

THIS ABOVE ALL;
TO THINE OWN
SELF BE
ZOO.

Vol. I

No. 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.

To the fullest extent permissible, all stories and poems herein are released into the public domain.

To Thine Own Self Be Zoo
Vol. I No. 5
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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 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.