven and hell depended on it. Him practicing on guitar, her sometimes singing along, and he was actually getting better faster than he had been before by her pointers, not that she played, herself, but she had more of an ear for music overall. One day Lory had been making a sandwich, peanut butter and jelly, butter on the jelly side before the jelly went on, and one of the slices of bread out of the bag was way thicker than it should have been, almost like they had missed making a slice, but it wasn’t quite twice as thick as a normal slice

either, just shy of that. "Check it out, Sandra," he said, and showed it to her, compared to the other slices, and she said, "Oh that's so weird, how do you think that happened?" and the two of them guessed on it for maybe an hour on and off, as they played games of checkers, and Lory ate the sandwich, sharing a lot of it with Sandra.

Over Thanksgiving, when a lot of students were going home to visit family for the holiday, Lory and Sandra and a couple of their friends all drove out to a cabin on a lake. There was beer and swimming and bug bites and poker and the raunchiest jokes Lory or Sandra had ever heard in their lives, yes indeed. One night they were all sitting around the dining room table playing a card game, not poker, something without betting, just a game to pass the time. Lory and Sandra had each had a couple but the others were *drunk*, real drunk, and he and she were in their own corner of the table secretly giggling to themselves at the others, like secret agents spying together on a party they were attending undercover. A loud woman, friend of a friend, started telling all about how men didn't know how to please a woman, how to get in there and do what a body needed, and she was not shy to speak about it from experience. Piercing laughs filled the room as people's facades broke over how right she was, even the guys were wiping their eyes as their fists pounded on the table, doubled over laughing. And Lory and Sandra tried to stay unseen, but it wasn't going to happen, there was comedy to be mined out of them by the others. In a lull in the shouting and laughing, a guy across the table said to Lory, so everyone could hear it loud and clear, "So what's your technique?" And Lory reached for his beer and had a long, slow drink, hoping everyone would move on to something else before he was done, but it had the wrong effect completely, everyone quieted down, you could hear a pin drop, and they waited for him to say. And when there wasn't any beer left he quietly set it down, and leaned on his elbows on the table, looked down at his hand of cards, and said, "So whose turn is it?" And there was booing and thumbs-downs, someone said, "You got nothing, damn." And then the eyes all turned to Sandra. And she laughed, broke the ice for herself a little by it, and she put a hand over Lory's hand and said, "He's fine, everyone. He's not a Kryptonian sex idol like you all think

you are, but he gets it done. Jake it's your turn." Lory felt like he had probably never blushed harder in his life as Sandra was talking, but the ravens were satisfied with that answer, they had picked all the meat off that topic they were clearly going to get, and they moved on, laughing and ribbing about other things.

A few more rounds of the card game were played, and by then it was getting to be time for bed, Lory and Sandra both were yawning. The others were still planning to be up for a while, one guy came in and said he'd gotten a fire started outside, and as everyone else started making their way outside, or went to use the bathroom or refresh their drink, Lory and Sandra held hands, and made their way off to their room. They undressed down to their underwear and climbed into bed together, and shared a blanket, and both of them were pretty ready to get to sleep, but there was something Lory wanted to bring up, before that.

"Babe," he said, "I'm not as boring as you think, when it comes to being kinky, I just didn't think you wanted to know."

"I'm not worried about that babe," she said back, and nestled in in the bed even more. "I just wanted them to shut up."

He gave a quiet little under-his-breath laugh, in agreement. And then he told her, thinking he was cool as can be, "You weren't my first time."

"Hold on, what?" she said, in an angry tone, quicker anger than he had ever seen in her before. But he didn't know better yet how to handle that, because as of then, things had been good. Their conversations weren't yet careful bomb diffusals, wartime negotiations. He just thought she was a little surprised, maybe embarrassed that she hadn't given him enough credit at dinner and would have to apologize to him. He really thought that's where it stood.

So he went on, and said, "Yeah, I never brought it up, but I've been into more than you'd guess. I didn't think you'd want to know."

"You said you and Summer never did anything but kiss. You said you and her *barely even* kissed."

Now he heard the anger, now it was unmistakable, but he still thought it was savable. So easily savable that he said the next thing like he was revealing the answer to a joke. "I never did

anything with Summer. That was true, we barely even kissed, promise. It wasn't her I was talking about. You didn't know this, but I've always been into animals."

"Like *dogs*?" she asked.

The way she said that one was what finally made him realize this wasn't about to be a simple miscommunication that got patched up once they were on the same page, caught up to the same point in each other's scripts. They disagreed about this. They disagreed completely, by the sound of it. She said "dogs" as though he had said he'd like to go jump down into an outhouse to take a bath. He knew fooling around with dogs was a little risqué of a thing to admit to, maybe, but he thought they were past the point of that being a problem to talk about, in their relationship. Apparently not.

"Well," he said, "yeah. All of this started before *we* met, but yeah. Casidy."

He had told her about Casidy. She had seen pictures of Casidy, and some other pictures from home, tacked up on his dorm wall. Although, she certainly had not known that he had masturbated to one of the pictures of the Border Collie a few times, actually, both before and after he and Sandra had started going out. It was one of her holding a stick in the front yard, proud as could be, sunlight in her long hair. It may not have been known to Sandra how much he was fond of that picture, or how much he had considered going back home over the Thanksgiving break to see Sandra specifically, and get up to some of their old routines, as it were. He hadn't shown his hand on every last detail of that. But, he had shown enough. He had told her about the dog, Casidy, and she had seen the picture even if she didn't know the details, and so she knew, when he said he had been with Casidy, exactly who he meant he had been with.

She said crossly, "Well that had *better* be something that stops now that *we're* together."

"Yeah," he agreed, before he thought about it.

As soon as the word had left his mouth, he was imagining how was he going to bring the idea back up again and convince her back into letting him, with Casidy still, or another dog, at some point. Because he wasn't going to stay away from dogs

forever. He had come to realize, in the time he and Sandra had been going at it, that humans weren't all that exciting to him. He really preferred a well-placed Border Collie tongue to putting it in a woman. He wouldn't have guessed he would have felt that way, beforehand, but it was true. And the sooner he could try to bring it up again, the better it would be for her, for both of them, he thought. But there it was, he had already flown the white flag on the topic, and that, it turned out, was going to be an impossible thing to retract, because they were fighting now. He didn't know it completely. He didn't know that things had changed. But he got the idea pretty quick. The next morning, she came back to the cabin from a grocery run and was unpacking while he happened to be making himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with butter on the jelly side before the jelly. The others were all outside on a floating dock, drinking tequila, complete college alcoholics with nobody at the cabin present to be the voice of temperance. And as Lory was taking out the bread for the sandwich, one of the slices was a thick slice again. And he pointed it out to Sandra, "Hey, look babe. Another thick slice." And she turned and looked for a second, and then turned back to stacking cans in the cupboard, and she said, "Who cares." Wowza. "Not you, I guess," he said, and started spreading the peanut butter. "What was that?" she asked him, and stopped stacking cans and turned to him. He kept spreading the peanut butter. "You said who cares, so, I assumed you don't care, and I said so." "But was does that *mean*?" she asked. He set the knife down, where it clattered on the countertop, and he folded the two sides of his sandwich together. "It doesn't mean anything," he said. She made a doubtful hmmmmmmmm, and turned back to stacking the cans, slamming them onto the cupboard so hard that Lory halfway wanted to tell her to be careful she didn't break something, but, he didn't. He put his knife in the sink and left the kitchen with his sandwich, and ate it in the living room. Sandra walked from the kitchen to the front door and stepped outside, walking past him without saying anything. He finished his sandwich, went to the fridge, poured himself a glass of lemonade from a pitcher, and sat back down in the living room with the glass, sipping on it, and thinking. It

was pretty clear to him what it was about. It wouldn't be about anything else.

The door opened, and Sandra leaned inside, sunlight haloing her figure, making her frizzy orange hair seem like some kind of exotic luminescent jellyfish. She said to him, as though nothing in the world had happened, "Doofuses are playing volleyball, wanna come?"

It was her way of apologizing, he thought, because he didn't know better yet. So he said, "Yeah," and stood up, finished off his lemonade, and went outside with Sandra, and they played volleyball with everyone and laughed with each other about how much of an edge they had, being the only ones sober.

And that was how things went on with them. Plenty of fun, especially when they were out and around friends, but in private where no one was looking she was cruel to him. One day back at the dorm she told him his guitar playing sounded like shit, actually said the words, "That sounds like shit," and he stopped. Didn't play much at all from then on. Any time he brought something up, like an interesting turn of phrase in a book he was reading or something funny that had happened that day in class, she was sarcastic with him, said, "Wow, that's really interesting thanks for sharing" with all the venom that could be imagined, and sometimes she didn't even do that much, she just rolled her eyes at what he said and then ignored him. If he spent time in his own dorm, the phone always starting ringing pretty quick, and it was her, asking why he didn't want to be over. And then sometimes there would be the times when she wasn't like that. The times like that time she had leaned inside through the doorway and asked if he wanted to play volleyball. Sometimes she *would* say "Oh that's so interesting" and still sound like she meant it. Sometimes she would bring up to him something that had happened in one of her classes, something ridiculous that some classmate had said in a workshop, and they would laugh. But it wasn't good anymore. Even when things looked like they were good, he always had a feeling like he was on thin ice, and it was only a matter of time before he made the wrong step, said the slightest thing that caught her the wrong way, and it was back to her being cruel again, her saying that whatever had just been fun was stupid, and that he was stupid. Over winter break

he wanted to go home and visit family, give the relationship some space, but she said, "You're going to get your dick wet with that *fucking* dog if you go back there, aren't you?" And in all truth he did want to see Casidy, he missed petting her and giving her food and going on walks out in the woods with her, and in better circumstances sure he would have liked to kiss her and do more with her too, but he had already agreed, that night in the cabin, that he was done with dogs in that way while he and Sandra were dating, and so he actually had made up his mind that when he did see the Border Collie over winter break, there would be no fooling around, not even any kissing at all, she would be like an ex to him. But there was no convincing Sandra of that. He tried, but she kept talking over him before he could get a sentence out. It was pointless. So he agreed to come with her to visit her family instead, for the entire three weeks. Her parents were very polite, and he didn't have a bad word to say about them, and Sandra was actually mostly really friendly those three weeks.

When they got back to school, he started working at a gas station, part time. They had each gone into college with savings from jobs they'd had in high school, him working at a gas station then too, her a fast food joint, and neither of them was near broke. but she had been getting on him about money, saying how more of a buffer never hurt, and he didn't disagree, he thought that was a fair point. It wasn't long, of course, before she started getting on him about his hours, saying he was working too much, asking why his hours never seemed to overlap with her classes and if he was trying to find an excuse to spend time away from her. Christ, he wasn't, but he realized what a good idea that was, and he started to arrange it that way as much as he could. No matter what they still saw each other every night though. And still, there were those times she was nice to him, that made him stay.

And then, the clincher. It was the spring, not long out before spring break. She was nice to him all day, that day, which was offputting enough by itself, and the two of them went out on a walk through town, and they came to a bridge over a river, and they stopped halfway over to stand at the railing and look over together, out at the big river crashing along, and the cars going

over another busier bridge that was farther upstream. And as they were standing there looking out at the river, side by side, she said it, "I'm pregnant."

He thought about pushing her over the railing. Not seriously, but it was the first idea that flashed across his mind when he heard what she said.

He knew what he was supposed to say back. And, he did. Not romantically though. He had been burned too much to really express much of any genuine feeling to her, because it was easier if the pleasant thing she turned and trampled on hadn't been real to him anyways. But, he knew what he had to say some version of, and he did. "I suppose we should get married then."

That did not land well, and he wasn't surprised. "I hate you," she said flatly, and then turned and started marching away over the bridge.

He called after her, "Well do you want to or not?"

She didn't answer him, kept marching away. He walked alongside her back to campus, trying now and again to say something, but she marched on, ignored him, wiped tears out of her eyes, and when they got to her dorm room she went in without him and slammed the door.

He didn't know what to do. He went back to his room, told his roommate he might actually be spending the night for once, and then the phone rang, and Lory answered it, and her voice came through and said, "Yes."

"Okay," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. She wasn't sorry. It was the same thing as always. It was her way of not giving him enough steam to achieve escape. Worked like a charm. Every, damn, time. She said to him, "Come over."

And he came over. They got married the next day at city hall. They both signed the papers. They booked a room at a restaurant for a week from then, and had their families over, and Lory's parents met their daughter in law for the first time, and hit it off well enough.

Lory and his dad stood outside at one point as his dad smoked a cigarette.

"She pregnant?" his dad had asked.

Lory nodded. "Yeah."

“Need any advice?”

“Got any?”

His dad smiled ruefully, and said, “Nope,” and then sucked in another drag.

Lory and Sandra got an apartment together. Lory picked up more hours at the gas station, that buffer of savings now feeling a lot more tangible than before, Sandra had been right about that one if nothing else. Lory came home each day to a nice looking place. Sandra had really taken to decorating. The baby’s room, especially, looked like something out of a magazine. She even threw him a bone in the decorating, and put up some of his pictures in frames on different shelves among her own family pictures, although none of his pictures she had put up had a certain Border Collie in them. She had seized those from him a long while back. He kind of hoped she’d held onto them, and the first time he came home to see framed pictures around, he went from one to one, hoping one might be the one of Casidy, with the stick in the front yard. But no. He never saw that one again. More than likely she’d ripped it up. Casidy was an ex, anyways, a bygone time, and she hadn’t even come up in the context of arguments in quite a while. Because all of Sandra’s vitriol, it didn’t stem *from* the fact of Lory and Casidy’s horny adolescent deeds. That was just what had broken the honeymoon phase. Sandra cared a lot that things were just-so. When he’d picked up one of the framed pictures of her and her mother to hold it up and compliment it, she scolded him and told him to put it back, and then told him *how* to put it back for minutes on end of arguing, and her making him do it since he’d been the one to ruin it and now she wanted him to fix it, until eventually she did put it back at just the right placement herself. And so when she had first learned that she wasn’t his first time, and that he’d been with a dog of all things before he’d been with her, that was what had made her realize that their relationship wasn’t something perfectly out of a story book or a bad movie. But she had already been mean. It didn’t have to have been knowledge of Casidy that sent her back to it. If he had failed to compliment her haircut at some point, or if he had said he wasn’t up for going out some night, it would have broken her spell just as much, brought them to the exact same outcome. Nice as she was

for as long as she was at the start, she must have been chomping at the bit for something to get set off by, so that she could get back to being her mean, mean self.

The baby was stillborn. "Something's wrong," Sandra had said, before the delivery had begun. She had stepped out of the baby's room and into the living room where Lory was sitting watching TV, and she looked really, really scared. She kept repeating, "Something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong," on and off all the way to the hospital.

When they were able to get home, Sandra trashed the baby's room, ripping everything off the walls and knocking over furniture, and at some point she took to all of it with a hammer. Lory slipped out as it was escalating, went for a walk by himself, a few laps around the block.

At some point in the middle of a lap she came marching up to him, he saw her from a ways off, saw she was furious. She said to him, "You hate me!"

"Sandra," he said, and really gently, because now of all times he didn't want it to be an argument, he wanted to tell her it was alright.

She shouted over him though, "You're going to leave me!"

He shrugged. "I'm not."

The idea had crossed his mind, no doubt about that at all. But a day ago he had been prepared to spend eighteen years with her, if that was the decent thing to do. And right then, she needed him to tell her he wasn't leaving, even as she yelled at him for hours that he was going to, and all he could do was quietly say that he wasn't.

One day, later that week, when Sandra was out being consoled by her mother, Lory took the opportunity to go into the baby's room, and bring all of the debris out to the dumpsters. They lived on the first floor, so there were no stairs to contend with. He took the bag out of their kitchen garbage bin, and used the bin to move out load after load. The room was completely bare when Sandra came back. He left the door to that room open, wanting her to see it, get it over with. Oh she yelled, and he thought she might actually kill him that time, it was in her eyes like she was really thinking about it. The police came and

knocked on the door. There was a noise complaint. Sandra became really quiet and apologetic. The police had heard her through the door as they'd been approaching, there was no doubt that the noise had been coming from her. The police left with no citations issued and no particularly well-done marriage counseling, but they didn't have to come back. Sandra did stop yelling after that. She still berated him, but she did it at a normal voice, like she'd used to. It was back to the same old, same old.

Both of them had stopped going to school. Lory was working more than full time, and Sandra stayed at home, or was out with her mother. Mostly, he and her crossed paths as little as they could arrange it, but they slept in the same apartment, same bed, so there was only so much avoiding each other. And sometimes she was nice to him. Usually not. But sometimes she was.

One day, in the spring, after they'd been married for a year and some, Lory had decided to take a walk in a nearby woods, by himself. It was a day off for him, Sandra was out with her mother, he had nothing to explain to anybody if he decided to just go do something. So, he walked. Passing by a picnic table that was beside the trail at one point, he had an old impulse to look under it, and there, hanging on the side of one of the crossed wooden slats that held the table up, there was a daddy long legs. He felt some flit of joy cross over him, unexpectedly. Brief, but, it was something.

He made another decision on the way back. He stopped into a pet store and he got a goldfish, with a big rectangular tank and a filter and colorful pebbles and decorations and everything, and when he got home he set it on the kitchen table. When Sandra got home, he was sitting leaning back in a chair, hands behind his head, looking at the goldfish that was still in its own bag floating in the water, acclimating the one water's temp to the other.

Oh there was no surprise what she thought of seeing that. Right away, not even through the door, she froze, and asked, "How much did that cost?"

"Hundred and thirty," he said.

"Did you even think to *ask* if you could get that?"

He continued to face the fish, continued to wear a blissful smile, and he closed his eyes as though he was relaxing on a beach towel out in the sun, and he said, "Thought about it."

"So you just *decided* to get this enormous fish tank that doesn't go with anything in the apartment?"

"Yup."

She scoffed. "Unbelievable! Is the store still open?"

"Oughta be."

"You are getting up and returning that right now."

"Threw away the receipt."

They went on arguing about that the entire day, until eventually Sandra went into the bedroom and locked Lory out. He slept on the couch and was glad to do it.

The next morning he let the fish out of the bag into the tank's water, gave it some food, and watched it as he ate his bowl of cereal. It was another day off for him, a rare actual two-days-off-in-a-row weekend, and he more or less intended to sit around all day long and look at a goldfish and be happy. After he was finished eating, he stood at the kitchen sink, rinsing his bowl, and the smell of the garbage caught him, the bag was getting to be full. He turned off the water, set the bowl down, and turned and tied off the top of the garbage bag, and carried it out. When he came back in, the fish tank was gone. He looked around. The door to the bedroom was closed, and when he tried it it was locked. He opened the door to the other room and looked in, and saw that it was still as it had been when last he'd looked in, just some packed up boxes, off-season clothes and the like, but no fish tank. Then, wandering back into the living room, he saw the window was open. Stepping up to it, and looking out, he saw the fish tank glass smashed on the ground outside, and all that had been in it spilled out onto the grass in a soaked run. The goldfish was there atop the colorful pebbles, its scales brightly reflecting the sunlight, its body severed almost completely in two by a shard of glass. It didn't move. It was dead.

Lory turned away from the window, walked across the living room, put on his shoes, grabbed his car keys, and left.

He called her from a motel that night.

“Hey Sandra,” he said, and didn’t even bother with more than that, because he knew he’d get talked over if he tried, and he didn’t want to give her that.

“Where are you?” she asked, angry.

He waited for her to say more, and she didn’t, so he then said one of the things that he had called to tell her. “I bought a van.”

Her yelling in response to that wasn’t even understandable through the phone, it came through all broken, garbled. At some point she asked a question, he didn’t catch it.

He said, “I traded in the car, so it didn’t cost too much after that.”

Again, fury. And he actually thought that her feeling that way was fair enough, because he hadn’t told her yet that they were over.

He knew it himself. He was done. He was free again. He was going to drive to Casidy, and borrow her, take her on the road trip of her dreams, and she and him were going to make out all they wanted, human and dog like he always liked better, snuggle naked, take care of themselves, take care of each other, he was going to feed her snacks and go on walks and play fetch again, and they were going to love it. They were going to love it. For the time being, though, he hung up the phone, went out to the van, and just sat in the back, sipping on a margarita out of a water bottle, and looking forward to it.

A WIZARD'S HOOKAH

With an extra big snore, Travin startled himself awake.

He gathered his bearings. Daylight. He was sitting in a big wooden chair on a porch that looked out over a lawn, beyond which was the woods, with many white birch trees at the fore.

He checked for any dangers. Holding his breath, he listened carefully. Birds chirped. The wind whistled through the trees. There were no footsteps, tapping over wood or shuffling through foliage. No snorts, growls, hisses, or whisperings.

He double checked it was all real—fool him three times, and all that. He smacked his arm up and down against the arm of the wooden chair he sat in. He could feel the arm smacking, and even more importantly, he could feel full control over the arm's movement, no paralysis, no forced inaction. He looked at the nearest tree in the woods, a skinny birch, and willed himself to teleport to it. He did not. He stayed put in his chair. He reached for the deck of cards in his left pocket to give the cards a shuffle. There was no deck, nor did he ever carry one. It all seemed to check out, so far.

He counted his friends. Lief. Anda. Rin. Jerritz. Kee. Tegg. Lohss. Loh. Dellia. Lyle.

There. Done. He was here. He was safe. It was real. His friends were all counted.

He turned his head and looked around. He sat on his own front porch, at his house in the woods. Indeed, he had woken up similarly enough for two, nearing three years. He looked down at his feet, saw a half finished pint glass, and leaned down and

picked it up. Settling back in his chair again, he chugged the remaining half of the pint, the taste of it a delightful and refreshing resumption to his day, the nap he had just awoken from a good rest. He ran his fingers through his scraggly beard, and scratched at the chin underneath.

He stood, stretched, yawned, and walked to the other side of his porch, where there was the bar. His hip was a little bit stiff, from sleeping on the chair again. He so rarely slept in the master bedroom. The bed in there was very comfortable, but with it being up on the fifth floor, it was quite a lot of stairs to bother with. The couches inside on the first floor's sitting room often proved a good middle ground, for convenience and comfort. And the gloves which hovered through the rooms, carrying brooms and feather dusters and neatly re-straightening the furniture, well, they had no mind to comment on it if he slept here or there.

Stepping behind the counter, Travin refreshed his pint glass, had a few big gulps from the new drink, and then wandered off of the porch, down the steps, and around the house to his open air workshop. He sauntered up to his work table, had another sip of his pint, set it aside, and looked at where he had left off.

On the table was a wooden race car, resting upside down. If upright, it would be a sleek black specimen, the hood all coming to a sharp wedge, and ripples going back along the body that resembled a flag caught in the wind. Into the hood, on the upper surface of the wedge, were shallow carvings of two big eyes and a linear mouth, also painted over with same coat of black as the rest of the body. Blackest Trout, he had named this one.

In spite of Blackest Trout's grand appearances, this one had not done very well on debut, and so Travin had brought it back for more work. The car was presently upended, and showing a hole he had bored in the underside. The hole, cutting through the paint and into the pale wood inside, was not so deep as to come all the way out through the top of the car, yet was still wide enough to get some appreciable weighting in there. Travin picked the car up, held it up to his eyes, and looked at it at an angle in the sunlight, gauging the circumference and, more particularly, the depth of the hole he had made.

He nodded, set the car down, had another sip of his pint, and then walked across the workshop to a wooden crate. He picked the crate up in one hand and began rooting through its contents. Inside it there were bits and bobs of iron—bent nails, scuffed spoons, found buttons. Sifting the contents around and brushing things to one side and the other, the muscular man gave a triumphant cheer at finding a thick iron filling, cylindrical. It looked to be the exact circumference needed—he had bored the hole with this discarded part in mind—and, on holding the filling up in the sunlight, he gauged that it would fill the depth of the bored hole very neatly, as hoped.

He dropped the crate back to the ground and returned to his workbench.

Taking Blackest Trout up in one hand, he used a little mallet to tap the filling into the hole. It fit perfectly snugly. The extra weight would be good, give the car a fighting chance on the track—a newcomer, it was to be expected that Blackest Trout had been unequipped to go toe to toe with the likes of Firesteed VI and Mordecai. It was more-so the fact that Blackest Trout had only barely beat out Driftfeather that gave tell to real need for improvements. Travin smiled to himself. With this extra weight alone, unless something very interesting occurred, like a wheel malfunction or an act of the gods upon the track, Blackest Trout would leave Driftfeather in the dust, and would stand a chance to place among the rest. He would have to see it though, to know it all fully.

With the extra weight slotted in, Travin picked up Blackest Trout, and wandered around to the back yard. There, running down one side of the yard, was a big wooden track. The side nearest him was raised twenty feet off the ground, with a stairway up to a platform where he could walk back and forth up there and arrange the cars in their starting stalls. From there, the track sloped downward, each car having its own walled off lane, each lane having its own unique descents and rises, straightways and plunges, until all eventually came to a stop at the end, the bottom of the slope.

Travin climbed up the stairs and walked to the far end of the platform, where he placed Blackest Trout in the last stall. The competition in the other seven stalls already waited, with a red

and white awning overhead to keep them in the shade. There was Firesteed VI in the champion's slot, the first track, and the solid iron body of Mordecai, a car of Lyle's construction, in the second. Then in an order determined by random lot, Twilight Torchbearer, Swift Hart, Good Messenger, Driftfeather, Firesteed V, and of course now in the newcomer slot, Blackest Trout. Other cars, not in play for this current race, sat in their own cubbies at one end of the platform, a sheet over all of them to protect them from the elements. Some were more or less retired, others, only resting.

Hand in his beard, fingers combing the wiry hair, Travin paced the platform back and forth. He paused behind Good Messenger, a race car that was carved out into the shape of a ship, masts and all, though with ribbons instead of sails—the cannons aboard, and the cargo of tiny gold bars, gave the whole thing a mean weight to throw around. Getting his eyes down low with the car, he examined the track beyond from the car's level, pictured how it would go, and then nodded. He walked a little more, picked up Swift Hart, and rubbed the wheels so they spun back and forth. The front left wheel squeaked a bit. Foreboding. He set it back down.

With the race cars all in place, Travin went back down the steps to the ground, and wandered up to his back porch. There, eleven treasure chests stood on a long table. He went to the first chest, marked "Travin," and opened it up. From inside, he counted out eighty golden coins, a pearl necklace, and a jewel-encrusted silver crown. He brought those items over, a few pieces at a time, to a round table out in the back yard, where there were eleven seats. The table at each seat was marked for betting. At his chair, he placed sixty golden coins, the pearl necklace, and the silver crown on Firesteed VI. He placed nineteen golden coins on Mordecai. And, in the spirit of taking a gamble, he placed the last one golden coin on Blackest Trout.

He then went up to the next chest, marked "Jerritz," and took a stack of ten golden coins out from inside. Travin chuckled to himself as he walked the coins to the table, shaking his head. If all the currency to buy them a needed night's stay at an inn were on the line, Jerritz would have insisted on betting it on Swift Hart. "It screams to us its sign, and you would ignore it!" he

would say, even teasing himself in the dramatic delivery, but all the same entirely intent on what he was saying. Travin could hear it as he walked. “The underdog! Aren’t you the least curious about its call?” No one would have been able to talk him out of it, short of holding his or her own coins tight, and only allowing Jerritz to risk just his. At Jerritz’s seat, Travin placed ten coins on Swift Hart.

One by one down the line—Anda, Rin, Lief, Lyle, Kee, Lohss, Loh, Tegg, Dellia—Travin carried the bets over and set them down.

Then, he went back to the head of the track. There on one of the struts, there was a lever that lowered all the gates above, and sent the cars going.

Travin took a slow, deep breath, smiled at the precarious about-to-happen nature of the moment. He looked over at the betting table with all of the gold and silver and jewels shining in the sunlight. And then he pulled the lever, and quick as he could ran along down the track, until he could see the cars racing down.

By the time he even got in a position to see anything, Firesteed VI was nearly at the end and Mordecai was fast behind: indeed, the two of them slammed into their respective finishing plates and then rolled up the curved slope beyond. The two of them came rolled back down from the steep slope, and managed to each backtrack over the finishing line in a sort of victory lap, before third place, Good Messenger, came over. Fourth was Firesteed V, then fifth Blackest Trout. Travin, seeing Blackest Trout place fifth, clapped heartily at the improvement. Torchbearer and Swift Hart crossed at nearly the same time, and Travin was entirely pleased that he would have to check the official recording mechanism. Last, Driftfeather rolled across.

Down at the end of the track, Travin knelt down, and opened up a chest that was tucked away underneath the course. From inside he pulled out the logbook, which was a very large tome, and a pencil. With those items in hand, he turned, and looked at the recording mechanism.

It was, he felt, maybe the cleverest thing he had ever come up with. In some ways a shame that such an accomplishment wasn’t made until recently, but in other ways even that was a

victory. New days in his life, new leaves to be turned. Lyle himself had complimented it, and not just in a way where he was being nice, he had gotten down into the mechanism and looked around at it from all sides, and said, "By the gods, what a perfect solution to this."

Below the track, near to the finish line, there was an octagonal glass prism. Inside of it presently, now that the race was finished, were stacked eight spheric gems: a red ruby from the first lane was at the bottom, then on top of it a purple amethyst from another lane, then a blue sapphire from another, and so forth, each gem corresponding to a lane, stacked in the order of first place at the bottom, first to fall into the prism, and last place at the top, last to fall into the prism. At the top of the prism were eight gates, one on each of the prism's eight sides, all equally high. Behind each gate was a steep slope in which each lane's gem had rested, waiting for its gate to come open so it could fall in and mark its lane as finished. The gate mechanisms at the top of the prism where each connected with wire to plates at the end of each lane, such that when a car hit the plate in its lane, the wire was released, and the gate was instantly opened, and the gem could fall in.

The original idea for the mechanism had been to produce eight slopes below the track, one below each lane, and have the gates open and allow the spheric gems to fall from below each lane, down their own slopes, and into the prism. There was no way to arrange it though, where each gem would be certain to take the same time to get to the prism: if the prism was placed at the center, the center lanes would take very little time while the outer lanes had to roll some ways; if the prism was placed at the far left side, that left lane would have its gem in in no time at all while the right lane would be sure to be marked as a loser, even if the right lane had won by a mile. The wires made any lane quick as a flash to drop its marble, regardless of whether some wires were shorter or longer.

Lyle, when he had been looking at it, had even asked, "Do I have it correct, that it was you who came up with this?"

Travin had given a pleased laugh at that. "I was bouncing the ideas off of Rin, but yes, the ideas were mine."

Lyle had again remarked that it was very good work.

Looking at the results of this latest race, Travin marked the competitors and victory order all down in the logbook. First a table for which race car was on each track, and then a table for which race car had taken which place.

The victory order, as marked definitively by the recording device, was Firesteed VI, Mordecai, Good Messenger, Firesteed V, Blackest Trout, Swift Hart and then Torchbearer, and Driftfeather in last.

Travin put away the logbook and the pencil, closed the chest, and reset the mechanism, reattaching the wire loops to their hooks and sliding out the bottom of the prism to collect up the gems, replacing the bottom of the prism, and putting the gems each back into their stalls.

He stood at the finish line for a moment, and looked at the cars, hands on his hips. He let them stay there for now, glad to let them revel in their achievement at getting to the finish line, even Driftfeather.

Leaving them there at the end, he returned back to the betting table, collected all of the lost bets into the center, and redistributed the pot according to the winning bets. He himself had put the most up, betting sixty gold and some accessories on Firesteed VI, and so he regained the most for himself—though he did make sure not to give himself back the specific coin that he had lost on Blackest Trout. That, he distributed to Lyle, who had bet on Firesteed VI as well: even though Mordecai was Lyle's own creation, Lyle was not someone to be prideful. Knowing race after race that Firesteed VI in track 1 beat out Mordecai in track 2, Lyle was not one to think, "Oh, but mine will surely win next, because it is mine." Maybe he had once been. But after the march across the dread woods, Lyle became such a person to abandon all follies, and fit hard wisdoms into their place. Even after Lyle had more or less singlehandedly gotten them across those woods by his brilliance and leadership, the man had remained a changed person. He took no joy at all in failings.

Travin brought the won treasures back to their appropriate chests. He had made out very well indeed on this round, and Lyle had as well. Rin, though her bets were often very small, all

the same very often did come out profitably on them, and her treasure chest's content was nearly level with its top.

With that all done, Travin walked down to the end of the track, grabbed up each of the race cars, and began walking with them in his arms up to the head of the track again.

As he was halfway back, he saw Lyle coming around the house, to the back yard. The robed man waved.

Travin, his arms full, called ahead, "Good to see you!"

Lyle gave a bow, and waited at the head of the track.

Travin, once he was standing before Lyle, informed the robed man, "You did well in this last race."

"Did I?"

"Firesteed VI has been the one to finally beat out Mordecai. You have been very wise to notice, and bet as things are, not as you may hope them to be."

Lyle's cheeks raised up in a smile.

Travin went up the stairs, and put the race cars away in their cubbies.

Coming back down the stairs, Travin asked, "Would you like a pint?"

"I brought you yours," Lyle said, and from behind his back produced the partially finished pint glass.

Travin gave a pleased laugh, took the glass, and had another sip of it.

"Today marks the start of the month of second salt," Lyle said.

"Ah," Travin said, and nodded. "I've lost the particular count of the days, my apologies."

As part of Lyle's devotions, the man did not drink on certain months. Had it occurred to Travin that the month of second salt had begun, he certainly would not have offered anything. In fact, he finished his own drink quickly, and hurled the glass off into the woods.

Lyle, holding his hands behind his back once again, asked, "Have you your sword, Travin?"

"Inside, yes. Why?"

Lyle answered, "One of Farmer Jen's boys was out playing and says that he came upon a hydra, guarding the entrance to a

small fort. Other townsfolk went to investigate, and confirmed that they have seen it too.”

Travin asked, bewildered, “A *tame* hydra?”

“One guarding the entrance to a small fort, that is what they say.”

“And they say it is a hydra, oh...” Travin trailed off, and scratched his head as he gathered some estimation. “What do you suppose, nearly a thousand miles from the nearest ocean?”

“One thousand and twenty three, I think. I did some reckoning off of Brother Fenis’s atlas on that very matter before coming here.”

“So the hydra is illusory.”

“Yes, I think.”

Travin laughed, and said, “Sure, I’ll fetch my sword. Come in, come in.”

The two of them proceeded up the steps of the back porch, and into the beaded curtains that lead into the house this way. As they walked through the house towards the front door, Lyle mentioned, “From what I could gather, according to the reports of the townsfolk, the fort is very interestingly tucked away in the hills. I could believe that no enchantments disguise its location, but that it simply has good obfuscation through the leafy trees on the hills surrounding, and is among a network of valleys that could make one think, ‘Oh, but I have explored that one, already,’ even when one has not. Do you think that makes any sense?”

“Very much so, yes,” Travin said, nodding. “It reminds me of that time with Kee, around Yellow Lake. Or that time with Lohss and Loh in the western goblins’ quarry. Or that time with Rin on the side of Heaven Scar.”

Hands behind his back, cheeks raised in a smile, Lyle added, “Or that time with Tegg by Locke’s River.”

“Yes!” Travin agreed. “In the caves.”

“Were they caves, or trenches?” Lyle asked. “I had mixed impressions from the stories I heard. I was with Dellia and Jerritz in Fall Keep at the time, remember.”

“They were caves,” Travin assured. “Dug caves. They began as trenches, at first, but burrowed down into the ground, it was very cold and you would need a light to see by.”

“Were they tunnels?” Lyle asked.

“Tunnels! Yes, maybe you would call them tunnels. I will call them that from now on, in fact.”

The two arrived at the front door. There, resting against the wall beside the front door, was Travin’s rucksack. He had set it down there two, nearing three years ago, the same with his sword that was in its scabbard on the ground beside it.

“Are we going far?” Travin asked.

“No, not too far,” Lyle answered. “If it suits you, I hope we will rest at Farmer Jen’s house tonight and go forth to the fort in the morning.”

With that information, Travin picked up just the sword, and strapped the scabbard about his hip. He held the front door open for Lyle, closed it behind the both of them, and the two set out on the road through the woods, that led from Travin’s house to town.

Along the walk, Lyle spoke about the fort. “I have an inkling as to how an illusory hydra could have come to be there. Brother Fenis, when he was just a boy—he is old now—heard a wizard of the temple muttering about an enchantment. Apparently, the wizard had enchanted a hookah, such that the smoke would show an image of your truest love—very powerful divination, if it indeed worked. And perhaps it did, for all young Fenis heard from the wizard at the time was the wizard’s incessant complaining about the item. ‘People won’t like what it says,’ the wizard muttered, time and time again, as he was going about his day. And then one day, while Fenis was minding his chores, sweeping I think he said he was doing, he overheard the wizard saying to another member of the temple that he had locked something up. Young Fenis had not caught what the wizard was referring to, but did realize that from then forward, the wizard never muttered of the magical hookah again.”

Travin absorbed all of the information, nodding.

When Lyle had said his piece on the wizard and the fort and the possible nature of the fort’s contents, Travin asked, “When we face the hydra, will we use all of our same signals?”

“Yes, I think that would do wonderfully,” Lyle agreed.

The friends, at times before, had faced all number of challenges, including the liberation of a town that had been

beset by an illusionist. The tricky thing about that had been that for the townsfolk, it was best for them if they still saw the illusioned threats to be defeated, even after the source of them had been stopped. And so the friends had some systems, for telling each other things that they marked about illusions, without saying anything so obviously out loud.

Likely, for this hydra, Travin would step forth with his sword and stand there, pretending to muse on the upcoming battle himself, while Lyle, who had a far better knack for discerning magic, would be behind, finding out if the hydra or the circumstances posed any real threat at all—sometimes, besides the illusions, there were booby traps. If Lyle came up to stand to Travin's left, the hydra actually did pose some danger or complication, and Travin was to step back. If Lyle came up to stand on Travin's right, then Lyle had in fact assumed control of the illusion, and Travin could step forward and put on a show of fighting it, for the townsfolk.

Travin and Lyle walked through the forests and hills.

In the evening, they came upon Jen's farm. A number of men and women from town had gathered there, congregating in the yard with tents and a fire. As Travin and Lyle neared, many townsfolk raised their hands and applauded. "They're back!" one man shouted, and another man whooped at that. Another commented, as Travin and Lyle were walking past, "It's the non-swordsman you've to look out for with this sort."

Travin was glad on the inside at hearing all of this, but he and Lyle kept a stern and skeptical demeanor as they walked up to the farmer's front porch. Travin knocked at the door. The farmer inside swung the door open, and, seeing who it was, stepped aside to let the two in. Travin and Lyle spoke with the farmer, and with the boy who had found the hydra, and it was agreed that the two would spend the night in one of the bedrooms, and in the morning go out and see the fort.

In the bedroom, Travin put his finger in his left ear as though to take out earwax, and twisted the hand three times, then rubbed at his forehead with his thumb as though getting an itch.

Lyle smiled at that, and said in a very quiet voice, "No, I don't think that will be necessary at all. If there is danger, it should yet be far from us."

Travin had asked, in their codes, if they ought to sleep in shifts, and had offered to take a longer shift awake, keeping guard. Being told by Lyle it was fine, though, he tucked himself into one of the beds, and slept through the night very soundly.

In the morning they all ate eggs, and then, Travin and Lyle and the gathered townsfolk set out into the hills. “Just this way, now,” said one man, and then later another, “Just through this valley,” and then, “Now is it this way, or that a’one?” and “That a’one, that a’one, the stump at the mouth marks it,” and “Ah, right you are, right you are indeed miss,” and “Are you ready, sirs? The hydra will be down a hill a little, but it will see us before much farther, and it’s likely heard us from miles off.”

Lyle answered, “We are prepared, I think.”

Travin, as they walked, began doing stretches for his arms.

Travin and Lyle and the townsfolk all came to a bend in the valley, and indeed, farther ahead, down a long slope, at the deepest part of the valley floor, there was a stone fort, a boxy main building and a round tower above it, and in front of the fort, on a stone brick plaza, there appeared to stand a scaly green creature with five heads. Each head snarled, showing pointed teeth. Lyle took in a sharp inhale, and pursed his lips tightly; Travin’s reaction was even stronger, he needed to turn back and face away from the townsfolk to keep from visibly laughing.

The hydra’s heads all moved on the same pivot, all left, and then all right, scanning back and forth, and not even observing anything in particular. It was lost on the townsfolk, but extremely funny to the two who had dealt with true hydras before, heads moving about independently, trading off jobs from one to the other, one body yet many minds, and hyper keen perceptions intent on staring at the objects of their fixations.

When Lyle had composed himself, he asked, “Be you ready, O Travin?”

Travin steeled himself with a solemn exhale, thumped his fist against his chest a few times to ground himself, and then drew his sword, and turned and marched forward. As soon as he came forward to a certain threshold, the five heads stopped rotating left and right, and all fixated on him. He did grant that if the

illusion weren't so apparent, it likely would be *very* frightening to see five toothy heads eyeballing him.

After a few seconds, the two left heads turned away and began looking off into the trees, the rightmost head looked up into the sky, and the second rightmost head turned down towards the stone brick plaza. Only the center head continued to stare. Lyle stepped up on Travin's right side.

Travin smirked, and then charged down the hill with his sword. With his first swing, the hydra's center head reeled back, and the leftmost head came over. Travin took a slash at that one, and a burst of smoke exploded forth from the wound—Travin laughed out loud at Lyle's absurd effect, but was able to save it and make the laugh sound like the beginning of a victorious battle cry.

Continuing to yell and taunt, Travin defeated each head as it came to him, each one bursting out smoke as it was struck with his blade—the blade cut through the illusion like air, as that was, in fact, all that was present. By the end, Travin realized the cleverness of the smoke—as he defeated more and more of the hydra, more and more pieces of it went away into dissipating clouds, until he cleaved again and again at the body, and the illusion was gone. Lyle would not have to maintain it in any way after this showing was over. Clever.

With a final shout and strike, the last of the illusory hydra went away in smoke. The townsfolk roared and whistled and clapped. Travin turned, and bowed.

Lyle, facing the townsfolk, instructed, "I request that all of you stay back, for now. Travin and I will try to venture in and neutralize any danger."

The townsfolk did stay back as Lyle went down the hill, nearly slipping on the wet grass.

As the two went in, Travin briefly clasped an arm around Lyle's shoulders, and gave the robed man a firm jostle. "It's good to be at it again," Travin said.

Lyle smiled.

Travin took his arm off of the robed man's shoulders, and stepped ahead to venture forth into the mouth of the fort first. Lyle followed behind closely. Just inside, the hall turned and descended in a winding staircase—the fort as visible from

outside seemed to be nothing more than a vacant room, to serve as a daunting cap to this tunnel down. Down and down Travin and Lyle ventured, until the floor leveled out into a passage that was straight, not bending or descending.

Lyle conjured up a flame, which hovered above his cupped right hand.

By the flame's light, Travin continued forward at the lead, Lyle close behind. The tunnel's walls were of stone bricks, and came to an arched ceiling, with a level floor of stone bricks underfoot. It seemed that nothing much had disturbed this place since its construction, as every brick overhead and underfoot was perfectly in place, untouched, and there was no detritus to indicate anyone coming or going.

"I ask that you stay a moment, Travin," Lyle said.

Travin did stop, and kept a watch glancing ahead and behind as Lyle knelt down, and put his free left hand to the ground, then stood up and placed the hand flat against the ceiling.

"By my best discernment, there is a faint enchantment at work in these stones," Lyle reported. "I think it shouldn't be anything that concerns us too much, only a mild subduement of life, to keep mold or moss from growing here. I imagine that water from the valley does flow down through this passage regularly, if the fort is at the lowest point."

"That would make sense to me," Travin agreed, imagining his race cars.

"I ask that we resume, if it suits you, Travin," Lyle said.

Travin, sword in hand, continued forward deeper into the tunnel, by the light from Lyle's conjured fire. At the end of the straight section, the entire passage took a curve to the left. As they were just nearing the start of the curve, Lyle shrieked, "FREEZE, I DEMAND."

Travin froze exactly in place—when someone as attuned to magic as Lyle said to freeze, that did not mean "Finish your step and then stop walking" or "First let me ask why we are halting, and then I will stop when I have heard the answer." It meant "Do not move your body an inch from where it is right this second, or you may trigger something that will disintegrate all of us."

On the walls of the tunnel, Travin saw lights of many colors illuminate the stones, as Lyle behind him coursed through different schools of magic. Finally, it was back to the firelight, and Lyle said, "I release my demand that you freeze, and I thank you for having done so. We have just gone somewhere."

"Oh, I think I agree. Is that how I smell the salt of the ocean, and hear the crashing of waves?"

Travin and Lyle inched forward around the corner in the hall. Just around the curve, the hall opened to a sheer cliff face over the ocean, such that one walking thoughtlessly through the hall would step right over and fall to their death.

Lyle looked out to the sea, stepped back, looked at the hall they had just come down, and then stepped towards the opening to the sea again, and stuck his arm through the mouth of the opening to be sure. "I am astounded," the robed man said. "This magic may prove more lucrative than the hookah the wizard seemed so obsessed by. The town will be quite interested, I think."

Travin agreed, "Yes. Let's go back though, and find the hidden entrance."

Lyle smiled. "I would like to find that. I do not object to that plan at all, sir."

The two of them stepped back into the straight passage, and began feeling and prodding at the bricks.

"Here," Travin called, finding one brick that was loose. He pressed it into the wall, heard a latch click, and then a section of the bricks swung forward as a loose doorway.

"Well, that was quite normal, in my opinion, after all of the eccentricity of the rest of it."

"The secret brick door is a classic," Travin said fondly.

"Oh, please be assured, I did not mean to imply that I faulted the man for it."

The two proceeded into the hidden room. In was about as big inside as a chapel, though rather than two rows of pews, there were numerous crates of quite meager treasures. Brass coins, lumps of copper, and the majority of the crates filled with rather mundane rocks such as granite and limestone.

"Among other interests, he was an alchemist," Lyle noted. "Perhaps not a very good one."

At the end of the room, there was an iron box shaped much like a coffin. Lyle's eyes glowed green for a moment, and then he said, "That iron holds the item. Aside from the item contained in the iron, there are no enchantments in this room. I would feel safe in allowing the townsfolk to come in, with the stipulation that we be the only ones to handle the item for the time being."

"Very good," Travin said, and then clapped Lyle on the shoulder. "Another verse for our grand song of accomplishments. I wonder what treatment Lief will give it."

Lyle patted Travin's hand that was on his shoulder.

Travin took the hand off. By Lyle's firelight, they returned out into the straight passage, up the winding stairs, and stood at the mouth of the fort. Travin waved to the townsfolk who looked cautiously down from higher up the valley floor's slope. "You may come in!" Travin called. "It is safe!"

The townsfolk came nearer. Lyle explained the geography of the fort's depths, and warned against investigating the way to the ocean for the time being. He told that there were items of a little value for the taking, and that he and Travin, for their part, wished only to claim the item inside of the iron coffin—this garnered no protest at all. With all matters at hand covered, Travin and Lyle led the way back down, with the townsfolk following—some lit torches of their own, freeing Lyle to go back to holding his hands together behind his back, conjuring no magic.

The group moved down the winding stairs, and through half of the straight passage until arriving at the door in the bricks, which they all shuffled through in a line. Inside, the townsfolk got to dividing up what there was. Perhaps aided by the watchful eye of a brother from the temple, the townsfolk did act fairly among themselves in dividing up the spoils, even paying mind to others from the town who had not been able to spare the time to come along. They divided claims to the crates of stones as well, if any man should want to come back later, equipped to haul them away, though even to themselves they joked that it was unlikely that anyone would go to the trouble.

Travin, standing beside Lyle in the corner, said very quietly, while there was enough chatter for the remark not to be the sole

echo off of the stone walls, "Should we investigate the item in their company?"

Lyle answered, "I would prefer to be very open about the item's function. I worry at what mistruths might spread otherwise."

Travin and Lyle stepped forth from the corner, and both came to the iron coffin.

"It is safe?" Travin asked, no longer at a whisper, aware that they were now well in the eyes of the townsfolk.

"To the utmost of my abilities to discern, you will not be harmed by opening this."

"You never say 'yes' or 'no' anymore," Travin noted.

"I have become very interested in accuracy."

"Huh."

The townsfolk had stopped talking among themselves, and were all watching the swordsman and the robed man from a cautious distance.

Travin lifted open the coffin's door. It made not the slightest squeal. Inside, there was a hookah, as they anticipated. Travin lifted the item out, and held it up. It did have a rather fancy look to it, and showed curvy thin writing engraved down the entire body of it, the line of text spiraling down and down.

Lyle turned, and asked, "Would anyone lend us a light?"

One townspeople stepped forward, and held out a torch.

"I thank you," Lyle said, taking the torch.

The townspeople nodded, bowed himself to make himself scarce, and stepped back.

Holding the light near the hookah, Lyle squinted, and placed a finger to the lettering. Travin rotated the object as needed while the robed man slowly spoke. "I read the writing as this: Behold, The Hookah of Superlative Matrimony! Smoke may be drawn from it until the day it is cracked! When breathing out its smoke, identify by speaking any person whose company is present, and in the smoke, all present shall see who loves that person the most in all the world! Love, of course, comes in many forms, but this device casts aside familial and friendly, and cares only of romance!"

Travin commented, "It doesn't rhyme."

"Well, many enchantments do not."

“I like the ones that rhyme.”

Lyle smiled without comment, walked back to the townspeople and returned the torch, and then came again to stand near Travin.

Travin asked, hookah in his hands, “Should we see if it works?”

Lyle answered, “I think we should. Do you know how to use it? From what was written on it, I think it is ready.”

Travin held the stem in one hand and the mouth piece in the other, and drew in a big breath from the item. He held the breath in for a moment, and then began exhaling a stream of smoke, which came forth in a huge cloud, bigger than when they had been in frozen wastes well below zero, and he and Lief had taken turns lowering their warmth-enchanted scarves to breathe out into the frigid air as they walked. As Travin exhaled the smoke, midway through the exhale, he whispered the word, “Myself.”

The smoke swirled around in the form of a dust devil which reached from floor to ceiling, and then flung itself against one of the walls: there the smoke all spread out flat, and among the smoke on the wall, there came to be an image as though looking through a window. In the image, there was a Golden Retriever. She laid in the shade of a tree in an otherwise brightly sunny scene, panting as she kept her head up, glancing around left and right at the goings-on in the field around her.

“Um, well that,” Lyle began, and then had nothing. “She is gorgeous, sir.”

“Did I use it right?”

“As best as I can tell. Would you show me it again? Oh, and if we could have the light once more—thank you, hold it just like that. As I read it, once again: and in the smoke, all present shall see who loves that person the most in all the world! Love, of course, comes in many forms, but this device casts aside familial and friendly, and cares only of romance! Yes, sir—oh, I thank you for the light, that was all I had request of it for—Yes, sir, this image would then be... as described.”

Travin began drawing in another big breath from the hookah.

Lyle noted, “I don’t believe there was any stipulation at all that doing it a second time would change the results, but please,

do not take that as me stopping you from investigating the device's consistency for yourself."

Travin exhaled, and whispered, "My friend Lyle."

Lyle gasped, and shot a glare at Travin.

The smoke swirled around and around, and then flung itself at another wall, and in that image stood a horse in a stall, tail flicking at flies who were pestering him—the 'him' of it was very apparent, as the stallion's endowment hung out down under himself.

Travin, and many of the townsfolk, began to snicker.

"I think," Lyle said, "that I am beginning to understand what the wizard had in mind, when he said that people would not like what this item showed them."

Travin asked, "How long have you and him been seeing each other?"

"I could ask you just about the very same, you know."

Travin looked again to the image of the Golden Retriever, which still lingered on a wall in smoke. "I do remember her," he said. "When we were coming here, we stayed at a farm for a month, so that if anything from our travels was still tracking us, it would not befall all of the townsfolk—we payed the farmer more handsomely than I would have ever thought to for lodging, even for such an extended time. This dog belonged to that farmer. Her name is Acorn. She slept in my bed, she wasn't allowed to sleep on the beds with anyone else, but I didn't mind, it reminded me of sharing a tent with Rin, or with Lief when he still camped with us."

Lyle interjected, "Are you about to tell us that one thing led to another with the dog too?"

Travin gave an amused laugh, and said, "No, no, no. If her feelings for me really were *that* strong, I suppose I missed it. All I can say is that I let her sleep on the bed. Was that all it took?"

"I would not know," Lyle responded.

"More of a horse person," Travin said, nodding.

Lyle rolled his eyes, and said, "By my brotherhood, if I speak a lie then the fires of Chthuth will forsake me." The robed man brought his hands forth, and conjured a small fire in a cupped hand. "I do not know that stallion."

The fire remained strong.

Travin prodded, "Are you fond of horses generally?"

"I am not *averse* to providing for them, or to making practical use of a beast of burden, but only in intrusive boyhood thoughts long ago did that ever extend into lust, and even then those thoughts were only briefly held, and never acted upon."

The fire, again, remained strong.

"In truth," Lyle went on, "I think very little of lust or romance anyways. They often feel more to me like devices that other people have, but not I. They are alike to another man's religion: real to him, a passingly interesting fiction to me."

The fire held as true as ever.

Travin said, a bit shyly, "I do not have any fire to prove it like you did, but I too have never cared much about lust or romance in the same way others seem to. All that ever happened with Lief, or Rin, to them I think was something deeper, to me, I don't know, it was a bit of fun to have with a friend. I didn't mind it, but it's nothing I've sought out on my own."

With piercing sincerity in his eyes, Lyle said to the swordsman, "I believe you, and I thank you for sharing."

"Happy to. Anything that helps."

Lyle dismissed the fire, and put his hands behind his back once again.

Turning to the townsfolk, the robed man asked, "Would anyone else care to see what the item says about them?"

There was brief silence. Then one townspeople, the miller, said, "There uh, what was it now, how did the smoky thing say exactly it eh, functioned? Shows you who you are the most in love with, or—"

"No, Miller Mardo," Lyle interrupted. "The hookah, irrespective of any of your own thoughts, shows who in the world holds the strongest romantic love *towards you*."

"Right uh, yeah, huh." The miller shrugged. "Yeah why not, give my name a whirl there. Can't hurt to know."

Travin drew in a breath, spoke "The miller Mardo," and the smoke spun away and hit another part of a wall. There, a donkey was shown, grazing in a field.

Many townsfolk laughed openly, especially the miller's drinking buddies.

The miller though, without even feigning an inkling of surprise, said, "Yeah I told every last one of you laughing now, didn't I, how much that jenny loves me, yes I did."

Lyle, interest piqued, asked, "Is it then true that you do know this jenny?"

"Yes sir," the miller said. "She stays by the mill, I see her about every day rain or shine, mind her, feed her, and yes I didn't need this item to tell me she feels powerful urges towards me, if it gets to about that time of day again she can't be ignored on the topic, and I help her plenty gladly, I feel the same way towards her."

The miller's wife shrugged, and said, "It's all true."

The townsfolk roared, and then another townsperson called out, "Me next!"

Travin on that breath spoke "The farmhand Ishek," and the smoke blew to a wall. In it was shown an image of another townsperson present, Lui.

Ishek gasped, and looked to Lui.

Throwing up his arms in faux drama, Lui proclaimed, "It's true!"

Ishek asked, "Okay but is it though?"

Voice then entirely straight, Lui said, "Yeah I mean, I do love you man, so probably."

"*Right* back at you."

"For really real?"

As the two had been speaking they had been inching cautiously closer together, and by that point were face to face. Rather than any further words, the two cautiously shared their first kiss. The other townsfolk and Travin and Lyle all clapped.

Looking into his new love's eyes, Ishek suggested, "Wanna get out of here?"

Lui nodded. The two men scampered off, each snatching up their sack of meager treasures they had been allocated, and disappeared out of the brick door, and ran up the stairs and off into the woods.

Travin pointed out, "It can show humans."

Lyle added, "And it seems to be accurate, at least in cases we have more knowledge on."

“Why did the wizard not like this?” Travin asked. “I think it’s rather sweet, to know that the creatures of the world care about us so much.”

“Amen, sir,” chimed the miller.

Lyle asked the group, “Would anyone else like to try it?”

The room very suddenly became silent.

“Hm,” Lyle intoned. “I thank you all for coming. Before you all go, does anyone, ah...” The robed man gave a quick bashful glance at the image of the stallion.

The miller’s wife offered, “I don’t know the horse, but that looks to be Farmer Yenet’s land, out of town southeast a little.”

“I thank you. Hm. He and I likely have crossed paths then.”

The townsfolk all began to chatter among themselves again, as they all moved and collected up their treasures. Travin and Lyle turned to one another.

Travin asked, “Are you thinking of going to see him?”

“I am thinking of it,” Lyle affirmed. “I do not recall any time that horse could have met me, long enough to garner any strong impression. To the best of my memory, I might have only seen a horse from that farm in passing on the road now and then.”

“Maybe you are very beautiful to horses.”

Lyle smiled.

“I mean it!” Travin said. “How many love stories begin with one lover seeing the other’s beauty at a distance, and falling in love instantly?”

Lyle considered it, and then answered, “I can think of quite a lot, now that you mention it. How about you? Do you even like dogs?”

“Of course!” Travin bellowed. “What kind of question is that? Dogs are wonderful.”

“Have you any plans with this, then?”

“I have some ideas,” Travin answered.

A month later, Travin stood at the top of his new track. Ten times the size of the old one, this one ran all the way down the length of an enormous hill, down towards the farm below. Travin had a hand on the lever, and stood at a slight crouch, prepared to begin running.

“Are you ready Acorn?” he asked.

The Golden Retriever wagged and lowered her front half playfully.

“Are you sure? We can walk back down, take our time—”

Acorn barked and hopped, her wagging betraying that her intent could only be friendly.

“Alright. Go!”

Travin pulled the lever, released the race cars, and he and Acorn sprinted down the hill, wagging and laughing.

PROSE POEMS

A Lad Insane.txt

I often sleep in the nude these days, or close to it. Last night the window was open a crack, and it is winter here. The heat had been on, as I like it, but the dog, my partner, was over hot, and so the heat was turned off, the window cracked open, and clad in a blanket I braved the nippy breeze and settled in to snooze the night away, him on his side of the bed, me on mine.

I had a dream, of course I thought it was real while it was happening, that I was in outer space, alongside numerous other people, each of us in our own pill-shaped personal space capsule, alone in the cold. I was looking over someone's shoulder as they were deciding, from a list of icons of people's faces, who to pair up. When two were selected, their capsules floated to one another, and the two people inside were able to reach out through openings and touch one another. I realized, as I was beginning to awaken from the dream, that the touching of each other through the coldness of space was a metaphor for how we show nurture to one another, two fursuiters breaking the magic to hold hands, a skater boyfriend and goth gf nuzzling each other's noses on a park bench, a rider kissing her horse on the mouth through the tiny bubbles of froth.

Through the cold of the winter bedroom, I opened the capsule of my comfy blanket, and let in the dog. He snuggled back in against me immediately, digging his back in against my chest and then exhaling and settling back down into the mattress,

thankful for the gesture, as both of us had become chilly this far into the dark hours. There in our shell of warmth against the cold we were yin and yang, fur clad dog and shaven human, imposing claws and trimmed fingernails, teeth and teeth, heartbeat and beating heart, each in want of nurture and providing it, the end and the way. We snuggled in various positions for hours, I often with my nose buried fully into his fur to not miss his nirvana inducing atmosphere for even a portion of a breath.

When the morning light came in through the slits in the window shutters, he and I bent and stretched towards it like two flowers, our soil our dashed together souls. We stayed in bed a while longer. Then, life's duties calling, we did get up and start going about our day, accomplishing our breakfasts and our morning pees and our donning of clothes, dress and collar. Before too much of the day had gone by, I made sure to lay down again with him where he was, on the carpet in the living room, and watch closely as his tongue glided in a few business like successions over the hair on his forearm.

A Lad Insane 2.txt or Cyndi Lauper

The act of breathing can be done alone, and often times is done alone. And yet somehow, occupying the same personal space as another body and breathing there together is a transcendental experience.

I remember when I was younger, reading kissy-kissy furry comics and feeling a burning envy at seeing two male bodied people get to snuggle. It was a sort of happy jealousy, a deeply glad and deeply spurned state of being. Getting to touch the shadow of the object that is love, but never having touched the object itself. Marcus and Reis. Joel and Matt. They had found each other: they had found somebody to lie in a bed with and breathe together.

It's easy to forget, these days, that I have had the same thing.

He begins running in his sleep. I kiss his fur, and bless his journey.

In, out. Woof woof woof woof woof. In, out. In, out. In, out.

In,

out.

A Lad Insane 3

It's been a little bit of a different morning. Not anything that an impartial observer would mark as all too different, I guess, and yet I felt it the time again to remark, and complete a sort of triptych.

I spent the night drinking wine and playing with a knotted toy, filling up my insides in terms of depth and with an especial circumference right inside past the butthole, and pleasuring myself to furry porn. I think it might be a secret knowledge, unique to those who play with knots or plugs or other bulbous things in their poop chute, to know that there are different sensations depending on how the ring of the anus is approached. To feel a knot entering and to feel a knot leaving are two different things. Similar, both fun, but not identical sensations. To feel a tongue licking the closed outside is a different thing to feeling an inserted finger do a business-like press and rub against one side to test the looseness. So as I was looking at the furry porn, there were a combination of pleasures in the drunkenness, the massaging of my very lubed hand over my female-identifying penis, and the variety of ways I would loosen and push the knot in, loosen and let the knot slide out, or do myself with the floppy smooth shaft for a while.

Usually after such a nightcap, I shower to clean the lube off of myself and pass out for a long sleep. This time though I went to bed luby and sticky, and probably didn't get more than a brief nap in before waking up at dawn and feeling ready to start the day.

I moved a forgotten load of laundry from the washer to the dryer, I did take my shower with some reluctance but it was nice afterwards to be clean, and then me and my dog husband who smells wonderful laid side by side on our bed together, pressed caringly against each other, and I had one arm draped over him as he snored and slept in, and with the other hand I held a touch screen phone and read through some of a piece of yiffy smut that a friend had sent to me, and I enjoyed reading it, it was a good read.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 11;

NOVEMBER 2023.

In this issue,
animal lovers visit a space station's sewer system,
and a mind reader helps someone with a secret.

*Featuring the items: Underground Newzletter, IGRA
PRC, Gift, and Super Soldier Mega Spies, as well as a few
poems.*

UNDERGROUND NEWZLETTER

AWOOOOOOOOOOOOO! SALUTATIONS, ANIMAL LOVERZ!
For all those who know the comfort of snuggling a dog under a blanket on lonely nightz: For all those who arent shy to look at a dogs boy parts or girl parts like another dog would, and would like the pleasure of sniffing around in there too: For those whose first thoughts about a horse arent their rideability (at least, not that kind)...: For those who LOVE ANIMALS, its time for your community newz as we continue our faster-than-light yet slower-than-an-unswelling-dane-bulbus-glandis voyage into the deep sector!! Therez p-l-e-n-t-y of animalz-themed fun going on if you know where to look: and if your looking here your looking in the right place! Come join in the debauchery! The more the marier! The party never ever ever ever ends, as long as neither of our competing captains on this shit show vessel tank the thing before we get to the next habitable space rock.

!!!Eventz!!!

Nickys Meet!

On Mission Day 438 at Unadjusted Station Time 1800, animal loving folkz will be gathering in Nickys Bar outside of the aft colluseum for drinks, then at around 2015 everyonez drunk assez will be walking around the corner to Crankys Theater to catch their showing of Balto for history and culture night.

Lutzful Meet!

MD 439 @ UST 2130: Wanna hump someone? Wanna get humped by someone? Okay with taking a chance on whether that someone is 2 legged or 4?? Evin will be leading an officially sanctioned tour of one of the stations sanitary sewers, the door in iz next 2 the door to Engine 4, by Insanity Pizzaria. This tour will definitely just be to obtain knowledge and foster a sense of community and it totaly iz irrelevant that Evin is bringing shitloads of condoms and lube and dog food.

Craftz Meet!

MD 440 ALL DAY!!! Somewhere in the arboritum, animal loving craftz folkz will have merch on display! Lindi has made tonz more knitted glovez with knit clawz on the finger endz after the last round sold out so fast, get some from the new batch while they last! Mergrit is continuing her surprise stickerz series, no spoilerz here but your not going to want to miss this weekz graffic, seriously. Get out there and check out whatz on offer!

!!!Newz!!!

Giroz VR!

Our god given master of 1s and 0s, GIRO, has released ANOTHER NEW VR EXPERIENCE. Mail him \$2 at the usual address and let him know you want giraffe, and he will mail back the disk that you can slip to the chair operator at your next VR sesh. U heard right, GIRAFFE! The scene can be scaled to make u big enough, the giraffe small enough, u can be a giraffe 2 or any other avatar u want to bring in. It feels out of this world. Giro sez the next one that hez workin on iz another in hiz line of fictional typez, and iz not commenting farther at thiz time.

Sticker Sitingz!

Ho. Li. Shit. To whatever ninja assassin ultra sneaker put a Get Lickjobs sticker on captain Berrmz podium right smack in the middle of his logo, in time for hiz LIVE BROADCAST TO THE WHOLE STATION, you deserve a place in history. Hiz press guy noticing it near the end and trying to walk by in front of the

podium and remove it casually and totally failing to get it off and only making it more obvious to EVERYONE it was there when he gave up and walked away again made my entire year. Bless you, unknown hero of stickerz.

!!!Artz!!!

(Line art of a man sniffing the stink lines coming off of a donkey's butt. A woman is watching him with her arms raised in the air in despair. Below in quotations is the text, "And he won't eat his spinach at dinner. MEN.")

(Line art of a deer from the neck up. In place of each of the deer's eyes is a plume of fire. Some of the deer's antler points are cut off and are pouring blood.)

(Black and white photograph showing the exterior of a bakery. The bakery's wall has spray painted art on it. The spray paint art depicts a Labrador dog with an arrow pointing to her rear, and text before the arrow which reads, "COOKIE LOOKING 4 MILK.")

(Line art of a dog's erect penis with the bulbus glandis swelled.)

!!!Personalz!!!

Jeff – Have hemeroids, my husbands dick needs somewhere to go in the meantime. Look for the bald guy and the husky walking around the oaklog forward dwellings, can host.

Stallion Stufft – Need recording professional to record our new album! Acoustic, so we have an excuse for not knowing how to do it ourselves! Please get in touch!

Aymee – The chick I hooked up with at the masquerade on MD 422 who had the dog tattoos: Still thinking of you. Hoping to meet again. I am at Iceberg Tunnel Coffee most mornings around UST 0645. Lets talk about dogs. Kisses, mwa mwa.

Alwaysz so much going on!!! Catch the latest newz again soon, animal loverz!!!!!!!!!!

IGRA PRC

My name is Lyn. I like to go on walks. I'm working on learning how to do art, but, to say my doodles are uh, childish, would still be pretty generous, they're still bad, I'm still learning. I chew on sticks. And, I am literally undead, although I don't mention it to most people.

I originally lived from 1952 to 1961, and died getting hit by a car in my old age. I was a Great Dane. My life partner (my human) was named Fiona, we grew up together, started as young ones and grew into ourselves, through all of the fun and all of the hopeless-feeling work that that entails. I remember long hours sniffing around our back yard while she did laundry; I remember lying pressed up against her side in the sunlight as she did the washing in the bucket, and I remember playing around bothering her to throw a rock for me to go get while she was pegging up the clothes to dry; I remember how at first she really wanted to throw a stick, but I liked the rock more, lifting it up and the taste of it as I carried it, it was important to me it was a rock, and eventually she went along with it. I think fondly of the smells that filled the house when she cooked. Roasts, bacon, I drool just at the memory sometimes. I remember some days were crying days, she would be in a foul mood, and it would never go away until at least the next day, but she would calm down a little if I was there, she would cling to my hair, she would pet me, she would tell me things that I don't think were about me, but I tried my hardest to be listening, and I learned who some of the people were who made her sad. I remember her

scolding me regularly for going up onto the table to eat food when she wasn't around, but the food she made always smelled so good, nothing she could say would stop me the next time I was left alone, it was always worth it. I remember a time when my ears were sore and itchy, and she would be mad when I scratched at them, I didn't understand; eventually they stopped being itchy, anyways. I remember sharing her bed, I would never fall asleep better than to the smell of her breath, and the warm comfort of her there with me, my packmate. I remember I always licked her, on the hands and arms and legs, and then one day while we were on the couch, she looked around to see if we were alone, and then we kissed mouth to mouth, and that became a thing that we did a lot. I remember one time our bedroom door was closed with her inside and me outside, and I bonked my paw into it to push it open, and to my surprise the door wasn't fully closed and did come open, and I saw her on the bed naked, doing something with her nakedness; she looked around like she had looked around before the kissing, and then she invited me into the bed; she showed me what she was doing, sliding some toy in and out of her vagina; I licked at it carefully, and she liked that a lot, and it became another new game we played; I even got her to use the toy on me, showing her my puss, showing every interest in getting played with too; when she finally did, it was so immediately fulfilling, pleasurable, enjoyable, like I had found out about a new sense entirely, similar to the disobedient gluttonous joy of filling my belly by eating good food off of the table; I remember the first time she did it, we looked into each other's eyes like hey, we just found something new to share together, didn't we; it was a fun personal moment. We went on for years, playing around on the bed, waiting around in the house, romping around in the sunshine in the back yard as the wind blew by and carried all of the neighborhood's smells right past my nose, for my inspection and appreciation. And then, yeah. Car. Smack. I barely lived long enough to even know that was what happened. It's not like it was all that traumatic, at the end of the day, from my perspective anyways. It was pretty quick and then it was over.

I don't even want to get into why I was brought back, because that isn't really my story. It's like if I was raped by a stranger.

Why *he* decided to do what *he* did doesn't define *me* or what *my* story ever was before that. But, since it did become a defining moment anyways, sure, I'll give the brief version.

The car that ran me over ran over a human later too, same driver in fact, and this time the driver actually did do time for murder. But, more to the point here, after being in evidence and then in an auction, the murder car mostly spent the next few decades forgotten about in some dude's barn under a sheet.

And then in 2018, my reviver—I won't say his name, fuck him—came along looking for a murdered soul, knowing about the story of the car. Well. He knew about the human who was killed by it. She was the one he was looking for. He didn't know I was on there too. Inadvertently, he got the more inert pieces of her, and the actual soul of me. He had designs of creating a zombie to assassinate President Trump. I didn't know what a president was prior to being brought back, because, yeah, dog. Not my ballgame. I did get some factual knowledge off of the human's soul, so, when it came time that I was resurrected for this purpose, I at least knew the job description of a president, even if the exact politics of this specific president were a few decades ahead of the other soul's time too.

My reviver died, anyways. As he was trying to imbue me with the desire to assassinate and the skills to actually make the attempt, something went wrong with the ritual. A demon appeared he hadn't even been attempting to commune with—I think she overheard, bless her. A giant she-wolf made of fire and smoke. She bit his entire head off, freed me from the chains he had kept me in, and then... the world was mine again. Just like when I was a dog, before, I was alive again, I was a creature in the world that could do... whatever it behooved me to do.

I tried to find Fiona. That took a very long time. It was difficult enough finding the town that we had lived in, but I did, in the end I walked there through huge fields of corn that cut up my bare and sensitive human feet. I walked to our house. Someone else lived there who I didn't know, and he threatened me as he told me to leave. I learned more about what year it was, and, what that meant. I found out it was 2019, and she had died in 1968, seven years after I had. Everything was over.

I tried to die. I went out into the woods and tried to starve. I tried to shoot myself. All I felt (after the initial pain and confusion) was a breeze. I reached into the wound and started scooping my brain out, handful after handful, until I could run my hand smoothly around the entire inside surface of my cranial cavity. It didn't matter. I regenerated. I never even passed out. My soul (my perspective of existence in the universe) is not predicated on having a physical body, like it is for most people.

So I decided, if I am unable to die, then I will give myself over wholeheartedly to living. I eat well and I eat healthy—I'm actually vegan, mostly, which is not very dog-like, but with these human taste buds I cannot get enough of onions and peppers, seriously. I have a job. I have a girlfriend who I uh, have not told the undead thing to. And I have a truck that I am driving in right now, on my way home from picking up some groceries from the organic store that's down the highway. I didn't really need to go there, but, I'm mixing it up today. It's a free spirit sort of day right now.

My exit isn't for another couple miles, but on a whim I take this other exit I'm coming up on anyways. I have a drink of my bottled lemonade on the way up, tilting it up beside by face, my eyes never leaving the road. At the top of the off ramp, I take a right turn onto whatever the hell street this is, and start cruising.

I don't really have anywhere to be. Not in a hurry. The groceries in the back are mostly produce, nothing that's going to go bad even if I take all afternoon getting home. And I'm on a two week staycation, because incidentally I have not used any of my vacation time this year, and that time resets on the anniversary of when you were hired. So, being that I was hired nearing three years ago, here I am with time off that I either use or throw away.

So I am taking the scenic route home.

Shortly after the off ramp and the stop light are some gas stations, fast food places, nothing surprising. I think one of these bigger buildings is a hotel, and the next one down is probably an apartment complex, and then I'm into a bunch of

housing, my truck ambling along by people's yards, taking it casual in the slow lane.

I see a sign for a yard sale. Yeah, why not. I throw on my turn signal, ease down the break, and make the turn.

A little ways farther down a bendy residential road, and I see the garage sale ahead. A few fold-out tables set up in the driveway, a few people poking around. I park the truck on the side of the road, hop out, and go to see what's good.

The other humans shuffle around between the tables, looking things over. Seems to be middle aged people, one of them has a kid with them who is goofing around in the front yard—I smile at her. She's making a better use of this day than any of the rest of them here, definitely, doing somersaults and running around.

I do turn my attention back to the tables. It's mostly clothes, from all kinds of ages, baby to adult. I wish it wasn't considered weird to smell things. Like, screw all these other people, I'm interested, you know? I'd love to spend a long, long time here, going item by item, holding the clothes right up close, cupping them around my nose whether they're a shirt or socks or pants or underwear, and just sniff them, inch by inch. Who knows. Maybe they'd all just smell like cigarette smoke anyways. But, maybe some body odor, maybe fragrant detergent, maybe dirt, maybe mildew. Guess it'll be a mystery. Guess I'll be left not really caring about these clothes, since, that was going to be what was interesting about them. Oh well.

On one table, there are some tools on one end, wrenches and uh, stuff. And on the other end of that table is some computer stuff too. A couple of screens, a couple of keyboards and mice. I certainly don't have an interest, and I think my girlfriend, June, is already good on screens and keyboards and mice. What catches my eye though is something that she might have an interest in: there's a cardboard box with game cartridges stacked inside.

I take some out and look them over. They're definitely used, a lot of the labels are scuffed or discolored. I sniff one, it doesn't really smell of much at all, which is good of electronics I have come to understand—I catch myself and do not sniff any more. Most of the cartridges are light grey, and have labels with different cartoon characters on the front, and names I am sure

I've heard before, Mario, Banjo, Zelda. Down at the bottom of the box are ten black cartridges that don't have any graphics on the labels, just a narrow white laminated strip with plain black text on it. I don't know what those are. They all say IGRA PRC and then a number, like, the lowest I see in here is IGRA PRC 2, and the highest is IGRA PRC 30, so there would appear to be numbers missing, I don't know if that matters.

But, details aside, June *loves* computer games. Each of the cartridges is labeled with a little sticker that has \$10 written on it in pen. I turn to the woman who's seated in a fold-out chair in the mouth of the garage.

I say to her, "Nice day out." It's the way humans say hi to each other, I guess. Start by talking about nothing. It is nice out, anyways: it is autumn, and it smells like it and it feels like it.

She says back, "It could stay like this all year long, you wouldn't hear me complaining."

Just estimating, buying all of these would be three hundred bucks. And I mean, I have it, and I'd do that, why not. But I do think June will appreciate this more the less I say I spent. She is smart like that.

I make an offer. "One forty for the box?"

"Deal," she says, no hesitation. As I'm getting out my wallet, she goes on, "I was on the phone with my grandson, he said I should charge more for those, found them going for more online. I said, well do you want to come get them? They're free to you, if they're staying in the family that's worth as much to me as selling them. And he said no, and I said well there you go, I'm not charging more if you won't drive an hour to get them."

I hand her one forty in twenties.

She counts it out briefly, and then says, "Thank you very much, miss."

"Good luck with the rest of the garage sale!" I say.

She grabs a sturdy plastic cane and starts to stand up, probably to go put the money inside. I have such a desire to help her stand up, offer her a hand, but I have learned that personal space with humans is... Touching a stranger is not something you do, even if you're being nice.

I leave her to stand up on her own, happily pick up the cardboard box that is so totally mine now, and carry my new

thing to my truck. I set it in the passenger side on the floor, rather than in the back, to keep the open box safe from unexpected showers or any dust on the road. I kind of hate computer stuff. Always have to be so careful with it. No fun. But, I'm happy to have gotten the box all the same, I think it's a good present. We'll see.

I continue driving in the direction of home. Driver's side window rolled down, arm hanging out, wind on my face.

Getting closer to home, now on streets that I do usually go down, I make a stop that I usually make. I pull into a small graveyard by the road, park the truck, and get out.

Reaching into the bed of my truck, I take a can out of a six pack back there, and open it as I walk to one of the graves.

Fiona Warren. My life partner.

I sit down in front of the grave cross-legged, and start sipping. There is a lot of space between my thoughts, as I speak them to her.

"Not much new to say since yesterday, Fi. Picked up a box of old games. I don't even know what system they're for. They look like Nintendo 64? I don't even know if all of them are games, some of them are labeled like they might be someone's tax files or something, so, maybe they aren't even for a game system necessarily. June will know. I basically got them for her. I think she'll either be stoked or she'll call me a dork and be a little bit annoyed at how much money I wasted on this. It wasn't much honestly, but, I guess it would be a dumb amount to spend on something she can't do anything with, if she can't. We'll see. I'll let you know if anything in the box was any good."

I set the can down and lean back for a moment, hands pressed down onto the grass, head tilted back to look up at the clear blue sky. I breathe it in, and sigh. I pick up the can again, which is half empty now, and I keep talking.

"I don't know what else to tell you. So much of the human experience seems to be about... thinking about things that you aren't sensing right now. And that's not to say I never thought about things that weren't in front of my face as your dog. Believe me, when you were at work, I looked forward to you coming home, even beyond the fact it would mean you would let me out into the back yard to play around. I just looked forward to

seeing you. So it's not new, thinking about things that aren't true yet. But it's... more. So much of the human experience seems to be thinking about things you aren't sensing right now, even when the things that you are sensing right now are good enough. I don't know. That's just how I feel about it in this moment. But I'll let you know how the games go over with June."

I take the last drink from the can, crush it in my hand, and huck it into the bed of my truck as I'm walking back to it. I get in, and drive the next couple of blocks back to home.

I live with June, my girlfriend. It's her house. It's *really* her house. A human's house. I would never think to put so many of the touches on it that she has, but she has really made it her own space, on top of all the things that the previous owners left here. She's done an unnecessarily cool job of decorating the walls: in the living room the walls are mostly painted black with a bunch of neon colored triangles here and there; in her office the walls are papered with desert imagery, sand and cactuses and skulls, that kind of thing. There are book shelves in so many rooms, many do actually have books, others have ceramic vases and figures, pieces of taxidermy, sewing projects, puzzle toys, tiny masks carved from wood and painted in detail. If this were my house I probably would have smashed all the windows to let the air in and dragged all of the blankets into the kitchen to make a food and shelter den. So, she has thought of more than a couple decorating ideas that I would not have.

Her car is in the driveway, I didn't really expect she would be going anywhere while I went out to get groceries. I bring everything inside, two bags of groceries in one trip (I bury my nose down into the bags as I walk in and sniff the onions and greeny earthy veggie smells), and the box of games in the second trip (I bury my nose into the box and sniff that too, and basically just smell the cardboard box itself).

I set everything on the kitchen table for now, and start going around to find where my girlfriend is. She isn't down here on the first floor, in the living room or kitchen or in her office or in the bathroom. I climb up the stairs—unashamedly I go up the stairs using my feet and my hands. At the top of the stairs I walk lightly over the carpet down the hall, and poke my head in to our bedroom. There on the bed is June, all cozy with blankets

strewn all over her. Sunlight falls on her in little golden beads and lines, through the gaps in the binds. I feel a phantom tail wagging behind myself—the fact that I don’t actually have one isn’t even super a bother right now, it would be smacking so hard against the wall behind me. I tiptoe forward, take off my shirt and pants, and slink onto the bed with her, snaking my way under the blankets, into the warmth that she has packed in there.

June, half asleep, grabs me in her arms. Under the blankets, we hug front to front, finding a way to settling in that is comfy: she ends up using my arm as a pillow, I have a scrunched up blanket for my pillow. We nuzzle in, my face and hers touching, skin tingling skin, my nose mashed into her forehead, her cheek mashed into my lips, and we are so cozy this way. I love her. It’s perfect.

I take a deep breath. A slow breath, letting go, wholeheartedly, of any sense of needing to be anywhere else. I do not need to do anything at all right now. I can just relax. I can snuggle.

I love coming home to this. I love June. She is warm. She is here. And she wouldn’t make it anything more complicated than that. She gets me.

And the smells. The sheets smell like us. Sweat, cooch, ass, detergent, breath. This is our den. This is our special together place. This is ours.

Before too long at all, I fall asleep with her there, face on face.

I wake up to the feeling of her planting a big kiss on my lips. I wag, or at least, I feel the fact that my tail is not thumping against the bedsheets when it should be. I kiss her back. Then I stretch, grab all of the blankets, and fling them all onto the floor in one throw, leaving me and her bare on the bed.

“How do you *do* that?” she asks, amused, but also really asking.

“I wanted them off the bed and now they are. Duh.”

I pet her tummy. She stretches, and lays back relaxed and lets it happen.

She says, “It’s like that trick where you pull the table cloth off and still leave everything on the table, but with the blankets and leaving us on the bed.”

I have no idea what she's talking about, but I just keep petting her tummy.

"I got you video games," I tell her.

"Did you?" she asks—she sounds like she might be happy about this but is sooo skeptical of what I mean by that, which, to be fair, is totally fair.

"Whole box of old ones, down on the kitchen table."

She floppily rolls away from my petting and off of the bed, onto the floor, and starts pulling her clothes on down there on the floor without getting up. I do get up, get back into my pants and shirt too, and follow her out of the bedroom door, towards the stairs.

"I need to see these immediately," she says on the way. "What kind did you get?"

"It's a surprise because I have no idea."

"Oh my god."

We get to the bottom of the stairs, and she runs to the box on the kitchen table, and immediately starts grabbing the cartridges out and looking them over and setting them out.

"Yeah, these are Nintendo 64 carts," she says. "Holy shit. Okay..." She is setting all of them out in some kind of organized way, it seems. "Where did you get these?" she asks.

"Garage sale," I answer. "I know the labels all say ten dollars, I just bought the whole box for a hundred and forty."

She continues digging and sorting while I'm talking. When she gets to the ones at the bottom, the black cartridges with the text labels, she says, "I don't know what *these* are," and she leaves them in the box. "But the ones I do know... yeah, honestly you did not get ripped off whatsoever, some of these are pretty worthless but some of these are good gets."

That is good to hear and all, but I wasn't in it for the resale value: I'm just pleased that her tone of voice at seeing this is all excited, happy, interested. I am very pleased that I seem to have not fucked up here. Some could even say that I have been a good girl.

June asks me, "Wanna play these?"

Holy shit. "You have the console??" I ask.

"Yeah, it should be up in the attic."

Holy shit! "You have an attic?????" I ask.

June lets out a shrill little laugh, as I continue to stare, wide-eyed, awaiting her elaboration as to this “she has an attic” news.

“We have an attic,” she tells me, resting a hand on my arm.

That is firstly very exciting, and I must know right freaking now where this entire freaking attic is hidden at. And, to the point of her emphasis on ‘we,’ it is nice that she thinks of this house in that way. Because, according to my understanding of how human ownership works, this house is all hers and she could kick me out for no reason if she ever felt like it. So it’s nice to hear that she doesn’t feel like it. The house had previously belonged to her parents, and then there was a sickness that killed a lot of people including them, and now it belongs to her.

She promises that yes, she will show me where the attic is. When I see she’s going for the stairs I run around her and climb up the stairs ahead of her on all fours, and wait for her at the top.

“There,” she says, pointing to some kind of square recess in the ceiling of the upstairs hallway.

“*That’s an attic?*” I ask.

“It’s the stairs leading to an attic. Come on.”

We go to stand under the square. I see there is indeed a little handle, painted the same white as the ceiling, I never noticed it at all before.

June carries out a stool from our bedroom, and uses it to step up, and pull a fold-down door stairs thing magically out of the ceiling.

“Woahhhh,” I say.

“It’s very cool,” she says, teasing me, but she loves me. “You going up first?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Really? You always seem to insist. Like, literally just now when we went up the stairs.”

“Yeah I already know what’s up the stairs, I dunno what’s in that fuckin place.”

“Alright, I’ll go make sure there’s no ghosts or anything,” she says, and starts up the stairs slash ladder thing, up into the attic.

I hold my tongue as far as commenting on how the ghost is kinda down here, sort of. Me. Her girlfriend. Whomp whomp.

I follow her up, once she's made it to the top. Looking around, I see that there is indeed an entire attic in this house.

I ask her, "Why aren't we doing anything with this! This could be like an awesome scary hangout that we turn into a cozy hangout!"

"Um," she says, and then looks around, and shrugs. "I guess I'm not against that, actually. I have to go through all these boxes at some point."

"Do you know where the video game thing is?"

"Yeah! My old gaming stuff is in a plastic crate, I should be able to spot it." She takes out her phone, turns on the flashlight, and barely shines it around for two seconds before the light lands on a blue plastic box that stands out from all the cardboard ones.

She moves towards it, doing a sort of crawling walk to not bang her head on the low ceiling here. I crawl after her, and take her phone to hold the light while she opens the box.

"This one!" she says, and takes out a game system. I can see right on the top of it, it has a slot the right size for the game cartridges I got. "One sec, let me find the right cords."

The box has all kinds of old electronics and game cases in it. Neatly packed in among them are power cords that are all bundled together and kept from being all loosey-goosey by the same kinds of twist ties that come on bread. She takes out two cords, and a pair of controllers, and then closes the box and takes her phone back, and turns off the light.

We split up the load, making easy work of carrying it all down to the living room. As she gets it all hooked up to the TV, I go and put away the groceries. I put the paper grocery bags beside the collection of paper grocery bags June keeps below the sink—sometimes I see them re-emerge as overflow recycling bags. I don't know if she uses them for anything more other than that, but, I put the bags under the sink, anyways.

When I come back to the living room, June is on her stomach, reaching under the TV stand into all of the wires back there. I sit down on the couch, and hold a pillow as I watch her work.

Eventually she is triumphant in setting up the system, and raises her hands over her head and does a little dance. I clap along to her rhythm—dancing still *looks* very strange to me, but,

some human instinct for keeping time has rubbed off on me, and so going along with things like music is... still weird-feeling, but it kind of tingles too. It's sort of like the first time June gave me a foot massage, when the feeling of music is strong. When the feeling is weaker, it's more like seeing an optical illusion.

June continues her little dance all the way over to the table, and there she stops. I turn around and flump over the back of the couch, facing her.

"Were there any of these in particular you wanted to play?" she asks, looking over all the games she's laid out.

"Nah," I tell her.

"Would youuuu like to try a racing one or a fighting one?"

"None," I say.

"What!"

"I just want to watch," I tell her.

"That sounds a little boring."

"It sounds a little *not* boring," I counter, and I wag at her—well, I would wag at her, etc etc. "I get seasick playing."

"Yeah, I know."

"But I wanna snuggle and see you play and you tell me what you're doing and I ask dumb questions and you tell me more."

"I love you so much, Lyn."

I blow her a kiss. She makes an air kiss back at me too.

She grabs one of the games, and says, "Let's try Ocarina, make sure my N64 still works. After that though, I'm really curious about these other ones with the weird labels."

"What do you think they are?" I ask.

She peers down into the box, moves a couple of the black cartridges around. "The labels say I G R A, P R C. That doesn't mean anything to me, off the top of my head. But I mean, it could be a few things? My guess is that these are just bootlegs, and they'll just turn out to be some other normal games, maybe in a different region or something. It could also be that these are loaded with in-development game snapshots? Doesn't seem likely, but, it's weird anyways, so who knows."

"Do they still make games for this?"

June laughs a little, as she comes over to put her chosen game into the system. "No," she answers. "This is like, later 90s, up into 2000, baaarely anything O1 or O2. Well, but that's the thing:

just because commercial development stopped, doesn't mean that any random person who wanted to couldn't develop on their own in the twenty years since too. Modding is definitely a thing."

I have no idea what she's saying, but I wag at the sound of her voice going on. It's very relaxing. As she's been talking she has put a cartridge into the slot at the top, and slid the power switch on.

Onto the screen comes a logo, and then the title screen, with a horse going across a dark field in the background.

"It works!" June says.

"Yay!" I yay.

June sits down on the couch next to me, presses stuff on the controller, and then we are looking at a menu. I don't know this game at all, but I get the gist of it, that these are two different save files. The second file is empty. The first one has some stuff on it.

June flips the selection back and forth between the two files, and says, "Huh. The guy named his Link Pick."

"Is that important?"

"No, not at all, but I guess that's what we can call him? I am assuming all of these games came from a guy, I have no reason whatsoever but it's what I'm going with."

"Sure, they can all be from a guy," I say, and then I melt over against her side, nuzzling her, getting comfy. "We can call the guy Pick. Can we look at where he got to in the game?"

"Yeah," June says, and just as soon selects the first save file.

The screen cuts to a view as though we are looking down into a room from the ceiling, and I am very glad I have opted out of playing: just looking at the screen I can deal with, but if I was the one who had to drive the character around right now I might hurl. June makes the guy, Pick, leave the room, hop off of a balcony, and then start wandering around in a village with a bunch of trees and hills.

June mentions, "From the file select, I know he's still on the first dungeon."

"Show me around," I request.

June takes me on a walk all around the town, doing all of the fun little things to do, running around in tall grass, throwing

rocks, talking to all of the people—she does the voices on all of them, as I snuggle in and wag and listen. I do enjoy it, seeing this whole place. It'd be neat to be there.

As June is about to go into some other part of the game, I interrupt, saying, "Let's try the weird games."

"Fuck yes, let's," she agrees.

We both scramble off of each other, and she goes to get the box while I stand and stretch—my side that was all mushed into her is all sore, but, no regrets.

She brings the box over and sets it beside the system, and kneels there as she switches out the game we just played for one of the black cartridges. "IGRA PRC Two," she says, and then slides the power switch on, and doesn't even get up as she looks at the TV, waiting to see if it works.

The game does come on, I think. It looks like a pale blue sky in the distance, a completely flat dark green field, and a yellow rectangle standing on the field. And that's it.

"Hm," June says.

"Any idea what this is?" I ask her.

"Nnnnnot a finished game, is all I can tell you," June answers. She hits the reset button, and same image quickly appears on the screen.

Sensing that this whole process might involve a lot of fiddling around with switching out games and doing stuff on the console itself, I start taking cushions off of the couch and blankets and pillows and stuff, and begin forming a cushion nest around June that I will join her in when I am finished.

June tries something with the controller, and right away says, "Oh wowwww, this is terrible. Look at this."

I look, as I am draping a blanket over her shoulders. She is moving the rectangle around, but the point of view on the screen isn't changing, so the rectangle easily goes away off to the sides or becomes really small in the distance.

She makes a noise like she's going to throw up (I think she's like half pretending) as the rectangle starts drifting slowly into the distance.

"What?" I ask.

“I pressed the... oh Jesus, the D pad starts the camera moving but then doesn’t stop it, I can still control the block with the joystick, this is... wow.”

“Bad?”

“Yeah, very bad.”

“You like it?”

“This game is talking dirty to me in the *best* way.”

I lick the side of her face, and then continue working on the pillow fort.

She tries the second controller. It doesn’t seem to do anything at first, none of the buttons effect anything, but then all of a sudden she says, “That’s a crash.” She laughs to herself, kind of rolls over onto her side (onto many of the comfy cushions I have placed) and then rolls back up, sighing after the laughter. “Wowwwwww this is shoddy. Initializing controller two crashed the game.”

She turns it off and on, and the game is back to normal. I sit down beside her, and get in on the blanket I put over her, stealing half of it so it’s now draped over both of our shoulders.

June tells me, “If the rest of these are as exciting as this one, we are in for a treat.”

I lick the side of her face again, she kisses me back this time, and then she turns off the game.

She reaches into the box, and says, “Up next, IGRA PRC Five.”

Swapping out the games, she turns it on with the new one in, and we get a totally different screen. We actually have a person to move around instead of a rectangle: he has a cape and green skin and a bald head. And there’s actually stuff here, too. A bridge is right ahead of us, leading towards an expansive obstacle course that climbs high above our heads in a field in the woods.

“Damn,” June says. She moves the guy around, and he actually walks. “Well this is a huge step up.”

She starts walking for the bridge, and our view actually follows the guy now, instead of staying behind.

As she goes, she tries out all of the things her guy can do. He has a bunch of different kinds of jumps, some of them are flips and others are really far jumps or tall jumps. She manages to do

double jumps too, finding weird ways to dance the character around.

“This handles insanely well,” June lets me know.

“Is it a copy of a game, like you were talking about?”

“No. This isn’t anything that was ever released on the N64. It’s taking some design cues from SM64, but this really is wholecloth its own thing.”

“Maybe it’s one you haven’t heard of?”

“I am a freaking historian with this stuff,” June says. “I promise, I am familiar with the entire N64 library, this isn’t anything in it.”

“Name every game.”

“Super Mario 64, Pilot Wings 64, Saikyō Habu Shōgi—”

“FUCK STOP, I believe you.”

June giggles to herself. She is doing a lap around the forest clearing area, staying on the ground rather than going up onto anything.

“Getting a lay of the land?”

“Yeah. This area alone is extensive. Can I...”

She tries a few things on her controller, making her guy do random stuff. Then, with an “ah ha!” she makes the view look upwards.

“Damn,” she says.

It goes up very, very, very far. Kind of far enough that the highest stuff up is basically too small to see, so it might go even farther.

Once she’s done a whole lap around, she stands in the middle of the clearing, and points the view around to a few different places. She explains, “So, we can start climbing up there... there... or there. I think all of them are a viable path up, but I wanna try this one, I see tight ropes and I’d like to see how those work.”

“Sounds good to me.”

June heads for that way, which starts with a series of platforms spiraling up the trunk of a very tall tree.

The way that June plays is mesmerizing to watch. I don’t just mean that of this game, either, I have sat and watched her play games before. It’s like performance art. She glides around the platforms up this tree like a ninja. She gets to the tight ropes,

and with laughing and experimenting, she has figured out how they work so fast, and starts jumping across them like she is hot on the trail of someone ahead.

This area of the game really is freaking huge. We spend way longer just climbing up all of these things than we spent in the village in Ocarina, and it just keeps going up and up and up.

At some point I grab us snacks. Snacks from June's food, not mine, so, chips and sodas.

By the time we can see the top of the area, it's gotten dark outside in real life. There is one last thing to get over, a bunch of platforms that are all spinning around a weird giant glowing green orb. June just goes for it, no hesitation at all, we both scream and reel at the idea of falling down at this point, but she powers forward, makes it across the platforms, and leaps into the orb.

Instantly, her character is teleported to a completely different level: a blue-tinted town, instead of a green-tinted forest. June scream laughs at the jarring change in scenery, and rolls over onto her side, into my lap. I pet her as she is laugh crying and trying to breathe.

She says to me, "We are going to be up all night, aren't we?"

"That sounds fun to me," I say. I. love. doing weird random shit with her.

"I need to know how much more of this game there is," she says.

"I'd like to know too," I tell her. And then I admit openly, "I mean, I don't actually care, but, I want you to be able to find out, and I like spending time with you."

June kisses me. She tastes like terrible cheesy corn chips. I love her. She then sits up again, takes the controller once more, and goes forward into the new area.

As we go around the town, she says a lot of things like "interesting" and "huh" and "ohhh." I usually have absolutely no idea what is so interesting or huh or ohhh-worthy, but she explains to me that basically this area is a huge puzzle, riddle, secrets kind of thing, unlike the last area which was purely jumping around.

She walks around to the same areas many times, sometimes spends a bit of time standing in place, staring at an area,

thinking, before she says “ah ha!” and then goes and jumps on something or moves something somewhere else, and then seems pleased about it, and explains how this thing she did here will have effected some other thing somewhere else. Mmmmost of this is lost on me, but mostly I don’t care. At a certain point I’m not even looking at the screen, I just have my head in my girlfriend’s lap, facing her, taking in deep sniffs of her shirt, and feeling her gut moving forward and back against my face as she breathes. She smells so human. Bad cheesy snacks, body odor. We are both incredibly sweaty for two people who are just sitting here. It’s probably a mix of all of the excitement from jumping around in the game and also just the fact that we are very toasty, both of our body heat pooled together and contained within blankets.

It really is seeming like we’re going to be up all night. She is still sitting there, I am lying beside her on my back, looking at the TV screen upside down, and she and I are just talking about stuff as she works on the puzzle thing in the town.

June says to me, “This reminds me of growing up. Being tired, and eating garbage, and hanging out with friends, and playing a game without knowing at all what I should expect next. An actual sense of mystery in a game.”

I treasure her sharing that. I haven’t told her much about my life from before I knew her, because, there’s not a lot to share if I don’t want to get into the whole ‘undead dog’ thing. And, in a sort of mirrored way, I don’t know much about her life from before I knew her either. In some ways I don’t need to? I never know if this is just a normal human thing or if I should try harder to ask. There is isolated trivia. She knows I dated someone named Fi who died. I know she had a girlfriend growing up too, but I don’t know what her name was, or what happened, and that’s fine that I don’t know. I feel like it is my dog side that is utterly nonjudgemental as to how she got to be here, and is only invested in the fact that yes, now she is here. But, this right here, this night, is the best of both worlds: her sharing some insight that stuff like this is how she grew up, I love to know that, and I love to get to be here doing it again with her.

She asks me, “Did you do a lot of stuff like this growing up?”

What a question. I tell her bluntly, “No. Doing stuff like this with you is a lot of firsts.”

“I had like, two best friends when I was a little kid,” she says. “One was a neighbor, and the other was a friend from school...”

She goes on, telling me stories from when she was little. Playing around in the woods pretending to be wolves—hehe, oh that is so great, I love that. I wag a ton at those stories, and ask to hear a lot more about their pack, their territory, their hunts. She tells me things about going to school. I hear so freaking much about school, from TV shows and from people talking. It sounds traumatic, so much of the time. Fiona cried about school a lot. It sounds like June had mixed experiences. Some of it was bad, and hurtful, and unfair. But she and her friends also got up to fun, writing things on the whiteboards that would disrupt class, passing notes and trying not to laugh but failing, and also sometimes just leaving school early with her friends to go hang out and, well, do stuff like what we’re doing, this night. I snuggle against her listening to all of it, wagging. It’s incredible I get through the entire conversation without it coming up that I never went to school.

It’s late enough into the night that June and I are both nodding off a little bit. We have busted out June’s energy drinks, and have been sipping those. June has been circling around and around a graveyard in the game. There has been a little lull in the conversation, and I find myself snapping my head upright, catching myself from almost falling asleep. I turn and lick the side of June’s face.

“You’re weird,” she says.

“Licking is a sign of closeness in wolves,” I tell her.

She is weirdly quiet at that. I expected her to explain we are humans. But instead, there is a real heavy silence, as she makes the character on the screen walk around the graveyard more.

And then she says really quietly, “Hey Lyn?”

I get the sense that we’re not in teasing joking mode anymore, and I try to affect a certain amount of... approachable gravity. “I’m here,” I answer her.

“I told you once that I could relate to you and Fi, but I didn’t want to get into it.”

I nod, and don't interrupt her. I can feel her voice on the verge of cracking, and I might cry just hearing how worked up she is, but I remain right at her side. I rest my temple on her shoulder, listening completely.

"Well. My partner growing up, my girlfriend who I had my first kiss with, and my first sexy times, and who I really wanted to marry and run away with... was my family's dog, Shiloh."

Tears flood into my eyes, because of how much I know now, how much I understand about her pain. The dog "was" Shiloh, not "is" Shiloh. I might be the first person she has ever told about this hidden pearl of love. I tell her, "Oh sweetie," and I grab her in a strong hug. She grabs me back, and we cry together.

"I understand," I tell her, as I pet her, and we hug each other. "You're okay. You're beautiful. You're perfect."

She lets it all out. I stay here with her, here to have it all let out onto. I'm good at that. I wouldn't have it any other way. I want all of her pain she will give me. I squeeze her again. She squeezes me back. We are real. We are two breathing crying things that are here together right now, breathing and crying on each other.

As some time passes, we are eventually just two beings breathing together, not crying. I lick the side of her face. She licks me back. I wag. She smiles.

"Do you wanna tell me more?" I ask.

"Not right now," she says.

"Will you later?" I ask.

"Sure," she says.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"I really do get it, and I hope you and her had all of the best years that you could."

She nods, and says, "We did. I wish it could have... no offense to you, but I wish it could have lasted forever."

"You don't have to explain that one to me, I understand."

"Right. Sorry."

"We have so many notes to compare, some other time," I tell her. I hope I used the turn of phrase right. 'Compare notes.' Seems like a school thing.

She seems to know what I mean, anyways. She nods, and comes in and hugs me again. We make it a quick one this time.

June looks over at the TV screen, and says, "I give up on this graveyard, unless you have any ideas."

"I have had no ideas the entire time you have been in this area, I promise."

She snickers, and says, "If these are all 'in progress' versions of the same game, maybe this is as far as this version goes. Should we try the next one?"

"Let's snuggle a little first," I offer.

"Sure," she says, and then in one motion she leans forward and switches off the power on the N64 and falls onto me to snuggle. I catch her, and gently lay both of us down in this nest of cushions and blankets. Both of us there, both of us having the taste of chips and soda on our mouths, both of us up way past our bedtimes and so tired, both of us so cozy, I nuzzle her. I kiss her forehead once, and then we just lay there, and I hold her, and I pet her.

Pretty soon, she is snoring as I am petting her.

I relax, good to fall asleep too. I fall asleep thinking about how beautiful my girlfriend is, this human completely asleep on me who knows what the love is like between a human and a dog. I fall asleep thinking about how much we really, really have in common. I fall asleep in love with someone who kisses dogs, more times than she knows she has, but I think, when I tell her, that it will all be good news to her, as much as something like that can be. I fall asleep truly, fully pleased with my new human, as she has fallen asleep with her new dog.

GIFT

Read the following short story, and then answer the questions about the short story that follow. The short story is approximately 8,000 words, and is called “Gift.”

—

Gift

A clatter of pool balls. Smooth jazz playing on the speakers, whenever someone isn't using the juke box. I sit in the booth in the back corner, my usual outpost here, hunched over my big notebook, carefully making a straight vertical line in pencil, drawing in a strut connecting floor and ceiling on the first floor of my latest creation. I can see it all in my head already, all five floors, every room, every piece of furniture, every painting, every trinket on every shelf, and it's good to get it down. It's good to be working on the sketches. I like this stuff. Architecture. Pure fantasy. Scratching pencil lead, or, graphite, it probably is, onto paper. It gives me a chance to just be... no one. I don't hear any voices when I'm working on this. I can't even say I hear my own, most of the time. It's a weirdly effective numbing agent for the mind. Part by part, line by line, I am filling the page in.

A drop of sweat falls off of my brow and lands on the page, about where the third floor's guest suite bathroom will be.

Distracting.

I lean back, feeling my back decompress with little aches and tingles. I maybe hadn't realized just how long I was bent over that notebook, finishing off the previous building that I had started on yesterday. With a sigh, I grab a couple of napkins out of the dispenser on the table, and wipe the sweat off of my forehead, and off of the rest of my head while I'm at it, ears, back of the neck. My shirt probably isn't visibly soaked, only by virtue of the fact that it's black. The weather had been hot all week, but it's been the worst today—now tonight—, and the AC here in Ivory's hasn't been switched on all summer.

I reach over to the other side of the table, and grab my fruity drink, which is sweating as much as I am. The fruit punch-y, pineapple-y, rum-y taste is nice for sure, but tonight the fact there's ice in the drink makes it. I'd just as gladly be sipping on water with ice cubes, almost.

Drink in hand, its condensation making it feel like I just grabbed it out of a cooler, I turn in my booth, and look over to the bar. Presently there are two men there, each one to himself.

I look first to the one in the green tank top: he's drinking a jack and coke, and his body screams of athleticism, sore muscles that are contented to be sore, they've been given their workout; he plays on the college football team, he's having a good season but he's not doing well in his classes, one teacher in particular isn't cutting him slack like she's supposed to for a good player on the college football team, she might really screw things up for him; on his phone, which sits out on the bar in front of him beside his drink, he's looking through an ebook, open to his physics reading assignment for today, he's really not getting it, he knows he's going to have to backtrack through the book a long ways to catch up; shaking it up and going out to read at a bar has been a nice change of scenery but it hasn't helped him understand the material better. I wish I could help him, but, I've never been a science whiz myself, unfortunately. Not one of the gifts I have been graced with.

I look to the other guy at the bar, the one in the white collar shirt: he's drinking a beer; on his phone, he's looking through a spreadsheet; he supervises an assembly line that is currently producing little assorted nut snack things; it's going well enough for them, but he's going over all of the data he can about it,

making sure that there's not something he's missing that would give lie to it actually not going well; but, so far it's all checking out, it all does seem to be shaping up to be a really positive production cycle for them. He doesn't know it, since his back is to me, but I lift my glass up towards him and silently toast to his success. I then have another sip, and set the glass back down on the far side of the table from me.

As it so happens, I don't know either of these men—Terry and Jason, are their names. I'm a regular here at Ivory's, here most nights out of the week, back here in my booth. They're both first timers. I have never met them, here or anywhere else, nor have I heard of them secondhand. But I'm also not guessing when I say all this, about Terry's struggles in his physics class and Jason's studious interest in his team's figures. Nor am I guessing about the fact that Terry just took a sip of his jack and coke that hit him all wrong and has made him queasy.

I was twenty three, working in a movie theater and going nowhere fast in life, when it switched on like a light bulb. The ability to look at someone and read their mind. I think the first time it happened, I had been sweeping up popcorn in the lobby when I glanced up to my manager who was clear on the other side of the lobby behind the counter, and I heard her clear as day that she wanted me to hurry up and come take her spot because she was already working way over and her feet were killing her. I shouted over that I'd be over soon, because, I was kind of zoned out, and I'd thought, without thinking about it, that she'd said all of that to me out loud. And she never talked about it after, but, I realized that that didn't add up, that would be a lot of oddly detailed information for her to convey at a raised voice, and I didn't remember her voice being raised. I think that was the first time it happened. But, in any case, once it was on, it was on, and it got real overwhelming real fast.

Believe me, I thought I was a lunatic. I was pretty sure I had gone schizophrenic. But I did get a handle on it. And it took no stroke of genius to monetize this new gift either. I'm trespassed from every casino in Las Vegas, from the strip all the way out to the micro casinos tucked away all throughout the suburbs surrounding. But I made my millions there before leaving.

I reach across the table and grab my fruity drink again, have another sip of the cool cocktail, and then set it down again. I turn my head back down to my notebook as I hear another new person entering. I take up my pencil, and am back to scratching in the details of this same little room as I overhear the new man ordering a glass of whiskey.

I'm not even done with the next strut in this room before I hear him order a second glass, and I hear Liam, tonight's bartender, cut him off.

That gets my attention pretty quickly. I glance up at the man. He's standing there at the bar, dressed in black cargo pants and a black long-sleeve shirt, and a black scarf that I assume is for its value in fashion, and not as a way to keep warm in this stuffy bar that is already a furnace in this hottest summer weather.

This man just drank the entire glass of whiskey as though he was gulping down water after a jog. I can feel his stomach and throat burning, but indeed, he was completely genuine in his intent on having a second glass. He is trying to get d-r-u-n-k, and he knows what his limits are, and he would like to get to them. He usually drinks at home, and would be glad to tonight, but but for the fact that he just woke up less than half an hour ago, saw it was late enough that all of the liquor stores would be closed on a Wednesday, and so he got dressed, and headed out for the part of downtown where the bars are. He realized upon stepping outside that he was overdressed, but he was on a mission.

I search for why he's trying to get drunk.

So, the way it works, basically, is that I have access to his mind in all of the same ways that he does. At a glance, I get all of his surface-level thoughts that he's thinking, right as he's thinking them. Hell, I don't even have to glance, really: if I'm in the same room as someone I can kind of hear it whether I'm looking or not. If I'm right next to someone I can definitely hear it. It's why I prefer the likes of Ivory's, instead of a place that gets busier. Crowded rooms get... very... very... loud. I was glad enough to get out of Las Vegas, I'll tell you that in a heartbeat. But, besides his surface-level thoughts, I can also attempt to recall things, basically as well as he himself would be able to recall things—actually a little better, because, while he may be a

layman in the art of thinking, I am for better or for worse a bit of an expert. So, no, I would not be able to pull the memory of his birth from out of his mind, because that memory does not exist anymore, the data is not there, no one has it, himself or me—at least, the birth as experienced from his perspective. Were his mother here, I assuredly could pull that one out. But, that's not the question at hand, anyways, I'm not trying to pull out anything nearly so far back. Trying to think for him about why he wants to get drunk, that is quite easy. And he won't know that I'm doing it, doing this information gathering. Right now, as I am digging deeper and learning that he's trying to get drunk because he is a pervert and feels deeply ashamed about it, he is completely unaware that I'm getting those thoughts from him, his mind is only on trying to weigh how many more bars are open down the street, and whether it will be worth it to try to bribe one more drink out of this bearded and unimpressed bartender in front of him.

He decides that he'll chalk this one up to a lost cause, and play the next bars a little bit slower. He glances down at the change he got for his first drink, which is sitting out on the counter. He takes the bills, and leaves the coins, and then turns and heads for the door.

I flip the covers of my notebook closed, drink the last of my fruity sweaty drink, and then stand up and head out after him.

As I'm going, I can sense my exit from a lot of perspectives. Through my own eyes and other senses, of course—my feet touching the ground with each step, my own sense of balance. I can also see myself leaving through Liam's eyes: he wonders how in the hell I do it. Every instinct in his thought processes tells him I'm a predator, but his conscious mind can't help but also remember his surprise that every time someone I've walked after has returned to the bar, they've been nothing but happy to see me again. I can also feel my exit in the peripheral awareness of the two at the bar, they sort of hear my footsteps and have vaguely noticed Liam's attention looking my way, but neither of them makes anything of it, they were more interested in the other guy who is already out the door, they're just paying enough attention to make sure there isn't trouble—good

instincts on both of them, some people are very dim and would not even be clocking that kind of thing subconsciously.

Stepping outside, it actually feels a little cooler than in the bar—I'm sure the weather hasn't actually improved any, but at least the slight breeze is, well, something. Chris's black scarf—his name is Chris—blows out to the side in a suddenly stronger breeze as he walks: I feel the breeze as him, and then a second later the breeze has arrived at me, and I feel it as myself too.

I start following after him, keeping my footsteps quiet—I am successful in that effort, I don't register in his awareness whatsoever. He's aware of the cars on the street beside us, but only because the headlights annoy him a little bit, having to walk with them coming the other way right next to him, blinding him. One of the cars honks, and he's annoyed that he can't see the situation through all the glare of the headlights, because if they're honking about him how would he know it anyways, and why would they honk at him anyways, he didn't do anything, dammit. These might not sound like flattering thoughts when I lay them bare like this, but, actually, they are exceedingly normal. Anyone else walking down this street would have better than even odds of thinking the same or worse. I stare at him as we go down the sidewalk towards the next bar, and I make sure I've fully understood the dimensions of his thoughts that I had started to unpack while we were inside.

He is in a dark place right now. He feels a huge amount of self loathing. He carries a secret that he hasn't told anyone else. He thinks it's a bad secret. He watches porn on the internet of animals. And he's seen a lot of it. He's seen videos of male dogs sticking it to men and women, he's seen videos of men sticking it to male and female dogs. Stuff with horses, stuff with goats, stuff with sheep. It seems like a fairly limited amount of this material has ever made it to the internet. I say that for two reasons. One is that I can see Chris has rewatched a lot of these videos, often when he's searching for them the same ones come up. The other reason is that I've seen these same videos before in other people's memories. I can't say I've ever gone to the web for that kind of stuff myself, but I recognize some of these scenes, a man on a bed sticking it in a great dane's pussy, a woman sucking a weird red dog cock as someone off screen holds it there for her.

By the time we're nearing the entrance to the next bar, I have gathered a lot. Firstly, that he has seen so many of these videos, and that's his secret, this is the only thing he gets off on and he's ashamed of it. His shame stems from the fact that so much of this material is rape, if not overt sexual murder, of the animal. He has seen videos where the animal is tied in restraints, and is trying to get away, but is forced. He has seen videos of men sticking it in a chicken, and while I can't find any memory of a video showing the chicken dying, I would agree with his thoughts on those videos, which are that the chicken in question seemed greatly pained and probably didn't have her health held in high regard by someone who would do that to her. Chris has also seen videos that he does not consider to have been abusive, where the animal seemed like he or she was having a lot of fun getting to fuck a pervy human. And I would agree with his thoughts on those videos too: in those videos, it does seem like the animal had a great time. I would go even farther than he has, and say that it's fucked up for his sake, and for the sake of people like him, that all of these videos, the abusive and the okay, seem to all be shuffled together on the websites he goes to as though they are the same kinds of videos, when they are really, really not. In any case, he still feels shame around those positive videos too, for the fact he can never talk to anyone about it.

Well, he thinks he can't talk to anyone about it. I'm going to get it out of him though. Helping people through their sexual damage by leading a good example is kind of my thing.

Oh, the other thing I have gathered, about Chris, is that his damage isn't anything worse. He's never raped an animal himself, he's never had sex with anyone at all, two legged or four. And as far as porn goes, animals are his sole interest, which, have no doubt, I've been in the thoughts of people who have seen worse, and I'll leave it at that. We are all flawed. Chris is flawed too, but he is not as far gone as he believes himself to be. And I would see him set on a better path. I follow him into E's, the next bar down the street from my usual post at Ivory's.

As he goes up to the bar, I loiter around inside by the door, grab a newspaper off a wire rack that's just inside, and make

some idle to-do about fanning myself with it. No one notices me much, I can say with confidence.

Look. I know how this comes across. Am I here to get my own rocks off? Yes. But if getting my rocks off on helping others is a crime, then I would submit that there are much worse criminals out there than me, your honor. It's true, I have used my gift as a means of getting around, and often times early on, it was a selfish interest, I will cop that every day of the week. But listen. Putting it in someone who's agreeable but distracted and not all that enthusiastic herself? It's sort of a bore, when half of the experience like it or not is in her mind too. I learned that if the other isn't over the moon, I'd have usually been better off staying home and pleasuring myself alone. On the other hand, tickling someone's most sensitive interests, letting them run free with their kink that they've never gotten to indulge in before, and reading them the whole time like I'm them, now that's something, and it's fun just about every time. Feet, spanking, role play, whatever their schtick is. Am I a foot guy? Not on my own. If I let a foot guy perv on my feet, do I feel his tinglies? You betcha.

Chris sits down at the bar. When the bartender gets to him, he orders a glass of whiskey, and sets some bills out on the counter. The bartender takes a couple of the bills and leaves the others, and gets Chris his drink. Chris does take his time with this one—at least, he does a better job of taking his time than at the last bar, where he more or less chugged his 90 proof glass. This time, he is taking measured pauses between his gulps.

I come forward, and have a seat next to him—not directly next to him, the bar isn't crowded tonight, so I leave one stool between us. I keep it light, order a beer. The bartender has it to me in no time, easy.

As I'm having my second sip, Chris is ordering his second glass.

The bartender looks at him. She's teetering on getting it to him or not. He almost has it, but then he ruins it for her by trying to grab his wallet out of his pocket, and stumbling off of his stool clumsily onto his feet. He still tries to hold out the money, but she tells him to take it easy for a little bit, and turns away.

I slide off of my stool and onto the one I'd left between us, and lean over to him all conspiratorially, and say, "They're strict around here."

He's pleasantly surprised to have someone on his side, but he leaps on it, and answers, "Yeah. I came here to drink, now they're not serving drinks?"

I suggest to him, "Probably too many lawsuits, from people who can't hold their liquor."

"Mannn I can hold my fuckin liquor, they shouldn't ruin it for the rest of us."

"You said it," I agree. I'm not even blowing smoke, too much. I do agree, different people have different limits. Some people could sniff what Chris drank tonight and not be responsible to be left unattended. Chris here, if he has his way, is barely warmed up. I ask him, and I actually haven't read his mind on this so I actually am asking him, "Do you like amaretto?"

He has no idea what that is, and takes a swing at answering, "I don't smoke."

I wear an amused little smile to myself, and tell him, "It's booze. It's 20% and it tastes like tootsie rolls. I have way too goddamn much of it in my fridge at home, if you wanna blow this place and hang out at mine, drink until we're silly, laugh our tits off watching dumb internet videos, that'd be a good night in my books."

I drink from my bottle as he decides. The bait is very strong, and don't I know it. I've just suggested one thing he knew he needed, booze, and another thing that I knew he needed but he didn't realize it until I brought it up, which would be friendship, comradery, a pal, someone to have fun with, hang out. He thinks about what the odds are that I might murder him, and he figures the odds are about ninety percent that I do, but he also makes up his mind that he doesn't care. I suppress a sigh at that. There are a lot—a lot—of depressed males walking this earth who would walk into something that might kill them just to prove a point, even if that point is something as petty as, "I knew it would, and I don't care." I am glad to see he has no intention whatsoever of killing me, though it is also a little sad to see he doesn't even think he would if I tried to kill him, he would probably just take it. But, it's good inasfar as I don't have

worries for my own safety, or for taking him to where I live. I have had to slip away from hookups in the past when I realized that that wasn't the case with some people who at first had seemed nice.

"Is your place far from here?" he asks.

"Up the hill, about three blocks."

"Really?" he asks, mind flashing to images of passing by the houses in that area, and recognizing that they are mostly mansions, not to mention the location, right on downtown.

I lie, and tell him I hit it huge on the lotto and am mostly just pretty bored these days. I do tell him the truth that my place isn't one of the huge houses you'd see from the main street, it's a more normal modern house tucked away down one of the residential blocks.

A short time later, we are walking across my front yard, up to the door. I fetch a key out of my pocket, unlock the place, and step inside first.

He steps in after me. In his head he is solemnly resigning himself to whatever may happen to him tonight, but that is quickly replaced with other more giddy thoughts when he sees my living room: there's the couch and TV, where I predict we'll be spending some time, but past that, I have a bunch of instruments set up, which immediately catches his interest.

"You play?" he asks, walking towards the equipment.

"Not uh," I start, and then I lose my train of thought. Normally one on one I'm better than this, but, let's say it is a learned and practiced skill to not get sidetracked when you're thinking for two or more. And Chris just got really excited at seeing all of what I have—keyboard, upright piano, guitar, bass, drum kit. He plays all of it. Some of his go-to's on each are rushing through his mind, he's eager to touch but wants to make sure I won't be bothered. I start over, "Yeah, I play."

It's actually more of a science experiment to me, or something akin to that. I have been in the thoughts of a great many people who can play musical instruments. Seeing someone's thoughts about something doesn't necessarily make me an expert in it. I took all of the normal math classes in high school, and just being exposed to the teacher talking about the subject did not make me automatically understand all of it

inside and out, I barely scraped by with passing grades—at the time I thought it was on pure luck, in hindsight I do realize that if high schools actually failed all of the students who didn't grasp the subject matter they were supposed to, graduation rates would be bleak. So, anyways, with this rock band setup, I'm not so much trying to pen the next pop hit or express my soul through music. I'm more-so seeing how much actually has rubbed off on me with this subject. How much I can access if I really put my mind on it. So far, the answer is that more of it has rubbed off than I would have guessed. For something I never had a knack for pre-mind reading, I've made a lot more headway on this than I have on calculus.

"Are you in like, a band?" Chris asks.

"I'm not against it, but no, I just play by myself. Notebook over there on that desk has some of what I've been composing if it interests you at all. I'm gonna grab drinks, feel free to play whatever you like if you want."

He is very pleased about the permission to touch the instruments and the knowledge that I am going to get drinks, and he actually is very passingly interested in my music as well, which is more than I would have guessed. He asks, "Sheet music?"

"Yeah."

"I'll check it out," he says, "but, I won't be able to play it without having heard it first. I only know how to, kind of read that stuff as a refresher."

He's not weird for that. That actually makes him pretty average among musicians. I give him a little play salute as I walk off down the hall, deeper into the house towards the kitchen.

Behind me, I hear the fuzz of the amp kicking on, shortly followed by some metal licks.

In the kitchen, I have a normal fridge, and then I also have one with a glass front that is more akin to what you'd see in a supermarket. In the glass-fronted one, there is, indeed, an absurd collection of booze, a large percentage of it being amaretto. It's a personal favorite. A bit like drinking candy that also makes you tipsy. I could drink the stuff all night every night, and, for some periods of time, I more or less have done that.

I grab two bottles, and a couple of glasses from the cupboard. Holding the glasses pressed between my arm and chest and holding a bottle in each hand, I return into the living room and all of the metal guitar sounds. Also returning into Chris's thoughts, he is pretty self-pleased that his guitar work is sounding good, he's aware it ought to be impressive.

Hey, as a budding musician who can't do what he's doing but can, directly, appreciate the talent that he's got behind it, sure, I'm impressed. I tilt back my head, and give him a loud, "AWOOOOO!"

He caps off his jam with a few fast strums, and then flips something on the guitar that turns it off—I hadn't been aware of that switch, and I make a mental note, that seems handy to know about.

I sort of make a show of slightly lifting the glasses and bottles in my arms.

Chris sets the guitar back on its stand, and comes over.

"Take either, should be the same," I tell him.

He grabs a bottle and a glass, freeing me to hold my own in each hand too. With two *pop!*s, our bottles are open and we're each pouring our first glass.

He's wondering if he should say anything.

I help him out, and make a toast: "To a fun night."

His mind blanks for half a second, but he smoothly enough retrieves the appropriate response: "Cheers."

We clink our glasses, and then each have a big, long drink.

Hits. The. Spot.

I start walking past him towards the upright piano, and I mention as I go, "More where that bottle came from whenever you want. Your pace."

"That is, a dangerous offer," he says honestly.

"I trust you," I say, less honestly. I do trust that he has a good sense of his own limits, I got that off him pretty much right away, but I also got that he has a habit of pushing them. So, I don't trust him, but I do trust that if I have to cut him off, he'll inadvertently tell on himself.

I take a seat on the piano bench, and set my glass and bottle on the ground beside myself.

I say over my shoulder, “I know I promised something to the effect of watching silly internet videos, we can get to that of course. Humor me with a song first?”

He’s stoked, but gives a subdued, “Yeah. What did you have in mind?”

As soon as I turn forward to face the keys, I feel him secretly —“secretly”—down the rest of his glass.

I pick up my own glass for another sip to keep up, and answer, “Improvised, play what comes to you. Original, something you heard, whatever you’re feeling.”

“Sure.”

I lay the bed of a comfortable, approachable piano melody, to see where we go from there.

Competently, he finds the key we’re in, and lets a few chords drone out at opportune moments. Then, after the melody has come around a few times, he stops with the droning and starts up a chugging on the guitar, dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn dnn, and I sense that he wants me to give him more to work off of. I throw in the flourishes he wants—exactly the flourishes he wants, little stings on the high keys here and there and switching up the rhythm to something more... he thinks of it as ‘jazzy,’ I don’t know if that’s right, but certainly something more shaken up than what I’d started on. We play back and forth, it’s a dialogue, and he’s into it. He’s having memories of himself in high school and another boy with curly brown hair, Caleb, the two of them a few times found themselves alone in the band room—some kind of detention? I can’t break this flow to unpack it completely right now—but he and the other boy played instruments back and forth and really, really, almost magically, seemed to be able to communicate their intentions back and forth, and play more or less exactly what the other had hoped would be played. This is reminding him of that. As we’re going and the notes are flying, Chris launches into one of the movements of Freebird, and I cackle with amused joy, not letting myself slip up, seizing this victory of musicality by the horns.

When his solo is over, I start letting us glide to a gentle landing with this, letting things ring out.

He is very emotionally open right now. Let loose from standing tight and upright in public, he is getting to make loud music, show off, flourish, he could do a lot of things he normally wouldn't be in a habit of right now.

I get up from the piano bench. As the last of his chords is still ringing in the air, I stand up, walk to him, and over the humming guitar, I lean in for a kiss. He reciprocates, although he's never kissed anyone before, he doesn't fully know what to do being this close with another person's face, doesn't know what to do against another human's weird rubbery muscly mouth and lips, against my stubble. He's curious to try it though, for a little bit.

I don't dwell on it though. As he's getting towards really over thinking it, I back off.

He's still very open. If I started unzipping his pants, he wouldn't say no—I can say that very confidently, because he is imagining me doing just that, and he would very much like that, less for the pleasure of it even, and more for the sake of not being a virgin anymore. He wants to be rid of that label, to not have to call himself that. He would like, when other people talk about sex, to not have to think about it as some kind of hypothetical.

And I could give that to him. And I might. But, later. If I can behave myself, that will be something for if we meet up again on another day. Tonight, I want to help him with the other thing. The porn thing.

I slink an arm firmly around him, a sort of hug, my hand going up across his back and resting on his opposite shoulder. But I say to him, "We eh, might have skipped the part where we talk about this first."

He gives a little laugh at that.

I ask, "Am I getting ahead of myself?"

He does think that I am very much getting ahead of myself, but that he's glad I am. Even still, he becomes embarrassed at the idea of being the one to suggest it goes any further. Sheepishly, he suggests, "We could... do more..."

I slink off of him. He switches off the guitar again, and as he's putting it back on the stand, he awaits me setting the bar for where we're going to go, what we might do, what's on the table.

Oh hell, I'm a sponge, what's on the table for me is quite a lot more than what there would have been before this gift, before I was more or less forced to be at least halfway into what any person I'm around is into. But, again, I make sure not to forget myself, my intentions.

"How about this," I start. "Are you gay?"

He immediately flushes at the prospect of having to answer that. Many, many, many, many images flash across his mind of seeing male humans and male animals doing each other in the butthole or sucking each other off. It's also not lost on him what he was just about to be down for, with me. But somehow, the idea of getting off to human males with animal males, or the idea of himself being swept up in the moment with another man, somehow all of that jars with the idea of "being gay." The label isn't one he feels is quite appropriate to himself. There is another one he has settled on, a while back, that is a bit more vague, a bit more apt for him.

He tells it to me: "I'm kind of more pan than gay, so I mean, kind of gay."

I go and retrieve my glass and bottle, and he does the same. As we're each topping off our glasses again, I say, "How about this: I don't want to seem like I'm taking advantage of you. Got you drunk, and all that."

He is quick to chime in at that, "Oh I don't feel like you were —"

"I know, I know," I tell him. I am though: I am getting him drunk.

I sigh. If I were to stab someone on the street with a knife, that would be assault with a deadly weapon. If I were a surgeon and cut someone open with a scalpel to perform life saving surgery on a patient, that would be me doing my job. I like to think of what I do as somewhere admittedly in the middle of those two things, but a lot closer to the life saving than the assaulting. I *am* doing this with the intention of saving him—suicide has crossed his mind a lot more than it does most people's. And I may not have a degree, but by whatever unknown forces, I have been given the role of world's biggest authority on what other people are thinking.

So yeah, what I do is sleazy. What surgeons do is gruesome. Sometimes some people are allowed to do things that other people shouldn't. Hopefully the end result is for the better.

I have a sip from my refreshed glass, and tell him, "I'd like to know you better anyways."

That sets him on edge, social nervousness prickles his skin.

"What you're into," I add.

That is a relief in his book, for a second, and then he actually thinks about what he is into, and now it's making him nervous again. He takes a gulp from his drink.

As he drinks, I suggest, "If you wanna get off, we could each have a seat on that couch, and you can pick something to put on that you're into, and we can watch it together, drink our drinks, make a night of it. How's that?"

No longer wanting to be on the defensive, he forces a little smile, and asserts, "I don't know what you're into. People have a large variety of limits, and stuff. I don't want you to be bored, or like, freaked out."

He says it thinking he is the biggest freak in the world, so anything I might suggest I'm into, he can match it.

"I like to explore new things all the time," I tell him, and then I sip my drink. "You won't freak me out."

He is hyper aware that I did not answer his implied question about what I'm into, and he does indeed call me on it: "Name your favorite thing."

I tell him, "I don't want you to feel like you have to conform your interests to my interests. I look at a lot of different stuff. No shame. None. Lately I've been looking at a lot of furies. You know them?"

He is unbelievably stoked that we are even in the same ballpark. Worst case, he figures, we watch some furry stuff, and he'll have an okay enough time getting off to that, he won't have to be faking it too much, not nearly as much as if we watched something human-on-human.

He is not able to stop himself from a huge smile, and tries to half cover it with his glass as he says, "Yeah I know what furies are," and then he has a drink. In his mind, he is picturing a couple of videos he's seen of someone in a fursuit getting mounted and fucked by a dog.

He notices his hardon is pressing against his pants. I can feel it too.

“Care to get more comfortable?” I ask, glancing down at his crotch and back up to his eyes.

He wanders over to the couch, and sets down his drinks. “I’ve never JO’d with another guy before,” he tells me. “I don’t know what’s, like, polite, I guess.”

He briefly considers if he’s really doing this, and then he decides it sounds fun and he definitely is, and he peels down his pants and underwear and kicks them off, and is ass naked on one side of my couch, still wearing his shirt and scarf, his prick completely stiff. I join him, sliding off everything from the waist down too, and taking a seat on the other side of the couch.

I grab the TV remote and press the power button, though this TV takes a little bit to load up.

He asks, “So you wanna watch furry stuff?”

“Nah hotshot, I wanna watch what you wanna watch.”

“I uh, don’t think you do.”

“If I don’t I’ll tell you you were right. No harm in suggesting it.”

That first part, laying it up to him as a challenge, really lands with him. I’ve given him his permission, his excuse, to tell me something really wild and out there.

He comes out with it: “Animals. Actual animals. Bestiality videos.”

What a weight that is, taken off his shoulders. It’s like it has been a mission, for years and years, to keep that information a secret at the cost of anything else, and now the mission is done, and if I but let him know it’s alright, then he will be able to truly relax for the first time he ever has. I have been in the minds of people who at one point in their lives sat accused in a court of law, in a trial that really could have gone either way, and so I know what the feeling is, when the jury has come back with a verdict, but the verdict has not yet been read. He more or less feels the same way, after revealing that about himself, and now awaiting how I am going to take it.

With an amused smile, I say, “Oh, alright,” and I take a sip of my drink.

Chris goes straight for his bottle, and takes what in his mind is a victory drink. I'm glad for him. He's earned that.

I press him, "Is that your thing?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah, that sounds pretty hot, alright," I say, and begin toying with myself. "What kinda animals are you into?"

"Um. Dogs, mainly."

Nodding, I say as though learning all of this for the first time and being very intrigued, "Okay, okay. Got a website for that or anything?"

"Are you sure you want me to look it up?"

"Yeah, that's fine," I tell him. I go to the web thing on my TV, and hand the remote over to him. It occurs to me then, we are missing something. I say to him about the bestiality website, "Look that up, I'll be right back with lube and more drinks."

With a smile, looking back and forth between the remote and the TV screen, he says, "You got it."

I step away from the living room very pleased with the way this is going, glad for Chris, and looking forward to the rest of the night. We'll watch some videos, we'll bust, and when it's all said and done, I think my companion for the evening will have been all the better for it.

I skedaddle up to my bedroom and grab the basket of assorted lubes that I keep on the dresser. I think back on all of the memories I have been privy to of Chris jacking it. From his muscle memory of how the container on his lube works, and the knowledge of what it feels like when he rubs it onto his shaft and how it holds up in practice, I actually know exactly which kind he uses, it's one of the very common store brands. But—professional poker player here—coming back downstairs with just that kind for him and just my kind for me would be a tell. Maybe not much of one, it could be a coincidence, but by this point, I don't want to give him any kind of prompt to question how I know things. I return down the stairs with the entire basket, stop back into the kitchen for a couple more bottles of amaretto as well, and then with my arms full return once more into the living room.

Chris is sitting there leaning back into one corner of the couch, stiff as ever, giving me a smug grin. I turn to look at the

television, and there indeed is one of his bestiality websites that he's called up. I nearly lose my balance, coming back into his presence, like stepping from solid land onto a rocking boat: he has downed the rest of his bottle, and is definitively drunk.

I set everything down on the ground in front of the couch. We have a giggle at all of the different kinds of lube I have—some stuff is good for some activities some stuff is good for other activities, what can I say. He does grab the one he usually uses and tells me as much, but then he asks if I recommend something different. The one he usually uses is fine.

Lubing my own tool, I start to stroke it as I face the screen. Chris, absolutely thrilled to be doing this, starts doing the same, with the remote in his other hand. He starts navigating through the site.

I say to him, "Wow, so many videos. I didn't know so many people were into this. Which of these do you like?"

He highlights a few for my interest, telling me this one looks to be a man taking it from a male dog, that one looks to be a man giving it to a mare, et cetera.

We make a night of it. Everything goes according to plan. We watch through some videos and he is utterly euphoric, firstly just from watching the porn itself, secondly from the booze, and, thirdly, as a new twist for him, the acceptance he feels within himself, what was once a shameful knowledge in him is now a smug knowledge, he is my teacher, or so it is good for him to believe. We both bust. He eats his without thinking about it, and then is briefly mortified at the idea that he might have just done something that would ruin my opinion of him, but I stick my tongue out at him and then eat mine too. I order us pizza, we each take turns washing up in the bathroom. Chris learns my name when the pizza guy says it: Dean? Yup, Dean here, thank you. Over pizza, Chris and I chat some more about the videos, what's out there. I lay the seeds for a better path for him. Are there others like you, I ask him. Are there communities. Basically, hey, I see there's a lot of porn, obviously some people are making this and even more people are hounding after it, so to speak, so what's the deal, why don't I ever seem to see people talking about this, do you not have any friends who are into this. He intends to look into all of that. He doesn't tell me so, he just

goes along, says yeah I don't know, it's weird, it's fucked up that things are like this, I don't know what to tell you. But he is looking forward to seeking those things out.

After our food, we go for a second round of watching through some videos. Chris helps me—"helps me"—steer clear of the videos that seem abusive. We chat openly about that, ah, no I hate that, I just want to see everyone having a good time, we agree.

After we've each finished a second time, Chris is very sleepy—he thinks it's because he didn't get enough sleep earlier, in my expert opinion it would be because of the orgasms and the large amount of food earlier and the booze, but what do I know. I get him a couple of blankets, and he falls asleep on the couch.

In the morning, he is gone.

I hope to see him again down the road.

—

1. Is Dean a reliable narrator or an unreliable narrator? Why do you think so?
2. Dean justifies his actions by comparing himself to a professional surgeon, rather than somebody cutting people open at random. Are Dean's actions in this story actually ethical?
3. What comparisons can be made between Chris's sexual interest in animals as a human, and Dean's sexual interest in humans as a mind reader?
4. Dean appears to possess a very large amount of amaretto, which he describes as being 20% and tasting like tootsie rolls. Does this say anything about him? Why or why not?

SUPER SOLDIER MEGA SPIES

Setting

It's the year 300,000,000, and humans have long since lost all affinity for harmony, nature, or animals: their singular goal as a species is to colonize the universe and its varied landscapes and lifeforms at all costs. This is where YOU come in! A conglomeration of elite intelligences at the center of the universe has agreed that it's time to send you and some other super soldier mega spies in to sabotage human endeavors on various planets. You and your teammates may look like such innocent beings as cute red pandas, little bipedal robots, or squishy green aliens, but beneath the cute veneer you and your colleagues are lethal assassins and adept saboteurs.

Materials

Minimum: One deck of cards and one 6-sided die, which the table can all share.

Optional: One deck of cards for each player, two 6-sided dice for each player, and a pencil and paper for each player.

Rules

In Super Soldier Mega Spies, one Game Master leads a Player or Players through a quest to reclaim a territory from human supremacy, setting scenes and presenting obstacles.

A Player Character starts with 5 HP and a number of GFY points equal to their level. Each Player may choose to represent these values by tokens, such as a stack of nickels for HP and a stack of bottle caps for GFY points, or by marking these values on a sheet of paper or on a digital document. Each Player Character should have a name (examples: Linda, Sir Hopsalot, The Mysterious Vanishing Ewe, Keith,) an appearance (examples: a Golden Retriever with a large sunhat, a frog who is blue with black bumps, a white sheep who is usually semi-transparent and stands on her hind legs, a koala double fisting vodka,) a weapon (examples: a sword, karate, wicked fire magic, insults,) and some things they are good at (as many as you want to say.)

Out of combat, the GM's job is to describe the current surroundings and to guide Players towards the way forward, perhaps encouraging them to make use of the things their characters are good at along the way.

In combat, the GM's job is to talk hella shit as the Enemies.

When combat begins, all of the Player Characters go in whatever order they decide, then all of the Enemies go in whatever order the GM decides, then back to the Player Characters and so on until combat is resolved.

When a Player Character attacks an Enemy, the Player rolls one 6-sided die, and the attack deals one point of damage if the die shows 4 or higher. If 3 or less, the Player may describe their character's fumble and how they're going to save it, and then roll a second die: if the total of both dice is 6 or higher, the attack deals one point of damage. The GM may, however, decide that Enemies are invincible unless a certain attack is described that circumvents that Enemy's reason for invincibility. Most Enemies should have 1 HP.

When an Enemy attacks a Player Character, the Player draws a card from a deck of cards. If the drawn card is a face card, the attack fails. If the drawn card is an ace, the attack fails and the Player may describe how their character manipulates the attack to effect the environment to the character's advantage. If the drawn card is a joker, the Enemy deals one point of damage towards itself. If the drawn card is a number card, the Player Character takes one point of damage, unless the Player

announces “Simon says I dodge!” with Simon being something that the table determines at the start of the session (examples: Simon is the name of any celebrity who the table then imagines as a dog, Simon is any furry media content tag, Simon is the description of any NPC in any video game.) Each Simon may only be used once per session. The deck of cards is reset and shuffled whenever a Player decides. Players may each use their own deck of cards or use a communal deck.

A Player Character may instantly defeat an Enemy using GFY points. The number of GFY points required to defeat an Enemy is determined by the GM, and should generally be 0, 1, or 2. The Player may inquire freely as to the number of GFY points the GM will require to defeat a particular Enemy. Player Characters gain 1 to their max GFY when they gain a level, with all points refreshing to max upon a level gain and at any time the GM decides.

Player Characters gain a level upon completing milestones in their quest, such as clearing a dungeon.

A Player Character’s HP returns to 5 upon gaining a level and at any other time the GM decides. If a Player Character drops to 0 HP at any time, that character is defeated, and the Player may introduce a new character to join the party at the next appropriate opportunity.

Happy human hunting, super soldier mega spies!

POEMS

Ducks

Ducks in pairs on logs and shores
Ducks in tandem flight
Ducks in V's of ten or more
Ducks in love with life

Fort Boysnuggle

Fort Boysnuggle
A fort for boys to snuggle in
The boys can be humans or dogs
They can have a vagina or a penis
But they must say they identify as a boy
While in Fort Boysnuggle
Fort Girlsnuggle will be on Wednesdays and Fridays
Fort Enbysnuggle on Thursday and Sunday
Fort Bring Your Own Gender Identity on Monday

Dog Pee

I think it's pretty cool that my dog can pee where he wants to.
On people's yards, next to the sidewalk, wherever.
I think public urination should be a right, not a crime.
It's not like a big deal, but like, I do think that.

Passing by a T intersection in a gravel road by a pasture

This morning was very cool
but it has since begun to heat up
and I am now overdressed
in three layers of clothing:

long sleeve shirt,
sweater,
winter jacket.

I can see vapor
rising off of a big puddle in the road
like this land's breath.

New Recording 5

Feel the cool spring-scented breeze
tingle across your drunken face
as you and a dog stumble your way
through the woods.

Grocery List

Go outside and bite the plants: Go outside and pick off little parts of the plants that you see and bite down on them in order to learn their taste and give their power to yourself. With deliberateness bite down on the plants that you find while outside, slowly crush the planty fibers between your upper set of teeth and your lower set of teeth and meditate on the flavors that come about because you have done this. If you need recommendations, here are some starting points you may consider depending on local availability: a pine needle; a big fistful of grass; a leaf from a tree; two other leaves from two other different looking trees or bushes; a small berry, just one of whatever the first type that you find is, no more than the one; a fresh, green twig; an entire flower at once; a lump of dirt; a lump of dirt from somewhere else. When you bite these things, keep them in your mouth for at least a minute or two; The point is not to eat, but to learn more than there may have seemed there to learn from initial visual impressions. If there are poisonous or dangerous plants where you live, maybe don't or at least bring a friend. But if you live in like Wisconsin go for it: Go outside and familiarize yourself gustatorily with the world that you have a place on.

Queer Dogs

Some dogs like humans
(Most dogs who like anyone like humans)

Squirrel

squirrel squirrel squirrel
climb climb climb
yay
good job

Apparent Loneliness

Hanging out with friends,
one makes a joke at my expense
about how I am single,
I have no sex life,
I am alone.
I am happy to swallow it
and know, myself,
how wrong they are.
My love with my dog—
my sexy, beautiful, affectionate, caring dog—
demands no public displays.
It does not need validation or certificate.
It can be for him and me alone
and be good:
everything that either of us needs.

Partners In Really Emotionally Healthy And Cool Crimes

I would really recommend becoming jerk off buddies with a dog if you happen to know one who would be down with that and there's any overlapping availability in both of your schedules.

He or she might even give it a few licks,
kiss you for a little bit,
or let you throw your arm around him or her for a sec
and let you give him or her a few affectionate strokes
on the back
while you're all squirmy and snuggly.
Even barring these things,
if he or she is chill about you taking care of yourself while they
hang out,
but he or she would rather not get too paws-on about your
masturbation themselves
then even just having someone else there in the room who
you're friends with is fun.

Feeling It

Drunk and really feeling this mattress
you did a big leap onto the bed
and laid down with me.
Smushing my balls around with one hand
I nuzzled into your side.
Realizing how much I appreciate this,
I grabbed my notebook and felt-tip pen
and on the bed beside you I wrote down this poem.

Sniffs

I think most dog people would get something out of with your
dog
while he or she is lying down
respectfully lifting their tail
and lying down with them
rest your face in front of their butthole
and just lie there with them
flaring your nostrils
and taking in the smells over time
seconds, minutes,
as you get to know the rear end
of their digestive tract
a whole lot more intimately
smelling their odor and occasional gas
each fart smelling a little bit different to the others,
hitting a little bit different to the others.
There is no need to lick or kiss,
to pleasure or to entertain—
just stay there,
lying down with your face in his or her butthole,
sniffing,
sensing,
taking in,
and all in all generally observing what it is like back there.
Zoo or non zoo,
I think you will feel closer with your dog afterwards.
The dogs already know each other like this, by their smells,
but they have better noses,
so as a human you gotta get real close and personal up in there.

Memo

100% optional “this dick” proposal—
it’s there if you want it.

Aw, thank you.

Good dog.

Air Conditioning

The air conditioning unit is an extremely un-subtle droning
as my boyfriend and I lie together in bed,
each of us naked head to toes.

Neither of us is really trying to fall asleep yet.
We snuggle and we make out,
human tongue and doggy tongue dancing
in this cool, naked bedroom.

Someday tonight we will go to sleep for real
and wake up well rested.

Dogs

Dogs

Still Dogs tbh

still Dogs tbh
kissin em
walkin em
pettin em
givin em personal space if they want it and being happy to know
that they're happy
givin em good food every day that's healthy for them and that
they like
listinin to what they got to tell you about
tossin em dog treats or handing them to them depending on
their preference at that moment
tossin or handin em a second or maybe even a third dog treat
because you like them so much
takin naps together
hangin out
dogs are great

Maternal

Snuggled up into your tummy
I think about the fact that you probably drank from your
mother.
I wonder whether you remember that.
I wonder whether you hold in you some maternal instinct
that makes you accepting when I want to nuzzle into your
stomach.
Whatever you are,
maternal or stud,
you are perfect.

Untitled Maturation

Wet dog smell
Getting hair in your mouth
Things that once seemed bad
Now nice

Moment

Hanging out on the bed
Dude and dog
You're worried about the dishwasher
I'm here for you
All the security and space you need

Memento

Cuddling
nostrils flared
to sniff your fur as deeply as possible
I am stricken with sadness
as I remember that you will die.
There will be a point in my life
after which you will never be there.

Untitled Vague Green Bug

Out walking the dog
Vague little green bug jumps over onto my eyelashes.
You can hang out there for a while if you need to little
individual.
There's no worries.

Metal Bit

When we walk
I often wonder whether the clasp on your leash
will hold forever.
As I commit this thought to writing,
I also wonder whether it ought to.
I do mostly use it to stop you from getting hit by cars.

Communication

There are depths to interspecies communication that I know
seem
hyperbolic to those who are deaf to the words of their dogs.
The other day a dog I was playing around with said something
to me that I swear if I were translating from canine body
language
into English was “Get over here Nerd” before then smugly
taking
my hand and using it to make himself cum. He was very pleased
with
himself, and how should he not be, after pulling off such a
move?

I Get It

I assume some people are jealous
of how often I get to pet a dog;
of how often he rolls over
for me to rub his belly;
of how often in the morning,
first thing,
before either of us has fully woken up,
the first thing my dog and I will do is snuggle;
of how often we kiss, and how thoroughly,
lip pressing to lip, his enormous tongue
licking my eyelids,
my tongue,
or the back of my throat;
of how much he trusts me;
of how nonchalantly we touch each other's dicks;
of how awesome his knot is,
big and red and veiny, throbbing,
a sign of such satisfaction;
of how much he likes to go out and walk with me;
of how happy he is when I come back home
from grocery shopping or from getting us fast food to share;
in short—I get it—
some people are jealous of how much my dog and I love each
other.

An Interest

Dogs evolved from wolves
and so many breeds of dogs exist today
because we took such a pointed interest
in their sex lives.

Is it any wonder that they
should have a sexual interest
in us

Superlative

I cannot overemphasize
how good dogs smell,
how beautiful they look—
their structure, their coats, their facial expressions—
how fathomless their capacity for kindness,
how contagious their expressions of joy,
and how soft their fur is
to hold against yourself
or to pet.

ZETA

Zoophiles for the
Ethical
Tongue kissing of
Animals

hehe

(Shh Secrets For Zoosexuals Time)

(Most people don't actually care you guys.)

(It's really only a smaller-than-it-would-sound number of noisy
bully types who make such an alarmingly big panic out of it.)

(Treat it like playing minesweeper.)

(Proceed with caution
but don't think that it is impossible to proceed.)

Police Dogs

Make dog love not dog war.

Suddenly Cognizant Seconds Apropos Of A Life That While In That Moment Cliche Is Being Well Lived

Seeing a sunset

Feeling immersed in a good book

Getting a message from a friend

Touching warm laundry

Relaxing in a hot tub

Walking through a dapple forest trail

Making out with a dog's butthole

Taking an accomplished huff of a breath after a hard day's work

Creating little arts like paper airplanes or doodles

Drinking a much desired glass of water

Hearing a new song that you really like

Hearing an old song that really takes you back

Making out with a dog's butthole a second time

Finishing dusting and vacuuming a room

Biting carefree into an apple or a plum

Snuggling with someone you're in love with

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 12;

DECEMBER 2023.

In this issue,
a German shepherd is seen to get a treat,
and three stable arguments are put forth.

*Featuring the stories: What Else Was There Had We
Forsaken The Pleasure Of This Shared Life?, Lustucia
Writers Meeting, Talking Around, To Advance
Completeness, Some Arguments, and Chicks in Space!
#101: "Pilot," as well as a few poems.*

WHAT ELSE WAS THERE HAD WE FORSAKEN THE
PLEASURE OF THIS SHARED LIFE?

“Neehehehehe,” Jeremy giggled, finishing making a continuous scissors cut all the way across the cushions of the couch in the center of the living room. Crawling around on the couch the-floor-is-lava style, Jeremy continued the cut (*snippy-snippy-snip!*) over the armrest of the couch, and leaned over the back of the couch to start cutting around the back of it too.

Virgil, Jeremy’s boyfriend, stood nearby, watching with his chin in his hand, wondering how it had come to this.

five minutes earlier

“Virgil wake up the neighbors just put a couch out on the curb help me carry it inside so I can cut the entire couch apart with scissors and maybe break and smash the rest with a crowbar later!”

anyways

Presently, Jeremy had gotten halfway around the back of the couch, and then stopped the continuous cut and went back to the front of the couch, and started snippy-snippy-snipping all around one of the cushions at the front. Jeremy then tossed the scissors aside, stuck his face into the big jagged tear in the cushion, and started grabbing the white fluffy stuffing with his

teeth and pulling it out, mouthful by mouthful, pbbbbbbth'ing it out of his mouth each time onto the floor.

Once he had done that a dozen times or so, he flopped onto his back on the couch, head happening to come to a rest on the discarded scissors that lay flat there. He draped his arms and legs wide across the couch to either side, one leg thrown over the back of the couch, one foot resting over on the floor, and he grinned up at Virgil, showing off the wiry white stuffing that was stuck in his teeth.

He asked Virgil, "Wanna get in on this?"

Virgil continued to look down at this with his chin in his hand. He shook his head. "No, by all means, I don't want to interfere with... whatever this is."

"There was a free couch to destroy so obviously who wouldn't?"

"I see."

"Thank you for helping me carry it inside you are so strong and I appreciate you?"

Virgil tried to stifle the smile that came to him at that, but wasn't fully able to. "Thank you. I am happy to help, even if I am admittedly baffled by... all of this."

Jeremy, still making full eye contact with Virgil, began open-throat wheezing and pbbbbth'ing, trying to get some of the stuffing out of his mouth that had started to get in his throat. Then after taking some of the stuffing out of his mouth with his hand, he laid there looking at the glistening bits he had taken out, and said, "Hey Verge, do you ever wonder what would happen if—"

"Uggggghhh, nooooo," Virgil groaned, and took his hand away from his chin and turned and faced away, and began making like he was going to walk off out of the living room.

"What!" Jeremy called after him. Jeremy crawled up onto his hands and knees and scampered to one of the arms of the couch, and leaned over it and shouted to Virgil, "Hey! I didn't even ask the whole question yet!"

Virgil paused to stand at the big arched doorway between the living room and the entry hall of their home, and asked, still facing away, "What do you want to ask the magic mirror Jeremy?"

“Do you ever think about the people you almost dated and wonder what would happen if you had dated them?”

Virgil shrugged. “No? Barely?”

“Let’s looooooooook!”

Virgil shrugged again. “Fine.”

Jeremy gave a hissing victory laugh as he threw himself back onto the couch, throwing his arms and legs all around in a victory squirm.

He then got up, and jogged up to Virgil’s side. Together, the two of them walked up the stairs, and set off onto the enclosed bridge that went over the house’s courtyard, towards the black glass tower that was at the courtyard’s center. Grey-feathered birds chirped and swooped all around, many of their mud nests built into the enclosed bridge’s ceiling. A baseline droning of bees filled the air below them, as though the bridge were over a sea and there was a distant sounding of crashing waves. Looking down at the courtyard, all of Virgil’s flowers were coming in beautifully.

As they walked, Jeremy commented, “This feels like an inadequate comparison, but you know that game where you can draw on a computer?”

“Paint?” Virgil asked.

“Yeah!” Jeremy said, and gave a gesture that was a snap and also a tossing fist pump kind of gesture. “Paint! Looking out at all your square patches of awesome flowers reminds me of looking at the squares of colors you can choose from, but especially when you’ve made a bunch of your own colors so there’s not just the first two rows, there are special colors too.”

As they continued to walk, Virgil took hold of Jeremy’s hand, lifted it up, and gave the back of the hand a kiss, then he let the hand go, and clasped his own hands behind his back, walking with an upright posture. He responded to Jeremy’s compliment, “Thank you. I like that more than you might think I do. I totally agree that is such a pleasant aesthetic.”

Nearing the glass tower, Jeremy checked himself and his boyfriend out in the reflection of the sliding glass doors that stood closed before them. Himself, skinny, messy curly blonde hair, black gym shorts and a t-shirt with an awesome green t-rex on the front: he stuck out his tongue super far like KISS and

gave himself sideways finger guns, and fired several rounds at himself. Virgil continued to walk upright beside him with his hands behind his back: blonde hair buzzcutted, with the very beginnings of the day's stubble, grey sweatpants and a black sweater that he had thrown on on his way to the front door when his boyfriend had woken him up to go get a couch from the curb in front of the neighbor's house.

Arriving at the glass tower, the sliding doors gave a *woosh* as they parted open before the boyfriends.

Inside, the two of them took the spiral staircase up to the magic mirror's room. Virgil held the door open, and Jeremy walked in first.

On the way in, Jeremy intoned a flamboyant greeting, "Heyyyyyy!"

The long room held no furnishings save for the mirror itself, which was mounted onto the far wall, some 20ft from the door through which the boyfriends entered. The walls, ceiling, and carpet were all colored in the same dark, reddish grey paint. Dark-reddish-and-grey tinted bulbs overhead kept the room in an even, monotone light. If one's mind wandered, and they were to stare blankly at some unoccupied space in the room for a moment, it would often suddenly give the sensation that one was falling through a vast and featureless dark-reddish-and-grey void.

The mirror, upon Jeremy's entrance, sighed, and said in his deep and full voice, "What do you want to look up this time, Jeremy?"

Jeremy did a cartwheel as he approached. Then he idly rubbed his wrists, which were very suddenly sore from doing a cartwheel for the first time that year probably.

Virgil closed the door behind them, and walked on his feet across the room to join Jeremy.

The two humans stood before the mirror.

Jeremy began, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall..."

The mirror bemoaned, "Please don't do it like this, you can just ask."

"Tell the prettiest boy of all..."

"What do you want, Jeremy?"

“What would... um... how...” Jeremy began, and faltered. He thought in silence for a moment. Then he leaned over to Virgil, and whisper-asked, “Who’s someone you almost dated?”

The mirror muttered, “Oh my god you don’t even know your question.”

Virgil briefly bowed his head in thought, and then looked up into the mirror and spoke, “In seventh grade, I asked a girl named Kim to the Spring dance. I had hoped that she would fall in love with me, and we would get married someday. She declined to go to the dance with me. If she had gone to the dance with me, and she and I had begun dating, where would I be now?”

“I see it,” the mirror said. “And I show it to you now, though there is no difference to detect: were you and Kim to have dated, you would now be exactly as you are today, standing before me with Jeremy.”

Virgil clapped Jeremy on the shoulder, and said, “See? Some things have a way of just working out the same one way or another. I’m sure that even in this other timeline where me and someone else had dated for a little while, I still went to college, met you, and here we are.”

“Yeah I guess,” Jeremy said.

“Do you want to ask about someone you almost—”

“Nnnnnnope!”

“Why?” Virgil asked. “Why are these always about me? Can’t we ask *one* about you?”

“No that is so transphobic oh my god.”

“What?”

Jeremy grabbed Virgil on the bicep tightly, and said, “What if I’m a girl in other timelines.”

“Then... you are in that timeline, but that’s not this one?” Virgil put forth.

“Yeah but what if... all of them, I stayed a girl.”

“We would be living in the special one where you didn’t.”

“Do you think we would be able to tell in all of them or would it not even be visually obvious usually?” Jeremy wondered.

The mirror chimed in, “I will literally tell you if you ask.”

“Like, women don’t wear dresses anyways very often,” Jeremy continued.

“I hate my job.”

“Like, women’s fashion is so close to men’s fashion ninety percent of the time, we probably wouldn’t even know, there’s probably nothing to be afraid of because it would still be unknown.”

“I don’t think there would be anything to be afraid of either way.”

“Like, we wouldn’t have to worry about the idea you’re actually dating a woman.”

“I am bisexual.”

“Like, even if some of these timelines would suggest I would have been a woman sometimes, this also isn’t all the timelines, we might have gotten a weird specific sample based on the questions we asked, so you wouldn’t have to worry about all that because we can’t know how all timelines would have worked out.”

“I am bisexual Jeremy.”

“You can literally ask me what percentage of all timelines you are he/him in.”

“Like, whatever we find out from asking these questions, it’s all for fun at the end of the day, it’s not like we can learn anything anyways.”

“I have no nerve endings and yet I suffer.”

“Like, okay, so...”

Jeremy scratched his hair, and sighed.

“Okay, yeah, um, mirror mirror on the wall, tell the prettiest boy of all, one time in school, Tanner had a crush on me, and I heard about it from rumors and basically avoided him and he got kicked out of school like a couple weeks after that anyways and he had to go to a different school and I basically barely ever saw him again. If I actually had started dating him, where would I be now?”

“I see it,” the mirror answered, “and I will show you.”

The image of the boyfriends in the reddish room faded away. In that image’s place, an image faded in of Jeremy in the woods on his hands and knees with his pants around his ankles, getting humped by a German Shepherd. Virgil and the Jeremy in real life dropped their jaws open. The Jeremy in the mirror made a different kind of open-mouthed expression. The German

Shepherd's penis pistoned inside of mirror Jeremy for a solid minute as Virgil and real Jeremy watched. Then, when the German Shepherd was done humping, he laid limp on top of Jeremy's back for a moment. Jeremy said some words to the German Shepherd that looked like praising words. The German Shepherd then slid off of Jeremy, but the dog's penis bent back along with the turnaround, and stayed stuck inside of Jeremy even as the two faced in opposite directions.

Virgil, lifting a hand and gesturing towards the mirror, said, "So, when dogs mate—"

"I KNOW WHAT KNOTTING IS," Jeremy interrupted.

"Okay, okay, just saying."

"MIRROR, WHAT THE FUCK."

"I have shown what you have asked," the mirror said, as its face continued to show the knotting scene. "All else being the same, except for the change that you described, this would be the world now. You and Tanner would begin dating, he would still get kicked out of school, the relationship would end at that point, and now you would be knotted by Clyde."

"WHY."

"Though I can answer many questions, the matter of 'why' on any topic is—"

"LOT OF HELP YOU ARE."

The mirror harrumphed, and stopped showing the knotting scene, fading quickly back to showing the two boyfriends in the reddish room.

"WELL THAT WAS FUN," Jeremy said, sarcastically.

"Want to try another?" Virgil suggested.

Jeremy ran his fingers back through his hair, and then calmly said, "Yeah alright. Mirror mirror on the wall, tell the prettiest boy of all: That night me and Verge went out bar hopping, our fourth date, both of us with fake IDs, and there was that woman who started hitting on me. What would I be doing now if I had ditched Verge and started dating her instead?"

"I see it," the mirror answered, "and I will show you."

The image of the boyfriends in the reddish room faded away, and in their place was the scene in the woods of Jeremy already knotted by Clyde, the German Shepherd.

"Huh," Virgil said.

“Shut up!”

“What, I’m just—”

“SHUT UP!”

Virgil shrugged, and then said to the mirror, “Thank you, I think we get the idea.”

The mirror faded the image away, back to the reddish room.

Virgil asked, “So, do you like dogs, or?”

“I LIKE them, I don’t LIKE-LIKE them.”

“Are you sure, because—”

“MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL, TELL THE PRETTIEST BOY OF ALL, ME AND JEFF, FRESHMAN YEAR, WHAT NOW.”

The mirror faded to the same scene in the woods, but this time Jeremy was knotted by a Black Lab.

“OH COME ON.”

“This one’s name is Strider.”

“GOOD FOR HIM.”

“That’s not the only thing good for him.”

“SHUT UP VERGE—wait you’re happy for him?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Do you wanna go pretend to be dogs right now and?”

“Eh, I’m down.”

“YES. Okay bye mirror we’re busy now!”

“Have fun you... two...”

The door was slammed shut as the boyfriends departed, leaving the magic mirror all alone again.

LUSTUCIA WRITERS MEETING

We were standing around in the writers' lounge, playing darts. Peter had just brought up to Bruce, "How do you picture the balcony scene?" Bruce stood there, dart in hand. You'd believe he was actually thinking of an answer to Peter's question. More likely, Bruce really had his mind on that throw. Especially with the benefit of looking back afterwards, knowing that after a day of puncturing new holes in the drywall, he then took his time on that one, maybe had something click or, sure, maybe got lucky, but some way or another he threw and got damn close to a bullseye.

Seriously, Bruce hadn't made contact with the target in at least a hundred throws that day, and then on that one, *whack!*, his dart smacks onto the target in the ring outside the bullseye, and only a hair's breadth away from the edge of the bullseye too.

So there was clapping, telling him good job, when the door, BANG, gets busted open, pieces of it around where the knob was flew off and landed on the floor. And Flint—you couldn't mistake him for anyone else, six foot five, aviator mirror shades, salt and pepper beard, hair down past his waist that was dyed green in some other millennium but is mostly the underlying bleached white now, the grey bathrobe with a black **F** embroidered on the breast—Flint came marching in wielding a big aluminum garbage can. And he went right to the middle of the room while we all jumped back against the wall. And there in the middle of the room he dumped out a whole garbage can's worth of loose papers, and then turned and threw the empty

garbage can at the wall like a discus. It took out a huge chunk of the drywall beside the door, and landed on the carpeted floor with a muted clank.

Flint then turned to face us. He pointed down to the mound of papers that was still in a lively tumult at his feet, and he shouted at us, "What the fuck is this!"

He turned his head in sharp jerks to stare down each of us one by one.

Bruce, maybe feeling emboldened by his last throw and not really having a good sense of how statistics works, threw Flint an answer: "It's a whole lot of papers, Flint!"

Flint bent down, swiped up a handful of papers from the pile, and shook his fistful of papers at us, and said, "What the fuck is this script!"

Glancing down at the papers, it did look to be photocopies of the draft scripts for the entire season of *Lustucia*. In among the script pages were photocopies of Bruce's storyboards so far too.

Peter gave an open palm gesture down to the pile of papers, and said, "They're just a first draft."

Flint threw down his handful of papers, and pointed at Peter, and said, "Don't *fuck* with me."

"Do you need to get some water, man?" Peter offered. "Some air?"

Flint bent down and grabbed some papers again, and started balling them up and stared at Peter as he asked, "What is the logline of *Lustucia*?"

Peter answered, "A bartender gets supernatural powers from lustful acts."

"You, Tightlips," Flint said, turning to me, "is *Lustucia* a show for kids?"

"No, sir," I answered, not sure where the sir came from, it just slipped out.

"You, Peter, did you hear that I was excited to spearhead this project because I like being censored by eighty year olds who have it in their head that some fuck ass swearing makes something unfit for adults to fuck ass watch if they fuck ass want?"

"The show is going straight to streaming," Peter answered.

"You, Giggles," Flint said, turning to me again.

I tried to get to a straight face, but couldn't manage it.

Flint tossed the balled up paper over to the side, and said, "Every one of those I finish I'm cutting ten thousand dollars from the writers budget."

"Woah woah woah, Flint," Bruce said.

"Go on," Flint said, staring at Bruce as he bent over to grab another handful of papers.

"What's this about?"

"You tell me, writers!" Flint said, and started mashing another paper ball together. "From all of the vision meetings and planning and preliminary notes, WHAT is missing from my show?"

We looked back and forth between each other.

"My UNCENSORED show, ABOUT perversion and sex positivity that is engaged in so painstakingly sincerely that it's giving a woman FUCKING SUPER POWERS."

Flint's fingers were clutched around the paper ball like he was strangling it in revenge of something. He held the ball towards Peter, and asked, "Going once?"

Nothing.

"You two?" he asked, holding it towards Bruce and then me.

I had an inkling, but my throat was closed up. If I was the one who guessed the wrong thing and made it worse...

Flint threw the paper ball over by the other one.

He then scooped up another handful of paper, and said, as he started balling those papers into a third ball, "Peter: Why is bestiality GONE from *Lustucia*? That a 'first draft' omission? I remember it being pretty FUCKING important to the plot! Episode FUCKING ONE, Lu feels mysteriously called to the woods, turns out she's unwittingly dialed in to a wolf pack's communications because her empathy for all beings is so profound, she gets a wolf to fuck her at the end of the episode's first act. Act two she starts presenting werewolf abilities. Act three she harnesses the powers mindfully by recalling the carnal oneness of getting mated and she uses these powers to save her roommate from an abusive ex, she gouges the man and puts the fear of the devil into him. WHERE IS THAT?"

Peter made a gesture with both of his palms upturned, and said, "We thought of another way. If you read those scripts, and

if those *are* the ones we wrote and there wasn't just some mix up, then you saw right in there, she gets monster powers from BDSM. She gets invited to a kink thing, it's outside of her usual routine but she's been looking to try new things, she gets tied up, another woman hits her around, uses a whip and stuff, and dialing in on that feeling is her awakening. Later she remembers *that* to get her powers to freak the roommate's ex out."

Flint pointed at Peter with the hand that held the paper ball, and said, "That's vanilla. I could put that on TV after Jeopardy and you know it. I will not be censored, Peter. Where's Jason?"

Peter answered, "He said he might be in today or he might be busy, I haven't seen him."

Flint asked, "Did he put you up to this?"

Peter gave a wavering hand gesture. "I think he brought it up, suggested that Jessica might be uncomfortable with the role if we went too far in that direction. We all started spitballing, and that new direction seemed to have legs as much as the sodomy version did."

Flint sneered at Peter, and tossed the paper ball over with the other two.

Peter sighed.

Flint told him, "I have been to Jess's ranch, she is excited for the 'sodomy version,' I'll tell you that, Peter. I will tell you that. Ohhhh when I see Jason, I am going to..."

Flint kicked the mound of papers, sent a bunch of them sliding around.

He then pointed to Bruce, and said, "Episode seven, she still transforms into a horse to run into town in time for the dance thing. Where did she get her horse powers? Was that at least implied bestiality?"

With a smile, Bruce reported, "She sleeps with a guy who's hung like a horse!"

"You are pathetic and weak."

Bruce's smile drooped into a confused look of hurt.

Flint took a deep breath in, and sighed. He went and grabbed the garbage can, brought it over, and started scooping the papers into it. "I'm gonna find Jason," he said. "Disregard his suggestion, alright? I will replace him as director with a snap of my fingers and do it my fucking self if he suddenly decides now

that he's uncomfortable with the project he knew he was signing on to, I fucking swear."

Peter assured, "We'll get to work on it."

"Write it right this time."

"Sure."

"Alright. When I have a script that does do it right, I will rescind those budget knocks. But I'm serious. Like we discussed at the start. We're making something that speaks a truth a lot of wusses aren't ready for. But it's overdue. I'm not fucking around. I'm not writing for grandmas. I'm not writing for pretentious fuckers who like 'innovative style' or 'cool shots' as long as the message is already the most baby food palatable paste that they wanted to fucking agree with anyways. We're not making some softcore BDSM bait. What we are making, is a badass series about a badass who taps in to the enormous sexual magnitude of beasts: wolves, horses, past societies knew that other species had sex appeal. We're bringing it the fuck back without dressing it up any different than if this was a show about Spiderman. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Godspeed," Flint said, and then with his garbage can full of script papers, went off to hunt down the director.

TALKING AROUND

“Henry, do you want to show auntie your drawing? Let’s see. Ohhh, wow. That sword looks dangerous. It’s a good drawing.”

“Thang you.”

“Looks good, Henry!”

“Thang you.”

“You can keep drawing more if you want.”

“Mm. Anyways. What were we talking about?”

“Well. We were talking about Lee and his... wife.”

“Right. Right, we were.”

“Is he going to be alright?”

“Probably. I think he’s aware it was going to happen. He tends to persevere on things. I think he’ll be in a difficult mood, kind of... cranky... for a while. But I think he’ll get through it.”

“I hope so.”

“I hope so too.”

“Did you ever know anyone else with a relationship like that?”

“Not... as such. I remember hearing one rumor of someone at school who got caught? I don’t even know if that’s true. Maybe, but maybe it was someone just making up a rumor that sounded embarrassing, you know? Who was that, that they said... I remember it was someone and, allegedly there was a dog involved, yeah, and then I think any time there was any animal, oh holy moly I just remembered, ha, any time in a book there was a horse or a goat or anything, we would write in the book, little, well, messages, to the animal, as... oh, it’s on the tip of my

tongue, I can almost see it right there, we would sign his name on these.”

“Ugh.”

“I know, hey, we were kids, you know?”

“That’s not very nice.”

“I’m not saying I still go to libraries and write this stuff in the books.”

“Well I would hope not.”

“Looking back, I don’t know if he was really... like we said he was. Maybe there was something to it. Probably got out of hand, the rumors, you know, exaggerated from whatever the truth of the matter might have been, if there was even anything. Hm. But no, besides that, I mean, no, I can’t even think of anyone who was rumored to be like Lee and his wife.”

“No, it was a surprise to me, when Josephine told me about that. I... it made sense, to tell you the truth, I was just surprised, because I had never heard of anyone... more than just for...”

“Yeah. No, it’s, I think that is a part of it, I don’t want to know, you know, but it’s more than that too, definitely.”

“Oh I know. I can see that.”

“It made sense to me too.”

“They’ve been very sweet together.”

“Yeah.”

“Well I hope he’ll be alright.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do too.”

“What else has been going on? Oh, did you hear about Josephine and Ty looking into getting an apartment in...”

TO ADVANCE COMPLETENESS, SOME ARGUMENTS

To my dear fathers, brothers, and sons in philosophy,

It is known that philosophy is an endeavor in building. To arrive at an argument that is sound, a philosopher must have arrived there by considering his other knowledge at hand and identifying the yet missing fact that is the natural next. With items of knowledge such as, "The rich have proven themselves the most successful," "The most successful should be the most rewarded," "The rich, being empowered enormously by affluence, are the only ones to make meaningful contributions to societal progression," and "The poor, being many of them, are more prepared and reliable to share the burden of taxation," one can then come to the sound argument, "The rich ought not be taxed."

There are, however, items in philosophy which do not need building to, but rather, prove themselves to be stable arguments in isolation. They do not need foundation, for they are themselves foundational: Grand foundations, on the measure of, "I think, therefore I am," may make one envious of some recent years ago, when such claims were not yet articulated and given credit for. But aside from the grand foundations, there are, as well, a very great number of small foundations: items which, though there may be seen no sagacity in committing them to writings, all the same may be committed to writings in the hope that with their cataloging and codification, one or another here

or there may prove to be some needed toehold for another argument of worthy grandeur later in time.

Here, I put forth three such small foundations, likely all of them already known to the man of prudent intelligence as truths that need no belabored explanation.

First: The stars exist at some ceiling threshold in the vault of the sky, and are made of material extremely light in weight. This is known because the stars are the farthest things out—nothing is ever seen to pass behind them—and, as small lily pads on water and as large bergs on the sea, these stars must be made of something that is lighter than air in order that they should remain suspended up there. It is most likely that there is further expanse of a yet lighter material beyond the stars, hence why they all float up to that threshold and no farther: neither a lily pad nor an iceberg would continue floating up past the water and into the air, for the air is then lighter, it is a natural sorting. There is, however, no possibility for any matter of substance to exist beyond the threshold of the stars, for, as light spreads dimly in water and greatly in air, the light of the stars would spread enormously through the thinner substance yet above them, and illuminate anything found in that further sky. As still no thing has been seen to exist there, the stars prove to all reason to be the highest.

Second: Our perception of invented characters invokes all of the same faculties used to perceive persons before us in the flesh, and moral crimes against invented characters are none different than moral crimes against men of flesh. The punishment given to a murderer—typically death or exile—is doled out to prevent the murderer from committing the crime a repeated time, and to appease the family of the victim that recompense has been settled. If some poet tells a tale of a worthy and beloved man, and then suddenly, as unprovoked as a murderer, tells tale of that man perishing in some unsatisfying way, his audience is the same as the family of a murdered man, and the poet the murderer, who ought then be put to death or exiled. A poet telling a tale of a man vandalizing the Parthenon, equal to the poet vandalizing the Parthenon himself, as either has created the same image in the faculties of his intended

audience, making the poet and the vandal equal worthy of contempt and punishment.

Third: It is none too pleasant a topic to bring to the immaculate annals of philosophy, but for completeness in arguments, it ought be said that—though I hesitate to put the word, I must—bestiality, the hardly conceivable act of a man or a woman engaging in sexual congress with a mere animal, is an act of moral ruination, its perpetrators of no better moral worth than the animals they have put themselves to. It is the act of barbarians who live as animals do, running about the woods and hollering their unintelligible gibberish. It is the act of lunatics so confused on the foundations of love and worth that they are present to a mare's whinny and hear an intelligently composed lyric. It is the act of the desperate pervert who sees a vessel of femininity or a dart of masculinity and is satisfied with that alone, and disregards that it holds none of the magnitudes and powers of a woman or a man, like an archer who attempts to fly straw rather than arrows. A man or a woman engaging in sexual congress with a mere animal is the complete abandonment of all that upright society holds imperative, and one who does so is no longer a moral agent, he or she has utterly thrown away his or her ability to abide by our best structures.

For completeness, these have been a simple three small foundations. Many more exist, I will endeavor to catalog them further, and would encourage others to the same endeavor.

Be it known, as well, that my arguments are unlike those of men of higher aspirations, who build one argument dependent on another three, like a tower of cards poised to fail if one argument should be disproven. I, rather, am far more fortified. One must disprove "I think, therefor I am" itself before the whole can be surrendered: indeed, my position is more alike to that of a trench in hard dirt, where one must destroy every aspect of an argument like removing shovels of soil, and all the while also needing to address what may easily slide in in one argument's absence. And until then, my faith in my own reasoning stands a worthy shell above me, like an impregnable stone overhead.

CHICKS IN SPACE! #101: “PILOT”

Animated series. 2D animation for the most part, but some 3D animation in the environments, particularly regarding space ships.

SPACE

A jet-like space ship is flying through space. Hang on an establishing shot, showing the space ship, and ambient pressure clicks and creaks and air flowing as the craft maintains its atmosphere.

Cut to a closer view through the windshield, to see Alex Chick piloting the craft. He looks disheveled, with unkempt blonde hair sweeping off to one side, and stubble. A look of serious determination is on his face as he grips the controls. We hang on this shot for another beat as the ambient sounds continue, and Alex says nothing. He only makes very minor adjustments on the controls, and the camera only very slowly zooms a bit in.

ALEX (VO)

My name is Alex Chick.

Montage of flashes of scenes showing how we got here. Alex says a part of the opening monologue, and we see the accompanying imagery.

ALEX continued:

Two years ago, me and my best friend Chip were making a delivery on our freighter, when we flew into a fucking hornet's nest.

Alex Chick and Chip Chick stepping into the cockpit of their freighter ship, pleased as can be. Alex is a human, and Chip is a dog, probably a German Shepherd.

Freighter going through space, then a flash encircles the freighter, and in the afterimage of the flash, dozens of smaller ships appear and begin shooting at the freighter.

ALEX continued:

They were everywhere. I made a run to reestablish power to the shields, but as the shields were coming back on, my section of the ship was blasted off from the rest of it.

Alex dragging along one end of a heavy 2ft diameter cable. He throws it onto the ground near another cable-end, and snaps the heads of each cable together, reestablishing power to the shields.

A large beam blasts Alex's area of the ship off before the shields get around to it, and Alex is shot off into space.

ALEX continued:

The latest suits these days can keep you alive on energy-turned-nutrients alone for as long as your battery lasts. I floated through space, away from my best friend, for a month until my distress hails were kindly answered.

Alex drifting, slowly spinning, muscles motionless.

Alex taking a hand into the rescuing ship; with the rescuer's hand still held, Alex pulls them in so that they are chest to chest, and rests his head against the crook of the rescuer's neck; the rescuer leans in too, and gives Alex a couple pats on the back.

ALEX continued:

But they refused to bring me back to him, and dropped me off a week later on the bog planet they'd been heading to.

Alex having an argument with the pilots of the ship, gesturing and pointing out into the depths of space.

Ship landing on bog planet.

ALEX continued:

Since then, I've toiled, swindled, forged, and out and out lied my way into a position where I would have the means to hijack a space jet and get back to where it was that I last saw my friend.

Alex working a plow.

Alex playing cards in a bar.

Alex in a starkly white and clean room standing at a computer terminal, one hand on a keyboard, other hand making a signature on the signature reader attached.

Alex standing around in a beige office space with a cup of coffee in hand, chatting with Sebastian and another.

Alex and Sebastian in the cockpit; Sebastian is walking away from the port pilot's seat to go back into the plane, but Alex leaps at him and puts him in a full nelson as he takes him to the ground; hang on the empty shot for a beat after the narration ends and Alex and Sebastian are on the ground; all we see is our view out through the windshield, and the stars turning outside.

With the opening monologue over, we go to a reestablishing shot of the ship from behind.

Cut back to the shot outside the windshield of Alex determined.

Come in through the windshield, fading the window away as the camera enters.

Now in the interior of the cockpit, cut to a shot from behind, showing Alex in the port pilot's seat and an empty starboard pilot's seat across from him. As a general rule, the port pilot's seat is the seat of more authority in any cockpit: here we see that since Alex has hijacked the ship, he has taken the more authoritative seat that Sebastian used to occupy.

Alex continues flying for another beat. Then he sighs, reaches over and hits a button, and then unbuckles and stands from his seat (there is gravity in the ship). He walks across the cockpit to a series of locker-ish doors that are situated along the wall behind the starboard pilot's seat.

Alex unlatches a garage-style slide-up door, lifts it up, and begins making coffee with the instruments and nozzles that are fixed into the wall behind the door.

SEBASTIAN
muffled shouting.

Cut to shot a broom closet door past Alex, situated on the port pilot's side of the ship, further back nearer to the door that exits the cockpit. Alex turns to face towards the broom closet door.

SEBASTIAN
more muffled shouting.

ALEX *annoyed:*

Shaaaat up in there! You'll get your ship back.

Sebastian continues his muffled shouting, and begins banging on the door as well. Alex turns to grab his coffee, and has a sip. Sebastian, though still muffled, begins repeating a distinct phrase.

SEBASTIAN *muffled:*
I have to pee!

ALEX *listens. then:*

You have to pee?

SEBASTIAN *muffled:*

Yes!

ALEX *sighs.*

How long can you hold it?

SEBASTIAN *muffled:*

Five minutes!

Alex gulps down the rest of his coffee, fixes the mug back into the rack, and slides that door back down. He grabs his helmet off of a rack behind the starboard pilot's seat, puts it on, and lets it seal to the rest of his suit. He then walks out of the cockpit, banging an "open door" button coolly on his way out.

Very quick shots of Alex grabbing some metal piping and some welding equipment.

Back in the cockpit, Alex welds the piping to the ceiling over the broom closet, in such a way that the door (which folds open outwards) will only be able to open a couple of inches when he unlocks it. When the welding work is done and he's tested it by banging on it a few times with another pipe, Alex unlocks the broom closet door and steps back, and holds a metal bottle out such that it is just within Sebastian's reach. Sebastian reaches out and takes it.

Alex wanders away, and paces while Sebastian urinates into the bottle. Sebastian then places the used bottle outside of the broom closet door, cap screwed on, and shuts the door himself. Alex closes his eyes and raises his eyebrows in an expression that shows he's surprised by Sebastian's good behavior. Alex goes and takes the bottle, empties the contents into a disposal nozzle, and places the bottle back outside the door.

Alex raises his voice to be heard through the closet door.

ALEX

Empty bottle's outside again if you need it.

SEBASTIAN *muffled*:

Thank you.

Alex saunters back to the port pilot's seat and sits down. He looks over to the empty starboard pilot's seat, lets out a shuddering sigh, and turns forward to face out the windshield again. He leans over to hit the button that he hit when getting up, but then after hovering his fist over it for a moment, drops his arm limp to his side, slumps back in his chair so that his lower back is now over the seat and his head is at the mid back of the chair, and lets the space ship continue flying itself.

Cut to white.

Fading into the scene, we see Alex from the past, doing mucky labor around a farm, being payed in futuristic but grimy coins, and then placing those coins into a metal lockbox which he keeps under his bed in his small living arrangements.

We then cut to him that night at a bar, hanging out with some locals. Luise, seated next to him, sways with tipsiness. Alex is trying to be smiley and friendly.

LUISE

Alex, why do you never drink with us?

ALEX

I drink.

LUISE

You do not! How many have you had tonight?

ALEX

None.

LUISE

You have MONEY, this is the only place for a hundred miles you can blow it.

ALEX

True. But I'm not trying to blow it.

LUISE

What the hell for not?

ALEX

Saving.

LUISE *hailing the bartender:*

Clyde! Four shots!

Luise slides the coins out onto the counter as the bartender walks over.

Simon turns away from another conversation and looks to Luise, who he is seated next to.

SIMON

Is Alex DRINKING?

LUISE

If he's not chicken.

SIMON

Clyde, four more.

Simon slides the coins onto the counter as well.

Eight adjacent shot glasses are filled in one continuous pour.

Many around the bar have come to peer over each other and crowd around to see Alex actually drink. He picks up one of the shot glasses, glances between Luise and the remaining glasses, and asks if she's joining. She tells him to drink up. He does the same with Simon, who leans back and shakes his head. Alex does shot after shot, back to back until the eight are finished. Cheering and whistling from the gathered crowd.

Some shots as though from a top back corner of the bar room, looking down on the goings on. Alex shirtless playing pool, Simon slaps his ass which makes him jolt upright, then with both hands pushes Alex forward onto the pool table. Cut forward, Alex has tied his shirt around his head, and is clinking beer steins with Simon. Cut forward, Simon and Lucy vs Alex and Luise in a chicken fight as a ring of spectators eggs them on. Cut forward, fewer people here now, less rowdy; one person stumbles and then vomits on the floor. Cut, now just Simon,

Lucy, Luise, Alex, and Clyde who is sweeping up in the background.

Luise rolls over and reposes across Alex's lap, looking up at him.

LUISE

I don't... know what... I was going to say.

ALEX

Can I walk you home, Luise?

LUISE

My carriage...

Luise doesn't finish the thought.

Luise reaches up and puts her arms around Alex, and Alex hugs her back and stands the both of them up. With Alex looking over Luise's shoulder, Simon and Alex have a brief exchange with facial expressions. Simon makes a concerned inquisitive face while glancing at Luise, or the back of her head. Alex makes a scrunched up overly friendly face with a tiny head shake that says don't worry about it, not trying to do anything. Simon shrugs via his eyebrows and turns away. Alex and Luise walk out of the bar, Luise's arm draped over Alex's shoulders.

Back at the threshold of Luise's place. Luise is hanging off of Alex, while he tries to keep her at an arm's length. She sways around as she clings to him in various ways.

ALEX

Alright. Tonight was a lot of fun.

LUISE

"Fun," I didn't know you knew the word. Always so stiff. Shy.

ALEX

Well. That's not without a history.

LUISE

You should make EVERY night like this night. You'd be happier.

This rubs Alex the wrong way.

ALEX

I said it was fun, I didn't say I was happy.

LUISE

Oh stop.

Luise leans back, swinging back and forth and holding onto Alex's arm for support for a moment. She is pulling them both towards the door, but Alex is rigidly upright, unbudging.

ALEX

Are you good to make it inside on your own?

LUISE

Aren't you coming in?

ALEX

Luise. It's not like that.

LUISE

Yeeeeeeesss, come on, the fun could just be getting STARTED tonight.

ALEX *sighs through his nose.*

I'm saving up because I'm trying to get back to my sweetheart off-planet.

Luise gapes at him, lets go of his hand and finds her own balance.

LUISE

Why would you go and say something like that?

ALEX *no longer that friendly:*

It's true?

LUISE *scoffs.*

And what kind of man are you that you'd turn THIS down just because you have some floozy off—

ALEX

HEY.

Alex is about to continue, but checks his tone, and instead takes a few steps backwards away from Luise, ready to turn and start

heading back for his place. He opens his mouth to explain, then shudders and clenches his fists, and turns and leaves.

Fade back to the cockpit of the hijacked space jet. Alex is sitting with his back against the wall nearby the broom closet. On the floor around Alex and around the door of the broom closet, which is open a crack, are a multitude of dishes, some with some food left in them, others now mostly picked clean.

ALEX

And what I wanted to tell her was, heh, well, everything. How much my friend—I call him my friend, but he's more than that, you get me, Chip is his name by the way—

Sebastian is sticking an arm out of the closet, reaching for a food item that's out of reach. Alex leans over and slides it into Sebastian's reach as he keeps talking, not breaking the monologue.

ALEX *continued*:

I wanted to tell her how much my friend means to me, how much she was mischaracterizing the situation by calling him 'some floozy,' because that did upset me, I won't lie to you, and I know that's what she was going for, but she really struck a nerve, acting like my friend wasn't the world to me, that he wasn't the whole reason I sweat buckets every day there, to save up enough to get plans in motion to get to him. I suppose it seemed to me like she was really just refusing to grasp the idea that there is no joy in my life until he's in my life again. Anyways. That's why I hijacked your spaceship.

Sebastian's response is no longer muffled now that the door is open:

SEBASTIAN

Well, she's behind you now. And it sounds like Chip is ahead. If it were me, I'd say let the past be past. And as for the future, hey, I'm rooting for you.

ALEX

I appreciate that Sebastian.

Alex has a bite of a biscuit and a sip of water.

Then he looks down to his forearm: from his skin, a rectangular glow begins, and then a screen becomes visible. The way he holds the wrist of this arm with the hand of the other arm, we have both arms in the shot, and can see that he only shaves the left arm to keep the display clear. On the display are some alien-looking numbers, and on one side of the screen is a solid dot with concentric circles positioned around it; another dot fades in and out on the other side of the screen. The solid dot (representing Alex's location) is on a thick river-like line that passes nearby to the blinking dot (representing the freighter, which has enough power to give off the needed ping).

Alex lowers his arm and sighs through his nose. Cut to a shot whereby we can see Alex sitting against the wall, and can also the windshield out into space in the background.

Alex says something that is ostensibly an assuring statement to Sebastian, but is more a statement to himself:

ALEX

We'll be there soon.

Zoom past Alex, towards the windshield, until all that's seen is space.

Fade to a region of stars further into space, but still, nothing of note is visible.

Fade again to a yet further region, and we can see a star intensely occupying one side of the shot, but can also in the distance see the freighter, which is orbiting the star.

Fade to an establishing shot of the freighter. Saturn-like rings of debris from other space ships circle the large craft. On an

antenna atop the freighter, we can see a glowing light intensifying and fading at the same rate as the dot on Alex's forearm display. With this shot we begin to hear some of the ambient sounds of the freighter: electrical pops, electrical crackles, pressure creaks, deeper more intense hull groaning, unexplained machinery noises that sound like something ticking around in a dryer at times.

Fade to a shot of the antenna, to highlight it and to show the intense power cables that wind up to it in order to keep it going.

Fade to a shot panning across a portion of the hull of the ship, showing all of the battle damage.

Fade to a shot of the solar panels on one side of the ship, sizzling and creaking, some sections of the shot glaringly bright. A few of the panels are damaged, but most appear intact.

Fade to a shot inside of the ship, panning to the right across what would seem to have been some kind of mess hall. Tables and chairs are all strewn across the opposite wall. Frequently, metal tiles from the ceiling, walls, and floor are loose, peeling, or absent. Only some of the lights overhead work, leaving some sections of the mess hall dimmer as we pan across.

Pan slows and stops as at the bottom of the shot, we arrive at a metal grate with round parallel bars going across it, presumably to push water into when mopping. With the panning halted, we hear the clicking of canine claws approaching at a walk from the right. The legs appear in the shot and stop walking. The dog lowers himself, getting his belly hair and sheath into the frame, and we see him urinate into the grate for about 45 seconds. The stream is mostly strong, with only the last 5 or 10 seconds fading into some spurts. When he's done, he stands fully again and continues walking out of the shot to the left.

Shot of Chip at a 90 degree angle from the previous shot, at his eye level, showing him walking confidently towards the camera through the mess (he is probably right of the center of the shot

so that he's not walking DIRECTLY into the camera). The way he walks is not jovial; he walks like he is prowling for a fight. His dominance over this space should be felt by the audience.

Shot later in his walk, set behind Chip, as he walks through a hall towards a door which opens from the middle, elevator-style. He gives a loud aggressive bark at the ceiling above the door, hair on his back raising, and the door opens without him needing to break stride. We see past him that inside this room is some kind of large room filled with piping.

At a mop sink, Chip uses a paw to push the cold water faucet, and then drinks from the resulting stream, much of the water going past him and draining into the shallow basin and drain below. Close shot of Chip's ear, showing wiring going into it, presumably to hear comms. It is the only form of suit or technology that we see on him. After he has had a good drink, he takes a few steps, and does a big hacking cough down at the ground with intense eyes, getting speckles of water onto the cement floor. Then he shuts the faucet off, and walks out of the room.

High angle shot of Chip walking through a room midway through the walk to his next destination. The walk through this room is not drawn out, but takes enough time that the audience can question what it is that this room contains. On the floor are various bits of alien machinery, and strange symbols are burned into the surrounding floor and walls as though by sci-fi laser. Chip meanders around the machinery.

Shot of the cockpit. We hear the door (which is behind the camera) open, and hear the ticking of canine claws as Chip enters the cockpit from camera bottom. The door closes. Chip goes to the starboard pilot's seat, hops up, and sits down, staring out into space.

Fade to Chip slumped over in the chair, facing space.

Fade to Chip slumped over the other way, facing the port pilot's seat. Suddenly, a soft electronic bell chimes from the dash. Chip lets out an aggressive string of barks as though unwanted company is at the door. He hops down out of the starboard pilot's seat, makes the brief walk across the cockpit (all of the hair on his back is up), and hops up into the port pilot's seat. The electronic bell begins to chime again, but Chip interrupts it by slapping a button on the dash. When he speaks, green dots along his muzzle glow, but he does not have to move his mouth.

CHIP

Who goes there?

MATHIS

This is Captain Erick Mathis of the—

CHIP

Access to this airspace is categorically denied.

Beat.

MATHIS

Who am I speaking—

CHIP

DENIED.

Radio silence. Chip stares down at a sonar screen, which highlights easily enough where the approaching ship is coming from. Chip paws at a few buttons.

Camera lenses outside of the ship adjust.

In the cockpit, hologram displays appear around the port pilot's seat and empty starboard pilot's seat, showing the other craft.

Outer space shot, we can distantly-ish see the other ship, which looks to boast large amounts of cannons and such weaponry. Quickly zoom out from here and turn (movement as though it were a handheld camera) to an “over the shoulder” shot of the freighter, to establish that the other ship is a significant distance

away, but all things considered not too-too far away in the vastness of space.

CHIP

You are ordered to leave this airspace.

Beat.

MATHIS *some uncertainty*:

Is this Captain Chick I'm speaking to?

Chip sits more upright, suddenly a bit curious instead of aggressive. After the kneejerk reaction however, he becomes weary again.

CHIP

This is Co-Captain Chip Chick.

Cut to the interior of the control room of Mathis's craft, where several crew members are working at their individual stations, and a handful of people are working to research and feed Mathis lines. Upon hearing Chip's affirmative answer, Mathis gives a surprised huff of a laugh to himself.

Shot of one of the analyst's screens showing the heat signature of a dog, Chip, sitting in the freighter's cockpit.

Mathis presses the talk button on his headset.

MATHIS

Your reputation precedes you, Captain—

CHIP *distorted, as we are in Mathis's ship now*:

CO-Captain.

MATHIS *blowing smoke*:

Yes, co-captain. My apologies.

One of Mathis's analysts whispers into his ear that is not occupied by the headset. Mathis pushes the talk button again when the analyst is finished.

MATHIS

You wouldn't be looking for one Alex Chick, would you?

A string of aggressive barking comes through the headset, peaking the headset's audio. Mathis reflexively yanks the headset away from his ear, holding it at a distance.

Cut back to the freighter's cockpit. Chip is standing with his back legs on the port pilot's seat, front legs on the dash, hair raised and jowls up, showing his teeth. Close up shot of the teeth, and his muzzle dots glowing as he says,

CHIP

Put him on.

Return to Mathis's ship. Mathis is leaning in with an analyst to get the scoop.

UNDERLING

It's our best angle. From what we know, it would be a plausible story that Alex Chick was injured before recovery, can no longer speak.

Mathis stands upright and presses the talk button. For the first portion of this line, we also get a shot of another analyst's terminal screen which shows the wanted posters of Alex Chick and Chip Chick, for what appears to be a large sum of money.

MATHIS

As you might imagine, Alex wasn't in the best of shape by the time we scooped him up. I'm sorry to say it. But among the damages—some frostbitten fingers and toes, some atrophied muscles—it doesn't seem he can speak no more. But in writing, he was vehement we bring him to you.

Return to close up of Chip's raised jowls.

CHIP

If he's there, he'll give our deadman's phrase in Morse as well as he could aloud.

Return to Mathis, who is drawing a pistol. The analyst who told him the play sees this and begins to run, but stumbles over his chair and is scrambling to get back to his feet. During this, with his non-gun hand, Mathis presses the talk button.

MATHIS

Well, don't blame a man for trying to go about things with peace and civility.

Mathis takes his hand off of the headset, turns his head towards the analyst, and shoots him in the head. Several others jump slightly, but continue about their work. One worker goes to the body and begins dragging it away, lifting under the shoulders.

MATHIS

You know you're the first nonhuman wanted for more credits than you could buy my home planet with?

CHIP

Leave this airspace.

As Mathis goes on, we see gunners on Mathis's ship readying their instruments, and a shot of two assassins on the exterior of the ship activating cloaking devices and then leaping off into space.

MATHIS

It is a shame that no one, yourself included it would seem, knows where that Alex got off to. What you could buy with his bounty, well, it staggers even my—

Mathis is interrupted as through the command window, we see a brief but intense energy beam shoot just astray of Mathis's ship, followed immediately by an aggressive bark through the comms.

MATHIS

I'll take it that was a warning shot.

CHIP

I'll admit to you I missed. Stay right there for a second.

Mathis turns to another one of his analysts.

SECOND UNDERLING

He's bluffing, sir. Or he's full of himself. Our shields outclass anything that that freighter can hit us with.

MATHIS

Hm. What other leverage do we have for—

A brilliant light comes in through the window, followed a fraction of a second later by total white and the noise of a beam destroying Mathis's ship.

Return to the freighter cockpit. Chip watches the distant explosion with a snarl.

Cut to the two assassins outside, who turn and see the ship they had just come from getting obliterated. They are still cloaked, but we can see a slight shimmer. A few pieces of debris from the ship plink off of the two, each time briefly revealing the true image around that area before the cloaking can come back. After the brilliance has cooled down and all that's left of Mathis's ship is a few stray bits of smoldering wreckage, one of the assassins grabs the other's shoulder and then turns towards the freighter. The two begin towards the remaining craft, using little jet propulsions emanating from the shoulders and hip.

Return to the freighter cockpit. Chip is now sitting with apparent calmness, watching the last of the destruction of Mathis's ship. Calmly, he hops down from the pilot's seat, and leaves the cockpit.

High angle shots as though from surveillance videos of him going through halls of the ship.

Low shot looking into a small cell-like room with little more amenities than a bed; Chip walks into the room. With the same angle, cut forward to him midway through viciously tearing apart the mattress, its innards flying all over the small room. With the same angle, cut forward again to him leaving.

Close shot of the front of Chip focused in on his muzzle as he is walking back down the hall away from the cell; blood drips from his mouth, having injured his gums in the process of tearing the mattress apart.

Leave closeup. As he's getting to the end of the hall, his walk slows, and then he stops. He looks down, and sees drops of his blood on the floor. He gives them a tentative sniff and then a lick, and calmly continues on.

In a medical room, Chip puts his paws up on the counter, paws open one of the drawers, takes out a syringe with his mouth, removes the covering with his mouth, and then sticks his gums and depresses the syringe. He holds still for a beat. Then he lifts his mouth off of the syringe, stands still for a moment, licks his lips, and leaves the medical room.

In an armory, Chip gets himself into a space suit. It has a cool helmet that also has a laser but we don't know this yet uwu

Still shot of a wall in a random hallway that has laser marks burned into it. On the far left of the frame is a laser burn drawing of an exploding space ship. In the rest of the frame are laser burned tally marks, totaling in the fifties. Chip walks into the frame. Using the cool laser apparatus in his helmet he burns another tally into the wall. NOW we know that his helmet has a cool laser uwu

In the room with the mysterious alien machinery, Chip grabs a canister. His helmet has a couple of pincers, one along the left jaw and one along the right jaw, to grab things with. In this shot we get a closer look than before at some of the alien tech, and can discern based on the context of the previous shot that Chip

is the one who burned the markings into the floor and walls around the alien machinery.

Shot behind Chip following him into an airlock. The interior door closes. Air hisses for a brief moment. Then, gravity goes away; Chip seems very used to this. The exterior door opens, and Chip uses small jets on his suit to navigate out to one of the artillery cannons. There, he takes out a spent alien canister, and replaces it with the one he grabbed earlier. He looks longingly out into space.

Inside, Chip gets out of his suit again.

Chip enters the captain's quarters, a very lavish and comfortable-looking space. He hops up onto the bed, lays down on his side of the bed, and stares at a pair of leather gloves that rest on the other side of the bed.

Cut to white. Fade into the next scene, in the same way we did earlier to look at a part of Alex's history. Now it's time to see some of Chip's past. We montage through several scenes, brief insights into Chip's life before now.

Puppy Chip and several other puppies suckling on his mother.

Close shot of puppy Chip being held in the hands of a human who is walking.

Puppy Chip under anesthetic, having his vocal implants put into his muzzle.

Puppy Chip is awake, and chewing on a plush toy in the middle of a nondescript room. A salt and pepper bearded man in a lab coat sits in a plastic chair on one side of the room; the man presses a button on a remote control, and causes Chip's vocal apparatus to light up green, and for his voice to say "Ma Ma." Chip recoils, and paws at his muzzle confusedly. He stands alert for it to happen again. The man in the lab coat does press the button again, causing the voice to sound again. Puppy Chip

barks at the voice, which is very cute. The lab coat man changes the settings by pressing a different button, and then presses the main button again, now causing a single “Ma.” Puppy Chip waits, and then tilts his head. The button is pressed again. Puppy Chip waits. The button is pressed again. Puppy Chip barks. The button is pressed again. Puppy Chip hesitates a moment, and then of his own volition, says the second “Ma” with the apparatus. The button is pressed again, and this time Puppy Chip says the second “Ma” immediately. Puppy Chip then begins babbling, to the effect of, “Ma, Ba, Ma, Ma, Da, Na, Ma, Ma.” He is wagging and trying to turn his head to look at his muzzle and appears to be very pleased to be making these sounds. The scientist makes a note on a paper on a clipboard.

Puppy Chip lying in the corner in a different nondescript room. There is a toy nearer to the center of the room that he is not playing with. The door opens, and in the doorway stands Alex, younger and better put together than we have seen him at present. Incidentally he is wearing the leather gloves that Chip was staring at on the bed in the freighter; Alex is wearing the gloves in the majority of the rest of these scenes as well. Alex crouches down, and offers out a hand in a friendly manner. Puppy Chip does not approach. Alex playfully lowers himself to be lying down flat on his chest, putting himself at Puppy Chip’s level, and begins crawling towards Puppy Chip, keeping flat to the ground. Puppy Chip begins to wag, and cautiously makes an approach towards Alex as well. Alex extends out his gloved hand. Puppy Chip, rather than sniffing it, goes straight to puppy attack mode and bites a finger, and pounces and paws at the hand as he noms. Shot of Alex joyfully smiling at the aggressive little biter.

Some time later, Chip is still young but not a puppy-puppy. Alex holds out two closed hands side by side to Chip. Chip sniffs each hand and paws at one of them. Alex opens both hands to reveal that Chip ‘guessed’ correctly which hand was holding a treat. Chip eats the treat and wags.

Chip and Alex running side by side through an obstacle course, each of them bounding over slopes and hurdles and similar. We can see in the background that there are other human-dog pairings doing similar training on other obstacles.

Chip and Alex out in the woods, Alex lying relaxed on his chest right nearby Chip, who is lying on his chest as well but in a more ready-to-leap-up-at-any-moment way. Chip's ears tilt towards some tittering birds. Here we see a thing that Alex and Chip turn out to do a lot, especially as Chip was learning to speak English, which is that one of them will say something, and then the other will repeat it, imitating the tone, and the two of them will say the same phrase back and forth to each other a few times.

ALEX

Listening to the birds, Chip?

CHIP

Listening to the birds Chip.

ALEX

Listening to the birds Chip.

CHIP

Listening to the birds Chip.

Next cut, Chip strapped to Alex's chest, Alex standing in an airplane with a hand on the bar that runs along the ceiling, his hair rippling in the wind. Alex approaches the open door, clutches Chip protectively, and skydives out of the plane. Shot from far overhead as though still on the plane, looking down as a parachute deploys safely.

Chip and Alex running obstacles again, this time helping each other as well, Alex throwing Chip up over walls, Chip scrambling and then leaping off the other side, Alex catching him there and the two of them continuing to run on.

A series of face-down cups lined up, covering contents that Chip has to identify. At each one, he gives it a sniff, says what is underneath, gets a pat from Alex, and they move on to the next one. Chip barely still has puppyish features. When they've gone

through the whole line of them, Alex crouches down and gives Chip a big praising rub.

ALEX

You're killing it man.

CHIP *trotting at the praise:*

Killing it man.

ALEX

Yeah you are.

Chip and Alex jumping out of the plane again, this time they are still connected together with climbing rope, but Alex holds Chip instead of Chip being strapped tight to Alex's chest. Chip looks to be an adult dog at this point. A couple of other human-dog pairings can be seen in the plane as well, on deck to jump after Alex and Chip. Alex exits the door, holding Chip tightly. Cut to a shot from near Alex's feet looking up at him and Chip, floating down, chute already safely deployed. Alex holds Chip tight. Chip is wagging and licking Alex's face, and after a moment Alex gives in and reciprocates some of Chip's kisses.

Chip and Alex running obstacles. This time Alex has a pistol, and is shooting targets along the way. Chip assists by calling targets out to Alex before Alex has gotten to them, and Alex keeps Chip in the loop, telling him after each set of shots that the targets are "down."

Chip and Alex on a cutesy little picnic, sitting there with a basket at the edge of a field, near some woods. Other human-dog pairs are playing and training in the distance. The sun is shining. Alex does not have his gloves on in this scene.

ALEX

Beautiful day out.

CHIP

Yeah, it's a wonderful day. The heat brings out smells in ways that are surreal sometimes.

Alex has a submarine sandwich in his hands, loaded with pepperonis and other slices of meat. He tears off a big piece of it and offers it over to Chip in his palm. Chip scarfs it down, wagging.

Birds titter.

CHIP

Listening to the birds.

ALEX

Listening to the birds.

Alex tears off another piece and gives it to Chip, who again accepts it happily. Alex takes a big bite for himself now too.

Alex sets the sandwich down between them, not worried in the slightest that Chip is going to take it. Even if Chip did take it he wouldn't be bothered. Reaching into the basket, Alex takes out a plastic bag with some cooked pieces of bacon in it. He takes one piece out and hands it to Chip. Chip gobbles it up in snapping bites. Alex takes out a second piece and offers it to Chip too. Chip grabs the end of it with his mouth; Alex lets go; Chip doesn't eat it, and continues to hold it in his mouth. He looks at Alex and wags. Alex is amused, thinking that Chip is asking for permission to eat it for some reason.

ALEX

You can have it.

CHIP

YOU can have it.

Alex gives a little huff of a laugh that is both amused and also impressed at how suave this dog is. He leans in and grabs the bacon with his mouth; Chip releases the bacon; Alex eats the bacon, and then when he's swallowed, the two share a kiss. Alex takes another bite of his sandwich, and as he's chewing, tears off another piece for Chip, which Chip gobbles up as enthusiastically as before.

Briefly, Alex and Chip swimming, just for fun.

Briefly, Alex and Chip out on a walk through town in matching red safety vests, the both of them walking with confidence and charm through the bustle.

Briefly, a little lawn on the campus; Alex sitting cross-legged and tossing a rope toy up into the air for Chip, who catches it and hands it back to him.

Alex and Chip sitting down for a rest off to the side of some hiking trail. Alex is drenched in sweat, and nearby is a large backpack. Alex sits with his back against a sandstone rockface, slumped down far enough that he can comfortably drape his arm over Chip, who is lying down beside him. Chip tilts his head towards an airplane that is flying across the sky in the distance.

ALEX *exhausted*:

I love you Chip.

Chip wags very intensely, even as the rest of his body language remains calm.

CHIP

I love you too, Alex.

ALEX

You're the best friend I ever had.

Alex gives Chip's scruff a little rub.

A cozy room in a log cabin lit by fireplace. Here we see Alex unclothed on his elbows and knees, assuming the position; the shot can either show everything, or frame down to only show Alex from the torso forward. In either case, we see Chip put himself on top of Alex and mount him, grabbing him and beginning to hump, penetrating Alex; Alex is entirely pleased to be taking it, and is lost in euphoria as Chip goes about his business.

Afterwards, Chip gets off of Alex and turns around, and the two are stuck ass to ass. Alex is panting. The two chat, probably cutting back and forth to whoever is speaking.

ALEX

panting.

CHIP

Heh. Hey Alex.

ALEX

Yeah friend?

CHIP

My big fat dog cock is buried in your human crap hole.

ALEX *amused:*

Yeah. Yeah it is, Chip.

CHIP

That's pretty fun. I had a lot of fun.

ALEX

Heh. Yeah, me too.

CHIP

There must be so much cum in there. I busted so hard, oh my god.

ALEX

happy, panting.

White fade back to Chip lying on the bed in the captain's quarters, chin planted on the sheets, looking at Alex's leather gloves. Chip closes his eyes to go to sleep.

Outside, visible by their shimmer, the two assassins continue floating through space towards the freighter. Nothing develops at this moment, this is only a reminder that they are there. We turn away from them, and out into space.

Fade to an establishing shot of the jet.

Cut to inside of the cockpit. Alex is at the port pilot's seat, looking at his radar display on his forearm. Sebastian is handcuffed to a pipe nearby to where Alex made his coffee

earlier. Sebastian has a fruity mixed drink with a decorative umbrella sticking out of it. He sips on it with a straw.

Looking down at Alex's wrist, we see that he's very near to the pulsing dot.

Alex speaks over his shoulder back to Sebastian.

ALEX

We're about to exit the current. Should be smooth, but, fair warning and all that.

Sebastian toasts Alex with his drink.

SEBASTIAN

You seem like a very capable pirate, I trust you completely.

Alex flicks a few switches, uses the controls, and then through the windshield we see that we are suddenly within a star's solar system.

Alex stands, walks over to the starboard pilot's seat, and leans over a button. He presses it repeatedly, sending a phrase in Morse.

At the freighter, we see the pulsing light on the antenna stop pulsing and become a solid green, and see some lights on a dashboard in the cockpit become less intense, signaling that security is lowered.

As he's nearing the end of the transmission, Alex says under his breath what the transmission is.

ALEX

Reveille, Reveille. Listening to the birds, Chip.

Exterior shot of the jet.

Cut back to the freighter, where outside, the two assassins reach the hull. They turn down the cloaking on their suits to fifty percent. One of them places a disk onto the outside of the hull, which affixes to it via magnet. A semi-transparent mucky goo begins expanding outwards from the disk, clinging in a bubble to the side of the ship. The other assassin takes out a space knife, doing a cool spinning flourish with it; she puts her hand into the goo, and begins cutting a triangular hole into the hull. We can cut forward a little bit to when the cut is finished. The assassin who placed the disk grabs a handle on it, and pulls out the triangular piece, which floats around inside of the goo once free. The two assassins, whose names are Melody and Skinner, go through the goo and into the freighter's interior.

We get an extremely brief overview of both of their backstories as they enter the ship.

As they enter the ship's gravity, Melody's foot hits the ground, and we see three flashes of her past: a shot of her as a little girl, silhouetted as she watches her village engulfed in flame; a shot of her only slightly older, she has two prominent scars across her face, and is currently sparring against someone else with a sword, with impressive speed and technique; a shot of her as an adult taking a ticket out of a machine and then walking towards a space ship which stands looming in the distance.

Next, Skinner's foot hits the ground, and we see three flashes of her past: on a city street, her friend is arguing with a man and it's getting physical, when Skinner calmly points a pistol and shoots the man in the head; Skinner in a prison cell, matter of factly straightening her guard uniform in the mirror, as behind her we can see the bloodied body of the guard who she just got it off of; Melody in a space ship's cafeteria sitting alone, luggage at her side, dressed goth with her prominent facial scars and leaning back on her chair as she sips a juice box, Skinner walks past, pauses, goes back and forth on whether or not to double back, and then does double back and sit across from Melody.

In the freighter hull, Melody takes out a remote and presses a button on it. The disk outside whirs, and the grey goo sucks the triangular piece back into place on the hull; the goo fizzles and sears the piece back on.

Skinner places a hand on Melody's shoulder and leans in close to talk with her, even though it does seem that their suits have linked up comms.

SKINNER

Let's take our time with this one and find out what we've stumbled onto. The bounty on that dog is a fortune, but there's an aura of mystery tells me they're using a fortune to cheat us out of nirvana.

Melody and Skinner do a brief cool handshake, and then turn and begin stealthing their way through the ship.

Back at the jet, Alex pilots the craft into the freighter's docking bay. Emphasis is placed on the touchdown.

Alex uncuffs Sebastian, and is quick about backstepping away from him afterwards, putting himself closer to the exit. With a groan, Sebastian stiffly stands up, and then stretches, and then gives Alex a big, probably fake grin.

SEBASTIAN

Need anything else from me before you go? Cup of sugar? Word of advice?

Alex is already backstepping towards the door.

ALEX

Thanks for the ride, Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN

Of course, Alex, how could I have said no?

Alex steps down out of the jet, and begins jogging. He presses his forearm display and then speaks into it as he continues.

ALEX

Reveille, Reveille. Listening to the birds, Chip.

In the captain's quarters, Chip snaps out of a dead sleep straight up onto his feet.

CHIP

ALEX!

Now jogging his way through a hall, tears are coming to Alex's eyes as he responds.

ALEX

Good to hear your voice again, friend. Race you to the mess.

With that Alex drops down into a full sprint. Cutting back and forth between Alex and Chip as they sprint towards the freighter's mess hall, as a 90s alternative rock jam begins; In the Meantime by Spacehog or similar; this is probably the first music we have heard in the show.

Chip and Alex enter the mess hall from opposite sides and sprint into each other's arms, Chip leaping onto Alex and licking him and Alex sitting there on the ground and giving Chip frantic rubs and praise. We do not hear what they are saying to each other, the visuals and the soundtrack convey the sentiment of it.

Chip and Alex hug each other, Alex wrapping his arms tight around Chip, and Chip throwing his paws over Alex's shoulders and clinging too; Chip continues licking, licking the back of Alex's neck.

With the song continuing to play, we get a montage of Chip and Alex doing work around the ship.

Alex sweeping up dog hair off of the cockpit floor as Chip sits in the starboard pilot's seat watching.

Alex working on wiring in a wall panel, Chip helps by holding tools. Overhead lights that had been out come back on. Chip wags.

Chip and Alex in a cargo room making out. Over the shoulder shot of Melody and Skinner in the air vents overhead watching.

In the docking bay (shot such that we don't know if the jet has left or not), Alex tossing a rope toy up, and Chip catching it and handing it back a couple times.

In a workout room, Alex doing pushups, and then Chip runs up and starts humping him. They are probably just playing, and they also probably already took care of that particular business off camera by this point, but in any case we don't see what does or does not happen from there in the workout room at that time.

Chip and Alex making out in a pipe room.

Chip and Alex making out near a window.

Chip and Alex making out on a table in the mess.

Music fades a bit, but continues to play in the background. Chip and Alex are straight chilling in the cockpit, Alex in the port pilot's seat, Chip in the starboard pilot's seat. Alex has his feet up on the dashboard and is idly doing something with his hands, perhaps shuffling a deck of cards or twirling a pen.

ALEX

All this time, and you stayed pretty much in the same place.

Didn't move on with the journey.

CHIP

No. Of course I stayed here.

ALEX

Why's that?

CHIP

I knew you were coming back.

Alex tosses aside whatever he was doing, crosses the cockpit, and goes to his knees beside Chip's seat. The two do a big smooch, and then we cut to black.

As a sort of epilogue, Chip does some voice over teasing the next episode.

Panning shots of the freighter's exterior.

CHIP (VO)

In the next episode: how DID these two dashing men end up with a freighter all to themselves? I'll give you a hint, it's stolen, and the cargo isn't just bolts and frozen hamburgers. Also, who are these two others I've been smelling around the ship? Why hasn't Sebastian left?

Skinner stealing a bag of chips from a pantry.

Sebastian leaning against his jet in the docking bay, smoking a cigarette.

Panning exterior shots again.

CHIP *continued*:

How much dog cum WOULD fit in Alex's ass if I could bust forever? Gallons? Infinity? These are the questions. The answers, may or may not be forthcoming.

POEMS

A Friend

A friend who'll always get you off because he wants your nut
A friend who when invited to will gladly lick your butt
A friend who tells you what he needs
A friend who's always there
A friend who meets your snuggling needs
A friend with really nice hair
A friend who in the presence of you can safely pee or fart
A friend who in the absence of there's a tugging at your heart
A friend to share a routine with
A friend you think is hot
A friend to share a lifetime with
A friend you kiss a lot
A friend whose nurturing picks you up when you are down and
out
"Man's best friend with benefits" is an apt name without doubt

Dog Sex Mattress

Here lies the mattress—

Dog Sex Mattress—

Where a human and a dog,

Not one time,

Not a couple of times,

Not even a few times,

But a lot of times,

Had really enjoyable sex with each other.

One of them was a female human and the other was a male dog

But this didn't stop either of them from having sex with each other.

Sometimes he would lick her vagina and she would cum.

Sometimes she would give him a handjob and he would cum

Though they usually did this on the floor, not the mattress.

Sometimes they would make out while she fingered her vagina.

Sometimes she would give his big red penis a blowjob after she had given him a handjob,

Though this usually occurred where the handjob had occurred,

Which was not usually on the mattress.

One time they had sex for two entire hours of licking and kissing and humping;

Some of this had occurred on the mattress,

Or while hanging halfway or three quarters of the way off of the mattress,

Though most of it had incidentally occurred in the kitchen.

From another perspective

Dog Sex Mattress could be called Human Sex Mattress

Or Bestiality Mattress, or other names like that.

Food Court Meal

Today I had to run an errand,
And in the afternoon I found myself in a food court.
I ordered a burger made of fake meat for lunch.
I sat down at a little one- or two-person table,
Unwrapped the burger, and started examining
Which parts I would pick off to give to you:
The parts with more of the meat, even if it is fake;
The parts with no slivers of onions.
Then I remembered that you were not here with me.
It made me appreciate how much I like to share a meal with you.

Afterglow

The dapple sunlight falling on your fur
when we go out to pee
after we have had sex
(which was a lot of fun,
thank you,)
makes you appear
angelic.
You really look,
in that second,
beyond that which should be possible.

10 Years

“Where do you see yourself in ten years?” I don’t think I would have thought to say that I would be lying comfortably on my back on the floor in the dark, butt ass naked so that it is quite apparent that the floor under me is coated with dog hair, my feet and calves in the bathroom on the glossy wood floor while the rest of my body from there up lies on the carpet of the hall, and looming immensely down from above me and deigning again to masterfully make out with my small and tipsy face is a one hundred and twenty pound Casanova of the studliest of studly dogs who is, as I once heard it put, “my love, my moon or more.” (It was a less flattering meaning there ultimately, in the original context, though I take the good poetry and apply it here instead to an unapologetically giddy whale of a season of our shared life, me and him.) It’s hard to believe that he is not the same dog who I felt such a life devotion to ten years prior—though, in my defense, I do not really feel either that I was the same human then as I am now today with the advantage of now having had ten more years to develop maturity and cultivate something that in some fields at least might convincingly approximate wisdom. I would never imagine that I would have such a rapport, such moves, as I do with this unabashedly self-pleased canine, and that he would have such a rapport and such moves to use on me and get me to go along with his desires and pleasures which unfailingly rub off and become my desires and pleasures too. How rich I have become getting to partake in the pleasures afforded not just my own animal genus’s birthright of occupations and pensive mutterings, but his joyful genus’s antics and revels as well. Where do I see myself in ten years? I don’t think I would have thought to say heaven.

VOLUME 1, ISSUE α ;

WINTER SOLSTICE 2023.

In this issue,
good wishes are given to a specific dog,
and C-suite debates virtual bestiality.

*Featuring the stories: Wish Knots, Hal, Mindy, Ice Pick,
and VR Policy Minutes, as well as a few poems.*

WISH KNOTS

Zadam squinted out of the mouth of the tunnel, looking at the cable which swung in the wind, suspended from this cliff face to the next across the vast canyon. The whitecap waves churned far below, and the clouds themselves were in a hurry. Once in a while, the wind cut around to face the mouth of the tunnel head-on, and Zadam's loose-fitting garments all fanned out as though he were some exotic bird affronted. He was glad for the cap he had brought, with the flaps on the sides that drooped down to protect the ears, and the little knit ropes that he tied off under his chin.

Chom sat beside him. He had wrapped the dog in one of their bedding sheets, in the face of the wind, to protect the Chocolate Lab's ears. The dog had seemed appreciative at first, and had wagged, and leaned close against Zadam while in the blanket. After some while though, the dog began wrestling with the sheet to free his legs, and so Zadam had assisted the dog in taking it off and stowing it back in their pack—the pack with both of their traveling things in it, which Zadam carried.

The cable car still wasn't coming. Zadam entertained some comical idea of going across the cable hand over hand. Even if he wore his mittens, his fingers would be shredded before he made it a tenth of the way across merely this canyon, to say nothing of the rest of the way through the tangle of canyons that the cable wound through. And what of Chom, if he were to try to go hand over hand across the cable? No. It was only a silly thought. If the cable car truly wasn't coming, if they truly did

end up sitting here all through this day, as they had the last, then as tiresome as it would be, he would arrange a new car himself, going all the way back through the tunnel to the green woods, and making something of the wood there. If the cable itself was broken in some inopportune place, then he and Chom would not be able to get through to the shrine until it was properly into Winter in some months' time, when the water below would be frozen through, solid enough to walk across.

Another idea came to Zadam. He looked down at the length of white string which he held in his hands, a piece about three feet long. Small stoppers were tied at random intervals in the string's length, little knots, each knot glowing green in the dim light of the tunnel, where he and Chom sat some dozen feet in from the tunnel's end, where the mouth left off on a large cliff face, and a bad gust of wind could have pulled them off down into the water, were they foolish enough to sit with their legs and whiskers dangling over in this kind of blustery evening.

Zadam began tying another small knot in the string, in a gap between two of the existing knots. He pulled the knot tight slowly, slowly, slowly, and as he did, he said to the string, "I hope Chom will find our bed a pleasant comfort to get back to, when we get back."

The new knot glowed green, at those words. Chom wagged. Zadam smiled to the dog.

That was the game of it, while they waited here: finding things to say that were positive hopes for Chom, that would not sound to Chom like immediate promises aimed towards him. Something like "I hope Chom gets a treat" would be mean to bring up, if there was nothing on offer. Something like "I hope Chom gets a big good meal when we get back," was enough for the dog to understand that it was something about him, that there was goodness aimed towards him, but that it was on the condition of them getting somewhere.

Zadam prepared another knot, and as he pulled it tight slowly, slowly, slowly, he said to the string, "I hope Chom enjoys the ride in the cable car."

This knot began to glow green as well, and Chom again wagged.

Wish knots, they were called. A sort of talent, a gift possessed by the people of the Shrine of Levat. Tying a certain knot, whether in a heavy rope or in a thin piece of string, if one with the talent for wish knots spoke a kind and genuine wish into the knot, the knot would glow. The glow lasted for about a month persistently, and then would begin to fade, taking a day or two to wilt away to a mundane stopper. The tying of a wish knot did not cause the wish to come true, nor did the knot offer any judgment of what was done to itself after its creation: it was, in fact, a common trade for the elderly, to create ropes and nets of wish knots to be sold as decorations. Out in the world outside of the shrine, as Zadam and Chom were returning from—or, attempting to return from, waiting to return from—the talent of tying wish knots was useful for proving some association with divinity.

The wish knots could glow in many colors, each with their own unique meaning.

Red: A wish for something good to happen for a parent.

Blue: A wish for something good to happen for a child.

Bright Blue: A wish for something good to happen for a bird of the sky.

Violet: A wish for something good to happen for a quadruped which grazes the field.

Orange: A wish for something good to happen for a plant.

White: A wish for something good to happen for a lover.

Brown: A wish for something good to happen for a friend, a brother, a sister, or a cousin.

Green: A wish for something good to happen for Chom.

There were some other fine color distinctions, a yet-brighter-blue corresponding to a wish towards the weather, and other relations one could also use to arrive at brown, but it was a well remarked upon fact that a pure Green had, for the hundreds of years of the talent existing, gone uncreated, until such a time as Zadam had made a kind and genuine wish for Chom: The first wish, Zadam hardly able to grow facial hair then and Chom just a puppy, had been a wish that Chom enjoy the new toy that Zadam was planning to buy for the pup when he went in to the market that day. Zadam had then brought the surprising green knot to the temple and was subjected to several important

conversations about it, but aside from all of that, Chom had liked the toy very much, a teddy bear whose brown coat matched his own tone of brown Chocolate Lab hair. If there was a greater criteria for creating green, anything more to the category, it yet remained unknown: if anyone made a wish for good to befall this Chocolate Lab specifically, the wish knot glowed green.

Zadam, though once looking at a simple lifetime as a weaver, became something of a curiosity for being the first creator of a green wish knot, even if others proved just as easily to be able to do it, if they too could come up with a true wish for the dog. And so, well provided for by the temple, he began to study oration and philosophy, recommit himself to his religious studies towards Levat, their goddess of storms, and in time he became an ambassador.

He had secured two good trades, previously, with nearby tribes, and for the shrine's use obtained many tools crafted of iron, in exchange for elaborately written upon scrolls which, when burned, would allow those tribes to petition Levat. She was a deity who very reliably answered when called, and in fact often did more beyond what had been asked of her: There were legends of storms that had lasted in one place an entire year round, and legends of roving storms from centuries ago which went around the lands still. Her reputation was ubiquitous, and Zadam, in garments adorned in glowing strings, had found that those first two ambassadorial trade endeavors had gone well.

This last one that he and Chom were now returning from had not gone well.

Zadam turned his gaze up from his three foot string, and pitched his hands above his eyes to look better into the glaring daylight outside of the tunnel: across the vast canyon, a cable car was approaching over the cable.

"They're here," Zadam said to Chom.

Chom wagged, got up, and started pacing back and forth in the tunnel, sniffing variously at the human and at the pack, and the few items of food and comfort they had set out there nearby them, indicating to the human all of the things that should not be forgotten.

Zadam did indeed begin collecting everything up.

He stepped to the mouth of the tunnel and waved for a moment. Then he went back to where Chom politely sat, nearby the pack. He knelt there beside the dog, the both of their heads level with one another, looking at the approaching cable car.

As they waited, Zadam prepared one more wish knot in his string. As he pulled the knot tight slowly, slowly, slowly, he said to it, "I hope they will not kill me."

The knot glowed green. Chom did not give any impression of being pleased or displeased with the words—no wagging, also no concerned glance from those big orange eyes—but Zadam smiled at seeing the knot turn green. It was true: that wish, too, was for Chom.

Zadam tipped his head over to nuzzle the dog once, and then turned and gave the dog a big smooch on the top of the head. Chom wagged, and turned and licked Zadam's face, and the two kissed for a while. They did stop before the cable car's operator would have been close enough to see them, in their position in the shadows back in the tunnel. Not that there was any secret. Chom had bred with many of the female dogs in the Shrine of Levat—it was Chom's pleasure, as well as the pleasure of any owners who wanted a litter descended from the dog who was the source of so many green points of light that hung around the shrine. But it was known that Chom's love mate was Zadam. That the dog's phallus had spent more time inside of Zadam than inside of any one member of his own species. That Chom and Zadam were inseparable, at some times quite literally. The people of the Shrine of Levat were a stormy people, and loud public displays celebrated: uproarious laughter, shouting spitting anger over stubbed toes or pinched fingers, loudly moaned curses over aching joints, singing, dancing, and sexual intercourse, it could all be seen walking around the shrine's streets. Zadam had many memories of being on his hands and knees at dog level, his flowing garments lifted up so that which covered his legs instead hung up around his stomach, with Chom facing the opposite way behind him, their posteriors touching, the two of them on the side of a public street where Chom had gotten to be in the mood to show off to the people, and indeed, many people standing upright overhead above the dog and the bent human passed by going about their business,

and many glanced down to the two of them. Many seemed to be conceiving of good wishes to use later, or indeed spoke them to strings or ropes right there, and with a smile showed their new green lights to Zadam, who would smile back and bow his head in recognition and thanks.

The cable car came close enough that Zadam could see the face of its operator: Oifim, who was indeed usually the one who took the cab out to check for people arriving. The man was built like a bear, and wore a grand moustache that curled upwards to each side like scimitars adorning his smile.

The cable car arrived into the tunnel, and Oifim stepped out, stretching and giving a loud groan which echoed down the tunnel behind Zadam and Chom's backs. Chom went up to the cable car driver and began sniffing him up and down, tail flying back and forth behind him. Oifim stopped his stretch short, and brought his hands down to the dog, rubbing the dog's ears and petting down the Chocolate Lab's back.

Oifim then looked up to Zadam, and bellowed, "WELCOME BACK!"

Zadam answered, "SHE GIVES!"

The humans each slapped their hands against their own breasts and then raised their arms upwards in Vs.

Chom returned to Zadam's side, as Zadam hefted up his pack. He carried it over to the cable car, and began securing it to the small cargo shelf, using the ropes already tied to the car nearby the shelf—there were also ropes within his pack that he could have dug out, if they had been needed. The people of the Shrine of Levat were a people quite glad to carry ropes, and strings.

"How did it go?" Oifim asked.

Zadam answered, "Dreadfully."

"Oh."

Zadam sighed, and then stood from the secured pack, and said, "I'll tell you on the way."

Zadam opened the rear compartment of the cable car for Chom. Chom leapt in, and stood inside on the cushioned seat. Zadam closed that door and secured it, and he and Oifim climbed in to the front.

Oifim asked, "Are you weary from travel?"

"I will push and I will pull."

“Many thanks.”

The two humans both leaned forward, and grabbed the bar which ran across the cable car in front of their seat. Together, the two of them pressed it forward, and began turning the crank, and the car began to move backward on the cable, retreating out of the mouth of the tunnel, soon leaving the tunnel behind as the men pushed and pulled.

“So,” Oifim began, as they were halfway across this first chasm. “Krenna and Ogen’s men had no interest in storms after all?”

“They did, I think.”

“Oh?” Oifim prodded. As they talked, they did not stop at turning the crank bar. There was a momentum to it that made the work easier while the car was already in motion. Oifim mentioned, “They did quite some work getting a messenger to us.”

“They did. But when I arrived to the conference with their ambassadors, we did not get to the point of talking about storms and trade before I left.”

Zadam left the statement at that. He would gladly never talk about what had happened, if no one would ask him.

There was a long ride ahead of them, and he did not think too confidently about his odds of getting through it unasked.

But he left it at that, not saying what had happened.

Oifim asked, “What happened?”

Zadam turned away to face outward, and shouted, “HELLS! RATS! ROT! SHIT!”

The canyon walls spoke back to him in a chorus of his own voice, on hells, rats, rot, and shit.

Oifim suggested, “If you don’t want to speak on it, we will not.”

“I will,” Zadam answered. “It is a story I will have to tell many times in the coming days, at this rate. I may as well find out the words of it.”

“All the time you need,” Oifim said.

The two continued on in silence, as the cable car swung back and forth in the wind, until they had arrived at the wall opposite the tunnel mouth. There they slowed, for a turn in the cable, and

then continued on along the canyon's side, as they would go along for the next mile.

Zadam told his tale.

"Krenna and Ogen are of course quite far. Well beyond the trees that we know, off into lands of hard grass and sand. Little of substance lives there, other than the men themselves who live there. There are no squirrels or birds. There is no possibility of growing crops, and even quadrupeds which graze the field cannot eat the grass there, it is too harsh for them. The men, quite alone as lifeforms, eat the manna of their god Vinyok, a rather tasteless substance, like hard grain, but which can be mashed and then baked into a rather tasteless bread. From the manna, they also ferment beer, so that they might get drunk.

"My mate and I arrived upon the place of the conference one day as the sun was beginning to set, and darkness beginning to rise across the desolate grounds. A circular edifice made of pale stones, large enough that sport could be played inside of it, though not so large that much of an audience could be contained within it to watch them. One and twenty tents surrounded, of various constructions, all small personal dwellings.

"Outside of the edifice, where the meeting would be to take place, several of the men, including the three ambassadors I was to speak with, stood around a large fire. Fires, too, were spawned of a liquid substance from their god Vinyok: they stood there in the desert around a flaming puddle. When my mate and I arrived, I bade him linger behind as I approached first.

"The men greeted me cordially, we all bowed to one another. They gave me bread and water, and uttered assurances that they looked forward to making agreements the following day. I made no objection, of course. I had come a long way to arrive there, the meeting did not need to be done that hour. Maybe if I had insisted it be done that hour, I would in fact be returning with racks of fine rapiers and drums of liquids which generate fire. I agreed to what they suggested though, uttering assurances that I looked forward to the following day as well.

"It became apparent to me that the men were drunk, and that they intended to continue drinking around the fire throughout the night. Though I did drink from their offered water, I had

none of their beer or bread. I told them again I looked forward to the next day, and I began to leave, telling them truthfully that I hoped to set up my tent while there was yet light.

“The men then pleaded, stay, stay, there is a tent empty for you, tonight we shall feast. I assured them that I appreciated their offer, but that I preferred my own dwellings. Truly I more believed my mate would better enjoy our familiar dwellings, and truly I had been away from him for some time by this point and desired to haste back to him to assure him that all was well.

“The men would not give me a polite moment to leave, and pleaded more, stay, stay, tonight we shall feast, bring forth your beast and we will cook it expertly.

“Were it a quick thing to do, I could have been moved to call down storms from Levat upon them at that very instant. Still, being an ambassador, and having come a long way to get a job done that was better done with good impressions, I merely told them, the dog is not an offering, I will not allow him to be eaten.

“They insisted, pleading, you will have to bring it no further, it will be a good taste unto us, we will have a glad celebration as we eat and drink. My responses that the dog would not be eaten were talked over. Though no polite moment was given to me to leave, I turned and left all the same, even as they jeered at my back. I will note I did not see swords among any of them, or I may not have been so bold as to make my exit with my back turned. I returned to my mate, and did not deceive him that I did not like what had just happened, but I did tell him that we would get through it all the same.

“An appreciable distance from any of the men’s structures, I set up our tent. The mouth faced their structures, and my mate and I sat within the tent and watched for any man to approach, though none did. When night fell, my mate and I fled the tent, sealed it up behind ourselves, and retreated far back into the barren lands, until finding a gully to pass the night in in hiding.

“In the early morning, my mate and I began towards the edifice and its grounds once more. Through the night, I had been wracked with tempestuous doubts in one direction and then the other, again and again as a flag in dire winds. I had, by the morning, decided that I would still meet the men as I had

come to, and with talk, smooth over any bad impressions, on either of our sides, from the night before.

“When I came over a ridge, and could see the edifice, I witnessed that no man stirred save for the three ambassadors, who stood at the entrance of the edifice with scabbards.

“Clearly, they were intent on rectifying the last night, by killing my mate at that moment, likely with the assistance of the other men who I believe were not still sleeping, but were lying in ambush, within the nearby tents and within the edifice.”

The two men in the cable car pushed and pulled on the metal bar in front of them for some while without speaking.

As they left the side of the canyon to begin the next crossing, across an intersecting canyon, Zadam concluded, “I did not attend the conference. I turned and left with my mate, believing at that point that the best I could hope to accomplish would be to not lose an asset to Levat. That much, returning him safely, is all that I can say proudly I have done.”

A stronger wind rocked the cable car greatly for a moment, as the two men continued to push and pull.

The car swung, and swung, many times, and then eventually settled to its small rocking.

The cable car driver responded, “You have brought back two assets to Levat: You brought back yourself as well. If such was the conduct of those men, there was no conference at all, and then, no conference you failed to attend to.”

The two men each clapped their nearby arms over each other’s shoulders.

As they got back to devoting all arms to turning the crank, Oifim began to tell Zadam of all the goings on since he had left, promotions, new couples, losses, new structures, new theories on the shrine’s images, new songs, and a new play which he did not tell of in too many details, to preserve the joy of the surprises of it, but he shared that it was worth stopping in to.

Night had fallen by the time the cable car arrived at the shrine. Sprawling over a vast plateau, protected within a yet vaster landscape of canyons, the shrine itself had many arms and nooks and facets, besides all of the homes of thatched roofs and stick walls, and other facilities that had been built on the plateau as well.

Zadam went to the back of the cable car and let Chom out. Chom leapt upon Zadam, and stood on his hind legs as Zadam held his forepaws, and the two of them kissed. Chom then trotted ahead to sniff around.

On the platform the cable car had come to, several ropes hung across the edges of the platform, to mark the dropoff. The ropes were tied with wish knots, which glowed in a variety of colors: often at places of symbolic importance, such as here, the entrance to it all, an effort was made to include every color. Zadam's heart was warmed to see where one of the rope's knots glowed green, the color for good wishes for Chom. They had been away longer than the duration that these glowing knots lasted: someone, while Chom had been away, had sent the Chocolate Lab good wishes.

Zadam grabbed his pack off of the cable car, and put it on.

"Many thanks," Zadam said, to the cable car driver.

"I serve," Oifim answered, and smiled below his moustache.

Ahead, there was a wide stone staircase, leading up towards the main thoroughfares of the shrine. However, beside the stairs, was an unassuming doorway, a tunnel used none too frequently, but which would take Zadam and Chom beneath the bustle of the shrine, and, with the right turns within the tunnel taken, deposit them into the quiet outskirts where their home was.

Oifim stammered, "Oh ah, taking the, that way?"

Zadam, stopped by conversation, turned to Oifim, and answered, "We are weary, more than I had let on before. Whatever tomorrow may bring, it will bring, and we will face it all then. For now, I hope to get us the last of the way to home. Though this passage is a little longer in its turns and doubling back, I worry at what or who might stay us if we march about above."

"Good!" Oifim said. "Yes, I, I was going to suggest—yes, well, good, good. I will not be the one to stay you either."

"You I would forgive for it, you have moved me quite a ways."

Oifim bellowed out a laugh, and bade the two, "I hope the best for the return of these mates to their den."

Zadam bowed, and then made towards the passage, Chom following beside.

In spite of his travel-sore body, Zadam found himself running, skipping, with Chom prancing alongside. Zadam let out cheers, and Chom echoed some of them in barks, as the two made their way through, below it all. “WE’RE HOME!” Zadam shouted, and the halls echoed back an affirmation in his own voice, “home-home-home...”

When the two emerged out into a forest, dark and with the sound of a few crickets around, Chom wagged as he did a big circle around some trees, and then lead the way towards their dwelling.

Their home was not anything grand, but indeed much like the others. Walls made from sticks, that the wind may pass in. A roof overhead. And, all that Zadam looked forward to just then, a bed. A bed which he and his mate had spent so many nights cuddled together on, and, although the cuddles in their tent had been perhaps even closer as they cozied in for body heat, it would be nice to be in their den again, as the cable car driver had so rightly put it.

Coming through the woods, Zadam felt confused at something: ahead, something in the night shined brightly, brighter than anything he could recall being in this area—he had thought they were nearly home. He continued to march ahead, until finally, he came upon it: his den, Chom’s den, covered inch by inch from rooftop to floor in nets of green wish knots. The green points of light covered the home, and swept out over the yard, a glowing floor of good wishes to the dog.

There also in the yard, some tables were set out, and many of Zadam’s friends—and a very out of breath Oifim—were gathered. Seeing the arrival of the dog and the ambassador, several of the friends blasted trumpets. Chom ran around between everyone, his body bending to one side and then the next as he wagged so hard at all of the petting and praises and familiar people.

Zadam’s best friend, Caua, stepped away from the excitement surrounding Chom, and towards Zadam, who lingered there at the edge of the woods.

She shouted, “WELCOME BACK!”

He answered, “SHE GIVES!”

The humans each slapped their hands against their own breasts and then raised their arms upwards in Vs.

As Caua brought her arms down, she made a passing swipe at messing up Zadam's hair.

She said to him, "Heard you had a rough time. We'll save the celebrating for tomorrow, and leave you to bed. Good to see you back."

Zadam made the rounds among his friends, as Chom already had, sharing quick thanks and good wishes.

Many odds and ends of meats and breads were shared with Chom, and the dog ate well. Zadam declined any of it for the time being, and all the more of it went to the dog.

And, true to their word, Caua and Oifim and the rest were soon all departed, leaving the tables on the yard in preparation of the next day, but leaving the mates to their rest until then.

Zadam took off his pack, and set it down outside by the front door.

He opened the door for Chom. The Chocolate Lab went inside first, and sniffed around at the little table, the trunks, the shelf, the basin, and the bed. Arriving at the bed, the dog did not turn away to investigate anything further, but rather, crawled up onto the bed, laid down on his side of it, and looked up at Zadam.

Zadam undressed from his light garments, and crawled onto the bed, and snuggled there with his mate. As a wind blew through the walls, Zadam and Chom were plenty warm in one another's embrace, sound asleep together through the night.

HAL, MINDY, ICE PICK

You assuredly already know what I'm about to say. The basics, anyways. You learn everything you need to know about multiverse theory in middle school, if you didn't already pick it up intuitively from the books you read in elementary school. And all of what I want to tell you doesn't require understanding anything more than the basics. The way timelines work is in a tree structure. Nothing more to it than that. Things are going along for a few days, and then somewhere in the world, something happens to where, if it goes one way then we go on to one universe where it went that way, and if it goes the other way then we go on to one universe where it went the other way.

Some people would argue that universes rejoin: they propose mechanisms such as mass amnesia to account for discrepancies of merging two branches back together, people mostly not remembering anything that would cause suspicion. I want to nip this in the bud right now: universes only branch outwards. Once they split, there's no going back.

There are vast treasure troves of records of these node points, thousands of stories to be told about big historical moments that could have gone one way or the other, and caused big changes from one universe to the other. You've probably heard a lot of the big stories of the big ways things could have gone. But I wanted to tell you a lesser talked about story of one of these node points. Maybe you've heard it, maybe you didn't: if you did, the person telling you about it was probably giggling to himself, and you thought he was pulling your leg. Or he was a

professor, and praying that you and his other students would be mature enough to not all begin giggling about it and turn the would-be informative lecture into a circus. But let me tell you about what is colloquially known as the Hal node.

We begin on a rainy day in a touristy small town in America. There's a lake nearby, and many folks under umbrellas and ponchos speed walking to get under some kind of shelter from the weather. All up and down the street are little souvenir shops, packed with coffee mugs and key chains and you name it that you can buy to say you visited.

One such visitor on that particular rainy day was Hal. He sat at a restaurant's outdoor seating, a few tables tucked into what could generously be called a spacious alley between that restaurant and Souvenir Shop Number 20 adjacent. In front of him was a big plate with three burgers on it, one burger mushroom and swiss, one burger classic cheddar, and one burger chipotle. He had just gotten his food, and was still working on the mushroom and swiss, giving a bite to Hal'vrick, and then a bite to Hal'ig while Hal'vrick was chewing, using one hand to then give a bite of the mushroom and swiss to Hal'stothoron while using the other hand to get Hal'vrick a drink of water to wash his bite down.

As Hal'ig and Hal'stothoron were finishing the last bites of the mushroom and swiss, and Hal'vrick was having some of the Coke they had ordered, the waitress who had served him escorted another diner out to the outdoor seating, there in the spacious alley, which did have a covering overhead to protect from the rain, I will add, if that wasn't apparent enough. This second outdoor diner's name—or fourth outdoor diner's name, depending on your philosophy when it comes to counting hydras—was Mindy.

Once seated, Mindy was asked if she needed a moment to look over the menu, but Mindy said nope, a friend had come here last month and had said you had to try the chipotle burger, and so that was what she was going to order. The waitress—incorrectly, if it's of interest to you, although it wasn't an intentional lie—said that the kitchen had just run out of chipotle sauce. Mindy and the waitress both said their oh-no's over it, and after a brief look over the menu, Mindy ordered a regular

classic cheddar burger and some fries and a Coke. The waitress wrote it all down, and headed back inside.

Hey, even if you haven't heard this story before, you can probably guess the next step of how things progressed from there. Hal'ig called out, "Excuse me, ma'am!" and got Mindy's attention. Mindy looked. Hal'ig offered that he had apparently gotten the last chipotle burger, and said that he hadn't touched it, and that she could have it if it meant anything to her. In her day to day life, Mindy probably wouldn't have taken him up on it. In his day to day life, Hal probably wouldn't have offered. But they were both vacationing, both on excuses to do things a little out of the ordinary, and so Mindy got up, and sat down with Hal. There indeed was the untouched chipotle burger there on his plate.

The two—or four—hit it off right away. Watching as a bystander—as one woman did, Jessica Thom, though she's not a part of this story in any meaningful way—you'd have thought that Hal and Mindy were already life long friends and that they had just bumped into each other. In truth, it was their first time meeting, and in some branches of the multiverse they would never meet again after that day, while in others they would find themselves a part of one another's lives for at least some while afterwards.

The split, the chief thing that characterizes the Hal node, did not happen there at lunch, even if intuitively, after you've heard the rest of this story, or if you have already heard it, you might look back and think that there should have been a split there at lunch too. And I mean, sure, it's a chaotic-looking affair, watching a hydra eat his lunch, but if you are a hydra and have been doing it all your life, it's about as natural to them as chewing for one is to you. It is true that various heads took over as Hal and Mindy were eating lunch, but it wasn't in a chaotic and random way, it was all very calculated and purposeful. Hal'ig, the most brazen speaker, did much of the talking, except for when a softer touch seemed better suited to the conversation, and then Hal'vrick would take over for a line or two as Hal'ig got to eat. Even though Hal had just the one stomach, it was a fortunate thing that a hydra's stomach has the appetite to match his number of heads.

We don't need to get into the personal lives of these people all that much, I mean, the details of what they talked about as they were eating are really neither here nor there. If it's helpful to you to know the general autobiographical details, then fine, but briefly. Hal was in town for his brother's wedding, which had been a week ago, but he was also taking the excuse to vacation in general, beyond just making it to the wedding. Mindy took time off from her job to go on little overnight trips regularly, and she had heard enough nice things about this place to want to check it out, even if it had mostly turned out to be a pretty unattractive tourist trap so far, it was at least nice to get out to new places. And Mindy did very much enjoy the chipotle burger. When the waitress emerged with another chipotle burger after having learned from the kitchen she had been incorrect about the sauce having run out, Hal and Mindy split the second chipotle burger, and by this point they were very sweet on each other.

They shared a few kisses there in the alley. Under other circumstances it would likely have been just one kiss, but, faced with what she was faced with, Mindy playfully gave a kiss to Hal'vrick, Hal'ig, and Hal'stothoron each, giving each of them a different treatment—a love smooch, a quick peck, and then for Hal'stothoron a long one to make the other heads jealous for more. It was very effective. Hal'ig invited Mindy to the room he was staying in. He didn't know whether to call it a hotel or a bed and breakfast—it was the size of a hotel room, but not a part of a chain, just four rooms tucked into the third floor of a building up one of the tourist town's streets, seemingly all operated as more of a family business. It felt more like a bed and breakfast than a hotel, even if Hal'vrick and Mindy agreed, as they were on their way walking there and Hal'vrick was describing it, they agreed that hotel probably was the right word in spite of it feeling off a little bit.

Pretty quickly after getting inside into Hal's room, Hal and Mindy were kissing, undressing, moving things to the bed. They had kissed for a little while, and had just begun to properly be having sex, when, in through the window, entered the owner's cat.

Cats are known to cause a lot of multiverse chaos even in ordinary circumstances. Here, in a sexually charged moment,

with a hydra, three branches formed, as the cat began walking along the edge of the bed and startled Hal.

Branch 1: Hal'vrick Fronts

This is, in many ways, the most mundane branch of the Hal node. Hal'vrick, upon seeing the cat, got off of Mindy, and pulled a blanket over both of them.

Mindy was disappointed at first, that things had stopped so suddenly when they were just getting good. But in short order, she had taken the blanket back off of herself, and was lying on her side facing the orange cat, and giving the fella her hand to rub against as he purred. The cat walked back and forth against her hand, tail raised and moving around through the air, perfectly happy to be getting this attention.

"It's just a cat, see?" Mindy said to Hal.

Hal'vrick, projecting his own modest feelings onto Mindy's dismodesty, commented, "You really... don't mind being naked at all in front of him."

Hal had been introduced to the cat, whose name was Ice Pick.

"He's naked in front of us," Mindy remarked. "You can't do it while he's in here, can you?"

"It's a little weird, I'd think we were showing him something he shouldn't see."

"Can I pick him up?" Mindy asked.

"Owner said he usually lets people pick him up."

Mindy picked Ice Pick up, opened the door a crack, and set the cat down in the hall outside, then closed the door, and got back into bed with Hal.

Hal and Mindy continued to make love, and that was about the end of the story for their time together. They both agreed it was fun, and that maybe they'd see each other around while they were both still there in town, but they didn't. Mindy went back to the bed and breakfast she was staying at, and Mindy and Hal went on to each leave the town a couple days later without having crossed paths again.

Branch 2: Hal'ig Fronts

This is the branch that becomes interesting from a legal perspective. It's the reason anyone in an academic context is likely to bring up the Hal node, and maybe that's where you may have heard of it before, if you have. Hal'ig, upon seeing the cat, began thrusting into Mindy with even more of a writhing rhythm, caressing her up and down with his hands, making the act look as sexy as possible to show off to the newly arrived feline audience who was suddenly sitting in.

Mindy, while being very into what Hal was doing, also saw the cat, and offered out a hand for him. The cat began purring and nuzzling her hand, and soon was walking all down the length of Hal and Mindy's bodies as the human and the hydra were making love.

It did so happen—and this was also the case in the previous branch, but it wasn't much of a big deal in that one—that a reptilian woman in an apartment across the street was looking out of her window, into the room with Mindy and Hal and Ice Pick. In this branch, seeing the human and the hydra making love while a cat was there too, walking around next to them, sometimes either of them even petting the cat, well, the reptilian woman began to film the proceedings on her phone, and she sent the recording to the police.

Hal and Mindy finished their lovemaking, and were still on the bed when the police came in and arrested them. Ice Pick ran, and was never apprehended for examination, though he continued to live nearby the area.

It was a pivotal case in bestiality law. At the time, the local laws only stated that any act done with an animal for sexual pleasure was a misdemeanor. Mindy testified that she did not receive sexual pleasure from the animal, and that the animal had only been a part of it incidentally. Hal'ig testified that he did receive sexual pleasure from the cat being there, but that it was so apparent that all parties involved had enthusiastically consented that he did not feel there was any grounds to claim that a crime had occurred. Watching the video that was taken of the events, the judge agreed that there was no basis for a crime here, and he dismissed the cases against Mindy and Hal. The

judge did comment that it may have been a different story if either Mindy or Hal had made their genitals to contact the cat directly, or if they had coaxed the cat into joining intentionally in any way, but that as it stood, it was equivalent to an act of God that their lovemaking had happened to involve a purring body and a swishing tail alongside it, not much different than if it had been windy and a wind had blown onto them from the outside: uncomfortable or exciting was a matter of personal preference, but there was nothing of morality or law put at stake, according to the judge.

Either way, the fact remained that the judge had dismissed their cases, making it clear that the laws were insufficient in some capacity. Some states which had similar laws endeavored to rewrite them with more explicit wording of what did and did not constitute a crime, while other states left the laws alone, and two states struck the laws entirely, one on grounds of animal rights and the other on grounds of personal liberty, both based on public discourse spawned from the popularity of the video, which was widely circulated online.

Mindy and Hal continued to keep in contact, at first simply due to the court proceedings and then for a little while dating one another, but they agreed mutually that they weren't really a good fit for each other's schedules, and stopped dating but with no hard feelings.

Branch 3: Hal'stothoron Fronts

This is the branch that becomes interesting from a magical perspective. Though it's nothing of particular historical note, nothing where nothing similar had been done before or since, it remains an example of magic drawn from emotion. Hal'stothoron, upon seeing the cat, began purring like the cat did. Soon Mindy was purring as well, and the three of them were all there on the bed together, purring and nuzzling and stroking.

Drawing from his intrinsic magical powers, Hal'stothoron began blurring things around in a way that excited and enhanced things for all parties present. He smeared the characteristic of the cat's purring over onto himself and Mindy,

so that they could let out real rumbling purrs in genuine, and not just make silly imitations of the sound. The characteristic of the cat's hair, too, he smeared onto Mindy and onto himself, so that all parties sported glossy and soft orange coats that were nice to pet.

To the cat, Hal'stothoron gave a hominid size and shape, to match the human and the hydra he was on the bed with, and soon Ice Pick was petting and nuzzling with the rest of them. As Hal'stothoron penetrated Mindy, Ice Pick began penetrating Hal'stothoron, all three of them reaching around and towards each other to make it a group activity of petting and appreciation.

The reptilian woman watching from across the street did not assume she was looking at a real cat, nor was she even sure she was looking at a real hydra or a real human. She closed her blinds and went back to her knitting, essentially like she had done in the Hal'vrick Fronts branch.

After Hal'stothoron, Mindy, and Ice Pick had all finished, they began licking themselves and each other clean. While in this process of cleaning, they all faded back to their everyday shapes and sizes. Ice Pick leapt up to the window sill, stayed on it for a brief moment, and then hopped away to go about the rest of his cat business on that day.

Mindy and Hal'stothoron, both tired out, settled in for a nap together. They spent their days in town together and continued to date after, though again, it didn't work out in the long run, but there was nothing that caused any bad feelings between the two.

The Importance of the Hal Node Generally

The importance of the Hal node in general is, in my experience in discussing these things, mainly for its utility in illustration. From one point in time, and for quite straightforward reasons, we have three very apparently different outcomes, one with outward-reaching consequences for the general population in the case of the Hal'ig Fronts branch, and all three of them with very understandable, very starkly different outcomes visually. It

is true, certainly, that other nodes have had bearing on the outcomes of wars or the speed of scientific development, and those are, in all respects, more important. But for audiences mature enough to hear about it, the Hal node is among my favorite examples to use to detail the curiosities and delights of multiverse theory.

VR POLICY MINUTES

Persons present are Mr McKinney, Ms Hall, Mr Richards, Mr Schwartz, Ms Foster, and transcriptionist Ms Fuller. Meeting taking place in the Svarga conference room in the Mag Mell wing in the Vanaheimr building with all parties in person. The door is closed with the sound proofing indicator indicating that no sound is capable of exiting the room. Electronic devices have been turned over to Mr Sullivan-Vasquez who stands guard outside. No persons have brought any notes on paper. No persons save for myself transcriptionist Ms Fuller have brought any means of marking notes. The meeting begins at 7:01 AM.

McKinney: “Okay, thank you everyone, for taking the time to be here. I want to begin by saying that everything is ahead of schedule for the next quarter’s content, so a big round of applause to Mrs Harris’s team for helping us with that.”

Clapping from McKinney, Hall, Richards, Schwartz, Foster.

McKinney: “Taking advantage of this extra time that we might have on our hands, we want to start looking ahead to the following quarter. We had already planned big updates on audial haptics.”

McKinney gestures to Hall.

Hall: “Yes, everything in the labs has been, phenomenal, when it’s working. I know some of you have been up to try it out. It makes the immersion in battlefields, doesn’t it?”

Hall gestures to Richards.

Richards: “I have never felt so much like I was there. It doesn’t even seem like a game anymore. The um. The non-

battlefield context demo was also remarkable. The, shouting, argument one.”

Hall: “Yes! Oh you tried that one?”

Richards: “Yes, I know the role fanatics are going to love it. Love it.”

Hall: “Have you tried it?”

Hall gestures to Schwartz.

Schwartz: “No.”

Hall: “Come on up any time.”

Schwartz: “It’s a little outside of my function.”

Hall: “Anyways. McKinney.”

McKinney: “Right, thank you. Big updates for the quarter after this upcoming one are audial haptics, a new 70s disco environment, a new Ancient Greece beach environment, and of course a wealth of new outfits and hair styles as always.”

Laughter from Richards and Schwartz.

McKinney: “But, since we’re looking at possibly an extra month of development cycles, we have the freedom to bring something new and unexpected to the relevant quarter. My understanding, unless something has changed since early yesterday, is that, Richards, you are proposing that we add bestiality content, into the experience.”

Sighing from Schwartz.

Richards: “Correct. That is still what I am proposing.”

Foster leans far back in her chair and begins flicking a fidget device in her right hand.

Richards: “Historically, you know, when we’re racking our brains for ideas on what to add in, we look to our most dedicated fans, one large subsection of those being the modding community. Based on the popularity of downloads and installs of those, it’s a very reliable indicator of what content people may feel is missing from the experience, what fixes they may want, what they feel should be expanded upon. At launch, the very idea that we would have sex in the experience at all was something we had decided against, but, over the years, it became clear the demand could not be higher, and Schwartz was able to get us through the legal aspects of endorsing sex as a part of the as-sold experience with no mods needed. And it could not have been better for sales or for community engagement. But,

obviously we went after, you know, the” (Richards makes air quotes) “biggest slice of the pie first, with straight, gay, and bisexual, vanilla as most people would say, humanoid sexual situations. And we’ve added to it piece by piece, you know, bondage was a very head scratching one to pull off in VR, but, McKinney, the community is generally very pleased with what you and your team managed to come up with for that. And, if we’re looking again at the modding portion of the community, bestiality is the most popular mod category that is not yet actually implemented in the game.”

McKinney: “Most popular that we’re actually considering. I assume we’re not considering underage.”

Richards: “Beast is actually more popular than underage. There was a spike in underage a while ago but generally beast has always been more popular of the two.”

McKinney: “Oh.”

Schwartz has put his head down and is rubbing his temple.

McKinney: “So, I guess, Richards, you are the proponent of this, as the Chief Community Engagement Utopiist. What’s on the table here, what content are we proposing gets added?”

Richards: “Well, at a most basic level, currently animal models in the experience are intentionally sexless, and the first place we would have to begin with is adding detail to the genital regions of existing animal models.”

Schwartz continues hanging head and stroking temple.

Schwartz: “We can do that.”

Foster continues leaning back and using fidget device.

Foster: “That’s fine.”

Richards: “And then we would add in the ability for humanoid models and animal models to interact sexually.”

Schwartz: “No.”

Foster: “Absolutely not.”

McKinney gestures to Schwartz.

McKinney: “Hang on, hang on. Let’s let him get through all of what’s being proposed.”

Hall: “I love it.”

McKinney: “Richards?”

Richards begins counting on his fingers.

Richards: "Adding detail to animal genital regions, adding humanoid-animal sexual interaction, adding animal-animal sexual interaction, adding animal mating routines into environments with animals, adding role sequences for humanoid-animal dating. Those would be the goals for content additions on this topic of bestiality."

McKinney: "Hall, you think this is good?"

Hall: "I think it's great. My department will be bored because I'd imagine we can already entirely use existing sounds for this, but just as someone with friends who play, I know people who would love this."

McKinney: "Okay. There were some objections?"

McKinney gestures to Foster.

Foster: "Detailed animal genital regions or scripted animal mating routines are fine. Both of those together and or any of the other items absolutely cannot be included in the experience."

McKinney: "Give us your perspective on why that is."

Foster: "How much time you got?"

McKinney: "Until eight, if it's important we can go over and I can reschedule my eight."

Foster stops using the fidget device. Foster looks around at McKinney, Hall, Richards, Schwartz, transcriptionist Fuller.

Schwartz continues hanging head and stroking temple.

Richards looks across the table past Hall at the opaque light window.

McKinney and Hall return Foster's eye contact.

Foster: "Adding detailed animal genitalia, or adding noninteractable animal mating behavior that doesn't involve detailed genitalia, would be fine on the grounds of realism and non-erasure, while having both, and or any of the other proposed items, would bring this into the territory of pornography and encouragement of harm."

Schwartz continues hanging head and stroking temple. With other hand, without looking up, Schwartz gestures to Foster.

Schwartz: "Legally, agreed."

Hall: "Half the use case of the experience is pornography at this point, might I mention."

Foster: "Not like this."

Schwartz: "Exactly."

McKinney: "What is the characteristic difference between this and the BDSM stuff?"

Foster: "Consent."

Schwartz: "Right."

Foster: "Obscenity."

Schwartz gives a finger gun gesture to Foster.

Foster: "How this will come off as an endorsement or an attack on other communities."

Schwartz gives a thumbs up gesture to Foster.

McKinney: "So there are sensitivity and legal concerns."

Foster: "Big time."

Schwartz: "There are."

McKinney: "Are there further legal obstacles?"

Schwartz: "There is not enough of a precedent to say whether this type of content would be allowed in any of the regions we operate in."

McKinney: "What do you mean not enough of a precedent?"

Schwartz: "I mean, no one has tried to make virtual bestiality porn experiences on a commercial scale as big as ours, and I can't tell you that we won't find ourselves without a product when we release that update."

McKinney: "Well, wait wait wait, wasn't. What was your mantra when we were adding gay stuff, initially, and a lot of the bondage? The law is the law, and the law is meant to bend to free expression."

Schwartz: "That is a mangled version of what I said, but yes, it was to that effect."

McKinney: "Is this actually different?"

Schwartz: "The difference is that in this case I don't know. I. Don't. Know. I. Okay. I."

McKinney: "So it's not legal or illegal?"

Schwartz: "Correct to an extent, although it depends on the region. Across all applicable regions, we are inviting legal liability."

Schwartz slides his hand off of his temple, and sits back upright.

Schwartz: "This meeting is not illegal, I don't mean to imply that us discussing the concept of adding it to the software is

illegal. You all can talk about it all you like. What I can do is listen, and then, if we are going to go ahead with this, in my own time, when I have my resources at hand, I can begin attempting to prepare a report on the legal roadmap ahead of us, if we did go ahead with this. I'm not saying the legal challenges would be impossible. I am saying that they are present, and that, professionally, I can't tell you that this is wise."

McKinney: "I've heard that, that's lawyer talk for yes."

Laughter from Hall and then from Richards.

McKinney: "I mean, you sound pretty against it from a legal point of view, is there anything to discuss at all, or is this your personal opinion?"

Schwartz: "I don't have personal opinions Mr McKinney. My professional statement is to caution you that doing this would present legal challenges that I am professionally averse to."

Hall: "I still like it."

McKinney: "Um. Foster, you raised three items."

Foster: "Yes I did."

McKinney: "Consent."

Foster: "Yes."

McKinney: "It's software."

Foster: "It's software we have made a point of making comply with consent or any sexual encounter terminates."

McKinney: "Right, but, since it's software, we have made consent more clearcut to achieve and more lenient to maintain."

Foster begins using her fidget device.

McKinney: "In a simulated scenario, is it so impossible to imagine what consent cues would look like? We came up with it for that deaf mute character."

Foster: "Very different."

Richards: "The community is aware of our consent policy, and the more vocal opinion is agreement with it, but, there are extensive writings people have done outlining how they think our policy on consent could reasonably apply to animals. That people agree to, whether or not they agree it applies to real animals, the general consensus is that in VR consent cues could be made by animals that would align with our policies just fine. I find it persuasive. You know, in, a platformer, you have your first obstacle that teaches you you need to jump, and, piece by

piece, shows you the mechanics and how to figure them out. In an animal dating scenario, we would be able to teach our mechanics of consent, what to look for in the animal, how to obtain it, and just like a humanoid interaction, losing it would end the interaction.”

Foster: “The point of the consent mechanic in the first place is to make players not completely lose sight of how such ideas are relevant to real life.”

Richards: “The community would argue that you would know in real life very quickly if you haven’t gained consent with an animal, based on our mechanics.”

Sighing from Foster.

Richards: “If you haven’t gained consent with an animal or that you haven’t gained consent with an animal, whichever way you feel is prudent to put it.”

McKinney: “The next issue you raised, Foster, after consent, was obscenity.”

Foster: “My vocabulary to describe that point sensitively is lacking.”

Laughter from McKinney and Richards.

Foster: “I know, I know, Chief Sensitivity Utopiist. Obscenity may not be the right word exactly, but, image, impression, very bad. Very nausea-inspiring. I’m. Choosing not to use some words that are coming to mind. Filthy, beyond what a large portion of our userbase would consider acceptable.”

Richards: “That is not what my data finds.”

McKinney gestures to Richards.

McKinney: “Well, hang on.”

McKinney gestures to Foster.

McKinney: “What is the worry there?”

Foster: “It’s the least of my points. But as it stands we have skated above the tide on being transgressively sex positive, and I have reservations that this would tank us into being regarded as immoral.”

McKinney: “Richards?”

Richards gestures to Foster.

Richards: “I will acknowledge that global public perception is more your wheelhouse than mine. My impression of our existing, very large fanbase, is that it would be celebrated. And

be very good for existing user engagement and userbase growth.”

McKinney: “The third item you brought up, Ms Foster, was that this might be seen to be in support of or in defiance of some groups?”

Foster: “Very much so.”

McKinney: “Do you have some examples?”

Foster: “Very directly it would be seen to be in support of real life zoophilia.”

Hall gestures to Foster.

Hall: “I’m gonna stop you right there, I don’t see any reason we shouldn’t endorse real life zoophilia.”

Laughter from Richards.

Hall gesticulates.

Hall: “I’ve got kinky friends! A member of my direct family is a zoophile and he seems cool to his dog wife!”

Foster drops her fidget device.

The fidget device remains on the floor.

Richards: “To Ms Hall’s point, supporting zoophilia is maybe not the worst thing in the world. Like I said, I’ve read a lot of posts of people talking about this. These are. Well. From some I see why you have reservations, I’ll say that first. But a lot of these people, my impression, is that they’re just people trying their best to be decent, in a world that hasn’t given them the tools it gives others, to learn how to be decent. Maybe we could be a part of that.”

Foster: “I disagree with that. And I disagree that this is the most productive use of our company’s time and efforts, if the goal is cultural uplifting.”

Richards: “I disagree. I think it’s a perfect use of our company’s time and efforts if the goal is cultural uplifting. These people are dying of being underserved.”

Hall: “They are. This would be very meaningful to them.”

Foster: “I haven’t conceded anything by the way, but just to get this last point out there to see if I’m completely alone.”

Schwartz: “You’re not.”

Foster: “Thank you, Mr Schwartz. Last point, point three part two, about how this will negatively impact other groups. There is a longstanding history of hateful talking heads making the

argument that homosexuality, transgender, what have you, will lead to so much social collapse of morals that soon enough bestiality will become permitted. Given our reputation currently of being transgressively sex positive, we would be giving credence to all of those alarmist proclamations, tacitly saying they were right, undermining positivity on things we do endorse.”

Hall: “I don’t see it that way at all.”

Foster: “Is this your area of expertise, Ms Hall, Chief Sound Utopiist?”

Hall: “All I’m saying is my zoo friends are trans, they love themselves, I’m a lesbian, I love them. I think you’re coming from a place of giving those intentionally harmful talking points too much credit.”

Foster: “This would be a disaster caused by our company.”

McKinney: “What if.”

Hall: “I don’t. Sorry McKinney. Quickly, let me just say. Ms Foster, I don’t want to discount your perspective either. My trouble is your perspective seems to be harmful to people I care about in a way that I’m surprised to hear coming from you, expert on sensitivity. But, sensitivity doesn’t mean your job is to be a pushover, it is to stand up for the sensitive, many different varieties of the sensitive, each of which have their own sensitive areas, I know that, and, that’s what I’m wanting to acknowledge. I just wonder if there’s. Never mind. I apologize for my tone, that’s all.”

Foster: “Thank you, I appreciate that.”

McKinney raises his hand.

Hall: “Would you be willing to meet with my zoo friends, if they would be willing to have lunch some time?”

Foster: “No.”

Hall: “That is a blatantly disrespectful attitude from this company’s sensitivity expert and I will be making a big deal out of that.”

Richards: “McKinney, I think, has an idea.”

McKinney waves his raised hand.

McKinney: “What if we did everything with made up animals? A dragon-dog mix, a cybernetic horse, golem sheep or something like that? Would that work?”

Foster: “Yes.”

Richards: "Yes."

Hall: "Yes."

Schwartz: "Yes."

Clapping from McKinney.

McKinney: "I'll get to work on the drawings and the design considerations. Richards, email me which animals we most want versions of."

Richards: "Dogs, but I will send you a more complete email with fantasy motifs that might be of interest as well."

McKinney gives a thumbs up gesture to Richards.

McKinney: "Foster, please please please send me an email of stereotyping or cultural appropriations to watch out for here."

Foster: "Already composing it in my head."

Laughter from McKinney and Richards.

McKinney: "Hall, you think our current suite of sex noises will work?"

Hall: "More than likely, but I will ask my expert friends on the matter."

McKinney: "Legal, any concerns with this approach?"

Schwartz: "If Ms Hall promises not to sample any sounds from real life material of bestiality, no concerns."

Hall: "Fine."

McKinney: "Alright! Very productive, glad we got there. Let's get at it, team."

Meeting ends.

POEMS

This Body

This morning I woke up
and stayed in the blankets for a while
all warm and comfortable.
When I got up I saw pre shining
in my penis hole in the sunlight
and I thought about this body.
I thought about how this penis
has been licked by a dog,
multiple actually.
I like that I can say that
of this body part. That whenever
I'm using it, even masturbating alone,
it is a penis that has been licked by dogs.
Not even just for the memory of the pleasure,
although, I thank those dogs for that,
but even just for the knowledge that
it happened, that sweet dogs are what
this penis has been used for, for them to lick.
It makes it a joy, a point of delight,
to use something again that has been used for that.
I thought of these hands—
both, though mostly the left—
that have held a dog's penis
and his hot and slick knot

more times than I could hope
to remember individually.
I thought of these lips
that have been licked by a dog's tongue.
I thought of this breast
which has snuggled countless times under blankets
against the bristly yet warm,
soft, breathing,
coat of hair on a dog's back.
I am proud of how this body has touched other bodies.

Instruments

I have a lot of things
that aren't really mine.
I don't mean that I stole them.
I mean that I have shelves and shelves of books
about straight humans
whose only want is to fall in love with other
straight humans.
I have a Holy Bible
but I am not Christian;
I got it to learn about others,
and it has turned out
to be interesting for multitudes of reasons,
but it is not mine.
I have dozens of CDs and tapes
about straight humans
whose only want is to fall in love
with other straight humans.

It makes me feel so far away sometimes,

those being the things
that most easily become my possessions
in this world.
Things that are not mine.
Things that are not about what I want to see:
humans and animals falling in love.
It's out there, of course.
Online, you can find stories,
spiritual discussions,
and songs
that are the creations of zoophiles, for each other.
If I went to a lot of effort,
maybe I could fill a room
with pooch smoocher books and tapes—
a lot of it probably bootlegged.
But I can't go to pick up groceries
and impulse buy a cozy zoophile romance
the same way I could for cis het human romance.
Most of my things
do not belong to me.

I would be so bold as to say
that the rest of the world is missing out.
If I have still found interest and meaning
in all of these things that are not mine,
others might like a cozy dog romance too.
But I do, mainly,
feel for myself here,
and for other zoophiles like me
who feel so far away from everything.

One thing that helps
is that, also among the things that I own,
are instruments.
An electric guitar, a bass, a keyboard,
this pen,
that can make these things I want.
It doesn't change that most of my things
don't belong to me,

but it helps to have stopped feeling shame
at the idea of making things that do.

Someday I do hope to have a bookshelf
filled with the works of zoophiles
who have also found pens
and actually gotten publishing contracts
and been widely distributed
enough for me to find
and buy on an impulse
when I go grocery shopping.
Or, it would be cool if we printed them ourselves, too.
Kind of like zines but with entire paperback books,
with cool covers by zoo artists,
art of humans and dogs kissing right there on the cover.
Mailing these things around to each other.
I think that could be fun.

Figurine Man

Jacob Bride sets his mug of coffee down on the side table, and sits himself down in the rocking chair on his back porch. He looks out at the open desert. Takes a big smell of the fine dirt in the air. From the side table, he picks up his sharpened knife and a block of basswood. He looks down at his hands as he works, though his mind's eye is jumping ahead. He whittles off the corners, molding the basswood block into a shape that is curved, organic, reminiscent of something living.

From out of the wood, Bride uncovers a belly, blocky and angular at first, thicker at the ribcage, skinnier below it. A foreleg rests tucked close to each side of the ribs, a head with a long pointed snout above, a tail below curved off to one side. He carves out the beginnings of the image of her hind legs, splayed apart.

With the rough shapes done, Bride retrieves his glasses from the side table. In doing so, he also remembers his coffee, and has a long drink of it now that it has gone from piping hot to warm.

Glasses on, Bride holds the wood closer to his eye level, and leans in and around the work as necessary. He carves the lush fur over her ribs, and the thin fur over her stomach. He carves the mound of her vulva in heat, each valley, each minute bump, and the swirls of fur below at her rump. He carves each paw pad, each tendon on each leg, each rivulet of the thick coat. He carves her ready and excited expression, looking over herself to whoever is standing before her.

Bride sets the figurine on the side table. She lies splayed on her back, awaiting.